

## CYNTHIA TROUP

from *Fragments for Her History of the Father*

## Feet, or “the boss”

What is the difference between a duck? One of its legs is both the same . . . or, one of its feet is both the same. Either way, this nonsense riddle he teaches us when I am too young to understand.

In such old slippers my feet spread out, warm and reddened from a country walk. I savour the softness of worn wool meeting soles and instep, a faint fizz surging against gravity through shins and calves. His slippers are the first of his belongings to be unceremoniously thrown away, in the hospital room at sunrise. They are large, fleecy slip-ons; like all of his footwear lately, too large. His feet have been so sore, ridged with calluses, toes compressed and bent outwards. So the slippers are cheap and comfortable, and we make a point of laughing, whenever possible, about the words stencilled across the top: “The Boss.”

*What was funny? You were the source of imperatives. “The Boss” of the general mood, yes. “The Boss” of what could be said, openly asked, observed, yes—especially about your past.*

A pedestrian crossing has been constructed in Rathdowne Street near the post office. Twin yellow lights flash on each side, but when driving I am still unused to giving way there. One afternoon I brake a little late, and stop close to the stripes that mark the crossing on the road. A white-haired man is standing at the kerb. With fist raised, he totters so as to turn and face my car. His expression is sour with outrage, his bawl unexpectedly loud. He steps unevenly from the kerb. As if Atlas’s burden has rolled to one shoulder, his carriage is lopsided, his gait laboured and lurching. I have seen the sheen of his skin made taut by bunions, swollen ankles. With each flash of the twin yellow lights the muscles in my throat throb; for a long time, I remain

immobile. He does not recognise me at the wheel. Once home, he is reminded to wear his slippers.

My own feet; his feet. My own calves—his calves shapely, shown off through nine months each year in knee-high “walk socks” kept neat with garters. My own hands; his hands, shoulders, lungs.

When his hands become a focus for attention, “he could have been a surgeon,” is the family refrain. Hands without elegance, but capable. Like mine. No. “No, dark-haired daughter,” I counter to myself. “His hands—your hands.” Your hands *like his; your hands like his*. His no-longer-aliveness is no cause to reverse the natural order of inheritance: your aliveness, I counter to myself, confers no precedence, cannot bestow it.

Since a fluid has no definite shape, its pressure applies in all directions. Nonetheless the death of the father creates an imperative. A terrible and gorgeous amplification of space—as though the dial for volume on a sound-recording has been knocked past its highest setting, and the bass notes, especially, shudder through all ground, through heels, the spine’s lymph and marrow. The daughter’s body courses with impossible questions. This body of matter, energy, motion, force.

### Music and flowers

He declares the Lord “kind and merciful.” This is not faith, but how he expresses relief—slightly incredulous relief that the Lord might have seen fit to be so. The words are a comfort, although in essence his Father in Heaven is not benevolent. At the requiem Mass we intone the same verse from Psalm 103, “The Lord is kind and merciful.”

Ideals of dazzling height. An atmosphere of perpetual danger. A self-exiled son. Rivalrous daughters.

*For love and healing I brought you red roses.*

Consciously, he would never have wished his children to fear him. Yet from childhood his own wide shoulders haul fear. *Certain materials can exist in several different states or phases*. Untold, untellable fear. “Children should be seen and not heard” is the single statement he ascribes to his

father. Singing, however—now singing must have been permitted. Singing, singing must have felt safe. Singing at school, for instance, when he is six years old: hymns with Sister Assunta in the tiny choir at the Good Shepherd Convent in Kandy. Singing surrounded by stone, but counting on reverberation that recreates the entire field of feeling. He trains to sing; studies and teaches musical acoustics, “the physics of the singing voice.” Still, past the clamour of knowledge and accomplishment, all of his life singing raises the possibility of tears. The merging of rhyming and weeping in song brings such consolation. To sing is to make the mysteries of his cosmos at once permissible and expressible.

*Against the failings of the body, I brought you red roses.*

The science of matter, energy, motion, force.

What flower to bring a woman for whom death has called off the family romance? When she is newly transfigured by loss of the father? In the blue dawn of these first days not a single entity patrols the threshold of her self.

### The weight of hands

My older sister is considered “the right age” for pierced ears. Or perhaps she has been pestering to be like our mother. Our mother wears different earrings for every day. Many a pair in her collection has been chosen by our father—carried home in a ribboned box that fits beside the pen in his shirt pocket, then cushioned at the centre of his outstretched palm.

Aunt Rosalie is a registered nurse. She brings surgical swabs and instruments and pierces our ears. On this Sunday afternoon the kitchen is warm with the odour of pine oil from Rosalie’s Dettol emulsion. Because I am six years old, I yelp and squirm from the moment I see my Aunt reach for the cold needle.

I tend to press butterfly clips too hard against the back of my lobes, causing them to become pinched and raw. In his shirt pocket my father brings home hinged sleeper earrings—which I cannot close myself. How many times did I stand with ribcage stretched, not breathing, while his sturdy grasp fluttered just past my cheek, trying to align and

close an earring's tiny clasp? Briefly his hands become the body of a sparrow. Then the tips of his fingers begin to sweat, his breath is quickening above me, and I am dreading his pronouncement that "this will make us late for school."

*You could assemble or reassemble a rarefied laboratory machine, but were loathe to lift the bonnet of a car. To your wife's sometime fury, you were not given hands for household painting or repairs, or garden pruning—but for an elegant cursive; for a lecturer's upward pointing, and other formal gestures of instruction. At breakfast you sliced an orange with efficient precision. You used one peg per item when hanging wet clothes on the line. Rather than long and slender, your hands were wide in span, and well built, even athletic, the fingernails squarish.*

In January 1976 the annual holiday pantomime at the Alexander Theatre is "Jack and the Beanstalk." Afterwards we are allowed to meet our father across campus, in the smoke-filled Monash Staff Club, and order pink lemonade, which is served in a stemmed glass. We clasp this with both hands and drink loudly through a striped paper straw. Before long the lemonade is warm and syrupy, and we are shooed out to the car.

The set for "Jack and the Beanstalk" features a muscular open hand, huge and convincingly fleshy—resting on stage at house right; with a crackling energy it shudders and rises to mark the giant's stirring from sleep. A light-hearted Jack trips and literally falls into the "clutch" of this mechanical hand, which lifts him out of sight, while "FEEEE FIIII FO FUMMMMMM" is heard bellowing from above the proscenium. That could well have been our father's voice. Within four years, memory of the pantomime hand became fused with impressions of the colossal "hand of God" rayed and reaching down from Italian altar paintings—and with the experience of visiting Rome's Capitoline Museums. In our thin cotton dresses my sisters and I traipsed blankly past so many authoritarian ancient fragments, including the hollow hand of Constantine in greenish bronze.

*The particular pressure and pace of your handshake I never felt. Yet—especially according to your wife—you and I had a special pact of sorts, which possibly began when I was born. Meanwhile, she had her hands perpetually full*

*with childrearing, studies and school teaching. Daily she played out, with almost equal fervour, both contempt and sympathy for you.*

At the dining table, there are now few occasions when he delivers his opinion, aggrandises himself again for the benefit of family. Now when misheard, or spoken over, he mutters and makes a slight fist beside his plate. As the lunch is cleared, I slide close enough to take his right hand, and rest it cupped beneath my own. His knuckles are mottled with cold, and cannot rest flat. Around us the chatting and lingering at table continues, while a kettle is set to boil. He and I are quiet. Tree branches move against the window. Regularly I glance at his face, lightly stroke the veined back of his hand. To me the gesture feels caring and companionable, until his forearm tenses, and trembles, and suddenly he uses all of his shoulder to twist and pull his hand away. *Each change in the state of matter has a name.* I curb my reactive wish to pull away too. His arm has stiffened with pain. This happens not long before he cradles my mother's face for the last time—feebly caresses her hair when, with a sharp moan, she drops her forehead onto the stark white of his hospital gown. Light and night and such tenderness hover.

*So late I realised how difficult it was for you to accept love.*