To pull the metal splinter from my palm
my father recited a story in a low voice.
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
Before the story ended, he’d removed
the iron sliver I thought I’d die from.

I can’t remember the tale,
but hear his voice still, a well
of dark water, a prayer.
And I recall his hands,
two measures of tenderness
he laid against my face,
the flames of discipline
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon
you would have thought you saw a man
planting something in a boy’s palm,
a silver tear, a tiny flame.
Had you followed that boy
you would have arrived here,
where I bend over my wife’s right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down
so carefully she feels no pain.
Watch as I lift the splinter out.
I was seven when my father
took my hand like this,
and I did not hold that shard
between my fingers and think,
*Metal that will bury me,*
christen it Little Assassin,
Ore Going Deep for My Heart.
And I did not lift up my wound and cry,
*Death visited here!*
I did what a child does
when he’s given something to keep.
I kissed my father.
My Mother Pieced Quilts
By: Teresa Paloma Acosta

you were meant as covers
in winters
as weapons
against pounding January winds

but it was just that every morning I awoke to these
October ripened canvases
passed my hand across their cloth faces
and began to wonder how you pieced
all these together
these strips of gentle communion cotton and
flannel nightgowns
wedding organdies
dime-store velvets

how you shaped patterns square and oblong and
round
positioned
balanced
then cemented them
with your thread
a steel needle

how the thread darted in and out
galloping along the frayed edges, tucking them in
as you did us at night
oh how you stretched and turned and rearranged
your Michigan spring faded curtain pieces
my father’s Santa Fe workshirt
the summer denims, the tweeds of fall

in the evening you sat at your canvas
—our cracked linoleum floor the drawing board
me lounging on your arm
and you staking out the plan:
whether to put the lilac purple of Easter against the
red plaid of winter-going-into-spring
whether to mix a yellow with a blue and white and
paint
the Corpus Christi noon when my father held your
hand
whether to shape a five-point star from the
somber black silk you wore to grandmother’s
funeral

you were the river current
carrying the roaring notes

forming them into pictures of a little boy reclining
a swallow flying
you were the caravan master at the reins
driving your threaded needle artillery across the
  mosaic cloth bridges
delivering yourself in separate testimonies

oh mother you plunged me sobbing and laughing
into our past
into the river crossing at five
into the spinach fields
into the plainview cotton rows
into tuberculosis wards
into braids and muslin dresses
sewn hard and taut to withstand the thrashings of
  twenty-five years

stretched out they lay
armed / ready / shouting / celebrating

knotted with love
the quilts sing on
Oranges by Gary Soto

The first time I walked
With a girl, I was twelve,
Cold, and weighted down
With two oranges in my jacket.
December. Frost cracking
Beneath my steps, my breath
Before me, then gone,
As I walked toward
Her house, the one whose
Porch light burned yellow
Night and day, in any weather.
A dog barked at me, until
She came out pulling
At her gloves, face bright
With rouge. I smiled,
Touched her shoulder, and led
Her down the street, across
A used car lot and a line
Of newly planted trees,
Until we were breathing
Before a drugstore. We
Entered, the tiny bell
Bringing a saleslady
Down a narrow aisle of goods.
I turned to the candies
Tiered like bleachers,
And asked what she wanted -
Light in her eyes, a smile
Starting at the corners
Of her mouth. I fingered
A nickle in my pocket,
And when she lifted a chocolate
That cost a dime,
I didn’t say anything.
I took the nickle from
My pocket, then an orange,
And set them quietly on
The counter. When I looked up,
The lady’s eyes met mine,
And held them, knowing
Very well what it was all
About.

Outside,
A few cars hissing past,
Fog hanging like old
Coats between the trees.
I took my girl’s hand
In mine for two blocks,
Then released it to let
Her unwrap the chocolate.
I peeled my orange
That was so bright against
The gray of December
That, from some distance,
Someone might have thought
I was making a fire in my hands
That second day of kindergarten, I ditched while Miss Clemens bent at the sink, helping Peter Farley wash the paint off his hands. I scurried across the wide green fields that led to the road where our row of white townhouses awaited me.

I wanted no more days without my mother placed in the center of every hour. I wanted her voice, the scent of the perfume she dabbed on her wrist each morning before we watched my father walk away. We stood at her dresser while she released the stopper from a crystal bottle so blue it rivalled sunlight staining the ocean surface.

I wanted to travel with her from supermarked to bank, dry cleaners to drugstore, wherever the days life took her. As if sensing some hunger to come, I craved her with a fierceness that made me run, as if knowing I would soon lose her to a sadness vaster than any of these fields I could cover with the pace of my own feet.

Andrea Potos
When I First Saw Snow

Gregory Djanikian

Tarrytown, N.Y.

Bing Crosby was singing "White Christmas"
   on the radio, we were staying at my aunt's house
   waiting for papers, my father was looking for a job.

We had trimmed the tree the night before,
   sap had run on my fingers and for the first time
   I was smelling pine wherever I went.

