

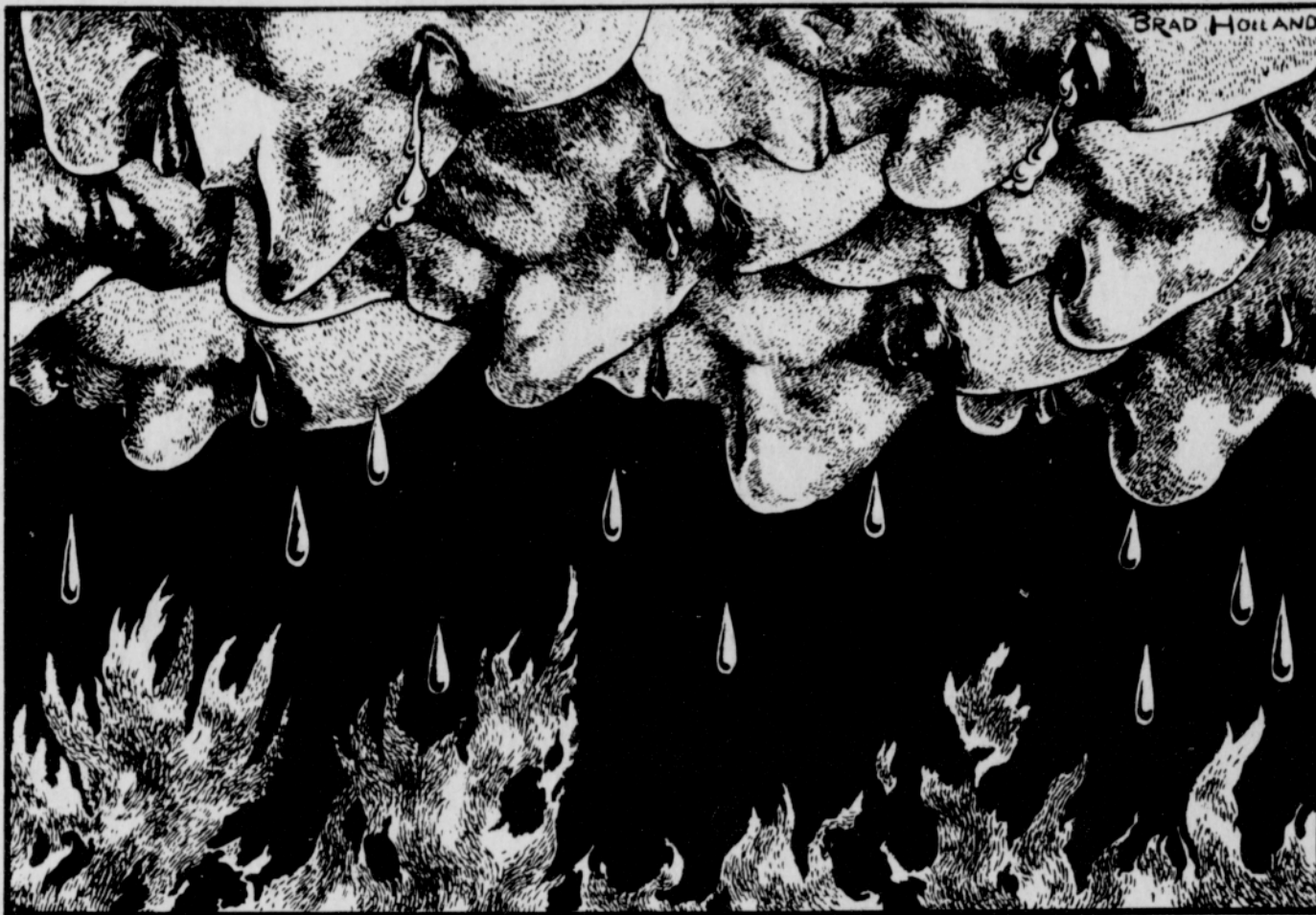


# THE PUBLIC REPORT



## WITHOUT HOPE OR HOME

Brad Holland



by Michael Stoops

In my office at Baloney Joe's you will find the cremated remains of a homeless person, a man who froze to death a few winters ago. He died homeless and alone, known only as John Doe.

Each winter I spend part of my time at the medical examiner's office, trying to identify friends who could not survive the night — people who have met the same fate as John Doe — victims of exposure, indifference and injustice. We claim the bodies of those nobody knew, and keep them with us. The cremated remains provide us with a grim reminder of the life and death nature of our work and a context of urgency that cannot be ignored.

Who is this army of people — our own untouchables? Certainly the image of the "dirty, lazy, drunken bum" or the free-spirited hobo is no longer appropriate. In 1985 the homeless are the senile, the autistic, those who talk to God and to themselves. There are those who cannot tie their own shoe laces without assistance. Many are veterans of our wars, especially the Viet Nam War, scarred and angry.

All are products of our ignorance, indifference, isolation and our pathological demand for conformity and productivity.

How has it happened that in the richest and most advanced nation the world has ever known that as many as three million of the most vulnerable and helpless among us have been sentenced to the living hell of life as animals on the streets and sidewalks in urban areas throughout the country?

In Portland, Oregon, this very night there are at least two thousand people without any place to live. They exist like the untouchables of Calcutta, sleeping in streets and alleyways and in broken down cars.

Some freeze to death for lack of shelter or, more accurately, they are killed by lack of concern. Some die quickly in empty buildings, during snowstorms or icestorms; some die in stages, slowly tortured on the rack of poverty.

We should not allow Americans to sleep in the streets like animals, eating out of garbage pails, living in dumpsters, living in a way no human, especially in the richest nation on the face of the earth, should ever be forced to live.

Why do people wind up on the streets of our cities? There are some obvious answers that come to mind. For nearly thirty years, we have in the name of civil rights, rightfully emptied our mental institutions.

Between 1955 and 1982, the patient population in state mental health facilities was reduced by seventy-five percent. Although the federal gov-

ernment planned to establish two thousand community health centers to care for the deinstitutionalized, fewer than eight hundred were actually built. Those who work with the homeless can testify to the abysmal failure of deinstitutionalization. The American Psychiatric Association recently released a report on homelessness that said that between one-quarter and one-half of the homeless are the longterm mentally ill.

Unemployment, especially among minorities and minority youth, has padded the homeless population and dramatically changed the faces of the homeless in the last four years.

A shortage of affordable housing and the unwillingness of lawmakers to create a decent and humane housing policy in this country has led to displacement and homelessness for the multitudes.

A continued breakdown of traditional family and social structures have set many adrift.

Finally, economic factors and a conservative mood in the country, coupled with a decline in federal social spending have created gaping holes in whatever safety net ever existed.

But these are only the superficial sources of the problem. To truly address this issue, we must look deep within ourselves and our society. To begin to find the solutions to this national disgrace, we must be prepared for a revolution — a revolution of the heart.

The reality is this: we have created a throw-away society with disposable razors, plastic tableware and throw-away diapers. Instead of fixing appliances, we toss them. It is a philosophy that allows us to evaluate on the basis of productivity: that which does not produce is discarded. The homeless have become our dis-

posable humans and the streets have become our landfill heaps.

We have a President whose closest neighbors are the homeless men and women who live on the heat grates and park benches that surround the White House, and who talks about the homeless as being homeless by choice. There lies the cruelest irony of all — we blame the homeless for their plight.

The reality is that all of us bear responsibility, and we must collectively begin to address this. We cannot separate our humanity from the man or woman or child who is homeless. Each time we walk by that person on the street without seeing and acknowledging their humanity, we leave a little of our own on the ground beside them.

We have built walls between ourselves and the homeless. Those walls have blinded us, kept us distant, ignorant and indifferent. As the wall has grown and as those behind the wall move farther and farther from us, it becomes increasingly difficult to hear their voice, to recognize their need, and to see them as members of the human family. The more voiceless they become, the less political clout they have. And those who lack political clout will see the rights we all take for granted slip away from them.

The first job of any advocate of those who are silent and invisible is to give them substance and worth in their eyes and in the eyes of others. The more silent and invisible, the louder we must make our voices and the more graphic must be our advocacy.

It has been our experience in Portland that our credibility as an organization, a community and as a political force has not come from our intelligence, hard work or creativity, but out of the proximity in which we homeless advocates share and live our lives with those we serve. We live in the shelters, hotel rooms and soup kitchens that we operate. The homeless themselves participate in their operation and it is out of those relationships that we speak.

Who among us would not fight tooth and nail for our mother, our brother, our friend? Who among us would allow those whose lives we share to languish and die on the streets? Our fight becomes real when that intimacy is real. We become empowered to do what we never thought possible, and the voice with which we speak is one of authority. When the homeless cease to be clients and become friends, everyone grows in the process. But more important, the gifts that each one brings to those relationships can move mountains. Wherever we go we bring the presence of the homeless and that presence cannot be denied or ignored.

Our resistance, our political action and our advocacy of necessity must be rooted in service and relationship.

We know enough about homelessness to know that the needs far exceed the resources. What we do not know, we will learn as the homeless

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