

The Tooth

*You have problems with your teeth,
With the slow digestion of the indecisive,
With the crunch of the occipital bone.
—“Diagnosis,” Miyó Vestrini, tr. Anne Boyer & Cassandra Gillig*

1. In high school I cracked a molar biting into a French fry at Wendy’s while ditching class. The tooth fell apart in my mouth, the way my teeth still do sometimes in my nightmares. I spit out the broken pieces into a napkin and thought *esophagus, beware of the enamel shrapnel coming your way*. With my head down, I awkwardly ate the rest of my lunch; but those sick buzzards I used to call my friends encircled me like a band of hot-breathed insomniacs zombied on quadratic formulas.

“What the hell did you just do,” they laughed.

I didn’t tell them shit about the tooth; instead, I said “I just spit out uh *pinche* burnt fry into my napkin. Now leave my ass alone and mind your business, pinches metiches.”

“You’re nasty, dude,” they said, staring disgustedly, as incoming fries and spit wads bounced off my head and shoulders before they returned to their banter and that relentless gorging.

2. What was left was a ruin, a remnant that would eventually rot, causing me all kinds of discomfort, until it didn’t, until all that remained was a blackened, odorous pit that would inspire both shame and embarrassment for years after I realized how much that rancid hueco smelled. Such as when I watched (or imagined, same difference) repulsed classmates plug their nostrils with their fingertips when I spoke; when I observed cousins shuffle

their feet in reverse, cartoon-style, when I asked for a cigarette or a drink from their 7-Eleven Big Gulps; or when customers searched nervously for exit signs at the video store where I worked with fearful eyeballs.

3. For years, I distanced myself when I spoke to family, friends, classmates, not to mention strangers; I knew something of social distancing long before I knew what a Dr. Fauci was, what a CDC guideline was. I covered my mouth when I spoke, I chewed pounds of gum, I bought Binaca when I could afford it, Listerine, Scope, give me a scented candle, I'll eat it, deodorant even, blah, blah, blah, I drank and sprayed and lathered those poisons during passing periods and lunches. I harbored this death scene, this secret mutilation—yellow police tape fell out my mouth, roots that waved their white flags until they went black, went cross-boned.
4. To be forthright, I was fascinated by the sight *and* the odor, even; I'd stare into the mirror with my mouth wide open, exhaling, then quickly stealing the stench back from the air with the obsessive inhalation of my enlarged, hairy nostrils, prodding the destruction with the tip of my index finger or toothbrush, my tongue that ran over the jagged, cragginess—I'd wave hello and goodbye to the deceased at the end of every day.
5. That oil pit.
6. That smelly, haunted cenote.
7. I imagined cobwebs and creaky wooden floors in there. A pallid vampire who drew burgundy, velvet curtains each morning and used food remnants for a pillow. A root that decayed and eventually died. A funeral dirge sounded from the grave. I adorned my room with charcoal renderings of the dead tooth like a

tormented courtroom sketch artist. I gathered my old stuffed animals, and together we poured imaginary caguamas onto the granite slab of death in memoriam to an old chorizo chomper.

8. I never told my parents about the broken tooth. I never told my brothers and sisters. And to hide something that's absent from view is never as easy as it sounds.
9. In time I marched my rotten, broken tooth into a new millennium; I introduced it to wars, economic recessions, a global pandemic, the loves of my life, two failed marriages, travel, four US presidents, protests and uprisings, car accidents, the list goes on and on. My dead tooth governed over my palette for nearly three decades until it didn't.
10. To have raised a dead tooth like a sickly lamb; my body, its arthritic hearse. Dentists in eight counties warned me that if I didn't remove it, I'd risk an infection someday spreading throughout my body; sepsis, they said, is no joke and can be life-threatening, asshole, or so I'm sure they thought. All of them were surprised that it hadn't happened during the first year. I nodded obediently. I assured them I'd have it removed at my next visit, though in secret, I knew the mausoleum had been properly built, secured, indestructible.
11. The stench never subsided. My head filled with death's odor like a helium balloon floating through my days. My dead tooth wrote the obituaries of our time. From its capacious murk, it logged the death stats of a civilization that marched out of rhythm. And it encouraged my other teeth to bite down harder on life than they had ever done before.
12. In time, my mouth turned itself over to the cemetery. Semi-healthy teeth began to dim as soon as the shadows overcame

them, and they too succumbed to the death nod. I lost them forever; they fell out, one by one, each like a key removed from a lock. Light rejected my mouth, and I learned to remain silent. The history of the world locked in a vault, an archive of witness. The prescription for undoing the destruction lingered somewhere beneath the gums.

Now I spend my days in libraries half-reading gardening magazines: *Country Living*, *Fine Gardening*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Horticulture Magazine*, a perennial subscription of blossoming things.

At night I lie in bed, tree roots descend from my ceiling, and I wonder what the next day will bring, if something glorious, if something gloriously contaminant. This room, like the snow globe my nina shook for me as a child, is a tireless squall of crushed enamel and cementum dust that accumulates on my eyelids near a window that never blinks.