



Library podcast

Joy Harjo Reads From 'Crazy Brave' at the Central Library

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[0:00:40] **Marion Scichilone:** Thank you for joining us for an evening with Joy Harjo who is here with her new book *Crazy Brave*. Thank you to Elliot Bay Book Company for inviting us to co-present this event, to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support for library programs. We thank our authors series sponsor Gary Kunis. Now, I'm going to turn the podium over to Karen Maeda Allman from Elliott Bay Book Company to introduce our special guest. Thank you.

[0:01:22] **Karen Maeda Allman:** Thanks Marion. And thank you all for coming this evening. I know this is one of the readings I've most look forward to this summer. And as I know many of you and I know that many of you have been reading Joy Harjo's poetry for many many years. And, so is exciting to finally, not only get to hear her read, but also to hear her play her music. Joy Harjo is of Muscogee Creek and also a Cherokee descent. And she is a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa. She's also a graduate of The Institute of American Indian Arts High School in Santa Fe and stories of her days there are part of her new memoir. By the late 1960s Indian boarding school included this very rich arts experience, at least at this school, and nurtured some fine artists, musicians and writers. And Joy Harjo explored many types of art at the school and that eventually helped shape the artist. She has become a writer of international renown, she is the author of many collections of poetry, some children's books,

[0:02:28] plays and several CDs of music - some with her band Poetic Justice. Some of her books have included *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems*, and *The Women Who Fell from the Sky*, and *She had Some Horses*. In 1995 Harjo received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas. Her work has also won a PEN Open Book Award for *A Map to the Next World: Poetry and Tales*, and also an American Book Award for her poetry collection *In Mad Love and War*. She is also the winner of a 2009 Native American Music Award. Tonight, she reads from her memoir, *Crazy Brave* published this month by Norton. And, in this book, she tells stories from her earliest years, her Oklahoma childhood, surviving abuse, becoming a mother, and also becoming an artist. And also as part of that, the path she took to first reading and then writing

poetry. She bears witness not only to her own family's past, but that of others she knew that did not survive to tell their own stories. And I know that her book will

[0:03:35] be an encouragement to those who wonder if it is possible to make art, and tell the truth, and survive. And, it is true and it's also a beautifully written testimony to what it took for her to become an artist. So this night will include music, it will include reading, and some time from for audience questions. I also wanted to say there are many poets, musicians and artists in this audience and I want to recognize you. Some of you are from Indigenous background some are not, and it's really a pleasure to have you writers, readers and music fans in this audience. Please join me in welcoming Joy Harjo and her band.

[0:04:25] **Joy Harjo:** It's good to be back here in Seattle and we're still alive.

[0:04:31] I'm going to start with, I want to introduce Barrett Martin over here. Wonderful.

[0:04:41] Some of you may know him. He's a wonderful. I don't want to say just drummer - I mean that could be the whole world. Performer, drummer, scholar and he plays, he is incredible, he is an incredible musician and spirit. And, plays everything from jazz to world music, to being in, had been in the band The Screaming Trees. So he agreed to come in and we're going to start with a piece. I'm going to read how this whole thing, the whole book opens with a vision that I had, and and then we're just going to open with the song that says we're glad to be here. And here we all are, all in a world, that is always shifting and changing, and some things we know will happen, and some things, we just never know what's going to happen. Once I traveled far above the Earth, this beloved planet I call home was covered with an elastic web of light. I watched in awe as it shimmered, stretched, dimmed and shined shaped by the collective effort of all life within it, dissonance attracted more dissonance, harmony attracted harmony. I saw

[0:05:56] revolutions, droughts, famines, and the births of new nations. The most humble kindness has made the brightest lights. Nothing was wasted.

[0:06:06] **Joy Harjo and Barrett Martin:** [Flute and drum music plays.]

[0:09:49] **Joy Harjo:** [Flute and drum music ends.] Thank you music you just never know what's going to happen. So I'm I'm here to celebrate the memoir Crazy Brave. And of course, there's quite a story to it. I signed a contract with Norton to do a memoir. And after I signed it, I thought I don't really want to talk about myself, and then I thought okay - I think what I'm going to do is write stories. Indian school stories, as those I was thinking Indian school stories because there's a lot of Indian school stories. And, and then I started working on it, and then I thought, I kind of walked around it for a long time, and it can be a difficult thing to write. I mean, I wrote I made all kinds of charts, maps, all kinds of things, you know, you could start at any time and that went on for quite a while. And then I decided that I would write it as short stories because then a short story would give me a kind of distance. You know, I could be working with the short story form and think about story arc and work with characters that way. Well the first story

