

Joan Houlihan's

The Us

(Tupelo Press, 2009)

A Reader's Companion

*"The Us is like nothing I have ever read or seen.
I thought it impossible to invent anything in poetry . . .
the very thing Houlihan has done. These poems are just extraordinary: wildly hewn,
classically construed and skewed by an imagined lexicon, but one that, miraculously,
works in plain English.
In a voice that is elemental, ancient, animistic, pre-lingual even, the speaker manages,
with nothing short of magic, to communicate with us, in a language
both syntactically inventive and radically simple,
about human truths that matter for all time."
— Lucie Brock-Broido*

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Introduction

Joan Houlihan

Some say language creates the world. A well-known hypothesis of language learning¹ states that after around five years old, deprived of the conditions leading to language development—overhearing and interacting with speakers—children can no longer learn how to form syntactical structures, they can only memorize individual words and their definitions. The relationship between words cannot be formed.

But what is the world if not a relationship *between, among, to and for?*

To consider relationships between words is to also consider relationships between people—parent and child, siblings, friends, couples, groups, cities and nations—in short, community. While the pronoun “us” gave rise to my imagined community of hunter-gatherers in *The Us*, and while discovering and uncovering the life of this particular community, line by line, in each poem, I discovered/uncovered the essential truths of any community: food, warmth, safety, and belonging (“Us nest fine a weather long / between the heat of kin / the least of us in huts / built round with stones.”)

It seemed to me then, while writing the poems, as it seems to me now, reflecting on them, that the language itself both made and served the group. Saying “us” created the Us, and each time the Us speak as one in a collective voice they confirm themselves anew. They state their existence as a community. In *The Us*, language creates a world of relationships: between words (syntax) and between people (communication).

Furthermore, because I wanted to portray the group as always at the threshold of language (and thus civilization), I felt their language needed to be as simple as possible, directly concerned with immediate surroundings, basic transactions of need, and without adornment. Because the natural world of the Us was close and dangerous, sometimes awe-inspiring, in its very nearness this world became almost a member of the group itself and therefore had to be treated as an entity, another sentient life-form (“From dirt, a stir put forth its mix, smell / of weed and green-held bud, deep cups / sweet and sharp. Warmer started day. / Sun lay wider where us walked.”)

The concerns of this imagined group are the concerns of any community, and the Us function as an allegory of community, especially in their drive to find “home”—a physical location free from attack by enemies (“thems”) and able to sustain life (hunnable and/or farmable). As with so many migratory or diaspora groups, the Us are forced to keep moving under harsh conditions (“Froze by winter blast / us could not grip on meat or crust, / ours fingers blackened down to all the hand”), and the resting place they find is an island untouched by civilization, in a time when all relationships, including those between humans and animals, exist before the community of all living things is shattered and splintered. (“Then horses low and red / came slow for us to ride / necks outstretched for hands, / eye cast down and soft / and nuzzled forth and bent for us to climb”).

The idea of community then, is a central concern of the book, and I examine this idea in two main ways: first, through the viewpoint of the collective “us,” and second, through the viewpoint of a separate consciousness formed by the independent action of one member (“ay”).

The emergence of a separate member’s viewpoint parallels the emergence of individuality through separation: Ay sees his mother suffering and being left behind by the group, and he therefore must choose to act separately from the Us (“ay am hers son and could not leave her colding.”). This loyalty to a first “community” (the bond between child and mother) supersedes the bond to the later community (the Us).

When his mother dies, and Ay experiences the further trauma of being captured by the “thems” and enslaved to them, his separation/individuation continues. He has lost his primary relationships (father, mother) and his community (the Us). The ultimate trauma is an experience of violence (an attack by one of the Us, who is called Greb, leaves Ay brain-injured and unable to move or speak), and he is driven into internal dialogue, his sole relationship residing within himself, as he literally talks to himself (thinks).

In the final sections of the book, Ay explores his thoughts through rhetorical questions and interior monologue (“When hurt stops the mouth / what talks on?”) as he is forced to struggle with ideas of his own origin and purpose:

Rain made me here. What would speak me
have a noise? Even bird would fold
and pleat then leaf-stirred make its cry
and go. How could winter matter touched rattling
to a tree, holding white and close
another sleep? Ay could not tell.
Ay came back simple, milded, felled.

Displaced by his injury into a mute state, Ay develops a heightened connection with self (or god–mind–spirit), the only connection left to him, one that does not require exterior speech or response. In his speechless state, immobilized and dependent on being lifted, carried, and fed by the Us, Ay returns to a primary bond, that of the infant and mother, as the Us tend and protect him as a collective mother.

