



On the Western Front

A Chapbook Collection of Poetry

By Cheryl J. Eschenfelder

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“Power without love is reckless and abusive,
and love without power is sentimental and anemic.
Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice,
and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

For Texas

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About the Author – Back Cover

Foreward

I sometimes wonder whether small acts of kindness are enough, especially when I'm confronted with man's inhumanity to man. Perhaps it is the fate of every poet to come up hard against their subject matter. It is certainly the fate of every responsible and ethical journalist, and I am both. We writers tend to write what we know and how we're feeling in the moment. Experience, and in turn the conveyance of experience, carries with it heavy overtones of emotion: sadness, joy, hope, despair, frustration and love. The human experience is not an easy walk through the meadow. Rather it is a marathon, fraught with disappointment, hardship and loss. But life can also yield a wide variety of rewards: wisdom, tolerance, empathy, connection and acceptance.

The world has changed, rather suddenly by my estimation, although in retrospect, perhaps many of us saw the changes coming years and even in some cases decades ago. We have become ripe for the change. Complacency, willful ignorance and acceptance of easy answers, designed to keep us fearful and immediately responsive, have led the way. Whatever the dynamics of change, the effect has now become deadly. The world is preparing collectively for the losses that seem inevitable. And yet, as is the case in every conflict, there are those who hold to hope, even against all odds. Hope that things will turn, that the masses will awaken and scream aloud with the voices of their better angels, that change will come for the better and not for the worse. That cooperation and peace will prevail.

This collection might be riddled with protest and even in places with fear. Such is my reflection of a world that is now engaged in supporting open genocide, the cruel separation of families, human rights violations, false imprisonment and torture, and doing it all while claiming political justification. Our empathy – our compassion – wants us to close our eyes. Our sense of responsibility won't allow it.

But my sense of faith in the world, and in humanity, tells me that our experience must also be steeped in hope, and in trust that the universe will provide for better days ahead. I pray a balance is coming and that the pendulum will soon swing in another direction – as it always, inevitably, does. As South African anti-apartheid activist Robert Sobukwe said in 1959, "There is only one race: the human race." I believe we all are vibrating collectively to that truth and will find a way to embrace our humanity and our love and respect for one another, and to reject the darker fears that now assault us.

I have faith in us. This faith is not unfounded. We are strong at our core, and I believe most of us recognize the weakness inherent in the moment. We know that things will unravel, and we know there may be little if anything we can do to prevent that from happening. But we also believe in our ability to reassemble the things that most matter, and I know that we will.

I believe we all must do our part, whatever that might be, to stand for what we know is right – to stand for love and kindness and for the rights of everyone. I hope that faith comes through in these pages and that hope and optimism shine through as well. Small acts of kindness do add up. Kindness can change the world, and I believe humanity is poised to make that change happen.

On the Western Front

On the Western Front

All is quiet here
as I wait patiently
for your return and wonder
whether my words have found you
found a home somewhere with you
found you in your garden
or under the stars
the sound of the sea in your ears
found you among the rocks
or in the roses
lost in thought of me.

And when you look
at the face in the moon
do you see me?

Or do the bits of sea glass
that find your toes in the surf
remind you of my eyes?

Do the waves sing
to you in my voice
or the rain caress you
like my fingers against your face?

Is my perfume buried
in a stand of wildflowers against the wall
or in the meadows larking
my heart beating gently against your own?

Am I there
as you are here?
Will the darkness ever clear the horizon
and a new sun rise in this sky for us?

Lay your head down on the sand.
Stand beneath the sky
and breathe my breath in sweetly.
I am waiting, warm and watching.
I am waiting here for you.
I am waiting patiently.

Bones *

A Texas man
built a house from bones
remnants of creatures
who have been swept clean
by sand and time
and I wonder
whether his neighbors
living in their neat little bungalows
thought he was clever
or creative or creepy
to construct a home
from things long gone.

Like the oldest men
in ancient lands
who gathered mammoth legs
and ribs to stack
convinced, perhaps, their size
would offer shelter and protection.

Our lives are constructed
from what is present
known and touchable
or what presents itself
in time of need
or we might take a simpler view
and cherish just the moment
a vista in which to breathe
a wonder that takes our voice away
a place we may not ever return
but will always remember
and hold in sacred soul.

We take
and this is always a given
but in the course of time
we learn to give as well
and accept with quiet reverence
the gifts this earth bestows
and what we feel
to the depths of our bones.

** In memory of my friend and fellow adventurer, Dan Phillips*

The Tree of Life

I smiled this morning on waking
a dream of you still floating
in the air about my room
like cinnamon toast
or cookies in an oven warm
and buttery to my senses
you were lingering
to start the day with me.

We hold the key to life in eager hands.

I'll share my apple with you
like Eve in the garden
or Vera Lynn
whose sweet voice still draws from me
a smile and a tear.

I'll entice you to temptation
while offering illumination
of all you have waited to know.

Why can't I be two women?
Enchantress and comforter
sister and lover
wise sage and damsel demure?

Would that the best of who we are
could live in the pocket
of the us that doubts our own goodness
could remind us to reach
for the power of our hearts
and dreams upon our suffering spirits ;
would have us believe
in the best intentions
bestowed by the saints
whose backs have been broken
by carrying the world in kindness.

This makes us real.

The depths of our souls
that would have remained otherwise sealed
the gift of wisdom granted

in the wake of challenge and chaos.

This gives us impetus to do more
than our deeds and words sometimes allow
the opening of a soul
to the tree of knowledge
and of the inmost love.

