

Memorial Tribute for Raquel Villegas
on March 27, 2008
at the Casabe Houses in East Harlem, New York.

1.

Calling

Oye me
que mi espiritu habla
y esta bailando aqui
Me dijo una cosa
y lo voy a decir a ti
Me dijo que la gente
nacieron a ser libre

Y encontra profundamente
lo que es sentir vivir.

Y mi espiritu baila mucho aqui,
Mi espiritu baila aqui,
en un ambiente colectivo,
Mi espiritu baila aqui.

—*Sandra María Esteves*
from *Yerba Buena* (1980) and from *Portal, A Journey* (2007)

2.

Sistas

Nina Simone, Celia Cruz, Billy Holiday, and Bessie
were all her sistas growin' up,
keepin her company through only-child-blues.
Afternoons spent laughin', cryin', dancin' motown gold,
harmonizin' are-'n-be teen sweet melodies.

Aretha Franklin, La Lupe, Diana and the Supremes
stayed up nights at heartbreak hotel,
rappin' real close moonshine doo-waps,
patiently riffin' their lines till she learned all the words.
Takin' it higher, hittin' all the notes home.

Ronnie Scepter and Gladys Knight hung out too.
The first time ever she heard Roberta Flack,
knew they were fruit from the same feelin' tree.
How they loved her madly without even tryin'.

Didn't have to be nobody. Didn't need to prove.
They never got tired, or complained about the volume,
or even cared who was listenin'.
Always by her side, no matter what.
Tight for days.
Gettin' it on. Gettin' down.

Sistas all the way.

–*Sandra María Esteves*
from *Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo* (1990)

3.
Mother's Day At Doña Rodriguez
for Aya

We never met, but I knew her.
By that ray of life passed into her son,
brilliant as sky through cane fields,
casting pastel shadows on a jibaro's balcón,
abundant fruit and flower scented
from an ancient Caribbean, full of spirit
y la vida india.

I never heard her cry, but I was there,
at the birth, when the hurricane growled,
fierce and terrible, screaming,
as she listened to its thunder within herself,
her womb stretching,
pushing out the manchild she offered the world,
not in regret, but full
of remembrances, of land-plowing farmers,
platano covered rainforests,
asphalt paths carved in slavery
through migrant jungles and concrete mountains.

I never saw the high curve of her taino face
with its delicate brown cheek,
or felt the caress of her motherly hands. But I knew her,
recognized in emanating points of vision
from a craftmaker's fingertips,
in precision woven tapestries, like gifts from ancestors,
marking borderlines where families become whole.

We never spoke, or shared a conversation,
but I can still hear the music
composed in the black latino brew of her kitchen.
Smells and leftover renditions of creole beans and salsa,
of mama-cooking ladles tapping three/two clave
from sinks to pots to laundry machines
in survival ritual symphonies.

We never exchanged a word,
yet she whispered to my soul,
the way mother teaches son to love his child,
the way father shares with daughter the meaning of abuela,
the way bonds are secured
like a Sunday afternoon banquet at the table of Orisha
where all food is nourished, love-seasoned.

I never knew her, yet she reached out,
as sister, woman, teacher,
as mother, a gentle wind,
touching me. Becoming mine.

—*Sandra María Esteves*
from *Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo* (1990).

4. Give Thanks

Give thanks to the women, the mothers and sisters
who were there when everyone else forgot about you.
Who bathed you in their baptismal waters
of sacred nurturing, hanging with the weight
you suckled raw, cracked and callused.

Give thanks for all those midnight hours
they warmed your bottle,
the rocking lullabies,
the multitude of diapers unhooked
soaped, washed, rinsed and powdered
for your baby soft scent.
For all the days they bathed and clothed you
as you grew into your skin.

Give thanks for all the meals cooked,
doctor's appointments kept,
parent-teacher conferences attended,
the Halloween trick-or-treats,
birthdays, school plays and dress-up Sundays.

Give thanks for the mamas who never let you go,
even when they belonged to someone else
but adopted you as their own, no matter
what daddy was doing or where he may have been.

Give thanks for the grandmas, great grandmas,
nanas, titis, aunties, lelas, maters and tatas,
the older sisters and sisters-in-law,
who took the place of ma to keep you safe.

Give thanks for those strong women who carried you
hundreds of miles over thousands of days
and wouldn't let you go, tired and weak,
big-boned, bowlegged, overwhelmed and overweight,
hunched and aching, humbled and underfunded.

Give thanks for the ones who loved you
and didn't care that you were dark, or light, or fat,
or young, or old, or naïve, or fast mouthed, or cute,
or fresh, or silly, or smart, or pigeon-toed, or shy,
or brazen, or nosy, or noisy, or introverted,
or crying for something all the time.

Give thanks for every time
they went out of their way
to get whatever you needed,
begged and borrowed,
worked morning till night
to make you look outta sight
like you had more than you did,
and left themselves with less
so you could get an education,
who read you stories at bedtime
each night you lived in their house
or visited for dinner and slept over.

Give thanks for the dreams they gave you,
and the strength they instilled
in your will to believe in yourself
because they always knew
you were worth all of their love.

—*Sandra María Esteves*
from *Poems In Concert* (2006)
and from *Portal, A Journey* (2007)