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RIT

*Token*

By

Kathleen Marie Ripton Johnson

Thesis submitted in  
partial fulfillment of the  
Degree of Master of Fine Art Studio in Fine Arts

College of Art and Design  
Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, NY

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**Thesis Approval**

Token

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## Abstract

Token is a thesis body of work that combines two and three-dimensional printmaking and sculpture techniques, to highlight contemporary issues and poetry through the lens of a fable. This body of work deals with how culturally relevant information is spread by using traditional storytelling to reveal, with a certain level of absurdity, an underlying lesson, warning, or teachable moment.

In the work, the tooth is a symbol of payment or sacrifice and in our contemporary capitalist world, everything costs something. In this reality, the number of teeth lost demonstrates who you are, what you have and what you have had to sacrifice. This exchange of currency in a tooth-based economy fable brings to light the severity of the inequality present in today's culture. For example, the Pink Tax, the fact that feminine products cost more than the equivalent male products, could go unnoticed when just a few dollars differ, but the sacrifice of an extra tooth cannot be ignored.

Material and audience interaction also play a role in the thesis work. As the viewer walks across the wooden platform, they experience a give in the material, movement the viewer must then compensate for while walking. The exaggeration of steel supports creates a barrier to convey otherness or separation while remaining transparent. The reference of time is present as the cast iron teeth begin rusting down the mortar head. The idea is similar to the collection of charms on a bracelet but uses the collection of teeth. This presentation, however, conjures reference to the creation of a "fools stone", and points to a lack of stability or knowledge. The sheer number of teeth presented throughout the work shows diversity in physical form and in concept.

## Table of content

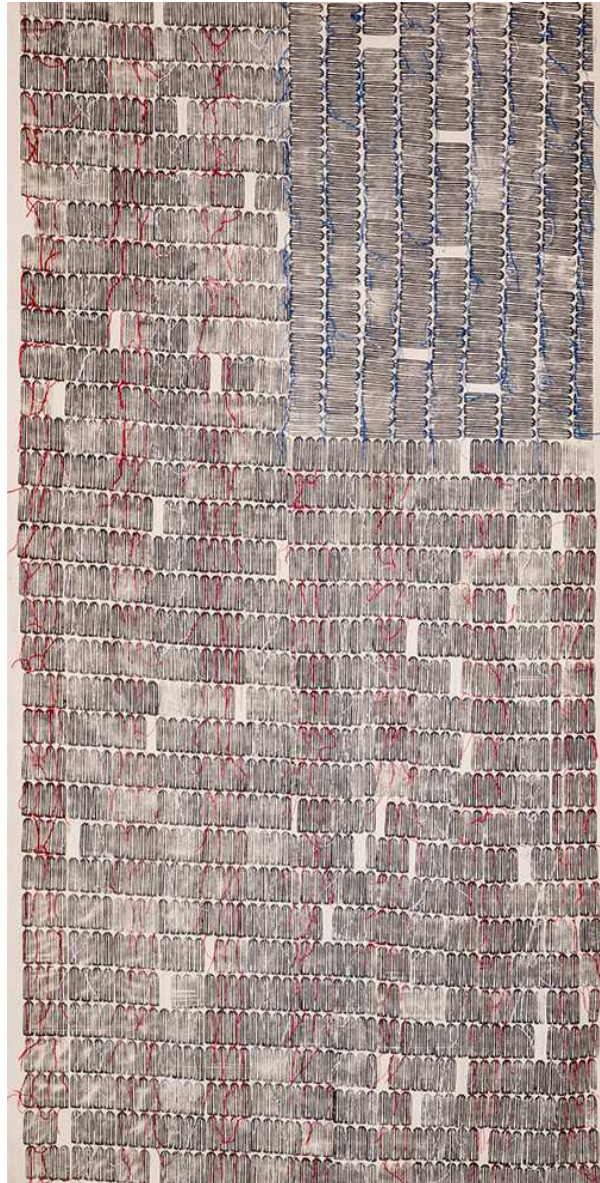
Introduction.....	i
Thesis Committee.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Content.....	iv
Token.....	1
Ritual of the spill.....	3
Tooth.....	5
A Transition in Payment Between Generations.....	6
A Slight Shift in the Foundation.....	14
Bibliography.....	18

