2020

Life Writing Prize

JOSH HOLTON

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LIFE WRITING PRIZE SHORTLIST 2020

Death and Birdwatching

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Fragments of a eulogy are rattling around my tired head.

A thuggish debt collector, an addict, a grave digger, and a birdwatcher with data and papers published on British bird populations; Dad was a man of eclectic interests.

Memory isn't chronological. It is randomly provoked by triggers including smell, music, bird song, context, and the most inopportune moments to present itself. My eulogy for Dad will be similarly chaotic, as his life was.

~

Dad's appearance changed a lot, so for ease, I'll describe him as my favourite of his incarnations. I'll revive him as he was when he was forty. He could still do a headstand and narrowly manage a handspring. He had a bushy beard and moustache that started in his ears and nostrils. His broken nose was smeared across his face. Little purple blood vessels flared on his cheeks. Sea green tattoos covered his forearms and bustled onto his hands. He had very few teeth. Most of the time he delighted in popping out his false ones, but sometimes he got pissed off if you asked him to do it.

Whenever he went outside, he wore one of several hats. If it was raining hard, he wore a cowboy hat woven from black straw. If it was sunny, he wore either a Golden Virginia branded baseball cap or a camouflaged Cuban cap. If he was tending to farm animals, he wore his flat cap. When it was cold, he wore a faux-fur trapper hat. All these hats smelled of chip grease. He had many other hats that he liked in principle but never wore. I assume this was because he never found the right situation for them

or didn't trust them to cover the small holes in his confidence that his bravado distracted from. He fluctuated between thirteen and fifteen stone, most of this in his muscles and beer belly. His hands were huge with white callouses from labour and yellow callouses from roll-ups.

He wore the cleanest of seven pairs of dirty, blue jeans that each cost a fiver. He usually wore three layers - a t-shirt, rugby shirt and fleece, but would put a waterproof or smock on top when he went outside.

~

"Oi, Josh," Dad shouted to me through the house. "Come and have a look at this."

I found Dad in the bathroom, standing over the toilet, his cock in his hand.

I shook my head and covered my eyes, "Oh har har, you made me look at your nob. Well done."

"No, don't look at my nob, you perve! My piss! Look at my piss!"

"Why?" I asked.

"Well you're at uni aren't you? Does it look alright to you?"

"I'm studying psychology, not piss."

"Oh, you know what I mean. Just have a look."

I walked over and peered into the toilet bowl.

"Is that just piss or did you do a shit as well?" I asked.

"It's just piss."

"Then that's definitely not right."

"Yeah, I didn't think it looked good," frowned Dad. "Don't tell Mum though, she'll make me go to the doctor."

"I think you probably should go to the doctor."

Dad scrunched up his face into a disgusted and disappointed grimace. "Fucking hell. Not you n'all."

"I'm just saying it wouldn't do any harm to check."

I left the room to the sound of the toilet flushing and Dad saying, "There we go, all sorted."

When I was a small child, I used to have anxiety attacks over the

prospect of my parents dying. Dad always made me feel better. He told me he was too hard to die. I believed him. He would point to the scar that ran the length of his beer belly and say, "They've tried to kill me before and it doesn't work."

Even at nineteen years old, having just seen he'd pissed out what looked like half his kidney, I thought he'd probably be fine. He was right, me and Mum did fuss too much. After all, I studied psychology, not piss.

~

Since childhood, I've had episodes of panic where the world doesn't feel real. It feels as though a draught, charged with electricity, gently shifts the curtain which is the world we see around us. Some days, it seems like less effort has been put into hiding whatever's behind the veil. Far off mountains look as though they've been painted on a canvas and there is no depth to the sky. Grand old buildings are clearly two-dimensional artifices that no one can enter. In these episodes, I'm accosted by the tingle of déjà vu and the sensation that my sight is coming from further back in my head than my eyes. My description is unclear now, but it was less clear as a child. Sometimes, the feeling of being boxed off from reality reduced me to screaming tears.

Dad would half hug and half restrain me, the coarse bobbles on his jumper were abrasive on my face. He told me, firmly, to calm down, "Of course it's real." Mum would hug me but chuckle at my distress, calling me a silly sausage and a dafty. Her condescension was meant to be comforting. I wondered if they were in on a conspiracy to keep cosmic secrets from me.

They must have been more concerned than they let on. I began regularly seeing an NHS psychiatrist, and I was taken out of primary school for being disruptive and scaring the other kids.

~

Dad told us he was dying. Doctors said we had three months. Three months to try and collect as much of Dad's essence as we could whilst he was still there for reference. I was consciously downloading a backup of him to my

brain, so I could still have him when he was gone. The problem was that I didn't feel like I could let him see that that was what I was doing.

