I am singing a song that can only be born after losing a country.

JOY HARJO
Postcolonial Love Poem

I’ve been taught bloodstones can cure a snakebite, can stop the bleeding—most people forgot this when the war ended. The war ended depending on which war you mean: those we started, before those, millennia ago and onward, those which started me, which I lost and won— these ever-blooming wounds.

I was built by wage. So I wage love and worse— always another campaign to march across a desert night for the cannon flash of your pale skin settling in a silver lagoon of smoke at your breast. I dismount my dark horse, bend to you there, deliver you the hard pull of all my thirsts—

I learned Drink in a country of drought. We pleasure to hurt, leave marks the size of stones—each a cabochon polished by our mouths. I, your lapidary, your lapidary wheel turning—green mottled red—

the jaspers of our desires.

There are wildflowers in my desert which take up to twenty years to bloom. The seeds sleep like geodes beneath hot feldspar sand until a flash flood bolts the arroyo, lifting them in its copper current, opens them with memory— they remember what their god whispered into their ribs: Wake up and ache for your life.

Where your hands have been are diamonds on my shoulders, down my back, thighs— I am your culebra.

I am in the dirt for you.

Your hips are quartz-light and dangerous, two rose-horned rams ascending a soft desert wash before the November sky untethers a hundred-year flood—the desert returned suddenly to its ancient sea.

Arise the wild heliotrope, scorpion weed,
blue phacelia which hold purple the way a throat can hold
the shape of any great hand—
Great hands is what she called mine.
The rain will eventually come, or not.
Until then, we touch our bodies like wounds—
the war never ended and somehow begins again.
The First Water Is the Body

The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States—also, it is a part of my body.

I carry a river. It is who I am: ‘Aha Makav. This is not metaphor.

When a Mojave says, Inyech ‘Aha Makavch ithuum, we are saying our name. We are telling a story of our existence. The river runs through the middle of my body.

So far, I have said the word river in every stanza. I don’t want to waste water. I must preserve the river in my body.

In future stanzas, I will try to be more conservative.

⇒

The Spanish called us, Mojave. Colorado, the name they gave our river because it was silt-red-thick.

Natives have been called red forever. I have never met a red Native, not even on my reservation, not even at the National Museum of the American Indian, not even at the largest powwow in Parker, Arizona.

I live in the desert along a dammed blue river. The only red people I’ve seen are white tourists sunburned after staying out on the water too long.

⇐

‘Aha Makav is the true name of our people, given to us by our Creator who loosed the river from the earth and built it into our living bodies.

Translated into English, ‘Aha Makav means the river runs through the middle of our body, the same way it runs through the middle of our land.

This is a poor translation, like all translations.
In American imaginations, the logic of this image will lend itself to surrealism or magical realism—

Americans prefer a magical red Indian, or a shaman, or a fake Indian in a red dress, over a real Native. Even a real Native carrying the dangerous and heavy blues of a river in her body.

What threatens white people is often dismissed as myth. I have never been true in America. America is my myth.

⇒

Jacques Derrida says, *Every text remains in mourning until it is translated.*

When Mojaves say the word for *tears*, we return to our word for *river*, as if our river were flowing from our eyes. A *great weeping* is how you might translate it. Or a *river of grief*.

But who is this translation for and will they come to my language’s four-night funeral to grieve what has been lost in my efforts at translation? When they have drunk dry my river will they join the mourning procession across our bleached desert?

The word for *drought* is different across many languages and lands. The ache of thirst, though, translates to all bodies along the same paths—the tongue, the throat, the kidneys. No matter what language you speak, no matter the color of your skin.

⇐

We carry the river, its body of water, in our body.

I do not mean to imply a visual relationship. Such as: a Native woman on her knees holding a box of Land O’ Lakes butter whose label has a picture of a Native woman on her knees holding a box of Land O’ Lakes butter whose label has a picture of a Native woman on her knees . . .
We carry the river, its body of water, in our body. I do not mean to invoke the Droste effect—this is not a picture of a river within a picture of a river.

I mean river as a verb. A happening. It is moving within me right now.

This is not juxtaposition. Body and water are not two unlike things—they are more than close together or side by side. They are same—body, being, energy, prayer, current, motion, medicine.

The body is beyond six senses. Is sensual. An ecstatic state of energy, always on the verge of praying, or entering any river of movement.

Energy is a moving river moving my moving body.

In Mojave thinking, body and land are the same. The words are separated only by the letters ‘ii and ‘a: ‘iimat for body, ‘amat for land. In conversation, we often use a shortened form for each: mat-. Unless you know the context of a conversation, you might not know if we are speaking about our body or our land. You might not know which has been injured, which is remembering, which is alive, which was dreamed, which needs care. You might not know we mean both.

If I say, My river is disappearing, do I also mean, My people are disappearing?