## Token

The transformation and evolution of language and its inherent meaning can be found throughout storytelling and fables and has influenced the research in the thesis work. These forms of communication reference a history of sharing information, perspectives and adaptations that can be traced back through the history of most cultures around the world. For example, the American nursery rhyme, *Ring Around the Rosie*, originates from the English acclaimed version, *ring a Ring O' Roses*, first appearing in print in 1881. This ditty originated as a form of the spoken word and has been circulating through society and culture across the world for much longer than its written form. The content and perceptions of this nursery rhyme that is sung around the world today generally have stayed the same. The only consistent change of vocabulary is in the third stanza. The American version says “ashes, ashes” whereas the British version says “a-tishoo, a-tishoo”. The common Indian verse states “Husha Busha” and also the Maori version reads “Kahuru Kahuru”. Kahuru translates to Murder and Husha Busha translates to “They are running out of breath.” (*“Ringa Ringa Roses - India”2018-07-18*) (Delamar 2001, pp. 38-9). Although these changes in word choices are slight, the content remains generally the same, highlighting how fables serves to spread ideas and the underlying lesson hidden beneath them. The evidence of change in wording shows that stories and their perceptions evolve. This occurs in both physical and conceptual form. There are many different explanations of theories related to the origin of the rhyme, with some references related to spiritual and environmental factors that date back to the Sixteenth century. Since we do not have the original version of the fable, its true interpretation is lost. The most recent connotations associated with the modern version reference the Great plague that happened in England in 1665. This interpretation fits with the language in the fable as it is used today, but since stories spread and language changes and evolves, there is no evidence backing this claim. This is particularly relevant as there are no references to this rhythm being associated with the plague in either the United Kingdom or the United states prior to World War II (Opie and Opie 1985, pp. 221–222.).

This concept dealing with the transition of perception through time, can be seen during the beginning stages of my research, specifically in the work, *Ritual of the Spill*. This work is a linoleum cut and mixed media print on fabric. Abstracting the form of a tampon, simplifies it to a basic linear shape that shares a visual affiliation with the shape of a bullet. The tampon was and often still is viewed as taboo by many cultures around the world due to its association with the sanctity of female virginity.

Although this is not the mainstream ideology of contemporary America, the tampon and many other feminine products, are considered a luxury and taxed as such. This unequal taxation is commonly referred to as the Pink Tax. The blurring of identity between the tampon and the bullet brings into question our country's definitions of both necessity and luxury. But just as all things change, the perceptions surrounding feminine sanctity alongside the perception of the second amendment and its corresponding components are experiencing change.



Ritual of the spill, Linoleum cut and mixed media on fabric, 66" x 131," 2019

## Ritual of the spill

One of the most influential pieces of writing for the conception of Ritual of the spill, was American poet Olivia Gatwood and her work

*Odes to my Period Underwear.*

I didn't purchase you as such,

You grew into the role,

Earned your name

After the first stain

And admittedly

Now I am careless

With your fabric

No fear of the overflow

As I trust you will not

Mind another scar

And yes, once you were

Brand new

Bought in the name

Of some boy who I wished

To see me unmarked

And clean as his mother's

Kitchen counter

Perhaps once you were

Even called

The good pair

Which is not to say

You are the opposite now

But that you gave

New meaning to the phrase

In the way a good car

Is often one with six digits

In the odometer

Isn't that the greatest evolution

For something to be good

And then to become More good

In its thorough use

You, keeper of a thousand

Non-pregnant surprise parties

Instigator of the exhale

Proof that no matter

how many years

I have spent her



I will never  
Get the hang of this  
And even though  
I have shoved you  
To the back of the drawer,  
Strategically folded  
So that your forever mess  
Was not revealed,  
I have also reveled  
in the fossil of you  
yes you, relic  
of age thirteen  
and also  
twenty-three  
hoarder of the blot,  
we all have at least  
one of you to slide up  
our winter legs  
wiggle in your loose grip  
and this too is a kind  
of ceremony, the choosing  
of you, I mean  
and the washing, too  
the folding and wearing  
and washing again  
and at last the ruin  
the ritual of the spill  
your national anthem  
your ever-changing flag

