

“The Morning They Shot Tony Lopez, Barber and Pusher Who Went Too Far 1958” treats a drug problem, while “Copper” is about boys searching the city’s streets for cars to strip of their valuable metals.

The Elements of San Joaquin is a significant book in the evolution of Chicano poetry. It represents a change in direction from many of the earlier politically motivated, more group-oriented writings, frequently strident and artless, to more intensely personal and well-crafted expression. Negative elements of Chicano life are presented just as in poems of the political movement, but the view here is more universal, and the human victims of social and political forces at a given point in history are portrayed with a more chilling effect. Soto is an outstanding poet, and the importance of this first collection cannot be overstated.

—Carl R. Shirley
University of South Carolina

Gary Soto. *Small Faces*. (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1986) 142 pp., \$8.00 paper.

This slim, superb collection is Soto’s second foray into the field of prose (*Living Up The Street: Narrative Recollections* was the 1985 American Book Award winner). The thirty-one vignettes in *Small Faces*, written in December, 1983, and between June and August, 1984, are imbued with warmth, charm, and nostalgia. They touch subjects such as human nature, human relationships, and love, all from a very personal viewpoint—that of the author. During the course of the book, we come to know the poet, his wife and daughter, and his friends. Selections treat the narrator’s college days, travel, poetry and philosophy, as well as the mundane episodes of his daily life. The sketches are not presented chronologically, nor are they arranged thematically, so readers can deal with them out of sequence if they so desire. They are short—from one to four pages—and because each is an individual unit, one need not set aside a large block of time to read the collection. (However, the book is so charming that this reviewer read the entire volume in one sitting.)

The subject of ethnicity is treated only briefly in several stories. For instance, in the first and one of the longest pieces, “Like Mexicans,” the poet relates that in his own family, his grandmother has the entire world classified as Mexicans, blacks, Asians, and Okies, and she lectures the young man on the virtues of the Mexican girl: she can cook and acts like a woman, not a man, in her husband’s home. When the time comes for his first meeting with his future wife’s family, who are Japanese-Americans, he concludes that they are “like Mexicans, only different.” In “June,” the narrator exposes the injustice of racism when he remembers a high

school classmate who “smiled the perfect teeth of magazines, the ones I scribbled black in my meanness, my bitterness, because her smile would get it all—the shiny cars, the houses, the beachfront vacations where she would sip tropical drinks with a lover or husband in the late haze of the afternoon. The boy who cleaned up would be someone like me: brown, quiet, and so thin he would be hardly noticed among the chairs.”

Soto’s love for his family and his observations concerning the universal human condition are capsulized in “This Man,” a character sketch of his stepfather, a rough, hard-working man whose dream was simply to lie on the beach. With deft strokes, the narrator sketches his subject: “He hurt from the house payments, the asking wife, the five hungry kids to clothe and offer someday to the world,” and presents the man’s dream in a poignant fashion: “This is what he wanted: to lie on sand, to quiet his mind and think nothing of the ocean, his kids, or the work that would end when he ended.” The hand of the skilled poet, always present, is evident in such passages as the following one: “White blossoms fall at your feet, and you can only guess where they came from, what bright wind blew them your way. They sputter in the air, lingering against the blue, and then are gone.”

Small Faces is a collection of finely wrought vignettes that reveal the soul of a very talented poet. Anyone wishing to learn more about Gary Soto, or anyone who just wants to read first-rate, highly poetic prose should obtain a copy of this book.

—Carl R. Shirley
University of South Carolina

Gary Soto. *Lesser Evils: Ten Quartets*. (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1988) 126 pp., \$8.50 paper.

This volume continues in the same vein as *Small Faces*, but here the poetic voice is more mature, more reflective. There are forty autobiographical essays treating many of the subjects of *Faces*: Soto’s wife and daughter, his pets (both present and past), friendships, recollections of his childhood and teen years, sex, and the details of his everyday life. There are also two movie reviews and an account of the writing of a review of a bad novel. The essays are grouped in fours, but they are not presented chronologically, and thus can be read in any order. Each of the quartets, however, treats a single theme from four different angles.

Quite a few deal with serious topics. “Between Points,” for instance, depicts the author’s feelings of helplessness confronting late twentieth century woes—disasters, pollution, discrimination—while “Bag Lunch”