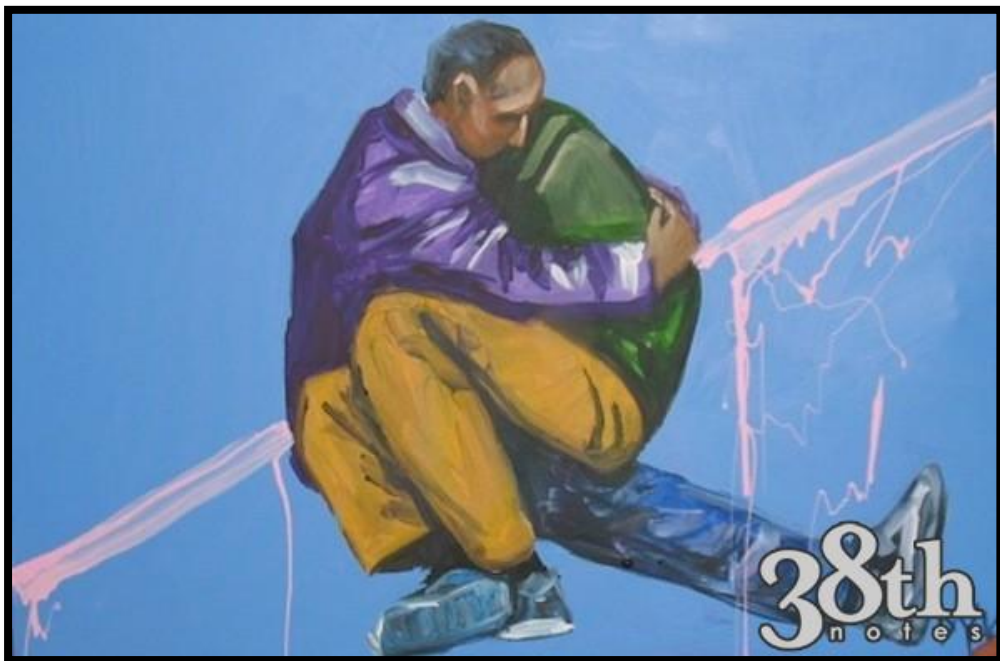




POEM: IN REMEMBRANCE OF A BROTHER LOST

December 31, 2011



1 "Holding Each Other" by David Kim of Community Rejuvenation Project for St. Mary's Center's homeless memorial

The winter months bring with them chilly temperatures and high heat bills. They also bring increased hardship for Oakland's large homeless population. The homeless are an invisibilized population the world over. We pat our pockets to allude to our lack of available funds. We mutter guilty apologies. We take unwarranted interest in our phones. Sometimes we flat out ignore them. Whether intended or not, we treat homeless people like they are miscreants, rather than good people who got the short end of the stick from an ailing economy or a fucked up health care system.

A couple weeks back, I talked to a homeless brother who had just got out of prison. He

held a college degree and had taken the time to learn German and Arabic while incarcerated, but with no where to stay and a criminal record, was shit out of luck. He was straight up with me, he didn't need a dollar for food, he needed \$12 to get a California ID. It was a humanizing moment to be sure.

Muttering drug addicts dominate our imagery of the homeless, but many have had amazing lives that were sent into a spiral by healthcare costs, addiction or lay offs. You'd be surprised how many of us are a couple paychecks from not having a place to live. The homeless are a living manifestation of a fate that befalls a society that doesn't value the health and well-being of it's people. At a time when our economy is stumbling, we have the least amount of resources going to support services and safety nets. A focus on the dwindling middle class in this country obscures the fact that many of us are closer to poverty than we are to the mirage of white picket fences.

Enough of me though. The reason I wrote this post, was to present the writing of an amazing man about another amazing man. Jay Fernandez, a dynamic elder at St. Mary's Center in West Oakland, wrote this ode to his homeless brother Juan Gonzalez. His poem says everything I never could. Please enjoy and remember his words every time you see a brother or sister struggling on these mean streets.

Source: <http://www.38thnotes.com/2011/12/31/poem-in-remembrance-of-a-brother-lost/>

A REAL POEM

2011 J. Fernandez Rúa

In this sooty-soup
 grit-gray rain
 I need to share
let it all go
 and tell you about a real poem
 a poem
made of flesh and blood
 with far seeing eyes
 and a deep
and powerful grace
 His name was Juan Gonzalez
 Juan Gonzalez
I met him in the line waiting for a bowl of soup and piece of bread
 and soon
 within weeks
we were inseparable
He became a brother to me
 where he walked I walked
 where he ate I ate
 where he slept I slept
when I was sick, he nursed me.
when he was sick, I nursed him.
Sometimes
we even slept under the same blanket.
 At times,
he reminded me of St. Francis
 because he loved pigeons too.
Called them
 his little brothers.
Then, just when I was beginning to see
that this man
 - who walked around with the words of Jesus in his pocket -
could teach me something real
 what we expect but never talk about
happened:
 One December night
 he fell asleep on a bench in Old Man's Park
 and never woke up again.
His beautiful heart just stopped.
The streets had worked him too hard for too long
 and now he was done.
So remember:
 his name was Juan Gonzalez
 and he died on a bench
in Old Man's Park.
Not because he was a drunk, demented or insane.
Not because he has on heroin or crack.
Not because he did not want to live.
 The truth is simple: he wanted
what we all want-
to love and be loved in the peace of his own God.
 And something more-
to be useful
to be useful.
 Yes, the truth is simple:
 he died because and
only because
 like me
 maybe like you
he was poor
 gritty gray poor

and except for St. Mary and her few sisters, here and there.

Tell me
who gives a damn about the poor anymore?
Stand or kneel
 beg or cry
We're on our own
No one knew that better or deeper than my brother Juan Gonzalez
 and if he was here
 right now

he would say this:
Let us not be stereotyped