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What's Real and What's Not

by Jimmy Santiago Baca¹

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,

¹ 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.