

# A PLACE TO STAND

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

*Jimmy Santiago Baca was born in New Mexico, the youngest child of teenage parents: a Mexican boy and a fair-skinned girl of Spanish descent. Jimmy's father soon ruined the marriage with his drinking, sporadic violence, and womanizing, and Jimmy's mother ran away with an affluent white businessman. She bleached her hair, changed her Spanish name, and left her three children with their paternal grandparents in the tiny town of Estancia, New Mexico.*

*For a few years, Jimmy was happy living in his grandparents' village, roaming in the woods, milking cows with his uncle, and playing innocent games. But after the sudden death of his grandfather, he and his brother were sent to an orphanage in Albuquerque. (Their sister stayed to help their grandmother.) Six turbulent years later, Jimmy's penchant for running away landed him in a detention center for boys. By the age of fifteen, he was living on his own, working odd jobs, and drifting in a haze of alcohol and drugs.*

*In his early twenties, Baca began dealing heroin for Mexican smugglers and was indirectly involved in a sale to an undercover officer. During the subsequent bust, a fellow drug dealer shot and wounded an FBI agent, and in 1973 Baca was sentenced to five years without parole at a maximum-security prison in Arizona.*

*This is where this type of story usually ends, or, more likely, becomes the prelude to an even sadder story. But Baca, under inhumane and terrifying conditions, discovered gifts that he could previously only have imagined.*

*During his six years in prison, four of them spent in isolation, he held on to sanity by taking mental trips through his past, mostly to his grandparents' village: the red harvest moon in the sky, the smell of smoke from the chimneys, the Spanish Mass on the radio in the parlor. By chance one Christmas, Baca received a letter from a Christian missionary. It was the first letter he'd ever gotten. He could barely read or write, so it took him hours to read it and fashion a short reply. Then, though it required tremendous effort, Baca began to send his correspondent daily outpourings of self and soul. The missionary sent him a dictionary and, recognizing a spark of creativity in Baca's urgent voice, arranged for him to correspond with the poet Virginia Love Long. With her guidance and the encouragement of other prisoners, Baca began to compose and eventually publish poems, which appeared in numerous small literary magazines, including *The Sun*.*

*Today Baca is the author of seven books and a recipient of the American Book Award. He tours the country giving free readings in schools, reservations, and housing projects. His most recent books are *Healing Earthquakes*, a collection of poetry, and *A Place to Stand*, a memoir of his childhood and time in prison, both from Grove Press. In the following excerpt from *A Place to Stand*, Baca describes how he earned the respect of the other prisoners, but then lost it again when he protested the administration's decision to deny him an education.*

