

*Wisdom*

*Sara Baume*

Around the same time as the pandemic begins in Ireland, I notice that I have grown a new tooth. *This is unexpected*, I think, as is the pandemic, though there had been clues: a slight sensation of constriction in my upper jaw, a thread of blood while flossing.

There has always been a gap of hard gum at either end of my top row of teeth, like two empty chairs in the dress circle. Now the right side has been breached by a knurl of jagged bone. I cannot see it, even if I stand in front of the bathroom mirror with my head bent back. Even if I cram a compact mirror into my mouth and tilt it at an upward, rightward angle. But I can feel it. I feel it every couple of minutes. I feel it hundreds of times a day.

I feel it until my tongue aches.

We get the death toll every evening around six. We come in from our walk and switch the radio on. The death toll has become like the weather forecast. We go silent out of habit. We hear but do not assimilate. Seconds later, we ask each other: *what was it again?*

It is April. The weather is lovely, better than the death toll. The swallows turn up; the ditches bush up. The lawn bursts out in daisies, as does the belt of grass that runs up the middle of the road. The road we live on is bumpy and windy and too narrow for two vehicles to pass at once. If you meet an oncoming car, you reverse until you reach a gateway. If you meet a tractor towing a slurry spreader, you panic. A couple of years ago I had a Dutch friend to stay who was not able to comprehend the principle of our road. He interpreted it, at first, as a one way system. He assumed, or so I imagine, that there was a concealed lane where traffic was travelling in the opposite direction; a tunnel beneath the visible road; an overpass obscured by cloud cover. *How do people not crash?* He asked when I confirmed that there wasn't. I had no satisfactory answer. This is something I have wondered myself.

The house we live in is charmingly symmetrical. Out the back, there's a kitchen/bathroom extension and alongside a cow shed that the landlady rents to a neighbouring farmer. Facing front, it has a door and two windows downstairs and three windows upstairs, a chimney either end. If you were to saw our house in half, straight down the middle, it would split into two indistinguishable halves.

Every evening our walk brings us up the hill overlooking our house. The road climbs and our home shrinks behind us. Its edges soften. Its details dissolve. At the top of the hill we turn around and see that it has become a miniature of itself, like a souvenir.

*I will make this souvenir*, I think. At this moment in time, it seems no more or less useless than anything else I might do.

Something in the attic has chosen to break. There is a noise that had not been there before. It starts as a whirring. It builds to a battering. It softens back into portentous silence. We are able to tell it is connected to the water tank because it occurs shortly after we have been running one of the bathroom taps or flushed the toilet. It's clear that a pipe or valve or ballcock has become loosened or damaged or worn, but I cannot bring myself to phone the landlady and report the plumbing problem, because this would mean inadvertently inviting strangers into my quiet rooms to brush against my surfaces, to exhale their sinister air.

*Please, please, please*, I think, *just hang on until all of this is over*.

Mark cannot find my new tooth either. I tilt my neck and he shines the screen of his phone into my gaping maw. *A sunflower seed*, he says, *an old boot*, *the third secret of Fatima*, *but no tooth*.

He claims that his own third set of molars came through when he was sixteen. Three of them erupted without fuss. The fourth caused some kind of ordeal he cannot recall the specifics of. *Did it hurt?* I ask. He thinks so. He will not allow me to investigate the inside of his mouth and there's nobody else I can ask. Other humans and all of their orifices are just things we see in the distance now – shadows at the further end of supermarket aisles, heads bobbing along behind the windscreens of passing vehicles.

We do still see the farmer come and feed his cattle first thing every morning. We still meet our elderly neighbour out on the narrow, grassy road while we are walking. Paudy is an eighty-year-old bachelor. He has lived his whole life in a house identical to ours, except that it is painted yellow and has no extension. He travels the road up to six times a day; in his little red tractor, in his little blue tractor, in his Seat Ibiza. He always used to stop for a chat, but since the beginning of the pandemic he only rolls down his window, just a crack, and shouts, with unqualified feeling: *Terrible TERRIBLE times!* Then our small dog, who despises Paudy for reasons unaccountable, explodes – yelping, jumping, snapping – and the old man accelerates away.

Sometimes Paudy barks back as he goes. Presumably he does not realise that Mark and I can hear him.

The last dentist I saw was the first time I had seen that dentist. This is my modus operandi, with dentists. I go to see one once and they tell me my teeth are ok apart from the enamel erosion. *Do you eat a lot of sugar or acid?* They ask. *Not especially*, I say. They tell me to cut out the sugar and acids and I leave.

