

*“...face to face with basic realities...
so like us, so different. They get on with living, and,
although things can go very wrong sometimes,
for the most part they enjoy that living to the full.”*

Jane Goodall in *THROUGH A WINDOW, MY THIRTY YEARS
WITH THE CHIMPANZEES OF GOMBE*

American Street Philosophers

Them is Us

Steve Wilson and Friends

AMERICAN STREET PHILOSOPHERS

volume:

I THE SUCCESS OF FAILURE

II WE'VE BEEN THINKING...AND IT WORKS

III KEEP ON...KEEPING ON...

IV THEM IS US

V THE 'ELSEWHERE' OF RISING EQUALITY

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*“It is your own choice whether you grow up to become human beings,
or remain on the intellectual level of beasts.”*

Ludmila Ulitskaya in *THE BIG GREEN TENT*

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*On a side street
on a scorching June day
she wears a winter overcoat.
Days later come Jeana/Donna's*

Letters to Myself

LETTERS TO MYSELF

I am poverty.

My lifestyle is far beneath comfort and safety
and I'm a captive of continuous distraction.
When I was very young
doctors tried to "fix" me with Ritalin.

It did more damage than good.
Nerves like burnt onion rings,
invisible days,

a choice of too many cigarettes, too little sleep
and a cat who never gets enough to eat—
a support system of meow, meow.

A man on TV telling me my soul will be saved
if I send twenty bucks—after all
what's twenty bucks anyway?
Well twenty bucks to me is
a week's worth of yogurt smoothies with a protein kick;
twenty bucks to me is
a month's worth of bus tickets
with a get-there-and-get-back-window of one hour.

It's a life I've shit for myself.

I'm not wallowing. I'm just facing facts:
waking up today being fifty when yesterday I was twenty-seven.
Years thrown away being somebody somebody else wanted.
My peers drifting away...moving on...disconnecting.

...the disappeared years:

focused on anywhere but my son;
daggers of guilt I have no idea how to handle.
Bad choices. Very bad choices.
And now
the consequences—When does resentment end?
When forgiveness?
How long I wonder.

I just want to run away and never look back.

Same pain, different story,
same story, different pain.
We are so fucking cruel.

Listening to myself,
too serious can undo,
not serious enough, ditto.
Tragedy and comedy abound.
So much of life is hidden
between the worlds of denial and desire,
of fantasy and hopefulness.
Balance seems the quagmire
where success can sprout — by risking.
Doing nothing fails—backwards, forwards, it doesn't matter
...DO SOMETHING.

...'denial or desire'

I choose who I am.

Goodbye Jeana.
Hello Donna.

Donna gritted her teeth.
She had been denying for a year.
This time she couldn't.
She needed...

It wouldn't take long:
two buses east,
one bus south.
If everything went smooth
she'd be on her way back on the same transfer.
But was anything ever "smooth" in her life?
Donna bit her lip, bitter blood;
but just this one time.

The bus turned left
in front of the familiar corner
she once frequented daily,
sometimes twice daily.

The bus stopped.
She still had time
to turn around,
to just say "no".

Donna stood up and walked past the driver.
He nodded 'good day'.
She stepped down through the door

into a rush of hot air.
Her hands shook in anticipation.

She knew the walk,
she had done it a thousand times:
twenty steps from the bus stop to the right,
six steps left and she was facing the double doors.

A stranger came through the double doors.
The smell wrapped Donna.
How long had she waited for that.

The air aphrodisiac
she could feel
almost the dark liquid
ready.

Ten more steps
and she'd be **face to face**
with...
anxious to take her money.
Her fingers fumbled her pocket
among moments in eternity.

Her trembling hand
dropped
money
onto
the counter.

His big blue eyes smile.

“Thanks for coming to Starbucks.”

“Triple Vanilla Latte.”





Just a Thought

The phone.

I say hello, he says “ya know,
there’s a two-legged
who leaves notes on our chalkboard.”

(The voice was Ben’s.)

“The one they left last night
I read this morning.

“Shall I share it with you?

“To make it in this world
you have to be oh so smart
or oh so pleasant.

“Well,
for years I was smart...
...I recommend pleasant.

“You may quote me.”





A 'Quik' Visit

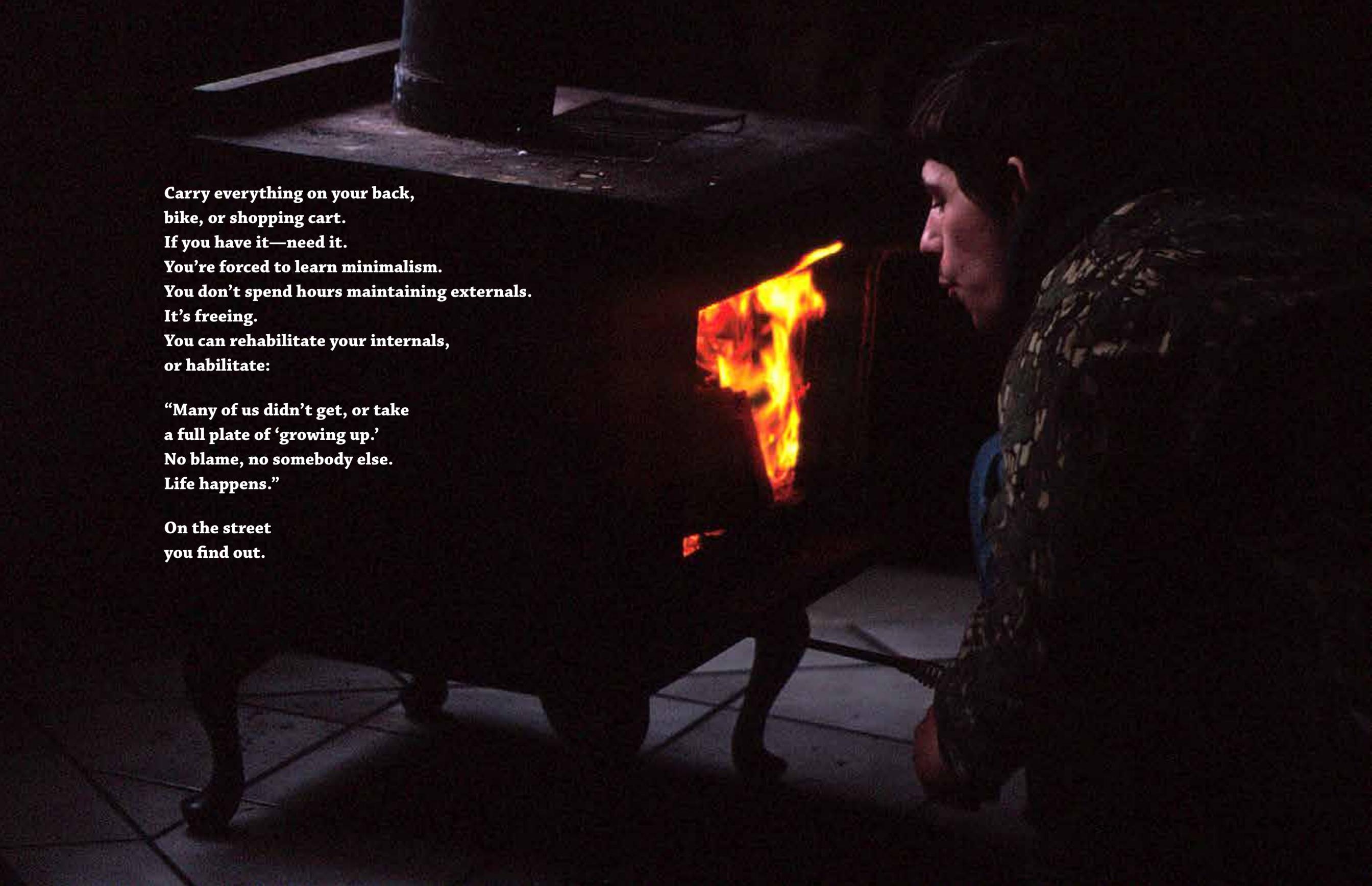
Welcome
to a frosty pre-dawn
Dignity Village.

