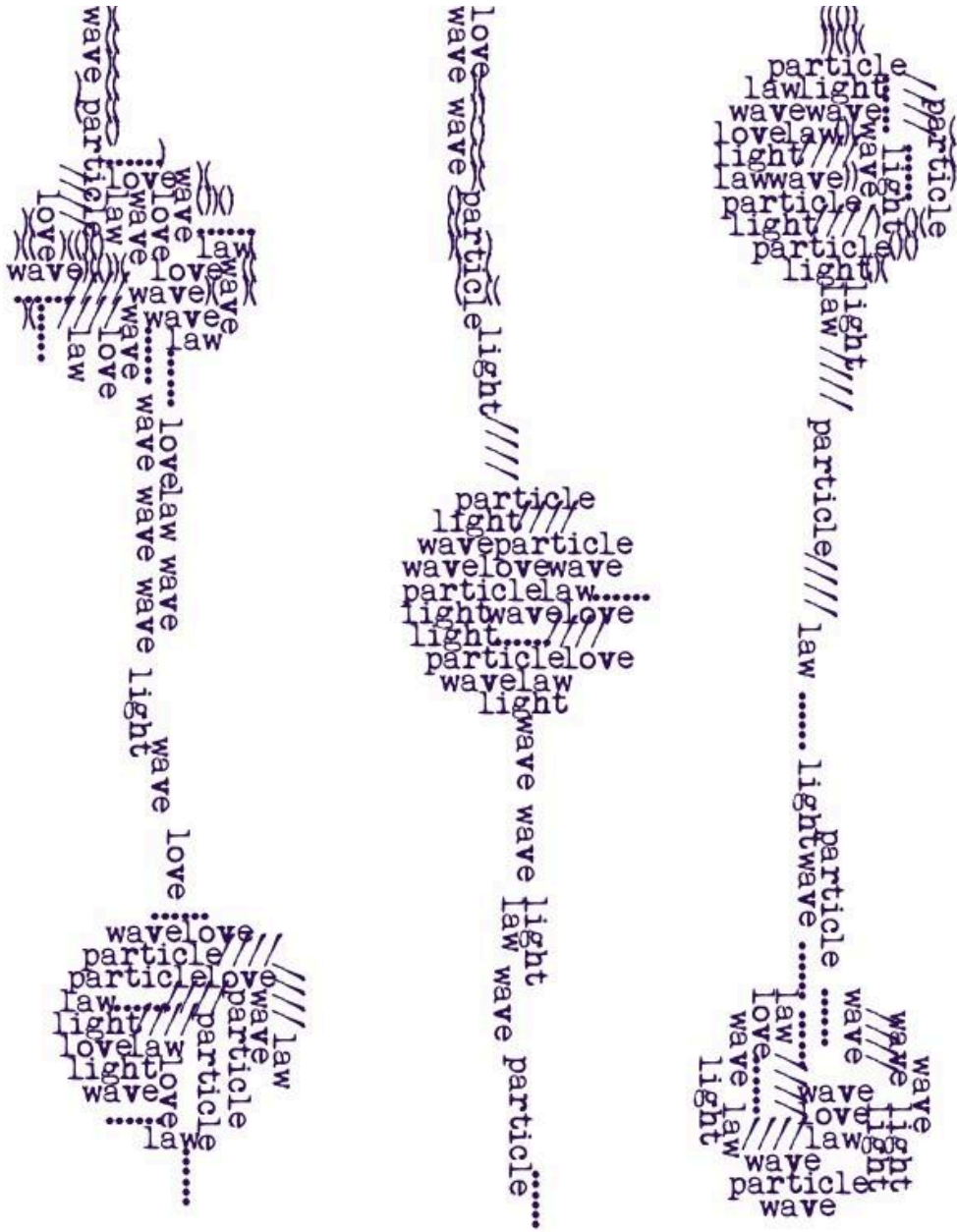


issue 33
streetcake



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jr clarke

the sky was an incomplete jigsaw of a fishing village in the Faroe Islands

light on the centre of my forehead

sends images of big rocks low lying storms

that turn eternal daylight

into a greyed sage red for months on end

each drop of rain a nimble investment made by millennia of dead Viking breath

far past the polyester world this is Valhalla separated by burning flags this is the end of
the world

but on St Olav's day we all eat fresh whale meat

whilst an innocent temptress fills the tankard

slightly unbuttoned Bunad

whose hair is Heaven

& sometimes the stitching that joins nails

to the end of fingertips

kris coffield

HOMELAND PTSD

I strutted down desert sand in a humvee
that exploded into its own universe.

I

sank

(just for a while,

before muscling

myself

above

ground)

gasping in smoke thick as foam.

Head showered, hair soaked,

clothes dampened, but unwashed.

Brother Jon is not going to be happy tonight.

Maybe God's hand

unfurled

just in time

to graft on my lips the word of war:

EMPTY

(no comrades

are left to dream of that blowout),

a staring contest with the *future*,

barbarous bodies read numbly

into our rusting heart of darkness.

No, Brother Jon is not going to be happy tonight.

