

streetcake

issue 52



@ simon cusack

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cover art – simon cusack

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Rock Remains Rock

There's a reason
no one
sings "I
did it
YOUR
way"

the fire blazes highest
during a storm,
high winds
charge up flares
from weak embers

the river flows around
the rock,
sand piles over
in sculpted waves,
leaf mulch turns
heavily to soil,
pressing stone deeper
into earth;
lightning strikes, rain may fall,
the elements continue,
& man
builds concrete outhouses
for whelps & pups &
yammering millions
harnessed to the mill
& lashed

Rock remains rock
forgetting everything
ever told,
inventing life
anew

the sky is open
& space &
time

Pictures Of You

Beneath this poem
are stretch marks of imagination
Others might call them fantasies
or weak choices
Metaphors can be misleading

like watching sci-fi
or sappy spiritual movies
telling us we're doing it wrong
that the hollowness we ignore
is a point of denial

like blaming others
for our loneliness
for not speaking out
the way that self-help book
spoke out about our trivial thoughts

holding us prisoners
in our failures
So we drink wine each night
to get that neon glow
in the dark of a cloistered room

glowing magenta as if pastel'd
by a famous artist
bringing us back to life
but it's just another distraction

making us believe we're alive

like when The Cure sings

Pictures Of You

and our hearts fracture

like romantics reading love prose

until the glow fizzles out

I wanted to write something

positive

something supportive

but what fucking good would I be

if I lied to you

Cops and Robbers

Yo! Me! I'm the one you wanted.
Yeah! both of us rummaged
alleys, gutters, streets of tenements
trails cooling as they fashioned.

Me! I'm no loiter. My prints may be chilled
while you're watching, hot with wanting.
Blink and the spoor fades – high speed.
We race nose to nose – head on,
eyes full focus, set to scan
gutters, alleys, twilights for omen
coded in night's hinterland.

Some time, in an unwary moment,
face to frown, we'll meet at trail's end
in an alley, gutter, tenement,
on ice thin as comfort
on ice as black
as our united fate.

The Headless March

I can see your head
But not mine
The lacuna
The lack
Even when I'm real
I'm not

I dreamed this was true
They were all there
Upside down and backwards
Floating in dark air
I couldn't catch them
Not a goddamn one

The bastards played us for laughs
Well we played them too
And ourselves I guess
So goddamn cock sure
And then it was over
Last drop In the whiskey bottle

It's full of holes
I'm not here
But I never was
It's that missing head
I waived my gun at them all
And laughed like a motherfucker

Silence Surrounds Her

I prop up a cheap mirror on the window sill so the women can peer into it and inspect my handiwork. There's a conflict in light, between the poor yellow light of the classroom and the real light from outside, that means the women have to get really close to see what I've done. The bolshier, smarter ones pull the mirror to them, hold it up to their faces and nod, but some crouch over the window sill, pressing their chins to the cold plastic.

But Hayley never looks into the mirror, even if I bring it to her.

When the officer shows her in and gestures towards the chair, she takes it as though she's walked miles to be here, as though she's truly exhausted, slumping in it as if she'd have died if we hadn't placed it there for her. She slides back so that her head, a cloud of coarse curls that doesn't move, just grows silently outwards, only just peeps over the top of the back of the chair. I want to kick her feet, but they look too fragile. That the bruises would grow and swell, intensify, travel up her legs so that before I could regret what I'd done, her legs would be blue beneath the too-big jeans she always wore.

'Sit up, Hayley,' the officer says, and looks at me with weary eyes. It's the officer I see often enough but whose name I've either completely forgotten or have never known. Hayley obeys, shooting upwards like a stick bobbing in the stream, caught on a boulder. But she doesn't say anything.

'What are we doing today then?' I say automatically, in the breezy tone I still employ for all my clients, whether it's the almost-aristocrat, Mrs Darlton-Clark, or Lauren, the close-cropped shoplifter whose every sentence ends in a lie. I don't know why I ask, really, when the answer is always the same.

‘Just a tidy up, Claire, please,’ the prison officer replies, ‘get rid of the split ends, that kind of thing.’

