Poem and Commentary: Perhaps the World Ends Here

by Joy Harjo

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table so it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow.
We pray of suffering and remorse.
We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

and a commentary on the poem by another writer...

by Dale Allender

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Part of the value of this poem as a model of writing is its rootedness in a particular object as a place from which to explore human relationships and the world. I remember late nights of adolescent identity exploration at the kitchen table with my mother. The conversation nourished my teenage mind and heart. When my wife and I wish to talk to my own teenage son, for praise or confrontation, we often sit at the table, plan our discussion, then call him to a chair to share the space and each other. My father always reached for our hands to begin a prayer before a meal when we were children. I do the same after my son has lit candles, my daughter laid out napkins, my wife serves food, and I pour wine and milk.

How often can we look at an inanimate object and see the cycles of life implicitly and explicitly buried within and hovering around? Harjo looks at this cultural artifact—the kitchen table—and explores the symbolic and literal. She works that invisible line between the universal and the particular: the relationship between the table-round or square, or long and narrow; made of wood, marble, or earth—and our lives, a particular life, and life itself.

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