[0:11:02] like that worked pretty good called "The Flying Man." Actually. I had some interest in it, you know people wanted to see more and and I think I even published it as a short story, not as a memoir piece, and it's, and I'll read a little bit of that piece, you know in a little bit, and that work pretty good. Then, the next piece, the next short story I had, I started fictionalizing a little bit because it's a short story and our lives don't fit easily, at least mine doesn't, some people, a little bit more, but mine is not like that at all, and it still isn't like that at all. And, so then that kind of, and then it wasn't right, you know when you're working on something whether it's you know, writing, or music, or you know, sewing something - a day, you know going from dawn to a day, there's an art to that. And, sometimes, you know, that there's something, it's not quite, you're going to have to stop and reconfigure. That's what writer's block or artist block or life block. Is about you know, it's about,

[0:12:15] you come to those places, and usually there's some kind of revision you need to rethink or you need to totally not think at all, or you need to go somewhere else, or you need you know, there's usually a shift that needs to happen, and we can be terrified of shifts. Well, I got to that point in the book and I kind of let it go for a while and then I put out four CDs of music and did two children, one children's book, and started on another and got you know, other things into, even to Norton, and two other presses and the memoir was still sitting there. And, you know how those things have a kind of weight, and I knew I was past contract because I was supposed to get it in within two years, but it was sitting there for a while and then I went at it again and then I wrote a play Wings Of Night Sky, Wings of the Morning Light out of some of that material and and then I would go back to it. And it was interesting because I realized that I was running away from the story that wanted to be told. It was not, this

[0:13:22] is not the story I wanted to write, this isn't the story I wanted to write. This was a story that almost killed me. And so two years ago, I mean it was the summer. I'm going to a summer writers conference in, next week and it was the summer, I guess not the last summer, but the one before. I was there and Jill Bialosky, my editor at Norton was there and it's she said well, we're calling the book in - meaning get it, turn it in now. We want it now. And I said, okay, I'll get you a draft by December and I thought okay.,I have a deadline. That's the best thing for writer you have a deadline and so again, I'm sitting there and I said, okay I give up. I'm just going to write and I'm going to write what needs to be written. And so I started writing and I say, I don't want to write that, that's not what I want to write at all, but I had no choice I couldn't fight it anymore. And so I started writing of course, it's not easy as that. When I went to her in December. I had a pretty good draft of

[0:14:38] a book. It was a hundred pages more than this, and she really she liked it and she gave me a list of revisions and I had my own list of revisions I wanted to do, and so I went and started revisig. And, I totally turned the book around into something else, and she didn't like it, and it was really rugged and raw and I don't like people to see my raw, unfinished drafts, but she said well what happened? And, but it, you know, it's part of the process. It's like taking something apart and then you're looking at all the pieces here, and and I knew that she was dismayed, and I was horrified but I said well, I'll have a rewrite for you. And, because I was trying to still keep from telling the story I would tell it, but I thought this would be cool. I'll put vignettes in. I always liked what Eduardo Galeano

did with Memory of Fire and it was beautiful. I thought well if I can write short little pieces, but it wouldn't work that way and finally I gave up and I just let the story tell itself. And, then I

[0:15:42] revised it about a hundred times after that. Going to the manuscript and just distilling it and so that it got smaller but I think it finally became what it, what it wanted to be, and I decided in this that I was not going to hold back from - I don't tell everything, of course, somebody emailed me and said great, on Facebook, they said, "Great, I want to hear about when you met, when all this other stuff happened. Am I going to hear about this and this?" thinking it was going to be a tell-all and it's like no, it's not that kind of book, that comes next. [Laughter from audience.]

[0:16:24] Yeah, and I always felt like because with every word there's like a hundred you can use every point in the story. It's interesting how the process works, and somebody says well, how do you write a memoir? I think every book teaches you how to, you don't know how to write, you can read a hundred books about how to write a novel, or how to write poetry, or how to make music, but you can't, you just have to do it. You really just have to do it and that's how you find out how how to do it. And so once I got the book in, I went and looked at my contract and I thought okay, I think I'm probably seven years behind contract and that was horrifying because I'm actually a person that gets a lot, I have a wild streak, that's true, but I also have a lot of common sense, I have integrity, or I try to have integrity. I try to have integrity. There's been places probably where I haven't, but I was, I'm a human, but I try to, if I say I'm going to get something in, I get it in, and I did get it in, but I'm not usually, I'm

[0:17:30] not one of these people. Well, you know, I'm a three months later for you know, I get something in. Well, when I finally looked at the contract 14 years. And what was so unusual is that in the book industry as we know, it's gone through lots of shifts in 14 years. It was so it was amazing that I still had my same editor, Jill Bialosky, she was still at Norton. Except now, she's like senior vice president. And so the book is out and it's called Crazy Brave and I never said, I don't say it in here, but Harjo is a Muscogee name that means so brave, you're crazy. That's one definition of it. So I think what we'll do is I'm going to read from the book and then we're going to play a couple of songs and then we'll have a QA.

[0:18:27] So I'm just going to skip around in here. I've got it divided into by directions, it starts with East. East is the direction to beginnings. It is sunrise when beloved sun rises. It is an entrance adored, a fresh knowledge breathe the light in, call upon the assistance you need for the day, give thanks. East is how the plant,s animals and other beings orient themselves. For beginnings to open and blossom, the spirit of the day emerges from the sunrise point East is also the direction of Oklahoma where I was born, the direction of the Creek Nation. Once I was so small I could barely see over the top of the back seat of the black Cadillac my father bought with his Indian oil money. He polished and tuned his car daily. I wanted to see everything. This was around the time I acquired language, when something happened that changed my relationship to the spin of the world, it changed even the way I looked at the sun. This suspended integer of time probably escaped ordinary notice in my parents universe which

[0:19:36] informed most of my vision in the ordinary world. They were still omnipresent Gods. We were driving somewhere in Tulsa, the northern border of the Creek Nation. I don't know where we were going, or where we had been, but I know the sun was boiling the asphalt, the car windows were open for any breeze. As I stood on tiptoes on the floor board behind my father, a handsome God who smelled of Old Spice, whose slick black hair was always impeccably groomed, his clothes perfectly creased and ironed. The radio was on, even then, I love the radio, jukeboxes or any magic thing containing music. I wonder what signaled this moment - a loop of time that on first glance could be any place in time. I became acutely aware of the line the jazz trumpeter was playing, a sound I later associated with Miles Davis. I didn't know the words, jazz or trumpet. I didn't know how to, don't know how to say it. With what sounds are words, but in that confluence of hot southern afternoon in the breeze of aftershave and humidity, I followed

[0:20:44] that sound to the beginning, to the birth of sound. I was suspended in whirling stars. I grieved my parents failings, my own life, which I saw stretching the length of that rhapsody, my rite of passage into the world of humanity occurred then through jazz. The music was a startling bridge between familiar and strange lands. I heard stomp dance shells singing. I saw suits satin, fine hats. I heard workers singing in the fields. It was a way to speak beyond the confines of ordinary language. I still hear it. Over and over and over - when are you going to come back baby? Over and over and over. The God of All Things reached behind the counter pulled up a sour dish rag and cleaned off the mess. We all went tumbling down. I said over and over and over. We all went tumbling down. My mother singing attracted me to her road in this world. It is her song that lit my attention as I listened in the ancestor realm. Secret longing rose up in her heart, as she sang along with the radio the music threading the atmosphere

[0:22:02] And, what was known as Tulsa Oklahoma or T-Town in 1951 was songs for falling in love, songs for falling out of love, songs to endure the purgatory of longing, or improvisational swing-jazz, country or songs just for the sake of kicking it. Tulsa was a Creek Town, Creek Indian town established on the Arkansas River after my father's people were forcibly removed from their homes in the south in the mid 1800s. When they arrived in these new lands, they brought sacred fire. They brought what they could carry. Every song, and I'm just going to skip through, every song has, every soul has a distinct song even the place called Tulsa has a song that rises up from the Arkansas River around sundown. As I approached the doorway to Earth, I was hesitant to enter, I kept looking over my shoulder. I heard the crisp voice of the releaser of souls urge me forward. Don't look back and I remembered how Earth is a heavy teacher, yet is so much loved by the creator of planetary beings. I did not want to leave

[0:23:09] mystery. Yet, I was ever curious and ready to take my place in the story. My mother wanted a baby to show her love for her husband, my father. My father didn't know what he wanted. And if he was going to have a child though, he preferred a son. Though in these everyday world in a racist Oklahoma the 50s, it was difficult for an Indian man. Especially one who had no living Indian father or grandfather to show him the way. My father, most people on my father's side of the family passed from this place relatively young. I am one of the oldest living relatives of our family line. My generation is now the door to memory. This is why I am remembering. My father born of the tribal leadership

Monahwee who is one of the leaders of the Red Stick War which culminated in the battle of Horseshoe Bend, the largest Indian uprising in the country, was his grandfather's six generations back on his mother's side. Monahwee is still a beloved person to the Creek or Muscogee people. Samuel Checote, another grandfather

[0:24:13] was the first principal chief after we settled in Indian Territory or Oklahoma. Osceola, the Seminole Warrior who refused to sign a treaty with the United State's government was our uncle. As I write this I hear the dinner voices of so many people, in so many stories, that want to come forth. Each name is a tributary. Too many others, too many places. I see the spirit of New Orleans and hear the singing of the spirit of Congo Square. Congo Square was originally a Muscogee, a southeastern Indian ceremonial ground. It became a meeting place for tribal peoples - Africans and their European friends, lovers and families. They gathered there to dance, to enjoy the music, and the food wrapped in cloths and gourds, they brought to share. This was the place of gossip, news, philosophy and history. These people, our ancestors, want to be recognized. They want to be remembered. I see Osceola's mother, Polly Coppinger, as she stands there with her hands on her hips and a reddish glint to her black, heavy, kinky hair.

