

ALSO BY JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

Black Mesa Poems

Martin & Meditations on the South Valley
Introduction by Denise Levertov

Winter Poems Along the Rio Grande

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Immigrants in Our Own Land
& Selected Early Poems



A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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The Sun on Those

The sun on those green palm trees, lining the entry road to prison. Stiff rows of husky-scaled bark, with a tuft of green looping blades on top, sword twirling in wind, always erect and disciplined, legallike.

Cars glide through the rows, like white swans on summer afternoons. The assistant warden in a government car is passed through the check point, in his new shirt and silk socks, and silent hum of engine, a well-ordered life of favor for favor, getting him where he is, on that road between palm trees, soft hands, and ears seldom hearing screams and eyes never the blood of these cellblocks, bucketfuls weekly, taken to the slop pen, along with broken ribs, cutoff fingers caught in doors of cages, often, dead men thrown to the hoofed mud like chewed corn husks. He goes on softly on new tires, pressing gas pedal, feeling the comfortable tug of speed taking him from the never ending stillness of prison, from the thing that never changes, made of rock and steel, moving like a river down the days. King of this river, power to let some drown or swim, river god on wheels, to a café downtown now, to meet a woman and have dinner.

My father used to plant trees around fields to protect crops. Trees against the wind, growing like me in my father's eyes, budding out, trees spreading out, leaves holding up their hands to protect the alfalfa and corn. We would pass the trees, and he would point to them; all that he owned was those trees. While men hounded him, took his land, none knew about his trees; in jail cell after jail cell, those trees were his secret. I was not his only son. And when they captured me through the turn of my days, one was still free, greening more, spreading wide in wind, sheltering crows, and mourning our imprisonment, rejoicing our endurance, ever plunging its roots deeper into the face of progress and land-grabbers. Fences mean nothing to the trees. Walls and fences cannot take me away from who I am, and I know, as the tree knows, where I come from, who is my father.

So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans

O Yes? Do they come on horses
with rifles, and say,

Ese gringo, gimmee your job?

And do you, gringo, take off your ring,
drop your wallet into a blanket
spread over the ground, and walk away?

I hear Mexicans are taking your jobs away.
Do they sneak into town at night,
and as you're walking home with a whore,
do they mug you, a knife at your throat,
saying, I want your job?

Even on TV, an asthmatic leader
crawls turtle heavy, leaning on an assistant,
and from a nest of wrinkles on his face,
a tongue paddles through flashing waves
of lightbulbs, of cameramen, rasping
"They're taking our jobs away."

Well, I've gone about trying to find them,
asking just where the hell are these fighters.

The rifles I hear sound in the night
are white farmers shooting blacks and browns
whose ribs I see jutting out
and starving children,
I see the poor marching for a little work,
I see small white farmers selling out
to clean-suited farmers living in New York,
who've never been on a farm,
don't know the look of a hoof or the smell
of a woman's body bending all day long in fields.

I see this, and I hear only a few people
got all the money in this world, the rest
count their pennies to buy bread and butter.

Below that cool green sea of money,
millions and millions of people fight to live,
search for pearls in the darkest depths
of their dreams, hold their breath for years
trying to cross poverty to just having something.

The children are dead already. We are killing them,
that is what America should be saying;
on TV, in the streets, in offices, should be saying,
"We aren't giving the children a chance to live."

Mexicans are taking our jobs, they say instead.
What they really say is, let them die,
and the children too.

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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."

ROOTS

Ten feet beyond the back door
the cottonwood tree
is a steaming stone of beginning time.
A battle-scarred warrior
whose great branches knock
telephone poles aside, mangle trailers
to meager tin-foil in its grasp,
clip chunks of stucco off my house
so sparrows can nest in gaps,
wreck my car hood, splinter
sections of my rail fence,
all,
with uncompromising nostalgia
for warring storms.

I am like this tree
Spanish saddle-makers copied
dressing from.
The dense gray wrath of its bark
is the trackway
shipwrecked captains, shepherds, shepherdesses,
barn-burners, fence cutters followed.
Camped here at the foot of Black Mesa,
beneath this cottonwood,
leaned muskets on this trunk,
stuck knife blades into its canyon valley bark,
red-beaded tasseled arm sleeves clashing
with each throw, as the knife
pierced cattail or bamboo
pinched in bark.