A Reckoning

The world is more
than the sum of its parts
more than just the things we live
and work and learn and breathe.
It's more than just
the things we believe
the side we choose
the things we consider
most important
or the things we find
most meaningful.

We weigh our choices carefully
and make our plans accordingly
as though the world will carry on
as it has always done
without a change.

We sit complacent
comfortable in our belief
that nothing moves
without our saying so
or that monumental changes
executed hastily
without regard
for those in need
or those who scream
in fear or anger
despair deep as the sea
rising
pounding
against our walls
is nothing to be regarded
nothing of which to be ashamed.

We schedule dinner parties
or evenings
events with friends
or decorate
the living room for Christmas
oblivious
to the pain we have allowed.

We have allowed.
We have allowed
our hearts to bleed dry
convinced our fear is founded
and the actions of the wicked –
justified, or worse,
ordained by higher power
little gods upon their thrones
casting dice
and laughing
while the world around them burns.

But a reckoning is coming
and it is coming quickly now
in rhythm with the changes wrought.
A reckoning is coming.

Hold me close and tightly.
I don't know how
to be prepared for this.
I don't know what
to do or say.
My tongue has frozen solid
around the true believers.
They wouldn't listen anyway.

I want to scream
but there's no point.
The world will just keep turning
on and on and on.

Hold me close and tightly.
Remind me there will still be light
and we will reckon with this world
and all that comes together.

You are not alone.
We are still together.
We will be together.

A Matter of Ethics

They say writers should never take sides
that poets shouldn't use their verse
in protest or to engage in activism.
But what are these words for
if not to appeal to the value in all
to smash a vase and watch the water flow
or to draw from the shards a bit of
kindness or truth?

Is this what we have come to?
A weapon for everyone
to defend ourselves against
the faces different than our own
the gods we don't recognize
or the browning of this experiment?

Why exist if not to challenge
to fly, while others sit in their cages?
And are we really free
or only pretending to be?

Will we defend their right to demand
that we share nothing
that makes them uncomfortable?

They say that all lives matter,
but who should matter more
than those who rise up for love and justice
who know the sting of inequality
or disposability
who pay the price for freedom
carrying forward the need for a better world
carrying the water
carrying the immutable vessel forward
for those who won't live to see it come to pass
for those who don't yet know the climb before them?

When history is no longer told
When all is obscured or erased or thrown to the fire
the future look backs and never sees
what is happening now
the things done in the name of God
in the name of change.

If God knew what lies in these hearts
and all they justify, and intend to justify,
as they use his name for their vanity and in vain,
he would surely lay them low.

And will we learn at all?
Will we come to wonder
how we could celebrate all that is right
without righting these wrongs?
How can we sing
when voices are silenced
when life is sacrificed
to suit the ends of the powerful
when refugee or escaped cannot escape
the lies they have fled
in places not so different from here?

Or when children in cages
and children with guns
stare at each other
across a mighty canyon
and no song rises
and so many lie down in the blood
blood on our hands
and the world bleeding dry?

Here we stop –
poet, composer, diplomat, mother
to breathe in this anger
or to hang a head in silent shame.

We rise in the morning
to defend this ideal
to stand against the tide
of false goodness
and embrace the changes
of a new dawn.

Here we rise –
and sing like a songbird
to stretch our wings to fly
into the sun or away.

Here we acknowledge –
that all is a matter of ethics

that broken glass can never be mended
that a new vase will need to be blown
that the world is a container
of pain that never subsides
and filled with tears we never cry.

Here we stand –
or in the end
here we lie.

Planes

I feel like a plane
riding the clouds
circling the ground
in a wide windy arc
a holding pattern
position unknown
until I'm given permission
to descend and touch down.

The horizon is perfect up here
from this vantage point
from this piece of air.

Its blue line shimmering
broken only by trees
and mountains and rocks
and I am amazed
that the whole human race
has made it this far
without killing us off
or leaving it all to the lesser of these
who walk on four legs
and look after each other
and don't take for granted
the life they've been given.

If I were a rock
I'd sit for an age
and think
or I'd climb a tall tree
if I were a squirrel
and look over the land
like a girl in a plane
I'd know my place
and the time to be still
and I'd know what's real.

But I'm not a rock
or a squirrel in a pine
or a girl in a plane
or a bird or a dog
or a dragonfly singing.

I'm sleepy and warm
and looking for arms
to reach through the blue.

I'm watching and waiting
for you to fly home
and make me your own.
To make it back here.

The skyway is lovely
and the runway is clear.

The Choice of a Lifetime

Life is a little
like a chicken or an egg
and we are born
of dust and light
wondering which came first
wondering whether we can find
the perfect answer
to the love
that carries us forward
from one bit of earth to another
over and over.

And if love binds one body
of starlight or stardust
to another
does it follow
that it will always bring
two souls together in time?
Two protons or two neutrons
married in an atomic dance
or spooky action at a distance?
Or does the physical proximity
of two hearts
two hands touching
eyes locked across a room
inflame the light they share?

A moment of absolute clarity
is all too often difficult to see.
Perhaps there are two paths
for those connected.
Two ways to choose.
To pour the light into the river
to make the other stronger and deeper
or to peacefully watch together
the sunlight reflected
on the surface of the water.

Perhaps the way we experience
the state in which we are bound
changes with each passing season
according to what we know
according to what we need.

Perhaps we have to learn
to cross the bridge
from both directions
to choose to be found
first by one and then the other.

Sooner or later
we have to let go
risk that long fall
and throw ourselves
from the heights of complacency
into icy waters
or the soft grass below.
Trust doesn't find us
in happy safety.
It screams
with its bared jaws
until we embrace it
in others
and in ourselves.

