

Be a light in the
gathering light

Selected Poems

1985 to 2017

by Jason Espada

Be a light
in the gathering light

Selected Poems

1985 to 2017

©2017 Jason Espada

All rights reserved

Great Circle Publications

ISBN # 978-1-948589-14-7

First Edition, January, 2018

For information contact: jasonespada.com

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

Table of Contents

Preface	page	5
From The Life Within the Life, Collected Poems, 1985 to 2005		
1. Let's not wait		17
2. Now I am a voice		18
3. Rapid-fire gunshots		20
4. I won't refuse sadness		22
5. If you suffer, friend		23
6. There is no rose in this garden		24
7. When I'm beaten down		25
8. Tonight I'm a lion-cub in the wilderness		26
9. Imagine an underwater system of channels		27
10. Evening Prayer		28
11. No one speaks		30
12. Every other kind of wine puts you to sleep		32
13. Bankers run out into the street		33
14. prayer		35

15. Who stayed the hand	36
16. In these times	38
17. Everyday I go out	42
18. In Praise of Tara	44
From Shadows and Exiles Made to Receive All the World, Redemption Poems, 2006 and 2007	
19. My heart is	52
20. Their drunkenness makes me sober	54
21. I put signs along the lonely road	56
22. There is one piece of cake left	57
23. You tell me when I should dance	59
24. Shadows and exiles, made to receive all the world	61
25. What to make of this day	63
26. Because all I hear is silence	65
27. Winter dreams	74
28. Why don't we	77

From Original Waters - Collected Poems, 2009 to 2015

Introduction	81
29. a postcard from home	83
30. A Psalm of Peace	84
31. Surprise	85
32. No place I'd rather be	86
33. reduced to poetry	89
34. Good News, for a Change	90
35. The Open Palm of Refuge	94
36. a few marks on a page	96
37. handling the family knives	97
38. We could have roads	99
39. The beauty of hands	101
40. The glory of being dis-invited	102
41. I wonder have you ever chosen	103
42. Dionysius or Apollo?	104
43. a single clear flame	105

44. Carrying the family tears	106
45. We are travelers in the dim light	108
46. If I start out amazed	109
47. is there no one now	110
48. Adoption	111
49. For me it's Tuesday	113
50. undefined	114
51. exorcism	116
52. a stranger arrives for a visit	118
53. I have heard there is a world	119
54. The seed	120
From <i>Open in case of emergency, New poems, 2017</i>	
55. Waking up in a burning house	125
56. Mistaken identity	127
57. Volunteers needed	129
58. A doctor would not ask	131
59. Why I live by the edge of the river	132

	13
60. Vulture Capitalism	133
61. I don't know anything about poetry	134
62. Martin's Bible	135
63. There are so many ways to save a life	137
64. The monster sleeps	139
65. You have a cup	141
66. Somewhere my Indian blood is howling	142
67. Indifference	144
68. Archeology	146
About the Author	149
Also by Jason Espada	150
About Great Circle Publications	153

Be a light in the gathering light,

be a prayer in the ruins...

*From The Life Within the Life,
Collected Poems, 1985 to 2005*

Let's not wait

Let's not wait until our time is almost gone
and we have to speak our truth to each other
in shortened ways
Let's not live as if this moment will be here forever
Instead, let us look with clear eyes
and with nothing between our being together
Knowing all this time, all this life is passing
brings a keen, lucid sense to our pleasure
brings our caring fully to life
allows us to rest in meaningfulness
and all of our words become words of love!

Now I am a voice

Now I am a voice of all those who never sang
who never had a chance open up to speak
My grandparents, my long ago forgotten ancestors
my flesh and blood relations,
and those who are mute, distant
walking vacant transported to another sphere
even while they are here with us

and all the attempts that could not find language
pressing fierce having urgency and having no form
All this weight moves in me
this brief time belongs to all of us
it is stalked after
with quiet almost invisible breath watching
long waited coolly sought after

Once in a rare time the way opens
and we come rushing out in a startled, ecstatic
triumphant release out into the open
the birth after hundreds of years
and the child is already a man
or a whole continent
with fully developed traditions of waiting and cultivating
as its eyes and ears
voices and hands to work to make offerings

All this born in a moment's time
now you know why words can rearrange whole landscapes
inside and outside
So much has waited to become this form

for so long and with so many lives
that when they gather a point comes
when every one of us can feel their presence

Rapid-fire gunshots

Rapid-fire gunshots at night
people smoking crack on my front steps
diesel bus blowing exhaust
people sleeping in doorways
I need to know this

You don't find these things in a quiet forest,
a secluded beach
although the world is that too
there is more
and already I forget too easily:

a self-absorbed business person,
stressed out and rude
an angry young man with a radio on his shoulder
degrading images of women on billboards,
telephone poles
people walking around talking to themselves

As long as such things exist I want to know about it
I need to be here to remember

violence,
people ignoring each other
hardly anyone thinking ahead

I know there is this all over the world
and the evidence is right here in front of me
So I need to be here
where I can feel fear, sadness, and hope

and more and more of a determination to work

This is the best place to be

I won't refuse sadness

I won't refuse sadness
I know this can become something we need
When held close
guarded
fed with reason for hope
a pearl may emerge
this worth out of not-abandoned grief

And I will stay with you loyal no end
My joy grows from this
and seeing too the knowledge of what can be

And I breathe smoothe breath
beneath the ash
of doubt, materialism
on the smoldering sense that can become alive again
as new days dancing in open fields

O, I can look at you I don't have to run
because you're not just what you say,
what you admit yourself to be
I know your secret
and it's why I can remain with no fear:

This becoming needs your presence,
and light,
until releasing rain to replenish
all worlds
all bodies and souls

If you suffer, friend

If you suffer, friend, let me be with you
This is the ground from where I have grown
the shell I flew out of
the substance I have eaten and transformed
Anguish, turmoil, desperate, unknowing choices
these I have swallowed and known
Craving, anguish, egotism,
flavors consistent everywhere they are found
Instead of sorrow, hurt disabling
A striking clarity moves steady hands to work
for what is needed
with no thought of success or failure
hands know only to work
ongoing work without hesitation or pause
This is nature

There is no rose in this garden

There is no rose in this garden
only the force behind a river of form
Branches are bare, like bones
and everywhere the fragrance of your immortal spring
On the ground, withered leaves becoming earth
and everywhere the bouquet
your telling presence
You would hide from me beneath the secrecy of winter
but the blume of all the kindness you give,
reaches me
and I follow the redolent turn of this day
and follow the turn of its' long and slow
continuous breath

When I'm beaten down

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,
and they set a halo of peace around me

Tonight I'm a lion-cub in the wilderness

Tonight I'm a lion-cub in the wilderness
scratching the ground for food
crying out that I've been left alone by my family
to learn to thrive if I can

I turn all my despairing out into 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

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

Evening Prayer

Tonight

may all our women be protected
may every child be safe from harm
may those who are about to hurt themselves, or others
be kept back from doing so

May those who have been forgotten be received
may the fearful be comforted,
may the lonely be soothed
may those who are without rest be calmed

May the hungry be fed,
the cold given warmth
may those who are sick be relieved of their pain

and tonight, may researchers find cures
for every type of illness

May those men, women, and youth
who are trapped by addiction be released

In the world tonight, may greed lessen,
may animosity, from its root, cease
and tonight may every veil of ignorance
be completely seen through

May those who are searching for light,
for peace and fulfillment
be amply rewarded

May this whole planet awaken with joyful music,
a celebratory knowing of all the love that we have

