

Beside Vigil

CATHERINE JAGOE

Because each night when I was pregnant
 my husband rubbed my aching feet
 and still does, when I'm grieving or in such pain
 the feet are the one place I can tolerate touch,

because my dad is slipping, lost, afraid,
 connected to a catheter, IV, heart monitor,
 blood pressure cuff, and leg pump
 that inflates and deflates automatically,

because he believes we're in Siberia,
 because he keeps on yelling for my mum,
 because he cannot sleep,
 because I don't know how to comfort him,

because we've never comforted each other,
 because my mother and his Irish mother
 are the only ones who've ever rubbed
 his skin, his limbs, to soothe and settle,

because I think maybe this most distant
 part of the body might be the least alarming,
 not so defended, clenched in fear,
 all I can think to do is rub his feet.

I should be less awkward, more at ease,
more skilled. He says he's never had
his feet massaged before, in eighty years.
They're cold, dry, bony, gaunt as old war horses,
the toenails thickened, yellowed, ridged,
the toes bent out of shape, the heels
like hide, hard and insensible, ivory-colored,
as I suddenly imagine he'll be in his coffin.

I rub lotion on them, knead the instep,
thumb the ball of the foot where all the muscles
crunch, circle the vulnerable hollows
round the ankle bone, squeeze and release
each foot from heel to toe, rotate and flex them.
He lies there stiffly, silent.
I ask him how it feels, and he says, carefully,
"It feels nice." He doesn't sound too certain.

I can't get his feet to soften, though, neither
the muscles nor the skin. They remain
inflexible, obstinately unyielding.
Only a little warmer, is all.