

MARILYN L. TAYLOR

Mother as Poet/Poet as Mother

Let me put it this way: it is probably not an exaggeration to suggest that nearly every poem written by a mother about motherhood—or, for that matter, by a daughter about daughterhood—is accompanied by a little ghost of guilt, busily spinning excuses, digressions, and scams. The poet Stephen Dunn, for example (obviously neither mother nor daughter, but in this case absolutely spot-on) refers to this sort of uneasiness in his poem titled “The Routine Things Around the House,” which begins like this:

*When Mother died
I thought: now I'll have a death poem.
That was unforgivable. . .*

Ah yes. Unforgivable, we mother/daughter poets sigh to ourselves—it's time now for the death poem. The grief poem. The terrified poem, or even the celebratory one. The piece we've been hoping to write as an honest, heartfelt expression of emotion, but—and we have to admit it—one that we know will also be coolly examined by total strangers, who might be on the lookout for exaggeration, sentimentality, melodrama, or some other severe transgression.

Do we therefore feel compelled to placate these shadowy third parties by diluting the emotional intensity of our poems? Do we sacrifice complete candor by trying for gracefulness, for artistry? And if we do, will that automatically add an unmistakable sprinkle of artificiality to our finished work?

Inexperienced poets usually don't let such questions bother them very much. They charge ahead and write what they feel, and their peers

(i.e. their readers) are likely to understand this. But as we grow more experienced and our potential audience more discerning, we begin to realize that a poem often becomes more effective when the heat is turned down a bit, in favor of control and congruity. Not always. Often.

But what happens to the veracity factor, especially in mother/daughter poems if the heat's turned down? There is probably no human relationship more complicated, nor is its poetry more likely to include feelings of pain, anger, longing, delight, etc. But the wise poet knows that such emotions probably shouldn't be allowed to go out into the world without protective gear. A lamentation, for example, needs to divulge its specific motivation, its context. Anger is often more effectively communicated in the third person than in the first, perhaps presented as a scenario, (no matter how appalling) or "story" rather than simply reproduced on the page. An indignant rant can be funneled into one jarring observation in particular.

In this way, a mother or a daughter can preserve her original honest impulse for writing the poem—e.g. a perceived betrayal? A memorable moment? An untimely death? A lesson learned?— in a way that permits her to use, even to the point of artistic exploitation, the backdrop of our own society, its customs, rules, recognizable conventions, taboos. Many of the best poems from this emotionally loaded subgenre will, in fact, reveal mastery of this approach, thereby busting a plethora of ghosts.