

Sixteen

FOUND THINGS

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Since I graduated from high school, I quit going to church, I got my wisdom teeth out, and I discovered found poetry. That's kind of a bare bones accounting for a whole ten years, but I mention those three things for a reason. They're more closely related than you may think.

The first thing you should know is that I put off getting the teeth out for a good ten years. When I was seventeen or so, my dentist took an X-ray and said that all four wisdom teeth—still sleeping inside my gums—should come out as soon as possible. No way, I thought, even as I smiled and nodded at him. If they ever started to hurt, I would deal with it then.

For a while the teeth remained quiet, and I thought I had outfoxed the dentist with my plan to ignore them and make them go away. But by the time I was in my twenties, they were in a rage.

Every few months the bottom two would undergo some seismic shift and start pressing against my gums, which throbbed with pain. They wanted out. Eventually they started coming in, but crazily—one of the bottom ones grew in sideways. When that tooth got infected, I had no choice but to make an appointment with an oral surgeon, who scolded me for waiting so long. “The recovery time is longer the older you are, and the risks are higher,” he told me. “Why on earth did you let this get to this point?”

I couldn’t tell him the truth—that, for some reason, somewhere along the line, my fear of getting my wisdom teeth out had gotten tangled up with my fear of death. Both were hazy, scary ideas in the un-pin-downable future, things I’d worried about until they’d become indistinguishable. It wasn’t exactly that I was afraid I would die under the anesthesia, although at times my fear-addled brain latched onto that possibility, along with the idea that anything could happen to me while I was unconscious. It was something more like this: I was afraid of how much like death it would be. I’d be as vulnerable as a corpse there in the dentist’s chair, deep in some unknowable black sleep. If I wasn’t awake to be on guard, I’d be defenseless, helpless, totally unprotected. Mortal.



This general faithlessness, this feeling that I was the only one looking out for me, had been a problem long before the teeth ever were. I was raised Catholic and grew up in a mostly Irish American enclave in an old suburb of Philadelphia—which, if you don’t know, is about as Catholic as it gets.

Our community, close-knit and insular, had managed to remain fustily true to the old ways as though the world outside didn’t exist. We lived in a huge metropolitan area on the East Coast, but none of the kids at Immaculate Conception knew anyone who wasn’t Catholic; I’ll bet most of their parents didn’t, either. Several

families in the parish had ten, eleven, twelve kids. Every weekend a group from our parish gathered in front of the local hospital to protest the hospital's practice of performing abortions.

On the first Friday of every month, the nuns trooped us in two straight lines, like the French girls from the *Madeline* books, from our squat little yellow-brick school building to the stony gothicness of the church next door, which was always chilly, even in the summer.

It's not easy being the odd one out in a group like this, but that's what I was. Odd. The other girls in my class were lovely and serene, like the sweet-faced Maria Goretti's and Saint Cecelia's in my mom's copy of *Lives of the Saints*. I, on the other hand, had as much energy as the boys and got better grades than all of them (except for Robert and Richard, my two main rivals).

My mom kept my fine hair embarrassingly short because she said I carried on too much when she tried to get out the tangles. I was sleepless at night and wild during the day, and when I grew up I wanted to be a famous novelist, a famous journalist, or a famous poet. But worse than the bad things about me that everyone could see were the things only I knew about. I wasn't good or holy the way I dearly wished to be. I couldn't even pray.

Oh, I was happy enough to chime in with everyone else when we said rote prayers in church or before school each morning, mostly because it seemed more like exercise or homework than something to do with God. It was the time set aside for silent, personal prayer that unnerved me. If I said the prayers inside my head, how was that different from plain old thinking? Did that mean God could hear all my thoughts? If so, I was in trouble. As I got older, the idea of having a conversation with someone who was invisible started to feel like magical thinking, no different from the dreamlike images from the Old Testament that, over time, our teachers gently told us probably didn't really happen. There was never any flood so big that it swept the whole earth after all. I still remember the look my parents exchanged over the

dinner table when I brought home a religion quiz with only one true/false question marked wrong. Prayer is a two-way dialogue with God, the quiz had posited. False, I'd responded. I was good at taking tests, and I knew what they were driving at with that question, but I just couldn't give the answer they wanted. Prayer was not two-way. At least, it never had been for me.

My one salvation, if you'll pardon the expression, was the homily. During mass the priest gave a talk that was a reflection on that week's gospel reading; it was the only part of the mass that was different from week to week, the part that really came alive. I became fixated on the idea that I could write homilies, too. It would be like writing essays for school, only better, because you could stand up and share the things you'd figured out while you had been bent over your notebook, scribbling down the ideas that were burning inside you.

