

Car - Cat

(2020-21)

In the town where I grew up, there have been two iconic bands. Or rather, one iconic band whose legacy is cleaved in two and pivots around a central tragedy. Whilst recently scrolling through the news app on my phone, I stumbled across an article (which I have since lost) relating to the music of these two bands within the context of the current year. In the article, the writer warned that under no circumstances should one listen to the first band's output during the present situation, as their music is too sad. Instead, they advised that it would be better to listen to the output of the second band, as they channel their sadness in a less overt, more danceable way. It is worth noting, when regarding this advice, that the mood of the band(s) change(s) significantly after the event of their central tragedy, though this is by no means an exhaustive rule. Despite this clear warning, and given my seemingly irrepressible attraction to music which mines the deepest depths of despair, I chose to disregard the writer of the article's advice, and listen to both.

On listening, their sung accents can be described as located somewhere in the middle of the sea – as if cast permanently adrift between landmasses. You sometimes hear it in old films. On their edges, where the veneer momentarily slips, it is possible to catch their true origins bobbing above the surface. I can notice myself in them. They reveal themselves for a second and then disappear back into the sea again. I noticed it specifically in the word 'car'. In the song, he says, 'stolen car' and there is a harsh 'A' at the end, somehow simultaneously cut-off and elongated. It comes out of my own mouth the same. It has long been a source of amusement for friends and family, the way I say 'car'. The way it is the same as the way I say 'cat'. 'Car' as in vehicle, 'cat' as in small domestic furry animal. The harsh 'A' of 'car' that bleeds into the glottal stop of 'cat'. A strange hybrid car-cat, a monster. They could not perfectly escape their voices. I don't know whether they really wanted to or whether it was more of a subconscious thing – years of hearing this smooth-sea accent come out of mouths like theirs and then replicating it without knowing.

I have recently moved, for the first time in my life, away from the North of England. At the time of writing, I have lived in various parts of the North for close to 26 years and so my identity, my body, my voice feels inextricably tied to this part of the world. Travelling towards London in a friend's van, I am struck by the seemingly impossible flatness of this part of the rural South. It looks as though someone squashed it by accident, for there seems no good reason why anyone would want a place to be this flat. I wonder whether the people who live here are aware that anything exists beyond the trees in front of them. Much of the rural North is a land of picturesque lumps. When I reach the top of a lump in the North, I can see far off into the distance, beyond the edges of my hometown. I can see other towns, villages, fields, the nearest city. On the horizon, I can even see over the edges of England and into the country next-door. Of course, when at the bottom of the lump, it is only possible to see the face of the lump itself. But for me, the lump is not an edge, but a suggestion towards something on its other side. All that is required, is to scale the lump and other places will reveal themselves. As I travel Southward, I cannot know what might be at the end of the field or on the other side of the hedgerow. Perhaps there is nothing: the end of the earth. Not endless space to breathe, but instead, dead ends in all directions. I suppose a road does give the suggestion that it should lead to somewhere, but down here, who really can be sure. When I have lived in cities, regardless of whether it is flat or not, there are peaks and troughs of landscape. Things appear suddenly at the end of streets or around corners. There are convergences of sound and language, a suggestion that there may always be a place other than where one currently happens to be; something outside of one's own lived experience.

The centre is held hostage by its outlying parts. It gives its name to them, though they have little in common. The centre is dense, intertwined, collective. The outer is dispersed, insular, isolationist. The outer dictates the centre's image to the world beyond. A few years ago, a fox was chased through the fences round the back of a street of terraced houses in town. It was followed by dogs and men in red coats with red cheeks and they killed it in the middle of someone's lawn.

The outer carries the body of the fox through the house.

The centre is a bargaining chip.

The outer leaves its residue, muck, its sticky fingers on the furniture. It projects an effigy of the centre to reinforce its own ideology, walks its muddy footprints through the living room. It takes ages to get them out the carpet.

