

# It's a Dove, My Love



Poems for a Time of War

By Lisa V. Comforty

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**T**o every thing there is a season, and a time to every  
purpose under the heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is  
planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones  
together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to get, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;  
a time to rend, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time of war, and a time of peace.

— Ecclesiastes 3:1–3:8

To my granddaughter  
and all grandchildren everywhere

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### **About the Author**

*May 6, 2023*

## ECCLESIASTES FOR THE VERY YOUNG

*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose  
under the heaven: a time to be born, . . . to plant, . . . to heal; . . .  
build, . . . laugh; . . . dance, . . . embrace, . . . sew; . . . speak; . . .  
love, . . . and a time of peace. —Ecclesiastes 3:1–3:8*

Climb up, let's read.  
Watch out, don't bump  
your head on my nose.  
Your hair is a bird's nest.  
Can I brush it? No?

You're wearing one white  
shoe and one blue—oh, the latest  
fashion! "To every thing  
there is a season."

Now it is spring.  
Now you are two.  
Now is your season.

\*\*\*\*\*

"And light is sweet,  
and it is good for the eyes to see the sun."  
Once upon a time not long, long ago,  
you weren't born, and your eyes  
were in the dark. Then you dawned

on a cold March morning, a rosy sunrise  
caterwauling into grey clouds.  
We haven't told you yet, but some eyes  
will see the sun only for a little while.

We shut our eyes to bear that darkness  
but find ourselves in the same shadow—  
we live in an eternal present. And so  
“live joyfully under the sun.”

Through my kitchen window, I catch  
my flowering quince living  
up to its name. The orange buds are poking  
their little velvety heads out of the boughs,  
which are not breaking here and now.

Buds hold the same promise  
that all you twos enfold: to become  
old and beautifully desiccated  
like the veined wings of dead moths.

\*\*\*\*\*

See the pretty bird?  
It's a dove, my love,  
which is a regular old pigeon.  
It can live anywhere and nowhere.

See the olive branch?  
Yes, olives grow on trees; if no one cuts  
the tree trunks down, they grow like backbones  
twisting out of the warm earth. Under the sun  
they can live a thousand years.  
To every living thing there is a time.

Now it is spring.  
Now you are two.  
Now is your season.

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*July 6, 2023*

## THE PYRAMIDS OF BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

*As one dies so dies the other, and all have a single spirit, and man's  
advantage over the beast is naught, for everything is mere breath.*

—Ecclesiastes 1:11–15, 3:20

What's in a cat?

A cat by any other name is life and death  
and love and bother and mess and memories for children, who also need  
and knead, alighting out of nowhere with eyes to see and breath to breathe.

Bloomington, Indiana, loves its cats  
in the ancient-Egypt way. Gods and goddesses abide  
within those feline features, grace and comfort stalk and hunt,  
sleep and stand their Sphynx-like guard on every porch amidst  
the broken wicker, potted plants, Tibetan prayer flags faded under the sun,  
and strange and wonderous weathered limestone eroding in the sands of time.

I never thought of you, oh Cat,  
as someone I could love, as someone  
I did love so much that when you died, I let  
out such a sob at the vet's that every animal in the  
anteroom looked up, frozen, all eyes in the face of grief.

But it was I  
who'd given you  
your death sentence, sacrificed  
you to the gods of peace, held you down  
while you looked up, beseeching as they placed that needle  
in your gray and silky forearm, breathing your last on that steel table.



And right there  
you gave up the ghost of all  
things cat, and part of me. Never did I think  
of you as the urn of my love, and yet, there you are,  
a black velvet box on a shelf with books and seashells and  
other implements for our afterlife. You're in the inner sanctum  
now, you scaredy cat, don't you worry. I won't put you out in the  
rain in the earth. You'll stay right here in our cozy pyramid on Seventh  
Street, warm and dry and safe for an eternity—or at least until dust do us part.

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*October 6, 2023*

## ICE SKATING ON THE MIDWAY

*There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit . . . .—Ecclesiastes 8:8*

The year is 1961, the hour dark, the water frozen  
into slick, hard time, a horizontal plane  
that once swirled but is suddenly solid. The rink  
flows for city blocks, a child's eternity

lined by dirty snow, bare elms, and cars  
hunch-backed like Chicago bears  
pressed by the perpendicular of night,  
scattered stars, and one large moon.

In those days, children skated alone  
at night, the grown-ups gone to God  
knows where, God knows who lurking  
on dark sidelines. No, the children were left

free to test their theories of the universe.  
Can you keep time with your skates?  
There it is, behind you, inscribed  
in the white disappearing ink of ice.

Ahead the horizon is a cold, dark thing.  
Your skin radiates newness every second.  
You feel the fallout in your bones. Watch skate lines  
melt into a soggy mess in March on the Midway.

The ice will come again, but that now will not,  
though we re-live it always. The Midway abideth  
forever (we believe); there will be time  
(we believe) to skate back to the warming-house

where vaped breath will rise again  
over warm hats of many colors and skates  
in various states of unlace. And parents  
will again kneel before children

to re-lace and re-turn them to the frozen air  
to suspend their small and flightless bodies  
in the icy now of each glide, midway  
for the moment between past and future.

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*October 7, 2023*

*October 14, 2023*

**WAITING FOR WAR**

*Wisdom is better than weapons of war. . . . — Ecclesiastes 9:18*

You're a pretty bird, you buzzard, you,  
hunched between your two big buddies  
atop the Victorian painted lady,  
in the middle of pink gables, green curlicues,

and orange black-eyed Susans, looking out  
over Third Street and Rose Hill Cemetery.  
Graveyard trees and stones, monumental  
over denizens who lay in wait underground,

loomed just across the Styx and the street.  
We were walking up Third, a couple  
of old gardeners inspired by rose-  
planted roundabouts and curved

yellow curbs, innocents before a fall  
day fell even though those white birches  
stretched their beautiful arms into the crystal  
blue sky and gold leaves. And there

we saw you, waddling on the roof.  
You looked down on us and other passersby,  
who glanced up and did a double-take  
at the three of you harpies perched

on the steep black roof, in the middle  
of the colors, three shaggy black  
haystacks with beady eyes and hooked beaks,  
shifting your weight from claw to claw.

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*December 7, 2023*

## DIZZY

*[A]s the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are [our children] . . . snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them. . . . Wisdom is better than strength; but the poor man's wisdom is scorned, and his words are not heard.—Ecclesiastes 9:12, 9:16*

The silent rubble screams  
every day and clouds  
our vision as living  
rooms go up in smoke  
and apartments  
return to dust  
that geysers up  
into the atmosphere of war  
and death that is  
visible from space  
and in our living  
room, I'm afraid to  
look

at my granddaughter,  
not yet two  
as she yet breathes  
    in  
and  
out

of a harmonica

while twirling  
and gazing  
at the ceiling,  
the interior sky  
far from the rain  
and reign  
of rocks and rockets,  
until she's  
dizzy and jolts  
to a stop.  
Twirls again,  
Falls.

The baby,  
pale as the moon,  
rights herself. And  
                  we  
are  
dizzy.

Am I allowed  
to love  
my own true  
bit of ephemera  
who plays  
the harp? She seems  
to have just drifted  
down and across  
the sea  
from the Sistine  
Chapel ceiling  
to land bumpily and  
bounce

on our living  
room floor  
like a  
          fallen  
baby  
bird.

Can I right myself  
amidst the rubble?  
Do I deserve to laugh  
and clap and say "Nice  
dancing!" to mine  
after the fall  
of fire on theirs?  
There's no choice  
but to say it  
in vain but loud  
enough to hear it  
cross borders.  
Wisdom

is still better  
than force  
and weapons;  
still,

          no  
one's  
listening.

And I still have  
to close my eyes  
to stop myself  
from falling



into the juxtaposition  
of my love  
with children  
in other living  
rooms. They are shadows  
flickering across screens  
we hold  
in our comfortable  
cave,

while beneath  
my eyelids,  
illuminations

                  explode  
like  
bombs.

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*January 7, 2024*

## **FIVE A.M. ON THE FRONT PORCH**

*There is an evil I have seen under the sun, a true error that comes forth from the person in power. — Ecclesiastes 10:5*

I'm still as one of those rabbits  
in my yard. Stillness makes  
the dogs blind. Movement  
lets the predator see its prey.  
So let me just stay still

here in the private dark,  
while it lasts, still  
behind veiled screens,  
flimsy things that shield me  
from wild animals

like that possum  
trundling across my front  
steps without so much  
as a by your leave. (If only  
you were here by me

we could drink coffee  
in this coffee-colored dark.)  
Something's rustling  
in the hydrangea bushes.  
I'm afraid the predator's

become prey, the prey,  
predator, and back again.  
They're whirling in the dust

as one. Which is which?  
There: it stopped. For now.

It's one in the full-blown day  
over there. And I flip through our forty  
years together while I wait  
for your call over here  
in the aftermath of old friendship

divided by new war that counts  
the dead like abacus beads.  
The calculations come  
forth from true error.  
They're irreconcilable. Are we?