How can I translate—not in words but in belief—that a river is a body, as alive as you or I, that there can be no life without it?

John Berger wrote, True translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay
behind the words of the original text before it was written. True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal.

Between the English translation I offered, and the urgency I felt typing ‘Aha Makav in the lines above, is not the point where this story ends or begins.

We must go to the place before those two points—we must go to the third place that is the river.

We must go to the point of the lance entering the earth, and the river becoming the first body bursting from earth’s clay body into my sudden body. We must submerge, come under, beneath those once warm red waters now channeled blue and cool, the current’s endless yards of emerald silk wrapping the body and moving it, swift enough to take life or give it.

We must go until we smell the black root-wet anchoring the river’s mud banks. We must go beyond beyond to a place where we have never been the center, where there is no center—beyond, toward what does not need us yet makes us.

⇒

What is this third point, this place that breaks a surface, if not the deep-cut and crooked bone bed where the Colorado River runs—a one-thousand-four-hundred-and-fifty-mile thirst—into and through a body?

Berger called it the pre-verbal. Pre-verbal as in the body when the body was more than body. Before it could name itself body and be limited, bordered by the space body indicated.

Pre-verbal is the place where the body was yet a green-blue energy greening, greened and bluing the stone, red and floodwater, the razorback fish, the beetle, and the cottonwoods’ and willows’ shaded shadows.

Pre-verbal was when the body was more than a body and possible.

One of its possibilities was to hold a river within it.
A river is a body of water. It has a foot, an elbow, a mouth. It runs. It lies in a bed. It can make you good. It has a head. It remembers everything.

If I was created to hold the Colorado River, to carry its rushing inside me, if the very shape of my throat, of my thighs is for wetness, how can I say who I am if the river is gone?

What does ‘Aha Makav mean if the river is emptied to the skeleton of its fish and the miniature sand dunes of its dry silten beds?

If the river is a ghost, am I?

Unsootheable thirst is one type of haunting.

A phrase popular or more known to non-Natives during the Standing Rock encampment was, Water is the first medicine. It is true.

Where I come from we cleanse ourselves in the river. I mean: The water makes us strong and able to move forward into what is set before us to do with good energy.

We cannot live good, we cannot live at all, without water.

If we poison and use up our water, how will we clean our wounds and our wrongs? How will we wash away what we must leave behind us? How will we make ourselves new?

To thirst and to drink is how one knows they are alive and grateful.

To thirst and then not drink is . . .
If your builder could place a small red bird in your chest to beat as your heart, is it so hard for you to picture the blue river hurtling inside the slow muscled curves of my long body? Is it too difficult to believe it is as sacred as a breath or a star or a sidewinder or your own mother or your beloveds?

If I could convince you, would our brown bodies and our blue rivers be more loved and less ruined?

The Whanganui River in New Zealand now has the same legal rights of a human being. In India, the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers now have the same legal status of a human being. Slovenia’s constitution now declares access to clean drinking water to be a national human right. While in the United States, we are teargassing and rubber-bulleting and kenneling Natives trying to protect their water from pollution and contamination at Standing Rock in North Dakota. We have yet to discover what the effects of lead-contaminated water will be on the children of Flint, Michigan, who have been drinking it for years.

America is a land of bad math and science. The Right believes Rapture will save them from the violence they are delivering upon the earth and water; the Left believes technology, the same technology wrecking the earth and water, will save them from the wreckage or help them build a new world on Mars.

We think of our bodies as being all that we are: I am my body. This thinking helps us disrespect water, air, land, one another. But water is not external from our body, our self.

My Elder says, Cut off your ear, and you will live. Cut off your hand, you will live. Cut off your leg, you can still live. Cut off our water, we will not live more than a week.
The water we drink, like the air we breathe, is not a part of our body but is our body. What we do to one—to the body, to the water—we do to the other.

Toni Morrison writes, *All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was*. Back to the body of earth, of flesh, back to the mouth, the throat, back to the womb, back to the heart, to its blood, back to our grief, back back back.

Will we remember from where we’ve come? The water.

And once remembered, will we return to that first water, and in doing so return to ourselves, to each other?

Do you think the water will forget what we have done, what we continue to do?
How the Milky Way Was Made

My river was once unseparated. Was Colorado. Red-fast flood. Able to take

anything it could wet—in a wild rush—

all the way to Mexico.

Now it is shattered by fifteen dams
over one thousand four hundred and fifty miles,

pipes and pumps filling
swimming pools and sprinklers

in Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

To save our fish, we lifted them from our skeletoned river beds, 
loosed them in our heavens, set them aster—

‘Achii ‘ahan, Mojave salmon,

Colorado pike minnow.

Up there they glide gilled with stars.
You see them now—

god-large, gold-green sides,

lunar-white belly to breast—

making their great speeded way across the darkest hours, 
rippling the sapphired sky-water into a galaxy road.