In the process of taking care and looking out for Ay, the Us re-forms the community around him, embedding him, healing the piece of the collective that has been wounded so that unity can be regained. (“Lifted like a brae, soft-turned by hands, / murmured on, wrapped in cloth, ay were / still. The us made a shade to lay me down”).

The progression or movement from inner silence (pre-language) to connection with another human (language) enacted through the infant’s pre-lingual connection to the mother and later, through language, to a family and wider community, is one that I attempted to recreate through the injury to the ay and his loss of language as communication.

“Mother tongue”—the phrase is apt, as language is not merely a means to (or result of) a primal bond, but the keeping together of those in the same family, tribe, citizenry, nation; the mother tongue not only a tool of creating community, but a reelection and expression of the community as it knows itself, its identity.

In this sense, the language of a community is an action, an enactment of bond, and the language itself, in its syntactical relations, forms its most useful and harmonious arrangement of parts, a community of words.

Interview

with James Kirkland

JKM: Initially, I wanted to know what inspired you to write *The Us*. How did it come about?

JH: It came about in two ways: the first way was really on the level of language. The seed came from one poem. In that poem I had used the pronoun “us” instead of “we”—I don’t know why—but the poem became bigger than itself and started to grow a people. And so that poem, which is not in the book by the way, started out with a journey and a people that journey to an island and led me into an interesting state I had never been in before, as a poet, and I assume novelists get into, which is waking up and thinking: What will they do next? Who are these people? Why am I thinking about them? Where did they come from?

So I started thinking about the idea that they existed in time, but I had no idea where. In other words, I didn’t do scholarly research and then write this book. What happened was, these people began to inhabit me in some way and I began to wonder about their genesis, background, purpose. And I also began to develop a real sense of tenderness, and worry, and necessity about telling their story.

JKM: So the book came from a pronoun and an exciting way of using the objective “us” as opposed to the subjective “we”: how did this turn into the subject-verb disagreement that appears in the book?

JH: It’s hard to trace this exactly, but it seemed to me to be a natural evolution that the us, because they were calling themselves by that name and because they also spoke by that pronoun—it was always the pronoun—that it became objective when they referred to the group as the “us.”

When you say subject-verb disagreement, from my point of view there wasn’t a disagreement, the subjects and verbs are in agreement, and in fact I was very careful to be consistent with all that. Once I worked out who the Us were and what they were about, the language to describe individuals within that collective flowed as part of the system.

So Ay and Him and Her and all those pronouns ended up being used basically in the same way that I was using “us.”

JKM: There’s so much of a structure there, and it’s very fun to read through the book and reread, looking at that structure.

JH: Yes, although I have to say that isn’t what I expected to happen. I mean, I went through the sequence of poems very carefully and made sure about the consistency in my own mind and according to my own standards of what the language is, but I had thought that reading the book could be a transparent experience, that what the language was doing would allow the expression of these people to shine forth in a way that wouldn’t be possible using standard English.

What seems to have happened instead is that some readers end up more focused on the language than the consciousness that it describes.

What I wanted was more of an emphasis on the idea of simplicity driving language, the idea that there is such a reality as *first sight*, *first sensation*, and because of our over-processed language we lose that initial fastening of the word to the thing. I wanted that to be what this language would . . . facilitate? Or make possible.

JKM: And I’ve been reading some of your old essays on the Boston Comment website (www.bostoncomment.com/). And one in particular, from back in 2000, the “Prosing of Poetry,” specifically mentions—I’m just going to read it. . . .

JH: Yes.

JKM: “Before writing was invented, poetry was used to mark special occasions and strong emotions and to burn the necessary stories—the myths and truths of a culture—into the memories of a people.” Is this a seedling for *The Us*?

JH: Oh, I had no idea of *The Us* when I wrote that. I don’t think . . . no . . . [laughter]. I mean, that describes in some way what I ended up coming to in this book, via the *word*, the first “thing,” but, uh . . . no. The essays are in a different realm. I guess I should thank you for pointing out that I’m intellectually in agreement with my creative self.

JKM: And ten years later, too.

JH: Yeah . . . [laughter].

JKM: Well, I find—and I think a lot of people do—find these essays [perceptive and relevant]. . . . It’s good to hear about over processed language and trying to move from that. And I certainly see that going on here.