No one speaks

No one speaks
but we have deep roots in each other
old lovers and family
the ones we were once close to
fathers and sons
brothers
husband and wife
no one speaks

and the close friends
whose touch was once such a comfort
no one speaks
the time and distance are too great to cross
and so we go on with our back turned
to enter the sad voiceless movement of time passing
Mourning what we've lost
what we never had a chance to know or have known

From within their sealed expression, sorrowing
no one tells you their truth
we can't retrieve or give voice to what's long gone, it seems

We move farther away
our hands are empty

Suicides don't speak
broken spirits have no voice
and no sound comes from under
the weight of addiction

For all that goes unsaid and undone in a lifetime
the chance is too brief for anything less than truth
But sometimes we're forced to leave
the pressure is too great there is too much danger
and sadness gathered, pressing
too much to see at once
How can we begin?
All this leaving too soon
when we never really wanted to go

Every other kind of wine

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

Bankers run out into the street

Bankers run out into the street
 and fling handfuls of dollars shouting,
'There's more where that came from!'
 Merchants kick open the doors to their stores,
 arms holding as much as they can carry,
 and push what they have
 through the open windows of passing cars

People are wandering around
 with pieces of delicious cake in their hands, saying,
'Here, take a bite...'

What's going on here?
 Just for today (or is it?)
 nobody's trying to turn a profit-
 no one's trying to sell *anything*

The whole city stayed awake all night
 trying to figure out ways to help others

Cabbies and bus drivers won't accept fares
 food is served - no bills are due
 No checks accepted - no credit cards
 Everyone's giving away what they have!
 Has the whole world gone sane?!

All the ad-men have found another line of work
 and today, all the sponsors will say is,
'Come on down! Free gifts! No strings attached!...'

It's a wonder - Ha!
Everybody's getting rich
You can see it on their faces
and people are saying,

'Why didn't we think of this before?!...'

prayer

prayer a small candle
eclipsed by the light of day
a prompting to open the door and see who's there
a messenger announcing the arrival of the king,
medicine that grows as it's needed
with grace and comfort
least expected yet hoped for still,
against unbelief

A barren river bed offers up its cries
and stirs the core of heaven to come running
pouring itself in streams
flooding valley plains

Search out the beginning of this movement in us
to reach out, to reach upwards
and it's of the same glory as its end
like holding a small gold coin close
and passing through gates
until you arrive at a city
where everything is made of that same light...

Who stayed the hand

Who stayed the hand raised in anger
and how did it happen that someone was moved to give?
Where did a person actually find the strength to save a life?

Somewhere, someone made a vow to serve

When did meditation become so easy?,
and when did laughter decide to return?
Why did this sheltered place, as if out of nowhere, appear?

Someone is praying
Someone has given over their life

And there will be a harvest
Estranged friends and family will meet again
A fever has broken,
A passage is clear

Someone has found the treasure!
New life is on the way

Comfort enters a home, as if in person
A writer with something to say find his words,
his touch again

A falling person hangs suspended in mid-air and is startled,
but he knows what has happened

Somewhere quite a clear decision has been made,
a brightness simplifying every arrangement

So write on, sing on, play on,
this verse continues as long as there are growing things

As some eternal spring has been tapped
and its streams flow to meet all the weary
with welcomed, unexpected grace

In these times

In these times
of crazy thick blindness
rage and grief:

what's needed

the strongest of medicines
the most nourishing of food for your limbs
the clearest of days
the brightest star
the most lucid of letters sent to you
the greatest strength
and a beacon to keep this ship on course
to defeat fear
and live on in spite of wars

these are messengers when ordinary lines of communication
are cut
prayers on the wing seeking home:

The Cantatas of J.S. Bach
the poetry of Langston Hughes,
the photography of my father -
(with the blessed eyes and radiance of the children
those moments he's captured!)

Rumi, Rilke, Pablo Neruda - Lovers of Life!
Walt Whitman - undaunted!
Beethoven, Mozart, Telemann, bright nourishment

Nathan Milstein, Arthur Grumiaux, Itzak Perlman,
 Pepe Romero, Andres Segovia, Vladimir Horowitz,
 Yo-Yo Ma, Bobby McFerrin, the celestial Andrea Bocelli -

their names are talisman, warding off evil
 in times of sickness, sadness, suffering and death,
 these are cure
 breaking bonds, freedom of movement again
 pure laughter, and pearls of truth
 in times of siege, a high fortress wall

messengers:
 all your Indian saints, and all your Tibetan saints
 and all those nameless Workers whose very lives bring joy,
 those who have been and those who are now
 pure giving

and the dream of love
 of taking the hand of your beloved
 and entering the magic of days that are filled
 where all is made more than complete
 but going from fullness to fullness
 the overflowing joy of it all

Now, in these times especially,
 shores and woods and high mountains
 and their welcoming embraces

Teach children to read, and play with them,
 learn to hold their attention
 and make them laugh again and again
 so that their luminosity fills the room
 (this is secret nourishment every parent knows)

Weep openly, and without shame
for your brothers and for the innocent
for the formality and the lies
for the technological advances in cruelty
and for the chaos of the world
then give yourself away in some way to some stranger today,
right now

do something opposed to death:
kneel and kiss a hundred bright flowers
as they grow from the ground
improvise a dance right on the spot where you are standing,
or completely forgive some old grudge

feed your family with the bread of hope,
pour for us all from your special reserve
your sweet tea

When the soulless flaunt their brutal will
and their warplanes strike at us all

then
remember our ancestors and read aloud the message they have
sent to us
become rain, my friend

this is the radical antidote all around

born of your honesty in the face of this
it's your beauty voiced that saves lives
your unyielding hope and courage

remembering springtime
and all the new seasons to come
that are in every seed
and in every eye

everyday I go out

everyday I go out
with a short stick in one hand
and an old burlap sack slung over my shoulder
I dig in random places in the hard ground
looking for food for my family for this one day
or for medicine
looking for any new life at all

too many times well after night fall
I've returned with nothing
and I've had to see all their hopes go unfulfilled
I've had to face knowing we will all have to be hungry
at least one more day

but today I my wanderings I came across sunlit fields
gardens with ripe fruit hanging on the vines
luscious with color and sweet to the taste
I found medicine for all our ills
streams that would help a person recover
with just the smallest sip
The airs, and the fragrance in this place all carried life
it was as if there was music everywhere...

I dropped my little stick, and bag dumb with wonder
not knowing how I could say this
or carry back even the smallest piece
carefully I took the seeds
breathed the fragrances deep into my lungs
let that sun warm my face
and the place tell me its secrets of how close we all are

I could only return with some roots
and a few seeds, hints, intimations

I try to draw this on the ground, and tell about it,
but few believe me

and so I wait for the seeds to grow
for the roots to take hold again and give others light
I try to remember everything I can,
and say it all faithfully

In Praise of Tara

Holy Tara, Protector of living beings,
 May your blessings flow throughout all of our lives
 and by Your Compassionate Activity,
 may all the needs of all beings
 be completely fulfilled now

Tara

Your beauty tames the minds of living beings.
 You draw all beings to yourself.
 Your virtue calms their fears and brings them all fresh
 happiness.

You are the one who makes what seems to be the impossible
 entirely possible
 You conquer disbelief, and dispel doubt
 without leaving even a trace
 You are miraculous activity, beyond comprehension.

You are 'swift to regard', quick to respond,
 the remover of obstacles.

