MODERN CLASSICS

The Essential June Jordan

The Essential June Jordan

June Jordan (1936–2002), born in Harlem to West Indian parents and raised in Bedford-Stuyvesant, was an activist, journalist, essayist and teacher. She was the author of more than twenty-five works of poetry, fiction and essays, numerous children's books, and the librettos for the operas *Bang Bang Uber Alles* (with music by Adrienne Torf) and *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky* (with music by John Adams and direction by Peter Sellars).

Her experiences teaching poetry workshops for teenagers in Brooklyn, and then joining the writing faculty of SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) of the City University of New York in the mid-1960s, inspired Jordan's radical beliefs in education as a tool for social change. After stints at Connecticut College, Sarah Lawrence College, and Yale University, she became a professor of English at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, where she directed The Poetry Center.

In 1988, she was appointed professor of African-American Studies at the University of California Berkeley. There she created the *Poetry for the People* (P4P) programme, encouraging students both to immerse themselves deeply in the history and practice of many traditions of poetry and to lead poetry-writing workshops in typically excluded communities, through after-school programmes, senior citizen centres, food programmes for the homeless, and shelters for battered women. *Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* (1995) is still in print.

Her books of poetry include *Some Changes*, *Living Room* and *Kissing God Goodbye: Poems 1991–1997*. *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan* (2005) won the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Poetry – the last in a long list of honours which also included a congressional citation for outstanding contributions to literature, civil rights and the progressive movement.

June Jordan died from breast cancer in 2002.

Jan Heller Levi, poet, was a student and long-time friend of June Jordan. She is, with Sara Miles, coexecutor of the June M. Jordan Literary Estate Trust. With Miles, she co-edited *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan,* and, with Christoph Keller, co-edited *We're On: A June Jordan Reader.* She is also the editor of *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader.* She taught in the undergraduate and the MFA graduate program in creative writing at

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Hunter College in New York City for many years. Her fourth and most recent book of poems is *That's the Way to Travel,* published in a bilingual edition (English/German) by Moloko Print in 2019. She now lives in Switzerland with her husband, Christoph Keller.

Christoph Keller – novelist, playwright, memoirist – is the executive assistant of the June M. Jordan Literary Estate Trust. With Jan Heller Levi, he co-edited *We're On: A June Jordan Reader*, and has worked with foreign publishers on translations of Jordan's work and books into German, French, Spanish, Polish, Portuguese, and Basque. Keller also edited a Bengali/English selection of poems entitled *Only Our Hearts Will Argue Hard*. Keller's 2019 novel, *The Ground Beneath Our Feet*, won the Alemannic Literary Award; his memoir *Jeder Krüppel ein Superheld* (*Every Cripple A Superhero*) was published in Switzerland by Limmat Verlag in 2020.

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The Essential June Jordan

Edited by Jan Heller Levi and Christoph Keller
Afterword by Jericho Brown

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This book is dedicated to Christopher Meyer, and to the next generation – and the next, and the next – of readers and writers inspired by June Jordan.

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And so poetry is not a shopping list, a casual disquisition on the colors of the sky, a soporific daydream, or bumpersticker sloganeering. Poetry is a political action undertaken for the sake of information, the faith, the exorcism, and the lyrical invention, that telling the truth makes possible. Poetry means taking control of the language of your life. Good poems can interdict a suicide, rescue a love affair, and build a revolution in which speaking and listening to somebody becomes the first and last purpose to every social encounter.

June Jordan

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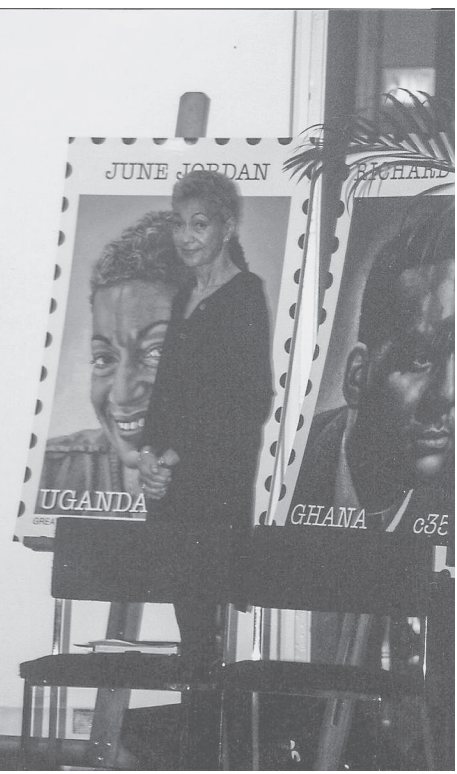

