

# Comments from Daughters on Fathers

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## Foreword

Most of these distilled fragments were heard in therapy. Few are in the person's exact words. They come from what I made of what was said. Several themes were heard repeatedly. Juxtaposing these pieces seemed to expose something of the potency in that role of father.

-A-

**1**

I am his daughter  
and still relying on  
daddy's protection.  
Put to the test, expectations  
must prove wanting – yet  
that he is there for me  
remains a sustaining myth  
I don't want exposed  
as self deception.

**3**

I used to be caught  
up with him in the lively  
every day. Now

**2**

I knew he was not  
up to much. He never took  
any stand against  
mother's unfairness.  
How could I  
expect  
anything of him?  
It was more or less  
over to me.

**4**

I am his daughter  
and he has been felled,  
his manhood about to crumble.

I look at him  
coldly  
and complain of his  
faults, having felt  
criticised all my years.

**5**

I remember an ease  
of breathing while I believed  
he was keeping us  
secure. When I saw how much  
was up to me and uncertain,  
it put in doubt whether  
all his promising was a lie.

**7**

I grew into a belief  
that he'd catch me if I slipped  
and lift me high,  
as he did at four.  
When I did fall  
it was too much for him.  
Far from striding up  
to make it right,  
he paced his room, incessantly,  
filling me with guilt.  
He failed to be  
that shining father of a  
child's mind.  
Passed rage –  
love came again –  
for a fallible man.

**9**

I carry the best of him  
from moments which buoyed me.  
He cut a hedge

His devastation  
covers everything –  
so what can I do  
except  
be as he requires –  
untearful, as though she  
has not been killed. If  
we now solely depend on him.

**6**

My difficulties turn  
on him. He was too  
weak. Would I have taken  
life in my stride, if  
I'd had a better example?

**8**

I am his daughter  
yet joined with her  
to despise the brute  
in all men.

**10**

I am his daughter,  
I suppose, but that  
means nothing to me.

and I stood alongside,  
wanting it  
never to end.

**11**

He was the one  
to whom I rushed,  
wide open  
with pleasure or woes,  
before I could see  
any point to restraint.

**13**

I am like him, not her.  
I have his temperament  
and connect more with him  
than anyone. Our bond  
is shaped from shared genes  
and his care.  
I'll never see myself as  
detached. Why would  
I want  
to do so?

**15**

He died and left me  
the intricacies

He was ironed from my  
life three decades ago.  
I never think of him,  
and am thankful  
to have left behind  
that time before  
there was this choice.

**12**

Mother insists I am his  
daughter  
but he never agreed a child  
with a handicap  
could be his and  
would not claim me.  
I can only come  
to therapy if you swear  
never to look at me.  
It's no longer just  
him who feels  
disgust –  
I've grown into  
the reject girl he  
could not bear to see.

**14**

I have only just begun  
to think about him.  
It always seemed to  
be my fault if  
he was nice to everyone  
else and only  
erupted at home.

**16**

I wish I'd been on tape record on waking.  
What fluency in my

of his morning shave and  
that smell of his head.  
Why should such detail  
seem so rich? Yet  
I smile,  
still,  
recalling him in the mornings.

**17**

I cling, unable  
to entertain misgiving.  
Holding to an image, leaving no  
room for contradiction,  
or acknowledgement of hurt.  
Once life proved precarious  
I clutched  
at  
a straw man.

**19**

I think of him  
only as “daddy” –  
though past fifty  
I still can’t consider  
him as a separate man.

**21**

While I was fully  
absorbed in being with him,  
he was a wonder.  
It’s hard to lose that  
with growing up.

dawn harangue of him,  
which flowed unhindered  
by any embarrassment, or  
his reddening face.  
Yet by breakfast I could not  
find a single stone to fling.  
My outrage is not fair,  
but how can I abide  
his being so  
afraid of life?

**18**

I can’t forgive him  
being ordinary.  
If I am to be significant  
a giant father is required,  
and he had such proportions  
while I was his special child.

**20**

Since coming here  
I look at old photos.  
It’s astonishing how much  
more of him I see  
and now we talk of his interests.  
I’m grateful he lived  
long enough to escape  
being obscured by  
my narrow needs.

**-B-**

**1**

I don't want generalities  
or Oedipal theories on fathers.  
How different he was  
with each of us,  
and that's what I need  
to comprehend. What was it  
in me, his fourth daughter,  
he saw to dislike?

