

Classic Poetry Series

Jimmy Santiago Baca
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Jimmy Santiago Baca(2 January 1952)

Jimmy Santiago Baca is an American Poet and writer.

Life and Career

Jimmy Santiago Baca was born in Santa Fe County, New Mexico, in 1952. Abandoned by his parents at the age of two, he lived with one of his grandmothers for several years before being placed in an orphanage. He wound up living on the streets, and at the age of twenty-one he was convicted on charges of drug possession and incarcerated. He served six and a half years in prison, three of them in isolation, and having expressed a desire to go to school (the guards considered this dangerous), he was for a time put in the same area of the prison with the inmates on death row before he was released.

During this time, Baca taught himself to read and write, and he began to compose poetry. He sold these poems to fellow inmates in exchange for cigarettes. A fellow inmate convinced him to submit some of his poems to the magazine *Mother Jones*, then edited by Denise Levertov. Levertov printed Baca's poems and began corresponding with him, eventually finding a publisher for his first book.

Immigrants in Our Own Land, Baca's first major collection, was highly praised. In 1987, his semi-autobiographical minor epic in verse, *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*, received the American Book Award for poetry, bringing Baca international acclaim and, in 1989, the Hispanic Heritage Award in Literature. A self-styled "poet of the people," Baca conducts writing workshops with children and adults at countless elementary, junior high and high schools, colleges, universities, reservations, barrio community centers, white ghettos, housing projects, correctional facilities and prisons from coast to coast.

In 2004 Baca started a non-profit organization, Cedar Tree, Inc., that supports these workshops through charitable donations. As well as writing workshops, Cedar Tree has produced two documentary films *Clamor en Chino* and *Moving the River Back Home*. The organization employs ex-offenders as interns.

Published Works

Baca's poetry collections include *C-Train* and *Thirteen Mexicans: Dream Boy's Story* (Grove Press, 2002), *Healing Earthquakes* (2001), *Set This Book on Fire* (1999), *In the Way of the Sun* (1997), *Black Mesa Poems* (1995), *Poems Taken*

from *My Yard* (1986), and *What's Happening* (1982). His memoir, *A Place to Stand* (2001), chronicles his troubled youth and the five-year jail-stint that brought about his personal transformation. Baca is also the author a collection of stories and essays, *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio* (1992); a play, *Los tres hijos de Julia* (1991); a screenplay, *Bound by Honor*, which was released by Hollywood Pictures as *Blood In Blood Out* in 1993; he also published at the end of 1993 *Second Chances*; Baca is also the author of a memoir, *A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet* (2002). Baca's most recent novel is *A Glass of Water* (2009)

A Daily Joy To Be Alive

No matter how serene things
may be in my life,
how well things are going,
my body and soul
are two cliff peaks
from which a dream of who I can be
falls, and I must learn
to fly again each day,
or die.

Death draws respect
and fear from the living.
Death offers
no false starts. It is not
a referee with a pop-gun
at the startling
of a hundred yard dash.

I do not live to retrieve
or multiply what my father lost
or gained.

I continually find myself in the ruins
of new beginnings,
uncoiling the rope of my life
to descend ever deeper into unknown abysses,
tying my heart into a knot
round a tree or boulder,
to insure I have something that will hold me,
that will not let me fall.

My heart has many thorn-studded slits of flame
springing from the red candle jars.
My dreams flicker and twist
on the altar of this earth,
light wrestling with darkness,
light radiating into darkness,
to widen my day blue,
and all that is wax melts

in the flame-

I can see treetops!

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Ancestor

It was a time when they were afraid of him.
My father, a bare man, a gypsy, a horse
with broken knees no one would shoot.
Then again, he was like the orange tree,
and young women plucked from him sweet fruit.
To meet him, you must be in the right place,
even his sons and daughter, we wondered
where was papa now and what was he doing.
He held the mystique of travelers
that pass your backyard and disappear into the trees.
Then, when you follow, you find nothing,
not a stir, not a twig displaced from its bough.
And then he would appear one night.
Half covered in shadows and half in light,
his voice quiet, absorbing our unspoken thoughts.
When his hands lay on the table at breakfast,
they were hands that had not fixed our crumbling home,
hands that had not taken us into them
and the fingers did not gently rub along our lips.
They were hands of a gypsy that filled our home
with love and safety, for a moment;
with all the shambles of boards and empty stomachs,
they filled us because of the love in them.
Beyond the ordinary love, beyond the coordinated life,
beyond the sponging of broken hearts,
came the untimely word, the fallen smile, the quiet tear,
that made us grow up quick and romantic.
Papa gave us something: when we paused from work,
my sister fourteen years old working the cotton fields,
my brother and I running like deer,
we would pause, because we had a papa no one could catch,
who spoke when he spoke and bragged and drank,
he bragged about us: he did not say we were smart,
nor did he say we were strong and were going to be rich someday.
He said we were good. he held us up to the world for it to see,
three children that were good, who understood love in a quiet way,
who owned nothing but calloused hands and true freedom,
and that is how he made us: he offered us to the wind,
to the mountains, to the skies of autumn and spring.

He said, "Here are my children! Care for them!"
And he left again, going somewhere like a child
with a warrior's heart, nothing could stop him.
My grandmother would look at him for a long time,
and then she would say nothing.
She chose to remain silent, praying each night,
guiding down like a root in the heart of earth,
clutching sunlight and rains to her ancient breast.
And I am the blossom of many nights.
A threefold blossom: my sister is as she is,
my brother is as he is, and I am as I am.
Through sacred ceremony of living, daily living,
arose three distinct hopes, three loves,
out of the long felt nights and days of yesterday.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

As Life Was Five

Portate bien,
behave yourself you always said to me.
I behaved myself
when others were warm in winter
and I stood out in the cold.
I behaved myself when others had full plates
and I stared at them hungrily,
never speaking out of turn,
existing in a shell of good white behavior
with my heart a wet-feathered
bird growing but never able to crack out of the shell.
Behaving like a good boy,
my behavior shattered
by outsiders who came
to my village one day
insulting my grandpa because he couldn't speak
English
English-
the invader's sword
the oppressor's language-
that hurled me into profound despair
that day Grandpa and I walked into the farm office
for a loan and this man didn't give my grandpa
an application because he was stupid, he said,
because he was ignorant and inferior,
and that moment
cut me in two torturous pieces
screaming my grandpa was a lovely man
that this government farm office clerk was a rude beast-
and I saw my grandpa's eyes go dark
with wound-hurts, regret, remorse
that his grandchild would witness
him humiliated
and the apricot tree in his soul
was buried
was cut down
using English language as an ax,
and he hung from that dead tree
like a noosed-up Mexican

racist vigilante strung up ten years earlier
for no other reason than that he was different,
than that they didn't understand
his sacred soul, his loving heart,
his prayers and his songs,
Your words, Portate bien,
resonate in me,
and I obey in my integrity, my kindness, my courage,
as I am born again in the suffering of my people,
in our freedom, our beauty, our dual-faced,
dual-cultured, two-songed soul
and two-hearted
ancient culture,
me porto bien, Grandpa,
your memory
leafing my heart
like sweetly fragrant sage.

But the scene of my grandpa in that room,
what came out of his soul
and what soared from his veins,
tidal-waving in my heart,
helped make me into a poet
singing a song that endures and feeds
to make my fledgling heart
an eagle,
that makes my heavy fingers
strum a lover's heart and
create happiness in her sadness,
that makes the very ground in the prairie
soil to plant and feed the vision of so many of us
who just want to dance and love and fly
that makes us loyal to our hearts
and true to our souls!

It's the scene
that has never left me-
through all the sadness
the terrors
the sweet momentary joys
that have blossomed in me,
broken me, shattered my innocence

I've
never forgotten the room that day,
the way the light hazily filtered in the windows,
the strong dignified presence of my grandfather
in his sheepskin coat and field work boots,
that scene,
the way the boards creaked under his work boots,
haunted me
when my children were born at home
and my hands brought them into this world,
that scene was in my hands,
it echoed in my dreams, drummed in my blood,
cried in my silent heart,
was with me through hours of my life,
that man behind the counter,
his important government papers rattling in the breeze,
disdainful look on his face,
that scene, the door, the child I was,
my grandpa's hand on the doorknob, his eyes on me like a voice
in the wind
forgiving and hurtful and loving,
to this moment-
his eyes following me
where I swirl in a maddened dance
to free it from my bones,
like a broken-winged sparrow yearning for spring
fields,
let the scene go, having healed it in my soul,
having nurtured it in my heart, I sing its flight, out, go,
fly sweet bird!

But the scene that dusty day
with the drought-baked clay in my pants cuffs,
the sheep starving for feed
and my grandfather's hopes up
that the farm-aid man
would help us as he had other farmers-

that scene framed in my mind, ten years old
and having prayed at mass that morning,
begging God not to let our sheep die,
to perform a miracle for us

with a little help from the farm-aid man,
I knew entering that door,
seeing gringos come out smiling with signed
papers to buy feed,
that we too were going to survive the
drought;

the scene with its wooden floor,
my shoes scraping sand grains that had blown in,
the hot sun warming my face,
and me standing in a room later
by myself,
after the farm-aid man turned us down
and I know our sheep were going to die,
knew Grandfather's heart was going to die,
that moment
opened a wound in my heart
and in the wound the scene replays itself
a hundred times,
the grief, the hurt, the confusion
that day changed my life forever,
made me a man, made me understand
that because Grandfather couldn't speak
English,
his heart died that day,
and when I turned and walked out the door
onto Main Street again,
squinting my eyes at the whirling dust,
the world was never the same
because it was the first time
I had ever witnessed racism,
how it killed people's dreams, and during all of it
my grandfather said, Portate bien, mijo,
behave yourself, my son, Portate bien.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Choices

An acquaintance at Los Alamos Labs
who engineers weapons
black x'd a mark where I live
on his office map.
Star-wars humor....
He exchanged muddy boots
and patched jeans
for a white intern's coat
and black polished shoes.
A month ago, after butchering a gouged bull,
we stood on a pasture hill,
and he wondered with pained features
where money would come from
to finish his shed, plan alfalfa,
and fix his tractor.
Now his fingers
yank horsetail grass
he crimps herringbone tail-seed
between teeth, and grits out words,
"Om gonna buy another tractor
next week. More land too."
Silence between us is gray water
let down in a tin pail
in a deep, deep well,
a silence
milled in continental grindings
millions of years ago.
I throw my heart
into the well, and it falls
a shimmering pebble to the bottom.
Words are hard
to come by, "Would have lost everything
I've worked for, not takin' the job."
His words try to
retrieve
my heart
from the deep well.
We walk on in silence,
our friendship

rippling away.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Cloudy Day

It is windy today. A wall of wind crashes against,
windows clunk against, iron frames
as wind swings past broken glass
and seethes, like a frightened cat
in empty spaces of the cellblock.

In the exercise yard
we sat huddled in our prison jackets,
on our haunches against the fence,
and the wind carried our words
over the fences,
while the vigilant guard on the tower
held his cap at the sudden gust.

I could see the main tower from where I sat,
and the wind in my face
gave me the feeling I could grasp
the tower like a cornstalk,
and snap it from its roots of rock.

The wind plays it like a flute,
this hollow shoot of rock.
The brim girded with barbwire
with a guard sitting there also,
listening intently to the sounds
as clouds cover the sun.

I thought of the day I was coming to prison,
in the back seat of a police car,
hands and ankles chained, the policeman pointed,
"See that big water tank? The big
silver one out there, sticking up?
That's the prison."

And here I am, I cannot believe it.
Sometimes it is such a dream, a dream,
where I stand up in the face of the wind,
like now, it blows at my jacket,
and my eyelids flick a little bit,

while I stare disbelieving. . . .

The third day of spring,
and four years later, I can tell you,
how a man can endure, how a man
can become so cruel, how he can die
or become so cold. I can tell you this,
I have seen it every day, every day,
and still I am strong enough to love you,
love myself and feel good;
even as the earth shakes and trembles,
and I have not a thing to my name,
I feel as if I have everything, everything.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Count-Time

Everybody to sleep the guard symbolizes
on his late night tour of the tombs.

When he leaves, after counting still bodies
wrapped in white sheets, when he goes,

the bodies slowly move, in solitary ritual,
counting lost days, mounting memories,
numbering like sand grains

the winds drag over high mountains
to their lonely deaths; like elephants
they go bury themselves
under dreamlike waterfalls,
in the silence.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

El Gato

At eight

El Gato's uncle lures them with grain in a pail
and shoots the brown pig between the eyes,
shoos the red-snouted white and black brothers
from guzzling blood in the trough.

At ten Gato walks chop-block streets
with a rooster's tail strut
razored for a fight – life
a broken fire hydrant
flooding streets with blood.

In opulent estates,
fountains gazelle and bridal-train gardens drain
abundantly over spear-tipped walls.
Grecian statues offer laureled wisdom
to butlered adults with paper-weight hearts,
who answer the burning and gunning of America,
by building more prisons.

Nobody cares what El Gato'll find to eat or where he'll sleep,
under street lights throwing dirt clods
at hornets' nests, unafraid of being stung,
he vows to avenge his poverty,
to gash unmercifully with a bicycle chain
spineless attorneys taking advantage of his misery,
rob a construction executive in a limousine
sampling heroin off a hooker's thigh,
mug preppy brokers with golden smiles
whose gutter glares condemn him,
and all the chumps
who never cracked a soup-line biscuit
or had a court gavel crush their life,
should know he plans violent schemes against you,

prays

saints melt his pain red hot,
he'll hammer sharp to take you down
to darkness where he lives

and impale your heads
on La Virgen De Guadalupe's moon sickle.

Twelve years old. El Gato is no good,
dime bagging Peruvian flakes,
inhaling a glue-rag.
With all your police and prison sentences,
you can't chase El Gato from the street
or stop him from selling drugs,
because in his square white paper
lives God -- El Gato deals God -- who gives reprieve
from earthly hell and makes him feel good,
gives him hope and self-esteem,
and transforms despair to a cocaine-heaven,
until he's killed or OD's
like other homeboys trashed
on a stack of county jail corpses,
who understood life was a sewer grate
their dignity poured down with discarded litter,
where crack creates light when all one has is darkness.

Crack is God
when hopeless days bury El Gato under
rock piles of despair,
blocking him from feeling any more,
breaking his heart into pieces of NOTHING.
El Gato is no good and preaches NOTHING door to door,
a strong kid full of NOTHING,
from NOTHING does he ask a blessing,
to NOTHING does he pray, hopes NOTHING
forgive his wrongs and NOTHING
helps when he take vengeance on us.

Now fourteen,
beneath a moon above the sport caster's booth,
at the out doors boxing coliseum,
after crowds go home and the ring removed,
El Gato shadow boxes invisible opponents
and raises his hand as champion.
He joins homeboys against a rival gang,
skips bleachers over hand-rails out of breath,
and holds court in the field with bats, pipes, chains,

brass knuckles and guns,
in a game every kid has to hold a five-ace winning heart,
or die with a poker player's bluffing hand –
death nothing but an eight-ball roll on the break.

El Gato's life is a Babe Ruth pop-up,
sailing beyond the rival gang's catch, hop scotching crime-chalked sidewalks,
fleeing police over backyard fences
from guard dogs barking,
down scuffed alleys where clapping windows and shutting doors applaud him,
sliding under a stripped car homeplate, hearing the news Jo-Jo and Sparky got
shot,
he x's their names off building scorecard-walls for dead.

