FLASH NONFICTION

The Economic Theory of Depreciation

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"Self Portrait" by Julia Barczewska

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The body is no different from a landscape. What shapes the valley, shapes me. When the sugars erode my right molar, my father offers me tiny red stones that smell of chemicals to ease the pain. He tells me to slip one stone into the decayed well of my tooth; it melts in the well, the numbing burgundy juices spilling over my gums and the neighboring teeth. The gums around the molar grow rough and heavy. When the pain subsides, my father tells me to spit out the saliva, but a sulfuric aftertaste lingers for hours.

Sometimes, the toothache comes at boarding school, away from my father. The pain flows like lava; my capillaries throb with red anger. I lie on my metal bed, the mattress as thin as a slice of cheap wheat bread, and kick and twist, waiting for the ecstatic release that comes after the pain settles in the body — like sand grains on the bed of a river after a flash flood. The boarding school matron, forced to play nurse because there is no nurse on the premises, tells me to chew paracetamol. When I can't take the pain anymore, a black Cuban dentist pulls the rotting molar out for five Namibian dollars. He sits me in a reclining chair, injects my gums with anesthetic, waits for a few minutes, and begins pulling on the molar with his strange tools. When I kick my legs, less from the pain than from the terror that I am losing something vital, he stills me with an airy hush. Before I know it, it is over. The space where the molar had been feels smooth, velvety and expensive even, like touching the smooth buttocks of a newborn. I feel light where I had felt heavy and burdened by the pus and rotting flesh. But I also know that it came at great cost. There is no pain anymore but the tongue can feel the emptiness that my tooth has left behind. I am now certain of the impermanence of the body. This is my first lesson in the scholarship of loss.

Years later, in the United States, another molar begins to erode. The pain rises and falls like a tide. The dentist tells me it would cost me five hundred US dollars to remove the tooth or seven hundred US dollars to fill the cavity. I am lucky and poor enough to be eligible for Medicaid. Medicaid covers the cost for filling the cavity, but I still have to pay for the crowning of the tooth out of my own pocket to complete the procedure.

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Months later, I begin having nightmares about losing my teeth. In one dream, I am caught in a barren land, my body suspended, yet tethered to the landscape in that dream-sense kind of way; I am in my body but also outside my body. I can see my teeth crumbling to rubble like chalk. Blood drips from both sides of my mouth as if I had devoured myself; I am the vampire that lusted after its own blood. My vanity is as clear as a seedling sprouting in the dead earth. How will the world bear to see my toothless smile? These jagged ridges for teeth. I am only saved because the dream ends.

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A few days after the dream, while drinking a cold Budweiser, I feel the rubble of sharp stones in the beer, feel the sides of my saved tooth with my tongue and discover the inside wall had fallen completely. The mold that the dentist had poured did not hold. The tooth had shattered, and half its debris twirled in the gulp of beer that was about to go down my throat. I catch the debris with my tongue before I swallow it, and spit it out. The inner wall of the tooth fell because I did not crown my tooth; it would have cost an extra five hundred US dollars. I did not have five hundred dollars, not even after my tax refund.

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