

The Collected Poetry of Jason Espada , Volume II - from 2006 and 2007

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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? waddy 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 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

Tracing the roots – wisdom and compassion

There is  
only one evil  
that is ignorance

how can we feel anger  
at insentience, such as a rock or a log?

What else  
except a dawn  
is called for?

And with what eyes do we see?  
What eyes are not yet opened?

A human being can live and die  
without ever opening their eyes  
the eyes of the spirit or the soul –  
To some these are like the words  
of a forgotten language –  
nothing stirs

Who can enter these worlds  
and make a way out  
where there was none before?  
Compared to this,  
all we value recedes

How can we be angry with  
what is just ignorance?

But removed from this,  
not tracing the roots exactly  
we strike or wish to destroy  
there is no end –  
no end  
except for seeing the roots

and streams of forgiveness flowing everywhere

And so this world calls to you  
you who see through appearances  
What other resolve can there be?

You few that are free  
This world endlessly calls to you

All the good you would do,  
if you will it  
it will be done  
and the world calls

All these, our family  
men, young men,  
women, children,  
young children  
now, and from the future  
they reach to you  
they call to you

'Turn the wheel'  
'Turn the mighty wheel'

How many times have I declared victory  
 only to be shot down from behind  
 as I raised my flag on some mountaintop?

The rhythm goes this way –  
 before I can say it, any victory is gone  
 Don't know if it's that  
 pride blinds,  
 or if I call these interferers on myself  
 raise them snarling from the ground myself  
 As soon as I say it, or only think it, I see the gathering armies

Taking the luxury of resting, I invite my own fall –  
 a story the same on every page of the book  
 that I don't seem to tire of writing  
 and I'm astonished at my endless stubborn rut

Who is that revolutionary that forbids us to say his name?  
 or speak, except covertly, of his mission?  
 his never-yielding nature  
 to throw off the dictatorship of the senses,  
 end the cruel tyranny of attachment,  
 and all the histories of pain,  
 to in fact cut through every bond –  
 only the heavy swift sword remaining

Anything less and we need more graces upon us  
 to crest that hill, to bite through

O lifetimes and lifetimes, where have you gone?  
 Oppression – what do you promise, really?  
 Behind what you show the world  
 in exchange for our precious consent?

This one gospel wail  
 rises out of times, cultures, peoples  
 “how long, o lord?” how long?  
 Where will it end, if not now?

And you also will speak of this  
to every passing stranger  
to every green child  
down every blackened corridor  
through rusted prison walls

melted into the colors of the world,  
you will speak of freedom  
and of no fear

words to birth another  
the gift that burns away everything that is less than freedom  
inside, outside

jaw set  
look, steady, intent  
that is already seeing and joy  
though joy be sometimes refused

two feet on the ground –  
O make me like  
that mountain!

During the day I strain and struggle and dig a hole  
and in the unseeing pitch of night I fill it again

During the day I walk over difficult ground  
towards my destination,  
and at night I re-trace my steps  
I go back

I sing  
Let it not all be undone!

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 -  
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  
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

bread and song  
all we ever really needed

What voices light up the world  
praise songs that break shoots from hard seed  
churn wastelands  
and make heaven worlds visible to us all

What light from the eyes  
breaks bonds

Solace given, making dancers of us all

What harmony adds flavor to our food

What spoken word lets us see color

A story is told to dispel ghosts  
passed down through generations  
never failing  
of pilgrims at dawn  
realizing how great this moving stream  
Of their slowly hearing welcomes –  
this, their food, companionship  
this, what gives strength to their limbs

a page turns,  
and then another  
and brightness finds one more way  
into our lives

The need to write

That I may never want to be rid  
of sorrow  
crushing life  
and making gems and small flowers appear  
on my ceiling  
and scattered on the sidewalks

I can't see putting this on a business card  
or on a resume  
or on a plaque on your desk  
or being introduced  
as the death shout  
corpse raising  
giver of gifts  
or some such strange but  
appropriate title

How can you squeeze something like this into a book  
or a calm reasonable conversation?  
I tell you, you can't!

heaven help us it will always be this way  
once free  
like a wave that's broken  
wed to creation

