

Use What You Know



Jimmy Santiago Baca writes poetry to express his thoughts and feelings. Do you have a way to express what you're thinking and feeling? Write about it on the lines below. Then read on to learn more about Baca's poetry.



IT'S NEVER TOO LATE, PART 2

A poet and a painter have a lot in common. Both want to make people feel deeply. Both make pictures. The only difference is that a painter makes pictures with paints. A poet makes pictures with words. How do poets like Baca do this? How do they use words to make us feel and to see things with **fresh eyes**? By looking at Baca's poetry, we can learn a lot about what **inspires** him.

Baca was a troubled young man when he first found poetry. His life had been filled with poverty and hardship. At the age of 18, he found himself in a world where he did not belong, where he did not **fit in**. He was in prison and his future looked bleak. Baca knew that life wasn't supposed to be like this.

He now believes that poetry saved his life. He said it was his "discovery of the possibilities of language that transformed what appeared to be a doomed life."

His poem "Like an Animal" describes how Baca felt while he was locked up in prison. It expresses the fears he had about his future. It is a good example of how poets use language to change feelings into words.

In his poem, Baca doesn't just tell us he is scared. He shows us scary things. He describes bloody fingernails and chalk white scars. He speaks of a part of himself that has died, and of prison walls. As we see these things, perhaps we also feel scared. In addition to pictures, Baca uses sound in his poem. He writes of running those bloody fingernails across his eyes, which are as hard as a blackboard. Think about the sound that would make. The sound of fingernails scraping against a blackboard is a horrible sound. It makes us want to shudder, just as we shudder when we are afraid.

The poet's use of all the senses is important for making pictures with words. A poet writes of the soft clink of ice cubes against a glass. A poet describes the ring of water left on a porch floor when a glass is picked up. A poet tells of the sweet sugar and the tart lemon on the tongue. A poet recalls the smell of roses in the warm, bright air. These words place us on a porch in the summer sunshine drinking lemonade. We see, hear, taste, smell, and feel the experience.

Sense impressions are just one kind of detail found in poetry. Poets like Baca know that the better their description is, the more powerful the image will be. In Baca's poem, "Martin," he describes the first home he and his wife shared:

House furnished with second-hand furniture,
frayed wicker rocking chair,
leaning bookshelves, woolen wall hangings,
wood and wool stitched blinds,
oak wood couch, and phone ringing constantly
you answered to console, comfort, and talk with friends.

In this poem, Baca gives us details that tell us what his life is like. He doesn't live in a shiny, modern house. His house is filled with second-hand furniture. The bookshelves lean. The phone is always ringing because he and his family have many friends. They have friends that they console, comfort, and joke with. These details help to create a clear picture in the reader's mind.

Baca's poem "El Sapo" is about a man who loves life. El Sapo is a big man who works hard and laughs deeply. He uses a coffin for a living room table. He wears a blue baseball cap. His jacket smells like hay. He has worked outdoors all his life. His skin is as tough as a turtle's shell. The details Baca uses to describe El Sapo paint a portrait of this character.

