

## JESUS SAVES

This dude *Jesus Saves*

must be popular or something:

You see his name everywhere.

I first saw it when I woke up

from a Bunker Hill cardboard box

to a huge sign near the top

of the LA library.

It read: "*Jesus Saves*."

I wish I were that guy ...

then I wouldn't be

this chocked-faced pirate on city

seas, this starved acrobat of the alcoves

loitering against splintered doors.

Then I wouldn't be this aberration

who once had a home, made of stone even,

and a woman to call wife.

In the old country,

I worked since I was seven!

I knew the meaning

of the sun's behest

for pores to weep.

But now such toil is allowed

to rot like too many berries on a bush.

In the old country, I laughed the loudest,

made the most incisive remarks

and held at bay even the most

limpid of gatherings.

But here I am a grieving poet,

a scavenger of useless literature;

they mean nothing in this place...

my metaphoric manner,

the spectacle of my viscosus verse

—nothing!

I am but a shadow on the sidewalk,

a spot of soot on a block wall;

a roll of dice tossed across

a collapsing hallway in a downtown

SRO hotel.

Ok, *Senior Saves*, right now this is your time.

But someday a billboard

will proclaim my existence.

Someday people will sigh my name

as if it were confection on the lips.

As long as I have a rhythm in my breast,

there will come this fine day

when this orphan, pregnant with genius,

is discovered sprouting epiphanies like wings

on the doorstep of

mother civilization.

## The CONCRETE RIVER

by

Luis J. Rodriguez

I'm at a *quinceñera* dance at the American Legion hall in San Gabriel, my cousin's, one of Tío Kiko's daughters. I'm older, married with a child, and dressed in plain shirt and pants, hair shortened, not much to show for what I'd been through only a short time earlier.

I step outside to take in some air. I lean against a parked sedan, looking at the stars which seem extraordinarily large and bright this evening. Just then a short figure, wobbling, with a kind of limp, moves toward me. He has a blue beany cap over his head and a dark, hooded sweatshirt.

"You Chin...de Lomas," says the figure. I don't recognize him, not even the voice, which rasps as much as it slurs. No pungs of familiarity.

"I guess I am — but it's been a long time since anyone's called me that."

"You're going to die."

"What are you talking about?"

"You thought you killed me, but you didn't," the dude says, haltingly, measuring every word. "I took all your shanks...eight of them...right here."

The dude lifts up the sweatshirt. A ghastly number of scars traverse his torso. A plastic bag is strapped at his side, to hold his urine.

"You did this to me...look hard, you did this!"

"You got it wrong, Chava, it wasn't me."

"Sure — I've heard it all before. I know who did this...and you're going to pay."

From the sides emerge two other guys, healthy and strong, looking like street, although a lot younger than the both of us.

"Chava — listen," I say. "I heard about what happened that night. But I wasn't there. For some time now, I've been working my way out of that useless existence. Now I've found something to live for, bigger than you and me, bigger than Lomas and Sangra. You don't want me."

Chava gets closer, alcohol on his breath. I can see tears forming in his eyes.

"Lomas did this — somebody has to pay!" he yells while pulling off the beany cap, revealing a misshapen head with scattered silver-ers of hair. The scars on his body don't compare to those on his head and the side of his face; they're larger with indentations and purplish membranes.

"Look what you did to me. Somebody has to pay for this!" Chava repeats. He's so disturbed, I can see him pulling out a knife and stabbing me just to salve his pain. I look at the guys next to

me, and they strike me as too young and inexperienced to act. I keep talking.

"There's some things to fight for, some things to die for — but not this. Chava, you're alive. I feel for you, man, but you're alive. Don't waste the rest of your days with this hate. What's revenge? What can you get by getting to me? I'm the least of your enemies. It's time to let it go, it's time to go on with your life."

Chava begins to shudder, to utter something, a guttural sound rising to his throat, a hideous moan. I think he's trying to cry, but it's hard to tell. I don't know what to do, so I pull him close to me. He twists away, the dudes to the side look lost, not knowing their next move, unprepared for what follows. I again pull at Chava, and hold him. He breaks down, a flood of fermented rage seeping out of every pore.