They call me a dangerous person,  
and I can't entirely disagree  
not because I burn or bomb houses  
steal children or lie and make people crazy  
not like some  
I don't block out the sun  
or act like weevils on crops

No, I'm quieter, mostly –  
They say I'm a danger because  
I'm a door  
and I have a dream that won't give up inside of me  
a world compared to which,  
what we see of this bright day's a scuff mark

I speak even if I don't mean to,  
it spills out

Little boy wearing a sailor's cap, and not much else  
once in a while still claiming to be steering the ship  
instead of the toy boat replica I'm sitting in

Hey, I'm just telling what is so

and it's this reminding others that gets me in trouble  
's why I'm accused (not all unjustly, after all)  
when it leads to melting down idols,  
throwing mortgage deeds on the fire,  
elopements,  
and gardens flowing down the street after us

Sunlight is why I'm branded a fool and a troublemaker  
'Innocent and Guilty!', I plead, tunefully,

even if there is no paper to write on,  
I spell it out  
like ancient hieroglyphs

with discards  
communicate in primitive ways  
tapping and rhyming  
speaking original language-  
songs that awaken their memory  
and go on this way  
from age to age

Calling to the shadows

I go gathering limbs  
twisted shoulders, faces, frozen  
go calling down barriers  
barricaded roads  
past disbelief  
taking up all that is ugly  
trying to hide 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 floor for the house

We know the summer delight  
peach blissful running down our chin  
and 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

remembering a dance  
once, long ago  
seen as if in a clear mirror  
laying flat on the kitchen table

remembering that summer afternoon  
how they were all swept up by the music  
as with one motion,  
the gleam in his friends eyes,  
the summer dresses, and perfume,  
the wine of it all

and legs that hadn't worked for years  
move again  
at once he's up, shuffling around  
the sagging wooden floor of his shack

and in the mountains  
with nothing to eat  
boiling snow and cooking nettles for his family to eat  
to appease his children's hunger  
and his wife's fears  
father tells a story  
stirring the pot

with everyone gathered around  
and listening, pitched  
he tells  
of feasts  
drawing it out slowly  
dropping in twigs and grass  
the shape and texture and weight of vegetables  
carrot, squash, tomato, potato, onions, cabbage, peas

and spices – sweet, and hot, and little ones, very very hot  
so you'd break into a sweat

and he'd tell until they were all spellbound  
stomachs somehow filled  
and night after night  
mountains were crossed like this  
later, he'd remember  
'best damn nettle soup anyone's ever had'

and one day, so sad  
I held her slender hand  
sometimes cloud, sometimes the branch of a tree  
would keep me from seeing  
sometimes my own tears  
but she was constant  
love that doesn't rise and set  
somehow all these years later, I remember her still  
and that she somehow freed me from my fears  
freed me to walk through prison walls a free man  
such that now  
there's no gift I give that doesn't have something of her in it

You know the feeling  
when you've forgotten something  
and can't remember what?

I leave the house  
and then I know it –  
I know you're not with me  
I feel it  
like a coat I've forgotten to bring with me

I need to wrap you around me  
and hold you tight to me  
to keep me warm  
I need this so I don't shiver,  
so my teeth don't clatter

When will you come?  
*When will you come?*  
*When will you finally be here?*

I'm a poor man today  
a beggar  
with a house somewhere  
but wandering  
asking  
pleading with everyone to take me there

I've become a town where all people do  
is wait  
for a train, a bus, a vision, a visitor  
through grey afternoons that stretch out into infinity  
it's been so long no one even remembers  
when the guest was due to come  
waiting's all they know

almost everything else has been forgotten  
such that

even if their long expected, long hoped for guest  
 should arrive  
 some of them at least  
 will not be able to believe it  
 and they'll keep waiting forever

others though, some amazingly lucky few,  
 will steal away from that sad crowd  
 and find solitude with the Guest  
 her hand alive in my own  
 and all the gifts that have been waiting  
 in that moment, can be given  
 nothing held back

Here's how to turn a poor stale vinegar soup  
 into a summer feast on tables spreading for miles:  
 love  
 and all the past  
 disasters – even their memory painful –  
 turn sweet  
 all the fears – like nightmares that shake us  
 can become beauties  
 all the imaginings – less than paper thin but like labyrinths  
 turned over and stirred  
 in the kitchen alchemist's pot  
 he adds himself, and lo!,  
 a song rises from the pot  
 feeding all our family,  
 all our guests, ho!

