

## The Hands Which Called Me Home – a translation

By Alivia Vaughns

Listening to these poets – I think of the visibility of work, the importance resonating through the world – how do you reckon with telling your ancestors the struggles that filled them fill you? So striking the ways a voice can take on thunder and heat – words which would never take such form in the outline of eyes – look at the image taking to the sky. Look up as Marilyn Nelson does – with a slow force halting words in ears outlined by hands of slaves upon my heart – which took flight with Brother Warren’s might through the mules. I’ve now discovered there’s a heat hot enough to bellow my soul – a fire blazing to bounds unknown. A match struck in my soul, illuminating history – in the depths of race. Sonia Sanchez – a voice encompassing oceans of history – a soft spoken smile, crevices filled in with burdens born by ancestors in shackles. I have a feeling now – a feeling never experienced, voice echoing the alive thoughts of the black women around me. Sanchez speaks words of protection over my existence – hearts weighing on my shoulders. The voice she uses – to talk of her father and the writing – the same voice I hear at my kitchen table – across from my father. I never knew my ancestors – existence kept at bay – until Sanchez spoke each one into the women around. And each new voice creates a new possibility – reimagining myself as writer, poet, body, self, being. All newly taking their places in this space of black poets and writers – a place I didn’t know existed.

Sonia Sanchez, *This is not a small voice* 1934 (excerpt)

This is not a small love  
you hear this is a large  
love, a passion for kissing learning  
on its face.

This is a love that crowns the feet with hands  
that nourishes, conceives, feels the water sails  
mends the children,  
folds them inside our history where they  
toast more than the flesh  
where they suck the bones of the alphabet  
and spit out closed vowels.

This is a love colored with iron and lace.  
This is a love initialed Black Genius.

This is not a small voice  
you hear.

I felt it in this space – holy by Them. Belonging had evaded me long enough, yearning manifested through powerful pronunciation– Sonia Sanchez called my / our / the / ancestors to light – hum of hearts in harmony, home.

Marilyn Nelson, *Mama's Promise* 1946 (excerpt)

I've always pictured my own death  
as a closed door,  
a black room,  
a breathless leap from the mountaintop  
with time to throw out my arms, lift my head,  
and see, in the instant my heart stops,  
a whole galaxy of blue.  
I imagined I'd forget,  
in the cessation of feeling,  
while the guilt of my lifetime floated away  
like a nylon nightgown,  
and that I'd fall into clean, fresh forgiveness.

*When you float to the bottom, child,  
like a mote down a sunbeam,  
you'll see me from a trillion miles away:  
my eyes looking up to you,  
my arms outstretched for you like night*

Concepts floating around: black, white, being black is not just skin. A community I had been closed off to – those who understood the sorrows of soul, scars of soul scratched carelessly in the seams. Gaze intensified upon skin – now switched to a new light, founded by the shining eyes of women who have come before me. Sanchez says “poets are crazy” – those who dance in summer rain, antics unmatched – she paints words free flowing with her tongue, each stroke layering certainty into cells kissed in sun. When I soak in such glorious beams, skin simmers with joy as I look to my brother laughing – splashing around, a golden boy glow.

Self-realization of awakening, current self-planted in supple soil to take root. I have now reclaimed my name – my self – my writing in the purpose of what has come before to shape skin into proper form. A watchful gaze and protected hand – purposeful history dropped into hands who take care of stories given with grace. My spirit strolled amongst the rest – smile gracing body head to toe. I will think of Them – often – not often enough – but now I do, known by hands resting on shoulders deemed worthy of weight by Them.

Them being a concept I have yet to define.

Pictured here: Them – black women who lived and existed in order for my creation and existence to be – an embodiment of a realization of those in my life: my grandmother / my dad's cousin / my great-great aunt / black women who resided in the room of my resurrection / my brother's sixth grade teacher / me. Before I felt scrambled – filled with punctured self being – lost in the turmoil of blackness not yet defined upon my skin.

When Sonia speaks – it's not just poetry but music – music not found on any scale, nor understood except in chants echoing deep from her lungs, voices and hums – a lyrical trance taking over.

A poet.	A black poet.	A writer of history.	A writer of
herstory.	A being given the gift of a lifetime of stories.		A human with the
ability to tell stories.	A gift given to those who are open.		