



Paradoxical
by Xanthi Barker

My dad is dead. He died three years ago. I miss him and I wish he hadn't died.

But he is also not dead, and the previous three sentences are all lies.

He is dead because he died on the 31st January 2014. It's a recorded fact and you can find it on the internet — he was a poet, not famous, but known to some people, with his name on books you can buy. I have the receipt for his death certificate in a brown box made to look like an old-fashioned book in the top drawer of my desk. The receipt is small and green and it was signed by a man who believed himself witty.

But he is also not dead because I saw him this morning, waiting at a bus stop, and he gave me a wave.

And so though he is dead and I can't call him up, sometimes I am walking a long way and it is exactly what I do. His voice is the only right thing for that walk and he knows exactly what I've called him for, and he's expecting me. He's still on my phone's list of favourite numbers so I can call him with one click, one press of the thumb, if I want to, but he is dead and nobody answers. But once in a letter addressed from the mountains of somewhere I'd never been, in the blue ink of his heavy pen he wrote: 'I talk to you, but without a telephone line the words tend to go astray', and it is like when I was a child and didn't hear from him for months — I don't believe that because he doesn't answer, it means he isn't speaking to me.

It seems that he must be dead because he doesn't know anything about my life now. People with living dads have conversations in real-time, discussions about work and tube strikes and retirement plans. When someone says to me they are going to see their dad, a hollowness gapes invisibly in my chest and I can't say anything like, "Oh yeah, dads, those old guys, all bad jokes and struggling with the internet." I can only say disturbing things like, "Yeah well, just wait. When they die, the jokes get worse." I can't talk to him about the plans I have made, the health issues I have had, the relationships I have cherished and

destroyed. He does not know the books I have read. So we never had a chance to talk about important things like Maurice Blanchot or Lydia Davis or the battered copy of *Conversations with Carl Jung* I stole from the bottom shelf of his room when no one was looking and the way a mind smashes open like a gas canister or a supernova flaming out into the world when a person dies and you can't see them anymore, how time opens up like a giant's mouth and swallows something you did not know you had, and you didn't know what it was, so haven't got the words to ask for it back, and that I got pregnant, and the mad shock of elections around the world and what he thinks of the EU or Theresa May or Donald Trump, in fact we never talked about politics at all. My dad is dead because he doesn't know anything about 2017, or 2016, or 2015, or most of 2014.

But he is also not dead because nothing has changed. I never would have talked to him about these things. He left when I was a baby and didn't visit all that much. When he did visit, he was easily bored and didn't like to talk about what he called personal matters. So we would not have discussed work or my prickling anxiety, heaving overdraft, redundant boyfriends, abortion. I would not have known about the giant's mouth, and I could not guess what edifying things he would have said about Trump. We did not talk about such things. We talked about space-time and DNA and words he made up, like presuppositionology (the study of what people presuppose) and the first ever lifeforms on the planet — (*chemolithoautotrophic hyperthermophiles*, he says, *say it again, try again, slowly now, once more*) the majesty of aphids and the psychoactive quality of conversation, whether or not two people could ever be said to know each other. He is not dead, because we're still having these conversations, because I have the notes and letters he wrote as addendum, can open at any moment all the footnoted emails he sent.

But he is also dead because now I talk to nobody about these things.

You might say that he is dead because he had a funeral, perhaps it is even true that you were at his funeral. If so, you will remember that it was long and overwhelming and he was not the only person missing who should have been there. But it is also true that he didn't have a funeral because the funeral we attended was not his. People wore strange clothes and faces and did not say anything they meant. There were young student caterers in waistcoats and big silvery ties bringing around morsels of expensive unreal food which nobody ate. There was a hall so large that nobody could fill it up, it was only an emptiness, and the guests felt conspicuous and sober. It was February, and cold, and there was no-

