



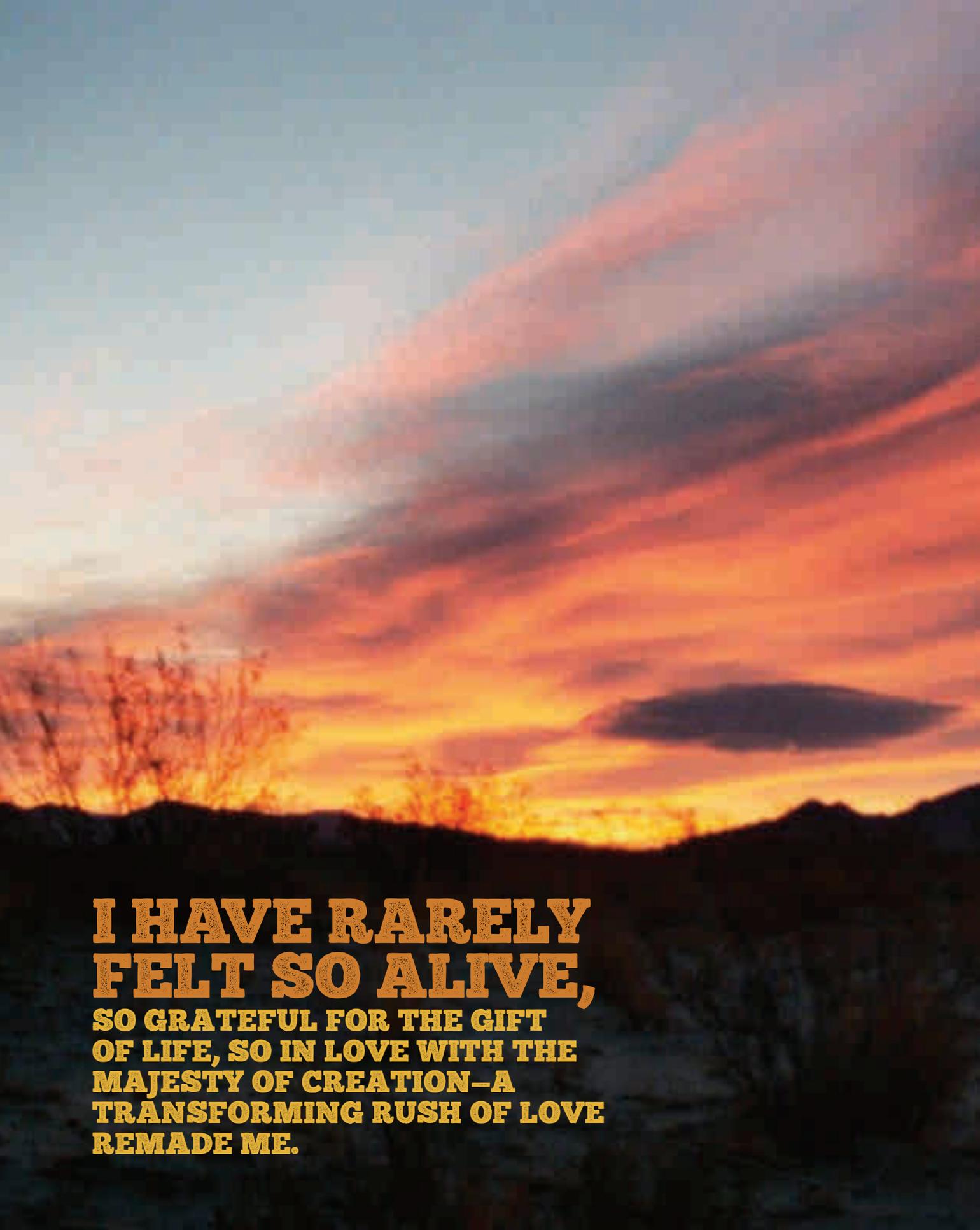
*The Road to*  
**CONTINENTAL**  
**HEART**

**Befriending, and Defending,  
THE SPIRIT *of* NORTH AMERICA**



**STEVEN DALE DAVISON**

*The Road to*  
**CONTINENTAL**  
**HEART**



**I HAVE RARELY  
FELT SO ALIVE,  
SO GRATEFUL FOR THE GIFT  
OF LIFE, SO IN LOVE WITH THE  
MAJESTY OF CREATION—A  
TRANSFORMING RUSH OF LOVE  
REMADE ME.**

