

Masthead Logo

**The Iowa Review**

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Volume 27  
Issue 1 *Spring*

Article 21

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1997

# Tooth

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## Recommended Citation

McKean, James. "Tooth." *The Iowa Review* 27.1 (1997): 137-138. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4818>

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## *James McKean*

### TOOTH

I'm near the end myself so hooray  
for this citizen who leaves his car in midtraffic  
and climbs the hood of the car in front of him,  
stopped in the lane next to me at a red light  
in Oakland, California, on a hot summer afternoon.  
He finally has his say, swearing through tomato-red  
cheeks, fist balled, and spitting. I keep my window rolled up  
though I'd cheer if my mouth didn't bleed and words  
didn't stumble from my numb lips. Today  
I took a friend's advice but her well-meaning Italian-  
born dentist, who believes in cleansing  
by pain, could wrench my tooth out only at rush hour.  
I made it on time but crawl back in traffic  
that lines up like teeth. All I taste is iron and cotton.  
I swear the radio plays opera from Milan,  
a chorus of famous dentists come home, doing fifty  
molars an hour, their gap-toothed relatives suffering  
no more. I paid for his leverage. With his probe  
he pointed out what I should let go and what I might save.  
I saved the memory of two breasts at eye-level  
beneath the white, blood-spotted smock of Becky,  
the assistant who winced on cue when my tooth cracked,  
who caught it in a pan, who wrote my future  
on a little card and wrapped my tooth in foil  
like silver rigatoni, a relic, blessed with pliers,  
and in her hands forever wise. Wait, I've found Daly City  
to be a boundless stucco grin. Wait. The lady  
in the car next to me doesn't move as if  
the man jumping on her hood is full service,  
doing a jig, conducting. I'd like to thank him.  
I'm nearly home and will drink soup and lie down and  
think of him, afoot at last in lane two, his wonderful

paroxysms and rage, who left his car behind  
as if it were a bad tooth, the motor running and the keys  
locked inside when the light turns green  
and we all drive off in a great crescendo of honking.