To say that "I miss you,"
and know what it means
to be closer than close
but still so far away.
But when we lay
ourselves down
to gaze at the stars
or watch for a sign
we know what we know.

Maybe, after all,
this, and nothing else,
is all that really matters.

Wishes

Sometimes in the night
I wish that you were here
to sit on the porch
and gaze at the moon
to count the stars
or fireflies dancing
around the tall grass.

Sometimes in the morning
when the fog trips gently
over the water
and rises
to the edge of the meadow
below the gate
I wish that you
could walk with me
to the edge of the ravine
and back again.

I wish that I could meet you there.
I wish that you could just be here
to see a hawk
or an eagle on wing
or a family of deer
with their heads in the clover.

I want to wish and go on wishing
though wishes be the things
that break a heart
over and over.

Green

A memory on the heart
the trembling and the mystery
of moonlight
dewy tides and goldenrod
in the distant dawn of dreams.

I laid sighing
in emerald down with you
and this became
the color of my heart –
my heart that's bleeding green.
And we have run across silver skies
or in the sand beside the waves
or somewhere in between.

Golden grief is deep.
Rivers rise
but it is more
than just the patience
and the faith to endure.
It's more than the lightning
in the clearing night
or the lights across the sea.
Remember,
and hold onto me.

Days Go By

Mornings are the hardest time
browsing through
the incoherent and profane
the predictable threads
of murkiness that pass
for proper theater these days.

How much assault on decency
can one heart stand
as craven actors
wave their hands
and say their lines
as though the comedy is lost
on everyone
not made of Teflon
or ready for
a long vacation
by the sea.

Afternoons are the hardest times
by now I'm contemplating
all the ways we deny ourselves
the power we possess
out of fear or hopelessness
of all the strength
we give away
to those who are ravenous
but never satisfied
when we all could fly instead
could reach out for the other
the one we crave
inside our souls
instead of being solitary, cold
and comfortable
in the place
we've all been told
that we belong.

How can we
convince them all
to leave the cage
to take to sky
when they're convinced

they cannot fly?

The goddess has been held down
clamped tight and voiceless to the floor
silenced by the patriarch
for far too long
while he has severed everything
in the quest
for power over protection
domination over safety
manipulation over reason
leaving both alone
his buddies dining
on the patio
congratulating themselves
for all that they've supplanted
courage crawling through the mud
honor trampled on the road
and the truest power that he needs
shoved aside
by hollow victory
over the other.

Nighttime is the hardest time
as I let go of another day
and wonder now
what you would say
if you were here
to dream out loud with me
or take a waltz around the room
or touch me with a smile.

I need your voice
or even just your deepest thoughts
scribbled on a piece of paper
anything to feed my senses.
You would tell me
not to be afraid
that being free
means letting go
that none of us need ever
travel the path alone.

We can't go back
or turn the world around.

The open door
closes fast
behind our exit
from the world
as it wants to be
as it waits to be
uncertainty
and mystery ahead.

Hold me now
in the place we've found
the secret space
behind the veil
and make your plans
for better days
and easy ways
to be.

Tell me
sacred Earth and Sky
will always find a way
to return
to all that has been sanctified
to all that love allows.

The long day gone
the view is clear
hope stretching out
before the dawn.

Mornings are the hardest time.

State of Mind

The place I live
is like another country
or so they say
something not to be messed with
or given to idle threat
they say that men
are real men here
as though the rough and rowdy
is a state of mind
or a strength to be admired
but I have found
a gentleness of spirit
among these cowboys
who have seen and had their share
of greed and bullying
and tolerate neither.
The honor of the west
founded like a blacksmith's anvil
of the weight of solidness and reliability.

We have suffered here.
Of that there is no doubt.
From history to history
of red and white
and black and brown
the colors of the tolerant
that breed this state of friendship
of loyalty
and thoughtfulness for others
and does not bend a knee
to any man regardless
of what he believes he deserves.

We revel in these stars at night
big and bright
and breathe in sweet
the yellow rose
the perfume of the twilight air
and the sand beneath our feet.

I have seen these vistas
stretching out before me
and sat among her tall pines

and crooked, ancient oaks.
From Barton Creek
to Terlingua's ghosts
the missions of the saints
the Brazos to the Pedernales
the plateaus to the grasslands
and every farm between
the western sky that glows
in canyon colors at the dawn
and southward to the sea.

Her breeze has sung to me
with Mockingbirds
and constellations
in the darkest skies
have held me tight.
She is my love of everything
and everyone.
This is my Texas
state of mind.

Christmas 2024

I'm lounging here
in my favorite chair
on a Friday night
a few days before Christmas.

Your moniker is splashed
across my chest and I'm thinking
it really should read in the possessive
not in the traditional sense
the way you claim a car or a cat
a wallet or a hat –
but more as a label
of belonging with another
and knowing that belonging infers
carrying around in the same way
you carry a smile on your face
or an aching in your heart.

I know that no one is ever possessed
unless of the spiriting kind.

A woman possessed
of a mind
and ideas
outspoken and frank
intelligent and independent
self-sufficient in her own right
and fierce in her loyalty
is likely as not to contribute
something meaningful
and recognizable to the world
far more than the sweet little flower
sitting in a corner
adoring eyes focused
only upon her lover
and living only to please her other.

I still believe in Father Christmas.
I still believe we will see peace on earth.
But allow me to scream a little
out loud at the world
right now if you will.

It deserves it
and I should be proud to be heard.

Let me know it's okay
to belong to myself
and the rarer of my sex
who actually care
about what most matters.

