Proof OF THE *Miraculous*

Campfire Poetry from the
Rainbow Gatherings
1981-2026

Stephen Wing

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Campfire Poetry from the Rainbow Gatherings, 1981-2026

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"Hitch a ride to the end of the highway,
where the neon turns to wood . . ."
– C.C.R.

"Here on this mountainside
I finally realized
home is a frame of mind . . ."
– Quicksilver

July 4, Oregon 2006. Photo by Garrick Beck.

FREE POETRY IN THE WOODS!

Dear family! This book is my gift to you. When the Rainbow Gathering came to Georgia in 2018, I fulfilled a longtime dream by crowdfunding enough to print my Gathering poems in a book, and gave away 400 copies sitting beside the trail. But then I came home from the Gathering with more poetry– and more Gatherings after that! This downloadable PDF makes my Giveaway endlessly expandable. Naturally it's free. Thanks for the inspiration! My deepest thanks to all who have donated to help manifest the Giveaway. Special thanks to all the photographers who contributed their work.

Blessings, Wing

This book is for my cousin
Ladd Smith
whom no miracle
could save

Longhair

"I Guess it Must Be
the Flag of my Disposition"

I cannot explain
to a fourteen-year-old
child becoming man, dear to me,
why I wear my hair so long.

I cannot tell him
as I tell my older friends,
Your hair is this long too, why
do you keep it coiled in your head?

He thinks I must have
grown it out in my righteous years
of rebellion, and somehow
forgotten to outgrow it.

I could tell him how I
fought the clippers in my mother's hand
with tears and wriggling, years
before I turned fourteen—

But I am almost thirty.
I can only tell him how I
love the luxury of it, the tumble
of a living wind around my shoulders.

I cannot tell him
as I tell my reasonable elders,
This is the banner of who I am, a testimony
truer than the name you gave me!

He can't see in my eyes
how I love to watch the grasses of Kansas
escaping their fences under the wind.
He has lived too long in Kansas.

I could tell him
that cutting it would cut my breath,
as cruel and as ineffectual
as year after year to cut the grass of Kansas.

But I may cut it someday.
I can only tell him that it grows
not from the scalp but from some deep
stratum of the living soil.

Its length is evidence of my living!

The clippers would only make it
spring out faster, I would have to cut it
again and again—

It will be the last of me to cease.

"And Now it Seems to Me
the Beautiful Uncut Hair of Graves"

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INTRODUCTION:

The Rainbow Family Gatherings

When I graduated from college in 1978 with no better plan in my head than to hitchhike around the country, I thought I was a remnant of something all but extinct. Just about all the other long-haired freshmen who'd arrived at Beloit College four years before had cut off their ponytails by senior year, no doubt thinking about job interviews and careers.

It didn't take many miles of thumbing for me to give up expecting a ride every time I saw a Volkswagen van full of longhairs coming my way. In fact, most of the folks who stopped for me were short-haired and rednecked, regular folks, working people. This I took as another sign that the hippie heyday of the Sixties was history, and I had missed it. But it was on one of my journeys out west that I first heard the rumor of the Rainbow Gathering.

In 1981 my sister Emily, who had transferred to a school out on the West Coast, mailed me a copy of an invitation printed in a rainbow of color. So that summer I hitchhiked west from my home in rural Georgia all the way to the backwoods of Washington state, surfing a wave of human kindness across the country in my accustomed manner. There I discovered that Haight-Ashbury and the Summer of Love hadn't van-ished into the past; they had only retreated to the wilderness of the National Forests.

At the 10th annual Rainbow Family Gathering of the Tribes, high in the mountains and deep in the woods, I found a city of longhairs living in tents and cooking communally under tarps, twelve thousand strong. I was awestricken, dumbfounded, thunderstruck, mind-boggled and blown away.

"Welcome Home!" went the greeting I heard everywhere as I wandered the trails and meadows. I didn't need the hint. I knew immediately that I was Home. A majestic circle of tipis, a myriad of kitchens serving vegetarian food, drum circles and acoustic jams around campfire after campfire, a free clinic for alternative healing, group yoga and meditation practice, outdoor theater, a barter circle, fire-twirling jugglers, Kid Village, Hug Patrol and other amazements surrounded me like a 24/7, 360-degree hallucination.

Again and again, casual hellos would turn into long, intense conversations with strangers who serendipitously crossed my path. Everything was free, courtesy of donations to the "Magic Hat." I watched

a fierce contention between outraged parents and advocates of erotic massage resolve itself over two hours of heartfelt listening, facilitated by the mere passing of a feather. I attended a workshop on riding freight trains. Most amazing of all, the central focus of the Gathering turned out to be a gigantic silent circle for World Peace on the Fourth of July, followed by a children's parade, feasting and celebration.

Though I didn't realize it then, hundreds of dedicated volunteers were working day and night to maintain peace and security and keep everyone healthy, hydrated and fed. Another hard-working crew stayed afterward to clean up and restore the gathering site.

According to legend, the Gatherings had been sparked in 1970 by the meeting of flower-power peaceniks and combat veterans fresh from the jungles of Vietnam. The hippies had a vision of neo-tribal utopia in the Cathedral of Nature. They had grown weary of demonstrating against the evils of the world as it was, and wanted to demonstrate instead how the world could be. The vets had the practical know-how to make it happen: field kitchens, field latrines, field hos-pitals. And perhaps more starkly than anyone, they understood the need for peace, love, and healing in a troubled country and a violent world.

From that unlikely convergence sprang a full-fledged "Gathering of the Tribes," a phrase previously used on posters for 1967's Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park. Everyone with a bellybutton was invited. From bikers to fairies, hobos to anarchists, Yippies to Deadheads, Jesus freaks to Hare Krishnas, every faction of the Baby Boom rebellion came together in a true "peaceable assembly"— a phrase previously used in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The Gathering blossoms in a different National Forest each July, following the consensus of the Vision Council on July 7th of the previous year. Regional gatherings spring up behind it wherever it goes. An annual "World Gathering" now follows a similar trajectory, and has likewise spawned new gatherings and tribal families in country after country around the globe.

On my last day in Washington, as I was hitching a ride out, I met a brother from my adopted homeland down South. He took a break from sorting piles of trash and recycling to draw me a map to a regional gathering in North Carolina the following month. There I met the Rainbow tribe of my home region, the Southern Appalachians— reclaimed under the Cherokee name *Katuah*— and discovered Home all over again. From

that point on I never missed either the annual Gathering of the Tribes or the Katuah regional gatherings if I could possibly help it.

It took me a few Gatherings to get past that initial stage of blissful awe to see that the deeper joy of gathering comes from pitching in to help manifest the miracle. Each day I tried to do my share of the daily work, taking a turn at hauling supplies, gathering and cutting firewood, chopping veggies, washing pots, sorting trash, digging a latrine (a.k.a. "shitter"). I attended councils and learned the art of leaderless decision-making by consensus. And from every Gathering of the Tribes I attended, I brought home at least one Gathering-inspired poem, which I would share around the campfires of subsequent gatherings.

In 1990, I traded in my nomadic life and settled in Atlanta with a lady I'd met at a Katuah regional and married at the same gathering the following year. Since then, balancing work and marital responsibilities, I haven't been able to make every annual Gathering. But I've remained active with the Katuah Tribe and have never missed a Summer Solstice with my tribal community.

Over their near half-century of "hipstory," the Gatherings have inevitably changed. They have grown more diverse, embracing new generations of alternative culture. Long hair is no longer the norm. New traditions have emerged and old ones have dwindled away. Aging gatherers stop coming, beloved elders pass on, children are born and welcomed into the Family, and "youngers" who grew up coming to Gatherings rebel against stale tradition in the time-honored way.

Some of the changes have been the natural result of evolution within the tribe. Others were imposed from outside. The U.S. Forest Service has sometimes cooperated with the Family to help keep the Gatherings safe and environmentally benign. At other times it has attempted to shut down the Gatherings using a variety of legal (and illegal) tactics.

In the mid-1980s and early '90s, the agency wrote new regulations requiring one or more individuals to sign a "permit" on behalf of everyone present at a Gathering. Despite the First Amendment's clear guarantee of the rights of Association and Assembly, longtime gatherers were targeted for refusing to sign, and several served six-month prison terms. After a successful lawsuit exposed the obvious absurdity of sign-ing a legal document on behalf of thousands of others without their consent, the U.S.F.S. backed off the permit demand. But the Gatherings still endure various levels of official harassment from year to year.

Rainbow is a visionary experiment in creating a new society, but it is also the raw material of that experiment, a microcosm of society as it is. Inflated egos, social conditioning, drugs and alcohol, race and gender, political divisions, and superficial distraction are all packed in the baggage we bring to the woods. The bullying tactics of the authorities have driven away some of the gentler gatherers whose primary focus was spirituality or children, disturbing the balance between those seeking the vision and those just looking for a party.

But every year more bright and cheerful young people find their way Home and add their own utopian visions to the veggie stew. And many old-timers who have invested their whole lives in the Gatherings keep coming, living the vision summer after summer. I honor and respect them not as leaders or "chiefs," which the Rainbow tribe neither has nor needs, but as personal elders in my own life journey.

Life at the Gatherings gave me a useful post-graduate education that played a central role in forming my character. My sense of family as "everyone with a bellybutton" helps me to see past differences in the diverse and eclectic community of Atlanta. The sense of responsibility for the needs of others that I brought back from the woods is part of my work ethic wherever I am employed.

Because of the high carbon impact of air travel, these days I attend the annual Gathering only when it's close enough to drive. But the Gatherings will always be part of me, and the Rainbow vision of an all-inclusive human family is still my spiritual center. For that reason, I re-gard the poems collected here— aside from the first few, written early in my evolution as a poet— as some of my best. I hope publishing them as a Giveaway will help future gatherers remember the vision that gave birth to the Gatherings and hold the balance for the generations to come.

To honor the noncommercial essence of the Rainbow, these poems can never be sold. That is why this volume has no cover price. If you share the vision, I invite you to pass my gift on to others by making a donation toward the next printing. I promise that this money will be held for that purpose as a sacred trust. I am deeply grateful to all who have donated to make my long-time dream a reality. Peace, love and healing to you all.

Thanks and blessings! *Wing*

Peace Prayer

10th Rainbow Family Gathering
Colville National Forest, Washington, 1981

"Hath Zeus no eye (who saith it?)
watching his progeny?"
Ezra Pound

Lord, what a lovely
thing!
this ring
of godly spirits gathered here
in all our human colors, hands joined
in homage to the high noon sun,
hearts joining
in a silence not of mourning
but of strength:
listen, Lord,
a prayer for peace!

And the baby whose papa
holds her high in our circle,
she voices our silent cry
until gradually— growing—
someone hums the reply

We sing skyward one huge
clear
celestial sphere
of sound, human harmonies joined
across the meadow's light, filled
with the warmth of human breath
but breathless,

as if immortal angels sang one deathless
everchanging note:
bright mantra
drifting

to the high source and center
where the circle broken into rainbows
in the bubble's sheer soap skin
reflects again God's holy
first-created pure white light—

Only in the Light will all
the nations
and races
ever be one people, indivisible
under God as we beneath this perfect sun,
circled in these most high mountains,
circling this sacred meadow stand to fill
this pure air
with our pure wordless prayer,
lift this round silence
to perfect
circular sound:

listen, nations and races,
a prayer of peace!

Somewhere Under a Raincloud

11th Rainbow Family Gathering
Boise National Forest, Idaho, 1982

The Gathering is gathering:
the brothers are leavening the bread,
the sisters are harvesting the rice,
the lovers of Earth are climbing the hill
where Heaven descends
in its robes of rainclouds to cleanse us
and our ancient Mother turns to mud.

The firmament is opening,
the moon is scattering the clouds,
rising round and full of fire, a mirror
for the day beyond our dark— this shadow
of the turning Earth— and now
the shadow falls across the full moon,
Sun and Earth and Moon align
as if they gather with us, and the stars
are mirroring the fires of our camp.

The encampment is waking
to the naked beauty of the day,
the Sun bursts newborn
from a cleft in the Earth,
and the children are dancing, likewise naked,
likewise newborn on the Mother's breast—
She wears the raindrops like a diadem
on every needle of her fine green mantle;
He wears them in a bow
of colors round his brow.

The mud has dried beneath our tires
and our highways lead everywhere
from this dirt road down: and descending,
every citizen of this nation on a hill
sees climbing from the valley
a seven-colored rainbow's arch.
We pass beneath the arm
of Heaven's benediction,
breathing out the breath of the mountain,
scattering the seed of silence and light.

Council in progress, Idaho 1982. Photo by Garrick Beck.

Watersmeet

12th Rainbow Family Gathering
Ottawa National Forest, Michigan, 1983

Where the waters meet
and leaping trout cross the road,
where the double yellow line ends
I saw a rainbow leaning
on a pine tree outside some shop
and knew I was
almost Home.

Where a city had lived
and vanished into pits and pockmarks
full of rusted metal in the grass,
where broken barrel-hoops
marked the scattering
of an ancient population,
near a graveyard without ghosts
we gathered.

Where we gathered
a city rose from the grass,
we trampled highways
where our bare feet found old paths,
we built a nation every morning
on the coals of last night's campfire
and cooked everybody
breakfast.

Swimming hole, Michigan 1983. Photo by Grey Eagle.

Tipis, California 1984. Photo by Grey Eagle.

Rainbow Mantras

13th Rainbow Family Gathering
Modoc National Forest, California, 1984

"The spirit host is advancing, they say.
They are coming with the buffalo, they say.
They are coming with the new earth, they say,"
sang the Ghost Dancers

Sometimes the world grows
barren as a road:

ROCK OF AGES
MONUMENTS
Authorized Dealer
(Chicago)

narrow as the highway
between two cities—

FORTRESS
CHURCH SUPPLY
Help Wanted
(Denver)

but I've arrived
and the sky-blue schoolbus
that passed me once (Wyoming)
and once again (Nevada)
balloons like a sounding whale
above a field of cars

"The blue bus
is calling us . . .
Driver, where you taking us?"
sang a California
shaman

(California plate in parking lot: UZR WNGS)

A crowd of people
all in natural step
Two riders
following on a white
and a brown horse
Three or four vehicles
idling behind, and the dust
coming to life
last of all—

Bless us, I think we are beginning
to arrive.

"Oh, city of gypsies,
who could see you and forget?"
Lorca sang

We are
the pale ghosts of Indians
browning in the sun
here on this ridge the Pit River people
hold sacred.

We come
every year to a place
this close beneath the sun
to brown our skins and grip more firmly
the earth in our roots:
natives of this clear sky,
natives of the rain tomorrow,
a nation under the Rainbow.

We feel
darker ghosts around us, watching:
for ten thousand years
people have camped here with their children,
their tents and cooking pots,
gazing up at the same slow constellations,
drumming and dancing
to an identical fullness of the moon.
Only the places they came from
differed much from us,
and how they came.

"Rainbows their raiment, aye,
the winds for their steeds!"
sang Li Po

I slept at dawn
and woke late
and somehow knew
it was not too late

I put on the clothes
of my sacred obsessions,
the shaman's feathers,
the clown's bright underwear—
one red and one blue sock,
my grandfather's pajama bottoms
and beads from Mardi Gras—

Shouldered my drum
and tucked my owl's tail
from the highway shoulder
into my headband
(that felt funny
so I took it down and
carried it in my hand)

At the top of the ridge
I came into the company
of the silence: sat listening
until my prayer came

I laid down my drum
and took off all my
precious things,
left my special clothes
in a heap of colors
and wandered
naked on the mountain

"Cover my earth mother
four times with many flowers,"
sang the Zuni

High in an ocean of small flowers
the circle formed:
so far across you only saw the colors.
From hand to hand
we passed each second of the silence.

To the north
and east and south seven mountains
held our breath
and the snows of summer glinted.
To the west
at the treeline the conifers listened.

In the forest
our metropolis of tents was quiet:
from the ridge,
from the sun in our faces and the scent
of the sage,
our chant spilled to flood the valleys.

A high chant
even the children understood. Peace.
And then the silent
syllable that flowed from us reached
our altitude:
a long vowel from our fingertips touched
and overflowed.

"The wind blows where it wills, and you
hear the sound of it, but you do not know
where it comes from or where it goes;
so it is with every one who is born
of the Spirit,"
sang the Avatar of this
passing age

(After long wandering
among the multitude of the naked
I began to watch for my
heap of colors, ready now
not to find it. Finally of course
I found it: looked up
one more time and saw
seven mountains all
looking back at me precisely
at eye level)

"We shall cover ourselves with the gold of
owning nothing,"
Vallejo sang

WELCOME TO THE WORLD PEACE BOOGIE

It's arrived!

People moving
far off on a hill
like dancers
trailing scarves of dust

For a hundred miles around
cows look up from their chewing
and crowd to the highway fence,
dogs forget the length of their chains
and howl in arcane harmonies
from farm to farm—

Occasions like this
leave a trail behind them:
the smoke of a stick
of incense, the whirling trace
of a juggler's firesticks

"We're dancing on the edge of the world,"
the California natives sang

Harold the one-legged duck
lost his leg at the '83 Gathering,
tough karma, those Rainbow kids
popped him loose of his rubber band
sometime in the night, now
there's a hole where he once trailed
an orange plastic leg on wings spread
to the horizons, and poor Harold
doesn't hold air any more—

"Do not confine your children to your
own learning, for they were born
in another time,"
a Hebrew proverb sings

Here on the mountain
the air is freedom
the earth is respect
and nakedness is sacred

Down in the valleys
we will breathe the cinder
of highways, of cities
we will walk in shoes
over asphalt and cement

But always we carry
our sacred nakedness
in open palms, in faces
that reflect the sun
going down over Shasta
from this high ridge
in the memory

"Naked you came from Earth the Mother.
Naked you return to her.
May a good wind be your road,"
sang the Omaha

Sometimes the world gets
barren as a road:

WATCH FOR ROCKS
(They may attempt
to communicate with you)

narrow as a highway
between cities—

HUMAN HEAD RENOVATIONS
Hair Creations
(San Francisco)

but I have seen a mountain blossom
into a city of tents
and I have seen a highway ramp
refract a caravan of colors
out of a line of climbing cars

"From the doorway of rainbow,
the path out of which is the rainbow,
the rainbow passed out with me,"
sang the Navajo

We return to the four compass-points,
to our gardens and farms
in the cities and hills of this country
and others, the old places
across oceans where our migrations began:
Jerusalem, Tokyo, London and Berlin—

"Let the names of imperial cities
caress the ears with brief meaning,"
Mandelstam sang

Hairs grow
on the body.
The open meadows
fill with young trees.
Slow forests
govern the earth.

"Through the middle of broad fields,
the rainbow returned with me.
To the center of my house,
the rainbow returned with me,"
sang the Navajo

Bless us, I think we are beginning
to arrive.

Two Moons

13th Rainbow Family Gathering
Modoc National Forest, California, 1984

for Stefan, a traveler from
Germany at his first Gathering

The seventh night.

Our circle is full.