The blurred wake they drag as they make their path through the night sky is called
‘Achii ‘ahan nyuunye—

our words for *Milky Way*.

Coyote too is up there, locked in the moon
after his failed attempt to leap it, fishing net wet

and empty slung over his back—

a prisoner blue and dreaming

of unzipping the salmon’s silked skins with his teeth.
O, the weakness of any mouth

as it gives itself away to the universe

of a sweet-milk body.

As my own mouth is dreamed to thirst
the long desire-ways, the hundred thousand light-year roads

of your wrists and thighs.
exhibits from The American Water Museum

0.
I can’t tell you anything new about the river—
you can’t tell a river to itself.

17.
A recording plays from somewhere high,
or low, floating up or down through the falling
dust-light.

It is a voice out of time, voice of quickness,
voice of glass—or wind. A melody, almost—of mud.
How it takes a deep blue to tumble wet stones
into a songline. The music any earth makes
when touched and shaped by the original green energy.
The song, if translated, might feel like this:

You have been made in my likeness.

I am inside you—I am you / or you are me.

Let us say to one another: I am yours—

and know finally that we will only ever be

as much as we are willing to save of one another.

4.
The guidebook’s single entry:

There is no guide.
You built this museum.
You have always been
its Muse and Master.
5.
Admission is general and free
except for what the children pay—
and they pay in the kidneys.

99.
From an original rock painting in Topock, Arizona, now digitized on a
wall-mounted monitor:

Before this city, the Creator pressed his staff
into the earth, and the earth opened—

it wasn’t a wound, it was joy—joy!—!
Out of this opening leaped earth’s most radical bloom: our people—

we blossoms from the original body: water,
flowering and flowing until it became itself, and we, us:

   River. Body.

78.
The first violence against any body of water
is to forget the name its creator first called it.
Worse: forget the bodies who spoke that name.

An American way of forgetting Natives:
Discover them with City. Crumble them by City.
Erase them into Cities named for their bones, until

you are the new Natives of your new Cities.
Let the new faucets run in celebration, in excess.
Who lies beneath streets, universities, art museums?

   My people!

I learn to love them from up here, through concrete.
La llorona out on the avenues crying for everyone’s
babies, for all the mothers, including River, grinded
to their knees and dust for the splendid City. Still, we must sweep the dust, gather our own bodies like messes of sand and memory. Who will excavate our clodded bodies from the banks, pick embedded stones and sticks from the raw scrapes oozing our backs and thighs? Who will call us back to the water, wash the dirt from our eyes and hair? Can anybody uncrush our hands, reshape them from clay, let us touch one another’s faces again?

Has anyone answered? We’ve been crying out for 600 years—

_Tengo sed._

204.
A dilapidated diorama of the mythical city of Flint, Michigan:

The glue that once held the small-scale balsa wood children to their places—along the streets, waiting in line at the bus stop, on top of the slide in a playground, or on the basketball court—has desiccated and snapped away. Now the children lie flat on the floor of the diorama, like they are sleeping, open-eyed to the sight, to what they have seen through their mouths—hundreds of miniature empty clay cups roll back and forth out of reach of their hands, some have ground down to tinier piles of dust and sand at their unmoving fingertips.

23.
River, an interactive performance piece:

_Sit or stand silently. Close your eyes until they are still._
_In the stillness breathe in the river moving inside you._
_It is a thick smell, a color. Touch it—not with your hands, but with your entire sensual skin. Touch it with your flesh._
Drink from yourself until you are full. Realize the emptiness made by your fullness. . . . No, no, no—Don’t repent. This is a museum not a church.

123.
Marginalia from the BIA Watermongers Congressional Records, redacted:

To kill take their water
To kill steal their water
then tell them how much they owe
To kill bleed them of what is wet in them
To kill find their river and slit its throat
To kill pollute their water with their daughters’ busted drowned bodies washed up on the shores, piece by piece

205.
The water piped into every American city is called dead water.

300.
There is a urinal inside a curtained booth in the corner.
The lit sign above the curtain hums and flickers: Donations.

You have nothing to give.

10.
Metonymic Experience:

There are more than 60,000 miles of waterways in our bodies—veins, arteries—the red lines of our own lives. We are topographies of sustainable greed—dragons be here now, in our bellies, in the cracked bowl bottoms of lakebeds, bloodshot eyes frayed like red speaker wires scorched in the sun. We thirst. Our thirst is a caravan—pilgrims of
scarcity. As we die of drought, we splay in the shifting sand like old maps to follow, ones that led us here to begin with, brought us to this masterpiece of thirst, as architects and social practice artists. The curators ask us to collapse as naturally as possible, in a heap—so those who come behind us might be immersed in this exhibit of thirst, as if it was their own.

Soon.