It's 25 above,
that's minus something Celsius.
Coat and scarf is good.

Coffee?
The Village runs on coffee:
coffee, cigarettes and kindness.
Well, kindness most of the time.
We've all been on the street
cold, hungry, shunned, harassed.

On the street
you find out.



A woman with dark hair, wearing a patterned jacket, is shown in profile, looking towards a person on a bicycle. The person on the bicycle has a bright fire burning on their back, which illuminates the scene. The background is dark, suggesting a street at night. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**Carry everything on your back,
bike, or shopping cart.
If you have it—need it.
You're forced to learn minimalism.
You don't spend hours maintaining externals.
It's freeing.
You can rehabilitate your internals,
or habilitate:**

**“Many of us didn't get, or take
a full plate of 'growing up.'
No blame, no somebody else.
Life happens.”**

**On the street
you find out.**



Street say:
"Dignity Village has rules."
"Dignity Village repairs lives."

The Village is self-governing
learning the true responsibilities of freedom
"...of the people, by the people, for the people."





Self-governing is messy
 creating kind, caring, honest, trustworthy fairness
 “...of the people, by the people, for the people.”
 But it gifts self-esteem.



No street-smart bravado,
 no gang-tough enforcement,
 no jailhouse mentality,
 no funny with the money,
 no “More than my share, IS my share.”

In the Village
 you’ll find out.

Welcome.





**Mandatory Membership Meeting
Council Election—Board Selection
16 December 2011 8:00 pm
at the Commons, Dignity Village.**

The Annual Election—2011



With this 13th annual election
the Village hopes to put behind it a stress year
of governance by ‘nitty-picky’ cronyism,
vacancy, chaos.

Tonight’s ‘stand-and-say’
may package the past, may energize the future.

Listen:

”We need to adhere to the rules.”

“...and Bylaws.”

“Board meetings ramble,
patience boogies,
meetings adjourn...nothing happens.”

“We’re not stupid.”

“...or lazy.”

“Everyone here has value.”

”We need to encourage opportunity
for members to make meaningful contributions.”

“We need a new vision
based on what we know.

And what we know is Community.”

*”Yeah, we are a group of people
forced to learn community!”*

“We need to create opportunity
to enhance personal skills.”

...”and opportunity for marketing
outside the Village.”

...”add value to the Village from personal skills—
wood-working, leathercraft, carpentry, jewelry,

handcrafted tools, gardening, computer skills,
bookkeeping, workshops in self-governance,”
...”street skills,“...”survival.”

...”Be more creative in the greenhouse.”

“More cooperative thinking, doing.”

“What about members not in compliance?”

We all know the commitments.

We signed them in our membership agreement.”

As ballots are passed out ‘stand-and-say’ mellows.

Voting is for ‘members-in-good-standing.’

Twenty-one ballots are tallied.





Mitch, Brad G, TJ, Tracey, Ed K and Ptery become the 2012 council amid cheers and some grumping.

The six caucus to select the new Board:

Mitch is CEO,

Brad G is vice chair,

TJ is secretary,

and Tracey, treasurer.

A wink past 9 pm and this election is history.

Outside, small groups talk:

“We all want the same thing.”

“We want the Village to succeed so we can keep our homes.”

“...but members in non-compliance?

Where’s their money?

Where’s their hours?

Quit easing non-compliance.

Those missing 40 hours/month and \$20/month for Village insurance matter.”

I listen to Mitch,

enthusiasm undampened

by the few non-compliant members excluded from voting.

“I’m reading these people.

I’m trying to understand.



“Morale is improving.
We can grow Dignity Village
into a place where earning
comes from something you like to do.
This is true. And we can.”

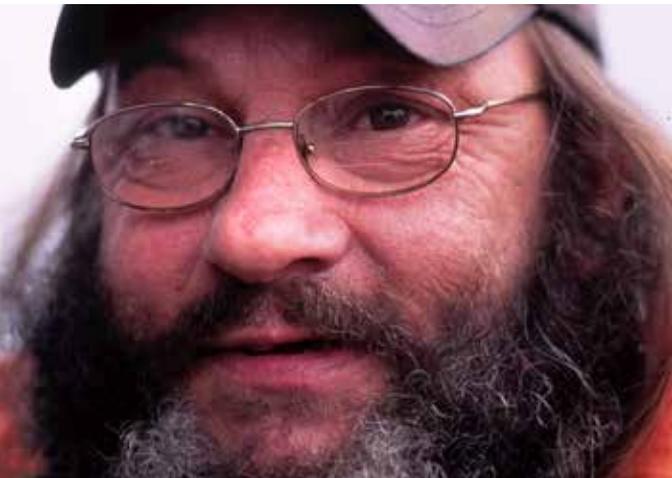
...there are sign-ups on the Common’s door:

1. “What’s your idea on what biggest issues we need to face?”
2. “Wish list priorities?”
3. “Micro business ideas and talents?”

Villagers express choices, select leadership, self-govern.
“Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”
Democracy.

I’m witnessing my third Village election.
The night is cold.
Their question clear:

“What good would we do to just throw them back on the street?”



Tim, a co-founding alum of Dignity Village, reminisced homelessness for me as we toured his new home and garden.

