

Draft of “My Mouth is a House”

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-I will hide things in my mouth. Crushes on girls. Secrecy. Keeping something of someone else's.

-Short story of someone finding their crush's retainer and putting it into their mouth. The discomfort of it. The recognition of difference. My middle school retainer will no longer fit comfortably in my mouth. Our own mouths and teeth shift.

I Hide Things In My Mouth

1. When T.’s filling falls out of his tooth, out of his mouth, and onto the table of our booth, no one sees it but me. A dull glimmer. A dark shine. A silver-tin kernel.
2. I’m eleven or twelve, and I’ve been admiring T.’s mouth for weeks. His teeth gleam like white pick-up trucks in the sun.
3. I trace the length of my archwire curve of top teeth with my tongue, I from the buccal surface of my
4. “Take something,” A. dared me several years earlier. The plastic wrapper of a White Mystery Airhead stuck to her skin, held against her stomach under the elastic waistband of her joggers. I picked up a small cylindrical piece of bubble gum from the 5-cents bucket and shoved it into the pocket of my shorts.

When the sun rushed into the back entrance to Kramer’s as we opened the door onto the blacktop parking lot, I waited. I waited until A. unlocked her rusty bike, until we double-rode down the cracked sidewalk, my arms around her waist, until A. pedaled hard past the picket fences, the Timrod Library, Bethany Methodist Church, across the narrow bridge at Pike Hole. I waited to breathe in deep, my tongue melting in my mouth like taffy.

T.’s filling shimmers there on the table. Like a drop of mercury from a broken thermometer. A lost earring back.

The girl next to me dips a fry into a puddle of ketchup on her plate. The boy next to T. licks his Riverdog Ripple, the florescent blue ice cream named after the local minor league baseball team named after the rats at the edge of the Ashley River.

At eleven or twelve-years-old, I’ve never had a cavity, and consequently, I’ve never had a filling, but I’ve seen inside the mouths of my parents’ friends when they laugh: the bright darkness spilling into the crevices of their molar cusps.

Kramer’s is part drug store, part old-fashioned soda fountain. It’s like stepping back in time, but so is walking through our small, Southern town. Rod, the soda jerk, mixes the soda flavors we want by hand. “What’ll it be, Joe?” he asks my ten-year-old brother, whose feet can’t touch the ground from the stool he sits on at the counter. Only two people call my brother Joe, an

abbreviation of Joseph: the elementary school crosswalk guard and Rod. They say it as a joke, to make my brother smirk. It works. It's Friday afternoon, and there are more kids in Kramer's than adults.

I put a paper napkin over T.'s filling and pick it up, like I'm catching a tiny spider. I scrunch the paper into a ball in the palm of my hand, like there's nothing inside it at all. So no one is suspicious, so no one knows what I've done, I wipe my mouth with the napkin. I look across the table at T. and wonder if he even knows he's lost something, if he felt it, if he heard the filling break loose from inside his tooth when he bit into something hard—maybe a piece of grisel in his burger, a too-crispy fry, a gobstopper. If he hasn't already, I wonder when he'll realize it's missing, when he'll feel the loss, the hole in his tooth open, exposed.

At the long tables in our middle school cafeteria that year, when my friends bite down on pieces of aluminum foil their parents wrapped their sandwiches and cut carrots in, I do it, too. I pretend I've had cavities, that I have metal in my mouth, in multiple molars. I pretend I feel a strange pain, a shock, a kind of pleasure. When I tear off a piece of aluminum that my father wrapped around my peanut butter and banana sandwich, and I bite down on the square of tin, I pretend the metal stimulates the nerve endings deep inside my teeth at the back of my mouth. A dull glimmer. A dark shine. I steal the expressions from my friends' mouths.

When I get home from Kramer's, unwrap the napkin from my pocket, and look at T's filling, I consider giving it back to him the next time I see him, or leaving it in the mailbox in front of his family's house. For months I've wanted to kiss T., for the bottle to stop on me when he spins it, for him to see me differently in the dark when we're paired together and hiding in a ditch at the far end of the Laurel Street Playground in a neighborhood night game of flashlight tag. Years later, I will be embarrassed that I took T's filling, that I kept it in a box with the best shells I'd collected at Edisto Beach. I will think about how insane it was to take it, to keep it. But maybe that's what love is. To see the thing that fills a hollow place, to see the evidence of loss in someone else's body, and, instead of wanting to fix the loss or fill it, you want to touch it, to put your mouth to theirs, to run your tongue over the emptiness inside their body, to feel their loss at its root.