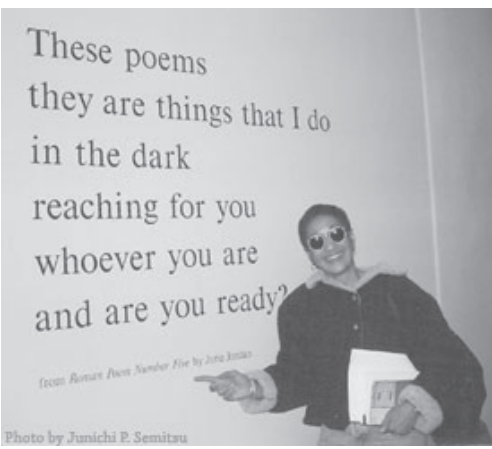

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If you will bear with me
for a few minutes I
will share with you
a few
of the 30,117 uses to which
the lowly peanut has been
put
by me
since yesterday afternoon.
Looking down to my feet you will notice
that I wear sensible shoelaces of unadulterated
peanut leaf composition but is biogradable
in the extreme
as well as pliable
enough for on and off again regular
habits of shoe use throughout one
to two weeks.
To your left you may observe the amazing Rembrandt
masterpiece reproduction I have cleverly priced together
with several million peanut shell chips have painstakingly painted
so as to accurately represent the colors of the original.
Overhead you may notice a squadron
of peanut B-52 bombers flying due west
at an altitude of 20,004 feet give or take
a few leguminous variables,
I would extend my hand in greeting to you
except for the fact that I am holding a reserve
supply of dry roasted and uncalled peanuts
guaranteed to accelerate protein assimilation
at a calculable rate documented
by my pocket [illegible] calculator

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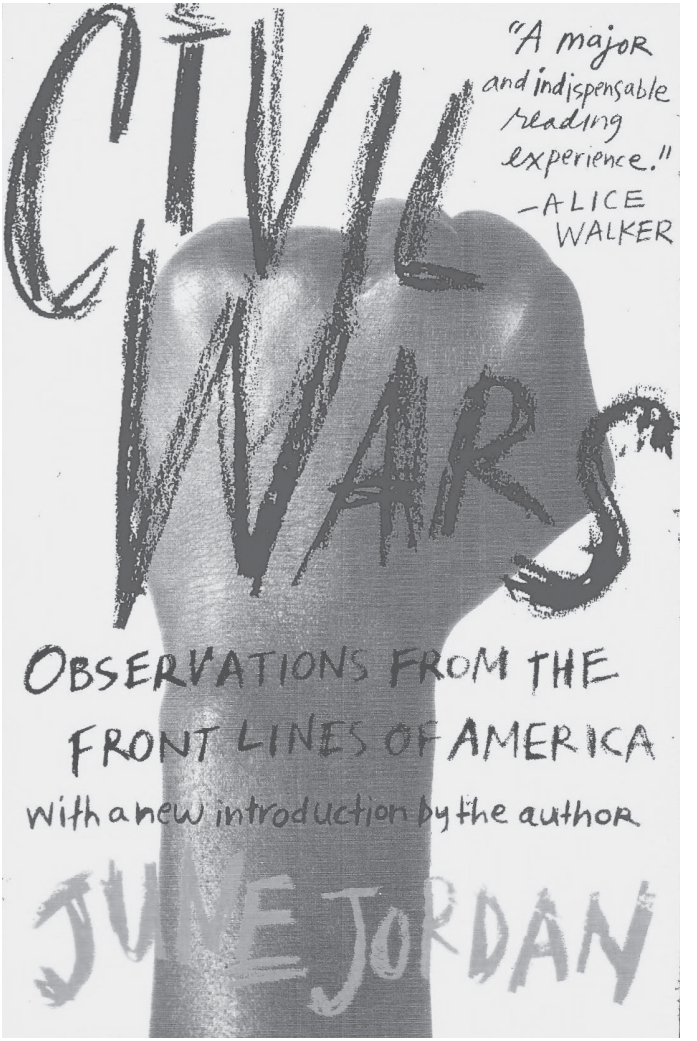

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Contents

Editors' Note xxi

from *Who Look at Me 3*

If You Saw a Negro Lady 11
Roman Poem Number Thirteen 13
I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies 14
Poem about My Rights 17
A Runaway Li'l Bit Poem 21
Poem at the Midnight of My Life 22
Poem about Process and Progress 24
Focus in Real Time 25
It's Hard to Keep a Clean Shirt Clean 27