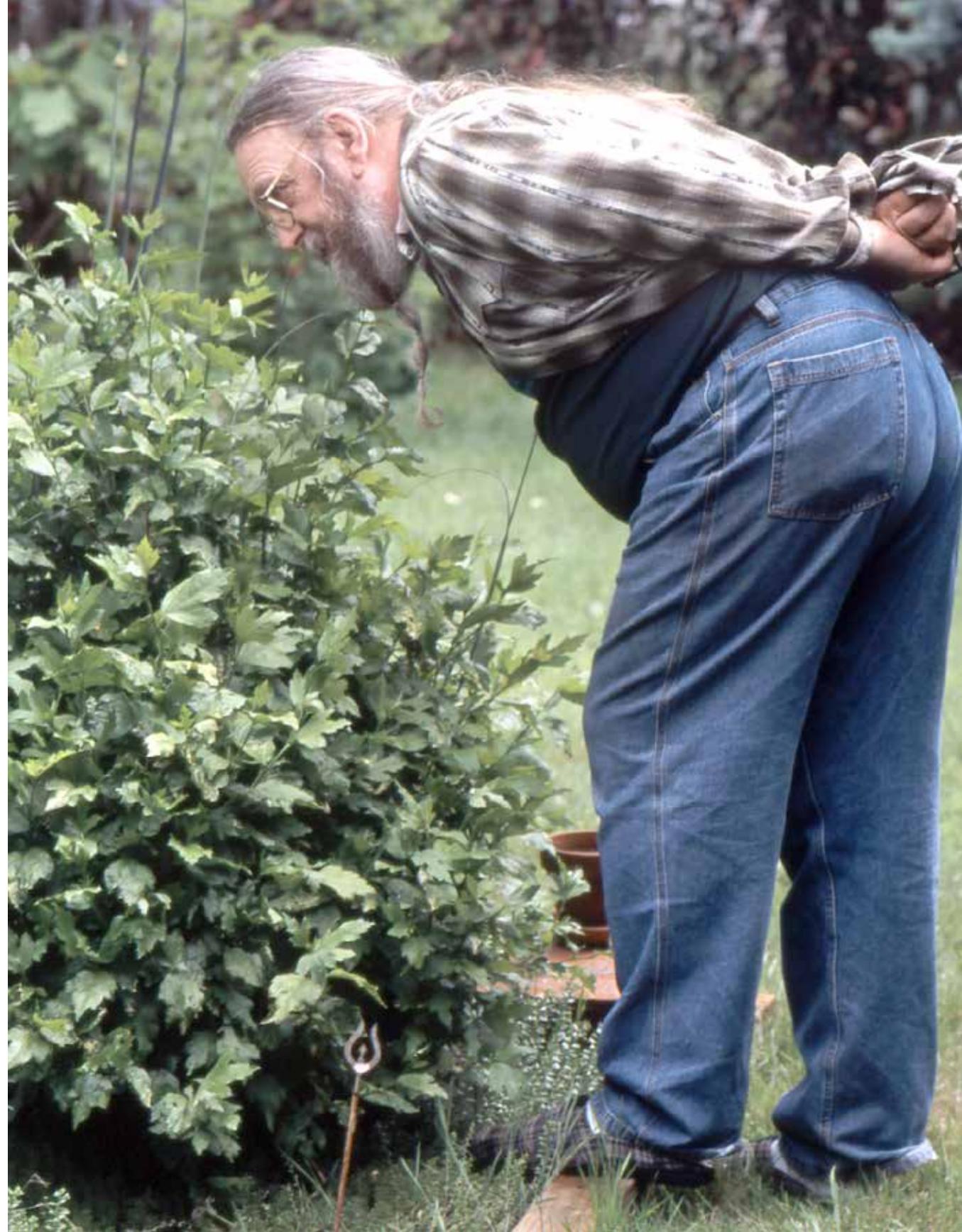
A Recollection: Tim M



“The street’s a terrible place to live. Kicked around, harassed, bullied, living without, unloved, forgotten, dumpster-diving ‘mystics of malcontent.’

“You are expected to feel worthless, like you did something wrong. We don’t need labels to be put into classes. With just our thinking we could change. We know we could change.

“We know about:
always waiting,
always listening,
always alert,
out on the street
flying signs,
sleeping in a cardboard box,
sleeping with your shoes on—people steal,
sleeping on mats 6” apart—germs, sickness
going to a restroom, a luxury,
standing in line by 3 to get a bed at 7,



the cost of education barrier,
the getting a job necessity,
...and nutrition and exercise
and self-respect and confidence.

“We know there’s something better out there...
...it’s lonely on the street.
Yet you get to know yourself.

“You learn to live without,
to take care of yourself,
to respect money,
to value cast offs.

“We found out sheltering is big business,
millions of dollars
made off the backs of the homeless.

“We wanted to build a community
that would work together;
not a party place
for the downtown homeless crowd.



“While putting Dignity Village together
we found out who our friends weren’t and aren’t.
By starting the Village
we were all considered domestic terrorists:

Shorty
Jack
Ibrahim
J. P.
Rob
Tom
JadaMae
Gaye
and me.



“And what do I miss most since leaving the Village?
After growing up in a family of eight kids,
then Village tarps and tents echoing interior sounds,
I miss most the camaraderie of morning coffee
...and the bickering.”

“In doing for ourselves
we learn failures can succeed
and success gives self-respect and dignity.

“Village alumni are home owners
and homeless advocates,
a construction exec and a restaurateur,
a law student, an art manager, a writer,
back-to-collegers, elder care-givers
and managers of homeless shelters.

“When a temporary reprieve is needed,
at twenty dollars and forty-hours per month,
Dignity Village works.





RVing in a southwest Oregon regrowth forest,
with story and music
with music and story.
And when people communicate
it works. A real blessing.

A Recollection: Jim M

Jim M, with companion dog Jake,
summarized for me their two-year plus
resident membership at Dignity Village.
“It was a blessing.

“When I first got to the Village
a competent bunch of people
were running the place.

Dignity Village offered a sense of security.
Dignity Village offered a sense of community,
Villagers didn’t argue about petty shit.

“ Dignity Village is a great idea.
For those of us coming off the street
Dignity Village looks real good.”

Jim does music and words:
“When I was four I started playing drums.
Nearly drove my folks crazy.
They got me a guitar...with lessons,
until I told my teacher I didn’t want to play
Mary Had A Little Lamb.”





“By high school I was doing solo
and concerts with a couple good players.
We traveled, played, traveled, lots of applause.
Recording...Contracts. It was great fun.
Money...Decisions...
...management...

...bad decisions.

Life happened,...the street...the Village.

“When I came the Village was a blessing.
When I left it had become close-minded.
I felt like I was walking on eggs.
Wise people didn’t have a voice.
VIC (Village Intake Committee) took in people
with few brain cells left in their crackheads.
I don’t miss a thing about the Village.
When I left if a bus ran over one or two I’d clap.”