JH: And it’s always going on for poets. I mean, for poets who really are poets, that’s what their goal in life is: To revitalize language, to revitalize the sensation of experience and how it’s expressed through words; that’s where we kind of live, in that space, as poets. Whether we succeed in doing that is another subject. This is one way for me to

approach what I think is an obligation as a poet, and also a responsibility to the people I created to tell their story.

JKM: So now I'm going to ask you a question that's probably a complete departure from when you started writing about these people, and [involves] the creative process. As I said in my email, coincidentally [as I read *The Us*] I was reading Matthea Harvey's *Modern Life*, which has a number of post-apocalyptic poems in it.

JH: Yeah, yeah.

JKM: . . . and as well, last year I was knocked down by Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and I noticed that there's a tendency in new poetry to . . . think of a kind of end of days . . .

JH: That's interesting.

JKM: . . . whether it is through global warming, through all that. And *The Us* [seemed] to me—since I was reading Harvey at the same time—[to go] with that as well, and I saw a lot of interesting dynamics going on. [I sensed] that this was some point in the future, and therefore the objective “us” . . . invites the reader in, to experience as well. Was any of that on your mind? Where did you find these people placed, in a time?

JH: Oh, where did I locate them in time?

JKM: Yes.

JH: I actually . . . at first I didn't. And then felt as I was completing the manuscript that there probably should be more of a location in time. But, the people seemed to me to be outside of . . . I mean it could be on either end of time, it could be very, very early or very, very late. Post-apocalyptic late. And in both cases it had to do with beginnings, it had to do with restarting, or beginning. It had to do with reconstruction of the self, the reconstruction of consciousness however this takes place or in whatever time. Historically, you know, we like to think about the studies in Neolithic times, and we're fascinated by early language and pictographs, but who knows? Maybe these are discoveries we're making now but they were post-apocalyptic for that time. I mean my aim wasn't to think, or care, what the time frame actually is, or the place. I really want the focus to be on is the connection between the development of consciousness and the parallel development of language.

JKM: Is there a favorite poem you want to talk about?

JH: That's hard to say . . . a favorite poem? Well, I liked—I felt there was a big turning point when I wrote “Bare evening ate,” because that poem came after the death of the father, and it was . . . the transition into the development of the son, Ay.

The development of Ay was based on separation—which is always the case

psychologically; I mean the mother and child unity is broken when the child perceives itself as a separate thing from the mother. And I thought just the idea of that, and the idea of the separation of the unity of the group, were similar experiences. So to have Ay recognize that he was bonded to the mother, but at the same time separate from the group, gave the story a lot of energy and direction in terms of the development of his aloneness, his separation from the bigger group but then his connection to his family bonds.

I think of the language as very simple, and I wanted it to be as simple, as possible but at the same time the language I used had to be in the service of thoughts I have had all my life, and ideas about religion and spiritual development, psychological development. . . . I guess the epic dimension in the poem, the experiences that human beings go through in their lives that in some way are echoed in *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*—those epic journeys are internalized, and we all go through them, and they're still contemporary. And I saw that in a big way while I was writing this book.

JKM: Yeah, and then after Ay breaks away you have [the poem] “Why so noisy,” which is one of my favorites.

JH: When he's connecting with the baby, Brae.

JKM: It's a really beautiful poem. And the structure of the poem itself, you have notes in the margins that we sometimes see in Beowulf, or in editions of Chaucer . . .

JH: “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” was the inspiration for that. I've always loved the “Argument” and the marginalia of old books, and—because they're making the point that the plot, the story, the kind of bare-bones narrative of something is one stream—these elements can be separate from the internal, lyrical experience that's going on the poem. I wanted that to be true, and I wanted those margin notes to be separate. I mean the book is narrative, it's certainly narrative, but it's also a reflection of internal state of minds and feelings. So, I like the idea of separating out the sort of skeletal “well here they are now and this is what's happening now,” very plainly. And I like the look of those notes, too.

JKM: It does look great.

So, I guess I have a couple more questions. The question I'll ask first is—did this [take form] in a sequence? Did you begin writing this from start to finish, without knowing how it was going to end?

JH: Did I have an outline of the action and the characters and all that?

JKM: Yes.

JH: No, I wrote it. As I thought of it I wrote it. I began to map a little bit ahead as things occurred to me, but for the most part the poems were written as poems and then later I worked on the narrative. In fact, forming the manuscript was challenging because I left out fifteen or more poems that I thought were narratively linked but not as strong as the other poems. This principle of organization drove a lot of the narrative, too, and helped determine what I thought were the pivotal poems that needed to be there, or the ones that

may have linked the narrative and may have been okay but weren't included.