These buses parked among the trees,
the tipis above on a sagebrush plateau,
sleeping tents for miles along the ridge:
this campfire halfway down the road
where crouching longhairs
offer us coffee and ask
for a cigarette.

My friend has one left, one:
it circulates, a spark among the stars.

"Tell me," I asked him, hours ago,
"do you feel part of something here?"
(Earlier he'd traded his shirt
for some trinket of mine in the trading circle,
we tossed a frisbee where the council sat—)
He thought a minute: shook his head.
"Not really. Not yet."
It was some time later that he noticed
a second moon.

He pointed it out to me. "There.
You see? Just past the windshield of the bus."

The rest of this last long night
we've wandered lost between two moons,
picking a dark path from campfire to campfire,
crouching silent by the coals awhile—
We crouch by this fire halfway
down the road
a long time sometime after midnight.
And wander on.

"Tell me," I ask him, hours later,
"when you passed around your only cigarette
there by the fire, did you feel something then?
Something huge and asleep, sprawled
for miles around you,
something you belong to no matter where
the morning carries you?"

He doesn't answer
for half an hour or so.
"Yes," he says.

And the circle is full.

Dinner circle, California 1984. Photo by Grey Eagle.

After the Gathering

13th Rainbow Family Gathering
Modoc National Forest, California, 1984

After the Gathering comes an equal
and somehow greater Scattering:
those who stay behind
only stay to scatter every sign that we were here.

I joined the crew going down to the lake.
Hadn't been down there yet for a swim
or a sweat.

The water was cold; a glacier above us melting
in the mountain sun,
a bulldozed basin at 7,000 feet.
We dried in the sun before our final task:
the sweat-lodge. Someone had given us directions.

We followed the stream that fed the lake.
Our landmarks were failing us.
It grew late.
We started the mile's climb back to camp.

Next morning I returned alone, deputized.
At last found the right set of stones across the stream,
the right path
among fallen trunks and flowers.
But I was late: two brothers had come before me.

The lodge was a hutch of bent stripped sticks.
One brother wore a leather loincloth and worked
at their unraveling.
The other brother
worked naked, scattering ashes with half a shovel.

The great Gathering was over.
We shared water over the stones of a dead fire.

Then I stripped my shirt and started lugging the stones
two by two to the clearing's edge,
flinging them
each with thanks and a blessing
to find their own hiding places in the brush.

The lodge came down, leaving
a small circle of pressed earth and a pit
in the center heaped with stones:
stones
that had held fire to make steam of a scattering
of water, steam that had glistened
on dark naked bodies in the glow of the red-hot
heap of stones—
Those we scattered together.

My turn with the broken-handled shovel came.
I broke the little circle
with axe-blows
of the shovelblade, each resounding through my arms,
through my legs and into the earth
like the note of a drum:
the great Gathering was over.

My hands began to blister. I grew slippery with sweat.
Kicked off my shorts and kept working.

The greenery around us glowed like green flame
in the high sun.
We covered the firepit, lifted logs
and left them in the random pattern the stream's
spring anarchies had made.
Scattered a coarse mulch
over everything and shouldered our tools.

High summer, sweat
and the cold lake waiting.
The great Scattering moved slow and radiant
in every direction around us.

Dinner circle, Missouri 1985. Photo by Marc Perkel.

The Rainbow Warriors at Dawn

14th Rainbow Family Gathering
Mark Twain National Forest, Missouri, 1985

I stepped
through a sleeping camp
of rainbow warriors at dawn,
my brother and I
going down to carry water from the spring.

They lay
like other sleeping creatures
inattentive in the early light,
scattered in the leaves along our path
traveling each
through a forest of shadows
toward morning.

We pass
a second time, climbing back
with our full buckets.

At the top of the ridge
here and there a warrior sits attentive
as the sun climbs
and the valley opens:
dewdrops on the wildflower petals,
mist rising from the circle below
where the dancing has flattened down the grass.

At the Crystal Teahouse
we find a sleepy gathering of warriors.
Some are early travelers.
Some have been up with us
stoking the campfire with cigarettes
and constellations all night,
stirring rainbows
out of sassafras and moon—

It's morning.
We start the tea.

Missouri 1985. Photo by Marc Perkel.

Interdependence Day, 1985

14th Rainbow Family Gathering
Mark Twain National Forest, Missouri, 1985

– Where were you when the jets went over?
(two Phantoms, 11:30 on the morning
of the Fourth–)

– I was lifting a pick from the hard clay
of Missouri, taking my turn
at the slit trench of a shitter.
They came in across the treetops
dragging their racket like a steel rake
among our upturned faces.

I thought of the children.
Then remembered all the kids
who know that sound and would already
be running.

I drove the pick down hard,
loosening earth for the brother standing ready
with the shovel. My steel striking deep
into roots, ringing stones–

The gashed air
seemed to echo a long time between us.

– *Muscle and bone. Muscle and bone.*

When I stepped back sweating
from the gouged earth
and he stepped forward, smiling,
I gripped my fear as if I gripped a weapon
and smiled back at him. The echo still
shrieking too loud in me
to speak–

– *People will hurry here, grateful.*
They will bend a moment and leave
gifts for the forest.
Someone will come and cover the hole we dug
with this same shovel. Roots
will grow again where we cut them,
ground cover will grow.
And children will not always run
from Phantoms.

We promised one another everything
in a look.
Then he started shoveling. My sweat
cooling in the shadow of the trees.

Kid Village, Missouri 1985. Photo by Marc Perkel.

The Gathering of Lights and Waters

15th Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 1986

I. Rainbow on Wet Pavement

The rain god is smiling
on me again, and
I get wet

The clouds have come down
to sniff the highway
and leave their scent

and the oil of trucks
makes a rainbow on wet pavement,
washing back into the ground

The old ones are with us

The rivers travel through
our sleeping settlements
like always

II. Heart's Content

"NO DISCRIMINATION
by segregation or other means
in the furnishing of accommodations,
facilities, or privileges on the basis
of race, creed, color, ancestry
or national origin is permitted
in the use of this GAME LAND

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania"

The old ones are with us

That boulder's been settin' there longer
than any of us remembers, but it
remembers longer, and the young ferns
crowd close as any child born
trusting in forever will

III. The Gathering of Lights

The five planets went retrograde
and so the Family gathered
in all the visible spectrum of our variety
to be whole again

Our lost ones gathered with us
from the Ultraviolet Fringe
to the Outlaws of the Infrared
and we were whole again

The moon was dead and not quite
ready to be born again
so we packed our flashlights
and one by one came wandering
into the circle of light-bearers
to be whole again

The old ones are with us

The trees hold our guylines taut
and kindly shade our tents
and then at nightfall
drop their nets of utter blackness
over our pale searching beams

IV. The Council of Drums

First you carry the drum.
Follow the heart beating under your bare feet
down the naked path
and find your place among the drummers
at the council fire.

Then the drum begins to carry you.
Close your eyes and
leap with the sparks whirling up from the fire,
ride the steady pulse
of many hands releasing taut notes trapped
in the skins of animals.

In the dark of the moon the circle of faces
reflects the fire, each
staring out of its private trance while the hands
of the drummers travel on,
a restless company of nomads walking homeward.

Stroke your own taut skin,
feel the animal inside come alive again: rest
until the dark lightyears
quicken in your wrists, and strike the first round note
in honor of an unborn moon.

The old ones are with us

The stars dance in the rising eddy
of smoke and rhythm, an echo
of the campfire's trance
winking down from the ancient
gathering of lights

V. The Gathering of Waters

Pennsylvania was a woman
plumed with ferns,
pendant with dew, uncomplaining
under the feet of her children

(In the Garden where we gather
arms of long afternoon reach golden from the sun,
a gem set in the cleft of mountains
as she lifts the day's
gold-stitched hem over her face and stands
goddess of twilight a while, and soon
the night)

Pennsylvania was a woman
growing round in her spangled gown
as the nights grew more brilliant
and the moon's time approached

until her bag of waters broke and flowed:
bogwater, the moccasin-eater
creekwater, talkative
under the eaves of our tents
rainwater, slick on our log bridges,
puddling the tarpaulins
springwater, a continual fountain
from our plastic pipes into plastic
jugs and bottles—

We stood in line to be
water-bearers on the birthday
of a new moon

(In the Garden where we gather
a flute-player sits hidden in the waist-high reeds,
the drummers glance up at the sound of laughter
on the sky's taut skin
and the rain god beams down)

The old ones are with us

All night the streams tell stories
of the origin of circles
as they meander our sleeping camp,
and by morning the trails
are a riddle in footprints

VI. The Circle of Aunts and Uncles

Stopped beside the trail to listen
where the Sister Circle swayed
and sang

A child stood watching the traffic
of bare feet over the tender earth
of the trail

Lingering there I saw the child
venture down the fern bank to stand
looking back and forth a moment
before setting out sturdily
southward

When I caught up I spotted underneath
the muddy T-shirt that sure sign
of a boy

The sister who came running down
to retrieve him scolded only,
"The Brothers' Circle is too far,
you have to stay
with us"

The Sister Circle swayed and sang

I traveled on
over the tender earth, remembering
the northbound highway that brought me
home once more to this swaying and singing
of trees and wind, the circle of Aunts
and Uncles

The old ones are with us

Look, we have constructed an altar
to the Mother of all the children!
Brothers and sisters, are not
all these littler ones our nieces,
our nephews?

VII. Under the Prism of Vapors

Yes, we came by the highway of the empty cars
flocking home to their barns before dark

We traveled the landscape of streetlights and signs
under the electrical hallucinations
of America

Over the dry slumber of the continent
whose prophets have died preaching Rapture we came
to put up our tents in a circle
and call one place Home

A village springing up and vanishing
under the eaves of the forest like mushrooms
of the Millennium, the reunion
of all Relations

We open and close our eyes these seven days and nights
on the garden of Imagination,
singing songs of the long Revolution, one more circling
of earthlings under sun

And baptized
in the mud of the Mother,
bearing the dust of memories like a precious pollen,
we depart on the four winds to carry on
the practice of Rapture

The old ones are with us

We gather in ancient light, each
moment's radiant envoy
has traveled a straight line
ninety million miles to rest here
on the nakedness of children

VIII. Four Corners

Far across the farmland
that was once a forest,
across the rangeland
that was all wild prairie,
across mountains and desert
the old women of the oldest race
tend their breakfast fires and wait
for the dawn of a day
numbered on the calendars
of a younger nation, marked
for the quenching of these fires
their grandmothers tended

The day breaks
and they have not departed

Their grandsons are returning to them

Young women unknown to them
touch the earth and pray with them
this morning, eyes they do not see
are looking south and west, wishing
long life to their granddaughters' children

The old ones are with us

The grandmothers have not left the sacred mountain
Spirits gather to applaud the sunrise
Like tributaries on our way to the ancient
gathering of waters, we wander
and remain

IX. Prophecy of the Rainbow

Everything goes
in a circle

There will always be
another summer

Someday, Mother
we will grow up
and be grateful

Under Mercury Retrograde

Scout Council, April 1, 1987
Cherokee National Forest, Tennessee

A turtle peering out of its house
is our welcome home, six feet
from where we park the truck.

Then we see
an aphid in the socket of one eye,
peering in.

Dead turtle, greeting us
on behalf of the continent that
carries its name.

Under Mercury retrograde
on the hillside of a perfect afternoon
we meet to council over maps of the forest.

The place is beautiful, green for spring,
the French Broad River high and hurrying
against its banks, mountains
shaped by some slow whimsy of the sky—

The continent is talking to us:
children making up a new game, empty cans
whose names the rain has washed away.

Drums at the Confluence of Visions

16th Rainbow Family Gathering
Nantahala National Forest, North Carolina, 1987

"This I burn as an offering.
Behold it!
A sacred praise I am making.
A sacred praise I am making.
My nation, behold it in kindness!"

Heyoka song, Dakota Sioux

Joined at birth
like these small rivers
that have slowly
shaped the loins of the Mother,
ceaselessly giving
birth to the bigger stream,
we choose our
yearly confluence and come
to live at least
one week under our true names,
in our light tents
and transparent shelters,
giving ceaselessly
birth to the bigger stream

Empowering the Council Feather

Great Spirit,
Divine Mother,
we know this feather
came to us from you,
we know its first purpose
in the Creation is to fly—
Empower it
so that each of us
who takes it in turn
may look down as the great eagle
circling over our Council,
empower us
so that each may speak
as the wind speaks
from every corner of the Creation,
looking down over the long shoulder
of the horizon

Two insects I'd never
seen before
mating on my tent flap
as I knelt
to the zipper, moving in

my granddaddy's old leather
suitcase bulging with unborn
works of art
(watercolors and pastels and
oils I embezzled
from Art class at Central High
a dozen years ago)

my portfolio full of patient
virgin paper

Like a little gearbox
under some cosmic clutch,
the kitchen crew relaxes
to smoke and talk

Which is it
that engages these gears,
the work, or all this
talk of life?

The Jehovah's Witnesses have
joined us
—two brothers in shirtsleeves
with briefcases,
ties hanging parallel
even as one (the elder)
leans to the hand of a shaven
Krishna devotee—
The Jehovah's Witnesses have
joined us,
now we are
complete

What rivulet
of soft feet
padded this ground
bare, down
the steep hill under
low boughs?
(to
the tent kitchen clearing
where I rescue
a cigarette package from the trash
and turn it inside
out, calling to the assembled—
"Help! Emergency!
Anyone have a pencil or pen?")

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

If you don't want to see it,
make it go away.

(No, closing your eyes
doesn't work.
I still see it.)

Remember to be
joyful as you bend, somewhere
surely
this is sacrament

Look back
and see your trampled Mother
virgin once more

Remember to be humble
as you walk on
with your pocketful of pleasure

Look! Another one!
This one still
burning!

(Any time I get homesick
for this village of love and mud,
I just start
picking up the cigarette butts.)

Sister—
you, walking away—
I think I understand you,
even the first look
belongs to me forever, a step
impossible to draw back—
see, I release you
from our marriage of glances
and you walk
on—

The war of love requires courage, yes,
how many of our brave warriors
have returned bearing children on their backs?

"Send prayers to Asheville!"
Under the gavel
of the federal judge
a peaceful camp looks up, uneasy
at the sound of a light plane—

Almost time for our evening shower.

(Tell the drummers to pound that
pulse of thunder deep into the ground,
wake the stump the mill and wood-lathe left
when they cut and turned and polished
his lacquered hammer!)

Rain falls on the judge as on the judged.

"Send prayers to Asheville today,
brothers and sisters—"

It's the angle
of the hand to the skin,
the stretch
of the skin to the hole carved
in the wood
or fired in the clay,
the angle of the hole to earth
and mostly
it's the shape of the air
in the hole
that makes the
music of the drum

Sun, evening shadows, mist
that drifts to rain:
the food is ready and we join hands.
It's only the clear day's light
refracted through the wet nights
that makes this Rainbow on the ground.

Our circle makes a hole in the ground—
spirit rising like water in a well,
falling like the light on a pond,
the round Earth and the rolling sky joined
in a circular kiss . . .
The Circle makes us Whole.

Vision Council carries on
all over camp— "Yeah, they're still
talking—"
over a trading blanket,
over buckets filling at the spring,
over a rough sawhorse where two brothers
draw the long saw between them—

No accident. We founded our village
a year and a day ago precisely
here (though it's been
only a month since we found this place)
at the confluence of visions

We are a village of visionaries
and the Council carries on
"—yeah, thirtysix hours now, and nobody
seems to have a watch—"

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

Ring All the Bells of Silence!

16th Rainbow Family Gathering
Nantahala National Forest, North Carolina, 1987

The silence of all but the poets
and the children
fell at midday like a stealthy dawn,
a clown on tiptoe
darting from kitchen to kitchen
with a finger to the lips,
awakening the camp (the poets
irreverently scribbling)

The sunlight streamed down over us
like an anointing
as we assembled in our solitary vigils
out of the thousand
shadows of the woods into one, our hands
found one another
seeking the ancient figure they know
(inspired circle, cipher
of our common forgotten tongue, a prism
for the daylight
like the stillness of a huge bell, hushed)

Our listening lasted
the arc of an hour across the meadow:
then we each gave our
deepest breath to Earth and Sky, naming them
Home again, one voice
ringing ridge to ridge of the listening trees,
the circle of mountains
(the kids meanwhile preparing their surprise,
a parade of noises
and that anarchist hymn, laughter)

The silence of all
but poets and children stole away again
through the jubilee,
a mute elder on crutches, lifting wild
antlers at the edge
of the forest and vanishing toward twilight
(the poets alone
watching, silent amid the celebration, and
scribbling it all down)

July 4, North Carolina 1987. Photo by Darmika Henschel.

In the Summer of the Dragon

17th Rainbow Family Gathering
Angelina National Forest, Texas, 1988

I.

The old bus was resting
on its perpetual right-of-way,
the highway shoulder,
while we slept: steel-hulled seed
of dreams, its day-glo
signs and slogans of Peace
invisible and shining
in the dark

Sometimes you can just feel
the whole journey tip
into the mythic

This old bus is older than I am,
veteran of the Great March
for Global Disarmament, code name
"Middleskool," its arch of ceiling
scrawled forever with echoing
voices of kids—)

Sweeping out the bus
afterward, admiring its hardwood,
I turn the journey like a pebble
in my pocket and consider
how the currents have their way
even with the stone

(We must have crossed the vanished,
shining track of those legendary walkers
somewhere on that journey down
the Mississippi, endless
valley of that night)

"Going to the Rainbow,
Going to the Rainbow,
Someday we're all gonna
get back Home"

II.

"Woman,"
the dying messenger cried out,
"behold your son—"

We all came out of different high schools,
facing our cafeteria trays again,
jogging in a dream in the middle of the gym class,
searching the faces in the hall
for the one that looks, watching for something
in the look that shines
and vanishes—

This can't be real, this can't be
how you conjugate the verb
"to live"— a Hollywood fistfight
in the parking lot, padded gangs
brawling under floodlights every
Saturday night, polished cruisers out
racing the stoplights—

One by one we came
to the woods.
By random wandering
in the thousand lost directions we found
the real country we'd pledged our hearts to
all those years
while we covered our hearts with our hands

(Country so quiet
it needs no name, country only its
yearning exiles have learned to call
"Peace")

Step by misstep, leap
by suicidal leap
into the black cavern inside
we groped to a true divinity, the temple
they cut down to build the churches,
the light we meditated on
Sunday after Sunday through the colored glass—

(Temple so ancient
it blooms again each spring and makes fruit,
sanctuary only the wounded even need to call
"Healing")

What could be more ridiculous
than a prophet in the wilderness?
By U.S. Forest Service count,
four thousand four hundred of us . . .

III.