I regret being less thorough and candid in questioning him. Especially now people are expecting a eulogy from me.

He became more loving after his prognosis. He hugged us regularly, told us he loved us every day. He started taking Mum out to nice places. For a couple of months, death gave him a new lease of life. But eventually a change happened, at first so subtle that I couldn't tell you when. One day, he started getting quieter.

~

When I was about sixteen. Dad was driving me to a house party. He drove me anywhere I wanted, whenever I wanted, without question. We lived on the nature reserve he wardened, miles from anywhere. Whenever he drove, there was time for conversation to get deep. I don't remember how we reached the subject of Dad getting stabbed.

"I was queuing for fish and chips," the story began, "and two lads thought they were special and tried to jump the queue. I was having none of it, so I stuck the nut on one of 'em. I'd lost my rag, so I was really giving him some welly, and my mates couldn't drag me off. The lads legged it and I didn't bother chasing 'em because it was now my turn to order chips.

"We went outside the chippy and a car pulled up. The window rolled down and the guys I'd been fighting were in it, shouting insults, so I passed my chips to my mate and ran over to the car. I yanked a door open and started leathering the nearest cunt. He only got one punch into my gut, and it wasn't a goodun, but very suddenly, I felt all wobbly and couldn't punch anymore. I looked down and saw a big bloody hole in my belly where I'd been stabbed and at the same time the guy slammed his door shut on my arm and his mate sped off. I got dragged about fifty metres down the road before I tumbled on the tarmac. They were off. My mates scooped me up, took the drugs out my pockets and dropped me off outside the hospital."

I would mention in the eulogy that Dad had died before. In hospital, after he was stabbed, he flatlined and had to be resuscitated. He told me that dying felt great, once the pain went away. He saw a light and felt overwhelming happiness like every worry he'd ever had was forgotten and irrelevant. He felt himself floating upwards, and everything was warm and cosy. "If that's death," he told me, "then I'm not scared of it at all."

~

The first time I walked the reserve, after Dad died, I took his *Field Guide to British Wildlife* with me. He'd have liked to have passed on what he knew, but I could only learn from heirlooms now.

I hoped the walk would be a momentous event, in which I would unlock the secrets and wisdom of nature and somehow manage to bond with Dad in the afterlife.

I stepped out of the house that I grew up in, beneath a cloudless sky, in the cool October air. The tips of the grass and tree leaves were tainted by the tiniest, cold hints of grey and brown. The birds sang a song of the summer I had missed while I was lost in hospital corridors and my own thoughts. A distant tractor hummed along, accompanied by the buzz of damselflies.

I read that male damselflies gang-fuck single females competitively. Their penises have adapted to work like rough wire brushes and scrub the female's insides of contending semen. They remove between ninety and one hundred percent of the sperm of their competitors.

~

I was about nine. It was sunny. Mum, Dad, my brother and I sat in leafy public gardens. We were enjoying *Mr Whippies*. Seeing the ice cream clinging in globules to Dad's moustache put me off mine a bit, but not enough to stop me eating it. A wasp buzzed about with threatening inquisitiveness. Dad, moving only the muscles in his neck with lightning speed, headbutted the wasp out the air, leaving it stunned and twitching on its back. He was the self-proclaimed headbutt king and ensured that my brother, Mum and I

were all trained in the art of sticking the nut on someone.

He instructed: "You must only ever stick the nut on someone if you really mean it. You've gotta proper go for it, else you'll hurt your head more than the other bastard. Make sure your forehead hits him right on the nose and you'll deck the cunt, no bother."

The great spotted woodpecker can generate a force a thousand times greater than that of gravity with a headbutt. It has extra eyelids to stop its eyes popping out of its skull, which is made of a spongy interlocking mesh of trabeculae bones. The skull structure allows its beak to deform and diffuse the force away from its brain. It can aim its beak more accurately than other birds, ensuring that it strikes at different angles each time. Its tongue wraps around its brain as extra cushioning.

I suspect the great spotted woodpecker only sticks the nut on something when it really means it. It could deck a cunt, no bother. They've been sighted scavenging meat from corpses.

~

The snowcock avoids human persecution and predation by living in severe climates and high-altitude areas where there are few living things to worry about. It's a cold and lonely life, but the only way such a peaceful and palatable creature can survive.

