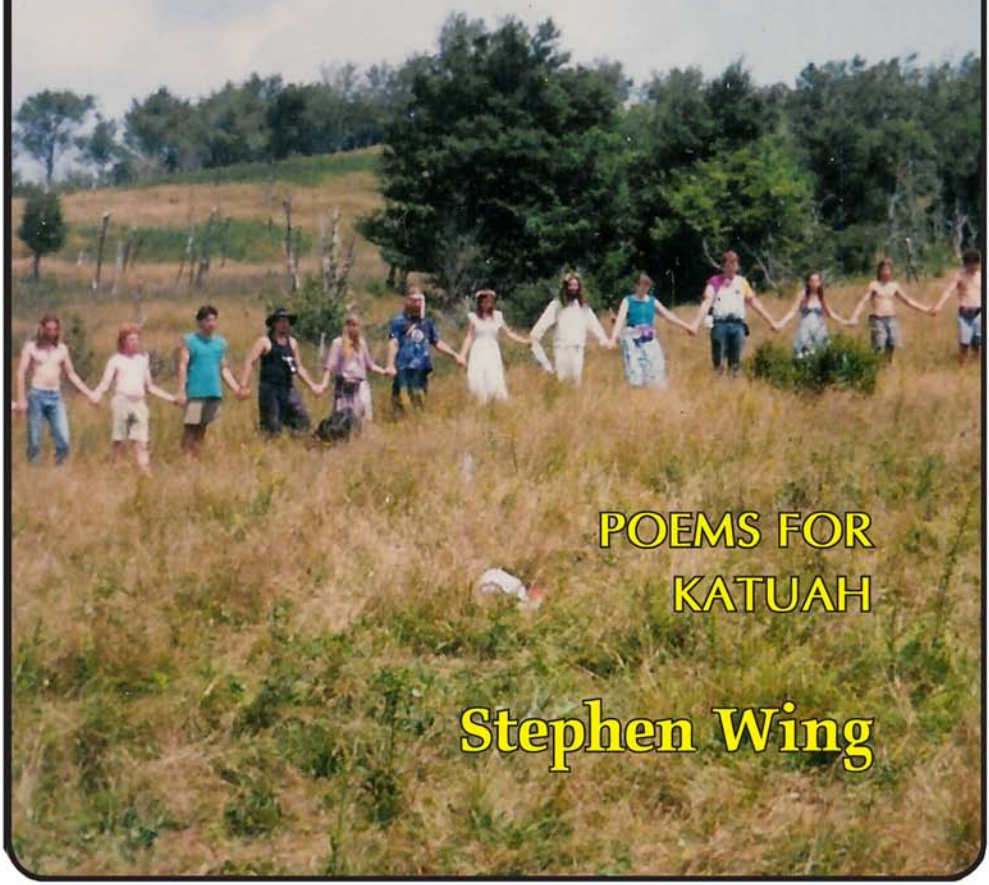
Dancing the Solstice



POEMS FOR KATUAH

Stephen Wing

To my Katuah Tribe, with all my love . . .

"Katuah" is one Cherokee name for the Southern Appalachian highlands, adopted in turn by the bioregional movement in these mountains. The Katuah Tribe is rooted in the Katuah bioregional gatherings and the countercultural festivals of the Rainbow Family of Living Light. Since the early 1980s we have gathered every Summer Solstice to honor the Earth, mother of us all, on one of her ancient holy days.

More recently, the Red Cedar Clan gathered in the Georgia mountains for Winter Solstice, and the Heartland Gathering has occasionally touched down in the Katuah region in the fall.

All kinds of people show up for our gatherings; two things bond us into a tribe. We love these mountains. And we try to love each other, as Jesus Christ and other long-haired spiritual teachers have taught.

A tribe is the opposite of a cult. Tribal societies invented the concept of individual rights, which Ben Franklin discovered by studying the Iroquois. A tribe governs itself by consensus, rather than compulsion. Tribal people live as an extended family, sharing and cooperating, and act with respect for the needs of their grandchildren and the rest of Creation. They value their relationships with one another above money, power, and possessions.

For the sake of our own grandchildren, we are trying to learn to live this way. If you believe that all human beings are sisters and brothers of one Family, you are already one of us.

We gather to celebrate these ideals, but more importantly to *practice* them until we get them right. To me, that makes every moment I spend at a Rainbow Gathering an act of prayer, every place we gather a sacred space.

The Southern Appalachian mountains are my spiritual home. The Katuah Tribe is my spiritual family. I have watched children grow up at the gatherings, go through an initiation ceremony to become adults, and eventually bring their own children to join the Kids' Parade on the Solstice. I have watched my elders grow older as my appreciation of what I've learned from them grows deeper. These poems are my tribute to the mountains of Mother Katuah and to my Katuah Tribe. I love you all.

blessings, Wing

Dancing the Solstice

Katuah Solstice 1993
Pisgah Forest, North Carolina

We gather on this
ground
so that the creek will flow

We circle here so the day
blooms
out of the black earth again

We touch hands
so that the bees will swarm,
the black bear give birth
on the mountain

We come together
to complete the old familiar
circling of stars,
sing our own rising to the moon,
our own
ecstasy to crickets

We are the tribe of all humans
dancing the solstice,
drumming to the great god
Summer

We call the splintered moment
Home

In My Mother's Mansion

The forest is a mighty house
These mud ruts through the meadow
make a starry hallway

I stand
in the doorway with my pack on

Till we are grandfathers
every step of the Earth is a return,
a prayer to gravity, a measure
of how far we have come

In my Mother's mansion
there are many rooms
among the rhododendron thickets
Moss and leafmold, tumbling streams,
long patience of the stones

I had forgotten silence!

Consensus of all the campfires
burning for lightyears
around this mountain clearing,
consensus of all the mountaintops
but ours

Nothing is more beautiful
than the sister dancing like the fire,
all dressed up in nothing at all
(But just to make sure I check out
the brother drumming next to her
and yes, he is just as beautiful—)

Blueberries for breakfast
with the fiddle singing
while a baby screams its hymn to the Mother—
(Everything is different
where a baby is, all dressed up
in nothing at all)

Till we are grandmothers
every breath is a feather
lifted into flight, a prayer
to possibility and the moment's reply

The world begins to slow
and settle, the road momentum wears off
Little by little I begin
to arrive here

I had forgotten silence!

Small Wings

Small wings
between my shoulder
and the netting of my
window
stir a flutter
in the long throat of the dusk-light,
suddenly I am listening to the leafy thoughts
of the forest

the Mother is walking
on the land tonight, invisible
except for the toe-marks
the fieldmice leave, tiny tooth-glyphs
in the dry corn, making it
sacred

Wildlife Opening

We have camped in this wildlife opening
for a hundred thousand years,
since human beings were only one more twig
on a single branch
of the vast living wilderness,
before we learned the art of clearing trees
with fire, making openings
for crops to grow, for astronomers
to gaze out at the stars

We return to camp once more
in this meadow cleared to lure the deer
within range of the hunter's gun
in this time when all the arts of fire
are burning out of control,
changing the very chemistry of the air
all creatures breathe,
an entire civilization hurtling
at the speed of electricity
down a dead-end highway

We come together in this forest clearing
to learn the art of growing wild again,
to listen to these trees
instructing us with their deep-searching roots
how to anchor ourselves in the Earth,
describing with their reaching limbs
how to embrace the sky,
repeating over and over
in every blossoming bud and fallen leaf
how to live without fear
and die without regret

We will camp here a few more days
and disappear, taking with us
every scrap of civilization we carried in,
and something more: the wild peace
of this opening in the trees,
the love song of this quiet stream,
invisible spores of a forest
that will sprout up inside us
from the dark fertile cracks
between the clicking channels of fear,
the ticking minutes of regret

We will always remember this wild
circle of faces shining in the grass,
the wild voices of these children
teaching us the secret meaning of silence,
even long after the fire-breathing machines
stop coming in to mow this meadow
and the trees close in to claim it once more . . .

We will never forget this wild
opening of our hearts

Summer, Waking

Katuah Solstice 2002
Chattachoochee Forest, Georgia

When silence falls
in the forest,
will the trees finally
speak to us?

For a week these sunlit spaces between pines
on the hillside
and the shadowy ones under rhododendron
down in the creek bottom
have gradually filled with a chorus of voices,
men's rough jokes,
women exchanging news, the age-old
excitement of children—

New noises arrived one by one
to syncopate
the tranquil chamber music of the stream:
an arhythmic ringing
of hammers on stakes and axes on logs,
the occasional
rising ecstasy of drums or flutes or fingerpicking
across the quiet
as a village of tents sprang up like toadstools
under the trees…

Solstice dawns,
silence falls,
and at last the branches
begin to speak

In whispers at first,
stirring in the least hallucination of a breeze,
stretching luxuriously
as the sun climbs— but the more
we hush ourselves to listen,
the louder the trees are rustling, till at last
we begin to hear
the deep, ancient undertone
of the mountain itself—

In our silence
the creek becomes a choir,
a hundred voices all
perfectly on key:
the glitter of mica in the dirt
reflects the blueblack flicker of a dragonfly
as we walk the trails
of morning,
of summer,
of the long journey home to planet Earth

Twig

Katuah Solstice 2002
Chattachoochee Forest, Georgia

Lugging
a five-gallon jug of water
along the path beside the stream,
I notice a twig
riding the glassy ripple of current
beside me, keeping pace
without effort, and suddenly
it's the water that carries me

Hunting Stones

Katuah Solstice 2002
Chattachoochee Forest, Georgia

Stones
from the creekbed
covered in grey silt
come up streaming water,
yellow quartz
shining like wet gold
in the leaf-speckled sun

When they know you're hunting them,
they stir up the muck
and hide under clouds of murk,
sometimes even
under one another!
Don't they know what an honor it is
to be chosen
for a step in the children's stairway
down to the sandbar
at the water's edge?

Stones
older than the most ancient
ancestor of my kind,
carved
from the oldest living mountains
on Turtle Island,
welcoming the wet bare feet
of its newest inhabitants
home

Gathering the Gathering

Katuah Solstice 2003

I sit here gathering…

gathering the sound of rocks in the creek,
voices along the trail…

gathering the greyblue sheen
of campfire smoke
in a shaft of sun, the yellowgreen ripple
of a breeze among the leaves…

gathering the fruit and pancake
flavors of breakfast,
the rough bark of a fallen branch,
perfect for firewood,
the wild smells of the forest…

gathering the memories that will help me
remember myself
through the year between gatherings,
through all my lifetimes
to come—

Rush of water,
rush of wind
and all these children,
bigger every year

Silence Is Relative

Katuah Solstice 2004
Cherokee Forest, Tennessee

Even before I open my eyes
my ears are awake, eager as children
anticipating a treat:
Solstice. Their favorite ribboned package,
the annual morning of silence.
Tugging on that ribbon of quiet,
my ears are always first
to unwrap the longest day of the year.
The long sunburned Summer.
Melons ripening on the vine,
corn in the field. Long sunny afternoons
slanting across
the swollen belly of the Earth.

Silence in the woods is always broken
like the sunlight, a tradition
disrespected by gossiping birds,
rocks endlessly
interrupting the laughter of streams—
the thousand voices of Summer.
Silence, washed in waves of sound.
Solsticetide.
A holiday feast for ears from the city.

But this morning the children woke first.
Their splashes, giggles and screams
mingled happily
with the conversations of the forest
just upstream of my tent,
as if the whole Kids R Us camp
had moved in next door
under cover of the shortest night.
Surprise!

And listening from my bedroll I can hear
so clearly
why I came so far.
I have none of my own. Here
I have so many, every boy and girl I see
or hear, mine forever
like the trees and vines and moss
of these woods, the rock under my bedroll
that will remain when I
and my tent
and the just-arriving Summer
travel on . . .

Summer after summer
we come home to the woods. One by one
I know their names.
And year by year they grow.

Opening my eyes at last to squint out
into the long day's early light,
I see them
piling up rocks in the little creek,
muddy and content.
Behind them, people pass along a trail
that I gradually recognize.
I came that way
looking for a place to camp.
The farther I thought I'd wandered past,
the closer I was winding back
to Kids R Us.
To the summers of childhood.
To the ancestor-memories of generations
that grew up in these woods.
To the ultimate relativity
of silence.

New Moon Gathering

Nantahala Forest, Tennessee

1. The Serenade of Fireflies

Dinner by fireflylight
in the open meadow
while silent lightning ripples across the sky
beyond the intermittent silhouettes
of mountains:
the blessing of beans and rice
and company, our circle
broken into clusters of talk and laughter
on the dark grass

2. Lightning's Compass

With every flash and flicker of the sky,
I glimpse another few steps
of the trail back to my tent,
this slow pilgrimage between the trees
without a flashlight—
fork to the left, jog to the right,
slippery downgrade, low-hanging branch—
like my life sometimes,
the chain of epiphanies lighting up my path
and the pitch-dark
between

3. Morning of Silence

Simply to listen
is to surround yourself with silence:
silence of the rain, the wind, the creek,
the children . . .
Simply by listening
I fill the whole vast, noisy world
with silence.

excerpts from

Southern Appalachian Seed Camp Solstice

Katuah Solstice 2012
Cherokee Forest, Tennessee

In the grand old Southern hospitality tradition,
the pleasure is all mine—
to welcome my planetary human family
to the cloud-forests of Katuah,
world's largest outdoor sauna,
and welcome my redneck neighbors Home.

