

 *Danny Thanh Nguyen* 

Troublemaker

It was a Monday and the boy—a freckled high school junior—was bored in the back of history class. His history teacher was lecturing about the Gold Rush, drawing animated boxes and lines on the whiteboard between the words Transcontinental Railroad and Chinese Exclusion Act. But the boy was busy pointing out to other students sitting within earshot just how faggoty Jeff Schuler (who was in the front row) was dressed that day. “This is all going to be on next week’s exam,” the teacher said, zigzagging the red dot of his laser pointer across a map of the world, circling Spain and the Philippines and the United States.

The boy entertained himself by breaking off bits of eraser and launching them at the back of Jane Hollingshead’s head. He was about to catapult his eighth rubber nugget when the teacher called him out—aiming the red laser between the boy’s eyes like a sniper. The history teacher assigned the boy detention for the rest of the week and removed his tongue. The tongue was thrown inside a fluid-filled mason jar and set at the front of the teacher’s desk like a trophy. When the boy’s tongue was ripped from his mouth, he could hear the sound of peeling Velcro ring inside his head.

“You can have your tongue back at the end of the week on Friday. Maybe,” the teacher said. He sent the boy home with a note addressed to his parents, explaining the situation on school letterhead which looked serious and official.

“Serves you right,” the boy’s mother said, folding the letter. She shook her head, disappointed, muttering something about how she and her husband could have raised such a troublemaker. The boy felt the hot blob of indignation rolling up his face. He wanted to protest: “This is not fair! What about the right to free speech?” But with no tongue to guide his voice, every word came out sounding smeared. He sounded retarded, the boy thought.

His mother walked out into the garden to water her garden before the sun set; she didn’t want to hear any of his complaints. The boy went back into the house and returned with a marker and piece of notebook paper, holding it up like a picket sign that read: THIS IS CHILD ABUSE. His mother stood by the wooden fence with the hose in her hand, unmoved. The boy turned the paper over and scrawled out BITCH and held it up. “You’re just angry,” his mother said. The scent of wet soil and petunias lifted into the air around them. The mother said, “You owe me an apology for that one, Mister. Now go do your homework.”

The boy refused. He left the house instead. He stomped his way to the convenient store on the other side of the neighborhood, holding his fingers laced together inside the kangaroo pockets of his sweatshirt. He spent the rest of the evening pushing quarters into the video game machine. It was a fighting game, nice and violent, tucked in the back corner between the snack aisle and cold drink cases. Back home there was an unopened textbook in his backpack containing the answers to how Hawaii had become the 50th state and how many internment

camps there were during World War II. But the boy was here, smashing his palm at the control panel of buttons, commanding his character to perform flying uppercuts and hurricane kicks. With the correct buttons and deft movement of the joystick, the boy could make his character yell while shooting fireballs from his hands. His enemies tried to knock him down in mid-air, but he launched his fireballs and let the video game do his screaming for him: *Ha-dou-ken!*

The boy won a few rounds, but lost quarter after quarter until his pockets were empty. He was distracted by the throbbing nub of what was left in his mouth. He imagined his tongue then, swimming like an otter in its briny bath on the other side of town. “So, a blond, a redhead, and a brunette walk into a bar,” the tongue would begin, reciting a joke. “They’re sitting on separate stools, arguing over which one of them was looser...” But the boy knew that tongues could not talk on their own; they needed a mouth and will to shape them. In that darkened classroom with no spotlight on it, his tongue would have only been able to silently yearn for a sympathetic audience. “Hey! Where did everyone go?” it would wish to call out. “Get me out of this joint.”

At school the next day, everywhere the boy went he kept noticing the students around him with their tongues still intact. Tongues doing what they were damned well privileged to do. In class they carved the outlines of words, responding to questions from teachers, answering them wrongly or correctly. On the sprawling cement field of the school’s quad, away from ears that would have cared, tongues were hollering insults: *Motherfucker! Douche-bag!* Pressed into restroom stalls, other students were making out, letting their tongues lurch like heavy wet towels over each other’s lips and sweat-salted necks—some lapping up the caress of another tongue for the first time.