You are our protector
 You are grace and blessings,
 the relative and ultimate liberator of beings

Your beauty inspires uprightness of moral character
 You pacify habit energy
 We shed our skins, lose our old ways,
 like leaves falling off of trees

You bring new birth, and give new strength

You purify the mind - like the stream-clearing jewel
 You uplift and brighten the mind

For those with positive aims,
 You are their Great Benefactress

You set all things right
 You bring about reconciliation without impediment
 without anything blocking it
 You bring harmony to every surrounding circumstance

You help us to gather all positive conditions
 You bring out the best that is in us all
 You make all practices effective
 It has always been this way
 It is this way now
 It will always be this way

You are the spring-like feeling of 'yes',
 the sum of all optimism,
 joyful positive energy,
 the feeling of 'I can'

Tara,
 May your blessings completely illuminate all of our lives
 and may all the needs of all beings
 be completely fulfilled now

O, Bright Virtue!
 You are light
 You are grace in my life
 and subtle nourishment
 The blessing of all the women who have ever wished me well

You are instinctive love,
 all-accommodating
 naturally inclusive
 comprehensive
 You are embodied enlightened intelligence,
 intuitive awareness, the heart awake,
 and the flourishing of joy

You are playful, youthful, joyful, quick, charming, elegant,
 inspiring, wise, warm, strengthening, encouraging, healing,
 calming, stabilizing;

How can I call you? Tara - hope, positive energy, joyful, pure,
 wholesome energy

With your rivers
 nurture my limbs, these fields
 With your warmth, your light
 bring about the total flowering of goodness...

Tara,
 May your blessings be established in all of our lives

Because this is Divine Feminine energy, quick to respond
 with magical activity,
 the equivalent of the patron saint of lost causes,
 grace,
 spiritual beauty bringing light, giving hope,
 removing obstacles,
 calming fear, pacifying suffering,
 and protecting
 bringing harmony to every surrounding circumstance,
 bringing life, health, happiness, good fortune, and stability

and, being the Spring-like sum of all optimism,
inspiring, positive energy,
enabling all the good things we would do to become effective,
to become fulfilled,
to become complete,
this is called Green Tara

May all share in these blessings...

From Shadows and Exiles
Made to Receive All the World,
Redemption Poems, 2006 and 2007

My heart is

My heart is

busted open and is
spilling light everywhere

on thinking how many people are misled by false teachers
themselves ignorant

Something in me started to wail, and will never stop
crying like a parent who's lost a child
like someone whose dearest has been taken from them

and in the same instant I see in me
there is one who dances and claps
and has left his home
and who couldn't begin to tell how to ever get back –
he's not looking for return

and he sings out a full throated crazy song,
full of pain and whim and logic and grace
anyone lacking a radical solidarity with the poor
is worse off than dead – they are death itself
withering crops or making the earth itself recoil

I sing, I dance, I mourn – what else can I do?

It goes on like this with me all the time, all the time I tell you
and usually I swallow verses such as these
(with no ears to listen – what's the use? I know myself)
but this much fell out, so here it is –

a sanity making incantation
 a joy in these netherworlds
 like some eternal seal
 burning through the mist - armies that pose
 as real and lasting,
 but that fade as my honeyed laughter dawns

Sing:

O Princes and Empresses – don't think yourselves less than
 this!

Every lie about you, one day will have to be seen through
 la la la

Hark! Why not today? Why not now?

Even if we've been in the wrong forever,
 now's a door, eh? waddya say?

I bribe, I cajole, I threaten, I lie, I lure, I seduce,
 I leave trails of whatever gems people regard

I talk to children like they are adults
 knowing they understand full well
 and I talk to those who appear to be adults
 like they are in the first grade
 (we're none of us that far along)
 knowing they understand too
 and are grateful
 and take the step that is in front of them

To the extent even of the horizon
 I set a meal
 and play and sing to you sweetly a chorus to join in
 What else can I do?

I turned myself upside down and shook
and am surprised (surprised still)
at what we can do together

Their drunkenness makes me sober

Their drunkenness makes me sober
 their sleep – so shocking!, makes me wake up

Their violence makes me gentle,
 as an innocent child
 and their greed makes me generous –
 the more they take and demand
 hoard
 more than they could spend in a thousand lifetimes –
 the more I give whole worlds away,
 light-filled, boundless

I see people weaving their shells around them
 and it sets me high over the mountain
 This conversation between us, you see, it goes on all day long

Barriers being built up against feared enemies:
 I heft a sandbag too
 join in the labors
 but I am inside already
 I mean,
 I understand labor,
 but at some point, come on!

Gluttons shame me into not eating
 and the adults-in-body-only
 trapped in adolescent games
 they age me centuries at a time

all the clashing – gnarled strands

brutality I am taunted with everyday
makes of me symphonies

I don't know why it is this way, I swear

my crying and laughter have become this one sound
moving in waves

pausing

silences
black, forgetting rest
and I wake upon
whatever place along the road
I'd fallen the night before
and as soon as my eyes open
I take handfuls of the bracing messages of the day
and wake myself with them
so I can continue threading these worlds

We are one, don't you see?
If you pinch me, I'll kiss your cheek

in me your ruins
are already born again as palaces,
pleasure gardens,
places of beauty,
comfort and ease

I put signs along the lonely road

I put signs along the lonely road
build huts for travelers passing through
clear the path of dangerous animals

I rain when rain is needed
and shine to make life break out
for us all to enjoy

I'm a clue, tantalizing
and a big brick wall
I'm hauling trash
and the once in a while kind of fire that opens seeds

It's always all I can do
changing shape
voice, color

Company on your arm when that's what's needed
to keep this heart from breaking
so the next step can be taken, and the rest

I know where the road leads
and the visions that appear in dreams

There is great joy and sadness together in what I do
and as long as it's needed
I wouldn't have it any other way

There is one piece of cake left

There is one piece of cake left
let the other person have it
taste the joy of that
know that happiness
be strengthened by that

work-
let others rest
taste the joy of that
the strength that arises when needed

My children sleep
I rise early
it's their life I'm living now
a future that will be there for them
bread that will be the light in their eyes
and their learning

I grow this slow medicine
so that times of illness will be shorter
or so that they will not happen at all
chasing shadows
clearing the airs

gifts will appear in their own time
because of this devotion
of this I am sure

a broader life
and a reminder to all others

of their innate treasures

this transient, insubstantial, ephemeral

beauty

the human shout

that is love

humanity's true name this

is the reason for our smile

You tell me when I should dance

You tell me when I should dance
and when I should sit in mourning clothes

This world's at play with me
and somehow the deepening sadness
is reflected in the sky of my joy
These flavors mix and become
food for a long journey

I'm beginning to understand the languages of the world
not what is said
but the sound and sudden feeling of it
goes straight to some understanding-center,
some body alive and in dialogue with the world

I take up somehow these worlds I once held in
my hands
that are now less than nothing
I can't see them anymore, or feel their shape or texture
I've forgotten their sound – all my clutching at them's come to
nothing
and yet as the light around us,
as spacious and airy as thought,
as rooted as bread, a kind of giving continues

somehow without a table,
wine is poured
an afternoon sun hangs
drawing out bliss
crisp perfection illuminated

60

bread and song
all we ever really needed

Shadows and exiles, made to receive all the world

I go gathering limbs
 twisted shoulder, faces frozen,
 go calling down barriers
 barricaded roads
 past disbelief
 taking up all that is ugly
 trying to hide from itself from the sun,
 or that's chasing innocence

Have you ever stopped and looked back?
 There are those who are chasing you!
 and who won't stop 'till you're at the head of the table,
 and your roads to getting there are buried deep,
 now just a floorboard in the house

We know the summer delight
 peach blissful running down our chin
 and the sun so strong
 everything sighs
 but there is another bud on the branch
 and we tell of being gathered up
 of being the original lost tribe
 scorned, pitied,
 repulsive even to ourselves,
 but then taken up and given new breath
 like the first breath of life on earth