where to sit and the elderly guests complained. If my dad were to have a funeral, it would not be like this. He himself made the personal request to me many years ago that Bruce Springsteen be played at his funeral, the song 'No Surrender'. In fact, I promised him. So he is not dead, because this has not happened yet. When he dies, I know exactly what kind of funeral he would like, and I will make sure to organise it right. He wants Pink Floyd and Bob Dylan and impassioned, drawled speeches and too much wine and long-forgotten anecdotes and scruffy, opened-up people and crying and kissing and stolen cigarettes and the exquisite pain of that sparkling new loss and candid talk and dancing. He's a poet and he'll have a poet's funeral. There were none of these things at the funeral I attended, except wine, but I learned from him years ago, before I knew what wine was, that it was a different thing drunk from glasses or a copper jug, and a different thing drunk with friends or people who didn't even know he had children. Also, though supposedly his face was on the funeral leaflet, it was a peculiar, irregular picture, and looked nothing like him, but looked like a dodgy priest or an old powdered stranger, and was wearing clothes that didn't belong to him, as well as that face that didn't belong to him, and many guests commented he would have been dismayed. He was handsome in his younger days, and vain, and he would have wanted to look his best. For this reason it is quite easy, even appropriate, to believe that it was not his, but a stranger's funeral.

On the other hand, he has a grave, and a gravestone with a line of his poetry carved into it quite majestically. The stone is Welsh slate and it is smooth and earth-cold and hand-carved and if it was not true that he was dead, and that only his death could have brought about its existence, I would say he must have chosen it himself. And when I visited the stonemason, there he was, whispering in my ear: *Look! Look at that — the way the mason's hand forms the letters straighter than a stencil, no need for a ruler, the way he sees through the tips of his fingers like an insect.* He was dead because the stonemason could not see or hear him, because the stonemason knew nothing of him but the name that he carved into the slate, because I had driven there with my stepmother, and we had not taken a trip alone together before, because it was six months since he had died, and I had been through the death-ache of it, and I was still alive, stuck on earth without him, knowing nothing, unable to find the words he would have spoken, and making up these inadequacies in place of him, and frightened, and cold, and lonely, and all that was undeniable and, as my brother insisted: he was deader than dead — but he was also not dead because I heard him say it.

He is dead because I have seen his wife crying, and she has hugged me, and this did not happen in his lifetime. But he is also not dead because he himself has hugged me, and I have seen him crying, and this could only happen in his lifetime. I have felt his arms around me, woken up in his tears, found myself suddenly in the pit of his ribcage, heart, brain, scalding head. But then he is dead because these are also nightmares.

He is dead because his obituary was in the paper, and several literary men took it upon themselves to vie publicly for his soul. He is dead because this would have appalled him. He did not believe in capitalising on any serious event, putting oneself in the spotlight, claiming stakes. He is dead because there were jabs and jibes and pointed comments caked in duplicitous guilt, about his parents and his religion, his professional decisions, the esotericism of his poetry, his Byronic looks and his multiple wives. He is dead because I was reading them that way, too angry to see anything but ruthless cynics' cruelty, not the delight in his anomalous brilliance I later heard others had read there. But he is also not dead because what was written there was nothing to do with him: they did not know him, they made him up. He is not dead, though they tried to kill him. He is not dead — he's rolling his eyes at them.

But he's also dead because they got the last word. He's dead because as I'm writing all this he's beginning to sound quite dead.

He is dead because he has a will, and his will has come into effect: he is dead and he left everything to his wife. He is dead because there is a house in Greece with holes in the roof and he isn't there to fix them. He built this house thirty-five years ago with my mother, when they first met. Every month bills arrive in his name and we must prove he is dead in order to pay them. There is work to do, and he can't do it, and if it isn't done the house will rot. He is dead because we have been looking after it for three years, since he died, and for the previous year also, because he was sick. He is dead because our names are carved into the beam, and only two of the three witnesses to that day can still tell the story. It is our godparents who live in the village, our mother's sweat and love and pain and youth that built the bamboo roof. He is dead because it is his house, and he is not here to show its finer points and learnings to us, and we are floundering, and Googling the Greek words for cement and chasing rats and catching them in plastic buckets and finding his writing on pieces of paper in old damp tins and missing him and not knowing how to be. But he is also not dead because the house is not dead, it smells of him, it looks like him, it

speaks like him, at night it screams deep into dreams of him, it was shaped by him, dreamt up by him, was a pile of stones put back together by him, enshrined in a long poem inscribed by him, malfunctions in ways characteristic of him, and yet stands, keeps the rain out, holds beauty, protects and feeds us and lives, and so as long as it lives, so will he.

