
The Flood

Joy Harjo

It had been years since I'd seen the watermonster, the snake who lived at the bottom of the lake. He had disappeared in the age of reason, as a mystery that never happened.

For in the muggy lake was the girl I could have been at sixteen, wrested from the torment of exaggerated fools, one version anyway, though the story at the surface would say car accident, or drowning while drinking, all of it eventually accidental.

This story is not an accident, nor is the existence of the watersnake in the memory of the people as they carried the burden of the myth from Alabama to Oklahoma. Each reluctant step pounded memory into the broken heart and no one will ever forget it.

When I walk the stairway of water into the abyss, I return as the wife of the watermonster, in a blanket of time decorated with swatches of cloth and feathers from our favorite clothes.

The stories of the battles of the watersnake are forever ongoing, and those stories soaked into my blood since infancy like deer gravy, so how could I resist the water-snake, who appeared as the most handsome man in the tribe, or any band whose visits I'd been witness to since childhood?

This had been going on for centuries: the first time he appeared I carried my baby sister on my back as I went to get water. She laughed at a woodpecker flitting like a small sun above us and before I could deter the symbol we were in it.

My body was already on fire with the explosion of womanhood as if I were flint, hot stone, and when he stepped out of the water he was the first myth I had ever seen uncovered. I had surprised him in a human moment. I looked aside but I could not discount what I had seen.

My baby sister's cry pinched reality, the woodpecker a warning of a disjuncture in the brimming sky, and then a man who was not a man but a myth.

What I had seen there were no words for except in the sacred language of the most holy recounting, so when I ran back to the village, drenched in salt, how could I explain the water jar left empty by the river to my mother who deciphered my burning lips as shame?

My imagination swallowed me like a mica sky, but I had seen the watermonster in the fight of lightning storms, breaking trees, stirring up killing winds, and had lost my favorite brother to a spear of the sacred flame, so certainly I would know my beloved if he were hidden in the blushing skin of the suddenly vulnerable.

I was taken with a fever and nothing cured it until I dreamed my fiery body dipped in the river where it fed into the lake. My father carried me as if I were newborn, as if he were presenting me once more to the world, and when he dipped me I was quenched, pronounced healed.

My parents immediately made plans to marry me to an important man who was years older but would provide me with everything I needed to survive in this world, a world I could no longer perceive, as I had been blinded with a ring of water when I was most in need of a drink by a snake who was not a snake, and how did he know my absolute secrets, those created at the brink of acquired language?

When I disappeared it was in a storm that destroyed the houses of my relatives; my baby sister was found sucking on her hand in the crook of an oak.

And though it may have appeared otherwise, I did not go willingly. That night I had seen my face strung on the shell belt of my ancestors, and I was standing next to a man who could not look me in the eye.

The oldest woman in the tribe wanted to remember me as a symbol in the story of a girl who disobeyed, who gave in to her desires before marriage and was destroyed by the monster disguised as the seductive warrior.

Others saw the car I was driving as it drove into the lake early one morning, the time the carriers of tradition wake up, before the sun or the approach of woodpeckers, and found the emptied six-pack on the sandy shores of the lake.

The power of the victim is a power that will always be reckoned with, one way or the other. When the proverbial sixteen-year-old woman walked down to the lake within her were all sixteen-year-old women who had questioned their power from time immemorial.

Her imagination was larger than the small frame house at the north edge of town, with the broken cars surrounding it like a necklace of futility, larger than the town itself leaning into the lake. Nothing could stop it, just as no one could stop the bearing-down thunderheads as they gathered overhead in the war of opposites.

Years later when she walked out of the lake and headed for town, no one recognized her, or themselves, in the drench of fire and rain. The watersnake was a story no one told anymore. They'd entered a drought that no one recognized as drought, the convenience store a signal of temporary amnesia.

I had gone out to get bread, eggs, and the newspaper before breakfast and hurried the cashier for my change as the crazy woman walked in, for I could not see myself as I had abandoned her some twenty years ago in a blue windbreaker at the edge of the man-made lake as everyone dove naked and drunk off the sheer cliff, as if we had nothing to live for, not then or ever.

It was beginning to rain in Oklahoma, the rain that would flood the world.

Embedded in Muscogee tribal memory is the creature the tie snake, a huge snake of a monster who lives in waterways and will do what he can to take us with him. He represents the power of the underworld.

He is still present today in the lakes and rivers of Oklahoma and Alabama, a force we reckon with despite the proliferation of inventions that keep us from ourselves.

the shining sun, while the people sat in front of their houses chatting, a huge purple flying fish emerged from the sea and flew over the village to the small lake above. As the villagers discussed the occurrence, someone even said that it was proof positive that they were the strongest tribe on Orchid Island. Unfortunately, they didn't know that a great catastrophe was approaching.

Naturally, there were a few good households in the tribe. At night the gods spoke to them in a dream, saying: "Oh, good people! In the coming days you must sleep on your porches. If you notice anything the least bit amiss, you must flee quickly." After several days another deluge fell, filling the little lake above the village. Late at night the good people recalled the dream of the previous day and immediately fled. But the bad people slept soundly. After a short while the gods removed the mountain damming the river and the water flew toward the village. In a matter of seconds the whole village was drowned.

The following day members of the other tribes came to look, and the village really was under water. From then on no one tyrannized over others and everyone was allowed to visit their relatives in peace.



The Last Days of Ikafaduan

SIYAPENJIPEAYA

IN ANCIENT TIMES there were nine tribes scattered around Orchid Island. Originally there were two tribes in Langdao: a big tribe of more than one hundred households and a small tribe of more than thirty households. The larger tribe was dispersed by a natural disaster with the remnants joining the smaller tribe, which gradually grew to become today's Iralalay. The Yeyou also consisted of two groups: today's Yeyou Yaya, which consists of fifty households, and the Ivaeas, which consisted of more than one hundred households and, for unseen circumstances, joined the Yeyou tribe. By the same token, the Dongqing tribe also included a group of more than ten households called the Straolo-did that had joined the Dongqing tribe for unseen circumstances. The Yeyin, Yuren, and Hongtou tribes experienced no changes. The ninth tribe was the Ikafaduan tribe.

The Ikafaduan tribe was the vilest on Orchid Island. When members of other tribes passed through their village on the way to visit family elsewhere, they would be robbed of their luggage. All the other tribes knew how overbearing they were, so they began taking their boats to visit their relatives. But they too would board ship and rob them. The other tribes did not wish to fight because the Ikafaduan had a giant headman who wielded a wooden club the size of a rudder with which he savagely beat people.

When the gods saw how overbearing they were, they sent a deluge that was down a mountain that blocked a small stream that turned into a small lake that contained small fish, shrimp, crabs, and other creatures. The people of the tribe never once imagined that the small lake could be the source of disaster and so went on with their rapacious lives as usual. The gods saw that they did not change their ways, so they performed a divine miracle: under