

## I've Stopped Trying To Make Celery Taste Good

1.

I hear it in a pop song for the first time as a child—  
a vegetable is a vegetable and also a dead weight.  
I see it for myself when I'm slightly older.

*Vegetable.*

What a horrible shape to form your mouth into and call a body,  
I think to myself, because I am no older than ten years of age.

It will be a long while before I begin to consider:

Venation,  
Taproot,  
Seeds, yet to be sown.  
Proof of life and new ground,  
immunity to the ever-present fires.  
Proof of pedigree.

Presently,

My parents look worried and busy  
through the narrow rectangle window. So I wonder about the etymology of  
the word 'hospital'  
while sitting in the waiting room.  
And though I can't spell 'etymology' yet,  
I'm sure it'll be fine. Google will get me where I need to go.  
I've been here enough times  
to know how to spell out 'hospital'

But still, I think. What a horrible shape.

2.

Fine. I'll admit that I'm not above complaining about the smell.  
My mother is cutting up celery tonight for my siblings and I watch closely  
because at thirteen,  
I have terrible knife skills.  
I hate celery, I keep telling her. It stinks so bad. I *gotta* let her know.  
As expected, she ignores this.  
She's doing the best she can to accommodate, after all.  
Her children have to eat their

strange after-school snack.

I've compared the feel of  
English in my mouth  
to the taste of celery ever since I was young.  
I had just learned about metaphor and simile,  
and I wanted to try my hand at writing.  
With that came chance and opportunity.  
For the first time,  
I could dismiss the mythologies of my parents' upbringing.  
I could come up with something  
of my own.

A brand-new evil, I write in the corners of my math notebook.  
Cold syllables cutting the insides  
of my cheeks whenever I  
utter a word.  
I swallow my sentences down  
—as sour as they come—  
and wince.

3.  
Whenever I get caught in a lie, my mother says she ought to cut off my  
split-snake tongue.  
I know there are consequences that come with  
having this sort of power.  
I know my words get me into trouble,  
and so do hers.  
I let her keep saying it.

4.  
My paternal grandmother used to enjoy Nutella and jam sandwiches  
before she passed on,  
and we as children giggled about it together because  
*who even does that?*

Don't worry. It's okay.

She didn't get the chance to know what we had been saying.

I try it for myself, when I'm older.  
God, I can't.  
It's much too sweet  
for a mouth like mine.

5.  
I learned it then—  
Between  
the bigamy of a forked tongue  
with a language barrier  
or an unpleasant meal,  
though it was still edible,

Between disgruntled in-laws,  
Between the weight of existing  
as a third-culture-kid adjacent,  
I still can't get the words out; there is  
just negative space. A gap between my front teeth.  
Diastema only wide enough to fit a  
pocket blade,  
which meant a duel.  
By word of mouth:  
Recess. Front playground. It's me versus the white kids.  
*Be there or be square.*

In between saying "I've lost"  
and saying "I keep on losing"  
I think our mouths occupy  
strange significance—

Guilty consciences  
posing  
unique harm.