

COLLEGE GUILD
PO Box 6448, Brunswick ME 04011

POETRY CLUB-2, UNIT 6
LATINO POETS

Jimmy Santiago Baca, born in 1952, of Apache and Chicano descent, began writing poems when he was in prison, where he taught himself to read and write. He was abandoned by his parents, put in an orphanage by his grandmother, ran away from the orphanage and lived on the streets. Many of his poems are concerned with the incarcerated, the disenfranchised and poverty.

OPPRESSION

Is a question of strength,
of unshed tears,
of being trampled under,

and always, always,
remembering you are a human.

Look deep to find the grains
of hope and strength,
And sing, my brothers and sisters,

and sing. The sun will share
your birthdays with you behind bars,
the new spring grass

like fiery spears will count your years,
as you start into the next year;
endure my brothers, endure my sisters

1. What do you like most about this poem besides the powerful message?

Notice how most of the lines in Baca's poem do not end with a period. This is called enjambment. It is used to put emphasis on important words. Also notice this poem contains only two sentences.

2. Write a poem with only two sentences using enjambed lines.

I AM SURE OF IT

(the first two verses of a six verse poem)

Just after supper sheets were passed out,
the sheets smell clean as I make my bed,
warm from the laundry dryers and soft.
I spread the first sheet over my mattress,
smooth it out and tuck it in.
“32581 . . .” I look back up and there’s a guard,
“32581 . . .” and I nod affirmatively.
He leaves the letter on the bars and goes on.

It’s from a magazine I sent three poems to.
On the envelope in bold black letters,
it’s rubber-stamped, FUND RECEIVED . . . AMOUNT \$10.
I open the letter and read the first paragraph.
They usually don’t pay for poems, they say,
but only wanted to send a little money in this case,
to help me out. My poems were beautiful,
and would be published soon.

3. Note the everyday details in the first verse. Write down a few of them. There is a phrase, “God is in the details.” What does this mean?

This poem is in free verse. It doesn’t rhyme and it tells a story. Reading this poem is like looking in a window on someone’s life. Often poems today tell a human interest story and leave the reader with the poet’s insight. The best poems don’t tell us what that insight is. They show us.

4. What do you think the insight is in the poem?

5. Write a poem that is a narrative, tells a story, and which illustrates some insight you have had about life.

Martin Espada, of Puerto Rican descent, was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1957. He has published over eight books of poetry, teaches college creative writing and give writing workshops in elementary schools, community centers and prisons.

PSALM FOR DISTRIBUTION

Lord,
 On 8th Street
 Between 6th Avenue and Broadway
 In Greenwich Village
 There are enough shoe stores
 With enough shoes
 To make me wonder
 Why there are shoeless people
 On the earth.
 Lord,
 You have to fire the Angel
 In charge of distribution.

6. Some poets today write poems to call attention to “social justice” issues. How does Espada do that in this poem?

Notice the specific details he uses. It is not just a street anywhere, but on 8th Street, between 6th Avenue and Broadway. These details ground the reader and make the poem seem more real and personal.

7. Write a social justice poem about something you are familiar with and ground it in very specific details of place, sounds, smell, etc.

WHEN THE LEATHER IS A WHIP

At night,
 with my wife
 sitting on the bed,
 I turn from her
 to unbuckle
 my belt
 so she won't see
 Her father
 unbuckling
 his belt.

Espada's wife, Katherine, suffered savage physical abuse as a child. This compelled him to “consider what it means to heal another human being, or to help that human being heal herself”. In his book, *Zapata's Disciple*, where this poem is printed, he asks, “What small gestures begin to restore humanity?”

8. List three small gestures that can begin to restore humanity.

9. Write a poem about one of those gestures on your list. Try using simple language and the form he uses with just a few words on each line. Notice this poem is just one sentence packed with specific details which put the reader in the scene as it unfolds.

Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), a Chilean woman, was the first Latin American to win the Nobel Prize in literature.

TWO HYMNS: 1 TROPIC SUN

Sun of the Incas, sun of the Mayas
 Ripe American sun,
 Sun that Maya and Quiche*
 Acknowledged and adored
 And in which the ancient Aymara*
 Were burned like incense:
 Red pheasant as your rise,
 At noon, white pheasant:
 Sun painter and tattooer
 O humankind and leopard-kind:
 Sun of mountains and valleys,
 Of the chasms and the prairies,
 Archangel of our courses,
 Golden greyhound of our passes,
 Through all land, all sea,
 Sacred symbols of my brothers:

[*refers to both the language and people of Central and South America]

These are the first 16 lines of a much longer poem. One gets a sense of place and time here, of the land and the atmosphere long ago.

10. List the ways the sun is described in this poem. Describe the sun in a way that conveys a different climate.

11. Write a poem about the sun, the moon, stars or a place on earth you know very well. Use details that put the reader in that place along with you the poet.

Brenda Cardenas, of Mexican heritage, is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Zacuanpapalotis is the Mexican word for Monarch Butterfly; according to ancient legend they are reincarnated souls of the dead. It was written in memory of Jose Antonio Burciaga, a Chicano artist (1947-1967).

ZACUANPAPALOTIS

“We are chameleons. We become chameleon.” J. A. Burciaga

We are space between—
the black-orange blur
of a million Monarchs
on their two-generation migration
south to fir crowned Michoacan
where tree trunks will sprout feathers,
a forest of paper-thin wings.

Our Mexica cocooned
in the membranes del Madre Tierra
say we are reborn zacuanpapalotls,
mariposas negras y anaaranjadas
in whose sweep the dead whisper.

[of the Mother Land]

[black and orange-colored butterflies]

We are between—
the flicker of a chameleon’s tail
that turns his desert-blue backbone
to jade or pink sand,
The snake-skinned fraternal twins
of solstice and equinox.

The ashen dawn, silvering dusk,
la oracion as it leaves the lips,
the tug from sleep,
the glide into dreams
that husk out metizo memory.

[prayer]

We are –
one life passing through the prism
of all others, gathering color and song,

Cempazuch and drum.

[Mexican marigold]

- 12. What is Cardenas saying in the poem?**
- 13. Why does she begin with the quote, “We are chameleons. We become chameleons.”?**
- 14. List all the color words she uses. How does this contribute to the impact of the poem?**

Cardenas uses Spanish words in this poem, part of her heritage. You may have spoken your own dialect of English or a language other than English in your home or with your friends -- your own and authentic voice.

- 15. Write a poem in conversational style in the way you spoke. (This opens a very unique window which allows readers of poetry to gain insight into the poet.)**

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes