

“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.

Commented [R1]: Following violent resistance to the encroachment of white settlers by some Creeks, President Andrew Jackson began a process of government-sponsored removal of Creek people that continued until 1837. Many Creeks were taken by ship to New Orleans and then overland to Oklahoma. On their way west, the Creeks endured heavy rain and extreme cold. Other Creeks boarded ships in New Orleans and were taken up the Mississippi River. On this journey, one steamboat was stuck by another ship, and approximately 300 Creeks died. Between 1827 and the end of the removal in 1837, more than 23,000 Creeks emigrated from the Southeast.

Commented [R2]: Creeks: a specific indigenous tribe

Commented [R3]: A Spanish conquistador who explored Mississippi

He should have stayed home.
(Creeks knew of him for miles
before he came into town.
Dreamed of silver blades and crosses.) line 45

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,** line 64
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?