

I Can Feel My Teeth

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## ABSTRACT

### I Can Feel My Teeth

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*I Can Feel My Teeth* is a collection of semi-autobiographical poems exploring the different forms discomfort and denial may take. The title refers to an observation I have continuously made throughout my life that the only times you can feel your teeth are when you, body or mind, are unwell. My poems utilize nature imagery and animal comparisons in unusual ways to further deepen the speaker's denial. If animals are part of nature, then surely the speaker's pain is natural as well. Scattered throughout the collection are references to the speaker's motherland, a place infested with memories and vermin, which serve to heighten the isolation felt in the other poems. The speaker has no outlet for this discomfort, and as a result turns inward towards their work, further distancing themselves from society. *I Can Feel My Teeth* has no happy ending, because there is nothing in the speaker's future except for more of the same, reflecting the tedium of life in quarantine. It's not all bad though. In the poem's own words, "Don't the continents look happy?"

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## Continental Drift

When the full moon peeks out from behind  
its cloud covers,  
I know it's time for change.  
The winds know this, too,  
in their own way,

because every four years  
they'll change their minds, switch directions and  
find new places to bring their flocks.

I can't remember where they ended up going  
this year, or even if this year's  
January was colder than the last. Knowledge of that cycle,  
like so many names and faces of vaguely familiars  
has escaped me.

Maybe it left with the breeze,  
and I'll recognize them again on the street  
four or five years from now—  
like the wind my mouth will twist  
and shape a name,  
then stop when I hear them  
laughing with another name I used to know—  
I won't say anything, I'll look down and  
they'll pass by unknowing, louder

because it really was quite funny,  
I just wouldn't get it, because it's been too long,  
and we're different people now—  
it's natural to drift apart over time.

Take a look at the earth.  
Don't the continents look happy?

## Sitting

For weeks after the tree fell, I dreamed  
of taking a few of his branches,  
and grafting them on to some of the seedlings they planted  
to replace him.

For weeks I thought of preparing,  
looking for grafting tape,  
and researching the best times to try.  
For weeks, the branches sat on the floor of my kitchen,  
gathering dust until I came upon them during a manic cleaning frenzy—  
three brittle stems in a heap of dust and hair  
beside the radiator and some cheerios—  
I discovered them the week  
I'd decided to make changes in my life.

By then the twigs were too dry.  
I sat by the baseboard heater in the kitchen  
and thought of ways to turn back time.

It's good to keep an active imagination  
especially when there's nothing to do or think about  
aside from which piles of dust are compostable  
and which ones are not.

I suppose the grey bits the silverfish touch and shed their carapaces on  
are all natural and good for the earth,  
maybe even good for me.  
Silverfish are one of the few insects that continue to moult  
and change, even after adulthood.  
It's natural for them.

I've spent years thinking about these things because  
it's so much easier to imagine than to act, or to do,  
and these quiet hours hatch ghosts  
of me that are jealous of other attentions.

Lately I'm preoccupied.  
I can't stop thinking about how long it takes for hair  
to disintegrate into the clouds of sleep resting on the mantle.  
I wonder how it is they get up there.  
I wonder why it is I cannot go to join them,

though I suppose it's too early for me to think about retirement,  
and still too early for me to think about sleep.

## Harvest Hour

Some nights my thoughts swim  
with muddy images, sepia dust.  
Slowly I will get out of bed,  
because the downstairs people hate  
noise and I'll see you  
a picture I took of you  
on the wall  
many years ago and remember when we were ourselves—

I can't help but laugh like  
we used to and  
did I capture the memory of your eyes  
in polyethylene?

Do I love your brown or mine?  
Is it yours or anything I gave you yours,  
ours or just  
me making you the way you made me  
so lonely,  
so cold, and so

I can't help but to go  
back to bed and dream of eyes  
too wide to be real  
and of the soft warm dirt

of the gardens  
where each summer on the mountain  
we planted our dreams,  
carrots and parsley.

## High Efficiency

My lover wants to get new light bulbs, the kind  
with the exposed wiring for the new home we are building  
together. She likes the way it reminds her of  
simpler places, distant times—the past.

I don't like the way they feel so inviting  
to look at. I just can't help but stare  
into their lukewarm filaments as they  
manufacture memories scarring the ocular tissue.

Perhaps my eyes search for the same reason moths  
will flock to any source  
of light in the night. Perhaps I think of home  
where it is safe during the day  
and away from the western screech owl  
and his insectivorous ilk—  
I have not been prey for many years now.

She tells me they will liven up the space  
and keep us warm in the dusk.  
I notice that when we are off to sleep  
she checks behind each door  
in our bedroom  
and closes them firmly.

She doesn't like the unknown. She tells me  
she imagines figures in the dark  
if we keep our hearths open.  
I tell her they are only lonely  
as she inches closer towards me  
looking past the dark frame behind  
when I close my eyes.

