

*OKLAHOMA HISTORY*

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*Oklahoma History* is a collection of poetry that examines the speaker's relationship to and critique of her home state, Oklahoma. The poems navigate race and gender as they intersect with local histories, culture, and religion, which complicates and often contradicts what the speaker is taught through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. The creative portion is accompanied by a critical preface which looks at how the poems and other writings of Oklahoma poet Joy Harjo impact the author's writing.

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By

Sarah Rebecca Warren

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The following poems were previously published in various journals and books:

- “To Virginia with Love” first appeared in *Gravel*, then in *Floodgate Poetry Series Vol. 5*
- “Oklahoma History” first appeared in *Oklahoma Today*, then in *Floodgate Poetry Series Vol. 5*
- “Sunday School Lesson” first appeared in *Hobo Camp Review*, then *Floodgate Poetry Series Vol. 5*
- “Vespers” first appeared in *LunaLuna*, then in *Floodgate Poetry Series Vol. 5*
- “Deer Woman’s Blues” first appeared as “Flower Moon Fugue” in *LunaLuna* then in *Floodgate Poetry Series Vol. 5*
- “Anatomy of an Eating Disorder” in *Arcturus*, then in *Floodgate Poetry Series Vol. 5*
- “Cherokee County,” “Wild Strawberries,” “Storm Season” (published as “Passover”), “Price of Admission,” “Aubade,” “Notes from the HiLo Club” (published as Epistle form the Local Dive”), and “Learning How to Pray” (published as “Prayers of Femmes Fatale”) were first published in *Floodgate Poetry Series Vol. 5*.

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## CRITICAL PREFACE

Mvskoke Creek poet Joy Harjo taught me things about myself that I had not realized I lacked. My first encounter with her poetry was as an undergraduate at the University of Oklahoma. The familiar landscapes and characters (especially those rooted in Oklahoma) drew me into each poem world. On every occasion that I have seen Joy Harjo read, it has been transformative. She sings, plays instruments, and performs poems all in one set, alternating as if code-switching or moving from one language to the next, seamlessly. Even on the page, Harjo's poetry reads as holy and supernatural and draws readers into an awareness that most humans seem to rarely access -- the place between song and prayer. Her poems delve through layers of origin and memory in order to make sense of the human experience.

To read Harjo's work often feels as if I have sat down at the table next to her as she has coffee and reminisces with (and sometimes interrogates) history itself. Having said that, her poems were also the first I experienced that really felt like I was consciously made part of the audience. From her poems, I learned how to appreciate my home state as a place of real beauty, where profoundly spiritual moments can, and do, happen. Though I am not tribally-affiliated as Joy Harjo is, I was raised tribally-adjacent, and in her poetry I was able to see stories and experiences similar to many people I knew. I learned that growing up Okie is more complex than mainstream narratives express, and that there are distinct and rich cultural histories to be told. My project aims to open up the experience of growing up in middle-America through the lens of a woman tracing her lived experiences, ancestry, and the history of Oklahoma. Though many of the poems in this manuscript are more specific to a certain kind of upbringing that comes from a conservative, religious culture, I want to provide insight for those residing outside of what has become known as "flyover country."

I think of Oklahoma as a place of exile for displaced tribes, and the violence of that



removal happened not only through physical oppression, but through the silencing of language, and therefore also of religion and cultural practices. So often in contemporary Native American literary discourse, the English language is regarded as an oppressive institution in itself for those who have been forced into it, but the language can be – and has been – used to address and redress existing stereotypes in the dominant culture, and to a much wider audience than just an immediate clan or tribe. For American Indians, as Joy Harjo says, “it was essentially illegal to write or perform poetry in...native languages until the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978...For indigenous people in this country the English language is a kind of trade language...it is our tribal languages that allows us to know ourselves intimately” (“Ancestors”). The lack of access to one’s ancestral language may have been (and may still be) an impairment to one’s understanding of self, and of one’s own communities -- and for tribal members, the self and the community are often inextricably linked. In an act of reclamation and reeducation amid a linguistic renaissance, many contemporary Indigenous poets have used traditional languages within their own writing, often intermingled with English. Joy Harjo herself speaks to the use of English specifically throughout her work - in poetry and prose, but most recently in her 2019 book *An American Sunrise*. She addresses the near extinction of her tribal language and customs through the haunting poem “Exile of Memory,” written in fourteen sections, in which the first section reads:

Do not return,  
We were warned by one who knows things  
You will only upset the dead.  
They will emerge from the spiral of little houses  
Lined up in the furrows of marrow  
And walk the land.  
There will be no place in memory  
For what they see  
The highways, the houses, the stores of interlopers  
Perched over the blood fields

Where the dead last stood.  
And then what, you with your words  
In the enemy's language,  
Do you know how to make a peaceful road  
Through human memory?  
And what of angry ghosts of history?  
Then what? ("Exile of Memory" lines 1-17)

The speaker of this poem warns us about the dangers of remembering - that the ancestors of her particular lineage would feel disappointment at returning to their homes themselves. She tells us that they will not understand how to see themselves in the current ways, that "there will be no place in memory" except everything that has moved in since European colonization. The speaker of this poem is the physical manifestation of the denial and removal of ancestral language, which does also seem to impair her relationship to her ancestors. The poem turns from a warning to an accusation at line twelve, where the speaker seems to interrogate herself and perhaps also other contemporary Natives as well when she says "And then what, you with your words / In the enemy's language, / Do you know how to make a peaceful road / Through human memory?" It is as if Joy Harjo the poet uses the speaker of this poem to wag a finger at herself, as if to say: how dare you write of this history and this memory in English when that very language took part in an attempted annihilation of your identity and existence in this human form?

"Exile of Memory" also teaches me how to consider the different angles of memory -- that sometimes it is a false witness, or it is the past reinterpreted as delusional nostalgia. Perhaps, even, a trickster as it drives a person down the wrong path or makes too much of one event and not enough of another. In the opening poem of this manuscript, "Cherokee County," I examine the ways in which memory shows itself in my Oklahoma experiences, ancestral or otherwise:

Just over the state line  
I am that interstate driver

pulled into her gravity.  
How many casinos,  
deer carcasses, roadside  
crosses can I count before I  
run out of memory.  
Memory –

where I keep prom night.  
Where my dress got ruined  
& John sniffed cocaine  
from the ash tray of his old  
black truck.

The solitude of the drive home is a specific time for memory to wind up and begin flipping through the past. This poem is intended to invite that same sense of excitement that is a mixture of seemingly inconsequential fragments that lend themselves to tipping off feelings ranging from longing to dread. Though from a different cultural narrative than Harjo's meditation on memory as a path to the ancestors (for better or worse), I find myself following a thread that Harjo dropped: do I know how to make a peaceful road through human memory? Is there a way to navigate this abstract space and find ourselves better for having opened memories for inspection?

It was here

that I found my body, a fact  
as true as weather:  
a breach of contract, a betrayal.  
An ebbing water quick to return  
in the onslaught of spring.

Choctaw, Kiowa, Creek.  
I cross nation after nation, return  
to the riddle & half-truth of catching up –

where the narrative of life follows the shore  
of a swelling river that will not hold  
in the storm of family.

This poem is the vehicle through which my Oklahoma history is driven. The histories of the land, specific places, and my own family intermingle with faith and disbelief, loyalties and rebellions,

and the space between fact and myth.

