



BER

issue 15 fall 2015

**Susanna Donato**

## Tooth Fairy

What interests me are questions of where things begin, and where they end. Things meaning childhood, faith, mystery, belonging, desire. How our identity pushes out of the body our parents gave us. How our relationship to our self pushes like other things that push out of bodies: blood and babies, hair, water, teeth.

\* \* \*

As a girl, I was one fucking delicate flower. Loose teeth unhinged me. With this particular trait, my parents were patient, resourceful. When a tooth demanded acknowledgment—when it flopped and clicked in the red-velvet hunger of my gum—I floated like Ophelia on my parents' waterbed. Mom worked delicate fingers between my jumpy lips to slip a thread around the tooth. Dad's fingers looped the other end into a slipknot that swallowed the brass doorknob. "We'll count to three. One, two—" WHAM! The door slammed before I was ready. Where the tooth had been, now a warm well felt dangerous when I tongued it.

The tooth fairy brought me money, even after all that.

Which is to say, people are complex.

\* \* \*

The autumn I turned ten, I sat on my parents' waterbed Indian style (no one had yet invented criss-cross-applesauce, no one corrected our careless labels). The bed's padded vinyl bumper was tacky against the soles of my feet. I picked at pills on the blues of the patchwork quilt while I sang over and over the *oom paw paw MOW mow* part from

“Elvira.” I puffed my still-flat chest into a barrel shape and tucked my chin, made a chamber of my mouth, trying to get my voice deep enough.

On the Barbara Mandrell Show, the Oak Ridge Boy with the deep deep voice looked like my Ken doll in a navy blazer. I wondered how that deep deep voice emerged from such an ordinary man. It was as if a larger, stranger man, the real man with the deep voice, was concealed inside the visible man. I bobbed in time, practicing my deep voice *oom paw paw MOW mow* until the waterbed-waves slopped Mom’s slip off the bed.

“Cool it.”

Her eyes warned me more than her voice. She bent to lift the slip, the seam of her pantyhose scriggling her belly. When she faced me, I saw her pubic hair crushed behind the pantyhose like a robber’s face, and when she turned back to her closet I saw the other seam, misaligned with her butt crack.

\* \* \*

I was young enough to still know my mother’s body, to know that evenings, the seams echoed in her skin like a map. I knew her smell and the feel of her skin, the shape of her delicate feet, the natural straightness of her white teeth, different from the gapped set I’d inherited from my father, growing gappier by the month.

I could only stay if I quit driving her crazy. Not Elvira-crazy. That was good-crazy. Good-crazy was still a myth, like the anomalies under M in the encyclopedia: mermaid, minotaur, monopod, mother. But in five years, ten, I’d learn good-crazy, and in twenty years, I’d push out my own baby who would drive me good-crazy at moments with her warm mouth and sharp teeth and sweaty curls, so that would be new.

\* \* \*

Children are silent witnesses. They absorb their surroundings mutely, the way bodies reabsorb blood, the way bodies change and deform, smooth skin into pimpled eruptions, flat chests into bosoms, the distended uterus, ripe with blood, shrinking when the child is at the breast. These things no one pays for. No one good.



It was hard to remember that a new tooth would replace the old, a stronger, better tooth, built to last. I repressed even the small successes of stanching blood and healing and gleaming replacement, even of the tooth Dad extracted with pliers at a campground because I let it wobble so long, so secretly, infection puffed my jaw.

\* \* \*

I sat on the bed not thinking about teeth, though at that age, teeth flee in gangs, a dozen or more with serious roots, each casualty a depletion my body grieved. My cheeks no longer dimpled, gaps no longer charming.

I might have been just days from receiving a slender packet containing my own nude nylons that I could wear only to church, a synthetic rite of passage with a reinforced toe that showed beneath my sandal strap. I would never wear pantyhose without underpants. It was hard to imagine I'd have hairs that pantyhose would crush.

The idea of big teeth erupting from concealment inside my jaw, driving out the baby teeth, made me seasick. I wanted to postpone the pang of expulsion. I never have learned that most pain is over in a moment and then forgotten. I never have learned that sometimes, pain is worth it. I'm not thinking only of teeth.

\* \* \*

I bobbed on the bed, clenching *oom paw paw MOW mow* like water behind my lips so I could stay to watch Mom choose her outfit. On tiptoe—a beached mermaid, bottom half slippery taupe nylon, top half gently dimpled white skin—she reached for the closet shelf. A stack of sweaters toppled. A white box fell and white shards bounced into the carpet.

She said, “Oh, no,” and I couldn't tell what had happened, and then I swallowed the *oom paw paws* because those ivory sprinkles were my baby teeth.

Before that I had known in my mind about the tooth fairy. But not for real.