

No More Permanence than I Possess

By Patrick Allen Carberry, Oct 22, 2009

It seems as though I have misplaced the memory of how we met. I don't know where in physical space a memory can go if it leaves the folds and wrinkles of a brain—into my pillow while I drool and sleep, into the air when I exhale, through my pores and onto my skin? It's a mystery. There was a time when I was able to describe with minute detail where we were, what you smelled like, what I was wearing and what music was playing. I used to own these details. That night still lived somewhere in me. It doesn't anymore. My head doesn't appear to be shrinking with this loss of information, but maybe I'm just re-inflating it with other, much less important memories. I can't seem to forget anything about the man who lives across the hall from me.

His name is Brendan. He works at a Walgreens. He likes his manager, Joan, even though she's sixty-three and her mouth is always coated in some sort of crusty smutz—his words. He wants to buy her a lip balm but never does because he thinks that that will offend her. "She might have a condition." His birthday is February 13th. He has an allergy to pine nuts and I'm not sure what that means. When he talks about you (which is surprisingly often considering he's just my neighbor and I don't even like him), he calls you Martin.

He still calls you Martin.

I don't know where he got that.

Nonetheless, I have no idea how we met. All I can remember is that you asked if I had any tattoos. When I said no, you pressed your hand into my chest and said "You're clean. I like that—I want to be the one to ruin you." I remember thinking that that was pretty lame because who are you? Who are you to do anything to me? Who are you to think that you are any more or less ruined than anyone else? I remember that I didn't tell you that I found your forwardness trite. My honesty would have been rude. I didn't tell you that I had already been thinking about getting a whole series of tattoos done for years. My lack of honesty was my protection. Instead, I smiled. Your words were "I want to be the one to ruin you," and my response was to smile. You see—if you knew anything, you'd have known right there that I was already ruined.

I smiled.

That night ended and we must have exchanged phone numbers or business cards or addresses or something. My next memories of us occur over a course of weeks. Even though I knew exactly what I wanted to have done, I let you go on and on about different tribal bands and the need for someone who has actually studied Kanji. We looked at some Web site where a guy posted pictures of horribly misspelled characters. Is that the right word for Kanji—misspelled? I'm not claiming to know anything about it. I wouldn't want a Japanese symbol anyway. It's just so banal. Also, I have no desire to learn or to pretend to have learned Japanese.

I let you describe how your ink is your blood and your body—your description sounded like religion. Tracing various lines and pictures littered around your skin, you told me stories about

who you are. Vines turn into waves turn into a whale with a thought bubble. What's on your mother's grave, where you grew up, what gives you hope. Hope is a funny thing to feel.

I try to avoid it.

You were cute and asked to draw on me with a Sharpie. I placated you. You drew a dragon snaking its way up my arm with wings that conveniently spread out over my chest and back. I'm pretty sure this was just an excuse to get me to take my shirt off.

It worked.

I "hmm"ed over your suggestions and "oh yeah"ed over the pictures you showed me on your laptop. Months passed. You persisted. "I can't even believe how badly you need one," you said. We continued to talk and go to lunch and do other things that would indicate a growing friendship.

It was a Thursday and an empty, nothing-filled day when I said, "I know what I want to get."

And then you said something.

I said "I want to define myself."

You said something else.

I said "I want to get a definition—or definitions of words. I want to be labeled. Annotated."

You said "I don't get it."

And even though (of course) there *is* something to get, I said "I don't know what you're expecting to get."

You said "I like it." You kept talking. You offered suggestions like it was your idea.

I had already decided on an order, and the first would be the word PULSE—the verb typed out on my left forearm and the noun on my right. My wrists to inner-elbows now read:

¹PULSE · \ˈpʌls\
intransitive verb
 1: to pulsate; to exhibit a throb; to beat rhythmically.
 2: to LIVE.
transitive verb
 3: to cause to pulse; to apply rhythmic pressure to.

²PULSE · \ˈpʌls\
noun 1: the process by which superficial arteries expand to accommodate blood flow from contractions of the heart.
 2: LIFE.
 3: a rhythmic beat; intermittent vibration.

When the tattoos were done, the artist who looked like he should have been named Bruce but was actually named Nathan took off his latex gloves. He slapped me on the thigh with a you're-done-nod. Nathan was cute. He'd be the kind of guy I'd be into if you weren't already here. Apparently, I'm into guys who look like their names should be Bruce. You kind of look like a Bruce, but you'd be a Bruce Kurtnotawitz or a Bruce Spichalski—Nathan looked like a Bruce Ramsey, a Bruce Kramer.

You said “They're great” as you slapped me on my thigh where Nathan had just removed his hand. Nathan didn't notice. He was packing up the needle gun. It felt like you were trying to pee on my leg with your hand and your imitated gesture. It felt like you were trying to claim ownership of me. Scent marking, that's what it's called. I meant you were metaphorically scent marking my leg, not that you were legitimately trying to pee on me. It felt like you were trying to compete with *Bruce* which didn't make sense because the only other person in the whole tattoo parlor was Nathan. Bruce doesn't really exist.

He's just a man I made up.

He's just a person to want.

