

Notes on To a Daughter Leaving Home by Linda Pastan: by Andrew Spacey

To A Daughter Leaving Home is a poem that describes the memory of a mother teaching her young daughter to ride a bicycle.

The contrasts are clear - the title suggests that her daughter is now old enough to leave home, yet the poem concentrates on the past, when she was only a child. The poet carefully and cleverly extends the metaphor of the bike as part of life's journey.

Linda Pastan's poems are often windows into domestic life at all levels, taking in husband and wife issues, the difficulties of motherhood and the complex relationships between family members.

To A Daughter Leaving Home focuses on a particular aspect of family life, learning to ride a bike, something we've all had a go at, and turns this simple experience into a threshold moment.

The tension created between mother and daughter comes and goes as the narrative progresses, taking the reader right into the action, whilst the metaphorical undercurrents allow for reflection and reaction.

The mother's love for her child comes through, the imagery stays strong, but learning how to cope with that same child as an adult is always more of a challenge.

To A Daughter Leaving Home

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.

Analysis

This is an informal, free verse poem with no strict regular rhyme or meter (metre in British English), this is one elongated sentence with brief punctuation now and then to produce a stop-start rhythm, a reflection of the learning process of the daughter on the bike.

Enjambment, where one line runs into another with no punctuation, together with present participle words - pumping, flapping, screaming and so on, helps maintain the sense of the bike lesson happening now, in real time, despite this being a memory.

The bicycle lesson is a metaphor for life's journey and is extended throughout the poem. Repetition helps reinforce an idea - pumping, pumping, suggests that the daughter is surging ahead with intense energy, typical of a child.

Note the use of a simile in the last three lines with flapping behind you like a handkerchief waving goodbye.

Further Analysis

The speaker is the mother, (possibly a father or other close relative), looking back to the time when the daughter is learning to ride a bike. It's a personal, stretched out short scene reminding the daughter of this very important learning process, a staging post for most children.

The bicycle lesson becomes the focal point as a metaphor for life - life is a bicycle - with all the potential dangers that involves.

So the need to know how to steer, how to keep balance and how to avoid accidents is paramount. Co-ordination is vital. The mother is loping along beside the daughter as she wobbles with uncertainty; the mother's mouth rounds in surprise in expectation of disaster when the daughter moves ahead, perhaps on her own for the first time.

This idea of the mother being behind is emphasized with the word sprinted - her daughter is forging ahead in life, growing up too fast, and the mother feels she has to up her game to catch up.

The form of the poem is crucial here- the one long sentence, made up of several clauses, represents the different stages of the bicycle lesson and hence the growing up process. And, as with many memories of family, time always seems to have gone so fast when you look back at certain specific childhood activities.

The daughter is receding, getting smaller as she cycles off away from the mother, which contrasts greatly with the idea that she is also grown up now, about to leave home. The speaker is understandably nervous because her child is fragile, vulnerable and may crash.

Growing up is a dangerous business but note how the poet sets the confident youngster screaming with laughter against the mother who thinks the daughter more breakable with distance.

This age old tension between the protective parent who fears for the worst and the bubbling, energetic, independent youngster who couldn't care less, surfaces. It's dealt with in a nostalgic manner, the tone one of mild sadness as the daughter rides away, hair flapping like a handkerchief, suggestive of a tearful goodbye.

So the whole poem represents that journey from childhood innocence to adult independence as seen through the eyes of a rather anxious mother. The bicycle lessons have been taught, the daughter now has to face the road alone, equipped hopefully with the necessary skills for success.

When the time comes for a daughter to leave the family home it is always a wrench for the mother but sooner or later the child has to be set free, let go for them to become what they have to become - independent adults.

This poem is a neat way of metaphorically telling that story, the cycle of life ongoing.