Last Poem for a Little While 33

To Be Continued: 41
Song of the Law Abiding Citizen 42
Letter to the Local Police 44
Owed to Eminem 46
The Bombing of Baghdad 50

Copyrighted Material

Poem for Nana 54
Ghazal at Full Moon 59
Poem to Take Back the Night 61
To Sing a Song of Palestine 64
First poem from Nicaragua Libre: Teotecacinte 66
Second poem from Nicaragua Libre: war zone 67
Third poem from Nicaragua Libre: photograph of Managua 68
Fourth poem from Nicaragua Libre: report from the frontier 69
A Song of Sojourner Truth 70
My Sadness Sits Around Me 73

Getting Down to Get Over 77

Case in Point 91
Notes towards Home 92
Moving towards Home 93
A Short Note to My Very Critical and Well-Beloved Friends and Comrades 96
Okay 'Negroes' 97
What Would I Do White? 98
May 27, 1971: No Poem 99
Grand Army Plaza 101
On Moral Leadership as a Political Dilemma 103
Home: January 29, 1984 106
Notes on the Peanut 107
Poem about Police Violence 109
On the Black Family 111
Racial Profile #3 113
1978 114
A Poem about Intelligence for My Brothers and Sisters 116

Copyrighted Material

'Haruko:' 118
Poem on the Death of Princess Diana 119
Winter Honey 120

On a New Year's Eve 123

1977: Poem for Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer 131
In the Times of My Heart 134
The Reception 135
Poem for Mark 136
Sunflower Sonnet Number Two 139
After All Is Said and Done 140
Shakespeare's 116th Sonnet in Black English Translation 141
Exercise in Quits 142
'Why I became a pacifist' 144
Poem for Siddhārtha Gautama of the Shākyas: The Original Buddha 146
Calling on All Silent Minorities 147
Poem Number Two on Bell's Theorem, or The New Physicality of Long Distance Love 148
Memoranda toward the Spring of Seventy-Nine 149
Scenario Revision #1 151
For Alice Walker (a summertime tanka) 153

Free Flight 157

Copyrighted Material

Not Looking 163
On the Spirit of Mildred Jordan 164
Meta-Rhetoric 165
Poem for South African Women 167
July 4, 1984: For Buck 169
Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Miracle Wheatley 171
Poem about Heartbreak That Go On and On 172
Poem for a Young Poet 173
Democracy Poem #1 177

Poem from Taped Testimony in the Tradition of Bernhard Goetz 181

On Time Tanka 189
In Defense of Christianity: Sermon from the Fount 191
Poem on Sexual Hysteria and Sexual Hypocrisy 194
Manifesto of the Rubber Gloves 197

Kissing God Goodbye 205

POEMS AGAINST A CONCLUSION

These Poems 217
When I or Else 218
I guess it was my destiny to live so long 219
Alla Tha's All Right, but 221

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Afterword 223

About the Images 227
Index of Titles 231
Index of First Lines 235

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Editors' Note

What a privilege it is to select the 'essential' June Jordan, and what a challenge – what of her work *isn't* essential? Reading June again for 2021 publication, we were struck by how many times we said to each other, 'This could have been written *now!*' That's the art and urgency of this extraordinary poet, activist, thinker, lover, fighter, and teacher who took up the daunting task of telling us who she was and, more importantly, who *we* are.

Jordan's words go where they're called for, where they're needed. Wherever the way things are is different from the way things should be, you'll find June Jordan. Sometimes her words arrive in the form of a strict and swooning Elizabethan sonnet or as a translation of Shakespeare's sonnet 116 into the insurrectionary splendor and clarity of Black English. Sometimes her words are a praise poem, sometimes an indictment. Sometimes they're a wake-up call, sometimes a lullaby. Whatever she writes, it's immediate, truthful, and *real*.

Love and passion are important words in this political poet's artistry. Her love poems are voluptuous declarations of touch and feel and be and know, heat and heartbreak – simultaneously languid, tender, taut, deliberate, delicate, spontaneous, crafted – and crafty! – and in the tradition of the best love poems, persuasive. She was, it is astonishing to realize, the first African American woman to publish a book of love poems, her *Haruko/Love Poems* (1994). And in that book, she reprints her stunning 'I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies' from *Things that I Do in the Dark* (1977), reconfirming that a poem can be both a passionate declaration of love and a fierce political call to arms. (Next year, we're delighted to say, Copper Canyon will reissue June's

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classic *Passion,* from 1980, with its famous introductory essay 'For the Sake of People's Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us'.)