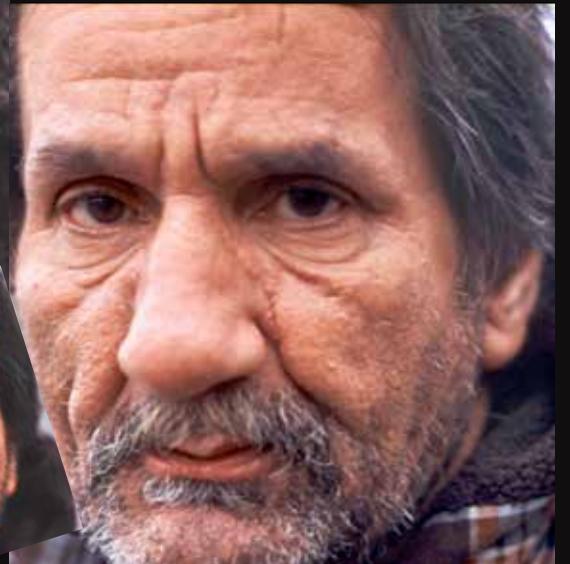
“I don’t know

*if you have had the same experience,
but the snag I always come up against when I’m telling a story
is this dashed difficult problem of where to begin it.*

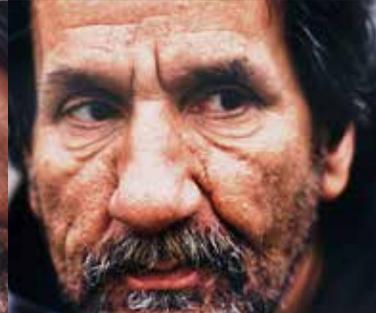
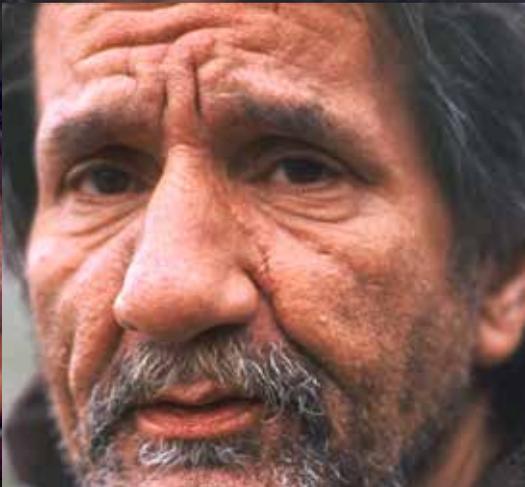
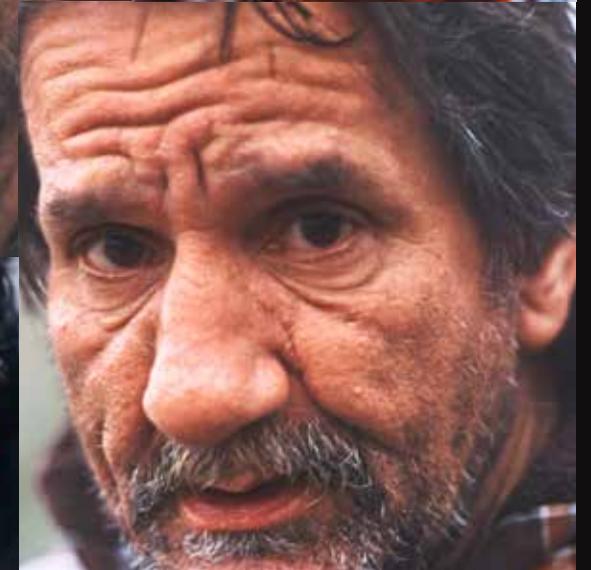
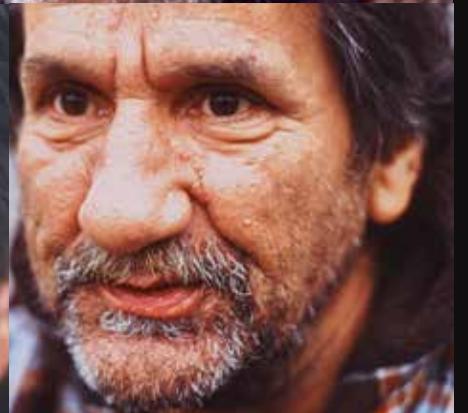
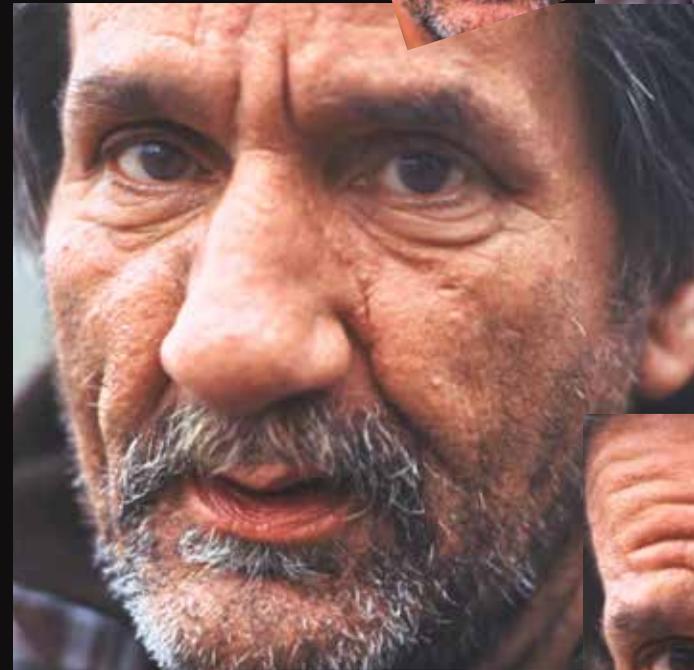
*It’s a thing you don’t want to go wrong over,
because one false step and you’re sunk.*

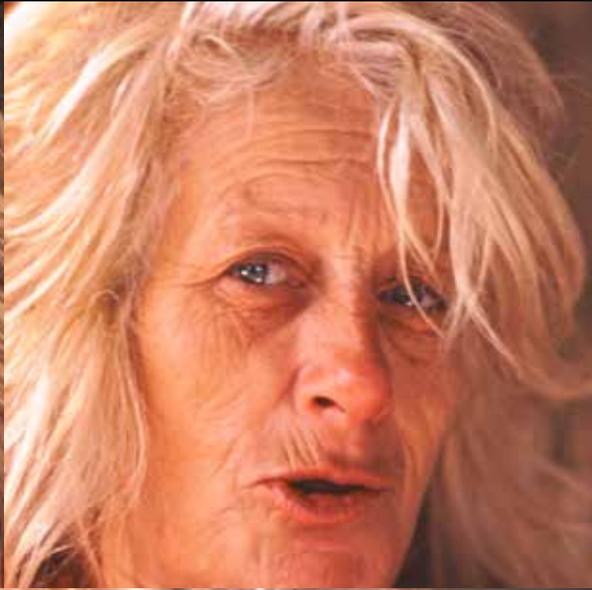
*I mean, if you fool around too long at the start,
trying to establish atmosphere, as they call it,
and all that sort of rot, you fail to grip
and the customers walk out on you...”*

(from PG Wodehouse, Right Ho, Jeeves)

