MUSIC ALBUMS

Red Dreams, A Trail Beyond Tears

Winding Through the Milky Way

She Had Some Horses

Native Joy for Real

Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century

PLAYS

We Were There When Jazz Was Invented

Wings of Night Sky, Wings of Morning Light

AN AMERICAN SUNRISE

POEMS

Joy Harjo

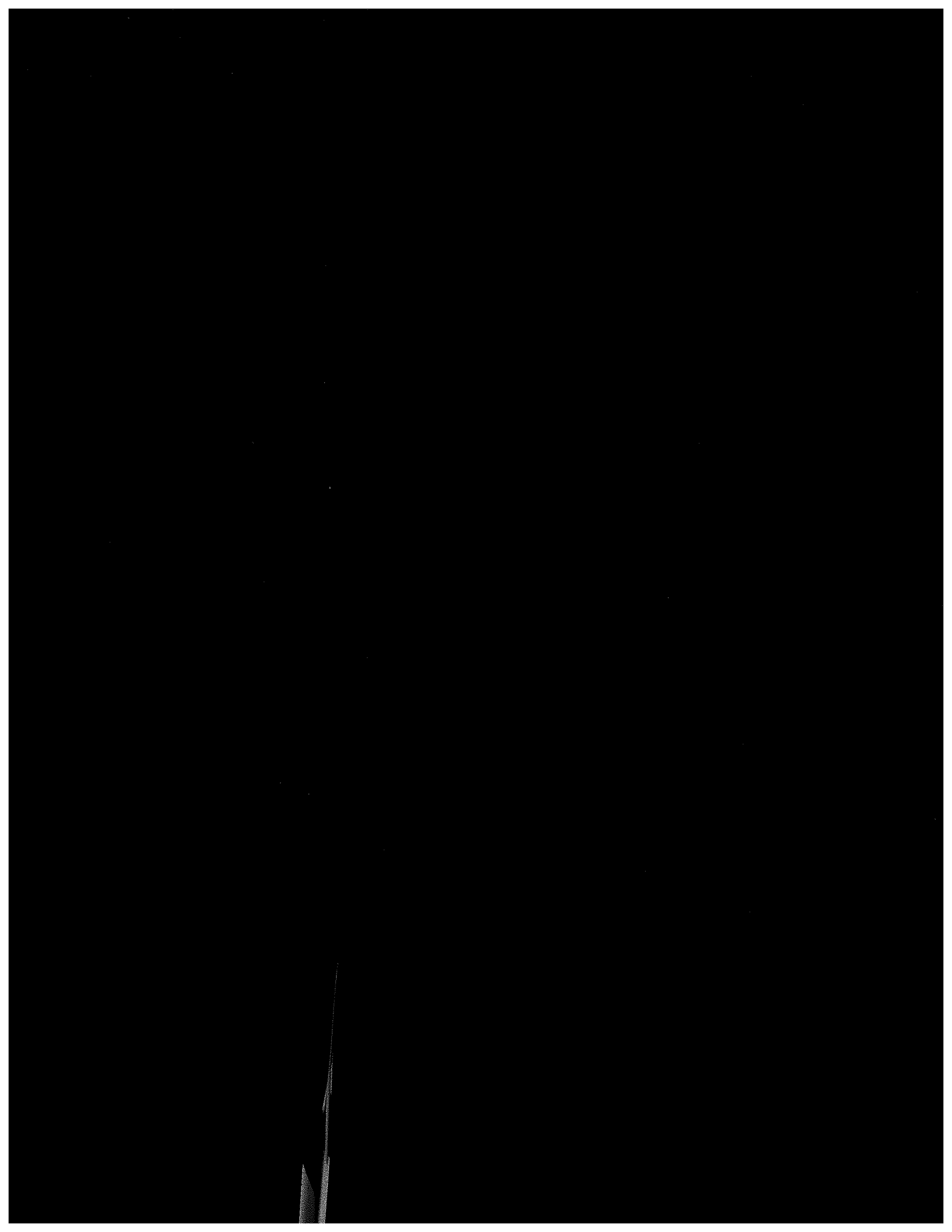
W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
Independent Publishers Since 1923

