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INITIATIONS, a review of *Crazy Brave* by Pam Uschuk
CRAZY BRAVE, a memoir by Joy Harjo
W.W. Norton, New York, 2012

I read memoirs written by writers the way some people sneak chocolate, savoring juicy gossip, the shadow story behind the pens, computers and public faces of my fellow writers. What I most enjoy and am moved by are the rare memoirs that rise above a chronicling of life experiences to risk breaking the rules and explore. Because it diverges from traditional autobiography and because her prose is often pure poetry, one of my favorite memoirs of last year is Elizabeth Alvarado's *Anthropologies*. The other is Joy Harjo's *Crazy Brave*, a book that defies linear time while blending poetry, prose and myth to leap to the realm of the visionary. *Crazy Brave* is one of most inventive memoirs I've ever read. It is as intensely engrossing as it is poignant. It also has a sense of humor. Since Harjo is a poet and musician, her prose reverberates with rhythm as well as with metaphor, story and wisdom. Harjo's imagery is expansive and tinged with the gravitas of knowing on the intuitive as well as the intellectual plane.

A member of the Mvskoke Creek Nation, Harjo was born and raised and, after a long hiatus, now lives in Oklahoma. Her Indigenous heritage, a deep spirituality, and the storytelling tradition inform her work. Her difficult childhood and adolescence forged in her a burning need to know, to find words for healing, words to create herself whole from the ashes. Harjo plays alto saxophone and has recorded some three albums, nearly all are arrangements of her own poetry. In 2010, she was awarded Best Female Vocalist by the Native American Music Awards. So, it is appropriate that music creates part of the weft of this memoir, which takes us through her early childhood, subject to the alcoholic temper and infidelities of a charismatic father, then, through her adolescence, marred by an abusive, sadistic step-father. We follow her to Indian boarding school, and we suffer with her through two heartbreakingly early marriages and motherhood, transcending all of it, as she evolves into a poet and a musician in her own right.

As Pam Houston said, Harjo invites us into a whole new way of seeing." So, the narrative begins:

"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....This was the time that 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...We were driving somewhere in Tulsa, the northern border of the Creek Nation...The radio was on...I became acutely aware of the line the jazz trumpeter was playing...I didn't know the words *jazz* or *trumpet*. I don't know how to say it, with sounds or words, but in that confluence of hot southern afternoon, in the breeze of aftershave and humidity, I followed 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."

The entire memoir is a feast seasoned with magic. As Harjo has said about poetry, "We must turn slaughter into food." This narrative is the shaman's journey of initiations through the folds of time and memory ultimately for healing, for Harjo, for Indigenous women whose rights Harjo has for decades fought for, and for all who read it. Harjo is as adept at rendering verisimilitude as she is at creating the poetry she is renown for.

"The Saturday after moving to her step-father's house, Harjo recalls that she "followed my five year old sister's cries to the kitchen and found her being held aloft by one leg by my stepfather. I froze in terror..."

this will happen to you if you misbehave.". He swung my sister around.

He unbuckled and pulled off his belt in one slick motion. i still see the sweat crescents under the arms of his work shirt. i hear him grunt with the effort as he whips her...

When he was done he put her down, then slid the belt carefully around his girth."

Holding the narrative together is Harjo's understanding of and journeys into the spirit world, a world as palpable as the physical world as it is in all of her writings. Despite violence and despair, Harjo's generous spirit triumphs with crazy courage and compassion.

Like an ocean, *Crazy Brave* refracts light through many levels. Through vignettes, memorable characters and interlocking stories, this memoir invites us on a trail of tears of a sort, the journey of a young Native woman exiled from her family and from herself, of a young woman bearing the heartbreak of a dispossessed people, of incredible longing, a way to walk through all of it with grace. Here is a journey marked by violence and beauty, by fear and love, by betrayal and courage. There is a good reason it has won this year's American Book Award and the PEN Center USA's Award for Creative Nonfiction. In

writing that is spell-binding and visionary, Harjo takes our hands and leads us to transcend the terrible fire of loss to find compassion and love.