

Nia McAllister

Consort of the Spirits

after Ntozake Shange

Abstract: Drawing inspiration from the 1982 novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* by Ntozake Shange, the poem “Consort of the Spirits” celebrates the legacy of Black womanhood, ancestry, and resilience. The opening lines of Shange’s novel read: “Where there is a woman there is magic.” This phrase serves as the entry point for framing womanhood, specifically Black womanhood, as something extraordinary. In tribute, “Consort of the Spirits” guides readers on a journey through time and memory, depicting the tangible yet magical ways in which lineages of Black women have carried tools for their survival, protected their shared histories, and guided their descendants on a path toward a more liberated future.

There are roadmaps in my great-great-grandmother’s braids.
 She keeps seeds in there too
 because where we are going, home must come with us.

Tell me how your mother hides spices in the hem of her skirt,
 tucks hymns behind her ears
 and calls it packing for tomorrow.

Do the women in your family hide rosewater in their saliva,
 sage in between their thighs?
 Because how dare we sleep on strange land
 without blessing?

There are black eyed peas in my auntie's coin purse.
She keeps moonlight in there too.
Because luck is far more precious than loose change.

Tell me how your sister folds indigo leaves between her toes,
smuggles cotton flowers under her arms,
and promises that where we are going there will be color.

Do the women in your family wrap beeswax around their
ring fingers,
tuck matchsticks in their collarbones,
and vow that we will never know darkness?

I carry a cowrie shell in the crook of my arm.
It sings when my twins are near.
I wear sea glass upon my ears because where we are going
there will be music.

They call this survival,
but we know better.
Where there is a woman there is magic.

They call this survival,
but we pack what we must
because what we return to may no longer be ours.

They call this survival,
but this ritual of making to leave
before knowing where we're headed is how
we birth futures.

They call this survival,
but the body is a compass
and we are each other's destination.

Living at the intersection of Blackness, womanhood, art, and activism, **Nia McAllister** is a Bay Area–born poet, avid reader, and environmental justice advocate. Nia's writing has been featured in *Radicle* magazine, *Poets of Color* podcast, San Francisco Public Library's Poem of the Day, and *Painting the Streets: Oakland Uprising in the Time of Rebellion* (2022).