

I never imagined myself to be the kind of person who got a tattoo. They were certainly frowned upon by my family as a mark of criminality, at best. But in the after, I wasn't a good girl and I didn't have to follow the rules as I once knew them. My parents, I knew, would freak out because they were still holding on to the idea of who they thought I was. But my getting a tattoo was not about them. It was about me doing something I wanted, that I chose, to my body.

And so I got my first tattoo when I was nineteen. I started with a woman with wings. The artist said getting the tattoo would hurt as he wiped my arm with rubbing alcohol, swiped a plastic razor over the hairs, removing them from his flesh canvas. I waited for pain but I felt nothing. I sat quietly and watched as the ink seeped into my skin. When I look at the arcs of ink, more than twenty years later, I still see a woman with wings, a woman who can escape anything she wants, even her body.

I got my next tattoo not long after, a tribal design,



black and red, just below the first tattoo on my left forearm. I wish I could say I had some kind of thoughtful approach to my tattoos, but I didn't. I just wanted to have control over (the marking of) my body.

I recognize the inherent tension in my getting tattoos while also wanting to be invisible. People notice tattoos. My tattoos often inspire conversation. People ask me about the significance or meaning of my tattoos and I don't have good answers. Or, rather, I don't have the kinds of answers people want to hear: convenient, easy ones.

My first few tattoos were small, tentative. With each successive one, the ink has gotten bigger, spread wider across my skin. I love the act of getting a tattoo. It's not so much about the design as it is the experience of being marked. I love watching the artist set up the workspace, ink, needles, razor.

With my tattoos, I get to say, these are choices I make for my body, with full-throated consent. This is how I mark myself. This is how I take my body back.

While I was in Lake Tahoe in 2014, teaching at a brief residency MFA program, I got a new tattoo, my first one in years. Before I got that tattoo, I was sitting at a fire by a lake with the writers Colum McCann, Josh Weil, and Randa Jarrar. This isn't name-dropping. That is simply who was there because we were all teaching in the same program. Colum asked me, "So why the tattoos?" with his lilting accent and bright eyes. This is a question I get asked



a lot. It's a bit invasive, but you invite such invasion when you mark yourself openly with dark ink. People want to know why. We want to transgress boundaries. I include myself in this. I don't think we can help it. I told Colum a version of the truth of why I mark my body like this, about what it means to have at least some measure of control over my skin.

Here, in the middle of my life, I would do things differently if I had to do it all again, but I would still have tattoos.

Now and again, I get the urge for a new tattoo. I get the urge to feel connected to my body in a way I am rarely allowed. I get the urge to be touched in that very specific way, the artist holding some part of my body, their hand sheathed in latex while they use this tool, this weapon really, forcing a series of needles into my skin over and over again, the pliant flesh becoming more and more tender.

There is a certain amount of submission in receiving a tattoo, so of course I'm very much into that controlled surrender. I love the submission of turning my body over to this stranger for hours. I love the pain, which isn't excruciating but is incredibly, infuriatingly persistent, accompanied by the endless whine of the tattoo gun, marking me forever. This guy who tattooed me in Tahoe was all about asserting his dominance. He made it clear that he was an alpha male. As he worked me over, he literally said, "I am an alpha male," and it took all my self-control not to roll my eyes.



During a tattoo, pain is constant and sometimes it lasts hours, but it doesn't necessarily register the same way pain normally does. I am not to be trusted on this. I do not register pain as most people do, which is to say, my tolerance is high. It is probably too high. But the pain of a tattoo is something to which you have to surrender because once you've started, you cannot really go back or you'll be left with something not only permanent but unfinished. I enjoy the irrevocability of that circumstance. 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'm overweight. I hope to not always be, but for now, this is my body. I am coming to terms with that. I am trying to feel less shame about that. When I mark myself with ink, or when I have that done to me, I am taking some part of my skin back. It is a long, slow process. This is my fortress.