A year, sometimes a few years pass. Eventually I feel it necessary to seek dental attention again. At this point I have either moved house or my dentist has retired, and so I must sign up to a new one. I single out a practice in which the practitioners are as old as possible. The new, old dentist examines my teeth and tells me they're ok apart from the enamel erosion. *Do you eat a lot of sugar or acid?* They ask.

I do, as it happens. My default tippie is hot whiskey. My default salad dressing is lime juice and balsamic vinegar. I have a habit of cradling a jar of set honey as I sit at my desk, scraping mindlessly away at its surface with a teaspoon. But because I have moved house twice in the past ten years, and had three dentists conveniently retire, I have not yet been forced to admit to my fondness for sweet, astringent substances, nor to change.

I have always been attracted to souvenirs, the tackier the better. I love the idea that it might be possible to confine all of the colour, complexity, nuance and particularity of a place – of an experience – to a single, pocket-sized object. I love the audacity of the souvenir, the miraculous act of reductionism it represents. I am also drawn to paradox, and to form – to the clean shapes of our house, its lovely symmetry. I want to own a miniature of the place that sheltered us during this miniaturised period of history. I want to reach out and cup my palms around it.

At first I try to include every feature. I cut a short, twisted length of gorse and whittle it into a replica of the tree in the garden. I bend a length of light wire into a wobbly wrought iron gate. I mount a clay moon on a cocktail stick. *You are always trying to make celestial bodies that have no relevance to the project*, Mark points out, while it is still drying. He suggests I leave them alone and instead, in the future, make a sculpture composed entirely of stick-mounted moons.

He is also working on a project in response to the government travel restrictions. He is journeying the back roads of West Cork on Google Street View. He has restricted himself to those that are reasonably nearby and were available to him just weeks ago. He is looking for anomalies in the footage, for places where the slippage of time is conveyed. He is interested in lapses, absences, slight peculiarities. So far he has found a golden aeroplane appended to the sky, a mosquito resting against the

lens of the camera, legs splayed, and a bungalow that disappears and reappears depending upon the direction you approach it from. He calls them his *treasures*.

I cast aside the clay moon, the wire gate, the whittled gorse. I revoke the features, the details. I decide my souvenir will be six simple pieces: the clay base, the house body, the roof, the kitchen extension, a chimney, a chimney. All but the base will be cast in modelling plaster from the plastic trays of Fig Rolls.

We are eating too many biscuits.

A cursory Google search informs me that humans don't require a third set of molars any more, not at this particular juncture of evolution. This is because nowadays we don't tend to use our teeth to grind up roots and molluscs and raw meat. Nowadays we cook our food, and so our jaws have grown lazy. And we fill the hours we once devoted to mastication to rumination, and so our brains have increased in size, which leaves less space in the skull for our underutilised teeth. As a result, some people – presumably those most evolved – don't develop wisdom teeth at all. Other people have one or two appear, or experience a malfunction. The gratuitous molars become impacted. They throw the other teeth off course. They need to be surgically removed. The average adult, according to Google, is confronted with this predicament at the age of nineteen-point-five.

I am thirty-five.

Coincidentally, the last time I visited my most recent dentist I had enquired for the first time about the non-appearance of my wisdom teeth. I had brought it up a means of deflecting the inevitable question about my obvious over-consumption of sugary acids. She confirmed I had none, and offered to do an X-Ray which I had declined to pay for. *How old are you again?* She asked, and then she reassured me that they were not likely to show up now.

My most recent dentist was a woman with very black hair and a very white forehead. I can still remember the way each strand stood out against her hairline – punched in, yanked back. Now the memory of a stranger groping about inside my oral cavity – prodding my mucous membrane with her shiny tools – seems like a scene out of a horror movie. I realise suddenly that she was too young – forty, forty-five at most – and that now I will have to use the tremendous societal disruption of this pandemic as an excuse for switching to a different dentist.

I glue the six separate parts of my souvenir house together. I paint it white four times. Mark and I agree that the real house is grey, but cannot decide on the precise shade. I feel like it has a touch of brown in it. Mark argues for a touch of blue, the cold hue of a headstone. I hesitate significantly before I can bring myself to impose colour, and then to consider spoiling its perfect blankness by outlining windows and doors. Mark points out that the absence of exits is prescient, in light of the summer that stretches ahead of us.

It is May. The lawn is embarrassingly long. Buttercups tower over the daisies. Their stems crane and curl. The broken thing in the attic is still broken, but seems no more so than a month ago. Mark and I have grown accustomed to its noise. We have finished the bottle of Baileys we were gifted at Christmas but had intended to gift on to somebody else, unopened. We are both suddenly so sick and tired of our parsimonious life. We long for debauchery, but no debauchery presents itself and so we return to the solace of our tedious routines, our habits of penury and preservation.

