

POEMS  
FOR  
MY FATHER

By Mark Pirie

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P O E M T O M Y F A T H E R

*May '94*

I called you daddy  
till I grew taller,

now just dad.

You called me Mark,

Mark Robert  
when you were angry.

*What else should we know?*

## S L I P P E R S

*Mornings come and go  
Evil moves too slow  
Death acts as an undertow  
Love seems a frantic blow*

The words are present here  
When I wear slippers full of fear  
And tread downstairs to the kitchen's delight  
To harvest the food placed in my sight

Glacé moons frost the window, and silence is rare  
Crystalline inflections panel the walls and sounds are near  
The footsteps in the distance challenge me  
Secret shadows uncover as I see

Slippers no longer live in fear  
But erase the wound like a tear  
The shadow forms an image of my Dad  
I wish he knew that I was sad

*1993*

## MY FATHER'S LIBRARY

I opened the door  
To a myriad of books  
Where my father had found pleasure  
In the past

I broke the palisade  
Around his library of books  
To discover the treasure  
From his past

I hesitated, then strayed  
Inside his library of books  
Where reading was leisure  
In the past

I sought my father's pride  
Inside a myriad of books  
To make a measure  
Of his past

And through his library of books  
I sense what the past can bring  
And what the content of books  
Mean; as I read them, they sing

MT VERNON'S SECRET (1979)

*'And it is my express desire  
that my body be interred  
in a private manner  
without parade or funeral oration.'*

— George Washington

we didn't know it  
as we arrived at the mountain's grounds

but as we wandered through  
past where Washington's sarcophagus lay

a snow storm blew  
'white as can be'...

it was like a silent scream  
quietly, quietly rising,

and, later, i went and told my dad  
it was a sign from him;

he, who lay there under marble  
like an undiscovered Pharaoh.

## THE RESCUE

*Pyramid of the Great Diviner, Uxmal, Mexico, 1979*

After racing my sister to the top, we reached  
the summit's urn-like shell and sat down to catch

our breaths, while a boy across from me walked  
round selling *Coke* to the tourists. Here looking out across

the Mayan city lit by the late afternoon sun  
everything seemed different. Before us stood the valley

and around it the wind's brambled messages  
gusted across the facade of the Chac's temple

before ending with a faint whistle by rock  
Chimeras jutting sullenly into the air.

We must've been there for some time, until we got  
the call from our guide it was time to head back.

But, as I got to the steps and looked down,  
I grew scared of the drop. I stayed at the top dead still.

'Hey kid!' a friendly American voice said,  
'It's easy, turn your back, take one step at a time,

and don't look down!' He came over  
with my Dad and they moved in behind me;

then we took it a step at a time, all the way down  
to the base of the plumed serpent, my mother and sister

mere dots on the distant ground, while the rest of our party  
gathered round, cheering my somewhat late arrival.

## I N C I D E N T

Staying at the MGM  
in Reno, Dad took us for  
a tour of the basement.

Here below rented rooms,  
*Can-can* shows and  
leggy girls who performed

to wealthy guests, lived  
a famous beast, a lion  
who danced to a different

tune. We were all  
excited as quickly we  
ran to his cage.

But, creeping closer,  
we noticed him slumped  
at the back, frail

and extremely limp.  
I stood watching,  
waiting, expecting him to

unleash a frightening sound,  
rattle the walls of his cage,  
but nothing. Leo looked

as if he could be dead.  
*Get up! Roar!* I thought,  
*Roar – like at the end*

*of films – whatsa  
matter Leo?* Then  
Dad explained he

couldn't. Leo,  
he told us, was  
on drugs.

*From* GOLDEN YEARS :  
SAN FRANCISCO SONNETS

When we left, many friends gathered at our farewell parties, and many toys were bought for us from the giant Toys 'R Us warehouse. Dylan gave me a key to the waterfront, always my favourite area, where Dad sometimes took me at weekends. Matthew, another good friend of the sand-pit, who I played with often, shed tears. I told them all I didn't want to go but my parents said I had to. *'Do they have Hot Wheels cars where you're going?'* they asked. *'What will you do without us?'* I didn't know, but regardless I boarded my plane, and left for new shores.



## T H E P A R K

I ask my Dad  
a quick question  
about a park  
in San Francisco I  
used to go to  
as a child.

I need it for a poem  
I'm writing. Happy memories,  
that sort of thing.

My Dad remembers  
those kind of things,  
he's good at that,  
like when I was  
waist-high, and  
he took me to a  
ball-game, during  
which I fell asleep  
and missed  
the main plays.

But this time, he says:  
“Oh you mean  
the park where you  
discovered the dead body,  
near the marina?”

Wait on Dad! I don't  
remember any *dead body*,  
I was just a kid!

“It was on the  
merry-go-round,  
a junkie, he’d OD’d  
and was lying there,  
we left real quick  
after that, but the  
name of the park  
I can’t remember either.”

