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This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article published in the New Welsh Review, 105 (Autumn 2014), pp. 7-10. The final definitive version is available from the publisher at:

<https://www.newwelshreview.com/article.php?id=814>

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Every Laugh is a Dice Throw

How long you had that cough?

Since I skated against the wind in Flanders.¹

Seriously, you should get it checked out.

But you don't want it checked out, for a long cough can be a sign of you know what.

Though you have been giving thought to the issue ...

On the great British cake show, an anamorphic skull. Like, the *vanity* of baking, and all worldly effort!

You are going to die. Tell a punter on Wind Street, you'll be slapped; or pinched – repeated three times, it's harassment ... Unless you're an oncologist, or narcissist – or Big Joe Turner:

'You're so beautiful but you're gonna die someday.'

At a certain age, it comes into view. Wow look at that! A mountain range. You thought you were just driving, like the younger folk behind, but there it is. Keep quiet. Don't spoil it for them.

There's always something to do before we get there. My grandmother wanted to see Brittany (she heard it was like Gower). Jenks told me he was going to visit the most dangerous farm in Mexico, where killer chillies grow (one of those lads could take out Cardiff). He never made it either. Rita had herself a Richard Dawkins tattoo, against the dying of the light.

Time to plan your last meal.

¹ Pinched from Laurence Sterne

Commented [MN1]: Deleted ,foisted onto the catering system,

I'll have a pound of liquorice hard-tack. By the time I've finished chewing, the guards will have gone off shift. And a bottle of Wray & Nephews. Get them pissed and pinch the keys.

Be serious for a minute. Martin Heidegger says you don't live true to yourself until you've imagined your own death as the thing that makes you unique.

Ah.

Though JP Sartre says the death you imagine isn't the one you get. When you think of your last meal, you forget the cancer will have made you so sick you can't stomach anything. They have to stick the morphine in your arse or you'll throw that up as well.

OK. I'll imagine cancer more factually. I'll go out and get a book on it.

Careful! Seen the weather out there? Owch! So much potential and he's copped it. Wasn't much older than Jim Morrison. Lifelong ambition to fight cancer with dignity. Sign outside the kebab shop, blew off and broke his neck.

When dad died, I couldn't believe he was gone: but believe I must, for he wasn't in his chair or Merc. On check paper I tried to philosophize. Georges Bataille talks about negative miracles. Such was the death of my old man, perhaps: 'Impossible, but there you are.' But I was mistaken to be staring through a hole in the future cut in his shape. For when I looked back over the final months, matching dates with his death, so he had exactly 7 months left, or 5 or 4, I saw that under the aspect of the past, he was at those times immortal – life without death was guaranteed him. So in memory, I was beside a man who could not die that day, when we drove up in the snow to examine the bombers at Duxford and he showed me turbines like he used to work on. We know death to be possible at any time, but only when we look ahead.

Eternity is behind us. Indelibly, you have been. You and you only, name, face, style of being. That was you. When you won that fight with a cross-eyed kid and they carried you on their shoulders. Walking to school in fog with lads from the estate, voices booming. Rita Jones – time she kissed you at the fair. All behind you, but there. How d'you feel about that, kiddo?

You want more though? Like a man who can't get himself to bed in case he misses something? Put your head down now and remember. See what you can find unaided. In the morning, try the attic. Crates of letters, photos, seasons – what a life! So much stretching

Commented [MN2]: Can this stay on a line on its own? No problem if not.

Commented [MN3]: Changed from wrote 40,000 words about it

back, and not on your road only; your life passed into others' and they haven't forgotten. So many of you back there! Your you, and theirs.

These certificates mam let you have. John Howells, her grandfather: 'Mason at marriage (13th August 1904). Coal hewer at death.' He built Nebo Chapel at Glyncoirwg. Wall on the right cut slant to fit the valley, elms above. Perhaps you're like him ...

Plays change and masks, said Schopenhauer: the actors stay the same. Not that John H passed into you intact, but you repeat essential gestures: making a church no one goes to anymore; writing novels. The named self you cling to, is the least of you. You are generally immortal. 'Moral cells' Proust called them, those habits and expressions which eternally appear, in individuals of the same series. That way of laughing more than smiling, the liking for rum and beer, manner of leaving a room – a witness would say the great grandson's just the same. In fact the witnesses must be immortal too.

Two scenes are alike. Prince Hamlet among the graves: 'To what base uses we may return, Horatio!' You could bung a beer barrel with Alexander the Great; block a mouse hole with Caesar. Don Quixote at a Barcelona printing house, his life in a box of pages. All may be vanity, but just beyond is hilarity.

They pass away with friends to hand, issuing instructions. And such deaths go back to Socrates, bathing and chatting as the hemlock froze his legs, reminding Crito to make sacrifice; to King David, with a lass to warm his limbs as he fixes the succession.