67.
There are grief counselors on site for those who realize they have entered The American Water Museum not as patrons but rather as parts of the new exhibit.

68.
The drinking fountain blows a metallic blue ribbon from its spout.

41.
Embroidered martyr banners hang in the entryway: A swath of cloth and flag for the rivers who refused American citizenry, who would not speak English, no matter how badly they were beaten and bled.

7.
Text RVR followed by # to sign up for the text message survey:

What does a day feel like when you’re nourished on the bodies and fleshes of those felled for your arrival? A butterfly sipping on the opened neck of a horse stiffening beneath the mottled shade wept by a cottonwood tree? What does it mean that your life is made of someone else’s shed water and blood? Dial 1 if you don’t care.
Blueprints from another water restoration project:

Faint lines of freeway overpass and surrounding houses.
The kidney-shape of a pond circled by a concrete path.
Sketches of a ramada, a parking lot, fake visitors, toy cars . . .

Graffitied in red spray paint across the blueprints:

>This once-river has not been restored to itself—
it is a river and still isn’t a river.

2345.*
The river is my sister—I am its daughter.
It is my hands when I drink from it,
my own eye when I am weeping,
and my desire when I ache like a yucca bell
in the night. The river says, *Open your mouth to me,*
*and I will make you more.*

Because even a river can be lonely,
*even a river will die of thirst.*

I am both—the river and its vessel.
It maps me alluvium. A net of moon-colored fish.
I’ve flashed through it like copper wire.

A *cottonwood* root swelling with drink,
I tremble every leaf to lime, every bean to gold,
jingle the willow in the same song the river sings.

I am it and its mud.
I am the body kneeling at the river’s edge
letting it drink from me.

* The prayer of an Elder Mojave woman shot in the head and throat by two rubber bullets as she sat in prayer before a tractor and a row of German shepherds barking against their leashes at the site of yet another pipeline.
200.
You cannot drink poetry.

19.
There is often trouble choosing which language for the headset:

Makav: ‘Aha Haviily inyep nyuwiich.
Español: A beber y a tragar, que el mundo se va a acabar.

I am fluent in water. Water is fluent in my body—
it spoke my body into existence.

If a river spoke English, it might say:

    What begins in water
    will end without it.

    Or,

    I remember you—
    I cannot forget
    my own body.

88.*
You remember everything,
carve a waterline of my transgressions,
and despite all I’ve done,
you’ve suffered to return to me.
You’ve fed the mesquite’s thorns
and the sweet of its glowing beans.

You’ve pulled me under and released me clean.
You made me new, something better than good.

* The last love letter written to the last river. It was the wish of the last river that the letter not be made public until 100 years after her death.
Like me you are a fast body.
A coppery current.
I laid in your bed.
I kept you for myself
except you are myself
and kept me instead.

365.
Photograph from a South American newspaper:

US-headquartered companies bought the rights
to water in other countries. These companies are
strangers to the gods of those waters, were not
formed from them, have never said Gracias to
those waters, never prayed to those waters
have never been cleansed by those waters.

The US-headquartered companies announce,
with armed guards, You can't drink from this lake
anymore. The Natives gather rain instead, open
their beautiful water-shaped mouths to the sky,
catch it in curved, peach-colored shells, in halved
gourds, in their water-shaped hands.

The companies say, Read these documents—
we bought the rain too.

We own the rain.

210.
The Credible Thirst Interview:

When did you first enter the territory of thirst?

How many days have you waited in the long line
of thirst with your dirty jug?
Are you able to love anyone—
your mother, your son, your lover—
in the midst of such hunger and this fire
stretching out and lengthening your throat?

How many bodies have you pressed into,
not for desire but for the saliva you sucked
from their tongue?

Have you leaned your head against the miles
and miles of cyclone fence to steady the dizziness,
to slow the breath and thud at your temples,
the mirages, and hallucinations?

Have you ever considered your thirst as a weapon?

Do you now consider yourself a soldier
in the battle for something wet?

Do you recall in how many instances
you didn’t care when it was
someone else’s thirst erupting?

And now: Who should fill your cup
from their own jug?

211.
There are differing opinions about how kissing
became criminal. Who hasn’t drunk,
hasn’t begged at the well of a lover’s mouth?
Love has never been different from thirst,
but now everything is different. All the cups
are filled with dirt—even our mouths.

3000.
Water remembers everything it travels over and through.
If you have been in water, part of you remains there still.
It is a memoir of an indissoluble relationship with the world.
But where is water now? Where is the world?

301.
The Magic Show:

Only water can change water, can heal itself. Not even God made water. Not on any of the seven days. It was already here. Or maybe God is water, because I am water, and you are water.

11.
Art of Fact:

Let me tell you a story about water:
Once upon a time there was us.
America’s thirst tried to drink us away.
And here we still are.