

the teeth poem

I lost my baby teeth late.  
The dentist wanted to let them fall on their own  
but they never did.  
He showed me the x-ray, and said that he didn't understand. There are no roots holding them  
in.

I've always tried to be very careful with my teeth.  
I don't use them for anything other than  
tearing my food apart.  
I never used them to rip open wrappers,  
or to grip something I didn't have enough hands for  
or to tell other children to leave me alone.

Braces terrified me, not because of the social isolation  
(I was already pretty isolated)  
Or the painful pressure in my mouth  
(I'd never really minded pressure, the feeling of growth)  
But because of the horror stories of kids  
who didn't take care and damaged their teeth beyond repair.

Even in the worst of my depression, I almost always managed  
to force myself to brush before bed.  
I wore my retainer for the entire time the orthodontist said to  
and for a good while past that also.

My front teeth had a gap when I was little  
and it grew back when I stopped wearing my retainer  
because I'd ground through it in the night.  
I figured that I'd worn it long enough.  
I'd already kept it in longer than I'd been told to anyway.

Some days, my jaw would ache when I woke  
because I'd ground my teeth together all night long.  
Those years of night were always the worst-  
The hazy sleep of depression and anxiety leaving me numb to the world.

I once dreamt of wolves, and a chase

that I could never escape because those I thought would help me  
moved too slowly, caught up in their own world.  
I woke still feeling teeth digging into my thighs,  
and my leg was sore the whole next day.

For most animals, baring teeth is a threat.  
Teeth are weapons, their only purpose is to tear and to crush  
anything they can reach that is soft enough.  
They are for ripping out throats, for consumption.  
We call the act of baring our teeth “smiling.”

What is it, about humans, that compels us to show pleasure  
by showing everyone how excellent our weapons are?  
Perhaps it's because most of our weapons aren't easily seen.  
We hunt by being smarter than our prey,  
and by having the endurance to follow where they run.

We have no claws to scratch, or horns to ram.  
Perhaps we like the reminder that, though we're all calm now  
You'd do well to remember that  
We are not as weak as we look.

I've always valued my intelligence, and my endurance.  
But a part of me longs for the spirit, the cunning, the bite of those around me.  
I wonder how much of who you are  
is just a manifestation of who you wish you were.

I've always been a polite and friendly girl.  
Held the door for strangers,  
made conversation with adults I didn't know,  
tried my best to be nice to doctors and dentists,  
hiding how much I feared them.

I learned to endure the fears  
of shots in my arm, and lights in my eyes  
and people poking around in my mouth.  
I have the endurance to hold myself still,  
to stay where I am without flinching.

I still had baby teeth at fourteen years old.  
I couldn't get my braces in until they were all out.  
The dentist finally recommended surgical removal,  
because he couldn't figure out what was holding them in,  
let alone when they'd fall out naturally.

I have high intelligence and endurance,  
which together mean I'm stubborn and know how to get my way.  
I'm not the kind of person to start a fight over what I want,  
but you'll know when I'm angry anyway.

I never cared about whether I would have braces, but other people did.  
I never cared about a lot of things that other people cared so much about.  
I never said outright that I didn't want to do this.  
I never was one to fight back openly.  
But to get me to go through with what they wanted for me,  
they had to pull my teeth out.