**3**

I may be his daughter  
but my older brothers  
were more important than he was.  
We mostly lived  
outside the house.  
He wanted no trouble and  
us subdued and didn't think  
about children. Besides,  
his fathering was cut in ten.

**5**

Is it possible to forgive  
him the loss of interest?  
The lovely girl, whose face  
lit up to see him did not  
stay long; she fell  
and was badly scarred.  
He wasn't cruel, just  
no longer captivated,  
and I didn't want his pity.

**7**

What does he  
think of me? Not as clever,  
not as pretty

**2**

I am his only daughter.  
I stake my claim  
to a place inside his  
importance.

**4**

I live  
waiting to be admired,  
expecting to be saved,  
holding on to my due  
from him.

**6**

Visits grow easier.  
I put effort  
into making accounts  
of my triumphs – enticing him  
with buzz,  
drawing him in to admire.  
But this isn't solid  
and rings hollow  
if I can't be sure  
what he really  
thinks, when  
I'm not at work presenting myself.

**8**

His high hopes for  
his darling could hardly  
be fulfilled. There is,

as he wished?  
How can I be “just  
myself”, as he advises,  
if my eye is fixed  
on his judgement  
and I am driven  
to prove  
I’m worthy?

**9**

I am his daughter  
who learned his lesson  
too well – I am the one  
who treads carefully,  
with a cover of manners,  
and never dares show herself –  
for that will be judged  
and rejected again and again.  
“Found faulty”  
is the fixed pattern set down  
for me by him.

**11**

He is there to blame,  
the one I accuse  
when I have to recognise  
that even here in therapy, I  
seek good marks, though  
I am forty-five.

**13**

I am glad you  
are not a man.  
I’m sure I’d come  
each week and protest  
that you were useless.

inevitably,  
disappointment.

**10**

I am his daughter  
and drop back into  
that – for his approval  
awaits, like an old coat,  
to wear against chill indifference.  
Draping him over one  
shoulder, I can step out  
with an antidote to  
unravelling in  
self doubt.  
Mother’s legacy is  
a totally different and  
undermining matter.

**12**

I haven’t come here  
to speak of him.  
I see no point.  
He did not once speak  
straight, and after I  
realised he was  
incapable of it, why  
would I want more lies?

**14**

Unfortunately I am his offspring.  
There is nothing more to say.  
He produced the genes and remains  
an object of contempt.

Father was ineffectual  
everywhere and a  
nasty bully at home.

**15**

I have nothing of him.  
It's obvious I belong with  
Mother's lot; you're the only  
one to suggest there might be  
any scrap of that man in me.

**17**

I have one photo  
where he looks unharassed,  
solid, in good shoes and a hat.  
And the baby hand, they say is mine,  
reaches out,  
caught by the camera  
touching the knot of his tie.  
He holds me wrapped in blanket.  
They also say I called out  
for him, from my cot, but  
for me there is no memory  
of the slightest connection.

**16**

I am his rightful inheritor.  
Those that followed  
are usurpers.  
I am his  
genetically, and a new  
wife won't ever share inherited  
tastes and history: those  
remain with me.

**18**

I am his daughter  
and he is mine in the  
closed circuit of what I say  
he means to me. To keep  
my picture intact, I restrict  
his access, and shed whatever  
fails to fit the image of  
a special man who provides  
that barricade against  
my being ordinary.

**-C-**

**1**

He was the picture  
on our mantelpiece.  
With him away I had  
an ideal –  
until his return – then I hated  
and still find adult men  
repulsive. The ethereal, young and

**2**

He'd returned battered  
from the horrors of killing,  
though couldn't  
speak of that in decent family  
circles. When it erupted, despite  
his efforts, we had to see  
the animal in grown men.

pretty male images appeal,  
but full blooded flesh, back  
after war and intruding into  
the set and gentle ways of women,  
was massive disruption.

Mother seemed horrified to be  
plucked from her fearful  
care of girls by a  
demanding husband.

She was petite while he seemed  
huge, and a beast. Sure he'd  
crush her one night, we crept  
to look through the key hole at  
that bed, which had been ours  
throughout his years of absence.

**3**

He is an unreliable  
creep, often violent.

As a child I was Mummy's girl  
determined to hold out against him.

My role as hers was absolute,  
though she confused by  
calling a truce with  
him some days, and  
kept producing children.

