

The girl whose teeth fell out

At eight years old, she choked on a handful of youth;
spat a fistful of the stuff – twenty tiny pearlescent pieces.

She tried to read the roots through the pool of saliva swirling
blood in her palm before giving up and rinsing them off,
careful not to wash any of her precious years down the drain.

The dentist couldn't figure it out:
Adulthood doesn't usually all come at once, he said, probing
the fresh line of milky points now cutting her gums.
And so sharp, he said. *So quick*.

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That night, the girl forced a raw smile up from her pillow,
joked that she'd have bankrupt the Tooth Fairy by morning:
I must remember to say sorry to the other children, Mummy,
she said, attempting to laugh. Then with a flinch, she teased
what looked like a splinter from the inner side of her mouth
before coughing up a summer;

fresh grass, warm tarmac, the sunflower she'd measured growth
against, all acid-bruised and drenched in bile gushed at the dam
of her fingers, whilst her mother, holding her hair away,
pressured a circle of comfort deep into her spine.

When morning came, the girl bared her jaws at the mirror
hoping to see canines, incisors grinning at her.
But instead there stood a white picket fence, bottom and top.
Twenty-eight identical posts, chiselled to perfect peaks.

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The tests came through quicker than expected:
100% timber, a pine/spruce mix, soft but durable.
I'll book her in for a felling, the dentist concluded.

But a week after she was back in the chair.

Impressed by her resilience, the dentist peered agape:
I've never seen nature regenerate so quickly, he said,
admitting failure to extract her adolescence.

Resigned, they diverted to the hardware store on their way home
and together they picked out a stain: Cuprinol White Daisy.
Apply once a year, to protect against aging, the shop assistant laughed
as the girl pristined her slatted smile, watched by her mother
who blinked a tear before it was truly ready to fall.

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In the winter months that followed,
the girl's mother, chopping logs for the burner,
would feel her knuckles turn pale at the swing of the blade, its possibility.

But the girl had grown used to speaking with a tongue
dagged by fragments, used to the tang of that particular pain,
the way her sentences could bitter at its influence.

By Christmas, she no longer stumbled over what the fence refused to let out.
She had come to expect the weight of it hitting her stomach
on the way down, how her belly would ache
at hearing its absence in the air.

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When her wisdom came in, years later, she was hardly surprised
to see the four white-washed houses backing her throat.

The new tenants were pleasant enough,
with their weekly routine of mowing the buds from her tongue.

And her mother would arrive every third Wednesday
to spend an afternoon lovingly pulling weeds from between the cracks
where her daughter's molars should have been, scattering
seeds of a more respectable nature as she went.

Just wait for the Spring colours to bloom, dear, she'd say,
attempting an expression that could almost be happiness.

Each visit, when the time for goodbyes came,
the girl, now woman, would steady a wave.

Without really thinking, she would wet her lips for the pleasantries,
licking her mother's efforts from the corners of her mouth as she did,
and smiling to herself at how wholesome
a person's shame could taste, how
of the earth.