GRANDDAUGHTERS

I was a thought, a dream, a fish, a wing
And then a human being
When I emerged from my mother's river
On my father's boat of potent fever
I carried a sack of dreams from a starlit dwelling
To be opened when I begin bleeding
There's a red dress, deerskin moccasins
The taste of berries made of promises
While the memories shift in their skins
At every moon, to do their ripening

THE FIGHT

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.
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 peacemaker



ıawa) Okfuskee, one of the
g with his wife Betsy Coser
:hment 3, which started
; the detachment of Upper
om Horseshoe Bend to
chiefs in this party. The other
his party was conducted to
ams on behalf of the Alabama
ut noon on September 17, 1836.

ıt, the first English newspaper

ıntry as they set foot were "The
Your Hair," "The Light of Other
Rory O'More."

welve miles below Memphis.
ıw and Chickasaw territories. The
1819.

HOW TO WRITE A POEM IN A TIME OF WAR

You can't begin just anywhere. It's a wreck.

Shrapnel and the eye

Of a house, a row of houses. There's a rat scrambling

From light with fleshy trash in its mouth. A baby strapped

to its mother's back, cut loose.

Soldiers crawl the city,

the river, the town, the village,

the bedroom, our kitchen. They eat everything.

Or burn it.

They kill what they cannot take. They rape. What they cannot kill
they take.

Rumors fall like rain.

Like bombs.

Like mother and father tears

swallowed for restless peace.

Like sunset slanting toward a moonless midnight.

Like a train blown free of its destination. Like a seed

fallen where

there is no chance of trees or anyplace for birds to live.

No, start here. Deer peer from the edge of the woods.

We used to see woodpeckers

the size of the sun, and were greeted

by chickadees with their good morning songs.

We'd started to cook outside, slippery with dew and laughter,

ah these smoky sweet sunrises.

We tried to pretend war wasn't going to happen.

Though they began building their houses all around us

and demanding more.

They started teaching our children their god's story,

A story in which we'd always be slaves.

No. Not here.

You can't begin here.

This is memory shredded because it is impossible to hold with words,

even poetry.

. . .

These memories were left here with the trees:

The torn pocket of your daughter's hand-sewn dress,

the sash, the lace.

The baby's delicately beaded moccasin still connected to the foot,

A young man's note of promise to his beloved—

No! This is not the best place to begin.

Everyone was asleep, despite the distant bombs.

Terror had become the familiar stranger.

Our beloved twin girls curled up in their nightgowns,

next to their father and me.

If we begin here, none of us will make it to the end

Of the poem.

Someone has to make it out alive, sang a grandfather

to his grandson, his granddaughter,

as he blew his most powerful song into the hearts of the children.

There it would be hidden from the soldiers,

Who would take them miles, rivers, mountains

from the navel cord place of the origin story.

He knew one day, far day, the grandchildren would return,

generations later over slick highways, constructed over old trails

Through walls of laws meant to hamper or destroy, over stones

bearing libraries of the winds.

He sang us back

to our home place from which we were stolen

in these smoky green hills.

Yes, begin here.

MVSKOKE MOURNING SONG

Sin-e-cha was aboard the *Monmouth*, which sank in the Mississippi River.

In 1937, Elsie Edwards related the following story of Sin-e-cha:

"Somewhere upon the banks of the Grand River near Fort Gibson lies an old grave of an old lady whose name was Sin-e-cha. I could lead you to that grave today. Sin-e-cha had come with her tribal town of Ke-cho-ba-da-gee during the removal to the new country. When the events, with never no more to live in the east, had taken place, she, too, remembered that she had left her home and with shattered happiness she carried a small bundle of her few belongings and reopening and retying her pitiful bundle she began a sad song which was later taken up by the others on board the ship at the time of the wreck and the words of her song were:

" 'I have no more land. I am driven away from home, driven up the red waters, let us all go, let us all die together and somewhere upon the banks we will be there.' "

SOURCE: Interview with Elsie Edwards, September 17, 1937, *Indian-Pioneer History* (Oklahoma Historical Society), 23:255. Public domain.

