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A Tributary, to Poetry and its Teachers

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A Tributary, to Poetry and its Teachers

As I child I could run out the backdoor and leap over tumbleweeds and sagebrush like a jackrabbit. By the time I reached tenth grade my body lost its buoyancy, and the open spaces around my house and in my mind were being leveled, fenced off, and cul-de-saced. I felt trapped by the prefabricated structures of school and its social hierarchies.

Mr. Murray was an exception. He taught us English by day and bounced a rough bar by night. His booming voice and massive build intimidated most students, but I appreciated his sarcastic idealism. He assigned us articles about homelessness, apartheid, and civil rights. He made us recite Shakespeare out-loud. He took us on field trips to movie theaters to analyze popular culture. He took us to Anasazi ruins to see evidence of ancient history.

He was the first teacher who let us write in first-person. This made me wonder if our thoughts and feelings might have some value.

Despite my respect for Mr. Murray, I was always late for first period. My self-worth depended on what I wore and how I got to school. After trying on at least seven outfits, I had to call friends to scrounge up a ride. The bus was worse than death---even worse than walking.

One day I entered class just in time to miss the Pledge of Allegiance over the intercom. Mr. Murray never stood; he told us that he was exercising his freedom, and we were free to exercise ours. He thanked me for gracing the class with my presence, and on my desk, I found a handout, still cold from the mimeograph machine and redolent with savory fumes. We were just finishing a unit on the Vietnam War and PTSD, and Mr. Murray asked April, who was applying black eyeliner to the inside rim of her lower lid, to read first. She snapped her mirror compact shut and rolled her eyes, one blackened and one bare.

“What’s Real and What’s Not. By Jimmy Santiago Baca...?”

“Yes, he’s a local poet. Go on.”

“Bob greases himself up...”

I knew the Bob in this poem, but by another name. He was my best friend’s father, who also fought in Vietnam and had “pin-blue eyes.” He

slept on the bare brick floor in a corner of his room, alone. His wife, my friend's mom, had committed suicide a few years earlier.

He, too, worked on an old van that he used to explore the “shady cedar groves/ and yucca patches” of the foothills of the Sandia Mountains. He took us with him, but said we were not *really* camping until we trapped our own food, skinned it, and cooked it over a fire we started with flint. He didn't care if we drank his beer. He'd hike up the canyon for a few hours while we laid on our backs to watch the moon rise. It was there my friend and I felt the yearning Baca described, for our lives “to be simple,” a flame “of natural blue gas/rising from the ground hills/plentiful, innocent/from the bowels of the earth.”

Mr. Murray asked to read another poem by Baca, and then invited us to write our own free verse. When the bell rang I asked for more. Mr. Murray lent me his hardcover copy of *Black Mesa Poems*. I think it was signed. He had no reason to trust me with it.

I don't know what it was about Baca that flipped my switch. We had little in common. He was a badass Chicano from the South Valley of Albuquerque. I was a middle-class gringa from the North Valley. Baca spent several years in solitary confinement. I endured only a few afternoons of detention in the windowless high school.

But like Baca, I knew that the mesa was not the barren wasteland that newcomers saw. Like Baca, I found treasures in the arroyos, the ravines carved by monsoon floods: blue-tailed lizards, leathery puffballs full of cocoa-like powder, and shards of pottery. I dug up *Los Niños de la Tierra* (Children of the Earth), gooey crickets with yellow stripes and giant baby-like heads. Baca's poems were the hands that exposed these gruesome creatures to the light. In New Mexico that light could be blinding, and its rays brutal.

Baca's poems described the unspoken tension I had felt since early childhood. The settling of this land by white invaders was not something done in the past, but still happening, played out in daily evictions, drive-by shootings, and mass arrests, just like the erosion of the red cliffs was not just a relic of the Carboniferous Period. The headless necks of volcanoes on the west horizon were not dead, just dormant. Their molten blood was still bubbling beneath our feet.

Baca's poems wandered the irrigation ditches that flooded apple orchards and alfalfa fields of the Rio Grande Valley. His poems did not heed the locals' warning to stay away from La Llorona, the mythical crying woman who mourned her drowned children. Some kids called her "The Ditch Witch." Baca's poems sought her out and embraced her, like the long-lost mother of his people. When I entered his poems I let her pull me into the brown swirling currents, through a cobwebbed culvert, and towards the half-circle of light at its end.

