Freeing Blue by Nikki Janzen

Attempting to free blues from a Billy Holiday song is impossible, mostly because you are meant to drown in this ocean, a sweet and salty taste reminding us of inequitable circumstance, one that chases harmony and longs to sit by its side. I did not understand this back then. It took me seven years to try on, refit and bend into my new understanding. Before I explain how I came to that point, you must understand how this journey began.

A syrupy summer night, I met a woman who was wearing orange in a way that could make the sun blush. Her skyscraper frame, embodying a rich, cocoa hue moved with the grace of a well-intentioned storm cloud. The crown on her head sat as curly locks, thick and brown and proud. Both of us were acquainted to the party host through artistic endeavors; me, a healing broken poet; she, a songbird with mistaken peacock feathers. Her jazz vocals seemingly meditated in the same woods as Louis Armstrong’s trumpet. Amazing how she could challenge instruments to play more boldly with her penetrating voice. When I had heard her sing in a nightclub months before, moved by the fierce breezes of emotion, I was far too intimidated to approach her. Yet here as I mingled with familiar faces over politics, endeavors and vegetarian treats, she approached my comfortable circle and easily merged her way in beside me.

Her sentences were racecars clearly leaving my Oldsmobile in the rear view. Stopping at red lights to allow me to catch up, only to drive off with her mystery sailing in the wind. As she laughed, she threw her head back, rolled her shoulders like the Nile; you could swim in the nourishment of her full, wet happiness. We all sipped our drinks, and I grew silent, intimidated, waiting to speak words with purpose. As the night in the large window beside us, began to pop pink bubble gum in the sky while pulling on her velvet dress, others
came and went, and we found ourselves alone; she finally pulled over her conversation, and allowed me to park myself in that moment.

I was soon embarrassed by her forwardness as she admitted how she had heard me perform poetry before, and yes she agreed with my past poems on how Urban does not have to be unicornless and oh yes, power can cover a snake’s teeth with McDonald smiles. It was not until then, I could almost taste the pain in her eyes, but they glistened with a sway of hopefulness—a rainbow after a break in a tornado. She began to tell me that her own grandmother hated her for being too dark skinned. She paused. Then I was shocked as slowed, held her lips tight, perhaps the levies of her spirit where trying to break out in bubbling hurt and anger; I wanted to smile up a miracle; speak so gracefully angels would stop singing, bend over to listen to me comfort her, but silence was heavy handed as my great grandmother pulling out more hair than she combed when I was a child. What place could I have, what words could I conjure up for soothing her of a lifetime of hurt?

Before I could utter a word, she had quite a few questions that shot rapidly at my soft inner core; she did not inquire about my accent, most referred to as city twang, in this circle, my honorary black status was comfortable and worn calm as the peace symbol dangling on my neck. I had known this circle of artist for a year or so and my poetry answered most of the daunting questions. My immigrant facial features could not be mistaken, as I told the story of how my father came here at the age of thirteen, and his blended German-English with a Spanish roll lopped off thick as sausage from his tongue. His mother, who had raised me much of my life, had twirled three languages before mastering English, but the roots of her travel could be identified by an attentive listener. My voice proved more of a challenge to dissect, so heavy in southern landscape though I have never lived in the south. My shy Germanic tongue was hiding in family conversations. Many of my childhood friends had roots
deep as sequoia trees and must have shared their country with me as their Big Mamas and Uncle generously shared barbeque and folk tales at gatherings. But she moved onto something bigger, a winter sweater hand-stitched in her own toil, one I would have to grow into, as she challenged, “Why didn’t you teach other white people, instead of hiding here trying to empathize. It would be more useful to share your knowledge.”

I didn’t ask how she had known of my lack of effort in this area; I wanted to be angry, I was defiantly incurable. For the first time in my life, I had thought I found a home where my “accent” didn’t put me at odds with presumptions, and my skin wasn’t backing me into a verbal battle that I’d have to resourcefully escape from. Reminding me of whiteness, felt like treason; I was one of them, the other, is that what she is saying? I knew my skin was melanin challenged, but I thought spiritually I had connected to this family of revolutionary artists.

