

Marching



Political Poems

by

Larry J. Eriksson

Third Edition

Selected writings by Larry J. Eriksson

Poetry chapbooks

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1945

Death and destruction
fill the early months of my life;
the night after my birth,
saturation bombing of Dresden,
a jewel of old Europe,
brings waves of destruction –
my cries as a newborn infant
echoing the screams of thousands
consumed by the resultant firestorm.

Anne Frank dies in March at
the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp;
in April, the Germans execute
Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Flossenbürg,
a war-weary Franklin Roosevelt
dies in Warm Springs, Georgia,
and war correspondent Ernie Pyle
is shot by a sniper near Okinawa.

The violence reaches its climax
with the dropping of atomic bombs
on Hiroshima and Nagasaki –
the first use of atomic weapons
is on civilian populations.

>>>

Blitzkrieg invasions, horrific death camps,
incendiary bombing, and atomic weapons –
all convincing demonstrations
of the willingness of the state
to practice mass murder
on an unprecedented scale.

In some ways, World War II
was a triumph of good over evil,
but it was also a triumph of
destruction over reason,
violence over peace,
collective force
over individual rights;
the veneer of civilization
was brutally peeled away –
it remains thin.

Vietnam Redux

Out of a whirlwind
of endless dark clouds,
a hungry draft comes
to consume young men
anxiously waiting
for their call to war.

Mocking long-held plans
for study and work,
unwanted letters
deliver cold and
unyielding commands
to join the army.

Random lives chosen
to serve the nation
without regard to
their value except
to meet the demands
of the war machine.

Many lives are lost,
countless others are
damaged or disrupted,
they face a future
not of their choosing
burdened by the past.

Weapons of War

During the Revolutionary War, battles were fought
between a few thousand soldiers;
by the Civil War, battles involved tens
of thousands of soldiers;
in the Great War, battles were held with hundreds
of thousands of soldiers.

During the Great War, you could fill an arena
with those who would die on any given day
from wounds and disease in battles, hospitals, or prisons –
hundreds, thousands, and even
tens of thousands every day
for more than four years.

During World War II, civilians deaths soared,
up to one hundred thousand killed in one city
from firestorms produced by incendiary bombs –
multiple nuclear warheads, carried by a single missile,
can now destroy several cities
and millions of their residents.

Our technologies to destroy continue to improve,
while we remain mired in the ignorance, greed, and confusion
that led to previous tragedies –
seemingly unable to improve
our political and diplomatic skills
as fast as our weapons.

Unexpected Results

At the start of the 20th century,
nations sought security
with alliances and
interlocking treaties
that ensured a massive
response to aggression
without hesitation –
the unexpected result
was World War I.

At the start of the 21st century,
nations sought security
by trusting the market
to make our decisions
and by embracing
simplistic fiscal and
monetary policies –
the unexpected result
was the Great Recession.

There are no formulas
for solving our problems
that avoid the need
in every case for
careful analysis,
thoughtful decisions,
and responsible action –
if you want to avoid
unexpected results.

Progressive Wisconsin

One hundred years ago,
“Forward” was the motto –
fighting for human rights,
helping those most in need.

Creating a world-class
university built on
the Wisconsin Idea
to reach the entire state.

Protecting workers’ rights,
setting a minimum wage,
first to assist injured workers,
to support the unemployed.

Helping labor unions,
outlawing child labor,
first with social security
for retired workers.

Reforming democracy,
supporting women’s suffrage,
controlling corporate power,
taxing progressively.

Historic achievements
after years of struggle,
soon taken for granted –
until they are threatened.

Turning Back the Clock

Once again the working class battles
the forces of power and privilege
on the anniversaries of events
that echo many of the same concerns.

Two hundred years ago, Luddites protested,
not to resist new technology
as some maintain for their own benefit,
but for decent treatment and fair wages.*

One hundred years ago, Congress held hearings
on Taylor's scientific management system
that hid power behind a facade of science
and demanded more output from fewer workers.

Many lost their jobs under a system
that tolerated only the strongest
and the Confessional committee concluded
should only be imposed by "mutual consent."

>>>

Today we have once again turned back the clock
to steal from the many and give to the few,
reducing rights and wages for the workers,
while reducing taxes for the wealthy.

And once again, these actions are masked
by deceptive, self-serving rhetoric,
this time hypocritical demands
for frugality and efficiency.

Oh, that we still had Howard Zinn to help us
through this maze of distortions and half-truths.

*see article by Richard Conniff in
the March, 2011, issue of the *Smithsonian*

(based on my letter “Workers must wage the same fight again and
again” posted on madison.com on April 2, 2011, and inspired by
the elimination of collective bargaining rights for public employees
by the Republican legislature and governor of Wisconsin in 2011)

The Marginalized Opposition

Some claim the recalls
are a complete waste
of time and money
that will change nothing
since the incumbents
will win the elections.

Even if this true
and the recalls fail,
it is a sad state
when leaders choose to
dismiss opponents
that include about
fifty percent of
the state's citizens
and just last spring marched
one hundred thousand
strong in Madison.

(inspired by the dismissive comments
of conservative politicians in Wisconsin
regarding protesters who sought recall elections)

System-Speak

from souls to giving units
churches to facilities
from calls to plans
missions to budgets

from patients to clients
serving to processing
from doctors to insurers
house calls to clinics

from students to consumers
citizens to employees
from education to training
learning to testing

from neighbors to workers
families to living units
from caring to producing
sharing to keeping

from openness to policies
reputations to appearances
from products to profits
dividends to golden parachutes

from discussion to monologue
compromise to confrontation
from respect to threats
sympathy to ridicule

from communities to individuals
prospering to surviving
from harmony to discord
hope to despair

Back to Serfdom

Middle class hardships,
but rewards for the wealthy
in a world gone mad –
it's winner-take-all
as investing becomes a
high speed lottery.

Global corporations,
royalty crowned as persons
by the Supreme Court,
reduce costs, maximize profits,
and promote their interests
with minimal accountability.

The wealthy tout markets,
not free or fair, that focus
on short term returns;
when the bubble bursts,
bailouts for corporations,
foreclosures for others.

Some lose their jobs
and slide into poverty
or even prison terms;
others keep jobs and homes,
but bow to corporate lords –
just serfs in bondage.

Much work is part-time,
temporary, or on a contract –
permanent jobs are hard to find,
those who have them
are like indentured servants,
they rarely quit.

>>>

The new royal class
monetizes the lives of
hard-working commoners,
owning and selling their
personal information
and even their genes.

Like the barbaric conflict
of children to survive and
win *The Hunger Games*,
state-run lotteries
provide besieged workers
an unlikely chance at wealth.

The pseudo-history
of the royal right,
suppresses the past,
calls Keynes the far left,
and ignores failures
of the private sector.

Rather than seeing
government as a means
for collective success,
they use it to promote
their own agenda
like autocrats of the past.

Union busting gains
acceptance as states balance
budgets on workers backs;
liberty and justice
remain far distant goals
in a land of serfs.

On Wisconsin?

When Wisconsin's leaders
attack the rights of women,
neglect the needs of our children,
destroy the power of workers,
ridicule the protesters,
reward the rich and powerful –
where is the moral outrage?

When Wisconsin's leaders
diminish democracy,
restrict government,
trivialize education,
disdain the views of experts,
mock its great university –
where is the moral outrage?

When Wisconsin's leaders
ignore the majority,
tune out the opposition,
respond to money,
pander to power,
impose their will –
where is the moral outrage?

>>>>

When Wisconsin's leaders
forget the ancient sermon,
blessed are the poor,
blessed are the meek,
blessed are the merciful,
blessed are the peacemakers –
where is the moral outrage?

Where are the leaders
who will rebuild Wisconsin,
our country's progressive leader,
the home of the "Wisconsin Idea,"
the "laboratory for democracy,"
the state of Bob La Follette –
who has the moral outrage?

Middle Ground

A nation divided into
red and blue states,
no pastels or shades of gray.

