

ALBERTO YBARRA

Corazón Fuerte, 2011
Oil on linen, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

American Orphan

As much as I would like to imbue my imprisonment with a cavalier claim that it was filled with adventure, it was anything but: unlike the fools in those fucking prison movies who glamorize it, truth was, I was a stupid twenty-two-year-old when I got busted, eight cents in my pocket and a court-appointed lawyer.

Fuck the adventure.

For years I had to gaze at the morning moon obscured by concertina wire, watch the sunrise peering through a scratch in the painted cell window. My body was accustomed to a 9 x 12 world, and freedom was so large and endless it dwarfed me to a speck.

Presented with a view of the world devoid of bars, walls, and razor wire, I was wary. But for the first time in a long time, I felt the hand at my throat unclench its chokehold, although my breathing was labored as I tried to adjust to the clean morning air.

At twenty-eight, late August of '78, I was released from the Youngsville prison in Colorado, completing six years for selling heroin. Because of my defiance, or unwillingness to get along with the administration, I ended up doing hard time behind the walls.

On the way out, I dropped my box of notebooks and letters off to go to my sister's, and picked up my airline ticket to New Mexico and a hundred bucks.

One never knows what to expect when passing through the big gates, but the moment my foot fell on freedom ground, I had trouble walking. For a few seconds I drifted in so much freedom it scared the hell out of me. I had the feeling I was falling, and felt like I had just landed on a new planet with no gravity.

One small step for criminal-kind, one giant step for Orlando Lucero, ambling as awkward as an astronaut in space; with the immensity of the sky and earth before me, it was hard to get my balance.

Staring at the stars, for a moment I ceased to exist.

I found myself floating in an aimless pause, insignificant, in a limbo between the end of a criminal sentence and the beginning of a new... life? Insubstantial as vapor willowing out of the heating vent—so much space—I didn't have the words to name this unknown world, and knew that if I couldn't find them to place myself in it, I'd be as lost as a tortured soul wandering a wasteland.

No rash decisions, I thought; definitely no more deal-