a song into the night –  
 joy even the stones

and grass,  
 houses, buildings,  
 animals  
 join in celebrating

ok

we're just visitors for a while  
on this sad earth  
some few fortunate enough  
to go around trying to say the word joy  
to others

don't ask why it is so  
today's a fresh day  
time to go out while  
the sun's still out and the sky  
so welcoming a blue  
not like yesterday  
all day cramped up  
trying to dig myself out of the mountain  
running out to get food  
and then back

today's a day for walking  
for cooking something simple for our family  
for making steps and to forget  
and to leaving behind  
whatever does not match  
the lives not yet lived  
that we yearn for

today's a day  
a royal day  
to make melodies out of  
whatever we are given  
hint at the universes within this one  
perfect, glorious  
tell secrets that enliven,  
winking, then disappear again

and

oh! just for one day  
or for one hour  
or for one minute even  
not one iota overlooked!  
not one thing underestimated!

praise to the round belly  
flat feet  
balding  
squinting  
gap where a tooth used to be  
hair at improvised angles

even wrong words  
miracles!  
that we speak and hear  
and write and read  
itself is angelic  
and not less

only be not jaded  
and all is alive,  
wondrous  
worthy of our gratitude and devotions  
how could it ever be any other way?

we all have a song in us  
and today's the day to be that

## Case One – The World Honored One Invites You to Sup

### Introduction

Here at the door you are invited to rest, and so the way opens. But if you are not of such a temper, don't worry, you won't be put down, you won't be neglected. You are most welcome in this house.

Here we have medicine, and clothes; food for strength, and song to put color back in your cheeks, such that all can receive gifts, onward leading, and peace beyond compare.

Look!, our hands are open, and we ask nothing of you. Whatever you bring to the door, you are welcomed in.

### Case

What is given, if you see it, you are free, at ease, already at table.  
But if you don't get it, don't worry, we'll try something else.

### Commentary

Any time is a good time, but how to say it? A kiss on both cheeks, or brushing the stray hair back from your eyes – tenderly gesture, and you're less than a step away. But let's not complicate. Leave your coats in the closet by the door, arm and arm to join with friends. With your arrival, you support us all! We crowd around, smiling – you've brought with you the most essential thing!

### Verse

Warmth pervades everywhere, certainly

it's the cause of our ongoing celebration  
Friends, we're not apart from the manifold wonders  
that are happening  
If you sing a bit too loud, we'll understand

### Commentary

The gifts in your hands, how welcomed! We've been waiting. Nothing stirs without you, and now we're in full swing!  
What is the ground of our smile and laughter? Our celebration?  
I'll tell you – it's just this glory, the jasmine, and eye-medicine of your walking among us.

Like tasting honey, we rise up in greeting after greeting.  
No mere memory this, or sleep, but full, with sighing, and secret food being shared. Coming from miles around, because of these long lines, it has to be this way. And so we can excuse excess, after all, if need be. Whether we should hang the tag 'timely' on it or not, I'll leave for you to say.

Aah, friend, so good of you to be here  
the name on every dish brought out

The man dragging his foot  
 seem from above  
 (don't ask me how!)  
 traces something like calligraphy

there's beauty in it, and more  
 not mere decoration, this,  
 but a clear message for us all

In our hurry –  
 our clipped – attention – deficit  
 not even half a word comes to our ear  
 and we shut the door,  
 pushing him out with feigned politeness

but if we could hear  
 stop running and relax  
 and become the arc of what is being said  
 then surely we would find  
 we have legs enough to cross the room  
 (doing that even still accompanied by our disbelief)  
 that we have arms and hands enough to take an orange from bowl on the  
 table  
 fingers and nails enough to peel it and a mouth enough to eat  
 this delicious message  
 'till we sing that with our satisfied smiles

The stumbling, slurring, interrupted speech  
 (speech did I say? – it hardly resembles that)  
 ok then, some few sounds  
 we never connect to see how they speak  
 and how to take this letter, this pause,  
 this vowel sound strung together not randomly  
 but as if our hand were guided  
 and then, when pages start to sing  
 kettles boil  
 stews telling us it's ready

calling us to sup

hands full of bills suddenly found in our pockets  
 It's this way – I swear!  
 and more than this way, if I could only say  
 the smallest part of it...

