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THE FATHER: POEMS

By Sharon Olds

Alfred A. Knopf

Of the characters revealed in Sharon Olds' three earlier poetry collections none is more vivid than the violent, abusive alcoholic father emotionally absent from his daughter's life.

In her National Book Critics Circle Award-winning second collection, *The Dead and the Living* (1984), Olds dreamed of an "ideal father" who might protect his daughter from the one who tied her to a chair and slapped the glasses off her face. In a sense, Olds' entire fourth collection grows out of that one remembered act of cruelty. The daughter, now in middle age, has put back on her glasses and is determined to see every aspect of her father's protracted death, hoping to reach a long-sought peace. His parental inadequacy itself makes her task more bearable:

*I would have traded
places with anyone raised on love,
but how would anyone raised on love
bear this death?*

The father around whom each poem in this masterfully unified collection orbits is neither the cold parent of Olds' earlier work nor the ideal one she had dreamed, but a man weakened and emaciated by throat cancer. The poems follow his increasing helplessness, his dying and the remembered presence he becomes.

The father himself faces death with the same laconic disengagement with which he'd faced life: "He seemed to approach it as a job to be done/Which he knew how to do." But under the intense observation of his daughter, he moves kaleidoscopically through all the roles she had ever observed: God, center of the universe, primary erotic force, silent object, boy, emotional abuser, herself reflected, a man who failed at life.

While Olds' language has never been more direct, the tension between her images and the psychological depth she explores teases the reader beyond thought. Olds experiences this dying with extraordinary sensuality:

*Toward evening his breathing became more shallow,
the fog came in blue and powerful
over the houses and the redwoods,
I laid my head on the bed in the path of his breath and breathed it,
it was still sweet with its old soiled sweetness
the way dirt smells sour and clean.*

Rubbing her father's back, the daughter says, "I let the full pleasure/of caressing my father come awake in my body,/and then I could touch him from deep in my heart."

Her experience moves through the erotic toward the maternal. As death approaches, the father grows infant-like, sheds some ability every hour, moving "head-first" toward death, a transformation, like birth, into a new stage: "I sense every inch of him moving/ through me toward it, the way each child/ moved, slowly, down through my body."

Gradually, the reversal of parent and child becomes almost complete, the daughter incorporating her father more and more into herself, metaphorically into her body but actually into her psyche, birthing him out of the womb of this life into one for which his long-unreleased cry is already prepared. With his dying, the daughter moves toward peace on a spiritual plane outside of time and space. Daughter has become mother, exchanging the parenting she now gives for the parenting she had received. Like Dante's Virgin Mary, she is "*figlia del tuo figlio*," daughter of your son. Like Shakespeare's Marina, she is "thou that beget'st him that did thee beget."

Typical of Olds, the best poems conclude with sudden, searing surprise, leading us toward some overwhelming question we had no idea we were about to ask. In "Beyond Harm," the daughter finds that, now past death, her father will never be able to take back the "I love you" he spoke, by mistake, days before he died.

Transformed by her father's death, the daughter resumes life among the living, best expressed in the magnificent "The Feelings." For 35 haunting lines, Olds observes the moment of the father's death and the minutes after. Then we hear:

The next morning,
I felt my husband's body on me
crushing me sweetly like a weight laid heavy on some
soft thing, some fruit, holding me
hard to this world. Yes the tears came
out like juice and sugar from the fruit--
the skin thins and breaks and rips, there are
laws on this earth and we live by them.

Olds has long stood out for her fresh vision, the sharp emotional honesty with which she makes familiar things new. *The Father* reaffirms her preëminent place among the poets of our time.