I looked down at my newly acquired skin. I made fists with my hands. The tubes and tendons in my arms flexed, but the words barely shifted.

“They're really great.” You repeated yourself.

They're honest.

You drove me back to my apartment and suggested that you come inside to help me remove the bandages when it was time. Brendan was out in the parking lot “walking” Daschund, Betsy. It was so goddamn awkward standing there—the three of us blinking at each other. Brendan did a lot of talking. He wanted to update us on the current whereabouts of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* cast. He thought she was dead. She's not. And yes, we did know she was once nominated for an Academy Award. She was very good in that movie. I cried when I saw it. I tell this short story. I say, I cried when I saw it. You told me that that doesn't make me less of a man. I assured you that I didn't give a shit.

You said you needed to go to the bathroom, but you were lying. Without talking about Brendan or your lie, we went into my bedroom, and you laid me down like a clothed version of the *Vitruvian Man*. My arms were positioned straight out, PULSES toward the ceiling. My hands dangled off either side of the bed. I closed my eyes and tried to feel where my skin didn't hurt.

That's a hard thing to do—feel where everything is going right.

You took off my shoes which surprised me because, to be honest, I forgot you were still there. I thought I was alone with (and in) my skin.

We had sex for the first time. We did it with our clothes mostly on. After, you said “I’m proud of you.” I almost threw up because that was such a creepy thing to say, but then I figured it out. You were talking about getting the tattoo.

“Thank you?”

“I’m glad you’re not perfect.”

“Your compliments aren’t really compliments.”

“Sorry.”

“Did you think I was?”

“Sometimes you seem to be.”

“I don’t think you know me very well.”

“I don’t?”

“I don’t think anyone does.”

“Do you know me?”

We both waited for an answer to come.

I said “I figured out what I’m getting next. Do you think you can guess?”

“Wait.” I wasn’t sure if that was a guess or an imperative, but I jumped at the opportunity to correct you. The way you were talking made it seem like you were going to keep guessing until you got it right and proved that you (capital K) Knew me. However, I was changing the subject.

“HUNGER” I said.

“Oh, I really like that. Are you getting it on your stomach?”

“Makes the most sense.”

Our conversation was over, so you turned and buried your face in my neck. Thinking about that moment now is devastating. I can’t make my skin feel your beard anymore. I can’t feel the skin on my neck right now. The harder I think about it, the less I feel it. If I touch that spot with my hand, all I can feel is my own minimal stubble. That’s entirely different. I want your beard, not my own.

Two and a half weeks after our Thursday we went back to Nathan. He remembered the both of us. The both of us remembered him. He asked who was getting what, and I said “I want HUNGER.”

He said, “That’s a funny thing to want.”

I said, “We all got it, might as well want it.”

You didn’t say anything.

I took off my shirt. You crossed your arms as if to cover my body by covering yours. Nathan put on his latex gloves which covered his body like a prophylactic. I was the only one even close to naked and I didn’t mind at all. You’re both Bruces after all. The three of us sat down. He put his hand on my shoulder, told me to lie back, and I did. This time it hurt more. I’m not sure if it was because I was expecting a certain level of pain and this new tattoo exceeded it, or because I was watching your face and you looked nervous. Your eyebrows were flirting with each other—something I hadn’t seen before—they were two men who normally stand very far apart inching closer together on a bench. Their hands were just about to touch. The love of your eyebrows was not extended to the rest of your face. You were chewing on your lower lip. You didn’t hold my hand.

¹HUNGER · \’həŋ-gər\ *noun* 1: a sensation or ache which denotes a need for sustenance. 2: a craving for food. 3: a strong and unfulfilled desire. 4: a necessary component of LIFE. ²HUNGER · \’həŋ-gər\ *intransitive verb* 1: to have a strong craving for food. 2: to be ALIVE. 3: to feel desire. 4: to experience a lack of a nutrients which may result in DEATH.

When he was done, Nathan looked to you and asked if you liked it.

“I mean—it’s just words, but I think it’s beautiful.”

“Hey, thanks man.” Nathan said as he leaned over me to shake your hand. You took it and smiled at him with just your mouth. He didn’t notice.

I slid into the backseat of your car facing the ceiling. “Take me home. I hurt. I have hurting!” You started the car without saying anything, so I asked “Are you okay?”

“No, yeah. Sorry. I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Can I call you my boyfriend?”

“What?”

“Nothing. Never mind. It was just something your stupid fucking neighbor, Brendan, said while I was waiting for you to come downstairs.” We were still in the parking lot of the tattoo place. We were still parked. I was still staring at your car’s ceiling.

“What did he say?”

“That he doesn’t get how gay relationships work.”

“Ew. Did he ask who the ‘woman’ was?”

“No.”

“Yes, you can call me your boyfriend on the condition that I can call you my boyfriend.”

You started to say something, but I interrupted you.

“*And* on the condition that you no longer discuss our boyfrienddom with Brendan.”

You turned around and smiled at me with more than just your mouth, more than your face, more than just your ears. You smiled with your hands, with your skin. I remember what you looked like—I still remember that. “I like you” you said.

I like you.