Anais, my cousin, was upstairs in her room
   listening to Danny and the Juniors.

Haigo was playing Monopoly with Lucy, his sister,
   Buzzy, the boy next door, had eyes for her
   and there was a rattle of dice, a shuffling
   of Boardwalk, Park Place, Marvin Gardens.

There were red bows on the Christmas tree.

It had snowed all night.

My boot buckles were clinking like small bells
   as I thumped to the door and out
   onto the grey planks of the porch dusted with snow.

The world was immaculate, new,
   even the trees had changed color,
   and when I touched the snow on the railing
I didn't know what I had touched, ice or fire.

I heard, "I'm dreaming ..."
I heard, "At the hop, hop, hop ... oh, baby."
I heard "B & o" and the train in my imagination
   was whistling through the great plains.

And I was stepping off,
I was falling deeply into America.
Fifteen

South of the bridge on Seventeenth
I found back of the willows one summer
day a motorcycle with engine running
as it lay on its side, ticking over
slowly in the high grass. I was fifteen.

I admired all that pulsing gleam, the
shiny flanks, the demure headlights
fringed where it lay; I led it gently
to the road, and stood with that
companion, ready and friendly. I was fifteen.

We could find the end of a road, meet
the sky on out Seventeenth. I thought about
hills, and patting the handle got back a
confident opinion. On the bridge we indulged
a forward feeling, a tremble. I was fifteen.

Thinking, back farther in the grass I found
the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale-
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me good man, roared away.

I stood there, fifteen.

--William Stafford
A LETTER TO THE PLAYGROUND BULLY, FROM ANDREA, AGE 8 ½
By Andrea Gibson

maybe there are cartwheels in your mouth
maybe your words will grow up to be a gymnasts
maybe you have been kicking people with them by accident

I know some people get a whole lot of rocking in the rocking chair
and the ones who don’t sometimes get rocks in their voice boxes,
and their voice boxes become slingshots.
maybe you think my heart looks like a baby squirrel.

but you absolutely missed when you told the class I have head lice
‘cause I one hundred percent absolutely do not have head lice
and even if I do
it is a fact that head lice prefer clean heads over dirty ones
so I am clean as a whistle on a tea pot.
my mother says it is totally fine if I blow off steam
as long as I speak in an octave my kindness can still reach.

my kindness knows mermaids never ever miss their legs in the water
‘cause there are better ways to move through the ocean than kicking.

so guess what,
if I ever have my own team
I am picking everyone first

even the worst kid
and the kid with the stutter like a skipping record
‘cause I know all of us are scratched,
even if you can’t hear it when we speak.
my mother says most people have heartbeats
that are knocking on doors that will never open,
and I know my heart is a broken freezer chest
‘cause I can never keep anything frozen.

so no, I am not “always crying.”
I am just thawing outside of the lines.
and even if I am “always crying”
it is a fact
that everything floats so good in the dead sea.
and just ‘cause no one ever passes notes to me
doesn’t mean I am not super duper.
in fact, my super duper might be a buoy or a paper boat
the next time your nose gets stuck up the river
‘cause it is a fact
that our hearts stop every for a mili-second every time we sneeze
and some people’s houses have too much dust.

some people’s fathers are like attics
I’ve heard attics have monsters in their walls and shaky stares.
I think if I lived in a house with attic
I’d nightmare a burglar in my safety chest
and maybe I’d look for rest in the sticks and stones
‘cause my mother says a person can only swallow so much punch
before he’s drunk on his own fist

but the only drunk I ever knew
was sleeping in the alley behind our church
and jesus turned water into his wine
so even god has his bad days

but on your bad days couldn’t you just say
“hey I’m having a bad day,”
instead of telling me I’m stupid or poor,
or telling me I dress like a boy
‘cause maybe I am a boy AND a girl
maybe my name is Andrea Andrew.
so what.
it is a fact that bumblebees have hair on their eyes
and humans, also, should comb through everything they see.

like
an anchorman is not a sailor.
like the clouds might be a pillow fight.
like my mother says,
“every bird perched on a telephone wire
will listen to the conversations running through its feet
to decide the direction of its flight.”

so I know every word we speak
can make hurricanes in people’s weather veins
or shine their shiny shine

so maybe sometime you could sit beside me on the bus
and I could say,
“guess what, it is a fact that manatees have vocal chords
but do not have ears.
and Beethoven made music
even when he could no longer hear.

and I know every belt that has hit someone’s back
is still a belt that was built to hold something up.

and it is fact that Egyptians slept on pillows made of stone
but it’s not hard for me to dream
that maybe one day you’ll write me back
like the day I wrote the lightening bug to say,
I smashed my mason jar and I threw away the lid.
I didn’t want to take a chance that I’d grow up to be a war.

I want to be a belly dance or an accordion or a pogo stick
or the fingerprints the mason left
in the mortar between the bricks
to prove that he was here,
that he built a roof over someone’s head
to keep the storm from their faith,
my mother says that’s why we all were born.

and I think she’s right.
so write back soon.
sincerely yours.