So the organization was partly created afterwards, and partly along the way: after I wrote each poem something often occurred to me that as a result grew out of that poem.

JKM: And the character of the Greb became that, as well?

JH: Yes. He is a disaffected member of the group. In fact I didn't know about him until after the Us reached the island and after they . . . basically when the horses befriended them. The idea that animals and people were in unity appealed to me a lot, and I wondered at some level what broke that unity—what would break that unity—and what came to mind was someone or something—not one person, but . . . the idea of what would it be like to eat the flesh of these animals? This seemed to me to be the crux of the disunity that they experienced. And it came from within, which is usually how alienation works. It came from one of their own . . . that break of the unity, built on cooperation and trust, with the horses and the geese and the creatures on that island, a unity that was beautiful.

JKM: You can say that when the G'wen has to stay behind is a similar breaking of unity.

JH: Yes, and that has to do with laws. The idea that, you know, in biblical stories and so on, you get a sense of these laws being made and passed down to us—religious laws especially—but they were based on practical matters, like not eating infected meat, and that became a religious precept. . . .

Tracing many of these laws back has to do with finding very practical explanations—in fact, when I was writing this everything had to do with “tied to the earth, tied to survival” ideas. And that made me start thinking about laws in general—human laws—and why they exist, where they came from. The story about leaving the G'wen behind: it was partly because they had to burn [the Father's] body so that it wouldn't infect them. And the G'wen was tied to that man who died, that leader, so leaving her behind was tied to their ritual.

The fact that she followed, and the fact that the son broke that law by staying with her, was also part of the energy of his genesis, the energy of his consciousness.

—James Kirk Maynard for *Black Warrior Review Online* (<http://bwr.ua.edu/>), April 2010

Note: This interview has been copyedited for clarity and consistency and so may depart in minor ways from the previously published version.

Interview

with Sawnie Morris

Joan Houlihan's third book, *The Us*, is a book-length sequence of poems recounting the story of an imagined pre-historical culture. The narrative focuses on one of the culture's members in particular—in a sense, its first true individual—"ay." Although the book is mythological in its scope, it is lyrical rather than epic in its approach, proceeding not with heroic pomp and encyclopedic comprehensiveness but instead with lyric delicacy and attention to carefully chosen particulars. *The Us* is not monumental, nor is it meant to be.

The Us begins with a table of contents, an "Argument" (which is a synopsis), and a list of the cast of characters. These three elements serve as guide to a vaguely familiar yet unnamed country and time where the living is primitive and the people's speech is rendered in an English unlike any known before—a broken, thorny idiom that scrambles the linearity we associate with traditional heroic narratives. It is the hobbled tongue of an anti-hero, and with *The Us*, Houlihan has given us an anti-epic with a scrappy, rebellious underdog placed front and center.

The book's Argument tells of migrations to and from an "Isle," the encounter of a Primitive People ("us") with an Advanced People ("thems"), a brief experience of life "in harmony amidst Horse & Geese," followed by the kind of fall-out that has transpired repeatedly since Neanderthals encountered Homo sapiens. The cast of characters list, "Kith & Kin," includes "father, leader of the us"; the son of the father, "ay"; five other human beings, among them a female conjurer; and "greb," described as "one of the us who is sly & dangerous." The story itself begins in the collective voice of the "us." It alters to first person, with ay as speaker, when he commits an act of compassion—ay stays behind to care for his recently widowed and pregnant mother when the us emigrate, an act that literally and figuratively separates him from the collective. He begins to speak for himself at the end of Part I, implying that consciousness is in transition, evolving into the individualized ego ("ay" is a homonym, obviously, for "I"). In stepping away from the collective, ay steps into himself.

Readers will recognize in Houlihan's "work of teeth and softening" echoes of Anglo-Saxon alliteration: "Brae, stay here, the branch and leaf / a shield of sun, moss, a bed / and every bird a guard." *The Us* also contains the sharp-sounds Seamus Heaney reports of Ulster speech, along with an occasional foray into the sprung rhythms of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Ice-taught, bit by sun's low arc, / rock-tall, quiet as a smoke / ours father goes before us." The language falters in moments ("Hail the kill and all it bring!"), but at her best Houlihan's music is convincingly shaped and advanced by anaphora, word-play, and the making of compounds and coinages we associate with Anglo-Saxon literature, as in "green-held bud," or "sea-talk," or the description of the hair of the nurse bending over the child as "a gleam-fall over him."