"If I thought my life could cleanse you of the hurt, of the memory, I would open up my shirt and let you take it from me. But it won't — we're too much the same now, Chava. Let it all out, man...let it out."

I hold Chava as if he were cornmeal in my arms, then pity overwhelms me, this complicated affection which cuts across the clear-cut states of being we'd rather seek: Here's friend, here's enemy; here's sadness, here's happiness; here's right, here's wrong. Pity draws from all these opposing elements and courses through me like an uncooked stew, mixing and confusing the paradoxes, because now this man I once admired, if not revered, I once feared, if not hated, stands here, a fragment of the race, drunk, agonized, crushed, and I can't hate him any more; I can't see him as the manifestation of craziness and power he once possessed; he's a caricature, an ap-portion, but also more like me, capable of so much ache beneath the exterior of so much strength. Pity links us in a perverted way, transcending our veneers, joining us in our vulnerability, and at the same time distancing us from one another. I want to escape from Chava's tired, perplexed and tattered face, to run away from how something so beautiful, in its own way, can become so odious.

After an eternal minute, Chava pushes me away, wipes his face with a soiled sleeve, and then turns. The dudes next to us don't seem to know what to do but follow. I see Chava hobble away, two confused teenagers at his side, and as he vanishes into a flicker of neon, I hear the final tempo of the crazy life leave my body, the last song before the dying, lapsing forever out of mind as Chava disappears, enveloped in flames breaking through the asphalt, wrested into the black heart of night.

La Vida Loca:

Gang Days in L.A.

ALWAYS  
RUNNING

LUIS J. RODRIGUEZ

## Meeting the Animal in Washington Square Park

The acrobats were out in Washington Square Park, flaying arms and colors: the jokers and break dancers, the singers and mimers. I pulled out of a reading at New York City College and watched a crowd gather around a young man jumping over 10 garbage cans from a skateboard. Then out of the side of my eye I saw someone who didn't seem to belong here, like I didn't belong. He was a big man, six feet and more, with tattoos on his arms, back, stomach and neck. On his abdomen were the words in huge old English lettering: Hazard. I knew this guy, I knew that place. I looked closer. It had to be him. It was—Animal! From East L.A. World heavyweight contender, the only Chicano from L.A. ever ranked in the top ten of the division. The one who went toe-to-toe with Leon Spinks and even made Muhammad Ali look the other way. Animal! I yelled. "Who the fuck are you?" he asked, a quart of beer in his grasp, eyes squinting. My name's Louie—from East L.A. He brightened. "East L.A.! Here in Washington Square Park? Man, we everywhere!" The proverbial "what part of East L.A.?" came next. But I gave him a shock. From La Gerahy, I said. That's the mortal enemy of the Big Hazard gang of the Ramona Gardens Housing Projects. "I should kill you," Animal replied. If we were in L.A., I suppose you would—but we in New York City, man. "I should kill you anyway."

Instead he thrust out his hand with the beer and offered me a drink. We talked—about what happened since he stopped boxing. About the time I saw him at the Cleland House

arena looking over some up-and-coming fighters. How he had been to prison, and later ended up homeless in New York City, with a couple of kids somewhere. And there he was, with a mortal enemy from East L.A., talking away. I told him how I was now a poet, doing a reading at City College, and he didn't wince or looked surprised. Seemed natural. Sure. A poet from East L.A. That's the way it should be. Poet and boxer. Drinking beer. Among the homeless, the tourists and acrobats. Mortal enemies. When I told him I had to leave, he said "go then," but soon shook my hand, East L.A. style, and walked off. "Maybe, someday, you'll do a poem about me, eh?" Sure, Animal, that sounds great. Someday, I'll do a poem about you.

## The Object of Intent Is to Get There

*"I am in the world to change the world."*  
—*Muriel Rukeyser*

One lifetime meets another lifetime  
in a constant lifetime of wars.  
Leaning cities greet us at every station  
and every wound points to the same place.  
If your unique pain cancels my unique pain  
then there is nothing unique about pain.  
What's left to do  
but carry your troubles to where they're going;  
once there, you stumble on the rest of us.