It's a simple matter of heritage:
my redneck forebears took this territory
from the Cherokee, who took it before that
from the Creeks;
then the Yankees came and took it again
and sold it under the table
to the real estate speculators,
the corporate investors and the financiers.

But these ancient worn-down mountains are done
biding their time.
A tribe of down-home hippies
and pierced, tattoo'd and dreadlock'd punks
has sprung up out of these hollows
like psychedelic toadstools after a rain
to answer the call
of foggy forest glades, grass-covered balds,
rocky streams meandering
like a mountain storyteller
through rhododendron in bloom . . .

We have taken our Appalachian highland homeland
back again
just by calling her true name.

*

Gentle rain at twilight
in the meadow—
a welcome condensation
of the June humidity
after dancing in the sweaty rays
of a long hot Solstice day,
planting the sacred seeds
of a Gathering
in this steep, moist,
breathtaking place
in the heat wave's sweltering
embrace

One last smoldering coal
in the ash of the heart-fire
sends up smoke
to the spirits
of this man-made clearing
on the mountain's slope
as the shadows creep out
from the treeline
to join us

The firewood we gathered
is damp, but
a few dry sticks of cedar
well placed
fire a slow blaze

And when I return
long after dark,
a heart-shaped pyramid of fire
roars in the center of a circle
of voices and drums
and one vagabond flute

*

Eerie dancing shapes of flame
come leaping out between
the shadows dancing
around the heart-fire's glow

With every fallen limb
the fire-tender heaves across the flames,
whirling embers chase each other
up a chimney of spiraling smoke
through the laser patterns
of someone's battery-powered
hallucination

The drummers are working
together, smooth and steady
as a river's unstoppable momentum
with occasional rushes
of turbulence in the flow

The dancers twirl like eddies
in the current of rhythm
while the singers
spin the hoop of each song
around and around, tossing it high
on their upstretched
fingertips

*

After all these years, at last
I have a new Rainbow name! Just call me
"Late For Supper . . ."
I'm hungry, sure,
but I've missed more than nourishment—
My hands miss holding other hands
on my left and right. My heart
misses the singing. My spirit
misses the praying. My brain
even misses those endless
announcements. Dammit, I missed
another circle!

*

These mountains know
we'll be back again
a year from now—no more,
no less—to put up tarps
and build a fire and sing

When Summer
comes around once more
and the sun climbs to its zenith
on the longest day, we'll be here
camped on another mountainside
to greet another Solstice

These children will always know
they belong to a family
that holds hands in a circle
once a year, honoring
the larger circle of Earth and sky
and a bigger Family:
their relatives in the forest,
in the creek, in the air
and in the heart
where all our loved ones
live forever

Ducking Under Rainbows

2nd annual Heartland Gathering
September 2012
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

1.

Young trees
arching over the trail
mark the spectrum
of a quieter, humbler rainbow,
closer to the ground,
one shade of green
giving way to the next
as I pass under
heading for my tent

Then a low branch I hadn't noticed
taps on my hatbrim,
knocks my cap onto the path
behind me, calling me home
to this moment I'm
striding through
just when my thoughts
begin to wander off

2.

Choose your sleeping spot
with care.

Fire-circle nearby?
The exuberance of drummers will keep you up late.
Family neighborhood?
The exhilaration of children will wake you up
early.

Perfect tent-site?
Before you pitch your shelter, clear any random
sticks and rocks and pinecones
and stretch out
to give it the only test that counts.

While you're lying there,
look up.
Any widowmakers up in the treetops
ready to fall?
Maybe it isn't your time to go
just yet.

Clear sky, no clouds?
Make sure the runoff from your tarp will run off
downhill
from your tent.
Don't wait to find out the first time it rains.

Leaving so soon?
Don't forget to look around for bits of trash and say
thanks.

3.

Good morning, little stream
I've been hearing your voice
from the meadow
waking up in my tent wondering
Is that rain? Falling back
under the current of your
clear steady
song—

Now I've come to visit
settling back against a tree
on your rocky bank
to watch you pass noisily
among mossy stones
under trembling patches of sun
and floating longlegged bugs
that somehow manage
to stay put
while you hurry by—

But it's only a formal call
till I lift a double handful
of cold mountain water
to bathe my face
then lean down low
to give your glistening
shadowy sunlit surface
a kiss
before we both
go our ways

A Leaf from Last Year's Gathering

Katuah Solstice 2013
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

Waiting there
when I drive the last stake
and unzip my tent,
in the middle of the empty floor
a single leaf
from Tennessee
welcomes me home to South Carolina—

dry-veined relic
of another summer's moist green life,
brown and brittle stowaway
on the spiral of seasons,
fallen scrap
of sunlit memory:

another brilliant, breezy day
on another mountain
when all these children were
one birthday younger
and the rest of us
a year less stooped and spotted and grey

Party of the First Part

Katuah Solstice 2013
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

So which one is the hugger
and which is the huggee?
I mean if two consenting adults
apply a mutually inclusive measure
of muscular encirclement,
freely attaching themselves at the heart
in a fully symbiotic, non-virtual embrace,
exchanging equivalent amounts
of sensual tranquility and consensual bliss
for a precisely equal number of minutes
that seem to stretch out luxuriously
heartbeat by heartbeat
into a lifelong friendship
the very first time we meet, well,
how can we even tell ourselves apart?
And for that briefest of eternities,
is it actually possible to distinguish
the ones doing the hugging
from the hug itself?

The Other End of the Rainbow

Katuah Solstice 2013
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

At the other end of the rainbow,
a pot of warm oatmeal,
fruit salad and herbal tea,
a two-day supply of dry
firewood . . .

Five conversations under a tarp
blend in a single
sacred chant
beneath the drumming of the rain

Smoke
drifting up through the branches
above our heart-fire
carries a prayer
made of gossip and banter and laughter,
children shrieking, dogs barking,
tales of gatherings gone by
rising into the sky
to seed the rainclouds
with sparks of tomorrow's
sun

Katuah Kids

Katuah Solstice 2013
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

High on the hill
above the waterfall,
the river's roar
and the children's laughter
counterpoint each other
perfectly

A tiny little girl
reaches up from her daddy's lap
to feed him the last spoonful
of oatmeal
as the water rampages past

At the dreamcatcher workshop,
half a dozen girls
and a couple of moms weave wild
mandalas out of roots and vines
while the youngest,
a small blond boy,
wraps his stick with rainbow yarn
because every dreamcatcher
doesn't have to be round

And at the very end
of the children's parade
on the Solstice,
one kid rides around the circle
on his papa's shoulders
giving every lifted hand
a high-five

Decorating the Silence

Katuah Solstice 2013
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

Water
sings a rising note
filling the big steel pot
An empty pan clangs
from the dishwashing station
like a temple bell
The cooks
dart silently between the noises
meditating us up
some breakfast

On my first trip out to the woods
I forgot my whole bag
of flags and banners—
so here I am on Solstice morning,
decorating the Silence:
Tibetan prayer flags fluttering
in the Appalachian breeze,
flowered *lava-lava* from Samoa
garlanding a treetrunk,
planet Earth
like a jeweled ornament
undulating, afloat
on a dark blue field . . .

An empty glade in the forest
filled with rippling ferns,
green fingers and bobbing heads
blessed by swaths of sun
between scattered trees,
a single path trampled through
and across—

But how is it
I'm the first one here?
Where are the motionless
sun-browned limbs and blissed-out faces
of Solstice morning meditators?
I'm the one dashing around
instigating a conspiracy
of silent shitter-diggers, replenishing
the lime and handwash,
muttering these illegible poetic
asides . . .

Well,
maybe because I hustled up here
with the kitchen conch
in search of someone to blow it
to manifest a circle of meditators
in the ceremonial glade
before the kids' parade arrives
to break the Silence—

All the rest are back at camp,
content to meditate
over hair-wraps and hemp-twine macramé,
so patient after hours of silence
that not one has so much as glanced
at a cell phone for the time . . .

You can tell it's a real ceremony
when it turns out
different every year

This Road Is a Rainbow

Katuah Solstice 2014

Along the mud and gravel road
we all traveled
into these woods, outlying camps
have sprung up between the cars.

But the farther you walk in
after parking,
the more this place reveals itself.
The road becomes a path.
Each tree welcomes you in its own voice.
The people walk more slowly
and greet one another
with naked eyes.

The farther you set up camp
from the vehicle you came in,
the less you'll feel the tug of everything
that road tethers you to.

So pick your spot along the spectrum,
lash your tarp between the trees
and park your gear.
Just remember: no matter how far
into this wild, quiet place
you carry it all, that road
is your umbilical cord.
One of those cars or trucks or vans
is your ticket back out
to the broken, boundless world.

The noise and smoke
of a carbon-fired engine.
The six-lane highway
faintly murmuring in the distance.
The vast multitude of newfound
relatives you'll meet
wherever you go from now on.

Carry home as many songs
and smiles and hugs as you can,
scatter them freely
to the world of buttoned-up
bellybuttons, blind glances,
well-guarded hearts.
And never forget:
the spectrum of the rainbow arcs
all the way
from the deepest shadow of the forest
to the panhandler's bright, hot corner
downtown.

Underfoot

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2014
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

Every time I walk down
into the hollow
through the winter woods
or up the mountain again,
I stop right here.
Standing on the packed earth
of an old logging road
where the creek slips quietly
through its rusty culvert
underfoot,
I'm not so much listening as feeling
a kind of tickling caress
through the soles of my shoes
and I recognize
a crossing of paths, a choice,
a way back
if I could only turn
and follow.

One Dozen Grownups, Just Born

Katuah Solstice 2014

Twelve kids
fasted all day
the day before the Solstice.

Look around and notice
who runs the world— people old enough
to drive, to drink, to vote,
go off to war, get rich
by wrecking the planet— you know, big people
who just never grew up . . .

Twelve kids
entered the sweatlodge
after listening patiently to the words
of their elders
and the much older wisdom of the stream.

In a tribe, the grownups are the ones
who look around and notice
what needs to be done
and make sure it happens, even if
all they can do is run for help.

Twelve kids
crawled on their hands and knees
into the dark womb
of initiation
and disappeared forever into the past.

Grownups take care of younger folks
instead of expecting older folks
to take care of them.

Grownups take care of the elders,
listen to their experience
and do whatever feels right
inside.

Grownups take care of our living Mother
the Earth, her waters, her air,
our relatives the animals and plants,
and never forget to be grateful.

Twelve adults emerged
from the steam and sweat,
reborn
in the same adolescent bodies
but too big, all of a sudden,
to dress up
for the Kids' Parade on the Solstice.

Grownups cooperate instead of compete,
settle things peacefully,
put the good of the tribe first.

Grownups practice the arts of kindness,
patience, truthfulness, generosity
and take responsibility for their mistakes.

Grownups remember
the children are always watching
and weighing whose example to follow.

But how many are ready for the first test,
a whole morning of Silence?
Which ones will I spot
playing noisily in the creek behind my tent
while the rest of us grownups are
trying our best to be silent?

No wise elder can teach you this.
You'll never even hear it unless you stop
to listen: the echoing hush
between heartbeats, a wordless wisdom
that grows nowhere but inside.

Life as an adult is one initiation
after another, it seems.

Last Turn, Sometime After Midnight

Red Cedar Clan, fall council 2014
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

Before I saw the turn-off
in the dim
periphery of my high-beams,
before I even saw a road, I saw
the neatly stacked
stones and said out loud,

I'm home!

Barefoot in Paradise

Katuah Solstice 2015
Pisgah Forest, North Carolina

Good morning?
Hey, it's the best one yet!

Barefoot in paradise
like so many scampering
nymphs and naiads of the forest,
gleeful children innocently
trample the ferns,
splash across the rocks
of the clear, cold, quick little river
that made this narrow
floodplain
where we camp together
under the high canopy of these
middle-aged trees

(Such hospitality!
All week, not a single
copperhead bite!)

*

In our silence
this morning, what we hear
is the living
voice of this place,
quiet presence of the passing
moment—
slant of sun, insect-buzz, faint
stirring of air—
a subtle language
telling us what we all forget
we always knew
till we sit here listening together
again

*

Dressed for summer heat
and Appalachian
humidity,
we weave our trails of bare dirt
and conversation
between the tall, straight trunks
and patches of poison ivy,
traveling from heart-fire
to swimming hole,
the crowded kitchen to the solitary
shitter, wading
shoeless
across the concrete ford at last for a turn
at Welcome Home

(Is it quartz?
Or just a slab of sunlight
lying there?)

*

In our singing
tonight
we give voice to the fire,
to the stars, to the darkness
itself—
like a spark flying up
in its one
flaring moment, giving away
everything it has
in the act of dying,
notifying the cosmos
that even an ember has something
to say

*

Packed up and ready
to lace my boots
and shoulder my load,
sitting here
with my sweaty socks peeled off,
a fresh pair in my hand, I pause
and look around.
Smashed-down ferns
where my tent stood. Gaps
between the trees
where my neighbors have vanished
one by one.
Cool grass and dry leaves
under my naked toes,
the peaceful forest rising around me
into the light . . .

Good gathering?
Hey, like we say every year, it's the best one
yet!