I come back to myself
near this tree, and think of my roots
in this land—

Papa and me working in the field.
I tell Papa, "Look, here comes someone."
He rises, pulls red handkerchief from back pocket,
takes sombrero off, wipes sweat from brow.
You drive up to our field. Unclip briefcase
on the hood of your new government blue car.
Spread official papers out, point with manicured fingers,
telling Papa what he must do.
He lifts a handful of earth by your polished shoe,
and tells you in Spanish, it carries the way of his life.
Before history books were written,
family blood ran through this land,
thrashed against mountain walls and in streams,
fed seeds, and swords, and flowers.
"My heart is a root in this earth!" he said in Spanish, angrily.
You didn't understand Spanish, you told him,
you were not to blame for the way things must be.
The government must have his land.
The Land Grant Deed was no good.
You left a trail of dust in our faces.

I asked Papa how a skinny man like you
could take our land away.
He wept that night, wept a strong cry,
as if blood were pouring from his eyes,
instead of tears. I remember hearing his voice
coming through the walls into my bedroom,
"They twist my arms back and tear the joints,
and they crush my spine with their boots . . ."

In my mind's eye I looked into the man's face
for a long time. I stared at his car for a long time,
and knew as a child I would carry the image
of the enemy in my heart forever.

Henceforth,
I will call this cottonwood
Father.

DREAM INSTRUCTIONS

While in bed, dreams came,
still thinking of the *curandero's* words,
". . . flood of that bull's blood
will not be wasted. . . ."
I thought of blood wasted, fell asleep, dreams came—

I appear entering prison.
Body part of me asleep,
face cringing, hands tightening,
terrified,
saying *no, no, no. . . .*

I am going in,
looking around at bars and walls
collared with barbwire,
guard huts.
Change of shifts,
horrible sounds of guard keys
lifted in a tin bucket on pulley to guard towers,
rattling
like a sick man
with a tube in his throat
trying to breathe.

I awaken.
Another appears—
Bearded, on a motorcycle.
My own voice calls out to him, whistles, wakes me.
Men I once was want me to return to their skins,
want me to fill their bodies,
again.

During afternoon siesta—
Winged serpent,
wings warped and scarred
wrap round its skeleton.
Wings beat
blistering hot winds

756 March

are like those people wrecked on a mountain,
wrapped in beggar's clothing, struggling up steep
cliffs. In the frozen faces there is a grim knowledge,
in the moustache sprinkled with snow,
the open eyes and snow-laden eyelashes,
Indios y Chicanos have that stolid death
in their features from knowing the snow's cold, cold extremes.
The dead sheep and cattle, the roads blocked,
no work, the fruits and fields destroyed:
they have known the snow another way, along sidewalks
of any major city, dressed in humble clothing, their breath laboring
against the cold, gritting teeth, blowing on their hands,
standing in soup and employment lines, toes numb
in crusty shoes, in the midst of the storm they exude
a tenderness of loss, their lives like snow
footprints slowly melting.

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.

SPRING

With one mighty tug and push, conservancy engineers
in Northern New Mexico
open water gates—snow-melt,
brimming northern lakes, and streams
gush, lunge, and hurl down Río Abajo to community fields,
fill the dry ditches and canals, clashing
like great banging orchestra cymbals
against dirt. Plants, bushes, weeds
uncurl, furl out along my ditch,
ants float on islands of leaves,
past pyramids of beer cans,
tadpoles fuse to the water
in swirls of brown mist,
catfish fin beneath driftwood
and stew the water dark brown.

All things pull and strain. The ditch swells
into a great marketplace, where death and life
are exchanged.

A pair of light blue-grey doves skim water surface,
geese veer down, royal couriers
flap-landing in gusty sprinkles, then
serenely floating like white flags of peace,
drifting in pairs, through glare and shadows,
as crawdads, spiders, snakes and frogs
peer from mud and weed corners.

