

THE
Misfits



Jimmy Santiago Baca

"Fresh as an open wound, this episodic tale warns of the poisonous temptation of selling out in lyrical prose."

— *Booklist*

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WALK THE ICE

Dorothy was right, there is no place like home. But if you don't have a home, only an apartment or flat, there's dozens like them. I've moved into many while migrating from city to city for jobs. In that situation, the closest thing to home are the friends you make where you're at. As you move on, some friends get lost and others remain in touch.

For five years I lived in LA writing screenplays. I considered staying until I was overwhelmed by the feeling that I needed to change my life and move back to Santa Luz. I was hoping to reconnect with old friends. And that was how I found myself on I-40 east heading to Santa Luz.

No more reminiscing nostalgically about the cool morning, the homemade tortillas and simmering pinto beans and red chili, the *huevos rancheros*, the music and murals and friends—I was stepping back in time. Although I wasn't returning, down on my luck or broke, I made the decision to leave LA at the height of my successful writing career because I needed open space uncluttered by traffic and mobs.

I couldn't delay my departure and risk the chance of becoming one of those writers who stayed, who kept promising to leave, taken in by the sumptuous mountains of money that became too much to resist with time. It's easy with money, power, privilege to drowse into an eternal torpor, after which, years later, you find yourself regretting never having fulfilled the youthful promises of

working for a studio and making enough money to carry you through the time necessary to write the book of your dreams—a novel about your estranged relationship with your father. By the time I had met too many who complained of never writing it, too many lulled by riches. They got complacent and comfortable, always thinking there was still time, even though they knew in their hearts they had sold out and betrayed themselves.

It's tough to be a writer, and almost impossible to get your life unwrapped and set out in a disciplined fashion to sit down and write every day. I needed a quiet, unexciting place, and it seemed Santa Luz was just country enough and slow-paced enough to give me a chance at my dream.

For most writers it just doesn't happen, unless rich relatives come to your rescue or loads of grants from the foundations and other benefactors pitch in to sustain you while you write. Otherwise, it's a long, arduous road most cannot endure. But I was determined.

I couldn't compromise my writing for grants and didn't have wealthy relatives. I felt an urgency and used my own cash to get back and set up my office in a nice, old, crumbling adobe house off Don Onate Street, where I'd throw a few pinon logs into the stove and start my long-awaited novel.

On the way, I stopped in Gallup to eat a plate of blue corn enchiladas. As I scooped up the chili and eggs from my plate, I knew I had made a good decision. And if the delicious food wasn't enough, I was sitting in one of my favorite small cafes, packed with Mexicans and Navajos gabbing and laughing. The menu hadn't changed and the café had maintained that certain fragrance of prairie life. I knew I belonged.

I drove on, open cacti and sage lands and long expanses of high desert prairie and mesas. Billboards advertised “real Injun artifacts.” Snakes. Turquoise. Truck stops. Casinos. I turned the radio on and flipped through the stations: on NPR a special report of a famous #MeToo movement Latina writer living in Mexico

turned out was a fraud—her accusation lies. It was all about a big payday. More stations—mass immigration swelling at the borders, Russia invades Ukraine, Covid, Trump moldering with prostitutes in a south Florida swamp, a bloated oligarch buys a soccer team for his son’s birthday present and four NYC penthouses for his mistresses, Putin murders women and children and a crown prince in Saudi Arabia executes eighty-one dissidents in one day. Bolsonaro chars thousands of acres of Amazon jungle, killing off indigenous tribes to make room for cattlemen, oilmen, lumbermen and mineral predators. The Wart, North Korea’s Kim Jong-un, wants in on this freak sideshow and is deploying missiles again—the miscreant will try anything to get attention.

I turned the radio off, promising myself to stop listening to news. I was pleased with the silence as it sank into my soul. I could hear the sweet sounds of the desert again, feel them, the raw, dry vibration of vegetation, crows, all of it coming back to me, heralding my return, even though home I sensed was not what it used to be.

It never is. The world had grown much smaller with all the constant deluge of information. I felt like throwing my iPhone out the window. It wouldn’t do any good—I still had my laptop packed in the satchel.

It was snowing in Ukraine, I was going home, and in my own way, I felt a little like one of those refugees lumbering out of cratered cities, reminded then, as I write this now, how once I was a kid living in Santa Luz, my little heart bursting as potential petals were unfurling, leading me to a generous world.