(Stick around for cleanup
and the triumphant
resurrection of the ferns!)

Hunter / Gatherer

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2015
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

All I'm hunting
is firewood,
but suddenly I catch a whiff
of the prehistoric thrill
of closing in on my prey—
a long straight piece of hardwood
slanting up across my path
where two standing trunks caught it
waist-high off the ground,
way too long to carry
till I balance it over a downed log
and bare the teeth
of my sawblade— triumphantly
bearing the cut lengths home
across my shoulder
for my clan and tradition,
for my Paleolithic
ancestors, for the family
fire . . .

Gazing
into the age-old oracle of the flames
hours later
I can almost read the heat
rising off the coals,
matter
flickering into energy,
sequestered carbon
on the sacrificial pyre
devouring oxygen, gushing smoke,
rekindling sunlight
through the winter night

Unsurprised by Rain

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2015
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

It's Solstice everywhere,
north and south of the Equator
all the way to the Poles,
but here in the meadow
the grey light of the shortest day
is waning
as the grey shadow
of the rain
begins to lift

No wonder they thought
of a Goddess
as they walked among the constellations
of glittering droplets
beading the wet branches

The trees here
dress in a patchwork of greys
and greens,
wearing their lichen spots
and fringes of moss, evergreen
thick among the hardwood,
soft bark
damp and fertile
as the earth itself

No wonder they conceived a God
watching the stars turn,
calculating the exact
degree of the Solstice, the moment
of Equinox

Looking around at the trees
on the rising slopes
in the dusk, I feel
like a very small child gazing up
at the looming mountain
of Mama, incapable
of imagining
she could ever go
away

My first duty is
to the Creation, to give back
what I have taken
and a little bit more, to repay
the sacrifices my ancestors made,
striving with head and heart
to hand something worthwhile on
to all these little ones

All Too Soon

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2015
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

The wind has tightened this knot,
rain has soaked the cord, twice
I've had to climb the ladder
of tree-limbs— but all too soon
the tarp comes down,
the ropes are coiled, tools
stowed in a bucket,
ready to carry, all the holes
filled in—
firepit,
compost,
greywater—

All too soon
again
it's time to go

In the Lap of the Mother

Katuah Solstice 2016
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Listen:
dogs
barking.
Smokers
coughing.
Distant
cries of children.
Peaceful snoring someplace
nearby.
Rhythmic
blows of an axe.
Wind and water
passing through this place . . .

Welcome
to the Silence:
sacredness of unified
intention, a humble attempt
to emulate
the silent ones around us
at least for a morning.

Mountains loom
over this valley no less
attentively
than over the next:
one more day
in the lap of the Mother.
But for once
I too am
paying attention.

Solstice Night

Katuah Solstice 2016
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

In a field of moonlight and clover
we sang
around the heart-fire

We danced the heartbeat
of the drums
while the moon climbed the sky

We kept the old songs alive
in the only way
songs live

The old ones taught the youngers
because the old are the keepers
of tradition

The young ones taught the elders
because the young
are in charge of evolution

The creek sang the oldest song of all
through the dark
to its ancient companions,
rhododendron and pine

The moon was round and full
Our hearts
overflowing

Standing in the Circle

Katuah Solstice 2016
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

If everyone I love
were standing in this circle,
most of them would be lost from view
beyond those trees
on the other side of this enormous meadow.

All the gatherings
are one gathering.
All these journeys between gatherings
are one journey.
This whole world is one big
gathering in motion
on a journey through galactic space.

If everyone I ever loved
were standing in this circle,
it would snake along the crest of the Himalayas,
trace the coasts of Australia
and Japan, track the length of the Yangtze,
link the Siberian tundra
with the Sahara,
interrupt the traffic of downtown Dublin…

This whole human soap opera
is just one endless reality TV show
called Family
with occasional commercials for murder
and corruption and war.
All these little clans and tribes and households
and nations and religions
are one enormous circle of Family
forgetting to hold hands
until something reminds them…

Like witnessing
the gush and trickle
of a stranger's blood, or even
catching a glimpse of their own
bellybuttons
in the bathroom mirror.

All the bellybuttons
fed
by one umbilical cord
from the same vast blue Mother.
All the blood ever spilled
pumped
through one red molten
heart.

Old News Is Good News

Katuah Solstice 2016
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

The bee that stopped to rest
on a sign I was making,
the butterfly I freed from a tent
made of mostly netting,
the millipede that crawled
out of a log in the woodpile
just in time, the ant
climbing my leg as I write—
This is the real story.
Never mind what they say
on the news tonight.

How to Tell When It's Rainbow Noon

Katuah Solstice 2016
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

If a child whoops happily
somewhere in the distance
in the middle of a morning of silence
deep in the forest,
does she make a sound?
Exactly when
does a sacred morning of silence
give way to the equally sacred
breaking of the silence
by the children's parade?
Is it the moment when
the first faint breath of drumming
and singing blows
across the meadow on the breeze
as we stand meditating
or simply waiting
in our silent circle, holding hands?
Even if the next moment
it dies away again beneath the sigh
of the breeze itself?
Is it still a silence while we listen
to the gradual approach
of the parade
without breaking our own fast
from words and sound?
Is it still a silence when we can't help
breaking into wild
noiseless dancing as the hullabaloo
of drums and flutes and voices
winds around the meadow,
closer and closer, louder
and louder, and the words
of the children's chant
grow unmistakeably clear?

"Everyone keeps asking us who we are,
so we tell them,
we are the children,
the mighty mighty children—"

Does the silence only come
to a rambunctious, undignified end
when the first chanting
painted kids
reach the edge of the circle
and we break hands
to let them in?

Accomplishing the Necessary

Katuah Solstice 2016
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

By carefully nosing the tip of the spade
among the rocks in the firepit
around the flaming coals,
gathering spoonfuls of warm ash to fill
an empty coffee can
and carry it up to the latrine
to keep the flies away, I earned
a long, blissful hug.
Pure coincidence, I'm sure. But still:
could anything be clearer?
Seeing what needs to be done
only carries you halfway.
Beyond the satisfaction
of accomplishing the necessary
and mundane, something finer
may surprise you.

Anniversary Waltz

Katuah Solstice 2016
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Meeting on these narrow paths
through the clover
there's no convenient way to pass
except to hug
and turn in place together
like an old-fashioned dance step,
a double pirouette, then
smile and go
each on our way—

Hey, ever notice how
it's all but impossible
to give a hug
without simultaneously
getting one back?

For some
it's the deep, enduring embrace
of longtime friends
meeting here in a field of clover
for the first time since last
summer's Solstice.
For others it's the bold or hesitant
but comparatively brief
squeeze
of the just acquainted
still practicing the ritual
remembering
of names . . .

But hey,
isn't forgetting someone's name
just the start
of the next conversation?

From the corner of my eye
as I wander on
in the footsteps of everyone
whose collective
footprint
this path across the clover is,
the dense tangle of trees
and underbrush
that surrounds this broad
sunny meadow
seems to be reaching around
to grasp it
and all of us
in thorny but affectionate
arms—

Hey, ever notice
how the Earth and moon
whirl together
like an elderly couple
waltzing at the anniversary party?

We Are All the Cleanup Crew

Katuah Solstice 2016
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Cleanup is a ceremony too,
I gradually discover . . .

Waking up alone here
where we gathered,
looking out across the meadow
where we circled before supper,
wandering down to the creek
where the kids played
to splash my face,
I don't miss the smiles
or the singing, the random
conversations, new
acquaintances or old friends.
The gathering hasn't gone anywhere.
It's all right here, wherever I look,
a week-old memory
alive in me like blood or lymph
or electricity, still
circulating through my body.
Shoveling a pile of earth
back into the hole it came from,
the Bliss Fire pit, the latrine
at Welcome Home, I lift
and release
every spadeful like a gift: after years
of leaving cleanup to the cleanup crew,
my turn at last.

We are all
the cleanup crew, I've said it
so many times . . .

Following every winding little path
back into the woods,
looking for flattened grass
or needles or duff
where people camped,
watching for anything left behind—
gum-wrapper, crocheted necklace,
fraying length of twine,
little scattered bundles
of disposable diapers—
I feel the gathering spread out
around me, a ghostly aura
equal parts sunlight and woodsmoke,
sweaty hugs and sweaty labor,
Sister Circle, Brother Circle,
harmonies of banjo
and mandolin, thimbles skipping
across a washboard, a weightless
invisible village
I carry with me now
and ever, here
and everywhere.

Cleanup is a ceremony too,
restoring the place
the first scouts found here, completing
the sacred circle of days and nights
around the Solstice . . .
We are all the cleanup crew.

Giving Thanks by Candlelight

Thanksgiving Council 2016

1.

Sitting on a boulder
left behind
amid the silt and scattered leaves
of a dry streambed
where the long-gone tumble and rush
of current
laid bare the roots of trees
and carved out a channel
between overhanging banks,
gazing downstream
toward the puddled seeping creek,
the high-banked river,
the steadily rising ocean
while the afternoon drains away
into twilight,
I send a prayer out
to the gods of drought and ruin
for the rain's return.

2.

A new tradition—
Thanksgiving dinner
in the dark?
But no, the weathered plank tables
are lined with candles
in canning jars
and the moon shines down
just one night from full.

We too wax brighter
as we grow full.

Oxygen and Spark

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2016
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

Here by the campfire,
at the intersection of flame and fuel,
oxygen and spark,
I can hear the distant honking
of a locomotive,
a chorus of yowling coyotes
nearby . . .

Inside my winter layers
I feel the familiar
friction of opposites, heart chafing
against mind,
body wrestling with soul,
thoughts and feelings
flaring up together
into words—

We are the light
of the flames, the heat
of the coals

We are the smoke
of incomplete combustion,
drifting soot
trapping sunlight and warmth

We are the green seedlings
of forests to come
fertilized
by the ashes of centuries

What a Shovel Is For

Katuah Solstice 2017

Nothing is lovelier
than a woman's naked arm
swinging casually
past her naked hip
at every stride, especially
if she's carrying a shovel
in her other hand,
crossing the meadow
in her muddy boots
with that purposeful look
of one who knows
what a shovel is for

Laughter of the Rain

Katuah Solstice 2017

1.

Supersaturated socks
where I hung my damp ones
out to dry last night . . .
What's that sniggering, giggling sound?

Among the myriad little difficulties we face
on our annual ten-day
journey together
along the road of learning, summer by summer,
gathering after gathering,
to be a tribe,
every year one particular challenge
stands out.

This year's lesson
was a gentle one: the light baptismal sprinkle,
long, slow, persistent drizzle,
midnight downpour . . .
the holy laughter of the rain.

2.

Under blue sky
yesterday
we passed the purple conch shell
three times around
our circle on the grass
like the shuttle of a loom,
weaving our colorful, complicated plan
for a ceremony
to honor our Mother Katuah,
these sacred mountains,
on the longest of her yearly round
of sacred days.
Midway through the council
a brilliant sunbow
circled the sun.

After dinner,
"Forest Follies" by torchlight
under the stars
as we took turns entertaining the tribe.

And today when the Solstice dawned—
the earliest daybreak
all year long—
we woke to a familiar sound.
This morning we're all on stage,
surrounded
once more
by the merry laughter of the rain.

3.

The rain
thundering on my tarp
drowns out our dignified
human attempt
at silence.
I lie
curled around my bladder
temporarily
interrupting the flow.

Who says I'm not working?
I'm busy listening,
replenishing the spring
for my next swallow
of sweet mountain water . . .

An unbroken thread
of runoff
anchors the corner of my tarp
to the moist green moss,
the wet dead leaves, the sodden sponge
of humus underneath—
so what's real out here, anyhow,
the nylon twine
that holds up my blue plastic tarp
these few days in the woods,
or the fitful,
eternal flow?

Let the rain wash the pots!
I'll just lie here
listening to those old stories
the raindrops love to repeat . . .

4.

Rain pouring steadily
down
through our morning of silence:
a perfect time
to visit the waterfall.

Keep my dry clothes
dry, here in the tent.
Pull on what's already damp,
head out into the rain.

The mud-puddled trail grows steep
and steeper
as I approach the continuous roar
of falling water.
Someone has tied a rope
from tree to tree
to make a handrail, but my descent
is just as precipitous
as the creek's.

Glint of something metallic,
man-made,
jammed against a fallen log,
held in place by the pounding
rush of water
down the mossy rocks—

Every drop of rain
tapping on my tarp this morning,
spilling over,
migrating through the soil to the stream,
feeds this raging waterfall.

No silence here, ever.
The neverending crash of water
on rock
is a meditation all its own.

5.

Two nights ago,
our after-dinner council
pre-empted by another shower,
nearly the longest
day of the year but finally we just
ran out of daylight and
crowded in under the big tarp
next door to the kitchen,
two rooms without walls divided
by a narrow alley of rain,
a single candleflame
focusing the twilight:
passing a feather hand to hand
around a tarp-shaped uncircular
mass of bodies
as the rain drums down
and the twilight gradually fades
around us—

I'm not elderly enough
to be an elder in this
or any tribe, but at least
I've learned not to arrive
at the council with my
mind already made up.
Not to see this talking
circle as a vehicle
for steering us all where
I want us to go, rather
than what it always is
anyway: a vessel
for listening. Listening
to all these gathered
voices, each of us
who holds the feather

facing a common
center from a slightly
different point on
the sacred compass
of directions. Listening
through the silence
between and finally
beyondall the passion
and logic and argument
for the whisper of
what we call *spirit*
for lack of a word
to denote the lack
of words, reduced
at last to simply
listening: the silence
of consensus.