But I sure do hope he leaves the light on.

Portrait of the Two

Where are their EyEs?

Not in the sockets
where they should be.

But don't assume
that these lovers are blind.

Inside their frame
it's a fiction, freer with the facts,

where eyes can wander,
roll behind your back,

from where they're watching,
now. Love

isn't blind, but looks
from unExpEcted angles

“We’ll Get Through This”

David stops the car outside the church and waits for Rachel to speak. She had said nothing for the whole journey.

If Lucy had been in the back seat, she would have spoken for both of them. But she is lying in the graveyard, a year since she died. They would never hear her voice again.

He turns to Rachel. The silence is more than he can bear.

“You ready to go through this?” he asks.

“Of course I’m ready,” she replies, an irritation in her voice.

David pulls the key from the ignition and reaches for the door. In the morning, he wondered if Rachel would come at all.

He watches as she pulls a pair of sunglasses from her handbag, their lenses the size of saucers. Outside, the sun is not even shining in the overcast sky. If other couples are visiting they will assume she is a celebrity, he thinks.

“Wait,” she says as he steps out from the car.

Rachel opens the boot and rummages inside a black bag. She can never travel without clutter.

David stops the car outside the church and waits for Rachel to speak. He has talked for the entire journey.

If Lucy had been in the back seat, she would have spoken for both of them. But she is lying in the graveyard, a year since she died. They would never hear her voice again.

David turns to her. He will not let her rest for a minute.

“You ready to go through this?” he asks.

“Of course I’m ready,” she replies, disliking her need to lie.

David pulls the key from the ignition and reaches for the door. In the morning, Rachel wondered if she could be with him at all.

She puts on a pair of sunglasses, their lenses as big as she could find. When she sees Lucy’s grave, Rachel knows she will collapse into tears. She does not care what David thinks, the master of control.

“Wait,” she says as he steps out from the car.

She opens the boot and rummages inside a black bag. Her heart stops. Perhaps she left it on the bed.

A pink teddy bear stares up at them, its paws open in an eternal embrace.

Lucy's favourite.

Their feet crunch as they enter the graveyard. A thin line of gravel winds through tombstones covered with moss. The same path they took for the funeral.

They had walked side-by-side, with the relatives pausing behind them. Even the Head Teacher from Lucy's Primary School had come. Such a tragedy, she had said. He remembers the card the other children had drawn covered in faces, their crayon mouths downturned.

David reaches for Rachel's hand but she is behind him. Slowing down, he realises he has been walking too quickly.

He is desperate for her touch.

"They must use volunteers for gardening," he blurts out, pointing to a row of orange bags filled with leaves and stacked against a wall.

Any comment is better than nothing, he thinks. But Rachel gives no reply, hiding behind her glasses.

He quickens his pace. They have to cross the church to the other side of the graveyard. No lights shine through the windows. The church is as sullen as his wife.

A pink teddy bear stares up at them, its paws open in an eternal embrace.

Lucy's favourite.

Their feet crunch as they enter the graveyard. A thin line of gravel winds through tombstones covered with moss. The same path they took for the funeral.

Rachel hesitates, the teddy bear dangling from her hand. Her doubts return as she recalls the funeral. Their relatives had left them apart, embarrassed at their grief. Even Lucy's Head Teacher had come with a card the other children had drawn covered in faces, their crayon mouths downturned.

David reaches for her hand but she is too far away. In his rushing, he is always ahead of her.

She is desperate for his touch.

"They must use volunteers for gardening," he blurts out, pointing to a row of orange bags filled with leaves and stacked against a wall.

A sudden triviality, its observation pointless. But if she replies, she knows her annoyance will be clear.

He speeds up in front of her to bypass the church. Its windows are dark, its inside quiet. If only he would stop, she hopes, so that they could just exist for each other.

As they pass the far side of the church, they look at the headstones in the corner of the graveyard.

“Three more,” he says.

No reply, again.

One of the new graves has fresh flowers. He wonders if another family is grieving like them and hopes not. His grief is a failure; he has never felt further apart from everyone.

“Lucy,” he says, his voice croaking.

A white curved marble headstone stands in a line of other graves. His stomach burns with acid as he reads his daughter’s name, still half-hoping that there was a mistake.

He doubts he can cope anymore.

Circling overhead, a bird twitters at them. David looks up, glad for the distraction. A flash of red against the milky white of the sky.

“A sparrow,” he says.

“Lucy’s favourite. She liked the colour,” Rachel replies.

Closing his eyes, he seeks a refuge. But he can hear Lucy’s voice, calling for mummy and daddy to play. In her eyes, they were the united parents. She had no brothers or sisters. They had planned for more, once.

David shuffles. He does not deserve the love of another child.

As they pass the far side of the church, they look at the headstones in the corner of the graveyard.

“There more,” he says.

She bites her tongue.

One of the new graves has fresh flowers. She wonders if another family is grieving like them and hopes not. Her grief is a failure; she has never felt further apart from everyone.

“Lucy,” he says, his voice croaking.