The other women apologise. I’m used to hearing their warnings, their lamentations. ‘I fucking wouldn’t be caught dead with these roots, normally, Claire, honest to god!’ ‘God, Claire, you know it wouldn’t look like this on the outside, don’t you?’ They promise that, at home, in their own bathrooms, they would buy the expensive shampoos, choose soothing serums and go for regular cuts. They would style their hair carefully, colouring with the professional stuff, rather than the cheapo boxes from Bodycare. That’s what they all say, that if they were outside, it’d be different. It doesn’t matter that the majority of them don’t look as though they have two pennies to rub together, that they’ve probably never had two pennies to rub together. But I am a representation of the outside, of the life that was, the glamour they can only dream of. They talk with me as animatedly as my regular clients, outlining their children’s latest achievements or their latest aches and breaks. There aren’t the month-old magazines to flip so their hands gesticulate wildly instead.

But I’ve got used to the silence with Hayley. The silence surrounds her: her fellow inmates don’t address her or involve her in their jokes, even the officers have given up punctuating her silences with their weather reports. You can’t forget what she’s in for either, like you can with the others. I cut her hair like she cut her boys, fingers manipulating them into a hold, snip, snip, parts falling away.

Her hair is thick, really thick, so thick I have to hold it taut between my fingers away from her neck, else it springs back. Her scalp is flaky. When I segregate a section of her hair, great white islands shift. I watch them with a curiosity, allow them to ride on the greasy strands like parasites. With the others, I sympathise, ask their officers for a course of T Gel, comb the flakes away with discretion, but I let Hayley’s build up so that they would come

away in her nails each time she touches her head, so that she has to see her own futile skin gathered under her nails, disgusting, disgusted.

‘Any plans for the weekend?’ The prison officer rocks back and forth on her heels like a comedy policeman. She has a sweet doughy face framed by brown shiny ringlets. They’re rare, proper ringlets, and though people the world over will try to achieve them in any way they can, from rags to tongs, I know that the owners of real ringlets would wish for straight, easy hair in a heartbeat. It’s the way of the world; you always want what you can’t have. But it’s my job to help them try, at least.

I tell her about the holiday shopping I plan to do, the manicure in the morning and how I know it will be chipped by the time we come to load the car because I will have insisted on cleaning every nook of the kitchen. I do it every year – cleaning for the burglars, he calls it – and it doesn’t matter whether it’s polish, gel, Shellac– I stop because it’s quite clear that the officer has no idea of the merits of different finishes.

She smiles, nods, says ‘yes, yes,’ but she doesn’t really care, not really. The purpose for the question is to apologise for Hayley, make up for the silence, plug the gap. So I help her out: talk for longer than is necessary, draw in other cast members she hasn’t asked about, like Spud the dog or my two teenaged children, or my dad, old as the hills but continuing to prop huge ladders against his house and clean the gutters.

‘Oh, perhaps he can come and do mine,’ the officer says, her flat black shoes, the kind you send your son to Scouts in, squeaking as she rocks.

I nod, laugh at nothing, sidestep to avoid Hayley’s hair as it falls to the linoleum. ‘He’d do that, he really would,’ I say, and I wonder if I can suggest to her that she should change the tone of her foundation, that it doesn’t work well in the harsh prison light and she should be more careful as there’s a thin blush of it on her collar.

‘He sounds nice,’ I hear her Hayley whisper. She coughs with a wet growl to clear it and tries again. It’s like a bird trying to go back up a chimney. ‘Your dad, I mean.’ She sounds like she’s had a tracheostomy. A pipe smoker. I imagine the years of yellowed, congealed phlegm in her throat, teeth crumbling like sandcastles in her gums. I picture her hot, sour lips smearing a kiss on the cheek of a man the same age as my dad and feel my stomach jolt. She can’t have a dad, she is too sick in the head to be allowed such luxuries.

‘He is,’ I say firmly, and tug too hard a section of hair at the nape of her neck. Her skull jerks towards me but she doesn’t complain. The prison officer watches Hayley eye the ceiling. There are square tiles on the ceiling, cheap flimsy looking things that don’t sit straight in the grid that’s meant to hold them together. Two have great big dents through the middle of them, as though someone’s leapt up and punched them. I doubt any of the inmates were tall enough or fit enough to jump that high, but I wonder how the dents got there, all the same. That’s the thing: once you start thinking about bad things, about violence or sadness or illness or whatever, then you notice it everywhere, in everything.