And let the music of the season
begin with a voice
small though I might be.
Let this eve of the wise men
strain forth with a smile
as you recall this raging heart
and the moment I first let you know
that I will always belong to you.

Thoughts on a Day

I often feel you near
as I go about my day
and I wonder
what you would make
of where we are
and of the reckoning
that's coming.

You always abhorred the lies
that accompany the lust for power
and the greed
that engenders
the worst impulses
in those who seek it –
the craving
for immediate self-gratification –
and we are enduring
an endless stream of both.

I know you would offer
some wisdom or insight
some kernel of hope
or at the very least
a cheeky remark
to invoke our laughter.

I know you would
grasp all the gravity
of the moment
but yet somehow remind me
of the levity needed
to survive it with sanity intact
your inveterate ability
for noting the obvious.

Please tell me now what to do.
Pass on some of your shrewd advice
and remind me adventure will follow
this storm that is brewing
that beauty and joy will prevail
that we will prevail
to safeguard a new reality
at the end of this horror.

Please tell me now
how to be strong
to hold onto my heart
and hold up my head
to take charge of my voice
and to know what to say
to know when to fight
or to just walk away.

To see
the best in everyone
knowing
the best in everyone
might not be enough
to get us through
without breaking
might not be enough
to show the way.

But I am mended knowing
that I can feel you near
as I go about my day.

Glaciers

I sent you a photograph once
a snapshot taken
by a friend with my camera.
I had crawled onto a rock
to sit on the edge of a bluff
in my jeans and pink sweater
my hair a rag doll in the mountain air
the lake and the valley
stretched out below me
the grasslands reclining gently
against the granite cliffs.

The air was still and cool
and quiet filled the space
between the land and sky
and the distant glaciers
breathed in silent reverence
against a jagged horizon.

Are we just a breath
a bit of phantom
trapped inside the ice
of a cold reality?

Are we warm and watchful
through the eyes of heaven sighing?

Do we know at all
the power we possess
or all that we are capable of doing
or of being?

These steely fields of ice
have slashed the chasms deep
to cradle rivers of fish
and feed the world of wilder ones.

It has carved
ancient faces into stone
the green men of the forests
and fairy fields of flowers.

In time we all

will sit among the stones
and hear the water flowing.

We will climb among the rocks
and I will hold your hands.

We will stand at mountains' top
at the edge of space and time.

We will stand naked in the sun
and we will let our spirits fly.

Black Umbrellas*(For Mum)*

You took me to see Mary Poppins
when I was around four
and twirled with me as we sang
a spoonful of sugar
for making it better
and the longest word
we'd ever heard
and tripped the light fantastic.

Black umbrellas gathered
like a flock of blackbirds
wings flapping
in a cold wind
you in a red sweater
and your favorite black, wool suit
everyone noticing
and commenting
on how beautiful
you were then
and back then.

But I couldn't look.
I couldn't help myself.

I chose instead
to protect you in my heart
to see you always instead
standing on our hill in the hay
or occupying your space
on the porch swing
sharing with the cat
or rubbing her belly
with your foot as you swing
gathering greenery
for the Christmas wreaths
or feeding the hummingbirds
at the back door.

You linger
and I can still hear
your voice
clear as glass

in my ears
reminding me
that you are my personal anchor
mooring me to the shore
and tasking me to be strong enough
to just walk away.

I found your black umbrella
on the floor
in the backseat of my car
and I opened it
on a dreary day
to be transported again
feet lifting gently from the ground
flying high
on the wind
and back to you.

In the Arms of the Morning

The goddess is facing east
gazing into the rising sun
the last of her ashes linger
in the air like diamonds
tiny flames of white snow.

She's been almost gone for some time now
buried under stones of hatred
intolerance burning its way under the skin
and emerging again
rebranded as righteousness.

Hate for the sin
but love for the sinner, they say,
as if this is valid
or truthful or fair
as if you can separate
one from the other
or someone from who they are.

I wonder that anyone would believe
that she ever intended to fight
her battles for the soul of humanity
in marble halls
or in the company of those
who play the game of thrones and gold
and shout into silver microphones
while proclaiming themselves
the savior of all
who follow them from
or into the darkness
in the name of the Lord
who couldn't care less
what they want or where they stand.

As if tanks or guns
or fields of blood
or the fuel of rhetoric
that feeds the flames
is a battle that matters
when souls are on fire
and the war rages on
in the human heart.

She has given her time instead
to those who know nothing of power
who strive only for peace
and find themselves hungry and lost.

Among those who no one sees or wants
those who disappear into dark places
and sleep on cold ground
who have no voice
and nothing to offer
around whom she wraps
always her arms
like tender ivy twining
around a small tree.

Empowered

Perhaps I have been wrong
about nearly everything
in my effort to uncover truth
and let the world escape me
perhaps I have found something
here that never really existed.
But I have spoken clearly
and I have shared freely
and without guile.

What is it that makes men lie
that makes them believe
they can play God
with other people's lives?
Is it possible
they will ever come
to realize what they once knew
that women are the givers
of all that breathes
and hold the power
of the heavens
within their hearts
and bodies?

A man may hunt
and take down prey
but it's a woman
who will keep the tribe alive
at the end of the day.

Her medicines
and ministrations aside
her witchy powers
and all she knows of love
and carries in her pockets
the secrets of the stars
and moon the cycles
of the weather
and the planets
and all that lies
within her spiral arms
the things she knows
and hears in dreams

those she sanctifies
and desires
to see become
their better angels
and the ways she connects
herself deeply
to the few
who prove worthy.

You don't understand this.
You don't want to know this.

