


Puspa Shrestha

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Before reading

Discuss the following questions.

- Do you try to be like what others want you to be? Why? Why not?
- How can we achieve our identity?

Born in Carolina, Puerto Rico, **Julia de Burgos** (1914-1953) moved to New York, where she worked as a journalist, and then Cuba, where she pursued further studies at the University of Havana. Returning to New York after two years in Cuba, de Burgos, a freedom fighter, served as the art and culture editor for the progressive newspaper *Pueblos Hispanos*. Predating the Nuyorican poetry movement, de Burgos' poems deal with themes of women's liberation and social justice.



A precursor to the contemporary Latina/o writers, de Burgos, in her poem "I was my Own Route," depicts how the women are burdened with the patriarchal ideologies from the past. Therefore, de Burgos urges the women to detach themselves from the past so as to locate their identity within.

I wanted to be like men wanted me to be:

an attempt at life;

a game of hide and seek with my being.

But I was made of nows,

and my feet level on the promissory earth

would not accept walking backwards

and went forward, forward,

mocking the ashes to reach the kiss

of new paths.

At each advancing step on my route forward

my back was ripped by the desperate flapping wings

of the old guard.

But the branch was unpinned forever,
and at each new whiplash my look
separated more and more and more from the distant
familiar horizons;
and my face took the expansion that came from within,
the defined expression that hinted at a feeling
of intimate liberation;
a feeling that surged
from the balance between my life
and the truth of the kiss of the new paths.

Already my course now set in the present,
I felt myself a blossom of all the soils of the earth,
of the soils without history,
of the soils without a future,
of the soil always soil without edges
of all the men and all the epochs.

And I was all in me as was life in me
I wanted to be like men wanted me to be:
an attempt at life;

a game of hide and seek with my being.
But I was made of nows;
when the heralds announced me
at the regal parade of the old guard,
the desire to follow men warped in me,
and the homage was left waiting for me.

Glossary

promissory (adj.): containing or conveying a promise

whiplash (n.): a blow with a whip

epochs (n.): periods of time in history or a person's life, especially the ones marked by important events of special characteristics

regal (adj.): of, like or fit for a king or queen; royal

warped (adj.): twisted out of normal or natural shape; strange and unpleasant

homage (n): things said or done to show great respect

Understanding the text

Answer the following questions.

- a. Why did the speaker try to be the way men wanted her to be?
- b. What do you understand by her feet ‘would not accept walking backwards’?
- c. Who are the old guards? Why did they grow desperate?
- d. How did the speaker have ‘a feeling of intimate liberation’?
- e. Why did the speaker’s desire to follow men warp in her?

Reference to the context

- a. What does the speaker mean when she says she was playing a game of hide and seek with her being’?
- b. Why, in your view, was her back ripped by the old guards as she was advancing forward?
- c. What, according to the speaker, did it feel like to be free?
- d. Why does the speaker prefer the present to the past?
- e. John Donne, in his poem “No Man is an Island”, says, “No man is an island entire of itself.” Would Burgos agree with Donne? Do you agree with Donne or Burgos?

Reference beyond the text

- a. Write an essay on **My Idea of Freedom**.
- b. Not all people, however, seem to agree with the kind of freedom upheld by Burgos in this poem. For example, William Faulkner, in his novel *Requiem for a Nun*, says, ““The past is never dead. It’s not even past. All of us labor in webs spun long before we were born, webs of heredity and environment, of desire and consequence, of history and eternity.” Do you agree with Faulkner? Why? Why not?