

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 8 *CutBank* 8

Article 45

Spring 1977

On Gary Soto

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Recommended Citation

Runciman, Lex (1977) "On Gary Soto," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 8 , Article 45.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss8/45>

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As the old standing-clock in the hall begins
To slow and climb, slower and slower,
Through a thousand gears and ratchets
Into what she knew best, and

Into tomorrow.

No assuming dialectic here, no tour guide, Dubie relies wholly on his eye and ear. "This song, / Which blames the memory, is wrong and not wrong/ Like a girl/ Showing her breasts to a boy in a cemetery." These poems carry an honest insistence on style rather than relation, or meaning. They are like the barbarian's venison in "Elegies For The Ochre Deer On The Walls At Lascaux": "historical and ochre," and like "the corpse dressed in purple on the sofa," alone, but most importantly, they are necessary, like the lights that disappear between a stage and an audience.

Ralph Burns

The Elements of San Joaquin

Gary Soto

University of Pittsburgh Press

\$2.95, paperback

Gary Soto's first book opens with chronicles of isolated and hence painful lives. Soto's people are "Far from home," but never far from degradation or violence—"Angela beaten and naked in the vineyard." Their condition is one of victims in fear of that violence which Soto knows can strike anyone, "Rachel and Maria, the dull mothers," or Tony Lopez, the local barber and pusher.

Because blood revolves from one lung to the next,
Why think it will
After tonight?

Given human life in these terms, it's not surprising that Soto turns, in a series of poems, to what is more elemental, "Field," "Wind," "Stars," and here, "Sun":

In June the sun is a bonnet of light
Coming up,
Little by little,
From behind a skyline of pine.

The pastures sway with fiddle-neck
Tassels of foxtail.

At Piedra
A couple fish on the river's edge,
Their shadows deep against the water.
Above, in the stubbled slopes,
Cows climb down
As the heat rises
In a mist of blond locusts,
Returning to the valley.

In contrast to the earlier poems, these read at least partially as a search for things which can be valued on their own terms.

But the real strengths of this book lie in the people and events which Soto remembers and finally values. "Braly Street," the last poem, is a quiet and astounding tour de force. There, and in poems like "In December" and "Emilio," the eye is as clear and unflinching as here, in "History":

That was the 50s,
And Grandma in her '50s,
A face streaked
From cutting grapes
And boxing plums.
I remember her insides
Were washed of tapeworm,
Her arms swelled into knobs
Of small growths—
Her second son
Dropped from a ladder
And was dust.
And yet I do not know
The sorrows
That sent her praying
In the dark of a closet,
The tear that fell
At night
When she touched
Loose skin
Of belly and breasts.

I do not know why
Her face shines
Or what goes beyond this shine,
Only the stories
That pulled her
From Taxco to San Joaquin,
Delano to Westside,
The places
In which we all begin.

It's not hard to understand why this book won the United States Award of the International Poetry Forum. If the best poems are gifts, then with this book we're all rich.

Lex Runciman