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“Phone Calls,” “Evolved People”

Gary Soto

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For more information, please contact southerr@usfca.edu.

Two Poems

GARY SOTO

Phone Calls

It'll hurt, the voice said on the telephone,
And that was enough for me to hang up
And stare at the slash of sunlight
On the wall. The hangers began to bang
In the closet. The dead flies
On the windowsill spun slightly
When I opened the door and studied the car
Across the street, a sparrow locked
In its grill. I closed the door again
And answered the phone in the hallway.
The voice again said, It'll hurt.
I hung up. I walked through two rooms
And stood in the kitchen. The faucet dripped
Over the chicken breast my wife left
To defrost. I tapped the breast with a knuckle,
As I might my heart, and looked out
The front window. The car was gone.
A dog heaved a milky liquid in my driveway
And rain ticked in the throats
Of our wooden gutters.
I listened to the blue thump
Of my pulse. I counted to ten,
Then let it go. I looked at the telephone,
Cradle of black misery, then returned
To the kitchen. I glanced out
The window. A neighbor was playing
Harmonica on his front steps. He was bad,
Inconsiderate. Didn't he know
It was going to hurt, and the hurt
Was what we lived for, bewildered and nervous.
Even in sleep,
Our eyes searched behind their lids.

Evolved People

At 7–11, my half-brothers would eat two hotdogs,
 Stuff them down really quickly, and
 Then buy a soda, no ice, just a liquid
 To slosh in their bellies from noon
 'til six. The cashier would ask,
 Anything else? My brothers, with half-swallowed
 Hotdogs in their throats, would shake
 Their heads and croak, No, dude.
 Outside, they laughed and they may have felt
 Their bellies, the buddhas of Me First
 And You Later. They told me this story
 While barbecuing chicken and hamburgers,
 This meal lifted from the local Safeway.
 The smoke from the coals stung my eyes.
 I told them they shouldn't steal,
 And they told me to shut up. Jimmy told me
 Everyone steals and said, Looka my finger.
 I looked at it, pink as a sausage and just as fat.
 He asked me, You see a ring there?
 I told him no. He said, That's the point, bro.
 It got stole. He then turned the patties
 And fiddled with the chicken wings,
 Crippled and all skin hissing over the coals.
 He took a swig of beer with one eye on me,
 And then said, I know what you are, Gary.
 You ain't nothing but a evolved people.
 I sipped my soda, piled high with ice,
 And said, Nah, man, I'm not evolved.
 I'm your brother. Jimmy crushed his beer can
 And hopped our low fence into the neighbor's yard.
 He plucked two ripe tomatoes
 And then asked, How about cucumbers?
 I nodded my head, scared that the neighbor
 Would come out of the back porch. But Jimmy grunted
 Over the fence and sliced the tomatoes,
 The seed spilling like teeth.
 He could see that I didn't like what he had done,
 And he laughed, You got a wino belt on.
 I looked down at my belt, stylishly cowboy.

He asked, How come you dress like a sissy?
And then shoved a black hotdog onto my plate.

I thought about this for two weeks,
Scared for my brothers because I thought
They would get caught at the 7-11,
Both of them handcuffed and swallowing the last
Of their free hotdogs. When I was invited
To a party for an Australian poet wearing ironed jeans,
I went thinking of shaking some hands.
The guests were poets and other scholars.
I listened to people say things like this:
The Swedenborgian tradition is contained by
The objective foundations that began in Blake's time.
This went on for a while, a very strange talk
That made me think I had stared directly at
A bare lightbulb—a galaxy of blinding spots
That had me holding onto a chair
And, after a moment, had me believing
I was experiencing real learning.
Some of the people listened,
But others just nodded their heads
As they felt for the little meats on toothpicks.
Their wine glasses sloshed chardonnay
And bathed the good cells
Inside the many folds of brain matter.
I didn't drink that afternoon.
I nibbled on balls
Of cantaloup and looked out the window—
The spots in front of my eyes were gone
And now I was glimpsing the sea
And down in the street
Two boys bending a car antenna. I knocked
On the window, and the boys ran off.
When I turned to join the others,
I thought I saw my brother by the food table.
This guy was stabbing the pinkie-sized sausages,
Letting them roll into his mouth,
Greedily. The man didn't bother
To half-listen to the scholarly talk
That blinded me from big notions.

He was really eating,
Head bowed, and for all I know the owner
Of the car with a bent antenna.
He could have been my brother or stepfather,
Or a friend of the family shoving
Chicken parts onto a grill, in summer.
I put down my cantaloup and soda
And thought I was somewhere between evolved
And unevolved. The man looked at me,
Eyes like a rhinoceros. The tomato bled
From the torturous end of his sparkling fork.