

Ed Bowers' Poet's Guide to the Tenderloin

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There is nothing that you have thought or done that is not written here.

What you will do and what you won't do is also scribed in the stacks.

Looking for truth? Words are band-aids. Poets are doctors. Don't let it go to your head. Enter from any direction and settle down.

Outside is an emotional jungle jingling its empty pockets and grinding its uninsured teeth.

In the library is an intellectual emptiness that can go in all directions at once, up, down, all around, an infinite potential searching for an infinite answer.

In the library, human beings lick their wounds of confusion with knowledge — just as they do on Jones St. when in search of pain relief from a pharmaceutical entrepreneur wanted by the police.

Knowledge comes in books and pills and poems. It is life and death.

Lots of homeless folks here, in the restrooms, on the computers, slumped in hard wooden chairs that hurt the back of an intellectual adventurer on a long voyage.

They are heroes from the Odyssey, bravely lost, shipwrecked voyagers fallen on siren song nights and lost days of white lightning stress.

Forgive them. In retrospect, they didn't know what they were doing being born just like you didn't know what you were doing when you woke up one day and saw a poet in the mirror.

The library, Oh Poet, is where your remains will be filed.

Yerba Buena Cemetery was once located on the spot where the library now stands.

The dead were removed and the books piled high to sit on their graves.

This is where the poems you write will be buried if they are regarded as more valuable than compost.

The dead speak to the living here in the library; it's a ghost town.

Here on the hard wooden chairs you can sit on your ancestors' laps and invite them to tell you a story.

They won't care if you're broke; all they want you for is your mind.

You are in a room full of dreams that when told will dream you.

Sit your bones on a chair by the window on the Fulton St. side and view City Hall, or a man's flesh walking naked on the street as though nothing was unusual at all, as a heroin addict in the chair opposite you stares into space in horror trying to stay awake.

The quiet here makes you feel slightly chilled, so let your eyes search the words of a book to fuel the Fire of Life.

Everyone from Anonymous Cave Painters to obscure Roman poets to Mark Twain and William Burroughs is buried here.

As long as there is one reader left to check out their books once in a hundred years the poets will not rest in peace.

As a poet, this is where you are born and this is where you will die.

It's not much, but if only one person is inspired by your words, was your work a waste?

Answer: No. Poets are born from poets in this building.

So, if you are a homeless poet, at least you have a home.

The weird sinking twilight feeling in the pit of your stomach that comes when you sit in the library too long is the silence of dead poets who want to wake you up to write or run or laugh or sing, outside, under the Sun, or inside the Moon.

Let the San Francisco Library inspire you, Poet.

It is Tenderloin special. ■



PHOTO BY MARK ELLINGER

People are allowed to sleep in the pews at St. Boniface Church, "where the lions lie down with the lambs, all of them homeless."

ST. BONIFACE The holy ghost crashes here

If you want to bond with your environment, volunteer your assistance to a neighborhood agency that addresses the needs of its citizens. The Gubbio Project in St. Boniface Church at 133 Golden Gate Ave. allows homeless people to sleep in the pews and on the floor weekdays 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. It's a good job for a poet, and a perfect way to make use of a church. I volunteer once a week.

Also, the architectural craftsmanship and interior design of St. Boniface makes the gold dome of City Hall look like cheese. Check it out.

There's some sort of war going on in the shadows here in this place of prayer.

This is where the lions lie down with the lambs, all of them homeless.

Outside these doors they scream at the sky, curse their ZIP code and each other, but no one wants to hear.

Here they pray to the ceiling that is carved from suffering and desperation, informed by something called redemption. Many asleep on the floor try to

climb out of their bodies by dreaming.

The golden sun genuflects at the wooden doors before entering. Inside, cells sleep in pews and on the floor. The holy ghost crashes here.

Socks are handed out from the closet in back sometimes, a wonderful miracle. But the socks run out fast, as miracles are wont to do.

Hygiene kits and razors and garbage bags are next in the hierarchy of blessings given freely in this tower built from the lowest of the low and the highest of the high, principalities of light and darkness, politics and spirit, money and renunciation, war and peace, sainthood and hypocrisy.

This room, schizophrenic as everything else, is basically good, at least for those who know what it is like to have nothing and then lose it.

Anything is better than nothing when all you have is nothing, just you.

A silent understanding is shared among those sleeping in the pews that the word "autonomy" does not exist. You will always need something or someone other than self; call it money or drugs or love, or call it a god, you will always need it one way or the other. That is simply a fact.