[0:25:14] She was born during times of great transition for the Muscogee Nation. She was charismatic, with a decided stubbornness, and passed this on to her son. I have seen her African ancestors often in my dreams. They gave me a doorway in a dream one night, when I was in my very early 30s. And then, I talk about my parents meeting. And and I say that my parents were fire and water meeting. And my mother to be was fire, and and then I talk about my mother's relatives who are Cherokee and Irish which is a potent and lethal combination. [Laughter from audience.]

[0:25:57] My mother to be was fire. Those afire move about the Earth with inspiration and purpose. They are creative and can consume and be consumed by their dreams, desires. They are looking for purpose, a place in which to create. They can be so entranced with the excitement of creation, that their dreams burn up, turn to ashes. My father to be was of the water, and could not find a hold on the banks of earthiness. Water people can easily get lost and they may not comprehend that they are lost. They succumb easily to the spirits of alcohol and drugs. They will always search for a vision that cannot be found on Earth. And so that's my parents, my version. A story, a matrix connects all of us. There are rules, processes and circles of responsibility in this world. And, the story begins exactly where it is supposed to begin. We cannot skip any part. Okay in about childhood, and the time they thought I had polio, and the alligators, the alligator dreams that were happening which I connect with the polio,

[0:27:11] with what happened, I think they saved me from it, but you have to read the book.

[0:27:18] And, then this is the probably the lot, this is probably the point when I left childhood, when childhood left me. When I was about 7 or 8 years old. when it left, it disappeared. The kitchen chairs were red vinyl, the ice cream churn was propped by the back steps of the pile of blankets. Waiting for my father to make ice cream for us, as he promised. The story veers from here and one version my father laughed as he stood up to make the ice cream. Us children followed him jumping up and down

in excitement and anticipation. I was the oldest, the one who got to sit on the blankets that covered the churn. He turned and turned the crank until the ice cream was made. My mother dipped us each a bowl of delicately flavored ice cream made from fresh peaches. We sit out on the steps and ate of the sweetness until we could eat no more. In the other version, my father continued his drinking party. The house was a roar of music and bravado. We were no longer in the yellow kitchen with my mother's plants that wound

[0:28:19] around the windows, hundreds of leaves and vines in response to her singing. And, it's interesting. She passed in October and I went to Oklahoma in August to help her and was doing my last revisions as she was dying - which kind of made sense. But, it was she when she passed in October, you know all are, all the plants were dying. You know, it's the season for them dying, and she had all these plants and they had all been like everybody else, dying. But, all of them revived and suddenly there were hundreds of roses. Hundreds of you know, where there had been a few little tomatoes suddenly, there were hundreds of tomatoes and hundreds of, was quite stunning. We were in the alternate realm of the anyway, I'll say in my was my mother's plants that wound around the windows hundreds of leaves and vines and response to her singing. So I guess she was still singing. We were in the alternate realm of the kitchen. It was the kitchen of hunting, rifles, deer blood and car parts soaking in grease. It was a house turned

[0:29:22] over in the dark. My father would get angry. He would get angry because his mother died of tuberculosis when he was a baby. Because his father beat him. Because he was treated like a Indian man in lands that were stolen away along with everything else. He would punch and kick in anger because something in the house was not right. The dinner is not right. My wife is not right. And, where are the children? What's wrong with them? Aren't they in bed yet? It will never be right as long as you are angry. I wanted to say but who was I to say? Because I was a child, and because I was a child I cowered under the table to hide when he started coming my way. And, my cowering made him even angrier because I was not brave at all. all And then it goes to the direction - north. North is the direction where the difficult teachers live. This is the direction of cold winds. The color is white - sharp and bare. It is a direction marked by the full moon showing the way through the snow. It is prophecy. and this was after

[0:30:24] our father left, and we got this horrendous stepfather, and I'm not saying that just because he was a stepfather. That's when I lost music. I started learning to play sax when I was about 40, but this is the section that tells how I lost music. Like one time I came home and found that my brothers and sisters were hiding because he had made our mother but he, they watched while he made our mother play Russian roulette with a loaded gun. And then he wouldn't, I remember right after he came and I said Mom I said, why don't we leave? Let's leave now, we can all work. I mean, I always worked anyway, but she said no we can't because he said he would kill us if we left. And we knew he would. But then Indian School saved me, and I should probably read some of this. I'm just don't know where to start. But Indian School this Institute of American Indian Arts Institue, which is then mostly a high school with some postgraduate was now a college. I'll just read this little vignette from there. When