**5**

He is a bully. And  
I, stubbornly,  
became a solid resistance:  
a wall of flesh blocking his  
intrusion.

It left me wary  
of sex, till I was nearly forty.

**4**

I am his  
and he beat me.

Did his power and domination,  
my submission

connect with sex for him?

Convention allowed imposing  
his will and physical strength

as 'good for the girl'. Did  
he have any idea my notion

of making love would

be stuck on tender

reconciliation after force?

**6**

I always took my place  
as mother's chief supporter  
and was inseparable from her.

His sexuality, which was there  
for his wife, felt a threat. If

she and I were one,

how could it not, also, be for me?

**7**

I shudder whenever I think of him.  
It's my bare flesh exposed  
to his hand or belt  
I can't forgive. She says,  
"it's just the way it was back then,  
it wasn't personal." Yet  
it came so close to the bone –  
was hideously intimate.  
Worse – it plays on and on – it's  
hard to escape  
boringly predictable pornography  
in my head during sex.

**9**

I am his daughter  
but does that mean I invite  
him to the wedding? I want  
it quiet, a registry affair,  
but my partner keeps arguing  
for celebration and a church.  
I've never set myself up  
to be admired and  
can't do that as a bride.  
I believed, aged eleven, it  
was my fault –  
– that  
skipping proudly in new  
petticoats invited trouble.  
Father's touching started then.  
My family don't understand  
why I can't face him  
at the wedding.

**11**

I am his daughter  
and he revolts me.  
He liked to catch us on camera  
in states of undress, made sexual

**8**

I am locked in the darkest dungeon  
with him. It's too intense – I am desperate  
to shut him out.

**10**

Even after he was widowed,  
we continued half naked around  
the house and sunbathed  
without clothes, as if he  
was entirely safe and neutered.  
Only recently he admitted  
that was hard for him.

**12**

I wanted to be like him,  
out there, not messing around and  
emotional at home.  
I'd never want to give up work.

comments about my unwelcome flesh,  
and walked in  
if we were bathing.  
Even now, when he visits and  
attempts a photograph, I can't bear it.

**13**

I am his daughter  
and there is no way out of that,  
I guess, though I saw myself  
as just hers. I stood with  
her against his manhood and fought  
off, with disgust, any hint of sex.  
As her protector from him,  
I stayed on guard,  
though at five I was not up to any man.  
She regularly slipped behind  
enemy lines, out of my bed into his.

**15**

He gave love wings –  
he went off to work  
and I flew out to him.  
He couldn't swallow me,  
as she did. It seemed  
safe to let rip giving my heart  
to him, who was mostly absent,  
but it wasn't.  
Now I'm trapped with wanting  
only lovers who are not present.

**1**

Living with him was an  
emotional minefield, with his  
uncontrollable moods.  
We could make no sense of what  
engulfed us until,

But I'm shocked to find I've  
left it too late for a child.

**14**

I still resent his power.  
He ruled us as bigger forms  
of the toy soldiers  
he regulated as a boy.  
He liked us to be ordered  
and we had rules. Obedience  
was basic, with set  
formal punishments.

**16**

I am his daughter  
and his eye was  
on young girls. That  
he didn't choose me is  
assumed to be  
grounds for gratitude,  
but as he seduced  
my friends, I was sure  
I wasn't, yet, good  
enough for him.

**-D-**

**2**

He couldn't be there for me  
when darkness swamped him.  
I grew furious.  
I wanted help to negotiate the hard  
things, which flattened him.

coming here, I filled in his never mentioned history, as a child in the Holocaust.

**3**

He is an improvement on his staggeringly self centred father. He manages, in fits and starts, to give others attention. No sooner am I hooked again, he has slipped back to where only he exists, with others just there to serve him.

**5**

He takes too much space. Like water down a plug hole he draws all concern to himself. Provided I can be an adornment for him, I am much admired.

**7**

He couldn't bear to see me hurt. Any wounding and he felt stricken – as if my misery floods direct to him. When I take a leap he holds his breath. For himself he accepts the inevitability of pain and sorrow, but his urge to protect me is as strong as if I were newborn. What strain on him that I should be driven to take high risks.

We couldn't all take to our beds with anti depressants.

**4**

Our role was to give him gentleness at home. After the grim realities of his working day we had to put toys, as well as fights, away for smiles, and brushed hair, and ease over sherry.

**6**

I am as proudly independent as he wanted. But my emotionally exacting sister has him hurrying to placate her. He never makes a fuss over me.

