

Linda Pastan's View towards Life

Linda Pastan is very good at depicting life, including the process of aging to death and other experiences that most people would encounter on the journey of life. This quality makes her poems especially easy of approach to a beginning student like me. In fact, her poem "To a Daughter Leaving Home" was the first poem that evoked my resonance. In this essay, I want to share my feelings about Pastan's possible view towards life by exploring two of my favorite poems, "Pass/ Fail," and "Marks."

At the first glance of the poem "Pass/ Fail," I simply assumed that it's talking about stress and fears of taking exams. Only until I read the poem more carefully did I discover deeper meaning of the poem. The poem is probably about different types of hindrance in our lives. The first two lines "You will never graduate/ from this dream" seem to suggest that this kind of difficulties in life, unlike that at school, will continue to rise no matter how hard we manage to settle them down. In line 9 and 10 "but you haven't even/ taken the course," we can see that the tests of life come to everyone even though we have not prepared for them.

Pastan uses similar analogy in another poem "Marks." In the poem, a housewife's daily work becomes something subject to evaluation by the metaphor of marks. The two poems adopt similar metaphors of school system to describe life's difficulty. And the two speakers' voice could be equally pessimistic: when the speaker in "Marks" satirically mentions in the last line "I am dropping out," the reality is that she is a mother of two children, which is a responsibility that she cannot refuse to shoulder by simply "dropping out."

Regarding anxiety arising from making decision in life, it seems that Pastan is also saying that you cannot achieve your dreams if you are expecting to fail.¹ While real preparations as "you succeed awake" are surely important, one can easily fail because he or she is not able to overcome the anxiety, and the anxiety grows like a nightmare "asleep there is a test/ waiting

¹ Reference: Rowan Gilchrist's essay "A Reading of Linda Pastan's Pass/Fail"

to be failed” in his or her mind.

The tone is pessimistic. However, it is also the unavoidable truth of possible failure in life that hints the possibility of success after accepting it. Anxiety comes from too much unnecessary worry. We could all fail some of the “course” in life, but we can never “graduate” from the whole life if we were so worried about potential failure that we didn’t even try to do our best. That’s why I believe Pastan is trying to tell us that we should not be afraid of life’s obstacles, and that sometimes it’s all right to fail some goals. What’s more important is to learn from the process because life is like “the curved path of the park” as described in her poem “To a Daughter Leaving Home.” No one knows what he or she would encounter on the long journey of life. Nevertheless, if we cannot stride across the puddles of the road simply because we dread to tumble, we would lose the opportunity to learn how to protect ourselves while falling down, how to persevere with our belief in difficult situations, and finally, how to pull ourselves out of the plight.

Appendix

Pass/ Fail

you will never graduate
from this dream
of blue books.
no matter how
you succeed awake,
asleep there is a test
waiting to be failed.
the dream beckons with two dull pencils,
but you haven't even
taken the course;
when you reach for a book--
it closes its door
in your face; when
you conjugate a verb--
it is in the wrong
language.

now the pillow becomes
a blank page. turn it
to the cool side;
you will still smother
in all of the feathers
and have to be learned
by heart.

Marks - Linda Pastan

My husband gives me an A
for last night's supper,
an incomplete for my ironing,
a B plus in bed.

My son says I am average,
an average mother, but if
I put my mind to it
I could improve.

My daughter believes
in Pass/Fail and tells me
I pass. Wait 'til they learn
I'm dropping out.

To a Daughter Leaving Home - Linda Pastan

When I taught you
at eight to ride
a bicycle, loping along
beside you
as you wobbled away
on two round wheels,
my own mouth rounding
in surprise when you pulled
ahead down the curved
path of the park,
I kept waiting
for the thud
of your crash as I
sprinted to catch up,
while you grew
smaller, more breakable

with distance,
pumping, pumping
for your life, screaming
with laughter,
the hair flapping
behind you like a
handkerchief waving
goodbye.