*Was I scared?* I think to myself.

“Well, maybe, you don’t  
remember that, too young?” he says.

“No, I don’t,” I say, turning to go.

Perhaps I’d better just  
go and Google  
the park.

## GETTING THE JOB DONE

it's not so much the fact that there's  
a mass of boxes lying around your living room  
and making themselves at home again,  
or that there is an inability to control  
and direct their movements,  
so that others in their vicinity receive a chance  
to relax and branch out as well

or the fact that moving in is never meant to be fun  
and that maybe greed is not really an issue after all,  
or the amount of trees cut down to make sure every item  
is covered, counted, sealed, and packed up for  
months of in-transit storage.

and now that they've finally returned, you realize your  
friend is right, when he analyses the situation  
with a big-bold-not-bothering-to-help, 'Bloody hell, they're back!'  
and it's also not so much all of the aforementioned above,  
or the strewn mess inside the rooms, or your mother's despondent face  
or your Dad's new-found fascination,  
or your sisters let's-get-rid-of-this-stuff-real-quick look,  
or your oh-so-empathetic 'I know' stare, but the mere fact  
that what really bugs you about this moving back in  
is realizing the amount of stuff you will  
actually take to the grave with you

and that is why it is so important to sort out  
whose antique silver-plated teapot this really belongs to,  
because time is continuously running out  
and meditating with the Buddha upstairs in the dressing room  
(currently modelling hats) is not going to help the situation

nor will it alter the fact that this is  
a magnificently lurid example of hoarding  
and you must not cease, nor will you falter,  
until the job here has been done.

1995

## FAMILY PORTRAIT

*Christmas 1993*

my sister's  
in bed  
after partying late

mum's  
cooking up  
a feast

dad's playing  
his overture

which I guess  
leaves me

I'm upstairs  
pen-in-hand  
writing to myself  
again.

## ICE CREAM, ORIENTAL BAY

At weekends in summer, a boy  
Heads for the place which brings his joy.

Money gives a little relief;  
The boy tastes it between his teeth.

Sweet sensation, time of pleasure,  
He sucks his chocolate treasure;

Then runs across shores of laughter,  
Racing to be with his father.

While behind works the ice-cream man,  
Keeping kids entranced by his van.

M Y F A T H E R

At the hospital I sit by my father's  
bedside and recall from yesterday

our conversation. We talked  
of Louis Johnson,

and how in his later years  
he said (tongue-in-cheek)

that he must've been 'mad' to edit  
his yearbooks and journals

while all his friends were out  
working, saving for retirement.

And my father looked over at me  
(quite serious), saying, 'Make sure

you get yourself a paying job —  
you don't want to go unrewarded

like that for all your hard work.'  
Always looking out for me,

I guess. But now, he lies here  
in the hospital bed, and so

I watch over him, remembering his  
advice, and hoping that he will live.

*1999*

R I V E R T O N   B E A C H   P O E M

*(For Tim)*

*Riverton Beach?* I was there once  
for a family reunion,  
stood on algae-skinned rock

facing the sea, and thought  
I was a child playing  
by the cool water, sun-tanned

glassy-eyed, out with the family,  
though it wasn't me  
that was playing there,

just my father – part of  
my history, but, later,  
I stood there too, and nowhere

did we skim stones...  
My father was older now,  
with son-in-tow. Me, learning

the far fragments of past,  
feeling his years grow colder,  
memory passing like a falling star.

## LEAVING DUNEDIN, WITH MY FATHER (1999)

I had been away from my parents for some months before I saw my father again. Driving down from Christchurch, where he'd been staying for my Grandmother's 85th Birthday celebrations, he soon discovered me in my little cell at 26 Heriot Row, just a few doors down from where Charles Brasch edited *Landfall*.

I had no money left by then, and was living out my last days, or so I thought; all for an MA, for which I was unusually interested in. Just before we packed up and he took me home, we made a trip to a local secondhand store, and I carefully picked the shelves clean, taking a good edition of Plath's *Collected Poems* and a

rare discovery, Curnow's *A Small Room with Large Windows*, which I continued to remain baffled by for the remainder of our trip; not by the poetry, as you might think, but by Oxford's remarkable dust flaps, which advertised proudly Curnow's then feuding 'son', Jim Baxter, at the back.

The flap trumpeted the favourable comment Baxter had received and, with no mention of his 'island reality', named Curnow 'one of the most influential of the New Zealand School of writers.' All this despite being in the throes of war. It seemed a 'united front' was to be presented to the English public, ensuring

all our best skeletons were firmly locked in store. Leaving Dunedin that day, we climbed away through the Otago hills, heading for fish & chips at Timaru, Curnow's birth-place, and, as we went, I felt Curnow's poems suddenly jostling with the landscape, while my father's eyes kept on travelling, following the road, unaware of the discovery taking place.



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