

ALBERTO YBARRA

Corazón Fuerte, 2011
Oil on linen, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

American Orphan

As much as I would like to imbue my imprisonment with a cavalier claim that it was filled with adventure, it was anything but: unlike the fools in those fucking prison movies who glamorize it, truth was, I was a stupid twenty-two-year-old when I got busted, eight cents in my pocket and a court-appointed lawyer.

Fuck the adventure.

For years I had to gaze at the morning moon obscured by concertina wire, watch the sunrise peering through a scratch in the painted cell window. My body was accustomed to a 9 x 12 world, and freedom was so large and endless it dwarfed me to a speck.

Presented with a view of the world devoid of bars, walls, and razor wire, I was wary. But for the first time in a long time, I felt the hand at my throat unclench its chokehold, although my breathing was labored as I tried to adjust to the clean morning air.

At twenty-eight, late August of '78, I was released from the Youngsville prison in Colorado, completing six years for selling heroin. Because of my defiance, or unwillingness to get along with the administration, I ended up doing hard time behind the walls.

On the way out, I dropped my box of notebooks and letters off to go to my sister's, and picked up my airline ticket to New Mexico and a hundred bucks.

One never knows what to expect when passing through the big gates, but the moment my foot fell on freedom ground, I had trouble walking. For a few seconds I drifted in so much freedom it scared the hell out of me. I had the feeling I was falling, and felt like I had just landed on a new planet with no gravity.

One small step for criminal-kind, one giant step for Orlando Lucero, ambling as awkward as an astronaut in space; with the immensity of the sky and earth before me, it was hard to get my balance.

Staring at the stars, for a moment I ceased to exist.

I found myself floating in an aimless pause, insignificant, in a limbo between the end of a criminal sentence and the beginning of a new... life? Insubstantial as vapor willowing out of the heating vent—so much space—I didn't have the words to name this unknown world, and knew that if I couldn't find them to place myself in it, I'd be as lost as a tortured soul wandering a wasteland.

No rash decisions, I thought; definitely no more deal-

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ing. I was a different man; moving lightly on my feet, looking at earth from a whole different perspective—the dirt, the weeds, the trees so close and weighted made them seem to be thriving and vital, and I greeted them with a slight nod as if their essence could acknowledge my release. I managed to carry myself into their world, heel to toe, into the nothingness of the dark heart of freedom.

I'd finished my time, yet a sadness shrouded me—the sadness of leaving so many friends behind—and it clothed me like the feverish temperature of my skin when I had a cold.

But slowly, between the gate and the van, my life tore from its familiar ruins, and the state prison paperwork that condemned me as a criminal scattered behind me in the dawn, and a whole new narrative of my life was about to begin.

I mentally noted a goodbye prayer for those left behind, and a help-me-Lord prayer as I stepped toward the white van idling in the employee parking lot.

We drove away.

I glanced behind at the prison that now seemed to have a strange force drawing me back, but I had no regrets or reluctance.

I wasn't coming back.

As the guard locked the van doors and shifted into gear

and we turned down a road, that massive spaceship of steel and concrete, that hulking empire of the doomed, sailed away into the dark horizon without me, collecting more debris of more broken lives and I tell you LOUD, LOUDER, the morning moon shone on me and murmured her affirmation, whispering, You, O Soul Shifter, you endured the dreamer's ritual and became a spirit-man.

* * *

Moments like this cry out for an epiphany—a climax—like in those Ben-Hur and Moses movies I watched as a child: walls topple, steel melts, a prophet appears wielding a biblical lightning staff to command legions of lions roaring and scattering across the desert, Gods on winged horses descend from mountaintops—but no, in a time such as this of epidemic mediocrity, pervasive corruption, and endless wars, if a cello player were to appear and strum the sweetest dirge to commemorate this memorable crossroads, he'd be arrested for trespassing and playing without a permit and have his cello confiscated.

Nothing but the exhaust pipe sputtering, Waylon Jennings on the radio, a dumb guard smoking discount rez cigarettes, and three other convicts threatening to kill each other.

One black, one white, one Chicano, just like in *The Dirty Dozen* movie with Clint Eastwood, except we were a Dirty Four of grungy outlaws. I could hear the whistle used in those spaghetti westerns singeing the air.

I smiled with irony at my reflection in the window—no four romantic knights were we, released by the king after rehab to go forth to retrieve the Grail—nay, brother and sister; nor were our spirits lifted buoyantly in awe of this wonderfully enchanted morning—we were criminalized into fucking killers, robbers, drug addicts, our souls maimed with a seething vow to avenge our suffering on the innocent.

It was business as usual, happening twenty thousand times all over America every single day with men like us who'd been broken into resentful brutes, who had waited a long time for this hour to fall on our hearts to purge our rage on society for the torture inflicted upon them.

