

Jimmy Santiago Baca

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Born: January 05, 1952 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, United States

Other Names: Baca, Jose Santiago; Baca, Jimmy

Nationality: American

Occupation: Poet

WRITINGS:

POETRY

- *Jimmy Santiago Baca* (chapbook), Rock Bottom (Santa Barbara, CA), 1978.
- *Immigrants in Our Own Land: Poems*, Louisiana State University Press (Baton Rouge, LA), 1979, expanded edition published as *Immigrants in Our Own Land and Earlier Poems*, New Directions (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Swords of Darkness*, Mango Publications (San Jose, CA), 1981.
- *What's Happening*, Curbstone Press (Willimantic, CT), 1982.
- *Poems Taken from My Yard*, Timberline (Fulton, MO), 1986.
- *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*, introduction by Denise Levertov, New Directions (New York, NY), 1987.
- *Black Mesa Poems*, New Directions (New York, NY), 1989.
- *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio* (poetry, stories, and essays), Red Crane Books, 1992.
- *In the Way of the Sun*, Grove Press (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Set This Book on Fire!*, Cedar Hill (Mesa, AZ), 1999, 2nd edition, 2001.
- *Healing Earthquakes: A Love Story in Poems*, Grove Press (New York, NY), 2001.
- *C-Train (Dream Boy's Story): And, Thirteen Mexicans*, Grove Press (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Winter Poems along the Rio Grande*, New Directions (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Spring Poems along the Rio Grande*, New Directions (New York, NY), 2007.
- *Rita and Julia*, San Diego City Works Press (San Diego, CA), 2008.
- *Poemas Selectos = Selected Poems*, New Directions (New York, NY), 2009.

OTHER

- (Author of introduction) Jim Nye, *Aftershock: Poems and Prose from the Vietnam War*, Cinco Puntos Press, 1991.
- *Los tres hijos de Julia* (play; title means "The Three Sons of Julia"; also see below), first produced at Los Angeles Theatre Center, spring, 1991.
- *Bound by Honor* (screenplay), Hollywood Pictures, 1993.
- (Author of poem) Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Que Linda la Brisa*, photographs by James Drake, University of Washington Press (Seattle, WA), 2000.
- *The Lone Wolf: The Story of Pancho Gonzalez* (screenplay), HBO Productions, 2000.
- *A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet* (memoir), Grove Press (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Importance of a Piece of Paper* (short stories), Grove Press (New York, NY), 2004.
- (With Steven Henry Madoff, Cormac McCarthy, and James Drake) *James Drake* (nonfiction), University of Texas Press (Austin, TX), 2008.

- *A Glass of Water* (novel), Grove Press (New York, NY), 2009.
- (With ReLeah Cossett Lent) *Adolescents on the Edge: Stories and Lessons to Transform Learning*, Heinemann (Portsmouth, NH), 2010.
- *Stories from the Edge*, Heinemann (Portsmouth, NH), 2010.

Contributor to anthologies, including *New Worlds of Literature*, edited by Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter, Norton (New York, NY), 1989; *The Pushcart Prize XIV*, edited by Bill Henderson, Penguin (New York, NY), 1989; and *An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, University of Georgia Press (Athens, GA), 1989. Contributor of poetry to periodicals, including *Mother Jones*, *Ironwood*, *Bilingual Review*, *Harbor Review*, *Confluencia*, *Las Americas*, *New Kauri*, *Quarterly West*, *Puerto del Sol*, and others. Also editor of *The Heat*, an anthology. Baca has read from his work and provided an interview for a sound recording in the Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape at the Library of Congress, 2004.

Writer. Teacher and lecturer at universities. Black Mesa Enterprises (nonprofit), founder; Cedar Tree (nonprofit inner-city poetry workshops), founder, 2004.