**8**

I wanted to find a wider space than the confines of being his child and moved away to a different life. He did his best to comprehend, though it challenged his settled ways.

**9**

He values  
loyalty,  
and is quite floored.  
Belatedly, I've set off on my own,  
which goes against the grain.  
He seems not to have thought  
his children might leave  
the unit he forged.  
Fiercely stalwart, he rallied us  
but I was not a natural for the team.  
It took too long for me to see  
my path can't just be reciprocal  
loyalty to him.

**11**

We were to achieve  
more than he managed.  
I used to be grateful he'd  
encourage and say I could  
succeed at anything.  
Now I recognise  
weakness in such certainties.  
When I try to hold up and  
do as much as expected,  
my back gives out again.

**13**

His is the  
central scene, all revolves  
round him. Mine is a  
major role, as the beloved to whom

**10**

I hate the size  
of his anxiety.  
I, too, could only become  
another object of his worry.

**12**

He thought it was  
over to him to work out  
whatever was good for me.  
He failed to grasp how much  
was not for him to manage.  
He is super efficient and  
reduces everyone to whatever  
can be sorted. He  
got me a bargain car  
I don't much want,  
and a complicated  
mortgage, but the force of  
my desires and  
artistic life  
eludes him entirely.  
He came to my show  
and barely looked at the walls.

**14**

There was no drama  
in his daily decency.  
People are only interested  
in the bleak and dark.

he gave so much.  
He can't conceive  
of giving me  
entitlement to  
a different  
script than his;  
one that might feel like  
my own.

**15**

I am his daughter  
and resent the fact.  
If he never grew up  
and cannot be self-effacing,  
how am I supposed  
to do it?

**17**

He drew us in, then  
spat out whatever proved  
more awkward than he wanted.  
There was only his way  
and if you didn't join him,  
or belong in his game,  
there was critical fury  
and shut down.

**19**

He is a typical, cut-off,  
public school man.  
You can't talk emotion.  
To him all is rational.  
Effort at presenting

How do you honour  
what is given  
in unremarkable fatherhood?

**16**

I am so often terrified.  
His earthquakes fill all  
the breathing space at home.  
I live in expectation of  
being overwhelmed.  
After each explosive tempest,  
the sun comes out for him  
and he wants smiles all round.  
That I continue to cower,  
fills him with disgust.  
He never feels shame for  
his own eruptions but  
gets furious with my reaction.

**18**

I hate him,  
for his violence and rage.  
I am his daughter  
and scared, because  
it was often said I  
inherited that temper.

**20**

Some say he is neglectful.  
He gets on with what is important  
for him and leaves me  
to do the same.  
He wouldn't dream

ourselves was what mattered.

**21**

He was closed in  
and unresponsive. It left  
me forever pulling at him.  
Even last week when we went,  
together, to get mother's present,  
he expected to wait outside,  
leaving me to shop alone.  
I'd hoped to engage him and  
share the pleasure of choosing.

**23**

To this day I can't  
argue properly with him.  
His having been my life support,  
and his approval of me basic, I  
fear he  
might strip all that from  
me, if we fought openly.  
I slip away  
instead of challenging.

**25**

He was up on our roof,  
which wasn't safe for girls.  
He painted protection for us  
and our roof was brightest red.  
He worked hard but  
I failed to see, then, how  
he escaped, unavailable to hectic  
family life with that brush  
in his hand. It took me long years  
to find escapes of  
my own.

of being intrusive,  
or burdening me  
with his emotionality.

**22**

He felt like  
a fault line under foot.  
I'm in therapy because  
I continue to expect  
detonation and can't put  
softer ground underneath myself.  
Not even protective things,  
like saving, or a pension.  
I carry on in permanent,  
impending doom.

**24**

I prefer to keep silent  
about him. My tussles with  
Mother are endless but  
I barely speak  
of the father, who gave much  
and asked so little, as if  
not to breathe too hard on that  
web he wove for us.

**26**

He was the child  
who wouldn't grow up.  
He was a shaky authority  
not up to the job  
of keeping bills paid  
or our home secure.  
Mother took control  
and he, like us,  
learnt all the tricks  
of evasion.

**27**

I am locked in reaction  
to his idea of order.  
Family life became another  
valued investment  
to be run efficiently.  
What stupid things  
I've done with my life  
just to thwart his  
excess control.