So much chaos was happening in the world, and people desperately trying to hold it together, huddling in rooms stockpiled with weapons, peering out windows in disbelief, weird climate patterns ravaged the land—snow in Florida, hurricanes in Kansas, drought and fires in LA. . . . Time was no longer flowing but smashed and rushed up against us, pinning us like butterflies

against walls of flames and floods and urban drug-overdosed corpses.

At some point during the Covid pandemic I became afraid of living life, hesitant to trust it. It was not what it seemed. Who knew in what shape and with what dangerous intent from every corner it would spring at me from the shadows? I even found myself questioning whether I should take the dogs for a walk.

It was like, some years ago in another time and place, that moccasin I saw curled up in a rock hole on top of a boulder I was standing on to watch the river flow by. I wanted to prove to myself that I was courageous, so I rolled out my blanket and decided to sleep right in the way where I knew that snake would come out at night to hunt for field mice. But after an hour or so, I rolled up my bedding and got the hell out of there, admitting, no matter how hard it was, that I wasn't that courageous. In fact, no matter how you looked at it, I was a coward.

In a sense, I kind of felt that same way going home.

On another occasion—when I first met my wife twenty-five years ago—I found myself in a similar situation. That time, I wanted to prove to my girl how much I loved her. I wanted to prove my belief in our love to her and show it was blessed by the Divine Forces of Nature that rule this Earth. There was so much magic in our relationship that I was willing to risk my life and walk out to the center of an icy pond. I just knew, even if it cracked, I would not fall in, because an angel would hold me up. That's the kind of faith I had in the power of the universe. Otherwise, how was I to explain me having the loveliest girlfriend in the world, how to understand her love for me, that seemed to go from where she sat, down into the Earth, exiting on the other side, wherever that was? . . .

I had never had this love, the invincible feeling I got with her there smiling at me, conveying the most profound truth of what happiness is as she looked at me. It does not happen: a girl twenty-

five years younger, from a Mormon background, hooking up with an ex-convict Mexican Indian—it just doesn't happen.

My pride has always handicapped me. I've always lived outside any perimeter society has set up. No fence or wall has been able to contain me. I've always, always found a way around or under or through whatever obstacles are set before me to restrict who I am. No better image than a trail of open and discarded handcuffs exhibits my journey's wake. In prison I did it with writing. In society I did it with success as a man who is drug-free, not a boozier, kind and generous, a homeowner, financially blessed, happy, has healthy kids, is able to handle most situations that come his way in a rational manner . . . In short, I'm pretty damn proud of myself. And I must add, although I approach life with humility, there was a time I couldn't bear to look at myself in the mirror. With time and spiritual practice I learned to love myself and realize how I'm a good-looking a man, I am caramel-skinned, Mexican Indian, Chicano by choice—and self-love radiates from my demeanor.

I expected when I got home, there would be a sense of fulfillment, of deep satisfaction that would reinforce my sense of a hard-won victory and balance. I expected that coming home would be a sort of final piece to the puzzle of my being staunchly placed in life, but surprises were in store for me.

My wife and I were once sitting in Taos, New Mexico, having breakfast on the deck of an outdoor café, and a waitress came up and asked us if we were movie stars—I kid you not—if we were starring in the movie they were shooting there. We smiled and said no, but we looked at each other with raised eyebrows; we looked like movie stars. We smiled, kissed, went back to our room and made love for a few hours. Wherever there was a place available, we made love—creek beds, rivers, mountain tops, caves, in the car—you name it, we did it there. We were traveling everywhere, enjoying life. Once when we were making love, a red bear crossed in front of us, padding west. Eagles and red-

tailed hawks soared above us, white-tailed deer walked the soul-inspiring countryside and swelled our hearts with awe.

I've been in planes that almost collided in midair; others a yard from landing had to veer nose-up because the wheels didn't come down. I lost everything in two house fires. My car stalled with an oncoming car racing at me 95 miles per hour; I was sitting in the middle of the road sideways staring as it barreled down on me, so close I could see the driver's frightened eyes begging me to move. At the last minute, his eyes turned tragic and he swung sharply left to the embankment to avoid me, his car flipping and exploding. A strange kid pulled a knife on me at a crosswalk and a stranger next to me grabbed the knife and knocked the assailant down. I skidded off a mountain cliff in a rage. I gambled with gangsters in life-and-death misunderstandings. I was hunted by FBI agents with a shoot-on-sight order—they had my most wanted poster in post offices. I was ambushed by a dozen police and escaped in a shoot-out. I overdosed three times on heroin. I had a heart attack on cocaine twice.