[0:31:34] I started Indian School in Santa Fe in 67. I was fresh from escaping the emotional winter of my childhood. I had been set free. The famous Quapaw Cherokee composer Louis Ballard was assigned as my advisor. Though I love music and singing I never took a class from him. I'd given up on music and Junior High when the band teacher wouldn't allow me to play saxophone because I was female, I quit band. This happened at around the same time my step father forbade me to sing. I spent hours hanging out with Ballard in his office and studio. He was warm, affectionate, and liked having a young Oklahoma Creek around. He was like a father to me. When I did return to music after I was 40, Louis Ballard and I took up right where we left off. I can still hear his voice urging me on in my creative musical efforts. Music is a direct communication with the sacred. It exists in a virtual invisible realm, there is no border of the corporeal. Although words can be carried and lifted by music. As adolescents, we

[0:32:37] defined ourselves primarily by music. At Indian school, we were either psychedelic visionaries with Jim Morrison in the Doors or Jimi Hendrix, or we were funky baby singing along with the Temptations, The Supremes and The Four Tops. Or we dance top 40 in white boots and bell bottoms. I think that's one thing I left out, is that I used to dance with the band. I was one of the girls dancing with bell-bottoms and white boots. On the stage and, and if you were far far out you were a Frank Zappa freak. And, then there were the country kings and queens with taped boots up to the hats with attitude waving them for Merrill Haggard and Loretta Lynn. They were also powwow and traditional music practitioners. Most of us cross back and forth between these types of music or thrived somewhere in the middle. I tended toward Zappa, jazz, Morrison and funk. I think I went to every dance in the canteen and attended the larger light show extravaganzas put on in the gym by the Arts faculty and advanced student. The animatic

[0:33:41] painter and teacher Fritz Scholder was one of the Arts teachers who manipulated liquid gel projections for the light shows. And anyway, it was a wonderful time, even though the Bureau of Indian Affairs, it was a Bureau of Indian Affairs school, but an arts college so you can imagine in the late 60s Santa Fe was filled with hippies. And that's where a student's wanted to be. And so it was pretty yeah, it was a pretty exciting time, but you often had the Bureau of Indian Affairs system, which forbid you to speak, still in the 60s, forbade you to speak your Native language. But, I roomed with Apache, so I started learning Apache, but we only did it at night after you know, people would speak their language at night. But I remember one student, a friend of ours, got in trouble for speaking her language and had to clean the sidewalk with a toothbrush. So we went out to help her and then we got in trouble. But so there was that system and yet we had some really into incredible artist Native and non-Native

[0:34:49] artists who opened up our you know, opened us up and gave us affirmation.

[0:34:56] And, we you know because even then we were talking about what was about Native art about where it was going, and it's going to going, you know, it looks like those conversations we had you know as kids. And then west is the direction of endings. It is the doorway to the ancestors. The direction of test. It represents leaving and being left, and learning to find the road in the darkness.

[0:35:25] And it's about being in theater. I wound up in one of the first all Native drama and dance theaters. And then I wound up a teenage mother, moved back to Oklahoma, lived in the Cherokee Nation with my baby, my son's father with his daughter. And, this is where I'm going to read, "The Flying Man" part of "The Flying Man" story. My mother-in-law blamed me. This is my Cherokee mother-in-law, blamed me for the fix her son was in. He had returned from his studies in the postgraduate program at Indian school with no job prospects, and with yet another pregnant teenage wife, who shifted his fortunes. I was the other woman in her life. The reason for his lack of success was her suffering. I was, I had the one man bound to her by blood and guilt, a sticky bond. Every man she had been with had given her a child and abandoned her, including her son who left her with his daughter while he went to school in the southwest. Now. I was now in the way and she took every possible every opportunity to remind me. Everyday was predictable.

[0:36:33] This is a being a teenage mother, and living on nothing and with a husband who kept quitting his jobs because he would always get in a fight. Each day was predictable. We got up ate cold pizza for breakfast, because he was working at a pizza restaurant, leftovers from my husband's shift at the restaurant. The night before I watched the children, cleaned the house and he went to work. I worried about money and what we would do when he lost his job. He would eventually lose it as he lost all the others. The only question was when. The last time he'd walked out on a job, we had only an industrial sized box of pancake mix, a gift from my mother, for meals to supplement beans and comidity cheese. My mother is disappointed with my life and did everything she could to keep from coming to the side of town I was living in. She had grown up in worse, and had cleaned and cooked her way to decency. My life was now a mockery of her struggle. Some days his mother would come over and we would pull our

[0:37:30] resources for food. We were bound together for survival. Her mood shifted according to the nature of our predicament. On the good days, we would hit the yard sales together. I was her ally as we searched through junk for dishes and clothes. If she was feeling especially hospitable, she would buy me something to wear, if it were under a dollar. One morning, as I was toweling off the children from their bath, my mother-in-law pushed her way roughly into the house puffing on a cigarette and blowing smoke into my face. My husband surprised me with a swiftness of his leap between us. He had never taken up for me before when she slid into her enemy mode. "Mom, get out of here now." He warned her. She stepped back, surprised at the vehement of his reaction. He slapped the cigarette from her hand determinedly pushed her out the door and slammed it behind her. The smoke followed her. "That cigarette was doctored with curses," he told me, "she's witching you." One morning as we struggled to put a bag of stuff from