This made me think about why Dad chose to live where we did. Over the country road, in front of the nature reserve and the house I grew up in, was the Solway Estuary, an expanse of white-trimmed sea, when the tide was in. When the tide was out, it was quicksand and worm riddled mud. Green fields, purple mountains, and hazy horizons swaddled us in a blanket against human relationships and the consequences of mistakes. Birdsong dissipated raucous thoughts of far-away, dystopian cities.

There was nothing here to judge you or punish you. You could hide here, even from yourself.

~

In a peat bog, cool temperatures and saturated soil makes organic matter

take a long time to decay. When I walked on the bog behind my home, I sunk into the spongey moss releasing pockets of gas and memories of walking with Dad.

Dad liked peaty whisky. He liked to drink it on his own until he staggered upstairs, karate chopping the air. As I walked, I wrote a poem for the eulogy:

A gentle spirit,
with the smoky flavour of thirty fags a day,
and mixed notes of 1960's number ones,
sang whilst meandering through a peat bog,
soaking up all it had to offer
on the way to the bottle.
Nose: Broken
Best Served: With a pinch of salt
and a forgiving smile.
Once it's gone,
it's gone.
The last
drop
is
the angels' share.

I realised this poem was shit and that Dad would've cringed for both of us. I knew it was a cliché to start writing poems when you were sad, so I kicked myself for falling into such a well-documented trap. Dad would've kicked me harder.

~

Dad's books told me that pairs of Leach's petrels remain faithful until the death of their mate. Leach himself, the zoologist who discovered this breed of sea bird and never married, named nine other species after a

woman named Caroline, of whom nothing else is known. Leach died of cholera, alone, at the age of forty-five. Maybe Caroline didn't know. Maybe she wasn't bothered.

After Leach's death, Sir Francis Boott described him as, "The most laborious of zoologists". A few years before his death, Leach suffered a nervous breakdown, spending too much time trying to learn and teach about the beauty and horrors of nature.

~

Racked with guilt, I told Dad when I cheated on my first girlfriend at uni. He said he was proud of me for feeling guilty. "A lot of people do stuff like that without breaking a sweat, mate. Don't tell her though. She'll over-react."

He drove all the way to Edinburgh to drive me back home after I'd been dumped. I'd told her.

I was depressed after getting dumped. Dad helped me deep clean the flat, so I didn't lose my deposit. He did the oven whilst I cleaned up the stain from the pile of sick I'd left next to my bed for two whole weeks.

~

A story inappropriate for the eulogy:

When Dad was a teenager, he worked as a gravedigger. During burial services, he and a colleague hid behind angelic monoliths so as not to hover ghoulishly over the grieving party. He saw so much death it became boring. Every burial was the same. The same priest said the same words to people who wore the same black clothes and reacted in the same black way. His colleague made the same stupid joke at the same point. All that changed was that Dad got angrier each time.

"In the name of the father, the spirit, and in the hole he goes."

"In the name of the father, the spirit, and in the hole he goes."

"And in the hole he goes."

"And in the hole he goes."

~

A carrier bag hung from our door when we came home. It rustled and convulsed.

"Oh God, Norman, what's in it?" flinched Mum. My brother and I hung back. Dad cautiously approached the squirming bag. He opened it to reveal a black head, with a silently gaping beak. It was a gull.

"Someone thinks I'm a vet because I work on a nature reserve," Dad tutted. He wrang the bird's neck - holding the bird upside down, tightly by the legs. Its breast rested on Dad's thigh and he pulled its head down sharply, dislocating its neck. He said this meant it died without pain, but it flapped with crazed energy and wriggled like a burning child. Apparently, this death dance is involuntary, painless spasms by the nervous system, but it looked really sore to me and it made me cry.

And in the hole he goes.

My best friend told a similar story of his own dad, who came across a bird with a broken wing when walking on marshland. He thought it would be kindest to euthanise it. He tried to wring its neck, but didn't know the technique and the bird struggled, stronger than he expected. Instead, he tried to stamp on its head, but the spongey marshland wasn't robust enough to support a death blow, just repeated, squelching, non-fatal stomps. The bird had to die, not just for its injuries but so that my friend's dad could prove he was up to the task. He took the bird to a rock pool where he held its head below the water for two minutes until it was motionless.

And in the hole he goes.

~

We had a tortoiseshell cat called Turtle. Mum loved her to bits, making her fat with treats and saving her the best spot by the fire. The rest of us found her incredibly irritating but living with a sentient being for fourteen years makes it part of the family. Turtle loved us simply because we were there, not caring what we were trying to do at the time. She spent her last bloated week of life splayed across newspaper by the fire, wheezing. We honestly couldn't pay a vet.

"Sal," Dad shouted up the stairs to Mum, dourly business-like. "The cat's got maggots."