One of the pleasures of *The Us* is the way things unfold as in a dream, its uncanny fusion

of the strange and the familiar. Archetypes and dynamics familiar in western mythology are in evidence throughout. For example, when Ay leaves his baby brother amid “branch and leaf” in hopes the Themis will find and provide the infant with needed sustenance, we think of the abandonment of Moses, the most recognizable instance of the lost-and-found archetype. More disturbing are the moments in which we recognize contemporary waking-life horrors. When Ay becomes a slave to the Themis,

Themis slide out a box
the size of lying down
and told with a hand—
here—go inside.
Ay fit to it, then on top
themis set a lid for sleep.
(“At night a milk bowl” 6–11)

Forcing prisoners to sleep each night in a tightly confined space is a form of torture we have read about in literature (think of Isabel Allende’s *The House of Spirits*, a fictional account of the U.S.-backed coup in Chile in the 1970s, in which the narrator is violently assaulted and imprisoned in a closed box), as well as in today’s news media (think of Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib). The brutality of such moments in *The Us* strikes us doubly because this brutality is at once archetypal and part of our own “advanced” time.

The Us is essentially romantic in its distrust of the “advanced” and in its sympathy with the natural world, as well as in its hankering—in spite of all the trouble—after a more primal existence, and one result of Houlihan’s bending and twisting of syntax and her altering of pronouns and possessives (“Hims g’wen did not go / quiet to the floor but tore hers cloth and wept.”) is a rough-hewn sensuality that is seductive and refreshing in this, the digital age.

I Skyped Joan Houlihan at her desk in Massachusetts from my desk in rural northern New Mexico one morning last fall. After some amused conversation regarding our digitalized selves, we began our conversation about *The Us*. (This exchange was later edited.)

Sawnie Morris: What was the inspiration for *The Us*? How did you conceive of it?

Joan Houlihan: *The Us* came from what painters call a “happy accident” (a stray brush stroke that changes the course of the entire painting), in that I momentarily misread my own handwriting as “us” instead of “we” in the draft of an early poem. That poem (not in the book) was spoken by one person in a group of exiles on a ship. In that moment of misreading, a question—who are/were us?—took shape.

SM: Could you say something about the process of its making?

JH: I began each day wondering, as a novelist might wonder, about his or her characters: *What are the Us like? Where do they live? Where are they going and why? What will happen to them today?*

I needed to know, I was in the grip of a mystery, and the only way to find out was to write it. There was a strange correlation between my drive for more knowledge about these people and the continuing revelation of a world of which I had no previous idea. It was both odd and thrilling to be in the service of this drive. As these people began from a word (“us”) the world they inhabited took shape from the way they talked. It seemed to me then as it seems to me now that the language itself both made and served the group. The Us *created* the Us and each time the Us spoke as one, they confirmed themselves anew.

SM: Lucie Brock-Broido says of *The Us* that “the speaker manages . . . to communicate . . . in a language both syntactically inventive and radically simple . . .”

JH: Because I wanted to portray the Us as always at the threshold of language (and thus civilization), I felt their language needed to be as simple as possible, directly concerned with immediate surroundings, transactions of need, and without adornment. Since their concerns were basic—food, shelter, safety, belonging—their language was basic.

SM: It seems you took the *theory* that language is consciousness and reenacted and embodied for the reader the development of consciousness through language.

JH: If I did, I worked through a theory I didn’t have to begin with, but came to as a result of writing. I wasn’t thinking about a world and how people might speak in that world. But, in speaking, the world was created. And that in itself led me to the theory that language creates the world, creates consciousness.

SM: The style of writing in *The Us* is quite distinct from your previous two books.

JH: I can see that there is a connection between the work I did before and this book, but it really is a departure. In between, I had been changed by certain catastrophic events in my personal life that swept away my previous ways of thinking and feeling, forcing me to start again. I began trying to reach a way of expressing newly felt and perceived places.

I identify with Helen Vendler’s theory in *The Breaking of Style*, that poets whose style changes radically in mid-career have experienced some kind of life change deeper than style.

Likewise, I stripped the Us down so that they had to begin again. It was only later in the process of writing the book that I thought of the Us as a group of ancient people. They don’t necessarily have to be ancient people, they could be any people, maybe post-apocalyptic people. I am not interested in historical reality. I am interested in origin.