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— Colleen Donfield

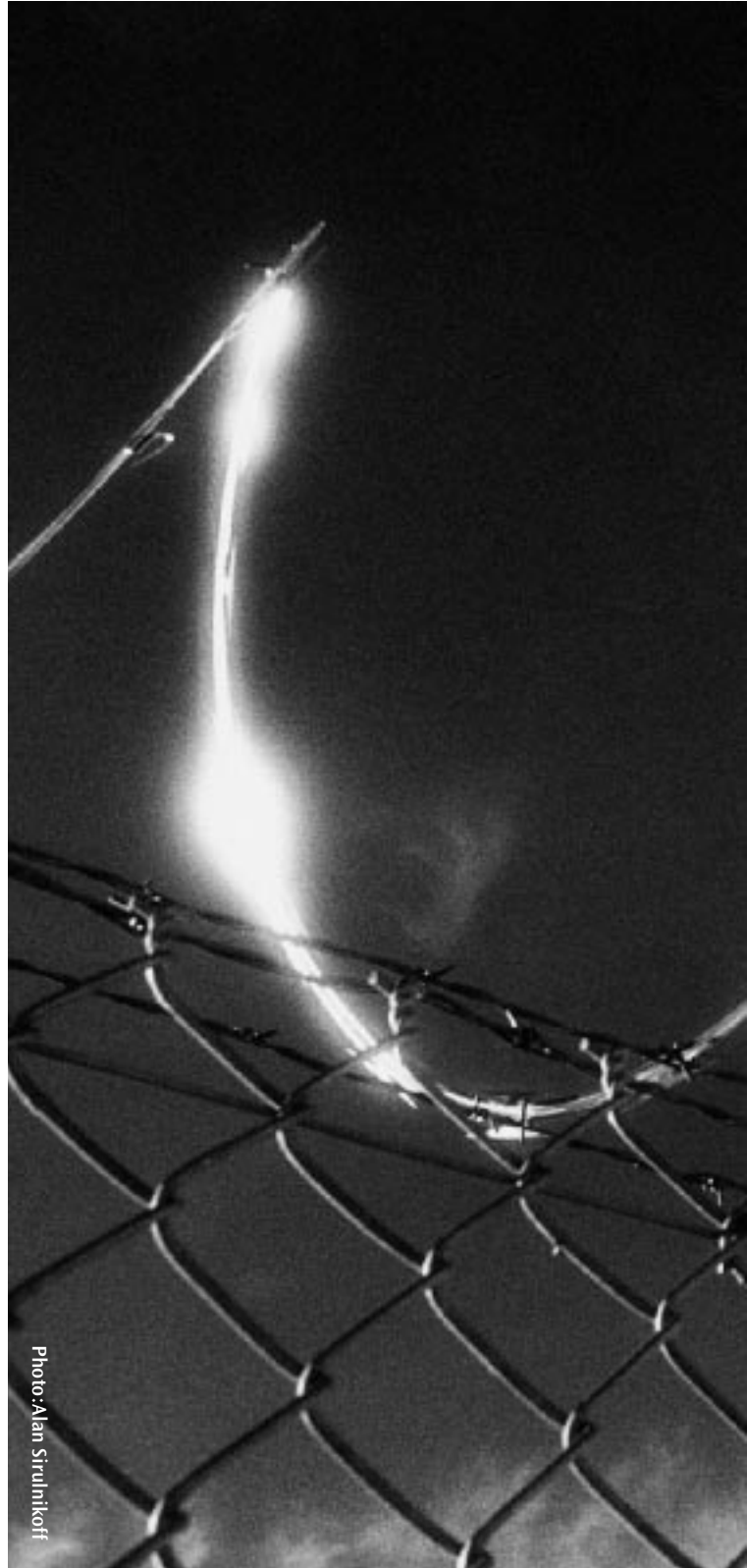


Photo: Alan Strunkhoff

## ON NOVEMBER 16, 1973,

I changed my original plea of innocent to a plea bargain of guilty of possession of heroin with intent to distribute. When I'd first balked at pleading guilty, my public defender hadn't even pretended an interest in my innocence. "Plead guilty," he had said, "and stop wasting everyone's time." Nor was he bothered by the fact that I couldn't read the papers I had signed. I was a negligible nuisance to him. He was in a hurry for me to agree so he could leave right away. By the chummy way he laughed and talked with the prosecutor, it was obvious they were good buddies and the least of their concerns was a twenty-one-year-old illiterate Chicano kid. When the judge entered, I recognized him as the guy who owned the Texaco station where I used to fill up the truck once a week. He usually had on oily overalls and a greasy cap instead of a black robe, with a socket wrench instead of a gavel in his hand. He gave no indication that he'd ever seen me. After I pled guilty, he set a sentencing date, and I was led back to jail.

To keep my mind from worrying about what my sentence might be, I kept busy scouring the drunk tanks, slapping lice from rancid mattresses with a broom, scrubbing spit and blood off grime-caked walls, and carrying blankets stiff with urine and vomit to the laundry room. In the afternoon, I'd mop tiers, cart meals to cons on lockdown, hand out toiletries, and run notes, or "kites," from one con to another.

I'd been flirting with this blond-haired girl, Tara, a clerk at the booking desk who worked the graveyard shift. She'd mentioned that she was going to college, and I thought she was pretty cool until one night when I was dusting the filing cabinets. Two detectives came in, roughly shoving a drunk Chicano to the booking desk. I didn't like being around the detectives, so I started to leave, but Tara asked me to put away the wax bottles and roll the cord up on the big buffing machine. Meanwhile, they'd stripped the drunk down, but he resisted their efforts to take off the talisman pouch around his neck. I knew it was considered magic, to protect his soul and ward off evil. He howled in terror, but they laughed as they ripped it off. Tara joined in their fun, chuckling over the drunk's superstitions. After locking the drunk up, the detectives went into the bathroom to wash their hands. When Tara returned to get the Chicano's file from the record cabinets, I reached through the bars, swiped one of her college textbooks, and hid it under my jail overalls. After putting the mop and buffer away, I told the duty guard that I was done for the evening, and he escorted me to my cell.

