

Classic Poetry Series

**Linda Pastan
- poems -**

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Linda Pastan(1932 -)

Linda Pastan is an American poet of Jewish background. She was born in New York on May 27, 1932. Today, she lives in Potomac, Maryland with her husband Ira Pastan, an accomplished physician and researcher.

She is known for writing short poems that address topics like family life, domesticity, motherhood, the female experience, aging, death, loss and the fear of loss, as well as the fragility of life and relationships.

Linda Pastan has published at least 12 books of poetry and a number of essays. Her awards include the Dylan Thomas Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Alice Fay di Castagnola Award (Poetry Society of America), the Bess Hokin Prize (Poetry Magazine), the 1986 Maurice English Poetry Award (for *A Fraction of Darkness*), the Charity Randall Citation of the International Poetry Forum, and the 2003 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. She also received the Radcliffe College Distinguished Alumnae Award.

Two of her collections of poems were nominated for the National Book Award and one for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize.

A New Poet

Finding a new poet
is like finding a new wildflower
out in the woods. You don't see

its name in the flower books, and
nobody you tell believes
in its odd color or the way

its leaves grow in splayed rows
down the whole length of the page. In fact
the very page smells of spilled

red wine and the mustiness of the sea
on a foggy day - the odor of truth
and of lying.

And the words are so familiar,
so strangely new, words
you almost wrote yourself, if only

in your dreams there had been a pencil
or a pen or even a paintbrush,
if only there had been a flower.

Linda Pastan

Emily Dickinson

We think of hidden in a white dress
among the folded linens and sachets
of well-kept cupboards, or just out of sight
sending jellies and notes with no address
to all the wondering Amherst neighbors.
Eccentric as New England weather
the stiff wind of her mind, stinging or gentle,
blew two half imagined lovers off.
Yet legend won't explain the sheer sanity
of vision, the serious mischief
of language, the economy of pain.

Linda Pastan

Home For Thanksgiving

The gathering family
throws shadows around us,
it is the late afternoon
Of the family.

There is still enough light
to see all the way back,
but at the windows
that light is wasting away.

Soon we will be nothing
but silhouettes: the sons'
as harsh
as the fathers'.

Soon the daughters
will take off their aprons
as trees take off their leaves
for winter.

Let us eat quickly--
let us fill ourselves up.
the covers of the album are closing
behind us.

Linda Pastan

I Married You

I married you for all the wrong reasons,
charmed by your dangerous family history,
by the innocent muscles, bulging like hidden
weapons under your shirt, by your naive ties,
the colors of painted scraps of sunset.
I was charmed too by your assumptions
about me: my serenity— that mirror waiting to be
cracked, my flashy acrobatics with knives in the kitchen.
How wrong we both were about each other,
and how happy we have been.

Linda Pastan

Jump Cabling

When our cars touched
When you lifted the hood of mine
To see the intimate workings underneath,
When we were bound together
By a pulse of pure energy,
When my car like the princess
In the tale woke with a start,
I thought why not ride the rest of the way together.

Anonymous Submission

Linda Pastan

Love Poem

I want to write you
a love poem as headlong
as our creek
after thaw
when we stand
on its dangerous
banks and watch it carry
with it every twig
every dry leaf and branch
in its path
every scruple
when we see it
so swollen
with runoff
that even as we watch
we must grab
each other
and step back
we must grab each
other or
get our shoes
soaked we must
grab each other

Linda Pastan

Marks

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.

Linda Pastan

Meditation By The Stove

I have banked the fires
of my body
into a small but steady blaze
here in the kitchen
where the dough has a life of its own,
breathing under its damp cloth
like a sleeping child;
where the real child plays under the table,
pretending the tablecloth is a tent,
practicing departures; where a dim
brown bird dazzled by light
has flown into the windowpane
and lies stunned on the pavement--
it was never simple, even for birds,
this business of nests.
The innocent eye sees nothing, Auden says,
repeating what the snake told Eve,
what Eve told Adam, tired of gardens,
wanting the fully lived life.
But passion happens like an accident
I could let the dough spill over the rim
of the bowl, neglecting to punch it down,
neglecting the child who waits under the table,
the mild tears already smudging her eyes.
We grow in such haphazard ways.
Today I feel wiser than the bird.
I know the window shuts me in,
that when I open it
the garden smells will make me restless.
And I have banked the fires of my body
into a small domestic flame for others
to warm their hands on for a while.