(they make them using LEDs,  
these days,  
it's more efficient  
and creates less heat  
than the tungsten used  
in incandescent bulbs)

(the northern hawk owl is diurnal  
and tends to prefer  
rodents and small mammals)

## **I confess**

Quiet days beckon “quite sorry” nights  
and there’s nothing better than being busy  
to uncouple noisome fears of dark—  
anxieties of past or future gone awry—  
though no room for me there, or anywhere

I fear,  
and the idea itself leaves me quaking  
more than what sits about in the living room,  
covered in shame, the slime of defeat commemorating  
once more the rush of battle, second wind,  
at the end,

with nothing else to occupy the space of a dark room on Friday,  
I cross the spans of quiet contemplation,  
far past the straits  
of self-deception, I know  
too poorly to understand,  
and dispose  
what’s left of my feeling  
in the ecosystems and estuaries  
my bathroom sink will one day drain into.

Desire fluctuates too quickly  
to overcome petty grievances  
or the moment’s lapse  
in judgment  
to remember there was nothing playing  
at my funeral—

not even the clowns would laugh for me.

## **Flesh and Wonder**

Moisture is the enemy of man, woman, and the works  
they in groups, create.  
Life-giving water seeps in through the cracks and seams  
and from the inside it rots.

I know this because when I am listless,  
slow,

in the shaded places of my home  
I feel it building in the far reaches of my body,  
fomentations of sweat and shame  
I don't notice when I've forgotten the last time  
I felt completely dry, completely clean.  
By the bathroom sink I'll sit still  
and slough skin like a shedding snake as I scratch—  
It's not painful  
for them, not at all.

Younger snakes may go through this process  
as frequently as once a month  
because it's normal for children to outgrow their clothes,  
even endearing to see it happen in real time.

I wonder if they ever recognize themselves afterwards,  
if they can recognize themselves at all.

I doubt they feel ashamed after they've met someone,  
a friend or otherwise,  
that they haven't shed in nine days  
because the circle of time reverberates endlessly  
regardless of how sad one feels Today  
or the other iterations of Today I've yet to meet.

Today I feel filthy, and I don't know  
if that's something a snake might notice. Oftentimes you'll hear reptiles  
described as having alien minds, prehistoric ontologies.

They don't strike me that way at all.  
They seem very gentle,  
and I feel like I understand what's wrong  
with me a bit more each time  
I drift closer to the tub.

## Sealed

The men around here all walk  
with salt-stained boots. You can tell  
from the patchy white stains left behind  
after it's dried.

They take such little care and  
in time, the salt and water and cold  
will crack the soft leather,  
and make it brittle,  
make it weak.

It takes such little effort  
to keep the boots safe, to make the leather last  
just a little longer: heat up the boots with a hairdryer  
and rub beeswax in  
until it's as supple a leaf in fall,

and every year, I'll still see them  
wandering into the stores,  
trying on every single

pair that catches their eyes,  
replacing the old  
with some new dainty thing  
sometimes twice a season.

Some days I could have coffee with a friend.  
We'll meet for lunch, and she will take hers  
black and hot and bitter.  
I might have cream, and at me  
she will look, even as her boots squeak at mine  
below the table  
shining, new and clean.

## Infestation

Some days I wake up before my alarm does,  
and indulge in a few moments dedicated to  
the self, and occasionally  
the past, and I might recall the love songs  
we wrote in the snow;  
how gently our blades would glide along—a smooth line  
etched forever the ice as memory.

Some nights I will not sleep until the dogs come howling out  
of the alleyways,  
chased by some unknown unknown,  
disrupting the bivouacs of the cats  
left straying in the dark, their eyes shiny like manhole covers  
after rain, paws numbed from  
time's creeping chill.

Out there they feel so much,  
and I can't help but imagine  
I could, too.

By the time I am awake again,  
the red star has started its process of staining the sky  
with her scarlet grace.  
As she sweeps across the horizon, somewhere beyond my frontal lobe  
in the hippocampus—  
I recall I left the hot water running,  
and imagine the embarrassment if the paramedics were to find me naked  
bloated and pale as the hot water  
seeps through the floorboards to the thirsty tenants below.

## Springtime Ritual

1.

Each year when the meltwaters rise, I go  
and make new friends  
I'd like to share with the old.  
Disaster brings people together,  
though I leave before  
change can happen.

Nothing rose for me this year but the death toll.  
If any waters came,  
I was asleep.  
I was asleep.

My eyes weren't open long enough  
for the everything  
birthing around me.

When I woke up I remembered  
every email I never sent.

Pointillist faces, expectations smiling in full HD—  
I gave nothing,  
and they did not move.  
I gave nothing  
and my screen dimmed  
and fell asleep.

2.

The love I own but cannot touch  
dreams in my brain,  
scattered in corners  
when I sit in the park.  
The bees take sips from my juice and vodka,

and when I think I've walked back home I cannot sleep. Sometimes  
it's because I didn't walk enough  
during the day. Sometimes  
the dryer makes too much noise at night,  
which keeps the rats awake.  
They live inside the house's pink meat  
to keep me company.

I don't know how they got my address;  
I haven't put any ads in the personals for a long time now,  
but they always know where to find me.

They know decay well  
because it sweats from our pores,  
it smells of inaction and it accumulates  
in each nook of my home and body.  
I am not like the bees today.

I am not like the bees tomorrow  
and the love is still misplaced.  
I am not like the bees two hours ago  
and I still have emails to shape.  
I am not like the bees right now  
and the bee has drunk his fill.