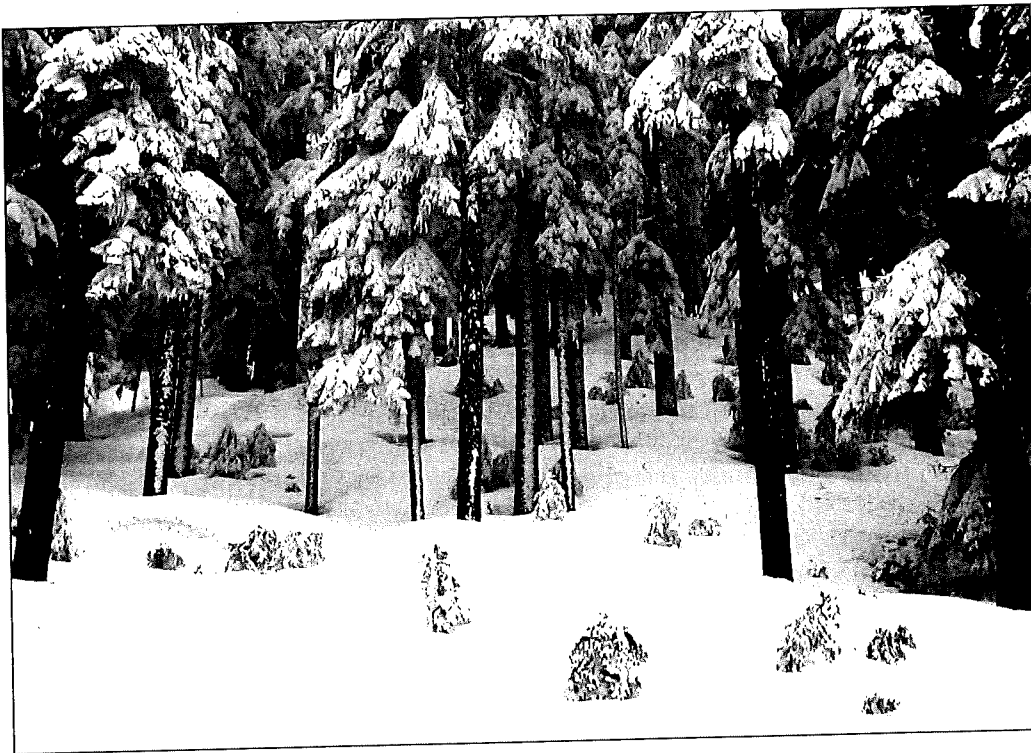
Baca compares El Sapo to a turtle a few times in his poem. In poetry, to compare one thing to another is called a simile or metaphor. The use of metaphor is one of the ways that poets help us to see things in a new way. This is what Baca is doing when he tells us that El Sapo's feet are swollen and have puffy veins. He calls them **turtle feet**. To compare them to a turtle gives us a clearer picture. We see feet so swollen they are rounded like a turtle's feet. We see feet so beaten they are cracked and rough like the skin of a turtle. We see feet so tired they move slowly, just as a turtle moves. We get the feeling that El Sapo is a man who is tired all the way down to his bones. A straight description gives us a picture, but a metaphor makes us want to look again.



What kind of person do you think El Sapo is? Circle your answer.

1. A tiny, fearful man.
2. A large, happy farmer.
3. A stubborn, mean person.

Baca's poem "Into Death Bravely" centers on one metaphor. The character in the poem is the winter season. He never uses the word "winter", but Baca portrays Winter as a soldier carrying a white shield. Winter is powerful and causes great destruction. He laughs a deep, fearless laugh as he breaks the branches of trees. He crushes the world with white. Like many soldiers, Winter dies. However, also like a soldier, he faces death bravely. He does not run away like a dog with his tail between his legs. However, as Spring finally takes over the land, Winter limps off to die.



There is another strange thing about "Into Death Bravely." In the poem, Winter is presented as having at least two features. He is strong and destructive, but he also has a short life. The two things is what poets call "duality." It means that all things and beings have more than one side to them. Life is both happy and sad. People are both weak and strong. Things that are new become old. You will find duality in many poems. Perhaps this is what Baca means when trying to explain the creative process. He says, "Writing is a form of mourning in which you sing happy songs."

Baca is happy to have found poetry. He values words and the worlds they create. In "I Am Offering This Poem," he expresses how meaningful he believes poetry can be. Baca offers the poem to someone he loves. He says it will provide warmth like a coat. The poem will give food like a pot full of yellow corn. If the person is lost, the poem can point out the right direction. No wonder he tells the recipient to treasure the poem. Its powers seem magical. Even though he says the poem is all that he has to offer, he believes it is a wonderful gift. Here are the last lines of the poem:

It's all I have to give,
and all anyone needs to live,
and to go on living inside,
when the world outside
no longer cares if you live or die;
remember,

I love you.

Poets like Baca appeal to all our senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. They use metaphor to explain the new, and to make us understand the old with fresh eyes. They show us the many sides of life. Though poets use words instead of paints, they create pictures. There is another thing that poets and painters have in common. When they move us their works become part of us. A painting or a poem is not just yours or mine. It belongs to the world, to be enjoyed again and again.