Silence, that is,
except for a quiet chuckling
out there among the trees . . .
A-ho!

6.

So much petty thievery in camp
this year!
If you came here
to prey on your family,
you're missing the best part.
You don't even know what "family" is.
You're here in Eden
carrying Babylon
like a worm in the apple
of your heart.

Camp in community.
Know your neighbors,
Watch out for each other's camp.
No groundscores here,
only Lost and Found.
Tempt not, lest ye be lifted from!

Because
this is our vacation from all that larceny
in Washington, on Wall Street,
that gang of bandits in the Pentagon
robbing the world at gunpoint.
You'd better be careful
whose company you keep—
even out here among the grandchildren
of the flower children
who will give you whatever you need,
a thief is still a member
of that other Family: the Mafia
of money, shoplifters in tuxedos,
pickpockets with private jets, swindlers
on the stock market floor . . .

We love you!
Our love is the wealth
you can never steal,
whoever you are,
because we've already
given it away. Yes, even
to you.

Can't you hear that snickering
laugh-track
following you up the trail
as you smuggle your stolen goodies
back to the mercenary world?

7.

Not the first time we've circled
for our humble fire ceremony
in the rain—
I remember years ago a sudden cloudburst
scattered us midway through
an even more elaborate Solstice plan.
The Lakota shaman visiting us
stood alone in the rain, shaking his head.

This year the kids are finally ready
for their parade,
but the rain is still tittering
on the tent flies and tarps,
so the call of the conch
gathers the family under the two big tarps,
our kitchen and family room.
The silence holds
till the parade enters, and we cheer—
not just the children but the ones
who decorated them
and proudly accompany their parade.

Because
of all the big and little
chores and tasks and responsibilities
that must be tended to
in our temporary village,
the most important job belongs
to the mothers and fathers.
Bringing their children down that trail
through the dripping woods
into the meadow
is such a gift to the kids—a lifelong memory
that will make them feel at home
in any wilderness—
and an even greater gift
to the rest of us.

Because
these little ones are only
the third generation
in this nearly four-decade
Kids' Parade
we make-believe is a "tribe."
We who cheer them have no
thousand-year tradition
holding us up
like the strong shoulders
of a loving dad.
Our Mother Katuah is a single mom.
Those who the young ones
call "elder"
have no one to call "ancestor."
Even a hundred years from now
we'll still be children
teaching children,
cheering on the next generation,
improvising a ritual
every summer like kids
inventing a new game.

Meanwhile,
just in case the sun can't resist
a cameo appearance
on our stage of trampled weeds,
we'll wait an hour or two
before we call the directions—
amending yesterday's consensus
to accommodate
the ceremonial laughter of the rain.

Sweat soaking through my clothes
under waterproof raingear . . .
What's that snorting,
chortling sound?

Stealing Leaves

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2017
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

Please don't bite me, tiny creatures
of the winter woods, as I creep along
beneath the naked branches, stealing leaves.
It's the hardest part of cleanup,
I can see now, gathering dead leaves
to re-naturalize the trampled places
where people walked and set up camp
without de-naturalizing at the same time
the places where we gather them.
But soon I begin to see which leaves
actually *want* to be lifted from
the forest floor and scattered
around this cozy glade and along the path
someone made to pitch a tent here.
And if I crouch down low enough
to reach them, they'll start whispering
in the dead language of fallen leaves
something like,

Choose me!
Choose me! My green gay life is over, but
even my dying has a purpose
like everything

Water Is Life (Water Is Alive)

Katuah Solstice 2018
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

Water from the sky

Is that rain again?
No, only the wind shaking the trees
under bright blue sky.
No, wait— here come the rainclouds
from the other direction,
delivering our daily shower!
But never mind.
As soon as I step out of my tent,
day or night, the wet bushes
crowding close
on either side of my little trail
baptize me again
in the name of the Mother.

Water from the mountain

My waterbottle runneth over!
Even water pressure is free here—
sweet pure water, gravity-fed,
bubbling out of muddy seeps,
meandering downslope
through half a mile of snaking waterpipe,
pushing through state-of-the-art
ceramic filters, high above the valleys
where mining for gold
has poisoned the wells of Dahlonega
with arsenic and lead . . .

It was the gold found here
that sealed the fate of the Cherokee,
stripped them of their
farms and stores, their printing press
and other earnest trappings
of assimilation, gold that drove them
from their mountain homeland
into exile on the Oklahoma plains.
And gold, as always,
that stripped away the mask
of peace and lawfulness and civilization
from the palefaced invaders.
Now it's petroleum, "natural gas," tar sands
that threaten the water of the continent
and Native nations
standing up once more
against the heirs of the invaders.

The crack in my waterbottle.
The puddle in my tent.
Every time I swallow a mouthful
of living water
from this openhearted mountain,
I grow more thankful
for the kindness of the rain.

Where the Trees Hug You Back

Katuah Solstice 2018
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

1.

Whose heart would not swell
and overflow
at the sight of her?
Mountains not so much for climbing
as for contemplating,
ridge beyond ridge, like a mantra
repeated to infinity.
Trees that hug you back!
Woods where the drums grow wild
and feral flutes whistle
across the meadows.
Mist rising, rain falling,
creeks running
in their endless round of song.
Who could look up
at these steep forested slopes
and majestic summits
that embrace us so tenderly,
and forget
we are held and loved?

2.

"We are love on the planet,
love on the planet are we!"

The hot sun makes our colors
sparkle as we sing
and weave our laughing spiral
in the meadow.
The cool rain sprinkles us
as we eat our Solstice feast.

Then a double rainbow
puts on an after-dinner show.
Home, sweet home!
Family, sweet family!
We release the seven directions
to the moonlight
and keep right on
drumming and singing our way
home.

We are waxing
with the moon,
dancing with the flames, leaping up
with the sparks—

It's never too late to bloom
and bloom again!

All Roads Lead Us Home

Many fires.
Many faces.
A thousand
generations.
Stars glittering
through the smoke,
unchanged,
unchanging.
Firelight glimmering
on these new faces.
New verses,
new voices,
the songs keep
migrating
year after year.

A Speck of Dream-Dust

Katuah Solstice 2019
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Circling eventually back
to the blanket I left
spread out on the grass
beside the fire,
I find a child sleeping there
while the drummers
shake the earth around him
and a dozen voices chant
a song of praise
to the Mother of us all.
I'll reclaim my blanket
in the morning, taking care
not to shake off
a single speck of dream-dust,
dragon-feather,
cloud-blossom,
any other lingering trace
of that magic-carpet voyage
through the dream-world
where the children
of all times and places,
religions and races
have plenty to eat
and play together
always.

Riding the Rhythm

Katuah Solstice 2019
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

The summers come and go
and circle back again
and new young faces gradually
grow familiar, acquire names,
and as fast I can
attach the faces to the names
in my cluttered brain,
one by one these little ones
are suddenly grown,
doing useful work all day
and at nightfall,
straddling a drum
to ride the heart-fire's
smoky rhythm
into the dark—

Between *This is the way*
we've always done it
and *Some things will never change*
lies the quicksilver
capricious present, when
for a split second
of breathless suspense,
the universe eternally hovers
on the verge
of changing its mind
and it's all fleetingly
possible

Tallia's Drum

Katuah Solstice 2019
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

It's the first Summer Solstice
since we lost Tallia.
I'm sitting on my blanket
facing the fire
while the drummers fill the darkness
of forest and meadow
and mountain
with the heartbeat of Katuah.
Deep-voiced djembes,
clackers, shakers and spoons
serenade the crickets and the frogs,
the racing creek, the crowded
constellations,
and the sisters sing.
I'm shaking my rattle, beginning to sway
as the beat reaches
into my bones, and suddenly I feel
something right behind me,
not quite touching, a deep vibration
humming in my kidneys.
It's Tallia's drum, lying on its side,
taut skin facing the fire,
picking up the rhythm
and singing along.

Consensus by Laughter

Katuah Solstice 2019
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Laughter breaks the silence,
an unexpected reunion
and a three-way hug.
The silence miraculously
heals itself and goes on.
Because even the most casual hug
roots us where we stand
for long quiet moments
of breathing
through the arms and torso
of a mystery equaling our own,
spirit and substance
inhabiting a single space and time.
Trees standing quietly
in their places,
in balance, at peace
against a backdrop of rushing water . . .
Children running and calling
against a backdrop of silence . . .
Small miracles
fill our days until the day we finally burst
and overflow.

As It Is in Heaven

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2019
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

1.

Some trail!
Three-quarters of a mile by daylight,
a mile and a half easy
after dark—
through epic mud and over boulders
the size of asteroids,
tracking the floodplain
of a merry little river,
it sucks my footsteps into its ooze
and offers up treasures
of trash
left behind by floodwater or blind
oblivious fingers.

2.

The sun is going down.
The temperature is dropping.
Sorry you can't stay!
But wherever you go, remember
at 11:15 tonight
it's Solstice there, too.
Once you're aware not only that
the planet spins but
that you spin with it, you'll ride
with the rest of us
Earth's slightly drunken roll and dip
around the four festive
compass-points of the grand tour
of the year.
Welcome home!

3.

The Solstice bonfire blazes bright,
radiating decades
of summer heat cooked down
into dried tree-sap.
The Solstice drums ring like bells
back through centuries
linked by the beacons of bonfires
from hilltop to hilltop, the years
spinning on
with slow-wheeling grace
as the darkening days turn imperceptibly
once more
back toward the light.

4.

Every circle of faces around a fire
is a new tribe, reborn
like the flames
leaping in their eyes,
carrying a spark of the light
passed down to them
and passing it on down in turn,
live sparks
swirling up from the banked coals
and the dance of combustion,
soaring up
to find their places among the stars.

5.

The only bird singing this morning
is a woodpecker
drumming its insistent tattoo, drilling
into the soft wood
of a chilly Solstice dawn.

6.

And when it's my own forgetful voice
breaking the Silence too soon, what then?
The rain has already forgiven me,
the startled faces under the kitchen tarp
betray only surprise, reply
with a shrug, a pointing finger,
letting me figure it out on my own—

The silence goes on catching raindrops
in its open mouth, gulping
every transgression down the throat
of mercy and compassion, lapping up
those not-so-distant gunshots
and roaring ATVs with a tongue
rooted in the dark before language,
absorbing all apologies into a heart
beating soundlessly since the dawn of
days—

7.

You can't even step
into the same river
once! It swirls
around your ankles and is gone,
instantly replaced
by the next instant's
miraculous new river—

It's all the same fire,
no matter how many
matches you strike,
lurking there inside the kindling,
inside the matchhead,
inside the fingers and the brain
and the craving for warmth
ever since the first
lightning struck
the first dry tinder—

One family, just one,
despite the endless mutations
of genetic diversity,
and we're the proof!
Holding hands in our circle,
holding out cold fingers
to the fire's warm rays,
serving hot soup
into dishes of every possible
size and shape,
love passing hand to hand
on Earth
as it is in Heaven . . .

8.

It's amazing
what a difference it makes
to take off my glasses
and look around through eyes
inseparable
from what they see, a world
slightly out of focus
but undivided by lenses,
unconfined by frames
as I hike back out along the creek
to the road.

Then,
trudging the steep
gravel switchbacks to the car,
I have to hook them
over my ears again to spot all these
irresistible treasures
of trash
along the roadside.

Where This Path Goes

Katuah Solstice 2021
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

Every pair of feet that walks here
helps to define the path—
whether it's the way to the shitter
or the one that winds through
all the obstacles and distractions
of our journey home
from exile in Babylon.

Each of us carries what we can,
even if somewhere
along the way we have to ditch it all
except the spark of longing in our eyes,
the smolder of truth
in our hearts.

Scattered wanderers stumble
one by one across the track we've left
over the towering ranges of steel
and cement, the vast
paved prairie, and one by one
find their way home.

Sometimes the path lies hidden
under an interstate highway,
a county blacktop,
a gravel logging road . . .
Where the road ends, a trail begins
and the path and the trail merge
into one.

But where the trail ends,
the path goes on.
Where this path is going
no one knows, but from here
we go together
and every pair of feet that joins us
helps to define the path.

Meanwhile, Back on Earth . . .

Katuah Summer Solstice 2021
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

As soon as you enter this
parallel dimension called "Earth," right away
you start forgetting to glance around
for a clock. Those tiny numbers
in the corner of that little screen
you've carried everywhere
as long as you remember
become cryptic messages from afar.
Then your phone dies,
and the minutes begin
to melt together into one elastic
everlasting moment.
The river ticks off the seconds in a murmur
of continuous wonder, each
indistinguishable from the one before.
The sun goes down
and comes up again, and you forget
you're supposed to keep track.

Here on Earth, we have to work
to live— no exceptions! Half an hour a day
should do it if we all pitch in.
But the pay and the benefits add up fast
when you're working
for nothing but love. Dragging a log
out of the woods for your family.
Stirring a stir-fry
for your family. Digging a deep
narrow trench for your family.
Bandaging a child's foot for your family.
Why go back to that other place
you can barely remember? If you've worked
all your life for nothing but money,
welcome home!