Ah,
Texas was a strange one

—the flotilla of pleasurecraft bobbing
perpetually just offshore,
sunbathers watching the mud-bathers,
waterskiers watching the kite-flyers,
the almost-naked watching the ones
who wore no clothes

though the difference between us was even
less than that
I heard of one or two that figured it out
and splashed ashore

—the brother in the mint
white '67 Thunderbird who didn't know
the woods were sacred that week
till a choir of strangers sat chanting
in front of his bumper, one last
outnumbered and surrounded Texan

but the difference between us was even
less than that
I saw him later with some tattooed biker brothers
grinning into the fire

—"Six up!" echoing along the road again,
guns in church: pistols hooded
in their holsters, shotguns riding
silent in the green jeeps dusting us again
with powdered clay, pale faces peering
from the tight necks of their uniforms,
young men once upon a time
in love with this wilderness

but the difference between us was even
less than that
we too brought our vehicles in and parked them
casually between the pines

Yes, Texas was a strange one

IV.

But
sometimes you can feel
the whole journey just trip
into the mythic

She was waving to slow them down, I guess
fearlessly she stood in their way

I was at Info Center, heard
the whole thing over CB

"Stop it, stop the brown jeep!"

They never even made it to the Front Gate

and the District Special Agent
caught them himself, the instantaneous legend ran—

Emblem of our Gathering
for Peace and Healing
in the summer of the Dragon
—our sister No Guns
run down in Main Circle
by a panicky kid

"Air evacuation!" someone kept shouting
"No breathing, no pulse, no nothing,
get a helicopter in here!"

But they brought an ambulance
instead, a runner passing the cry
to clear the road

eight broken ribs,
a punctured lung . . .

She left us a message,
lying in the mud of Texas: she left us a mantra.

"No blame. No revenge."

And the next day at noon
when we lifted our silence
and our joined hands to the humid sky,
the Peace and Healing came down at last,
shining and disappearing into the dry
mud flats, the nervous creases of uniforms,
the cynical shoes of the tourists, into
the sweat of shitter-diggers and the steam
of the cooking-pots, seeking its level
among us

The mayor of Zavalla came in person to thank us
for bringing the rain (and all those
one dollar bills)

But we knew who to thank

(Of course we knew all the time, too,
why it had to rain

The tourists and the press didn't find out
till three days later the sky began to clear
and the invincible rainbow
linked the island to the shore, shining
and vanishing again

But by then the press and the tourists
had begun to clear as well)

V.

The brokenhearted young man
and the grieving woman must have looked
a long time into one another's faces
before they understood his last
broken parable: "Behold
your mother—"

We gather in the fold of the unchurched
We, tired of preaching
We gather up the unloved
as disciples gathered crumbs after the feast
so that none go wasted
We, natives of one Mother, natives
of one another

We gather on the ground of our common birth
(we eat, we love,
we disagree, we defecate)
and put up the flowering tents of our belief:
colors as many as the gazes
that turn toward a single sunset, each
an outpost of the daylight
shining on a while
into the dark

Sweeping out the bus afterward,
following the curve of the baby grand,
gathering little piles of the dust of Texas,
I'm recalling how the ocean's
dumb weight presses grains of sediment
to solid stone

We gather
under the vast flag of stars
to chant the pulse and breathing of one body
dancing on a hundred thousand feet
We feed our fire with sticks
of incarnated light,
grasp hands in one more circle around the sun

(But Texas, Texas
was a strange one)

The last campfire will outlive
the final lightbulb,
the living skin of the drum
will outlast the radio tower

We have always been sitting here
content with the night
and our suppers, staring through
the last silent coals into something
invisible and vanishing

The east is glowing. We have work to do.

Idaho 2001. Photo by Grey Eagle.

Children of the Canyon

18th annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Humboldt National Forest, Nevada, 1989

1.

Looking down from
the rocks on the canyon rim
into the cleft of her womb,
I follow the trail that winds down
through the Gathering.

I see the fire at Kiddy Village.
I see blue tarps by the river.
I watch the children of the canyon
climbing and descending
the windy face of the Mother.

Across the canyon her high rocky bosom
holds the snow up to the sun.
They are drinking it down below.
A horizon of mountains receding
to the ancestors, sky-color.

For miles behind me the plateau breathes
a single scent: the sage.
This place is holy. (Every place is holy
now that we have noticed.)

Clouds have come over at last
to soothe the hot dust
of the long walk from the parking lot,
but the desert sun still glows
in these many-colored companions, rock
and lichen.

2.

One by one
the brothers and sisters climb the hill

(Our faces glowing every color
the sun has yet invented)

In silence
on a hot dirt track,
the barefoot pilgrims cross the lower meadow

(Our bare feet all identical
the color of this high desert dust)

In the upper meadow,
an ancient lake bed, they gather
in concentric circles around no particular center

(It's the way a politician talks
to a prophet: a light plane whining
insect-size across the vastness of our silence)

Among the gathered
a silence gathers greater than their own;
a patience, sun-fired, waiting to be broken

(It's the way the prophet replies
to the politician: as if listening for water
in a wilderness of rock and light)

The silence breaks at noon.
They sing its song, the nameless syllable
that seems to echo from the source of all water
to the rim of the world—

(Beyond, a dustcloud and a shifting of gears:
someone has just left us. Someone has arrived.
The world nags its litany of wars and rumors.)

3.

All night Sarah sings
to her unborn son.
With every breath of the candlelight and cedar
under Joe's blue tarp
she keeps calling to their baby boy
the wordless syllable of his first
name.

In the early light
above the rush of the river over stones,
at last he answers:
thick black hair like his papa,
baby-flesh the color of this canyon
but waterborne
like these smooth river-stones,
not that rough weathering of sand in wind
above—

Little caterpillar of a bud
on a twig
suckling her wild breast, springwater
in the canyon

The neighbors come bringing presents,
plates of food, soft strumming,
anything to partake
of this moment's preciousness
(all moments are precious now that we
discover them)

The brothers and sisters
oblivious above,
the cops, the thieves,
trash-haulers, hitchhikers, all of us
oblivious
newborn.

The children
of the canyon sing the river on
down the mountain into deeper rivers, drum all
rivers Home to the sea—

(Invisible along the rim the telephoto lenses
gather all this light into a box of darkness.
No, our silence does not dissipate unheard.)

The snow melts
on the mountain. Sandstone trickles away to be
reborn. The children stream out
from the center of the meadow to encircle it,
one hand reaching for the next until
an instant of completion passes
like a pulse around the circle, unnoticed and
unknowable—

July 4, Nevada 1989. Photo by Garrick Beck.

The Drums of Katuah

19th Rainbow Family Gathering
Superior National Forest, Minnesota, 1990

Coming up the main trail I can tell I'm getting close:
the drums. Have I missed dinner?

Climbing the mud path through the trees
I can hear among the hollow harmony of drumskins
a clatter of forks and spoons on plates and cups—
just in time. I join the serving line.

The drummers are gathered in the kitchen
where the servers ladle soup and smile.
My dish is a deli container. My spoon is a groundscore.
I dig them from my daypack and join the drumming.

Ho! drummers of Katuah kitchen, don't you
hear the thunder? Are your tarps tight?
Are your dry clothes sealed in plastic?
Careful with that rhythm stolen from the rain!

Someone fills a pot to keep some soup warm
for the drummers. They thunder on
till everyone is fed and all the plates and cups
and forks and spoons are clean.

The leftovers will keep awhile.
The drums of Katuah thunder on.

Council Fire

19th Rainbow Family Gathering
Superior National Forest, Minnesota, 1990

Pilgrimage to the old
power spot, our abandoned
council circle—
I meet all
the pilgrims packing out
their tents and trash-bags

I find
a giant fire-pit dug here
since we counciled
hard for three hours in the sun
to move the council closer
to the center of camp

Three pilgrims
rest here on a log:
they too casually join
the council of all vanished
tribes around the coals
of the original fire

The Circus of Visionaries

20th Rainbow Family Gathering
Green Mountain National Forest, Vermont, 1991

July 9

The clouds move through a silence
above the bird-songs

between the dim ridge
of dawn and the crescent moon

like a shoal of whales,
one after the other

the young ones still forming
crowding close under
their dark bellies

the whole clan taking on substance
against the daybreak,
traveling the high
currents on their ancient way

*

Spirit, my tribe too is
migrating once more,
seeking our direction in the ancient way.

We have just retired
the feather for the night;
the third day of the Vision Council breaks.

Since we began we have
wandered the whole map,
following this feather around our circle.
We go to our rest
as the cooks are waking.

*

All afternoon outside the yellow-striped
medicine tent where we
listened in our rapt circle,
the rest of the tribe was working:
hauling out the trash, separating
glass and metal and plastic,
covering the shit in our latrines and
scattering the hearthstones
of our many circles
back to where the glaciers left them

a lingering warmth
and everlasting memory in them,
flutes and drums, song after song to the vanishing of flame

(I know, because today
I spent breaking down
the Wise Crackers kitchen, trusting the visionaries
in the circus tent
to listen without me)

*

The feather was an eagle's, it flew
from a staff, then alone,
it changed to an owl's,
it became a rock, then a peacock feather.
We listened.

(It had rained
the morning of the 7th, so the Council started
in the big tent
where the medics dealt
with a half-dozen cases of craziness this Gathering)

The sun stood above us;
someone started
taking down the canvas around the sides,
and mountains too
stood listening.
One after the other we stood to speak our pieces
of the shattered dream.

(Once it started, there it
sat, the feather progressing slowly around
the same circle
of faces always changing,
each one stepping back after speaking, leaving space
for the listener behind)

The earth turned
and we listened. Like tattered seamstresses,
we drew the thread
of our attention
tighter and tighter, focused on the feather

as though following the point
where the tip of the needle gleams and disappears.

The sun went down:
no decision till daylight.
For miles around us the work is done for today.
Not here; we lit candles
and kept listening.

*

The sun stood above us again the second day
curtained by showers
as the clouds moved across
the mountaincrest. We listened.

In the afternoon
the rainclouds passed
and a rainbow lifted all the colors
hidden in our circle
way up into the air.
Two rainbows. Three concentric rainbows,
with one half-grown
young one still forming—

It was a sign, to be sure (to be sure and listen,
pass the feather on
and on till all the colors
have spoken, the quilt of vision complete . . .)

We passed the feather
clockwise— our clock
slower than the digits on my watch, I noticed—
sunwise, always slower
than the circling of shadows,
it seemed. But wisdom flowed from somewhere,
out of crones and greybeards,
out of the drooling mouths of babes . . .

*

The happy stream of voices out on the main trail
and the sanctuary of listening
made a kind of harmony where I
stood on the edge of the circle, returning
just after sundown
of the second day.
The candles were already burning: no decision tonight.

Good. Time now
for the listening.

On the muddy road outside, the footprints of loved ones
blot out the footprints
that were there moments before.

Every so often our asking for a true direction
home is pierced
by the laughter of farewell.

*

At midnight against the flung stars
tall shafts of light leaned
in a parallel rank
over our council from the northern horizon

It was a sign, to be sure
(to be sure and speak
from our humble prayer-rug of earth,
gazing to the stars,
not the other way around)

The feather migrated on from hand to hand
in the candlelight.
I am no longer waiting
for my turn to speak, turning over
what to say.
I am listening.
Through every interruption, the Spirit speaks.

*

We listened.
We laughed together.
A prayer, a confession, a speech.
No one wept alone.
Many visions.

The night passes so quickly when you really
listen! Effortless.

Three times
we asked for consensus. We're learning.

The feather goes
so slowly around.
At last it reaches my hand. I look around, and I'm
the last one left.

What shall I say, Spirit?

At last it's dawn, and the birds' turn. Today sunshine.
All my relations.
A-Ho!

July 4, Vermont 1991. Photo by Garrick Beck.

Lost at the Gathering

21st Rainbow Family Gathering
Mesa Verde National Forest, Colorado, 1992

Lost at the Gathering! It brings back memories:
passing the endless parade of strangers
singing "Happy Trails"—

(When everyone who passes you
is grinning, you know you're
headed in the right direction!)

Occasionally a face you know from somewhere,
also lost, and suddenly
one you've been watching for all day, all *week*,
headed the other way—

(This might be our only chance
to catch up, who knows if we'll
cross trails again this Gathering?)

While the beaming clouds float by
our meadow in blossom: kitchens
tied to trees, a Tipi Circle,
a pyramid of prayer-flags, a banner
billowing like a sail full of breeze,
the psychedelic stones and wee shy
flowers— a snowy range
looming over every conversation—

(The first scout who found this place
must have suffered the same jolt
of heaven: *Welcome Home . . .*

Even now, one small plane whining
like a mosquito at the screen, *Here*
let all children of the Creation
be equal and free, here
let our ideals be true,
let us be true to our ideals . . .)

Thank God for the mud
when it's dusty

And thank the Goddess
for stones to walk on
where it's muddy

Unified Field

21st Rainbow Family Gathering
Mesa Verde National Forest, Colorado, 1992

Every time you touch someone
today, even a handshake
Close your eyes, remember
the last time you touched
warm skin through the layers
of cloth, talk, custom
And then open, look into
the eyes of the one you are
hugging, rubbing, wrestling,
baby-powdering, leading
into the dance, making change for,
helping up into the bus:
Trace the chain of touching
to the fingertips of time,
and calculate
the great circle we'll make
when we all meet in one
unified field
on that final Fourth of July

Sunwise

Spring Council 1993
Bankhead National Forest, Alabama

Brown baby
at her breast,
long feather
curving from her hand
toward the sky

Green boughs
reaching down
across her vision
toward the yellow clay

The council circle sits
here in a fork in the road:
pine-shadows turn
another inch
as the sun travels west

and the feather passes
sunwise

July 4, Nevada 1989. Photo by Grey Eagle.

The Bridge that Merges with the Stream

22nd annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Talladega National Forest, Alabama, 1993

1.

In the distance the drums
are still speaking
their hollow hearts to the ground.
In the stillness
close by, birds are starting to sing.

At dawn of the last day,
heading home to bed, I finally meet my ride
out. We arrange a rendezvous.

Walking upstream
along the bank of the creek
as the water walks over its stepping-stones
downstream, I come
to the bridge:
three logs, lashed and anchored,
a handrail of ropes.
Once more my path has crossed the journey
of the water.

2.

Lugging two buckets of springwater
from the hose
up the hill for the ceremony
of the washing of cans,
up the long curve of Alabama clay
smoothed by the naked feet
of love, up to Supply
where the fingers of evolution are
sorting the trash, I come
to the road.
In Law and Order We Trust!

Official green trucks roll by on their mission
of reconnaissance.
Once more my path is about to cross
the tiretracks of war.

How do you stop a gathering of free people?
Not with guns. The pistols ride
blindfolded in their holsters.
It's done with camcorders collecting license plates.
It's done with directional mikes.
It's done with roadblocks
and the language of regulations.

These men and women in uniform have sworn
to uphold the Constitution
all day in the hot sun.
But a filedrawer in Washington holds the mortgage papers
on each one's conscience, the salary and benefits,
the photographs of dependents.
The badges gleaming on their uniforms are only
to armor the heart.

Twice a day, though, standing naked
in front of the mirror in the locker room
or the privacy of home, they are
brothers and sisters of the bellybutton,
like us, every mole and wart-hair
precious to the Creator . . .

3.

Lying down to sleep at last among feathery ferns,
under wild grapevines, at home
under my plastic tarp
in an overgrown clearcut beside the creek,
I come
to the end of the path:
once more I am crossing
where there is no bridge, beginning to drift
downstream

We are riding together
the long current of living
to the living sea, despite our many
deaths along the way:
a river of sweat and footsteps, crates of food
disappearing down the trail,
compost and feces covered with earth
and left behind, as one by one
so are we—

Why the checkpoint
at the end of the road
home, where we leave our vehicles to walk in?
Because there we start across
the imaginary bridge our ancestral dreamers built
to the dreaming unborn, ephemeral arch
of all colors, bridge that merges
with the stream: with every step the earth
grows more solid, licenses and insurance
pale and fade . . . Moonrise
reveals the peacefulness of strangers
passing on the trails, tall briars
reclaiming the meadow.

Why do the patriarchs of our
two-legged tribe try to dam that flow?
Why don't they listen to the mothers
with the milk of it still
wet on their nipples?
Why don't we let the newest naked baby
lead the way?

For a few minutes
as the light grows steadily
between the leaves, I slip under
the current of darkness.
Then I get up
and start to pack again for the struggle
upstream.

Kudzu Curtains

25th Rainbow Family Gathering
Mark Twain National Forest, Missouri, 1996

Out of the city's
greasy armpit,
alive!

Across the smoldering
Southern summer
into my own west wind

Over the bridge at Memphis,
where I once caught that
midnight ride

Nothing but miles
out here
between the speed limit signs

Down the long dusty back roads
of Missouri, into
Sam Clemens's own back woods

Into a pasture full
of peacefully grazing cars
and grinning people

Up an easy trail
into the shady welcome
of trees and running water

Kudzu curtains—
I haven't come so far
from Georgia after all

At Popcorn Palace
the price of admission is
an empty bowl

At the swimming hole,
you don't even need
that much

A barefoot brother joins
the morning jam: birds,
mandolin

Far-off drummers . . .
maybe I never actually
left this place at all

July 4, Missouri 1996. Photo by Grey Eagle.