Anonymous submission

Linda Pastan

Mosaic

1. THE SACRIFICE

On this tile
the knife
like a sickle-moon hangs
in the painted air
as if it had learned a dance
of its own,
the way the boy has
among the vivid
breakable flowers,
the way Abraham has
among the boulders,
his two feet heavy
as stones.

2. NEAR SINAI

God's hand here
is the size of a tiny cloud,
and the wordless tablets
he holds out
curve like the temple doors.
Moses, reaching up
must see on their empty surface
laws chiseled in his mind
by the persistent wind
of the desert, by wind
in the bulrushes.

3. THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

We know by the halos
that circle these heads
like rings around planets
that the small donkey
has carried his burden

away from the thunder
of the Old Testament
into the lightning
of the New.

4. AT THE ARMENIAN TILE SHOP

Under the bright glazes
Esau watches Jacob,
Cain watches Abel.
With the same heavy eyes
the tilemaker's Arab assistant
watches me,
all of us wondering
why for every pair
there is just one
blessing.

Linda Pastan

On the Steps of the Jefferson Memorial

We invent our gods
the way the Greeks did,
in our own image—but magnified.
Athena, the very mother of wisdom,
squabbled with Poseidon
like any human sibling
until their furious tempers
made the sea writhe.

Zeus wore a crown
of lightning bolts one minute,
a cloak of feathers the next,
as driven by earthly lust
he prepared to swoop
down on Leda.
Despite their power,
frailty ran through them

like the darker veins
in the marble of these temples
we call monuments.
Looking at Jefferson now,
I think of the language
he left for us to live by.
I think of the slave
in the kitchen downstairs.

Linda Pastan

Pears

Some say
it was a pear
Eve ate.
Why else the shape
of the womb,
or of the cello
Whose single song is grief
for the parent tree?
Why else the fruit itself
tawny and sweet
which your lover
over breakfast
lets go your pear-
shaped breast
to reach for?

Linda Pastan

Petit Dejeuner

I sing a song
of the croissant
and of the wily French
who trick themselves daily
back to the world
for its sweet ceremony.
Ah to be reeled
up into morning
on that crisp,
buttery
hook.

Linda Pastan

Prosody 101

When they taught me that what mattered most
was not the strict iambic line goose-stepping
over the page but the variations
in that line and the tension produced
on the ear by the surprise of difference,
I understood yet didn't understand
exactly, until just now, years later
in spring, with the trees already lacy
and camellias blowsy with middle age,
I looked out and saw what a cold front had done
to the garden, sweeping in like common language,
unexpected in the sensuous
extravagance of a Maryland spring.
There was a dark edge around each flower
as if it had been outlined in ink
instead of frost, and the tension I felt
between the expected and actual
was like that time I came to you, ready
to say goodbye for good, for you had been
a cold front yourself lately, and as I walked in
you laughed and lifted me up in your arms
as if I too were lacy with spring
instead of middle aged like the camellias,
and I thought: so this is Poetry!

Linda Pastan

Self-Portrait

After Adam Zagajewski

I am child to no one, mother to a few,
wife for the long haul.
On fall days I am happy
with my dying brethren, the leaves,
but in spring my head aches
from the flowery scents.
My husband fills a room with Mozart
which I turn off, embracing
the silence as if it were an empty page
waiting for me alone to fill it.
He digs in the black earth
with his bare hands. I scrub it
from the creases of his skin, longing
for the kind of perfection
that happens in books.
My house is my only heaven.
A red dog sleeps at my feet, dreaming
of the manic wings of flushed birds.
As the road shortens ahead of me
I look over my shoulder
to where it curves back
to childhood, its white line
bisecting the real and the imagined
the way the ridgepole of the spine
divides the two parts of the body, leaving
the soft belly in the center
vulnerable to anything.
As for my country, it blunders along
as well intentioned as Eve choosing
cider and windfalls, oblivious
to the famine soon to come.
I stir pots, bury my face in books, or hold
a telephone to my ear as if its cord
were the umbilicus of the world
whose voices still whisper to me

even after they have left their bodies.

