“New Orleans” by Joy Harjo

This is the south. I look for evidence of other Creeks, for remnants of voices, or for tobacco brown bones to come wandering down Conti Street, Royal, or Decatur. Near the French Market I see a blue horse caught frozen in stone in the middle of a square. Brought in by the Spanish on an endless ocean voyage he became mad and crazy. They caught him in blue rock, said don’t talk.

I know it wasn’t just a horse that went crazy.

Nearby is a shop with ivory and knives. There are red rocks. The man behind the counter has no idea that he is inside magic stones. He should find out before they destroy him. These things have memory, you know.

I have a memory.

It swims deep in blood, a delta in the skin. It swims out of Oklahoma, deep the Mississippi River. It carries my feet to these places: the French Quarter, stale rooms, the sun behind thick and moist clouds, and I hear boats hauling themselves up and down the river.

My spirit comes here to drink. My spirit comes here to drink. Blood is the undercurrent.

There are voices buried in the Mississippi mud. There are ancestors and future children buried beneath the currents stirred up by pleasure boats going up and down. There are stories here made of memory.

I remember DeSoto. He is buried somewhere in this river, his bones sunk like the golden treasure he traveled half the earth to find, came looking for gold cities, for shining streets of beaten gold to dance on with silk ladies.
He should have stayed home.

(Creeks knew of him for miles
before he came into town.
Dreamed of silver blades and crosses.)

And knew he was one of the ones who yearned
for something his heart wasn’t big enough
to handle.

(And DeSoto thought it was gold.)

The Creeks lived in earth towns,
not gold,
spun children, not gold.

That’s not what DeSoto thought he wanted to see.
The Creeks knew it, and drowned him in
the Mississippi River
so he wouldn’t have to drown himself.

Maybe his body is what I am looking for
as evidence. To know in another way
that my memory is alive.
But he must have got away, somehow,
because I have seen New Orleans,
the lace and silk buildings,
trolley cars on beaten silver paths,
graves that rise up out of soft earth in the rain,
shops that sell black mammy dolls
holding white babies.

And I know I have seen DeSoto,
having a drink on Bourbon Street,
mad and crazy
dancing with a woman as gold
as the river bottom.

1. Identify examples of **color** imagery in the poem. What effect does this imagery create? Give text evidence in your answer.

2. In line 64 (bolded), the speaker refers to “beaten silver paths.” To what does this image refer, and how is it connected to the “silver blades and crosses” (bolded) in lines 45-46?

3. What does DeSoto represent to the speaker? What particular words or images reveal the most about the speaker’s feelings toward DeSoto?