He stumbles along the rim of the plastic cup,  
his abdomen rippling with joy  
at this discovery  
of simple sugars to digest,  
half-baked in the sun.

The polystyrene has company now, so  
I leave the bee to his meal, and go home  
not where beds are soft, and sleep is restful,  
but the fields where generations of myself, freshly starved  
grew old, fell silent,

knew dust.

## Night Terrors

For weeks I watched as a rose bush slowly died  
after her elderly caretaker was taken away.  
The petals lived on  
as nothing but shadows.  
They left no trace or presence in the belly afterwards,  
though the scents and pain  
nested in my palms, fingerprints  
haunted me for many months after.  
I didn't want them to go to waste.

Through closed eyes I would know them frequently.  
Each night they painted shapes on the grass in the places they fell—  
I saw faces of strangers who once passed by  
recognizing none  
so each night I made war in the mud of my sleep  
digging deeper into the muck for any roots that stayed bright and clean  
even as the petals rot.

I never felt awake afterwards.  
Sleep paralysis never felt the same afterwards  
because I'd always feel  
hungry in the morning despite my thorned palms  
prickling me awake each sunrise

hungry as the sun's heartbeat in the sky  
endlessly serenading its work  
setting the cycle aflame  
trapping me anew.

## For Holly

I've been looking at wildlife photos lately.  
The bears at Katmai are so fascinating to me. They're such  
lonely creatures.  
It's impossible to get close to them  
but we'd all like to try anyway,  
so we persevere.

They're just bears you know.

They're just living, and I think  
they get bigger each year.  
I wonder what it is they eat,  
and if it hurts to be eaten.

A few bears don't come back from last year's magazine  
and I wonder what happened to them—  
where the cubs go after  
their parents have gone, never to be  
caught on camera again, watched by the masses—  
do they get to grow fat and strong too?

It's not always so nice out there.  
You know they didn't mean it.

I think I saw her crying today after we met for breakfast.  
It was raining outside  
and I couldn't hear a thing walking to the station,  
so maybe she didn't want me to know,

but the way I've seen those bears fishing by the rapids tells me  
everyone is an actor, and all the wood is  
just waiting for its time in the spotlight.  
Do the salmon know they're waiting to die?

When we reached my stop she pulled me out  
of the crowd and in  
for a hug and she thanked me  
because I was such a good listener  
and she watched me  
pushing out away from the train—  
she waved at me  
as she rolled away  
and I was left standing  
on the platform, soon

underneath the dripping stairs,  
each step swarming,  
raging with people—  
all struggling to breach the surface—

it was raining that day and the worms, oh—  
I know!

I will drown if I stay inside because  
it's just so much, it's far too much for me,  
for all of me, the worms and me, for me, and oh;

I know.

The bears are still feasting on salmon as they  
have always done—  
when they wake up from their long—

I know sleep is pleasant after long days and restless nights.

That night, it was quiet and small in our little corner of the galaxy,  
and I didn't hear her make a sound when I cleaned my teeth—  
I thought of her hands when I fell asleep;  
they looked so thin, and so small  
I thought she was dead in the morning

but when I turned over to ask how she'd take her coffee  
she was only just  
dreaming  
of soft places, warm spaces and  
fish to eat in the long morning.

## Small Hands

The nice thing about the rain is that no  
one knows when it will come again.

Outside you will see people  
in different states of dress.

Some felt all along that it would rain, and they  
carried long umbrellas with them, dragging behind and  
scraping on the

concrete.

When there's a bump in the road it makes a little  
double-tap sort  
of noise. It's pleasant the way  
you can predict how it's going to  
sound, but not  
when it's going to happen.

I didn't have an umbrella with me today; someone  
broke the one you left me  
a few years ago. I was  
mad at first. You'd given it to me as a  
gift. Another boy  
had left it in your car, and you gave it to me  
and it was raining!

I realize now  
the same thing he was telling himself  
when he brought it back, twisted and battered  
from the wind—

It was just an umbrella.

I asked him what it sounded like but  
I don't think he understood because  
I'd been dragging it along for a few  
hours each day;  
I thought it might help me remember you,  
but it's already been six years and that's  
twelve times as long as the time  
I've spent waiting for you beneath the trees,  
watching businessmen run by at the end of the day,  
leather shoes ruined

and I'll wonder why they didn't just bring an umbrella

## Gone Fishing

Last night a tree fell because of the wind and rain,  
by morning there was already bright yellow tape around him  
which said DANGER  
even though he was dead already  
and I didn't quite understand because the wind was, too,  
and we all stood and watched so still,  
with coffee still staining our breaths  
I thought I could hear

my kitchen sink's faucet dripping,  
its loose drumming over the plates and forks,  
all the way in the park where we waited  
just to see a dead thing lie so quietly on the earth  
like he was tired, maybe even grateful for the peace and—

when I close my eyes I can see him still:  
a green monolith looming above the rotted food in my sink—  
the light smiling at me from beyond the canopy,  
a new friend,

waving softly with the other tall trees, and the grass swaying  
with the sleepy children to church music carried in the wind  
like seasons slowly grinding to winter  
as the sounds of organs die.

When she is snoring beside me I pretend it doesn't bother me  
so much  
but there are no shadows for hiding out at sea—  
each wave denies its own light, rejects the sun and moon  
with each new height yet to be embraced, and I can't help it.

I want to be out there, too.

The night after I saw him lying so still  
I drowned  
once more with the rats in the sewers, with the worms who  
mewl through the dirt after the rain,  
cold as the space between our beds,  
colder still than the void between our hearts.

When I haven't been doing the dishes  
I know that cups can be used as bowls too,

but I still can't be happy.

## **Bad at Dancing**

By the time that I awoke  
I had eaten too much already.  
Mouth does not know loneliness,  
from morning he swallows dust til dusk,  
until Lungs are as gray and furry as the stray cat  
who lingers beneath when the cars are resting.

I wake and the stray turns big then small.  
I wake and there is a stain on the road.

I am tired of waking. Eyes too  
are tired  
of fighting nature's march.

Sleep is the Winter of the day,  
or perhaps it is Spring  
and Hands are just as confused as Mouth is  
working these—things—into words.

If this is Winter I should know why I slip and fall  
when I dream of You,  
and if this is Spring I am tired of only passing through  
Your flowers, and wading through your brush.

## For Rent

I think I had a nightmare again—  
the ghosts that like to come and go—  
they came for me through the inky black.

I heard my mouth say, “I don't understand. I am tired of sleep.”

We've made quite a mess of things.

It's quiet in the suburbs when we're all in the dark:  
running around in our sleep with our necks slit open,  
while the skies breathe fire on the corners of the world.

There's certainly a fire inside, somewhere, but please never ask  
of me, or for me.  
I don't know where it is, or what to do with it.

I am tired of walking the beaches and witnessing the shells—  
each so stained with old memories, old faces,  
did they know love and grow enemies?

I want to be with the many-legged marchers in the deep.  
Down there I will soak in the acid rain  
as my skin grows soft with the fish.

Alone I will begin the process of repainting the coral  
while the furthest stars begin to blink their morning greetings,  
even as there is no one home  
to answer the door.

## Hungry

I have grown to hate the taste of aspartame—  
the false memory of sweetness and acid on  
the teeth, and the tongue—each as  
cloying as the last sip from the tall but squat

liter bottle of diet soda bought lovingly  
from the corner store, chosen from the tall, uniform line  
each face praying  
to be picked up, cracked open

broken, and left in the dirt to one day  
join the rest of their misbegotten kin  
in the ever-growing tumours and false-Valhallas  
buried beneath the soot and dust

unchanging in their subterranean purgatory—  
now there is no prodigal son to strike out against  
the hard-ass holier-than-thou prison guards this time  
no warden at all to rage against—

and in the dark there is nothing at all in the empty glass cages of those  
who live below—hardly a yard for the forgotten dregs of self-control  
lying still in the dark to figuratively pump iron  
to better the self, improve the body, weak

in the eye of the beholder, weak  
in the lying mirrors all forged from the same silver  
of that extinct race of men too perfect to be true  
spawned by the inexorable sin of Pandora, long before

I wanted to be just another Eve wishing I could go and borrow a few ribs  
from the man across the hall and make something out of the blood, gristle  
and bone that I have far too much of to be beautiful, slim  
and full like the shapely thighs of Menelaus, he

who doomed a city in his lover's rage—like me  
he could never let go, forgive or forgive or forget  
until there lay a pile of weeping hair, rags and flesh  
begging for Nobody to come back and be happy

(like we used to be), before we started counting the dead  
the years, the calories, and the aspartame—  
and I lay the bottle to rest  
in the corner of the room,

adjacent to the unwashed neglect I leave behind every time I decide  
that what we have now is not enough, just unworthy of the joy  
I wanted it to bring, unable to hold me warmly with you  
as the night sky creeps through the sleeping gates of this bygone dreamscape,

no possibilities in the dull ashes that remain  
after a great fire in the city, acrid and choking like the death of the self  
at the four-in-the-morning-sleep-paralysis-demon-get-together that invites hunger in  
to beg you for something—anything at all—

please do note that you must get out of bed and fill  
one more glass of icy water (as tribute) and perhaps imagine  
a walk through the woods with William Blake;  
the two of us listening to the lamentations of the trees

(I feigning ignorance as to how they all got there)  
as the wind tears off bits and pieces of their branches  
and flesh until the manless bird things chase me inside  
again where that thing (and I) are left staring

into the mirror's diseased face, each glistening pustule quivering out a different pigment:  
yellow for the diseased flesh, red for the willing blood,  
and the black rot of that Spirit  
chained waist-deep in the ice, wondering why

*he* never came to avenge the plastic bottles  
that advertise insecurities at the bottom  
of the dumping ground which forms  
my sallow leper's heart, gaping wide but always hungry—

never empty, and never full.

## The Desert

It's nice to let your guard down for a bit, sometimes,  
just to feel the wind blowing gently around you<sup>1</sup>,  
and relax, there's no one out to get you until you close your eyes,  
though there's nothing  
scarier than keeping them open as it gets closer to you<sup>2</sup>;

There are no secrets in nature. The answers are everywhere if you're looking  
for reasons to be suspicious<sup>3</sup>—

I don't want to close my eyes and I don't  
like sleep, the way it and exhaustion creeps, comes to  
remind you of what came before, will  
come after.

