

CHARLES BURWELL

Invisible Dialogue, 2014
Acrylic on canvas 96 x 78 in



COURTESY BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

MAGGIE PAUL

Simple Beauty

An interview
with Gary Soto

Poet, memoirist, novelist, essayist, and playwright Gary Soto is nothing if not prolific. Drawing upon his upbringing in Fresno, over a career spanning twenty-five years, Soto has given voice to the everyday experiences and challenging forces that shape the lives of Mexican immigrants in California. But the reach of his oeuvre does not end there. As Raymund Paredes once noted in the *Rocky Mountain Review*, “Soto establishes his acute sense of ethnicity and, simultaneously, his belief that certain emotions, values, and experiences transcend ethnic boundaries and allegiances.” In Soto’s own words, he is a writer who “provides portraits of people in the rush of life.”

Gary Soto was born in Fresno, California, in 1952 to working-class parents. As a young man he worked in both the fields of San Joaquin and the factories of Fresno. Despite being a disinterested student, his early discovery of Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Frost, among others, led him toward a writing life. Even as an adolescent, Soto has said, “I was already thinking like a poet, already filling myself with literature.”

Soto went on to college at Fresno City College and California State University, Fresno, where he earned a BA in English and studied with the poet Philip Levine, whose candid portrayals of the working class made a formidable impact. In 1974, he attended the University of California, Irvine, and became the first Mexican American to earn an MFA from that institution. Influences from this period include Edward Field, James Wright, Pablo Neruda, and Gabriel García Márquez. Soto’s first book, a collection of poems entitled *The Elements of San Joaquin* (1977), was awarded the United States Award from the International Poetry Forum and published in the Pitt Poetry Series. His second collection, *The Tale of Sunlight* (1978), was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. He has received a Discovery/The Nation Award and the Levinson Prize from Poetry.

Yet Soto is perhaps best known and most beloved as a writer for children and young adults. His work across genres and age groups explores the universal themes of alienation, family life, and the difficult choices that confront families living on the margins. Even so, his work is not without a kind of humor that sets readers at ease—enough to allow the serious dilemmas his characters face to be heard. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Roberto González Echevarría praised Soto: “Because he stays within the teenagers’

Maggie Paul is the author of the chapbook, *Stones from the Basket of Others* (Black Dirt Press, 2002), and *Borrowed World* (2011), a collection of poems from Hummingbird Press. An instructor of college composition and literature for over twenty-five years, she currently works as an editor of non-fiction books, and as an education consultant for college-bound students. In addition to poetry and nonfiction, Paul writes book reviews and conducts author and artist interviews for publication.

universe . . . he manages to convey all the social change and stress without pathos or didacticism. In fact, his stories are moving, yet humorous and entertaining.” Soto’s books for young readers have earned him several awards, including from the National Education Association and PEN America. He is also recipient of the Tomás Rivera Book Award.

A first volume of short stories for young readers, *Baseball in April and Other Stories*, was published in 1990. These eleven stories depict Mexican American boys and girls as they enter adolescence in Hispanic neighborhoods in California. *Living up the Street* (1985) was awarded the American Book Award. The popular novel *Buried Onions* (1997) and its sequel *The Afterlife* (2003) are widely taught in high school and community college classrooms.

The author’s ability to reflect his own readers is a remarkable element of Soto’s work. In *Lesser Evils: Ten Quartets* (1988), a collection of essays, Soto shares slices of life that draw upon experiences from his childhood, experiences many young people, and particularly Mexican American youth, can see themselves in. Soto is very forthcoming about the trajectory of his career; a revised and expanded edition of a collection of poems entitled *A Fire in My Hands* (2013) includes a candid interview with the poet and features a brief explanation of how each poem came to be, demystifying the creative process and how his personal experience provides material for his work.

Gary Soto’s body of work reflects the triumph of making honest art out of difficult circumstances. His inspiration and dedication as a writer is best expressed in his own words: “I tried to remain faithful to the common things of my childhood. . . . I wanted to give these things life, to write so well that my poems would express their simple beauty.”

* * *

MAGGIE PAUL: You’re a poet who writes poetry, non-fiction, fiction, children’s literature, and plays. How—or why—did this happen?

GARY SOTO: At heart I’m a poet; in behavior I’m also a poet; in appearance I’m more like a successful insurance agent—let’s laugh here, people . . . There’s no getting around that I have stepped beyond the noble boundary of poetry to have a crack at other genres. Most writers remain faithful to the genre of that first magnetic force

that willed them to pick up a pencil or pen (I date myself) and put their first tottering sentences on the page. And, boy, did I totter. My first efforts were ghastly. I burned my first poems (like a mortgage-burning party) and in the process polluted the air with the smoldering.

