

Extractions

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Extractions

Lauren Ehlers

Prostrate in an orthodontic chair that managed to be beige and gray and blue all at once, I kept my gangling, fourth-grade body still as Dr. Charlie's dental assistant placed a gas mask over my face. Its clear tubes trailed gently over my cheeks and down to the floor, and I could've sworn in the moment that the nose piece was made to look like an actual nose, although I can't be certain now. Within a few minutes, light and sound were smudged by the nitrous oxide touring my bloodstream, and currents of electricity roiled beneath my freckled skin, swirling up around my neck before whooshing down toward my feet. By the time Dr. Charlie's voice boomed in my disembodied ears, letting me know the extraction was about to begin, all of my limbs had stopped responding. Could I move if I wanted to? If I needed to? I laid there, heavy and dumb, and didn't try to find out.

When I think of teeth, I think of dentists. I think of those foam trays of fluoride they stuff in your mouth two at a time, lukewarm and gooey. I think of blue toothpaste and white floss stained pink by the blood of unbrushed gums. I think of pain. I think of my sensitivities, of cold foods and ice water. Time and again, I picture in vivid detail a blonde woman I've never seen before crunching a perfect bite from a bright green Granny Smith, like a stock photo come to life. I've never liked using my bottom teeth to eat apples and exclusively use my top, while this invincible woman uses every tooth she has. There's something strong about her, there's something healthy, there's something about an apple a day that's making miracles happen. I love apples, but I'm too protective of my teeth to ever bite one the way she does.

Maybe this is because, every couple of months or so, I dream about my teeth falling out. Sometimes I lose several, but, most often, it's only one. The tooth loosens gradually over the course of a day, the impending event of its loss always overshadowed at first by details from other plotlines. But, in the end, the tooth is the center of the story, and I always find myself tonguing the fleshy curve of the jaw it dangles from, maxilla or mandible, in a request for it to fall. Sometimes it feels like I'm a kid again, my fingers prodding impatiently between my lips so I might have something to put under my pillow when the moon's out, but I'm not that young anymore—in real life or in my dreams—and I ran out of baby teeth a long time ago. Instead, it's an adult tooth that cracks off in the second before I wake up, and I can't grow another in its place. The little bone lands between the ones still embedded in my gums, and the resounding crunch brings me lurching back to consciousness. It always takes a few moments for my heartbeat to slow down again.

I'm not really sure what the dreams mean, but I do know how they make me feel and that none of it's good. However, I also know that the loss of my teeth was once a source of excitement, of magic, of unadulterated financial promise: dump a tooth, get a dollar. The easiest money I've ever made was

off the tugging on my gums as one tooth after the next bungeed the open cavity of my mouth from roof to base, the pink anchoring cords stretching taut before they finally snapped. I always pushed and pulled for as long as I could bear until the strain became too much. I remember bedtime apprehension, the scent of crumpled dollar bills, a white square pillow with a pink-buttoned pouch for storing teeth. I think of lime green walls and linen sheets with cats on them. I imagine the Tooth Fairy, and I hear my father's jocular proposals that my sister and I tie our wiggling teeth to doors he'd then slam so we wouldn't have to wait another night for her to visit. I smile at the playful lilt in his voice, but I shudder at the idea itself and the sensation my brain pairs with it.

Dr. Charlie boomed again, but I couldn't make out the words. Miles away, a Latex hand pushed my jaw open wider and the fluorescent light mounted above me turned the room molten orange beyond my eyelids. Metal tools scraped my enamel and tickled the contours of my hard palate; I choked on bone dust from spinning drills and winced inwardly as spit dried in the corners of my lips. Finally, Dr. Charlie went for his first molar. There was a splintering sound and a release of pressure in my gum, before a gush of rusty liquid filled my mouth. I was still entirely immobile in the orthodontic chair, which at that point felt more like a guillotine. The scent of my own blood clogged my nose as the wetness coated my throat, and I was powerless to protect myself against any of it. Dr. Charlie tore out three more and gave them to me in a little yellow canister, shaped like a tooth itself.

As far as I can remember, I only have tooth loss dreams when I'm sleeping in my childhood bedroom. The walls are gray now, the bedding unpatterned, but the soccer plaques are still there, along with the stuffy warmth that builds up when the fan on the floor is turned off. The same books form a stack in one corner and the closet still struggles to fit its doors around the clutter I've jammed inside of it over the years. The room is bursting with spiral notebooks half-filled, drawers of clothing half-cleaned out. The bed frame comes up no higher than my knee, and the mattress itself holds memories of sobs and sex and stress over slipping grades; it holds bad sleep and good sleep and the imprints of feet that bounced in evasion of any sleep at all because the Tooth Fairy would be coming later in the night. Now those same feet peek out over the end as I dream that my canines are falling out of my face.

In my earliest formative years, I went through a period where my mom had to force-brush my teeth because a particularly condescending dental assistant scolded me so brutally over my unscrubbed inner gum line that I nearly cried. I kept my chin down and eyes low the whole way out of the building so no one could see, and steeled myself every time my mom remembered to take my face in her hands and scour the tissue above my teeth until it bled. So I can comfortably admit that I've always hated the dentist's office, and that matters of the teeth in general make me nervous. But there's something else there too—something in my sleep, something in my bedroom, something in the little yellow canister

that holds those four extracted molars, their roots intact and crusted with blood the color of marmalade—that brings teeth so often into my mind, only for them to fall out soon after.

I read somewhere once—or in a few places several times—that these sorts of dream scenarios can be rooted in a number of things, from stress and insecurity to sexual repression and fears about aging, depending on who you ask. Infuriatingly, they can also mean everything opposite. I’m most often tempted to decipher in my tooth dreams a loss of agency, but even this isn’t always true. Maybe the only consistency here lies in the shift of my eyes beneath their lids on nights when I’m having the dreams again, which I never see myself but can logically assume. My brow probably furrows in discomfort as my palms sweat, tangled in plain sheets, and I imagine that my tongue runs over my teeth in mimicry of its pointed probing when I was a kid. I bet I look just like I did on that day with Dr. Charlie, when my thoughts ran blind behind my forehead while my arms and legs were stunned in place. Now, the excitement over one-dollar teeth is gone, and the laughing gas dissipated years ago with stories of the Tooth Fairy. All I have now are the memories, the dreams, those four little bones.