

Hula Hoops

when i was a kid i was an asshole to my cousin—
me, with a mole the size of the moon sitting beneath my left nostril.
he, 6 years younger than me, taking speech classes.
he always pronounced *yellow, lell-low*
i died laughing,
then died a second time when he tried to say it again.
my brothers and i called him *big nostrils*;
those things were the size of hula hoops.
we all died, went to heaven and came back when his nostrils flared when he talked.
eventually he didn't want to talk anymore,
and i made fun of him until he became mute.

i'm 27 years old now—
me, a grown man taking speech therapy,
not because my speech got crumbled up because of a car accident or a near-death stroke.
but i left out the part
where i was ridiculed by everyone else for the mammoth size mole beneath my left nostril.
people pointed and said *yennw that big booger beneath your nose*;
they pointed until my eyes followed my shoe laces.
i altered the way i said words so the mole wouldn't move that much
so i wouldn't stand out like a black flower in a red rose bed.

life is just like those hula hoops,
and things come around full circle sometimes.

my cousin is 21 now—

he, a tall thing of confidence and can talk anyone's ear off

while i can barely get my own name out right to people.

now looks who's talking?

WeClutter

we are the eye contact that becomes uncomfortable.
we look away like we have low self-esteem because
we have low-esteem. we make you feel nervous,
even though we do not mean to. we are the fast name
introductions that bomb rush out of our mouths
while shaking hands. we are the other person's name
which we will forget as soon as we do not say it right.
we are the over-enunciated words, the squint they give
us back. this is the other side of english, chopped and
confused. we are the words that stick to the side of our
mouths, the burst of spit that lands on your face when
we are struggling to get one word out. we pray about it.
we pray about it. we pray about it. we are the hand
movements that are out of sync with what we are
saying. we are *you know what i am saying, you know what
i mean!* we do not know what to use first: tongue, teeth
or breath. we run out of breath trying to test it out. we
are the kings of repeating ourselves. we are the nods
you give us as if you understand us the second time
around. we know it is hard on you, but harder on us to
deal with it. of course we pray about it. we pray about it.
we pray about it more than ever when the stakes are high
and we need the foundation of words to serve us like the
sun serves daylight. so we are left to find our own little
way through the dismay, so we tell statements, not stories,
the fastest you have ever heard. we are the conversation
that runs short and the smile we have because we are glad
it is over. we are the biggest comedians, jokes we can only
make out; we have so much life within us yet none in front
of people. we pray about it day and night. we are the phone
conversations that are hard on your ears. we are feedback
we don't want to hear, the cringe at an echo, the dread of a
cold call, pull our hair out if we have to break down complex
information, shoot us before you make us publicly speak,
we can't get past the phone interview for a job. we have a
degree, but cannot verbally deliver. we are crossed fingers
in hopes that our words fell out right, but unfortunately our
facial expression remained neutral. we dash from confrontation,
we call it *no drama*. we absolutely get ourselves, but sometimes
we don't. we do not even know it's a speech issue, we think it's
just a small issue, something we haven't fixed yet. we are all over
the place, cannot contain the words so they won't spill out at the
same time. we even trip up asking God for help, but we still pray
about it. we pray about it. we pray about it this confusion
we cannot fix, this circus that lives in our mouth.

Teeth: Telling It Like It Is

i've come such a long way from being a crippled tongue. i use every vein in me to hang onto conversations without making people feel so stressed. i swear sometimes it's like trying to snatch a cloud out of the sky. but you choose to act like my words are so distorted that you cannot bear it. i find it ironic, my darling, that my words went down your ears with ease when you wanted to get down my pants to make a fountain out of me so you can feel revived and replenished. i understand your cravings, we all have them—mine was in finding a companion, someone who could make herself at home in my heart. but now all of a sudden everything sounds like japanese to you. you made your favorite word *what*, ran me over with it, and made a mockery out of me, even when the words flowed out like a symphony—perfectly in unison. i think it is unfortunate that i am inclined to say more to you now than i did when we were in sync. perhaps we had nothing in common; i'll take that. in this moment, i am a frozen volcano, there is no more heat around here for you. for all of that, i want to leave something you can place in the back of your psyche—i own a heart and i would rather spend my time helping people than humiliating them when their imperfections are shining bright in my face. my darling, i recommend you try going for *kind* next time, i guarantee it will suit you better, and please remember this about me: even though my speech walks on one bad leg, it gets the job done.

