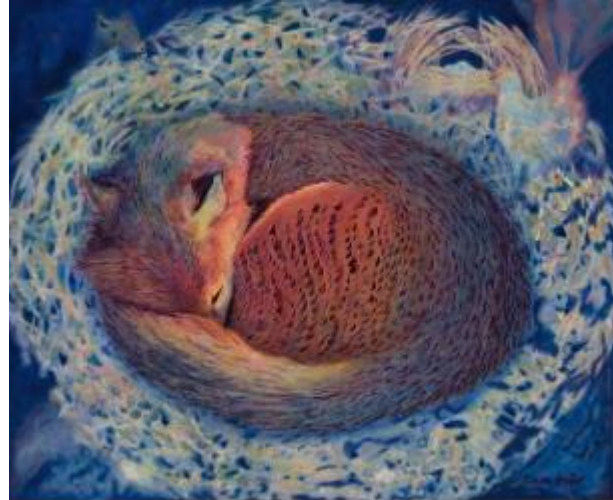


EARTH CELEBRATIONS¹

By Mary Miller Stair

On one autumnal equinox, when afternoon light was dancing with shadows, I remember groups of people at the north edge of the Sunshine Meadow of Botanical Gardens at Asheville clustered under the Basswood trees. At the eastern edge, others emerged from the gazebo, where they had sought shelter from the rain. At the southern edge Reed Creek babbled and gurgled, heading westward toward the French Broad River. Near the green bridge came sounds of someone playing a Native American flute.

[Eliza Hafer](#) was already in the meadow, opening a large black folio of her animal portraits. These were copies of what would soon be featured as the cover story in [The Laurel of Asheville](#).² Eliza had brought oversized editions of a black bear, two different birds, a fox, and a horse . . . all in autumn purples, gold, blue, black and maroon.



"Fox Dreams" © Eliza Hafer



"Rhapsody" © Eliza Hafer

I watched a middle-aged man reach for the portrait of the bear and hold it close to his chest. A young woman, blonde like the portrait of the golden horse, took it and paused for a time before turning the palomino to face the center of our circle. I saw she was crying. A child claimed the fox and, with help from dad, turned it for all to see: fox was curled up, sleeping in its lair. Two older women took the last two portraits: one a blue bird, singing silhouetted against a blazing sun, and the other a tiny hummingbird.

¹ "Earth Celebrations" were public solstice and equinox events held from 2005-2008 in Sunshine Meadow of the [Botanical Gardens at Asheville](#). "Earth Celebrations" was also the name for an association of artists, farmers and gardeners who co-created the events.

² *Laurel of Asheville*, December 2007, 24-25. Pictures in this article are reproduced with permission of Eliza Hafer.



"Hummingbird" © Eliza Hafer

We sang a farewell to summer. Someone passed around watermelon pieces to eat. We sang a welcome to autumn followed by a grapevine dance to light and dark. Around the circles came baskets of muscadines and hickory nuts to sample. We had a botanical show-and-tell about native plants still blooming followed by an equinox dramatization and a poem from beloved elder Tomas Meyer. Then silence. Silence was a customary part of each Earth Celebration. In it, we could pay more attention to where we were and why we were here. This particular evening the man with the black bear broke the silence.

"Look at this black bear, lumbering up the hill" he had gruffly spoken. "Black bear is hot and tired, dragging that powerful body and that coat of fur back up to the mountains. He doesn't want to be down here, in garbage cans and dumpsters. Black bear's habitat is up there!"

As he gestured westward, we followed his gaze, opposite where the sun was now setting, toward the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Southern Appalachians.



"Bear" © Eliza Hafer

"Black bear has lost his home!" the man with the gruff voice continued. "Lost his home to million-dollar houses! There's no law, no court to adjudicate for him or his mate and his cubs!"

An uncomfortable silence followed. In the space and stillness, one could notice a breeze, some birdsong, more burbling from Reed Creek. Into that stillness, the woman with the blue bird asked:

“Where was bright bluebird, this morning? Look at this bluebird, here singing loudly before a golden orb of sun. I didn’t hear her this morning! Not bluebird or cardinal or robin or sparrow singing. There I was, outside in my pajamas to hear the dawn chorus. Instead, everything was silent, until came that eerie screech of hawks. No squirrel chattering; no chipmunk scurrying. Screeching hawks instead!”

“Can’t these birds share space?” she asked no one in particular. “Must the biggest, loudest, meanest always take over?”

No one answered, waiting for another question.

“Where have the crows gone?” she asked. “There aren’t any crows to referee, to watch the air space, protect the small and keep the big ones in line.”