From each unfolding lilac leaf
a blue-green arctic haze glimmers,
from feathers dark winter melts,
from eyes glide out cold deeps,
everything bears a new light.
The crane is breaking ice with its call,
long-legged spider skitters
to birth-thawing rhythms of the shore,

as spring finally arrives,
glistening the dead-slag of winter
in all creatures,
as they emit that special light
they do.

AT NIGHT

I lie in bed
and hear the soft throb of water
surging through the ditch,
from extreme to extreme water bounds,
clumsy country boy,
stumbling over fallen logs and rubber tires
to meet a lover
who awaits in her parents' house, window open.

As I used to for love.

Now gray-black hair,
vigorous cheeks, weathered brow, chapped lips,
dismal thoughtful eyes,
I float in brown melancholy on the lazy currents
of memory, studying my reflection
on the water this night,
with distant devotion,
a swimmer who has forgotten how to swim.

GOD'S COMING

I await the burning books
of lilac buds
to flame. This year I promise myself
to read them
as they are opening
before they burn away.
Along the front of my house
silent tombs of lilac bushes
await God's coming,
rising out of each bud
fleshed with petals.
Now, He grafts Himself
to dirt, piecing Himself together
a worm.

INVASIONS

for Eddie

6:00 a.m.

I awake and leave to fish
the Jemez.

Coronado rode
through this light, dark
green brush,
horse foaming saliva,
tongue red and dry
as the red cliffs.

Back then the air
was bright and crisp
with Esteban's death
at the hands of Zuñi warriors.
Buffalo God, as he was called,
was dead, dead, dead,
beat the drums
and rattled gourds.

The skin of the Moor
was black
as a buffalo's nose,
hair kinky
as buffalo shag-mane.

No seven cities
of Cibola gold were found.

Horses waded the Jemez,
white frothing currents
banking horse bellies,
beading foot armor,
dripping from sword scabbards.

I wade in
up to my thighs
in jeans,
throw hooked

salmon egg bait
out in shadowy shallows
beneath overhanging cottonwood, and
realize

I am the end result
of Conquistadores,
Black Moors,
American Indians,
and Europeans,
bloods rainbowing
and scintillating
in me

like the trout's flurrying
flank scales
shimmering a fight
as I reel in.

With trout
on my stringer
I walk downstream
toward my truck.
"How'd you do?" I ask
an old man walking past,

"Caught four—biting pretty good
down near that elm."

I walk south
like Jemez and Pecos pueblos
during 1690 uprisings,
when Spanish came north
to avenge their dead.
Indians fled
canyon rock shelters,
settling in present day
open plains.
Trout flails like a saber
dangling from scabbard stringer
tied to my belt,
chop-whacking long-haired weeds.

Peace here now. Bones
dissolved, weapons rusted.
I stop, check my sneaker prints
in moist sandy bank.
Good deep marks.
I clamber up an incline,
crouch in bushes
as my ancestors did,
peer at vacation houses
built on rock shelves,
sun decks and travel trailers—
the new invasion.

MI TÍO BACA EL POETA DE SOCORRO

Antonio Ce De Baca
chiseled on stone chunk gravemarker,
propped against a white wooden cross.
Dust storms faded the birth and death numbers.
Poet de Socorro,
whose poems roused *la gente*
to demand their land rights back,
'til one night—that terrible night,
hooves shook your earthen-floor
one-room adobe, lantern flame
flickered shadowy omens on walls,
and you scrawled across the page,
"¡Aquí vienen! ¡Aquí vienen!
Here they come!"
Hooves clawed your front yard,
guns glimmering blue
angrily beating at your door.

You rose.

Black boots scurried round four adobe walls,
trampling flower beds.
They burst through the door.
It was a warm night, and carried the scent
of their tobacco, sulphur, and leather.
Faces masked in dusty hankies,
men wearing remnants of Rinche uniforms,
arms pitchforked you out,
where arrogant young boys on horses
held torches and shouted,
"Shoot the Mexican! Shoot him!"
Saliva flew from bits
as horses reared from you,
while red-knuckled recruits held reins tight,
drunkenly pouring whiskey over you,
kicking you up the hill by the yucca,