

Gary Soto

FROST & NERUDA

Fallen walls, barrels of apples,
Wrists caught in saws, snow, lots of snow,
And country wives stringy as chickens . . .
Mr. Frost, with a pipe like plumbing in his mouth,
Leads me down a leafy path.
The sage is going to tell me a story,
But first he must light a fire
For fire, he tells me, is like ice,
And ice, he says, is like fire.
Which is it? I wonder. Mr. Frost reads
My face, a rumpled sack
For last night I emptied a bag
Of cold beers into that barrel
Around my middle. "It's good
That you ask," he says, puff, puff
On his cold pipe. "But first,
Let's make a fire." A good idea,
I think. I'm wearing huaraches,
And each of my faceless toes
Could use a struck match.
But his matches are wet, all of them,
And I don't know if fire
Is ice, but I can't wait
For spring to find our bodies.

I'm in Chile, bare-chested as a pirate,
Walking with Neruda along the beach,
Picking up agates and bits of glass.
I can see a book of matches
In his shirt pocket.
He strikes one and lights
His pipe, a gift from a comrade,
No, a lover, no, a comrade lover!
I kick off my huaraches. I'm home,
I feel, salt on my eyelashes,
Salt on my lips. I ask: Master,
Why are you staring at the sea?
It must be the cosmos, or a new world order
For man and beast. He frowns at me,
Sighs, and turns when he hears a wave
Break on the beach.

Then I, minor watercolorist from
The Junior League, pull my senses together
And I see: the discarded tops
Of bikinis swaying at the edge
Of the water, little mountains
Rocking in the foam. We're quiet—
A crab with huge pinchers steps
Between us. It's early afternoon,
The wind not yet up. If we turn our backs
On the sea, we become old men
With fallen chests. If we continue staring,
We remain virile! The women
Will emerge before our eyes,
Naked and sleek as mermaids.
What is time to us?