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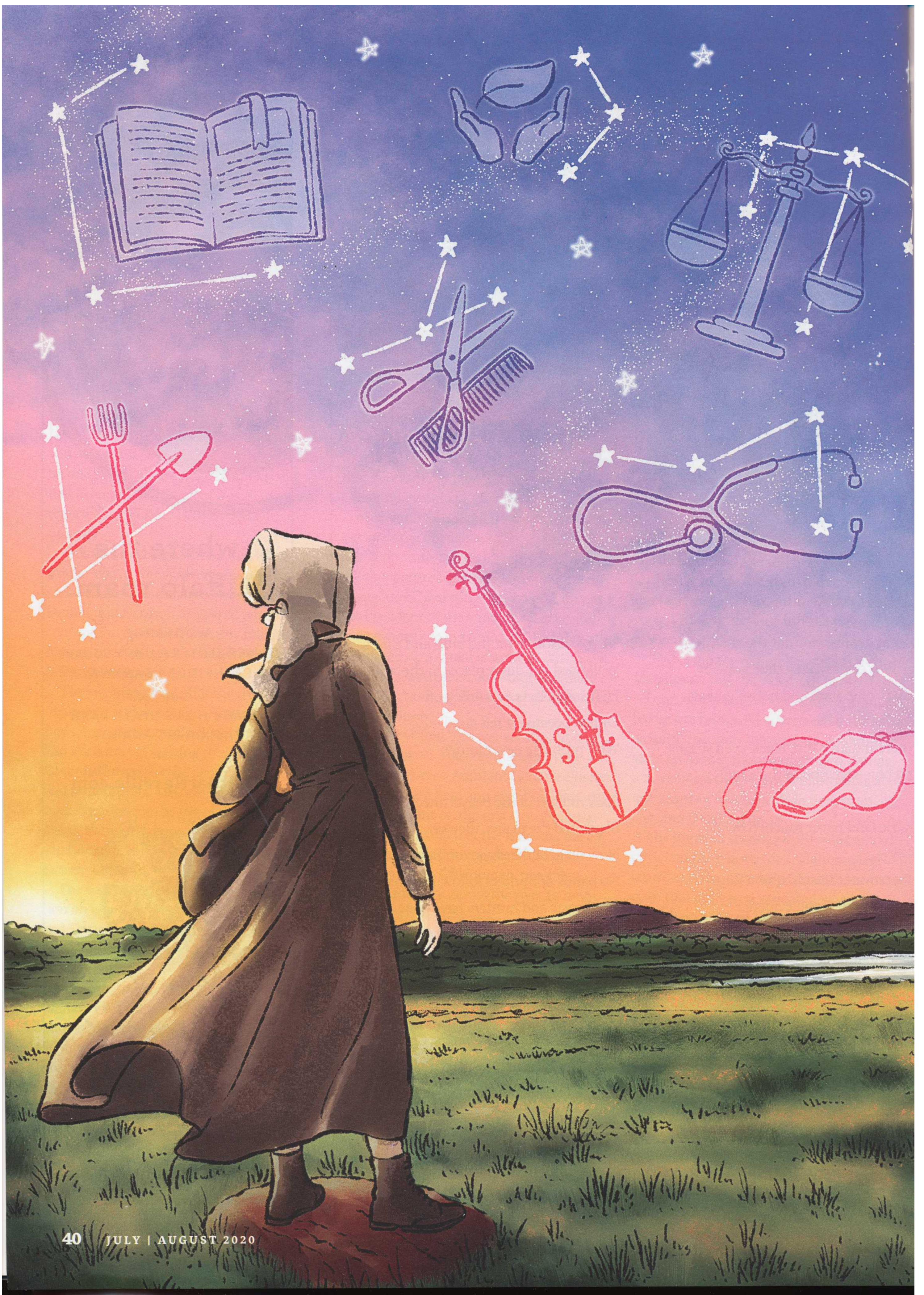
INDIAN TERRITORY'S
Queen of the Outlaws



DESPITE THEIR DEPICTION IN MANY WESTERN FILMS AS MERE HELPMATES FOR MEN, OKLAHOMA'S WOMEN OF THE WEST HAVE GUIDED OUR HISTORY FROM ITS VERY BEGINNINGS.