Conservatives have simple answers
with no desire to be confused
by the complexity of problems.

Liberals condemn simple answers
and embrace complexity,
but their solutions often fall short.

Both groups reject pragmatism
in their pursuit of values
that they declare preeminent.

Neither side has much interest
in listening, reading, or thinking
outside of their own boxes.

Our religious beliefs are
just as polarized,
as our political views.

>>>

Often, it's either
that old time religion
or no religion at all.

Humanists disparage
religious references
whenever they're used.

Fundamentalists follow
an orthodoxy that prescribes
a faith-based reality.

In politics and religion,
we ignore the ambiguities
and need for compromise.

Instead, too many seek
the evanescent security
of ideological purity.

The middle ground in our
sharply divided country
is a largely empty space.

Political Fairy Tales

Some people say that
a little risk is a good thing
and they may be right,
after all they say, risk
drove the prosperity
of the last decade,
but we are all responsible –
something like original sin,
for the house of cards
that collapsed in 2008
due to excessive risk.

Now they say,
we are too risk averse,
banks won't lend money,
companies won't hire workers,
consumers won't spend money,
due to uncertainty
concerning taxes, regulations,
and fiscal policies,
aiming their criticism
at those calling
for a balanced approach
to our problems
that includes tax increases –
wonder who that could be?

>>>

It's a nice little fairy tale,
easy to tell,
easy to understand,
a bit theological,
it makes us all sinners
and calls for repentance
even while criticizing
the opposition party,
though it is hard to take risks
and be frugal at the same time –
not even fairy tales are perfect.

In contrast, I see a country
where for over thirty years
more and more has gone
to fewer and fewer
while the average American
has less and less.

>>>

Driven by an orgy of greed,
the rich and powerful
called for reduced taxes,
fewer regulations,
and less oversight,
allowing banks to lend money
through fraud and deception
without paperwork
and bringing us to the brink
of economic catastrophe.

Today, those who
got rich from their greed
resist even modest efforts
to restore fairness
to our tax system
and complain that
the government doesn't create jobs –
yet another fairy tale,
even as unemployment increases
with cuts in public jobs
and government contracts.

Can you fool almost all the people
almost all the time with enough money?

(inspired by an interview of New York's Mayor
Michael Bloomberg on ABC's Good Morning
America, Aug. 10, 2011)

Chip Seal Nation

Our roads wear out,
but instead of repaving them,
we apply a cheap and easy
chip seal of oil and gravel;
they may look better,
but the road is still broken.

Good enough
for a chip seal nation?

Our environment is in crisis
and climate change looms,
but instead of real solutions
we sell rights to pollute,
asking the market
to make our decisions.
Why look to the future
in a chip seal nation?

>>>

Our schools are in disrepair,
and teachers beg for supplies
in overcrowded classrooms
as we keep cutting costs
and tell our students
they only have to pass a test.
Who needs a real education
in a chip seal nation?

Our broken roads lead
to gated communities
for the privileged few
as millions struggle
with stagnating salaries
and disappearing jobs.
Why share the wealth
in a chip seal nation?

(published on *Verse Wisconsin*
website and Facebook page)

Politics of Wealth

Some complain that
too many people
get more money
from the government
than they pay in income taxes

frequently forgetting that
our winner-takes-all system
mass-produces poverty

where millions get by on less
as others over-consume
and complain about the poor

whose government benefits
exceed the taxes they pay
only because they
must survive on
poverty-level wages.

Economic Haiku

(1)

Though people claim that
mergers create synergies,
they ignore the costs.

(2)

Some praise investments
of the rich but ignore their
over-consumption.

(3)

The poor create jobs
by accepting low wages
and living on less.

Living with Richard Parker

A boy and a tiger
named Richard Parker,
sharing a lifeboat
on the vast ocean,
looking for a way
to live together.

Reducing their needs
to a minimum
and depending on
each other as they
struggle to survive
on the endless sea.

Without the boat,
they both die;
without the boy,
the tiger starves;
without a companion,
the boy gives up.

>>>

Six billion people,
sharing our planet
with countless other
plants and animals,
need a new covenant
for the care of the Earth.