I didn't know how maggots manifested themselves in cats, but I was warned not to look, so I didn't. Behind a closed door, Dad smothered Turtle in a towel then walked through the house carrying a cat litter bag with a bundle of tortoiseshell fur slumped at the bottom.

Dad dug a little grave in the garden.

And in the hole she goes.

~

One summer I worked as a shepherd on the farm next door. The flock I was minding were Texel sheep; square-headed brutes that looked like woolly bulldogs, but bigger. One task was to check they didn't have maggots. The way to spot this was if large numbers of flies congregated around the sheep's mouths or udders.

My heart sank the day I found one of the sheep with a buzzing, crawling, black beard. The farmer was away, so I asked Dad what I should do. "It's alright," he said, "They just need spraying. I've got a can in the workshop."

Despite the squareness of the sheep, and the stumpiness of their legs, they were hard to catch. Dad and I chased the afflicted one all over the field. I wanted to show Dad that I was strong and capable, so I tried extra hard. I cornered the sheep and wrestled it to its back. I felt like I was taming nature: and Dad saw it.

"Nice one, mate," he said, approaching with the spray.

The flies buzzed in the sheep's mouth and in my ear. I held tight as it jerked sporadically. Its udders undulated with a black, many-legged horde. Dad sprayed the can at point-blank range. My face was engulfed with the million tiny flies, still warm with the stink of their flesh nest.

I'm dramatising it was more like having a bucket of raisins thrown at your face. It was still gross though.

~

The only magic that Dad showed us he could do was water divining. He

trudged across the peat bogs with two thin metal rods wobbling in his hands, confident he would pick out seams of underground waterflow. When the rods crossed it meant water had been found. He divined water so consistently that people at his work stopped laughing and paid for him to travel to their reserves to do it. Locating water is crucial in land management.

One Christmas, Mum bought the best bottle of whisky she could afford and hid it. She said Dad could only have it if he found it with his divining rods. He searched for hours, spanning days and weeks. He didn't find it and Mum didn't give it to him. Everyone forgot about it.

After Dad died and we were packing the house for Mum to move, it tumbled out of a gash in a mattress my brother and I were moving. As did a nest of screeching, scurrying mice.

There was a tag around the bottle neck in Mum's handwriting. It read, "Well done Normy, we never doubted you for a second."

~

I remember Dad taking me to see an osprey at Dodd Wood, in the Lake District. As I tried to write about this for the eulogy, I realised I was making most of it up. The only facts I have are that the walk was uphill, and that my small, seven-year-old legs were heavily tested. I knew there were trees present. I couldn't describe them as I was far too occupied with walking as fast as I could up the hill, to try and prove to Dad that I was good at something. I remember feeling my wellies slapping and chafing against my scrawny legs, and a sock had slipped off one foot and hidden in a corner of the cavernous boots. Dust and hassled pebbles crunched beneath, on the path. At that moment, Dad was a pair of legs, clad in blue denim, that extended above my field of vision, setting a pace to push towards.

~

At night our garage was terrifying. It was heaped with rusty farm tools the colour of dried blood, lit by one flickering strip light. It was perpetually under invasion from huge leopard-print slugs, toads that crawled over and under bare feet, spiders the size of mice, and rats. Cobwebs, as thick as

zombie hair, draped every surface. Towels, damp with mould, crumpled to create hollows and crevices from which any creature that liked moist darkness could scurry from, towards an open trouser leg.

Every so often, Mum would squeal when she went outside to the chest freezer. Sometimes it was because of creepy crawlies but sometimes it was what was hidden in the freezer itself.

An opaque, blue sandwich bag nestled between chicken nuggets and a tub of ice cream. The knot was hard to undo, especially with chilly, numb fingers. It had to be one of Dad's, so she opened it, nervously. A little, furry face with leathery skin, sharp teeth and a snout made her scream.

The blue bag rattled Dad's TV dinner tray with surprisingly heavy impact.

"What the fuck is a dead bat doing in my freezer?" yelled Mum, eyes bulging, face flushed.

"I'm going to take it to Mike at Tullie House Natural History Department. I don't know why it died and I thought he might-"

"You don't know how it died? And you put it in the freezer with the food for our children? It could have fucking rabies!"

"Come on, Sal, it's in a bag," said Dad still trying to watch the snooker.

"You'll be in a fucking bag if you do this again. At least ask me. Warn me that I might stumble across a biohazard when I'm looking in the freezer for a *Cornetto*."

"Why would I tell you when I know you'll react like this?"