*(New American Best Friend, 2017, pp.44-45).*

Published in her book, *New American Best Friend*, 2017, Gatwood's relatable and comedic musings, transform past perceptions surrounding girlhood. This poem references a ritualistic practice that became essential to my research. Most significantly, the stanza "Ritual of the spill" stood out, motivating the repeated and overlapping form, which can be read as tampon or bullet. The meaning of Ritual of the spill could also be fluid in its translation, referencing the shape of the American Flag the ritual of spilling blood via tampon or bullet.

There is an underlying thread in both Gatwood's poem and the well-known nursery rhyme: a softening of content in order to make it more palatable for the consumer. Connecting the value of period underwear to a well-used car and the twentieth century theory that children are singing and dancing about death. This is also prevalent in the print *Ritual of the Spill*, the viewer is automatically presented with the flag and must investigate further to extract the concept within the art. Individual perception is altered by the viewer's, experiences, and history.

## **The Tooth**

My father always told me everything costs something and that nothing was free. So as any child would, I proceeded to list off things to prove him wrong such as air, water, and sunlight. But he always found some payment that must be given in exchange for any of the simple necessities I threw at him. This was my introduction to the concept that not all payments or costs can be quantified into a single physical dollar amount.

Looking back on the history of currency, the value of physical material has slowly diminished throughout the evolution of humanity. Civilization once traded physical goods and services with the translation of values determined by the individuals participating. Later people utilized luxury goods and precious metals, stones, and gems as a form of payment. Currently we use printed paper to determine value, solely relying on the current culture and economy to sustain or uphold its metaphorical value.

In the work, *Token*, the tooth is repetitively used as a symbol of a payment or sacrifice that must be given for all things. In this currency system, your identity and connections determine the number of teeth one must sacrifice. In another poem written by Gatwood titled, *At the Owl*, she writes in part:

I break my face into a half melon smile  
Cock my neck like a question mark  
offer him more of whatever he is drinking  
In a half assed curtsy tone  
His gaze hangs longer than I've asked for  
Work for your money girl  
Dance like a hooked fish  
Beg me like a stray dog  
Give me your teeth as tokens  
I hand them over  
Like coins in an arcade game  
*(At the Owl, PoemHunter 2019)*

This exchange of currency in a tooth-based fable seeks to represent the severity of systemized inequality present in today's culture. The Pink Tax demonstrates a sacrifice that could go unnoticed when just a few dollars make up the difference, but in my tale of teeth, the sacrifice of an actual tooth cannot be ignored.

## **A transition in payment between a generation**

My investigation into the translation of language and its meaning brought me to the spoken word poetry of William Evens. This contemporary poet describes the challenges of being a black man and a father of a black daughter in modern America. He talks about his experiences and fears while raising his daughter, the lessons she will learn, the difference between how they each learned, and the sacrifices they each had to make in the process.

***I Turn the Volume Down Because Beyoncé Says Fuck While I Drive My Daughter to School***

The four-year-old gives her first protest of the morning  
Whether warranted or the default position  
Of her mother's legacy. Her fist is balled the way a boy  
Would grip her hair in a kindergarten class or at any age  
That boys put their names on things.  
She says, *Hey I like that song*  
And Beyoncé has already finished saying *I'm gonna fuck me up a*  
*Bitch* so I turn the volume back up to five seconds ago  
before I told this muse what sound was too ripe for my daughter's lungs,  
before I was the fist resting upon the speaker and I know  
It doesn't take much to get this little girl's blood  
Into a spell because it was once her grandmother's blood,  
Which means there will be a day when someone  
Some man tries to pull it out of her and she becomes a wound  
Where the curses her father hid from her come tumbling out  
(*I Still Can't Do My Daughters Hair, Evens 2017*).