HEAR HER Roar

BY JEANETTA CALHOUN MISH | ILLUSTRATION BY J.J. RITCHEY

THE SCENE: A spunky blonde woman, worn by sun and struggle, watches for her man returning from hunting, from town, or from the west forty. Her children tugging at her skirts, she stares into the setting sun, shading her eyes with her hand at her brow or in the shadow of her sunbonnet. Without a doubt, this is a stereotype—but where, when, and how did it arise?

Scholars of Western literature and film note three common representations of the Western woman: the pioneer mother, the victim, and the bad woman. Oklahomans are familiar with the pioneer mother—there's a statue of her in Ponca City. The bad woman can be exemplified by Oklahoma's many female outlaws like Belle Starr or Cattle Annie and Little Britches. But I can't name any Oklahoma woman, past or present, whose primary attribute is victimhood.

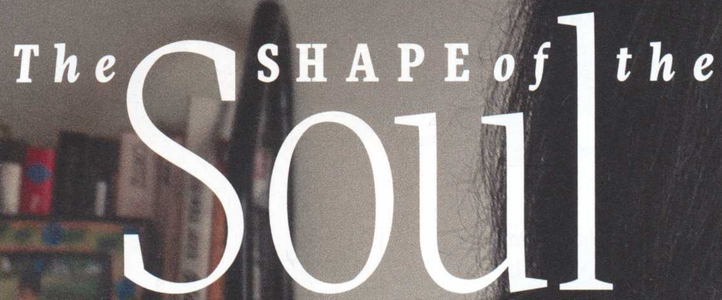
It's clear that these cultural conceptions obscure the living, breathing real deal. What then, are the true attributes of a Western woman, Oklahoma-style? Let's keep the spunk of the celluloid western woman but add to it adaptability, resilience, courage, and self-assurance—qualities abundant in Oklahoma women. Women tough enough to overcome removal, segregation, poverty, and violence. Women like Clara Luper and Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher. Like Alice Brown Davis, who was a businesswoman, a teacher, and the first female Chief of the Seminole Nation. Annie Coury (Koury) Abdo, who immigrated alone from Lebanon to America sometime around 1890, worked as a peddler, saved enough money to bring her five children to Oklahoma, and became an early Tulsa real estate investor. Mildred Imoch Cleghorn, born an Apache prisoner of war at Fort Sill, received her college degree at thirty-one then became a teacher, an extension worker, and a nationally recognized dollmaker.

Oklahoma women are gifted with creativity and intelligence. Singers, songwriters, musicians. Actresses, ballerinas, and visual artists. Ten of twenty-one Oklahoma Poets Laureate have been women, like the first, Violet McDougal, and Pulitzer Prize nominee Maggie Culver Fry, who was Cherokee. Caroline Henderson earned a master's degree in literature and wrote a series of articles for *The Atlantic Monthly* about the Dust Bowl—dispatched from the No Man's Land farm she homesteaded herself. Chickasaw opera star Tessie Mobley sang at the 1937 coronation of England's King George VI; while in college at OU, she was a member of the rifle team. Many of Oklahoma's historians are women, including Angie Debo, Muriel Wright, and Eddie Faye Gates. In the sciences, there is Donna Lee Shirley, former manager of Mars Exploration at the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory; experimental psychologist, educator, and inventor Gloria Twine Chisum, who developed protective eyewear for pilots in extreme conditions; and Mary Golda Ross, also Cherokee, who was a Lockheed engineer.

The most enduring quality of Western women is dedication to community combined with practicality, dependability, and generosity. They advocate and agitate—are union organizers, social service workers, civil rights leaders, environment-protectors, reformers, activists. Florence Etheridge Cobb was a lawyer, suffragette, magazine publisher, librarian, writer, poet, and municipal judge. Carrie Barefoot Dickerson, a school teacher, nurse, and nursing home owner, mortgaged her home and sold her business to fight the Black Fox nuclear plant at Inola. Her fight went on for nine years before plans to build it were shelved.

Bertha Frank Teague was a mentor to young women from 1927 to 1969 as Byng High School's girls' basketball coach and, in 1985, one of the initial three women inductees into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. Ina Wood, co-owner of the Progressive Bookshop in Oklahoma City, faced prison for insisting on Oklahomans' First Amendment rights.

