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2020 Marguerite Rush Lerner Creative Medical Writing and Art Contest

Baby Teeth

They said a man with no face haunted the lonely backroads of our town. Perhaps the spirit of a murdered local, his face shattered like a hard candy by a careless driver. But more likely, an ordinary man left deformed by disease, taking strolls by starlight to avoid scaring the children. Maybe he was afraid. Less of a terror and more of a tragedy, but a ghost story nonetheless.

We had crept into the soccer field after dark to smoke our first cigarettes. This was us growing up, we told ourselves, as our sweaty fingers, knuckles still hairless, struggled with the lighter. Before we could even finish lighting them, we stamped them into the dirt and scurried away when we noticed. Shuffling toward us, one of those strange men who wander in the empty places in the dead of night. As we ran, I could see ghostly and alien lights in the thickets at the far end of the field, twinkling uneasily, like far-off stars, like cinders smoldering in the grass.

Don't go into the men's bathroom alone. A man will pull you into the stall and cut your penis off. I didn't know what he planned to do with my bloodied boyhood, but my mother sounded sure of it. You shouldn't use Porta Potties either, for the same reason. And because you will get worms you sit on the toilet seat. Whenever we would return from a trip, I would creep through the house,

baseball bat in hand, checking under beds and in closets for the man that I knew would break in someday. My parents never understood why I did this. The baseball bat I wielded was my father's, the one he kept by his bedside, ready for the day that the man broke into our home. My mother also told me not to talk to strangers, a reasonable request. She told me they would kidnap me and pluck out my eyeballs and boil them and make me go door to door, begging for money. I would try to imagine the emptiness of the sockets in my head, and my stomach would turn and I would vow never to speak to strangers. I didn't know what they planned to do with my boiled eyeballs. When I got older, I realized that my mother was just trying to scare me. When I got even older, I saw a movie about where my mom grew up. In it, a man kidnapped a child, plucked out his eyeballs, and made him beg for money. I still don't use Porta Potties.

My cousin on my father's side had a double thumb. It looked like a two-headed snake, her two thumb heads sprouting from a single fleshy neck. Twinned errors at birth. I remember staring at it during a family wedding. I was old enough to know not to ask but young enough not to feel guilty for staring. My cousin had painted both little thumbnails pink, matching the pink petals scattered on the ground and the hem of the pink sari she pinched. A strand of her black hair dangled over her closed eyes, and her lips parted as she sang in prayer, revealing a friendly gap in her front teeth. I wanted to tell her she looked nice. I wanted to ask if she thought she was a monster. I held my forked tongue either way.

There was a word for the people my mom worked with, a word slung on playgrounds and summer days like a sharp pebble at your head. I knew what that word really meant. I didn't really know the people, even though my mother would bring me to the nursing home and make me talk to them. I would keep my eyes down and only glance at them sidelong, out of politeness and caution.

She would make me tell them about my school and what I did for fun. Small talk. I wasn't supposed to ask questions. But I knew where they lived, how they lived, with my wandering eyes. A place of bone-bleached walls and locked doors and bowls of hard candies you weren't supposed to touch. The place had been around for decades. My brother told me there was a locked bathroom in one of the old wings. He said it was splattered with a patient's blood, floor to ceiling. Too much to clean up, so they sealed it off. How he would know, I had no idea, but it was plausible. Some things are better left behind closed doors.

When my cousin and I would walk along the streets of his city, teenage boys would scream at us from their car windows as they roared by, laughing into the night. For the first time, I felt murder in my bones, the desire for the power to kill. We began carrying a baseball bat with us. Little brown boys with the fear of God in their hearts and a Louisville Slugger in their hands. I would imagine shattering their windshields and splattering their animal grins across the sidewalk, their white teeth twinkling like stars against the pavement and their mouths empty. No more screaming.

The briefs lay in the park near my cousin's house, enamel white and enormous in our small eyes, spread eagle in the dirt, strewn with heaps of feces. We would make regular pilgrimages to the site, to see this wonder that, in a different sort of story, would be a dead body. We would prod at it with a stick, stirring up the blue-black flies that buzzed around it, a cloud of bullets. It yellowed over the ensuing weeks and months and maybe years. We stopped visiting for no particular reason on no particular day. It had to stop being funny eventually. Maybe we realized it was disgusting. Humor melts into horror. Years later, I heard talk of a condemned mental hospital in the same city. An urban legend about escaped patients. A coincidence most likely. Yet it festered in the back of my mind, like a body naked in the brush

One summer my mother's face peeled off. It was an allergic reaction to some makeup her sister lent her. Her face endlessly scaled and flaked, like cherry blossoms dropping in the spring, like cicadas molting in the buzzing summer. I feared my mother's melting face and the new mother that might be hiding beneath the snake skin. I feared I would inherit her body's tendency toward falling apart. My mother lived like this for months. She hid her face with a shroud whenever she went outside to protect it from the sun. She hid her face when it wasn't sunny too. Summers had long been dangerous. Too much sun would turn me dark like a crow, my mother would say. I wasn't supposed to play outside before 4 o'clock. I had a birth mark on my left foot, a patch of lighter skin, a puddle of almond milk spilled on a mahogany floor. At some point, the patch began growing, inching toward my toes and my ankle. I wanted it to spread, to consume me. To climb my legs and torso and neck like floodwaters. To crawl into my mouth and fill my throat and coat my guts. To be clean inside and out. But skin is mutinous, I learned. It grew dark anyways, sprouted wild black hairs when I was too young, erupted with pimples when I was too old. But revolutions wane. My mother's face grew back eventually. I chose to stop fighting, to lay down my arms. To be a crow, dark and glossy, warming itself in the June sun.

I looked down upon it, embedded in a half-chewed chicken patty like a tombstone. My last baby tooth, lost during lunch. I was a bit too old to be still losing teeth. I had almost swallowed it. Part of me wanted to. To hide it. To plant it as a seed in my belly. Cut me open someday and you'd see my stomach lined with rows and rows of twinkling molars. At least the loss meant no more meaty, calloused fingers invading my mouth to rip it out and stop my whining. A slab of breaded chicken took care of that. I wished I had saved the others, put them in a jar. I could've made something lovely out of them one day, maybe a necklace. A single incisor isn't a collection, a history. I decided I could always make more. I didn't know of the wisdom teeth yet to come. I threw the tooth in the

trash with the rest of the sandwich. I ran my tongue along my gums to taste the emptiness and feel the blood. There was no blood.