Reunion of the Elements

27th annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, Arizona, 1998

July 4

Overhead the sun
approaches noon

Underfoot the rain
has molded weeks of dust
into firm mud

Since early morning
I have wandered the trails
of a vast camp
fallen suddenly silent

in consensus
with the peace and healing
of this wild place

Smoothed by passing feet,
dried all morning in the kiln of sun
to a warm living skin, every path
this morning leads to the center
where the procession of feet assembles
around the Peace Pole in the meadow
and concentric circle after circle of voices
hold one Silence

But no one is more silent than the two sleeping
sentries who guard last night's
heroic firepit, one sprawled peacefully
across its architecture of piled stones, the other
cradled in its deep dry moat

This is the firepit constructed
by the frenzied engineers of last night's boogie,
eager for firelight and warmth, the ancient
reunion of the elements, passing rocks
hand to hand, digging in time to the drums,
chanting thanks to the rain we'd all prayed for

Year after year we grumbled about the rain,
forgetting to be thankful, until this year
of wildfire and drought: night after night we sat
staring into the campfire in ignorant bliss,
forgetting to be grateful, until we came
to this dry place heaped with dry firewood
in this dry season— Season of the Fire Ban

It's our Season of the Fire Watch:
wood-gatherers hauling propane tanks, cooks
stirring huge pots of beans over thin blue flames,
minstrels trading songs all night
around a dwindling candle, fire-tenders transmuted
into fire-trolls, patrolling miles of trails
through the dry woods, each one breathing
the dust of a multitude of feet

Maybe it was our Native elders who brought the rain
with their traditional prayers;
maybe it was the children and their raindance.
But no precipitation was predicted here
till August, the Rangers said, and yesterday when it fell
it fell nowhere else in the state

The clouds came out of nowhere
and gathered in a circle around this mountain,
the eyewitnesses say, and after that first
ghostly mist of rain— so gentle that it seemed
the clouds were only passing through
like the rest of us— according to the rumor,
a rainbow arched over in a shower of sun

All around this meadow the aspen groves
join the consensus of silence,
surrounding our concentric circles
like slender shining angels lifting wings
of silvery green: joined underground
by a common root-system, someone told me,
into a single organism

Even the arid soil beneath my blanket
is a woven mat of root-threads,
I can see now, sitting here: a prayer-rug
peculiarly suited to silence,
decorated here and there with the prehistoric
paisley of the lichen-spotted stones

And the heroic builders of last night's firepit?
vanished like the shamans of the Stone Age
leaving only the ceremonial ordnance of their office—
two shovels, standing upright while the sentries sleep,
three five-gallon buckets of water

A helicopter overhead
barely penetrates as the Silence
approaches zenith

A wind blows across the faces
gathered in the meadow

The earth turns underfoot

A multitude of hands take hold
of one another and we rise
to sing the *Om*

Rattlesnake Tribe / Lightning Nation

28th Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 1999

Somewhere out there
roaming the wild vistas
of the heart, I've heard,
is a tribe anyone can join

We are the forest
sprouting up through leaf-duff and fern
under the spreading limbs of our elders,
tying and re-tying our knots
till we learn the art of the stormtight shelter

Somewhere out there
on the free horizon, the family
of all opposites is converging
from the seven directions Home

We are the meadow
waking one morning between unfamiliar streams
of footsteps and voices, remembering
from some distant generation of meadowgrass
a dream of firelight and drumming

Somewhere in the heart-pulse
of light and dark, the long-lost
orphans of the Earth are gathering
for the reunion feast

We are the stream
singing to every pebble and boulder we meet on our way
in a babble of continuous praise, a parade
of barefoot pilgrims chanting holy laughter,
forever seeking the easiest way downhill

Somewhere in a sweaty flashback
hallucinations are hugging,
the annual parliament of anarchists
is assembling

We are the mountain
sheltering its immaculate community
under broad leafy wings, protecting the Indiana bat
and the Eastern timber rattler, offering a home
to all creatures too wild for the human zoo

Somewhere far
below the deep blue sky the armies
of every continent and faith link hands
across the wildflowers to dance

We are the rainstorm
sailing high on its weatherfront
between the mountain ridges, roaring its drunken guffaw
just to hear the valleys echo, shooting down
electric dragon-talons at whoever stands tallest

Somewhere high
above the treetops a prayer
sung in all the languages of silence
breaks the surface of sound

We are the rainbow
shining after the storm, arched from cloud to cloud
like a bridge between hardships, a path
from one lesson to the next, disappearing
when the last of us has crossed the abyss

Somewhere asleep
in your classroom reveries
and cubicle daydreams is the vision
of a tribe anyone can join

We are the poison fangs
of rattlesnake and lightning, the rocky trails,
the slick mud, the haze of humidity, even
the biting swarms of Pennsylvania State Police
on our dirt roads: this year's catechism and curriculum

Somewhere deep in the Earth
under your next step,
and the next, the vision breathes on
and on and on

We are everything
we have endured together, year after year, and we
carry it with us always from now on,
stronger every summer— thanks and praises!
than we were the year before

Homemade bridge, Pennsylvania 1999. Photo by Rob Savoye.

The Miracle of the Silence

29th Rainbow Family Gathering
Beaverhead National Forest, Montana, 2000

What is the sound of twenty thousand people
holding one silence?

It's louder than the brother camped behind me
who hears silence
as a challenge and bellows out
his battle cry—
louder than the barking watchdog tied at his camp—
louder than the four small airplanes
that fill the sky
with their lonely circling, their noisy longing
to join us—
louder than the one deaf drummer
in the distance
who never even *heard* of silence—
louder even than the children congregating
at Kid Village
to be painted for their parade (their screams
of laughter or frustration
high homage
to the Mother and Father of all that lives . . .)

What is this miracle so many
have gathered in this dry mountain meadow
to listen for?

It's the silence
that was here before we came, the silence
that will remain
when we have broken up these trails and gone—
the silence
of herds of caribou, bison, elk
who have ceded this valley to an army
of cattle, the silence
of mountain grasses that surrendered
to the invading sage—
it's the silence of the Bitterroot Range,
the snowy divide
where rain and meltwater start for the Pacific
or the Mississippi,
looking down on this overgrazed rangeland
ringed with clearcuts
we have claimed for Home

(but it's also
the scrape of a shovelblade
digging through the glacial till
for a slit latrine,
hard work with this tin entrenching tool . . .)

Who has ever heard the hush
from dawn till noon
of every language and dialect
of the most talkative species on Earth?

It is my own
inner silence
before the music of Creation,
contemplating the microscopic
mysteries
of the dirt beneath my knees,
the endless transmigrations of the clouds,
breathing the sacred
incense of the sage and pondering
paradox—
a silence of sunlight and thunder,
of friendly raindrops that wet down the dust,
falling soundlessly
out of bright clear sky to speckle the path
before me (vast wild
skyscapes and snowpeaked vistas
looming over every shoulder, no matter who
I hug . . .)

What is the sound of high noon
in this cathedral
where no church towers chime,
temple of ten thousand Millenniums?

It's the overlapping ripples of a distant
chant of *Om*
as a multi-colored cluster
breaks open like a seed and sends out shoots
that blossom
into random segments of a circle—
it's those rippling rainbow arcs of people
holding hands
breaking up and moving back
and re-connecting
again and again until suddenly I stand squinting

a quarter-mile across
to my counterpart on the other side—
it's the silence
that goes on and on
across the meadow till the Children's Parade
arrives (though
the circle's several ends never absolutely
meet, and the chant
never travels all the way around, still . . .)

What is this peace that passes understanding
hand to hand around our slowly forming,
dissolving and expanding,
never quite unbroken circle?

It's the silence of the wind playing with a kite,
someone on a parasail
playing with the wind, the cold creeping in
with the shadowline
against the precious gold of sun—
it's that clear, ancient silence
of stars unfurling
like the spangled banner of infinity,
glittering in the treetops
while the watch-fires burn along the ridgecrest
and the crescent moon grins
more brightly each night

(but it's also the chorus of drums
from two different campfires
on either side of the hill behind Info
beating in unison, keeping one
heartbeat
through the silence
between random love-calls across the night . . .)

Evergreen Lotus Mandala

30th annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Boise National Forest, Idaho, 2001

1. Bear Valley

"This talk is like stamping new coins. They pile up,
while the real work is done outside
by someone digging in the ground."

Rumi

The broad flat meadow laps against
pine-crested ridges
like a lake of wild grasses,
scattered yellow and purple flowers
and dry sandy dirt

Distant figures make their way across
as if walking on water

(Nothing on Earth could be more beautiful
except these slit latrines
gradually filled with human manure,
tree-ash and handfuls of soil,
then dug all over again
a spade's length away)

Water so transparent it shimmers in the sun
like liquid light
runs over beds of precious stones
where the young salmon feed,
spanned by bridges of lashed pine poles

Children and greyhairs, longhairs, no-hairs
meander among the pine-needled clan

(Nothing on Earth could be more peaceful
except those dusty feet
crossing the bridges in the dry heat all day
without stepping down
into the clear, cool, shallow paths
of the endangered salmon)

The waxing moon glides down across
this high mountain valley
into the trees, translucent and luminous
as a red-hot stone
entering the sweat lodge

Nomads wander the dusty moonlit trails
from kitchen-fire to kitchen-fire, adrift
on her tide

(Nothing on Earth could be more lovely
except these bags of garbage
washed and sorted for recycling
because in nature nothing ever, ever
goes to waste)

2. Interdependence Day

"A circle of lovely, quiet people
becomes the ring on my finger."

Rumi

Silence walks the trails this morning
while last night's late
carousers sleep it off

Till almost dawn they fired their
arching streamers and blossom-bursts
of voices and drums across the dark

Now silence drifts down the mountainsides
like mist, filtering
with the daylight
through a forest of young pines
to fill the waking valley (overrunning cup
of silence—)

Early risers meeting on the path
say nothing, though their eyes
exchange light
and every so often two hearts
greet each other
with a long, silent hug (mute
conversation of heartbeats—)

Silence radiates from an island of quiet
in the center of the meadow
as a slow procession converges
from every direction at once
and for a long
unbroken moment, hands
grasping hands along the shore
of a vast lake of silence,
peace has come

(Nothing on Earth could be more sacred
except the hot work of aerating,
mulching and re-seeding
the abandoned kitchens and trails,
scattering oven-stones, burning
bridges)

3. Mandala

"Suppose you scrub your ethical skin until it shines,
but inside there is no music,
then what?"

Kabir

Somewhere in this circle of thousands
stands a 30-year-old
who has never seen fireworks
on the Fourth of July

The young ones are with us
holding the silence

Longhaired teenage boys picking up
the weapons of peace,
shovel, mattock, saw, suddenly
boys no more—
shaven and ponytailed Hare Krishna monks
chasing a frisbee
after the pots are scrubbed—
young women with slender wrists
and firm palms
confidently addressing the spirit of the drum,
singing to the fire—
a parade of wild kids
more innocent than we were,
wiser than we'll ever be,
gaining on us year by year, inch
by inch—

The young ones are with us
sounding the *Om*

(And nothing on Earth could be more precious
until they arrive one year
smiling, stunned, shy,
holding one more howling infant
because in a family not one child ever
goes to waste)

Pick up any pine cone,
turn it upside down
and gaze into the thousand-petaled
lotus mandala
of generations of evergreen

Grandmother, father, daughter!
Grandfather, mother, son!
I see it now: the shortest distance
between any three points
is a circle

Bus Village, Idaho 2001. Photo by Rob Savoye.

Babylon Come Home!

31st annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Ottawa National Forest, Michigan, 2002

As above, so below

Laughter through the trees
along the trail, wind
playing high in the branches
while children play among the ferns—
The woods are alive
with people at work
like a convention of beavers,
building a village of sticks
and tarps and string
that will stand forever
in the memories of these kids

The forest is my church

Following a call for circle,
I found a kitchen in a clearing
and a couple hundred
strangers holding hands.
There's always room for one more.
In the center of the circle
giant pots of food sat steaming
while a sister prayed,
a brother complained, and we all
sang. Then we sat down
on the grass and the servers
started their procession
around, following the holy jug
of handwash.

How did we ever get so
scattered?
Which lifetime did we learn
this trick of dividing
and conquering ourselves?
Who sold us the latest
technology of separation,
these deadbolts and fences,
tinted windows and alarms,
and how long must we
keep paying?

A circle of drummers
serenading the brown glitter
of current downstream
around a double horseshoe bend—
The water is alive
with people at play
like a tribe of hippopotami,
while just upstream
of the bridge, three solar panels
pump riverwater through the filters
into an endless queue
of cups and waterbottles

Water is my sacrament

On one side,
the riverbank was crowded
with citizens exercising
their sacred right to assemble.
Across the bridge,
lawmen played cavalry,
defending the holy relics
of an archeological site
where loggers dumped their trash
while they milled the local sacred groves

into money— (though
the real ruins were bulldozed
by the Forest Service
years ago, local oldtimers say)

Babylon is only a state of mind

Half
sacred tobacco,
half
profane plastic:
detach
with a twist,
pocket
the filter and
tenderly
split the paper,
sprinkle
grateful prayers
beside
whatever path you
wander

We all have a role to play
in the melodrama of history, however
minute. Mine this year is made up
of a couple dozen small services:
refilling handwash at the Kid Village latrine,
digging through Lost and Found
to recover a sister's green-rimmed glasses,
a brother's pocketknife
on its loop of hand-braided hemp,
policing the trails from the blacktop
down to the river—

Babylon, come home!

I met a fellow from back home
assisting with a birth
at his first Gathering, he said,
taking a break to hurry back
and zip his tent before the rain—
and later I heard
how Stella Rainbow was born
just before we all looked up
and saw the rainbow

A naked woman is a pure
vision of the Divine.
Don't confuse it with desire!
Learn to look without lust,
meet her eyes without shame
and you may be ready
for a grown-up woman of your own.
Maybe even this one
passing on the trail right now,
glancing shyly back— (but
even a woman fully clothed
is a Goddess incognito, brother,
beware!)

The Gathering is bigger than the Family

Two eagles circling
above our circle in the Silence
on the Fourth, as people
continue endlessly to arrive—
advancing weaponless
down the hill, almost wordless
across the forbidden bridge
and up the grassy slope
to take the hilltop in the Name
Unspoken

— While I still
lingered at Info, one hand flat
against a brother's back, listening
through the Silence
as he spilled out his anger and heartbreak.
His irreplaceable blue backpack— stolen
or spaced on a supply run?
It didn't matter. His faith
was shaken and his shoulders rocked
with the sobs of a man
working hard for nothing but love,
cheated out of his wages in the end.

If here, then everywhere: Babylon come home

I hope he at least looked up
to see the sundog that circled the sun
in the clear blue sky
after the Silence broke into celebration—
I hope he looked down
a night or two later to see the candlelit
mud altar along the main trail
covered with intricate mud sculptures,
a miniature pueblo along the mud bank
where tiny mud people
waved from ladders and hammocks
at the passing multitude . . .

As above, so below.
Spirit
manipulating the manipulators
in the council,
leading us Home again and again.
Bureaucracy
entangling the bureaucrats,
hierarchy foiled by hierarchy,

officers of the peace
restrained from disrupting an illegal
prayer for Peace.
The river of Love flowing on to the sea
without ceasing,
carrying off the sediment of sorrow,
the salt of sweat,
the droplets of heaven that fall
when the clouds
can no longer contain their love
for the Earth—

The Family is bigger than the Gathering.
Babylon, come home!

July 4, California 1984. Photo by Grey Eagle.

Spirit Hunt

33rd annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Modoc National Forest, California, 2004

> "We each speak our piece; that's our duty to
> our people. That's why each of us is a leader.
> That's Indian Way. That's true democracy . . ."
>
> Leonard Peltier, *Prison Writings*

July 3

My candleflame burns serenely
at the center
of a vast spinning pinwheel of planets and stars—
campfires, lanterns, flashlights
twinkle through the woods
and across the meadow,
carrying the holy burden of light

On the road up this mountain
we passed miles of old clearcuts,
acres of fire-blackened trunks,
one silver sports car spun sideways
into the ditch . . .
At the end of the road we hiked down
into a valley of delicate streams and wetlands
littered with cowpies,
invaded by sagebrush,
surrounded by hillsides of aspen
and Washoe pine
under towering purple outcrops of volcanic stone
graven by the wind
into abstract images of time.

The birthing stones.

This place has ghosts.
Not just artifacts— a hasty
government archeological survey
carted off a truckload
just before the Gathering, lost arrowheads
of legendary hunters
which the local tribes may get back one day—
No, the prehistoric memory of this place
whispers of hungry winters,
of herds that no longer came,
fences, cattle, drink and disease,
assimilation by massacre,
a people hunted almost to extinction
like so many indigenous
others . . .

The burial grounds.

Between the birthing stones
and the burial grounds
we gather—
a tribe of palefaces
with suntans, born-again Indians,
mystics, misfits,
visionaries and contraries—
to learn this year's
lesson.
It's our annual Spirit Hunt.

My pen-tip scratches at the silence
in the center
of an enormous nonstop merry-go-round of noises—
drums, dogs, laughter,
far-off horns and nearby guitars,
murmurs of gossip or philosophy
from the camp next door,

distant shouts of desperation or joy
awakening the sacred power of sound
long after midnight . . .

"No yelling in the woods!"

*

July 4

I wake in bright daylight
surrounded by miles of silence, camp after camp
after camp, as far as I can hear
(ignoring the interruptions, as always—)

But once again I've drawn the morning shift
on Independence Day: a fresh latrine
that should have been ready yesterday.

Digging into rich black dirt
with my borrowed spade, I hear their voices echo
across the valley of silence
like grieving ghosts of some lost language:

This valley is sacred,
every sprig, every streamlet, every stone.
This soil is home
to our ancestors' bones.

Right now on eBay, a Modoc skull
commands $10,000.
They can't even tell us where not to dig!

This was a summer hunting camp once,
sacred ceremonial ground,
gathering place for many tribes
over many millennia.
One week after we gather here,

the sheep and cattle will return
for a Forest Service demonstration project,
"sustainable grazing."

Our Silence this morning
answers: *Yes.*
This valley is sacred.
Every sprig.
Every streamlet.
Every stone.

But scraping and chopping at that Silence,
one end of my long narrow trench
already three feet deep
and open for business, I remember
countless holes I've dug,
every one of them in sacred ground,
disturbing somebody's ancestors.
How can we honor those sleeping spirits
of defeated warriors,
the widows and orphans of this land?
How can we honor our own ancestors
who innocently murdered them
like so many buffalo,
who burned their villages
to save their souls,
whose own bones lie in stolen ground?

Our Modoc and Paiute elders
want us to haul in chemical toilets.
To dig a hole here, any hole,
they have to wait months for a permit!
Of course, if anyone
had ever struck gold here,
oil or uranium, by now this entire valley
would be one gigantic hole.
And if anything could be more absurd

than squatting over a slit trench in paradise,
it's trucking tanks of excrement
preserved in chemicals
back to civilization for "treatment."
No matter where
they dump that weird blue solution,
it was somebody's paradise once . . .

Scooping out another shovelful
of my Mother Earth,
alert for artifacts,
I look up to see a silent sister
smiling. I point to the open end,
but she shakes her head
and takes the shovel from my hand.
Before our new neighborhood latrine
is complete, three silent brothers
have arrived to take their turns
digging into the rich dirt,
the sacred Earth,
the holy morning of Silence.

Sanitation is sacred, too.
Cleanliness is godliness.
Keep the children healthy!
Health is wholeness is holy.
Hallelujah, ho!

*

Like a circle of tipi poles
standing separately
but leaning together in the center,
withstanding the winds,
our nation is gathered
in circles within circles within circles
within the circular horizon

of the round Earth,
linked hand to hand into something
that soars invisibly
skyward . . .

Everyone saw the brother on stilts
and the rainbow kite
that spun on its axis over our heads.
Did anyone but me
see the white-painted mime
gliding in slow motion around the circle
as the Silence broke?
And how many trustworthy eyewitnesses saw
the golden eagle
that circled once
above our radiant rippling song
and flew north?

The *Om* dies away, wave after wave
washing up the mountainsides
that rim this valley,
subsiding as the next arrives.
But the ripples that carry the sound
from our hearts to our throats,
expanding out of Silence
to the Six Directions,
pass through walls of hardened lava
and armored steel
and calcified childhood fear
to engulf the living planet in a radiant
embrace.

Hippy New Year! Hallelujah! Ho!

"You can't start a war over love."

*

July 5

Hippies reinventing the wheel!
bicycles, wheelbarrows, carts and wagons
navigating the trails
after so many years of lugging it all—
Jazz combo in the kitchen, bluegrass at Info—
A queue with a view—
That game of remembering names
without nametags—
The green lighter that traveled around the world—
A six-foot pedestal of stones balanced on stones
that sprang up beside the trail—
Free sandal repair and footwashing at Jesus Camp—
Hug vortex on the trail, every long-lost
bosom-buddy reunion
just another eddy in the flow—

"I actually went to a barber— I know it looks
like I cut it myself . . ."