These women never had time to stand staring at the setting sun—they were too busy looking after children, old folks, and incarcerated women. Oklahoma's Western woman is busy making plans, directing projects, finishing a degree, a painting, a poem, or a holiday dinner. She's writing laws and fighting injustice. Teaching and healing. She's bringing a dish to the church supper, weeding her vegetable garden, pruning her roses, taking her grandbabies to the park. She's playing guitar and singing her songs for a benefit concert. She's helping neighbors recover from a tornado or a fire or an illness or a bombing. Visiting the bereaved. Keeping books for the round-up club, supporting FFA and 4H. She's waiting tables and cutting hair and checking out groceries and working in the oilfield. Raising cattle and training horses. She's wearing a uniform, an evening gown, a pair of jeans. If you see her at rest, maybe sitting on the porch swing or in the pew, know that her stillness is temporary, that at any moment she'll be a flurry of activity again, an admirable and powerful force in the world.



The SHAPE of the Soul

Tulsa native Joy Harjo first was appointed United States Poet Laureate in September 2019. In April 2020, she was reappointed to the post for a second term.

IN THIS Q&A, 2017-2018 OKLAHOMA STATE POET LAUREATE JEANETTA CALHOUN MISH INTERVIEWS UNITED STATES POET LAUREATE JOY HARJO ABOUT THE HEALING POWER OF POEMS, RETURNING TO OKLAHOMA AFTER A TIME AWAY, AND HOW HISTORY INFORMS US ALL.

IN SEPTEMBER 2019, Joy Harjo was named the twenty-third United States Poet Laureate. A member of the Muscogee/Mvskoke (Creek) Nation, she is the first Native American United States Poet Laureate as well as the first from Oklahoma. Harjo grew up in Tulsa and recently returned to her home state after a long absence, a move that coincides with her current tenure as a 2019 Tulsa Artist Fellow. She also is a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and a founding board member of the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation.

Harjo's first publication, *The Last Song*, a chapbook of poetry, was released in 1975. Her most recent collection, *American Sunrise*, was published in August 2019. Her awards include the Ruth Lilly Prize from the Poetry Foundation, the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her memoir *Crazy Brave* won the PEN USA Literary Award for Creative Non-Fiction. Harjo has published two picture books for children—*For a Girl Becoming* and *The Good Luck Cat*—and she has recorded four award-winning albums of music including *Winding Through the Milky Way*, for which she was awarded a NAMMY for Best Female Artist of the Year. Harjo is a founding member of For Girls Becoming, an arts mentorship program for young women of her tribal nation.

BY JEANETTA CALHOUN MISH
PORTRAIT BY MELISSA LUKENBAUGH

GENEVIEVE LEE/POETRY FOUNDATION

In 2017, the Poetry Foundation awarded the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize to Harjo at a ceremony in Chicago.

Q: *Your writings often are referenced by scholars of environmental writing—the theme of taking care of the earth and all its inhabitants run throughout your work. Oklahoma has suffered many environmental insults—from Tar Creek to fracking to injection-disposal of waste drilling fluids to poultry waste polluting the Illinois River Watershed. Your elegy for Mvskoke poet Louis Oliver, "Fishing," is one of my favorites of your natural world poems. Would you speak about your approach to writing about the natural world?*

A: I don't know that I have an approach to writing the natural world. We are that world. It is imbedded in us, no, we are imbedded in the earth, we are the earth, or *Ekvnvjakv: Earth Mother* in Mvskoke. Louis Oliver taught me, by his poetry and his being, about not being self-conscious about who we are as Mvskoke people and about our place in this world as we look out from the eyes of a culture in which we have clan relationships to animals and elements. All that we do has to be evaluated in relationship of our place here as humans, which is not above the animals or over the other Earth inhabitants. I hadn't read that poem in a long time and just reread it. It makes me lonely for Louis and for a different time in my writing and writing style. I have been very lucky when it comes to teachers and mentors. In a way, that's what we poets, writers, and creative people do: We fish. And it's not just humans who fish. I imagine that the fish go fishing.

Q: *Do you have a specific project you're pursuing as a Tulsa Artist Fellow? Could you tell us more about the Norton anthology of Native American poetry that you and other members of the editorial team recently completed? Where did you find—or did you create—the title of the anthology,* When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through?

A: The Tulsa Artist Fellowship doesn't demand a project; rather you are expected to be actively creating. If I reapply next year, I will have a project that will be part of or include the community. I am working on several projects. I am writing the second memoir, finishing a musical play, and will have an album out this fall.