MP: Did you always know that you were going to become a poet and writer?

GS: I did. As young as ten, I imagined writing a book. I recall very clearly [seeing] a rack of romance novels at Mayfair Market in Fresno and thinking, “I want to write one of those.” It was a bodice-ripping cover that starched me with attention. Later, after skirmishes on the playground, after my odyssey of kicking around Fresno streets, after a couple of college composition classes, I abandoned my geography major in favor of literature. When I told my mom that I was majoring in English, she said, “Don’t you already know English?” That’s my family.

MP: You say that poetry is an act of attention. Explain this notion.

GS: I think that we have to give ourselves over to reading and rereading poetry. I still reread the poets of my youth, namely Neruda, Merwin, early Simic, midcareer James Wright, midcareer Adrienne Rich, and one my favorites, Edward Field, from whom I discovered that humor has a place in poetry. But by “act of attention,” I refer to close readings of a text, not unlike, I suspect, how art critics assess what’s before them.

MP: You haven’t mentioned the Beat poets.

GS: True, I read them early on, but they are poets—all grand figures—I’m no longer attracted to.

MP: You have a large readership among Latinx youth. How did that come about?

GS: I make a public confession. I left my first love—poetry—at the altar and drove away to write prose! What a sellout! Still, we admit that a fairly well-written novel gets lots more attention than poetry. This was certainly

evident after the publication of my first middle-grade book [of short stories], *Baseball in April* [1990]. I recall attending an educational conference in Wisconsin and attracting a crowd at my table. Of course, as a poet, I was excited; then I realized, as if for the first time, the power of words and stories and the legacy of literature—then saw beyond book sales to the readers themselves. I began to really look at my readers, many of whom were brown as me, Spanish speaking, polite, the sons and daughters of immigrants. Then I recognized my purpose.

MP: What has been the response from readers?

GS: Letters, lots of letters, from young readers and teachers—a hundred or so a week. It appears that I have touched something deep within them, and, in turn, they have touched me deeply as well. By this, I mean to say that I created stories and images that were absent in children’s and young adult literature. I took my role seriously. I did my best to write at a level that was both enjoyable and meaningful, possibly artful. True, I wrote a couple of what they call chapter novels, that is, third-grade novels, and poems that were sweet as candy and not by any means great. But when I wrote my more serious work—*Buried Onions* [1997], *The Afterlife* [2003], *Jesse* [1994]—I did so with every intention of making them strong efforts. I had to compartmentalize my work for younger readers—quick reads or sturdy, durable work.

MP: You say that your work has influenced others. Do you have a specific story?

GS: Yes, I recall reading at a community college in the San Diego area when a woman—a mexicana, I believe—told me why she loved my story collection *A Summer Life* [1990]. With very limited English skills, she had read that book, dictionary at hand, over and over until she became bilingual. She expressed her appreciation. It was a moving encounter, for me, for her, for those who were listening to our conversation. I recognized how literature matters. There are so many other stories like that.

MP: Can you give me another example, please?

GS: This one involves my musical—yes, that’s right, my musical, namely *In and Out of Shadows* [2013], a play that I was commissioned to write at the insistence of Emily Klion, the producer. I went into the project like a wailing brat—I didn’t want to do it! You can’t make me! Secretly, I was scared that I had gone too far beyond writing poetry into a territory where *Hamilton* exists. I say I was scared because the musical is about undocumented youth, Dreamers in other words. I was given two-hundred-plus pages of interviews with Dreamers and Emily said get to work. Ay, *Chihuahua*, I thought. I read those pages, came up with a structure, and, after about a year’s work, wrote the musical. It played at the Marsh theater in San Francisco, and numerous other cities. It was a small-time success but big on emotion. I recall how a dance troupe from Modesto called Los Falcones arrived to see the musical. They loved it. It was all about them, some of whom are the children of undocumented parents. Then Laura Malagón, the codirector of the troupe, beckoned me outside the theater. Out on the sidewalk, the troupe danced for me—thirteen girls in full ballet folklórico ruffled regalia dancing for me, a poet. What higher honor is there?

MP: And what are you doing creatively now?

GS: Is looking for a publisher a creative act? Well, I’m trying to find a home for a manuscript titled *Sit Still! A Poet’s Compulsive Behavior to See and Do Everything*. That aside, I’m working on two films based on my poem “Oranges.” Go ahead and rub your eyes and ask if you have read this correctly. I repeat: I’m working on two movies, a short film called *Oranges*, which will be atmospheric, plus a feature-length romantic comedy titled *A Fire in My Hands*. Perhaps I have gone too far—not one film but two simultaneously? Not too much for a compulsive poet who can never just sit still! I’m also teaching myself to bake cookies and other desserts.