

Hard-to-Reach Places

by Beth Thomas

Jody wakes some days with pieces missing. Small pieces, mostly: an eyebrow, a toenail. Sometimes the things come back, sometimes not. Last month, she woke with a hole through her right hand, a neat hole about the size of a half-dollar coin, big enough to look through. She plays peek-a-boo with kids on the bus when their parents aren't looking, wondering if this memory will surface later in therapy.

Sometimes, though rarely, there are extra things. An extra finger, which disappeared weeks later. Once, an extra tooth jammed in the back of her jaw, aching. She says to whomever, you can get used to anything. Her mother used to say that.

Every morning, she investigates, fingers nimble in her mouth counting teeth, then down over her breasts and ribs, poking around, feeling for holes. Roger finds this sexy. Roger is missing an entire leg, from the hip down — car accident a dozen years ago. He understands how things that once were there can just be gone. He helps her search her hard-to-reach places, then makes pancakes for breakfast.

She watches through the window as tiny birds build a nest in the willow. She calls into the other room, “A molar and a canine gone!” Roger calls back, “Oh, on the same side?” She knows there is nothing else to ask. “Yes,” she says, feeling the void with the tip of her tongue.

The birds circle the nest, placing a twig, a shred of paper receipt, a piece of turquoise ribbon. Small pieces of things. She fights the instinct to go outside, climb the tree, and reclaim them.

Roger leaves after helping clear the breakfast dishes. In a sheepish aside at the door, after a good-bye kiss on tiptoe, he asks if she feels

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taller.

She will get an x-ray tomorrow. She imagines the glowing white-on-black of extra vertebrae, transverse processes, and tailbones stacked as if to breed more hips and legs.

In the evening, when the birds have gone elsewhere, she walks beneath the trees and scatters strips of newspaper, bits of photos from an old parenting magazine.

The hole in her hand winks closed. In the morning it will be gone.