At sixteen,
a brown fighting get down impromptu warrior,
lip-pursed oohing fevered to defy,
clicking tap shoes on sidewalks,
chi chi chi cano, heel to toe, chin to chest,
chi chi chi cano,
T-shirt rolled to bare midriff, pomade hair back,
low-hugging hip khakis,
inked-cross on right hand,
bandanna'd, top button
tied on his Pendelton, lean and mean,
haunting us with his gangsta' signs.

El Gato learned his history
around water-bucket talk,
listening to mule-tongued growers
mutter holy whys they barbwired lands off,
clacking hoe in grower's dirt
on skulls and bones of his people
murdered and buried in chains.
In branding-hot noon
he cuts lettuce for bronc-buckled
soft palmed land owners
posing as frontiersmen,
their steer-horn cadillac radios
tuned to religious broadcast
blaring glory to their godliness,
as they loom over him,

'God hates you spic. God hates you!
You're dirt, boy, dirt! Even dirt grows weeds,
but you, you're dirt that don't grow nothing but more dirt!'

Beat purple at nine,
wood-paddle whizzing
butt bullet stings.
El Gato touched washcloth to welted bruises
on thighs, legs, back, winced under the shower nozzle, cursing life.
His heart the severed head of an outlaw
pickled in a jar of liquor and drugs
to numb the hurt.

Purging his shame for being born,
OD'd, was stabbed and shot,
wanting to believe he was bad.
It was better than falling into darkness
where nothing existed but more darkness.
He wanted to exist even as dirt, no good dirt.

At nineteen, trying to rebuild his life,
El Gato got the urge to get high and did –
put pistol to his head and played roulette,
his bloodshot drunkard's eye seething rage
his guardian angel didn't want him dead.

The dirt yard pleads for his daughter's laughter,
her tricycle treads scribble,
You are always gone,
in whiskey and drugs,
never here to play or help me grow.

No heat, light or food.
His baby's crying
chisels on the headstone of his bones
her need for a father,
wobbles to a stop
when he picks her from the crib,
inhales her milky aroma,
patting and kissing her,
walking her back and forth
in the cold living room,

warming her with his skin heat,
breathing warmth on her,
holding her to his chest,
humming a deep-chest hymn
learned from his grandmother –
' Bendito, bendito, bendito sea dios,
los angeles cantan y daban a dios...'

' Blessed, blessed blessed is the lord
the angels sing and give to the Lord...'
Her tiny hand flexes, a wing
unwrinkling from cocoon for flight,
fossilized in the stone of his arms.
El Gato is two men with one life –
he loves her, cares about her feelings,
wants to live at home, be a family man,
grow old with one woman.
But the warrior bares thorny teeth
at domesticity, slurs in disgust
at the dreamer's naiveté,
wants to brawl unafraid of dying young.

Tonight his infant is him
and he is her. He sees himself
as he was born,
innocent and perfect, whole life ahead of him,
and sees she can become him,
no good. He hums her holding tight,
melting into one hug humming her
'til dawn thaws frost down window casements
into stucco cracks, stray hounds croon in ruts,
yeowling cold from jaws, tooth-scratching
stickers from paws, he walks and walks
his sleeping infant in his arms,
humming hurting-man blues.

Thinking how to give his family a better life,
he strolls the ditch-bank next morning,
surprised to see pebbles last night's rain uncovered --blues and greens. He wants
his tears to reveal
what is covered in him like that.
He throws a stone in the irrigation water,

where it gasps his child's awe-struck mouth glistens
for breath, for a chance at life, glimmering ripples calling him to be a father.
El Gato realizes he must start today.

Where the stone hits is the center of the ripples,
where the stone hits is the center that causes action. Where
the stone hits is the beginning,
where he is now,
is the center. He is the stone, he held in his hand as a kid and threw to see how
far it could go.

El Gato changed.

At twenty one
he prays his lightning self
carve from thrown away wood-pile days
a faith
cut deep to the knot-core of his heart,
giving him a limb-top buoyancy,
awakening, a realization that he was
a good man, a good human being,
healing emotional earthquakes in himself.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

From Violence To Peace

Twenty-eight shotgun pellets
crater my thighs, belly and groin.
I gently thumb each burnt bead,
fingering scabbed stubs with ointment.

Could have neutered me, made extinct
the volatile, romantic man I am.
"He's dead,"
doctor at emergency room
could've easily told my wife that night.
Instead, "Soak him in a bath twice a day. Apply
this ointment to the sores. Here's a month's supply
of pain killers." I remember the deep guttural groan
I gave, when the doctor pressed my groin.

Assured

I could still make love, morphine drowsed me
and in a dull stupor I don't remember
police visiting my bed, or laughing so hard,
they scowled for a serious answer.
I howled a U.F.O. shot me along the Río Grande,
and they cursed and left.

In the summer of '88
I'd traded alfalfa for a bull calf.
Still smelling of milk udders,
I tied it to the truck rack and drove off.
Its hooves teathed
at pink roots
'til the whole lush field went bare dirt.
A magnificent bull.
Glowing wheel of heart
breathed brimming stream of white flame at dawn.
He wrangled his black brawn
like a battleshield to challenge the sun,
reared thick neck down and sideways,
lunged at me with dart and snort,
hoof-stamped and nostrilled dirt,
 'til I growled him back
 whipping air

with a limber willow branch,
poured grain in trough
and spread alfalfa.

I respected his horns
and he the whistling
menace of willow.

One afternoon my cousin Patricio
helped me band the bull's scrotum,
usurp swollen sap
in his testicle sack. It withered
to a pink wattle and seeded
the garden to drive cornstalks
to bear hardy, golden horns.

Thereafter, he grazed the fenceline,
with the tempered lust and peaceful grace
of a celibate priest.
His bearing now arranged itself
elegant as a wild flower
sprung over night.

Perfecto shot it.
Rasping on a black rope of blood
round its neck, it staggered,
bouldering convulsions.
Blood exploding
in bright lash of earthquaked air,
it stumble-butted stock trailer fender—
second and third shots glowed
its death.

A quivering shadow of life-flame
darkened the air and it sputtered
a last drop of blood.
I drank long swigs
of whiskey and, thinking it was dead,
turned to walk away,
then

it gave a tremendous groan, tremendous groan,
a birth-letting groan . . . a moon groan . . .

blood spurted out, thick, thick, thick
alleys of dead star blood

and I turned and said aloud to myself,
"That's the moon's voice!
That's the moon's voice!"

And the white moon was in the sky,
and I looked at the moon for a long time.

I sat on the ground
and gulped whiskey, drank the steer's death
still warm in my throat.
A beautiful animal! I allowed to be butchered.
When it trounced and galloped in the field,
its body was a dark, windy cliff edge,
and its eyes were doorways of a dream—
now it bled a charred scroll
of ancient chant in gravel, I would never know,
and its blackened logs of blood
smoldered dying vowels, I would never hear.
My heart's creak-n-tremble rage
milled the steer's death to red grist,
I grieved,
I wept drunkenly
that no one cared,
that humankind betrayed him,
that we were all cowards.

Perfecto, Valasquez and the butcher
tried to stop me
from driving,
but now was the time to settle
a bad feud with another friend.
Redeem the bull's blood with ours.
I drove to Felipe's house,
anger knotted in me
tight as the rope tied
to the stock trailer
steer strained against.

I pulled, but could not free myself.
(I had a dream night before—
I crossed black-iron footbridge,
partially collapsed by sea storm.
Left-hand railing swept out to sea,
I gripped bolt-studded right-hand railing,
finger-clutched wire netting sides,
carefully descended waist-high water. Waded
through slowly and ascended other side—
but had lost my sunglasses and wallet,
went back, groped bottom, found them and ascended again.)