Voices Rise

Katuah Solstice 2021
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

As I snap off
my flashlight and curl up
in my nylon and aluminum den,
the bullfrogs are talking.
The little waterfall upstream
is making its joyful
perpetual plunge, calling out
to the bigger waterfall
downstream
as the river goes muttering
around its horseshoe bend
through the darkness between.
Behind me
the drumming pauses and
starts again.
We have gathered here before,
pitching our tents
among the twisting trunks
of rhododendron and laurel,
hoisting our kitchen tarp
into the treetops,
digging a heart-shaped firepit
into the sandy riverbank
and lifting a lantern
of coals and flame to the stars.
Voices rise from the heart-fire now,
resurrecting a song from the dark
of old memories
as the drummers conjure up
a rhythm far older.

The bullfrogs pause
and start again.
They've been repeating the same
conversation
longer still, almost as long
as this river's been
muttering to itself
through the shimmering days
and the darkness
between.

Om-coming

Katuah Solstice 2021
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

By the third day,
I'm beginning to get my *Om* back.
At first it bucks and crackles
in my throat,
croaks and gurgles like a dead crow
struggling to come back to life.
Then it quavers
irresolutely between two notes,
settles into a tentative groove
but jumps out of gear
with a hiccup
like a drunken transmission.
Finally it steadies and evens out
into a smooth, even flow
like a river
suddenly stretching out wings
of opalescent feathers
and gliding out over mountains
into sky.

The River of Seasons

Katuah Solstice 2021
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

1.

The rain thunders down
on Solstice morning
like a Silence,
muffling the voices of children
and overzealous dogs,
deafening me to the clamor
of argument and gossip
inside my head.

The rain pounds
on my tarp like a pulse,
the lifeblood of everything that lives
circulating through
the sandy soil right here
under my tent,
riding the water table down
to our little river and on
to the distant beating heart
of the sea.

The rain drums
on the taut skin of the Silence,
chanting a song of power
powerful enough
to transport a shaman into trance,
offering me new words
to the age-old refrain
of gratitude and praise:
another Solstice
in the circle of my tribe.

2.

These kids
gathered here in their facepaint
and fairy wings,
getting ready for their parade,
are quieter than some of the grownups
I've passed this morning
chattering away in their camps . . .

Between the happy whoops of children
and the steady roar of the river,
a Silence
mysteriously blooms.

The river is happy this morning
too, buoyant and swollen
with last night's rain.
It flows on like the river of seasons,
never even slowing down
as it rounds the bend
where we gather once more
in this holy place
on the banks
of the ceaseless flow of the year.

3.

In this cathedral of plastic,
a blue tarp stretched between us
and the rain, our circle forms.
The Children's Parade
breaks the Silence and then
breaks the circle, crowding in to fill
the hollow heart of the world
where a sleeping shape still lies
rolled up in a green blanket,
and as we sing
the blue above us turns to sky
and the sun breaks through.

All around us
the Summer flows on
without stopping
for long enough to join us in some
solemn ritual.
To honor it, we have no choice
but to step into the current
and dance!

On the bank of the river
we dance
around the drowned heart-fire,
two circles weaving themselves
into one,
hand grasping hand, left to left,
right to right, eyes following close
behind,
catching and releasing
one laughing glance after another,
feet bringing up the rear
as the drums
and voices lead the way: *"We are
the same family,
stronger than before!"*

4.

A spiral path
of candleflames
draws our gazes in
to an altar at the center,
consecrated by the ashes
of two elders
become ancestors at last.
They've come home
to end their wanderings
across the temporal plane
and the material realm
here among family, to pass
through the heart-fire's
gateway of flame
and begin the next journey
in new bodies
of light and smoke
on the spiral path
of song.

Who's Who in the Woods

Katuah Solstice 2021
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

These two trunks
share a single bulging mass of root
five feet across, hunched
on a granite outcrop
about the same size and color,
both so artfully spattered with moss
and daubed with lichen
that it takes a minute of study
to tell which is rock
and which is root, or rather
who is *who*

Backwash

Katuah Solstice 2021
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

Yellow-striped hornet
hovering an inch away,
swooping low
over the foreign topography
of my anatomy, exploring
the sprawled length of my leg
as I lean against a stump,
circumnavigating
my daypack and then
suddenly whizzing away
past my arm,
bathing my bare skin
in the windy backwash
of tiny wings

Taking Root

Katuah Solstice 2021
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

Careful, now!
Hiking into this wild place
you take the chance of growing
a little wild yourself,
taking root under these trees
like some exotic foreign species
gone native.
The drifting pollen of these
innocent-looking wildflowers might
settle in your lungs.
The spores of fungi lurking
under these fallen leaves
could colonize your brain.
The river's quiet roar
could infiltrate your arteries
and re-synchronize your pulse.
Hiking back up that trail
you might emerge into the sunlight
shy and bewildered,
a new, wild creature
to the deepest coils of your DNA.
Pausing there at the edge
of the wild woods, gazing around
at the devastated remnants
of what the loggers call
"a selective cut,"
you might suddenly forget
what's so urgent about leaving . . .
how to find your way
through the tangle of highways . . .
where exactly you need to go
in such a hurry
and why.

Walking Home

Thanksgiving Council 2021

I want to walk
for the rest of my life
along a winding gravel road
through a forest,
gazing up into a sky this blue
with the fall colors
exploding like slow-motion
fireworks around me
and the clean cold
autumn air in my nostrils,
my lungs, my senses,
striding forward
over the stones and puddles,
the dips and rises
and switchbacks
of my days and weeks and years,
never once forgetting
no matter how far I wander
that this forest forever
surrounds me, this road
always knows
where I'm going, that sky
welcomes me
minute by minute, stride
after stride

Season of Gratitude

Thanksgiving Council 2021

The land is so gentle here!
a carpet of tiny ferns,
bright green moss, soft brown
needles and leaves
barely covering
a layer of rocks almost
impossible to dig through

Creatures and spirits
of this sacred spot,
remind us again that every inch
of the Mother is holy

Help us remember to stand
where we set our feet down,
to breathe
where we are standing

And no matter where we stand,
whatever we long for
out there in the world is right here
inside us

And at the same time, all
that we seek within
surrounds us
if we'll only look around

The trees here stand quietly
intelligent, each one unique,
demonstrating
in a single graceful gesture
how to be an individual
rooted in the world, giving back
even if all we have to give
is gratitude

Noted

Thanksgiving Council 2021

The executive subcommittee
to choose a site
for the latrine
convenes after breakfast.
Bring a shovel.

It's the fitness club
where you pay your dues
by working out!

Three pairs of hands, three tools:
spade, mattock, inkpen.
No supervisor needed,
but obviously somebody
has to take notes.

Progress: satisfactory.
But are we making a hole
or making a pile?

Silence Speaks

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2021
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

The silence speaks
in the language of creekwater
hurrying along
on its mysterious,
perpetually unfinished errand . . .

A little later,
the silence answers
in the voice of a soft, icy rain.

Dramatis Personae

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2021
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

1.

This fire is way more
entertaining than TV.
Any channel you can name.
One glance and we're hooked,
gazing for hours
into its glowing, pulsing heart
as the mystery unfolds.

2.

The wood is wet.
The fire plays coquette,
winking and disappearing,
teasing and seducing,
flickering up again
whenever we start to lose hope—

3.

The breath of the fire sleepily
rises and subsides.
Lean close to the coals
and blow: the fire god
roars with delight!

Moonwalk

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2021
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

I came to a place
where the moonlight lay sprawled
across the path.
The path was only an old gravel road
interrupted every so often
by miniature lakes
filled with muddy water,
but under the moon
and the branches of shadow
it shimmered with a quiet beckoning,
a silvery whisper,
a doorway into stillness where I paused
a moment and
stepped
into a cold pool of light.

At Home Among Strangers

Red Cedar Clan, Winter Solstice 2021
Chattahoochee Forest, Georgia

Wherever people see a stranger
and smile, I'm home.
This campfire, the drumming and singing,
the warm food in my belly,
the trees pressing close around us in the dark,
the full moon burning
blue and cold above the ridge,
all of this is extra.
Wherever people smile at strangers,
that's home.

Homeward

I travel the creekbed
doing my best
to keep up with the stream,
stepping from moss to rock to moss
down a staircase of tumbled boulders,
clambering over logs whose bark
has rotted away in the mist,
doubling over on all fours
through the thickets of rhododendron,
vaulting little pools and waterfalls
chasing nothing but *downstream,*
downstream—
Then I reach
the road, and remember I was lost.
Ninety degrees: left or right? I choose
uphill.
The water goes
singing on homeward without me.

Voices of the Elements

"Earth my body,
water my blood . . ."

The drumming grows softer
and finally fades
away
The voices go on

"Air my breath
and fire my spirit . . ."

Regardless

And who invented this all-day, all-night,
year-round rain-or-shine
perpetual motion machine?

Not the water itself, swirling around
a tiny island of rocks and bushes,
rushing together again
in a joyful reunion,
surging on between dappled boulders,
over a low mossy cliff
and on down the mountain—

Not some government or corporate sponsor,
no council of bishops or Pope,
no technician or scientist or engineer—
No, if you don't have a God
or Goddess to blame things on,
you must finally admit
Nature knows what it's doing
and goes right on doing it
regardless.

Sacrificial Rite

Katuah Solstice 2022
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Here in this open space
scooped out of the forest
between two mountains, we pause
between springtime and summer
to dance in the sun
across the trampled green bodies
that grew waist-high
before we came

What's a ceremony without a sacrifice?
And what's a sacrifice worth
if the life in it does not
spring back up toward the sky
after we're gone?

As the summer always wheels
around again, as the trampled plants
stir themselves, slowly unbend
and stand up straight
to worship the sun once more,
may the life in us always
return

Silent Music

Katuah Solstice 2022
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

To anyone who has lived alone, silence
is no rarity. But to live
among other humans
and hear nothing but silence
for an entire morning, that
beckons a mystery.

Silence is truth distilled
to a drop of pure inspiration, trembling
at the tip of a twig
in the instant before it falls

Silence isn't merely
a lack of sound.
It's to be at peace
with all the noises of the world.

Silence is the language of trees and flowers,
the mating song of drifting pollen,
the heartbeat of the mountain and the breath
of wind through the leaves

Some live for days or weeks
in deliberate
meditative Silence.
Can we make it through
a morning?

Silence is the natural habitat
of birds and insects,
the wall where they paint their bright graffiti
Silence is the ground
we've built our nation of noises on

The rattle and clank
of work getting done, that too
is part of the Silence.

Silence is the breath the storyteller draws
between sentences, the pause
between words, the thought behind the word
that gives it meaning

These intentional breakers
of Silence—too nervous
in the company of those
holy strangers, themselves?

Silence is the sun's laughter,
the howling of the moon,
the whistle of morning and the drum of night
Silence is the listener
on the bank of the babbling stream

Not that it's possible to be utterly silent.
But for one morning each year
it's at least worth the effort
to be conscious of every sound I make,
how it intrudes on the general quiet
of my surroundings
and blends with the subtle harmony
of the spheres.

Silence is the hum of the planet turning
under our feet, the frequency of the galaxies
cartwheeling through time
Silence is the earth we bury our beloved elders in

"Hello" is only a rough translation
of "I love you," which is
an even rougher translation of a smile
across sound and Silence alike

At the Speed of Song

Katuah Solstice 2022
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

In the last of twilight,
with the help of the evening's first
fireflies,
I snap my tent to its poles
and raise it from the ferns and needles
toward the slow-waking
stars

Then the moon arrives
too late to help
but precisely on time

*

I came here last night
carrying my headfull of thoughts
like always . . .

This morning the voices of birds call
across an open meadow in there
instead

*

The sun has cleared the ridge
and I'm still waiting
What's your hurry? whispers
the stillness between breezes
Come on, get up! the birds insist
So I sit procrastinating
everything except this urgent
waiting

*

Today the sky
is one giant cloud
hanging so low that its arms
brush the ridges
that rim this valley,
gathering us close and holding us
tenderly

*

Last night
in the glow of a lucid dream,
in the flicker of faces
arriving one by one out of the dark
of a memory,
the singing caught me up
and lifted me
like a spark from the flames . . .
Is that my voice, I wondered,
are those stars up there
bending down to listen,
are we really on a mountain
rocketing through space
at the speed of song?

*

The Earth turns
one shovelful at a time
By the time we finish digging
and step back
to rest from our work,
we stand in a different place
entirely

The Earth turns
one pot of food at a time
Dinner-circle by dinner-circle,
the long days sink into brief
summer nights
Summer by summer,
the years dance on around
their unbroken ellipse

*

Did they just holler
"We love you!"
from the kitchen?
No, I think it was
"Pizza!"

*

I'm here
among the leaves
and the twitters of birds

The sun shines through
the leaves, lighting them up
like a million
little green lamps

The silence echoes
through the twitters
as if each bird rings a tiny bell
glistening with dew

*

No hurry
It's the longest day
I can wait
till this ant has finished
crossing my blanket
before I gather it up
and go my way

*

The day dawns
The shadows retreat
Morning finally peeks over
the mountain's shoulder

The invitation is open
The truth is clear
The secret is free
to all who are paying
attention

And still some claim
they see nothing
but what is visible!

