

# The Collected Poems of Josie Craig Berry



*Edited and with an introduction by Jeanetta Calhoun Mish*

Oklahoma Black poet, Josie Craig Berry, published her first (extant) poem in 1918, when she was 29. She also reported on cultural events, reviewed books, and wrote and a weekly literary column for Oklahoma City's *The Black Dispatch* newspaper from 1937-1941. Berry continued writing poetry as late as 1975, when she was 87 years old.

This is the first collection of Berry's poetry, a poetry that agitates for civil rights, insists on the dignity of Black people, comments on contemporaneous events, and explores the culture and landscape of Oklahoma. *The Collected Poems of Josie Craig Berry* includes a biographical introduction and an annotated bibliography. With this collection, Josie Craig Berry will be recognized as an accomplished poet, a public intellectual, a literary powerhouse, and a woman whose contributions to Black literature and Oklahoma literature are immeasurable.

*Jeanetta Calhoun Mish*  
*Editor, The Collected Poems of Josie Craig Berry*  
*Oklahoma State Poet Laureate 2017-2020*  
*Poets Laureate Fellow, Academy of American Poets, 2019-2020*

Josie Craig Berry's poems affirm that music, imagination and the rigor of form have long been tools of clarity and conscience in the Black lyric tradition. These poems are incisive, prophetic and alive with ever-urgent unrest.

*Tracy K. Smith, US Poet Laureate, 2017 to 2019*

Josie Craig Berry was a poet and writer of her time, yet well ahead of her time. This collection chronicles over six decades of poetry and prose that speak to economic injustice, capitalism, patriarchy, racial injustice, immigration, and the white man's Jesus—scathing attacks on the rationalizing of the irrational in measured verse which heightens both tension and voice. An impassioned purveyor of Black Womanism decades before the ideology was conceived, Berry's vision is forward-looking to the point of forecasting climate change from northeast side of Oklahoma City in the late 1930's. She championed Sequoyah in the middle of the 20th Century as we struggle for inclusive education today.

Sadly, so many of these poems speak to ills that continue to linger, but that is also a testament to Miss Berry's mind and literary activism. But there is whimsy in many verses here, too: odes to marriage, love, the seasons, and Oklahoma's chaotic weather.

Dr. Calhoun Mish has skillfully constructed the literary journey of an important, largely unknown trumpet of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Black experience in Oklahoma and the nation. It is a chronicle of relentless courage, fight and faith.

*Quraysh Ali Lansana, Emmy Award-winning journalist and author of over twenty books in poetry, nonfiction and children's literature.*

Josie Craig Berry's poetry remains relevant today by spanning the breadth and depth of the political ("The Devil Writes a Letter"), social ("Save"), natural ("An October Moon") and spiritual ("Peace")—all themes I wrestle with in my own work. Berry's ability to commune with the reader is reflective of a time when poetry doubled as informative journalism and literary art—she easily blends news with elements such as imagery, rhythm, rhyme, and figurative language.

Reading Josie Craig Berry's poetry as young Black woman poet who grew up in Southwest Oklahoma, revealed to me a path I didn't know existed but one I know I need. Her poetry allows me to see myself in the past where once I only saw white faces. I felt *seen* in Berry's blessed stanzas. In the poem "Heritage," the speaker exclaims "when I write, I place at top of page Thank God I'm black!" I, too, am an unapologetic and unashamed Oklahoma Black woman poet—I walk in the footsteps of Josie Craig Berry and honor her legacy.

*Mary B. Gray, author of Who Do You Think You Are? (Turning Plow Press 2022).*