**29**

If he is on his knees  
over my dead sister,  
where does that leave me?  
I live shut in belief  
that life is more  
than I can possibly manage.  
How could I  
cope, if the adults  
were so defeated.

**31**

He left me with a theme  
tune to replay –  
I gave love and wanted him  
but that was never valued.  
I dream of him and the Mayans.  
He is to be sacrificed – his beating  
heart removed. I say in my sleep,  
“I'll need the opera glasses.”  
And as I wake I think,  
“A heart for a heart seems  
fair enough to me.”

**28**

He was super efficient,  
while she stayed a sulky  
child being managed.  
He organised everything  
for us “his girls” but  
could not deal with  
Mother's emotional blackmail.

**30**

He was not at ease  
over here. He  
was constantly judging,  
to keep us  
to the old ways.  
He couldn't trust  
us to find an honourable way  
through being  
immigrants. My head is  
filled with his  
relentless criticism.

-E-

**1**

I am his daughter  
so how could I not feel  
it was also me he divorced.  
I share much of mother's  
temperament and have a look  
of her. When he was clearly irritated,  
then left, I felt sure he must  
find equal fault with me.

**3**

I used to say,  
at least he was there  
making trouble, the illegitimates  
next door had no dad at all.  
Mother protected us, more or less, during  
his rampages but could not  
do the same for her crystal  
and fine china. Once we  
were down to plastic and Woolworths  
plates, she threw him out.  
After that I never saw him sober.

**5**

I have no idea what they saw  
in each other. They were at such  
variance and broke apart to go  
contrasting ways. It's hard to see  
where they ever met but, as a  
genetic combination of their unamalgamating,  
where does that leave us?

**7**

What little there was  
of him crumpled,  
when she ran off with a neighbour.  
It was the end of  
anything to rely on.

**2**

I can't accept my dramas  
will not alter the fact of his  
second family and wife.  
If I refuse to look, that new daughter is  
rendered non-existent.

**4**

Though he was an alcoholic,  
that he loved me is a treasure.  
He became wrecked  
by drink, leaving her as cold  
organiser, of us, the house and money,  
providing  
a solidity I cannot value.  
But he made emotional connection.  
I felt seen by him and  
keep hold of that much.

**6**

He was disinclined  
to take on care for anyone  
and had other children.  
Don't rely on me was his message.  
"Don't pin me down," he seemed to say;  
"I am one who has moved on  
before and am bound to disappoint."

**8**

He just left and I  
hate to see little girls  
with their daddies.  
She knew what was  
going on but they both agreed

She left and he could see  
only his own need  
to stagger on at work.

**9**

It never occurred to me  
to wonder how it was for him;  
thinking myself in his shoes  
was not what I could do.  
She had a lover,  
and wouldn't have father  
in her bed. I was badly  
hurt but he tried for a year,  
then could not stay with  
such a deep chasm between them.

**11**

I felt proud of him and  
thought that was love.  
He provided reflected glory  
and I had  
a hoard of pride to keep,  
when he went abroad  
with his new wife.

**1**

How has it come to this,  
that there are no adults  
ahead and we are "it" –  
the end of the line.

we were best protected.  
So the only sense  
we made of desertion  
was that it must be "our fault" –  
we weren't enough to keep him.  
If I had to manage with no  
Dad, why can't those  
precious wimps cope alone?

**10**

I am his daughter,  
but illegitimate, and he slid  
out of responsibility.  
At sixteen I finally  
rang, and he  
pretended not to know me.  
Insisting I had the  
wrong number, he  
hung up on me,  
though I recognised his voice as  
the "uncle" who used to visit.

**12**

I believed myself safe  
enough between those two,  
who gave life to me.  
After such basic fabric  
tore – then split –  
why would I trust again?

**-F-**

**2**

He is not dead to me.  
His love is  
drawn on, whether or not  
he lives. My reaching out for him –

**3**

He is my father, though he dropped  
into an early grave, to shatter  
any illusion of his  
possible protection.  
All we could do was keep a grip  
on her. His legacy was fear  
as we barely survived  
his abrupt departure.

**5**

Finally, he cannot come at me.  
A battle ends as he lies, formally dressed,  
in a cheaper coffin than he'd expect.  
With him dead (and I have carefully  
checked) there will be no more panic  
at his voice on the phone, or  
his writing on an envelope.

**7**

What can be said on the matter,  
now he is dead? He was there and  
in my genes before I had  
any words.  
They told me the first  
thing I said was "dadda".