Call and Response

Katuah Solstice 2022
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

In a forest of rhododendron
beside the perennial song of the stream
we lashed bent sapling poles
into a cage of ribs
piled blankets like layered skin
racked a stratum of rocks
between two tiers of dry wood
and lit a pyre of flame

Then we crawled into the ancient darkness
of the tribal womb

Nothing was ever so beautiful
as the heated rocks
glowing red as dwarf suns in space
transparent crystals of lava
living gemstones ablaze from within
as the firetender guided them in
one by one
on the tip of a shovelblade

Water splashed and sizzled
and the singing began

Drawing breath after breath
of searing steam
into the deepest caverns of our bodies
where our oldest memories
have lain asleep all our lives
and longer, we sang out in a language
we had long forgotten
answering the chant of the water
flowing past outside

Breath by breath we remembered
the last time we made this journey together
lifetimes ago

We emerged at last reborn
yet again, already beginning to forget
until the next time we hear
the new-born, age-old
song of flowing water, and it all comes back
how we lived together
in a sacred way
in a forest of rhododendron
sharing birth, love, joy, death
and everything

Thank you, Grandmother!
Thank you, Grandfather!
All my relations!

Creek-Musings

Katuah Solstice 2022
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Today I leave the woods
for the city.
A jet crashing through the stratosphere
like a continuous collision
calls my name.
The creek-music doesn't stop to listen.
It will go on singing
when the last jet has rusted
into silence.
I keep walking, singing along.

Where could so much water come from
and keep coming, year after year?
Same place as the abundance of life
everywhere on Earth

This deluxe two-lane trail beside the creek
was once a logging road
and before that, for countless summers
a solitary creek
gurgled and splashed through a tangle
of rhododendron, roaming
day after day
down this mountainside.

Every swallow of springwater
fills me with memories of another life
somewhere upstream
Then they flow on through

The sound of the creek never ceases to remind me
time is passing, hour after hour
all too soon lost to memory.
I ride along, afloat
on its buoyant melody, minute by minute
forever entering
a mysterious new life.

Heart-Fire

Katuah Solstice 2023
Cherokee Forest, Tennessee

A campfire
is a primitive device
fueled by twigs and sticks
to generate light, warmth,
and conversation.

A heart-fire
is a sophisticated technology
for the circulation of song
from heart to heart,
fanning the embers
of tribal communion
into flame.

Two's company, three
is a village!
Our faces flicker and glow
like a circle of moons reflecting
a communal sun,
like goddesses and gods
incarnate in light,
like spirits of ancient forests reborn
in a blazing dance . . .

The darkness crowds
close around us,
adoring that brilliant warmth
and its reflection in our eyes,
captivated by the the drums, the singing,
but powerless
to step into the circle
of laughter and firelight

Water Cycle

Katuah Solstice 2023
Cherokee Forest, Tennessee

1.

The rain taps gently on
a green umbrella
high above my tent,
and I stay dry—

Easy to complain
about these days of endless rain,
but where did you think
this creek comes from,
this springwater you've been drinking?
The earth catches
whatever falls from the sky,
and the water flows.

2.

All day and all night
this little creek sings its
neverending song.
Let's not jump to conclusions:
just because it never dies
doesn't mean the water is alive.
But even though
everything alive must die,
life itself goes on
giving birth to life
in neverending generations.
Therefore, of course,
it logically follows
that water is life.

3.

All morning, off and on,
the rain keeps whispering
its esoteric secrets
to the upturned ears of the trees.

And every time it pauses,
I can hear the water in the creek
explaining to the rocks
all the mysteries of existence.

And suddenly it occurs to me
that the youthful innocence of water
is only a reflection
glittering across the surface:

Underneath, swift or sluggish,
shallow or deep, murky
or clear, the current carries the wisdom
of many lifetimes
reborn.

4.

Daytime again.
And notice how the light
keeps falling through the rain!

We baptize you in love, joy, respect,
and a holy sprinkle of rain.
Welcome home!

Black Velvet

Katuah Solstice 2023
Cherokee Forest, Tennessee

Look! the intricate
gold pattern etched
on its tiny black wings,
flashing and vanishing
as they open and close,
each brief glimpse
just long enough to fall
deeper into the maze
of golden filigree against
the velvet dark, and look!
the next flap catapults it
into the air and off
across the meadow
where dozens just like it
dance on sunshine!

Seed-Sower

Katuah Solstice 2023
Cherokee Forest, Tennessee

One black dewberry
shining in the grass, irresistible
among its pale siblings . . .
so now I'm picking my teeth,
tossing dewberry seeds
over my shoulder,
planting the future
everywhere I go

Morning of the Second-Longest Day

Katuah Solstice 2023
Cherokee Forest, Tennessee

1.

The inside of my tent inevitably
becomes a jumble,
impossible to organize.
Crawling out my zippered door I step
into a world of perfect order,
firm underfoot, bright and breezy above,
held together by tenacious roots
gripping the earth,
graceful branches lacing the sky . . .

Checking out of this temporary hotel
of nylon and netting
cluttered with the artifacts
of an artificial world
so far away, I am instantly home.

But by this time next year,
these medium-aged hardwoods
between here and the road
could so easily be mowed down
by the scythe of progress,
the dozers of death, the engines
of what some profane
sadistic comedian christened
"economic growth."

Every plant here is native—
some green and flourishing, others
brown and shriveled,
culled with poison spray by order
of some invasive authority
to keep the forest from swallowing
this unnatural meadow
where the hunters collect
their annual trophies.

2.

Not far from here, the bulldozers
are already at work.
The trees are going down,
one by one. Poured concrete hardens,
asphalt cools, cinderblock walls
rise against the sky.
The global economy spins
like a drive shaft, hums like a hard drive
while men with guns guard the exits.

Still, a few of us find a way out
for a week or two each year.
Here the birds still flit from tree to tree,
whistling their favorite tunes.
The trees still gossip quietly
in little clusters, waving to each other
across the meadow grass.
People still sit or stand in circles
within the circle of horizons,
the circle of seasons, the circle
of birth and death and birth again.

Our fire flares up against the stars.
Raindrops fall and creeks flow down
toward the distant sea.
Our songs rise on the flames,
our laughter overflows and cascades
downstream.

3.

If we didn't accept each other
just as we are, each
imperfect, each unique,
no one would be here at all
except the grass and the trees.
No circle on the grass.
No tents among the trees.
No laughing and singing around the fire.
The plants and creatures
who accept one another just
as they are would have this place
all to themselves.
These trees, skinny and fat,
leaning this way and that,
just like us.
These grasses, tall and short,
broad-leafed and sharp-needled,
just like us.
The bear darting across the road,
the creek bubbling over the rocks,
the mist of rain
across the meadow . . .

Somebody up there
loves us!
Why else would these constellations
blaze so intently down
between the curtains of rain?

Plastic and Me

Katuah Solstice 2023
Cherokee Forest, Tennessee

A black plastic tube
runs along the forest floor
headed downhill

I guzzle pure springwater all day

A blue plastic tarp hangs taut
above my tent
ready for the downpour

My sleeping bag stays dry all night

The nylon netting
of my hammock sways gently
under my weight

I lean back in a lazy sprinkle of shade

My fleecy sweater sheds particles
of microplastic
every time I wash it

So why bother to wash it?

Later, up on the road,
I tease open a knotted trash bag.
If only I had some water
to rinse all these plastic
bottles and jugs and jars!
That's when the clouds cut loose
and a sudden river of brown water
comes gushing down
the deep rut between me
and the edge of the road.

At Every Bend of the Trail

Katuah Solstice 2024
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

Walking into the gathering,
at every bend of the trail I see
shimmering
everywhere around me
a miraculous vision—

A peaceful village
among the trees. Humans
inhabiting this world
just like any other
creature of the Creation.

Or am I hallucinating?
There's only one
infallible test: look deeply
into the eyes
of every person I meet.

Any vision that's true
is irresistibly
contagious.

Glimpses of the Ephemeral

Katuah Solstice 2024
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

We can't take credit
for any of this. All we do
is hang a couple of tapestries,
bury our compost, and go.
Mama Katuah does the rest—
supplies the water and the fire,
the forest, the fungi,
the wildflowers and bees,
a blanket of soft dead leaves,
this artfully sculpted topography
tucked away in the cleft
of her green bosom
as the creeks ripple through—

*

Work isn't work
unless it's hard work
that tires you out,
raises calluses on your hands,
flexes the muscles
of your mind and makes you
at least a tiny bit
stronger—

*

Listening to six conversations at once
in the dark
around the dwindling fire:
a dozen voices I recognize,
intertwined
in a gentle burble of sound,
while one more
I never heard before
softly threads a chant to the Mother
into the weave

*

At a certain distance
from the drumming,
the crickets take over.
But if I go back
just a few steps and stand
listening a moment,
the two rhythms
draw even, equalize
and merge into one
syncopated song

*

I wore out my flashlight battery
searching for my tent

Reckoning by the sound
of snoring in the dark
off my starboard beam, I found my way
back to the fire

Now I'm scribbling this by the light
of half a moon
and the hunger of the flames

*

Silence is truth
Opinion
merely a variety
of interesting noises
Life itself
an improbable
harmony of opposites

You Are Here!

Katuah Solstice 2024
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

1. Welcome Home

Howdy, friend!
Ever been to a Rainbow gathering before?
Hey, cool!
And did you camp at the road, or hike all the way in?
Way cool!
And did anyone explain what a Rainbow gathering
is? Well . . .
Every gathering is different, everyone has a different
reason
for coming, and that's precisely why we gather.
You see,
everyone's opinion is absolutely correct, as far
as we know,
so the only truth we're absolutely sure of is this: a unity
made entirely
of differences. The fact that we're all here in one place
peacefully
disagreeing about why we came— that's the unity
we reach for.

2. Magic

If this gathering is magical, it's because
each of us
brings our own precious shining ray of magic
to beam out
of our eyes into everyone else's, and all our old
heartaches
to toss into the heart-fire, so it flickers cheerfully in all
directions.
From the rock'n'roll blaring down at Front Gate
to the quiet
of the farthest meadow, the entire gathering

pulses
with the ordinary magic of a peaceful day
in the forest.
Of course the trees and meadows and creeks all rang
with magic
before we came. But perhaps this place will vibrate
with silent
echoes of voices raised in song for a little while
after we're gone.

3. The Circle

You might see this circle as a metaphysical symbol,
a ritual
of communion, or just a communication device.
But the fact
that we're all reaching toward each other,
stretching
far enough across the void between us to touch
and hold hands,
just happens to hold the only possible hope for peace
on planet Earth—
this physical plane where one sweaty palm grasps
another,
the atheist, the believer, apostles of left and right
embracing
for one wordless moment. It's less about geometry
than electricity:
two ends that connect and instantly fuse
in a circular
energy flow, just as the rushing stream,
vapor rising
from the lake, the splash of raindrops miraculously
knit
this round blue world into one infinite spinning
mystery
brimming with life. At least that's my opinion.
What's yours?

The Sun at Zenith

Katuah Solstice 2024
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

The longest day has begun

Since the Earth first tilted on its axis,
this day has come around
once in every swing around the sun.
Today the cycle of light reaches its climax
and turns back toward the dark,
without pausing even a moment to rest.
Yet it lingers, stretching out long
and longer, inviting us to slow down
and gather every drop of the day.

This year, sunshine

Nothing else in this world
is so dependable. Not climate or weather,
culture, language, technology,
corporate logo or legal tender.
We have gathered here to stake our loyalty
on the one thing that does not change,
though it never stops revolving
through the wheel of transformation.

Shadows migrate across the meadow

The tilted world gradually
fills with light, deeper and wider
day by day until the day
called Solstice comes and Summer
spills over everything, bathing us
in a glow as rich and sticky as honey,
and perspiration runs down the skin
beneath our rainbow colors like
the multitude of creeks
that cool this mountainside.

The sun passes overhead
and travels on

Synonyms for Silence

Katuah Solstice 2024
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

Words marching through my head
drown out the delirious birds
of Solstice morning.
But what words can possibly
summarize the dawn?
What synonym for silence
could be this quiet?

A silence as vast as the sky, as minute
as the spider in the vortex
of her web—
A silence so deep
I can hear the bombs going off
on the other side of the world—
A silence at last
of the one species
amid the chirping, buzzing billions
that has forgotten how to listen—

A whole morning of gradual
remembering
as the woods go on whispering
that constant, quiet wisdom
we so lightheartedly ignore
at the risk of our lives and loved ones—

The wild wisdom that's always
waiting here for ears
that have learned to listen,
the innocent wisdom that breathes
through our lungs, day and night,
here and everywhere,
if we listen fearlessly through
that jangle of noises we've been taught
to call *living*

Between Last Night & Tomorrow

Katuah Solstice 2024
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

Every night of drumming and singing
around the heart-fire is an expedition,
a voyage among the stars
toward a destination lightyears beyond.

Somewhere between midnight and morning,
that imperceptible crack where last night
suddenly becomes tomorrow
splits open and swells
into a dimensionless ocean,
a buoyant darkness we can ride
through the glimmering hours toward dawn.

People we think we know by daylight
turn into fantastic strangers
in the leap of firelight, the waves of rhythm,
the swirling currents of song.
They say and do things we could never
imagine in the light of day, dancing
feverish or flowing or hypnotic circles
between flame and sky.

