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Letter to My Father

i would like to write a poem for my father
but every time i start i get so frightened that i have
to gather blankets and write a poem to me instead.

the first line of the poem-letter i start for you, father, is always:
my face is wet: snot tears and plastic make an ugly sound across
pennsylvania and california
and then i am led to apologize again:
i am sorry about the noise, father, and about the wet.
i am sorry that i am crying at you.
how unfair.
i am sorry that i don't call.

here is the scrawny ink pen that made these stains on my fingers
here. see?
just under the knuckle on the middle finger.
and here the slight scratch in the desk from where i was too em-
phatic
and an exclamation point cut the wood.

the letter was returned, stamped
addressee unknown.
i read the letter myself,
so that someone would have heard me.

Merlyn's Pen



Poetry is boned with ideas, nerved and blooded with emotions, all
held together by the delicate, tough skin of words.



-Paul Engle

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enclosed please find:
my first line of poetry
my first-grade report card
my first school picture.
i would be sending a clip from my first haircut
but i have never needed one
and this is why:
you can see from the photograph that i have oil-prone hair but it
is soft when washed.
you can see from the photograph that i have
narrow edges and empty eyes.

when i was very young i needed softness:
i yanked out my hair in clumps and held it,
long and graceful, in my fist.
stuck my thumb in my mouth and rubbed my upper lip
with the smooth comforting ends of my hair.
it smelled of shampoo and toddler sweat.

i signed with sincerity and a good deal of release,
a leaking and sprawling signature,
your loving daughter.

—Nava Etshalom,
Twelfth grade, Masterman School,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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