It hurts to see our Grandmother Earth
trod to dust, her summer adornments
broken under blind feet

It's hard to watch these Grandfather Rocks
with their ancient psychedelic lichen
worn away by children's shoes

But it heals to hear the Water Child
slip away through her meandering channels,
only to bubble up from the spring,
always laughing, young again

Wandering our nation of neighborhoods,
slowly learning the trails,
I come limping along
in the footsteps of the first explorers
looking for kitchen sites, amazed
at the power of the place
even now—

"Well, my cat destroyed
my air mattress, but that was inevitable . . ."

*

It's our annual summer
Spirit Hunt.
No matter how good we get at
gathering, every year
the spirits conspire to teach us something.
It's a hard lesson sometimes,
often humbling, always
heartfelt.
And every year it leaves us stronger.

Each one of us imagines we know
why we traveled here.
But once we arrive
in the forest, a Silence begins to grow
inside. An emptiness.
A listening . . .
though sometimes the voices that instruct us
crack like thunder's whip,
impossible to ignore.

This year
the whole encampment carries on all week
that council
where the native elders spoke.
In campfire debates,
kitchen-talk and trail-colloquies,
a vast circle of separate views
all turn to face one center: the grief
that soaks this continent's soil,
the weight of our footprints here, the healing
this land has given us and the honoring
we owe in return.

How many centuries will it take
to heal the centuries of heartache?
Some brothers and sisters
among us, both Native and paleface,
have spent most of their lives beginning it
or seeking a place to begin.
How many of them have found it here
in this valley between birth and death?
That we won't know
until next summer,
in some other valley.

But be warned.
The spirits delight in playing trickster,
planting spores in cracks
where we won't spot them till we're
thoroughly colonized
by the mysterious mycellium of love:
and love, in the right conditions,
can sprout overnight
its mind-altering mushrooms of hope
and purpose in the brain.
Your life may change
tonight!

And somehow,
if we can keep the children healthy
and the memories
of these elders alive, we may serve
as a bridge between generations
where the spirits of this valley may walk
safely across the abyss
of five hundred years.
And like the final elder who spoke,
his anger spent, surrounded
by circle upon circle

of respectful listeners, some
quietly weeping,
may the children of the palefaces
receive them with a simple prayer:

"You are welcome here."

*

July 8

Just me
and the mossy pines,
the volcanic
boulders,
the yellow and purple flowers
of this mountain
meadow,
the dirt road underfoot
and my bag of
garbage:
last trip out.

Bless this land for giving us so much!
Bless the elders who came
to teach this tribe of orphans!
Bless the spirits who brought us together!

Forgive us, Mother,
for our footsteps here.
Thank you, Creator,
for those selfsame steps
on the long trail home.

Happy trails!
Hippy New Year!
Hallelujah!
Ho!

Children Come in All Sizes

34th annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Monongahela National Forest, West Virginia, 2005

> "Now so many people that are in this place.
> In our meeting place.
> It starts when two people see each other.
> They greet each other.
> Now we greet each other. . . .
> This is the way it should be in our minds."
>
> Thank You: A Poem in 17 Parts
> (Seneca tribe)

Ignore all rumors
of cancellation of rumors:
yes, there will be
a Gathering

Those West Virginia country roads
took us Home
to a subarctic island of cranberry bog
pushed south by glaciers an age ago
and abandoned here
to be fostered and adopted
in a motherly fold of the Appalachian quilt
like any other refugee.
A concrete flight of stairs
interrupts the trail up to Main Meadow,
relic of a prison camp
for conscientious objectors
during World War Two.
Among our neighbors a famous doctor
who is also a clown, a small-town mayor
who is also a poet, the usual
white supremacist compound . . .

We are only the latest seekers of shelter
to arrive.

And the children of the sunlight
brought their children Home
to the Mother of mountains
for the yearly reunion of all relatives
(though the bears and snakes and bugs
and white supremacists
never showed)

But children come in all sizes,
from the ones expected any day now
by two young mothers in camp
and their midwives
to the one on stilts
with greying dreadlocks and a terminal grin
towering over the hubbub and commotion . . .

At our campfires this year,
the tellers of tales
weave one more round of Hipstory:
how the townspeople rallied in support
of the barricaded Seed Camp
till even the local Wal-Mart donated supplies,
which the young warriors backpacked in
through the woods night after night,
dodging the police blockade,
the infrared goggles and attack dogs—

And the light came down
pure and whole and complete
only to shatter
against the rocks of West Virginia
into ten thousand glints and glimmers
of every possible hue

Children come in all sizes:
the happy trolls under the bridge
knocking from below
whenever footsteps cross the planks,
the idle architects who built
a metropolis of flat stacked stones
in the rocky creekbed,
the backwoods engineers
who constructed kitchens, theaters and ovens
out of mud and sticks and string,
the fire-twirling dancers trailing flame
around the boogie fire
like a synchronized swarm of sparks—
even my playmates at Front Gate, rebirthing
not-so-ancient treasures
of glass, aluminum, paper and plastic
from the burial-mounds of trash bags

Fireflies cruise the dark bog
in its shadowy bowl of mountains
blinking back at the stars
that gleam at intervals
between the low clouds traveling through

(Hello, fellow light in the darkness,
can you tell me where this path
goes?)

And the forest rang with echoes
of the original note
inventing the elements,
mutating into endless phyla and genera,
species and subspecies,
multiplying and dividing into all
the chords of Creation

Yes, children come in all sizes
such as the pre-dawn adolescent
with the grownup lungs
who woke me just in time
for the traditional morning of Silence
on the Fourth,
bellowing out his loneliness and boredom
in a glossolalia *de la* Tourette's

> Sunrise through the mist
> over the cranberry bog
> gradually reveals
> beautiful meadow plants
> danced flat
> under naked, ecstatic feet
> (only to rise again,
> weeks from now,
> crowds of them swaying
> blissfully together
> under the sun
> just as we did—)

And a silence rose up
with the morning fog
from the mud of West Virginia
as one by one the late-night screamers
nodded off and missed it
and the children woke up, eagerly
heading for Kid Village
to be decorated for the sacred day

Children come in all sizes,
up to and including
six-foot impostors re-living childhood
in the Kids' Parade
as I did this year, shaking my rattle
up the muddy trail

near the tail of a long, snaking procession
of painted faces and fairy wings,
arriving at last in the open meadow
where a cordon of cheering, clapping
uncles and aunts
opened gradually into a circle so enormous
only a kid on stilts
could have seen the other side

And a circle of interlocking hands
intersected with a circle
of days and moons and seasons,
the Silence broke
and one more cycle was complete.
Happy Interdependence Day!
Happy Rebirthday!
Happy New!

Around the campfires, Hipstory's
already woven into legend:
how the blockaded Seed Camp finally withdrew
to a government-approved site in a bog
to save the endangered bats
feeding their young around the meadow's edge—
(doubly endangered, we learned later,
since the locals lost their fight
to stop a stone and gravel quarry
permitted for that very spot)

Mountain Mama, almost Heaven,
your green arms opened wide
in welcome, gathered us into
this valley's protection, drew us close
together in your boggy lap
for one slow, sunlit moment
as if to claim all children everywhere,
of every size, for yours . . .

And all you ask of us
is to remember you
when they try to sell us
your hard black bones for fuel,
your green hair for paper and wood,
your endless tears in six-packs
of little plastic bottles—
Mother,
we're only children, but we'll try.

Driving home from Home,
we traveled underneath two mountains
in well-lit tunnels
and through one stormfront
in a blinding barrage of rain.
On the other side,
in the slant rays of late afternoon,
a random drifting
shred of humidity winked at us
in a blaze of colors that vanished,
only to wink again
across the interstate:
a faint outline arched up against
the slightly more solid shape
of a cloud, and suddenly
the most glorious rainbow since Noah's
spanned the highway,
a pale companion hovering just above it,
and the long gathering
between Gatherings
had begun.

Yes, there is a pot of gold
at the end of the Rainbow!
As soon as we have one
sister and brother
of every color, we'll circle up
and dish out the soup.

"After having a dream let someone else
guess what it was.
Then have everyone act it out together."

Iroquois Dream Event #1

Idaho 2001. Photo by Grey Eagle.

Along the Trail from Heart to Heart

39th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 2010

for Enoah

Lights
cruising the woods at midnight
mark the invisible trails
that crisscross the blackness for miles
around my tent

Early the next morning,
sitting on my stoop of pine needles and duff
amid sunlight and leaf-shadow,
between birdsong and silence,
I can't help noticing
the light
in every passing face

Duet of saxophone and flute soaring "Somewhere
Over the Rainbow"
from the trail above my camp

Down those trails
worn smooth by the footprints
of barefoot wanderers
we go wandering in our turn,
my traveling buddy and I,
over log bridges packed with dried mud,
two more sets of footsteps
in the circumambulating parade:
fire-trolls and water crew,
supply sherpas and shitter-diggers,
drainbows and bliss ninnies,

this laughing, ranting, cursing, chanting spectrum
of light
walking upright

Pineapple pizza coming out of the mud oven
till the wee hours
the night we hiked in from Welcome Home

All these trees
grew up together,
dividing up the sunlight,
sharing the rain,
giving voice to the wind,
gradually filling every jigsaw piece of sky
with interlacing branches
that welcome all wandering visitors
into their shelter and shade,
while everywhere underfoot
between the hospitable trunks
that hold our tarps and banners high
lies a cornucopia of firewood
for the ovens and bliss fires,
poles for kitchen rails and bridges,
sticks for tables and counters,
twigs for muddy spots on the trail,
leaves and needles
to cushion my sleep

I swear I saw you at the Gathering,
about twenty years old and gorgeous,
eyes lit up with that mysterious alchemy
of transmuted sunlight,
hair dark and wild like a sleeping memory
of last night's holy bacchanal …
I don't think you recognized me

But sometimes I only recognize myself
in the young warriors I pass on the trail,
staring around shy and amazed
at this impossible vision
of tipis and trading blankets and smiling topless sisters,
a tribal village floating full-blown
out of the wild reaches of their imaginations,
settling to earth in the Pennsylvania mud
before their unbelieving eyes

(and in one of those tipis we heard the saga
of a busload of hippies who drove from New Mexico
in a freshly converted biodiesel schoolbus,
pulling in behind fast-food joints
instead of the usual truck stops,
working together like a ship's crew,
hand-pumping used grease through their filters
to re-fuel the mothership
on its maiden voyage,
their dog happily licking up the spills—)

Kitchen crew doing "You're So Vain"
in five-part harmony
chopping veggies for the stew

So where was I exactly
when I set down my dish
and went on a quest for fresh hot dishwater?
"Not all who wander are lost,"
goes my motto this gathering.
"Some of us only lost our stuff . . ."
Of course I'll never find it
till I stand in the uphill corner of the kitchen
and holler it out—
"Right over there by the dish station,"
someone casually informs me

"We're doing this on the sly,"
my traveling buddy quips to a pretty young sister
who joins us to scrub a few pots,
"pretending we're doing a job we don't like . . ."

The water here
converges in wandering streams
from the mountainsides
that flank this valley,
seeps up through the mud
under sandals and boots and bare toes,
hangs in steamy clouds of humidity,
drips in branching runnels of sweat
down painted faces and tattooed torsos,
saturating tie-dyes and halter tops and sarongs,
flows cold and muddy
almost bellybutton-deep
between naked bodies at the swimming hole,
runs steadily from the circular lips
of black waterpipe
into the circular cups and containers
of grateful humans
taking our turn in the water cycle
that keeps us all alive

Ping Pong in the nude
across a slab of plywood in the meadow

That joyriding helicopter
buzzing our six square miles of meadows and trails,
burning precious hydrocarbons
and fouling the atmosphere
can't disturb the quiet breathing of these woods,
can't interrupt the levity
of fiddle and mandolin,
the happy chatter of the kitchens,
raucous drumming and hoots of laughter
across the valley—

Even the one that circles low above the treetops
on the morning of the Fourth
as if under orders
to desecrate our sacred morning of silence
finally fades away,
leaving the forest twice as quiet as before

(and later that day we heard the saga
of the kid who climbed the wrong tree
in the dark hour before daylight,
the dead branch that cracked under his weight,
his broken pelvis and fractured skull,
the medivac pilot who didn't trust the meadow
so refused to land until a ground crew had hiked in
to confirm safe landing—)

"Anybody got some helicopter repellant I can borrow?"
asks my traveling buddy

The power of the drum not played,
cradled under one arm
down the trail to Main Meadow,
idly caressed beside the warm ash
of last night's boogie fire,
all that leashed thunder held in check
till the moment for celebration arrives—
the power of this deliberate silence
voicing a momentary absence of rancor and rivalry,
the song of a deep listening,
a loving drumroll of quiet,
brainwaves and heartbeats aligned
with the millennial meridians of the Earth,
a peaceful, breathing presence
of sunlight and silence . . .

The silence is sacred
because we make it so:
by discipline and attention,

reverence and respect,
aware that our one small particle of choice
compounds with thousands of others
into one huge fern-carpeted,
tree-buttressed, sky-roofed cathedral
of pure intent—
a temple to the planetwide convergence
of vision and will
that must someday calm the noisy world
of killer drones and car bombs
and death camps (real ones, not just pretend)

Been rebelling against authority
for 39 years now, long enough
to raise our own crop of rebels,
protesting the peace meditation on the Fourth

So where else can you say
that waiting in line is the best part
of your day? The old friend
unseen for many a gathering,
the new friend who hitched up from Florida
for his very first one—
Finally we reach the pushbutton
hand-wash dispenser,
the stainless steel pans heaped with pasta,
the sublime grins of the servers,
only to realize
we've spaced out our plates and spoons again
somewhere back along the trail . . .

"Some things can only be achieved
by retroactive planning,"
my traveling buddy explains

A portable massage table headed into Kid Village
for a "house call"
as we head out after lunch

Go, team, go!
The barefoot warriors
who haul the food in, the garbage out,
some exhausted mama's gear
up and down these trails,
the kitchen ogres and dinner-circle servers,
radio-carriers and Info crew,
not to mention a perimeter of warriors
directing traffic on the roads,
driving the supply trucks, dealing
with the occasional armed gang in uniform,
working the courtroom in Erie
an hour's drive away,
making this whole peaceable assembly thing possible
down here in the valley

(and somewhere along the trail we heard the saga
of the weeping young sister busted for heroin
disguised in a bottle of Alleve,
how a family attorney suggested the cops
might want to pick up a sealed bottle
of their own from any drugstore,
how the head cop broke open a pill
with the butt of his flashlight, scattering clouds
of white powder everywhere,
and how it too tested positive—)

The only snake I saw this Gathering
was somebody's pet, peeking anxiously
out of her shoulderbag

Every trail here is a spiritual path,
a rambling journey
from heart to heart, hug to hug:
every person we meet
is a fresh destination,
every passing glance a potential detour

through airports and alleyways,
digital avatars or ancient
incarnations:
every conversation is an odyssey
of chance companions
across watersheds and divides,
starry dunes or galactic clusters:
every fork along our way is a choice
between parallel dimensions,
clashing mythologies or colliding
techtonic plates,
every camp or kitchen where we linger
a supernova of stories,
songs, laments, visions, memories,
each left behind in its turn
on our daily pilgrimage
from daylight to starlight

A long "Om" sounding through the trees
from the neighborhood next door

At every stop for rest
on our way up the long steep trail,
another rustic, peaceful view
down through the woods

Looking back into the heart of the Gathering
from my mossy stump
or fallen log, all I see is trees
but the invisible valley below swells and surges like the sea
with a jubilant pandemonium,
voices, drums, dogs . . .

With every step the birds grow louder,
the noises fade behind us—
then suddenly out of nowhere an electric guitar,
and a dude strides by
hugging a monster boombox,

missing everything the birds keep
patiently repeating

"I swear that cart has put on about twenty pounds
since we started up this hill,"
my traveling buddy pants

And all at once without warning we're in the car,
doors slam, engine revs,
driving back into the vast, oblivious,
infinitely obnoxious boombox
of the world

(Yet even there, if we pay attention,
under every yard of gravel and asphalt and concrete
we can detect a trace
of an ancient trail
that leads unerringly always
to another heart—
another hug— another
home)

Kid Village, Pennsylvania 2010. Photo by Rich in Spirit.

Pennsylvania 2010. Photo by Rich in Spirit.

July 4, Georgia 2018. Photo by Trisha Morgan.

Southern Appalachian Seed Camp Solstice

Pre-Gathering Seed Camp, June 2012
Cherokee National 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 and dreadlock'd and tattoo'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.

*

Forgive me, little greenbriar vine,
for sawing you off at the root
with my hopelessly dull pocketknife,
but you've drawn blood already
once today, and you know
that only brings out the worst
in a human. Anyway I know
you have strong, deep roots
and you'll be back before long
— as I will myself, if my own root system
goes deep enough
and strong enough
when my turn comes

Thank you, quiet tent-site,
for absorbing all my clumsy human noises
into your quietude—
my crooked stumbling in circles
through brittle leaves and grasping vines
that first evening just before dark
in search of you
and every night since, finding my way back

*

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

*

If you're a kid with a toy,
certain things become irresistible:
like tasing a safely unarmed suspect,
or drilling the pristine Arctic for oil,
or buzzing the Rainbow camp
with one hand trembling on the joystick
of your government-issue helicopter
("N.Y.P.D.," this one says, oddly enough,
swooping low over the treetops
of a National Forest in Tennessee—)
And the bigger boys upstairs
get the same video-arcade thrill,
I'm sure, with a loftier view
from their offices in Washington
and Manhattan

*

A tribe of long-legged crickets
has taken up residence
between my tent and rain-fly
for the duration, it seems,
along with an assortment of spiders
and spider-prey

Thank you, gentle tent-site
for cradling my weary spine
against your bosom of leaves and moss
at the end of each day's endless
wandering—
trudging dust and gravel and mud
and heat, uphill and down,
hauling cabbage for Kid Village,
plywood for Info,
cornmeal for Katuah Kitchen
and my own two loads of way too much

*

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

*

Just when I finally earned my Merit Badge
for Decorating the Forest,
my expertly strung banners of colorful cloth
start vanishing one by one—
abducted by a cadre of kids who think
the quickest shortcut to adulthood
is to upset all the grown-ups
and run.

I went through that phase too,
I seem to recall, so I know
the flag-snatching game will pass
and one more generation of rebels
will gradually relax
into the sacred responsibilities of living—
including the task of watching over the next
wave of adolescents—
until their own turn comes
to catch themselves ranting crabbily at kids
about flag-thievery
or some equally juvenile game . . .
(Score one more for rebellious youth!)

But the flag-bandits are not the only children here.
It's ten days before the Gathering,
and trading blankets crowded
with glittering toys
already line the main trail

and full-grown men sit idly dangling
an empty pipe from a length of string
tied to a stick
while adults of all ages are hard at work
lashing tarps to trees,
laying miles of waterline,
digging slit latrines in the rocky clay,
preparing a place
for children to play . . .

*

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 interminable
announcements. Dammit, I missed
another circle!

