

A PROLOGUE WITH TEETH



She wears a mask that looks like her. It slopes severely at the nose with cheeks set far back below the cheekbones. The sides of her face: the color of a split pear. Grainy when on the lips. Through her mask she says “ah” when a stranger tells her he is shedding his most recent sun-burn. She asks what he is becoming. The sound from her lips barely catches on the mask’s lips. She once imagined the tails and ears of her words never making it through her masklips and falling between the skins, digging trenches. That if ever the mask were removed her warts and cracks would show. But years of practice changed everything. She rarely wishes someone could see her for what she really is. In fact, she often forgets it is there. As does everyone else.

To a clerk she shows pictures of fish with teeth. *With Teeth*, she says and reveals her own. The crowns. The fillings. The un-coloring from a baking soda and peroxide paste unable to reach the curved spaces between. That yellowed surface before it ducks behind a slightly inflamed red gum. Her teeth, a memory of teeth. Her mouth, teeth-worn.

He shakes his head. She flips a page, her mouth still open. Another fish, this one with human-looking teeth. *With Human Teeth*, she says and slams it on the counter. *Fish With Teeth. Gar fish . . . alligator gar fish, snakehead fish and, of course, the piranha. Razors. Shark-like. Shark-fish-like.*

Shark-fish-like, the clerk repeats.

Sheepshead fish, she says. *With human(like)Teeth*. Those incisors. Smooth and solid. Pluckable. Denture-able teeth. *Teeth that could bring that fish out of*

the water to a plate of pasta. No minnows, algae, river scum, or salmon eggs. No no no. She crumples up her cash before handing it over. *Combo meals! Vending machine snacks! The kind of teeth that would take a fish to a couch, belly-up,* she says.

He says he hasn't seen any. He sells her duct tape, sanding paper, and wallpaper that looks like stained wood. She asks him to ask around.

The sheephead fish, she says when the glass door of her shop won't budge. Jingle of keys. Her slight weight pushed against the glass. Wait for the bells on the other side to say, *We are in.*

The sheephead fish was a man. The front door of her pawn and curio shop scoots open. The distinct smell of too many old things at once pulls her in. The door no longer her obstacle, she finds herself back behind the counter—purse, shopping bag, and keys placed away. Away away. She yawns, stretches, and then pulls herself back into herself.

The sheephead fish was ONCE a man, she says aloud to no one in her shop. Readied and assured, those words hang lower on the lip, falling along the crest of her mask. The sheephead fish was once a bold man. A man that talked a lot around town. He said things no one would say. He told people what time it was exactly. He knew the longitude and latitude of many great (and not-so-great) places. He was a man who knew things and said so; he had no face beneath his face.

Or he was a rude man. He listened to gossip and repeated it loudly. He said the things that typically slide along the sidewalks and backrooms of a town. He said them with a smile and no regret. He was all mask-face. Masks on masks. And a witch heard him once and turned him into a fish. With Teeth.

Or he was always a fish, she says. She puts her hands up to her outer face and taps on her nose. No one sees this. But she knows this story is almost true. A fish that swallowed a man. But a man that knew too much and kept all his knowing in his teeth. The teeth stayed; the man did not.

Or . . . it was a woman.

A woman that plucked the teeth from her lover. A remembrance. A hope. She took them while he slept. He had said so many words. He had said *all* the words. All the words that mattered. She had once looked up along the cracks in the ceiling thinking of all the words that would matter to be said. And realized he had said them. And there were no words left. No words to be said to her. Only those actions. Those steals of looks and tiny grins . . . at first. And then those other actions, the ones that took those words apart. He might work late. He might not like the way she reorganized his records. He might learn to repeat those words while resenting her for always being there in his bed, when those other ladies, the ones that don't need the words, were standing outside his door. So she took those teeth. And more than likely, after realizing a jar might turn them stale, she ate them. Thinking she could keep them inside. And not being a witch or a type of forest magic or a very bright girl, she did not grind up the teeth or use any sort of oils, which might help her body absorb the teeth into her blood and straight to her heart. Instead, the teeth sat in her stomach for two days as she worried. Worried he would notice and leave her. Which he did.

She was then a sad girl. A distraught girl. A girl with words of a lover in her gut. She was not bright enough to imagine them gnawing at her. She just imagined them there in her gut smiling and speaking those words again and again.

Like all sad and distraught and not-so-bright girls, she ran to the river to talk to a fish. A fish that had no knowledge of men or women and the heartbreak and troubles they occupied themselves with, but a fish that would speak as if it did. It was the sheepshead fish and was more than likely annoyed to be related (in name) to a sheep because it had never seen one. And like all fish in rivers talking to people, it tricked her. It might have said as much as, "If you come in the river, I will swim into your stomach and take out the teeth," which is exactly what it did.

And for a moment when the girl's mouth was as wide as it possibly could be, when the unmasked skin around her chin began to reach up to her wide cheekbones, hoping to pull itself back up, when her tongue began to wonder

the taste of chewed fish scales, when that great fish plunged (sheep's)head first into her gaping maw . . . she was no longer a not-so-bright girl and she realized something the forest nymphs and witches of her little world might understand that she too now had suspicion of. She gathered from the week's experiences that this sort of situation was one to be avoided.

Of course, the fish entered her stomach. Grabbed the teeth. And ate its way out.

And she, a pulpy mess of once-her-body, drifted throughout the river, to feed the river animals and fish. A smorgasbord. Although our storyteller wasn't Swedish, it was the first word that came to the woman's mind.

Satisfied by her retelling of the origin of the sheepshead fish, the woman practiced it several times. First muttering those words and letting some tumble about on her own tongue and onto her lips (masked or not), often wondering the taste of fish scales as well as what it might be like to have a man's teeth that could eat human food.

She had nothing to tidy in the shop. Nothing new but the wall and sandpaper and duct tape, which she wasn't moved to use just yet. She had no messages, no mail. No books to tend. No messes to sort this day, a Tuesday, which she believed was never the day for too much sorting. And she had only to practice the story before she could swim through the telling of it to no one in particular—except perhaps to a few imaginary people that might listen. One was a tall man, who often wore collared knit shirts, always plain knit shirts: red, blue, and sometimes a tan-colored one. And he would come by her store hoping to find a good deal on something that one finds out they need only too late, too late to actually afford a new one or a decently-priced used one online. He had no friends from whom to borrow. Perhaps he had no friends. And he needed something like a chainsaw or a lawn mower. Her other imagined listener was (as most of the people in her shop are) looking for money, bringing in appliances and tools and silver candlesticks (how they all still had weighty candlesticks!) from their homes. These visitors, looking for cash (the kind that smelled used) and always walking by and ignoring the wall displays: