

Nikhil Damji



"Homeless, Port Authority, NY" By Dan Gheno

### **Before it is Too Late**

A fire hydrant, a phone booth, and an old man  
all living on the street.  
We are part of your daily commute  
but invisible to you, Mister starched shirt and shiny shoes.  
As your eyes skip over me, I want to scream  
"I'm here!"  
Like a wrapper blowing in the wind,  
a piece of gum on the sidewalk,  
trash in your city - you step over me and move on.

Eye contact or eyes forward?  
Should I give him money?  
Will he just use it to buy drugs like the rest of them?  
I see you old man, but I don't know how to help.  
I've walked too far, it is too late to turn back –  
tomorrow.

You know Mister, we could have been the same.  
Poverty, anxiety, depression –  
like a slingshot, they catapulted me into the streets.  
My life, not as lucky as yours.  
It is not that I don't want it,  
it is not that I won't put in the work,  
I am in an unbreakable cycle.

I still see you each day and want to help,  
but tomorrow becomes never - an unbreakable cycle.

I still keep promising myself that I will.  
The day I come with food and clean clothes,  
the old man on the cardboard box,  
between the fire hydrant and the phone booth,  
is gone.  
I want to scream,  
“Come back, I’m sorry!”

### **Artist’s Statement**

“Need food,” “Please help,” “Spare change.” Walking through Times Square or downtown Seattle, the homeless fill the sides of the street. In every major city, homelessness is a significant social issue. Every doorway is occupied with cardboard beds, dirty blankets, and battered paper signs with these messages, like billboards trying to capture your attention.

From a young age I’ve heard - don’t make eye contact, stay away, and they are probably drug addicts. My early perceptions of homeless people were inaccurate – I thought all of them were dangerous and probably deserved to be on the street. I was completely wrong.

As I have grown up, I have learned about the injustices of this world. Veterans, amputees, mental health patients, abuse victims – many of these people didn't have the choice to try and lead a healthy life off the streets, they were forced to be homeless. There is a perception that they are inferior because they don’t dress like us, act like us, and a few of them, the ones who need escape, turn to drugs and alcohol in hopes of distracting themselves. It is the one or two that commit a crime that end up in the headlines, defining the homeless and reinforcing the reputation of being dangerous.

In the painting, “Homeless, Port Authority, NY,” I was struck by the homeless man sitting in the shadow cast by the businessman. Having grown up in New York, the painting reminded me of what I would see when I would walk around the City. Business people in their fancy suits and shiny shoes and homeless people crowding the doorways - the smell unmistakable.

In this ekphrastic poem, I started by describing how the homeless man perceives himself and I compared him to a fire hydrant and phonebooth, which are street objects that are just... there. I alternate stanzas between the two individuals to show how they think about each other and juxtapose their thoughts, almost like a call and response. Another technique that I use in this poem is to carry certain words, phrases, and thoughts forward between the two individuals. For example, the old man says “As your eyes skip over me, I want to scream “I’m here”” and the businessman is thinking “Eye contact or eyes forward?” and later says, “I want to scream “Come

back, I'm sorry.'” Similarly, both refer to an unbreakable cycle, which has a different meaning for each of them. I also incorporated enjambment to build suspense and tell the story.

Typically, when you see a businessman and a homeless man, you think they have nothing in common. For this poem, I wanted to change the narrative and show how people often do want to help, they just don't know how and when they figure it out, it is too late.