These three? Having lived in cells next to each other for decades with nothing to do, had spent each day fantasizing horrible ways to kill each other. Well, sometimes

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El Camino Largo, 2011

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COURTESY THE ARTIST

that nasty joker in the deck shows up when you’re holding the best of hands.

And with each mile, they started swearing how they’d dismember the other two once we arrived at the terminal.

It could’ve been thirty minutes or three hours, I don’t know; I was looking out the window. On the glass my face skimmed the ground, rolling over motels and scrub brush, until we finally glided under the corrugated airport terminal.

The guard said, “Aaright, here’s where Daddy leaves his bitches,” and he swung to the curb and pulled out as quickly, leaving us there like four disabled ducks at a busy intersection.

We stood for some minutes saying nothing, just standing there, until the Chicano said, “Need a drink before I kill you fucks.”

The skinhead and black followed and I took up the rear, thinking, *When water rises to the chin, find a straw.*

In case some crazy shit broke out, I took an end stool at the bar and ordered water. The skinhead snarled *motherfucker* and ordered Jack and coke; the Chicano, tequila; the black, vodka.

They stared in the mirror and the Chicano said, “We next to each other for twenty years in the dungeon, and then all released at the same time. You right—mutha-fucker!” He downed his shot, and shot two fingers at the bartender. “Double.”

“Cruel-and-unusual-punishment class action suit.” The skinhead licked his lips. “Here here, to the one who filed it.” He drained his glass.

“Be how we did,” the black brother gazed at his face in the mirror, pleased with it, and raised his glass for another. “I’ll take it any way they give it.”

“Who’d ever believe that’s how we got out. None of us even knew about the suit.” I shook my head. “Why’d you wanna kill each other, anyway?” I asked, knowing you could never ask this in prison.

“You a fucking counselor?” the brother intoned.

I replied, “We ain’t inside anymore; I can ask.” And after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, I added, “I’d be making mad money with you crazy mother fuckers if I was your counselor.”

“I had a million reasons to gut yous in there, and out here I can’t scratch up nary a one,” the skinhead offered.

“Toast,” I said, raising my glass of water, “to a killing averted.”

“Wouldn’t speak so soon,” the Chicano grinned.

“Hey-hey,” the other two assholes chimed.

They ordered more drinks and continued sitting there staring at the mirror, wondering with their eyes what the fuck had happened, trying to measure the incalculable damage years in prison had inflicted upon them. Not wanting to notice the sorrow in their eyes from what could have been and never was, they stared at their glasses and ordered more numb-juice.

They were getting buzzed, and I said goodbye, and they wrote their addresses on napkins—a pool hall, a bar, and a laundry-mat in Oregon—in case I was ever in the area and needed drugs.

Feeling bad for us mangy homeless criminals, I went up the escalator and headed for my gate. I was in the same sorry condition, no home or address, but I was heading to New Mexico to jump-start my life.

Jimmy Santiago Baca was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Raised by his grandmother and later sent to an orphanage, he was a runaway by age thirteen. It was after Baca was sentenced to five years in a maximum security prison that he learned to read and write. His many honors include the Pushcart Prize, the American Book Award, the International Hispanic Heritage Award, and the prestigious International Prize.

JIMMY SANTIAGO
BACA

Esai 1-01-04

Esai, celebrate your mixed blood—
Ibericos, Phoenicians, Celts, Visigoths, Romans, Moors,
Olmecs, Mayans, Toltecs, Aztecs, and Incas,
seeds buried in your bone marrow
flourish a forest in your blood—
in the rainforest of your black hair
sacred quetzal birds caw,
and ancient origins of Indio/Arab/Jewish rivers
mix as they rush through you,
mimicking tears of one tribe, laughter of another,
in you a thousand lives celebrate and mourn,
your heart was the size of a pomegranate seed,
quenched both
to rise up in rioting blossoms and fiercely
bow before the dawn’s splendor:
on hands and knees
you scuttle around the house,
growl like a jaguar,
your brown-hazel eyes peek around the kitchen
archway,
flash behind the bedroom French doors,
you scamper on all fours like a young prong-deer
as I chase you, nonsense words giggle out from your
throat
a flock of egrets
exploding across the living room,

swoop into the dormant fireplace, vanish up
the chimney toward the sky.
In the sunroom, sunlight pierces the shadows
quivering to reveal your jaguar jaws
clamped around a yellow rubber duck—
Tribal infant,
you raise your arms to the sky,
standing up against the couch,
testing your stance, your balance shaky,
your small rose-leaf hands release from the couch
clap a thankfulness prayer,
your eyes dart at me
and I smile at you, now changed into a tawny fawn,
alert ears twitching for danger
before you incline your sleek neck and sip water
from the river of life running between us.

Later in the morning,
in the bathtub, about to cry, choking breath back,
almost-tears transform into a cough then change to a
whine
and end up as laughter—