*

The rain
taps a rhythm on my tarp
in code: the random spatter and splat
of high truths descending
on a material plane
of bright blue plastic and running off
unheeded, only briefly
interrupted in their age-old work
of re-hydrating the world
one tiny glimmering droplet
of holy water
at a time

Thank you, patient tent-site
for enduring my restless human
comings and goings,
for watching over my increasingly chaotic
tentful of jumbled objects,
for giving me the peaceful moments I need
for all these gathered glimpses,
insights, impressions
to overflow at last into hasty scribbling
like turning inside out
my pocketful of random trash
at the end of the day

*

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

In the Sanctuary of Silence

41st Rainbow Family Gathering
Cherokee National Forest, Tennessee, 2012

1. Homecoming

Let the wild rumpus
resume!
— back from the city after working a week
between two weeklong vacations
at the Gathering, my Home
away from home,
this peaceful village among the trees

A peeping frog
speaks up from a puddle
at the side of the trail
in his inimitable voice, singing
the one syllable that is his to sing
in the invisible choir
of Creation
as I too paint my irreplaceable stripe
of this infinite human spectrum

(But the cicadas own the night!)

The circle of acquaintances you make
dashing in from the downpour,
taking shelter
beneath the closest kitchen tarp—

Someone has done this work:
spreading sticks
in the muddy patches on the trail
— and someone will break up
the dry hard mud
with pick and digging bar
and scatter new seed
when we're done walking here

The circle of newfound friends you make
around a brand-new shitter,
taking turns
with the mattock and the long-handled
spade—

A mournful violin quavers sweetly
behind my tent this morning,
rehearsing "The Star Spangled Banner"
for the celebration on the Fourth

The circle of brothers and sisters
lost to the tribe
since last year's Gathering,
enshrined
in a round white pavilion beside the trail
filled with photographs and messages
of farewell
that overflow the heart—

Two heartbeats meet and merge
into one
for the eternal moment
of a hug
separated by nothing but the bone and skin
and cartilage
of a mere human lifetime

> *Don't know what you're high on, but I'm*
> *high on this mountain*

2. Variations on the Theme of Silence

So quiet
I can hear the cooks whispering over breakfast
under kitchen tarps for miles around

So quiet
it spooks the dogs and they can't shut up

So quiet
I can hear a child somewhere insisting that a dog
stop barking

So quiet
I can hear the coughing of campfire-smoke close by
and road-dust a mile down the mountain

So quiet
I can hear the tow trucks growling along the road
stalking their next victim

So quiet
I can hear the *Om* of the flies and mosquitos
searching for a way into my tent

So quiet
I can hear my heart pumping oxygen to every cell
of my inner universe
and contaminants from every cell
back to the source
to be purified by my next breath

So quiet
that the sudden cry of "Six up!" echoes
up the main trail
like a pistol shot interrupting a Sunday service
in the sanctuary of Silence

So quiet
that the infant wailing in my neighbor's tent
seems to be telling me
not to worry about the future of this cantankerous,
quarrelsome tribe

3. Family Reunion, Fourth of July

This is the family:
good friends from gatherings long gone by
suddenly gone grey
amid the swarm of unfamiliar faces,
all these young ones
just as respectful
of the heart of Silence

A brother doing slow Tai Chi, a sister spinning
her leather baton in the air,
dragonfly cavorting
over meditating heads
as the meadow fills with beatific smiles
and multicolored parasols,
pale liberated breasts under sunburned faces,
ecstatic hugs of "long time no see"
in pantomime

One twisting out the kinks in his vertebrae
audibly above the Silence,
another with a family-size box of chocolates
hurrying through the steamy humidity
in search of shade,
the silent face-painter intent on his craft
amid a carnival of tattoos

A long *Om*, letting it all out . . .
on and on
until it seems to take on a life of its own,
a living, chanting creature
rippling the sunshine,
washing the perimeter of trees
with overlapping waves
like the breath of the meadow itself . . .
on and on
even after the kids' parade arrives,

threading in silence
through concentric circles of sound
to the very center of the *Om*—

Then comes the breeze
and the cheer
followed by the ritual sacrifice
of watermelons

4. Trash in My Pocket

Competition for pocket-trash
sure is fierce this year . . .

Leaning
uphill, bent
against the weight, staring down
at the gravel roadbed
and my plodding boots
as I tow my loaded hand-truck
step by step up this mountain,
I spot every cigarette butt
and glittering fragment of wrapper,
and my trash-pocket is still
only half full

(Standing up to rest, my breath
catches—
the open, listening woods
stretch away on every side . . .)

On the flattened grass, the morning after
at Granola Funk Theater:
two butts, three wrappers, one dime,
one stray envelope
addressed "To the Girl
I Fell in Love with on the Trail"

while the white canvas pyramid shines
in the sun
like something that landed here
when no one was looking,
its black-painted stage like an open mouth
where I stood last night
bellowing out a poem
about Silence
to an audience of dim listening shapes,
the trees
crowding thick around the meadow,
dark against the darkness, rapt
and curious

Tennessee 2012. Photo by Flower Parker.

5. Mama Katuah

Somebody up there
loves us!
The downpour interrupts
everything,
Mama Katuah
refusing to be ignored

Mama Katuah will rain on us,
we know,
showering us clean inside
though she smears our clothes
and shoes
with yellow mud

Mama Katuah,
up to her ancient tricks
as usual
but I never saw her
more beautifully
garbed and jeweled,
showing it off
in every stroke of lightning

Mama Katuah loves
a surprise,
the gust of wind so strong
it toppled a leaning tree
across an empty tent
even though that
particular tree
was leaning the other way

I hear Mama Katuah
laughing to herself
behind the ridge and head back
to the tent
to doublecheck my tarp,
my white socks
forever stained
with Mama Katuah's love

And finally,
Mama Katuah in person—
the fat copperhead
waiting
at the zipper of my tent
when I come home at two a.m.,
shimmering
psychedelic stripes
the color and pattern of the leaves
under her pale belly
oozing
through my flashlight beam

Tennessee 2012. Photo by Flower Parker.

6. Homegoing

Thank you, ancestors,
spirits of this land,
protectors of this sacred water,
guardians of all the directions
we travel, leaving Home

Thank you, brothers and sisters
harnessing yourselves
to more one load, headed
this time down the hill,
each re-invention of the wheel
more inventive
than the one before

Thank you, mothers and fathers
of all these children
chasing one another across the grass,
seedlings of Gatherings to come

Thank you,
Earth and Sky
Thank you,
All my Relations
Ho!

Granola Funk Theater under construction, Idaho 2001. Photo by Rob Savoye.

Granola Funk Theater playbill, Idaho 2001. Photo by Grey Eagle.

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.

Water Is Life (Water Is Alive)

Pre-Gathering Seed Camp, June 2018
Chattahoochee National 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.

Hugs and Conversations
(Farther Along the Same Path)

47th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chattahoochee National Forest, Georgia, 2018

Another sticky, steamy day
in utopia!
Sitting by the trail all day
memorizing 827 names,
falling in love
with a lovely young sister
every six minutes or so,
waiting so long in the outer ring
at dinner circle
that the first course to arrive
is dessert—

(like seeing a rainbow
before the rain,
like calling out "Thank you!"
a heartbeat after the voice
of the forest whispers,
You're welcome)

○

Flakes of mica glinting through the grass
wherever grass grows

○

I measure time and distance here
by hugs and conversations:
It took me six conversations and fourteen hugs
to make it to Kiddie Village, how far
have you traveled today?

Arriving with my sack of tomatoes
safe in plastic clamshells,
I made my offering to one of the sisters
who feed the children.

She pointed to a stack of
identical clamshells
lining the side of the supply tent
and grinned. I added
half a dozen more to my sack
and wandered on.

At Instant Soup they were thrilled
to see tomatoes
but had some bread they couldn't use
because it wasn't gluten-free
so I loaded my empty sack again
and wandered on.

○

Farther along the same path,
the people I passed a ways back
come strolling by
in a gentle mist of rain
where I've stopped for conversation
and shelter.
Next time I see them
they're the ones who've paused
to socialize beside the path
as I pass by—
no matter what holy pilgrimage
or mission of madness you're on,
whatever you do,
slow down to the pace of the trees,
don't miss the moment
you're passing through

○

Safe in leaf-duff camouflage, the toad
you can only see when it moves
or blinks

○

A new team sport!
Pitching a rock over a lofty limb
with a string attached
to hoist a banner explaining
how to care for the forest—

Give us this day
our daily workout!
Hauling a load of groceries in,
bags of trash back out—

Rattle of pots and pans
at the dish station,
chitchat over suds and soot—

A new revolutionary slogan:
Working for free is more fun!

○

At the town meeting,
the county sheriff stood up and lied
right into his microphone.
Trash left behind in the woods?
These woods are cleaner now
than before we came!
Some of the trash we found
has lain here so long it's considered
an artifact, illegal to toss
in the garbage!

Every trail this morning
is muddy and pristine.
No accident. For every thoughtless
or distracted set of fingers
casually letting go of what
no longer serves, at least one
pair of eyes is watching
for the tiniest scrap of microtrash.

○

Contusions and abrasions,
scrapes and booboos,
poison ivy and chigger-bites,
the occasional copperhead
or timber rattler strike—

Feed those medics well,
brothers and sisters!
Send a runner with some extra
dessert!

○

Flock of black-winged damselflies
trailing long thin bodies
of electric blue

○

"We're on the Rainbow Trail right now,"
says a little guy with loose wild hair
walking in front of me
on one of the random tracks we've made
traveling single file through the high grass
across the meadow

○

A shitter with a view!
The roll of toilet paper that got away,
unspooling down the steep
shitter trail—

We will be known
someday
to archeologists of the future
as "The People Who All
Shit in One Place"

Dance and play
while the weather is fine,
tomorrow
you'll be digging a shitter in the rain!

○

A brother in a wheelchair
who chose
to miss his very first chance
to hold hands with his newfound family
in a circle on the Fourth
so another brother could borrow his wheels
to join the circle one last time—

○

A young dog tethered
to a tree beside the trail
watching anxiously for one
particular face
among the passing multitude

(Reminds me of the snakebit pup
who saved two kids
from a copperhead, saved
in turn by an herb-wise
midwife)

○

Striped curve of fan-shaped fungus
like a grey-brown butterfly pausing
on a stick beside the trail

○

Dark-thirty.
Lusty strumming and singing
spilling down the hill from Granola Funk—
jazzy wordless *a cappella* riffs
with finger-snapping percussion
drifting from the Katuah heart-fire—
Rice Krispie treats and
blueberry cobbler fresh from the oven,
a choice of desserts, except here
I don't even have to choose—
Now you're spoiling me again!

And then the ultimate luxury
out here in the woods:
fresh, hot, soapy dishwater
provided by some loving
anonymous soul

○

Crickets fill the night
with rhythm
accompanying every act
of the Rainbow Variety Show
onstage
in this moonlit hilltop meadow

Thunder of a military chopper
circling in the dark
above the thunder of the drums
around the heart-fire,
interrupting the rhythm and rhyme
of Spoken Word Open Mike
at We-Home kitchen

○

Friendly lights
passing in the darkness,
friendly voices passing
without a flashlight,
clusters of young folk
talking and laughing
in the cool of night
at every bend of the road—

They're here to lead the way

Better get busy and
train your replacement!

○

There is only one world
but two ways of seeing:
from inside the tent
it's all beautiful and amazing,
filled with mysterious light.
Step out into that light
and you are the mystery,
that beauty and amazement
hidden inside you all along.

○

May your path wind steadily
upward,
a little less steeply
than this trail up to Fat Kids kitchen—

○

A long streak of foxfire
lighting up a phosphorescent stick
floating eerily down
the dark path in someone's
invisible hand

○

By the last day of the Gathering
we've got this down,
we could go on forever

Here in our natural habitat,
the state of nature,
every color, creed, and culture
sharing the forest,
dining room in the meadow,
living room among the trees,
at home in sunshine and rain-shower
alike—

Now it's time to break camp,
disappear these trails, recycle the garbage
and go

Vow of Silence

47th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chattahoochee National Forest, Georgia, 2018

Take that first step
into the Silence, even if only
to visit the latrine

You can't quite gauge the depth
of the Silence
till you hear two voices
blithely chatting away, unaware

Silent blessings
on my neighbor who sneezes,
silent giggles
at my neighbor who snores—

A solitary drumbeat reverberating
between the ridges
till it seems to come from every direction
at once—

The inevitable dogfight, accompanied
by the usual chorus
of human barks and howls—

Until you learn to hold the Silence,
you can't hear the Silence

Listen! It's right there
inside you
always

If silence isn't part of your religion,
what about respect
for the observance of others?

The Circularity Is Coming!

47th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chattahoochee National Forest, Georgia, 2018

Such a deal!
down at the trade circle, a hug
for a hug . . .

I wish I could reach
all the way around this meadow
and gather everybody here
in one gigantic hug!
I wish I could hold
every single hand at once!
Luckily, all
of my sisters and brothers
have arms and hands too,
extending my reach all the way
around the sun
and back—

A hug is the smallest circle,
a living fractal
of that moment when we all
touch and hold
for one electric moment
the current of love that connects us all,
everywhere,
always.

A family is a circular being
like a planet.
Most of the time you can't see
the whole thing at once.
That's why humans launched themselves
into space, to look back
over our shoulders and see
where we came from.

That's why we instinctively converge
in the biggest meadow we can find
to hold hands in a circle:
because we came from
a circle and to a circle
we return.

But instinct is evidently not
enough.
The concept of a circle is beautiful
in theory, powerful
in esoteric doctrine, perfect
in mathematical precision,
but this hungry dinner circle crowd
hasn't quite grasped it yet.
Look around:
it's not a circle till you can see
every face!
It's not complete until we all
link hands!
No trailing ends. No lonely
disconnected arcs. No spirals.
Yes, hippies can form a simple
geometric configuration
in the meadow!
A single self-bounded
energy circuit, grounded
in the Georgia clay
beneath this meadow grass,
and even that leftist conspiracy
"thumbs left."
Yes, it can be done!

(But the servers get the best view
after the circle breaks up
and the food starts on its way
around)

Love circulates through this crowd
like blood through a body,
like water through its cycle—
gas, liquid, solid.
Eyes, voice, heart.
Open your arms, accept this gift,
pass it on.

Finally, on the Fourth, it happens.
In the Silence, no one
bellowing out guidance or instructions,
we line the undulating edge
of the meadow,
shady side to sunny, our ragged
circumference slowly stretching out
and stepping back
as more hands join
until we reach the uneven perimeter
of trees, two circles
finally touching,
holding an identical Silence, suddenly
One.

A family is a circular being
like a rainbow!
It's that rare moment
when we can see the whole thing all
at once, the way the rainbow
only shows itself complete
to eyes aloft on wings. Once
you've seen it, who could ever
forget? Seven colors. Innumerable
shades and tints and hues
between. One circle
circumscribing the visible spectrum,
the chromatic splendor
of ordinary daylight, the diversity
of unity, the family
that lives in light.

In Spirit House

47th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chattahoochee National Forest, Georgia, 2018

Imagine!
Anyone might show up
in our circle on the Fourth,
anyone at all . . . except
the ones enshrined here
in Spirit House.

Within these open walls
of fallen branches
lashed upright
in a circle on the grass,
in the circular shelter
of a parachute,
we remember
looking back.
We reflect
looking ahead.
Our turn will come.
And no one is truly lost
as long as someone remembers.
All these missing ones are gathered
into our circle after all.

When I die
just toss my ashes in the shitter—
not all at once,
just a scoop at a time
to repel the flies
and keep the family healthy

(Though I scattered Paisley's
in the heart-fire instead,
my last stop before heading up
the trail and out
to the lost, forgetful world)

Grace for Bandits

47th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chattahoochee National Forest, Georgia, 2018

> "Musician, play this moment's music as grace
> for those who block our road, grace for
> bandits!"
>
> Rumi

Free people instinctively know
which laws to ignore,
which ordinances and regulations are unjust,
unnecessary, specifically targeted
at freedom.

Law enforcement officers instinctively
seem to fear free people.
They might act
like adolescent bullies, but only
under the color of law,
forgetting the rules that don't quite apply,
ignoring the ones that limit
their discretion.

Sometimes the only way
to declare your independence
from the bulldozers and chainsaws
is to hike deep into the wilderness
that remains.

"Freedom isn't free,"
as the bumper sticker says.
Sometimes the price of freedom
is an illegal search
without probable cause
at an unconstitutional roadblock
where immoral statutes of corrupt republics
are enforced by lawmen
breaking the law in broad daylight.

Sometimes you have to walk six miles
carrying all your gear
to escape the tyranny of television
with its goosestepping ads,
the dictatorship of cash registers
and credit cards, the despotism
of the internal combustion engine.
Freedom is a muscle that grows stronger
with exercise, not a virus
you can catch from a website about freedom.

Sometimes the only way
to proclaim your emancipation
from the war against love
is to hug every stranger you see.

Freedom doesn't shelter you from the rain,
but the rain scares away
the thugs in uniform,
and navigating the mud makes you stronger.
Building a fire when the wood is wet
makes you smarter—
next time you'll unroll that extra tarp.
And sawing through each dead
fallen branch you dragged out of the woods
to keep your family warm
keeps you not only warm but free.

The Nazis convicted at Nuremberg all
pled innocent.
They were only following orders.
The Lumpkin County deputies, Georgia State
Patrolmen, and Forest Service LEOs
who gathered to harass and intimidate
a Gathering of free people
on the taxpayers' dime
have at least caught a glimpse of freedom.
They can no longer claim innocence.

Make a Joyful Noise

48th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chequamagon-Nicolet National
Forest, Wisconsin, 2019

Calling in
the four directions
to consecrate the dawn:
birdsong . . . banjo . . .
yapping dog . . . voices
from the shitter behind my tent—

*

Carrying poetry
deep into the woods, bound
into a book,
captive in a clear
ziploc bag,
but still untamed—
like a long drink of cool
sweet water
pumped from the lake,
filtered and sealed
in stainless steel, but
forever wild,
replenishing the water table
within

*

Silver crescent
low on the horizon, tilted
over the dark treeline

Red-gold flame and coals
in the heart of the heart-fire

Bagpipes swirling around the drums

Euphoric devotees of the moon goddess
Euphoria, wildly dancing
with living flickerings of flame
as the drummers pound out
their joyful noise
to the fire goddess
Joy—

*

The young dogs
don't know any better.
The young folks tethered to them
by leash or rope
don't know much more.
But only the untethered,
human or canine,
walk these trails imagining
we wander alone.

*

"Emancipation from Babylon"
means liberation from grocery stores,
shovels and saws, cooking pots,
flashlights and batteries, fancy
tents, sturdy tarps, cars and highways,
cell phones and towers,
the omnipotent
internet itself—

Emancipation of the heart,
on the other hand, requires only
redemption from that old heartache,
the lonely striving to belong
to a world crammed with illusions
of belonging

*

First light— some drummers
don't know when to quit!
This one's been waiting patiently all night
to take a solo—

*

Kids shrieking and squealing,
chasing each other
with water balloons
in the hot sun, getting wet,
no one getting hurt—
(but then afterward,
all these colorful
fragments of rubber
in the grass . . .)