Ok – maybe I deserve to be heartbroken  
 and stranded, stung out in some wasteland bardo  
 with only my prayers and repentance to keep me company

I try to remember  
 something about  
 a Buddha in every realm turning the wheel  
 to free migrators from their fears and poverty

Ok – I can accept the uncountable aeons  
 whatever they bring  
 and maybe there's not enough time here  
 but today  
 if only for today  
 taking all my pride fear anger grief desire  
 and noble aims  
 I point it at just this one aim  
 that whatever good I've found be given over  
 saying:  
 all that I have, and more, is yours

light offerings, if you want to call them that  
 illuminating greater truths  
 lights for the path  
 lights for the inner learning  
 light that can't be taken, or put out  
 light that melts away night of not knowing where we are  
 in the wilderness, the most needful thing

refreshment for you and for you and for you  
like giving small cups of pure water  
multiplied in my dream, this dream  
my refuge in the uncertain world that blazes

here, I want to say, is beauty  
stop traffic with it  
halt disease  
break through cloud cover  
sun's zeal

had this conversation once, I'm sure  
because we didn't have a common outer language  
the inner meanings all we could clasp together  
saying (roughly translated)  
'this is all that matters'

and so, with that,  
with these overlapping desires  
one greater wish sweeps over them all  
that I could place this in your hand  
to feed our children  
our sisters and brothers  
and fathers and mothers  
and leave countless anonymous gifts  
everywhere for people to find when they most need them

becoming oars on the ocean  
coats in winter  
and warm soup  
and messages of love to be found or felt  
encouraging  
the hidden pulse,  
the music we sway to without knowing why

this is it  
this is many times more than enough

and so, smile,  
no distance, even if we tried  
for the benefit of all that lives

speaking, or keeping silent  
no borders for this life  
no passport needed, native everywhere  
no tariff or curfew either

some time, in some place  
long time from now and far from here  
this same life  
plain as bright day  
and always new joy spoken

Akin to all that soars

Akin to all that dances

Akin to all that sings

Akin to all that brings comfort and joy

Akin to everything that is solid

Akin to all that brings peace

Akin to all that burns

Akin to all that illuminates

Akin to everything that heals

Akin to all that is lovely

Akin to the morning,

and to the fullness of noon;

to the tenderness of dusk,

and to the eyes of the night

Akin to all broad dreams

Akin to all that teaches us who we are

Akin to all that is celebrating

Akin to all that is utterly free

Akin to all things that proclaim themselves

Akin to everything that is not small

Akin to everything that is fearless

Akin to all that is golden

Akin to all that brings release

Akin to treasure today

Akin to all that appears briefly just this one time

and also akin to all the warmth

of generations before and those that are yet to come

Stand on a mountain  
sun embracing everything  
wind nourishing  
a bright face  
and silence  
akin to all wonder

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

and again I know what's important

knocking things out of the way to hurry up and sketch it  
knowing I'll forget again, but wanting to stay with this wisdom  
even a few seconds more

You show me again how it is -  
that every kind of love  
is food for today  
and that this is the one thing we need  
to do what we have to do  
to climb hills  
to sing out  
or to think

For me to be without you  
arriving too late, leaving too early  
somehow missing you, your voice, your joy,  
dear friend,  
everything becomes strange  
the distant becomes close  
and the close far away  
all my clocks tell me something different  
and my own body becomes a traitor

you've seen me like this  
limping,  
incoherent,  
or putting on a brave face

o, bright one! come once more !  
so the world can see again  
see how lovely a melody can be  
and how this play you bring your whole self to,  
can be grace for everything

Did you go outside today?  
The sun triumphant  
the wind blowing hard and soft  
carrying scents everywhere  
the whole world in conversation

new flavors met unexpected  
kiss on the mouth  
all new dance partners  
tap and clap their own rhythm  
invite you to rhyme with them

bouquets offered to you at every turn  
hand painted plates with delicious  
and simple fare too  
all manner of hunger filled  
giving power for the journey

Did you go outside?  
Did you hear the music?  
Did you watch the parade?