And in the morning we crawl
out of our tents to find we have landed
on a strange new shore, far
from that other world we faintly recall
where we embarked last night
when twilight fell
and some courageous soul
kindled the fire.

Midnight Zuzus

Katuah Solstice 2024
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

I'll be tripping for days
on this chocolate concoction
smothered in nut sauce,
served upside-down on my open palm
by a troupe of forest elves
who came whooping down the meadow
in the middle of the night, delighted
to deliver it right to the door
of my tent—

These are the kids who get it,
roaming the country in a tired van,
serving vegetables gleaned
from the dumpsters of America
to America's lost and forgotten—
the only future this country offers them
is here and now, and they know it.

Because let's face it, Babylon
is going down, death's stockholders
are cashing in their shares,
stocking the bunkers with Twinkies
and champagne. The rest of us
may find ourselves shivering
in an alley heaped with charred debris,
scaling a cold steel wall
to stare down into a dumpster
as empty as a supermarket shelf
the day after the world ends . . .

But these kids, they refuse
to go down with the past. Me?
I'll bet it all on that other future they see
rising with the moon.

Seed Camp Saga

Katuah Solstice 2025
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

1.

I remember how that broad grandfather oak
reached out over the meadowgrass
from the edge of the wild woods
when we first arrived—
before the invisible seed of Seed Camp
began to sprout hands and hearts,
before a parade of wheels and feet chose this spot
simply by stopping
when the rambling path we were making
reached the shade of those stout leafy limbs,
and started to unload
random piles of pots and utensils, knives
and cutting boards, propane tanks and burners—
and I remember how
that oak-leaf canopy patiently sheltered us
from the hot summer sky
till a spontaneous synergy of eyes and arms
raised and stretched a ceiling
of multicolored tarps between the branches—
I recall how the supply tent bloomed
out of the grass and immediately
began to swell with fruit
by the wheelbarrow and wagonload—
how hungry fingers started chopping
and the wok began to sizzle
while a dish station sprang up
out of a patch of poison ivy, lashed
between two pines, the dishpans suddenly
brimming over with hot sudsy water,
and we were home again
in our cozy kitchen, with walls of starlight
and sunshine, morning mist and evening rain,
the whole living, breathing world
our open window—

2.

Someone has to backtrack along the line again
in search of a leaky connector, or silt
infiltrating like arterial plaque
to obstruct the flow— someone
has to stalk the long black water-pipe
snaking up the mountain
under mossy rotting logs into rhododendron hell,
where the creek will keep on
dashing nimbly down
through shadowy green grottos
till the end of time— while far behind and below,
people are already lining up
at the filters to fill their jugs and bottles,
to keep our section
of the planetary water cycle
running—

3.

New faces show up one by one,
tents pop up everywhere
like toadstools after rain, dogs and children
multiply and run wild,
grinning young folks we've never seen before
dig a firepit in the meadow,
outlined with a heart-shaped ring of stones—
and finally, before we even start
gathering firewood,
a latrine!

Good to have work to do
Good to work for a dream
Best of all to work hard
and see the dream sprout
little by little from that invisible
dreaming seed
into the magical realm
of the real

Revenge of the Greenbriar

Katuah Solstice 2025
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

The briars I cut through
with the little sawblade on my pocketknife
were still angry as I grasped each one
warily between the thorns
and piled them safely out of the way . . .

Hours later, in another part of the woods,
the bright bead of blood on my thumb
makes me wonder: how far
do those tough roots actually travel underground
before erupting again
in a wild green tangle of fangs and claws?

Circles Within the Circle

Katuah Solstice 2025
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

One *Om*
to bless our breakfast

One to consecrate the feather
for our council

One to close the council when we're done

One to honor the shift to sharing
from our deepest hearts

One to sing gratitude
for our supper
and another day together

Ignore All Rumors of Precipitation!

Katuah Solstice 2025
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

It's raining again in the cloud-forest—
the frogs are happy,
the creek sings lustily, the faces glow
and the leaves all shine

As the rains sweep through each day
and the sun smiles again,
the family drifts back and forth
between shelter and open sky,
a pendulum swinging
with the rhythm of the day

There's no such thing as a stranger
under a tarp
stretched tight as a drumskin
under the fingers of the rain,
deep in the wilderness
of the human heart

Brimful

Katuah Solstice 2025
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

What looked like a polished gemstone
shining on the path ahead,
topaz, perhaps, or jasper,
as I walked on turned out to be
just a brown and yellow leaf
cupped to the sky, brimful
of rainwater and sunlight

Shitter-Digging Talk

Katuah Solstice 2025
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Some of the most amazing conversations
take place
around a slowly deepening trench
in the forest floor
as we take turns with mattock and spade,
jokes
and stories

*

Thank you family!
Sorry I have to crush you
temporarily
under my tent . . .
(because yes, you too are my
long-lost relatives,
baby sweet-gum trees)

*

Eating spaghetti and salad with a spoon
is easier
than eating soup with a fork
but still
takes a little practice

*

rippling creek

roaring jet

drifting thoughts

sparks

fireflies

stars . . .

*

Here we are on a big blue tarp together
under the stars,
ready for the talent show, smudged
by campfire smoke

*

A fairyland of ferns
between the main trail and my tent—
I'm trying my best to step
between these littlest ones

(Pay close attention
to your footing, I'm learning,
and your breathing
will take care of itself)

*

Love is not a philosophy
or a religion
Love is not a disembodied metaphysical concept
Love is something you do
Or at the very least
something you holler across the meadow
long after midnight

*

The gurgling unstoppable stream,
the wind and rain,
the thunder, the waterfall, the people—
drums, conch-shell, voices
hollering *We love you!*
to anyone who's listening—
the conversation goes murmuring on
through the world, day after day,
year after year

At Wobbly Rock

Katuah Solstice 2025
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

The water exploding over the mossy lip
of the waterfall and racing noisily
past my dangling feet isn't exactly
in a hurry— no, just preoccupied
with a critical mission and so contagiously
enthusiastic that its continuous roar
rampages right through my head,
scattering whatever might have been
going on in there a moment ago,
leaving my feet far behind as my thoughts
go charging on down the mountain, gleefully
making for the sea—

Starlight

Katuah Solstice 2025
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

It's the grave responsibility
of every star in the heavens
to shine, no matter what— all night
whether cloudy or clear, all day
when nobody notices,
even through the long and leisurely
arc of the Solstice sun—
and during those dark intervals
when the candles of the stars wink out,
it's the glorious responsibility
of every earthbound soul
to light up the faces around us
with our own ardent, all-consuming
inner burning

Forest and Sky

Katuah Solstice 2024
Sumter Forest, South Carolina

Somewhere up there
in the treetops, the sky begins.
Only the birds know exactly where.
Somewhere up in the high branches,
small shiny eyes are drinking in
sunshine, slender colorful throats
pour out note after note
in a pandemonium of praise.
Light and shadow mingle
among the leaves. Forest and sky
share this world, and nothing
divides them until a bird
lets go of one and flaps up
into the other.

Duet

A raindrop smacks
into a leaf, a leaf
catches a raindrop
high up in the canopy
where a million leaves
are busy catching
a million raindrops,
singing together
the quiet, steady *om*
of the forest,
a million tiny voices
tracing the edge
where the rain
and the forest
touch and become one
thunderous song.

Lunchtime in the Wilderness

Fall Council 2025

Walking away from the voices
and the kitchen-clatter,
I reach the end of a grassy path
bush-hogged through the bramble
and keep going, down the hill
into the woods.

Are we camping out here together
just for fresh air and company?
I don't think so.
We're inventing a new way to live
that's almost as old as these mountains.
But are we doing it on purpose,
or simply surrendering, willingly
or unwittingly, to the gravitational pull
of our hearts? I don't know.
We might not even be the ones
who are doing it. Could it be
the mountains themselves,
grown old and lonely, losing patience
at last with their wandering progeny,
quietly calling us home
to the heartbeat of the drums?

From somewhere ahead
across the hollow,
a murmur of traffic swells
as the sounds of camp fade
behind me. Standing precisely
in between, all I can hear for one
still moment is a whisper
of wind through the leaves
and a woodpecker
hunting for lunch.

Horizon of the Cosmos

That hazy line of horizon through the trees
is another ridge almost exactly
like this one—
dendritic fingers of the mountain's arm,
following the universal rule
of infinite repetition
with infinite variation,
no two leaves or bugs or clouds or crystals
or human beings
quite alike, up and down the scale
of this microcosm of the cosmos,
the wheel of lights above us turning
against the infinite dark,
atoms spinning
through the darkness
below.

Council of the Butterflies

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Tiny wings
like excitable flakes
of periwinkle sky
fluttering madly
around our ankles
along the muddy path,
congregating
on a random patch
of mud, chosen
by consensus,
no doubt, to debate
the next random
gathering spot

Incoming!

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Among the million anonymous pairs of headlights
traveling the dark roads
across the land tonight, here and there
one particular pair is seeking out
a certain gravel road
that winds up a mountainside into the forest
to a dim junction
between a beaver pond and a brisk, cold creek
where a line of miscellaneous vehicles
sleeps along the roadside
as one by one
the searching pairs of headlights come
bouncing over the potholes,
and a dozing watcher jerks awake one more time
to call out
a sleepy *"Welcome Home!"*

Chorale

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Flute notes drift up
from the meadow
and float across the trail
into the trees
like glistening bubbles
of morning light
gliding skyward
on the rustle and murmur
of morning breeze
and carried away
on the burbling psalm
of the stream.

Another Game of Name-Tag

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

1.

Hey, good to see you.
even in the dark!
I'll never forget that voice
ringing out with mine
across this same fire
night after night
for a hundred lifetimes,
singing this same song
in a hundred languages—
So remind me,
what was your name again
this time around?

2.

No sooner do I finally stammer out
someone's actual name
on the first try
instead of two minutes after they walk away
than two new faces
I swear I've never seen before come smiling
down the trail,
calling out my name

The Human Rainbow

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

1.

Looking around in the pause
between heartsong and supper,
I recall the rainbow I once saw
from an airplane window:
a perfect circle reaching over
a perfect circle of horizon . . .

Violet twilight, indigo night,
bright blue morning,
green ferns, yellow fungus,
orange sunset, red berries—
each complete
and perfect in its way, but
we don't get a rainbow, do we,
till we all stand together
hand in hand
in a warped, imperfect
circle in the meadow?

2.

Tent people and hammock people,
road people and woods people,
barefoot people and boot people,
kitchen workers and trailwalkers,
drummers and traders
and rambling troubadours,
city folks, homesteaders,
wind-blown travelers—

Each one an irreplaceable
link in the circle, each glance
or smile or grin or laugh
that greets me on the trail
radiating a light all its own,
each a singular wavelength
in the dazzling spectrum
of the human rainbow.

3.

As sure as Summer circles
around again
here we are again, joining hands
under the Solstice sun

Our circle is a spectrum
as broad as it is round—
always room for one more
in the circle,
and our circle grows

Tighter and tighter
with every hug
we weave this web called
"family"

The Forest Walks With Me

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

The forest lives and breathes around me
and inside me
as I live and breathe and move
around in it—
as if this damp light
fills and overflows my boundless
hollow skin,
as if these moody winds
sway the twigs and branches of my bones,
as if the sizzling humidity
and the shining rain
saturate this suit of leaves and needles I wear,
as if the running creek behind my tent
can simply wash away
the doomsday nightmare of the world
of neon and concrete
that lurks beyond the treeline—
This forest is alive
and as long as I live, no matter
where I walk,
it lives and breathes
in me.

Cadence and Harmony

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

At the heart-fire tonight
under the glow of the night sky
the drummers played
together, then drifted apart,
each pursuing a solitary
journey through the dark
till at last they emerged
one by one into the firelight,
converging smoothly again
into a steady, joyful cadence
as the voices rose and fell
in intermittent harmony till one
by one we found the rhythm
and learned the song.

Low-Beams

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Walking the dark path
through the night meadow,
my light pointed straight down
so I won't blind anyone
going the other way, my boots
swing steadily along
in a gently swaying
puddle of light—
or is it
this path that's traveling past
beneath me instead,
as I stride endlessly
in place?

The Original Gift

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Meditating in silence for world peace
is a bit ambitious, I know,
if not completely oblivious. Maybe even
ridiculous. But another name
for meditation is
attention.
Another name for silence is simply
listening.

Listen! This forest is more
than a painted backdrop
for our human dramas, peace and war
included.
If what you call silence is only
the hush of human voices,
listen again.

The forest is never completely quiet.
It has so much to tell you
about something softly
singing inside you to the heartbeat
of nights and days.
Something older than human history,
older than these human bodies,
as old as life itself.

It has its own dramas, of course;
just ask the field mouse
about the owl.
But hunger has a purpose.
The hunt is a quest not just for food
but for life, for lineage,
for the future itself.
Life in the forest
is serious business.

War, on the other hand, is just
a children's game
on an imaginary playground,
a fantasy role-play
where bullying other people somehow
gives meaning to a human life.
But the human story goes
on and on, full of meaningless suffering
and relentless cruelty.

