

that nasty joker in the deck shows up when you're holding the best of hands.

And with each mile, they started swearing how they'd dismember the other two once we arrived at the terminal.

It could've been thirty minutes or three hours, I don't know; I was looking out the window. On the glass my face skimmed the ground, rolling over motels and scrub brush, until we finally glided under the corrugated airport terminal.

The guard said, "Aaight, here's where Daddy leaves his bitches," and he swung to the curb and pulled out as quickly, leaving us there like four disabled ducks at a busy intersection.

We stood for some minutes saying nothing, just standing there, until the Chicano said, "Need a drink before I kill you fucks."

The skinhead and black followed and I took up the rear, thinking, *When water rises to the chin, find a straw.*

In case some crazy shit broke out, I took an end stool at the bar and ordered water. The skinhead snarled *motherfucker* and ordered Jack and coke; the Chicano, tequila; the black, vodka.

They stared in the mirror and the Chicano said, "We next to each other for twenty years in the dungeon, and then all released at the same time. You right—mutha-fucker!" He downed his shot, and shot two fingers at the bartender. "Double."

"Cruel-and-unusual-punishment class action suit." The skinhead licked his lips. "Here here, to the one who filed it." He drained his glass.

"Be how we did," the black brother gazed at his face in the mirror, pleased with it, and raised his glass for another. "I'll take it any way they give it."

"Who'd ever believe that's how we got out. None of us even knew about the suit." I shook my head. "Why'd you wanna kill each other, anyway?" I asked, knowing you could never ask this in prison.

"You a fucking counselor?" the brother intoned.

I replied, "We ain't inside anymore; I can ask." And after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, I added, "I'd be making mad money with you crazy mother fuckers if I was your counselor."

"I had a million reasons to gut you in there, and out here I can't scratch up nary a one," the skinhead offered.

"Toast," I said, raising my glass of water, "to a killing averted."

"Wouldn't speak so soon," the Chicano grinned.

"Hey-hey," the other two assholes chimed.

They ordered more drinks and continued sitting there staring at the mirror, wondering with their eyes what the fuck had happened, trying to measure the incalculable damage years in prison had inflicted upon them. Not wanting to notice the sorrow in their eyes from what could have been and never was, they stared at their glasses and ordered more numb-juice.

They were getting buzzed, and I said goodbye, and they wrote their addresses on napkins—a pool hall, a bar, and a laundry-mat in Oregon—in case I was ever in the area and needed drugs.

Feeling bad for us mangy homeless criminals, I went up the escalator and headed for my gate. I was in the same sorry condition, no home or address, but I was heading to New Mexico to jump-start my life.

**Jimmy Santiago Baca** was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Raised by his grandmother and later sent to an orphanage, he was a runaway by age thirteen. It was after Baca was sentenced to five years in a maximum security prison that he learned to read and write. His many honors include the Pushcart Prize, the American Book Award, the International Hispanic Heritage Award, and the prestigious International Prize.

## JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

### Esai 1-01-04

Esai, celebrate your mixed blood—  
Ibericos, Phoenicians, Celts, Visigoths, Romans, Moors,  
Olmecs, Mayans, Toltecs, Aztecs, and Incas,  
seeds buried in your bone marrow  
flourish a forest in your blood—  
in the rainforest of your black hair  
sacred quetzal birds caw,  
and ancient origins of Indio/Arab/Jewish rivers  
mix as they rush through you,  
mimicking tears of one tribe, laughter of another,  
in you a thousand lives celebrate and mourn,  
your heart was the size of a pomegranate seed,  
quenched both  
to rise up in rioting blossoms and fiercely  
bow before the dawn's splendor:  
on hands and knees  
you scuttle around the house,  
growl like a jaguar,  
your brown-hazel eyes peek around the kitchen  
archway,  
flash behind the bedroom French doors,  
you scamper on all fours like a young prong-deer  
as I chase you, nonsense words giggle out from your  
throat  
a flock of egrets  
exploding across the living room,

swoop into the dormant fireplace, vanish up the chimney toward the sky.

In the sunroom, sunlight pierces the shadows quivering to reveal your jaguar jaws clamped around a yellow rubber duck—

Tribal infant,  
you raise your arms to the sky,  
standing up against the couch,  
testing your stance, your balance shaky,  
your small rose-leaf hands release from the couch  
clap a thankfulness prayer,  
your eyes dart at me  
and I smile at you, now changed into a tawny fawn,  
alert ears twitching for danger  
before you incline your sleek neck and sip water  
from the river of life running between us.

Later in the morning,  
in the bathtub, about to cry, choking breath back,  
almost-tears transform into a cough then change to a  
whine  
and end up as laughter—