In that respect the sleepers here are awake.

Of course even here tempers flare. There's war everywhere, inside and out, just try staying up all night to sleep

in a church and you will see how irritated you too can be.

I am impressed, though, with the natural saintliness of crack addicts, alcoholics, junkies, the mentally ill, the disenfranchised.

If I was them ... well, in a sense I am; but I'm a poet not a saint.

Most of the sleepers are bastard-angels of gratitude, so when they say bless you or thank you for giving them toothpaste they mean it. There is no politesse here.

The staff, good shepherds who work here, maintain the order of the day with dignity and firm kindness, their lack of glamour making them a neglected mystery.

Their kindness and wisdom, firm and unobtrusive as a diamond concealed from light, is seen and appreciated by the broken hearts coughing in these hushed holy shadows.

This church built in 1900 has one hundred and fourteen years of whispered prayers and tears and curses etched on its stained glass, while many forms of hell party outside its gates.

If this church could talk it would write not Bible stories but sad poems written by vulnerable people who die.

A series of simple one-liners walking in and out inside an infinite performance space.

The highest of the high and the lowest of the low come here to collaborate on the impossible task of being

human.

Doing the impossible is a job you as a poet must get used to doing. So feel at home here.

This is a chamber filled with unanswered prayers; but if you volunteer here you can hand out free hygiene kits, toothbrushes, razors, and socks and blankets (if they have them) and that's better than nothing. Good job for a poet whose poetry is free for anyone who will listen. Brother, can you spare an ear?

Yes, this is the last call before closing time in Heaven and the concrete reality of time and space sucks into its maw thousands of tiny homeless others who call themselves "you."

6:00 a.m. to 1 p.m. visit 133 Golden Gate Ave. and see your self there.

If you are homeless or a poet or a homeless poet you can sleep in the pews or on the floor of a Tenderloin church.

Or you may volunteer your time to work in service to all the ripped discarded poems attempting to be read in this dangerously literate world of sad, lonely, broken words and little lives written in the shadows of Cathedrals and Parliaments.

It's good that here the teachings of Jesus are being taken literally in the right way for a change.

Try it out. ■

21 CLUB With a twist of grime

When your spaceship lands in the Tenderloin, you might need to be around a diversity of people inside a simple room where you all can relax and get to know each other slowly over a stretch of shipwrecked years.

The 21 Club, corner of Taylor and Turk, might work for you. It did for me many years. But don't drink too much.

Pace yourself like a well-written story and you'll have more fun.

It's a power spot.

Got bones there go back to the Gold Rush still drinking goblets of old beer.

This is a pauper's party, a dead miner's club.

Nothing to lose because by the time you arrive it's already lost.

Dance under the basement and get a contact high from the drunks.

It's small as a sneeze and big as a heart, whether broken or on its way there. What is it?

The barstools are tombstones and the odor of Spam swims in a sea of conversation.

The bits of smoke blowing in from the street are poems scribbled by pencils sharpened by untranslatable dead poets forgotten by the age of computers, their ghosts raging forward to beginningless ends, red wine lips drinking spilled wind and sometimes when you're scared and trying to be brave and can't, no, CAN'T

stand to be alone, because you're dead, you can offer them a drink in your bomb shelter with a twist of grime.

It's on the corner of Taylor & Turk in the guts of the Tenderloin. What is it?

This is where tossed thoughts go when they're not wanted elsewhere.

Some go to church. Some to jail. Others go here. Same reason. Community service.

You're here! You died and went to Heaven! Or you went wherever, as the saying goes. Too late to go back now. Now is now, and that's now and forever more ha ha boo hoo.

You're in The Land of the Dead. What is this place?

Saw a hard working man here yesterday; he'll never be thanked for his job.

Saw a miracle woman who would later throw off her hooks and rise like Jesus

from the dead. An angel named Robin who served drinks here was her savior.

There is an infinitely complex mystery standing with dignity behind the stoic eyes of those who enter this tiny room. It is embodied proudly as both birth and death in the human universe.

This humble war room stands as a monument to endurance and poetry lurks here.

X-stream stress floods the joint with bowed heads praying over a beer and a shot.

You know this is a bar; but what is it really? Is there ever really a reality?

I guess not; at least not for a poet. So, when illusion needs grounding a poet comes here.

Occasionally there's an absence, an empty barstool, and you can feel it there in your memories when you sleep.

Talk to it and it will tell you something important that you

probably won't remember.

You take this place home with you. What is it? Is it your mind?

