Poetry

“My Mother Pieced Quilts” by Teresa Palomo Acosta

About the Author

Born in 1949 in McGregor, Texas, poet Teresa Palomo Acosta grew up listening to family stories about working in and living near cotton fields. She came from a family of hardworking men and women. The women were known particularly for their sewing skills. Palomo Acosta combines her love for her Mexican heritage and her family’s quilting and storytelling abilities in her poem “My Mother Pieced Quilts.”

they were just 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
a thimble

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 work shirt
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-

whether to mix a yellow with 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 thread 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
Imagery & Diction

Novelist Robert Newton Peck once said, “A good author makes a camera out of a pen.” An author creates imagery through his or her diction. Imagery is language that appeals to the sense. Writers use it to describe an experience and evoke a feeling.

1. Review Acosta’s poem and identify two images. Explain why the images appeal to you.

2. Next, consider the topic, purpose, and occasion of Acosta’s poem. How might they shape her diction or choice of words?

3. The power of a sentence or a line of poetry to produce a reaction in the reader lies mainly in the connotation (the suggested meaning) of words. Consider the final image in the poem, “knotted with love the quilt sings on.” What are the denotations of the words knotted and sings.

4. Consider what would happen if the author’s diction were different. For example, if instead of “knotted,” she had used “entangled,” “Mixed up,” or “tied together.” How might a different word or phrase affect the reader’s perception of the final line in that poem?