*The Road to*  
**CONTINENTAL**  
**HEART**

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THE SPIRIT of NORTH AMERICA**

STEVEN DALE  
DAVISON



# The Legs

Published by Boyle & Dalton

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# Introduction

**Imagine: An artist walks across America with a calling<sup>1</sup> of environmental activists, taking photographs, raising ecological consciousness, and learning the land firsthand. His friend, a poet, longs to go with him, but can’t. So he writes poems.**

ONCE A WEEK, the walker comes to a town where he can get his mail. Waiting for him each week for nine months is a poem about the next leg of his walk, usually incorporating research into the landscapes he would walk through next, their geography and geology, their social and natural history, their features and creatures, their First Nation inhabitants.

That’s the premise, and the promise, of this book. That artist was my friend George Lawrence. That poet was I. Those poems and photos are *The Road to Continental Heart*.

*The Road to Continental Heart* is a meditation on

the landscapes of North America expressed in images—images crafted through the poet’s pen and the photographer’s lens. It is a collection of reflections on how a people relate to their land base. It is also a celebration of human friendship. But most of all, *Continental Heart* is a love poem, an invitation to dance with the Spirit of North America—a slow dance, as slow as a walk across a continent, cheek to cheek with the wind and the sun, feet moving to the beat of purple mountains’ majesty and amber waves of grain.

## THE STORY

I met George in New York City when we were both active in the bioregional movement there in the 1980s. Bioregionalism is a social change movement founded on the principle that human systems should be designed as if the places we live in matter. It proposes that the basic unit of human system de-

sign should be the bioregion, a geographical region defined physiographically, ecologically, and culturally, not politically, or by the haphazard legacies of history. Watersheds and mountain ranges offer good places to start when defining a bioregion. For instance, much of eastern Pennsylvania and western

<sup>1</sup> “Calling” is my term of veneration for a group of ecological activists, as in a pod of whales, a herd of bison, or an exaltation of larks.

New Jersey are one bioregion—the Delaware River watershed; but history and politics have used the river to divide the people and systems of Pennsylvania from those in New Jersey, rather than to unite them in their common regional and, especially, their environmental interests.

The basic principles of bioregionalism are carrying capacity and what I would call ecosystem attunement: How many humans and how much human activity, and what kinds of human activity, can a bioregion support without collapsing from exhaustion or colonizing other bioregions to keep itself going? And what kinds of human activity does a bioregion naturally support—and not support?

George and I were both drawn to the projects and the people active in this movement in New York City, which included two of its luminaries, Thomas Berry and Kirkpatrick Sale. We grew close when we worked together on a play to which I allude in the poem for Leg Eighteen. George designed the costumes and masks for the play; I wrote the script based on improvisations by the actors, working off of natural history profiles I wrote for each character. The characters were six animals indigenous to the lower Hudson River bioregion: wolf, black bear, box turtle, striped bass, wild turkey, and beaver. In the play, they hold humans on trial for crimes against the ecosystem.

In 1989, George decided to join the first phase of A Global Walk for a Livable World. He would walk from Los Angeles to New York City through most of the year 1990, the twentieth anniversary year of the

first Earth Day. Their goal: “raising awareness about the environmental crisis and demonstrating what we can do reverse it.” Because I couldn’t accompany him in person, I decided to accompany him with these poems.

The regimen of a researched poem a week was both grueling and exhilarating. I did miss a couple of my deadlines, and George had to stop for a while to earn money, and these interruptions show as blips in the poems’ progress. The discipline, the study, the meditation, defined my life for almost a year, though not nearly as much as the walk defined George’s, of course.

After nine months and forty-two poems, I was a bit burned out. I took a break. A long break. And I mostly stopped writing poetry. I had begun a big environmentalist nonfiction book project, and I let these poems go to sleep in a file cabinet. Every now and then, I would check in on them, then tuck them back in again.

Then in 2017, my friend Michael Frenchman asked me to write some short plays for a video project on artificial intelligence he was developing through his company Videograf. He was looking for pieces on the theme of hubris based on some Greek myths, written in verse that would sound and feel like Aeschylus or Sophocles, but for a modern ear. I had already written one of the plays he wanted, a reimagining in modern verse of Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*. I set about shortening and adapting *Prometheus* for Michael and writing the other plays, also in verse. The project rebooted my poet mind. I began writing po-

etry again in earnest. I began submitting my work, and I returned to the Global Walk poems.