SM: Ay is a hero, in terms of risking his life. He is not a proud, vengeful Homeric hero or a female hero on the order of Alice Notley’s *Alette*, for example, who must destroy that which destroys. . . . Rather, Ay’s acts of heroism, which in effect make him an anti-hero, are in every case acts of nurturance, as a result of imaginative sympathy with another—such that the urge toward empathetic consciousness provides the psychic drive of *The Us*.

JH: That's very true. It is interesting to me that the act that is rebellious is the act that is compassionate. There is a drive in groups to conform, to ensure the survival of the whole. In the world of the Us, an individual act that is compassionate is dangerous for the group. There is a hardness to the way the Us live based exclusively on survival, but Ay's is the story of what the Us will eventually go toward, which is a higher level of consciousness, and which really has to do with being aware of, and empathic toward, others. The Us are bound together by necessity and utility—the hunting, the sharing of heat—which is not a result of love or compassion but primal need. Ay's is a bigger picture. He has a vision and the will to act on it. That's what makes him a hero.

SM: So you are saying that authentic empathy is only possible when individual consciousness is able to emerge from collective consciousness?

JH: Yes, and a paradox exists, because Ay's separation is fraught with isolation. He is able to help others because he is aware of them as separate beings, but that awareness forces him into a position of being alienated from the group.

SM: The Us say that the size of a deer “put in mind / the reach of what us were and came to be / and how us were the smaller.” The animal, rather than being objectified or commodified, humbles the human.

JH: Animals are important in many ways to the Us. On the island, when they become one with the horses and geese, the killing of animals—which is what they are used to doing—is mitigated. I see that as a moment of evolution for the Us as a group. One that is humbling but also strengthening—a step up.

SM: Later in the book, it is in relation to a red horse that trust between humans and animals is broken. Horsemeat is part of the culinary tradition in some European countries, and elsewhere. Are you a vegetarian?

JH: I just recently started being a vegetarian, but not philosophically. I'm not a big activist for animal rights. I don't have that political agenda.

In the book, the animals in many ways represent a more spiritual life. The horse, especially. After I had completed writing *The Us*, I saw a PBS special about early Ireland and I found out that there once were small red horses, ponies, on the island. There was talk about the spirit of the horse and about how the Celts worshipped the horse. I thought: *Wow! That's great!* It was backward research, fitting things together.

The killing and the eating of the horse is a real taboo for the Us; it really is a crossing of the line. That killing becomes akin to the killing of the albatross. It haunts and damns them.

SM: There is much in *The Us* that is archetypal in nature, including its themes of death and regeneration. The line that describes the death of the father, for example, calls to mind Osiris and the ancient Egyptian belief that at death one becomes the god.

JH: I love it that echoes of mythology occur in the book. Throughout working on *The Us* and now with the sequel manuscript, *Ay*, I have been immersed in the idea that people project a god onto a vacancy. When Ay is rendered silent by his head injury, he is viewed as a god by the Us because of the mystery of non-response and because of his lineage as son of their dead leader. It's very Ingmar Bergmanesque, in a way—I'm thinking of his film *The Silence*, and his idea of "negative imprint," as well as thinking of the psychology of projection and transference. When there is no response it creates a vacuum into which people can posit their own imaginative wishes and fears. Ay becomes something much bigger than he is through being silent.

It is the same when the father dies and creates *his* silence, although he is a very large figure in the tribe, so once he dies, the honor of being a god makes sense on another level, too. They can attribute something large to him in death because he was large in life.

SM: Tommy Archuleta, who introduced you at a recent reading in Santa Fe, mentioned that there are practices described in *The Us* that are similar to his people's traditions (he is of Native American and Spanish descent, tracing his father's side to Spaniards who arrived in New Mexico in 1598). He said that he wasn't offended by *The Us* in the way he is sometimes offended by people attempting to write about [indigenous] cultures. Rather, he said, *The Us* was "reeking of authenticity." Did you conduct research in preparation for writing this book?

JH: I did not do research. However, writing the poem where I misread my handwriting—as I mentioned earlier—occurred around the same time I had been looking online at a tale about an early Celtic voyage to the Isle of Man. I did look up some Anglo-Saxon root words in the *American Heritage Dictionary* and developed the names "gwen" and "brae" and "sen." Other than that, I did not do any research about people or groups of people. I wanted the book to be more allegorical than that, and to stand for all such groups.

SM: Has anyone challenged you about issues of appropriation?