Had to cross that bridge again.
Full of significance . . . tonight,
deepest part of flooded bridge was danger . . . drowning . . .
represented years of my life collapsed
and destroyed, water the cleansing element,
my ascent from had healed, onto firm ground,
but I went back, to re-live
destruction...

“Felipe!” I yelled, porch light
flicked on, illuminating the yard.
“Came to fight,” I said, “take off
your glasses.”

Bug-eyes glazed
bewildered, then gray slits of lips
snarled, “You motherless dog!”
He withdrew in darkness a moment,
reappeared on porch, serrated saw of his voice
cut the chill dark,

“¡Hijo de su pinche madre!
¡Mátalo! ¡Mátalo!!”

First shot framed darkness round me
with a spillway of bright light,
eruption of sound, and second shot roared
a spray of brilliance and the third
gave an expanded halo-flash.

My legs woozed, and then
I buckled to the ground.

(I thought, holy shit, what ever happened

to the old yard-style fight between estranged friends!)

I groaned with the steer,
and crawled my dead legs
to the truck, lunged on elbows into the cab,
hand lifting the dead stone beneath my waist
to clutch and brake.

Following morning calls came,
"Tell us who did it Gato!"
"Our rifles are loaded!"

I said, "Leave it alone. What would you do
if a drunk man came into your yard,
threatened to beat you?"

I wanted peace,
wanted to diffuse the immovable core
of vengeance in my heart,
I had carried since a child,
dismantle the bloody wheel of violence
I had ridden since a child.

During my week in bed,
pellets pollinated me
with a forgotten peace,
and between waking thoughts of anger and vengeance,
sleep was a small meadow of light,
a clearing I walked into and rested. Fragrance of peace
filled me as fragrance
of flowers and dirt permeate hands
that work in the garden all day.

Curandero came to visit, and said,
"The bull in ancient times was the symbol of females.
Did you know that? Killing the bull,
is killing the intuitive part of yourself,
the feminine part. Did you realize,
when Jesus was raising Lazarus,
he groaned in his spirit and that bull groaned,
and when you killed the bull, it was raising you.
The dying bull gave birth to you and now you are either
blessed or cursed. The flood of that bull's blood,
is either going to drown you or liberate you,

but it will not be wasted.”

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Green Chile

I prefer red chile over my eggs
and potatoes for breakfast.
Red chile ristras decorate my door,
dry on my roof, and hang from eaves.
They lend open-air vegetable stands
historical grandeur, and gently swing
with an air of festive welcome.
I can hear them talking in the wind,
haggard, yellowing, crisp, rasping
tongues of old men, licking the breeze.

But grandmother loves green chile.
When I visit her,
she holds the green chile pepper
in her wrinkled hands.
Ah, voluptuous, masculine,
an air of authority and youth simmers
from its swan-neck stem, tapering to a flowery collar,
fermenting resinous spice.
A well-dressed gentleman at the door
my grandmother takes sensuously in her hand,
rubbing its firm glossed sides,
caressing the oily rubbery serpent,
with mouth -watering fulfillment,
fondling its curves with gentle fingers.
Its bearing magnificent and taut
as flanks of a tiger in mid-leap,
she thrusts her blade into
and cuts it open, with lust
on her hot mouth, sweating over the stove,
bandanna round her forehead,
mysterious passion on her face
as she serves me green chile con carne
between soft warm leaves of corn tortillas,
with beans and rice—her sacrifice
to here little prince.
I slurp from my plate
with last bit of tortilla, my mouth burns
and I hiss and drink a tall glass of cold water.

All over New Mexico, sunburned men and women
drive rickety trucks stuffed with gunny sacks
of green chile, from Belen, Beguita, Willard, Estancia,
San Antonio y Socorro, from fields
to roadside stands, you see them roasting green chile
in screen-sided homemade barrels, and for a dollar a bag,
we relive this old, beautiful ritual again and again.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

I Am Offering This Poem

I am offering this poem to you,
since I have nothing else to give.
Keep it like a warm coat,
when winter comes to cover you,
or like a pair of thick socks
the cold cannot bite through,

I love you,

I have nothing else to give you,
so it is a pot full of yellow corn
to warm your belly in the winter,
it is a scarf for your head, to wear
over your hair, to tie up around your face,

I love you,

Keep it, treasure it as you would
if you were lost, needing direction,
in the wilderness life becomes when mature;
and in the corner of your drawer,
tucked away like a cabin or a hogan
in dense trees, come knocking,
and I will answer, give you directions,
and let you warm yourself by this fire,
rest by this fire, and make you feel safe,

I love you,

It's all I have to give,
and it's all anyone needs to live,
and to go on living inside,
when the world outside
no longer cares if you live or die;
remember,

I love you.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Immigrants In Our Own Land

We are born with dreams in our hearts,
looking for better days ahead.
At the gates we are given new papers,
our old clothes are taken
and we are given overalls like mechanics wear.
We are given shots and doctors ask questions.
Then we gather in another room
where counselors orient us to the new land
we will now live in. We take tests.
Some of us were craftsmen in the old world,
good with our hands and proud of our work.
Others were good with their heads.
They used common sense like scholars
use glasses and books to reach the world.
But most of us didn't finish high school.

The old men who have lived here stare at us,
from deep disturbed eyes, sulking, retreated.
We pass them as they stand around idle,
leaning on shovels and rakes or against walls.
Our expectations are high: in the old world,
they talked about rehabilitation,
about being able to finish school,
and learning an extra good trade.
But right away we are sent to work as dishwashers,
to work in fields for three cents an hour.
The administration says this is temporary
So we go about our business, blacks with blacks,
poor whites with poor whites,
chicanos and indians by themselves.
The administration says this is right,
no mixing of cultures, let them stay apart,
like in the old neighborhoods we came from.

We came here to get away from false promises,
from dictators in our neighborhoods,
who wore blue suits and broke our doors down
when they wanted, arrested us when they felt like,
swinging clubs and shooting guns as they pleased.

But it's no different here. It's all concentrated.
The doctors don't care, our bodies decay,
our minds deteriorate, we learn nothing of value.
Our lives don't get better, we go down quick.

My cell is crisscrossed with laundry lines,
my T-shirts, boxer shorts, socks and pants are drying.
Just like it used to be in my neighborhood:
from all the tenements laundry hung window to window.
Across the way Joey is sticking his hands
through the bars to hand Felipe a cigarette,
men are hollering back and forth cell to cell,
saying their sinks don't work,
or somebody downstairs hollers angrily
about a toilet overflowing,
or that the heaters don't work.

I ask Coyote next door to shoot me over
a little more soap to finish my laundry.
I look down and see new immigrants coming in,
mattresses rolled up and on their shoulders,
new haircuts and brogan boots,
looking around, each with a dream in their heart,
thinking they'll get a chance to change their lives.

But in the end, some will just sit around
talking about how good the old world was.
Some of the younger ones will become gangsters.
Some will die and others will go on living
without a soul, a future, or a reason to live.
Some will make it out of here with hate in their eyes,
but so very few make it out of here as human
as they came in, they leave wondering what good they are now
as they look at their hands so long away from their tools,
as they look at themselves, so long gone from their families,
so long gone from life itself, so many things have changed.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Into Death Bravely

Winter
throws his great white shield
on the ground,
breaking thin arms of twisting branches,
and then howls
on the north side of the Black Mesa
a deep, throaty laughter.
Because of him
we have to sell our cattle
that rake snow for stubble.
Having lived his whole life
in a few weeks,
slow and pensive he walks away,
dragging his silver-stream shield
down branches
and over the ground,
he keeps walking slowly away
into death
bravely.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

It Would Be Neat If With The New Year

for Miguel

It would be neat if with the New Year
I could leave my loneliness behind with the old year.
My leathery loneliness an old pair of work boots
my dog vigorously head-shakes back and forth in its jaws,
chews on for hours every day in my front yard—
rain, sun, snow, or wind
in bare feet, pondering my poem,
I'd look out my window and see that dirty pair of boots in the yard.