A white curved marble headstone stands in a line of other graves. Her sunglasses smudge with tears as she reads her daughter’s name, still half-hoping that there was a mistake.

She doubts she can cope anymore.

Circling overhead, a bird twitters at them. David looks up. But her attention is on the grave, his fidgeting distracting her.

“A sparrow,” he says.

“Lucy’s favourite. She liked the colour,” Rachel replies.

David closes his eyes. Left to her own thoughts she hears Lucy’s voice, calling for mummy and daddy to play. In her eyes, they were the united parents. She had no brothers or sisters. They had planned for more, once.

Rachel hears David shuffling. He deserves to be a father again.

Looking down at his foot, he runs the toe of his shoe through the blades of grass around the grave.

“I should have come more often. Tended the grave,” he says. “And I forgot to bring flowers.”

His confession is as long as he dares. Lucy’s face returns to him, covered in baby food. He turns to leave the grave, not wanting to bear anymore, but Rachel shakes her sunglasses.

He reads Lucy’s name again on the headstone, hoping that the repetition will bring him comfort like a mantra. But instead he feels the lump in his throat returning.

Lucy. The pointlessness of death.

She had meant everything to him. His daughter, a first child. He should have been with her when she was growing up, then taken her down the aisle at a wedding of her own. She might have had her own children, doted over by their grandfather.

A brain aneurism. It could have happened to anyone, the hospital had said.

Now Lucy was under the grass in her wickerwork coffin. The size was so small that the coffin had to be made especially.

She watches him being awkward, running the toe of his shoe through the blades of grass around the grave.

“I should have come more often. Tended the grave,” he says. “And I forgot to bring flowers.”

His confession astounds her in its unexpectedness. She wants him to continue but he turns to leave the grave. She shakes her sunglasses. Stay with me, she mimics.

She reads Lucy’s name again on the headstone, hoping that the repetition will bring her comfort like a mantra. But instead she sees the smudges in her sunglasses returning.

Lucy. The pointlessness of death.

She had meant everything to her. Her daughter, a first child. She should have been with her when she was growing up, crying over her first boyfriend. She might have had her own children, doted over by their grandmother.

A brain aneurism. It could have happened to anyone, the hospital had said.

Now Lucy was under the grass in her wickerwork coffin. The size was so small that the coffin had to be made especially.

Our agony. I cannot bear this any longer, he decides.

Rachel picks up the teddy bear, dusts its fur and props it gently against the marble of the headstone. Its ears hide the year of Lucy's death, only the birthdate and a dash remaining.

He could not have chosen a better place.

Swallowing, he tests the dryness of his throat. He should say something to cheer them up, but lets the wind can speak for them instead.

Daring one step at a time, he edges closer to Rachel and holds out his hand. He can always step back if he fails.

Her fingers slip into his, squeezing his flesh so firmly that he can feel bone. Above them, the sun bursts through a gap in the overcast sky, briefly dazzling them. They will get through this, he vows.

Our agony. I cannot bear this any longer, she decides.

Rachel picks up the teddy bear, dusts its fur and props it gently against the marble of the headstone. Its ears hide the year of Lucy's death, only the birthdate and a dash remaining.

David would have chosen a better place.

Rachel feels him tensing, as if he is about to speak. But he keeps silent, for which she is grateful, and lets the wind speak for them instead.

David's hand begins to move into the corner of her vision. If she wanted, she could reject him easily.

Her fingers slip into his, squeezing his flesh so firmly that she can feel bone. Above them, the sun bursts through a gap in the overcast sky, briefly dazzling them. They will get through this, she vows.

stephen emmerson

from Letters to Verlaine
XLI)

I havoc my hands
in putty

Shape pity with finger

or pull Paul snail
with nails bitten

This auto-sun

is havoc to have

& malleable

To unsex her thus
in alley

to have it cocktied

Pyloned
& catenaried

My vocation thus is to have

To speed open-road
with this

Poor poor holy starfucker
& melt

whisper

halo

- round skull points
reach ing

grasp ing

without a murmur

we used to [touch]

we used to [kiss]

we used to [love]

cut

- switch blade circus
break ing

speak ing

without a monotone

we used to [smile]

we used to [laugh]

we used to [whisper]

Milk

1.

My dentist

warns me:

You have acid erosion

Even when I see him on the street

or in the hardware store

he comes over

and his warning resounds:

Acid Erosion

Add climate change

and gun violence

and I'm a nervous wreck

My dentist assures me

he can sedate me during treatment

but all that means

is that he's going to stuff me

full of valium

That's not

the answer

2.

I once had a girlfriend
whose father was a famous
crusading journalist
One day a mafia hit man
threw acid in his face
and blinded him
so I know how dangerous
acid can be

Now my dentist tells me that
I have too much of it
and it's eroding me
from the inside out
starting with my teeth

It doesn't matter how much milk I drink
I am acidic

I drink ten gallons
before I realize it's hopeless
I call the man who delivers
into the box outside my front door
and tell him:

Forget it

Just forget it

He says: Listen, buddy

Milk is not holy water

Milk will not bring redemption

even to orphan infants

They've got to work to find their way

just like the rest of us