

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”

advocates a system whereby we might feed the poor one-on-one (each person giving his lunch directly to a needy person) rather than through unwieldy, impersonal, and ineffective bureaucracies. Other pieces are whimsical and amusing. "I Love My Students" is about a girl in his class with an overbite who thinks that the favorite color of the gods is lavender. "Reprobate" details his lust for three women (another one with an overbite!), and "Happy" is a hilarious account of the five-year-old narrator's recollection of a night spent with a friend of his mother's. Two children, Donald and Lloyd, "necklaces of dirt around their throats, their T-shirts like slaughterhouse aprons stained with peaches, bean juice, hotdogs they rolled clean when they fell in the dirt," are jumping up and down in tubs of chow mein the boy fears are destined to be his dinner.

Only a few selections deal with ethnicity. "The Girl on the Can of Peas" is about a youthful infatuation with a blond girl pictured on a label. The narrator cannot "imagine that someone so delicate and rich would live near a poor street like ours." In "Guess Work" he thinks about how he could have been a migrant worker, "but woke up in high school to see that I didn't want to stand on a ladder with buckets tied to my hip and babies screaming in my ear when I got home." Instead, he wound up in college, sitting on campus grass "among other ambitious Mexicans." In "A Local Issue" he remembers his first black friend and their trip to Clovis, where they didn't belong, "a brown boy and a black kid on the wrong side of town."

Noteworthy in this collection are the pieces treating animals. "Pip" is a thoughtful story about the author's cat, posing a question about what it does all day when the people are away. "Pets" recalls Blackie, an old dog who liked raisins, and "Moses" is a poignant memory of a dog who was a regular at the young male poets' barbecues and beer blasts. After he is hit by a car, they bury him lying on his side because "it's a long blackness in the earth; we must find a comfortable position to wait it out."

Throughout this collection, there is evidence of the poet's eye for details of the human condition, and manifestations of his splendid ability to render a feeling or image with just a few compressed but expressive phrases. Although not as engaging as *Small Faces*, *Lesser Evils* is a thoughtful, first-rate book.

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