GARY SOTO

The Dime-Store Parakeet

The bird didn't speak
Until the day I dropped my tortilla
And it said, "Ha-Ha."

I dropped other things,
Like my report card in blazing flames,
And the parakeet repeated "Ha-Ha."

Wind rattled the TV antenna on the roof.
Boys with green teeth showed themselves
At our picture window.

The bird remained silent.

I turned the parakeet upside down
Boy or girl, I wondered,
And shook it like a salt shaker—
No salt but a dribble of bird turd.

I dropped a spoon—"Ha-Ha."
I dropped a #2 pencil—"Ha-Ha."
I dropped myself into the couch
To eat a bowl of ice cream—"Ha-Ha."

Then it snowed,
The boys with green teeth went away,
And a moose appeared at our picture window.
No comment from the bird.

The parakeet lived in its cage, silent
Except when I counted my failures
On my fingers and let the parakeet put its beak
Like a pipe wrench around my pinkie.

Bird, I said, I can count the stars—
What can you do!
The bird rang its bell with a claw,
And bit its mirror, trying to kiss the image
Of himself, the conceited little shuttlecock!

I dropped a shoe with deadly fumes,
And the bird kicked over his bottle cap of water.
I dropped a goldfish
And the bird raked his beak across the bars

I next dropped big ideas,
Like the love for my brother,
Like the love for my country.
Like the love for the nine planets,
Like the love for God because I'm so small,
Like the love for all creatures
Dressed in feathers, fur, or little hair.

The bird shed a feather
And then, like a bat, hung upside down,
The theory that nature speaks to us
A dumb idea.