Did you meet your new love?

Did you snap chains?  
birth salve?  
give wings?  
Did you? Did you?

Did you carve a flute from a fallen tree  
and play it on the spot?  
Did you mail out hundreds of love letters?  
Did you make life appear out of formless chaos?

Did you start spring rolling?

Did you write long verses on scraps of paper  
because you couldn't find anything else to write on  
and you couldn't wait anymore?  
Did you? Did you?

Composed and confident,  
kissing embracing  
holding up the world  
Did you? Did you?

Did you start something that will never end?  
kick loose sticks from that river

Did you stand in front of tanks  
as the world watched breathlessly  
your heart bigger than all of them put together

Did you introduce yourself properly  
with some before unimagined flower  
because, after all,  
what are we waiting for?

a day like this  
sweeps by  
and if you slept through it  
you have my sympathies

but listen,  
the fields, the sun  
and beauties  
are in secret conspiring  
to outdo themselves with yet another new day

let's go out on the road to meet them  
it won't be long now, I assure you  
and our meeting it will overflow  
reaching to heaven  
covering all the earth

Because all I hear is silence

[tripwire: seeing the August 7<sup>th</sup>, 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 descendents  
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 Afganistan,  
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  
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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 descendents,  
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

all the voices you're born with

child, you're born with a chest full of voices  
there's no lock on it,  
and they can't be lost

they go out and return  
nestle in, waiting to wake again

they stay with you  
and it's too much of a secret

people look at you as though you are poor  
and you look at yourself the same way -  
but listen,

you have voices in you that make roads open  
voices that make army parades  
leave their weapons on the side of the road as they pass

you have voices that can make fruit appear  
in any season  
and voices that bring to our eyes  
never before seen color

you have in you  
voices that chase demons  
and host voices  
for the angels that come to sing for you  
at breakfast and in the afternoon too

o if only you knew it!  
you are charged full  
of rain voices,  
of river making voices  
of blood stanching voices

of windstorm that shakes the roofs voices and  
voices that bless us with winter snow like silence

you have  
animal call voices, oh yes,  
you speak their language too,

and, guttural voices  
flirt and wink voices

troublemakers of every kind  
hell raisers  
peace brokers  
radicals and  
voices that bind up wounds

you have in you  
voices that lead back from the edge  
voices that, by themselves, pull drowning souls  
from the current and undertow

you have voices that make children dance,  
voices that make buds open,  
in you are voices that are full of light,  
it should be said

and more should be said of this:  
you have  
voices that calm fever

voices that can raise armies  
and voices that unbutton blouses  
and that pare us back to our original form

voices that make worlds appear on your out breath  
cloud-parting voices  
and not only that

but sorrow, confusion-sowing voices  
 wilderness wasteland voices  
 and junkie beggar voices too

heavenly choir voices  
 hall of monks chanting voices  
 are there in you, listen!

simple, straight and true voices  
 breath restoring voices  
 and voices that give new ground

voices that press clothes  
 that bathe, perfume,  
 part hair elegantly  
 feed gloriously  
 and rock to safe sleep

you have voices in you that are landfall, my friend  
 voices that are mighty trees  
 voices that are inheritance that *we hear*,  
 that *we remember*,  
 and that are a great boon -  
*those* voices are indestructible ,  
 beyond the reach of this changing world!

Now then, dear one,  
 which voices will you use today?

you choose  
 from among  
 medicine voices  
 or the sheer dregs,  
 scorching voices  
 gentle roads, or devastating voices

voices that feed or ones that impoverish  
 decimating voices  
 black-hole voices or

all your abundant fruit voices  
seductive voices  
shirt torn open  
heart offering voices  
votive candle voices  
delicious wine and honey halavah voices  
or bitter fruit, stale bread voices

you have all these  
o yes you do

kiss and love bite voices  
cruel, friendly, kind, homey,  
fire in autumn branches voices  
shining jewel feast laughter proving we're all rich voices  
river gushing  
mouth of flame mouth of eternal water voices  
or mournful grave digging song  
in the air wind mist voices

it's up to us  
but how many people know  
they can speak  
and the taste of honey can appear  
on their listeners' lips?