National Endowment for the Arts Literary Fellowship, 1986; Ludwig Vogelstien award in poetry, 1987; Pushcart Prize, 1988; American Book Award for poetry, Before Columbus Foundation, 1988, for *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*; Wallace Stevens Endowed Chair, Yale University, 1989; Berkeley Regents Chair, University of California--Berkeley, 1990; International Hispanic Heritage Award, 1990; Southwest Book Award, 1993; Endowed Hulbert Chair, Colorado College, 1995; Champion Poetry Bout, Taos, NM, 1996-97; Humanitarian Award, Albuquerque, NM, 1997; Discover New Writers, Barnes & Noble Booksellers, and International Prize, both 2001, both for *A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet*; Cornelius P. Turner Award, 2006; Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010. University of New Mexico, honorary Ph.D., 2003.

Born January 5, 1952, in Santa Fe, NM; married; wife's name Beatrice (a therapist); children: five.
Education: University of New Mexico, B.A., 1984. **Addresses:** Home: Albuquerque, NM. **E-mail:** baca@swcp.com.

"Sidelights"

Jimmy Santiago Baca, an ex-convict and drug addict who taught himself to read while in prison, is a highly acclaimed poet who won the prestigious American Book Award in 1988. Admired for his use of rich imagery and lyrical language, Baca, unlike a growing number of "prison writers" who inject their works with rage and desolation, writes poems dealing with spiritual rebirth and triumph over tragedy. "You really don't have time to be angry," Baca explained to Beth Ann Krier in the *Los Angeles Times*. "If you compare a life to daytime photography, my life has been more like nighttime photography. My life as a background has had darkness; the only way to survive the darkness is to have my soul flash. I'm too busy trying to capture the aspects of myself in the dark."

According to A. Gabriel Melendez in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Baca "has come to the forefront as one of the most widely read and recognized Chicano poets working today. Not the least of

Baca's contribution to Chicano literature has been to widen the critical attention directed by mainstream critics and publishers toward his own work and that of other Chicano writers." The critic continued: "Baca's poetry is to a large degree infused with elements drawn from his experiences, and the reader is struck by the recurrent themes of transformation, metamorphosis, and self-actualization that have accompanied the poet's own trajectory as an individual and a writer."

Of Chicano and Apache Indian descent, Baca lived with his grandmother after his parents divorced and abandoned him at the age of two. By the time he was five, Baca was living in a New Mexico orphanage, his father dead of alcoholism and his mother involved with a second husband who would one day murder her. Fleeing the orphanage as often as he could to hide in the *barrio* or live with relatives, Baca was eventually reduced to a life on the street. He soon abused drugs and alcohol and, by age twenty-one, was convicted of drug possession (a crime, he later told Krier, he did not commit). Sentenced to serve several years in a maximum security prison in Arizona, Baca ultimately spent four years in isolation and received electric shock treatments for a combative nature. All told, he spent six years in jail.

Despite his hardship, Baca did not lose spirit. Rather, he became intellectually invigorated during his incarceration period, teaching himself to read and write. He later divulged to Krier: "[In prison], I saw all these Chicanos going out to the fields and being treated like animals. I was tired of being treated like an animal. I wanted to learn how to read and to write and to understand. ... I wanted to know how to function in this world. Why was I so ignorant and deprived? ... The only way of transcending was through language and understanding. Had I not found the language, I would have been a guerrilla in the mountains. It was language that saved [me]." Baca began writing poetry and, at the behest of a fellow inmate, sent his works to *Mother Jones* magazine. "I took a wild chance," he related to Krier, "I didn't even know how to put the stamp on the envelope and address it." His determination was rewarded when poet and professor Denise Levertov, then poetry editor of *Mother Jones*, printed Baca's poems in the periodical. Judging Baca a talented writer, Levertov began corresponding with the inmate and eventually found a publisher for his first book.

"The biographical file on Jimmy Santiago Baca might well be read as the working sketch or preliminary study for much of the autobiographical elements that infuse his poetry," noted Melendez. "Baca began to exercise a natural and gifted ability to arch his circumstance into metaphor and sling forth his poems as personal responses to the lived experience of his early years. ... Attuned to real-life circumstances, each of Baca's books represents a concrete step in the process of rebuilding his life from the point of nonexistence that he associates with the years spent in prison."

Baca's first major collection, *Immigrants in Our Own Land: Poems*, appeared in 1979. The poems, highlighting the splendor of human existence amidst the desolate surroundings of prison life, met with rave reviews. A *Kliff* critic, for example, found Baca's works "astonishingly beautiful" for their "celebration of the human spirit in extreme situations."