And now, owing to my trust in God (none of the conventional Gods you know) who brought this woman into my life, I consider all these near-death misses a ritual passage to get here at her side, even though, when we went to meet her parents in South Carolina, they said upon meeting me, that a Mexican was never welcome in their house. While she visited her folks, I rented a room at the Motel 6 five miles away. When I picked her up, her mother yelled from the door, "Come around again and we'll shoot you." I smiled and waved, thinking they'd have to pay me an awful lot to counsel them out from the dark age into modern-day society.

And now, late December, just south of Santa Luz where a large body of water and ice had pooled at a massive hole, to test my faith in the powers that made this love mine, to show my gratitude for this woman who had given me my greatest happiness, I decided to walk out to the middle of the pond. I picked up a large rock and hurled it out to see how thin the ice was. It landed and

cracked a spider web. Millions of white little bubbles emerged like cells just beneath the ice along the cracks. I picked a larger rock, two hands to lift and launch it. It hit and slid, and larger cracks crept out in every direction.

I turned and glanced at her and smiled. Behind her, in the distance, sat the dark planet known as the Martinez steel mill that we had visited earlier. How lucky am I to be a poet, not to be laboring over a molten pit of iron. I remember the galvanizing department; mostly Chicanos, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans amid the smoke and sulfuric acid fumes clouding the air so thick you see others walking only by the beams of their hard hats. A crane man way up was moving tons of molten vats, pouring them into a cauldron large enough to fit school buses. The men hand-dipped hot strips into batches of molten zinc. Men worked the hot tongs. Everyone drank whiskey with their lunches.

For them too I would walk the ice. In honor of my grandma and grandpa, fieldworkers, house maids, janitors, cooks. In that mill was an army of men and women who made cities and yet lived unnoticed. My warm breath blew into the cold air. I stared at the ice. I stood at the edge of the pond, the city of Santa Luz beyond me, home of our state capitol, home of the famous Chicano poet Antonio Baca, who I had long adored. In fact, I worshipped most of his poetry, which inspired me when suffering from writer's block.

I remembered the other day, Stace and I, with three steelworkers, drove to Baca's house. The streets were packed with two feet of snow. I found the run-down house on a street corner, with graying decrepit clapboard; it had been taken over by dealers and crack addicts milling around on the porch. It was a letdown, but understandable in a country that hates poets.

I drove by slowly, my steelworker friends in the back seat nervous as the crack dealers glared at us. I turned left at the corner and got stuck in the snow. My wheels spun, I gunned it, the tires whirred. I stuck the automatic gear shift into reverse, then

drive, threw it back into reverse, then drive, rocked it back and forth; the transmission whined, tires smoked and spun hot on the snow, transmission and tires zinging like two giant yellow jackets around us. I slammed the gas pedal, accelerated hard, let up, revved the pedal again, shaking the car back and forth, the whole while studying Baca's tar-papered roof and splintered railing and ancient thick windows burnished blue by sunlight. I watched as three, then four and five crack addicts moved our way and surrounded the car.

One of the three men in the back said, "Go, move this goddamn car!"

"Let's go, get us outta here, let's get the fuck gone," another steelworker ordered.

Four of the druggies stalked within arm's length of the car, grinning at their prey. The car lurched and lifted up, the tires belching black snow up in the air and the engine steaming and grunting as we slid and careened down the street, fishtailing as we all laughed and said, "*¡Ay ay ay!*"

I had never been so in love with a woman as I was with Stace sitting at the picnic bench by a cheap barbecue grill with a metal overhang. There were no facilities, no water fountain or bathroom in that park. When in love, one needs nothing. Really, even as cold as it was. I could strip my coat and shirt off and be as happy as if fully clothed in an Alaskan parka and puffy insulated pants. That's love, and it makes the air vibrant and good to breathe and the gray day full of happy possibilities.

The men in the mill skim the heavy hot slag off the surface of the molten zinc melted to 850 degrees, wielding ninety-pound iron spoons to dredge the burning vat. That's the shit.

I looked up. The overcast day made the Martinez steel mill look that much darker and menacing in the distance. I knew the workers used this picnic area sometimes. Maybe this was as good as it got for them. Their vacation was this place, where they played with their little girls, snuggled with wives as their hotdogs

smoked on the grill, where their teenage sons fell in love with their friends' daughters, where they came and drank away their sorrow with other trailer park friends. The barrenness of the place felt like their decaying lives. Only in a place like that—with tufts of dying grass and weed patches and gravel walkways and a swing set whose paint was peeling—could a man appreciate the laughter of an infant or the kiss of a young lover.

You can keep artsy-fartsy Paris. Give me the arthritic man with swollen knees, sipping his Jack on a bench, who thinks and worries and dreams about one day making a comeback, one day . . .

I was in love, out of control, like too much gravy over mash potatoes. You know, where you get to mash your fork full of gravy and mash potatoes into your peas and corn and stuff your mouth. That's love.

I was someone who didn't belong, a raggedy cluster of roadside field trees that didn't belong to anyone and grew all by themselves away from people. I was the kind of kid roaming around on a boring afternoon with a drinking poppa long gone and a momma in bed on her fifth boyfriend. I was like an ugly winter tree for people who had lives that didn't fit into anything, lives that felt more like an ex-wife throwing your clothes at you as she chases you out of the warm kitchen, lives that yelled your sorrow at you like a train a few yards beyond your window, passing in the night, rattling all about your decline and disappointment. I felt kinship with the trees whose trunks were twisted young in a tribute to forced loss of innocence, to a horrid legacy. I grew thick and onerous. Fifteen, maybe twenty tree trunks gnarled together is how I loved her. Holding the fence line, baby, I was holding the fence line against the winds of racism and poverty and failure that wanted to blow me down.

It was the kind of love that took James Dean around that curve too fast, made Bukowski wear his boxer shorts while drinking and writing poetry, the kind of love that makes a man go down

on his knees a coward. And in the inner-bark grow rings where I had the whole universe encircling me, running like a vein of gold beneath the glinting barbwire buried in my bark . . . That's how I loved her.

It's how her love made me bigger and crazier and made me lose myself in her vast array of roads, where parts of me took off walking, each part waving goodbye to the others, a dozen mes starting off a hundred ways in her—that's how love was. I could start from any point in the compass and still find center, come at it from anywhere—plains, mountains, deserts, seas, forests, Artic and Sahara, tropical and moonscape—and I ended up where I was supposed to be, in her arms. That's love.

I never get lost yet don't know where I'm going. No matter where I'm at, I end up . . . if you're in love, it's the center.

I stood there at the Martinez Pond, at the iced edge of the pond, feeling like I was at the center of the universe.

Earlier that day, touring the mill with my girl, we saw fire on a level and scale equal to the fire God used to make people and Earth. We saw the darkness of that fire, the vast worlds of dark rafters, a six-story-high warehouse a mile long, piles of steel shavings, ash, epic cauldrons where metal was liquefied—metal, molten red—poured into giant molds and forms and shoved into furnaces so formidable they tamed a landscape as open and broad as New Mexico into a city like Santa Luz.

These epic men worked forces that fashioned the future, destroyed dreams; matter immune to all else but their will. It is smudged a man's heart, became a worker's Lent ash thumbed on the forehead at Mass with courage undefined and hurtful.

A steelworker, Gutiérrez, told me a story of a man pushing a wheelbarrow across a plank bridge to dump the ash into a molten pit of bubbling metal, and the wheelbarrow leaned too far to one side and, in straightening it out, the weight was too much, and instead of letting it go . . . he tightened his grip and followed its momentum down into the molten steel. Something in him, a steel

part of his will, said, “No, I will not let this lead me to its will, I will not surrender to it,” and he died in this very human heat of conviction.

And then there was Gary, walking his daughter across on her first day to register at New Mexico Highlands University. He didn’t say much, but his eyes did. He was used to carrying his scuffed black lunch bucket and thermos and felt awkward. His eyes saw the steel beams that held the buildings up, saw the bicycles racked up, the new cars wealthy parents had bought their kids, everything that was made of steel, everything he had helped make.

He was close to retiring, hoped that he didn’t get sick like most of the men and women, who retired only to cancer, joints rubbery with arthritis, headaches, bad blood—the effects of putting in decades at the mill. It was all worth it now as he escorted his daughter to her first class.