Do you know also that life
 that is made of all the decayed,
 burned, hardship,

and then
touched and welcomed

a song brought forth
we didn't know we had in us to sing

charred, a ruined paper
made fresh,
made right,
shadows and exiles,
made to receive all the world

What to make of this day

Jerry Springer makes no sense to me
 and Maury Povich, Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh, Bill
 O'Reilly –
 what does this say about us?

that anyone takes politicians seriously, at all at their word –
 I'm dumbstruck

game shows, soap operas, professional sports,
 the absurdity of high fashion
 reality tv, sitcoms,
 imbecilic movies
 computer games
 nail salons
 extravagant waste
 commercial delusion
 american garbage culture

gluttons,
 drunkards,
 perverts,
 bible thumpers,
 crack addicts,
 soulless businessmen and women

and not so much as a finger-tip is lifted
 by anyone, almost
 not so much as a finger-tip is lifted

to help the poor

to help the hungry
to help the sick

to help the aged
to help the child laborer

to help the refugee
to help the political prisoner ...

this is the world spinning out of control
and this earth stays silent

everywhere, underfoot,
this earth stays silent
fine brown dust blowing over everything

but in her is a song
O, in her is a song

if you put your palm flat on her body
you can feel this great heart waiting

if you put your cheek to her,
tenderly,
you can hear
this earth
calling

our treasure held
for safe keeping

Because all I hear is silence

[tripwire: seeing the August 7th, 2008 tally for *American* dead
an wounded in Iraq]

On my way here
the wraps came loose
and everything I wanted to bring
has spilled on the road
was trampled and forgotten

of everything I wanted to you to have
all that remains is this
barely a shred of its wrapping
but I pledged to give this over to you
and I do so on knees that are bleeding
pounding my hands
understand
foolish, ridiculous as it seems
it's not what I meant
not barely

if there are schools that come of this,
hospitals, clinics, trained medical help,
teachers imparting the arcanum of language
opening wide those halls
and generations to follow come of age
beside their great gardens

if there
is clean water enough
so even the names of diseases are forgotten

and if the lives of you and your descendants are long and rich,
know, this was only the smallest part of what the ark of my
desire held
and would have delivered to you

these few poor works, splinters washed ashore, really, of what
is left
these aims – how can they repay what you
are due
what your descendants
are due

because
we destroyed your families
set disease and bitterness among you
crushed your human dreams, my family
and wrecked mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children,
friends, lovers
with grief
and helpless mourning rage

from the sky
so nothing was heard or felt,
we dropped our bombs on
wedding parties,
hospitals,
and elementary schools,
our blinded youth, our insane leaders,
and vast sums from the public treasury
funded your hells

a few ruthless criminals led the way
and not enough of us saw or acted to stop them

there were thousands of ways it could have been stopped,
and *we* didn't stop it
and so
on this day:

another 90 destroyed in Afghanistan,
and scores more, certainly
we'll never hear about
even as they mechanically, soullessly
try to justify it –
at the podium
where every word they say
is the worst kind of profanity

they show us
just the smallest glimpse of their terror
but it's enough to wake me up
wake me up also to

worldwide secret prisons
disappearances,
torture
an absolute dictatorship of evil

This day, today,
is one more day that our moral debt grows

because your homes,
your schools,

your libraries,
your museums,
your hospitals,

and more

your children, your parents, your brothers and sisters, your
friends, families, neighbors
torn apart

since this is an unjust war,
an immoral war
every soldier is a war criminal
all of them
in the extreme of moral blindness,
taking out their own eyes
to say they were
just following orders

In Germany, and in Japan too
in the early and middle part of last century
there were those who knew their leaders blasphemed
and that the hysteria of the masses

would be seen as
vile, contemptible

as something rabid,
a searing drunken flash in history
leaving generations to grieve
and to try to recover humanity and culture

such is our nation, America,
now, in this the start of the 21st century
and yet
no one remaining
not drugged with arrogance and blood lust

no one speaks of this world as it is
or that

everyday it is not paid
our debt grows

or that

If we were to repay even the smallest part
it would be like this

our body laid at your feet
all of you
those of you who remain
the nape of our neck in plain view
servant to you and yours for as long as there is breath in this
body
to feed, house, care for, educate and serve
and then even this
the smallest remnants
the smallest part of what you are owed
what is your right

by our hand, your injury
then by our hand,
more than your remedy is due
and there is no measure for what you are owed

not paid, our debts grow:
in Asia, from the 'sixties and 'seventies
in Central America, from the 'eighties,
and now in the Middle East

so though it's a shred
this, a poor man's offering,
even so,
o let it be what it is
the first trace
of words,
rains to wash away
the scars of war

for me, there can no longer be any excuse
to not act
and bare though it may be
I say, let it be what it is
for all of our lives depend on it

let this work, this aim,
of apologies
to set the balance right
in generations to come,
this, seeming to be so small a thing,
so small as to be almost nothing,
let it be, at least, what it is
for however long it takes
all our lives depend on it, I say
because this road is the one we must,
in time,
walk together

Here's how we can begin:

with those closest to us
 with you all in mind
 and the aim
 the great aim to begin

the homeless
 the hungry closest to us
 the crushed and almost gone
 the hand reaching from the gutter
 the trembling addict
 the lost brother and sister
 the weak and forgotten
 diseased

mending the broken closest to us
 and reaching out from there
 from *our own* wounded heart
 from *our own* staggering, falling again
 here's how we can begin
 all the way to your and yours
 it starts here

so don't demean it
 tho it looks small
 like almost nothing in fact
 a great aim can be held
 in this slight gesture

love travels, don't you know
 there I've said it

What else would you propose?

We have to start somewhere
 some time
 Why not here?
 Why not now?

Where if not here?
 When if not now?

Hours and minutes are precious, given this
 I can't reach out and touch your hand tonight
 but this, *this* is what I can do, so
 three steps and a bow

skip a meal and feed someone with it
 take less sleep, a few hours more sober
 and put myself to something worthwhile and necessary
 This is what I can do

The day's not yet when I can cart the bricks and rebuild your
 homes
 or be the medicine you need
 or music for your ear
 or some embrace to ease the pain
 but this much I can do
 this much I can reach today

love travels
 providing every needful thing
 is there any other way?

and one day,

maybe long long after I've left this earth,

when these fruit trees will shelter and feed your descendants,
when words not so different from these will nourish and
fortify their hearts,
when memories no longer tremble –
ours in shame and remorse and yours
in anguish,

then we can say –
the ship's arrived in harbour,
our long journey's at an end, at last
the labour's been done
and the long table set for us all
our families gathered

ancestors and descendants together
and each of us fed
from the other's hand,
with the holy bread of forgiveness
and peace

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

Why don't we

Why don't we
invoke the blessings
of billions of angels
to pour down upon
everyone we see,
hear, or think of

Why don't we settle thoroughly
that we have it in our power
to feed each and every one
with the food that matches their deepest need and desire
and then do it

Why don't we do this?
It costs us nothing if we do
and costs us so much if we don't

Why don't we
wash the feet of all weary travelers,
offer them humble sustaining fare
and a soft bed
for them to be able to continue
laden with gifts
on their way

Why not
spread lotus blossoms
on the ground for each person to walk on
every step of their way

Why don't we

Why don't we
wash away the murk
of our confused thinking
so we stand resplendent
and as light for everyone's eyes

Why don't we pick up
in both our precious hands
that part of the wounded staggering world soul
we've each been given
to restore to health

Why don't we cup
in our hands
the dreams of future generations
and heal all injury
as our gift to be passed forward in time

Why don't we
abide in fullness
with every gift passed around
from one house to another
no limit

all the broken
isolated
born but not able to be fully born –
this, plus the heart
and there is vow

this path made entirely of
somehow wanting,
needing to say
a mighty yes

*From Original Waters –
Collected Poems, 2009 to 2015*

Introduction

On my good days, I'm one of those people who believes that poetry will save the world. You find our likes in other times, in other places, and, although this world has not yet been saved, in fact it looks like it's heading for destruction, still, we are all quite confident in our bearing.