He is not dead because this is just the kind of outlandish statement he would have made. He is not dead because when I speak sometimes like a magician arriving on stage with a flourish he steps right out of my mouth.

But he is dead because whoever steps out is not good enough. I cannot do a good enough impression of him and the impression I can do falls flat. I cannot introduce him to my friends. He will never meet the future father of my future children. He is dead because, and dies in shame every time, I make him pompous or comedic or madly enthusiastic, and without all his long words and frowning and magic, there is nothing to back my impression up, to ground it. He is too many people to impersonate. But because of this, he is also not dead: he is too many people to die. It would take a thousand deaths, a million; it is not possible to die so many times (at least one obituary agreed with that). So even if he is dead, it is only a fraction of him that has died, and not an important one, not the best. And so he is not dead, because who I speak of is *him* — the living one.

The living one: he's whispering at the back of my neck as I type this. I'm draped in the warm balm of his smile. He is my dad and I know him — there's a line in a poem of his on sensing the presence of Christ: 'Take the presence of your husband or your wife or your friend — of your loved ones./Each is unique and obviously so.' Not considering Christ, there's a specific sense a person brings into a room, it's inimitable, and this is just like that. I can feel him here behind me. But he is also dead, because I can't touch him, and I am losing the memory of his shoulders, and the way he squeezed me against his side, and because I won't ever again walk into a room in which he is sitting and watch the space between us light up with the snap-magic that erupts when both our particular mouths go hello grinning.

He is dead because this is painful to think about.

He is dead because, as I mentioned before, he was sick, he had cancer. He is dead because they gave him three months to live and that was three years ago. If he was alive, it

would be by some miracle. But he is also not dead because there are miracles. Cancer took his body, yes, but what if he did not need a body? He of all people might have existed without one. He never made much use of the physical world. And yet he's dead because he didn't take enough care of his body, did not do as the doctor ordered, did not exercise, drink less alcohol, eat a high proportion of fresh fruit and veg. He is dead because, disassociated like this, he did not notice the strangling fist growing in his chest, the breathlessness chasing him at five steps, then four, then three, then two. But he is also not dead, because he cannot have died, because he wasn't a body in the first place. He's not dead, because he had better things to do than die.

But he is dead, because that's a phrase I've borrowed from him and I didn't know him long enough to learn the wry certainty he could intone in utter impossibilities, because I remember that breathlessness and I hear it again as I'm writing, and what I remember now is the night I had to carry him to bed and undress him and spoon-feed him morphine because he'd drunk so much whiskey he was afraid he would die right then.

He's dead because a person can only stand so many nights like that before the facts begin to weigh against them.

Like in the end, life weighed against him. His illness was painful, horrendous to watch, abject, spiked with his bitter aloneness. Nobody could have lived long in that smell of him, coughing up his own flesh. Nobody could have stood it when they brought him a commode chair, and the statutory white table to fit around the bed, that did not fit around the bed but was repeatedly pushed away when he reached for it, like a joke in a cartoon, except it was not a cartoon, his legs had swelled up from the steroids, his voice had got shrill from the stent, he had lost all his joy to radiotherapy, the will to get up to the morphine. He was living off protein shakes — Like space food, he said — and you'd think they'd be enough to cause cancer. He's dead because he could not live like this. He said they tasted like cement. He is dead because he could not have stood this. He is dead because he could not stand it. He is dead because it was unbearable to watch, and when he died, it was that furiously painful thing, that tenderbone, quick nausea, dull thing, sharp thing, swift thing, bright hollow angry thing — a relief.