I often think it's hard to describe what the town is as a place. It seems to sit across many categories at once, if such categories exist. I remember coming home once and a large, prominent building by the war memorial in the centre of town had totally burnt down. Its burnt-out structure stayed there for years before being demolished. On the other side of the road, the trees were covered with fairy lights. Sort of idyllic, sort of dilapidated. Sort of post-industrial (but not really), sort of new industry. It is working class in parts, and home-counties posh in others. On one side of town there are roads that seem to be lined only with gaudy footballer-mansions but in others there are lovely Victorian streets, housing estates, cul-de-sacs. The once ghost-town-centre that looks in parts like the cut-and-paste centre of many other towns in the UK, now hosts a monthly market selling, amongst other things, vintage furniture and fresh local vegetables, cheeses and baked goods. It would be possible to feel the old boredom of 'not much to do', but equally possible to find yourself burning the roof of your mouth on greasy pizza on the walk home from dancing and drinking with friends. It is small but sprawls outwards, and close enough to the nearest city not to feel insular. After I first left, I described it to people I met in a way that seemed to place it neatly within the confines of 'small-town mentality', or of 'provincial Northern social conservatism'. But looking back, I don't think this was an accurate or fair portrayal. Things are often more complex than they initially appear, and rarely stay fixed. I was forever shapeshifting, and so was it. We were misaligned, but sometimes overlapping, dipping in and out of synch. It, like I, seems to have changed each time we meet.

I wonder what the place was like when they were there. I feel like I've only really seen it in black and white. There was a film made about them, various TV documentaries, and there's a photo inside the covered bridge at the train station. It strikes me that they always look cold; always huddled together in coats that look not quite warm enough – but maybe it's only the photo at the train station that I have in my head. I don't think the town itself is that cold really, it rains a lot but from what I can remember, it's rarely raining in the pictures. I think I imagine them in the post-2008 town centre, shops shuttered up. I know this is incorrect but maybe it's something close. The grey, austere, pain-in-your-shoulder-on-the-way-home-from-school kind of feeling seems to fit well with a bunch of chilly looking young men staring moodily out of an old black and white photograph.

I found an old article from a national newspaper that was written by his daughter. She describes visiting the set of the film and hanging out with the actors. People dressed as the dad she didn't know and the mum she still does. She says that the actor who played her mum seemed to have copied her mannerisms quite well. The set she visits isn't actually in the town, but instead a city in the midlands. I thought this was strange because apparently the town's visual appearance hasn't really changed much since the events depicted in the film, though I am assured that footage of the real town is also used. From what I can remember, she says she feels it was a good thing that the set she visited wasn't in the real town. She didn't want to associate it with the tragic events towards the end of the film.

There is optimism, I think, in their synthesizers. It contrasts with the iciness of the rest of the instruments. In the moments where the guitars and drums feel simultaneously propulsive and frozen, the synthesizer shimmers over the top. It hovers us over the bare bones - the brittle or rigid - sometimes overtaking the other instruments, carrying us with it. It sounds future-looking – though it is curtailed by the future that has now arrived. In his voice, there is warm and cool at the same time. It is definitely mournful, but it has a resonance within its bass tones that feels rounded out with warmth, even through the prevailing melancholy. It might be those edges of his accent glinting from behind the veneer that feel kind of comforting. I'd have to ask someone from out of town to be sure. Maybe the warmth comes from catharsis – a way of cutting through the descending fog by becoming the fog, sitting fuzzed-out inside the harsh as ice landscape. Warmth within a cold exterior, defrosting from the inside out.

I heard that, in the ballot box, his hand moved towards the right. It seems at odds with what we know about him through his work. I've heard of young men in towns doing similar as a joke. Maybe its privilege but I guess there's also maybe a feeling that nothing would change anything anyway. We know he was 'troubled' so maybe this allows us to disregard any knowledge about the possibilities of his political alignments. It doesn't seem to taint their music in a way that others' allegiances might. He may have only had the opportunity to vote once. He did not become some wealthy, aging Rockstar, who has decided in their ignorance and from within their crisp LA mansion, that they belong to some disempowered section of society. I think people usually imagine him as older, but he was younger than I am now when he died. And, given that I still often feel as though I know very little about anything, and would ideally not like to be forever judged upon the character of my ignorant adolescent self, it feels fair that these potentially misguided allegiances might be forgiven.

A man wanted to turn his old house into a museum. It was just a normal terraced house in the centre of town, and the site of the tragedy that I mentioned earlier. From what I can remember, it was an American man who was wanting to buy it. It was all over the local news. It seems quite an American thing to do, I think. To turn the site into a sort of Hard-Rock Café to revel in the sadness. I hope they weren't going charge for entry. It didn't end up happening in the end and now, as far as I'm aware, it's just a normal house that someone else lives in. People in town said there wouldn't be enough good parking for it there anyway.