Poetry's an invitation to love, you see, it is an invitation to dance, to be your own unique, extraordinary self, and to tap into that source that will heal us all.

"Original waters – New Poems" contains writings from the last seven years, and the title comes from a verse written while on retreat: "Original waters fill the wells...", and that to me is what poetry, and the arts are all about. We are renewed every time we touch the deep truth about our being here, however we find our way to it. This has no beginning. This has no end. The needs of today are the same as they were yesterday, and they will be the same in all of our tomorrows. And this is how we move in the world.

a postcard from home

Thinking this world needed more color,
and the gift of flight,
I found a mountain
where I could see the whole sky,
and there I grew out my beard.

In the company of deer,
I set down the harness,
made space for new wonders to appear,
and witnessed another chapter
in my original tongue.

By the measured breath of the seasons,
being cared for by strangers,
returning the earth's every embrace,
I am at ease once again.

A Psalm of Peace

What was it this morning
about the pine tree with snow on its branches,
that made me want to run
and embrace my child?
to go to a school board meeting
and speak out,
to join my local Friends of the River?

What was said this dawn
when it was just myself and her,
that set the textures of all we do
into such relief,
that pared back everything false,
and left
just a few bare facts?

In the chill before words could rise up,
something was said
of this place,
and the gift of belonging here

In the morning,
before everything else begins to stir,
and it is just you and I,
this song of peace is heard,
so bright and true,
it moves
from one to another
waking up the courage
to love in new ways

Surprise

Surprise
is a sight and fragrance of a new flower,
stopping you,
stopping time

It can appear anywhere,
and add a new flavor to everything

This is the food that keeps us young,
This is the freshness
that goes to the root of breathing
where all joys alight

No place I'd rather be

I usually don't try to explain a poem, but in this case a few words of how it came to be might add something to it. I went on a short retreat in 2011, and when I came back to San Francisco, on the first night back I had this dream, of a teenaged girl who went to join her parents in a concentration camp. Her father said to her, 'Why are you here? You could have escaped and saved yourself!' and the girl said, No! If I am here I can offer you some joy, for as long as we are together. I can make the suffering less! There is no place I would rather be...'

I tried to catch what was said and put it in a poem, but I don't know how successful I was... in any case, I had to try... you know the feeling...

No place I'd rather be

In good times,
 hard times,
 and the worst of times,
 there is no place I'd rather be
 than *right there*

If you ask me why,
 it is because,
 by the power of love,
 I can share the joy with you, and make it more
 I can help to make the pain less,
 and I can offer happiness

That is why,
through it all,
and when things get tough,
and even,
or *especially* in the worst of times
in the worst of worlds,
there is no place that I would rather be

If this were the only world
where there is both happiness and suffering,
still, I would choose just this one
to be with you

By being here together,
we can make the way better for one another
Don't you see?
That means more than anything else to me

For this very reason,
it's worth every effort
whatever we need to go through,
it is, all of it, then,
completely worthwhile

Giving of ourselves,
Measured next to this world's
pleasures –
there is no comparison, really

People don't know of this, or else they don't feel capable,
and so they hide
or run to small pleasures
that disappear even in the moment and are gone

But because we can be light for one another,
make each other's trials that much less,
and offer food, and shelter
even for future times,
through love,
there is no place that I would rather be
than right here

This thought
strengthens me in hundreds of ways

If we only get one song,
and that song is our life,
then let this be my song

Let everything else be done, or left undone,
no matter –

but just this, to aim to care for you
in the best of ways -
this brings life,
freshness that does not fade

Every other gain and loss,
no matter -
but just this

of all worlds, of all paths,
to be with you,
and to offer you my hand,
for your whole life
oh, the joy of this!

reduced to poetry

there are times when I'm reduced to poetry,
I run, I tell you,
to listen to poets,
or to write something,
anything at all,
to recover my sense

Give me a language I can to grieve in,
when I have to,
and one that has music at the ready,
for when I need to dance

Good News, for a Change

O, news of the day,
I counter your incantation with my own

seeing with certainty now
that real friendship exists in this world
and love between family, friends, and even strangers

that Mozart is still heard,
Eva Cassidy too,
and the work of Van Gogh, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Picasso,
Gauguin, and more can still be seen on any day

that one sky covers us all,
and light brings all manner of green to birth in the world

that is our immutable pure common well

that children still smile,
their beatific innocence
and inspire parents, aunts, uncles, grandfathers,
grandmothers,
and complete strangers
to reach fearlessly
to make the world right for them, and future generations

O avalanche of despair
frenzy of hopelessness, helplessness
sounds of drowning man

idiocy, and fixation on injustice, images of devastation –

the snarling apparitions of panicked minds –

with one single remembrance of a wise person,
you are all dispelled from being the center of all things

you are no longer all that I see

Where will you look when you feel threatened?

Where is your safe haven?

You can't tell me now that there is none,
because
I know better.

Call me deluded if you like,

or worse, an optimist

Ok then –

you've put your cards on the table, for long enough now,
you've had the only play,
and so I'll lay out my evidence too,
and let you decide:

Have you seen the photographs of Matthieu Ricard?

have you seen the eyes of the children, saints, mothers and
fathers?

Have you seen the great oceans?

If you have, I defy you to tell me
what is not possible

Have you heard Mozart played by Brendel?

or Perahia playing Bach or Mendelssohn?

or Carulli – music for flute and guitar?

Have you read Hafiz?

Do you see, along with everything else
 that part of this house we were born into
 is the living legacy of many great men and women
 who were here before

DT Suzuki, Howard Zinn, Jane Jacobs, Dorothy Day,
 Walt Whitman, ML King, Paul Robeson, Cesar Chavez, Jacob
 Riis, John Lennon, Albert Schweitzer, Lama Yeshe,
 and so many more

Do you see, that along with everything else,
 there are, with us right now
 many people committed to human rights,
 people like Noam Chomsky, Paul Farmer, Greg Mortenson,
 Thich Nhat Hanh, Arundati Roy, Muhammad Yunus,
 Desmond Tutu, Ani Tenzin Palmo, Doctors without Borders,
 and so many more

Do you know that there is a generation of young people,
 and there will be another after that and another after that
 who will not take 'no' for an answer
 who will not lie down and give up so easily

And, most of all,
 do you see what we are capable of
 when we set our heart to something
 Do you know what treasures we hold within
 to be drawn from to feed each other

Have you heard Eva Cassidy?
 Have you read Pablo Neruda and Julio Cortazar

So take your best shot with all your oppressive news

oppressive views
with all your maddening cries of despair and helplessness
Drop all your bombs –
empty all your payloads of devastation if it's all you can do
but I'll tell you
quietly, so it can be heard

that I don't live in that world anymore

and

it's not hidden

if you take your hands
from in front of your face,
the way is open for you too

I invite you

This world
holds that one
in its embrace

The Open Palm of Refuge –

for my sister, with lasting gratitude

I rested on the open palm of refuge,
having survived the wars,
and fallen over her threshold

I woke in a quiet place,
with food left for me,
and a note
with plans for later that day

I bathed, put on clean clothes,
and slept again,
for what felt like years

I had my wounds to tend,
mixed with the riches I'd gathered,
and these
would have to sort themselves out

But until then,
I rested,
free of cares,
well fed and looked after.

Even then,
day by day,
I did not miss seeing
the depth of the gesture;
Even then, at all times,

with every cup of water,
I knew the crux of it
as a shining gift

I celebrated the way being opened,
and the visions
of season after season
bearing fruit
that I am witness to now

Coming back to life
by more than just a room,
and food,
I was made whole again
by such kindness

A turn,
and a whole new plane opened

I was not in the tomb
for three days,
but months had gone by
And now,
whatever follows,
it is because I was tendered
a chance at new life

a few marks on a page

a few marks on a page,
a message in code –
if you find the meaning,
a path will appear,

treasures you walked by,
day after day,
allies you didn't know you had

These hidden words are all that matter now,
the rest, fades to grey

You hold the map in your hands,
incredulous,
as day breaks all 'round

handling the family knives

Inherited mostly unknown to me,
hidden 'til the day they spill out,
flashing edges, a guarded tension

I look around – no threat –
but still my breath is short

What is this crowd?
Family, how can I hold you,
if we've never met?

but your memories have become my own now,
I see how they were hidden
in my own body

these are the grown children of your fears,
the surge of the crowd,
the steel-eyed column,
the dense hush of hunted,
clandestine meetings

In deep Winter, how many of us
forget even the name 'Spring'?

How can I hold you, my family,
when your heritage rolls out in front of me?
and any way I reach
to pick up the steel of memory
I see the dangers in it –
hear the insistence

we keep our defenses both sharp, and hidden

Family, I've carried you here at long last
to learn from you,
and because I want to know
the peace and rest that could cover us all

We could have roads

We could have roads
We could have schools;

We could have hospitals and clinics,
and health care extended
to whoever can't afford to pay

We could have clean water
We could teach more children to read;

No one who needs a bed
has to go without one

and the gates of paradise
of learning about this world
are not locked –
they stand wide open

and so,
why are there roads and bridges
needing repair?

Why the closed schools?
and,
Why *aren't* the clinics being built?

Why are the cities so crowded
with people needing a place to rest?

Why these groans and cries today,

if people could be made well?

Some few –
have made their castle on a high plateau,
have set themselves so far from the earth,
that they don't see,
or hear, or feel,
or take account,

of the warm lives they effect every day

those
are like pieces on a board game to them,
or like a story someone once told

They reign like demi-gods,
not knowing they sleep,
until they hear the rattle at their door,
and see the long lines
carrying away their palace
brick
by
brick

the beauty of hands

the beauty of hands when they caress
so small and yet
the force that lifts us all

The glory of being dis-invited

Aah, the glory of being dis-invited

It's an honor to be dis-invited to the White House,
as happened once with some anti-war poets

We should frame those dis-invitations,
and put them on our walls

We should hold parades
to celebrate the dis-invited,

I can see the few of them now,
walking down the closed off streets
waving to cheering crowds...

We should stamp their images on coins,
and put it on paper money...
you get the point

We could compose church hymns
and rap songs,
and anthems that could be sung
in the seventh inning at ball games

because when everyone else was too afraid to speak,
those few didn't back down

We should remember them,
so when everything else crumbles,
there'll be something left to build on...

I wonder have you ever chosen

I wonder
have you ever chosen to watch one channel's news
instead of another
because the weather man there is more optimistic?
the others, they are calling for rain, but this one,
he says the sun is going to shine
he looks a bit mad while he's saying it
wearing shorts and sunglasses and flip flops
and not much else
telling us to get out the ice chest and lotion
he scares his fellow anchors
but it doesn't seem to faze him
on other channels he's a joke
what with their dopplar radar
and trenchcoats and umbrellas and boots
I wonder if they'd see it, even if the clouds did part
they're pretty invested
they're not like those prophets,
who must see something we don't
to make the park sound so inviting today

Dionysius or Apollo?

Dionysius or Apollo?

Dionysius took me this morning,
and thank heavens for that,
but Apollo is by my side now,
and thank heavens for that

How about you?

a single clear flame

a single clear flame,
in the night can be seen for miles and miles,
and even dreaming of light
can guide our steps

Carrying the family tears

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

We are travelers in the dim light

We are travelers in the dim light
Mostly I sleep and am carried,
but wake enough to know
the heavy coat, the thick beard

not sharing a common language
we communicate with looks
and gestures, and touches along the way

being too young to understand,
I put together a sense of where we are
and where we are going
by the sound of the conversations,
by the quiet, by the urgency,
by the love that I hear

I have a large sheath
I carry with me,
and one or two pages
have fallen from it

If I start out amazed

If I start out amazed,
everything is ok, even dying
but if I lose the thread,
I fall to pieces again

Maybe the usual is not being here,
and what is altogether extraordinary
is to move, to feel, to see color...

A hundred times a day,
I decode the wonder of your smile,
and wake in a grace-filled world
This changes everything.

is there no one now

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

Adoption

How many children will you adopt today?
If it is more than you can feed,
you will cry yourself to sleep every night
for a time,
then set yourself to work
plowing fields
and building roads

If you choose to,
you can hold in your heart
all this world's children,
and will it be every one of them
that you claim as family?

How many people need a friend and sponsor also,
and will you take them all in?
set up schools, and safehomes,
distill medicines,
and rain your beauty on them

And how many old growth forests,
rivers and lakes and fields,
ailing and pristine
will you be a steward for?
They need you,
and they sigh,
they hum when they hear your assent

Once you've said Yes, then it is settled,
and these are yours forever
and the work of you hands and heart,
from that point on,
are for each of these

For me it's Tuesday

A day's journey ahead
Sunset tinged reflection in my eyes

How is it that the another generation's starting point
can make itself felt now?
I don't answer but live with the question
looking for a larger canvas

I've got welcomed visitors
who stay for years
and who tell me some of how it will be one day
in a morning we pass through seasons
and before lunchtime,
see my younger self as still curled and sleeping

The outside seems to move so slowly
almost frozen,
but these whirling universes
reach their limit in me
and speak an unguarded word,
in a language to be born

undefined

I am -
undefined
and even that label does not stick
anywhere
like tossing paint onto empty space,
no history, no location,
no biography touches me

these wheels turn
and the wind
ranges over my face
letters arrive
addressed to no one
and the mail carrier
stands bewildered
looking for where the house used to be

I travel easily
without passport
invisible
to border guards
and having language everyone understands

like water
like sunlight
your parents knew me
and I appear
in the flowing script
of our dream children

wearing today's colors
and boldly marching
keeping promises
it is
the stillness of night
and first light wherever I am

exorcism

swing the censers and give voice
to the old chants that worked in the past

there is an archangel who waits to be called on
and this is the time

the wind hisses
through holes in the roof
candles flicker
and we draw our coats close

no one remembers how it used to be
except for the priests and the outcasts
a time before the plague,
a time before the terror
of not knowing each other

we rise up as a wave now
from some place in us that wasn't needed 'til now

and we sings songs of restoration
learning as we go
finding that the language shapes us

a mighty arm hefts Gabriel's horn
light fills the foyer and rushes to the nave

we were trampled down
we were without form
we had no voice
but mourning

but these small exorcisms reach far
candles re-light themselves
and a tune
and harmony
again make their way from our home

a stranger arrives for a visit

a stranger arrives for a visit
his features slowly becoming clear -
a faint family resemblance

he knocks pots around loudly
swings open the cabinet doors
and makes up all new dishes
no one has ever heard of
but all of them fantastic

we lose track of time
telling stories, jokes,
comparing notes and translations

he claps me on the shoulders
as though we know each other well,
insists I wear brighter colors
and get out to hear the birds more often

mostly though, I take dictation
scribbling his asides
even when I don't comprehend

then he leaves as suddenly as he came
and I stumble about for a day or two
trying to figure out if I dreamed it all
and except for the gifts it might be so