In her poem “Perhaps the World Ends Here,” Harjo examines the evolution of family, not just over the years, but over generations. The poem opens with, “The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat / to live” (“Perhaps the World Ends Here” lines 1-2). I am struck first by the conscious decision to use an object at once intimate and personal to one family’s experiences, and also by the weight such an object carries - because yes, we all must eat to live, but what unique rituals and rites of passage take place on and around a table are so deeply linked to familial and cultural identities. Harjo traces lineage and values through something universally understood as a gathering place, and one that “...has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun” (“Perhaps the World Ends Here” line 14). We all must have once been familiar with this kind of object as it relates the human experience. The sound of the first sentence, the lilt of iambic pentameter in “the world begins at the kitchen table” draws me in sonically, as if the cadence of the line is itself a meditation before the praying, sharing, laughing, and crying to follow. In the first four stanzas, the reader is given a checklist of functions the table provides, almost a manual for future generations:

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women (“Perhaps the World Ends Here” lines 1-8).

The decision to use the first-person plural creates an invitational tone. We are in her dining room learning the valuable role of the table in the growing and nourishing of a family. It is not just an

idea or aspiration, but the way the people understand and maintain their humanity. Using the prop of a kitchen table offers just enough intimacy that this poem is able to work organically for nearly every reader, and as such, the poem reads like a script - preparation before an important meeting about the Grandparents or that rogue cousin. Harjo continues the ode to the family table through a series of actions:

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite (“Perhaps the World Ends Here” lines 9-21).

Memory and years and bloodlines are preserved in the table itself through behaviors and situations that many might experience, like, “At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers,” and “We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents / for burial here...” (line 9 and lines 16-17). By including these scenes, the poem offers up more opportunities for connection -- yet does not indulge in specific names or personal histories. Just enough detail to set the framework. And in these last lines of the poem, the scenes are more visceral and emotive, such as the birthing of new lives and the anointing of elders who have passed.

From Harjo's poem "Perhaps the World Ends Here," I follow the lead of first-person plural because of the welcoming, inclusive tone. When I think of the ties that bind us in Oklahoma, what could bring us closer together than disaster? The weather, good and bad, unites us. Unpredictable weather is a common threat, and here in Middle America, that demon is tornado season. I cannot fathom a complete discussion of Oklahoma without addressing tornados, how we love the thrill and feeling of a wild thunderstorm and watch for twisters on the front porch. Yet we know the dangers so well that we buy storm shelters and non-perishables -- just in case. Keeping with the intent to create a scene that depicts the communal experiences of Oklahoma spring, I enter the space of "Storm Season" with:

Every year we're damaged goods  
when twisters rewrite the landscape.  
But we're charmed by the breeze  
and soft gray light of clouded afternoons.

Uncles aunts brothers sisters  
chase lightning in the bed of a rusted truck  
(until the tempest, loud as a morning train,  
tosses our hair and slaps our cheeks red).

These first two stanzas read somewhat like a guide, as "Perhaps the World Ends Here" functions somewhat as a manual for living, but in this instance a step-by-step set of instructions for how the day will inevitably go. This, the nearly universal way generations of Okies have witnessed and responded to their weather.

Our mamas papas cuss the sky. We retreat  
to the cellar basement bathroom.

We clutch our dogs, the radios.  
We hold hands when we pray.  
We wait for the gods to pass over.

We retch at the thought of breaking  
into years-old cans of quasi-meat, neat  
in rows with syruped peaches, double-A

batteries, and bottles of Dr. Pepper. We know  
we're spared when skunks perfume the night  
and rivers stop swelling to meet us.

What a strange life we lead, those of us who live in the heartland. We stay and we stay and we stay even though we know that one of the most reliable things about where we live is the unpredictable, destructive weather.

The 2019 book of poetry *An American Sunrise* could not have come at a more appropriate time, as Joy Harjo's familiar songs of family and tradition turn to lessons on the genealogy of violence, the process of grief, and deep criticism of greed and power. The book begins with an epitaph that reads, "For the children, so they may find their way through the dark – / They are all our children." This framework is not as much a dedication as it is a lesson, and even a warning. Though many of the poems in this book give glimpses of history and connect objects from the past to now (even including actual maps), Harjo makes it clear that what we think is past is present, and is part of us always when she writes, "We are in time. There is no time, in time" ("Exile of Memory" 108). In this way, there is continual suffering and grief, but there remains the possibility of continual love and joy, and the completeness of our human experience as a species – not just as individuals – depends on how the children are taught to live. It is the responsibility of each person to be a light in darkness. As we continually navigate tragedy after tragedy, Harjo's words land powerfully in "How to Write a Poem in a Time of War," that "Terror had become the familiar stranger," just as we hear news anchors say in the twenty-four-hour news cycle that we must not normalize violence.

In "The Fight" Harjo writes of generational violence in a way that recalls it in the literal physical sense through imagery one might associate with old Western movies. The language Harjo uses conjures archaic scenes of Native tribes, as in the first eight lines:

The rising sun paints the feet  
Of night-crawling enemies.  
And they scatter into the burning hills.  
I have fought each of them.  
I know them by name.  
From before I could speak.  
I've used every weapon.  
To make them retreat ("The Fight" lines 1-8).

We see the night-crawling enemies and burning hills invoking something like a midnight raid, but perhaps not one that was unexpected. The speaker reveals that she not only knows them, but has fought them before, extensively. When the speaker tells us that she "...knew them by name. / From before [she] could speak," one might consider that perhaps this fight has gone on long before she existed, like information about this conflict was passed down intuitively, subconsciously, or somehow through the very DNA of the speaker's ancestors. Perhaps these first eight lines foreshadow the fight as it affects the speaker in this contemporary era - more through psychological and emotional oppression:

Yet they return every night  
If I don't keep guard  
They elbow through openings in faith  
Tear the premise of trust  
And stick their shields through the doubt of smoke  
To challenge me.  
I grow tired of the heartache  
Of every small and large war  
Passed from generation  
To generation.  
But it is not in me to give up.  
I was taught to give honor to the house of the warriors  
Which cannot exist without the house of the peacemakers ("The Fight" lines 9-21).

The contemporary enemy is, then, one that shatters faith and trust, and one that creates doubt. In this sense, I think of endless broken promises to Native tribes by the U.S. Government over generations for Indigenous people - where the fight exists, now, mostly through language and legal terms. The lines blur between literal and symbolic violence, which brings to mind the



protests at Standing Rock over the proposed pipeline through Sioux lands. How those nonviolent protests, over days and months and years, were met with brute force. This poem - without referencing place specifically - resonates with that struggle, and the many legal battles tribal governments face over their ancestral lands. Generational exhaustion, it seems, may never disappear, and though our speaker insists she will not give up, she says she was “taught to give honor to the house of the warriors / Which cannot exist without the house of the peacemakers” (“The Fight” line 21). Perhaps in some other lifetime there will be an existence of peace without war.

When I think about Oklahoma, I think about the many ways in which it is stuck - in time, in ideology, in violent hypermasculine behavior, and also in the ever-present issue of domestic violence that my family, like so many others, has experienced. In “Pore Jud,” I examine intergenerational violence as it applies to Oklahoma -- with the lines of Joy Harjo’s poem “The Fight” at the center of my inquiry: “I grow tired of the heartache / Of every small and large war / Passed from generation / To generation” (“The Fight” lines 15-18). The myth that violence defines what is perceived as masculine behavior runs deep in Oklahoma, as it does in many places. There is one character created by Rodgers and Hammerstein that shows the whole country, even the world, what that kind of man looks like, who is the subject of my poem “Pore Jud.”

