

## **Death Blues Ruminations**

by Marielle Allschwang

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### *Homeland*

In the Philippines, we would stay up all night. I thought this was a cultural trait, that Filipino women didn't need sleep.

There was little furniture in my family's home, except for a large wooden table that to my young eyes looked large enough to seat fourteen (the idea is reasonable, as my grandparents housed three of my aunts, a number of cousins, and my uncle). We made porridge or hot cocoa on the gas stove and sat at the table. The women would talk all night, and occasionally cry. I couldn't understand much of their Cebuano. Instead I listened to the tones and inflections of their speech, the rhythms of their dialogue. I examined not *what* my mother and aunts were saying but how they were saying it. And after hours of listening to their conversation as one would listen to wind over a rising tide, I watched the sun rise silently through tall pane-less windows, open rectangles in the concrete.

No one had told me that my aunt was dying. I knew something was wrong, watching her. My grandparents' 'villa' was unfinished during my visit. It was just a poured concrete structure with open spaces in lieu of windows or doors, so we had little privacy. Walking through the house was like a scene from a film, the camera on a wheeled dolly introducing you to the candid moments of various little worlds, half inside, half outside. Through one open space I saw my aunt in the dark. Though it was a sweltering afternoon, she was still in her white cotton nightgown, doubled over in a chair by the square of light on the other side of the room. When I could see her face behind her black hair, I saw a silent wail as though invisible feathers sprouted from her skin. A man was rubbing her back patiently, purposefully.

My mother and I came back to Milwaukee and the night we returned, I had a dream that all my teeth fell out in a river of blood. The phone rang in the morning and my heart raced. I ran downstairs. No one said what had happened, but I knew.

*Can I say it without saying it?*

I am listening to “Here...” as I read Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus.” The artist is speaking in tongues while I read about the limits of language. The coincidence is meaningful and compels me to take note.

How much of art and life is centered around this struggle? There are so many visual vocabularies, vocabularies of movement, intimations of the purpose and meaning of so many forms. When Patti Smith sings, “I am not human,” what does this do to the listener? What registers in our consciousness when we hear that growling vocal tone, nearly a drone, while she is still singing, “I”? Has she already uttered the most essential part of the phrase? Are the words just physical shapes in the mouth set to house a process more magical than speech?

As a musician, Death Blues allows me to let go of instruments and focus on singing. And it’s my favorite kind of singing – the kind of singing that emphasizes the *feeling* of singing, the kind of singing that needs the power of your body and breath to charge forward and plunge into the music. For me, it is original singing, the kind of singing I loved as a child, where I made up words that sounded a little like my mother’s tongue but had no known meaning. I had a secret creole, which was constantly transforming. Alone in empty rooms, I sang in devotional gibberish, putting myself in a trance. Completely in the moment, a word would be created, sung, and instantly forgotten.

*Hey, yeah. Hey, yeah. Hey, yeah. Hey, yeah... [1]*

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*Take them up up up up up up  
Oh, let's go up, up, take me up, I'll go up,  
I'm going up, I'm going up  
Take me up, I'm going up, I'll go up there  
Go up go up go up go up up up up up up  
Up, up to the belly of a ship. [2]*

My perspective on the experience of singing has thus shifted, or returned. I remember now that it can be experimental, explorative; it can drive you to encounter strange forces within yourself if you let it.

The idea of “aspiration” is an inexorable part of the Death Blues project – Death Blues compels the participant to unfold the potentialities of the human experience, to actualize all that one can, in whatever form. The physical emphasis on aspiration rather than lyrical content, singing “hey,” “yeah” or “ah,” over and over, can throw one into a timeless state. Indeed, all my experiences with healing, meditation, classical music, and dance assert the breath as essential to the practice. Breath is given a specific pattern in relation to the activity or non-activity of the rest of the body. Breath is given form. And this form, when focused, can be transcendent.

My approach to the practice — the way I throw my mind into the moment, throw my body into the rhythm, into my voice, and throw my voice into the space renders me a nonattached witness to each instant, as well as a disciplined participant. Practicing ‘original singing,’ where tone renders words irrelevant, my mind is emptied and I can be aware of an entirely different world of exchanges and reverberations.

## *Mountain Tribe*

For the most part, my creative decisions have not changed as a result of my involvement in Death Blues, but rather coincide seamlessly with it. The collective energy and dialogue behind the project have an effect not unlike amplified feedback, lending strength to my practice and discipline to the momentum of ideas, melodies and movements through time.

One particularly powerful coincidence for me was that my invitation to Death Blues followed my certification in QiGong meditation, a practice to which I devoted an hour every day as a means to heal myself from certain chronic ailments.

I remember wandering about a New York apartment in the middle of the night, unable to sleep. Flipping on the television, I found a PBS special on the Dukkah Tribe, a nomadic tribe of reindeer-herders whose paths traverse what used to be, approximately, Mongolia. I was mesmerized by the magic that permeated their lives and minds. Their ancestors, the dead, walked among them, and could be summoned with song.

The tribe's Shamaness was chosen based on her ability to heal herself, and so myths developed about paralyzed girls who proved their power when they realized their ability to walk. The shamaness, draped in ragged, multicolored cloth ribbons, beat a drum and sang her medicine.

*Up up up up up up*

*Sha da do wop, da shaman do way, sha da do wop, da shaman do way,*

*Sha da do wop, da shaman do way, sha da do wop, da shaman do way,*

*Sha da do wop, da shaman do way [3]*

I saw this documentary as an affirmation of so many private customs and ideas. This, too, coincided with and amplified a realm already being constructed.

And then I came home. And then I made more music. And then I found another mountain tribe. And then I fell ill, and for years I worked, slowly, to heal myself.

Physical discipline, struggle, acceptance, impermanence, aspiration, the thunderous clash of contradictions – every day, these vital elements have played their part. And every Sunday, now, they are acknowledged in Death Blues. I’ve jokingly compared Death Blues practice to “church,” where in a specific space, with a specific set of people, something concrete is happening, and whatever thunder that rattles daily is rattling through a field tactile to all of us.

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[1] Jon Mueller, “Here: An Advanced Study of Death Blues”

[2] Patti Smith, “Birdland”

[3] Patti Smith, “Birdland”