But my happiness depends so much on wearing those boots.

At the end of my day
while I'm in a chair listening to a Mexican corrido
I stare at my boots appreciating:
all the wrong roads we've taken, all the drug and whiskey houses
we've visited, and as the Mexican singer wails his pain,
I smile at my boots, understanding every note in his voice,
and strangers, when they see my boots rocking back and forth on my
feet
keeping beat to the song, see how
my boots are scuffed, tooth-marked, worn-soled.

I keep wearing them because they fit so good
and I need them, especially when I love so hard,
where I go up those boulder strewn trails,
where flowers crack rocks in their defiant love for the light.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Ix. Part 6

We bought a small house
along the river, in Southside barrio.
A shack I pried boards from the front door to get in-
half-acre of land in the back
heaped with decades of scrap-rusted wire fencing, creosote
railroad ties, tumbleweeds, a mountain of decaying
harvest never picked, weaving itself
slowly into the dirt again.

I gutted the plaster frame house,
nailed, puttied, roofed, plumbed,
poured cement, sheet-rocked, tiled, carpeted,
tore-out, re-set,
 piled, burned, cleaned, cemented, installed,
washed and painted,
trimmed, pruned, shoveled, raked,
 sawed, hammered, measured, stuccoed,
until,
 calloused handed, muscle-firmed, sleek hard bodied,
 our small house rose
 from a charred, faded gravemarker,
 a weather-rotted roost
 for junkies and vagrants,

wind, rain, and sun splintered
jagged stories of storms on,
I corrected,
 re-wrote upon
 this plaster wood tablet,
 our own version of love, family and power.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Like An Animal

Behind the smooth texture
Of my eyes, way inside me,
A part of me has died:
I move my bloody fingernails
Across it, hard as a blackboard,
Run my fingers along it,
The chalk white scars
That say I AM SCARED,
Scared of what might become
Of me, the real me,
Behind these prison walls.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Listening To Jazz Now

1.

Listening to jazz now, I'm happy
sun shining outside like it was my lifetime achievement award.

I'm happy,
with my friend and her dog up in Durango, her emailing
me this morning
no coon hound ailing yowls
vibrant I love yous.

I'm happy,
my smile a big Monarch butterfly
after having juiced up some carrots, garlic, seaweed,
I stroll the riverbank, lazy as a deep cello
in a basement bar--

smoke, cagney'd out patrons
caramel and chocolate women in black
shoulder strap satin dresses,
and red high heels.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Llano Vaqueros

Padilla unloads mangy herd of Mexican
cattle in the field.

Meaner, horns long and sharp
for bloody battle, lean from a diet
of prairie weed, looking more
like cattle did years ago
on the plains
than cattle now—
sluggish, pampered globs
stalled year round
for State Fair Judges to admire,
stall-salon dolls, hooves manicured
and polished, hide-hair blow-dried, lips
and lashes waxed.

I ride down the dirt road
on Sunshine (my bay mare)
and she smarts
away from their disdainful glare—
come in, try to lasso us,
try to comb our hair.

I admire my ancestors, llano vaqueros,
who flicked a home-made cigarette in dust,
spit in scuffed gloves, grabbed one
by the horns, wrestled it down,
branded it, with the same pleasure
they enjoyed in a bunk-house brawl.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Main Character

I went to see
How the West Was Won
at the Sunshine Theater.
Five years old,
deep in a plush seat,
light turned off,
bright screen lit up
with MGM roaring lion-
in front of me
a drunk Indian rose,
cursed
the western violins
and hurled his uncapped bagged bottle
of wine
at the rocket roaring to the moon.
His dark angry body
convulsed with his obscene gestures
at the screen,
and then ushers escorted him
up the aisle,
and as he staggered past me,
I heard his grieving sobs.
Red wine streaked
blue sky and take-off smoke,
sizzled cowboys' campfires,
dripped down barbwire,

slogged the brave, daring scouts
who galloped off to mesa buttes
to speak peace with Apaches,
and made the prairie
lush with wine streams.
When the movie
was over,
I squinted at the bright
sunny street outside,
looking for the main character.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Matanza To Welcome Spring

for Pat and Victorio

Spread eagle sheep legs wide,
wire hooves to shed beams,
and sink blade in neck wool,
'til the gray eyes drain of life
like cold pure water
from a tin pail.

(It kicked, choking on nasal blood,
liquid gasping coughs
spattered blood over me.)

Slit down belly, scalp rug-wool
skin away, pinch wool back
with blade to pink flesh, ssst ssst ssst
inch by inch, then I sling
whole carcass in bloody spray over fence.

(Close to its face, I swear
it gift-heaved a last breath
from its soft black nose
and warmed my nostril hairs
as I sniffed the dark smell
of its death.)

Mesquite in hole
boils water in the iron cauldron
which steam-cooks
hind quarters
on grill across cauldron.

Tonight I invite men and women
con duende,
who take a night in life
and forge it into iron
in the fire of their vision.

Aragon has gone
to the river to play his drum.
I hear the deep pom pom pom.
Round bonfire
Alicia squats, ruffles sheaf of poems,
while Alejandro tunes guitar.

Shadows dance round
stones that edge the fire.

(In Alejandro's boot
a knife hilt glimmers.)

Their teeth gleam grease juice

(as do those of the children, who play
in the dark behind us).

There is fear
in the horse's eye
corralled nearby.

(Hear the drum on the Río Grande.
Boom pom boom pom....)

Blood sizzles,
moist alfalfa in the air,
bats flit above the flames.
I toss a gleaming bone to spirits
in the orchard,
and Gonzales yells,
with his old earthen voice,
"Play, hombre, �Canta, mujer! Sing!
Sing the way the old ones sang!"

Tonight life is
lust
death
hunger
violence
innocence
sweetness
honor
hard work
and tomorrow I will go
to church.
But tonight
I leap into
impulse, instinct,
into the burning
of

this moment.

(I commit myself! One moment to the next
I am chasm jumper and silence is

a blue fire on my papery soul. I construct
out of nothing. I am air, am labyrinth,
place with no entry or exit,
am a smoking mirror.

Commit myself! Storms stroke my heart
and destroy its neat furrows.
My words are mule teams,
that loosen, pound, hurl, out and up,
and leave me standing in the open, naked,
with star flame roar, life opening. . . .

Commit myself!)

Hear the two hands
bleed along the river beating
drumskins,
deep sounds of thu-uba,
of magic, despair, joy,
 emotions trance-weave through sound,
 thumba, thumba, thumba.

Follow drum,
 thumba thumba thumba,
 umba umba umba
 ba-ba ba-ba
 thumba thumba thumba,
hear hearts mate with earth
in song,
spiral toward death
 in its long thuuumbaa,
toward life again
 in ba-ba ba-ba.

The sound is stain on purity,
is cry of broken thing,
drum does not wither beneath bed,
but rises heart
 into newness around us,
all around us,
 come follow Follow the drum,
 thumba thumba thumba
 ba—ba—ba

thumba thumba thumba

ba—ba—ba,

of living!

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Meditations On The South Valley, Part Xxiii

Pancho, the barrio idiot.
Rumor is that una bruja from Bernalillo
le embrujo. Unshaven, chattering
and nodding to airy friends
that follow him,
he roams the barrio all day.
I see him at least twice a day—
walking on the ditch behind my house,
hours later walking across the bridge.

Harmless, la gente leave him alone
in his own fantasies,
to share his bread with invisible companions,
to speak back to voices
that brim over from his childhood memories.