And why should we<sup>4</sup> fight against it? Isn't it natural to be tired,  
empty, naked with the sun  
staring hard against you?

This is not your body<sup>5</sup>.  
I like the look of those skeletons half-buried in the desert,  
the way the wind and sand have scoured flesh and feature from the bone.  
They look so nice and clean,  
happy to let the wind rush through them,  
to have and be nothing when your eyes open again  
to see that you are already home, where it is warm, safe, and dark<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is not your body.

2

3

4

5

<sup>6</sup> This is not my body.

## Sourdough Starter

My landlord doesn't believe in mice the way I do.  
He says there's no way they're smart enough  
to evade traps, to teach each other where the traps are,  
to learn to hate the smell of peanut butter.

I think they're just shy.  
I know that when it's dark, quiet and still,  
they might come out  
to look for the bread I keep on the counter, or the crumbs that fall  
after I've finished with the knife.

They leave me messages with their teeth  
in the loaves I bake.

I don't think they taste well.  
I've just started recently, and I'm sorry  
I'm not very good at this yet.  
I tend to be impatient.

The lactobactilli and the yeast have barely met  
before I make them work.  
I know it's rushed, but there's something charming about a first attempt.  
The mice don't seem to mind the density,  
and the hardness is good:  
it keeps their teeth neat  
and short.

## Said like “pay”

I don't like the English word for 陪. It lacks the softness of my original. 陪 means to accompany, but the sound itself contains a multiplex of other meanings.

Using the same tone, it can mean “to cultivate,” or “to raise.”

When I was young, my mother would ask me to 陪 my younger brother. She spent the day at work, paying with her sweat and blood for our youth. After school it was just the two of us. She would always tell me, whenever we fought, that the world had only the two of us as constants—I have my father's blood. I could not listen.

Nothing that flows in my family's river is suitable for cultivation. Nothing will ever grow here, our minds and hands can fill only barren bodies.

“To accompany” does not work for me. There is nothing of innocence, nothing of the whispers of joy in a childhood composed of choice.

When I 陪 someone, I think of the few hours of pastoral stillness between my tantrums when I would tell my brother that I loved him.

Only in the language of my mother do the warmth of the sun,  
the fragrance of the rice,  
the quiet peace of knowing  
that always  
we would have each other

return to me.

## Discontinued in the Spring

Suffering is the spice of life, and  
in the deep, dark winter, a little heat never  
hurt nobody; easily acquired when you use your  
new salt body scrub, and like your heathen  
ancestors salt the freshly conquered valleys<sup>1</sup>;  
if they were so strong, they'd still be here  
to do it themselves.

Wouldn't we feel so clean afterwards?

It's gentler than the steel wool  
more exfoliating too.  
You haven't felt truly beautiful until you've seen  
the ugly dripping out, red in the mirror's grime  
so familiarly to welcome you  
home, where you are safe in the dark alone.

I<sup>2</sup> saw a stranger in the mirror, the other day.  
She looked distressed, but when I tried to find her  
She<sup>3</sup> was gone again.

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<sup>1</sup> Nothing will ever grow here.

<sup>2</sup> Nothing will ever grow here.

<sup>3</sup> Nothing will ever grow here.

## A Song About Grandpa

The oak trees in the park don't seem  
to mind the extra space.  
Maybe they don't like  
to share their feelings.

Doctor C says that's okay,  
they might just be processing loss  
in their own way.  
I wish they could say something. A hole  
in the ground with the imprint  
of a massive hand planted  
until it fell asleep, rotted,  
and fell off with the numbness  
of a diabetic whose children don't visit  
his door often enough  
is no home for my sleeping heart.

I wanted the others to notice  
the void every day it grew life  
with the seedling grass,  
and then the falling snow,

but they did not.

When the bathtub stays filled even  
As the plug has been missing  
for many months already, I know  
it is time to see my doctor again

before I desire a visit to the family  
of partially emptied drain cleaners  
I leave beneath the sink.  
They help me to keep clean, but  
I hate to be a bother when they look  
so at peace amongst the dust  
and silverfish laying still  
in the dark.

She explains it is common  
for the terminally lonesome to see  
and hear things. She asks if I've been  
getting enough sun, though we both  
know it soon will be January.

I don't understand why  
the monarch butterflies  
each year can die away from home  
after months of travel,  
teaching their children what to eat,  
where to go  
to find a way back  
but my shower drain is forever  
clogged—with hair

I am too young  
to be losing.

## Astarte

Outside my apartment building,  
a lone man with long hair, a red hat,  
and a dusty mask approaches and asks me  
how long I have been growing my hair.  
I have headphones in my ears and I take them  
out, as he gestures  
towards his, and my head.  
I tell him “five times”  
and he laughs and asks his question again.

It’s difficult to read lips when they are covered,  
and I was once diagnosed as dyslexic  
by a doctor now accused  
of medical malpractice.

It’s been two years, I tell him,  
and I can feel  
myself being left behind again.