Preface: "Poetry By the Laws of Nature"

"Live the life you have imagined."

—Henry David Thoreau

Poetry, like any art, touches all creation, all life. Not just the intense experiences but also the mundane. You can find poetry in the cracks along a wall, in the faces of friends, in the palms of children—in the *trochemoche* of our manifold existence. As well as a means of expression, poetry is a way of knowledge, of participation in the world, of discovering, as Henry James charged, "the significance in all things."

Not long ago, I facilitated weekly poetry workshops at an arts-based shelter for homeless women in Chicago, most of them with the help of performance poet Cin Salach. Although the women consisted of former employees, housewives and mothers, many intelligent and skilled, some of them were considered "hard-core" homeless—substance abusers, mentally ill; a few had been raped and terribly scarred, emotionally as well as bodily. Yet what was to be a six-week program ended up lasting four years. The women wouldn't let me go—and for so long I couldn't let them go.

I opened up to a deeper level of poetry, a word-dance that traveled the path of spirit yet remained tethered to the mother ground we all walk on. These women proved that a person's value is not dependent on whether one has a job, a spouse, children or even a home; that it's not based on material wealth (or the lack of it), skin color, or sexual orientation. What gives us "value" is that we are human, possessing intrinsic attributes waiting to be nurtured, developed and guided. There abides in every person a reservoir of creativity that when tapped proves to be inexhaustible. As the saying goes, "artists are not a special kind of person; every person is a special kind of artist."

Yet the artist in each of us is too often corralled, dissuaded, or suppressed.

So when everything else has been taken away from them, the women struggle to maintain their core being—which is mind linked to desire linked to necessity (one of the women called this "poetry by the laws of nature"). There is nothing more powerful and transformative in a human being than an awakened heart, an engaged imagination, the clarity of purpose associated with conscious life-activity.

This was evident in workshops I conducted throughout the country—from behind thick-walled cells in the juvenile halls of Santa Cruz or Tucson to maximum security prisons in California or Connecticut; from "classrooms" in El Paso held in cluttered storage rooms beneath aging bleachers to private schools along the mansion-strewn Main Line of Bryn Mawr, PA; from the most over-crowded schools in the country (in East L.A.) to some of the most sparse (next to corn fields in Nebraska); among Puerto Rican migrant workers in upstate New York to impoverished Southeast Asian youth in Fresno; from rez's such as the Quinault in Washington state to the Navajo in northeast Arizona; from among poor white youth in the depressed east Ohio coal-and-steel valleys to Mexican immigrant children in Chicago's Pilsen *barrio*.

So why is poetry today mostly missing from our lives? I believe this is due to the soul-death that is implicit in the modern, high-tech but economically and socially archaic capitalist order that exists in the United States of America.

With all my revolutionary heart and mind, I declare love for this land, its people and its destiny. Within these shores flow the blood of the Swane, the Chumash, the Tohono O'Odham, the Irish dockworker, the Yoruba drummer, the Yiddish-speaking dressmaker, the African American journalist, the Hungarian packing-shed worker—from former slaves to former farmers, autoworkers to deep sea

fishermen, soldiers to teachers, Bavarian shopkeepers to Dominican preachers, Gypsies to Salvadoran refugees, Wobblies to Muslims, Huicholes to the Hmong.

But I know, like all empires before, this country will be crushed by the weight of its own deceptions unless we turn toward the outcasts, the abandoned, like the women at the shelter, to witness essential humanity stirring and free even if, for the moment, imprisoned by circumstance and history.

I'd like to recognize a few of the great writers who recently passed on and who accomplished this in their own way: Meridel Le Sueur, Denise Levertov, José Antonio Burciaga, Ricardo Sanchez, Melvin Dixon, and Allen Ginsburg.

I believe in the cooperative, equitable, and abundant place this country is capable of becoming (and that once existed for most of my ancestors, the original peoples of this land). A vital step is to realize the abundance within our own souls.

Poetry may not get us there, but it can help illuminate the way.

—Luis J. Rodríguez

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*Trochemoche*

poems by

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