Jud Fry. The prototype for Okie boys  
like my cousin, who once broke his infant  
son’s leg. Be like Jud: a bachelor  
and farm hand whose love was a stack  
of girlie mags. Raised to resist tears, to have  
no tenderness. Jud towered over everyone

with force. Fear. And the Juds of  
the southern plains wear violence like  
a cloak to survive a shallow view  
of manhood. Layers of insecurity disguised  
as a gun, a blade, or a body tight  
with carefully forged muscle.

It is the total lack of empathy and compassion, the inability to have healthy, meaningful relationships that are the result of this training. In the immediate sense, this Jud-like behavior causes chaos and destruction within a family or upon those who are attacked (especially women, children, and any marginalized peoples). Even if someone like Jud is or becomes wealthy and a member of the elite, the framework for this character ends in self-sabotage - and in Jud's case, premature death. The closing lines of my poem contemplate the repercussions of maintaining a Jud-like vision of masculinity: "...If the lesson is Jud, / the only outcome is an angry man / setting the town on fire with unattended rage."

I grow tired of the generational misinformation, the heartache of it, as Harjo says, and I wonder -- how have we really taught our children to live? If the lesson is Jud, the outcome is generations of boys learning that violence is what it takes to be a man. If I follow that logic, I conclude with the poem that follows "Pore Jud" in this manuscript, "Still Life." Of course there are exceptions to any rule, and there are men who are not defined by violence who live in the state of Oklahoma, but there are also many men who steer anger and feelings of aggression directly into weaponry, as in:

A boy no more than three heaves  
an axe against a defeated tree stump.  
His pit bull looks on from a distance,  
and I imagine, worries on behalf  
of an absent mother, at his bare legs  
and feet. The boy acts out manhood

as Oklahoma has taught him, each strike  
an act of violence waiting to bloom.

Beyond our kissing yards, police scour  
the street for a man who's bolted  
across a busy road, and as our boy  
finally climbs to the tree stump summit,

his angry mother runs out, yells,  
as if the boy had any other option  
than to learn too soon how to destroy.  
Across the street, a neighbor emerges

from a Jeep next to an RV the size  
of the house itself. He pulls a shotgun  
from the back seat, loads it. He looks through  
the sight, down the street, and holds steady.

Here, we see the young boy enacting rage onto a tree stump with an axe, mothered seemingly only by the family dog, while the speaker also observes two other men in the same vicinity.

Perhaps this is the Okie version of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, where the narrative follows one housebound voyeur's observations first out of curiosity, but then out of deep concern. The speaker of "Still Life" interprets the actions of male neighbors and passersby in varying stages of what she judges as dangerous behaviors informed by several generations of belief that violence is the way to manhood.

Witnesses to and victims of abuse use language and creative expression to inspire more just interactions and forms of resistance. Where people in positions of power exhibit predatory behavior and make statements – even laws – which discriminate against marginalized groups, many communities have taken steps to protect their rights and safety. Native women especially suffer at the hands of masculine violence, and are too often victims of domestic abuse, abduction, rape, and murder. From protests to hashtags to songs to poems, women use their words to challenge and interrogate the status quo. The purpose of a poem for many Indigenous women is

to push against patriarchy and racism by placing the body on the page. Poetry becomes an act of sovereignty and survival for Native women, an act of resistance through reclaimed narratives. To understand ourselves, we must understand our history, and many Native poets also look at the genealogy of violence, reaching into memory and ancestry. Joy Harjo writes a scathing review of the United States Government's role in the history of generational violence that Indigenous peoples suffer in *An American Sunrise*. In the poem "Exile of Memory," Harjo writes:

We are still in mourning.

The children were stolen from these beloved lands by the government.  
Their hair was cut, their toys and handmade clothes ripped  
From them. They were bathed in pesticides  
And now clean, given prayers in a foreign language to recite  
As they were lined up to sleep alone in their army-issued cages.

\* \* \*

Grief is killing us. Anger tormenting us. Sadness eating us with disease.  
Our young women are stolen, raped, and murdered.  
Our young men are killed by the police, or killing themselves and  
each other.

\* \* \*

This is a warning:

Heroin is a fool companion offering freedom from the gauntlet of history.  
Meth speeds you past it.  
Alcohol, elixir of false bravado, will take you over the edge of it.  
Enough chemicals and processed craving  
And you can't push away from the table.

If we pay enough, maybe we can buy ourselves back ("Exile of Memory" lines 44-60).

This poem reminds us of what is truly valuable amid the tumult: honor, memory, and the Earth itself. Harjo honors the world as a living being, admonishing our societal love of money over care for the planet, and that in response to the damage done, "Earth's womb tightens with the need to push," to rid herself of humanity ("Exile of Memory" line 118). The language leading up to this is a straightforward accusation about anger, torment, sadness, disease, rape, and murder.

There is no euphemism in these words, and here again we see a speaker who says “This is a warning,” though now not about an abstract concept of memory, but of the literal, physical ways - drugs, alcohol, processed foods - that the U.S. Government continues to oppress Indigenous people, even after the stolen children, theft of land, destruction of clothing, and forced language and religion. Many poems in *An American Sunrise* carry a similar weighted tone, a heavy anger and resentment rumbling underneath the words. “Exile of Memory” brings a verbal lashing to contemporary and past government leaders and policies, which inspired my more satirical poem “A Prayer at the Oklahoma Capitol Building:”

Bless the oil. Bless our fracked hearts.  
Bless earthquakes that shudder at night.  
Bless the wastewater from natural gas.  
Bless our Oilfield Prayer Day. Bless the gas  
and electric company, bless the cold,  
dark homes in winter. Bless those deep cuts  
to education, the history books printed  
last century. Bless the side jobs, two and three.  
Bless the health crisis and those who wear  
masks just under their noses. Bless  
the gurgle of a young mother’s rattling  
breaths, the small white pills that dot her floor.

What the politicians and oil-rich of Oklahoma have done to average Oklahomans is inexcusable, and the front that state leaders wear is that of a God-fearing Christian. This poem began as a question: what would the prayers of these politicians sound like? What it became was a sharp

criticism costumed in an exaggerated prayer. If only those politicians were ever so honest. As Oklahomans navigate the state's many deep struggles, though, there is always somehow joy in gathering with family or friends to tell stories of way back when, or sing a favorite song. Memories, in some cases, are relief from the starkness of daily reality, even if they are a bit untrue or a little over-embellished. Joy Harjo reminds us that we must remember always, that "Rivers are the old roads, as are songs, to traverse memory;" that we must emerge "...from [this] story, dripping with the waters of memory" ("Washing My Mother's Body" lines 139-140). Just as Harjo teaches us, we must never forget our histories, and we must always continue to sing.

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FOR REVIEW ONLY

*OKLAHOMA HISTORY*



Cherokee County

Just over the state line

I am that interstate driver  
pulled into her gravity.

How many casinos,  
deer carcasses, roadside  
crosses can I count before I  
run out of memory.

Memory –

where I keep prom night.

Where my dress got ruined  
& John sniffed cocaine  
from the ash tray of his old  
black truck. It was here

that I found my body, a fact  
as true as weather:  
a breach of contract, a betrayal;  
An ebbing water quick to return  
in the onslaught of spring.

Choctaw, Kiowa, Creek.

I cross nation after nation, return  
to the riddle & half-truth of catching up –

where the narrative of life follows the shore  
of a swelling river that will not hold  
in the storm of family.

FOR REVIEW ONLY

Part I: Wild Strawberries

## Oklahoma History

From the back seat of the Tuna Clipper,  
that beige '82 Chevy Impala

built for grandmothers and drug dealers,  
I ask my parents about the red dirt.

The radio twangs vintage dust bowl songs  
while Mom and Dad talk bows and violins.

Dogwoods and redbuds dot the countryside  
as jet trails crisscross wide cerulean sky.

We're on 64 home to Tahlequah,  
from Creek Nation back into Cherokee.

The power plant, stacked and smoking, signals  
our return. Then a train, whose full-blown whistle

blasts a dissonant symphony. I know  
Wilma Mankiller is Cherokee chief

and the lake nearby is called Tenkiller.  
I wonder why their surnames speak so mean.

With its native tongues and immigrant pasts,  
I imagine the dirt full of blood and bodies –

that clotted clay made of plasma, platelets.  
My parents' grown-up talk of double-stops

permeates the hum of rubber and road  
with lyrical protests in ill-tuned chords

when I ask them, again *why's the dirt red*.  
They tell me *it's the iron* and let it drop.

## What I Learned in Eastern Oklahoma

I learned the Christian pledge. I learned praise songs.  
On a cool autumn day, the kind where the grass

turns brown and the trees are orange and yellow,  
and there's a slight smell of firewood in the air,

my teacher had her six students making calls  
from the living room phone of her mobile home

to a Tulsa TV network. We, as children, protested  
the airing of a crime series we knew nothing about,

except that it might show guns, blood, and cussing.  
There was too much sin already and we need only

to worship God. Two years later, my parents drove  
me to Tulsa every weekend for music lessons.

Hour and a half each way. We'd listen to news radio  
or jazz in the car. I heard a story about a riot in Tulsa

years ago, the Greenwood neighborhood where  
Black folks lived was attacked. Hundreds likely died

and few were white. How could my teachers not teach  
this? Where were grownups to stop the violence,

to help children running from fire and mothers  
chasing after them, pierced with bullets?

## Sunday School Lesson

I was eight years old when this boy touched me  
more than I wanted, as if all the flesh that made me

was a buffet for the hungriest hands. They fluttered  
up and down, agitated wings of a scavenger bird,

furiously searching. When I used the word *bastard*  
to teach him that his hands didn't have permission,

he cried. Our Sunday School teacher saw the boy's  
snotted face. *She's mean* he howled. No one asked

why I said it. The teacher read to us from a book  
with watercolor white men in robes and beards.

A woman was in trouble for loving too much.  
She stood in judgment, facing fistfuls of stones.

I wondered if she was really so bad, and if I'd  
end up on the felt board one day with cut-out

prophets and farm animals nearby. In one panel,  
a Felt Me seducing the Felt Boy. In another, Felt Me

facing a fistful of stones for allowing the Felt Boy's  
touch. When we left class for big church, a mother,

full-skirted and sour, stomped down the hall under  
harsh fluorescent light. Every wrinkle on her face

bent and contorted with disgust. She demanded  
I apologize. Said I called her son names. *Nice girls*

*don't talk like that* she said. What happened next  
may have been my apology. Or maybe silence.

Me, hidden behind my father's legs as my mother  
publicly grieved my words to such a nice boy.

An Open Letter to Deer Woman

I am told not to say your name,  
as if the softest muttering could  
become a prayer. A conjuring.  
They tell me you're dangerous.  
*If you don't look she can't bewitch you,*  
they say and *check her feet for hooves.*  
Do you lurk in shadows, waiting  
to hear your name? As if you have  
nothing better to do but prowl  
among hemlock and walnut trees.  
Did they ask what happened  
in those woods, how your knees  
came to bend that way? Did you  
curl up with the spirit of a doe,  
wake as a deer in headlights?  
I imagine your thin nose widening,  
ears grown to a point with light  
brown hair shadowing your skin.

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## A Recipe for My Childhood

My uncle and his gold-tooth smile.  
The red clay Frankoma trivet with  
Sequoyah's alphabet under the heat  
  
of a Sunday pot roast. Sounds of  
A sung benediction. Grandparents  
and history and blood and memory  
  
tucked inside a volume of photos  
from decades past. The quiet roar  
of an ecstatic crowd as Oklahoma  
  
makes a touchdown on the T.V.,  
the altar, in front of my father's nap.  
After which he will make casserole  
  
for supper while my mother tends  
her orchids: shelves full of fuchsia  
blooms and potted stem cuttings.

## Grandma's Crayon Wall

I'm seven years old and obsessed  
with Shirley Temple. Auburn curls,  
black Mary Janes, lacy pink dresses.

I draw her disfigured likeness, an  
impressionistic rendering, less a  
Picasso line drawing, more cubist

color study. In the kitchen, there  
are rainbows and crayon stick arms  
on rounded bodies, a spray of art

made with care by each of Ruby's  
grandchildren. I gaze at the gallery  
set on country white wallpaper

with tiny blue Forget-Me-Nots.  
The late summer Oklahoma sun  
heats the room as bright beams

slice through fluorescent lighting  
and I wonder if a girl like Shirley  
made stick-figure drawings, too.



Wild Strawberries

Just after I learn the mountains  
are not a mural painted at the end  
of the world, rocks slick with emerald  
moss surrounds us from all sides.  
Damp twigs snap underfoot as we hunt.  
Will these be like red grocery store fruit,  
plump decapitations neatly boxed –  
those gems of the produce section?  
I wonder what the rest of their plant  
bodies look like. Will it hurt  
when I tear the newborn flesh,  
and do I ask the forest permission?  
Then my mother, kneeling into mud,  
calls. Her cupped palm rises to meet me  
offering tiny, seeded rubies. A prayer.

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## Epileptic

1.

I'm in kindergarten and my class moves  
single file to the gym, but the hallway goes  
off without me. I go into other rooms.  
*Weird girl*, they say. A teacher asks, then yells,  
*where are you going*. I walk and walk. I do not answer.  
And where do I go? Under water, or  
a tunnel. It turns inside out and drops me  
into muffled sounds -- and vision like looking  
through the eye doctor's phoropter  
before the clicking, adjusting, lens by lens  
to 20/20. Routine medication in three  
and four syllables of inch-long pills  
kill a perfectly good  
breakfast.

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2.

“...I wander’d off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.”  
- Walt Whitman

Once I saw the rings of Saturn, through a telescope  
as tall as my Dad. And when the Challenger burst,  
I watched it with my classmates on a bulky TV

at the top of a metal cart from the school library.  
We sat cross-legged in a half-circle on the stiff carpet  
and gazed at the fuzzy screen as if it were a makeshift

Christmas tree, topped with an angel of coaxial cables  
and radio frequencies. Months later, I stood in line  
for Space Mountain with my Dad. My cheeks flushed

under July’s endless sun, nausea taking over. I was afraid  
to faint. I was afraid to say I wanted to leave the line  
after our long wait. I convinced myself we’d finally sit

in the big plastic bucket seats, the cool indoor air  
on our faces; fly through galaxies and meteor showers.  
But I don’t remember anything past the incline

into Disney’s stratosphere. I held my father’s hand,  
and the moment a strobing light met us on the track’s  
incline, I went limp at the quick of Walt’s imagination.

3.

