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## What's Real and What's Not

by Jimmy Santiago Baca<sup>1</sup>

Bob greases himself up  
in his garage,  
works on his Volkswagen bus,  
away from wife and kids for a while,  
smells of oily work table,  
exhaust and oil, he grunts a valve  
to millimeter perfection, purrs  
timing screw to a coaxing rrrrr rrrr--  
saving money by doing  
his own work.  
Helping me  
with my Volkswagen, he looks up,  
oil-smudged face, greasy-handed, nostrils  
black, and says,

“This is real Jim. Feel that energy”—  
He revs it. “Runs better.  
Beats paying two hundred  
dollars, when we can do it ourselves.”

It's real.

Following week  
Bob and I go camping.  
( Confident of his work, and proud,  
he wants to try Doris,  
as he calls his van, on steep mountain terrain. )

My singleness glimmers bright,  
and my first time from home in months  
makes the land glow, the sky bluer,  
and the asphalt road  
winding to the foothills  
ignites each nerve into a sacred torch.

An ex-vet Nam grunt,  
instead of going back to New York,  
Bob became a back-packing  
stick-handed Hillman,  
herding goat flocks in Placitas,  
with ram-wool beard waist long,  
he roamed gopher-warted arroyos,

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted by permission of the author from *Black Mesa Poems*, New Directions, 1989.

up snake-burrowed coyote trails,  
healing himself in shady cedar groves  
and yucca patches.

We snuggle in our sleeping bags,  
look up at stars,  
and want our lives to be simple  
flames of natural blue gas  
rising from ground hills,  
plentiful, innocent  
from the bowels of the earth.  
From his bag, Bob stares into the dark sky,  
atop Sandia Crest, at radio transmission poles  
blink red lights of flying mortar.

Second night set camp, and at midnight  
follow boulder bottom trail  
full moon fevering in its folds, heel-skid  
from graveled crust to smooth  
stream gulley silt,  
and follow roadside stream up.

Suddenly, Bob plunges  
into Creekside brush,  
splash-wading stream,  
belly-down  
over bloated bodies  
with dead-leaf eyes,  
then he sloshes up  
bloody backs, amid dying coughs. . . .

and springs out  
of the brush as quickly,  
sopping wet, shivering  
red-faced in full Cambodian moon,  
old exhilaration of Nam patrol  
in pin-blue eyes.

I show him  
the old preacher's rock house  
clothed in a century of wild clover  
and thorned laurel,  
caved-in ceiling *vigas*  
charred by livestock rubbings and dung,  
herded here  
during bad winter storms.

On the way back to Burque next morning,  
we passed Willard, Estancia, Moriarty,  
towns hollowed by decades of blowing prairie dust.

Stones here are dream rooms  
with answers to my questions.  
Those I know from various pueblos,  
their lives are white cloaks  
my words wear on freezing nights.  
Black hounds of Bob's tires  
bound us toward the dark, hostile angels  
of the city, panting *necessity! Necessity!*  
over cattle guards and arroyo dips,  
tearing up the delicate blue stems  
of hours we spent camping.

We enter city limits,  
and the torch my body is  
dims to old darkness again.