Evens poem shows an internal struggle between what he thinks his daughter should experience verses the path his daughter will inevitably experiences growing up as a black woman.

This poem was an influenced in the creation of the interactive sculpture, *Illusion of Stability*.

This piece consists of a wooden platform made up of three thousand six hundred individual two-inch square blocks sewn together with industrial cable. The top of each block has a single linoleum cut print of a tooth. The viewer must walk across the platform and experience a 'give' in the material, a material that is usually perceived as stable, hard and unyielding. The individual walking across the blocks must physically adjust their body to make up for the sudden instability in order to continue to the other side. Although this instability is only a slight shift, the number of teeth suggest a history, or a collection that has built up over time.



*Illusion of stability, Limonium cut on wood, 10'x 10' 20202*

Evens wrote another poem called, *Wildfire*, from his book called *We Inherit What the Fires Left*. Here again, is another internal battle expressed through the spoken word regarding a payment given for a life lesson. He struggles to negotiate the amount his daughter should pay to learn this lesson. A payment for which he personally, sacrificed more than enough teeth for.

### ***Wildfire***

I know that when it doesn't flinch at my arrival

That the rabbit in my front yard is dead.

I knew this after yesterday's sun

When the rabbit tried to move

And could do nothing

But stare at me

Drowning in my merciful shadow.

I have returned today to see that my home has found death

Or that death has found the shadow it fled too.

The rabbit is so small

That the grass had barely bothered to part for it.

I wonder if it will do the work for me

Pull the rabbit into itself.

I have seen a street do that

I have seen small creatures left on a sidewalk

Bodies elongated and still

Until someone confirms they will never pull the world into their lungs again

And then they were gone

As if the concrete had not been fed.

But it is insatiable

8

The tar and the earth and the blood it demands.

I find a shovel because it is hot out

And my daughter will want to play here.

I assume we all dance among the dead especially if we don't know any better.

I do not want her to see the rabbit like this  
Where the rabbit is no longer a thing, but a thing left behind  
But I don't want her to not see it either.  
And isn't this what I went to college for?  
To buy a home in a place  
Where my daughter can learn about death from small animals  
Instead of classmates.  
I don't know when someone she loves will leave something behind  
That she no longer recognizes.  
I learned animals will flee scarier thing  
Unless they have forgone fear  
Or they're already dead.  
Because one time a police officer told us to stop  
And we ran into the arms of a new night  
Except for big Kevin  
Who must not have been scared  
Or he was already dead.  
Either way, the next day he was still on the sidewalk  
And the day after he was gone  
I do not know if the cracks of his burial took him in  
Or who was assigned a shovel that day.  
*(We Inherit What the Fires Left, Evens 2020)*

Death is an unavoidable life lesson that we all must learn. During my own life and experiences, I, like his daughter, was able to pay a small price for the lesson of death from the sacrifice of small animals instead of people, classmates, or loved ones. For me, Evens is pointing out an imbalance of payment based on physical geographic and the racial segregation between urban and suburban regions. *Big Kevin* is a reference to another poem Evens wrote titled “*How to find a heaven you don't deserve*” where he describes his experiences growing up in Chicago and the police violence that occurred around him. *Big Kevin* was just one of his many friends that have died due to racial police violence.

“And then every kid in the hood wanted to put *little* in front of their name because who wants to be so large that something this fast can find you.” - *How to find a heaven you don't deserve*, William Evens 2015



*Token I*, Cast Iron and Mortar, 48” x 58” x 64” 2020

Material has its own connotation in the work, *Token*. The large stylized stone-like head is a mortar shell with an armature of carved and laminated two-inch foam sheeting. The mortar shell suggests a “fool stone”. Several cast iron teeth wrapped with rope like a gift, are arranged and rest upon the head conveying a sense of instability. Rust from the iron drips down the side referencing the passage of time while the hollow fool’s stone suggests a lack of knowledge and hoarding a multitude of tokens, like a collection of charms on a bracelet.