How to prepare for an electrical brain scan,  
or 20th century witchcraft, or a monster

hooked to Doctor Frankenstein's machine:  
no caffeine, no food. A good sleepless night

to get in the mood for a storm of brain waves  
arriving through quick strokes of a needle

on paper, then a screen with tiny mountains -  
peaks and valleys that I'm told will prove why

I'm strange. Long white wires sprout from  
my scalp. I feel like the monster's bride with

more than a dozen tentacles weighing down  
my sable hair, electricity surging in waves that I

imagine resemble her chalky zig-zagged streak.  
Then the flashing lights experiment, the forced

hyperventilation as I lay on the cold, beige cot  
in the corner of a tiny office labeled *Neurology*.

I have to close my eyes, but I'm not allowed  
to sleep. To dream. Somewhere in between,

in the ether, my mind takes off by herself.  
She draws a landscape of peaks and valleys.

Self Portrait as Red Dirt

It's hard to miss me, sitting up against  
prairie grasses. I'm the *Clay Red* crayon.

Made you look twice when you drove  
by farmland with tiny copper cliffs.

I turn lakes and streams into shades  
of rust and blood. You saw me on

an embankment: I left a trail of scarlet  
rose rocks--my heart, my sandstone

love notes. When left high and dry,  
I've been known to act up. I poured over

your ancestors' homes when the wind  
took me flying under doors, through

keyholes, in clean cups tucked away  
after supper. I'm a coat of iron oxide

on the prized family Ford. I fill the soles  
of shoes. I'm the wall of sand, the storm

pounding your front door. I'll leave a note,  
a pile of grit blown through the keyhole

and watch to see if you stay, or if you'll  
pack up and leave all my mess behind.

## Sink

I stand at Grandma's kitchen sink with a fistful  
of rotten orchid roots. My mother doesn't say *it's okay*  
or tell me how to not kill orchids. We stand at Grandma's  
kitchen sink examining the shriveled plant while she,  
cold and disgruntled, marks time in the hospital.  
Later, we visit Grandma and learn her small intestine  
is a tangled root and she waits in a state of hospice.  
Her wig is at home on its stand. Her white head  
is bald with a map of blue veins, alopecia exposed.  
How is it to be here and not. My mother and I  
breathe softly by the elevated bed, as if we could  
steal up all of the oxygen in the room. Machines  
hum and hiss. An earthquake rumbles beneath us.

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## Sundown

See the horizon, the prism of plum  
pink orange that bleeds like watercolor  
into Oklahoma night. Look at that first

star through the skeletons of winter trees.  
Do you sigh? Do you think of the divine  
or the vastness of an open prairie? Or--

do you imagine torches held by white hands.  
Even the music gets run out of town at night.  
Even cars running on empty are afraid to stop.

Don't look away from the body hanging,  
the creak of branches, the bubbling creek.  
How much blood that burr oak has seen.

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Storm Season

Every year we're damaged goods  
when twisters rewrite the landscape.  
But we're charmed by the breeze  
and soft gray light of clouded afternoons.

Uncles aunts brothers sisters  
chase lightning in the bed of a rusted truck  
(until the tempest, loud as a morning train,  
tosses our hair and slaps our cheeks red).

Our mamas papas cuss the sky. We retreat  
to the cellar basement bathroom.

We clutch our dogs, the radios.  
We hold hands when we pray.  
We wait for the gods to pass over.

We retch at the thought of breaking  
into years-old cans of quasi-meat, neat  
in rows with syruped peaches, double-A  
batteries, and bottles of Dr. Pepper. We know  
we're spared when skunks perfume the night  
and rivers stop swelling to meet us.



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Part II: Prairie Grasses

## Laurey's Dream

After the Rodgers & Hammerstein 1955 musical, *Oklahoma!*

Laurey falls into a sunset fever dream  
hung in orange sky: chalky, smeared

with white cirrus wisps. She reaches  
out from the shadows for herself;

another woman vested in the same  
cornflower blue dress, crowned

in identical plaits of blond, curled hair.  
Laurey falls away as her doppelgänger

turns, opens her eyes. A new Laurey,  
awakened from a long slumber, sets

her gaze on a new Curly. Old Curly stands  
back in shadows as she runs, then leaps

into new Curly's arms, then the air;  
the pastel blue sky on cotton clouds.

She takes flight in this new freedom  
of desire as distant trees fade and tall

prairie grasses dissolve. Just Curly  
and Laurey, but not Curly. Not Laurey.

What passion lives in this elixir  
dream? Whose desire dances circles?

## The New Rituals

“I had to make peace with being female in this world.” - Joy Harjo

I held a furnace in my flushed cheeks from  
embarrassment of a blooming body,

and I learned rituals for feminine offences.  
Razor to skin in repetition. Erasure of full,

dark stubble. Paint, powder, and rouge  
to sculpt a clean, angelic face. Masking

the pungent musk of puberty with a clump  
of perfumed wax and silicon. At church

I heard prayers for teenage purity.  
A photo display of various aborted fetuses

covered a wall in the chapel entryway.  
I watched other girls pledge virginity

to their fathers, rings stamped with *True Love  
Waits* on the daughters untrained fingers.

I was taught I sinned because I bled  
a fistful of garnets between my thighs.

It Was 1995, 2nd Period History

There was always a hardback book with dark lettering  
that read *OKLAHOMA HISTORY* on each desk.  
Each day we sat in rows, filled out pages of notes.

A T.V. stared, unblinking, from the corner  
and played a constant news cycle on mute.  
The teacher graded papers with his red pen

as we worked puzzles using words like *treaty* and *Sequoyah*.  
We copied each others' answers. On the T.V.  
there were blond women in suits and fresh manicures

who bobbed their heads, mouthed words  
as an explosion played behind them. On the T.V.  
*Oklahoma City Federal Building*. The scene played again:

sudden destruction, a hollowed-out shape  
of a jagged crescent where the front half  
of a structure once stood. Now debris. Now dust.

It looped again. We picked up our pens,  
wrote words in the crossword like *treason*  
and *insurrection*.

## What Happened in Tulsa

To Sarah Page of Tulsa, teenage elevator operator,  
what really happened downtown that May day  
in 1921? I imagine your heart pounding. I imagine  
one scenario: Richard reached for your hand  
in a solitary moment, where the world fell away,  
where a white girl and a black boy could be  
something more than a Jim Crow crime scene.  
Maybe you loved him. Or another scenario:  
the elevator's unsteady climb prepared the scene  
for Richard's downfall, the biggest misstep anyone  
could invent for a quiet Memorial Day afternoon.  
He tripped, grabbed your arm, you screamed  
out of shock, or fear. Did you know the witness  
would call on a clan of white men in government  
clothes, a lynch mob in uniform by day and night?  
Soon after, a crowd of white men raged on north Tulsa,  
and now we search for mass graves in Greenwood,  
replace the word *riot* with *massacre*, and I wonder  
why it took so long for me to see the layers  
of division where a woven tapestry should be.

## Rose Rocks

A red earth jewel, a bloom from blood  
and Cherokee tears. Sometimes, a spray  
where the tears join together to sing.

Their songs are prayers dropped  
decades ago, planted by the ancestors  
for us to find along the highway. So we

remember. We hold them like diamonds  
in our palms. Each rose like a hand-drawn  
blossom on the front of my 9th grade

composition book. When I learned how  
to draw a rose, they multiplied across biology,  
U.S. history, and English notes in flourishes

of red and black ballpoint pen ink as if  
each was the name of the boy I loved.  
Like Christopher. My 14-year-old heart

pounded as he walked another girl to class.  
I held my rose rock, my tears, and scribbled  
over his name. A choir of roses just for me.