It’s been three years. I thought  
I would have found “it” by now,  
or that looking for it would come easier.

It’s been five years and there is nothing to answer for  
but more misunderstandings.  
There’s something missing;  
I’ve found no reason.

It rained today and I wear sandals when it rains.  
I didn’t when I met you  
because I was self-conscious  
of the look of my feet.  
The skin is dead and rough  
because I have always walked barefoot in my home.  
Nothing has changed since that day  
except my footwear. Still my feet ache,  
crack, and bleed  
when I work them too deeply.

In another life, I was exempt  
from military service.  
A soldier’s foot cannot be flat  
like the hardwood and tile  
I pace each day, waiting

for the unrecognizable feelings inside to dissipate.  
I'd keep the range hood running  
but the noise bothers me.  
It's inconsistent  
and at times the mechanisms inside  
sputter, some hidden gear  
growing confused and overlapping with another,  
like passing nuclear submarines flirting  
with international crisis.  
I wanted to be funnier,  
even if it's not a real word,  
I'd still like to try.

I once heard the same thing about you,  
and I thought I was in love. I still do,  
but I'm old enough to know when I'm wrong,  
even as I pretend  
it was raining the day you left.

I remember thinking that sandals were a bad idea when my toes grew red  
like morning sun of my youth and early adulthood,  
and the little book my grandparents  
carried always. They didn't believe in love back then.

There was only starvation in the fields,  
and killing in the cities,  
but somehow  
they found each other and kept one another alive  
even as the invaders were competing  
to decimate the population.  
My grandfather died when he was in his fifties.  
There used to be a web page  
run by the government that explained how he died  
and what he did  
to be commemorated.  
That page is now offline  
and I wish I took a screenshot  
or even a picture of the screen  
or wrote it down  
or did anything because

I can't remember anymore how old he was,  
and one day no one will.

The man outside reminded me of him.  
His dust felt like my memory's dust.

His rain felt like my rain.

I remember at the time feeling strange  
that you reciprocated my feelings.  
I had a terrible haircut  
and a voice which still doesn't match my face.  
There aren't a lot of white girls into Asian men,  
though I found out later you had a bit of a  
thing for them.  
I think, like all men, I was a bit of a gamble.  
My brain betrayed me  
and hatched into an unstable mistake  
the same year my father  
absconded from his duties and moved to Thailand.

The man outside turned out to be quite nice.  
He shook my hand, which in hindsight  
wasn't very smart of either of us  
and he started crossing the street  
the moment the pedestrian crossing signal activated.

My grandmother outlived my grandfather  
by many years.  
She's still alive and in her nineties.  
I visited her three years ago  
at her assisted living complex in 西安.  
It's where the terracotta warriors are,  
and the same city where a truce was brokered  
between the 共产党<sup>1</sup>  
and the 國民黨<sup>2</sup> during the invasion.  
My grandfather's ashes are interred  
in one of the city's massive military graveyards.  
The ceilings of the mausoleum drip  
after rain, and no one has tended the gardens in years.  
I'm told he was struck by a jeep during a retreat,  
which subsequently rendered him a martyr,  
though I am unsure of the criteria he filled,  
beyond a figure on a spreadsheet,  
and some dust in an urn.

It was difficult to shout through the rain and my mask,  
even as I strained for him to hear me.  
He turned briefly towards me and smiled

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese Communist Party

<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Nationalist Party

before resuming his senseless march.  
It was raining and around the corner a blue  
or gray Honda was coming,  
and I shouted again because it was raining  
and the driver wouldn't have had time to brake,  
but he didn't turn around that time.

The police were very polite to me afterwards. In the back of my mind I felt bad  
for the old man driving the car who would probably lose his license.  
In my frontal lobe I didn't want to feel anything at all, and I sat by the curb  
waiting for the epinephrine to drain.  
The last thing you told me that  
cloudy day is that I was too much to bear,  
like an urn spilling out ashes in the wind  
with the cover nowhere to be found.

I'd added that last part in my memories  
because the truth was too boring to imagine.  
You'd suddenly decided one day that I wasn't enough,  
or that I was too much to be enough.

I can't help replaying these moments in my head,  
I stay up late watching the found footage in my skull, hoping that  
in time I will understand  
and bury them,  
these books of changes  
abandoned like defensive lines by the government  
databases and left to rot  
by the hands that placed them there.

## Chang'e

She says she doesn't like the bagels I get from the grocery store.  
They aren't real bagels I keep hearing. They're just bread  
baked into a shape and given a name.  
Honestly, it makes me feel a bit jealous.

They taste the same to me,  
like the varieties of seafood  
I don't remember from the days after  
my first molting.

Poseidon's sedan chairs don't breathe  
the way fish and I do—  
you can take a crab and put it on land,  
it doesn't care,  
but if you put a rat,  
or any other mammal underwater,  
we'd probably die after a minute or two.  
Moisture on the gills is enough  
to draw oxygen from the air around them  
which makes them very adaptable;  
pleasant to keep in mind  
when drowning, at the end,  
is said to be peaceful.