[0:38:29] a yard sale into the trunk of her car. She showed me a book of spells written in Cherokee that she had acquired during her last trip home. The book was so old the pages were turning to powder. I didn't touch it. She had stolen it from someone she saw regularly, to combat the many enemies she had in the world: the terrible men, the minimum wage jobs, and the unwanted daughter-in-law. I didn't get sick that day, or die that day, or in the weeks that followed the witching, but neither did our fortunes change. I began to believe that I had dreamed the smoke curse, or pretended it hadn't happened far away from my baby, it had happened far away from my babies, and my house.

But, what I didn't dream was that each day after she blew the curse in my face, she began to stoop just a little. At first imperceptibly even, then it became noticeable how the weight of the smoke bore down on her as it sat on her back kicking its legs as it rode. And then I go into talking about spring and the circus,

[0:39:32] and this is a story where I was I got an idea while the circus was happening that of a new job for my husband. Another sign of spring was the posters announcing that the circus is coming to town. We got discount passes from the grocery store. I took the kids and my sister-in-law to the Sunday afternoon show. It was my first venture out in over a year and I felt expansive. The arena was packed with families, and the city's kids were swirling with snacks, circus toys and excitement. We sat next to an aisle for easier access to the bathrooms. The girls asked about everything as we waited for the show. They wanted to know what time the show started exactly how long long would it be before the show started? Where were the tigers? Could they have balloons? If they couldn't have a balloon, could they ride the elephant? And, why couldn't we sit closer so we could see better? And, could they just go to the bathroom even though I had just been a few minutes ago? As I answered I watched people, and imagined their

[0:40:31] lives and how I would paint them - rejuvenated by the smell of popcorn and the change in scenery. Out of the churning crowds came a slim man in tights and a cape. As he headed up from the ring people parted to let him by. An incongruous figure in the middle of the flatly ordinary. He stopped next to me and surprised me by speaking to me. At first I thought he needed directions, or had mistaken me for someone else. But, he casually introduced himself as one of the brothers of the feature trapeze act, the flying something or other brothers. I felt suddenly awkward and mumbled a response. I didn't know what I had done to garner his attention. I had forgotten how to speak to anyone but small children and a husband who was so desperate for youth and fun, that he had taken to riding around and drinking beer with his high school friends. This strange man from Italy was the first person who had talked to me in months. The only one who had asked me a direct question about my life. I responded by talking

[0:41:36] about my husband. I told the cape performer who had suddenly befriended me that my husband had been a dancer who was compared by critics to Rudolf Nureyev when we had performed together in the Indian school troop. He had many offers to join dance companies in the east, but he turned them down. I nervously talked up his attributes, but I didn't really know where I was going with any of it. Then I agreed to meet him after the performance. When I looked back, I can imagine how I must have appeared that afternoon - a vulnerable young woman dressed neatly, but poorly, accompanied by an infant and by children waving their cotton candy clouds. That afternoon the children and I watched the flying brothers swing gracefully from one small platform to another. I began to consider what it would be like to fly like this man, beyond fear from Italy who traveled the world flying into space risking his life, while the crowd watched in awe. It was then that I became convinced that this was a job my agile husband

[0:42:42] could do. He could learn as quickly and easily as he learned to toss and twist pizzas. We could travel together and move into a world much larger than the one that was squeezing us flat, far

far away from his mother. I don't remember how we got from the circus to the pizzeria where my husband was working the afternoon shift. The sun came in through the colored dark glass in the restaurant as the manager retrieved my husband from the kitchen. I was excited about the possibility of something that might engage him. Use his dancer skills and keep everyone in food and clothes. I introduced the acrobat to my husband. They were civil to each other as I explain my idea, a ripple of tension coursed through all of us. It was my dream of flying, my fantasy. It didn't belong to anyone else. As I left the pizza parlor that afternoon the flying man insisted on accompanying me to my apartment and waited as I put the children down for their nap. I was confused about his intentions, but I offered him coffee,

[0:43:51] water and food which he declined. Then he praised my beauty and asked me to leave with him immediately for Corsica.

[0:44:02] The exhilaration of the force of possibility pained me for a moment. In the slant of the late afternoon sun, this was what I had been waiting for. But, it wouldn't fit, and nothing I could do would make it fit into a map that was apparently there but not there. I told him I couldn't go anywhere not even Corsica. I had children. I ask him to leave. The circus left town that afternoon. My husband lost his job at the pizzeria a few weeks later, as I had predicted. We move to another part of town after he found work in another pizza restaurant and his mother followed us.