I had always envisioned this book as a kind of coffee table book, with maps, George’s photos, and

### THE MESSAGE

In the time since the Walk, the reasons for such efforts have only multiplied and gotten worse. The earth-care messages in these poems have only become more relevant. The Spirit of North America needs defending now more than ever.

And it needs *befriending*, too. We defend what we love. We love what we know. *Continental Heart* is an invitation to befriend the land we live on, to get to know it intimately enough to love it, and then to defend it. This bioregionalist theme pervades the whole book: *know thy place*—and live in it as though it mattered.

Furthermore, when we befriend the land we live in, it ’friends us back. Not just with its bounty, which is blessing enough, but also with its *beauty*. Its beauty, its multi-varied majesty, inspired me to write these poems. North America—Turtle Island, as some First Nation peoples call it—has a spirit, a

### FRIENDSHIP

Another love permeates this work: thirty-plus years of friendship with George Lawrence. Long periods of time have passed without any contact between us, but as soon as we reconnect—you know the feeling—it is as though no time has passed at all.

For those nine months I tried to feel what George was experiencing on the walk, projecting my imag-

some other elements, printed in a larger format than is usual for a book of poetry because of the images. Thanks to Boyle and Dalton and my generous supporters, you hold the result in your hands.

mysterious capacity to answer our regard, to awaken within us a sense of awe and gratitude and peace and love, a marvelous way of lifting its countenance up to our own human faces with parted lips yearning for our kiss, if only we would come to know it.

I have not personally visited many of the places George walked through on the walk. But I have crossed the country many times, often hitchhiking, which involves a lot of walking and a lot of waiting, with time to pay intimate attention to where you are. So I have known her, this Spirit of North America. I have felt her breath upon my face. I have swooned deliriously in her arms. In the Rockies and the Adirondacks, in the basin plateau of Nevada and the plains of Nebraska, I have given myself to her, to the Spirit of this great continent. I have fallen into the continental heart. I have tried to share that love with you in these poems.

ination and trying to capture the images that came to me with the words you find in this book. It was for me a deep and unique form of meditation, and it created a deep and unique kind of bond between the two of us, which we have tried to share with you through excerpts from our letters, in addition to the poems.

*The earth-care messages in these poems  
have only become more relevant.*

MORE LOVE

Continental Heart expresses three other kinds of love, also: love for earth science, love for the study of indigenous culture, and love for poetry.

I wrote these poems before the internet, so most of the research came from my own bioregionalist library, or the library of Rutgers University. I love this science stuff. Geology, physiography, and natural history fascinate me, just as the eco-political ideas and ethos of bioregionalism guide me and as the landscapes themselves inspire me.

I also spent years in those days studying the indigenous peoples of the lands we European-Americans now inhabit. Their spirit-ways have had the greatest effect on me. My own formative spiritual experience took place in a sweat lodge ceremony held during the First North American Bioregional Congress in 1984. For years I had meaningful connections with the traditional Mohawk community at Akwesasne in New York State and served for a while on the Advisory Committee of the American Indian Program at Cornell.

One of my goals with all of my writing, whether poetry, fiction, or nonfiction, has been to foster a European-American culture of place that is led by the spirit of gratitude and care that my indigenous friends possess, rather than the proprietary objectification and extraction that so often characterizes the European-American relationship with land. The traditional peoples of the places we now call home model still for us today this kind of spiritual inhabitation. Accordingly, throughout

**MY GOAL:  
A EUROPEAN-  
AMERICAN  
CULTURE  
OF PLACE.**

these poems, I often call trees the standing people, birds the winged people, humans the two-leggeds, as the Indigenous People do, inviting relationships, people to people.

Some of the poems mention things, like the mound builders of the Midwest, or the process that creates petrified wood, which readers may know little about. I unpack some of these references in the introductions to the book's various sections, which organize the poems by state. These introductions also offer some memoir-style commentary about my life at the time, the poems, the times themselves. They are extensions, in a way, of this general introduction you are reading.