But the boy could do none of these things. At lunch he sat alone in the buzzing cafeteria, remembering the pull and snap of when his history teacher locked his tongue away. He cut a wedge from his public school lunch—a wilted-looking brick of lasagna on a Styrofoam plate—and brought the plastic fork up to his mouth. He could smell the grease and cheese and sauce, but as he chewed the food tasted like nothing. Just a flavorless lump of mush.

The boy tried writing about all of this in detention after school—which was held in his history classroom, room number 237. His history teacher had given him two options: either study for their test or do a minimum of five pages of free-write.

The teacher then went to his desk on the side of the whiteboard. He loosened his necktie and un-notched the top button of his collared shirt. Fluorescent beams from the ceiling washed over him. With his face lowered to the desktop, the teacher tapped rhythms onto the mason jar. “Say Uncle,” he cheered at the tongue. His eyeball was menacing, magnified through the glass. “Say *Uncle!*”

The boy tried to write, but it was difficult ignoring the sight of the history teacher mocking his tongue like a prisoner. The boy could tell his teacher wanted to laugh but was suppressing a righteous smirk.

If only the boy were in possession of his tongue right then, he would have made it spit a song of disses: *Fuckin’ faggot. I’m not your bitch, Bitch. You can’t control me.* Unable to invoke any of this, though, the lone tongue charged at its walls, attempting to pounce at its keeper.

Which startled the teacher. Which made the boy light up with pride. His tongue was still a fighter! His tongue was a fireballing betta fish in that watery prison!

The teacher pulled out a ruler and plunged down into the jar, pinning the fighter and watching it struggle—thrashing back and forth, wriggling side to side—until it was finally subdued. Then he looked up at the boy from across the room. “Don’t forget to finish your free-write,” he said. His voice was not admonishing but calm, as if he were smoothly commenting upon the weather. “Looks like you still have about three more pages to go,” the teacher said.

From where he sat, the boy could see his tongue was now lying spent on the floor. The bones in his body suddenly feel weak. He wrote down the words *Meek and Humble* on his free-write paper. For the rest of the day, the boy would look up and see his tongue occasionally straining a lopsided wave, as though reaching for something. At four o’clock, he handed in his pages and left, choking on the dread of what his sadistic teacher would do to his sad, defenseless tongue when he was not around.

He returned after school for Day 2 of detention and it was the same mind-to-butt-numbing routine: him in that hard plastic chair with another set of free-writes. His teacher was no longer paying attention to the tongue and, instead, was busy grading a stack of assignments, checking off answers to why there was a North and South Korea and what did the five presidents between 1953-1977 have in common. The boy could not remember whether or not he had turned his homework in.

The tongue sat neglected in its jar. It just bobbed in the fluid like a lazy sea sponge.

On this particular afternoon, the boy found that the free-write was somehow harder to do. He thought back upon his day and it came up as a blur; the school had cleared of people and noises; and with only silence all around him, the boy found that he was unable to come up with words to write. So he scripted the phrase, “Without words to write,” over and over again with his number 2 pencil. This was a trick his English teacher had told him to do whenever he was given a free-write and had nothing new to say—just repeat yourself until you come up with some new ideas. So he wrote that.

Four o’clock came. With the ends of his fingers aching, the boy handed in his punishment. The teacher eyed the redundant lines on each page. The boy slung his limp backpack over a shoulder and was headed for the door.

“Wait,” the teacher said. He crumpled the free-write pages into the recycling bin. When the boy turned around, the teacher was holding the jar out at him. “Here,” his teacher said. “Take it. You can have it back early.”

The boy was very happy; after all, it was only Wednesday.

He opened the jar then and there, and even spilled some tongue juice onto the linoleum floor in his haste. Plugging the cold tongue back into his warm mouth was a strange sensation—an icy-hot reunion. He sighed at its fulfilling relief: to be able to refill that space which had begun becoming accustomed to emptiness.

The teacher smiled an arch of coffee-stained enamel and pink gums. The boy’s tongue began to tingle. Then, despite his control, it blurted out “Thank you.” He cupped his hands over his mouth, but again it spoke. “Sorry,” it said, softly but clearly audible.