I know that grocery store bagels aren't the same  
as the ones that get boiled  
then baked in the ovens that don't sleep  
in the same way that a red king crab  
(with its asymmetrical shell  
evolved from hermit crabs)  
is not the same as the porcelain crab,  
who sheds limbs and has three pairs of legs  
instead of four like true crabs do.

But if they're not the same the way she insists they aren't,  
then I wonder why it is my grocery store continues to try  
the same way evolution keeps trying to make a crab,  
or why I keep making them the same thing.

Nature wants to make crabs,  
the grocery store wants to make bagels,  
my brain wants to make serotonin,  
and I suppose failure is just part of the process.

The crabs and bagels don't know they're disappointing,  
and I don't think they ever will.  
Maybe it's enough just to be eaten by some,

and eaten a bit faster by others.

Most crustaceans are biologically immortal  
because their telomeres do not decay and shorten like ours do.  
Their only limitation is the shell—their frame.  
The molting process is incredibly stressful

and many die as they undergo this change.

She is buttering toast and I tell her I am ready.  
She laughs and says "for breakfast?"

She doesn't understand, but I hope the crabs do.

## Turning

1.

It's Sunday, I am coming up on another deadline,  
though I am just sitting.  
I am inside, unproductive, unbelieving  
of how unproductive I have been,  
that time could be so cruel to walk  
quickly past me without a goodbye  
or a hello.

I don't blame her because how could she know how I feel?  
She's got a job to do and I can respect that  
because so do I and I've just been  
avoiding the doing of it  
all this time.

She's just doing what I would've done  
if I could still do it.  
She just does it better than I can.

It's a miracle to watch her work.  
She simulates the bees beautifully  
and doesn't get mixed up while she does it. By now I'd be confused  
about if we're still talking about Time or not,  
but she'd know, and she wouldn't be confused, she'd just understand  
and knead the sentences until they were smooth like dough  
ready to be risen under the sun.

I'm still trying to get the recipe right.  
An awful lot can go wrong

especially when you think it's going right.

2.

I forgot to vacuum the entryway for a few months  
and the pebbles and grime moved in.

Familiarity helps people cope with loss,  
or trauma, or any combination of the two,  
but I don't mind being lost,  
never recognizing another soul or street again.  
I'm not ashamed to ask for directions  
if it means I can get away from this place faster.

I'm not lonely though, or at least  
I don't think I am. I've heard of enough philosophers to know  
that it may well be the same thing for people like me,  
in situations People Like Me get stuck in,  
but I feel fine right now.  
I feel okay.

3.

## Sunday

1.

I've been drinking more water lately.  
There's something hypnotic about the way it approaches me  
in the glass when I lift it up  
for a better look,  
and something sad when it startles down  
to the base.

It means I'll need to get more, and I don't know if I'm ready for that.  
I thought it would last a bit longer,  
and I wouldn't have to feel thirsty again  
so soon.

I got a cat from the shelter a few months ago.  
She drinks as much as she needs,  
never more,  
but I have to finish two glasses  
before every meal so I don't get too hungry.

It's important to me. To have this  
remainder of biological function that I  
cannot deny. That no matter how much I drink  
I will one day again need more until I don't.

The cat doesn't understand. She's not anxious about anything  
until she's left alone, because she's from an abusive home  
and I don't want her to feel that way anymore.

2.

Every Monday I look at my e-mails  
one by one because I've been saving them.  
Someone out there wants to talk to me and after a week of nothing  
I think I deserve a little bit of delusion, a pretense that people might  
think of me wandering the streets howling  
like the wind that's too shy to go between the buildings,  
and instead watches the alleys after it's blown my hat off.

I started wearing hats, too. I've always heard it grants character  
and I need something right now to hold on to.  
I dropped a cup the other day  
and I've been finding shards for weeks.

They cling to the baseboards where I don't tend to walk.  
Maybe they're as afraid of me as I  
of them,  
having them enter into my flesh  
and remain for years, a sharp friend in my heel  
that I think of whenever after a long day  
I take off my shoes, socks,  
sit and try to rub the ache, the lactic acid out  
like a mother sucking venom from a baby.

3.

Thursdays I'm supposed to get groceries, unless I forget, so  
I'll go Friday;  
routine adds structure to an unstable day  
but I've lost track now.

It's been two years since I've seen a dentist, and last time  
Doctor Martinez told me I brush too hard—  
it's making my gums recede.

She told me they don't ever come back.  
Now my job is to be much gentler with myself so when it's time for change  
I won't embarrass myself again in front of a stranger.

I haven't noticed any differences, though. My teeth still hurt  
when I drink cold water, and your name is brought up  
by a friend I haven't seen in ages.  
I just haven't gotten around to telling them.

It's a different kind of pain. You expect it to be sharp,  
like the thorn of winter, but it feels more like the sleep that comes  
after a long day of work in summer.

No, that's not quite right yet.  
It should've been easy to say it was like the dentist  
but that would've been boring,  
like the pain that makes my teeth hurt  
when they've forgotten to sedate me.

4.

Sunday mornings I am tired  
because of each day I measure out and swallow  
over the week.

It's a little bit more each time,  
and I end up spilling some  
over the edge  
of the spoon.

It hasn't been the right tool for the job,  
but neither have I.

