

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Jimmy Santiago Baca**

**- 39 poems -**

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## **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)

#### Works:

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## **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 ooohing 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 teethed  
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.

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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.

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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 Felipé 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,



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

## Old Woman

I see Senora Sanchez  
along the river.  
Black catfish  
pop the silver  
water surface,  
waves unroll  
as the gnarled  
bronze face and  
black eyes  
remember  
cool sea shells  
and warm turquoise,  
the turkey gobbling  
behind bushes,  
and the red skirt  
hanging on boughs  
as she bathed....  
She pulls her black sweater  
snug around her, folded arms  
across her stomach.  
She who remembers  
cannot say amen  
but smiles to sunrise  
as she walks through the grass,  
  the tall,  
  green grass,  
grass that does not listen to  
  the priest  
in black robes, blooms green  
as she walks through the grass  
and talks with them.

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,  
"Sssshhh 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 form 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 form 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, □Isleta, □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  
do 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  
is 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,  
foreclosed 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?

Jimmy Santiago Baca



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