I have seen him
on all fours in Raul's field
with the sheep. Or last Christmas
in the tree meowing like a cat.
You always fill my heart Pancho
with delight.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Oppression

Is a question of strength,
of unshed tears,
of being trampled under,
and always, always,
remembering you are human.

Look deep to find the grains of hope and strength,
and sing, my brothers and sisters,

and sing. The sun will share
your birthdays with you behind bars,
the new spring grass

like fiery spears will count your years,
as you start into the next year;
endure my brothers, endure my sisters.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Sanctuary

for Tony

I could not disengage my world
from the rest of humanity.
Wind chill factor 11° below. All night
wind thrashes barechested trees
like a West Texas tent evangelist
hissing them on his knees,
lipping
sinnn . . . sinn . . . sinn . . .
All night wind preaches.

Old tool shed
behind my house
fist-cuffs itself to nail-loose tin,
horse pasture gates
clank their crimes,
while neighing black stallions of rain
stampede on the patio
fleeing gunshots of thunder

Miles south of here,
nightsopes pick up human heat
that green fuzz helicopter
dash panels.

A mother whispers,
"Sssshhhh mejito, nomás poco más allá.
Nomás poco más allá."

Dunes of playing-dead people
jack rabbit under strobe lights
and cutting whack/blades,
"Ssshhh mejito.
Sssshhhh." Child whimpers
and staggers in blinding dust
and gnashing wind.

Those not caught, scratch sand up
to sleep against underbellies
of roots and stones.

Eventually Juanito comes to my door,
sick from eating stucco chips—
his meals scratched off
walls of temporary shelters,
and Enrique, who guzzled water
at industrial pipes
pouring green foam out
at the El Paso/Juarez border,
and Maria steaming with fever,
face dark meteorite, whispers,
 "Where I come from, Señor Baca,
 a woman's womb is a rock,
 and children born from me,
 drop like stones, to become dust
 under death squad's boots."

And Juanito,
 "The came at midnight
 and took my brothers. I have
 never seen them since. Each judge's tongue
 is a bleeding stub of death, and each lawyer's
 finger a soft coffin nail."

And Enrique,
 "You can trust no one.
 Each crying person's eye is a damp cellar
 where thieves and murderers sleep."

They have found refuge here
at Black Mesa.

The sun passes between our lives,
as between two trees,
one gray, one green,
but side by side.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Ten

If it does not feed the fire
of your creativity, then leave it.
If people and things do not
inspire your heart to dream,
then leave them.
If you are not crazily in love
and making a stupid fool of yourself,
then stop closer to the edge
of your heart and climb
where you've been forbidden to go.
Debts, accusations, assaults by enemies
mean nothing,
go where the fire feeds you.
Turn your attention to the magic of whores,
grief, addicts and drunks, until you stumble upon
that shining halo surrounding your heart
that will allow you to violate every fear happily,
be where you're not supposed to be,
the love of an angel who's caught your blood on fire
again, who's gulped all of you in one breath
to mix in her soul, to explode your brooding
and again, your words rush from the stones
like a river coursing down
from some motherly mountain source,
and if your life doesn't spill forth
unabashedly, recklessly, randomly
pushing in wonder at life,
then change, leave, quit, silence the idle chatter
and do away with useless acquaintances
who have forgotten how to dream,
bitch rudely in your dark mood at the mediocrity
of scholars who meddle in whimsy for academic trifles--
let you be their object of scorn,
let you be their object of mockery,
let you be their chilling symbol
of what they never had the courage to do, to complete, to follow,
let you be the flaming faith that makes them shield their eyes
as you burn from all sides,
taking a harmless topic and making of it a burning galaxy

or shooting stars in the dark of their souls,
illuminating your sadness, your aching joy for life,
your famished insistence for God and all that is creative
to attend you as a witness to your struggle,
let the useless banter and quick pleasures
belong to others, the merchants, computer analysts
and government workers;
you haven't been afraid
of rapture among thieves
bloody duels in drunken brawls,
denying yourself
the essence of your soul work
as poems rusted while you scratched
at your heart to see if it was a diamond
and not cheap pane of glass,
now, then, after returning from one more poet's journey
in the heart of the bear, the teeth of the wolf,
the legs of the wild horse,
sense what your experience tells you,
your ears ringing with deception and lies and foul tastes,
now that your memory is riddled with blank loss,
tyrants who wielded their boastful threats
to the sleeping dogs and old trees in the yards,
now that you've returned from men and women
who've abandoned their dreams and sit around
like corpses in the grave moldering with regret,
steady your heart now, my friend, with fortitude
long-lasting enduring hope, and hail the early dawn
like a ship off coast that's come for you,
spent and ragged and beggared,
if what you do and how you live does not feed the fire
in your heart and blossom into poems,
leave, quit, do not turn back,
move fast away from that which would mold your gift,
break it, disrespect it, kill it.
Guard it, nurture it, take your full-flung honorable
heart and plunge it into the fire
into the stars, into the trees, into the hearts of others
sorrow and love and restore the dream
by writing of its again-discovered wild beauty.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

The Blackbird

The blackbird sits
On a bronchial limb
Ready to
Squeal his guts
Where?

Jimmy Santiago Baca

The County Jail

Men late at night cook coffee in rusty cans,
just like in the hills, like in their childhoods,
without rules or guidance or authority, their fathers
dead or wild as gypsies,
their mothers going down for five dollars.
These are the men who surface at night,
The sons of faceless parents,
the sons of brutal days dripping blood,
the men whose faces emerge from shadows,
from bars,
and they join in circles and squat on haunches,
share smokes, and talk of who knows who,
what towns they passed through;
while flames jump under the coffee can,
you see new faces and old ones,
the young eyes scared and the old eyes
tarnished like peeling boat hulls,
like wild creatures they meet,
with a sixth sense inside of them, to tell them
who's real and who's the game;
and their thoughts are hard as wisdom teeth,
biting into each new eye,
that shows itself around the fire.

The coffee is poured steaming hot into cups,
and the men slowly sip.
Shower stalls drip bleakly in the dark,
and the smell of dumb metal is inflamed
with the acrid silence, and once in a while,
a cab horn will sound from outside the windows,
and the man with only a cheek illuminated by the fire,
the rest of his face drenched in shadows,
will get up and leave the circle,
return to his bunk.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

The Day Brushes It's Curtains Aside

to a dark stage.

I lie there awake in my prison bunk,
in the eye-catching silence
of prison night.

I study the moon out my grilled window.
I figure this and that,
not out, just figure, figuring more,
the inner I go, through illimitable tunnels,

roaring great, myself back back back.

I lie still, listening to water drops
clink and pap pap pap
in the shower stall next to my cell.

In that airy place we call the heart,
I move like a magician
in the colorful stage lights of my moods,
my bright dreams, and blue light
circles a tear on my cheek, and lips with her name.

>From flowers in my hands
her face appears. In cards
she is the queen. These are tricks
and I am the magician.

Tomorrow morning I will crawl out of bed
knowing I cannot escape the chains
they've wrapped around me.

I will crawl out of bed tomorrow,
as though I had stepped out of a box
on stage. It was no illusion,
when the sword plunged into the box,
I smiled at the crowd,
as it went deeper and deeper into my heart.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

There Are Black

There are black guards slamming cell gates
on black men,
And brown guards saying hello to brown men
with numbers on their backs,
And white guards laughing with white cons,
and red guards, few, say nothing
to red inmates as they walk by to chow and cells.

There you have it, the little antpile . . .
convicts marching in straight lines, guards flying
on badged wings, permits to sting, to glut themselves
at the cost of secluding themselves from their people . .
Turning off their minds like watertaps
wrapped in gunnysacks that insulate the pipes
carrying the pale weak water to their hearts.

