

Notes on Composing “Dad by Numbers” by Carolyn Masel

Dad by Numbers

My dad was born in 1924,
the Jazz Age, though in our family
no one swung – there’d been enough of that:
a huge, short-sighted, happy child,
his mother’s pride and shock, at twenty-one.

Till he was six he had his tea in the kitchen
with Ila, plotted holidays, packed
early to catch the first train home.
Her brothers showed him how to drive the sulky.
Perched up there, he was king of the world.

At sixteen he was ready to go to War,
but his dad, down an older brother,
kept him another year in officer school,
where his eyesight, flat feet
and honesty could assert themselves.

Afterward, he never mentioned the Navy.
His officer’s hat landed in my dress-ups,
his trauma seemed confined to shepherd’s pie.
Tall, preoccupied, for decades reaching
for the gearstick in an automatic,

every day without a trace of resentment
he drove to his office in town, taking a route
in the opposite direction to avoid traffic
lights, past the black cathedral and rank
hops and whiskery drinkers under the elms

and home at quarter to seven, despite my mother’s
pleading – hungry children watching for lights
along the Boulevard, driving her up the wall.
He never left till after six, never
explained the traffic, or quiet time alone.

Sleep was his secret – one minute loud
snoring, then his breathing stopped –
long uncountable seconds,
while his oxygen-starved brain
made untranslatable dreams.

This was a very easy poem to write – unusually easy, because the structure came to me early. It's a simple chronological account of my father's life. He died in 2013, so this poem, written in 2019–20, was long after the first flush of grief. Yet this depiction of my father in the context of his historical context seems right for a man who is no longer present, having subsided into that history. He is also one of the most consistent people I've met – the patterns in his life were consistent and the glimpses you got of his character were available from any of the instances I heard about or remembered. That consistency was born out through the composition of the poem – there were no discoveries – I wrote it from beginning to end. The only detail I had up my mind's sleeve, to mix a metaphor, was the detail about the gear stick. My sister says she does the same thing. My father was warm, popular, especially amongst men, but also a bit of a duffer, absent-minded, yet with a sense of his own entitlement. What I wanted to capture in this poem was that absent-mindedness – that he was never quite here, in the full consciousness of his life. Even as a little boy being brought up by the maid (the detail of eating his meals with the maid would become a source of derision for my mother), I had my dad look forward to going home with her, rather than being fully present in the home where he actually lived. When they invented sleep apnoea, I recognised him immediately as a sufferer. I'm sure that contributed to the absent-mindedness, but so did habit. He was, I think, like many men of his generation, without a highly developed inner life – or else he did not choose to share very much of it. That ambiguity I wanted to depict.

As befits a biographical poem, the details had to be true – for example, the spelling of the maid's name as 'Ila', rather than the more common 'Isla'. She lived somewhere in country [regional] Victoria, and dad and his younger brother did get to spend time there. There is a lovely photo of him looking happy, clutching his football. Dad recalled driving the sulky there and retained an admiration for horses. I actually got one detail in the poem wrong – it was my father's mother, not my father's father, who lost a brother, and that was during World War II. But by the time I learned that, the poem was done, in the sense of no longer being malleable. But my father did often take the most indirect way of driving into the city – which introduced me to some of the poorer, more interesting suburbs – and he did hate traffic lights enough to detour around them. (I was once asked about this, and I've since wondered if this was due to my inability to settle, as a baby, except in a moving car. Again, this would fit the pattern that

once he'd acquired the habit of avoiding traffic lights, it never left him, though the reason was long past.)

It was important to me to record those details that never made it into history books or footage – not that I could search, anyway. For example, the homeless men, drinking port or even methylated spirits, on the wide grassy verges between the streets that comprise Victoria Parade, a splendid civic street that provides a grand entry into the city of Melbourne. In my childhood, that entry into Melbourne smelled distinctly of hops, coming from the then-active Victoria Brewery, a splendid nineteenth-century edifice (now apartments). But beer was not what those 'whiskery' men were drinking. Nor was it whiskey. There was always a more interesting overlay superimposed on official Melbourne. It's still the case, though less so than it used to be, as the city becomes increasingly curated.

The poem was already written before Diane Charleson found footage to go with it. We've found more since. It's not as easy as it might be for some. My mother took pictures with her box brownie and various instamatics. So did we all. My sister bought a movie camera when she was about eleven, but from the start she was bent on features rather than documentary. The voice recording was supposed to be a trial recording, but we don't always get the time we would like to remake things. Diane and I enjoyed working together, and we're planning to do it again.