I should have expected Mum's scream when she found the otter. It was an awkward forty-five kilograms and Dad had asked me to help him get it in the freezer slowly and carefully. "I could have got it in myself," he said, "but you know your mum would go mental if an ice cream cone got accidentally crushed."

~

Aged eleven, my schoolmates and I towered over the baby swallow like cyclopean deities. The choice of life and death was ours. We chose mercy. We chose death. The tiny bird had fallen the distance between heaven

and hell. It would never return to its familial nest. It lay flat and purple, grotesquely melded to the tarmac, below the eaves of the school library. Only its straining bald neck moved, its head squealing, eyes closed. We recognised the ubiquitous language of pain and panic. We all winced. None of us thought ourselves able to kill the baby, though the decision was unanimous in favour of its death; to end its suffering sooner rather than later.

I turned my back, raised my thick-soled school shoe and crunched my heel onto the tiny head with three heavy stamps. I dragged the last blow along the ground, smearing the pink corpse across the tarmac.

Each of us present considered ourselves to be tough, as all eleven-year-old boys do, and we had each proved it by bullying our weaker peers. But we were all silenced by the baby bird's death and not one of us said anything, leaving the scene with sadness and respect.

And in the hole he goes.

~

Dad never said that he lived in a crack house. He told me that he lived in a two-bedroom house with twelve other people and his bedroom was a bathtub. He said his friend was an artist and spent all day painting pictures on the walls then painting over them again when he ran out of space. He said, genuinely, that he was lucky to get the bathtub as there was space for him to spread out. Somebody else's room was a cupboard.

~

I used to wake up on a weekend to the sound of Dad's voice reverberating through the wall as he chatted with Mum in bed in the morning. His voice, though not particularly deep or high, hit a certain resonance that vibrated through walls and shook windows. Maybe the house was just knackered, but it was another way his presence seemed to fill our home.

This chatting died off as Dad awoke later and later with less and less vitality.

~

In his deathbed in the hospital, Dad's suffering transfixed me, much like that of the dying baby swallow. He had the same purple desperation and

panicked inability to communicate. Mum asked the doctor if there was anything he could do to speed along Dad's death. The doctor said no but reassured her it was a common request. Dad stared up through the space between them with dry, yellow eyes as brown foam gurgled from his mouth like a blocked toilet.

We watched Dad, and when the foam began to overflow from his thin, white lips, we pressed a button for a nurse to come and put a hoover down his throat to suck it all out. He wasn't allowed any fluid or food.

On his death bed, I told him to die; to give up and let it go. I told myself I was telling him for his own sake. He'd had no food or fluid for four days and was still hanging on to the last wisp of parched life. He might have been strong enough to hold on forever, but I wasn't strong enough to watch him try. I told him to join his dead friends and our dead family.

I'd been watching him die for three years since he was given three months to live. I wanted to give up. I couldn't give up until he was dead. I failed him.

~

A sentiment not appropriate for the eulogy:

I did nothing to make Dad proud of me in his lifetime. He only saw me fail. He picked me up from the police station, from hospital, from park benches. He always had to bail me out, and he always did so willingly, supportively and without judgement. There was nothing that I could help him with. He was so wise, so skilled and so strong. There was nothing that I could impress him with, but he still always said he was proud of me. How could he have been?

~

The day after Dad's death I walked up the stairs of our house and saw his tie, neatly curled up on a shelf, never to be worn again. Dad was not big on wearing ties, and when he did wear ties it had never been this one, but the notion that he would never be able to wear this tie again, whether he would have wanted to or not, reduced me to tears.

Mum followed me up the stairs and asked, "Are you alright, lovie?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry. Just saw one of Dad's ties and it got me."

Mum hesitated and said carefully, "Josh, that's your tie. It came in one of those god-awful shirt and tie combo boxes you buy, and you just left it here."

As soon as she said this, I realised that she was right. I was a twat.

~

I collected Dad from the crematorium in a cardboard tube, wrapped in a pastel sunset. The tube was the same shape as the package of a whisky bottle. Dad would have made a joke about that and taken the chance to mock my lame poem. I moved the tube of Dad around, so it didn't tire of the view.

I wondered if the dust inside the tube contained his dreams, wishes, jokes and ideas, as well as the body that failed him. Thirteen stone incinerated down to four kilograms. I hoped it still had the good stuff.

BIOGRAPHY

JOSH HOLTON is an ex-MMA fighter who took too many blows to the head and now writes weird fiction and non-fiction. He quit his stable office job to find fulfilment in the study and practice of storytelling. He now survives on instant noodles but loves his life. Find him on Twitter @JHoltonWriter.