

Heat or Some Other Such Device

It was hot and the glass of my head was all hazed over by the heat and the sound of the animals. The sky hung low, dimmed by the crimson dusts of some far desert. There were plenty of other animals with which to concern myself, but the animal with the eyes and nose of a bat, and the mouth and chin of a snake held my eyes. Perhaps it was the heat or some other such device, but I could swear that the animal was screaming, shrieks from both its mouth and its eyes. It was this piercing sound that caused my soul to shrink, withered and frayed at its edges.

I knew I had to act. An urge to museum the beast crossed my mind, strap it to a bed corded off by velvet ropes in the Victorian mansion of some famous dead white dude – Daniel Webster, Samuel Clemens, Edward Gorrey – but this urge didn't last. Too much like the Nantucket Whaling Museum. In an attempt to clear my head I went on with the dishes, clearing them from the table and tossing the scraps to other animals, bull frogs with fast tongues, and then throwing the plates to the floor amidst other shards. But the shrieking became worse, a scum-like effect on my mind. I was out of time. I remembered the old days from which I'd sprung, before the screaming, when people looked so much better, the young looked younger, the old looked older as if having lived in this heat for decades, intimate with their knowledge of dust and burn and fear.

I wouldn't let it end like this. I couldn't. Kill myself first. And so I threw a word at the animal. I didn't want to, knew I shouldn't, but I did it anyway. Then I threw another, sharp words, popping p's, jagged stems, a spinning ampersand, a hook, a serif and then I was upon it with all my weight and force, my tongue doing the most damage.

An Absence in the Mouth

The baby was a normal baby, except he was born with teeth. His parents split up soon after he was born.

Teeth are unjust things. They rattle and crow inside us. The boy grew. His teeth did not seem unusual in any way other than they were simply there. His mother often ran her fingers over the ends of her baby's teeth. They were so sharp, weren't they so sharp? Luckily it seemed that though her son indeed possessed authentic teeth in his small mouth, he did not know yet how to use them. Nursing felt like wading thigh deep into a lake for a few minutes as tiny fish nipped ungently at her.

One never knows what sort of child one will receive. The boy took to biting at an early age, and bit other children with such savagery that he attracted the attention of the priest in the parish where his mother was a lax parishioner and where the boy attended preschool. The priest kindly pulled aside the boy's mother, who was mortified and had always feared, with the boy's past, that something like this would happen.

However, rather than the rebuke the mother expected, the priest mentioned an admiration for the boy's intensity, certainly a quality the boy had in abundance. Your son, the priest said in a hushed tone, is -- he murmured something in Latin that she couldn't understand -- then he walked away as if entranced.

The boy, as most boys do, grew out of the biting, and then he embarked upon a relatively normal childhood. However, when he began to lose his baby teeth, which of course had been with him since the moment of his birth, the boy grew notably withdrawn. At some point, his mother noticed with alarm that he hadn't eaten in she didn't know how long. When she confronted him, he declared that he could no longer do it. He could no longer eat. His mother did not know what to do, and it was not her imagination that the boy began to lose weight, his cheekbones shining through his face like ping pong balls in poor light.

The mother, after a prolonged period of willful forgetting, remembered what the priest had said on the playground that day many years ago, and though she did not understand it, she'd never forgotten his words. She visited the church in an attempt to find the priest, though she hadn't attended the church since that interaction on the playground years ago. Father D'Avalo was dead, an elderly lady told the mother. He'd died one year ago this spring. How did he die, the mother asked, afraid. He died of an infection. A rare one. A sudden one. From a nasty dog bite. How strange you should ask now. There is going to be a remembrance this week in the cathedral.

The mother decided to attend the remembrance, and to try to bring along her son, who these days did nothing but lie around the house staring blankly at his toys. With a little cajoling, he surprisingly agreed to accompany his mother to the service. On the drive there, the mother, as she often did, asked her son if he was hungry. "Starving" was the word he tried to say. By now he'd lost all his baby teeth and his mouth was a pink gum cave. Everything folded in on itself. Can you try a

grape? His mother had brought them along. He shook his head. How about a smoothie? She could tell he wanted to, but he simply couldn't.

The remembrance was in the afternoon in the central nave of the large cathedral that nobody ever went to anymore. There was a smattering of gray heads in the first few pews. A woman approached the altar, stood on the short stage, and turned to face the audience.

We all miss the father, the woman said, without introducing herself. We are lost without him. He left us too early. But we all remember him.

The mother turned to sneak a glimpse of her son. He was weeping.

But we must continue without him, the woman said. We must live on in his name. Make his hunger our hunger, make his heart our heart. At that moment, a sense of pure relief spread over the mother because she'd saved her son's baby teeth, though her first instinct had been to get rid of the white knives. Why did she feel this? She knew in that moment her son would never again possess teeth. She clenched her fist and had been clenching it for many years, and opened it to find a single wave tlong traveling break at last.

The son lived another eleven years. Not a long life by any means, but long enough. He had dreams. Some of the came true, but like all of us, many did not. But the boy never ate another bit or drop or spoonful of food in his life. I just can't, he'd mouth. Doctors gave him three months to live, then six, then, surely, one year; the point of his body's expiration, like a universe, kept expanding. The boy, now a young man, lived to disprove, an exception. Some thought him a hero. None of it matter to the boy born with teeth. None of it.

His mother had the misfortune of outliving her son. No one should have to do that, but after a while, it wasn't going to be a surprise. She'd been watching it come closer and closer since the

day the boy was born. When he died, his mother had him cremated and she put his ashes in an antique silver fruit bowl with a lid. To his ashes, she added what she'd always saved: his teeth. She sprinkled them into the bowl. They plopped with a dry poof, then she mixed them in with a wooden spoon. There he was, all of him, her hungry, hungry boy.