He drove a truck, lived in a trailer, was a steelworker all his life. There he was, walking beside her across the lush grounds of the university, shy and quiet, proud but wordless. He had worked all his life in the mill so that his daughter could walk those grounds, sit in one of those classrooms and read books his savings had bought her. His hand was on all of it, the way it was when she was a little girl and he fixed her room up with butterfly posters and flowered quilts and dolls and stuffed bears. This was her new room, a woman’s room.

He’d never been late for work, never was the cause of an accident. That was worth more than a million dollars to him. The school grounds were too quiet. At the mill people talked into microphone speakers to each other. The quiet at the university was eerie. His world was midnight shifts, black coffee and enough prescription pills to make it to his pension. National Steel fucks the workers. But then what corporation doesn’t? And Americans, stupid as they are for new trucks and guns and boats, ignore the abuse. Rectangular buildings a mile long, safety helmets, safety

glasses, safety boots—but no safety for the heart or the soul, as it is slowly squeezed out of the body, no safety from coffins that most suit up early, after having given their lives to the company.

My pops said once he could place his index finger and spin a compass needle, and wherever it landed, to the smallest line indicating a direction, he could look and tell me an experience he had there. The same with the roulette table marble.

“You’d be blessed,” he said, “to claim the same.” He went on: “Don’t you ever sit and get complacent because you’re comfortable. Test yourself, boy, push yourself, even if you fall over the edge. Otherwise, you’ll live but won’t have a life. We call that zombie living.” He died in the gutter, a hole the size of a quarter in his liver.

I looked around, spotted the largest rock and picked it up. I heaved it like a shot put. It hit the ice and slid a good twenty yards to the center of the pond. I turned and yelled to Stace, “I love you.”

Traumatized by taking risks all my life, even from altar boy days when I drank the wine and ate the host like a saltine cracker, so thirsty and hungry was I, I stepped on the ice, stopped. I stepped a little ways, stopped. It was so cold, the ice had already furred the surface where I had thrown the rocks. They had slid across the ice like my own life sliding, sliding, sliding away from society to the center where few dare to go. Most lives are lived close to the banks, but few risk themselves to step out where nothing is guaranteed. Grooves, little channel cracks webbed out like a fisherman’s net. Another step. Beneath the ice, little bubbles floated up, like something slow boiling down there in the dark. Like there was a body down there, letting out small burps or farts. Something rose from the depths, emerged with white claws and fangs and waited beneath for me to fall in. The clear dark skin of the ice monster below glistened and creaked as it followed me, ready to emerge as I stepped. There was a heart down there beat-

ing, some deep foreboding warning me to turn around, turn around now.

I stepped forward, and this time my weight sent movement in the cracks, the ice shivering for a second, cracks zigzagging out in longer trails. More zigzags. The web grew. I felt like a fly in a spider's web, enticed but unaware of the spider coming for me. I looked up and saw the big rock, still a ways to go. I could make it. Beneath my shoes, a paperclip stuck to green water weeds that licked the bottom of the ice plate. Metallic razorblades of ice shimmered below.

I turned. Stace was watching. I took a step, and a crack sounded like a zipper being zipped. Thin layers of ice bits freed themselves and floated under my shoes. Ten minutes had turned into a year. I stepped again. The ice tightened like a cable dangling in mid-air. I could hear the give. It was about to snap.

The ice gripped against my weight. I could feel its clenched fist losing its hold. I leaned down and felt the ice with my fingers, and it burned like acid. Women and kids watched now from the pond's edge.

The ice coughed below. Breathed. Its rattles thickened. My legs were freezing. The cold raked through my jeans. My knees were stiff, my ankles brittle. It was the kind of cold that broods in the bones. I stepped to the rock, and the cracks followed me now like a blue uniformed policeman crouching on one knee, a pistol ordering me to stop. "Fuck you," I said, "chase me." The ice made the sound of a thick bolt being wrenched. It was creepy, and I knew it was the prelude to an ancient door opening. I was going in.

Water froze as soon as it escaped the cracks.

I could not back down. I cursed. I should have never fucking done it. It felt like the cold was pinching my toes. The air smelled like rust.

I turned and smiled at Stace. Her smile was so beautiful, I said, "Fuck it, game on."