Trickster

Her spirit is a cyclone that splits May in half.  
Wild thing. Coyote. A trickster. The memory  
of that night is an Instagram story, a high  
unpacked days later. Shared smoke. Fighting  
sleep in the back of his car. The smell of weed  
in the upholstery. How she slapped his hands  
away and prayed *God don't let me die tonight I'm sorry  
for sneaking out. For getting high.* And she became  
an offering, an unsteady calf birthed to the streets  
from the belly of a low-riding Impala.  
On 5<sup>th</sup> Street, she found herself alive.  
Barely beyond the memory of her Quinceañera,  
those black eyes keep her Aztec ancestors  
framed under long black hair on toffee skin.  
Gold rings on each finger: flowers, filigree, and 15.  
Thick chain on her neck and a gold semi-automatic.

## Tintype

A couple sits inside a sepia scene -  
rigid, stern, and uncomfortable.

Tahlequah, I.T., 1863 is scrawled  
in stately cursive on the back.

I'm sure that a man stands behind  
a wooden box on stilts, cloak draped

over his head as he steals their images  
onto tin plates. The photography

studio would have been downtown,  
where the Cherokee first rebuilt

after removal to Indian Territory.  
The woman holds a crumpled kerchief

and rests her hands politely in the lap  
of her handmade calico wedding dress.

I imagine her patting sweat from that  
dainty forehead, fixing dark wisps

of hair fallen from her tight bun.  
She smiles like Mona Lisa, vaguely

amused. Her husband wears a string  
bow tie with dark jacket and trousers.

Long hair is pushed behind his ears.  
His skin is leathered from work,

lips pursed in irritation. His eyes  
pierce through the photo, icy and light.

I think he might jump out of the scene  
and pace the floor, but he poses,

disgruntled, as a man holding a flashbulb  
says, *now move your head just so, like this.*



Deer Woman Poses for R.C. Gorman

After the painting "Posing for RC" by Tom Farris

I bet you think he died of natural causes,

but RC's mistake was whistling after dark:  
windows down from Gallup back to Taos

and a powwow tune on his wind-chapped lips.

Bad medicine fell on him that night,  
when Deer Woman came draped in moonlight.

She went to Taos with Rudolph Clay

where he posed her like all his models,  
like she was one of those Earth Mothers.

Not once did he see murder in her heart.

The line was his music and he conducted  
in black grease pencil. He traced and smudged

obsidian hair, her horns cloaked in midcentury

bouffant (tied up simply with peach silk).  
His lapis ring followed each contour before

the brushing of a Pendleton blanket, whose sanguine

weave held crosses in black and gray, a collection  
of crucifixions. In the foreground, a pinch-pot

marked with black stags. (He must have noticed

her hooves as) he smoothed the paint of her  
porcelain frame, nude except the black-winged

eyeliner and thick, dark fur-trimmed ankles.

A Good Girl

My grandparents paid me to lose weight --  
thousands of dollars toward disordered

eating and organ failure. *Such a pretty face*,  
I was told, as if it wouldn't count for anything.

Not if the numbers on the scale never moved.  
They wanted me to become skinny as a stock

of ragweed, blown around in the rough wind  
on the Oklahoma plains. What sickness

they sew in the air with yellow-green pollen.  
What beauty is there in a weed who throws

pain and misery to her passersby, and what  
strength will she have against strong gusts?

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## Anatomy of an Eating Disorder

My body has never been mine, but I dress  
and sit beside it, or just behind – the way  
the brain can cut itself in two. The way

an epileptic walks a hallway, reads concern  
on unfamiliar faces with no power to change  
course. I am twenty-one and have decided

to cut myself up; to play the new song of myself.  
The thin veil of health the reason I am bribed  
to tame my body. Good girls are always in control:

one can green beans, tomato paste, salt to taste.  
Toast, no butter. Tap water. Repeat  
to become invisible. Repeat to finally be seen.

My body. A body. A thing to ribbon like a 4H hog,  
and the family agrees: it must be altered, carved up.  
Here, the taste of Thanksgiving is somewhere

between sadness and fury. I eat my own cardboard  
beside buttery pies and glazed meat. Here,  
I am made of embarrassment, where words are loudest

when unspoken. I appear as through the optician's tool  
of the family that asks: *one or two? One...or two?*  
Meanwhile, I am told I can still suck the saccharine

marrow out of life; that carnal, corporate salt-fat –  
through discipline all things are possible.  
I have decided to cut myself up; to become, finally.

Deer Woman's Blues

My words bloom as I sing to the flower moon.  
My heart's in full bloom as I sing to Polaroid you.

These boots so worn their red turned brown  
like every rose you gave. Blood roses on  
my mouth and brow, dark buds, a parting gift.  
Blood roses on my finger from a single prick.

My words bloom as I sing to the flower moon.  
My heart's in full bloom as I sing to Polaroid you.

This thorny love, this cavern, your night melody  
unraveled. With you I know how lonely feels.  
I sing and my words break into morning.  
This bottle keeps dark from coming

My words bloom as I sing to the flower moon.  
My heart's in full bloom as I sing to Polaroid you.

The flower moon sits in full bloom and I  
flick the light, watch flames black the edges of you  
What can keep dark from coming but flames  
and white plumes on the riverbed

My words bloom as I sing to the flower moon.  
My heart's in full bloom as I sing to Polaroid you.

Price of Admission

My first kiss was not planned, but an uninvited  
rum-soaked plunge through my numb, untrained lips.

His tongue a claw in my arcade – an urgent churning  
like an oil derrick drilling the land. It's the first lesson

in the classroom of Woman. No prerequisites,  
admission based on the space between legs,

the slightest puff of breast. That night the snow fell  
fresh on our hot faces, onto wet red dirt and I'm forgiven

for being a girl in this world, for not seeing my own hesitation.  
I lost time standing there, rocking in a cage of man –

arms locked, head bowed tall over mine, as if  
in his lustful prayer there could have been light between us.

## Vespers

We are sixteen and arrogant. We follow curiosity  
in the cab of your F-150, skip what we told

our mothers about church. Our prayers are songs  
pumped loud through speakers. We sing hymns

of Kurt Cobain, flush against our wind-flung hair.  
Tonight, there will be no God domestication, no tongues

of babel or hands held up in false expression. It is October  
and dusk courts us. We believe in the damp smell

of earth and desire; our imagined cages of smallness.  
At the end of Cherokee Street is an open mouth:

yours, mine, an iron gate. Here is a congregation  
of quiet memories, where headstones stubble the hills.

We think there is nothing to undo but ourselves.  
Permission comes from nowhere – everywhere – to dance

under the wide moon. We become loud. Our dance  
becomes song and our song is prayer. Is it Hecate

who grants us liminality, or that cloven-foot woman  
we've heard so much about. (Don't say her name. She'll hear.)

The moon shows us verses, gray angels. A persimmon tree  
points through plump gold fruit (gray in blue-black dark)

to four men lined single file, heads bowed. Under cassocks,  
slim legs dissolve to white talc, then nothing. A ritual looped

and eternal rites chanted in familiar, unknowable sound.  
You run and you run through the silver night, the dark

chrysanthemum blooms; fumble your keys like a wind chime.  
You gun, she fishtails. We stumble from one night to another.

But what do we know of night. We live inside a dream,  
too compact to let the air in or the devils out.

