

How We Carry Ourselves

By Jimmy Santiago Baca

To Others in Prisons

I am the broken reed in this deathly organ,
I am those mad glazed eyes staring from bars,
the silent stone look
that knows like other stones the smell of working feet,
knows how long and side a human can spread
over centuries,
each step, until we now step on dust
and rock of prisons.

I could not throw my feelings away,
shoot them like wild horses,
stone them like weeping dirty prophets,
could not machete them pioneering a new path,
I sought no mountain, no brave deed,
I sought to remain human, to look and feel wind bless
me. . . .

Chicanos, blacks, whites, Indians,
we are all here, our blood all red,
we are all filled with endurance
and have tasted the blade,
smelled the gun's oily smoke of death.

We are steel hunks of gears and frayed ropes,
our hands the tool sheds,
our heads the incessant groan
of never ending revolving wheels
In an empty, gaunt warehouse,
our blood dripping from steel joints
like grease and oil onto granite floors.

I meant to say you can turn away from this:
if you can take the hammering, they will give,
if you can hold on while they grip you
and hurl you ragefully at the ground,
if you can bite your teeth when they bend you,

and still, you do not fit,
you can be who you are.

You can see the morning and breathe in God's grace
you can laugh at sparrows, and find love
in yourself for the sun, you can learn
what is inside you, you can know silence,
you can look at the dark gray machine around
you,
souls going up like billows of black smoke,
and decide what you will do next,
you who are the main switch, who turns
everything off.
But you breathing, smiling, struggling,
turning yourself on. . . .

*From "Against Forgetting:
Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness"
edited by Carolyn Forché
(W.W. Norton)*