**9**

I don't have much respect

a child who wrapped herself around  
his limbs – continues on.

**4**

My basic plot of dying dramatically  
and young, like mother, took  
a paradigm shift and I got a pension,  
after I saw old age might be  
for me, if I followed him.

**6**

He was the centre of family life.  
When he dropped with an aneurysm,  
some force sent us spiralling apart,  
left to watch her desperate loss,  
unable to make it right.  
We were to carry on for her,  
behaving as if it hadn't also happened  
to us. Father wasn't there to help.

**8**

He is dead, his grave dug  
straight and deep, dug for him  
who worked hard on his garden  
and that less regular hole, where  
he intended to enjoy the frog spawn.  
We gathered at his grave,  
and then around the pond he warned  
"might kill him".  
Marvelling at the energy  
"for his age", afraid of its depletion  
from our lives; fearful,  
also, of that coffin  
left deep  
in soil.

**10**

I weep for him,

for men. He was mild and decent  
but mother remained the force  
to reckon with. Trying to keep her  
content was his goal and, finally,  
he succeeded by leaving her an unchecked  
widow with a tidy version of  
all-loving husband.

**11**

I am his daughter  
and, though past fifty, still  
say I won't survive his dying.  
My sense  
of myself  
is locked into  
being  
that child he must  
come  
back to adore and rescue.

**13**

With him I was never  
flesh to flesh. I only expect  
intermittent, brief bursts of connection  
to him, dead or alive.  
It never occurred to me there  
could be more. It's with mother  
I hunger and feel whatever  
there is, is insufficient.

**15**

While other deaths  
recede with time, his remains  
one I cannot stomach.

though he was weak  
and his grip on life  
gave out too soon.  
I cry over his dying,  
which crushed that tiny  
space he made for me  
outside her deadly  
control and beliefs.  
After his death  
there could only be  
tight allegiance to her.

**12**

What he was slips  
from me like silken petticoats.  
It's harder to catch than  
a vivid dream in the bright light  
of morning. I can't quite believe  
it can so readily vanish, and have  
no idea what to say at his memorial.

**14**

I readily claim  
"he was there for me,"  
though suspect that's shadow play.  
It still feels the same, though he's  
dead, as when I'd say  
"my dad is there when I need him".  
Not that he'd listen carefully,  
or make much of my concerns,  
or that I'd have wanted him  
looking too closely.

**16**

In twenty years since his death  
I see something of what he held  
for me. After my place as his child

Perhaps too many  
expectations were gone with him.  
The fact that it was a faulty  
heart and we hadn't known  
made it likely  
my place  
in it was also broken.  
There seemed to be just  
questions,  
where there'd been  
an unpuzzling dad.

**17**

I have to watch him dying  
too slowly. With his old life  
gone, he's quite undermined,  
with no appetite  
for making any effort. His  
hopelessness at growing old,  
as if he didn't deserve it,  
sucks me in and I'm unsure  
whether I'll sink with him.

**19**

The mysterious shape  
of what might be me  
was attached to  
his endurance. I wonder  
if it was weak to have  
relied on his rocky surface.  
He is dead and I now  
flounder in uncertainties.

began to unravel  
there was a gentle liberation.  
His death loosened  
threads, invisible till then.  
.

**18**

I am his daughter  
and have no idea what  
that might mean.  
He took me on outings and  
after he died his friends  
said he adored me.  
He did not deliberately hang  
lead curtains in my head.  
I stopped eating and felt bewildered  
but could make little  
of his early death.  
He didn't expect to be wiped out.  
I live ever ready for it.

**20**

He was the ocean  
I swam in.  
When he died, I tried  
to grasp at him, as if  
I might be washed away,  
all at sea without some idea  
of him to hold.  
Then I gradually moved out  
of the state I was in  
beside him, and find

**21**

He has become  
like the local ruin,  
with uneven  
stone, open to clear sky,  
yet sufficient remains  
to dignify a past.  
Now he is fixed  
and can no longer surprise,  
his function reduced  
to formal grandeur.

**23**

He left a life  
to celebrate, after a  
treasured goodbye.  
He died before indignity  
overcame him and  
I long to bequeath  
the same for my children.

**25**

How can I go back

it hard now to believe those  
who have much to say about fathers.