The traditional Selected Poems presents the poet's work book by book, in chronological order. But we wanted to do something else: to give you the June Jordan of then and the June Jordan of now, together. Jordan herself inspired our experiment. In *Things that I Do in the Dark,* she brought old and new poems together in newly named sections. For *Naming Our Destiny* (1989) she selected directly from *Things that I Do in the Dark* and *not* from her first three volumes of poetry, emphasizing, twelve years later, how important that experiment was. As we began our reorchestrating – or maybe our remixing – of her work, we also took courage knowing her collected poems, *Directed by Desire* (2005), is still in print with Copper Canyon. So if you don't find your favorite June Jordan poem here, or you want to return to reading her year by year, you can pick up a copy of *Directed by Desire.*

We've added to this book a two-part ideogram – 'j. j.' – which you'll find on the pages between the sections. June Jordan signed all her letters, cards, and poems to friends this way. We thought it fitting that her readers get to know her ideogram, which stands for what we called her and she called herself to us: 'jay jay'. Our invented character names her and what she believed in and taught us to work for: joy and justice.

The Essential June Jordan begins with an epigraph poem, an excerpt from her remarkable first book, *Who Look at Me* (1969) – a single, long ekphrastic poem that was companioned with reproductions of twenty-seven paintings of African Americans, many of them the work of African American artists such as Charles Alston, John Wilson, and Hughie Lee-Smith. *Who Look at Me,* in its entirety with its images, is without a doubt an American treasure, an equal of Jacob Lawrence's 1940–41 *The Migration Series. Who Look at Me* also anticipates the powerful, provocative reframing of Black/White history by outstanding African American visual artists including Kara Walker, Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas, Xaviera Simmons, Vanessa German, David Hammons, Carrie Mae Weems, and Betye Saar.

The next section and the sixth are then organized chronologically, but with a twist. For these we selected just one poem from each

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subsequent book, from *Some Changes* (1971) to *Last Poems* (composed 1997–2001 and published in *Directed by Desire*), to illuminate the grand sweep of her life's work. In the middle sections, we experimented with association, putting early poems together with later ones, and we were excited to see how June spoke to June—and to her readers—across the years. For example, when her 'On the Black Family' from *New Days* (1974), "Racial Profile #3" from *Last Poems,* and '1978' from *Passion* arrive one after another, each becomes freshly immediate. The sparks fly when 'Song of the Law Abiding Citizen' sits beside 'Letter to the Local Police,' and they both throw down the gauntlet in her brilliant rap, 'Owed to Eminem.' Then 'Owed to Eminem' strikes a match that blazes in 'A Song of Sojourner Truth.' And there's the unflinching description of massacred Native Americans and a ravaged landscape in 'Poem for Nana', which echoes the piercingly specific description of her mastectomy-ravaged breast in 'To Be Continued:' by her piercingly specific description of her mastectomy-ravaged breast. Can you see how Jordan's eye is positively surgical? Our 'section dividers' are six of Jordan's tour-de-force long poems (several of which ended her books), and these selections are in chronological order too.

We call the book's last section 'Poems Against a Conclusion.' Again we took our cue from the poet, who ended *New Days* (1974) with a section called 'Poem Against a Conclusion'. The section consisted of the single poem 'These Poems', which she reprinted in several books as a kind of signature; Jan and Sara Miles did the same to open *Directed by Desire.* It seemed fitting to include this signature here, alongside other poems reminding us that June Jordan, who died of breast cancer in 2002, is absolutely not gone.

We're also excited to include, in section six, four previously unpublished poems that we discovered in the process of putting together this book. These are vintage Jordan texts written toward the end of June's life some twenty-five years ago. But they sound like today: 'I'm serious about I don't wanna die / from / mainstream contamination', she writes in 'Manifesto of the Rubber Gloves'. Are they essential? Well, let's check in on that in another decade or two.

*

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We thank, above all, June Jordan, for a lifetime of writing essential poems. We also thank Sara Miles, coexecutor of the June M. Jordan Literary Estate, whose insight, intelligence, and steadfast good sense helped make this book possible and who continues to keep June's work and spirit alive in the world. Our thanks to June's friends and students who told us what their essential poems are and helped make this an even richer collection than we might have created without them. Finally, we thank the folks at Copper Canyon – Michael Wiegers, John Pierce, designer Phil Kovacevich, copy editor Jessica Roeder, publicist Laura Buccieri, and copublisher George Knotek – and many others behind the scenes, who put their enormous care, devotion, enthusiasm, and excellence into creating *The Essential June Jordan*.

Jan Heller Levi & Christoph Keller
October 2020

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