Writing in the *American Book Review*, Ron Arias commended the poet's skill and versatility: "At times [Baca] can be terse, narrowly focused, directly to the point. ... Other times he can resemble an exuberant Walt Whitman in the long-lined rhythm and sweep of his emotions--expansive, wordy, even conversational." The critic concluded that Baca "is a freshly aggressive poet of many abilities. ... His is

a gifted, young vision, and judging from this collection, I get the feeling he is just warming up. I look forward to more." Melendez observed that the publication of *Immigrants in Our Own Land* "established Baca's potential as a serious and prolific new voice on the poetry scene."

Baca produced another work, the ten-poem collection *What's Happening*, in 1982. While less well-received than his first effort, the book garnered praise for its subject matter concerning both the Chicano and prison experience.

Michael Hogan, writing in the *American Book Review*, found Baca's focus on racial oppression, exploitation of laborers, and the horrors of state-run penitentiaries "powerful"; yet he also agreed with other reviewers, deciding that the poems showed a "tendency toward looseness and the prosaic. ... There is entirely too much telling and too little showing." Hogan, however, praised some of the poems' "wry humor" and "disarming ingenuousness," reflecting that Baca "is a gifted poet and has a natural lyricism in the best of his work." The reviewer declared: "One hopes to see the promise of his first book realized ... in a future, better-crafted volume."

Baca's next work, 1987's *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*, met with outstanding success, earning the American Book Award for poetry. A semi-autobiographical work that critics termed a novel in verse, the book chronicles the life of Martin, an orphaned "detrribalized" Apache who sojourns across the United States in search of permanence and meaning in his life. Intended to convey the sometimes traumatic Chicano experience in America, *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley* details the protagonist's sense of abandonment and displacement.

"Your departure uprooted me mother," writes Baca in the book, "Hallowed core of a child / your absence whittled down / to a broken doll / in a barn loft. The small burned area of memory, / where your face is supposed to be, / moons' rings pass through / in broken chain of events / in my dreams." Although enduring emotional pain, the narrator, by book's end, finds spiritual comfort. "With *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*," Melendez suggested that "Baca brings to closure that phase of his poetry that deals with loss, dejection, a searching for identity, and a sense of belonging. ... Absent are the self-destructive tendencies that typified Baca's earlier years of searching and wandering. In contrast, Martin's senses and aspirations are attuned to keeping the solemn pact he has made with life."

Critics found much to praise in *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*. While several recognized the work as a forceful sociological and cultural document, Liam Rector in the *Hudson Review* also deemed the poetry volume "a page-turner." Rector explained: "It's ... a powerful orchestration and revision of a narrative and lyrical admixture ... with an utterly compelling dramatic form." Commending Baca's descriptions, drawn with "great telescopic accuracy and poignance," the reviewer called *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley* "a book of great complicity, maturity, and finally responsibility. ... It is a contemporary hero tale."

The success of *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley* brought international attention to the former prison inmate, who found himself in demand for teaching positions and poetry readings; he also enjoyed the publication of another book, *Black Mesa Poems*, in 1989. This new phase of life--including marriage and two children--finds voice in *Black Mesa Poems*, described by Melendez as Baca's

"ultimate and most complete recuperation and revindication of his barrio, of its Chicano, working-class ethos, and of the life that he has formed around his South Valley home." The critic continued: "*Black Mesa Poems* represents the culmination of a long process of recovery and vindication through language and poetry. ... The book is underpinned by Baca's vision of a man moving from violence to peace and from personal turmoil to spiritual harmony."

The poetry collection *Healing Earthquakes: A Love Story in Poems* draws on a technique of journaling to record emotions and experiences. The poems collected are presented in the form of a journal, and the result is "a veritable torrent of confessions and prayers, autobiography and reflection," according to Donna Seaman in *Booklist*.

