

EROSION

“Miss? Can you tell us how to get to the room with the whale? You know, hanging from the ceiling? I’m sure it’s going to fall someday. Don’t you think the whale will fall, crash through to the subway? Hundreds of commuters killed by the great whale? I’ve always thought that. Ever since I was a kid and we’d come on field trips. We’d walk across the park and we’d have to buddy up. Boys holding boys’ hands. We’d have a field trip in the museum. Big whale. Please.”

She pointed and continued walking past a vertebrate paleontology diorama. That museum visitor might have brain damage though probably not. She pressed her cheek to her shoulder thinking that if she walked through the museum with her head cocked too far to one side or if she concocted a tic, a trigger between her right cheek and her left knee then there would be no more language that sullies. People would stop talking to her. A troop of Boy Scouts passed. I hate you, she thought.

In ancient Greece there was a woman named Timyche admired for her virtue. She had cut out her tongue with a knife so that, unlike other women, she would not say the wrong thing. Timyche made the woman who worked in the museum curious because either Timyche was like the woman’s younger sister who used to drop her pants on the playground to make the boys happy or else Timyche had another reason and couldn’t tell anybody what it was once her tongue was gone.

The woman herself had another reason for not talking. When she had fallen in love there was nothing that she wanted to tell people except, mind your own business and, smile, I’ve got a lover. The more she opened her mouth, the more geologists moved in, took up residence in her chest cavity, spilling rough grade sediment and fixing their pencils, “Let’s watch this erode.” So she told her sister, “He doesn’t like too much cream in his coffee.” She told the woman next door, “I’d like to get married in the winter.” And she told the people in her office, “No, he doesn’t like me to wear red clothing.” Then she stopped for the echo. Imagine how these statements got back to him over drinks or the telephone. When she looked at the place inside where he used to be there were only a few words rattling in a once full cavity, words of little use from the jingly opening song of a sitcom he used to watch.