

Paul Allen

“All I Want For Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth...”

One of the few teeth that stuck it out all his life
sometimes gets away from him.
Trapezoidal, chalk-white, bright, and out of line,
it overlaps its little yellow brothers,
looms there like a monument,
like a cliff face in his face.

This is no tooth for a choir—some “Living Tree” in a church.
It is a tooth that has written little more than a name or two
maybe 50 times in its life; that accepts driving tickets
without looking back as though to see the infraction
taking place, says *sir*, *mam* to people half its age,
minds its business, stares at floors in waiting rooms;
a tooth that shuts doors to stores lightly, easily;
that keeps the light off with women;
that finds women who have downcast eyes.

He is not a fool. He sees in the populace
how they take it into themselves, or on themselves,
and knows from their eyes: Once seen, it's in their lives
and in their children's lives. They may wake
to it themselves, as he has always done,
or use it to make their children eat their fruit,
I saw a man once with this big, white tooth in front. . . .

When they were young, and he was young,
they laid him on a turd near the flag at Byrd Elementary.
And when he cut out for good as a man,
a man gave him a ride, gave him 50 bucks
to let him do this or that. Then something changed
the man. He backed out, apologized for even saying it,
then begged him to keep the money just the same.

It was the tooth. He has always known it
whenever luck (or no luck) slapped him in the face.
When people notice it, they get that helpless look
of one more time not knowing what to say.

So mostly now he tries to keep his lip zipped
to spare them, spare himself, let everyone off the hook.
Except in seasons like this, when he feels called,
compelled by the time of day or the air, to walk
among them with a weird feeling in his heart
and gut and groin. He moves along familiar streets,
the sky an angel blue, and all down-town busy,
though hushed—despite the tinny carols
hissing on every corner. He passes
through the shadows under the snagged awnings,
pauses between them in the warm shapes of sunlight,
and smiles at perfect strangers
in the spirit of the season. And for spite.