I have heard there is a world

I have heard there is a world
where the earth shakes
and thousands are buried alive,

while boxers are exalted
and fight to split a purse
of 300 million

no one speaks of the tragedy that night
and a wall is built reaching to the heavens

tell me if we ever get close to such a world
I want to stay as far away from it
as I can

The seed

under weight and darkness
and time,
vision is cast far ahead, looking for light
there is light in the eye, looking through the darkness

in my heart I can see rain clouds
moving across the plains
and I know the feeling even now
when gifts long held are given

time is a weight I press back against
and I move against the slow grey sky
in time before the birth shout of worlds

when no one knows my name
when competing voices and loud engines leave no space
in a cupped alcove
I am a dirge invoking rain from above

against this shell of mine
sharp calls now in waves
to break open
reach upwards and shake the sky

I must have rain in me too
the taste of it on my tongue
to call it so from above
the tender hand also
that shields me and caresses
the one I know only in my dream

thunders in me

and wind stirs the ground outside
spirals upwards
twists the clouds
over day darkened fields
until the rain surges
and that touch
brings joy dancing in new forms

though I may be tiny
my voice is a rocking chorus of prayer
that sweeps upwards
in new language
of full throated protest
and celebration at once
grieving and demands insisted on
all true to a single image in me
of the harvest

From Open in case of emergency,

New poems, 2017

Waking up in a burning house

Out of night's troubled dream,
I wake and hear cries,
shouting,
and people running down the hallway

I gather myself and listen -
Our house is on fire.

I count who is here,
every one of them,
all my family,
and throw open doors

Some sleep heavily, and will need to be carried,
some are so fixed on their games
their toys need to be slapped from their hands,

some are curled up under the table, wailing,
others are drunk

most are our children

What choice do I have?
I'm not leaving anyone behind

resting's not an option,
or panic

the floorboards are falling away, and soon,
if we don't find a way out,

this place we call home and all of us will be gone

fools and derelicts,
those with matches still in their hands,
the deranged and the distracted
have nothing to give us now

the pompous hear nothing, see less

If you ask me my name, where I'm from,
or what right I have to raise the alarm
I'll tell you there's no time for that

look at the floor beneath your feet
see the smoke,
hear the tearing apart of the walls

there's safety,
but also confusion, dense sleep,
and arrogance

others sound a pure, clear bell

If you want to talk about how this all happened,
or what can be done,
we'll have to do it
with one or both of us in motion

Mistaken identity

{for all those who don't know me, but only imagine they do}

So this guy comes into the cafe,
looking mad,
he's got me confused with someone else -
someone that owes him money
He rages around, muttering curses,
but doesn't see me

He's saying something about
how I dated his sister,
ate all the food out of his refrigerator,
borrowed his power tools and didn't give them back,

and other things too:
how I shrunk all his clothes,
took his parking place,
forgot to walk his dog...

I don't even know this guy,
but he's convinced I'm the one
on the wanted poster he's waving around in his hand

I know how a fiction can take hold -
I often dreamt I was someone else,
and then in the morning, thought,
How convincing!

I once stood next to my brother,
not two feet away,

and tried to make sense of his tirade,
until I realized it was directed at no one real,
but to an idea he held onto fiercely
of someone who didn't exist at all!

What if we don't see each other?
What if we see instead
a fevered idea,
fitting our half-dream narrative -
What hope then for communication?
What hope for making a shared world
that works for all us all?

I wanted to wave my hands and shout,
'Over here!',
but he was not listening,
he was deeply asleep,
deep in his illusory world

and so I will wait until the day starts in his eyes,
and then finally, together we can dispel
the last remnants of his dream

Volunteers needed

Volunteers needed
to go to the hell realms -

battlefields,
places of devastation
haunted places

destinations
created by the minds of those
who know only greed,
confusion,
fear, paranoia
violence -

The work
is changing all those minds
and freeing them from suffering

This work will go for eons if needed

The cost to you:
You will suffer while there.
You will be scorned and ridiculed for your choices.
and it will leave you time for little or nothing else.

The advantages:
You will be eternally supported and loved by those who care
for the lost and the abandoned
You will be doing the essential work.

130

Apply now.

You are needed.

A doctor would not ask

A doctor would not ask
about the right or wrong you have done

A doctor would not ask before agreeing to see you
about your gender, age, race, religion or sexual orientation

Simply, if you are in pain, he wants to help

A doctor would not ask how much money you have,
or how you're going to pay,

or what political party you belong to

instead, he welcomes you with open hands,
an attentive heart

You are the reason he wakes in the morning
and leaves his home before dawn

You are the reason he set out on his journey
to become capable

Just this alone:
to see you well
to ease the way for you

Why I live by the edge of the river

Darkness approaches,
and with it a cold wind
You struggle to hold the rope,
and listen for the sound of help

This is why I live by the edge of the river
to wrap my arms around you,
and keep you from the dark currents

I was one almost taken,
and would have been
if not for someone reaching out,
so now all that's left
is the will to see you safe
and with your kin,
given the food set out for you

Everyone reached
goes on in some way
feeding our greater family
pulling ashore those who can be taken hold of
and venturing out farther still
to wild places,
to bring them all home

Vulture Capitalism

Puerto Rico, 2017

These days the barbarians don't arrive on long wooden ships,
but in their private jets,
bloodthirsty howls replaced by pirate law

delirious they rampage,
with their dead eyes,
and insatiable hunger

They hear nothing at all
They see nothing at all
and they will burn everything to the ground.

I don't know anything about poetry

I don't know anything about poetry
made of well considered lines,
taken at leisure

I only know how it is
when the ground tears open,
and reveals an ancient city

I know the violent shaking loose of forgotten languages -
I spill everywhere -
the deafening, cataclysmic birth

Some savage stranger who moves in with me
and refuses to leave
no matter how many times I ask him what he wants
and strain to understand his fearsome, emphatic answers

When peace returns,
I know only
that before and after is not the same
that the whole world has changed,
and I go looking for the new order
in what remains

Martin's Bible

(As it should have been)

Chief Justice Roberts reading the Oath of Office
for Obama's second inauguration:
The president, right hand raised,
reaches out his left palm
for Martin's bible

Suddenly, the ground shakes,
and Michelle, holding the book, stumbles,
the book falls through the air,
pages snapping like banners in the wind

Everyone together
takes a short breath,
everyone leans forward,
they stretch out their arms,
only to see Martin's bible burst into flames

ghost of an angry prophet
coming in a flash as they do,
leading an army

The Nobel Peace Prize
and drone warfare,
the smooth elocution,
and the hysteria he unleashed -
the perfect setting,
can not bear the weight,

the earth splits open,
past, present and future lights
searing the war criminals' hand

There are so many ways to save a life

There are so many ways to save a life

You can
let your friend know you are thinking of them

You can
cut a few flowers from the garden
and give them away

You can
open your window, and play a song,
so someone walking by can hear it

You can
let yourself dream for all of our sake

You can buy ice cream for the local kids,
and relish their satisfied look
because saving ourselves is also what we must do

Alright, I'm broken open tonight,
on account of a madman
plowing into a crowd in Nice,
and the shooting in Baton Rouge,
and the one in St. Paul,
and the one in Dallas,
and this is the best I can do right now,
but there's something to what I say,
if you care to look -

Instead of studying war, and retaliation,
barricading ourselves with thoughts of the enemy
we can stand exposed
like the lions that came before us

There are so many ways to save someone's life
and if you are awake,
it's all you aim to do

The monster sleeps

The monster sleeps
but people remember
in their haunted eyes,
in the slope of their shoulders,
in the marks that don't stay hidden

When the winds stop raging,
and everything is still,
but taut before the next storm,
if you didn't know better,
everything would seem viable,
but nothing resembles a home anymore

People sift through what is left
talk as stunned survivors do
in a vocabulary of disbelief
trying to restore normalcy in small ways,
they even joke,
but hurry to seek shelter anywhere
readying for the next turn

The generals
set up tents again
talk strategy
prepare for the next siege
and there are losses all around,
too many to count...