Waging war on nature,
wages war on ourselves –
bringing us closer
to the tipping point
of our little boat
on the sea of life.

(inspired by the book *Life of Pi*;
read at UUFDC Poetry Sunday,
Ephraim, WI, Apr. 28, 2013)

What Comes Next?

Mathematicians prove
some of their questions
have no answers,
are undecidable –
a limit to progress?

Physicists use
mammoth accelerators,
miles in diameter
and costing billions –
the end of growth?

Astronomers call
nearly everything
either dark matter
or dark energy –
but what are they?

Biologists learn
heredity is more
than deciphering
the DNA code –
endless complexity?

>>>

Researchers debate
whether we will ever
be able to understand
our own consciousness –
is this door closed?

Diplomats struggle
to achieve lasting peace
as countries brandish
devastating weapons –
a futile mission?

Are we approaching
another dark age –
a bleak era of
dead ends and closed doors
that we cannot enter?

Or are we at a
cosmic inflection point
where the new emerges –
is it indeed darkest
before the dawn?

Point of No Return

Open-wheeled Indy race cars
flying around an oval,
extreme speed in a tight pack
that unnerves even the best,
then one car skids out of line,
touches another, causing
a cascade of collisions,
leaving drivers no option
but to crash into others,
many becoming airborne,
exploding into the wall,
creating mindless chaos.

A surging population
consuming resources at
an ever-increasing pace,
clearly not sustainable,
pollution, food shortages,
global climate change triggered
by fossil fuel consumption,
the problems are evident,
minimized by too many,
whose disregard of the facts
leaves a world out of control,
racing to oblivion.

(inspired by a tragic racing
accident in 2011 in Las Vegas)

Let's Talk

We used to hear it was unwise
to discuss religion or politics;
that's still true, but the hot topics today
also include race and gender,
knowledge and money –
why are they all so contentious?

They all revolve around power –
wanting it, possessing it,
sharing it, losing it.

The collective power
of corporations and unions,
governments and churches.

The power of individuals driven
by education, position, wealth,
religion, race, gender.

Tough issues, hard to confront,
we disagree on who has power,
who needs power, who wants power,
who deserves power.

Maybe that's why so many people
keep their eyes firmly glued
to their cellphones
and don't want to look up.

Small Steps

Most poems emerge
one step at a time,
start with a sentence,
edit, change, delete,
something new evolves,
almost writes itself –
but you have to start
with a thought, a phrase.

Two people may meet,
nothing much in mind,
share some interests,
soon become friends,
perhaps start dating,
even get married –
but it all begins
with that first meeting.

Evolution works
by taking small steps,
new species emerge,
birds get wings and fly,
polar bears turn white,
people stand and walk –
miracles of life started
with one small change.

The most difficult task
is often the first step –
why not take one now?

Marching Strings

In my dream, a string orchestra
suddenly appeared down the street,
no rifles or martial outfits,
just black and white formal attire.

Led by leaping dancers spinning
and twirling colorful banners,
surrounded by a vibrant group
of banjos and ukuleles.

Followed by rows of instruments –
a host of petite violins,
their synchronized bows producing
waves of angelic music.

Escorted by endless lines
of muscular violas,
slightly larger alto voices
adding elegant harmonies.

Then ranks of sensual cellos,
with graceful curvaceous bodies
supported by long shoulder straps
and radiating deep, rich tones.

Finally, massed rows of basses
gliding on rubber casters and
providing a rhythmic footing
for the musical brilliance.

Not a band, marching for war,
but just strings, marching for peace,
leaving behind smiles and sunshine,
birds and flowers, love and kindness.

About the author

Larry J. Eriksson is a Wisconsin poet active in the Dickinson Poetry Series at the UU Fellowship of Door County and a member of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. He sees the world as filled with the music of poetry – a cosmic mystery driven by rhythms, rhymes, and riddles. His poems preserve memories, clarify thoughts, explore feelings, or simply have fun with language. They have appeared in numerous publications and are available at www.quartersectionpress.com.

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