. . .

Every increment of any thought, action, or deed matters, has consequences in all directions.

Not if you can make a law. Not if it passes the Supreme Court. Not if we can pay for it.

There will be no balance without all voices present in the power circle.

You will never earn your way here. You are the wrong sex, wrong color of skin, wrong sexual orientation, not my religion, not my language.

We are making our grandchildren's world with our words. We perceive a world in which everyone sits at the table together, with enough for everyone.

"We will make this country great again."

TOBACCO ORIGIN STORY

It was way back, before there was a way back
When time threaded earth and sky
Children were conceived, were born, grew, and walked tall
In what we now call a day.
Every planted thought grew plant
Ladders to the stars, way back, before there was
No way back, *Miss Mary Mack*
We used to sing along the buttons of her
Dress. Our babies are always
Our babies. Even back then when time waved through
The corn. We knew our plants like
Relatives. Their stories were our stories, there
Were songs for everything then,
for every transformation
From that first couple, a young Mvskoke man
And woman, who walked through the
shimmer of the early evening.
They had become as one song.
They lay down when it was dark. I can hear their
Intimate low-voice talking
How they tease each other with such gut love.
Earth makes a bed, with pillow
Mounds. And it is there as the night insects sing
They conceived their first child. They
Will look back as they walk east toward the sunrise
The raw stalks of beginning
Will drink the light, root deeply dark into earth.
In the tracks of their loving
The plant child emerges, first the seed head, then
Leafy, long male body and the white female

Flowers of tobacco, or
Hece, as the people called it when it called
To them. *Come here. We were brought*
To you from those who love you. We will help you.
And that's how it began, way
Back, when we knew how to hear the songs of plants
And could sing back, like now
On paper, with marks like bird feet, but where are
Our ears? They have grown to fit
Around earbuds, to hear music made for cold
Cash, like our beloved smoke
Making threaded with addiction and dead words.
Sing this song back to me girl.
In the moonlight tobacco plant had silver
Moon buttons all up her back.
We're getting dressed to go plant new songs with words.
Our sun is dimming faster.
Mvto hece, mvto hvse, mvto—
Ekvnvchaga, mvto ah

My aunt Lois Harjo told me that our grandfather Monahwee had to go into hiding once, after removal to Indian Territory. When he came upon a white man beating his wife in the street, he took the whip from the husband's hand and beat him. The government agents of law enforcement in Okmulgee looked for Monahwee to charge him with a crime, but he hid out in the pockets of Native communities that white men didn't enter.

Monahwee is buried near Eufaula, Oklahoma, in a small Creek Indian family cemetery. His unmarked gravesite is surrounded by seven cedar trees. My cousin John Scott, known as "Porky," showed me his burial place.

REDBIRD LOVE

We watched her grow up.
She was the urgent chirper,
Fledgling flier.
And when spring rolled
Out its green
She'd grown
Into the most noticeable
Bird-girl.
Long-legged and just
The right amount of blush
Tipping her wings, crest
And tail, and
She knew it
In the bird parade.
We watched her strut.
She owned her stuff.
The males perked their armor, greased their wings,
And flew sky-loop missions
To show off
For her.
In the end
There was only one.
There's that one you circle back to—for home.
This morning
The young couple scavenge seeds
On the patio.
She is thickening with eggs.
Their minds are busy with sticks the perfect size, tufts of fluff
Like dandelion, and other pieces of soft.
He steps aside for her, so she can eat.

Then we watch him fill his beak
Walk tenderly to her and kiss her with seed.
The sacred world lifts up its head
To notice—
We are double, triple blessed.

of our peoples whose bodies were worn out, or destroyed by a man's slash

hit of greed. This is our memory too, said America. Heredity is a field of blood, celebration, and forgetfulness. Don't take on more than you can carry, said the eagle to his twin sons, fighting each other in the sky over a fox, dangling between them.