*

The drumming drops off, pauses
but never stops completely,
as if it's only me that goes away
between gatherings, as if
the crowd of voices hollering
"We love you!"
and the crowd that hollers it back
across the meadow at midnight
never actually stopped
loving me—

*

Black dirt trail, weaving
through a stand of birch

Jazz and brunch at Kid Village—
in the background,
a tent coming down

In the end we learn
if we're lucky
the very first lesson:
just being here together
is enough

Cook-Smoke

48th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chequamagon-Nicolet National
Forest, Wisconsin, 2019

What do you do out there all week
in the woods, anyway?

Well, before we pray
and after, we take turns
feeding each other—
prepping veggies, flipping pancakes,
tending the oven-fires,
serving the crowd at Main Circle,
scrubbing pots and utensils—
what else are we here for
in this bountiful world
but to take care of our family?

Rainbow chefs at work
under billowing tarps,
cook-smoke blown shimmering
on the morning breeze
through slantwise
shafts of sun—

Puppies dragging their leashes,
pygmy goat on a rope,
banjo hanging by its strap
from a forked branch, teenager blowing
a ram's horn for the hell of it,
getting the hang of it—
people scattered on blankets and logs,
sleeping, talking, strumming,
not waiting, exactly, but ready
any minute to line up
at the bliss rail again
for the next round—
"Free food in the woods!"

Shitter Magic

48th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chequamagon-Nicolet National
Forest, Wisconsin, 2019

1.

In the last of twilight I tracked down
a not only flat but level
and miraculously unoccupied
patch of grass
just big enough to pitch my tent,
made camp
on the verge of the dark—

Didn't discover till I came home
around midnight that I was camped
at the edge
of that no-man's-land
where tie-dyed tourists and water-shamans,
pipeline warriors and spare-changers
squat as equals
over the shitter.

Checking it out next morning I found
five slit trenches
used up and filled in again,
a sixth still in use,
brim-full and about to overflow . . .
Luckily I didn't need it
just yet.

2.

Never too old to dig a shitter
in my pajamas!
At least not yet.
Once again, it's my morning meditation
on the Fourth.

The dirt is rich and moist and easy, at least
between the roots—
but these roots are the toughest
I ever tried to chop through
with a shovel-blade.

Finally, about three feet down,
the first rock:
a water-rounded hunk of glacial till,
so hospitably
cooperative
compared to the roots . . .

3.

So much depends
on some young brother or sister
stepping up
to carry it on as we old folks grow older
and vanish one by one
into the dark
to nourish the roots
of the living . . .

Or, in this case, two brothers
and a sister
who digs like she smells buried gold
or chocolate!

A lesson in the seemingly impossible:
just begin.
If the goal is worthwhile,
someone will show up
precisely when
you're ready to fling your shovel away
cursing the dirt.

4.

The secret of success
at the shitter,
as in just about everything, is to wait
till the moment is ripe.
Remove pants. Remove skirt.
Remove underwear.
Squat in the ancient *asana*
of elimination.
Pay close attention to movement
and murmurings within.
And then, whatever you do,
don't miss!

5.

How come only one species
has to wipe its behind?
Agriculture.
How come only one
feeds an arrogant One Percent
with delicacies
grown by the rest of us?
Agriculture.

6.

Blister at the base of my thumb
scabbed over and
almost forgotten
till the moment I stand here wondering
how the shitter I helped to dig
could have moved
eighteen inches or so
sideways . . .
Till it dawns on me: that one's
long since used up, filled and covered.
This one right next to it must be
the latest model.
My turn at last.

Under the Tarp

48th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chequamagon-Nicolet National
Forest, Wisconsin, 2019

Have you noticed?
The weather forecast is 100% accurate
50% of the time.
The weather itself,
on the other hand, is always precisely
correct.

Standing here under the tarp
looking around at the rainy woods,
I am of the world
but not in it. Life is good!

Under the tarp at Info,
at Kid Village,
at Turtle Soup, casual talk
braids the loose threads
of random lives
into a circle
while the rain rants and mutters
and finally dies to a whisper,
a feral language older
than this glacier-sculpted terrain:

Life is never so good
that it can't get better.

The Feast of Gratitude

48th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chequamagon-Nicolet National Forest,
Wisconsin, 2019

Are you sure it's not illegal
to have this much fun?
Circling for dinner
in a sprinkle of rain, waiting for
the serving wagons and wheelbarrows
loaded with steaming pots of food
to make their rounds
between our concentric
circles on the grass—

Creature with a thousand empty stomachs
sprawled here in the meadow,
a thousand empty cups and bowls and plates
overflowing with the feast
of gratitude

All these youthful faces, unknown to me
yet so familiar,
dreadlocks, navel rings, tattoos
catching the wane of daylight like a field
of flowers in bloom

Joking and gossiping,
finger-picking the theme song
of a sitcom canceled
long before they were born,
trading instruments in mid-jam,
standing and joining hands
when it's time at last to circle
and sing
like it's the only reason they came—

Creature with a thousand open mouths
singing the divine chord
Om
in a thousand mortal voices
from a thousand open hearts

At last it arrives,
my three-course, five-star,
field-gourmet meal:
I mix together helpings
of beets and lentils,
then salad and macaroni, finally
two kinds of soup
with a dinner roll
(and on the other side of the circle,
something else
entirely, no doubt—)

Are you absolutely positive
it's not illegal
to have this much fun?

Dinner Circle, Wisconsin 2019. Photo by Henry the Fiddler.

Peace to the World

48th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chequamagon-Nicolet National
Forest, Wisconsin, 2019

Silence in the meadow.
Silence in the woods.
Silent maze of trails.
Silent village of tents.
Silent cooks
in silent kitchens.
Silent people
smiling, hugging, praying, meditating . . .
Peace
at last
on this embattled Earth?
Why not?

The sleep-in meditation . . .
(Bhakti yoga)
The sun-bath meditation . . .
(Raja yoga)
The cell-phone-trance meditation . . .
(Jnana yoga)
The whispering-first-aid meditation . . .
(Karma yoga)

Yes, we're all here, each
observing our own Silence on the Fourth,
a fragmented circle
groping toward unity
as we arrive one by one in the meadow
and the sun reaches toward noon—
hands stretching out
for hands, little by little closing the circuit
of living energy, joining our many
silences into One—
a reverse prism, gathering all the colors
in a single beam of clear white light,

radiating more
than the sum of our hearts,
projecting a cosmic ray into space
where a bright hot disk burns
against the blue—
one heart on Earth, one in the sky, each
pumping life through a living
circle of family.

Gunshots? No, just
some adolescent firecracker prank,
forgotten a minute later
when thunder growls like an angry god
beyond the horizon.
Heavy dark clouds crowding in
to shade our sunburns, or
to douse our campfires? No, just
a cooling mist of spray
across our steadily expanding circle . . .

Peace to the world
beyond this meadow!
Peace to the Earth
turning under our circle!
Peace to the Mother
who gave birth to all these
bellybuttons!
(Peace to my own beloved mother
who lies peacefully dying
eleven hundred miles away
on this random day in July.
It's a good day to die.)

And right on cue, the Kids' Parade
marches in to pop the Silence
like a giant bubble, a new
generation of bellybuttons
taking its proper place: the center
of a mighty circle
sounding the *Om*.

The Wind Goes Where It Wills

for my mother, Carol Ann Wise Wingeier
June 21, 1930 - July 4, 2019

Who is that, slipping
invisibly away
between the leaves?

The wind passes high
in the trees,
a restless murmur traveling through
to parts unknown,
and the trees toss their heads—

Tears have nothing to say
about her silence at the end
after long life.
Her smile said everything.

Every so often, stirring
nervously, these
lower branches catch the rumor
of vast, unimaginable
distances—

And then her breathing just
peacefully stopped
when she'd seen or heard from each
and every grandchild.

Above the treetops
against a clear blue
emptiness,
the wind passes over
unseen.

One Useful Thing

48th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chequamagon-Nicolet National
Forest, Wisconsin, 2019

No place to plug in my phone out here,
so I left it in the car.
At every turn of the trail another place
to plug myself in
and recharge my heart!

At least one useful thing per day
is my pledge:
dumping an overflowing
compost bucket into the pit,
hanging a few signs along the trail,
hauling an armload of timber slabs
(formerly G-Funk Theater)
to the firewood pile at the heart-fire,
unknotting a rope
left behind in a tree
by my recently decamped neighbor,
helping a sister haul her gear
out to the road—

A dedicated core
and a willing multitude
can do anything, it seems.
When will the world finally
catch on?

Among the Creatures

48th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Chequamagon-Nicolet National
Forest, Wisconsin, 2019

1.

Tent unzipped,
I sit
daring the mosquitos
just to be part of a world
undivided by netting
as long as I can stand it—

Swarming dragonflies
patrol the meadow
to feed on the mosquitos we've been
feeding

Sun streams down over the ridge
of deep green shadow,
lighting up the translucent green
of this leafy valley
where the grass and ferns
on the flattened tent-sites of my
departed neighbors
are slowly straightening up
to salute the day

A tiny maple tree
with just two leaves
holds its ground among the towering
ferns

2.

Through my tent-netting one morning
I counted six baby slugs
making themselves at home
under my rain-fly—

On my last morning,
flipping the tent over on its head
to let it dry underneath—
at least two dozen more,
all sizes, only one
squashed and dried. I deposit each
on its own leaf.

Unclipping the tent from its poles—
through the netting
a trapped moth
fluttering in the folds. I crawl
back inside, try to herd it
toward the door—
Suddenly it lands on my thumb,
stays there
just long enough for a glimpse
of its blue-brown glory
before I make it to the door and it flies
free—

Every creature
of the creation has its purpose
for being here, it seems . . .
Only one even has to ask
the question

3.

Back at the trailhead,
loading the car to go—
two unbathed hippies in unwashed clothes
sort through the dripping, stinking
bags of garbage
piled here by the road . . .
"Hey brother, can you take home
a couple bags of recycling?"
I can. I will. And like all the best
hugs, it's impossible to tell exactly who
hugged who
first.

Correction: only one creature
has the option of listening
to all the other creatures
of the creation
for clues

Info Center, Wisconsin. Photo by Henry the Fiddler.

Fifty Years On Down That Same Dirt Road . . .

50th Anniversary Rainbow Family Gathering
Routt National Forest, Colorado, 2022

Plunging into a field of yellow flowers
blooming knee-high
to the horizon, where the green jutting
pyramid of a mountain rears up
to anchor the dangling Earth
to the Colorado sky,
we finally ease to a stop
and turn off the car.
Deep beneath our tires, a seed
of Silence
cracks open in the dark.

The trail is a twin black ribbon of mud
between dripping trees
and more crowds of yellow flowers,
as if they've congregated here
for a better view
of the parade. Puddles lurk
in the low spots, reflecting the twilight,
indistinguishable from the mud
until I take that fatal step.
(Is that rustling I hear the titter
of a thousand flowers?)

Everyone we meet is happy to see me
though nobody knows me,
even the ones I swear I recognize
from other trails,
other magical passages
into enchanted twilight.
Between calls of "Welcome Home!"
"Howdy folks!" "Hey-ho!"
and "How's it going?"
a pale root-tip of Silence pushes out
through the crack.

ꕥ

High above my tent, the aspen leaves
ripple in the wind,
sending down little aftershowers
on my rain-fly
like flurries of percussion
from God's timbales . . .

People lived here
in this forest of aspen
in this high mountain valley
for thousands of years, give or take
a millennium.

To wake up here this morning,
all I had to do
was to leave certain things behind,
starting with anything
too heavy to carry.

Like those ancient people,
we congregate here to learn
how to live like the aspen—
the second-largest
living creature on Earth—
connected underground, out of sight,
into a single organism.

Underneath our banter and bickering,
our drumming, our dramas,
our reunions and reminiscences
and delirious declarations of love
across the valley,
a Silence is sprouting
deep in the soil toward the unseen
light of day.

ꕥ

Waking to the sounds of Kid Village—
"We need potato choppers!"
"Firewood please! Firewood for Kid Village!"
"How can I help?"
"Love you, family!"
— the hundreds of voices blend
like merging rivulets into one
rushing stream

If this Gathering is an organism,
Kid Village is its heart.
All these corpuscles
coursing along the trails,
circulating from camp to camp
were children once.
Somewhere under the earth, out of sight,
we remember.

These children
thoughtfully squishing the mud
between bare toes
while grownup boots tramp by
on the muddy path—

These children
who have not yet realized
what kind of world they will inherit,
this sacred bequest
we have fouled and squandered
and desecrated
in the act of passing it on
like our own forebears
before us—

These children
squealing on a swingset
of lashed logs,
testing the limits of centrifugal force—
bouncing on the seesaw,
discovering the joy of balancing
one another— that one
with blue-painted legs,
this one roasting a dead earthworm
on a stick—

The lost kid delivered to Info
by three kind strangers,
who gravely accepts a sticker
and a lollipop, and waits
till his frantic mom arrives
to burst into tears
(and the next day, grinning,
performs his crazy dance for us
at the Kids' Talent Show—)

These children
don't know yet how much
depends on them
as they grow up, carrying
the seeds of Kid Village
like a field of bright yellow flowers
somewhere inside—

Dormant memories
of this startling glimpse
of grownups actually sharing,
helping, cooperating,
like they're always nagging
their kids to do, as all humans
everywhere must learn to do
if our species
expects to survive—

(Relax, kids, no pressure!
No obligation! Just reach back
for those memories,
ditch the fallacies and flakiness
and press on
with whatever works . . .)

Testing the General
Theory of Relativity, I experiment
with a look, a smile, a word
for each and every relative I meet
along the trail
Then
a little girl trots by
beaming out the ultimate
irrefutable proof

Holding hands in a circle
is more than just
sacred geometry: it's the oldest
of human technologies, linking us
like the networks of mycelia
that transmit the intelligence of life
across the planet.

Not just through physical touch,
palm to palm, thumbs left
as the energy flows, but joined
in a living circuit
on every level— mental,
emotional, spiritual, and unknown
dimensions beyond.

We are already One.
Holding hands only reminds us
that applies all the way down
to the ground.

And the shoot of Silence
breaks through
into the light.

"Circle the wagons," it turns out,
was not a defensive strategy
against Indian attacks.
The pioneers only did it for company:
to share an evening campfire,
cook supper, eat and socialize.
The Native people of the prairies,
it turns out, only stopped by to visit
and do a little trading.

These young people
skipping or slogging or drifting
along the trails,
smiling cheerfully through the rain,
shining through tattoos
and mud-stained clothes,
where did they all come from?

They seemed to materialize
from the Akashic ether, already
knowing everything
it took us decades to discover—
alert and aware, ready to lean in
and do their share (even
a little of mine, if I fall short)

Look, there's one with two hens
tethered by cotton string
and a shaggy black dog, looking bored,
all tied to the same tree—

Their smiles and greetings seem
to amplify each other
exponentially, like lightning
electrifying the raindrops
into a throng of sentient sparks endlessly
reflecting each other—

Another walking a dainty
potbellied piglet on a leash, who refuses
to step into a mudpuddle
but dips its snout for a drink—

Their parade of faces, no two alike,
framed in every imaginable style
of clothing and hair,
every shade of skin,
refracts a rainbow arching invisibly
upward into the sun—

Now one with an orange cat
slung in a baby-carrier on his back,
another with a grey songbird
glancing around from his shoulder, amazed
at this 50th Anniversary
Gathering of the Species

Their voices call out
in cheerful slang and profanity,
trading songs across the fire,
echoing between the mountains
like that comfortable quiet that only falls
between old friends . . .
and the sprout of Silence
unfurls leaves,
greedily
gathering sunlight.

People from everywhere
I would never meet anywhere else,
a tide of strangers
blinding me with solar-powered
high-wattage grins— then,
every so often,
the sudden hallucinatory flash
of someone I actually know
and the muscles in my face
stretch a little farther
yet

These elder brothers and sisters
topped with snow
like a Colorado peak
hold no authority
by virtue of years, only respect
for the way each has put
those years to use,
summer after summer,
and for still,
despite the years, showing up
for one more—

Even if they can no longer
hike the long trail
up the mountain,
camping together down on the road,
even if they quarrel
and kvetch and complain,
it was their vision, their sacrifice
that made this breathtaking
impossibility
between two mountains
as real as the mountains themselves
fifty years on
down that same dirt road.

They have given everything to this.
Their strength and intelligence,
hearts and hands,
even their heroic misjudgements
and arrogant missteps,
each hard lesson an evolutionary leap
enshrined in tradition.
Repeat at your own risk!

Because in the end, growing old
is the best-case scenario,
isn't it?

And the ones we have lost
gather with us still,
join our circles, stand firm among us
on the solid earth
of one undeniable fact:
we still gather.
They're still here
in these fuzzy, faded snapshots
tacked up in Spirit House,
in these two urns of ashes
we circle
to honor and inter
in the trampled grass of Main Meadow,
most of all in the tales
of tribal legend
that pass from voice to voice,
generation to generation
like a feather
traveling hand to hand.
And once more
their voices rise clear and strong
as the Silence
begins to break at last
into bud.

Because this grief we feel
is just the afterlife of love, proof
of eternity, isn't it?

ꕥ

"Hey, long time no see,
are you hugging?"

What a blessing
to lean on one another
for a spell,
holding each other
up, a brief
or extended reprieve
from the gravity of living,
not to mention
the raging pandemic of fear
in this time of viral
separation—

"May I breathe
over your shoulder
for a moment, please?"

(And at Everybody's Medical,
to my relief, this time negativity does
pull me through)

Every smile, every greeting, every hug
adds one more golden stitch
to the tapestry of light—
the luminous embroidery of this Gathering—
of this world— of my life
wandering the trails of Planet Earth

ꕥ

Under the ghostly rainbow of the Milky Way
scattered specks of light
slowly wind across the dark meadow,
tracing the random twists
of midnight trails

At the heart-fire, the pounding drums send ripples
of rhythm to the farthest shores
of the ocean of stars
while the dancers surf those waves of sound
and even the bonfire
shimmies and sways,
waving its arms in the air

In the distance, meanwhile,
silent flashes of lightning outline the niche
between two dark mountains . . .

Next morning
the thunder finally comes, a single
startling crack
reverberating peak to peak across the Silence
of a cloudless sky like the echo
of a single slap
on the Goddess's djembe

Is She yelling at us,
or was that only laughter?
The breaking day answers
with a thousand sunlit smiles

ꕥ

Exactly
half a century
since the fireworks first fell silent
on the Fourth of July,
I wake up surrounded
by the sound-burst of Kid Village, and set out
in search of Silence.

Wouldn't you know it, the most silent camp
is the Library!
(where later today I'll witness a brother
expertly extracting
"The Star-Spangled Banner" from a banjo
with a fiddle-bow.)

"Dog out!" crashes
through the Silence like a curse
or a prayer
to the goddess of kitchen hygiene.

The noisy ones don't count.
No oblivious voice can penetrate this quiet.
No desperate need to interrupt the grownups
can disrupt a focused intent
to hold Silence.
A spontaneous burst of laughter
can only feed the joy.

We who walk in Silence know
how to talk in Silence.
Communication gives way to communion,
entire languages condensed
to a glint in the eyes, a signal flickering
heart to heart.
And the buds of Silence split open
and burst
in a thousand
blossoming hearts.

