

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 or 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 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 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 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 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