I left New Mexico as soon as I finished high school. Somehow I got into Colorado State University, and then finished at a small liberal arts college out west. Then I backpacked across the Rocky Mountains, and then across Europe and parts of South America. Whenever I felt homesick I sought the banks of moving water-- sometimes I heard music playing inside the gurgling rush.

Then I became a teacher, but not in a classroom. In the rivers of Montana I paddled rafts and kayaks with troubled youth. In one we bumped into the body of a man who had successfully completed what some kids had tried themselves. The river bloated his skin with a green hue that turned their stomachs. Suicide was not the glamorous exit they had imagined. The river had a way of transfusing a vital energy back into their veins: they wanted to live!

In a stream of a redwood forest in California I found salamanders with city kids. I told them to rinse the potato chip salt from their hands before they handled the sensitive creatures. Sometimes one had a short leg--a new limb growing from one lost.

These kids' feet knew only concrete, so at first they stumbled on the forest trails. Soon they leapt from stumps to boulders. These kids' eyes did not know the blackness of night, so they trembled as they followed the circle of my headlamp. In the clearing they saw Orion for the first time. The fresh air let them breathe without inhalers. It softened their hardened faces. Soon they looked and acted like the children they were.

At the end of the week, we formed a goodbye tunnel to the door of the bus with its tires like the "black hounds" from Baca's poem. I knew they "would bound...toward the dark, hostile angels of the city, panting *necessity! necessity!*" The City, where one's worth was measured by shoe

brand and neighborhood. The City, where a new sense of tenderness and wonderment can get you cut.

I hoped that our outdoor school had shown these kids a different way to live, but I knew this was arrogant: the same impulse of missionaries, colonists, and developers. We had also shown these kids how their lives were stressful from factors out of their control. Maybe they could visit the woods in their imaginations, but for most of these kids, it might as well have been Middle Earth.

During breaks I went home. One time I saw Baca read in a church on Christmas Eve. After the pews emptied I stood in line like a groupie to shake his hand. They were warm and weathered, like his eyes.

A few years later in Taos, I saw him compete in a “poetry bout” against Sherman Alexie. They had five minutes to compose and perform a new poem that riffed on a phrase drawn from a hat. The words were “snap beans.” Alexie won, but Baca had the home advantage.

Then I moved into the belly of the beast, The City, to find a steady job. I organized an arts program that served low-income, homeless, and incarcerated youth. One time we hired Baca to inspire them. During his reading in a small theater at 16th and Valencia, a cellphone rang. He stopped and threw an F-bomb into the audience to turn it off. A few parents gasped, but the kids understood: poetry was to be respected, and their devices were disrespectful. After the reading I introduced myself as a fellow ‘Burqueno, and despite my fair skin and green eyes, Baca embraced me like a long-lost hermana, maybe one that La Llorona pulled into the ditch.

Another ten years passed and I moved to my ancestral homeland, Minnesota. At a conference for writing teachers I met a professor from St. Cloud State whose lively face assured me my ideas might have some value. At lunch I spied an empty seat next to him, took it, and we chatted. He said his name was Rex, and he gave me a copy of *Survive and Thrive*. I flipped it open to a poem by Baca.

I asked, “You know him?”

Rex said, “I taught him poetry in prison.”

So here he was: the source of the source, the spring inside the river.

I wondered: would I be here without this poet? And where would the poet be without this teacher? And then I wondered where I would be without mine, Mr. Murray, who still sends me hardcover books to read and share with my own students.

It was more than three decades ago when I read Baca's poetry in Mr. Murray's English class. Now I live by a creek where I encounter black bears and red squirrels, graffiti artists and homeless men. The water level tells me how much rain has fallen. In winter it freezes, so I can walk over the waterfalls that carved corridors into the gabbro on their way to Lake Superior. In spring the side trails are treacherous with ice and mud, and later, alongside summer's lazy current, my daughters and I look for red dragonflies and iridescent damselflies. We call them the "real fairies."

And I now want to say,

"This is real, Jim. Feel that energy."
