A "Puerto Rican-Dominican-Boriquena-Quisqueyan-Taino-African-American" born and raised in the Bronx, Sandra Maria Esteves is one of the founders of the Nuyorican poetry movement. She has published six volumes of poetry, as well as receiving numerous literary awards and recognition for her activism in the Latino community. She’s not a bad artist either.

For Henry Realbird and Corby Skinner

1.
I could see the mountains from the air as the plane began its final descent along the beginning eastern range of the great Rockies in the heart of Indian land.
As we drew closer to the land thru the flying cabin window I saw a lone deer dancing down a slope into the trees.

Even before we touched ground spirits began speaking the birth of a new poem in Montana tongue. Somewhere in the sky sailing through clouds raining their gentle blanket of Winter's first snow.

I want to see some Indians, I thought, go to the reservation. Any would do.
I want to stand on free territory belonging to warrior people become empowered through scientific osmosis and cross-cultural association.

A low-hanging fog obscured the final approach. We had to circle round and try again as the Deity decided when to grant entry onto sacred land.
We eased into gate three, a numerical omen.  
Creative number of Divine Trinity.  
Orisha Elegba’s number of passage.  
A sigh of relief, breathing fresh air again.  
Twenty-five degrees wasn’t so cold it seemed.

The ride to town was quick  
with a generous host, a gentle man.  
_Tomorrow we’re going to Crow Reservation_, he said.  
Without a word my wish was granted.  
He checked me into the hotel to settle in.  
Said he’d be back at a-quarter-to-eight.  
The room was lonely.  
Not even western-navajo-state-of-the-art décor  
could change the feeling.  
When you’re alone, hotel rooms are just empty.  
I turned on the t.v., pretended I had company  
as the 1992 vice-presidential debate was about to begin.  
It’ll have to do.

From my window the snowfall stopped.  
What was left of the evening sun shone orange light  
across the Yellowstone mountains.  
In no time it was time to do present my poetry.  
I prepared my repertoire and changed  
into my multicolored robes.

The stage was huge.  
I felt alone and couldn’t see any faces  
only faint outlines  
of souls swallowed by a great darkness.  
But then the goddess said, _let there be light_  
and the light technician turned up the houselights.  
I could see people I almost thought I knew,  
eyes filled with vision, smiles of recognition,  
appearances I could identify,  
real human beings to whom I could sing  
my poems, share the songs  
voices in the words.
2.

On the second day
we raced down the highway to beat
the clock towards Crow Reservation,
passed cattle loosely scattered
across the wide range of hills,
saw the hawk fly across our view.
An hour later we reached Little Big Horn College.
Indian university nestled in the valley of the sacred hills,
a converted gym rebuilt by Indian students
committed to self-empowerment.
Images of war heros on the walls.
Relevant art. Computer lab, library, media room
to document the oral histories of elders.

Then Henry Realbird drove us
to his mother’s house where he goes
every morning to join her for coffee.
We met his whole family.

3.

Looking out over the battlefields
across Little Big Horn territory
you can almost see details rising in the dust
of Custer’s troops against Indian warriors,
bayonets against empowered spears,
army uniforms against buffalo skins,
casualties falling on both sides.

Scattered across every hillside
monuments barely visible in the snow
mark where government soldiers fell.
Yet, nowhere are the names of Indian braves
who died there too.
Their stories remembered by elders
who pass their names in songs
from generation to generation.
You don’t have to close your eyes to see.
It’s there. The stark line of warriors
across the horizon, their war paint and
eagle feathers headed into the wind, fierce
into the face of death
for land and kin
doing what they had to do.

You don’t have to try hard
to imagine, to know,
that on that day mothers would mourn,
wives and daughters would join
fathers and sons in somber
sharing of these unwanted offerings.

If you look from these silent peaks,
examine the landscape closely,
a painting reveals where
common causes caused yet another battle to be won.

4.
Like guardians of the land
great cottonwood trees surround
the old wood house of Chief Plenty Coups.
Carved on a bark his tender redskin image
faces the sun-rising east.

Strangers have long emptied
the contents of the trading post.
Only one loose hanging picture frame remains
precariously balanced over dusty time forgotten logs
with spaces wide enough to fit
memories of frozen hands.
The firewood has long burnt out.

The water from the well
is still crystal pure.
Hardly any come to drink it now.
If only they knew,
the fresh watercress and cottonwood roots
which dwell within have turned it into
powerful medicine from an ancient motherearth.

If only they would drink.