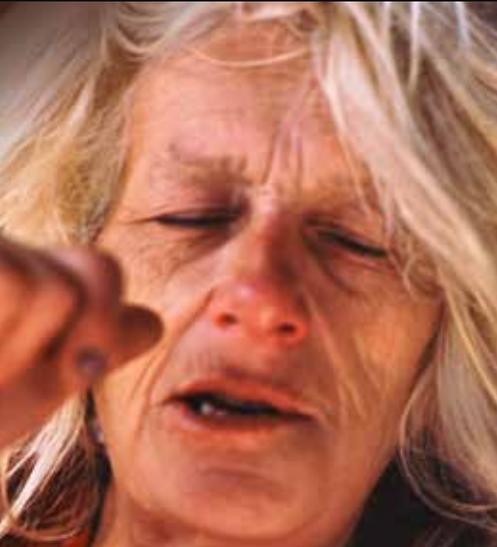
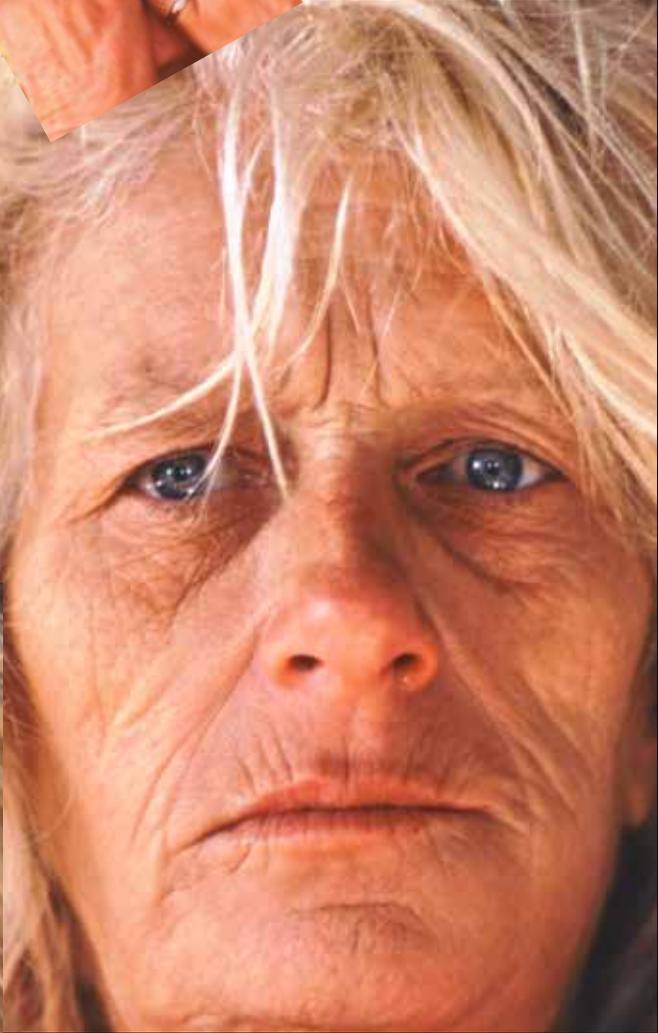


**How is Who and
When is What**





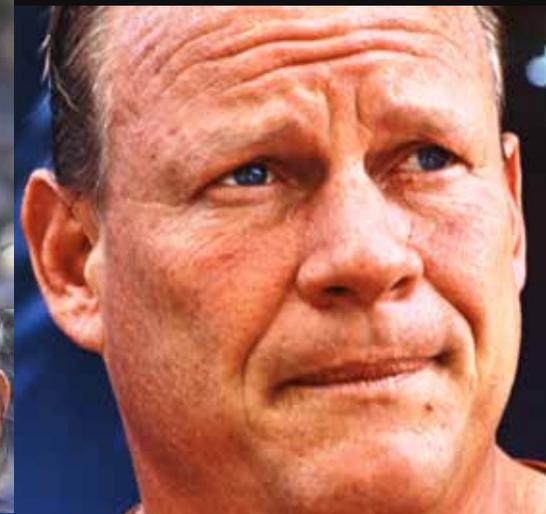
**Who is Where What is
When How is Where
When is Why**





**What is Where and Who
When How is
Now and Then**

**Who is Where
What is When**



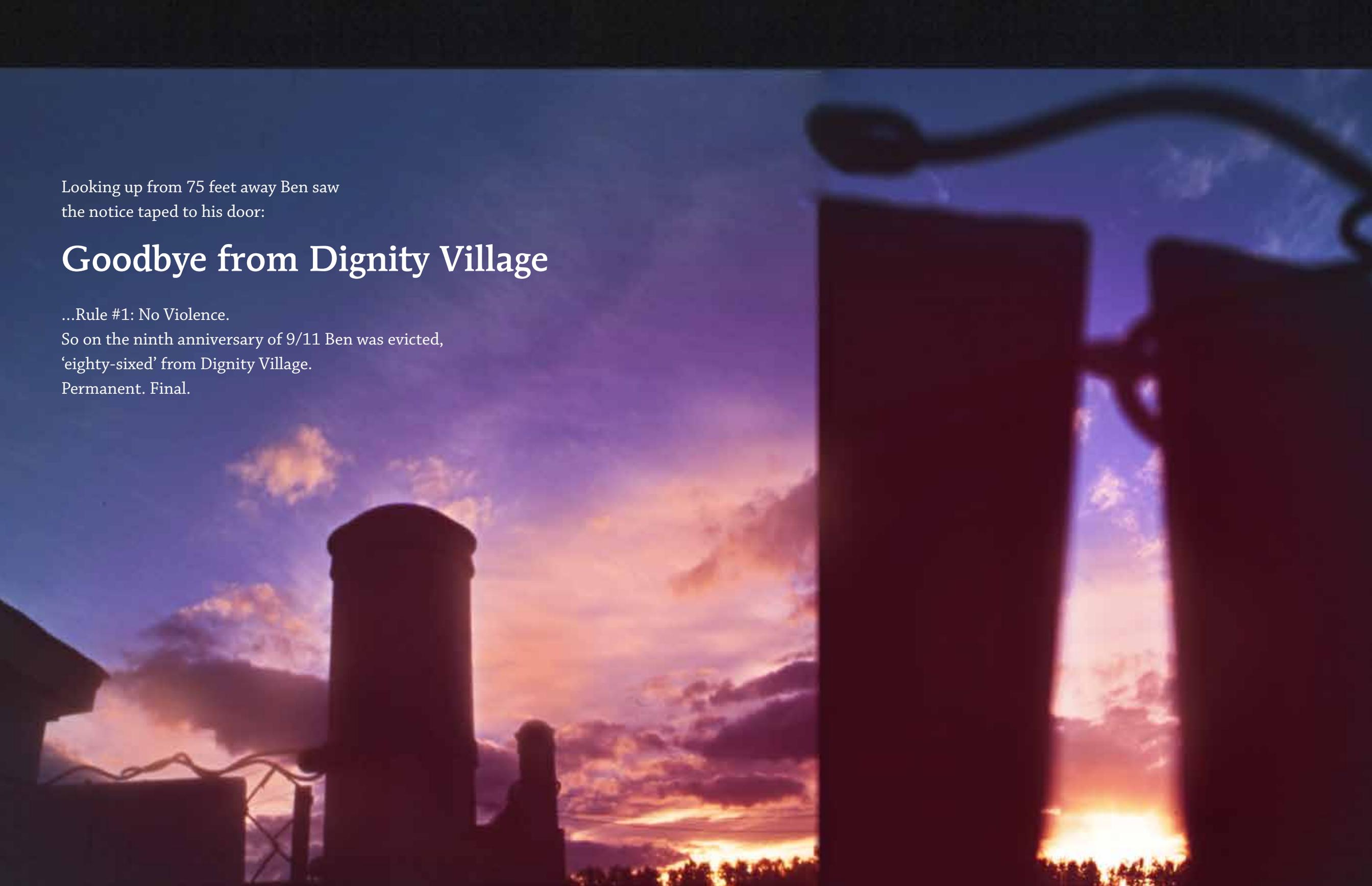


**Why is Now When
How is What and
Where is What**



**What is When
Who and Where
are Now**



A sunset scene with silhouettes of a building and a street lamp against a purple and orange sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange glow that transitions into a deep purple sky. The silhouettes of the building and street lamp are dark against the bright sky.