I excused myself and left. Abruptly. Alone. How could I, such a master of poetry on stage, swift with jokes or warming phrases that could embrace an entire crowd at once, be so ungraceful now? Now I was white, outcast, feeling guilty of this, and knowing in past the whiter social settings were so unacceptable by my unconforming tongue refused to speak in the “standard English” we should have learned in school. I felt torn and had no real person to blame. I cried on the way to the car, and in the car, and on the way home. . .flashbacks of having hair pulled for being white girl, and fights for being called white girl, and my running away from home because my father with the help of Jack-Daniels-though he didn’t mind my black girl friends, despised black boys, for to him they were trouble. As a teacher in an inner city school, I am constantly pushed to defend the capabilities of my students. Distant family members ask, “How do you deal with THOSE kids?” As I swirled between memory and present tense confusion, learning how pain can make you change your plans,
your intentions, your goals and desires, but it does not happen as easy as swans swimming, not all baby birds learn to fly.

I took months to myself, writing and reading, questioning others and searching for a place for a deeper purpose. Learning how Booker T. Washington, because of poverty, walked from different cities to put himself through school. How when he was hired to be a teacher, he built a school with his bare hands, a few tools and the help of his students. The pain and confusion I felt, does not make me any more special. If Frederick Douglas had to buy his own freedom, I could expect what purpose I have found in my own to at least be questioned. I know how to wear the different masque that W.E.B. Dubois spoke of, but that didn’t mean I knew how to get others to try them on nor respect the person underneath. How would I teach what I knew to others, when I did not fully understand the position I was in? Some made me feel as is a white person with urban goggles was dirty; therefore, the need to be white washed was their destiny. There are many past conversations charged with angst, sprinkled with white out, among others awkwardly phrased questions that had no logical appeals. “Why do you talk like that?” I was asked by people who grew up in the same city as me.

Seven years later, the aurora borealis of enlightenment pealed itself from the displeasure of this experience. I found myself in a college classroom, since I had been invited to join a national writing project class. Surrounded by teachers of diverse backgrounds, ages and levels, on the third day of class, and I was giving the first fellow presentation: “Exploring the power of Language: Respecting African-American Vernacular;”. The point was how Ebonics can be used as a tool to expand language and include children that speak AAVE instead of allowing teachers negative attitudes to push them away from academics. And in this class, teachers wrote a letter to Ebonics, before and after my presentation and a woman
in tears admitted, how she wanted to reflect on her teaching methods. She realized she has been negatively impacting her students. Those were no the only tears that fell.

There it was. Progress had a gulp of air. I learned to appreciate blue in a different way; it was not mine to lead to escape. I could envision Billy Holiday's tears and watch the grace in which they must has trickled in time with her soul. The idea of me being a bridge had its first crossing and not an easy one. I had connected with the conscience of other teachers who would make the classroom world a little better for their students. There is no way I can go back and change history, or rewire the entire American system on my own; my own guilt is useless, but through words, allowing my intentions to speak, no matter how twangy, no matter how immigrant red or urban orange could keep every bit of blues strapped anymore. That strong woman in orange may have been a prophet; perhaps she was just really honest; either way, she urged me forward on a path where I’d create my own home and hopefully leave the door open for others to visit. Her intention was not to isolate me, but to encourage the insight I had to paint new colors on the white washed walls.

This pain, frustration and hurt never completely goes away, but it reminds me to stay humbled, which ironically connects empathetically to others in the world; it challenges me to change what makes me uncomfortable and recall where happiness lies. I hope you can see how sadness comes in many shades, in many hues, but the good news is this: so can happiness; like finding a home in the unknown, in between shades of blue because something has to connect them to other colors.