Perhaps I have been wrong
about almost everything
about the nature of your yearning
the things that you desire
and strive the hardest to possess.

About the way you see the world
and your place within it
and the ways
you cannot comprehend
the entirety
or even a small part
of who or what I am.

But I am certain
of the things I have
and all the universe
has blessed me with,
and when this tale is written
they will say
as I now know
that I am not
and have never been
your fool.

Fall

I have stretched myself
as thin as silk
suspended on the breeze
or dancing on the water
gossamer for wings.
I have found you in your bed
or walking restless
beneath the expanse of heaven
among the olive branches
the scent of lavender in the air.

Tonight I am tripping the moonlight path
reminded not to feed the darkness.
I have fallen like a star
into the hands of the sky
the cosmos spreading
wide across my way
and opening her arms to catch me
galaxies unfolding like origami.

I have been raging and I'm tired –
raging at injustice and hunger
the over-abundance of power
and the lack of human empathy.
I want this madness to stop
before it causes catastrophe
before the fire and flood
require us all to pay
for allowing the inmates
to take over the asylum.

But there are moments
of rest and peace –
deep peace.

I dreamt about you
again last night.
This desert around me
in all directions
and the mountains like sentries
standing watch in the night
have gently opened
my heart to my dreams

and you were so close
your breath on my face
as you told me you love me.

I must find a way
to bottle this feeling
draw from this space
so much more
more than just this delicate moment
stretching the time
until minutes become hours
and days become years
until the path becomes the road
the road becomes a river
and the river becomes an ocean.

Float with me
among these celestial bodies.
I will breathe in your ear
and the infinite will wrap
her arms around us
and catch us as we sleep.

We chart our own path
through the heavens
we blaze across the night sky
we are healers and seers
we are stardust creatures
of light and grace
of mercy and love.
We are not alone.
We are blessed
in our shining and shadow.
We are blessed with it all.
We are stars
who should let go and fall.
Just let go and fall.

In the Breach

We're standing
in uncharted territory
a gap in the wall
where everything
has become splintered
and shattered
by liars and thieves
making their way
along the river road
like the damned
in a long, inexorable
march towards hell.

The colors of the leaves in the light
bright against the horizon
are falling gently as they pass
or floating in blue green
against the bank
but they couldn't care less
about their beauty
or the sun or the wind
or the trees reclining
towards the water.

Their steps are settled in stone
marked by their fear
driven by false gods
and the desire to preserve
their fragile, homogenized world.
They reject the world as it is
or could be
lashing out at the facts
that bolster truth
and threatening to muddy
the crystal clear waters
with things they have deemed unnecessary
or dangerous
to the world they believe
should survive.

And we are standing
between what was
and what will be

when this change is complete.
The sound of your goodbye
still rings in my ears
while I wait for the sound
of your next hello.

We are stardust
children of the fairies
born in magic
and held by the heavens
but we are mortal
flesh aching
burning hearts and blood
in need of baser things
a touch
a smile
the voice of a friend
to help carry the day.

A dance in the twilight
with the radio blaring
and the sound of shared laughter
carried on the breeze
past the porch
and into the darkness.

This break must not be
allowed to remain
to consume all our dreams
or to swallow our souls.

We are born of dust.
We are steeped in light.
We must find a way.

Older and Wiser

If I were a car
I'd probably be a box on wheels
even though I still feel
like a '67 E-Type
or a '58 T-bird convertible
turquoise blue
something to take out for a spin.

I can't turn this car around
can't go back or return
to what has already fallen
from view in the mirror.

On clear days I can see
the open road before me
and I can feel the stars
moving into line around me.
There's a freedom in this open air
the world gliding by
and the feeling of flying
just above the ground.

And I often see you there
standing in my path
holding out your hand to take mine
a smile creasing your face
a soft breeze caressing your hair.

Some days I just want to push
my foot to the floor
feel the heavy vibration of speed
as cylinders fire
and the engine roars in my ears
and I think this getting older
isn't as bad as all that.

Somedays I think, to hell with getting on.
I'm still just a girl
a bit shy of 21
with nothing to do and nowhere to go
miles still ahead of me
driving through sun and rain
the radio blasting and the top down
and doing my best to outrun the last light of day.

Lullabies

Sweet dreams
follow the sun
as she sinks in her bed
dreams of home
hug the moon in his perch
and I am snug in the grass
or the sand by the shore
where the apples you brought
carry the fragrance
of green air and cinnamon
red and perfumed.

Don't wake or forget
when you go
the curve of me
as I lie clothed in sunlight
the stars in your hair
the sand on your golden skin
glistening on the shore
or in the sweet brown hay
my hair spread out like seaweed
my face or a hand
cradling your cheek
and my heart holding yours.

And if the sea rises high
or the gilded grass waves
in the wind
let go the stars
and dance naked
round the Milky Way
and Orion's Belt
and allow Cassiopeia
to lay a hand
against your brow
or kiss the corner of your mouth.

The days slip past
but everything is free with you
walking lonely against your shoulder
a shadow of light
every verse and every word
a dream come true.

Lullabies Two

I know that you're awake tonight
fighting the dust that shutters eyes
and the worries of the day
hanging low and fragrant.
Sleep, my darling,
in the sweetness
sleep against the world
so wild and lovely
your heart pressed tightly
against the sand
your eyes behind the stars.

Let go to the darkness
and imagine again
that you're a pirate
master of ships
of golden glass sails
of sparkling sunlight
and masts of peppermint
upon a lonely, aqua sea.

And let the never ending
tide of dreams
carry you
around the moon
and back again to me.