I wondered if this bird and bear talk might be too hard for the boy holding the fox? So I started singing “The Fox Song.”

The Fox went out on a chilly night and prayed to the moon to give him light.
He’d many, many miles to go that night, before he reached the town-o

The mood shifted as others began to sing along. A young mother with two small children began to dance in their own circle. The ceremony expanded to make a softer opening for the boy and his dad to speak.

“My son tells me this is a lucky fox “ explained the dad. “Fox gets to curl up in a safe place and sleep through cold weather.”

“And nobody knows where his den is” added the boy as we all looked at the portrait. “Fox is safe in the forest.”

It was then that Eliza walked into the circle and turned around a painting no one had seen. It showed a gaily-colored dancer, moccasin clad and dressed in feathers, ribbons, and bells.

“Do you remember Spring?” Eliza asked.

“Do you remember dancing barefoot, in wet grass”?

I remembered. That vernal equinox the drums and flutes began. From the nearby woods and down the hill came sounds of tambourines and bells. As late-comers appeared over the green bridge, barefoot young women arrived from the woods. They were dressed in flowing skirts, which moved with them to the music. They were definitely Nancy's belly dance class.³ But were they not also Persephone's Maidens welcoming spring? I watched bewildered boyfriends and parents who followed them and wondered.

The maidens danced into a circle within our circle, holding hands. When they opened their arms wide to invite us in, many from our circle started taking off their shoes! Steve Dixon, the [Asheville newspaper](#)⁴ photographer, captured it all. The next day, page two was covered with photos of bare feet, clasped hands, children, adults and two in wheelchairs, all in a circle in a meadow.

I turned back from those memories of spring to the autumnal evening before me. There was one in the circle before me still holding her animal ally, it was the blonde woman with the golden palomino. When she finally spoke, her voice was soft through her tears.

"The stables had to sell him," she said, showing us the portrait. "This was the horse I rode. They had to sell him . . . and all the others"

She began to cry again as she described evenings grooming him after their long trail rides in the mountains.

"It was that drought in August," she explained. "All the grain in the fields was drying up. That grain was their feed; it had to be watered. But the stable couldn't afford the water bill. Then they couldn't afford to import feed. What could they do? They couldn't guarantee the horses food, or a place to grow old among friends."

She was crying again.

Our best response was silence, sharing our grief over our heating-up planet and all our companions suffering. To know it, to feel it, to do what we could do. This was the job now for all of us—to love the home where we all belonged.

That autumn night each of us left in silence. I was the last to go. As I loaded my cart, I looked up to see "Wodechuck" watching me. He was sitting on his haunches, beside the Green Bridge where he made his home.

³ Nancy Hayes, University of North Carolina-Asheville librarian and belly dance teacher.

⁴ March 21, 2007.

I had seen Wodechuck there before. He would wait for all of us to leave, before coming out. I knew Wodechuck was his Cherokee name. I knew that most Eastern Woodland tribes (including the Cherokee) had a Wodechuck in their dances and stories. Grandmother Wodechuck was a wise elder who danced as teacher and model of wisdom for the tribe.

“ Good!” Wodechuck seemed to be speaking to me!

“You people are learning!”

“My people have been dancing since we got here!”

I drew closer, stopping my cart near her end of the bridge.

“Yeah” she continued in short, clipped phrases.

“Mother Earth speaking to you.”

* * * * *

Mary Miller Stair is a musician, a writer, a returned peace corps volunteer (Morocco), a permaculture gardener and an Ayurvedic cook. She studied at the Institute for Culture and Creation Spirituality with Matthew Fox, Brian Swimme and Neil Douglas-Klotz and earned degrees from American University, the University of Oregon, and Emory University.

LOVE IS A GARDEN

By Margaret Aiseayew

Editor’s Note: This is one of our favorite articles. We repeat this article nearly every year during gardening season.

This week was explosive. My garden produced cucumbers, zucchini, yellow squash, potatoes and the first cherry tomatoes. I was overwhelmed and since I can’t share the fruits, I share the reflections.

I am not sure there is anything in this world to be learned that cannot be known through growing a garden. That work is required to do a life is a given, so you prepare the soil and plant the seeds. Then, as a first thing, is the dynamic of trust. You must trust the soil to render up its nutrients. You must trust the weather that it will not dish out more than the plants can bear, and that it will meet out enough of what they really need. Then there is the issue of patience. You must wait. But you also learn that patience is not idle. Unseeded growth must not be allowed to consume what you wish for your plants.