Linda Pastan

Shadblow

Because the shad
are swimming
in our waters now,

breaching the skin
of the river with their
tarnished silvery fins,

heading upstream
straight for our tables
where already

knives and forks gleam
in anticipation, these trees
in the woods break

into flower--small, white
flags surrendering
to the season.

Linda Pastan

Something About The Trees

I remember what my father told me:
There is an age when you are most yourself.
He was just past fifty then,
Was it something about the trees that make him speak?

There is an age when you are most yourself.
I know more than I did once.
Was it something about the trees that make him speak?
Only a single leaf had turned so far.

I know more than I did once.
I used to think he'd always be the surgeon.
Only a single leaf had turned so far,
Even his body kept its secrets.

I used to think he'd always be the surgeon,
My mother was the perfect surgeon's wife.
Even his body kept its secrets.
I thought they both would live forever.

My mother was the perfect surgeon's wife,
I can still see her face at thirty.
I thought they both would live forever.
I thought I'd always be their child.

I can still see her face at thirty.
When will I be most myself?
I thought I'd always be their child.
In my sleep it's never winter.

When will I be most myself?
I remember what my father told me.
In my sleep it's never winter.
He was just past fifty then.

Submitted by Jt

The Cossacks

For Jews, the Cossacks are always coming.
Therefore I think the sun spot on my arm
is melanoma. Therefore I celebrate
New Year's Eve by counting
my annual dead.

My mother, when she was dying,
spoke to her visitors of books
and travel, displaying serenity
as a form of manners, though
I could tell the difference.

But when I watched you planning
for a life you knew
you'd never have, I couldn't explain
your genuine smile in the face
of disaster. Was it denial

laced with acceptance? Or was it
generations of being English--
Brontë's Lucy in Villette
living as if no fire raged
beneath her dun-colored dress.

I want to live the way you did,
preparing for next year's famine with wine
and music as if it were a ten-course banquet.
But listen: those are hoofbeats
on the frosty autumn air.

Linda Pastan

The Happiest Day

It was early May, I think
a moment of lilac or dogwood
when so many promises are made
it hardly matters if a few are broken.
My mother and father still hovered
in the background, part of the scenery
like the houses I had grown up in,
and if they would be torn down later
that was something I knew
but didn't believe. Our children were asleep
or playing, the youngest as new
as the new smell of the lilacs,
and how could I have guessed
their roots were shallow
and would be easily transplanted.
I didn't even guess that I was happy.
The small irritations that are like salt
on melon were what I dwelt on,
though in truth they simply
made the fruit taste sweeter.
So we sat on the porch
in the cool morning, sipping
hot coffee. Behind the news of the day--
strikes and small wars, a fire somewhere--
I could see the top of your dark head
and thought not of public conflagrations
but of how it would feel on my bare shoulder.
If someone could stop the camera then...
if someone could only stop the camera
and ask me: are you happy?
perhaps I would have noticed
how the morning shone in the reflected
color of lilac. Yes, I might have said
and offered a steaming cup of coffee.

Linda Pastan

The Months

January

Contorted by wind,
mere armatures for ice or snow,
the trees resolve
to endure for now,

they will leaf out in April.
And I must be as patient
as the trees—
a winter resolution

I break all over again,
as the cold presses
its sharp blade
against my throat.

February

After endless
hibernation
on the windowsill,
the orchid blooms—

embroidered purple stitches
up and down
a slender stem.
Outside, snow

melts midair
to rain.
Abbreviated month.
Every kind of weather.

March

When the Earl King came

to steal away the child
in Goethe's poem, the father said
don't be afraid,

it's just the wind. . .
As if it weren't the wind
that blows away the tender
fragments of this world—

leftover leaves in the corners
of the garden, a Lenten Rose
that thought it safe
to bloom so early.

April

In the pastel blur
of the garden,
the cherry
and redbud

shake rain
from their delicate
shoulders, as petals
of pink

dogwood
wash down the ditches
in dreamlike
rivers of color.