When I was around ten years old, a visiting priest came to our school, and we all filed down to the cafeteria, which we also used for assemblies, to listen to him talk about vocations. Some of us might hear a calling to the religious life someday, he said, so we should all listen carefully. Boys would be called to be priests or brothers; girls could be nuns. *Bleh*, I thought. Our nuns were scolding, gray-faced taskmasters who never, ever liked me. The only other kind of nun you could be was cloistered, shut away forever under a medieval vow of silence. Intellectually I already knew I wouldn't be called to the life of pious scholarship I wanted for myself; now I knew it in a way that hurt.

With all these dialogues and callings that were supposed to be going on, it was awfully quiet inside my head. And at some point, even my confidence in my answer to the true/false question began to waver. What if God did respond to people's thoughts, questions, and hopes—just not to mine? I spent a lot of time fidgeting around in my pew, worrying, faking it, looking around at my more content classmates and feeling lonely. Each time I tried to turn my thoughts to prayer, a mental breeze picked them up

and blew them somewhere else, like a feather or an autumn leaf. Quite literally, I was at a loss for words.



The minute I got out of my parents' house I stopped going to church, my old dream of writing homilies long forgotten. But it must have been buried inside me somewhere, at the bottom of the compost heap, making things grow. In high school and college I wrote articles, essays, poems, reviews. I jotted rhymes on scraps of paper, overheard conversations on bits of napkin. By the time I was grown and working as a journalist—and had finally worked up my nerve to have those wisdom teeth seen to—I was obsessed with found poetry.

Found poetry, like other found art, gets its content from other sources. The writer of a found poem doesn't really write anything. Instead, she looks at the language in something unpoetic—like the owner's manual for an electric stove—and, by rearranging the words or simply taking them out of context, turns it into a poem. (The title of that manual, *Know Your Range*, fairly begs to be turned into a poem, if you ask me.)

Once I started looking for hidden poems, I saw them everywhere: on street signs and television, in SAT prep books, menus, and spam e-mails. It was different from any writing experience I'd had. It felt like that wonderful Emily Dickinson line about writing, only turned inside out. Tell all the truth, but tell it slant, she wrote. Once you started seeing slant, the truth was right in front of you. How could you keep from telling it?



When I finally got to the dentist's office to have my wisdom teeth out, I acted cool, but I was sick with fear. As I followed the nurse

down the hall to the surgery room, I actually considered turning on my heel and running, weighing the embarrassment it would cause my mother, who was sitting in the waiting room, when they would grab me under the armpits and pull me back in with my feet dragging along the floor.

I sat back in the chair with three nurses around me in a ring. The doctor slipped a needle beneath the skin on the underside of my elbow. I lifted my face to look up at him for reassurance, but instead my eye snagged on the awful metal instruments lined up on their tray, gleaming at me from under a paper napkin. A cold feeling washed over me, and for the first time in years I tried to pray. Once again, I found I couldn't do it. There was silence on both ends of the line, like a long-standing fight that neither person can remember starting but no one wants to be the first to end. The drug seeped into me, and the contours of the room appeared to buckle and heave nastily before everything went black.

Obviously, I survived—and with a vengeance. My cheeks were distended for a week solid and, for some reason I couldn't bring myself to wonder about, I had a black eye. I was a slave to my painkillers. Every four hours I took another big horse pill that dulled the pain and gave my thinking a lovely, loose quality.

During one of those trippy painkiller afternoons, I was lying on a spot of sunshine on my bed, drowsing like a cat, not really awake but not asleep either. I started thinking about how I couldn't wait to forget all this mess and get back to my poems. There was one in particular that I'd just started piecing together from a 1948 Boy Scout Handbook—just looking at it made me feel warm inside.

The poem was taken from two sections. One was on hand signaling, which is one of many methods of communicating when you are alone and in distress in the wilderness. The other section was about learning your own limitations. A good scout has to know himself well enough to know when he can do things on his own and when he needs to ask for help. The first section

was called “Find Your Way,” and I’d made that the title of the poem. I picked it up and read it.

*With simple means
and using your own personal measurements
determine a height you cannot reach
and a width you cannot walk.
Call loudly for help if you are alone.
Call loudly for help if you are alone, and keep on
calling.*

I was thunderstruck. The reason I loved making found poems was because it was different from other writing, where you have to imagine an audience and have no idea if anyone will ever read it anyway. Looking outside myself for poems was like asking the universe a question and actually getting an answer. It was—well, it was like a two-way dialogue.

Oh, that was it! Those poems were my prayers! Making them connected me to the people whose language I borrowed, like those little scouts, grown men now with families, some of them gone. But they connected me to something bigger than that, too. All the time I was listening so hard for the God in my head, God was in the language all around me. And when I lost my own voice, the world around me provided the words. It was a surprise for me to realize, sitting up in my spot of sun, that, even after I thought I had quit, I’d kept on praying and worshiping, loving and being loved back.

I still struggle to understand what I have found in my found poems. I’m not saying I have it all figured out. But I do know this: I was alone, and I called for help. I called loudly, and I kept on calling, and someone answered.