or that  
because of your speaking  
the secret designs of birds flying overhead  
can suddenly become intelligible?

we breathe in and out and speak  
the heart speaks  
and the heart is a mysterious thing,  
it is brimming with wonders  
and something new is born every moment

don't let anyone tell you otherwise!  
 if they don't tell you even this much, from grade school  
 then you've been robbed, daily, hourly  
 teaching you like that – it's a lie,  
 they may not say it, but  
 not knowing this much

it's like walking the road past a great mountain  
 and never looking up –  
 not having had anyone ever shout, 'hey!, look up!'  
 it's like walking around with our pockets stuffed full of jewels  
 and yet sneaking around at night and breaking into people's basements  
 to steal from the dogs bowl  
 imagine the disbelief on the cops faces when they catch you!  
 but it is this way!, I swear!

let it be said  
 sing with all the voices in you  
 and you'll see what I mean  
 birth them as you need to  
 or be squeezed like a sesame seed  
 and surprised at what strange and marvelous things,  
 grounds, and halls, and monuments

that come to be

this is how our old family songs come through  
 weaving our heritage  
 celebrating a thousand births

voices that are a fast  
 or that are a warm cloak  
 or a hearth fire  
 voices sweet as first love  
 still ringing  
 delicious voices  
 all in you  
 yes, it's true

healing voices  
and ancestor voices,

all our past generations in you  
and voices of your children and your children's children  
laughing, playing, singing -  
these can be heard sparkling in your voice

furious voices, whipping up furious winds  
and voices that make the waters become still  
treasure map voices  
and voices that cover over our real treasure  
lost voices  
and voices that lead out of the wilderness, surely  
charade voices  
and rosetta stone voices  
in you

box of worms voices  
and voices that bear along true gifts

containers brimming with light

all these – now –  
what do you make of that?  
that we are chameleon?  
or that we are vistas to marvel over?  
were this form, could it possibly fit in this world?  
or would it surely overflow?

oh – this world, newborn and ancient  
strife and wonder at once  
What do you make of this?  
What voice will you use?  
Where will you go?  
What mountainside will you travel down? I wonder  
What cups and towns will greet you,

asking for your voice, your true voice

When your heart is right, you won't have to ask  
what form it will take  
what tambre

so drive the tent stakes  
hoist up the multi-colored tents  
bring out the long tables for all the different kinds of food  
and tune the instruments  
open the gates wide  
and welcome the day  
and all our honored guests

o let the true heart speak  
in response  
in celebration  
and you'll find yourself singing, whispering, sighing, birthing,  
knowing flows and fills

and travels on in other voices  
in the colors and light and music of the world

O friend!, give us your light!  
your rough bark and planed boards  
your fresh mountain  
give us your children  
and their grand, delightful designs hidden in your voice

bring out new, fragrant dishes  
never before known  
and hot from the kitchen  
and the special occasion wine from the cellar  
because today is the day  
and this is the hour

amnesiac nation voices  
 great awakening voices  
 here we are

why give rocks and road dust voice when you can give  
 voice that is melon and cold grapes in the summer  
 when you can give voices that are  
 the substance of our worlds to come  
 the brick and mortar  
 the tangled vine  
 the hummus  
 the architect's raw matter  
 o let your fullness grace the world  
 over and over  
 because we do so need  
 your holy fresh bread and fruit voices

and I thank you  
 and our children thank you  
 and the birds in the trees thank you  
 and the sky and ocean thanks you  
 and young couples  
 men and women writers  
 and song men and song women  
 we all  
 thank you

revelee and taps voices  
 all needed  
 Joshua at the battle of Jericho voices  
 snake charmer flute voices, needed  
 bass drum and piccolo  
 roadhouse blues harmonica voices  
 forgotten instruments and

all new ones too,  
 just forged

all necessary

and not only that, but also  
snake rattle and hiss voices  
don't you know  
mother bear protecting her cubs voices  
bull moose in mating season voices  
purring kitten voices  
and king of the damn jungle savannah voices

forgotten languages and common tongues are there in you  
you can be sure  
voices that have nourishing silence in them  
and all kinds of light  
voices of morning light

and voices full of summer sunlight  
voices of moon reflecting on a lake and candle soft light  
voices  
memory inspiration voices  
like a flashlight in a deep cave voices