Well, without your mind it wouldn't exist but it is a bar; the 21 Club on the corner of Taylor and Turk.

In this tiny shelter at one time or the other every grain of dust in the world has passed on through to ... where you are now.

You'll see Frank, the owner, standing behind the bar. Talk to him. He knows everything so sometimes he's bored. He's seen it all so sometimes he just smiles. He has no patience with members of the club who steal or are stupidly mean. Other than that, he is all forgiving and when you see him you know you are in a poem written long ago that continues to be written now.

See you there. ■

FAITHFUL FOOLS Blue Tenderloin Kwazy Kat Zen

A poet needs silence, but modern life is besitant to provide it. Silence must come from within, and a good way to develop it is to sit in silence, is it not? I bong the gong in the Zen meditation room at the Faithful Fools two days a week.

Join me there.

I'm a falling leaf doing kwazy kat zen, sitting flat on his slats in a Tenderloin Zendo.

234 Hyde St., San Francisco, CA. Outside this Buddha Lounge, garbage dogs smoke cracked-out hamburger helper mixed with neurological napalm.

They sit with me as ghostly spirits. I can feel them thinking. Their astral bodies stretch out cigarette-butt-fungus fingers for a long-lost helping hand that bows in respect to despair. Their faces of light reflect in a mirror full of wisdom the grief outside this Zendo.

Light has created them to be seen. Do not be deceived by their surface. They live as light lives when it is honest and it has no choice. They are holy.

Bow to their invisibility. Their light is now and its meaning is to be seen. I sit with their holy ghost but their bodies remain outside the Zendo! Why?

There is nothing to be ashamed of here. This is your mind. Come in and own it!

A line of nothingness leads to the door. Bring it with you. Transform it into the emptiness of a bird's body. You too can fly. Your fuel is the shit

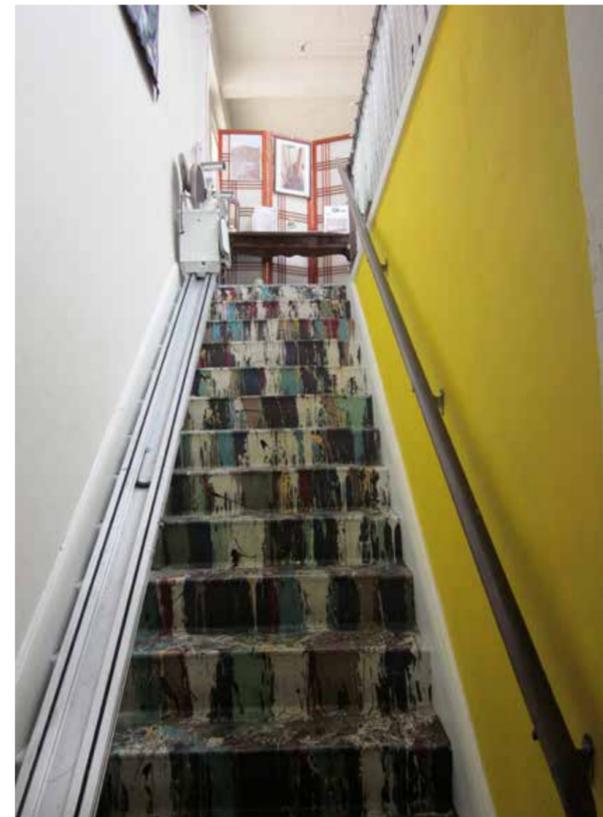
you sit on that you bring through the door.

Come inside, plant your seeds of destruction in silence. Silence turns winter into spring! A rock falling in silence becomes a bird singing in the sky.

Try sitting with me. I'm lonely. I

will always be alone. My aloneness is lonely for you. Let's acknowledge that we will always be alone together and sit with it.

Citizens of San Francisco! I'm panhandling you! Can you spare an hour to sit with me in the Zendo at 234 Hyde St. from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m.? Your time cannot be so valuable that



PHOTOS BY BRIAN RINKER

At the top of the stairs at the Faithful Fools' ministry on Hyde Street is the room where "a little meditation won't hurt. One hour of silence. That's all."

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you will ignore the infinite silence of no judgment, the psychedelic finger paints inside the space of your mind. I do not deserve to sit alone. I am not that unique.

Explore your mind and I will explore mine. And together, doing this, it will make a third consciousness, a mystery person, the one you are waiting for perhaps.

At any rate, a little meditation won't hurt. One hour of silence. That's all.

It's funny how a little silence can sometimes save your life. Sit with me. Soon. ■



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