Hayley doesn’t look as though she could punch a polystyrene ceiling panel. Her body is the kind of thin that comes from not eating, her posture from wishing she was invisible or dead, rounded as though her head is too heavy and her shoulders collapse in on themselves. Her skin is dull, her hair hard. I can’t see her nails as her hands are always balled up in sleeves but they are almost definitely short, their edges snagged and splitting.

So how could she have gripped a knife, an ordinary kitchen knife, for as long as she needed to cut the throats of her three boys? How could she have held them down, pinned down their flesh and muscle and ended their miserable campaign to survive? And why did she, afterwards, drop the knife and succumb to sleep? Why did she not finish the job and take the blade to her own thin wrists? She could have snapped them if she truly wanted.

My scissors fall to the floor and the noise hurts our ears. I see the officer wince.

‘There now, let’s have a look at you,’ I say, quickly picking up my scissors from the curls on the floor. I’m reminded of Dad’s workshop dusted with metal shavings, coiled as they’ve dropped from the workbench. I stand back to assess her hair. In all honesty, it doesn’t look much different. A bit reduced in volume, I suppose. It’s not a look anyone would willingly emulate. Not that she cares.

‘Think that’s about right,’ I say, pulling down one lock above her right ear then the same above her left.

‘Great,’ the prison officer exhales sharply, as if she’s remembered to breathe. ‘What do you think Hayley?’

Hayley doesn’t even shrug but peels herself from her chair. She stands like one of the early humans in that famous evolution of man image.

‘Got your extensions ready, Claire-man?’ a voice bellows from the corridor, ricocheting on the unsympathetic walls and floors.

‘In another world, Kayla,’ I reply with a mock sigh. Kayla appears with the prison officer I see most often, a tiny petite woman called Louise who manages to make her restrictive uniform look alright. It’s all in the way she carries herself.

As Kayla and Hayley well know. Kayla carries herself with utmost confidence, the what-you-looking-at of a cage fighter, the height of a supermodel, the solidity of a Mountie. She wears the biggest smile known to man and her clothes look ready to fall apart at another belly laugh.

‘Got ‘er a new wig, have you?’ she points at Hayley with her eyes, nods, winks, clucks her tongue against her teeth and lips, winks again. Her face doesn’t tire of animation, it keeps pulling in different directions, her mouth fleeing from her nose, her eyebrows floating upwards. It’s exhausting watching her, but she’s good company from the half an hour

it will take me to tidy up her braids. I'm not an expert on black hair, but she says I'm better than nothing which, from Kayla, is a compliment from on high.

But Hayley doesn't hear the wig comment. She can't have done, else she'd have flinched, look wounded, embarrassed. Her head, though lighter from the cut, still lolls forward to the floor.

I see the prison officers glance at each other. They would compare later, in the canteen or in the locker rooms where they shook off those clinging, ill-fitting uniforms.

'Alright, Kayla,' Louise says, apologising with her eyes. I shake my head; I'm used to the comments, the teasing, the playfulness, the spite. It's rarely aimed at me, I'm the intermediary they actually look forward to, but I'm party to the hostilities between inmates, or inmates and their officers.

Hayley and the officer whose name I can't remember leave the room, the officer a few paces ahead like a mother leading her sleepwalking daughter back to bed. Kayla's incessant chatter, skipping between topics in half-breaths, drowns out Hayley's footsteps.

Kayla continues. If she was permitted chewing gum, she would pop the bubbles between words with a square fingernail, or blow too-big bubbles and let them deflate over her moving lips. Instead, her fingers draw invisible scenes in the air, her tongue corralling her words enthusiastically.

'At least I didn't kill me own kids,' I hear her say. I've heard her say it before, she and other inmates. No, she hadn't killed her own kids. She had helped a number of nameless, faceless, spineless men traffic people from abroad, complicit in their labyrinth of drugs, sex and exploitation. 'For me, it's a job, just a job,' she says, not for the first time, and cracks an imaginary piece of gum between her molars.

Her scalp is smooth and clean, though she would be unhappy at the tiny, wiry greys refusing to conform and sticking up on end, signalling their existence by their pure audacity. I decide not to tell her, as there's nothing I can do about them anyway, and let her talk, the words bouncing off the walls like beads from an exploding necklace.

Love

within an overflowing bin
steals my solitude.