Looking up from 75 feet away Ben saw
the notice taped to his door:

Goodbye from Dignity Village

...Rule #1: No Violence.

So on the ninth anniversary of 9/11 Ben was evicted,
'eighty-sixed' from Dignity Village.

Permanent. Final.



Back when Ben was under the bridge feeling real bad he even said it back then, “Somebody could give me fifty thousand dollars and it wouldn’t amount to much more than fifty thousand problems I can’t handle.”



“You get a severely depressed person and about the best you can do is hope they don’t go through with it. Gun ownership is not for everyone. Time for thoughts...”



“It’s a tough way to go, nobody wants it, but it’s not as unlivable as you might think. For those well enough, being outside is more fear than pain.

Even in the dead of last winter there were only a couple times I cut my six pack down to a four pack and went to bed early because it was just too cold to be outside.

“My opening salvo goes something like:

You can’t give someone a happiness transplant, it has to come from inside.

“If you had six or seven like me all giving you an overview of poverty-happiness you could easily end up with six or seven completely different stories:

Ujam, Nitewatch, 8 x 8,

Thursdays under the Bridge,

Father Dan, R2Dtoo, Dignity Village,

...there’s no shortage of raw material to study up on

...and there’s all kinds of different moods

walkin’ and talkin’ homeless in Portland’s Old Town.



“... when the police officer asks the woman with hepatitis,
“Is it the bad kind? she replies, ‘Which is the good kind?’
...and on 4th and Davis, ‘Can I ask you a question?’
I said, ‘Well you already did, but ask me another one.’
He asked me if I would be willing to sodomize him for five dollars.
I told him no.

“The sidewalk from the bridge and around 2nd and Couch is most nights
haphazardly strewn with specimens of humanity some of whom a chagrined
Creator would call failed experiments. To a new guy finding a spot is anxiety.

“This challenges the new guy. Two weeks and I am on Burnside over the MAX
where Andrew Payton came to a bad end. A block up and over. They counted
53 bullets. Welcome to Old Town. Sweet Baby Jesus.”





“In Old Town with a few spare clothes,
a couple blankets, the shock of sudden transition.
One measure of how far gone I was is the stuff I left behind
and why I picked Old Town.

OK two measures.”







“You probably have not noticed so much those **‘No Public Restroom’** signs I noticed. That was my chief concern.

Where am I going to go to the restroom?

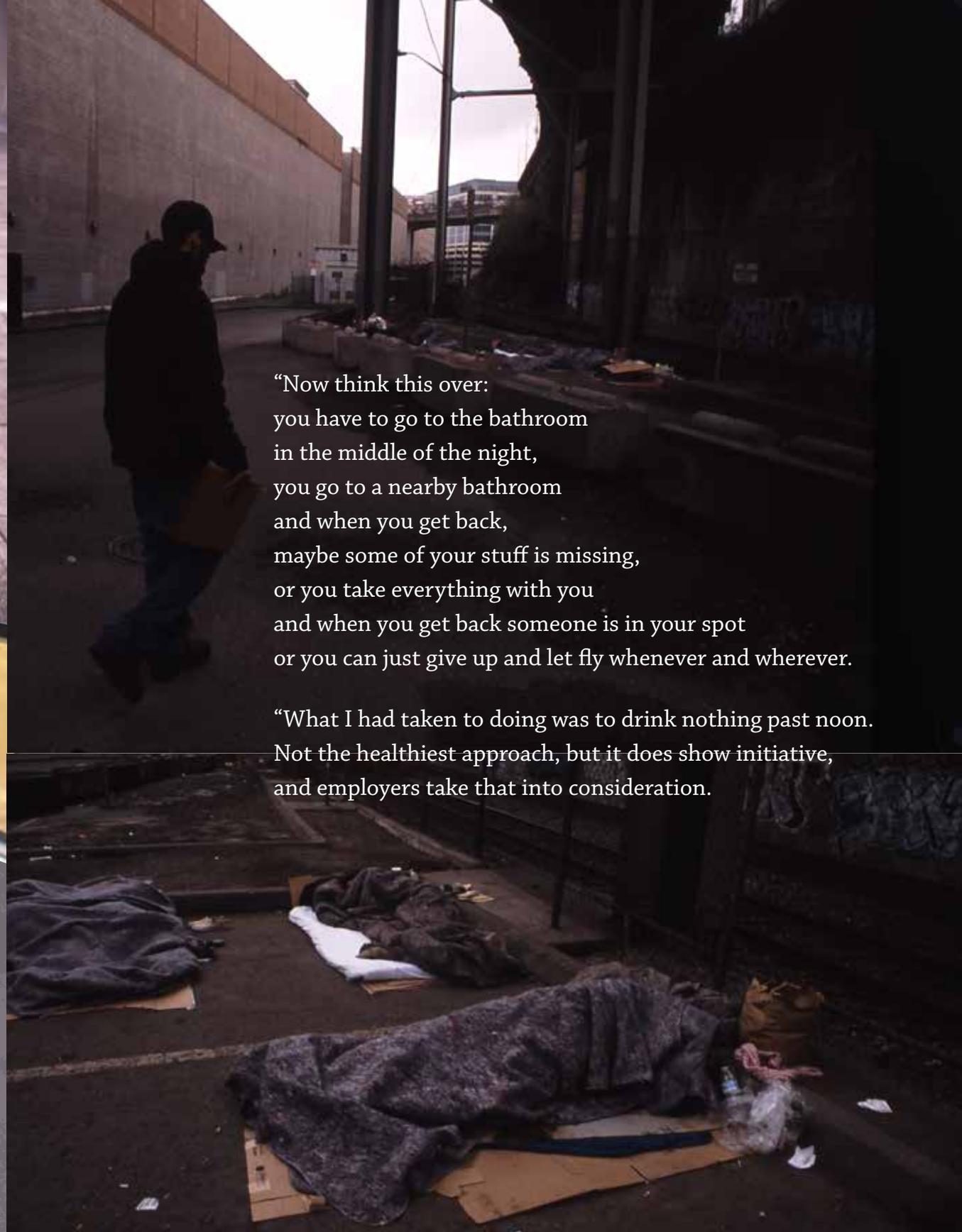
The rescue mission is always open.

Fact is, much later, when I started to extend my range

I did get caught out, luckily while wearing double socks.