It gets bad when you see these same guards
carrying buckets of blood out of cells,
see them puking at the smell, the people,
their own people slashing their wrists,
hanging themselves with belts from light outlets;
it gets bad to see them clean up the mess,
carry the blue cold body out under sheets,
and then retake their places in guard cages,
watching their people maul and mangle themselves,

And over this blood-rutted land,
the sun shines, the guards talk of horses and guns,
go to the store and buy new boots,
and the longer they work here the more powerful they become,
taking on the presence of some ancient mummy,
down in the dungeons of prison, a mummy
that will not listen, but has a strange power
in this dark world, to be so utterly disgusting in ignorance,
and yet so proudly command so many men. . . .

And the convicts themselves, at the mummy's
feet, blood-splattered leather, at this one's feet,
they become cobras sucking life out of their brothers,

they fight for rings and money and drugs,
in this pit of pain their teeth bare fangs,
to fight for what morsels they can. . . .

And the other convicts, guilty
of nothing but their born color, guilty of being innocent,
they slowly turn to dust in the nightly winds here,
flying in the wind back to their farms and cities.
From the gash in their hearts, sand flies up spraying
over houses and through trees,

look at the sand blow over this deserted place,
you are looking at them.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

This Day

I feel foolish,

like those silly robins jumping on the ditch boughs
when I run by them.

Those robins do not have the grand style of the red tailed hawk,
no design, no dream, just robins acting stupid.

They've never smoked cigarettes, drank whiskey, consumed drugs
as I have.

In their mindless

fluttering about

filled with nonsense,

they tell me how they

love the Great Spirit,

scold me not to be self-pitying,

to open my life

and make this day a bough on a tree

leaning over infinity, where eternity flows forward

and with day the river runs

carrying all that falls in it.

Be happy Jimmy, they chirp,

Jimmy, be silly, make this day a tree

leaning over the river eternity

and fuss about in its branches.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Tire Shop

I went down yesterday
to fix a leak in my tire. Off Bridge street
there's a place 95 cents
flats fixed,
smeary black paint on warped wood plank
between two bald tires.
I go in, an old Black man
with a Jackie Gleason hat greasy soft
 with a mashed cigar stub in mouth
and another old Chicano man
working the other
pneumatic hissing tire changer. The walls are black with rubber
soot blown black dust everywhere
and rows of worn tires on gnawed board racks for sale,
air hoses snaking and looped over the floor.
I greet the two old men
 'Yeah, how's it going!'
No response.
They look up at me as if I just gave them a week to live.
 'I got a tire needs a tube.'
Rudy, a young Chicano emerges from the black part of the room
pony tailed and plump
walks me out to my truck and looks at the tire.
'It'll cost you five bucks to take off and change.'
 I nod.
He tells the old Chicano, who pulls the roller jack
 with a long steel handle outside,
and I wait in the middle of the grunting oval tire
changing machines,
while the old guy goes out and returns with my tire.
 He looks at me like a disgruntled Carny
 handling the ferriswheel
for the millionth time
and I'm just another ache in the arm,
 a spoiled kid.
I watch the two old men work the tire machines
 step on the foot levers that send the bars around
flipping the tire from the rim
and I wonder what brought these two old men to work here

on this gray evening in February –
are they ex-cons?
Drunks or addicts?
He whips the tube out,' Rudy ' he yells
and I see a gaping hole in the tube,
'Can't patch that,' Rudy says
Then in Spanish Slang says, 'no podemos pachiarlo,'
'we got a pile of old tubes over there, we'll do it for ten
dollars.'
At first I think he might be taking me
but I hedge away from that thought
and I watch the machines work
the spleesh of air
the final begrudging phoof! of rubber popped loose
then the holy clank of steel bar
against steel
and every gently the old Chicano man, instead of throwing the bar
on the floor,
takes the iron bar and wipes it clean of rubber bits
and oil
and slides it gently into his waist belt,
in such a way
I've only seen mother wipe their infant's mouth.
And I wonder where they live these two old guys
I turn and watch MASH on a tv suspended from the ceiling
six '0 clock news comes on
Hunnington beach blackened with oil.
Rudy comes behind me and says,
'Fucking shame they do that to our shores.'
I suddenly realize how I love these working men
working in half dark with bald tires
like medieval hunchbacks in a dungeon.
They eat soup and scrape along in their lives –
how can they live I wonder on 95 cents a tire change
in today's world?
I am pleased to be with them
and feel how barrio Chicanos love this too –
how some give up nice jobs
in foreign places
to live by friends working in these places
and out of these men revolutions have started.
The old Chicano is mumbling at me

how cheap I am
when he learns my four tires are bald
and spare flat,
shaking his head as he works the tube into the tirewell.
I notice his heels are chewed to the nails
his fingernails black
his face a weary room and board stairwell
of a downtown motel
given over to drunks and derelicts, his face hand worn
by drunks leaning their full weight on it
wooden steps grooved by hard soled men just out
of prison, a face condemned by life to live out more days
in futility.
I bid goodbye to the Black man chomping his ancient cigar
the Chicano man with his head down
and I feel ashamed, somehow, that I cannot live
their lives a while for them.
Grateful they are here, I respect such men, who have stories
that will never be told, who bring back to me
my simple boyish days, when men
in oily pants and grubby hands talked in rough tones
and worked at simply work, getting three meals a day
on the table the hard way.
They live in an imperfect world,
unlike men with money who have places
to put their shame
these men have none,
other put their shame on planes or Las Vegas
these have no place
but to put their shame on their endurance
their mothers
their kids
themselves
unlike men who put their shame
on new cars
condos
bank accounts
so they never have to face their shame
these men in the tire shop
have become more human with shame.
And I thought of the time my brother betrayed
me leaving me at 14

when we vowed we'd always be together
 he left to live with some rich folks
and I was taken to the Detention Center for kids
with no place to live –
 I became a juvenile
 filled with anger at my brother who left me alone.
These tire shop men made choices
never to leave their brothers,
in them I saw shame with no place to go
 but in a man's face, hands, work and silence.
 And as I drove away, nearing my farm
I saw a water sprinkler shooting an arc of water
 far over the fence and grass
it was intended to water --
 the fountain of water hitting a weedy stickered spot
that grew the only single flower anywhere around
 in the midst of rubble brush and stones
 the water hit
and touched a dormant seed that blossomed all itself
 into what it was
despite the surroundings.
Something made sense to me then
and I'm not quite sure what --
 an unconditional love of being and living,
 and taking what came one's way
 with dignity.
That night in my dream
I cried for my brother as he was leaving,
 all the words I used against myself
 rotten, no good, shitty, failure,
 dissolved in my tears,
my tears poured out of me in my dream and I wept
for my brother and wept when I turned after he left
 and I reached for my sister and she was having coffee
with a friend --
 I wept in my dream because she was not available for me
when I needed her,
and all my tears flowed, and how I wept, my feeling my pain
 of abandonment,
 all my tears became that arc of water
 and I became the flower, by sheer accident in the middle
 of nowhere, blossoming....

Jimmy Santiago Baca

To My Own Self

My hands the Hook thunder hangs its hat on,
My breast the Arroyo storms fill with water,
My brow the Horizon sunrise fills,
My heart the Dawn weaving blue threads of day,
My soul the Song of all life...

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Too Much Of A Good Thing

Snow's been melting too soon—
passing the Río Grande every day, I note
water level is high,
all flowing down river.
What happens
when I need to irrigate pastures
in summer
and there is no water?
Farmers get edgy.
Start cursing neighbors under their breath
for using too much water.
Crops stunted,
only one alfalfa cutting
instead of three,
no feed for cows,
no money to buy feed . . .
and then like it happened a few years ago,
Mr. Gonzales goes out
and you hear rifle shots blister
cold morning air,
and you know his cattle
are falling in snow,
dead.
At Coronado Center, biggest shopping mall
in New Mexico, I hear two suntanned ladies
praising our wonderful weather. I give them
a glance, throw my gloves
on the counter for the cashier, and wonder what
a farmer's wife would tell them.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

V

Years pass.