As the Sun's clear light
contains all the colors,
the pure music of Silence
combines every voice
that could sing but holds back,
every song that patiently waits
to be sung . . .

Assembling out of the human world
to spread out
in concentric circles
across the meadow, the Family arrives
for its annual blooming.
Crowding in one by one, a vast bouquet
of multicolored scented petals:
some in fur and buckskin, some only
dressed in a suntan . . .
One sitting with eyes closed,
back straight, palms up,
one twirling a hoop around her hips . . .
One stepping eagerly across thistles and sage
into a long silent hug . . .
A barefoot dancer channeling the secret music
of acres of skunk cabbage . . .
A child missing a tooth, carrying a sign
saying "Love one another"
in silence through the crowd,
the grownups around him who can't help
whispering . . .
A beautiful naked sister
offering sunscreen, squeezing into my palm
no more than my share,
her smile an overflowing
basket of sunshine—

(Those who shout from the other end of the meadow
craving someone's outraged
attention, as if Silence were merely
the absence of sound, love
no more than abstaining from hate,
they only donate their grief and pain
to be absorbed
and dissolved
in the healing balm of Silence.)

We gather here representing the Whole
of Humanity.
So many faces from back home
belong here!
So many who may never make it
out of the city
but hold this circle sacred in their hearts . . .
So many more who never even
imagined it!
And so it is. The instant they light up
smiling
in my mind, they're here, too.
Welcome Home, family!

The *Om* arises and sweeps
across our circle
like an enormous swarm of bees
erupting out of Silence, up
from the grassy Earth, taking flight
in every direction
to pollinate the planet
with jubilant voices lifted to the sky:
a single shimmering moment
that lasts an hour, afloat on eternity
as we take turns breathing in
and singing out
the harmony we offer to the world
and simultaneously seek
within ourselves—

And deep inside us as we hike back out
to the road and the world,
the Silence we came here
to free from its seed
begins to bulge and swell and grow
plump, sweet and juicy,
and the next
generation of seeds
begins to form . . .

. . . And the Rest Is Mystery

54th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Mark Twain National Forest, Missouri, 2025

1.

Deep in the jungles of Missouri
at the junction of two long muddy trails,
in a grove of old-growth pawpaw trees
under a wild crescent moon,
the four directions all arrived at once
by the most far-fetched coincidence
from their infinitely far-flung
points of the compass, and met
precisely here, delighted as always
with yet another impromptu
reunion—

And precisely here, where
that improbable *X* marked the spot,
drawn by an equally serendipitous
synchronicity and an irresistible
tingling of the navel, a tribe
of nomads and pilgrims and rebels
and aging flower children on vacation
began to congregate one by one
from their own disparate and diverse
quadrants and dimensions
of space and time to play
another round of that age-old game,
"Relativity" . . .

Hey kids, I've got an idea!
Let's get all the amazing people we know
together in one place,
and all the amazing people they *know,*
and see what happens!

2.

So much beauty,
every possible kind!
Young women and men,
all smooth muscle and extravagantly
ornamented skin,
looking out through the eyes
of the ages—
Children shining with pleasure
through their facepaint—
Elder couples
out for an evening stroll
among the brambles and briars,
arm in arm—

A Chinese couple chatting away
in Mandarin, matching metal cups
dangling at their belts—

Dancing boy, a twin-flame twirler
in a cowboy hat—

HomeShalom family singing
their daily prayers,
Jesus Camp offering baptisms
down at the river—

Meanwhile, Main Trail Medical
needs footwashing tubs
for all the bare feet bruised
by these rocky trails, lacerated
by these thorny paths—

Every year it's a different Family
that gathers, depending who shows up
Every year more young folks arrive
for their first Gathering
Every year fewer silver-haired old-timers
make it to their last

3.

This gathering is a journey
down the long smooth ribbons of dried mud,
through occasional swamps
of desperate footprints, where a black hole
lurking in the wetness tried to swallow one
unwary traveler after another . . .

Deep-fried donut holes
served fresh along the trail—

Two big German Shepherds,
with a definite dash of husky, harnessed
side by side, goofy grins
across their snouts, pulling a wagon
down the trail—

"Ant Crossing!" marked
with a tiny sign, staked out
between towering barricades of twigs
across the trail—

We travel together
to our separate destinations
up and down the trail,
laughing as we go—
Or we travel alone, but pause
to trade life stories
with every traveler we pass along the way—
each one exactly the person we needed
to meet, every conversation
exactly the one
we needed to have . . .

That's how we know it's not just a festival,
a get-together, a meet-up,
a convention, a conference, a crowd . . .
Yes! It's a Gathering!

That quiz-show game of remembering
everybody's name—
Yes, there will *be a quiz*
when the roll is called up yonder!
(Hey, nice to see you
lending your beauty to the day, smiling sister
whose name I instantly forgot . . .)

4.

Whose brainstorm was it anyway,
whose brilliant flash of lightning in the dark
to weed-whack through
that thick and thorny undergrowth
between the trees
down by the riverbank
to carve out a fine Main Circle
in the shade?

As the circle gathers for dinner,
one young brother has mastered
the backflip, or else was just spontaneously
overcome with the urge—

Wait, this tick traveling
up my right arm, did it crawl
from the hand I'm holding onto mine?
Is our dinner-circle *Om*
so transcendent that even the bugs are inspired
to embark on a holy pilgrimage
around the circle?

Then the after-dinner singalong
as twilight fades and the quarter moon
lingers in the sunset—

The First Nations
who did not invite us here but graciously
welcomed us anyway
would never have allowed this jungle
to grow chest-high,
choking the open woods.
And they wouldn't have needed
a weedeater,
electric or otherwise.
From coast to coast,
the natives of Turtle Island knew
how to shape the world they wanted
with the tools
of fire and tradition.

"Free food in the woods!"
the chiggers hollered to the ticks . . .
But the smart set never forgets
the ritual tick-check between friends
or even better, lovers
every night . . .

5.

Want to be part of something awesome?
Try silence!
Whatever you contend,
whatever I retort, it's only
one person's opinion.
But join this abstinence from sound
of every voice for miles around,
now that's one powerful
consensus! Unity
that sounds and resounds, vibrates
and reverberates, louder
than any bickering, brawling
controversy or debate—

That first *Om*, just before
the Kids' Parade reached the circle,
that was breathtaking.
But somehow the *Om* after the *Om*
draws a deeper breath out of me,
deeper than my diaphragm,
deeper than the taproots of feeling or thought,
deeper than the boundaries of empires,
deeper than the fire
at the center of the Earth
that melts all depth and distance
into One . . .
now those are some mighty
powerful little kids.

They can count our license plates
but not our webbed and interlacing friendships
They can limit our numbers
but not our ever-expanding example
Year by year the word gets out: there is
another way to live

6.

Walking the long trail
to the car and the gravel road
back to Babylon,
my home away from Home, I've learned:
never look back.
Wherever I go from here, it's a Gathering.
Whoever I meet is Family.
The game of Relativity goes on echoing
into infinity.

. . . And the rest is Mystery.

Relatively Speaking

55th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 2026

I head out on the rugged path
years of gully-washers
have gouged beside my tent.
When it crosses a black
plastic waterline, I turn left
and follow the water on
toward the kitchen, hoping
I haven't missed breakfast . . .

*

What, fireworks
on the Fourth of July?
No, just a spectacular
synchronized display
of lightningbolts and thunderclaps,
courtesy of the management
here on Planet Earth.

*

"That fuckin' Om *yesterday, that*
really was a good one!"

*

Rock 'n' Roll Rotini
at Stock Tots!
Diamond Dave might be gone,
but he hasn't gone far.

*

Selfishly I serve
this family that welcomes me
so faithfully and feeds me
so well—

*

"Am I on the Main Trail? Just curious . . ."

*

A village of visionaries!
Too good to be true?
That depends on you.
What did you bring
to stir into the pot?

*

Drums at the heart-fire
after supper, faces
reflecting the flames—
sixty or a hundred voices
singing in the meadow
around three little colored lights

*

"I'm going to rinse my feet again
even though I know they'll immediately
get muddy again."

*

Ever notice how the twigs
at the end of the branch
make perfect kindling,
and how the branch gets thicker
every time you break off
another piece
to build your fire?

*

They also serve
who sit in a chair and
untangle the rope
while others climb the ladder
raise the tarp and tie
the knots—

*

"If we rig this tarp right, it won't rain."

*

All through the late-night
variety show at Instant Soup,
a child sleeps on my blanket
through music and laughter
and applause, while vigilant feet
step carefully around him

*

Stainless steel dog bowl
catching rainwater
beside the trail—

*

"Anyone seen a big, dumb dog?"

*

An exuberant Jewish wedding
just down the trail— meanwhile,
waiting quietly on call
behind the Love Kitchen,
"Red Tent— A Safe Space
to Bleed and Be"

*

Wet branches above my tent,
leftover raindrops
tapping on my rain-fly—
from a nearby tree, woodpecker
tapping a reply

*

"Ocala? My parents used to go . . ."

*

The wild woods, transformed
into a busy neighborhood
and back again:
square patches of dry appear
amid the damp

Guns in the Church

55th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 2026

"Happy First of July!"
bellows the helicopter circling
low above the treetops
in that wordless language
of playground bullies everywhere,
joybuzzing the Gathering at nine a.m.,
blaring a cop-show siren
with schoolboy glee . . .

If we call it "Rainbow,"
every branch of the Family
is liable to show up, right?

A peace gathering is incomplete,
it seems, without a war party
parading through in uniform—
or more precisely, in costume,
fully accessorized with sidearms
and paintball guns, led by a character
in a white cowboy hat
just to clarify what kind of movie
these heroes are acting in.

What scares them the most, I wonder?
These tribes assembling so peaceably,
from hobos to herbalists?
The spectrum of subcultures flamboyantly
celebrating our differences?
The promiscuous display of freedom
like something natural,
as if individuals are born to become
whoever they decide to be?

Or maybe it's the living fractals
of kitchens and camps, each
a self-sufficient miniature gathering
with its own tarp and handwash,
popping up like toadstools overnight
along the twisting trails
as new folks arrive and add their own
personal variation on the theme
of endless variety, one more
unique and original branch
of the family tree, radiating
from the epicenter of joy . . .

"Illegal gathering?"
I know
a democratic government
at war with freedom everywhere
must promulgate a plausible excuse
to bully and besiege its own
freedom-loving citizens
who dare to assemble in peace
to pray for peace. I get that.
But officer, are you tripping?
Pretending to uphold the law
to justify a crime wave
of unconstitutional roadblocks
and illegal search and seizure
is sheer hallucination!

So how much does it cost
to circle a peaceful encampment
in a government gunship for half an hour
right around dark-thirty,
when Singer-Songwriter Night
is getting started at Granola Funk?

"Five thousand dollars,"
someone immediately answers
across the Info desk.

The pilot and the infrared photographer
just show up for work
when and where the order dictates.
They're probably earning extra pay
for night duty. But *work*,
according to my dictionary,
is any useful activity, paid or unpaid.
Volunteering in an outdoor kitchen
qualifies. Profiling and harassment
on a muddy forest road— or an icy
city street— does not. The amount
of monetary compensation is irrelevant.
What's relevant is the oath
both pilot and photographer swore
when they signed on to serve
as my public servant.
What's relevant is who
covers the payroll.
So how much does it cost me
to pay for my own
unconstitutional persecution?

In the exact spot
behind the Info supply tent
where a posse of armed officers
chased a brother down
just before Dinner Circle on the Third
and pinned him to the ground—
overnight, a massive pile
of oranges, bananas and watermelons
materializes right there
for the celebration on the Fourth!

(No miracle of manifestation, sorry,
just old-fashioned
muscle and determination.)

"Illegal gathering!"
I know
that's why your bosses
up and down the chain of command
sent you here to harass us.
But officer, why are you *harassing us?*

"I was only following orders,"
if you recall, turned out to be
an inadmissible alibi, no better
than a guilty plea.
But those were the orders
of a murderous totalitarian state.
In a constitutional democracy,
it might get you off the hook.
And what else can you do,
anyway, when "all enemies,
foreign and domestic"
just happens to incriminate
every bureaucrat in uniform
who hands down your orders,
rank upon rank
all the way to the top?

Dogshit on my shoe.
Ticks guzzling my blood.
Another cop-show chopper
roaring over my tent.
All in a day's fun
at the Rainbow!

In a Sacred Way

55th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 2026

The big storm
with its fifty-mile-an-hour winds
must have swept through some other
neck of the Pennsylvania woods—
this morning the Silence gradually
fills with tranquil sunlight
glistening on the beads of rain
with particular brilliance
for our sacred day.

All days are sacred, of course,
but why not pick just one
to practice on?
And on that day, why not practice
doing one simple thing
together
in a sacred way?

Joining a silent trickle
of latecomers in ones and twos
winding down Main Trail
toward Main Meadow,
up ahead I hear the hubbub
and commotion of the children
getting ready for their parade,
eager to join the ones already
waiting at the bridge.

Threading through the noisy
festive throng of painted kids
and moms and dads, I cross the creek
and enter a double row
of silent smiling grownups
lining the path into the meadow.
Passing through
the gauntlet of smiles, I step out
into the wide-open arms
of an enormous circle, stretching
to the far edges of the meadow,
and emerge
newborn
into the vast, breathing expanse
of the *Om*.

We are all related!
Why not pick just one week out of every
fractured, contentious year
to act like it,
just for practice?

Another Windy Day

55th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 2026

While trying to usher a flying bug
out of your tent,
one hand holding back the door flap,
the other fanning the air
to waft your befuddled guest
in the right direction,
did you ever get the feeling
a pair of giant invisible hands
is encouraging you too
along your way?

Radiance

55th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 2026

Why on Earth do we call this family
"Rainbow"?
The sun ducks behind a cloud.
We keep shining.
The sunlight sulks all day
under a cloak of overcast grey.
We keep shining.
The cloud lets loose a shower.
We keep shining.
The sun goes down at last
behind the hills
as darkness fills the valley.
And we keep shining.

Patience

55th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 2026

The moist green mossy log,
the soil's brown skin
of damp decaying leaves,
the soggy humans—
all of us are basking in the sun
we waited for all night.
Meanwhile, in the deep
shadow of the trees, some
are still waiting. It's all right.
The Earth keeps turning,
the sun keeps circling on
across the sky
on its slow steady way
toward another nightfall.
Everyone will get a turn.

We Survivors

55th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 2026

In this spacious field of waist-high
milkweed,
we summon the Monarchs
to lay their eggs
and hatch their young.

In these open woods among the broken trees
lost to tornado winds
just weeks ago,
we welcome the newborn pups
of the Long-Eared Bats
who nest in the decaying trunks
of the standing dead.

Because we too are endangered and surviving
despite the odds.
Because we too depend on this wild habitat
to propagate our kind.
Because we too
have something precious and beautiful
to pass on down
to generations yet to come.
Because we stubborn survivors are all in this
together.

Afterlife

55th Annual Rainbow Family Gathering
Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania, 2026

What was that old saying
about a pot of gold
at the end of the Rainbow?

Those first few Gatherings so long ago
I wandered lost and stunned,
ignorant and useless, gaping around
at things I never imagined could exist
but had kept on imagining
anyway—

These past few Gatherings I find myself
wandering again, lost again
but growing old, no longer ignorant
but feeling useless once more,
gazing around at things
that year by year have grown more real
than that imaginary world
where we all live
between Gatherings.

Everyone I meet along these trails
among the trees and meadows
here in the real world
is gentle, cheerful, helpful and kind,
every camp a brand-new welcome,
every campfire a fresh
musical medley—

I can think of only one thing
more amazing and wonderful than this:
that when I lie down at last
and let my last breath go,
this wonderful and amazing thing might go on
and on
without me when I'm gone.

Choose Your Note

Draw a breath.
Breathe in long and slow and deep.
Fill your lungs,
your heart, your mind,
your limbs
all the way to your toes and fingertips.
Breathe in the entire sky,
all the air and light you can hold.
Breathe in the peace
of the forest, the love
of this lush sunny meadow,
the green giving life
of the Earth.
Breathe in
the somber and serene and smiling
faces in the circle,
the warm embrace of hands
on your left and right.
Breathe in the silence
that held you breathless all morning.
Breathe it all in,
hold the spinning universe
absolutely still
for one unbroken moment
deep in your center.
Now
choose your note
on the human scale, claim your place
in the spectrum of voices,
breathe it all
back out again
and join the rising, falling, rolling
chorus
of the *Om*.

Idaho 2001. Photo by Grey Eagle.

To learn more about the Rainbow Gatherings:

www.welcomehome.org
www.bliss-fire.com
www.nyrainbow.org
www.weloveyoufilm.com

People of the Rainbow by Michael Niman
True Stories by Garrick Beck
Rainbow Gatherings by Butterfly Bill
Judge Dave and the Rainbows by David Sentelle
Rainbow Nation Without Borders by Alberto Ruz Buenfil

North Carolina 1987. Photo by Grey Eagle.

July 4, Nevada 1989. Photographer unknown.

July 4, West Virginia 2005. Photographer unknown.

About the Author

Stephen Wing has been traveling to Rainbow Gatherings for over four decades. Known as "Wing" at the Gatherings, he spent his twenties on the road, attending the Annual Gathering every July and numerous regionals throughout the South and Midwest. He helped to start Rainbow circles in three cities, worked on the 1988 and 1989 issues of *All Ways Free* (an annual newspaper for and about the Gatherings), took a turn publishing a Southeastern family newsletter, and published several articles about Rainbow in national magazines.

In 1990 he met his wife Dawn at a Southern Appalachian regional gathering and settled in Atlanta, his biggest gathering yet, where he continues to go by his Rainbow name. They married at the same gathering the following year. Wing still gathers with the regional Katuah Tribe every Summer Solstice and attends the July 4th Annual when he can.

Now retired, Wing has worked as an editor and coordinated the recycling at two different businesses, including the South's oldest and largest food co-op. Once each season he hosts his "Earth Poetry" workshop at a different urban greenspace. He serves on the boards of the Lake Claire Community Land Trust and Nuclear Watch South.

He is the author of five other books of poetry: *Four-Wheeler & Two-Legged* (1992)*; Crossing the Expressway* (2001, chronicling his hitchhiking years); *Wild Atlanta* (2023, poems about Atlanta's urban forests); *Washed in the Hurricane* (2024, poems about wilderness, wild nature in the city, and climate change), and *Honk If You're Awake!* (2026, four decades of political poetry). He is the creator of a line of original bumper stickers, Gaia-Love Graffiti, and has published numerous essays on ecology and human evolution in local Atlanta publications. A sampling of published work and recordings can be found at www.Stephen Wing.com.

About the Typeface

Prospera, the font used for the poetry in this book, is a digital typeface created by my good friend and Rainbow brother Petros (Peter Fraterdeus, www.fraterdeus.com) with the assistance of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Its first appearance in a printed book was my debut collection, *Four-Wheeler & Two-Legged: Poems*. Sadly, we lost Petros in the fall of 2020 to an inoperable brain tumor.