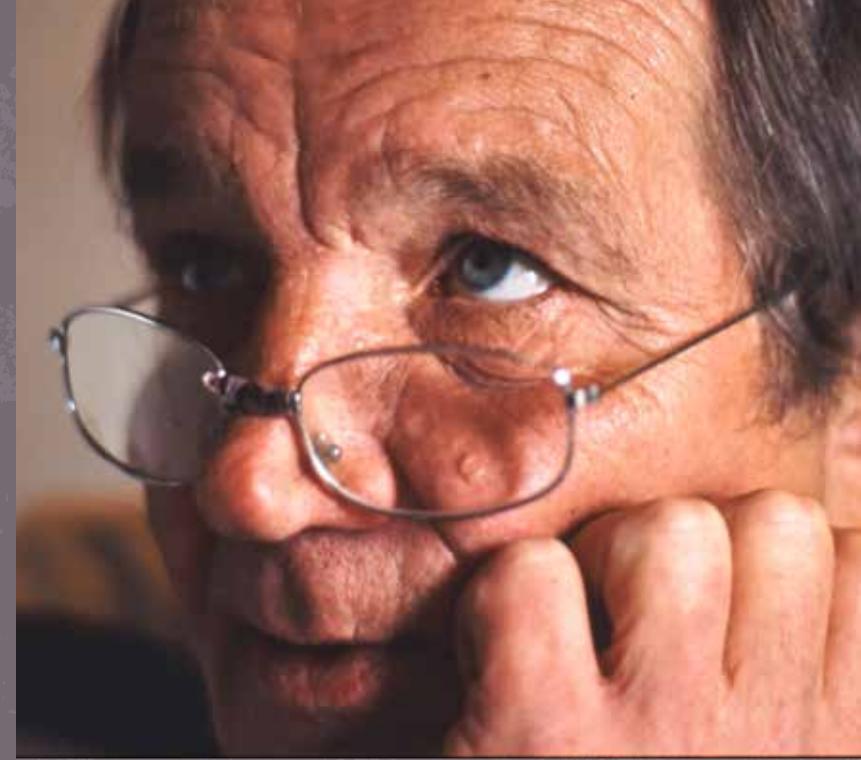
I know you want the unlaundered truth, so I give you the straight poop.

“There are a few doorways on 3rd, between Couch and Davis, good rain spots. Availability various. I sort of commandeered one of them and it sort of turned into ‘my’ spot, even though there is really no such thing as a reserved spot.



“Now think this over:
you have to go to the bathroom
in the middle of the night,
you go to a nearby bathroom
and when you get back,
maybe some of your stuff is missing,
or you take everything with you
and when you get back someone is in your spot
or you can just give up and let fly whenever and wherever.

“What I had taken to doing was to drink nothing past noon. Not the healthiest approach, but it does show initiative, and employers take that into consideration.



“I’m from Los Angeles where your car is an appendage and making that adjustment was an ordeal. Plus my mental condition: anxiety, depression, borderline {?} schizophrenia.

I would bring a book to the food line so I wouldn’t have to talk to anyone.

In clinical terms: the dude’s wack.

“So it’s back on the sidewalk with a bag of belongings you have to lug around. You can’t even go canning—collecting cans for recycle. That’s a big feature of a campsite, being free of that restriction. Another is that a peanut butter sandwich that you made your way when you wanted tastes better than the best meal in town. Especially with Birdbrain and Armando in attendance.

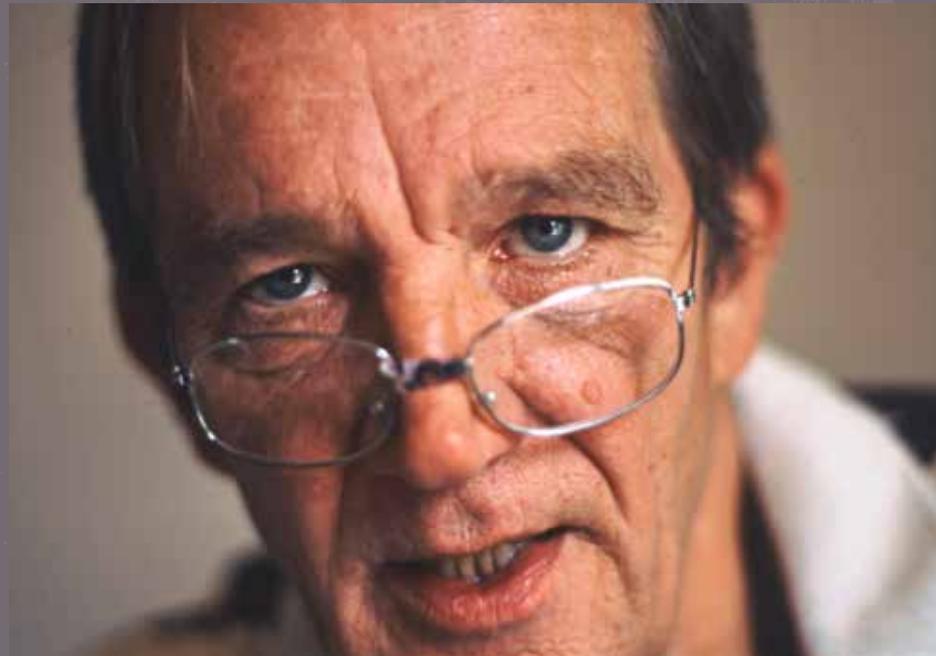
“... so marked my first full year as outdoors-man in the hinterlands.

“In round two comes a little more maneuverability. Sidewalks still sans comfort but a little wealthier small change.

“I never did a single thing they said to do at TPI (Transition Projects Inc.) except the treatment program. Might have been enough to keep me in, but I was getting real bad bus anxiety and didn’t even keep up with the program.

“I got cute and got myself bounced out of TPI which torpedoed my school semester. After I got over the panic attack as my plan evaporated, it was different. COMPLETELY.

“The immense amount of help that comes out of TPI can’t be measured. I was coming around, but the leg up was tremendous. Multiply that by 90 guys times rotations in and out every four months for three years. That’s a lot of people and you still must times that by the people in their lives.



“Autumn’s melancholy. Late summer’s sun. I checked out two books from Laura at STREET BOOKS. As she remembers:”

“The last books I checked out to Ben were in late autumn on a sunny day with a chill to the air. He showed up in his professorial glasses and a thin jacket. I remember he seemed particularly glum.

“I asked him if he’d looked into the possibility of a warmer coat for the winter. He said he knew of two different coat drives in the past week. He could have gotten something free, but he just hadn’t done it.

“Why are you being so hard on yourself, I asked him.”

He smiled and shrugged.