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Part III: Summit

A Prayer at the Oklahoma Capitol Building

Bless the oil. Bless our fracked hearts.  
Bless earthquakes that shudder at night.  
Bless the wastewater from natural gas.  
Bless our Oilfield Prayer Day. Bless the gas  
and electric company, bless the cold,  
dark homes in winter. Bless those deep cuts  
to education, the history books printed  
last century. Bless the side jobs, two and three.  
Bless the health crisis and those who wear  
masks just under their noses. Bless  
the gurgle of a young mother's rattling  
breaths, the small white pills that dot her floor.



A History of Violence

It's ninety degrees and the trees are thick  
with summer. The bullet of my Hyundai  
shoots through the dense muscle of Tulsa.  
At the corner of Cheyenne and Archer  
is Deadtown Tavern. Men cue up at tables  
behind us. Suddenly, pool sticks and curses fly.  
A swarm of black leather and rockabilly boys,  
just like the Greasers in *The Outsiders*, gathers.  
Jeans cuffed, hair slicked, knives pulled,  
bottles shatter. The owner wipes his hands  
on dirty jeans. Tulsa's in a coma and the bar  
is her hospital bed. She's got an empty pocket  
where luck used to be and I am afraid the rumble  
beneath this city will have our throats by morning --  
be at our backs with a lead pipe, and just as day breaks,  
blood will roll red streaks down the neck of this town.

Singing Along to Amy Grant, Post-Evangelical Upbringing

I scroll through forgotten music on YouTube.  
*Love will find a way*, Amy sings from 1985, and

I sing along as I drive down hometown streets.  
Her perfect white smile is bared to the camera,

perhaps as a safety signal, perhaps as a charm,  
a spell I once escaped. I think of the tremors

that flew from my ears to my amygdala, years  
after I finally accepted that my leaving was less

rebellion and more preservation. That pomp  
of teased, curly brown hair pulled halfway up

like a babysitter I had. Add padded shoulders,  
leopard print blazer, and metallic pink blouse.

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To Virginia With Love

George & Virginia dance to Ricky Nelson –  
a Route 66 diner, orange-glow juke in the corner.  
Cokes & fried chicken sit crisp  
on a red-checkered tabletop slick with sweat rings.

Avon scent on her pink spring dress  
a faint saccharine mist  
through smoke-incensed air as she twists  
into his arms and unfurls again,

black marks crayoned  
from wide heel to tile floor  
with each new dip & spin. Wind kicks  
up her skirt, through the open door whose bell  
clinks as thick Tulsa air ghosts through.

Gorged green-blue thunderheads sit thick  
as two scissortails float by, drop & lift,  
wings pushed back as swimmers in water.

Record clicks to Santo & Johnny, George  
slips a small card into Virginia's warm hand –  
a freckle-faced boy presenting a heart in his arms,  
*Be Mine* glittered gold on soft cream paper.

*To Virginia with Love –  
Forever Yours, George*

scrolled in thin black ink.  
They unwind each other to be wound back,  
together. They spin in a daze to Hank Williams.

## Saint Wilma

For Wilma Mankiller, first female Chief of the Cherokee Nation

I was a child when you were Chief.  
You were not the stoic, headdressed man

on the *Big Chief* notepads at the school store  
of Cherokee Elementary, where I learned

to write CWY in Sequoyah's syllabary.  
A Cherokee feminist with the surname

Mankiller (who insisted it was earned),  
you did not look like touristy Chieftains

outside truck stops on I-40 and Route 66.  
Years later, I bought a novena candle.

Instead of Our Lady of Guadalupe,  
you stand tall, smiling in your turquoise

ribbon dress. You hold a single feather  
and wear a crown of warm, golden light.

You are a solar eclipse with sun rays  
beaming around you, just like Our Lady.

Pore Jud

After the Rodgers & Hammerstein 1955 Musical, *Oklahoma!*

Jud Fry. The prototype for Okie boys  
like my cousin, who once broke his infant

son's leg. Be like Jud: a bachelor  
and farm hand whose love was a stack

of girlie mags. Raised to resist tears, to have  
no tenderness. Jud towered over everyone

with force. Fear. And the Juds of  
the southern plains wear violence like

a cloak to survive a shallow view  
of manhood. Layers of insecurity disguised

as a gun, a blade, or a body tight  
with carefully forged muscle. If the lesson is Jud,

the only outcome is an angry man  
setting the town on fire with unattended rage.

Still Life

A boy no more than three heaves  
    an axe against a defeated tree stump.  
    His pit bull looks on from a distance,  
and I imagine, worries on behalf

    of an absent mother, at his bare legs  
and feet. The boy acts out manhood  
as Oklahoma has taught him, each strike  
    an act of violence waiting to bloom.

Beyond our kissing yards, police scour  
    the street for a man who's bolted  
    across a busy road, and as our boy  
finally climbs to the tree stump summit,

    his angry mother runs out, yells,  
as if the boy had any other option  
than to learn too soon how to destroy.

    Across the street, a neighbor emerges

from a Jeep next to an RV the size  
    of the house itself. He pulls a shotgun  
    from the back seat, loads it. He looks through  
the sight, down the street, and holds steady.

## What Happened in Tulsa

To Sarah Page of Tulsa, teenage elevator operator,  
what really happened downtown that May day  
in 1921? I imagine your heart pounding. I imagine  
one scenario: Richard reached for your hand  
in a solitary moment, where the world fell away,  
where a white girl and a black boy could be  
something more than a Jim Crow crime scene.  
Maybe you loved him. Or another scenario:  
the elevator's unsteady climb prepared the scene  
for Richard's downfall, the biggest misstep anyone  
could invent for a quiet Memorial Day afternoon.  
He tripped, grabbed your arm, you screamed  
out of shock, or fear. Did you know the witness  
would call on a clan of white men in government  
clothes, a lynch mob in uniform by day and night?  
Soon after, a crowd of white men raged on north Tulsa -  
now we search for mass graves on the northside,  
replace the word riot for massacre, and I wonder  
why it took so long for me to see the layers  
of division where a woven tapestry should be.

## The Life and Death and Afterlife of Elmer McCurdy

McCurdy is buried in Summit View Cemetery  
in Guthrie, Oklahoma.

Your corpse was discovered, once again,  
in 1976 in the midst of filming a TV show.

You were hanging from the gallows in a  
boardwalk fun house, where scents of popcorn

and salt water must have wafted all around  
as patrons craned their necks to say *He looks fake*

while tossing empty Coke bottles at your perfectly  
macabre body. You must have swayed like silent

wind chimes. No fingers, toes, or ears were left  
on to your arsenic-steeped skin. Bullet casing, no bullet.

When they removed your jaw, a penny dropped out.  
Did Charon deny you a ferry across the river?



## Deer Woman Makes Grape Dumplings

A tub of fresh moscatos, sweet scarlet  
globes all plucked from seedless clusters,

sits in waiting as Deer Woman hoists one  
hoof in, then the other. She marks time.

Crisp skins crunch as grapes gasp and burst  
under the weight of her body; sharpened edges

of two-pronged feet. It becomes music  
as she marks time to a distant drum,

the memory of removal, the language  
of mourning. This is the sound of those songs

at night. This is the drum that beats into  
morning. Her ritual becomes ruddy,

crimson compote. She sings, prays, then ladles  
cup after cup of broth, strained of excess

skin and flesh to bathe in cane sugar. This  
is the potion. The way to a man's heart:

temptress to the knight, veiled in succulent  
grape gravy. And the pastry. She breaks

the butter down slowly, pushes a thin  
metal fork through the cold, creamy brick

into blankets of flour and sugar. She moves  
her newborn dough as a fawn is nudged

by its mother. *Here, go this way*, she purrs  
into a Pyrex bowl. *Now turn over. There.*

Surely Joy Harjo Also Scrambles Eggs

There must be words  
to hang onto, unravel.  
Her tattooed body never  
undesired, her tongue  
always placed to sing.

