

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, FUNDS RECEIVED . . . AMOUNT \$10.

I open the letter and read the first paragraph. They usually don't pay for poems, they say, but wanted to send a little money in this case, to help me out. My poems were beautiful, and would be published soon.

Holding this letter in my hand, standing in the middle of my cell, in my boxer shorts, it's now, times like this, rapt in my own unutterable surprise, I wonder about people . . .

I take a few steps to the toilet and pull myself up, my mouth on the back grill at the back of my cell, just about to holler down to my buddy in another cell, when I am struck silent by the window across from me, and look outside, upon a few convicts at dusk, running in pairs around the baseball diamond, or some close to the fence that separates them from freedom, they walk, pointing arms to freedom. The grass is green, trees lulled in deep spring slumber, sun going down at the west edge of earth.

Shadows cover hovering sunrises, shaking sun out of leaves, boughs dark, fields darken perceptibly, leaving one solitary walker, hands jammed in coat pockets, looking down with a blue beanie cap over his head, thinking, thinking, as he walks around the field one last time, then disappears. The baseball diamond is empty now.

The smell of cool spring is in the night air, above all things, and toy-sized cars crawl in black distances, headlights roving into long roads of darkness,

from Immigrants  
in Our Own Land  
by Jimmy Santiago  
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New Directions, NY,  
1982

leaving small towns behind, sparkling in streetlamps, the car slides into a great wave of darkness, a jhtworker, searching stars and breathing fresh air, the hum of engine and whir of wheels, drone on in the silence of a Tuesday night. Grass crickets tune their fiddles on the wind; by rumbling trucks on the freeways, construction workers coming and going into honey bars, greasy caps cocked to one side, smoking cigarettes, stroking pool cues through gritty, thick fingers, suck their unbrushed teeth watching intently, as Tammy Wynette waits out her country hits to dimes and quarters plunked in the jukebox, among the bearish beer-drinking, smoke-swirling workers, coughing and cursing and smiling, while their fathers push on screen doors, enter yellowed kitchens and drink coffee with married daughters, as night darkens over the city and porch lights collect bugs in their nets . . .

All the while we convicts live in a smooth block of rock, convicts scan through their TV guides, and through all the different blubbering channels, an old Mexican song floats out from someone's cell, recalling memories: under the screams and gunshots tumbling out of TVs, memories float heavy in me, and I think of tennis shoes my grandfather bought for me as a child for my birthday.

My life so filled with simple things! With beds and people crying and laughing and fighting, towns and voices and kisses and unforgettable nights, walking on sidewalks or through grass at dusk, this is life, I am sure of it. . . . I step down from the toilet, grab the sheet and tuck it in. I spread the blanket over, then sit down, thinking all the time, this is life, even in prison, respecting each other, helping each other, close or far away, it doesn't matter, I am sure of it.

A writer from New Mexico, Jimmy Santiago Bacca is a recipient of the Pushcart Prize and the Bertha Columbus Foundation American Book Award. He has been called on to help to Pablo Neruda and one of the best poets in America today. At the age of 21, Bacca was illiterate and incarcerated in a maximum security facility for selling drugs. Five years later, he emerged from prison with a passion for reading and writing poetry.