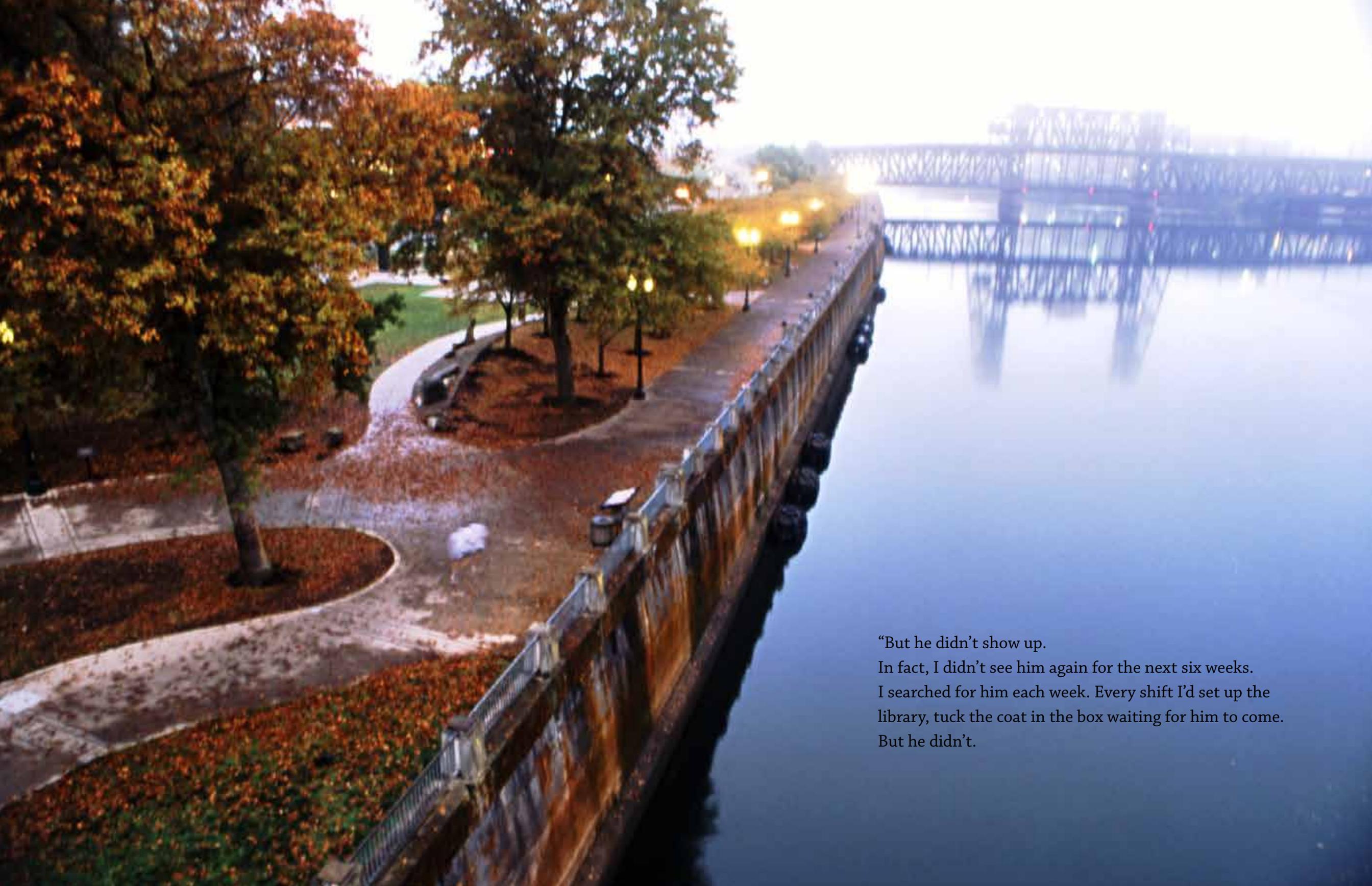
“I gotta go, all this introspection is getting me down.”





“I’m not sure we sent you with the best books for curing introspection, I called after him. Ben waved...without looking back. He’d taken two titles: a story along the US/Mexico border about a drug deal gone wrong and a memoir of a descent into poverty with its attendant hunger pangs and lack of shelter.

“Later that afternoon I went against my own rule and bought a used coat at the Goodwill for Ben and folded it atop the library books in my cart. I kept an eye out for him at the library the following week as I checked out books.



“But he didn’t show up.

In fact, I didn’t see him again for the next six weeks.

I searched for him each week. Every shift I’d set up the library, tuck the coat in the box waiting for him to come.

But he didn’t.



“With time I realized the coat added extra weight to the bicycle library and I needed to stick with my original mission: **to bring books to people. I couldn’t expand to coats no matter how tempting in the cold weather.**”

“Once again Ben had his pick of spots, normally right next to the Old Town free clinic if that motorcycle isn’t parked there or to *Street Roots* or an opportune spot right on Burnside. Lots of nightlife foot traffic—‘What a great place to live,’ was not in the forefront of Ben’s mind at the time, but in retrospect, a thousand small kindnesses and...”



“...watch the dogs.”

Crafty scroungers. Bull Mastiffs, Pit Bulls, Labrapoodles. It took a long time before noticing that these are some of the best behaved dogs. As explained, it makes perfect sense. ‘It’s ‘cuz they’re always with us. They get all the attention that a dog can possibly use and they know every move we make.’”





“My friend Ben

likes chess and bad puns, and cooks a mean pot roast on Sundays. He is a seasoned dumpster diver with scores including a taxidermied armadillo, he calls Armando and an ancient Spanish-English dictionary. He has a funny wry wit and keeps a neat apartment.

“The apartment is important to this story because when I first met Ben he was sleeping outside on the ground each night. It was the first summer of STREET BOOKS, the bicycle library I founded in June of 2011.



“Twice a week I set up my bicycle library, pulling out the drawers of books, hanging out the sign that reads:

STREET BOOKS
is a bicycle-powered mobile library
servicing people who live outside.

“I remember Laura telling me about the whole garage full of books she needed to get organized and would pay me for the help. At that time, being able to get to a place on a bus was a little out of my range and I sort of let it drop. Later, being the main borrower the first season, Laura urged me to attend the year-end event...At that time socializing with humans was just a little out of my range and I sort of let it drop...





“Despair is actually the most deadly sin, worse than all the others: avarice, pride, hate, envy, not knowing when enough is enough.” Ben gestured vaguely to the books on the cart, “I think I read that in one of those books.”

“It was later that I began talking to people again, a few, a little. A guy told me about a ‘squat’ he had lived in for years. Another told me how he had supported his habit for a good long time with nothing but bottles and cans. Add small kindnesses still in evidence. The guy who lived at The Estates stopping and chatting and giving me a dollar sometimes, I think depending on how he made out at the video lottery. One guy who had moved on to bigger and better things told me that this was his spot when he was stuck outside. He gave me a few dollars.

“Having mentioned the kindnesses, it’s only fair to point out the occasional indignity. Of countless verbal confrontations, maybe just three got physical. It’s face saving. Someone mouths off, you respond. If not, you internalize. ‘*Eat shit. I think I brought a bit of style though it took me time to get there. ‘Yeah, come on back. I’ll rip your face off and feed it to the rats.’*”



“He didn’t come back not because he was worried about his face. The thing is, ***what’s what and where’s it at... here and now?***”



“In retrospect a thousand kindnesses. People might hand me a couple of bucks if I’m awake, or leave it there. One very early morning, I sensed someone leaning over me reaching in, only later realizing he was not leaving something but removing something someone else had left. Hey, it’s not like I never pulled any stunts. The guy probably needed it.



We is Why

We is How