

THE BATTLE OF CHICAGO ART ICONS

IN THE WINDY CITY, VISITORS AND LOCALS DEBATE THE MERITS OF **PICASSO VS. THE BEAN** 

WORLD WAR II'S COURAGEOUS MONUMENTS MEN / OUTDOOR ICE HOCKEY IN L.A. / Q&A WITH A SOAP OPERA LEGEND



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(pg. 12)



The Growl of Poetry

No, this is rust-under-your-fingernails, dust-in-your-eyes, blood-in-your-mouth poetry. This is the kind of poetry that reflects the maddening of souls and chronicles a yearning for justice. This is the kind of poetry that was shaped in a maximum security forge, fathomable only to someone who had been institutionalized for 25 years. This is the poetry of a violent street kid-turned-nonviolent drug offender who'd been jacked around his whole life, first by a foster-care system after his parents abandoned him, then by the Santa Fe and Albuquerque authorities, who viewed him as nothing more than a transient scourge who'd be in prison before too long, so might as well lock him up pre-emptively now. On many levels, they were right. Yet even after he was paroled in 1979, Baca harbored no ill will. "Instead of sitting in the day-care nurseries of dreary university classrooms, I was gifted to be an eyewitness to life on the edge."

Reading *Singing at the Gates* inspired me at 37 the way "Spliced Wire" had at 16. While the 16-year-old me secretly kept Baca's poetry close to my soul, the 37-year-old me — the me who's been around the block a few times — no longer wants to keep the prose as a dirty secret. The 37-year-old me wants you to know that Baca's poetry — that Baca's story — is out there for public consumption, and you should drink your fill.

The 37-year-old me got on the phone with Baca's publicist the day after I read *Singing at the Gates* and pleaded with her to schedule a lunch with the National Endowment for the Arts poetry-award recipient. She said that's a tall order: Baca could be anywhere. Apparently, although he has now been out of prison for 34 years, the mentally institutionalized Baca still wins out over the free man, and he prefers to stay secluded.

But persistence paid off, and I am now on flight 163 from Albuquerque to DFW after lunching with Jimmy Santiago Baca. The man is everything I envision a poet to be. He has a soft demeanor, and each sentence is more eloquent than the one before it. Like this, for example: "I've had people tell me that my poetry gives them enough hope to go on living. And I think I write because it gives me enough hope to go on living." I tell him that when I read Jimmy Santiago Baca, I think of a working man's poet. "I consider myself

more of a living man's poet," he replies. "I'm tired of criminals. I'm tired of the criminal mind. I just want to live. I just want to sit at the kitchen table with someone and talk."

This inaugural 2014 issue of *American Way* is indeed a collection of poetic stories from throughout time and place. Imagine, if you will, a world in which Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper" existed only in textbooks. Were it not for the Monuments Men (page 52), that hypothetical would have been a reality. For decades, when someone said "Chicago" in an artistic context, an artistic reply would be, "the Picasso." These days, it's "the Bean," and our writer tries to determine if that's a good thing (page 40). And pay close attention to the quotes by cover subject Kristen Bell (page 44), whose regular, everyday conversational voice is quite poetic.

Flight 163 is nearing its point of disembarkation at DFW, and as perfect timing goes, I'm through writing this note. Today was a complete success and this column, hopefully, was an inspirational one to kick off the new year. I hope Jimmy Santiago Baca agrees.

"From inside the walls that hold us and divide us, language has the means of breaking through into light, love, freedom and celebration of life," he writes in *Singing at the Gates*. "All of us experience conflict with joy and pain. All of us with genuine voices — not scarecrow mimicry that borrows and copies — we create a sublime journey to find beauty in what is considered the mundane."

Happy New Year, humanity.



ADAM PITLUK
Editor

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BACK IN 1992, when my high school English-literature class was studying contemporary American poetry, we read a poem that somehow spoke to this 16-year-old boy unlike any book or magazine or cassette tape or television show. I don't remember whether it was because I'd been a victim of high school puppy love — puppy love that went unrequited — or whether it was because I could see the passion, the angst, the ire, the wrath and the love in the poetry. Of course, I didn't exactly let on to my buddies that I could relate better to a 40-year-old Santa Fe, N.M., orphaned poet, released from prison just over a decade earlier, than I could relate to any popular-culture figure at the time.

But I could. The poem, "Spliced Wire" by Jimmy Santiago Baca, is still a very real, very important part of the man I've become. Over the years, I've kept an eye on Baca's writing. After all, I feel as though he's somehow shaped my life. He's certainly shaped my literary life. And so it was that when I received a copy of his forthcoming book, *Singing at the Gates*, due to be released later this month, I took it home and read it in one sitting. The prose made me laugh out loud in some parts, weep like the bereaved in others; it made me desperate for love like a wayward cupid, and it made me blinded by white-hot anger and arresting fury.

Those of you who are familiar with Baca's work are nodding in agreement because you know what the self-taught poet is all about, and you know that the challenges he's had to overcome are manifold. For those of you who aren't familiar with Baca's work (and are somewhat surprised to learn just how profound an impact a poet could have on a 16-year-old boy), let's clear something up: This is not but-soft!-what-light-through-yonder-window-breaks poetry.

