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Essay by Mandy Shunnarah

Doing What Everyone Says You'll Regret



For a decade before I got the tattoo of a pen on my right forearm—a Pilot Precise V5 Liquid Ink Rollerball with extra-fine point (0.5 mm) in black—I dreamed of the day I'd gather my courage to finally get inked.

My mother has always longed to be a proper Southern woman, and to her, that's Dolly Parton. When I was growing up, she, like Dolly, would dye her hair sugar-white blonde, get acrylic nails an inch long, and bedeck herself in rhinestones. And like Miss Mona, Dolly's character in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, my mother said tattoos are "just plain tacky."

So, in high school, while other kids were sneaking off on the weekends to get tatted at seedy downtown shops that didn't check IDs or came back from summer trips to Europe with fresh tats, I heard my mother's voice echo in my head:

Only trashy people get tattoos.

No one will ever hire you.

Just imagine how ugly it'll be when you're old!

Haven't you ever seen a fat person with a tattoo? They stretch and get distorted. Ugh!

Do you really want to look back and wonder why you did something so stupid?

Wouldn't the money be better spent on something else? Like a nice purse or a flat-screen TV?

That, coupled with a low tolerance for pain and lack of cash, was enough to discourage me until I turned 28.

Now, I look at the pen on my arm and wonder why I waited so long to do something that makes me warm with happiness. I wonder what else I've denied myself this past decade, especially as a writer.

Writing has been the most constant thing in my life, second only to books. Writing hasn't just been a hobby; it's been one of my longest-lasting relationships, and in desperate times—be they mental, emotional, or financial—it's allowed me to survive.

I chose a Pilot Precise V5 Liquid Ink Rollerball with the extra-fine point as the model for my tattoo because it's a pen I actually use. Though I succumb to the conveniences of the keyboard, if I'm going to write something out by hand, I want to do so with the Pilot V5. The best word I know to describe the pen is dignified. It's no Montblanc and can be found at any average store, but something about the thin line of ink smoothing out over the page from the metal tip makes me feel as if my ideas, however mundane, are stately.

Writing with a V5 makes my handwriting more elongated and stylized, adding grandeur to the chicken scratch. Watching the volume of ink in the pen's visible inkwell lessen the more I write is a rewarding inverse relationship. It's the only pen that makes me feel like a writer, even if I'm just jotting down the grocery list.

But the week I got tattooed, I didn't feel like a writer. It was May 2018, and in years prior I'd pivoted from freelance journalism to creative nonfiction, specifically personal essays that I hoped to find homes for in literary magazines. Cheryl Strayed and Roxane Gay were my models, and it eventually worked out for them.

After freelance writing for nearly a decade, I hated it. With few exceptions, having other people tell me what to write or approve the subject of my writing before I'd actually written it unnerved me. I procrastinated until the absolute last minute, developing phone anxiety that prevented me from calling sources or ghosting the phone calls of my sources. I was doing it for the money and the byline and a glamour that was short-lived.

Tired of answering to the whims of editors for a pittance—and given the financial security of a new day job—I threw myself into creative writing. But despite my constant outpouring of work, I'd only had one piece accepted that year, five months before in January. And that acceptance was for a poem, not the essays that are my lifeblood. It was the longest publishing dry spell I'd had up to that point.

Depression followed. Though logic would dictate my writing career had to go through an inevitable shift with the change

in genre, depression doesn't answer to logic.

That May, I'd reached out to my chosen tattoo artist the month before, knowing she typically had a six-to-seven-month waitlist. I thought that by September or October I'd feel more like a "real writer" with some decent bylines to my name. When she emailed me back two weeks later to say she had a cancellation and could fit me in the following week, I was thrilled and stricken.

I could get the tattoo I longed for sooner, but who was I to call myself a writer? There was no guarantee I'd ever be published again—no guarantee that readers would like the new direction of my work. And if I wasn't published again, the pen tattoo would be a constant reminder of everything I wanted to be and wasn't.

I took my time answering her email. What if my mother was right? I might regret it for any number of reasons. I could get an injury that damages the design, it could fade over time, my aesthetic could change, or my body's changes could distort the pen into something unrecognizable. Infinite possibilities existed for things that could go wrong.

Or it could go right. A scar from a future carpal tunnel surgery could make it look even better, a testament to the dedication I have for my craft. My tattoo might evolve with me, aligning itself more with the person I become.

As I watched the tattoo artist prep her station—wrapping plastic film around every surface; checking the motorized, pulsing contraption; measuring out the ink in a tiny cup; removing the frighteningly long needle from its packaging—I nearly fainted. All those fears my mother had ingrained in me came back in a rush.

At the moment the pulsing needle touched my skin, I felt myself blanching. I could feel my heart pounding as if it were knocking against my sternum, and I couldn't take in enough air with each breath. The fear and anticipation of the pain rendered me senseless with anxiety.

Then I saw the needle going in and the beginnings of the tattoo appear on my arm and realized, despite what I'd heard, that it didn't hurt. Whether from adrenaline, thick skin, or something else, all the discomfort I felt was mental, and I decided I could tolerate it.

Because my tattoo makes me happy. I still feel a rush of endorphins every time I look at the pen etched on my arm. And within a week of getting it—before it had fully healed—I had an acceptance from a literary magazine. My nearly six-month publishing dry spell was broken.

I want to believe the tattoo had something to do with that. With it, I made a permanent commitment to my writing—there's no way I'd quit now. I'd be afraid someone would ask me why I got a pen inked on my arm, and I'd be too embarrassed to tell them I *used* to be a writer. It's my social accountability, a permanent reminder to remain dedicated to a perhaps impermanent, elusive dream. As a fellow tattooed friend put it, "Tattoos are the promises we make to ourselves."

Yet I can't bring myself to tell my family, although I know my forearm is a visible location, and they'll find out eventually. I can't bear the thought of them interjecting their opinions and attempting to sully something that means so much to me. Even sitting in the chair at the tattoo shop, I kept waiting for someone to chastise me—someone to tell me that I was making a mistake or shouldn't do this or didn't belong among the tattooed ranks.

If there's one thing getting a tattoo has proved to me, though, it's that I belong to no one but myself. As Roxane Gay puts it in *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*:

[T]he pain of a tattoo is something to which you have to surrender because once you've started, you cannot really go back.... You have to allow yourself this pain. You have chosen this suffering, and at the end of it, your body will be different. Maybe your body will feel more like yours.

I walked out of the tattoo shop into the bright afternoon sun and felt—I have to say it—like a new person. In truth, I was

more myself than I'd ever been. Even my Southernness is intact. I've since learned that, though she doesn't show them, Dolly Parton has more tattoos than I do.

Publishing Information

- *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* by Roxane Gay (Harper, 2017).
- "[Does Dolly Parton Really Have a Bunch of Hidden Tattoos?](#) [5]" by Billy Dukes, *Taste of Country*, April 15, 2019.

Art Information

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Read more at [Mandy Shunnarah's website](#) [6] or follow her on Twitter [@fixedbaroque](#) [7].

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