Poem for my Mother

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1. That isn't everything, you said
2. on the afternoon i brought the poem
3. to you hunched over the washtub
4. with you hands
5. the shrivelled
6. burnt granadilla
7. skin of your hands
8. covered by foam.

9. and my words
10. slid like a ball
11. of hard blue soap
12. into the tub
13. to be grabbed and used by you
14. to rub the clothes

15. a poem isn't all
16. there is to life, you said
17. with your blue-ringed gaze
18. scanning the page
19. once looking over my shoulder
20. and back at the immediate
21. dirty water

22. and my words
23. being clenched
24. smaller and
25. smaller.

Jennifer Davids
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and my words
being clenched
smaller and
smaller.

Mom's reaction?
She does not show
pleasure
when she recites poem
and my words
being clenched
smaller and
smaller.

Time of day? Why?
Poem for my mother by Jennifer Davids

Analysis

This poem describes a tender moment between the mother and her daughter. Yet despite the closeness of their relationship there's a constant awareness that in sophistication and in a mere approach to creativity there is a huge gap between the two of them. It leaves me to wondering why there is that gap. The poem opens with the mother's response to the poem of the title. In a sense her response is surprising as it seems a harsh rejection of the poem and the child's gesture of having written a poem for the mother. Her response immediately shows that the mother is a practical person, possibly she has no appreciation for poetry at all. Later she declares that a poem isn't all there is to life but it suggests that she could have been irritated not having any time for such things as creative writing and emotional sensitive expression. There different point of views are highlighted in contrasts such as "your hands" "my words". The speaker is aware of the way the mother has to work. She describes her as hunched suggesting that she has had to spend a great deal of time washing and her hands have "shrivelled burnt grenadella skin". This description of her hands emphasises her age and the harsh effects of long years of washing using the hard soap. This could be why a poem means so little to the mother. It is far from her own experience and her life. She is practical and hard working. Her life is one of physical hard labour, soap and foam and rubbing clothes. The speaker has written a poem something more academic and theoretical working with words and showing emotions.

The start of the second stanza returns the focus to the poem. The way the mother responds to the poem is compared to the way she uses a ball of hard blue soap but a poem cannot be literally grabbed and used to rub the clothes. It is a more figurative and fragile creation than a ball of hard soap. The speaker realizes that the words and feelings expressed in the poem are not understood or grasped by the mother who has grown up in a very different and restricted environment. There is some despair in the speaker as the words are "grabbed" and "used" rather than read and appreciated.

The first lines of the thirds stanza are a blunt rejection of the poem but the next lines provide some kind of explanation. "Her blue ringed gaze" suggests that her life has been one hardship. She has rings under her eyes that are ironically the colour of the soap she uses. While the speaker longs for her to stop washing and read and appreciate the poem she has no time. She simply glances once at page. Note, not at the words or the images, and does this looking over the speakers' shoulder not sitting or standing beside the speaker in an act of interest or intimacy. She then turns back to her work, what she sees. She cannot be bothered to appear interested even though the focus of her interest is the immediate dirty water. The word immediate shows where her interest lies and what is important to her: getting the washing done. This act is final and very hurtful to the speaker. The mother's indifference is painful but even more painful is the fact that she is more interested in the unappealing dirty water than in the poem written for by her child. The speaker's sadness and hurt at seeing the poem being so disregarded is conveyed in the last lines. The poem has been offered with great excitement and enthusiasm, clearly the speaker wanted approval and attention from the mother but the words like the soap are clenched and the delight of creating the poem and the expectations of the speaker diminish in the same way as that piece of soap becomes smaller and smaller as it is used in the vigorous rubbing of clothes. Eventually, quite quickly it becomes utterly insignificant. The pressing needs of reality and the present have created a distance between the mother and the speaker. You could discuss why this distance exists. Is it just a generation gap or could there be other reasons?
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Notes

Notice the form of the poem: irregular line lengths; no punctuation; run-on lines.

Look at the clever construction of the last stanza.

Conversational tone.

Questions

1. Give 2 interpretations for the title.

2.1 What is the attitude of the 2 characters in the poem to the poem?

2.2 What do you think the relationship between the 2 characters is like?

3.1 Using evidence from the poem, what can you deduce about the class / social background of the mother?

3.2 How would your answer in 3.1 help to explain the first line of the poem?

3.3 Explain the reference to the "granadilla skin" of the mother's hands.

4.1 What is the effect of comparing her words to "a ball of hard blue soap"?

4.2 The mother pays very little attention to her daughter's poem. What does it tell us about her priorities?

5.1 How does the form of the last stanza reflect the meaning?

5.2 What is the tone of the last stanza?
**Answers**

1. Written for / dedicated to her mother by her; brought to her mother for attention, written by someone else; this poem is **about** mother therefore her reaction to the first poem

2.1 Mother dismissive, too busy, unimpressed; daughter enthusiastic, appreciative

2.2 Not close, warm, not much understanding of each other's interests

3.1 Poor, working class - blue-ringed eyes, tired, hands worn by work

3.2 Poetry - a luxury; she's focused on the practicalities of life, survival

3.3 Metaphor; skin is so wrinkled it looks like granadilla skin, therefore also dark from working

4.1 Hard - no feeling; blue - cold, harsh; soap used to wash disappears as you use it; Mother is rubbing away / diminishing her poems

4.2 Very different to daughter's; can't survive on poetry. Practical woman, earthbound

5.1 Small / short stanza, just as she feels words are being silenced / squeezed into nothingness

5.2 Disappointment, deflation