

Be a light in the gathering light

Selected Poems by Jason Espada, 1985 to 2017

68 poems, 153 pages.

A New Preface

I can think of no better way to end this year than putting together this collection. Essays have their place, but I think poetry gets right to the heart of what we're doing here. I feel most myself when I can write, and see the world this way. The writing itself is a rare event for me, and so like most people I read to remember.

I've added last year's poems to an earlier edition with the same name, so that in a single volume, I can share the best of what I've written.

With a heart full of love,
San Francisco,
December 31st, 2017

Preface I.

In my ideal world, we introduce ourselves with poetry, either our own, or that of other people, that we keep with us at all times. This would tell us so much more about each other than what people usually ask about, or are interested in.

I know it's unusual, but sometimes I forget on purpose that we're not living entirely in that world yet. I pretend not to notice the dismay this causes, and I'm mostly forgiven for being simple.

See, I have a different sense of time – that we only get today and this hour once, and that tomorrow is not a given. This loosens the grip on my purse, which is filled with gifts that are not mine to begin with, and so I go around looking to give what I can.

Sometimes in all this chattering that goes on, we happen on someone who speaks our native language, and, startled, everything we've been carrying with us spills out everywhere. Still mostly invisible to passers-by, that doesn't matter now, but only this communion.

II.

All the time in the world. Where do things like poems come from anyway? And when we read them, and something about them makes sense to us, what then? The world, as we usually see it, is a fiction, some of it of our own creation, some of it borrowed, or sold to us, or imposed from outside. We read, and listen, we look more deeply then to remember how things more truly are. Something in us moves with power to do so - like roots that break concrete and rock in finding water. The result then is a new flourishing of the life we've had in us all along, the life we are here to live.

Sometimes reading poems, either those I wrote or someone else's, changes my feeling about time itself. What felt before like something I could never get enough of, suddenly shifts and it feels like there is no hurry, and there never can be. There is plenty of room, and the dimensions of our being here once again feel true.

Enjoy these selections. They are from three collections I've put together over the years - *The Life Within the Life*, 1985 to 2005; *Shadows and Exiles*, *Made to Receive All the World*, 2006 and 2007; and *Original Waters*, *Collected Poems*, 2009 to 2015. I've also included a few from a new, untitled collection.

Jason Espada
San Francisco,
June 16th, 2016

is there no one now
who can use the strength you have to give?
who might walk with us another mile
because of that leftover food on your plate?

you don't need to be a hero
chest puffed
flashing glances
you can be disheveled
broken yourself
it doesn't matter
a look across the gulf can save them
can last for decades even
that someone met them on time,
it goes on in countless ways

be a light, in the gathering light
be a prayer in the ruins
be the pulse quickening
the warm breath,
be that grace handed off in celebration
in confirmation that we still have
the ground of peace with us

and its not forgotten
no its not forgotten
that all this music is waiting
some simple things, they are not talked about
they go mostly unnoticed
but those gifts we give in secret
they are the lasting power

Carrying the family tears
weight that makes the shoulders sag
the unspoken heritage
the invisible chorus

Someone has been left to do
the unfinished work of grieving –
and it goes unclaimed
Any one of us can pick it up again
at any time
and what would it feel like
to see our whole family,
and the next generation
standing upright at last?

But who can take the measure of that untold story,
unfurl the last needed testimony of the ghost company
and give them rest?

It would take a straight up hero,
and not your usual sort –
but a listener
someone to bear witness
to crimes, and shame,
to those life sustaining dreams,
and those victories that have never been celebrated

We all carry this weight
and it is thick water we move through
We inherit boundaries no one else sees
We may say it was not our doing,
that this past should have no claim on us,
but the jewel box placed in our crib at birth

also has these dark mysteries
no one has ever walked in
and until it is finished
this work of revelation
will wait and will haunt us
a pressing weight that one day has to speak its name

Winter dreams

On the cold pavement
I sleep fitfully,
dream of palaces
with fountains and gardens in the sun,
with music and friends
a soft bed to rest in
and more than enough food

buried
but beating on the coffin lid
this is the rrap of my knuckle-blows:

skin and bones
and from my delirium
spreading in space,
a banquet with friends and family

I am a man on fire
such that I am all flame
dreaming of gentle breezes blowing on my skin,
and shining pools beneath a waterfall –
these two halves in me meet like a thunderclap

poor, ugly, frightening,
I dream though of a celestial queen for me
here on earth
What can I do?
it's nature herself that dreams
that speaks
but she does so

in such extravagant terms!
so far from where I am

I am dull as stone
but still, some spark hides in my belly
and dreams of being a fountain of knowledge
for endless generations to come
and quench their thirst

a fading sound,
and from my broken form, a heap -
the sight and sound of me leaping,
running fast and far
heart racing, skin glistening in the sun

outcast, scorned,
in an alley alone
I mutter something about
taking my place at the family table
golden with renown

such dream sounds come from me at times
and then
for a moment
a single-eye sense of what I am
and who I am rises above all this
want and crying out
in me and in the world
and at once
I have many mouths
all calling
calling
calling for rain

with nothing left out

My part of the dream-cry somehow finds
the greater voice
the greater prayer
with no one and nothing left out
a creative word
a vast call

and I am everything not yet born

I am the power of hope

I am the power of prayer

I am the tide in the chest

I am a blazing message

*I am the peace that calls out
right in the midst of wars*

*I am the secret prayers spoken by millions
the sound of rending the shell of earth
for new earth to appear*

I am the will to be born

These things move and turn in me
and such is this world
upheld,
and turning
on the axis of prayer