[0:44:44] The last section is called is south. South is the direction of released birds that migrate south for winter. It is flowers and food growing. It is fire and creativity. It is a tails of two snakes making a spiral, looping over and over, and eternal transformation. When I lived in Tahlequah and we lived there for a while. I used to walk through the town up and down hills, along the creek, by storefronts filled with items, I had no money to buy. I walked when I was hugely pregnant and then after my son was born it was my time alone. As I walked I could hear my abandoned dreams making a racket in my soul. They urged me out the door, up in the night, so they could speak to me. They wanted form, line, story and melody and did not understand why I had made an unnecessary detour. Think for yourself girl. Your people didn't walk all that way just so you could lay down their dreams. I wanted more and I didn't know how I would get it. My days were consumed with the drudgery of survival. I took care of the household,

[0:45:52] made meals of beans fried potatoes and cheap meat. I negotiated with a husband who was essentially a boy. He didn't know how to grow up. His father had abandoned the family and he had no father map. There were flashes of inspiration and joy. I saw my son sitting by the screen door making dirt parachutes. His fine baby hair lit up by the sun, singing with the radio, "See me, feel me, touch me, heal me," and my stepdaughter in a striped jumper with balloons in honor of her fourth birthday climbing up swings in a park. But, this wasn't enough to say sustain the need for artistic expression. I believe that if you do not answer the noise and urgency of your gifts, they will turn on you or drag you down where their immense sadness at being abandoned. Then I'm in New Mexico and with my daughter's father, he's not her father yet. Sorry.

[0:46:58] That night as we walked home from the bar and I wanted, I waited for him behind the motel. He seemed to take forever. It was about 2:30 in the morning. And as I stood there the avenue grew quieter after the initial rush of traffic from the bar. The desk lamp inside the motel office made me lonely. I felt far away from everything. I carried an aches under my ribs that was like radar. It told me I was miles away from the world I intended to make for my son and myself. I saw my easel set up in the corner of the living room in our apartment next to my son's box of toys. I imagine having the money to walk up to the motel office to rent a room of my own. I knew what I would do, I would sleep until I could sleep no more. I would wake up with my dreams and listen and sketch and paint the visions I put aside to take care of everyone else. I recalled the dream I'd had of a daughter who wanted to be born. I've been up painting all night when she appeared to me. She was a baby with fat cheeks. And then

[0:47:58] she was a grown woman. She asked me to give birth to her. "This isn't a good time," I told her. I was in the middle of finals and assisting in planning for the protest of the killing of Navajo street drunks for fun by some white high school students. They had just been questioned and set free with no punishment. "Why come into this kind of world?" I asked her. Her intent made a fine unwavering line that connected my heart to hers. I walked behind the motel to look for him. I found his shoes under a tree. Behind them, or beyond them were his socks like two dark salamanders. A little farther beyond his socks were his belt, and then I followed a trail of pants, shirt and underwear until I was standing in the courtyard of the motel. My stomach twisted and turned as I considered all the scenarios a naked drunk Indian man might get into in a motel on the main street of the city. I heard a splash in the pool. I remember thinking he's Pueblo Indian, he can't swim. I considered leaving him there

[0:49:08] to flounder. It would be his foolish fault as well as the fault of a society that builds its cities over our holy places. At that moment his disappearance would be a sudden relief. It was then I first felt our daughter moving within me. She awakened me with a flutter a kick as I walked to the pool. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I never told her father about that night she showed up to announce her intentions. Or, how I saw her spirit when she was conceived wavering above us, on a fine sheen of light. I never told my daughter how I pulled her father from deep water. And then this.

[0:49:53] Though on the surface, I continued as a student who garnered scholarships and made excellent grades and was now beginning to publish my first poems in the University student magazine. I continued to struggle with panic. I considered all the possible reasons the mother-in-law witching, the tribal history, the strangle of jealousy from others, the banishment from my home, because I was banished for it several years. Faltering into territory and offending spirits there, but no matter the reasoning it remained a fact of my life. I recalled how the dream of the chase began around the time our father left home. It would begin with the sound just like the panic, like worrying bull roars, making an eerie echo that echoed, that traveled across time. And, I would begin running. One night after writing my last paper for a class I struggled in a sweaty anxiety-ridden sleep. I was running and then I was cornered in a white room. I could not find my voice and all the years of the chase. I had never come to

[0:50:54] this place. I heard a congested snuffling, breathing monster that rose before me. I saw him for the first time the horror transfixed me. I had no room in my mind for such a being. I realized how tired I was of the chase, of all the years of the chase. Just when I was about to give up the knowing reminded me that I knew how to fly, I thought fly! And, I leapt to the ceiling of the white room. I felt safe. Then the monster flew up. There was nothing else I could do. With the sudden unexpected grace all the fear within me escaped. There is no panic. I was a lightness. I had never experienced before in my life. The monster put his hand to me. It did not touch me. He disappeared. I was free free free. I carried that dream back through several layers of consciousness to where I stood in the future with a stack of poems and a saxophone in my hands and I wrote my first poem. It was the spirit of poetry who reached out and found me, as I stood there at the doorway between panic and love. There are many such a

