How We Became Human

New and Selected Poems

JOY HARJO
or all places, so she could leave, leap
into the sound she had always heard,
a voice like water, like the gods weaving
against sundown in a scarlet light.

The child now hears names in her sleep.
They change into other names, and into others.
It is the ground murmuring, and Mount Saint Helens
erupts as the harmonic motion of a child turning
inside her mother’s belly waiting to be born
to begin another time.

And we go on, keep giving birth and watch
ourselves die, over and over.
And the ground spinning beneath us
goes on talking.

THE WOMAN HANGING FROM
THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR WINDOW

She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor
window. Her hands are pressed white against the
concrete moulding of the tenement building. She
hangs from the 13th floor window in east Chicago,
with a swirl of birds over her head. They could
be a halo, or a storm of glass waiting to crush her.

She thinks she will be set free.

The woman hanging from the 13th floor window
on the east side of Chicago is not alone.
She is a woman of children, of the baby, Carlos
and of Margaret, and of Jimmy who is the oldest.
She is her mother’s daughter and her father’s son.
She is several pieces between the two husbands
she has had. She is all the women of the apartment
building who stand watching her, watching themselves.

When she was young she ate wild rice on scraped down
plates in warm wood rooms. It was in the farther
north and she was the baby then. They rocked her.

She sees Lake Michigan lapping at the shores of
herself. It is a dizzy hole of water and the rich
live in tall glass houses at the edge of it. In some
places Lake Michigan speaks softly, here, it just sputters and butts itself against the asphalt. She sees other buildings just like hers. She sees other women hanging from many-floored windows counting their lives in the palms of their hands and in the palms of their children’s hands.

She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window on the Indian side of town. Her belly is soft from her children’s births, her worn Levi’s swing down below her waist, and then her feet, and then her heart. She is dangling.

The woman hanging from the 13th floor hears voices. They come to her in the night when the lights have gone dim. Sometimes they are little cats mewing and scratching at the door, sometimes they are her grandmother’s voice, and sometimes they are gigantic men of light whispering to her to get up, to get up, to get up. That’s when she wants to have another child to hold onto in the night, to be able to fall back into dreams.

And the woman hanging from the 13th floor window hears other voices. Some of them scream out from below for her to jump, they would push her over. Others cry softly from the sidewalks, pull their children up like flowers and gather them into their arms. They would help her, like themselves.

But she is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window, and she knows she is hanging by her own fingers, her own skin, her own thread of indecision.

She thinks of Carlos, of Margaret, of Jimmy. She thinks of her father, and of her mother. She thinks of all the women she has been, of all the men. She thinks of the color of her skin, and of Chicago streets, and of waterfalls and pines. She thinks of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms. Her mind chatters like neon and northside bars. She thinks of the 4 A.M. lonelineses that have folded her up like death, discordant, without logical and beautiful conclusion. Her teeth break off at the edges. She would speak.

The woman hangs from the 13th floor crying for the lost beauty of her own life. She sees the sun falling west over the gray plane of Chicago. She thinks she remembers listening to her own life break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor window on the east side of Chicago, or as she climbs back up to claim herself again.
GIVE YOU BACK

I release you, my beautiful and terrible fear. I release you. You were my beloved and hated twin, but now, I don't know you as myself. I release you with all the pain I would know at the death of my children.

You are not my blood anymore.

I give you back to the soldiers who burned down my home, beheaded my children, raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters. I give you back to those who stole the food from our plates when we were starving.

I release you, fear, because you hold these scenes in front of me and I was born with eyes that can never close.

I am not afraid to be angry.
I am not afraid to rejoice.

I am not afraid to be black.
I am not afraid to be white.
I am not afraid to be hungry.
I am not afraid to be full.
I am not afraid to be hated.
I am not afraid to be loved.

to be loved, to be loved, fear.

Oh, you have choked me, but I gave you the leash. You have gutted me but I gave you the knife. You have devoured me, but I laid myself across the fire.

I take myself back, fear.
You are not my shadow any longer.
I won't hold you in my hands.
You can't live in my eyes, my ears, my voice my belly, or in my heart my heart

But come here, fear
I am alive and you are so afraid of dying.