

# Journey to a Place Where the Air Is a Gift of Promise

*Prose poem in honour of North American Native Writers' Conference,  
Returning the Gift, Oklahoma, August, 1992*

A people without history is like the wind on the buffalo grass.

LAKOTA PROVERB

Their journey will be remembered as a sacred place where the voices of many tribes gathered to be one body and one spirit on this earth. The trek back to this centre started with the collective knowledge that we are slowly drifting away from the origins of our songs, stories, and dreams, the words that have their nests in trees, flowers, buffalo grass, stone, and river. We have come to Oklahoma country in the belief that the mound builders of this land will give our blood a new dream path if we thank our elders in a way that links all things to our recovery of the ritual dance of words. We have decided to sit in a circle and wait until the spirit helpers of the language and the land enter our chant like morning sunlight. We will watch for the tiny miracle of rain to show us the path to the clarity of the five senses. Then we will have a good reason to move like the wind swirls until the changes are a delight to every nerve.

We have travelled great distances to reach this lifeline of memory, family, and faith, to hold the thread that will lead us to our animal bodies, the field where the words will form from the mountain river that will rush before us like the wolves showing us the multi-faceted shield of survival in their songs. We carriers of the people's torch through the darkness know in our hearts that this circle we are weaving with the sinews of our lives for our children's children has a special purpose, meaning, and direction. We are waking up to the reality that the majority of the people around the world are almost completely indifferent to the destruction of the earth, sea, and air, and continue to deny the consequences of this destruction. It is becoming more plain to us now that they don't want to understand or appreciate the extent of our grief that circles the earth like the sea. We know that if we stand by and do nothing while this great mother dies, then

we will die with her. Our ancestors never imagined such an end could come to pass. Unfortunately, we recognize only too well that it could be our end. Thus we are here to ask the young not to mime the self-destruction they see each day. We, therefore, are here for our young people; we want to show them how important it is for us to find the path to those original songs, the ones embedded in rock and shell and bone, and that our reason for gathering the tribes this summer is to embrace our fear and ignorance and loss, thus prevent ourselves from being swept away by the plunder of the New World that wants to destroy not only our bodies but our songlines that have their heartbeats in the inner nature of Mother Earth.

So we came together to this festival carrying proudly the doubled-edged arrow of our vision. We have returned home to touch the deepest layer of our soul, and to tell our young that we don't want our bones or spirits to be found in the mass graves mushrooming across this land and beyond. Today we have watched the four corners of the earth become man's killing field. Who can remain blind to the way the world is becoming one giant grave, since the living creatures that inhabit each corner of the earth are not alive to any song of a green awakening or a greener repose? Thus we link hearts in our pilgrimage to the origins of our people.

We have learned in our long battles with loss and denial and defeat that what is most difficult to face is not ourselves, but the pain of the ancestors in our dreams. It is the agony we see in their eyes and hear in their keening that led us to the mound builders' sanctuary, the healing rainbow of ancestors. We are attempting again to live fully in the geology of our bones, in the stories of our cells. We have united in spirit to celebrate the myths and legends of our great-grandparents round dancing in our genes. We ask in our most humble way that tomorrow's life be only as honourable and as beautiful as the shawls and quilts of our sacred, but very real, guardians. We merged at this point on the medicine-wheel to fly like the erotic monarch butterflies migrating far south on the golden air streams of ecstasy. We have one last chance and we are taking it.

DUANE NIATUM