But he is also not dead because he is my dad and like a child I still believe he is stronger than that, stronger than morphine, than the paraphernalia and banalities and rip and stench of death.

No he is not dead because he is brilliant still, flashing across the darkening ceiling, irresistible daddything hushly whispering my name. I can see every moment of him — rolling his sleeves up and reaching for his gnarly wooden hammer; his eyes half-shut in his racing green Rover singing Bob Dylan's Pat Garrett through the traffic on Gordon House Road; flipping the flat knife to butter both sides of the bread, making toasted cheese sandwiches in a machine he used a clamp to keep shut; waving a glass of green wine in the late sunlight, a blanket tucked over his faded legs, telling me like a secret he had three months to live, a big froggy grin on his face; smoking Rothmans and reciting his poetry, blind-drunk, under the Greek sky two decades ago, weeping at the beauty of his own words and passing out before my brother put me to bed; eating a picnic at his desk on Father's Day, just before he got ill, while he explained to me his new poem on Heidegger and could not believe that I understood him, how I grasped what he was saying immediately, and his joy made me lose any of the familiar resentment, and when I sat there trying to understand, he said, "What are you doing with your hair? Pulling your hair like that. That's just what my mother used to do". It is right there, all of it — I close my eyes and he stares back and if I say his name into an empty room, he reaches out a huge, hot hand and rests it on my head.

But he is dead because this is not the whole truth. There are other things I don't want to remember: his silence, his absence, his indifference to our lives; the too-detailed story he told when I was too young to hear it of how he fell in love with the woman he left my mother for; his flirting and leering over every young woman he encountered; his disdain for philosophy, fiction, anything I was interested in; letting his wife write a letter to my mother explaining he would not take financial responsibility for children he had not wanted. The mystic poet-wanderer and the cold, intellectual snob — how can I tell it isn't only the latter who died, and my real dad is hiding somewhere? The other died, and I'm not sad about it. I hated him, as I felt his hatred of me. We were enemies, and I'll never see him again and I don't care one bit. But there is another dad, a realer dad, the dad I let myself remember, and I will wait for him forever as I've been waiting for him my whole life.

But he is dead, because when I try to explain all this to my psychotherapist, he tells me this is the work of integration. These two men are the same man, and I must learn to let go of them both. My psychotherapist is 78. He is both older than my dad and older than my dad will ever be. He has been listening to the incommensurate insides of people's heads for decades, trying to see the sense they have made. But he will not make sense of this. He says dead means dead, to him. He asks if I mean my dad lives on in memory, in his poetry, in the house he built. I tell him that is nothing close to what I mean. Then I say enough to alarm him, because I hear a catch in his voice, and he says, You're speaking metaphorically, of course.

I'm not.

My dad is dead because he would have understood this. But he is also not dead because it is his way of thinking which allows me to understand this.

But he is also dead because I understand nothing.

I saw him lying on the floor. I felt the warmth go from his face. The paramedics wrapped him in a curtain and cut off his t-shirt. Later other strangers put him in a bag and took him in a black undertaker's van. He is dead because they undertook him. It was hard to get him down the stairs and my brother went to help, wanting to be a man, and it was traumatising, he said, he wished he had not gone. My dad would never have allowed this — not my brother's pain, he wouldn't have helped with that, but he would have found a better way to engineer the transportation. He could have solved things like that. Though he could not solve the nauseating awkwardness of all of us, both intimate and unknown to each other — his daughters, his son, his wife and ex-wife — sitting there all day in that house which was no longer his, crying and shaking and not saying anything and then saying too much, talking about apps and work and mortgages and the last time we'd each seen him and soup and nothing, my mother, who had not been in that house since she came to claim her husband back twenty-five years before, taking care of everybody, just to prove something terrible had happened. If he was not dead, there is no way my mother would have been in that house. But if he was not dead, he himself would never have gone to that house, would not have given up on the family he'd just begun. He is dead because he has always been dead. Death, abandonment, it makes no difference. He is dead because it is so typical of him, disappearing when I turn up to need him.