The Power of Pain

I wonder if suffering
is something we all choose
together
agreed upon
to provide a lesson
to give us opportunity
to learn from hurt
to feel
to try to heal.

There is power in survival
and strength in compassion.
Once experienced,
pain connects us
to another.
We suddenly see more
do more than witness
as the heart relives
reflexes and feels
for a sister or brother.

How I ache
for the feel of your arms
encircling me
your breath on my cheek
and your voice in my ear
saying that everything
will come out alright.

There are days when I want
so badly to talk to you
to tell you everything
to sit on the porch
and pour out my heart –
the nights stretching quietly
like wine breathing into a glass –
or to scream and weep
in a child-like voice
knocked to the grass.

We fight for the freedom
to feel this
the power of pain

and the naked love
of fever and dreams
in another's eyes
a first step into necessity
understanding what we share
knowing because we have been there
and come out through the door
after walking in shadow
and soaking in the light
after the rain
washes away
the remnants of despair
and names us its victors.

This is the prize
of perseverance
and holding to principle.

The hard truth
of the value of agony
is joining the weary
in conquering heartbreak
and claiming it our own.

Limestone

The remnants
of ancient seabeds
line these roads
fossilized
in coastal coral sand
molded like a potter's clay
or dripping white and pink
in cool, dark caves
Sonora's secrets
carved by time
and water
into palaces and pools.

They say the largest pterodactyl
ever found lived here
and hunted where the river bends
a solitary creature
with wings that spread to 40 feet
a thing of terrifying beauty
wicked to behold.
I wonder if he had a mate
or lady friend
to keep him company
to shred the air beside him
or jump from rocky cliffs
to take to flight
whenever he came home
to greet him.

This rock is soft like sand
but still immovable
and white majestic
towering towards the stars
like standing in the sea
where canyons cut by salty water
rise to kiss the sky.

And I
and you
are but a breath of air
a bubble floating gently
on the breeze
a feather

from a distant bird
the horizon purple
against a darkened sky
we are high.

If I must fall here
into the black of space
and some strange star
a trillion miles away
whose luminous pearl of light
is just now reaching me
10 million years too late
let her sing to me
and let me know
that she
will still remember me
remember us
when all of this
has washed away.

Dismantling

There is an angry elf
in the cupboard
wreaking havoc.
He doesn't know where he is
or the awesome power he possesses
to turn our lives upside down.

Content to sit on his shelf and eat cookies
while his friends make off
with everything else in the larder.
I can hear him in there at night
in there behind closed doors
in there eating away and talking
talking to himself I presume
since there's no one else with him
who cares to listen.

All sorts of creatures have followed him in.
How they made it into the house
is still a mystery to me.
Perhaps they outfoxed the alarm
or slipped in like insects
through a crack under the door
or slithered between the wood planks on the floor
until suddenly one night
the cabinet was heaving
with the weight of their presence
and things were disappearing
from forgotten corners.

The trolls who try to convince us
that everything is still
right where it should be.
They smile sneaky smiles
and smell of all they've consumed
convinced we can't see
that the cereal is missing,
along with the peanut butter and chips,
convinced that the boxes they've shifted around
to cover their tracks will fool us
into believing that they aren't really stealing.

Soon this cupboard will be nearly bare

stripped of all the things we had saved
and stored for a stormy day
or to ward off the cold.
Stripped of essentials
and things we've forgotten
and I'm wondering now
if anyone has made a list of what's needed
if anyone will know what to replace
when the time comes to kick them all out
and lock tight the doors
to ensure they will never return
or what damage will yet be inflicted
what loss we'll endure
while they ravenously eat
and discard at their will.

Sometimes the worst has to happen
before we know what we've lost
or understand just how precious it was.
The things most revered
aren't marked with a stamp
or gilded or gleaming.
Sometimes they sit at the back of the shelf
unnoticed until they aren't there anymore.

One day we'll pick up the pieces
sweep up the crumbs and start over.
One day they'll slink back
to their own elven realm
and leave us alone.
One day I'll find myself sitting
and wondering what can be done
to make everything right
and remember, like Alice,
that I am much braver
than I ever believed.

Giving Up
(For B)

I wonder sometimes
late at night where you are.
I wonder when you will come home, if ever
or if you remember
the wars we have waged
in the name of justice or honor.

Do you know now
you can't carry
the pain of the world?
Do you know
you can put down
your weapons
and give up to the darkness
your impulse to win
to take evil down
or chop off the heads of your demons?

They run from you now
and you are alone
as you've chosen to be
but why must this be?
To what end will your battles deceive you?

Maybe soon
you will search out a new path
that lies just ahead
and out of your reach
the one strewn with flowers
flowing down from the hillside
the one where the robin and cardinal sing
and the hedge grows in summer
and shelters in autumn
and gives up its berries
for birds and small creatures
where fruit falls in bushels
and everything resonates
vibrating in the rhythm
of life and desire.

Will you finally
give up your heart to hope

and a spirit of restless resistance
and walk through the darkness
to raise voice to your gods
and let music play
in your heart and your mind
as you sing its refrain?

Let life take you where it will
backwards or forwards or sideways
or into the light that gleams from the well
and rises at daybreak.

You will always be there
safe and untouched
by the conflicts you've created or resolved
the injustices you've challenged
and the pain of the reckoning
that always comes at the end of the day.

Give up your soul so beloved
for a chance to see heaven
the olive trees shaken
their treasures of gold
falling into white canvas
and reap the reward you deserve
the moment you have longed for
without ever knowing you craved it.

Give up this life
and let go.

Give up your self
and you'll know.