It's that time of the year, when we eat tamales and latkes. We light candles, make fires to make the way for a newborn child, for fresh understanding. Demons will try to make houses out of jealousy, anger, pride, greed, or more destructive material. They place them in a cracked part

of the body that will hold them: liver, heart, knee, or brain. So, my friend, let's let that go, for joy, for chocolates made of ashes, mangos, grapefruit, or chili from Oaxaca, for sparkling wine from Spain, for these children who show up in our dreams and want to live at any cost because life says

we are here to feed them joy. Your soul so finely woven the silkworms went on strike, said the mulberry tree. We all have mulberry trees in the memory yard. They hold the place for skinned knees earned by small braveries, cousins you love who are gone. All memory bends to fit. We become poems.

BEYOND

Beyond sunrise, there is a song we follow
Beyond clouds traveling with rain humped
On their backs, lightning in their fists
Beyond the blue horizon where our ancestors
Appear bearing gifts, wrapped in blankets woven
With sun and strands of scarlet time

Beyond the footpaths we walk every day
From sunrise to kitchen, to work, to garden, to play
To sunset, to dark, and back

Beyond where the baby sleeps, her breath
A light mist of happiness making
A fine rainbow of *becoming knowledgeable* around us

Beyond the children learning alphabets
And numbers, bent over their sticks and dolls
As they play war and family, grow human paths

Beyond the grandmothers and grandfathers
Their mothers and fathers, and in the marrow of their bones
To when that song was first sung we traveled on

Beyond sunset, can you hear it?
The shaking of shells, the drumming of feet, the singers
Singing, all of us, all at once?

In the song of beyond, how deep we are—

REN-TOH-PVRV

TRANSLATION OF "BEYOND"

Hvs-os-sv ren-toh-pv-rv, v-ho-lo-ce hvl-we ful-lat os-ke a-ce-koh-yet mon v-tok-yv-hat-en no-kof-ti-cet ho-yan-e-cof pom yv-hi-ke-tv po-hēt a-cak-a-pē-yēs

Su-tv ces-kv ho-lat-ten ren-toh-pv-rv, pom v-cul-v-ke em-kv o-ke-tv mon v-ce-tv he-ra-kat a-pvl-la-pi-cet es-yi-ces

Ne-ne v-pas-ku-ce ren-to-pv-rv, hvs-os-sv o-ke-tv, hom-pe-tv-cu-ko, v-tot-ke-tv, cv-po-fv, ak-ko-pvn-kv, mon hvs-ak-lat-kv o-ke-tv, no-ci-cet, o-ke-tv hv-tvm te-re-pot-a-ran-es

Ho-pue-wv no-cat ren-toh-pv-rv, en he-sa-ke-tv cvm-po-se a-fvc-ke ha-yat, nak-ker-rat po-fe-ken ce-la-yes

Ho-pue-ta-ke po-na-kv en-yo-lvn-kv ker-ra-kat ren-toh-pv-rv, 'to-lv-cu-ce, es-te-v-ha-ke sa-ko-pvn-ak-es. Hor-re ha-ya-ket, cu-ko-ha-yak-et, ah-ko-pvn-ak-es. Em po-ya-fek-cv nen-'o-ce oh-li-ca-kes

E-pu-se, e-pu-ca, ec-ke, er-ke, mon fo-ne en-fo-lo-wv ren-toh-pv-rv, en-hv-te-ces-kv pom yv-hi-ke-tv yv-hi-kēt a-pe-yēs

Hv-sak-lat-kv ren-toh-pv-rv nak mak-a-kat po-hec-kv? Lu-cv so-pan-vl-ke, o-pan-vl-ke, yv-hik-vl-ke o-mvl-kv e-te-hvm-ku-se yv-hi-ka-kat po-hec-kv?

