

# THE TAPS

BY GARY SOTO

**N**ot much happened when I set a rock on the railroad tracks. I expected a great noise of iron and pig squeals and an avalanche of lumber. I expected the conductor to hold onto his engineer's cap and sparks to bloom as the train slid on its side. I expected steam and hot, devilish coals bouncing down the street and setting fire to the broom factory, which in turn would set fire to the L&R Book Company. The flames would march from factory to warehouse, and in no time all of Fresno would be on fire.

We were on fire. The July heat was a blond locust with square jaws feeding in the trees. The asphalt was a soft, blackish river on which cars traveled, windows down, the passengers pumped up with sweat. The dogs whined, even in the shade of toolsheds, and

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my *abuela* (grandmother), hot from watching me circle on her small brick patio, said for me to go play somewhere else. I had just hammered taps to the bottoms of my shoes and liked to hear their tinny music.

I was happy to leave the brick patio. I figured I could hear my taps better by skipping on a cement sidewalk. I walked up the alley and crossed the street and stood in the sun, the machinery of sweat pumping to my face. Mother warned us about not crossing the street. She warned us about a lot of things, like eating raw bacon at the Molinas, like climbing hand over hand on telephone lines. We weren't too smart at listening, and now that I had crossed the street, I was scared of a spanking but not so scared as to turn back. I looked down at my shoes, black puddles of leather, and stomped the heel gently. I loved the sound of taps, little clinks that made me feel grown up. I took one step, then another, left over right, right over left as I skipped and imagined the sparks I was throwing out from under my shoes. I watched my shoes intently, head down, and in no time I was lost. I turned around, hot in the face. I could see the Sun-Maid Raisin tower and Mr. Drake's palm tree, and had a feeling that my house was where the sycamore scared up wild branches.

I looked down at my shoes, then shaded

my eyes. A block away, train tracks wavered in the heat. I hurried over, less in tune with the music of my taps than in the long rip of a train whistle. It was a passenger train the color of spoons that rushed by. I was disappointed because I wanted to wave to the engineer. I was also disappointed for not thinking quicker about hanging onto the gate as it raised up, straight as a sentry.

A man the color of a sparrow walked near the tracks. I thought of waving, of saying, "The train will be here," but he was dirty and his mouth was blistered. The soles of his shoes were tied with twine. His coat was ripped like a sail. I remembered mother's warnings about poor men who lived near the train tracks, and knew enough not to bother him.

I played with the gravel as I waited for the next train. I pulled at foxtails and with my fist pounded a bottle cap into the soft asphalt. I smelled the inside of a Cracker Jack box, stomped flat by a hungry hobo. I stirred an ant hill with a splintered plastic spoon and collected the shark teeth of broken bottles. When I heard the faraway sound of a train, I wiped my hands on my pants, set a rock on the tracks, and enjoyed wild thoughts about the train overturning. As the train rumbled closer, plume of black smoke

riding over its back, I felt a rumbling in my chest. Dust stirred. The sparrows on the shiny rails took flight. The gate lowered and the bell changed to the one/two of the signal.

I hid behind the spidery-itch of a tumbleweed as the train grew closer, its hypnotic eye of light swirling in its socket. The train was huge, and black, and for the first time since my brother and I had tried to burn down our house, I felt something was going to happen. I held my breath, hands over my ears, as the train met up with its fate, *me*. But I stood up from behind the tumbleweed, again disappointed, when the rock just ricocheted off the tracks and car after car swaged past and the man in the caboose only looked when I waved.

I managed to return home by keeping an eye on the Sun-Maid Raisin tower. I snatched three plums from the Japanese yard and watched the Molinas hammer skates to the bottom of a rickety dog house. At home, I washed my face with a garden hose, and rested in the shade of our almond tree, petting my dusty shoes with wet Klee-nex. I waited for dinner, but more so for nightfall, when in the dark I would race around *abuela's* patio, whistling like a train and kicking up the engines of sparks that lived beneath my soles. ■