Garbage Disposal

we wake up earlier than sparrows to sanitize the house as if it doesn't already smell like bleach. we scrub the invisible ring around the tub. we windex the glass so we can see straight through it. we make sure the corners are free of cobwebs and make sure spiders aren't overlooking all this work we do. we mop right to left, left to right. we don't open the door for our friends, because we are on punishment. we've been on punishment for centuries though.

we ignore the sweat sliding down our backs. we make sure mama knows that she makes herself clear. *if y'all don't do it right, you got to do it over!* mama, mama don't you know you are raising hell, not young boys? we stop-up the sink so the water bill won't be higher than jupiter. we take baths with two inches of water. we scrub ourselves down to our chromosomes. we brush our tongues as if that is going to eliminate this sour taste in our mouths that we have about mama. we pick up the big stuff off the floor so it won't tear up the vacuum, or she will tear our butts up with switches we have to hand-pick ourselves.

we put elbow grease on the baseboards. we put pep in our step. we act like we want to keep a roof over our heads; if we don't, we won't have a roof over our heads. mama, mama remember you are raising young boys. we turn off the coffee pot when we hear it screaming. we slice a hole in the middle of our fried baloney. we make sure we only use one thin slice for our sandwich. we make sure we don't use too much butter because times are too hard. we warm up leftovers from ages ago. we grate the cheese as if we are grating this lifeless life into pieces.

we peel potatoes like they're diamonds, making sure we don't cut off too much of the essentials. we remove the rocks from the rest of the dry beans. we splash a tablespoon of vinegar in almost every dish. we keep stirring so nothing sticks to the side of the pot. we put a lid on the pan like we hope

to put a lid on mama's mouth. we try not to let any grease fly out of the pan, if we do, we use a tiny bit of detergent to wipe it up. we better not open that door either because we are still on punishment.

we preheat the oven and imagine one day it will burn this place down. we clean as we go. we let the meat marinate long enough. we poke the center with a fork to make sure it comes out clean, all while trying to not let all the heat out the oven. we make sure the top is golden brown like it has a tan. we fan off the smoke alarm like we are trying to fly out of this hell hole. we put our heart and soul into the casserole. we set the table. *now whose turn is it to bless the food?* we better eat everything that's on our plates. we make our stomachs into garbage disposals.

we unset the table, we use as little aluminum foil as possible because it has to last for the next lifetime. we freeze food hoping it will disappear. we watch our hands shrivel up like prunes as we wash all the dishes. we let the pot soak for a little while, but we make sure we wash it before we go to bed. we lay our heads down for another early morning of cooking, cleaning and cursing. mama, mama don't you know this is not the recipe for raising young boys?

Bells and Whistles

i thought you were going to be on board with me and this language of mine. i thought you were going to dive into this deep universe of limping letters and brave words that want to say a lot, but only say so much.

i know i am not the easiest person to listen to, but once you listen to me, your heart can hear the sound of a sincere man in every messy syllable—a man who loves like no other and brings depth even though his remarks leave him short.

i come with all kinds of bells and whistles, all sorts of uncharted land. i am a playground for the one who declares their devotion to me. if you listen closely, it blares in the way i say your name, in the way words get jammed up when i try to talk to you.

i thought you would notice the rarity you had in your possession, nurture it like a newborn child, then call my future yours. it was here for you to rejoice in, take flight, and go places only you and i can understand. i thought you were going to share this world of mine and give yourself into a language that is not broken, but beautiful.