JH: When I recorded poems from the book for the audio archives at Harvard's Woodberry Poetry Room, the curator invited questions from the audience and someone asked if I had worried about appropriation, assuming that I was taking on the voice of an actual group of people. I responded that it hadn't occurred to me, because the group and world they inhabited were entirely imaginary. And, she said: "Oh, so this is all made up?" And I said: "Well yeah, this is all made up." I didn't really try to compare it or draw from or read about any ancient people, or any groups of people, or any tribe of people or any current so-called primitive people existing now. That is all of interest, of course, but it isn't what I was doing.

SM: Ultimately we all descend from a tribal people somewhere.

JH: Well, yes we do—though I'm more enamored of the collective unconscious idea than the idea of finding a particular tribe and using that as a basis.

SM: In terms of process, John Berryman talks about having written a stanza a day when writing his “Homage to Mistress Bradstreet,” and not allowing himself to continue on to writing the next stanza until the following day. Did you have any similar agreements with yourself?

JH: That’s a great question. I wrote in a rush, pretty much everyday—and I don’t usually do that, but at the time it seemed to me that each poem was so connected to the next that I needed to follow that connection.

SM: Did you have anyone in particular to whom you showed the work, especially in the early stages?

JH: My husband is not a poet, but he is an astute, insightful reader. I would show him the poems as I went along to get a sense of whether or not he could even understand them. He thought the language was strange but completely apprehensible, and he was excited by it, which helped me to continue.

SM: I have wondered whether the marginal glosses in *The Us* served initially as a plot outline or came later. It sounds like it must have come later.

JH: When I went back to revise, I started to think about the narrative and whether or not the plot should be spelled out. I didn’t want to talk down to the reader, but I did want the reader to be in the experience, not hung up on plot points or who was who. I wanted the lyricism to come through and the psychic thread to be apparent, as it was for you. I also liked the faux-ancient look of the marginalia.

SM: Was Berryman’s *Dream Songs* an influence?

JH: *Dream Songs*? No. Though I love Berryman. My major literary influences in poetry are Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, Theodore Roethke, Dylan Thomas, and Sylvia Plath. In prose, they are Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, and William Trevor. Vladimir Nabokov’s poetic and allegorical novel *Invitation to a Beheading* was a huge influence when I was in my twenties.

SM: Of particular interest in the language of *The Us* is word play. For example, the pronoun “I” becomes like a seed inside the name “ay,” and you draw attention to this in lines where “ay” appears twice in close proximity: “Ay could not tell. / Ay came back simple, milded, felled.”

JH: You are absolutely right, the seed of the “I” is there, and the sound of it. I saw “ay” as a precursor to the pronoun “I.”

SM: How did you come up with the name “ay”?

JH: Coming up with Ay was more deliberate because once the Us existed, there needed to be another pronoun that represented the split or limbo state in the evolution of self-

awareness. That which was to become Ay wasn't ready yet to be the modern "I." I thought about the letter "Y," but it sounded too much like "why." It was my husband who came up with "ay" in one of our brainstorming sessions.

SM: When G'wen is giving birth, Ay says: "Hers head went side to side and groans / went round the wood, more / and hard against / what would be born." This provides a description of a woman giving birth that in a marvelously oblique way conjures a coffin. It also stands in contrast and echoes later when Ay is forced by the Them's to sleep in a lidded box.

JH: I like the idea of encompassing life and death in one image. And, I was thinking of the woods, the forest. "Hard-against" was a description of labor, not wanting the pain, but having to go through it. Which is what happens in the book: the Us are repeatedly put to the test, to the cruel rigors of weather and starvation that they are against but have to go through in order to get to a birth, in order to get to something that keeps them alive.

SM: In a desperate effort to feed and care for his infant brother and himself, Ay ventures into the Them's territory. Trouble—for Ay—ensues. This brings to mind the immigration debate in our own country, our own "U.S."

JH: There are different possible ends to the development of a self, and not all of those results are good. The Them's exemplify an attitude that is contrary to the qualities of empathy and nurturing, which is: Let's use what we can, including people. They are "advanced" but only in their ability to plan, organize, get food efficiently, conscript laborers, but there is no equivalent to Ay in the Them's, no variation in the group consciousness that presages awareness, though the nursemaid who leaves with ay could be seen as a precursor to compassion.

SM: Alice Walker speaks about hearing the voices of her ancestors or feeling that they speak through her. Did you have any sense of that when writing *The Us*?

JH: I did feel that I heard the voices of my ancestors. It happened suddenly and in a lasting way. It's like finding a road that goes somewhere, not by looking for it, but you happened upon it when you were lost and it went somewhere great and now you can go there. I wasn't even aware that such a place existed before this book. That's been a great gift to me. I don't want to sound self-aggrandizing or to set myself up as hearing things from the divine or anything like that. I feel like what I'm describing is an experience available to anyone.