Indian summer in San Francisco voices  
voices that are the southwest desert at dawn  
voices that are light for ships at sea -  
all the voices we celebrate

you have this  
so let's hear it!

voices we can use to chart  
a course to rich places  
and to chart a course home again

to our loved ones

voices of being alone

and voices that go out to the whole world  
without hindrance

it is this way, I tell you  
in you are  
lone voices  
and crowd uprising voices are in you too  
first voices breaking shell  
and solidarity voices  
voices warmed by the heart of the world  
voices giving gifts and gifts and more gifts  
voices that are the food that is love's gift itself,  
lasting for lifetimes  
and drink enough to fill everyone's cup

yes you have snake in the grass voices too,  
but let's not  
in you are also  
and voices that are a well that is available to any and all  
to come and drink

First summer rain in India voices  
making people dance in the street  
broken from the rock spring- as-we-stand-dumb-with-wonder-and-  
astonished-gratitude voices  
and first cup of refreshment after a marathon voices  
greeting those who have wandered  
forty years in the desert voices  
giving them water and orange tangerine sherbert voices

river talking voices  
and flood wall voices too  
knowing when to keep quiet

and high vista voices,  
oooh  
cool mist voices

occluding voices  
and eye washing voices  
dancing naked on the table top voices  
and anonymous giving voices  
thorny voices  
and voices that are a balm to another

lo!, yet more!  
burning bush voices,  
voices that are a revelation,  
voices that are forgiveness itself,  
and saving grace voices

of course, voices that blaspheme too but also

voices that overturn the tables  
of money changers in the temple

lullaby voices  
enlivening voices  
not-two voices  
and voices of low-hanging fruit  
only saying ideas that belong to all of us

and oh yes, I almost forgot  
if truth be told:  
bargaining voices  
used car salesman voices  
politician voices  
sniveling, simpering voices,  
but upright voices too  
your true voices

voices of freedom

all this is true

you have also  
man giving gifts on his wedding day voices  
out of his great joy voices  
out of his superabundance voices  
a parade  
a wedding party  
moving down the street, royally  
gifts flowing out  
flowing everywhere voices

yes it's true  
you have this in you

remember, and sing as you will

or forget everything I've said here  
and let it surface  
as in a dream  
but with this difference:  
here, dreaming of food we gain a few pounds  
we say something of the sun  
and wake  
with burnished cheeks

Help them first

Lords, Masters, Great Benefactors

I know there are people today  
who are much worse off than I

help them first

There are those having their limbs pulled off  
eyes pulled out  
there are those being raped, bombed,  
living in terror  
trapped in sexual slavery

I am not one of them today  
help them first

There are those stricken with grave diseases  
terrible

I am not one of them  
help them first

There are those exhausting themselves totally  
praying with all their might  
that a loved one be spared

I am not one of them today  
and so help them first, I pray

There are those with no one  
with no education

and no means to get out of suffering

I have a little means sometimes, to ease the pain  
and to restore some small hope

so, help them first, I pray

with this whole world suffering  
and no way out appearing to them

I pray, go to them, help them,  
appear in whatever form they can relate to

I'm not completely blind,  
at least not all of the time

so, help them first, I pray

but my life calls out too  
for being the smallest part of what it should be -  
entangled, wasted, heartbroken,  
crushed,  
with all its' infinite desires and remorse  
isolated, sad...

I would help too but this is how it is-  
I'm trapped, frozen, bound

I know I don't suffer as many do  
their cries pierce the earth itself

but your compassion is limitless  
and so I ask  
out of the super-abundance of your compassion and ability

out of the super-abundance of your grace  
that you help me also to heal my life  
and live my full life  
so that I and all the others I know

can be best cared for by me

Help my sister first  
help my parents first  
help my friends who suffer first

help all those who suffer more than I do first:  
the homeless, the hungry, the destitute, the desperate,  
the addicted  
the benighted, the angry, the terrified and trembling

help all these before me

but then help me too  
to live the best life I can live

I want to be more than a paralyzed, powerless bystander here,  
tormented by what I see,  
or avoiding it all

I would help too  
and assist, and feed, and encourage

so, for others directly

and for myself  
and then others indirectly

I pray,  
heal us all

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