E-kvn-v mon su-tv em-o-pu-nvk-v, en-yv-hi-ke-tv, suf-ke-tos. Yv-hik-e-tv ren-toh-pv-rv, pom-eu, suf-ke po-ni-yēt, yv-hik-ēs

MEMORY SACK

That first cry opens the earth door.
We join the ancestor road.
With our pack of memories
Slung slack on our backs
We venture into the circle
Of destruction,
Which is the circle
Of creation
And make more—

WELCOMING SONG

(taught me by my cousin Joe Sulphur)

ALLAY NA LEE NO ar-ri-no (while I go/came?)

HETHLEE KNEE TOOK KAH LAY he-reen e-to-kvl-ik-en
(very well we gathered)

ALLAY NA LEE NO ar-ri-no

HOBANEEE HOBANEE E o-pan-e o-pa-ne *(dancing, dancing)*

ALLAY NA LEE NO ar-ri-no

AH JAH LUHGEE MAH GUN GHEE v-cul-a-ke mah kvn ke
(the old ones said/foretold)

ALLAY NA LEE NO ar-ri-no

HAYOUNG GEE (G)O LEE hv-yom-e ful-le *(this way they/we go about)*

AN AMERICAN SUNRISE

We were running out of breath, as we ran out to meet ourselves, We
Were surfacing the edge of our ancestors' fights, and ready to Strike
It was difficult to lose days in the Indian bar if you were Straight.
Easy if you played pool and drank to remember to forget. We
Made plans to be professional—and did. And some of us could Sing
When we drove to the edge of the mountains, with a drum. We
Made sense of our beautiful crazed lives under the starry stars. Sin
Was invented by the Christians, as was the Devil, we sang. We
Were the heathens, but needed to be saved from them: Thin
Chance. We knew we were all related in this story, a little Gin
Will clarify the dark, and make us all feel like dancing. We
Had something to do with the origins of blues and jazz
I argued with the music as I filled the jukebox with dimes in June,

Forty years later and we still want justice. We are still America. We.

BLESS THIS LAND

Bless this land from the top of its head to the bottom of its feet

From the arctic old white head to the brown feet of tropical rain

Bless the eyes of this land, for they witness cruelty and kindness in this land

From sunrise light upright to falling down on your knees night

Bless the ears of this land, for they hear cries of heartbreak and shouts of celebration in this land

Once we heard no gunshot on these lands; the trees and stones can be heard singing

Bless the mouth, lips and speech of this land, for the land is a speaker, a singer, a keeper of all that happens here, on this land

Luminous forests, oceans, and rock cliff sold for the trash glut of gold, uranium, or oil bust rush yet there are new stories to be made, little ones coming up over the horizon

Bless the arms and hands of this land, for they remake and restore beauty in this land

We were held in the circle around these lands by song, and reminded by the knowers that not one is over the other, no human above the bird, no bird above the insect, no wind above the grass

Bless the heart of this land on its knees planting food beneath the eternal circle of breathing, swimming and walking this land

The heart is a poetry maker. There is one heart, said the poetry maker, one body and all poems make one poem and we do not use words to make war on this land

Bless the gut labyrinth of this land, for it is the center of unknowing in this land

Bless the femaleness and maleness of this land, for each holds the fluent power of becoming in this land

When it was decided to be in this manner here in this place, this land, all the birds made a birdly racket from indigo sky holds

Bless the two legs and two feet of this land, for the sacred always walks beside the profane in this land

These words walk the backbone of this land, massaging the tissue around the cord of life, which is the tree of life, upon which this land stands

Bless the destruction of this land, for new shoots will rise up from fire, floods, earthquakes and fierce winds to make new this land

We are land on turtle's back—when the weight of greed overturns us, who will recall the upright song of this land

Bless the creation of new land, for out of chaos we will be compelled to remember to bless this land

The smallest one remembered, the most humble one, the one whose voice you'd have to lean in a thousand years to hear—we will begin there

Bless us, these lands, said the rememberer. These lands aren't our lands. These lands aren't your lands. We are this land.

And the blessing began a graceful moving through the grasses of time, from the beginning, to the circling around place of time, always moving, always

Mvto, mvto, mvto, mvto.