May

May apple, daffodil,
hyacinth, lily,
and by the front
porch steps

every billowing
shade of purple

and lavender lilac,
my mother's favorite flower,

sweet breath drifting through
the open windows:
perfume of memory—conduit
of spring.

June

The June bug
on the screen door
whirs like a small,
ugly machine,

and a chorus of frogs
and crickets drones like Musak
at all the windows.
What we don't quite see

comforts us.
Blink of lightning, grumble
of thunder—just the heat
clearing its throat.

July

Tonight the fireflies
light their brief
candles
in all the trees

of summer—
color of moonflakes,
color of fluorescent
lace

where the ocean drags
its torn hem
over the dark

sand.

August

Barefoot
and sun-dazed,
I bite into this ripe peach
of a month,

gathering children
into my arms
in all their sandy
glory,

heaping
my table each night
with nothing
but corn and tomatoes.

September

Their summer romance
over, the lovers
still cling
to each other

the way the green
leaves cling
to their trees
in the strange heat

of September, as if
this time
there will be
no autumn.

October

How suddenly

the woods
have turned
again. I feel

like Daphne, standing
with my arms
outstretched
to the season,

overtaken
by color, crowned
with the hammered gold
of leaves.

November

These anonymous
leaves, their wet
bodies pressed
against the window

or falling past—
I count them
in my sleep,
absolving gravity,

absolving even death
who knows as I do
the imperatives
of the season.

December

The white dove of winter
sheds its first
fine feathers;
they melt

as they touch
the warm ground

like notes
of a once familiar

music; the earth
shivers and
turns towards
the solstice.

Linda Pastan

The New Dog

Into the gravity of my life,
the serious ceremonies
of polish and paper
and pen, has come

this manic animal
whose innocent disruptions
make nonsense
of my old simplicities-

as if I needed him
to prove again that after
all the careful planning,
anything can happen.

Linda Pastan

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.

Linda Pastan

Traveling Light

I am only leaving you
for a handful of days
but it feels as though
i will be gone forever
the way the door closes
behind me with such solidity
the way my suitcase
carries everything
i'd need for an eternity
of traveling light
i have left my hotel number
on your desk, instructions
about the dog
and heating dinner. but
like the weather front
they warn is on its way
with its switchblades
of wind and ice
our lives have minds
of their own

Linda Pastan

Vermilion

Pierre Bonnard would enter
the museum with a tube of paint
in his pocket and a sable brush.
Then violating the sanctity
of one of his own frames
he'd add a stroke of vermilion
to the skin of a flower.
Just so I stopped you
at the door this morning
and licking my index finger, removed
an invisible crumb
from your vermilion mouth. As if
at the ritual moment of departure
I had to show you still belonged to me.
As if revision were
the purest form of love.

Linda Pastan

Vertical

Perhaps the purpose of leaves is to conceal
the verticality of trees which we notice in December
as if for the first time: row after row of dark forms
yearning upwards. And since we will be horizontal
ourselves for so long, let us now honor
the gods of the vertical: stalks of wheat which
to the ant must seem as high as these trees do to us,
silos and telephone poles, stalagmites and skyscrapers.
but most of all these winter oaks, these soft-fleshed poplars,
this birch whose bark is like roughened skin against
which I lean my chilled head, not ready to lie down.

Linda Pastan

What We Want

What we want
is never simple.
We move among the things
we thought we wanted:
a face, a room, an open book
and these things bear our names--
now they want us.
But what we want appears
in dreams, wearing disguises.
We fall past,
holding out our arms
and in the morning
our arms ache.
We don't remember the dream,
but the dream remembers us.
It is there all day
as an animal is there
under the table,
as the stars are there
even in full sun.

Linda Pastan

Wind Chill

The door of winter
is frozen shut,

and like the bodies
of long extinct animals, cars

lie abandoned wherever
the cold road has taken them.

How ceremonious snow is,
with what quiet severity

it turns even death to a formal
arrangement.

Alone at my window, I listen
to the wind,

to the small leaves clicking
in their coffins of ice.

Linda Pastan