**22**

We were a secret  
before that funeral.  
I never minded till mother did;  
it was as if he came back,  
like a travelling salesman,  
for celebration on Monday and Tuesday.  
I drew pictures,  
mother picked flowers  
and there was buoyancy.  
She had the best – a delighted lover –  
his wife had tired, bourgeois  
claims. Then it changed –  
the buzz of attraction shrank after  
my brother's difficult birth.  
Mother grew jealous,  
wanting more from him.  
By the time his heart  
gave out  
no one was satisfied.

**24**

He was kept busy  
with mother's every worry.  
His task was taking care  
of whatever upset her.  
His anger was stirred if we  
didn't do as she wanted.  
Now he has failed utterly  
to spare her and us.  
He is the cause of the trouble,  
as he slowly dies in hospital,  
with Mother crying she will not  
be able to bear it.

**26**

He much preferred

to truly recall  
that earlier incomprehension,  
which brought me in to therapy.  
When I could not suffer  
his total defeat,  
but held myself  
tight with indignation,  
that my father should die  
like the dog I'd seen  
hit by a car.

**27**

She kept centre stage  
and left him in the wings.  
She spoke for him.  
Home and children were her show.  
He even died right out of sight.  
She carries on much as before,  
a confident intermediary, speaking  
in his name while he remains  
a blur to me.

**29**

It seemed my nest  
relied on him for its sturdy tree.  
I was terrified he might die  
through both my pregnancies.  
He did soon after my second child arrived,  
and it was surprising to realise  
that whatever held up my life  
continued to do so.

young boy scouts to  
any girl or his wife.  
He was active outside  
our house but  
as tense indoors  
as I remain.  
Though seeking ease,  
now he is dead,  
I can't find peace  
with myself or him.

**28**

He betrayed the  
care he promised.  
Driven by demons  
of his own and the need  
for drink, he was inappropriate,  
inconsistent and set  
on self destruction.  
Fully destroyed  
he could become fixed as the  
one I loved and clung to.

**30**

When I dropped into  
this cruel, strange  
world,  
he caught  
me up  
to hold me  
away from the worst,  
keeping it from view.  
Then he was the one to show  
there is no escaping it.  
He screamed for his mother  
as he died.

## Afterword

The range of things said shows the particularity of tangles these women found themselves in, though we are all subject to a prevailing culture.

In our practice we attend to the specificity of what is said, and how and when it is said. We make sense by taking into account the full context from which the speaker comes, including the family, social and racial context. [D9], [D10] and [D30] are all daughters of immigrant fathers, and many women included here are the first generation in Britain. It also became noticeable how many of the women who were most emphatic, either in their claims and disappointments, or in finding their fathers too much, were the eldest in the family.

Although I have seen in therapy a number of women who were raised as illegitimate and more who were adopted, so far I have not worked with girls raised by same sex couples, or from anonymous sperm donors.

This compilation does not reflect the shift in understanding which happens during the process of meeting regularly over time. Some women arrived with a fixed, closed account [A10] [B15].

Others did not recognise the contradictions in what they were saying. Once their words are being heard and called into question the women who come to therapy begin listening more carefully to themselves. [A18] and [B11] risked saying something aloud, then could give it more consideration. These vignettes don't show the atmosphere in the room, or the difficulty of facing what was once expected or wanted, or women find themselves still demanding, as their due from fathers. (If facing things was easy, few would pay to come to a therapist.)

Language gives us many tricks to play to avoid accepting the way things are [E2], especially the difficult things, which include the inevitability of disillusionment [B18] and of being an ordinary mortal who must die [A18]. Most of us keep some childhood expectations of fathers [F11], while also growing into more sophisticated ideas. It is necessarily an emotional matter and there is pain involved in letting go an illusion that once felt necessary.

Even harsh pictures of themselves or their fathers may be an attempt at protection from what is feared, whether panic that life will be too much [D29] or trepidation that any close attention must confirm a conviction of being unlovable [E1].

Many expectations are replayed in the consulting room. [A12] was sure she would be rejected, [A14] often dreamt of my throwing her out because she wasn't worth any attention, [D30] was certain I must be criticising her no matter what I said, and [F5] was in despair that I would take her over, as there was no hope of space for mutual exchange.

Others idealised the therapist out of longing for a loving understanding they felt to be lacking but believed must be somewhere.

Each one of these women struggled to make more sense of false pictures they came with, as they tried to see themselves more clearly and to accept the pain of what had already been their lot, long before they came to therapy.

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