

# Mine is a Community of Misfits and Outlaws

I came to this place  
almost 25 years ago  
my eyes ablaze with crystal meth  
a single pair of boots and about 72 t-cells.  
This was back when an AIDS diagnosis  
meant a quick slide through poverty into a grave.  
All I wanted was a room with a door  
I could lock against  
the voices of my dead friends

Here we live  
the small broken promises  
of shattered picture frames  
whiskey bottles  
mirror shards  
cracked ribs  
splintered doors  
chipped teeth  
tattered cosmologies  
and zoning laws.  
The hubris and debris  
of who we might have been  
had we not  
from the highest  
windows jumped  
escaping destinies  
we could not abide.

I have seen  
the poor chew the bones  
of those they loved best.  
I have seen  
the sick stagger about disrobed  
in the parking lots of hospitals  
begging to be embraced.  
I have seen the crippled lying

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In hotel rooms staring into space.  
The Tenderloin is a place  
where the broken, the deranged  
and the diseased are warehoused  
then left there until their expiration date.  
Thankfully, the people have their own notions  
about how their lives should be.

They live their lives with defiance  
courage and with the freedom  
of a people who were never meant to survive.

It is in the despair and capitalist waste  
in the ruins of other times  
and the fragments of our former lives.  
It is in the rot that is the Tenderloin  
that we find fecund soil  
for our return to the world.

Healing, justice, love, redemption  
do not come easy to men.  
They require effort  
commitment, sweat and humility.  
They require a second chance  
or a third or more.  
No one of us can create  
the chance we need alone.  
We require the help of others  
and we must help them in turn.  
Each giving what they can  
and only taking what they need.  
That is the lesson and gift of solidarity  
among the outcast and the poor.

See that woman arguing with her hair?  
See her sister feeding pigeons?  
Is it prayers they mutter or obscenities?  
To me it doesn't matter.

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See that panhandler with the homemade sign?  
See that young skateboarder sick for heroin?  
It is among these, the addicted, the ill  
the criminal, the old, the rejected  
those who bear the brunt of poverty  
those who suffer most the contempt  
and violence that America  
rains down upon the poor  
that I have found shelter, sanctuary  
respect even affection.  
Mine is a community of misfits and outlaws.  
People who defy convention.  
People who transgress borders.  
People who push against society's boundaries  
and in doing so expand the possibilities  
of what the rest of us might be.

—Jesse Johnson, *Tenderloin Poetry*



BIO: *Jesse Johnson*  
a native of Texas  
was a founder of  
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