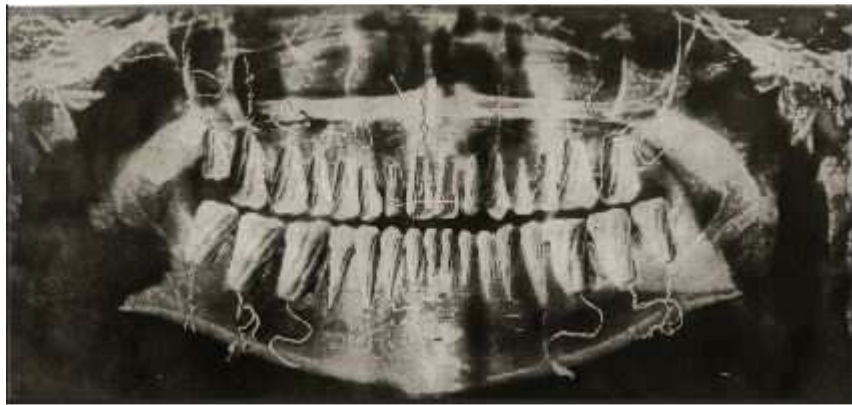
*Token II, screen printing, found objects and fabricated steel, 65"x100"x104," 2020*





*Token II, screen printing, found object and fabricated steel, 65"x100"x104," 2020*

A Large sculpture composed of fabricated steel and found object (windows) explores the concept of transparency. The work can be viewed from both sides of the barrier- like structure. The hand drawn teeth are screen prints on a plastic PTGE plate and then adhered to the windows from both sides. The tied hanging rope references the doorknob tooth removal process used in popular culture. Like learning about death from a small animal, there are less traumatic ways to pay what is owed. But in this tooth-based fable I have shown that not all payments will be equal. There is a barrier between weighted and false exaggerations and transparencies. We all can see who is on the other side.



Say Cheese, Photopolymer Print on paper 14 ½” X 25 ½,” 2020

*Say Cheese* is a digital image I requested from my dentist office of my jaw scan. I digitally removed all the teeth and inserted tampons using Photoshop. I manipulated the form and coloring to match the scans and then translated the imagery using the photopolymer plate process. The photopolymer results mimicked and enhanced the visual elements within the natural textures of the jaw scan. References to the nursery rhyme and its evolution, ashes, a-tishoo, murder and they are running out of breath can be seen in this research along with my evolution of visual vocabulary from tampon, bullet, tooth, coin to token.

## **A Slight shift in the foundation**

Throughout this journey in my research and creations, I have come to insert this fable narrative through more aspects of my life by trying to recognize and comprehend the world around me. A tool to weigh the pros and cons of a decision, I utilize the concept when deciding to either pick up an extra shift at the restaurant or put a few more hours working in the studio. I experienced an unpredicted sacrifice or payment in order to graduate. The spread of COVID-19, and the abrupt but necessary actions taken, literally halted me in my tracks. I am saddened by the sacrifices made due to this global impact but recognize the therapeutic process this research and thesis brought me. Having this shift, has further solidified this concept in my head, and created a shift in my work as well.

This time of isolation has removed the “Blinders” that have kept me focused on my goal of graduating. My time at home has allowed me to see other aspects of my life neglected by my focus on this thesis. This time had led to revealing the slow erosion of my foundation at home and the ripple affect it has created. This site-specific sculpture is a reaction to the physical neglect of my domain and the organic reaction nature has presented around the world since we have gone on lock down, an expression of reclaiming what is rightfully yours.



*A Slight shift in the Foundation, 30"x38"x60" found object 2020*

In addition to this piece I have continued using my house, the place of required isolation, as a canvas to explore the relationship of my concept and constructed fable to the world around me. These site specific, and somewhat temporary work acts as documentation of my experiences and thoughts during the COVID crisis.



*Foundation Supports, 32" x 48" Site specific wheat paste drawing 2020*



*Behind the Wall, 11" x 16" site specific wheat paste drawing, 2020*



16 *Extraction, 24" x 36" site specific wheat paste drawing, 2020*





*Essential Worker*, 38" x 52" site specific wheat paste drawing, 2020

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