Moments in the Sun

There are things I see
of which I cannot speak
things that hang and linger
just beyond the edge
of my horizon
beautiful or terrifying
waiting for their time to bloom
or turn the world
upside down.

Why do men play chess
with living pawns
and kings of stone
that immolate anything
they deem necessary to their ends?

Letting go of peace
as though it all is just a game
a swap of commodities here
or a necessity of sacrifice there
pretending the gods are on their side
when anyone watching can see
ever so clearly
the things to which they bow.

But there are gardens in the sun
leafy verdant little shoots
of green that explode
through cracks in the sidewalk
or spread gently
across the hardened ground.

There are flowers in the meadow
standing wild
defiant in the grass
a splash of color
splendid in their summer clothes.

And you are standing there
a dream inside a dream
that may not ever come.

But there are things I see

that cannot be unseen.

There are things I see
of which I never speak.

Soon

I want to write a radiant story
or paint a picture glorious
to defy the joyless bent of the moment
this rage in present vogue.

I want to sit and howl with you
scream with laughter
until tears roll
down our cheeks
sing a cheerful song
or find a sunny spot
to do some good
to help a friend or stranger
pass on a bit of kindness
and trust that every day will shine

to walk the streets
slowly enough
to recognize the faces
of those we meet
to drink in the sunlight
and hold on against the dark

to dance a waltz or two
or lie under a tree
to float upon the water
under clouds that form
like wild, wooly animals
drifting lazily across the blue

to fly in heaven's realm
and touch this heart
with tender ways
to be the friend
you never knew you had

to see the world through gentle eyes
and shed a light on little things
to see in everything
as you see into me.

We will meet and soon.
I will hear you say the words

I have been waiting for.
And you will hear them back again.

You have known this story well
for it has been your own.
You have seen the colors
on this canvas
bright and vibrant
in the air.
One day you will know me
for who I am and seem
a part of you
as I have always been.

We Are More

than the accumulation
of what we read and think
of what we feel and say.
We are what we do.

The world can see us
only through this lens
not a reflection of who we are
but who we are.
The bone and breath and sinew
the heart and face and flesh
a warm covering
colored by the day
and chastened by the light.

The soul
the sun
the moon
the breath of the eternal
on my face
I wonder whether love endures
the hatred of a thousand voices
or the fear of something different
the cruelty of certitude
the coldness
in the lack of courage
or compassion for another.

And yet a moment
of kindness shines
through the gloom
glistening in its glory
a small solitary flame
a glimpse of heaven
illuminated in the dark.

We ride on waves of sufferance
or cling to values
long obscured
or trampled by the angry.
We know our place in history.
We wrap ourselves
in the clothing of forgiveness

and reject the fear of being lost
of passing by
as all things pass away.

We are more
than what consumes us.
We are better
than what belies us.
We are more
than all of this.

We are what we do.

Tears

Your voice
caught in my throat tonight
and sudden sobs followed
hot and sharp
against my heart
the tears
I had been holding hostage
waiting here
for a glimpse of you
in bright light
or shadowed in a darkened room.

Why I crashed
and melted into a puddle
like ice cream
on a hundred-degree day
in the shade
is beyond the mystery
of missing you.

And how silly
you must think I am
to miss what I have never had
the feel and smell
of your skin
against mine
or the pain
I recall
at losing you all over again.

I wonder if you feel this too
this aching
for something more
than just a touch
or a thought in a dream
no matter how sweet
it might still be

A little like watching the garden
in a showering rain
the tears of gods and angels
falling gently through the storm
singing a gentle refrain

‘they’ve been waiting for far too long,’
while they pray for us
to find our way back
at last
into the other’s arms.

The Way of Things

Is longing the same as lonely
the feeling of facing the world alone
even in a crowded room?

I am frightened now.
There.
I've said it aloud.

Those around me look at me
with vacant eyes
with hearts of thunder
relishing their victory
ready to remake the world
in their own image
playing games and playing God.

Where does the feast prepared
for all of us become enough
when so many are insatiable
and ready to deny
that many more
belong here at the table?

I miss you now.
I miss your smile
and your sweet voice
singing lullabies
as you did when I was small.

I miss your arms around me
and the scent of you beside me.
And I wonder whether I should plan
to leave here soon
to find a better place to be
to wait for you in clearer climes
or in a cottage by the sea.

You always said
that you would find me
anywhere I chose to be.
That we will be together.

Innocence and ignorance

are always sure
always certain of what they know
and what they believe is right or wrong.
Wisdom in age
and the truth that comes from spirit
from an older soul behind the eyes
never has an answer
only hope and possibility
to lead her on.

You would tell me
this is the way of things.
You would remind me
not to allow fear
to control or conquer me
not to let it make me wonder
whether I will suffer this alone
or whether we will survive intact.

The fire is coming now
and I do not believe that we will stop it.

It's a lesson we must learn
a learning and a yearning
to endure – to rise and fall and start again.
For the ignorant to grow
to shed the pain
and feel for someone they consider lesser.

To know the meek and understand
the harvest that awaits them
after they have suffered.
To shed the voice of fear and hate
to stop trying or wanting
to punish those who they have labeled
and condemned to lay their anger down.

The certainty will fade with age
humility will take its place
and you and I will walk
together on a crowded street
or on the shore at dawn
and feel the world as she should be.

We will imagine something better

lay down our hearts and dreams for her.
We will let the future be.
I am here for you
waiting here for you
to come home and lie beside me.
We will be together.

The Levee

My eyes are focused
on the horizon
on the dawn
after the dust clears
and all is brought to its knees.

To the sun and the stars and the moon
and not the gloom
of darker days.

