Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Pacyinz Lyfoung: Three DC Poems

Pacyinz Lyfoung · Wednesday, February 16th, 2022

For the Petworth Chronicles or Poetry Log…

By the time you read this, this place may be gone or saved,
and with it, the people who make this community

holistic in all its laughter, solidarity and fights,
yes, fights too, outbursts of heart-wrenching fights

about having no money to be in the store,
about credit cards being declined,

about giving people a job if you want them to pay.
The belligerent last stands of people down to the wire.

The jokes of the store owner diffuse situations
while holding the business line, and yet, despite the skirmishes

for the survival of each in this urban jungle, and despite the store
owner's background as a new immigrant from Africa,

still– respect for each other's humanity, and the fellowship of
blackness, a tie of brotherhood more like a sense of neighborhood

united against the tide of gentrification; a shared raft for those left
on the margins of the city's prosperity.

Through this open door, their few dollars can still afford the pink of bottled
soda or the orange of bottled juice or the alluring amber of liquor,

small drops of joy, safe bubbles, rocking amidst the stormy madness
of daily lives excluded and alienated as economic refugees

in their own Chocolate City.

Today, a messenger, lily-white like a funeral, came
through the door:

a most unusual and unexpected sight in this black store
on one of the last historically-black, well historically-black as in

inner city co-existence between Asian grocery stores that served
black neighborhoods for 20 years after the riots emptied the

city shopping blocks. (But I digress, although to correct
the Asian-Black shared history erasure.)

What purpose might the lily-white messenger have? Maybe
he made a mistake? Alas, no mistake for this stealth carrier dropping
the bomb of the new white landlord's eviction court papers, coming

to sink this last black community buoy.

Their SOS intersected with the trajectory of my search for justice,
I, child of refugees of the Vietnam War (actually, for my Hmong ethnic

family, more like the CIA Secret War in Laos), still burning with the fire

of redress from my parents' forced exile, as we speak the same language:
of displacement. But my legalese clouds my eyes with the specter of

unfriendly rules, so as the store owner carries his heavy cases of happiness
bottled in rainbow colors, he says, "you fear because you care a lot,

and that's good, but we have justice on our side, so we fight",
and he reminds me:

we, war refugees and immigrant or local economic refugees,

we also share the language of hope and faith against all odds.

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Chronicles of Ward 4

I.

In DC Ward 4, the Crestwood buzzes like a Babylon Tower,
with the sounds of every corner of the world sharing walls

singing Middle Eastern melodies, Latin salsa and Kdrama
soundtracks, these latters escaping from this Hmong poet's

lonely days in the Capital city. The common hallways and
elevators lilt with greetings accented by tongues

from faraway places courteously exchanging hellos and
have a good one! Sending the warmth of belonging to one

human family sheltering together in this rent-controlled,
multifamily complex, this oasis of safe and affordable

housing, we all call home.

II.

The Petworth Safeway's high ceilings and spacious aisles
display vividly multi-colored flowers, pastel ceramic vases,

shimmery balloons for every life celebration, grocery
store luxuries delighting the senses before strolling

through rows of produce piling fruit gems among green
leaves divided by root veggies, lined in the back

by dried nuts: picture perfect, it feels like stepping into
a suburban store, but in the inner city, and staffed

by busy locals who seem to love their jobs, making
fresh food available to their neighbors, like this Hmong poet

who beelines here to find the best mangoes, blushing
red on yellow or dark emerald green,

they look nothing like the mangoes from her uncle's garden in
Laos, but they still taste like her one trip to the land of

her ancestors, transported just one metro station
away from her country-that-could-have been.

III.

On new roads smooth like purple plum skin
or old roads cracked like acorn shells crushed

by the passage of vehicles, she bikes the intraveins
of the city, circumvents traffic juggernauts,

seeks the shade of tree canopies. Hair flying
in the breeze dancing with petals showering in

spring or golden gingko leaves sweeping in
autumn, on her route, row houses slip by one by one.

Each a precious pearl humming with the secret
of life stringing one neighbor to the other

in the circle of community. Up Upshur, past

16th Street, she marvels at the cherry tree dangling

with ruby red earrings where pink blush blossoms
used to wave in the wind, now they ring summer

that greets her at the intersection randomly sown
with wild prairie seeds, blooming in a splash of salmon

and white and red poppies: mesmerized,
she descends from her faithful aluminum Trek

steed and embraces her Western namesakes—
as she reaches for their wrinkled paper thin

silk softness, she feels her grandmother's
fingers gently patting her hand,

welcoming her home.

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National Croissant Day in DC

I.

His was the earthiness of bread
not the flakiness of croissant.

Seeds, and oil, and brown flour,
with a pinch of salt, and hands that

kneaded dough with the patience
of français de souche, not the ones

touted by nationalist purists as the only
true French rooted to French soil,

but the French from the farmlands,
not tall from generations of laboring

between the moist soil and the golden sun
and growing a heart big like shared bread.

Mostly, his, was the comfort of bread, soft and
steady under the color and flavor of jam, butter,

paté, cheese, his beloved wife and friends,
including me, his fellow French American.

II.

When money no dey, everybody run away,
When money no dey, nobody look at my face,

Sings Timaya in Nigerian Afrobeat.
As Sherif sways and shuffles,

clothed in canvas splattered with colors
dancing from his brushes to his coverall,

the sun’s heat increases with each of his strokes
and like butterflies trembling in the frozen air

we gravitate to his light melting the winter icy chill
warming up to the painter touching up his painting.

Voilà. escapes from his mouth and I ask,
Do you speak French? I mean, Parlez vouz français?

Oui, I grew in Paris, says he, I grew up in Bordeaux,
Says I, oh, smile we, finding us French Americans.

Do you know it’s National Croissant Day? Says I.
Really, says he, good thing I ate my croissant this morning!

I will write a poem about you, is that cool?, says I.
D’accord, says he, and au revoir, say we.

III.

French farming/landowner/husband of an American
Côte d’Ivoire immigrant/Parisian child/ex-boyfriend of an American
French born/child of Hmong refugees/hmoob fabkis/from Laos

One of us is now a lovely memory
One of us is a street artist
One of us is a poet

In DC on National Croissant Day: We, French Americans

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