Sitting on my cot, I smoked a cigarette, opened the big hardcover book, and leafed through it. Parts of the text were highlighted with yellow, and on page margins she'd scribbled notes in red ink. I set my cigarette down on the concrete floor and murmured the words, sounding out the letters deliberately to see if I could understand them. I had trouble. It seemed each letter was fighting me. While sounding them out, I had to remember what they meant when combined. It was a lot harder than I'd expected. As I struggled, time, jail noise, cells, and walls all vanished. I was engrossed in the simple story of a

man and his pond. How he spent his days there. How he loved to watch the birds. How he sat on its bank and meditated. How he compared the water's sensuous currents to making love with a woman.

Each letter had its own voice, and as I put the sounds together to make words, they told a story. The more I read, the more I thought about the pond in Estancia. I put my finger under each word, sounding them out all the way to the bottom of the page. It was confusing, but I gathered it was about a man named Wordsworth and another named Coleridge. Words-worth and Cool-ridge. Word cool, cool word. Wool. Coolo. I smiled because *coolo* in slang meant "stingy chump." Farther down, breaking off from the rest of the long-lined text, were shorter lines called a poem. I spent a long time figuring it out, until I was interrupted by my neighbor Enrique. He asked me to brew some coffee, and I took out the red Folger's coffee can I'd found in one of the vacated cells and filled it with water. I tore some pages out of the book and lit them to heat the water. I crouched on my haunches and watched the words burn on the page, the balled-up paper unwrinkling into dark ash.

## I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD

the first time I ever set foot in prison. A policeman came to the door one night and told Mom she was needed at the jail. She took me with her. When we arrived at the booking desk, the captain asked, "You married to Damacio Baca?"

"Yes."

"He was arrested for drunk driving. His bail's a hundred. Sign here and make sure he appears for court."

"What are they?"

"His release papers."

The captain studied her hesitation.

"He stays till his appearance then." The captain shrugged, surprised at her, and led us past the holding cells to the drunk tank.

It smelled like urine and whiskey vomit. I held tightly to Mother's hand. The corridors were dark and gloomy, and the slightest sound echoed ominously in the hall. We stopped in front of a cell where men sat and stared at the wall in front of them. Some were crumpled on the floor where they had passed out.

"Oye, Damacio, *despierta!*" the captain cried, and banged the bars with his baton.

The inmates glanced at us with hung-over disinterest, and one shook my father awake. He rose in a groggy stupor. Cautiously stepping over bodies, losing and regaining his footing, he approached the bars. He rubbed his face and blinked his red eyes.

"Did you have to bring *him?*" he asked accusingly. Then he added, clearly hurt that I was there, "I don't want him seeing me like this. Get me out of here."

"No," Mom said.

He stared at her, shaking with rage. "Listen, you, don't —" He looked at me and made an effort to control himself.

We stood in silence for a few seconds. Then Mom cried,

“Stay away from us!”

He reached his hand through the bars to me, but Mom yanked me away, her hand painfully gripping mine. I wanted to tell her not to leave Father in there. I feared he might get hurt or be swallowed up by the darkness, and we would never see him again. The green-painted bars, the guards with guns and keys and surly attitudes, the caked grime on the walls and floor, the unshaven men with no teeth and swollen red eyes and scratched faces — these filled me with terror. I tried to free my hand from Mother’s to go back to him, but she squeezed harder and dragged me along.

“Get back here!” My father’s voice was strained by both aggression and self-pity, but Mom opened the door and we left. I wanted to tell him I was sorry. I didn’t want to leave him in jail. Only when he was drinking did he wreck the car, threaten to beat Mom up, lose his paycheck gambling, and sometimes not show up for days. He was not drinking now. We should have let him come home with us. When he would stagger in drunk, Míeyo and Martina would hide under the bed or in the closet, but I wasn’t afraid of him. I would hold his hand and guide him to his chair, and he’d put me on his lap and moan drunkenly about how sorry he was for drinking and not being a better father. Even as scared as I was by the jail, I wanted to sit on the floor outside the cell bars and hold his hand because he needed me.