Commented [MN4]: Substantial rephrasing here

Falstaff turned cold from the feet up. Socrates and David must have been in Shakespeare's mind. The old knight smiled and played with flowers, he sung a Psalm. Made a fine end says the Hostess, went away like a child. Not to hell, this old sinner, but to Wales; for he's gone to 'Arthur's bosom'. King David went 'the way of all the earth', with sound words to his son; but Falstaff went to Arthur. Perhaps the **best** end of all.

Commented [MN5]: Del 'happiest' ins 'best'

With Christ, the image of death strikes terror. We used to dwell on this for eternity's sake; now we just have the terror, frightening ourselves off life itself. Look at our regulations. 'Health and safety' dominates us like a sky god. Flash photography can set off a bomb in your head. Disturbing images may destroy your comfort. Warn viewers. Warn them not to 'approach' this man under any circumstances in case they all flock to him like the kids of Hamelin. Round off the news with a severe weather warning. No one looks out the window anymore in case a hoodie stabs them with a toothpick on a pole. A sandwich box has more

text than the Lord's Prayer. You go to work and it's security status 'Amber'. They make you leave early 'due to' snow/heat/wind. The announcer tells you not to slip. The announcer tells you to bring a bottle – not a bottle of Tawny Port, you berk, a bottle of Evian Still. People walk the streets clutching water. They've got security-console wristbands to measure humidity, radioactivity, whether there's a riot going on. For God's sake, this is Britain. There's hardly anything to die of.

That's what you think ...

On Valentine's Day, here it came ... Are you acquainted with the edge of death? *Why, sir, tis is a sort of grey struggling dream.* With cordial thumps the missus brought me back, howling in my eye. She's a top doctor herself, but resus isn't her scene.

Ta! I'll be off to work now.

You were blue as Stilton you fool!

Enter paramedics with electrodes.

So he was laughing at something then the cough took him down? The skipper was a good man with a Chelsea tattoo. In the ambulance they watched me like an IED.

We entered A&E the back way. They asked if I knew the date. The nurse who wired me was highbrow. On the shelf was a stack of cardboard Trilbys, vessels for throwing up in. My wife was making calls like Napoleon. The nurse chatted about *Ulysses* and Chaucer, eye on the monitors behind. A neurologist asked gently if I'd pissed myself. The word for today was 'syncope'. Enter an Italian with the scanner. Do you know how much an ex-smoker does *not* want a chest x-ray?

Commented [MN6]: Deleted 'me'

I really ought to vamoose. Got a class at 11.

You're going nowhere, pal! sang this somber quartet. For dignity, they let me keep my shoes on. The door blew open like a dawn raid: medics bore a screaming women behind screens. She was going to die. The Italian was pointing at a screen over the way, like her gallery'd just acquired a lost anatomy. Look at that for Christ's sake! Look everyone! Stop that woman screaming! Send postilions the length of the land! Tell them in Kiev!

Ever seen a pair of lungs so *clear*?

The woman screamed in stereo. In fact, she'd just given birth. The kid had lungs like mine. They should call it Michael bach.

They rolled me to the Acute Assessment Unit like a president who's been shot. We were four floors up, storm battering the roof tops. Fellas lay about in the manner of banqueting Romans. I had a cardboard demi-john to piss in. An Irish nurse came and took it away. It's a good-hearted world is the NHS. They did right to show it well in the Olympics. But all I wanted was out of there before they had me in pyjamas. I'd brought a novel by that cough-meister, Kafka. The hero visits the mansion of Mr 'Pollunder', and has trouble leaving. He gets roughed up by Pollunder's daughter. I knew how he felt. Bright-haired Hildegard had me in an armlock², wanting blood. Two Greek lasses took over, listening for heart echo like they'd trapped a mugger. The Roman opposite was vague about the date; he wasn't too sure of the century (tip to dossers: How to get a free bed). A South Indian registrar sat with us; I humbly offered a diagnosis: Whooping Cough.

Ah, Pertussis!

I loved this guy – he was nodding. The beauty of Pertussis is it's not lung cancer, or COPD (in other words, not your *fault*); it has no other symptoms (for *55 days* I've been saying I feel fine); you don't have to stay the night.

But here come a soft-spoken specialist from Yorkshire and a mighty-thighed Parisian consultant, to hear the chronicle of this cough, its span, changing sounds, productivity: so the sputum, Monsieur, what d'you say? ... Pond-slime, Swarfega, gooseberry, limoncello? – Absinthe! Bravo! The marvellous thing about medicine is that doctors are much given to interpretation: they listen to the body like a difficult poem.

One thing they're agreed on: with a condition like yours, every laugh is a dice throw.

In another bed, a Roman bawled for Librium; the wind sang like a Hoover.

Commented [MN7]: Please keep thus – not who'd

Commented [MN8]: Ins semi-colon and del 'and'

² The one known by Judo folk as *juji-gatame*