Then there is the poet laureate project, which I am developing with the Library of Congress staff. We are making story maps of Native poetry in the U.S. These maps would be available on the Library of Congress

at those moments that transform us in our lives, such as birth, death, marriage, and falling in and out of love. We turn to poetry when we have no words.

site, and communities would be encouraged to make their own maps.

The anthology, *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: a Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* will be released by W.W. Norton in August. I worked closely with LeAnne Howe, Choctaw, another Oklahoma poet and writer, and Jennifer Foerster on this project. The rest of the editing team is comprised of Native poets. We had other assistance from my students at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville when I was teaching there. The title was inspired by a line from the *Kumulipo*, a Hawaiian creation chant, and an excerpt is included in the anthology.

Q: *How does/can poetry fit into the lives of Americans—and Oklahomans—of all backgrounds?*

A: We go to poetry at those moments that transform us in our lives, such as birth, death, marriage, and falling in and out of love. We turn to poetry when we have no words. You don't have to be a poet to write poetry. Poetry is a kind of form that can be a time machine, can take you into the workings of history, or reveal the arc of the shape of the soul. Poems can be funny, furious, or sad. A poem can hold almost anything, especially those things that are too heavy to carry.

Q: *You are known in the poetry world, by both Native and non-Native writers, as a treasured mentor. I know that you have also mentored young Mvskoke women through your For Girls Becoming project—but I hear that project is expanding to include both young men and young women. Would you talk to us about what mentoring means to you and describe the mentorships you're involved in now?*

A: After the poet laureateship, I will go back to working closely with the For Girls Becoming project, a mentorship program for young Mvskoke women in the arts. The Mvskoke poet Jennifer Foerster and I developed and produced the pilot program, and for now, the tribe's Mvskoke Youth Council under the leadership of Nancy Mason has taken it over. They have included young men, and the program is proving quite successful. Jennifer and I are thinking about an arts school featuring our language and community service as next steps.

Q: *You have often spoken of your artist's lineage, which includes poets, writers, and musicians from all over the world. How do you place yourself as an Oklahoma writer?*

A: My origin story begins here in Oklahoma. I was born in Tulsa and lived here until I left for Indian school at the Institute of American Indian Arts, when it was predominately a Bureau of Indian Affairs high school. My tribal nation is here, and for years I trekked back and forth between Oklahoma and New Mexico, keeping as close as I could as someone who lived far away, to traditional culture. I kept my presence here with my people, my family. I would have to name N. Scott Momaday, who is similar with his Oklahoma-New Mexico connection. I met him when I was a graduate student at the University of Iowa. He has been a champion of my poetry. And I think of those early gatherings of Native poets and writers that included Louis Oliver (Mvskoke), Lance Henson (Cheyenne), Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), Geary Hobson (Cherokee/Quapaw/Chickasaw), Joe Dale Tate Nevaquayah (Yuchi/Comanche), and LeAnne Howe (Choctaw) among many others.

Q: *Oklahoma is fraught with contradictions and saturated in painful histories and violence—The Tulsa Race Massacre centennial is fast approaching, and David Grann's investigation of the Osage murders has brought national attention to one of Oklahoma's most shameful moments. Your poetry often confronts and reclaims history. How has returning to Oklahoma affected—or not—your relationship with history?*

A: I don't believe the questions of history are ever completely answered. I often confront them, as I did in my most recent collection *An American Sunrise*, which focuses on removal, and particularly my great (a few greats back) grandfather Monahwee, one of the Red Stick warriors who fought at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend against illegal removal of our people from our homelands in the South. Sometimes I don't think much has changed, and we appear to be living with the same division that was in the country during the time of removal . . . Ultimately, I have to speak my truth, or rather live it. I embrace a worldview in which we are all relatives, and in this worldview, there is a celebration of diversity. No one is above the other.

Q: *Both of us came back to Oklahoma after many years spent in many other places. In another interview, you said that coming back was both a "challenge" and a "renewal." The final lines from one of your early poems, "The Last Song," seem prophetic: "Oklahoma will be the last song I'll ever sing." Can you describe the Oklahoma song in your heart now? What key is it in?*

A: I think that poem said it. Everyone always returns home, in one way or the other. Yes, my return is a challenge because of history and a renewal because I have come home to give back what was given to me by my ancestors to carry forth into the world. I love my people. They are with me wherever I go, in memories, stories, and their songs, images, and words. Each generation is the fulfillment of a promise dreamed by the grandparent generation.