Discussing the themes in *Healing Earthquakes*, which include acceptance in a community, the loss of family, and contradictions in romantic relationships, a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer considered the work "a sprawling journal of epic proportions ... certainly a breakthrough book for Baca." Ilan Stavans, writing in the *Nation*, found that "overall the work is stunning, the product of a poet in control of his craft, one worth paying attention to."

Winter Poems along the Rio Grande contains personal, confessional poetry, much of which describes the terrain along the Rio Grande. More optimistic than his earlier poetry, the thirty-nine poems contained in *Winter Poems along the Rio Grande* focus on Baca's current life, and his future dreams.

Barbara Hoffert, in a *Library Journal* review, found that Baca's poetry in this collection "hooks you in and leaves you breathless." Although a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer found many of the themes and images included in the collection to be predictable, the critic assured that Baca's readers "will certainly want to come along for his heartfelt exploration of the American Southwest."

Baca has also had some success with dramas: his play *Los tres hijos de Julia* was performed in Los Angeles in 1991, and his film *Bound by Honor*, for which he cowrote the screenplay and produced, was released by a Disney company in 1993. The latter work, a story of Chicano gang culture in East Los Angeles, was rather controversial for its depiction of violence.

New York Times writer Vincent Canby, for one, said of *Bound by Honor*: "Though it's not the epic it means to be, it is not a failure."

In 2001, Baca published a memoir of his childhood and his years in prison, as well as his transformation from convict to poet, with *A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet*. Baca deals with some unbelievable material, so much so that David Romo, writing for the *Texas Observer*, initially reacted with disbelief. However, Romo concluded: "I don't think it's a 'journalistically accurate' account of Baca's life, but so what? His memoir reaches for a deeper truth. It's a search for personal and collective myths, a firsthand account that goes to the heart of an American reality that's often ignored." Nedra C. Evers, writing in *Library Journal*, called the memoir an "unflinching account of his incarceration, with its brutality and occasional benevolence," and considered the book "worth reading from both a literary and a social perspective."

A *Publishers Weekly* critic felt that "readers may find Baca's poetry more dazzling than this prose

memoir," but acknowledged that "the content of his story is so interesting and his poetry simply shines." *Booklist* contributor Seaman stated: "Baca's harrowing story will stand among the world's most moving testimonies to the profound value of literature."

Baca's *The Importance of a Piece of Paper*, is a collection of short stories, one of which has the translated title of his earlier play, "The Three Sons of Julia." This debut collection of fiction was greeted enthusiastically by critics; a contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* called the included stories "vivid, horrific, visionary, disarmingly sentimental tales," and concluded: "Let's hope for a novel to follow soon." All eight stories in the book focus on Chicano culture in the Southwest and feature characters who come from underprivileged backgrounds striving to do more with their lives than merely survive. Though a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer felt that occasionally the prose is overly literary for the stories, the critic acknowledged: "Baca has the ability to convey much in few words, and his precise use of detail delivers small, startling truths."

Noting that although this is his first fiction collection, Janet St. John commented that "his short fiction seems like second nature," in a review for *Booklist*. "Baca has enriched the [short fiction] genre and exposed another facet of his multi-dimensional literary talent," praised Cecil Johnson in his *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* review. Tim Davis, reviewing the book for *Kliatt*, found *The Importance of a Piece of Paper* to be a "superb collection."

A Glass of Water, Baca's first novel, addresses such themes as immigration, family, and persistence. Told from several points of view, this epic family saga portrays Casmiro, a Mexican-American immigrant who must raise his sons alone after his wife is murdered. Growing up without their mother, Lorenzo and Vito both search for vengeance against the unknown killer who forever altered their lives. Although the action is not presented in chronological order, it stretches from 1984 to the late 2000s, following the brothers' wildly different lives. Yet, at its heart, the novel is "about the whole immigration issue and about the families and what happens to the families once they get here," Baca told Bridget Huber in a *Mission Local* Web site interview. Baca added: "On the national news they were showing a guy who was going to be put in jail for not obeying a judge's orders. He was leaving bottles of water for the migrants because a lot of them through the years have died from dehydration. And the reason I wrote [*A Glass of Water*] was because of all of the corpses being dragged out of the desert."

This inspiration for long-form fiction provides "an auspicious beginning for one who has already found success in poetry, memoirs, and short stories," noted Lawrence Olszewski in *Library Journal*. Several critics also commented on Baca's diction, noting that, like many poets who have written novels, the prose is exquisite. "In lyrical bursts of language and fragments of scenes, and in naturalistic narrative sequences that flow gracefully for a short while, [Baca] tells the story of a contemporary Mexican family," *Dallas Morning News* contributor Alan Cheuse pointed out. Seaman, again writing in *Booklist*, felt that "the intense drama, raging physicality, molten emotions, and righteous social indictment ... make this such a tumultuous fable." However, a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor panned the "prose that never earns believability, empathy or a hold on the reader's attention." The critic then went on to call *A Glass of Water* "a potentially interesting story sabotaged by lack of discipline." Despite this rare criticism, *America's Intelligence Wire* reviewer Aurelio Sanchez stated that "the simplicity of the story shows that we are all alike, wanting the same things, dreaming the same dream." He added: "As might be expected from a poet, the imagery is striking, the prose lyrical."

While Baca continues to write poetry and teach and lecture at colleges, he also works with people in the inner city who face the same persecution he faced as an abandoned teenager. He is the founder of a nonprofit grassroots cooperative for inner-city youth called Black Mesa Enterprises. He runs a creative writing workshop with steelworkers, and the product of that class is an anthology called *The Heat*. When Barbara Stahura in the *Progressive* asked him if the reason he works with gang members, convicts, and illiterate adults is because of his own empowerment through language, he responded: "Damn right. Right into the barrios and the projects and the poor white areas. They have such a reverence for language. They can't believe the language can carry so much power, and once they get hold of that, they begin to unteach what they were taught about who they are. If they were taught to be racist or violent, language has this amazing ability to unteach all that, and make them question it. It gives them back their power toward regaining their humanity. That's why I do it."

Despite his impressive accomplishments, Baca claims to maintain the humble attitude he first fostered while in prison. Proclaiming to Krier that producing poetry still "comes down to my act of sitting down in my little room and writing what's in my heart," Baca elaborated: "I have been hailed by some of the most severe critics in the country. It doesn't mean anything. ... I just try to stay within the rules of the earth, within the boundaries of dignity. I don't do anything for money. ... I live on a day-to-day basis. ... In prison, I didn't know if I was going to be alive from day to day." An essayist for the *Dictionary of Hispanic Biography*, concluded: "Though Baca's poems speak to the experiences of people in the American Southwest, particularly the Chicano Mestizo people, his poems strike a universal chord; the quest of one individual for identity and meaning." When asked by Stahura what inspires him to write poetry, Baca responded: "What inspires you to breathe? If you want to live, you breathe."

Further Readings

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- Baca, Jimmy Santiago, *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*, introduction by Denise Levertov, New Directions (New York, NY), 1987.
- Baca, Jimmy Santiago, *A Place To Stand: The Making of a Poet*, Grove (New York, NY), 2001.
- Balassi, William, John F. Crawford, and Annie E. Eysturoy, editors, *This Is about Vision: Interviews with Southwestern Writers*, University of New Mexico Press (Albuquerque, NM), 1990.
- *Dictionary of Hispanic Biography*, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1996.
- *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 122: *Chicano Writers, Second Series*, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1992.

PERIODICALS

- *American Book Review*, January, 1982, Ron Arias, review of *Immigrants in Our Own Land: Poems*, pp. 11-12; November, 1983, Michael Hogan, review of *What's Happening*, pp. 19-20.
- *American Indian Quarterly*, winter-spring, 2003, Diane E. Benson, "Standing up against the Giant," pp. 67-79.
- *America's Intelligence Wire*, September 27, 2009, Aurelio Sanchez, review of *A Glass of Water*.
- *Booklist*, July, 2001, Donna Seaman, review of *A Place to Stand*, p. 1969; July, 2001, Donna Seaman, review of *Healing Earthquakes: A Love Story in Poems*, p. 1971; February 15, 2004,

Janet St. John, review of *The Importance of a Piece of Paper*, p. 1034; Janet St. John, review of *Spring Poems along the Rio Grande*, p. 64; September 1, 2009, Donna Seaman, review of *A Glass of Water*, p. 38.

