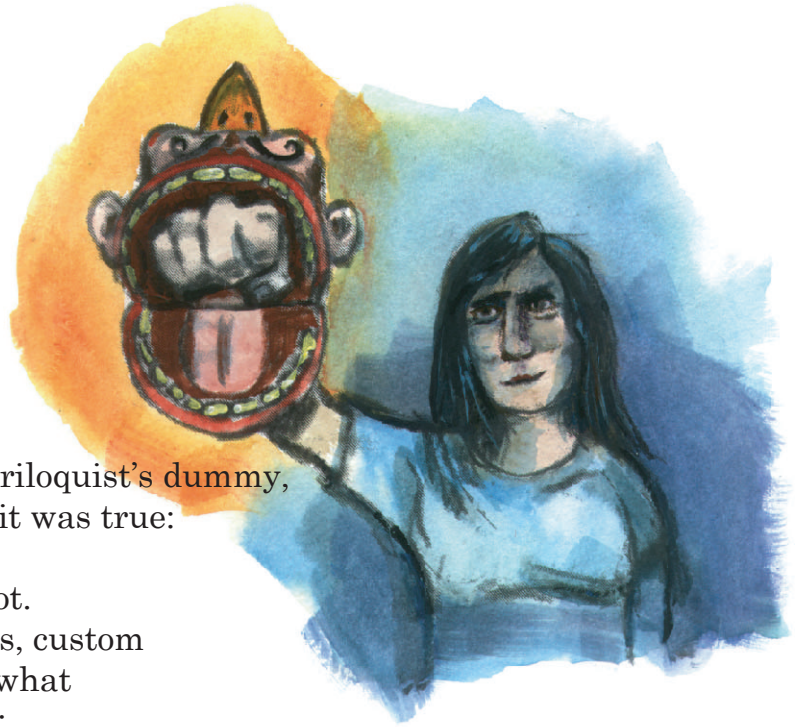


# Mouth



When she bought the thrift shop ventriloquist's dummy, she said, Who could resist him? And it was true: a little man who'd sit on your lap and say the things your lips should not. And they were expensive, these things, custom made, she believed, though that was what at last began to bother her about him: the coiffed black hair, the pencil mustache, his diminutive, excellent tuxedo, like a dollhouse playboy or a maitre d' nose high to the place setting. It wasn't so much how he looked drolly on as she made love with a larger if less wooden man, but that she'd sometimes think to sit him on her bare thigh afterward as he reviewed his competitor's performance. And it wasn't that her hand inside him made her, or him, or them, cruel exactly, or even unkind, though there were sighs she could fake and words he would not. It wasn't even the lover who took him by the throat and tossed him face first back on his corner chair, then took her again, and harder. Nor that as he did she imagined the fleshly man the dummy, the taste of his sweat the dummy's sweat, the smell of his dangerous rage the source of the words only the dummy could utter. No. It was, she insisted, the mouth nothing ever entered but from within, and how she could open that mouth all the way and tilt back the empty head of him and laugh and laugh, from the gut, from the heart, which was nothing more or less than her fist.

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