Finally, these poems share with you also my love of poetry itself. I write for the ear. I write for the body, for the mental body, if you will, with a love for the music of poetry. My muse loves music—rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, or sounds corresponding with

each other within the structure of a poem. Not rigid ABAB (though sometimes that, too), but sounds that call out to each other from various places in a poem across its lines and stanzas in a dance sonorant, attracting attention for emphasis or meaning, or just for the pleasure of the ear of the mind.

This kind of poetry is a bit out of favor these days. Some poetry journals explicitly discourage rhyming poetry. Perhaps those editors think it's old fashioned or they fear that their readers will think that they are old fashioned. (I am so grateful

that my editors at Boyle & Dalton feel as I do about this.) But I just can't abandon your body for a poetry that appeals only to your mind, to write poetry that would read perfectly well as prose if you took away the line breaks. I love the muse-ic promise of sound-conscious poetry and I hope that it speaks to you as well.

Also, to paraphrase Psalm 19—and Bob Marley—I hope that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart do speak to you. I hope these im-

ages speak to you, that the images of a continental heart awaken a friendship with the place you live in. I hope the letters in the book enrich your own experience of human friendship. I hope the notes in the introductions deepen your appreciation for the marvels in your own backyard.

So let me end with a thank-you. Thank you for your interest in this work. I hope it rewards your interest in ways both sought for and unexpected.



Once a week, George could pick up his mail. Waiting for him (most of the time) would be one of the poems. Here he is standing in front of the post office in Avila, Missouri.

# IT EXPANDS THE HEART TO LEARN A PLACE.



George and Gabriela carrying a peace dove that George created, walking through LA.

## California

I almost died once in the majestic violence of the Pacific Ocean. I was flashing on that experience as I wrote the opening lines of *Continental Heart*. I flash on it now as I reread them to write this introduction.

I WAS OUT in the middle of the night at the Sutro Baths on the San Francisco coast, a bunch of foundations for a spa that was destroyed by the great earthquake in 1906. The northern arm of that cove has an arch through which I'd climbed into the next cove up. That cove is filled with boulders of all sizes, from basketballs to small bathrooms, ranging out into the water.

I had hopped and climbed out onto one of the big ones, as far out as I could get. I stood ten, maybe twelve feet above the heaving water line. For quite a while

I watched the waves come pounding in as a storm grew nearer. It wasn't raining much yet.

Then I saw a wave so much bigger than any of the others, way out there, but so obviously massive, even from a distance, that I knew it was going to crash into me, sweep me off that rock, and pound

me into the boulder field behind me.

I looked back the way I'd come, thought for a moment about how slowly and carefully I'd picked my way out here, jumping from rock to rock with the water swirling around me and the wind howling. I looked back at the wave, now so much closer, so much bigger,

and coming on fast. I knew that it would catch me crossing the boulder field before I could get to shore, knock me down, maybe drag me out.

And then, in my hesitation, I was out of time. I sat down, spread my arms out behind

me, and watched this mighty maw of ocean rise above me and descend. It was so big that it didn't push from the front, mercifully. It fell from above, as if a swimming pool had been emptied on top of me. In a moment, I was drenched to the skin. I remember the crashing sound. I remember thinking, in the next moment, I'm still alive; I'm still on this rock.

**"I ALMOST  
DIED ONCE IN  
THE MAJESTIC  
VIOLENCE  
OF THE PACIFIC  
OCEAN."**

I stood up and looked out to sea. There was another one, bigger than the first. And behind that, another one bigger yet.

Then my hindbrain took over. Flight. No fighting that thing, those things. Just jump and run! That's all my body knew.

I jumped off the bathroom rock onto an office desk-sized rock below me, maybe eight feet down, and started to run and jump. No careful clambering, no thinking about it. Just pure I-gotta-get-

outta-here-or-I'm-gonna-die. Vaguely aware that one miss would likely shatter some part of me and leave me crippled in the foam, I leaped and leaped and leaped and I never missed a one. On the beach, I turned around to see the rock I'd been standing on disappear beneath the next monstrous wave. I stood transfixed as the third one rolled in and did the same.

The overwhelming fear, the pump of adrenaline, the climactic exhilaration, all these forces forged my soul into a new shape with the Pacific's hammer blow. I have rarely felt so alive, so grateful for the gift of life, so in love with the majesty of creation—a transforming rush of love remade me. Love for that place. Love for the dynamic earth forces that are alive in that place—and in all places. That experience lies behind the opening lines of *Continental Heart*. That love animates all these poems.

A whole book's worth of similar stories tie me to other places on Turtle Island, this magnificent continent of ours. Turtle Island is a Native name for North America from the Native peoples of the northeast woodlands. It comes from a creation sto-

ry, a sublime tectonic mythology: After many other spirit animals had tried to swim to the bottom of the sea to form land, finally muskrat dove and piled mud onto the shell of the cosmic turtle, who

then rose from the bottom of the sea with the landmass mud on its shell and gave us our home—Turtle Island, the North American continent.

Such a myth inspires gratitude and kinship with our fellow creatures in a way that our tectonic science story cannot. So I use Turtle Island a lot in these poems.

European-Americans have taken almost all of Turtle Island away from the peoples who gave us these stories. But we have often kept their names for things. Almost half our states have Native names, as do many of our towns and counties, our rivers, deserts, and mountain ranges. Such names abound in these poems. They describe the place they name rather than naming it after a person, as the European settlers tended to do.

Take Red Rock and the Taconics, where I wrote Leg Three. I was visiting my teenage son Adam in the little village of Red Rock, New York, an exception to the rule of European names. The village has no center, just a bathroom-sized red boulder carried from Vermont, I think, and dropped by a glacier, standing at a country road intersection surrounded by some buildings. An apt description for a little village. And Taconic—the word means “in the trees.” The range is part of the Appalachian system running north to south; it's the eastern shed of the mid-Hudson River watershed.

**SUCH A MYTH INSPIRES GRATITUDE AND KINSHIP**

I love the Taconics. Adam and I would literally walk out his door and take off up the ridge into the rumpled landscape. No trails; just infinite intimate spaces in its folds, with lots of little waterfalls sliding down 20-foot-high rock faces into micro wetlands, the water then heading downslope to the next little waterfall. Beautiful. Fantastic clambering. Lots of frogs.

It expands the heart to learn such a place.

But it breaks your heart to carry the stories of Turtle Island's loss.

Like the hundreds of tribes and hundreds of languages now gone from California, gone down the starry road, the Milky Way, held by some Native peoples to be the paths our spirits take to the camps of the dead.

Yet some, like the Serrano, San Bernardino's old-

est inhabitants, they survive, and even thrive, striving to hold onto their language and their songs.

Holding on. Like the California condor circling the mountain airs, America's largest land bird, a vulture, now extinct in California and barely saved from utter oblivion by conservationists, soaring now over Arizona and southern Utah.

Like the condor, I circle back in these poems to the theme of turning, of reversing the ecocide, of traversing a landscape in which we European-Americans could live as Earth's children, in gratitude, in ancient Indigen emulation. Returning to land-based covenant, to agreement about how to reciprocate her gift-giving with promise-keeping and care, re-learning a continental heart; that is, *feeling* our Homeland as our Mother, and the turtles and condors as our sisters and brothers.



George on Hwy 62 between 29 Palms and Parker, AZ. The Bureau of Land Management only allowed a few people to walk that 85 miles because the desert ecosystem there was too fragile. A “Spirit Walk” of about 15 people, including George, volunteered to walk that stretch. George: “It was one of my favorite parts of the walk—endless desert vistas, just a few people, camping under the stars with very little gear. I think it took us about 4 days.” While waiting for them in Parker, the Walk reorganized itself, creating a daily work crew system so that Walkers no longer had set jobs like cook or driver.

## The Road to Continental Heart

The Walkers on day 1 about to start from the beach in Santa Monica. It was a public event with some speakers; the photo also includes some school children there to see the Walk off.



George taking a lunch break on the second day into the California desert after days of walking through Los Angeles. Much of the day was spent walking through fields of giant windmills. George and his friend Gabriela are sitting opposite each other in this moment; she took this shot, while he took the picture of her wearing the yellow scarf that you see several pages on.



## The Road to Continental Heart

### Santa Monica to West Covina

#### — LEG ONE —



George's journey with the Global Walk began at the Pacific Coast in Santa Monica on February 1, 1990. On the first leg, he walked through the city of Los Angeles to the Galster Wilderness Park in West Covina, about 40 miles.

Dear George.

I sure hope this catches you. I've been meaning to write for weeks but... I got your letter & the T-shirts and that finally got me off my ass.