- *Dallas Morning News*, October 18, 2009, Alan Cheuse, review of *A Glass of Water*.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, August 17, 2001, review of *A Place to Stand*, p. 66; March 26, 2004, Joan Keener, review of *The Importance of a Piece of Paper*, p. 79.
- *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, March 17, 2004, Cecil Johnson, "Collection Confirms NM Poet's Reputation as a Writer for the People."
- *Hudson Review*, summer, 1989, Liam Rector, review of *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*, pp. 393-400.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 2003, review of *The Importance of a Piece of Paper*, p. 1407; August 15, 2009, review of *A Glass of Water*.
- *Kliatt*, spring, 1980, review of *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, p. 20; May, 2005, James Beschta, review of *Winter Poems along the Rio Grande*, p. 32, Tim Davis, review of *The Importance of a Piece of Paper*, p. 38.
- *Library Journal*, May 1, 2001, Nedra C. Evers, review of *A Place to Stand*, p. 82; January, 2004, Jack Shreve, review of *The Importance of a Piece of Paper*, p. 161; July, 2004, Barbara Hoffert, review of *Winter Poems along the Rio Grande*, p. 87; November 1, 2009, Lawrence Olszewski, review of *A Glass of Water*, p. 53.
- *Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 1989, Beth Ann Krier, interview with Baca, pp. 1, 6-7.
- *Nation*, March 4, 2002, Ilan Stavans, "Lost in America," p. 27.
- *New York Times*, April 30, 1993, Vincent Canby, review of *Bound by Honor*, p. C8.
- *People*, September 30, 2003, "Second Acts," p. 123.
- *Prairie Schooner*, winter, 2002, Marcus Cafagna, review of *Set This Book on Fire!*, pp. 175-177.
- *Progressive*, January, 2003, Barbara Stahura, interview with Baca.
- *Publishers Weekly*, May 28, 2001, review of *A Place to Stand*, p. 58; June 18, 2001, review of *Healing Earthquakes*, p. 78; December 22, 2003, review of *The Importance of a Piece of Paper*, pp. 33-34; April 26, 2004, review of *Winter Poems along the Rio Grande*, p. 57.
- *Reviewer's Bookwatch*, September, 2004, Willis M. Buhle, review of *A Place to Stand*.
- *School Library Journal*, July, 2005, Coop Renner, review of *The Importance of a Piece of Paper*, p. 45.

ONLINE

- *Jimmy Santiago Baca Home Page*, <http://www.jimmysantiagobaca.com> (November 18, 2010).
- *Mission Local*, <http://missionlocal.org/> (December 10, 2009), Bridget Huber, author interview.
- *Poetry Foundation*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/> (November 18, 2010), author profile.
- *Poets.org*, <http://www.poets.org/> (September 21, 2005), author profile.
- *Texas Observer Online* (Austin, TX), <http://www.texasobserver.org/> (September 21, 2005), David Romo, "The Unbelievable Goodness of Jimmy Santiago Baca."*

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Poet Jimmy Santiago Baca and National Writing Project Fellows Kym Sheehan and Denise VanBriggle have crafted these teaching tools (textbook and curriculum) using poems from Baca's incarceration as a young man. Learn More. For educators. Audio poetry albums. High-Quality MP3 Streaming & Downloads. Poems Written and Read by Jimmy Santiago Baca. Purchase Whole Albums or Individual Poems. Never-before Released Material. Go To Poetry Albums. Jimmy. Santiago. Baca. Jimmy Santiago Baca (born January 2, 1952 in Santa Fe, New Mexico) is a Chicano-American poet and writer. 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. At the age of 13 he ran away and wound up living on the streets. When he was twenty-one he was convicted on charges of drug possession and incarcerated. He served six and a half years in prison, three of them Jimmy Santiago Baca was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on January 2, 1952. Abandoned by his parents at the age of two, he lived with one of his grandparents 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 years in prison, four of them in isolation. During this time, Baca taught himself to read and write, and he began to compose poetry.