

Walt Whitman Strides the Llano of New Mexico
Rudolfo Anaya

I met Walt, kind old father, on the llano,
 that expanse of land of eagle and cactus
 Where the Mexicano met the Indio and both
 met the tejano, along the Río Pecos, our
 River of blood, River of Billy the Kid,
 River of Fort Sumner where the Dinéh suffered,
 River of the Golden Carp, god of my gods.

He came striding across the open plain,
 There where the owl calls me to
 the shrine of my birth,
 There where Ultima buried my soul-cord, the
 blood, the afterbirth, my destiny.

His beard, coarse, scraggly, warm, filled with sunlight,
 like llano grass filled with grasshoppers, grillos,
 protection for lizards and jackrabbits,
 rattlesnakes, coyotes, and childhood fears.

“Buenos días, don Walt!” I called. “I have been
 waiting for you. I knew you would one day leap
 across the Mississippi!
 Leap from the Manhattas! Leap over Brooklyn Bridge!
 Leap over slavery!
 Leap over the technocrats!
 Leap over atomic waste!
 Leap over the violence! Madonna!
 Dead end rappers!
 Peter Jennings and ungodly nightly news!
 Leap over your own sex! Leap to embrace la gente
 de Nuevo México! Leap to miracles!”

I always knew that. I dreamed that.

I knew you would one day find the Mexicanos of my land,
 the Nuevo Mexicanos who kicked ass with our
 Indian ancestors, kicked ass with the tejanos,
 And finally go their ass kicked by politicians!
 I knew you would find us Chicanos, en la pobreza,
 Always needing change for a ride or a pint,
 Pero ricos en el alma! Ricos en nuestra cultura!
 Ricos con sueños y memoria!

I kept the faith, don Walt, because I always knew
 You could leap continents! Leap over the squalor!
 Leap over pain and suffering, and the ash heap we
 Make of our Earth! Leap into my arms.

Let me nestle in your bigote, don Walt, as I once
 nestled in my Abuelo's bigote, don Liborio,
 Patriarch of the Mares clan, padre de mi mamá,
 Farmer from Puerto de Luna, mestizo de España y
 Mexico, Catolico y Judío, Moro y indio, frances
 Y mountain man, hombre de la tierra!

Let me nestle in your bigote, don Walt, like I once
 nestled in the grass of the llano, on summer days,
 a child lost in the wide expanse, brother to lagarto,
 jackrabbit, rattlesnake, vulture and hawk.
 I lay sleeping in the grama grass, feeling
 the groan of the Earth beneath me, tierra sagrada!
 Around me, grasshoppers chuffing, mocking bird calling,
 meadowlark singing, owl warning, rabbit humping,
 flies buzzing, worms turning, vulture and hawk
 riding air currents, brujo spirits moving across
 my back and raising the hair of my neck,
 golden fish of my ponds tempting me to believe
 in the gods of the earth, water, air and fire.
 Oriente, poniente, norte, sur, y yo!
 Dark earth groaning beneath me, sperm flowing,
 sky turning orange and red, nighthawks dart, bats
 flutter, the mourning call of La Llorona filling the

night wind as the presence of the river stirred, called my name: "Hijo! Hiii ii-jo!"

And I fled, fled for the safety of my mother's arms.

You know the locura of childhood, don Walt—
That's why I welcome you to the llano, my llano,
My Nuevo México! Tierra Sagrada! Tierra Sangrada!

Hold me in the safety of your arms, wise poet, old poet,
Abuelo de todos. Your fingers stir my memory.

The high school teachers didn't believe in the magic
of the Chicano heart. They fed me palabras sin sabor
when it was your flesh I yearned for. Your soul.
They teased us with "Oh, Capitan, My Capitan!"
Read silently so as to arouse no passion, no tears,
no erections, no bubbling love for poetry.

Que desgracia! What a disgrace! To give my soul only
one poem in four years when you were a universe!

Que desgracia! To give us only your name, when you were
Cosmos, and our brown faces yearned for
the safety of your bigote, your arms!

Que desgracia! That you have to leap from your grave,
Now, in this begetting time, to kick ass with
this country which is so slow to learn that
we are the magic in the soul! We are the dream
of Aztlán!

Que desgracia! That my parents didn't even know your name!
Didn't know that in your *Leaves of Grass* there was
salvation for the child.
I hear my mother's lament: "They gave me no education!"
I understand my father's stupor: "They took *mi honor, mi*
orgullo, mi palebra."

Pobresa de mi gente! I strike back now! I bring you
don Walt to help gird our loins!
Este viejo es guerrillero por la gente!
Guerrillero por los pobres! Los de abajo!

Save our children now! I shout. Put *Leaves of Grass* in their
lunch boxes! In the tacos and tamales!
Let them call him Abuelo! As I call him Abuelo!

Chicano poets of the revolution! Let him fly with you
as your squadrons of words fill the air over
Aztlán! Mujeres chicanas! Pull his bigote as you
Would tug at a friendly Abuelo! His manhood is ours!
Together we are One!

Pobresa! Child wandering the streets of Alburque! Broken
by the splash of water, elm seed ghost, lost and by winds
of spring mourned, by La Llorona of the Río
Grande mourned, outcast, soul-seed, blasted by the wind
of the universe, soul-wind, scorched by the
Grandfather Sun, Lady Luna, insanity, grubs scratching
at broken limbs, fragmented soul.

I died and was buried and years later I awoke from
the dead and limped up the hill where your
Leaves of Grass lay buried in library stacks.

"Chicano Child Enters University!" the papers cried.
Miracle child! Strange child! Dark child!
Speaks Spanish Child! Has Accent Child!
Needs Lots of Help Child! Has No Money Child!
Needs A Job Child! Barrio Child!
Poor People's Child! Gente Child! Drop Out Child!

"I'll show you," I sobbed, entering the labyrinth of loneliness,
dark shadows of library, cold white classrooms.

You saved me, don Walt, you and my familia which held
Me up, like a crutch holding the one-leg Man,
Like Amor holding the lover,
Like kiss holding the flame of Love.

You spoke to me of you Manhattas, working men and women,
miracle of democracy, freedom of the soul, the suffering
of the Great War, the death of Lincoln, the lilac's last
bloom, the pantheism of the Cosmos, the miracle of
Word.

Your words caressed my soul, soul meeting soul,
You opened my mouth and forced me to speak!
Like a cricket placed on dumb tongue,
Like the curandera's healing herbs and
Touch which taught me to see beauty,
Your fingers poked and found my words!
Your drew my stories out.
You believed in the Child of the Llano.

I fell asleep on *Leaves of Grass*, covering myself with
your bigote, dreaming my ancestors, my healers,
the cuentos of their past, dreams and memories.

I fell asleep in your love, and woke to my mother's
tortillas on the comal, my father's cough, my
familia's way to work, the vast love which was
an ocean in a small house.

I woke to write my *Leaves of Llano Grass*, the cuentos
of the llano, tierra sagrada! I thank the wise
teacher who said, "Dark Child, read this book!
You are grass and to grass you shall return."

"Gracias, don Walt! Enjoy your stay. Come again. Come
Every day. Our niños need you, like they need
Our own poets. Maybe you'll write a poem in Spanish,
I'll write one in Chinese. All of poetry is One."