[0:52:07] doorways in our lives. Some are small and hidden in the ordinary, others are gaping and obvious like the car wreck we walk away from. Meeting someone and falling in love, or an earthquake followed by a tsunami, when we walk through them to the other side. Everything changes. I had come this far without the elegance of speech. I didn't have the physical handicap of stuttering but I could not speak coherently. I stuttered in my mind. I could not express my perception of the sacred. I could speak every day language. Please pass the salt. I would like. Where and when are we going? I'll meet you there. I wanted the intricate and metaphorical language of my ancestors to pass through to my language, my life. Much like the night I witnessed the healer become a poem in a faraway country though in spirit, nothing is ever far away.

[0:53:03] The spirit of poetry came to me. To imagine the spirit of poetry as much like imagining the shape and size of the knowing. It is a kind of resurrection light. It is the tall ancestor spirit who has been with me since the beginning, or a bear, or a hummingbird. It is a hundred horses running the land in a soft mist, or it is a woman and dressing for her beloved in firelight. It is none of these things. It is more than everything. You're coming with me, poor thing. You don't know how to listen. You don't know how to speak. You don't know how to sing. I will teach you. I followed poetry. [Applause.]

[0:53:50] So that's a little of that.

[0:53:55] So this next song, or this first song, is a love song. I think most songs in the world are love songs, most poems which are also songs. If you look at the origins of poetry it always leads back to music and poetry. I remember learning poetry in college, always love poetry. My mother always sang poetry, she wrote song lyrics. I remember, I went to the university and studied poetry and poetry was in books. And then I said, "But where's my peoples' poetry?" and it turned out I was related distantly to Alexander Posey who was a pretty well-known in in the this world, the over culture world, for poetry for writing poetry. And he was a journalist. But then at home if I heard the poetry was, you know at the ceremonial ground, beautiful poetry. And, if we did, it was also with music and with dance. and they get lonely when they're not with each other.

[0:55:05] **Joy Harjo and Barrett Martin:** [Saxophone and drum music plays.]

[0:55:40] **Joy Harjo:** [Lyrics begin.] This is my heart. It is a good heart weaves a membrane of mist and fire. When we speak love in God's and our world. My heart is close enough to sing to you in a language too clumsy for human worlds.

[0:56:26] This is my head. It is a good head was inside with us, worm of worries. What is the source of this mystery? Why can't I see it right here? Right now? As realize these hands hammering the world together.

[0:57:12] This is my soul. It is a good soul. It tells me come here, forgetful one. We sit together. We cook a little something to eat. Then a sip of something sweet for memory.

[0:58:41] This is my song. It is a good song. Walk forever the border of fire and water, of fire and water. To sing to you.

0:59:07] It's new wings quiver with vulnerability. Come lie down next to me, put your head here. My heart, my heart is close enough to sing to you, to sing to you, to sing to you. [Lyrics end.] [Saxophone and drum music begins.] [Applause.]

[1:01:47] And, this next one is "Equinox," which could be called Crazy Brave too. And, it's like I realized it's the equinoxes that balance between, when there's a balance, and we're all, I think, we're all built to find balance. We're all working towards some kind of balance. But, to know it, we have to know the edges of it, you know, the extremes of it. And, it's interesting. It's, it's often at sunset or even sunrise when it seems like that's when the wisdom our inspiration is able to burst through in ways that are unspeakable, so it's kind of about that.

[1:02:32] **Joy Harjo and Barrett Martin:** [Saxophone and drum music begins.]

[1:03:07] **Joy Harjo:** [Lyrics begin.] I'm must keep from breaking into the story by force. If I do I will find a work glove in my hand and the smoke of grief. Run to the sun. Your nation dead, beside you.

[1:03:47] I keep walking away though it has been an eternity. I'm from each drop of blood, each one.

[1:04:02] Springs of sons and daughters and trees. A mountain of sorrows of song.

[1:04:25] I tell you this from the dusk of a small city in the north. Not far from the birthplace of cars and industry. Geese are returning to mate. Crocuses have broken through the frozen earth.

[1:05:14] Soon they will come for me, and I will make my stand before the jury of destiny.

[1:05:28] Yes, I will answer in the clatter of the new world. I have broken my addiction to war and desire. [Lyrics end.] [Applause.]

[1:07:49] [Saxophone and drum music begins.] [Applause.] Thank you. And, thanks Barrett.



[1:08:00] Barrett has a new album out. What's the name of your new album? Artifact He's got several new albums out. He always got one out. Anyways, he's incredible. Thank you all so much for coming tonight

[1:08:26] **Podcast Announcer:** This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