I am happy with the first souvenir, so I make another. I am happy with the second souvenir, so I make another. I make ten, twenty, thirty. I run out of clay and superglue and the art shop still hasn't reopened, so I keep going with just the modelling plaster. I carve the individual parts. I lay them out to dry, leaving a respectful space between each pale, moist form. I line them up alongside one another in anticipation of the day when I will be able to stick them together.

We hear there are Garda road blocks, though we haven't seen any. We hear that country publicans are doing bicycle deliveries, but we see no tell-tale puddles of spilled stout along our narrow, grassy road. We sleep exceptionally well, as if our brains instinctively understand that oblivion is a good solution. We wake up and everything is exactly the same.

The farmer comes every morning with two huge buckets of nuts for the cows in the shed. The cows moo as soon as he pulls up. They moo loudly, frantically, imploringly. It's like they believe that if they do not immediately shout out he will drive off again – even after he has come all this way and parked right in front of them. And the dogs bark as if this daily occurrence is something completely new and suddenly menacing; as if they believe that instead of emptying his buckets and driving away as he always does, this morning the farmer might thrust down his nuts, kick the back door off its hinges, and storm into the house.

We wake up and everything is completely different.

We wake up and I feel for my new tooth.

I tongue its jagged apex. I tongue the hard gap of gum at the other side. My new tooth has not made much progress, nor have any of the others commenced to follow. My new tooth remains invisible, innocuous. Unless I reach out for it, it does not even exist. I lie in bed and contemplate the unrealised potential of my wisdom teeth; the possibility that I will be caused pain, that I will require treatment. It is a threat I had not psychologically prepared myself for, as is the pandemic.

*Please, please, please, I think, just hang on until all of this is over.*

Mark has a break-through with his Street View project. One day while cruising for anomalies, he stumbles across a field where the grass is soft pink. The colour seems to cling to the tips of the stalks like strange, seductive dew. He starts to search for the pinkness elsewhere, and gradually, it reveals itself. In some places it's just a tinge, a veil. In others it has infected not only the fields but the ditches and hedgerows, the belt of grass up the middle of a back road, the leaves and needles of the trees. Each time Mark finds a new cluster of pinkness he notes down the co-ordinates. I find them beautiful but it's the atmosphere that interests him. *They're moody*, he says, and I don't push him to elaborate.

Outside the real ditches are thronged with nettles. Every summer I intend to eat them but never get around to it. This summer, for the first time, the weeds of the driveway strike me as less ominous than anything I might carry home wrapped in plastic from the supermarket. So I pick and boil and blitz them into a spicy tomato soup. They taste like spice, like tomato, so I keep going. Only once I have eaten the last nettle from the driveway do I realise that sea spinach is plentiful around the surrounding coast. It tastes better than the nettles; it doesn't wound me as I harvest it. Mark catches a pollock, and we eat the whole thing in one sitting in a curry, and I am buoyed up by the idea that if I can forage and Mark can catch fish, then we might survive slightly longer than the average domesticated human once the apocalypse arrives. *Providing it arrives in May, Mark points out, and I happen to have all the right gear and bait. Providing that seasons are still a thing. Providing that plants still grow. Providing that fish still thrive in the poisonous ocean.*

In the beginning the nights had been calm and clear and the moon full. I would wake in the dark to an eerie light. *I will always remember this pandemic for its bright moon*, I had thought, but then, of course, the moon diminished; the clouds returned and the pandemic continued.

In the beginning, the weather was lovely. *I will always remember this pandemic for its lovely weather*, I had thought, but then it had turned cold and rained again. The winds swung northerly and strengthened. The pandemic continued.

I carve the parts of my house, one at a time. I try to worry about my teeth one at a time. There is no point dwelling on the others. Some of them never even formed. Some of them haven't even shown up. They are lost in there – confused, disenfranchised, unviable. And the ones that did show are already getting smaller. But this one is brand new, unblemished. Its surface is perfect, the enamel strong. This is the one I will chew with when the others have been smoothed away to naked, blunt nubs. This is the one I was given when all hope was lost.

There is only this tooth now.

It is June.

The weather is lovely again. Paudy approaches in his little blue tractor as we are walking up the road. He slows down and slides back the window pane as he approaches and calls out. For the first time in twelve weeks instead of *Terrible TERRIBLE times* he shouts, with unqualified feeling: *Glorious GLORIOUS morning!* And the little dog explodes. He snarls and lunges and yaps, drowning out our greetings, and the little blue tractor accelerates. The old man passes on down the narrow, grassy road. His head is still leaning out the slit of the window, and above the choking, coughing, struggling sound of the engine we can just about hear him barking back.

*Sara Baume, © summer 2020*