Sitting here in silence,
what I hear around me is the original
peace of this world.
It's a gift we can carry back—
together, if you'll join me— to a world
perpetually at war, desperate for meaning
even as it destroys, tree by tree,
the original gift of peace
we were given
when we were born into the miracle
of this world.

Thanks and Praise

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

The meadow is crowded with plants
of every possible shape and size
and shade of green,
every leaf and flower and stem
reaching for its share
of sky—

We rootless and clueless latecomers
join the crowd, cradled
in the cupped hands
of these mountains, safe in the leafy
embrace of a forest
carpeted with baby trees
all patiently waiting their turn
in the sun.

The wind lofts our songs and chatter
high above the treetops
as we awaken
little by little to the unbelievable
blessing, the impossible grace
of our moment
on Earth—

Our drums and flutes and voices
can offer only a few
clumsy refrains
of thanks and praise in return,
and only for a few delirious days
every summer.
But the meadow and the forest
and the windy sky
can hear our hearts breaking open
when we're ready at last
to give back
all we possibly can.

Ceremony to Bury the Heart-Fire

Katuah Solstice 2026
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

Glow of live embers, pulsing
deep inside
a mound of ashes—
the living heart of this gathering
still beats.

Mingled with those ashes are the stories
and sayings of an elder
we released here on Solstice day
to his journey on
around the next bend
of the trail.

Now two brothers sink two
long-handled spades
into the raised ring of Carolina clay
tamped down flat
around the heart-fire by pounding rhythms
and frolicking feet
through the summer nights.

Another brother raises a mattock
to break up
the hard-packed earth
for the shovelers, and together they begin
to bury the ashes
our lost uncle under the living soil
we all sprouted from
together, he once told us, lifetimes ago—
so many summer days and nights,
songs and memories
echoing in our hearts.

Another gathering is over.
Time for all of us to journey
on.

The Night Before Solstice

'Twas the night before Solstice, and all through the woods
Not a creature was stirring, not even a moose;
The stockings were hung by the heart-fire with care,
In hopes they'd eventually dry, hanging there;
The children were snug in their fiberfill bags,
Dreaming of fairy-wings and colorful flags;
And Ma in her long johns, and I in my skirt,
Had just dug a trench 'round our tent in the dirt

When out in the meadow arose such a drumming
I sprang from my bag to see who could be coming.
Away down the trail I took off at a dash,
Just in time for the crash of a huge lightning flash!
Way out in the midst of the trampled mud clearing
A bonfire lit up what I had been hearing.
But what could it be? Alien starship? Flying tipi?
Or was I already asleep, not just sleepy?

A little red wagon with Tibetan prayer-wheels
Drawn by eight white-tailed deer as electric as eels,
With a little old driver so mellow and tranquil
I knew right away it must be Uncle Bill!
Faster than a speeding pullet they came,
And he tried his best to remember each name.
"Now, Happy! now, Dopey! now, Bashful and Sneezy!
On, Grumpy! on, Goofy! On, Mickey and Breezy!
To the top of the meadow and into the trees!
Now hop away, hop away, like a circus of fleas!"

Just like sparks from the fire that go skyward a-sailing,
Like a hookah-smoking Caterpillar finally exhaling,
Like fireflies on acid, blinking orange and blue,
Up a rope to the kitchen tarp Bill's wagon flew.

And then, at the blue tarp's precarious peak,
I heard all those tiny hooves halt with a squeak.
As I looked up to see, I heard something roll down
And eight miniature deer-turds fell all around.

Then, sliding right down the big tarp's center pole
Came Uncle Bill himself, the original kitchen troll.
He was dressed up like Elvis from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all covered in sequins and soot.
He was hoisting a bundle of fresh fruit and veggies,
But his eyes were all crazed and his manner was edgy,
And he looked like a smuggler opening his pack
As he plucked out a cigarette and then put it back.

His cheeks were like apples, his nose like a berry
And his scalp was as bare as his chin was all hairy.
His grin was as wide as the famed Cheshire cat's,
And his round belly shook just like Domino's fats.
He was clearly demented, a light-hearted old elf,
And I laughed when I saw him in spite of myself.
A wink of his eye and a tip of his bottle
Let me know right away he was tipsy a little.

He spoke not a word, but reached into his sack
And filled all the blissware with zuzus and snacks.
Then scratching an itch somewhere way up his nose,
He climbed back up the pole and right out of his clothes!
He sprang to his wagon, all goosebumped and nude,
Looking over us all in a beneficent mood;
To his team gave a blast on his silent deer-whistle
And away they all flew like a mushroom-tipped missile.
But I heard him guffaw as they soared over the ridge,
"Happy Solstice to all, and recycle your garbage!"

Morning Circle

1.

Winding through scrubby second-growth
on a muddy gravel road
striped with shadow
in the early sun, I feel the grind
of the gears
as I climb each switchback,
weight against gravity, tar-sand pits
and fracking wells
against the quiet of this place . . .

I spilled gasoline
on my shoes, putting back
the pump handle

I still stink of it

2.

Walking down through the trees
into the clearing
where the family is gathered around the coals
of last night's storytelling,
the noise of the highway
raving incoherently
somewhere behind me, I find the petals
of the new day just beginning
to open: rattle of pots and pans
at the dishwash station,
harmonies drifting from the heart-fire . . .

I drink the peace
of the forest until my lungs
can hold no more

Then let it go

3.

A sandy-bottomed stream, gurgling around
a pebbled bend . . .
the fire snaps its fingers,
leaves tinkle like bells in the wind . . .
the natural habitat of the human tribe.

Our circle is always
a spiral, broken in one place,
open in another.
If you walk the circumference
of the singing, the chord keeps changing
with every step
but there's only one *Om.*

Take one more walk
around the sun—
the wheel, the circle, the hoop—
fresh light on everything

and a new beginning

Into the Millennia

Hiking into a gathering
late one night,
I came to the edge of the trees
and stepped out
into an open field of starlight.
Ahead of me the path curved on
toward a campfire
at the crest of the meadow
under the stars.

Lugging my load
stride by stride up a long
gentle slope, gradually
I began to hear
the singing:
song after song I knew well
from years of gatherings
spiraling skyward
with the smoke and sparks,
soft drumming,
harmonica and mandolin.
A circle of faces glowed
in the flickering halo
of coals and flame.

But when I reached the edge
of the firelight, eased
my burden down and stepped
into the circle, I didn't recognize
a single face.

Looking back now I can only guess
I must have somehow stumbled
through the smoky veil
into a dream
or a vision
or the actual future,
those ardent young voices
that will carry the life of this tribe on
into the millennia, regardless
of what else happens.

Or maybe it's the opposite:
maybe the songs
themselves are the living breath
of this family, our tribal DNA
spiraling skyward—
Maybe it's the songs
that carry us along
under our burdens, stride
by stride, calling us together
again and again
generation
after generation
around that eternal campfire
under the ancient stars.

Nocturnal Companions

The treefrogs are hollering
around my tent
like shrill prophets of joy
in the face of catastrophe

The fireflies greet me when I step out
into the dark
like distant galaxies lighting up
and burning out
in brief defiance of the laws
of entropy

The wind sifts through miles
of leafy branches
like the surge and plunge of ocean surf
over the ruins
of an arrogant metropolis

Raindrops hit my tarp
with miniature staccato explosions
like a history of heartache
told entirely in Morse code

And the creek carries on
a running commentary on it all
like a stampeding freight train loaded
with rusty guns
and second-hand prosthetics

How could I ever feel alone
in the wild woods, in the fathomless dark,
in this toxic, lunatic world
with companions like these?

Praise

16th annual Rainvow Family Gathering, 1987
Nantahala Forest, North Carolina

saxophone in the morning

Praise to the spirits of the four directions
who join us here from such
great distances!

sweet smell of sage
drifting after someone on the trail

Praise to the Mother of mornings,
you, pregnant dancer!

potatoes frying
in the smoke of the cookfires, murmur
of a village hidden in the leaves

Praise God for hunger and good food!

ritual of one more day
between the haste of water
and the reverie of the pines, each dawn
since we lost track of the sabbath
a fresh revelation

Passing the Feather

Harvest Council, Georgia
November 2017

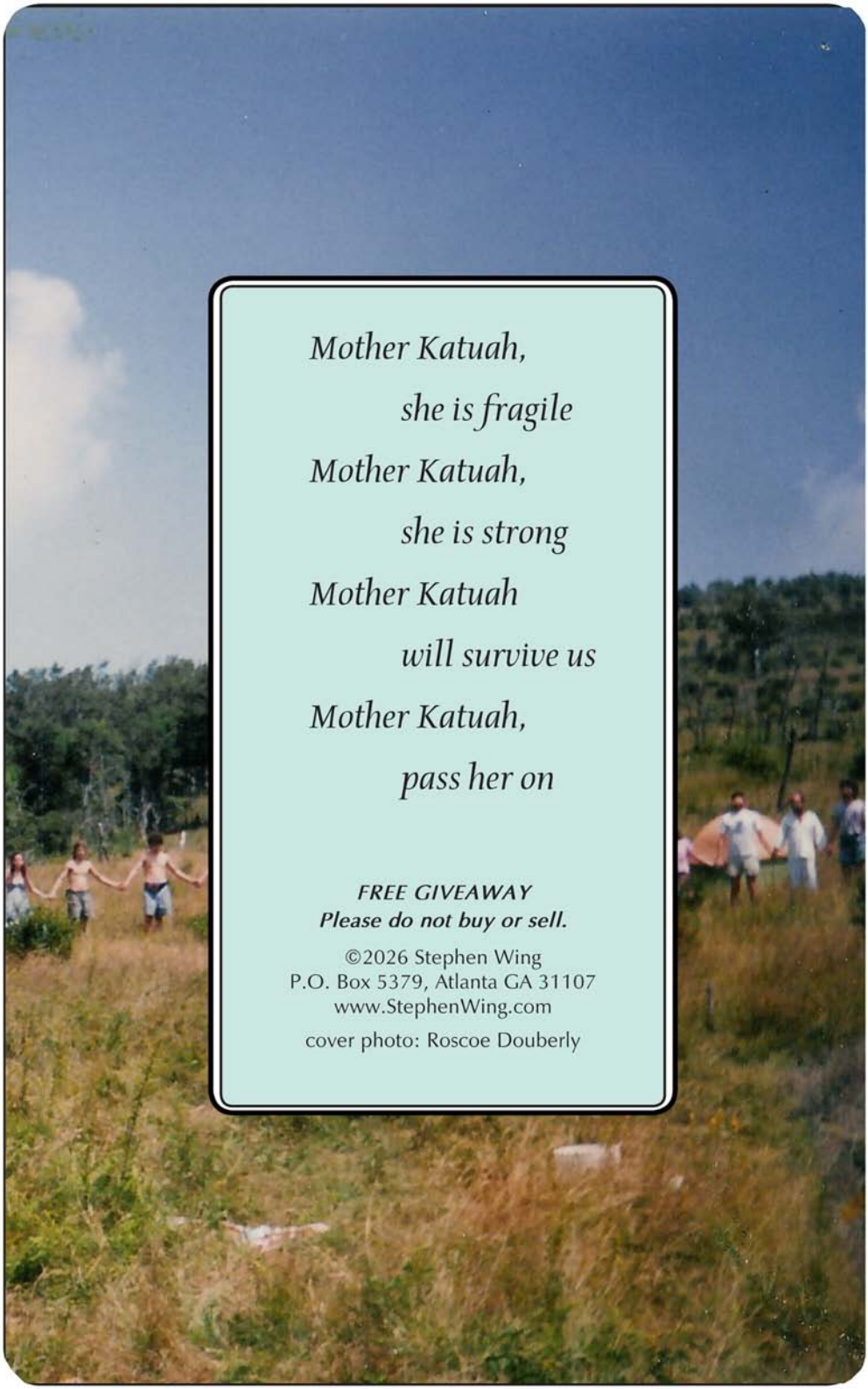
Pass that feather!
I've been sitting here listening,
twitching and trembling,
lips pressed tight, holding back
all the wisdom and enlightenment
of a lifetime, waiting
while the feather makes its leisurely way
the long way around this circle
for my turn to speak.
Now
I sit turning it around and around
in my fingers, admiring its
psychedelic turkey-stripes
while I try to recollect everything I had
saved up to say.
And now
that I've said it, it's time
to pass the feather on.
On to other fingers, other voices,
other visions, whole new generations
that have joined the circle while I sat
speaking my mind, younger
sisters and brothers not yet even born
who will settle into their places
as we older ones step back, fall away, and pass
into the lore of tribal memory.
The circle is never-ending, ever-changing.
Wisdom and enlightenment
grow and evolve.
Generations arrive, speak their minds,
pass on. The listening goes on
and on. The feather
keeps on going
around.

One Heartbeat

Stand waist-deep in the creek
facing upstream
toward the source of the One Water
that covers most of the globe
Let yourself fall
forward
into the flow and swallow
deep

Stand waist-high in the grass
facing east
toward the rising of the One Fire
that holds this planet just
close enough, and no closer
Let yourself fall
backward
into the meadow and breathe
deep

Stand quiet in the silence
facing inward
toward the truth of the One Heart
and listen for
the rushing creek,
the chattering birds,
the gently swaying trees you carry
deep
within you always



Mother Katuah,
she is fragile
Mother Katuah,
she is strong
Mother Katuah
will survive us
Mother Katuah,
pass her on

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