I have been struggling
with feeling that I've failed somehow
that we all have failed
to see or to hear
to lend a hand when needed.

But I can see more clearly now
that investments made
were never meant
to stop the flood
but rather to finance
the rebuilding
when all the dams have failed.

There is water all around us now
rising dark and moldy
and the sun has hidden
in her cloth of cloud
wrapping the Milky Way around her
dancing in the stars
so thick they shimmer
like a satin dress.

The quay and jetty cracking
by morning they will fall.

But there will be a morning yet
with gentle breeze
and golden fields
and flowers in these meadows.

The trees will wave
to sea birds on the wing

and the orb of light
beyond our reach
will shed her coat
and gaze on us in all her glory.

We will build a levee.

State of a Soul

Sometimes I'm sad.
So I've confessed it –
a little forlorn or just slightly blue
like a Chagall
or a night swirled
in Vincent's starry heavens.

I wonder if only an artist
understands this feeling
of being alone
in a room full of voices
and people who can't see
the light in their eyes?

Sometimes I'm falling
drowning or drifting
or nodding to sleep
that feeling of breathlessness
that comes in a dream
when the floor falls away
and you drop with a rush
so fast that your cries
are caught in your throat
and you wake in a sweat.

Sometimes I'm flying
in summery gauze
or coasting or gliding
with parachute wings
paralyzed arms stretched wide
like a bird's
or a babe in her crib
imagining I'm dragging
my hands through the water
as I pass over
a clear mountain lake
or gaze to the man in the moon
his glowing face shining
delicate white and misty
in a cloudless afternoon sky.

Sometimes I'm waiting
wondering where the time has gone

wonderfully dark and sultry
in the still star-filled night
and thinking that maybe
I might retrace my steps
find a way finally
to be young again
with fewer regrets
and a wide, open road in my sights.

Sometimes I'm hopeful
for bright sunlit days
dazzling, dizzying
vividly beaming
imagining something more heartening
than the ones we know now
wondering how
we will make this world finer
or find our way back to the start.

I'm hopeful for better angels
to guide us through trouble and fear
that grows twining like bramble
to close fast the way.

I'm encouraged and gladdened
by small moments
of kindness or sacrifice
optimistic for outcomes
and blessed in my faith
in the glory of intrinsic goodness.

Sometimes I'm greater
than just my small self
as I stretch myself out
on the wind to touch
or connect with another
to sing in strange harmonies
or dance round the room
to hold on too tightly
or let go too soon
to find myself stronger
and ready to bloom
to join in the symphony
and hum a sweet tune.

This ritual of knowing
and dreaming
that feels like a lover
with wide open arms
that blankets my thoughts
and brings me closer
to where I am happy
and steady and warm
confident in my song
and reaching for more
than my life is allowing.

Hoping, waiting, flying and falling.

Refuge

The stars are hiding
tonight in a hazy heaven
but I know they are there
peering at me from behind the clouds
or reaching out to gather me in their arms.

What do you see
lovely and bright when you look at me?
Do you see the faces
of a thousand years gone by
skin stroked by sun
or baked like clay
hair dripping dew
from the river
riches strewn on ankles and wrists
or strings of coins
shimmering in my hair.

Do you know this face
these hands that have held you
tender and warm?

I have known your fingers
tracing every line
and every word
the taste of your mouth on mine
and the smell of the autumn air
washing through the curtains white
perfume on the breeze.

I have known you in your wandering
your thoughts turned to the struggle
a warrior gleaming in the sun
or as a bird flying
wings pounding in humid air.

We are as birds
or feathers floating
swimming swiftly to the light
or skimming the water
our hands tracing patterns
across the waves
or around the sun

gliding through a glistening cloud
or a glimmer of sky.

We are high.

The earth will find us
as we fall away in sleep
and bind the silence to us
give us dreams to hold us close
and to the other.

And I will feel your heart
beat inside my own
and wrap your arms around my soul
and fall into the sea of your clear eyes.

And I will find my refuge there.

Give Me This

Love me as though
we have no past or future
as though the sun will sear us
if we linger here too long.

Love me like there's no day after
only now to drink in deep
and feel the darkness
like liquid light
like wine from a sacred cup
velvet on our tongues
and open hearts beating fast
to match the trembling trees
the breath of me
that wraps itself around the places
only you can reach.

Love me deep and sweet and real
keep me safe and let me feel it all
from flesh to soul
and let the sound we sing
to mother earth
vibrate in her rivers
and cling to her lips
like spirits from heaven,
or a clear, cool cloud
on an autumn breeze.

Falling Star

I feel a little like a star
a tiny bit of light
oscillating tenderly
from somewhere far away.

Here in desert mountains
in the darkest place on earth
I have seen the light
and fallen deep into her sky
that spreads in shimmering waves
across my heart.

The universe is naked here
and sparkling like sunlight
on the water
or a million diamonds reflecting
on a skin of satin whirling.

This is just a pirouette
a dance around and round
spinning dizzy and reeling
intoxicated
from the taste of you.

Stand beneath your stars
or on the edge of galaxies
and close your eyes.
Hear my call.
Make a wish.
And I will ripple through you
as I fall.



About the Author

Cheryl J. Eschenfelder is a faculty member in the Department of Mass Communication at Sam Houston State University, where she teaches courses in desktop publishing, news editing, and features and news reporting. She holds B.A and M.A. degrees from Sam Houston State University, where she studied creative writing with the late Dr. Paul Ruffin. She has worked as a news and features reporter, editor, designer and public relations specialist in East Texas and the Gulf Coast and has published, edited and contributed numerous news and features stories and creative writing pieces to news agencies, academic journals and radio news outlets.