I feel, as I get older, that I am in much closer touch with those who are dead: my parents and my brother, for example. And I have a sense of continuity that I did not have when I was younger.

SM: Did you read the article about Neanderthal DNA that was in the *New Yorker* last summer? Does that bear relationship to *The Us*?

JH: Yes, in terms of the collective unconscious and the repetition in the DNA of

language structures. All of those ideas of Chomsky's, and ideas of the innerness of grammar, are relevant to DNA. Language is from the body; it is not just a construction from the head. We carry ancient voices.

SM: What, if anything, has surprised you about the book's reception?

JH: No question, it was the wildly off-the-mark, hostile reaction in a review that appeared in *Poetry*. The review was completely baffling to me and it was disheartening at the time because I had been wondering if maybe the book wasn't as clear as I thought . . . if maybe it wouldn't be apprehended the way I wanted. But then, when the reviewer mentioned bad grammar . . . [laughter].

You have to wonder why *Poetry* initially published poems from *The Us* only a year before. The sound team came to my house and did a recording of my reading, then editors Christian Wiman and Don Share did a podcast that intelligently discussed, and clearly appreciated, the poems. We had a lovely interaction. So, while I was surprised by the review itself, I was more surprised by its appearance in that particular magazine.

On the other hand, I was happily surprised by the number of random readers who were genuinely affected by the book and moved to tell me so. I received many spontaneous and appreciative emails.

And later, several reviewers surprised me with their willingness to enter, and appreciate, an imagined world of language. Overall, since so many poetry books receive no reviews at all, or very sketchy ones, I was grateful for the thoughtful responses *The Us* did receive.

SM: You recently completed writing a sequel. *The Us* ends with Ay wounded and existentially alone. You mentioned earlier the effect of his silence.

JH: As someone who has lost the ability to speak and as "son of the father," Ay is propped at an altar and used as a divine figure. The sequel, *Ay*, revolves around his thoughts about that and his increasing need to escape the projection of the Us and to discover his own identity as a separate being.

SM: Are the two books structured in the same way?

JH: *The Us* is plot driven. *Ay* is composed mainly of lyrical monologues. It's a much more interior book, and the language is a tad more sophisticated. Ay's seeking enacts Joseph Campbell's hero archetype, his need to discover who he is now that he knows he is. *Ay* depicts a building towards the modern conception of self as an identity made up of thoughts and memories that only the individual self constructs and that are different from and separate from any group.

SM: How does that modern conception square with your instincts about the unconscious?

JH: In the process of this journey, Ay meets many of the dead. He meets family and he meets some others of the Us who have died. They are part of his world; they are doing

things in parallel. While he's making a campfire, they are also making a campfire. They are not copying him, but they are going on with their lives as if they are alive. He is part of a continuity of life/death, consciousness/unconsciousness.

Another aspect of the book has to do with meeting the Greb again and reencountering that pivotal, violent event in a different way.

SM: How so?

JH: I was influenced by a true story that later became a film (*Heaven's Rain*), about two children who had witnessed their parents being killed by an intruder. The murderer was convicted and imprisoned. The children had a very hard time in life and, in his forties, the son decided to confront the murderer. As soon as he saw the murderer face to face, instead of saying what he had planned to say, instead of reviling him, he said, "I forgive you." He had no idea he was going to say that. The murderer cried. The sister was angry. It was a remarkable story, especially because of the mysterious, wholly illogical origin of that forgiving impulse.

So I asked myself, how was Ay going to deal with Greb's action, which was completely inexplicable and drastically damaged Ay's life?

They have to meet. That's the plot. The rest is in the language.

—Sawnie Morris for *Boston Review* online (<http://bostonreview.net/>), January 2012.

Note: This interview has been copyedited for clarity and consistency and so may depart in minor ways from the previously published version.

Joan Houlihan

Biographical Note

Joan Houlihan was born and raised in Massachusetts. Her previous books are *Hand-held Executions: Poems & Essays* (Del Sol Press, 2003; expanded edition: Room 204 Press, 2009) and *The Mending Worm* (Green Rose Award, New Issues Press, 2006). In 2004 she founded the Concord Poetry Center, and in 2006 she established the Colrain Poetry Manuscript Conference for advanced writers. She is also on the faculty of Lesley University's low-residency M.F.A. in Creative Writing program.