She must wake early,  
drink coffee (black, no sugar),  
scramble eggs to Joan Jett  
or The Clash. Miles Davis,  
Muddy Waters. She'll read

a note from Simon Ortiz,  
curse the newspaper, mark it  
red after staying out late  
at a jukebox bar with whiskey

(and somewhere in the bathroom  
or parking lot is a lusty couple,  
a quick-pulled knife, and spirit  
woman hitching at 3 AM).

Next day, she'll jazz  
her sax, talk a record  
into being, shoot a music  
video, rock Coltrane  
louder than ever.

All this before noon,  
when she'll hop a flight  
to OKC, read love, sex,  
lust, rage then sing, or  
was it praying,  
or a dream.

Indian Territory, 1889

When the gunshots boomed permission  
to take the untamed land, you drove a horse

through the Cherokee strip. How long  
you must have waited. Days, even, before finding

Mulhall on the wild prairie. Your wagon,  
wife and children, the cow that followed.

What hope you had as you watched the kids  
run along on stick horses after a dinner

of dried meats and drop-fried biscuits.  
Did you sing as apples stewed, after seeing

the people with dark skin whose lives  
were hung by a litany of cheated treaties?

You must have seen their wagons stuck  
in rivers, full of salted government pork.

ONLY

FOR REVIEW

Cimarron

First there were tents sprawled across red dirt.  
Then, a town with bricks like loaves of cinnamon

stacked on sand and stone. Masonry from the ghosts  
of statehood stands in steep-roofed Victorian memory.

What were your dreams of more than a century ago -  
that your progeny would know the same plains?

The river may snake more to the south now,  
but I cross the Cimarron bridge and wonder:

was the water clean, were the sandbars the same  
shade of red. Did you look out on the sunrise river  
to see fog lift slowly, like quiet spirits at dawn?

ONLY

FOR REVIEW

Attending an Easter Vigil in Tulsa, Oklahoma

Outside, redwood blooms push through ruby shells  
as we, in darkness, watch incense float out the door.  
Boys in pinstripe and girls in pastel ankle socks,

then me: incomplete, alone. My mind gathers  
in the purple pattern spread across a dress,  
then a dark stain on the pew. Bishops gather

with catechumen, candles, and crucifer. I think  
something of a prayer. When oil is pressed on faces  
of men and women, I count my sins and hide them.

When organ pipes exhume the dead, I hide my sin  
in thirds and fifths. When the lights go up, my truth  
hides in my singing mouth, in cracks and dripping wax.

ONLY

FOR REVIEW

Chief John Ross Cemetery, Cherokee Nation

On this day in Cherokee county,  
a five-point earthquake shook me awake.

A column of heat still plumes from the earth  
like a spirit escaping an ancient tomb.

As I lay my palm against the chill  
of your headstone, I know I'm made of you:

rerouted bloodlines, tiny strands that vein  
tangled across this wounded landscape.

I don't have to tell you this land is breaking.  
I ask you: what difference is there

between the fracked, rumbling ground  
and the dark of dust clouding the sky?

As you lived, tall clouds of dirt pushed through  
the land like an Exodus plague.

This soil will always have us picking grit  
from between our teeth, planting socks

in window frames against slaps of red dirt.  
We'll wake from a jolt, the neighborhood ass

braying low and endless as we pray  
that the good plates don't chip, framed photos

won't crash glass to the floor,  
and blood that spills in the war is worth it.

Notes from the HiLo Club

Welcome to the temple of Dionysus  
whose only god is hunger. Witness

a prairie ghetto, a sideshow basement  
of fetish as night creeps into morning.

This man is a day-drink short of vomit  
and leans into a woman whose marriage

is as fluid as each sentence he drools –  
his alphabet careless as a weary rainbow

of lights. Here, I am the eye of the storm:  
my date buys drinks for another girl,

her smile dim in a theater of bad decisions.  
Even the dog drinks a vodka soda.

ONLY

FOR REVIEW

Aubade

At night we go to Mr. Bill's, where beer  
the color of healthy urine is served for fifty  
cents a glass on Tuesdays. Smoke from dozens  
of cigarettes convalesces into every open space –  
between strands of hair, into the fibers of your  
winter coat. Drunk girls grab at us, in awe  
of your dark hand wrapped around my pale  
fingers. We take spirits before succumbing,  
once again, to what we swore would end:  
the repeated motif of us under cheap sheets  
in my tiny one-bedroom near campus. I watch  
the sleep that takes you from me & know  
your waking will bring us back to zero.  
What stains the heart like social anxiety –  
had we been somewhere other than here,  
where not a century has passed since Tulsa  
rioted at the darkness of one man against  
the whiteness of a girl...had we been.  
At the edge of light, you appear in soft  
focus. The curved tip of nose, the stillest  
lashes guard a well of dreams. An engine revs  
in the distance. An alarm clock rings nearby.



Golden Shovel for Broken Hearts

after "Flood" by Janet McAdams

When will we forgive everything -  
the chaos between lovers and friends. Will  
one forget before the other, the hurt disappear,

and hearts bleed back together into  
a deep, fibrous scar? But what if this  
wound is too much, or too thick

to forget, and the water  
for baptism has dried. Love crawls into  
the deepest crevasses, sometimes last

to emerge. If ever the long night  
turns and Kronos gives back our time, when  
the day is a handful of lovers, we

might fold back toward each other. Leave (un)told  
truths buried in another time. We might each,  
once again, bloom. In some other

dimension we'll sprout, green to what  
grievances swelled under foot. Had we  
held a light above the path. Had

we unraveled each hurt memory, kept  
them in storage on the top shelf, each secret  
swept away before the guests arrive. One for  
you, one for me; for all those years.

## Learning How to Pray

At the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo, we wash Oklahoma  
off of hands, out of mouths in a pool -- the *tsukubai*.

We use bamboo cups with long handles  
and are taught the ways to make peace.

One does not enter the garden of gods with murder  
or desire in the heart. We marvel at the quiet, tall trees,

how the city does not seem to be around us.  
Our hearts are small in this sprawl of temple.

We go to the altar in silence, drop Yen  
into a wooden box. I want to pray,

but only know how to kneel, to cross  
myself, to bow my head. A bright mantis

looks on from her perch, just like one who lived  
in my Oklahoma yard - bright against the red dirt.

I remember seeing a video of a female,  
tearing another, limb by head by limb.

She devoured each piece of her lover.  
Her greenness, her triangle head –

the way that head can turn so far without the body  
moving. What alien beings so common among us.

Now I lock eyes with this one. I move one way,  
she mirrors. We rock back and forth at the altar

as if I'm in the way of her prey. Her prayer.  
Do the same rules of purification apply to her –

the washing, the peace. Has she murdered yet,  
and does she disrupt the gods in this temple as I do,

saturated in desire? I secretly tell the little femme fatale:  
I do not know how to ask a god for favor. I offer only

ignorance at the feet of thousands of years' grace.  
Ages, then, cleansed by the waters, released to the wind.