

## Tenderness

Where did your tenderness begin?

When did you dissolve a little,

slide into darkness,

turn yourself inside out?

The openhearted ones—

their hearts might fill up with fear.

Better to be a little brainwashed;

better not to feel so much.

You're tense and you're taut—

you just don't feel right,

yet curled up inside your fear

is your precious receptivity.

They taunt me, they spit on me—

they can't accept that I'm different.

There's darkness in the middle;

I hide out on the edges.

My fear looms higher than the Two Towers.

I took a number and I stood in line.

I read the self-help books, but it did me no good.

I forget where I came from.

I work a little cheaper than the other guy

I keep my mouth shut; I promise I won't complain.

Where does it begin?

It's supposed to go up—

instead it went down.

Supposed to get ahead

but I'm stuck in the mire.

The angles are bent;  
I've got the wrong instruments.  
I read the book, but its doing no good.  
Maybe I held the book upside down.

I guess I sold it too cheap—  
in the end I gave myself away.  
I push the basket, collect bottles and cardboard.  
my friends are these stuffed animals—  
they tell me their stories at night.  
I enjoy my coffee,  
play dominos with the grandfathers at Walnut Square.  
Those on the margins have all the time in the world.

I remember your stories, Dad;  
I replay them in my mind:  
Whitewater rafting,  
sleeping outside on the summit of Mt. Whitney,  
some snippet the old Indian whispered in your ear  
at the hobo camp.

I keep the drawings you gave me  
tucked in my flannel shirt pocket.  
My brother shrugs them off  
as lunatic scribblings,  
but I see them as your sacred gesturing  
so that, through your creative expression,  
your angel  
can experience herself.  
You give me a questioning look, Dad;  
you have no idea what a mandala is.

I trim their hedges, water their lawns.

I'm just background noise.

I wouldn't want to live  
in one of these gated communities anyway.

Intercom screeches  
making me jump; my truck stalls out,  
then I can't start it.

Security guard gives me a funny look,  
but I got my papers—  
I got nothing to worry about.

Maybe he'll lend me five bucks.  
I'll hitch hike back to town,  
buy a can of gasoline.

We've sold our soul to the banks and oil companies.

Debt in the trillions—  
we're all shouldering the burden.

Car bomb going off,  
faceless man's got a detonator.  
In the instant before the flash,  
I remember the peace on his face  
as he was sleeping.

Dad had his longings, up to his final day.

In the end it was  
desire that tore him apart.

I got a pocket full of quarters  
but the dollars have all been spent;  
I lost my future  
but I kept his wildness.

I received the seed, but the weather's been extreme—

water pouring down,  
people's gardens overgrown.

Time to strip the husk away—

I know there's something precious to keep.

Time to go out to the desert.

I want total disconnection, infinite shame,  
infinite boredom, infinite futility.

I want

the donkey to be my guide.

I want

to be ruined, so I can see  
my true gesture to the world.

The condemned man is up on the scaffolding,

hood over head, noose around neck,  
seconds to live; he's been numb for so long—

now he feels everything.

There's a hidden language in his body

glowing like an illuminated script:  
assassinations and glorious sunrises,  
groans of the lovers,  
baby's first smile, grandfather's last breath.

In the final moments he hears a song.

He's in his village—

morning sunshine on his back,  
his mother preparing him breakfast.

The sensitive ones soak up the confusion—

darkness in the world growing

as fast as the light.  
Heroes think they have the answers;  
realists just keep on sleeping.  
Boys like me, we take on too much,  
carrying the pain seems part of the bargain.  
Our bodies are permeable in ways we don't understand.

The young novitiate is badly traumatized—  
he's listless; prefers to be alone.  
The elders give him a room with a view to the east  
where morning colors  
of lavender, orange and red  
can move through his senses  
and seep into his soul.

He's instructed to light a candle four times a day—  
meditate on the beauty of the sunrises  
and the glittering midnight stars.  
He's allowed two meals each day;  
he sings and prays with the other monks  
in the congregation hall.

Otherwise he is silent the whole time,  
for then the larger silence of the desert becomes his silence  
as the joy within the singing  
awakens his heart.

A senior monk leads the boy back to his cell,  
The boy trusts him and begins to relax inside.

The old monk has learned  
that many who come here are broken  
and decades may pass  
before healing arrives.

Fruit will ripen on the vine  
for that is the natural expression of the fruit.  
Within the beauty of the desert  
    there is a wisdom inexpressible.  
Daytime light piercing and pure,  
    midnight moonlight spun soft and close.  
Wisdom of the land like folded hands  
    best received through a tender and open heart.

I picked up your clothes, I filled your glass.  
    I walk quietly through life.  
    I leave the tiniest imprint.  
I was still like the morning,  
    elusive like the wind.  
    Grief within the summertime sunshine,  
    like bread and wine  
    served at the Last Supper.  
I fed your donkey while the stars hardened.  
I think you noticed me,  
though you never said anything.