I want to say again how much I respect what you're doing. On the way home from your send-off, I got to thinking: if how good our friendship is, & how much we've enjoyed working together. And I came up with an idea, still not quite fully formed, of another collaboration revolving around the walk.

So far, all I have is this poem, conceived as an offering to you in serial form, a way for me to participate with you and, through you, develop a relationship with Turtle Island itself. Hence the vaguely bi-regional bent.

I waited so long to get going on it that the research is kinda skimpy. ~~But~~ And I literally wrote the poem this morning, the last day & it can be mailed to you in LA. No chance for revisions.

And I fell in love with it - not the poem (tho I like it well enough), but the stream of consciousness process. I plan to write the rest the same way. See: I'm going to be sending you a poem every week, each one conscious at least a little of where you are - physiography, flora, fauna, indigenous peoples, personal notes, etc.

And, realistically speaking, it'll be a challenge just to meet the deadline of all. But, by the end, I'll have spoken to the entire Turtle Island, at least in my heart; and,

A course and most important, I'll  
have spoken to you.

It's a small step, compared with  
the roughly 7 million footfalls (is  
your stride about 30"? ) you're  
putting in. But I can't tell you how  
much joy it gives me to be there  
with you.

So - there'll be times when a picture  
of George Lawrence Walker will be clear  
in my mind each week, bathed in light,  
photolling into my keyboard through  
my fingertips. Maybe you'll feel it  
sometimes. Keep a journal if you  
like and so will I & when I worked -  
and the work itself I'll send to you.

Blessed be

Steven

## California

Standing on the sand:  
the One World Ocean  
pounds on the crescent  
cove beaches and jutting  
stone with a saltic force,  
sloughing off the faces  
of the cliffs in mudslides,  
carving caves in the headlands,  
hollowing out the arches  
till the jut stands abandoned  
as a sea stack in the breakers,  
sinking slowly beneath the crash.

So, at human scale, the awesome  
presence of the Pacific,  
from the Western point of view—  
the violence of nature  
in evolution as competition.  
But as the vast first womb  
Herself, the Sea, these waves  
caress with tiny fingers,  
or press real hard in wild  
abandon to the pleasure of Herself  
in a longest dance with Moon  
and Sun and Wind and Stone/Sand  
spin of planetary scale,  
Creatrix Mer occidental.

Standing on the sand,  
on the Pacific ocean floor.  
The Longest Dance mystics  
ride the waves behind you  
in their wetsuits, attuning to

**CARRY  
THE HOPES  
OF ALL  
YOUR  
FRIENDS**

the shivers of her groaning  
pulsive foreplay. Facing  
to the sun on the first day  
of the Walk, the first foot  
rising, falling, following  
the footsteps of Peace.

Carry the hopes of all your friends.  
Marry the willing Earth's yearning.  
Tend the tilling of the soul *in terra*.  
Mend the Web with footsteps learning  
anew the endless truths of old.

Do you feel the cool pass  
of ghosts? The Uto-Aztek  
walked here, too. The Shoshone  
Gabrielino have vanished,  
so long ago, the books (un)just  
list the name. Tideland  
gatherers like the Yurok:  
shellfish, surf fish, acorns,  
game. Floating balsas,  
rafts of tules, and dugouts—  
for the inland waters only.  
Trading with the sea-hunters,  
bathing on the beach, lazing  
in the sun. Now passed along  
the starry road, or drifting  
'cross the sand seeking  
the camps of the dead.

Head east. Move  
with Earth's own revolution,

California

turning always toward the Light.  
Is it morning? Is He rising?  
Are mountains on horizon  
facing distances between you  
across the basin of The Angels?  
What was for breakfast? People  
press around, walkers and friends—  
how many? Laughter? Tears?  
Fears, and exhilaration, thrill  
of anticipation—what?  
will happen . . .

For me,  
walk the globe of one remembrance;  
wear the robe of trees and birdsong,  
talking blues of Earth's unhindrance;  
share my Muse with me, whose words long  
to share your road to continental heart.



Walkers on the road.



Gabriela Cover came from Madrid, Spain, to join the Walk. She and George became friends early on during the Walk and have remained so for over 30 years since. Between them, George and Gabriela took hundreds of photos along the route and the photos in this book have been selected from their collections.