Down the right side of my body, I got BREATH.

¹BREATH · \ˈbrɛθ\ *noun* 1a: the air inhaled and exhaled during the process of respiration. 1b: the act of breathing. 1c: LIFE
3: slight indication
4: a soft breeze.
5: air filled with fragrance.

It took a while to come up with a word whose definition could fill my entire back and still be applicable. You helped, suggested a pair of homophones. BARE-BEAR.

“I like it. I really like that”

We went to Nathan. Nathan liked it too and you thanked him this time. You shook *his* hand this time. Nathan got to work.

¹BEAR · \ˈber\ *transitive verb* 1a: to support or hold up. 1b: to move while supporting or holding up. 2: to behave <to BEAR oneself well> 3: to give testimony <BEAR witness> 4: to possess a resemblance

<BEAR a likeness> 4: to be a progenitor; to give birth to; to give LIFE to. 5: to produce. 6: to contain. 7: to sustain an immense weight. ²BEAR · \`ber\ *intransitive verb* 1a: to suffer. 1b: to abide. 1c: to tolerate. 2: to LIVE through. ³BEAR · \`ber\ *noun* 1a: any mammal belonging to the Ursidae family. 1b: a gruff LIVING creature. ¹BARE · \`ber\ *adjective* 1: exposed;NAKED; nude. 2: unadorned. ²BARE · \`ber*transitive verb* 1: to open. 2: to expose; make or lay uncovered. 3: to make NAKED.

When he was done Nathan slapped my ass. I was shocked before I remembered that he's a slapper. He slaps. He has always slapped me after finishing a tattoo. It's how he says you're done. I think he meant to slap my thigh or some more appropriate part of my body. My ass just happened to be there. You laughed. Eyebrows far apart, divorced, out of love. You weren't mad. I was relieved but also fine with Nathan slapping my ass.

You took me home. Brendan saw us and gave a thumbs up. You returned the thumbs up accompanied by a wink. Brendan laughed. You slapped my ass. Brendan said "Hey now, you two are going to need to get a room." I was still shirtless, my back bleeding ink.

Once in the apartment, I laid face down on the couch. My skin was filling, no longer blank, no longer empty. You looked at me with something—I couldn't tell if it was less or more interest.

"I have a question," you said.

"Okay."

"You don't need to answer."

"Alright."

"But can I ask it?"

"Yes. I said yes."

"What are you getting on your left side?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like over your chest, what definition are you going to get there?"

"I don't know." That wasn't a good enough answer. You were expectant. "Why?"

"What about getting the most obvious thing?"

“Hmm?”

“You know what I mean. Why don’t you get that defined there? We talked about how you need something for the left side of your body, right? Why not that? Is it too obvious?”

“I think it’s obvious, but that’s not why I wouldn’t get it. All of my tattoos are obvious in that way—you know.”

“Wait so you don’t want to get it?”

“No.”

“But not because it’s too obvious?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Ice in my freezer shifted. Someone downstairs yelled and the tone of the disembodied voice sounded like your thoughts—mad. My response was stuck in my mouth. It was a rotten apple—unable to swallow but too vile to allow into the world. “I don’t believe in it,” I said.

“What?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t believe in it?” Your eyebrows didn’t touch, but I thought they might. “I’m not sure I know what that means”

“I think it’s made up.”

“Made up?”

I thought about saying “I’m sorry” but opted for saying nothing instead.

“Oh, well—what does that mean for us?” you asked. It was a legitimate question. But I had no answer—I didn’t know.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’ll never love me?” you answered my question with a sentence posed as a question. Mine was more polite.

“Don’t take it like that—I don’t believe in *it*. I didn’t long before we met and I won’t for long after we break up.”

“So we’re not a serious couple? We’re just going to break up?” These were sentences. My apartment floor was filled with potholes and landmines. Sink or explode. Sink or explode.

“I didn’t—that’s not what I meant. I don’t think we’re going to break up. I don’t want to break up. I like you. I just don’t buy into that whole thing. It seems made up,” I said.

Some ice shifted in the freezer again. How frozen water can move by itself, I’ll never understand. After a while, you said “by whom?”

I had to think back to what I said last. “Everyone.” Answered. I know it doesn’t exist in me. I know that. I recognize that. Either I’m all wrong or everyone else just commits to this lie. “It’s too perfect,” I said. “I like you,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“I can lie and say I feel it.”

“No. Don’t.”

I almost apologized for a second time, but I stopped myself again. “I don’t know what you want.”

“Nothing. Let’s just drop it. I knew it was a stupid idea to ask. What’s your word?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Banal—like anal with an extra B.”

The day you finally left I filled the left side of my chest—I had been planning it. When I’m feeling emotional I say, I filled the gap over my heart. I know what “gap over my heart” sounds like. It sounds the same way the Kanji symbol for “heart” looks. It didn’t feel boring though. I probably should have started with this tattoo anyway: WANT. This word, more than any other, seems to be the most important, the most definitive. When I went into the tattoo parlor, Nathan asked where you were.

“We broke up.”

“Aw man. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay,” I lied. “We just believed in different things,” I told the truth.