I'm not a particularly happy person some days,  
and I don't recognize this half  
of that person's face when I know  
I'm supposed to.

When I can't think of anything to say, I don't,  
and the quiet feels like running water  
in the middle of the night,  
when you're thirsty but have too  
many cups to wash,  
and you can't decide which cup to wash  
because there are so many,  
so you stoop over the sink at three A.M  
lapping at the tap, and swallowing handfuls

over and over and  
over and over and  
over and over and

now your stomach hurts because nothing  
is saying it's okay to stop,  
all because it's just easier than waking up  
early enough in the morning to go  
to the white jackets behind the counter  
and whispering a few words to break the spell.  
It's not even a secret to them,  
and I bet they gossip  
about who is taking what  
for whichever reason,  
but I'm scared of that connection all the same—  
like I'm the last one to cross the valley  
before an earthquake.

When it's Sunday I'll go out and walk  
with Nobody because it's easier not to talk.  
I'm still tired from the night before.

I hear clicking in the shelves when it's dark.  
In an old book I could have found in a library,  
or on the street, I learn the name  
of deathwatch beetles.  
Because they're lonely,  
they tap on the walls to find each other  
after their ten year adolescence,  
chewing on woods and fibres.

The noise used to keep me awake before  
when I didn't know what it was.  
I know now, but the knowledge hasn't made me feel  
any less afraid of having a bat infestation.  
Their droppings are good for the earth, because they're rich  
in nitrogen, phosphates and potassium.

You can grow so much  
out of so little—but that won't help me  
if I get rabies because it makes you afraid  
of water, and really  
that's what makes things grow.

I can never find any beetles, after I've opened a book,  
because the cat's still anxious and I don't have as much time  
to look properly anymore,  
but I know they're there—  
maybe just behind a few layers I can't yet see  
or look past  
because I'm just stubborn and know that these things  
seldom end well for me  
especially on Sundays when I can't eat because

I've just been worrying  
for a few days now about what it all means;  
the tapping at night and the ringing at day—  
I forgot to tell you I think I have tinnitus.

I had good friends before.  
They treated me kindly,  
and never judged me for singing too loudly in my room,  
or when I used too much cologne  
pacing the halls of our dormitories alone.

It's been a few years since I've seen any of them  
and I don't know who's really to blame.

Who can't handle things going wrong?

I'm inflexible  
but I just moved my dentist appointment  
to next week. It's more convenient,  
and Doctor Rico doesn't mind,  
he's been there on most days this year anyways  
after the old dentist had an incident.

On Sundays I'm afraid of endings  
so I close my eyes because I don't want to watch,  
and I don't want to lie to my journal  
and claim I tried to do something today.

The cat wants to be involved in whatever I do. She leaps  
from the floor to my lap, and then to the  
cheap medium-density fibreboard surface  
of the desk I found on the street six years ago.

If she can't reach, she sits next to me on the floor  
and chirps until I pick her up, and if I don't  
she goes to the front door  
and screams because she's afraid she doesn't exist  
anymore, and that I don't have the heart  
to tell her.

When the census came this year  
I had to write that I live alone  
because even the government knows I'm still  
lying to myself  
and the cat, so on Sundays

I try to write down as much as I can remember,  
even if it's not much, it's good to try,  
and even though I didn't do much  
I'd like to think that  
today was a good day,  
and I can't help but worry  
tomorrow won't be—

so I open my eyes on another Sunday  
where I might write something down,

shape something that matters to me,  
even when I don't need it to.

It's just nice to have something.  
My cat has anxiety and her bowl.  
I have an empty journal,  
but I can't fill mine with kibble  
when she tells me it's time to eat.

She lets me know if I ever forget,  
and she composes ever the symphony when she reminds me  
at night when the beetles are knocking, and my ears  
are ringing.

It's easy to sleep  
when the sounds are too much.  
It's like drowning, by any other name  
and I could use a little peace  
and change. I could use change,  
but the more I dig in my pockets, the less I find.

It's becoming a problem for me  
when I fill up the washing machine with another load  
of soiled clothes—who is dirtying them?  
It can't be me, I have nowhere to be or go,  
no one to see.

Outside isn't quite right anymore.  
People come and go in groups again  
and I'd just gotten used to  
being by myself again.  
It's not all terrible,

There's no one here to see how much my weight has changed  
so I can still pretend to be yesterday's me  
who smiles, nods and listens.

Am I the only one still dreaming like this?  
It doesn't feel right.  
I can't wake up.  
I can't move.

I can't read the newspaper  
because they haven't sent one in years,  
and I don't like learning new names every day.  
I know enough that I should be happy.

I know enough I should at least try  
to be happy, but there's always  
so much to do Today before I can have happy,  
and then tomorrow I'll have dishes to do again—

I don't know where they're coming from,  
and I keep finding dust blanketing my things,  
my glasses,  
my body,  
even after I've just cleaned them—

I want this body to do things.  
I want this body to scream  
so much to do things,

and I want this body to want to scream  
at this body to clean things.  
I want things and I'm afraid  
of wanting these things because—

I wanted to tell you  
that I think my cat has depression.  
I don't think she understands sad, so much as she understands

alone.