In time I would become all too familiar with such places, not only with those very same cells down on Garcia Street, but with a long string of others as well, on different if equally dusty streets, with different but similar jailers, different but similar men. That initial encounter, however, never left me. It remained a fixed, haunting reference point to which I would return time and again. Whether I was approaching it or seeking escape from it, jail always defined in some way the measure of my life.

## THE JUDGE SENTENCED

me to a mandatory no-parole five to ten years, with five years flat, day for day, in a maximum-security state prison at Florence. They were giving me six months’ time served — the three I had put in at Albuquerque awaiting extradition, and the three at the Yuma jail. I was twenty-one, and I figured I’d be out when I was twenty-six. It was no surprise that the judge had given me the harshest sentence allowed by law. The nuns had always said I was a bad boy, and here was the judge making the same condemnation. I was sure I was convicted mostly because of who I was, expunged from a society that didn’t want people like me in it. I sat back in my wooden chair as they signed the paperwork and I stared down at the armrests, studying the various layers of paint, the chips and cracks. How many hands had gripped them? I wondered. What lives were attached to those hands, what dreams were shattered, what sorrows were they trying to squeeze out of their souls?

## I HAD MADE UP MY MIND

to blend in at Florence State Prison, attract no attention, do

my time, and get out alive. It’s true, as convicts know, that you seldom make real friends in prison, just acquaintances, allied by mutual need. All of us had lived in projects, reservations, and barrios, as addicts, hustlers, or nothing at all, existing in aimless desperation. And though we didn’t want to admit it, many of us were begrudgingly relieved to have three meals a day, a bed, and a roof over our heads. The key was to survive prison, not to let it kill your spirit, crush your heart, or have you wheeled out with your toe tagged.

Florence is in the desert, so, like almost everyone else, I wore boxer shorts, dressing in prison blues and brogans only for family visits, counselor interviews, chow time, or trips to the infirmary. Diagnostic Center, the block I was temporarily placed in, housed all new arrivals. Even if you had been to prison ten times, you started here — the newest, most high-tech cellblock in the yard, four tiers high, thirty cells to a tier, facing one another across a broad landing. There were three cellblocks in the main yard, all with various security levels, and every block had one or two tiers reserved for special cases: Nut Run for the mentally disturbed; lockdown cells for suspected gang members; the Dungeon for dangerous psychos; isolation cells with varying degrees of deprivation; and the maximum-security and protective-custody cells. For various reasons, I would eventually visit all of them.

Every day, I anxiously waited for my number to be called for a counselor interview. Once on the yard, I made twelve cents an hour working and I could buy street cigarettes, toiletries, and candy at the canteen; learn a trade or get my GED; even go to college if I could get smart enough. In the general prison population, you were allowed to have a TV and a radio and to go to the exercise field, the movies, and the library. To break up the boring hours, I’d gotten into doing push-ups and sit-ups, standing at the bars watching the other cons, then exercising some more. The only thing that broke up the monotony was rapping to Macaron, the con in the next cell.

My harmonica had been confiscated in Albuquerque, but it had made its way here, and I was jamming a Leadbelly blues one day when Macaron asked to borrow it. I expected him to blow a few notes, but he didn’t. Later he handed it back to me through the bars in three pieces, the main body and two side plates, charred inside where he had cooked heroin. I didn’t know how to respond. I knew from my past street life that if you let a guy get over on you, the rest of the wolves will follow. I paced up and down, thinking. Should I tell him he had to buy me a new one? This would lead to a fight, and I didn’t want trouble. There was a thin line between fear and respect. He might be testing me, and I knew if I didn’t say anything he might think I was a punk. I heard him stirring next door, rousing out of his heroin doze. I was trying to decide what to do when he tapped my bars and his hand shot around with two packs of Camels. That showed respect. I put my harmonica back together and ultimately found that the heat had seasoned the reeds and allowed them to bend more easily when I blew into it. I was later glad that I didn’t jump to any conclusions, because Macaron invited me to sit at his table in the dining room. This was a big deal — it meant I was being accepted.

*(end of excerpt)*