

Name: _____ Class: _____

Immigrants in Our Own Land

By Jimmy Santiago Baca
1979

Jimmy Santiago Baca (b. 1952) is an American writer of Apache and Chicano descent. This poem describes the experiences of people who leave their homes in search of a better life. As you read, take notes on the speaker's attitude toward dreams.

- [1] We are born with dreams in our hearts,
looking for better days ahead.
At the gates we are given new papers,
our old clothes are taken
- [5] and we are given overalls like mechanics wear.
We are given shots and doctors ask questions.
Then we gather in another room
where counselors orient¹ us to the new land
we will now live in. We take tests.
- [10] Some of us were craftsmen in the old world,
good with our hands and proud of our work.
Others were good with their heads.
They used common sense like scholars
use glasses and books to reach the world.
- [15] But most of us didn't finish high school.



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- The old men who have lived here stare at us,
from deep disturbed eyes, sulking, retreated.
We pass them as they stand around idle,
leaning on shovels and rakes or against walls.
- [20] Our expectations are high: in the old world,
they talked about rehabilitation,²
about being able to finish school,
and learning an extra good trade.
But right away we are sent to work as dishwashers,
- [25] to work in fields for three cents an hour.
The administration says this is temporary
so we go about our business, blacks with blacks,
poor whites with poor whites,
chicanos and indians³ by themselves.
- [30] The administration says this is right,
no mixing of cultures, let them stay apart,
like in the old neighborhoods we came from.

1. to help someone become familiar with a new place or situation
2. the process of bringing someone back to a healthy and independent condition after an illness, an injury, substance addiction, or time in prison
3. Here, the terms "Chicanos" and "Indians" refer to Mexican American and Native American people.

We came here to get away from false promises,
from dictators in our neighborhoods,
[35] who wore blue suits and broke our doors down
when they wanted, arrested us when they felt like,
swinging clubs and shooting guns as they pleased.
But it's no different here. It's all concentrated.
The doctors don't care, our bodies decay,
[40] our minds deteriorate,⁴ we learn nothing of value.
Our lives don't get better, we go down quick.

My cell is crisscrossed with laundry lines,
my T-shirts, boxer shorts, socks and pants are drying.
Just like it used to be in my neighborhood:
[45] from all the tenements⁵ laundry hung window to window.
Across the way Joey is sticking his hands
through the bars to hand Felipé a cigarette,
men are hollering back and forth cell to cell,
saying their sinks don't work,
[50] or somebody downstairs hollers angrily
about a toilet overflowing,
or that the heaters don't work.

I ask Coyote next door to shoot me over
a little more soap to finish my laundry.
[55] I look down and see new immigrants coming in,
mattresses rolled up and on their shoulders,
new haircuts and brogan boots,⁶
looking around, each with a dream in their heart,
thinking they'll get a chance to change their lives.

[60] But in the end, some will just sit around
talking about how good the old world was.
Some of the younger ones will become gangsters.
Some will die and others will go on living
without a soul, a future, or a reason to live.
[65] Some will make it out of here with hate in their eyes,
but so very few make it out of here as human
as they came in, they leave wondering what good they are now
as they look at their hands so long away from their tools,
as they look at themselves, so long gone from their families,
[70] so long gone from life itself, so many things have changed.

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4. to become worse over time
5. an apartment or similar residence
6. heavy, ankle-high boots

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which TWO sentences best describe main themes of the poem?
 - A. The cruel reality that many immigrants face can gradually rob them of their humanity.
 - B. Things are always changing, so people should make decisions without fear of change.
 - C. As people grow older, they must evaluate — and sometimes give up — their dreams.
 - D. People who wish to improve their own lives should heed the lessons of their elders.
 - E. Many people mistakenly believe that life will improve if they start over in a new place.
 - F. As long as they work hard, all immigrants who come to this country can enjoy success.

2. PART B: Which of the following TWO quotes best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. “The old men who have lived here stare at us / from deep disturbed eyes” (Lines 16-17)
 - B. “The administration says this is temporary / so we go about our business” (Lines 26-27)
 - C. “The doctors don’t care, our bodies decay” (Line 39)
 - D. “with a dream in their heart, / thinking they’ll get a chance to change their lives.” (Lines 58-59)
 - E. “others will go on living / without a soul, a future, or a reason to live.” (Lines 63-64)
 - F. “gone from life itself, so many things have changed.” (Line 70)

3. How does working in roles like dishwasher and field hand initially affect the speaker?
 - A. The speaker is satisfied at first with these opportunities to earn money.
 - B. The speaker feels disappointed but believes that things will quickly get better.
 - C. The speaker wishes to complain about this poor treatment to the administration.
 - D. The speaker feels upset but understands that everyone must start at the bottom.

4. What impact does the repetition of the word “some” in line 62, line 63, and line 65 have on the poem’s tone?
 - A. It creates a curious tone, as the speaker wonders which path the immigrants will take in their lives.
 - B. It produces an informative tone, as the speaker recites a list of possible paths without displaying emotion.
 - C. It creates a resigned tone, as the speaker sees little hope in the future lives of the new immigrants.
 - D. It produces a cautionary tone, as the speaker warns young people of the consequences of giving up their dreams.

5. How does the speaker's point of view evolve between stanza 2 and stanza 5?