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February 7, 2024

## Songs in the Key of Exile

*Behold the tears of the oppressed, and they had no comforter;  
and on the side of their oppressors there was power . . . [And]  
on the day that . . . the sound of the bird arises and all the  
songstresses are bowed, of the very height they are afraid, and  
terror is in the road . . . — Ecclesiastes 4:1, 12:3–5*

### Chapter I.

Long after the War, and long before  
we really knew what the War was,  
we sometimes whispered of some vacant someone:  
“from the DP camps.”

I fought with a boy who laughed.  
A Dis-placed Person is just a person  
out of place, I told him. Like my grandfather,  
I didn't tell him,  
who, I learned when I was old, once  
saw some people set his house on fire.

One day out of the blue of fifty years,  
I was told, “You know, the first thing  
he thought of was his violin.”  
I hadn't known. Hadn't known  
he'd played, hadn't known  
he'd turned and ran into the forest  
without it, and kept running  
for 203 miles, I see on Google Maps,  
hiding all the way to Königsberg,  
re-named by Russia Kaliningrad  
in 1946, and now a dot  
on the vague map of our past.

*“Oyfn pripetshik brent a fayerl,  
Un in shtub iz heys”*  
“In the hearth burns a little fire,  
And in the house it is warm.”

Do you know that Yiddish lullaby?  
A fire burnt my grandfather’s house.  
And now it’s ashes.  
And now it belongs  
to the hordes,  
to the blank stare,  
to the bell  
ringing almost  
imperceptibly in memory.  
The singers were silenced then  
as they are today  
(nothing’s new under the sun),  
and terror was in the road,  
It followed him through  
the forest, straight to the Baltic Sea.

“Got myself a spotted horse, and he took me everywhere  
Fields, fountains, mountains, streams, where he did not  
care. . . .  
One night he even snuck into my room, took me down  
to Mexico. . . .”

## **Chapter II.**

He dis-embarked at Vera Cruz,  
where he was met by bullets  
in bandoliers slung over the hearts  
of Mexican men who paid him no mind,

and also by some brothers dis-placed  
from the same place back home  
in Poland. And off they went with him  
into the wild land that was not as wild  
as the warring land they'd left.

They aspired to be peddlers,  
so they sold crosses  
—crosses?—  
Yes, they made them  
from wood and twine.  
His customers nicknamed him  
“the blue-eyed Jesus”  
—Jesus?—

“Jesus loves me.  
This I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

He bought a mandolin in Vera Cruz  
but it was soon stolen  
in a holdup on a train  
by none other than Zapata,  
my grandfather told me proudly.  
Zapata? That couldn't have been right  
—it wasn't the right time,  
though it was the right place.

Peddlers aren't famous for fortunes,  
but he lived in Mexico long  
enough to earn a new language  
and papers—those flimsy keys to the crossing  
“via the footbridge” over the Rio Grande.

### Chapter III.

We stood one summer-Chicago morning  
in the gray cool of the back porch,  
and we surveyed the world  
from the second floor.

And we saw that it was good,  
from the asphalt lawn below  
to the trees-of-heaven above.

We could hear the first-floor  
Mexican neighbors, their words  
entwined with the chirping  
of Chicago sparrows,  
and my grandfather knew it was time  
for magic. "Watch this!" he said,  
and he launched a "¡Buenos días!" laden  
with heavy Yiddish hues into mid-air  
over the railing. A stream of Spanish rose up  
like a geyser, he volleyed back, and the stream flowed

"merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily.  
Life is but a dream"?

Which life? Which dream?

Can Chicago air be sweet?  
It was, and it had that smell  
of soot and earth  
poking through pavement  
around rough but green weeds.

"Don't throw the pa-ast away  
You might need it some rainy day  
Dreams can come true again  
When everything old is new again . . ."

#### **Chapter IV.**

But he never played music again,  
never spoke of the fire,  
the ocean, the Rio Grande,  
the whole continent of Europe, dis-placed.  
It was his daughter who let the story slip  
through her fingers like water held  
for fifty years. She forgot to forget.

And that's how silence came  
to find itself forgotten  
after it had roamed  
like a cloudy ghost  
over our Lake Michigan  
shores for an eternity until  
that one moment  
when it just said, "You know,"  
just took a big stick  
and scratched an image  
in the sand, a stick figure  
of a boy and a burning violin.

#### **Chapter V.**

I'm grandmother to my own  
grandfather now. I still worry about him.  
And I have other grandchildren,  
some still living,  
some still unborn,  
some stillborn.



“Sleep my child, and peace attend thee,  
all through the night  
Guardian angels God will send thee,  
all through the night . . .  
I my loved ones' watch am keeping,  
All through the night.”

