

Celebrating Joy Harjo

Travis Hedge Coke

Joy Harjo might be one of the hardest people in the world for me to tribute. Who am I to tell you, Joy Harjo is important? In her third term, now, as the United States Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo's presence and power radiates from her art and her being.

Joy Harjo splits open the sky even before her poetry. To see Joy in a room is to know she is important. The sun doesn't cross the sky importantly, but it is important. Rather than make the normal extra-magical, a poet's trap, to make it extra-normal, Joy walks in and out of several worlds before her words. She knows how to listen. How to speak. How to sing.

Joy's poems aren't always sound. Her jazz is born with eyes and born with life and not everything is.

You cannot look into Joy Harjo the way you confirm many poets. She is not especially private or presenting a facade, but she is so multifarious, so multifaceted, that when you start to look into Joy Harjo - poet, person, poetry, presentation, power - what you see isn't the surface, it is not inside her, it isn't even behind her like she's a interstitial medium. What you get it reflected around, occluded and reflected and it is not trick mirrors because there is no trick.

Sometimes, you learn about a poet and, now, the poems don't work. Sometimes art gets overtaken by life, and some get lost in art and they and you can't be sure if they are still really living. Some poets live only really inside their poems.

I believe in Joy Harjo like I believe in the sun. She's there. I have seen her. I dare you to argue the world would not be colder without her.

When I was in my teens, as an undergraduate, Joy came out to the school to read, and every Indian - we were Indians then - came out for Joy. Not many of us there. But we were there for Joy. And, when the reading finished, Audrey and I had some gift for her, a thank you, a welcome here and thank you for coming. I don't remember what it was. But, I do remember the white woman leaping in front of Joy as if to shield her from us. Then two white women. Stopping us. Stopping the students, stopping Joy.

One of them taught poetry and prose and it was always so white and the other taught post-colonial literature and the novelists she chose were all white colonial adjutants and embassy people. Here they were, standing guard, stopping us, stopping Joy.

You cannot stop Joy Harjo. She walked through them. She gave us hugs. She accepted her gift. She told me to say Hi to my mom.

I believe in Joy Harjo like I believe in the sun. They are equally real and equally big and standing in front of them does not stop them.

You can't look for something more concrete, or it will get away from you, because Joy Harjo is not a poet who can be contained or defined in that rigid way. She is not trying to avoid her audience, to avoid life or the world, the way a rigidly definable poet is.

Do not hold regrets. Steal corn.

Joy said, We must each tend to our own gulfs, and the thing is.