What no one can see now
shadows them everywhere

and how they long for rest

Some few
nod in the sun
and the monster stirs

and before anyone can believe what is happening,
old horrors return
swift, merciless -
devastation

once
they fought back
didn't let up
and said

*the monster is slain
his blood turns the ground red
his teeth are scattered
his limbs
carried off to the four quarters*

Some
remember it all
and tell the story now
without leaving *anything* out
to keep the beast at bay

Around the safety of small fires at night,
they trace the circumference of descent and return
seeking to revive a full memory at last
so that we don't sleep again

You have a cup

You have a cup, and there is water
and the size of the cup depends
on the size of your desire

You have a family, spread over this earth
and some of them hunger and thirst,
and what you will be able to give them
depends on if you carry their needs
right up to the cusp of asking

Some have never heard of water
Some
don't hear more than their own wants,
and they deny their family

Most do not believe in the religion of water,
that you can have oceans

They would never guess the potency that is in their hands
Saying,
My world is too much already,
my street, a mythic journey,
and more than that is a strange tale,
told in a foreign tongue

but all this fits in the corner of an eye,
and in an embrace,
and the latch on the gate is such a small thing, really,
to flick open

Somewhere my Indian blood is howling

Somewhere my Indian blood is howling
Can you hear it?

These revived echoes,
the sound
everyone understands in their bones -

of women taken in the night,
heard across compounds,
across valleys

of the grief
at men and boys not returning

of children
being pulled away from their families

of heavy chains,
the sound of the whip
attack dogs,

by force, banning language and culture,
and then, vacancy, of whole tribes gone

Tell me now, in your history, who were the savages?

self proclaimed gods
mad with the sword and the book

to this day, proud

to this day, exalted
on this day, lifted even higher

and somewhere my Indian blood is seething
at the god of power,
at the god of enslavement
and those who worship him

For what kind of religion is it
that celebrates with spectacle,
vestments and choirs,
when it should be grieving for its sins?

Your god,
the one you say created everything,
the one you say is everywhere,
the one you say only you understand,
must be waiting for you to turn

Indifference

I swim in a grey sea
without sense
or color,
or variance
Head down through the tide

In the distance,
when I hear others speak of sharp spikes,
they are mostly a distraction,
or a joke,
or deserving my scorn:

They talk of the desperate,
or the blissful,
and none of it makes any sense to me
I'm blanketed and no light gets through

Birth and death,
the wail of mothers, and sons,
the beggars empty cup
the imprisoned,
the buried alive

wolf packs,
rivers of fire,
heroic acts -
not a whit of that matters

You see me, impassive,
corpse-like,

swaddled, embryonic
enfolded in a dreamless sleep

Archeology

This work is not like building,
with cranes and back-hoes
and trucks coming and going -

it is more like
unearthing a temple
that has always been here,
right beneath where we are now

A vast edifice,
a pristine refuge,
translucent, imperishable,
thrilling to behold,
and restorative to enter

My part here
is not to add,
or even advertise
There's no need to adorn the bright flowers,
the flowing waters,

or concern myself with when the guests will arrive-
at all times, day and night,
they arrive and depart,

miss it completely,
or see it and exult

Here, the notes of celestial musicians
do not fade,

flowers do not lose their color,
food on the tables is always fresh,

and printed and sung invitations
are going out all the time,
becoming new languages as they travel,
to re-awaken the sense of our first family

to mark the difficult passage
with lamps, and bread,
and trustworthy guides

caretakers who birth salve in their palm,
and new cups of cool water to calm fever,
and return people to themselves

Even seen from afar,
a city of light
moves people to noble actions
that spread across the earth

About the Author

Jason Espada is a writer and classical musician living in San Francisco. He is a steward of his father's photography, and the founder of abuddhistlibrary.com. Over the years, he's made a number of recordings of Buddhist teachings, and these days his focus is on the connection between spirituality and social action. His new website is jasonespada.com.

Also by Jason Espada

Living in Beauty - Buddhist Loving Kindness Practice begins with traditional teachings on how we can cultivate metta, or loving kindness, starting from wherever we are now in our lives. This love is the basis for what is known as the Bodhisattva Vow, which is the aim to benefit others as much as we can through actualizing a spiritual path. Metta then finds expression through Engaged Buddhism.

In an era of increasing isolation, materialism, fear and despair, metta helps us to tap into our inner richness, and gives us reason to hope. For this reason, metta is the ideal practice for our times.

A Buddhism for Racial Progressives - Inspiration for Activists is a handbook on Buddhism and social justice. It presents a compassionate world view, and methods that can help us to achieve our aims. Using traditional teachings, we have greater resources to bring to the work that we do.

A Belief in the Miraculous - Buddhism, Magic, and a Sense of the Sacred goes into the seldom discussed esoteric side of Buddhism. It describes Sacred outlook - the pure perception of our world; Buddhas and bodhisattvas, saints and their miraculous activity, a description of our subtle nature, as well as a celebration of the divine help that can be called on.

Ending Racism - A Buddhist View is a response to the ongoing crisis in this country of systemic discrimination and police violence. It details what Buddhism can teach us about the deep education that needs to take place to remove the roots of racism in our culture.

Where Joy Can Be Found is about the happiness that is essential for each of our flourishing. We may think of joy as a luxury, as something we can get only when we're finished with our day to day tasks, or after achieving some goal. The reality is that we need this quality that enlivens all throughout our life, if we're going to bring out the best we have in us.

A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty - Buddhist Thought Training describes methods for turning adverse circumstances into causes of healing and awakening, so that instead of being oppressed by conditions, we can be empowered by them. When things are especially difficult in our lives and in our world, compassion can manifest even more strongly. The Thought Training teachings then show us how we can use everything we meet to benefit both ourselves and society.

Poetry

The Life Within the Life

Shadows and Exiles - Made to Receive All the World

Original Waters

Be a light in the gathering light - Selected Poems

Open in case of emergency, New poems, 2017

Audio Recordings

{these can be heard on jespada.bandcamp.com/music}

1. Mahayana Prayers and Poetry
2. The Dhammapada
3. The Treatise on Buddha Nature

4. A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, by Shantideva

1. An Exhortation to Resolve Upon Bodhi

6. The Medicine Buddha Sutra

7. The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines, and It's Verse Summary; The Diamond Sutra, and The Heart Sutra (16 hours)

8. Selections from The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines (one hour)

9. Dharma Readings

Music

1. Classical Guitar to Put Your Mind At Ease

2. Holiday Music for Classical Guitar

1. From the Soul of Spain

About Great Circle Publications

Great Circle Publications is dedicated to sharing the light of the world. While other circles exclude, through identifying with one tribe, nation, or religion, the qualifier, 'Great' refers to another way of living in our world; one that is inclusive, compassionate, social justice oriented, and forward looking.