We sing lullabies.  
In our house it is warm.  
I barely hear the bell of memory  
toll in the background. I am lulled.  
Which song shall we sing next?  
Let's try this one, says our teenager:

“We didn't start the fire  
It was always burning,  
since the world's been turning  
We didn't start the fire  
But when we are gone  
It will still burn on,  
and on, and on, and on, and on, and on,  
and on . . . ”

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March 7, 2024

## CEASE, FIRE

*I have seen the travail, which God hath given [our children] . . . He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, . . . [no one] can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. I know that there is no good . . . but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life.—Ecclesiastes 3:1–3:12*

I.

“Would you like to know what fire is?”

The baby was playing with candles.  
She positioned the pinks,  
blues, and greens with a grave

deliberation on the canvas of the living  
room floor. She examined a sliver  
of waxy blue lingering on her finger  
and she reached for pristine paper.

“Candles are for lighting, not drawing,”  
said her mother. “Would you like to see  
what fire is?” And her parents knelt before  
the one white candle and held a match to it.

II.

The family reflected on the flame.  
“Hot, hot,” warned her father.  
The baby turned to her parents  
and the flame and did not touch.

The still bodies on the floor draped  
together in the darkening living  
room. And her mother offered her  
the other little colored waxy things,

the ones for the art  
of flowers, friends, father,  
mother, apples, houses,  
and the smiling sun itself,

which will wear sunglasses.  
To protect itself from its own light?  
Our light? The light of other suns?  
What does the sun see?

The spark deep in the chest  
of the baby burns oxygen  
but extinguishes in fire.  
The sun sees birth days and death days.

III.

We carry the spark carefully  
as we walk the edge  
of the inferno. "Who shall live  
and who shall die?" asks the prayer.

We scan the heavens and the radar;  
the stars look like hearts, beating  
or still or not yet begun. We listen  
across light years; the stars radiate silence.

IV.

The baby began to scribble in blue  
on a flat white page about beauty  
in a round world. Creation takes  
an infinity of forms. How does she know

about scribbling? Yet there she was,  
human, in love with blue, afraid  
of fire, and already squinting  
to see what the sun sees.

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## About the Author

Lisa V. Comforty is a writer, editor, and documentary filmmaker. Her work has in large part addressed issues related to the Holocaust. For example, with her partner Jacky Comforty, she co-produced and co-wrote *The Optimists: The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews in the Holocaust*, which explores the question of how the 50,000 Jews of Bulgaria did not die in World War II even though Jewish communities throughout the rest of Europe were decimated in the genocidal crimes of that era. Lisa and Jacky's work together has won awards from the Berlin International Film Festival, the Jerusalem International Film Festival, and the Chicago International Film Festival, among others. Originally from Chicago, Lisa currently lives in Bloomington, Indiana.

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## Notes

### Song credits for *Songs in the Key of Exile*, pp. 17–23

*Oifén Pripitchek [In the Hearth]*, written by M.M. Warshawsky, c. 1900. Performed by Mark Olf on *Mark Olf Sings Jewish Folk Songs*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1951. Available at <https://soundcloud.com/markolf/oifn-pripitchik-on-the-oven>.

*Little Brown Dog*, traditional English ballad adapted and sung by Taj Mahal on *Shake Sugaree, Taj Mahal Sings and Plays for Children*, 1988. Posted courtesy of Universal Music Group, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fO9uIHKK9x0>.

*Jesus Loves Me, This I Know*. Christian hymn, especially popular with children. Lyrics by Anna Bartlett Warner, 1859; music composed by William B. Bradbury, 1861. Available at [https://hymnary.org/text/jesus\\_loves\\_me\\_this\\_i\\_know\\_for\\_the\\_bible](https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_loves_me_this_i_know_for_the_bible).

*La Bamba*, traditional Mexican folk song adapted and sung by Ritchie Valens on *Presenting Ritchie Valens*, 1958. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZhYnXz\\_seg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZhYnXz_seg).

*Everything Old Is New Again*, co-written by Peter Allen and Carole Bayer Sager for Allen's 1974 album for A&M Records, *Continental American*. Performed by Allen for, among other productions, the Bob Fosse film, *All That Jazz*, 1977. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRVv2b-hL\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRVv2b-hL_0).

*Sleep My Child and Peace Attend Thee*, traditional Welsh lullaby. See, e.g., the performance by Chris Thile, Aoife O'Donovan, Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer & Alex Hargreaves on *Live from Here*, syndicated variety radio program produced by American Public Media and Minnesota Public Radio on Dec. 10, 2016. <https://www.livefromhere.org/listen>.

*We Didn't Start the Fire*, written and published by Billy Joel in 1989, released as a single in 1989, and released on his album *Storm Front* in 1989. Music video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFTLKWw542g>.

