

The Life Within the Life - Collected Poems, 1985 to 2005

66 poems, 128 pages.

Introduction

It wasn't until I was in my mid-forties that I thought of gathering together the poetry and other writings I had done, and putting them into some kind of order. Before that, writing was something I had done just for myself. Sharing things like this was far from my mind. This started to change for me when I looked at my pages and started to sense a connection between them. I had also shared a few writings here and there, and gotten some favorable feedback. Mostly though I wondered how it would look to piece together a book. This resulted in my first two collections, *The Life Within the Life, 1985 to 2005*, and *Shadows and Exiles, Made to Receive All the World*, 2006 and 2007.

I can see that, back then, I had the idea of telling a story, and that a book should be logical. Ten years after arranging these pages, I don't feel that way any more. Nowadays, especially when it comes to poetry, I think anything at all can be between two covers.

A story is something we tell others, to give them an idea of who we are, or it is something we tell ourselves, to build a sense of identity, for what that's worth, or to make sense of the world. There's truth in the telling, and in the attempts to find meaning. More is left out than said, of course, but even this much communicates something. It can tell how we got from one place to another, or what the landmarks were along the way.

I take these pages now as significant both as a record of what has long passed, and the first sightings of what has remained a stable part of my life.

'The life within the life' sums up how I felt those many years, throughout my 20's and 30's, as the miraculous life I was going to live emerged from

the apparently ordinary, the common and easily overlooked. I'm sure it's this way for a lot of people, only we don't speak or even write about it much. Now isn't that something?

As much as anything else, it was this tension between the plain appearance and the wonders that led to me writing. We all have a depth and creative nature in us, and although our lives are not by any means easy, I would have everyone know at least this much.

Jason Espada,
San Francisco,
December 7th, 2017

When I'm beaten down
and the wolves approach
the ones I guarded in my thoughts
step forward to protect me
They emerge from between the layers of my skin
They come out from my breath,
looking fierce, confident,
they set a halo of peace around me

Tonight I'm a lion-cub in the wilderness
scratching the ground for food
crying out that I've been left alone by my ancestors
to learn to thrive if I can
I turn all my despairing out in to the night
and the air fills with the scent of my family
and I hear lion sounds
having released from this body the instinct to awaken
and the night creatures scatter...
I carry this with me, now I know
I am alone and
my whole family is with me

Imagine an underwater system of channels
one channel opens
and the stream of cool, pure water can be felt moving through
felt all the way back to its source

Contacting a spiritual tradition can be this way
the clean, clear life moving through
felt in this very place, and known to its origin
Teachers, practitioners, deities, protector spirits
virtues faithfully maintained
and given forward through lives

We are welcomed by this, our family
They are eager to assist the awakening life
the heart becomes very quiet watching this work
this far reaching, unceasing compassion

They speak behind their words
move behind the curtains of form
in silence, shaping

All of this is given to you,
it is immanent
the life within the life

Every other kind of wine puts you to sleep
this one wakes you up
every other touch leaves you sitting there,
alone this one brings you to your feet
and places you in graceful movement
looking from behind everyone else's eyes
You feel the billowing of their robes
the widening of their heart
Every other type of solitude is a fractured jar
but this one is the laughing heavens
and poverty and all the strategies of the poor
you step beyond
in an instant the world lights up