But he is also not dead, because it is hard to tell the difference, sometimes too hard, and I hate him for that and want him to die.

He is not dead because he would never give me what I wanted.

He is dead because I saw him in the chapel of rest. He was frozen. It was disturbing. His skin was like agar, like a dead jellyfish washed up on a manmade beach. But he is also not dead because he was there the day I first touched a dead jellyfish, first recorded this sense memory, and so he was there too, that day, looking over his own plasticised face with me, wondering what to say or do. He is not dead because it was him in me, looking at the him he was no longer in, thinking about the mechanisms of things, considering it necessary to know. But he is dead because they broke his jaw to remove the tube they had placed in his throat for the CPR that had no effect, and I am guessing they didn't bother with surgery to fix that. He is dead because his hand was stiff and I placed a twig from a Greek olive tree in the palm of it. He is dead because his sister tucked a letter in his pocket. He is dead because they put him in a suit. He is dead because he didn't wear suits, not often. He wore trousers and tough cotton shirts tucked in but open so you could see his t-shirt. He wore t-shirts and jumpers, but mainly tough cotton shirts, and he was never cold. Never. Never that cold ever at all. He is dead because they nailed the coffin and put him in a hearse, and because of that funeral, though it was not his funeral, and how heavy it was for the men to carry him in. He is dead because they buried him, I was standing there, we threw in handfuls of soil and holy water from a plastic squeeze bottle with HOLY WATER handwritten on a sticky label on the side. But he is not dead because that bottle was absurd. He is not dead because none of it made sense. He is dead because death doesn't care about sense, and because we prayed and rode in limousines. But he is also not dead because out of the corner of my eye, standing there beside the swathe of lawn in the middle of the urban sprawl grasslands in which they supposedly buried him, I saw him sail off into the silver-blue sky, I saw him cloud-riding, taking off, tail-spinning, heard him whisper-cry, *Let's go*. He is not dead because I don't believe it, and whoever tells me otherwise, I don't give a damn how they look back pitying, all-knowing, whatever they're thinking, I just think that, see him up there, smile.

He is not dead because I saw him in the Hagia Sofia, one year later. He did an arabesque, gliding down the chandelier, after tiptoe dancing around the multiplicity of religions,

smoothing his way through Christ, Peter, Mary, the word of Allah, tourists, camera-phones, gold leaf. He is not dead, because I doubled over right there and laughed until strangers were alarmed and my eyes watered and I had to sit down. He is not dead because like a mystic it doesn't matter what science says, I saw him there and I know this is true. He is not dead because he whispered in my ear at my sister's wedding that summer, and wore that suit, and was suntanned and bold, though he stood at the back, gave a salute, and disappeared before the dancing. He is not dead because it is just like him, these appearances, sudden and frank and winking and silent and though there is so much more you want from him, you're not getting it, no matter what you do, and though you hate him for it you have to admit he does a spectacular job of making such a small thing gorgeous. He is not dead because he has never been the kind for conventions, for obeying society's petty rules. "Dead?" he'll be saying. "Well sure — but have you thought about what that means?"

He is dead because I'm angry with him: this confusion is his fault, he was always filling up my head with mad lies and shattering thoughts and fantasies he could never remain close enough to uphold, and because he abandoned my mother with two tiny babies and he never said sorry and he deserved it. He is dead because he wanted to die, he was ready for it, grateful, when he heard about it. He is dead because he drank himself to death. He is dead because he'd had enough of life, and said so. He'd had enough of watching us grow up. He is dead because he lived his life for metaphors. He is dead because he spent his life alone in a room, filling journals with meticulous handwriting and watercolours nobody ever saw. He is dead because he *is* a metaphor — what happens when you mistake writing for life. But he is also not dead because this ambivalence is metaphysical, because it brings him back and keeps him changing and I no longer believe it is possible to die. But that being alive is just the finite tip of a person. And it isn't possible to know or mean anything except a sweet short stop over nothing by this ersatz fact: he died.