Cattle cars in the downtown freightyard
squeal and groan, and sizzling grills
steam the Barelás Coffee House cafe windows,
as the railroad workers with tin hard hats
stop for coffee, hours of dawn
softly click on grandfather's gold pocket watches
in Louey's Broadway Pawnshop, hocked
to get a cousin or brother out of jail
City workers' tin carts and long-handled dust pans
clatter in curb gutters
as buses spew smoldering exhaust as they stop beneath
Walgreen's neon liquor sign.

I lean against an office building brick wall,
nothing to do, no where to go,
comb my hair in the blue tinted office windows,
see my reflection in the glinting chromed cars,
on a corner, beneath a smoking red traffic light,
I live-
blue beanie cap snug over my ears
down to my brow,
in wide bottomed jean pants trimmed with red braid,
I start my daily walk,
to the Old Town Post Office,
condemned Armijo school building,
Rio Grande playa,
ditches and underpasses-
de-tribalized Apache
entangled in the rusty barbwire of a society I do not understand,
Mejicano blood in me spattering like runoff water
from a roof canale, glistening over the lives
who lived before me, like rain over mounds of broken pottery,
each day backfills with brown dirt of my dreams.

I lived in the streets,
slept at friends' houses, spooned
pozole and wiped up the last frijoles with tortilla
from my plate. Each day
my hands hurt for something to have,

and a voice in me yearned to sing,
and my body wanted to shed the gray skin of streets,
like a snake that grew wings-
I wished I had had a chance to be a little boy,
and wished a girl had loved me,
and wished I had a family-but these
were silver inlaid pieces of another man's life,
whose destiny fountained over stones and ivy
of the courtyard in a fairytale.

Each night I could hear the silver whittling blade
of La Llorona,
carving a small child on the muddy river bottom,
like a little angel carved into ancient church doors.
On Fridays, Jesus Christ appeared
on La Vega road, mounted on a white charger,
his black robe flapping in the moonlight
as he thrashed through bosque brush.
Sometimes Wallei, the voice of water, sang to me,
and Mectallá, who lives in the fire, flew in the air,
and Cuzal, the Reader of Rocks, spoke with a voice
jagged as my street-fighting knuckles.

A voice in me soft as linen
unfolded on midnight air,
to wipe my loneliness away-the voice blew open
like a white handkerchief in the night
embroidered with red roses,
waving and waving from a dark window
at some lover who never returned.

I became a friend of the old women
who hung out by the bars
on Central, Gileta, and Barcelona,
blue tear drops tattooed on their cheeks,
initials of ex-lovers on their hands,
women drawn out from the dark piss-stinking rooms
they lived in,
by the powerful force of the moon,
whose yellow teeth tore the alfalfa out of their hearts,
and left them stubbled,
parched grounds old goats of tecatos and winos

nibbled.

All my life the constant sound of someone's bootheels
trail behind me-thin, hard,
sharp sounds scraping frozen ground,
like a shovel digging a grave,
It's my guardian, following me through the broken branches
of the bosque, to the door
of the Good Shepherd Home on south 2nd street,
for a hot meal.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

What Is Broken Is What God Blesses

The lover's footprint in the sand
the ten-year-old kid's bare feet
in the mud picking chili for rich growers,
not those seeking cultural or ethnic roots,
but those whose roots
have been exposed, hacked, dug up and burned
and in those roots
the animals burrow for warmth;
what is broken is blessed,
not the knowledge and empty-shelled wisdom
paraphrased from textbooks,
not the mimicking nor plaques of distinction
nor the ribbons and medals
but after the privileged carriage has passed
the breeze blows traces of wheel ruts away
and on the dust will again be the people's broken
footprints.

What is broken God blesses,
not the perfectly brick-on-brick prison
but the shattered wall
that announces freedom to the world,
proclaims the irascible spirit of the human
rebellious against lies, against betrayal,
against taking what is not deserved;
the human complaint is what God blesses,
our impoverished dirt roads filled with cripples,
what is broken is baptized,
the irreverent disbeliever,
the addict's arm seamed with needle marks
in a thread line of a blanket
frayed and bare from keeping the man warm.
We are all broken ornaments,
glinting in our worn-out work gloves,
fireclosed homes, ruined marriages,
from which shimmer our lives in their deepest truths,
blood from the wound,
broken ornaments—
when we lost our perfection and honored our imperfect sentiments, we were
blessed.

Broken are the ghettos, barrios, trailer parks where gangs duel to death,
yet through the wretchedness a woman of sixty comes riding her rusty bicycle,
we embrace
we bury in our hearts,
broken ornaments, accused, hunted, finding solace and refuge
we work, we worry, we love
but always with compassion
reflecting our blessings—
in our brokenness
thrives life, thrives light, thrives
the essence of our strength,
each of us a warm fragment,
broken off from the greater
ornament of the unseen,
then rejoined as dust,
to all this is.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

When Life

Is cut close, blades and bones,
And the stench of sewers is everywhere,
Blood-sloshed floors,
And guards count the dead
With the blink of an eyelid, then hurry home
To supper and love, what saves us
From going mad is to carry a vacant stare
And a quiet half-dead dream.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Who Understands Me But Me

They turn the water off, so I live without water,
they build walls higher, so I live without treetops,
they paint the windows black, so I live without sunshine,
they lock my cage, so I live without going anywhere,
they take each last tear I have, I live without tears,
they take my heart and rip it open, I live without heart,
they take my life and crush it, so I live without a future,
they say I am beastly and fiendish, so I have no friends,
they stop up each hope, so I have no passage out of hell,
they give me pain, so I live with pain,
they give me hate, so I live with my hate,
they have changed me, and I am not the same man,
they give me no shower, so I live with my smell,
they separate me from my brothers, so I live without brothers,
who understands me when I say this is beautiful?
who understands me when I say I have found other freedoms?

I cannot fly or make something appear in my hand,
I cannot make the heavens open or the earth tremble,
I can live with myself, and I am amazed at myself, my love, my beauty,
I am taken by my failures, astounded by my fears,
I am stubborn and childish,
in the midst of this wreckage of life they incurred,
I practice being myself,
and I have found parts of myself never dreamed of by me,
they were goaded out from under rocks in my heart
when the walls were built higher,
when the water was turned off and the windows painted black.
I followed these signs
like an old tracker and followed the tracks deep into myself
followed the blood-spotted path,
deeper into dangerous regions, and found so many parts of myself,
who taught me water is not everything,
and gave me new eyes to see through walls,
and when they spoke, sunlight came out of their mouths,
and I was laughing at me with them,
we laughed like children and made pacts to always be loyal,
who understands me when I say this is beautiful?

fronting myself as possible prey
so you could escape,
that kind of poem

I am writing you now.

Circling as hunters aim down on me
while you rise, rise, rise into the blue sky
and meet me over in the next fields.

I wanted to write you a poem for two days now
to tell you how happy I was,
seeing a white crane arc
between banks in the irrigation ditch
with furious efforts, its big wings flapping
like an awkward nine-year-old kid
much taller than the others his age
with size twelve sneakers
flapping down the basketball court.

But once the white crane
found its balance, its wings their grace, it glided more perfectly
than a ballet dancer's leap across air,

all of its feathers ballet dancer's toes,
all of its feathers delicate dancers
all of its feathers, in motion
made me believe in myself,

but more,

when it rose, swooped up,
the line of ascent up
made me think of the curve of your spine,
how I traced my finger down your spine
when you slept,

your spine

is the ascent of the crane
toward the sunshine,

and my hands my face my torso and chest and legs and hips
became air, a blue cold arctic air
you glided up in your song of winter love.

Jimmy Santiago Baca