

DESIRÉE D. ROWE

## ROSES AND GRIME

*Tattoos, Texts, and Failure*

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”  
—Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

There is a print in my office of this quote. I stop, occasionally, to think of what it means to others. In relation.

The framed print hangs next to an 8x11 color photograph. The spatial proximity between the photo and print are important to me. The photo is an enlarged image of my father Al's bicep. I bought a gaudy shiny black frame to offset the rugged masculinity of the image—a big muscular, hairy arm. At the very top of the picture you can see two of my father's fingers as he lifts up the sleeve of his shirt.

Those hands. The story of my relationship with my father is long. Too long for me and you now, but sometimes I think it is a narrative all too familiar. I can say keywords and you can put it together, right? Drinking, yelling, divorce, single mom. Damn. Sometimes I feel like I live a clichéd life.

My father has worked as a mechanic since he was 14. His hands show the years. Cracked with perpetually black fingernails. Always. I can imagine that the same dirt that was there on the day of my birth will be there until the day he dies. And the smell. The smell of a garage. Not the garage that sits comfortably within your two-story home, but the garage you pull into, panicked, with a flat tire in the middle of the night. That garage. The one where you think those lying, cheating mechanics work. The one that people bitch about all the time. That's my dad (and three uncles, two cousins, and a dead grandfather). They have those hands.

Below the fingers that pull up his black short sleeve is a tattoo. A tattoo that fills his large bicep. Deep black and red. A melting scroll leads to two bursting red roses, one stacked upon another. I don't know when he got the tattoo; I was too young to remember. The two spots on the scroll once held my name and my mother's name. The tattoo happened, supposedly, during a drunken evening with my mother's two brothers. All three have the same type of tattoo. The ones with the thick green, once black, lines that show the wear of the years. The bold reds and blacks have faded from each man's arm.

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Time has changed my father's tattoo in other ways: now it only holds my name. My mother's name is covered in (tattooed) leaves.

But there is one thing that has always bothered me about the tattoo.

I think my name is spelled wrong.

It's difficult to articulate the failure here. The font is script, a jagged rough masculine script, where the letters are pushed close and tight together. It is difficult to make out, and I could be wrong. But, it is my name and I know how my name should look.

My name is Desirée. I see something like Dasirée or maybe Deserée. My name seems blurry, in the photograph and in the flesh. I have never talked to my father about the spelling—I'm too timid to bring it up. Like I said, my father is a big guy. And we have a history together. I am sure he would laugh at me, a hearty laugh that communicates so much. Dismissal. Removal. But I have known this tattooed-name failure for as long as I can remember. What does not asking him about it say about me?

#### TATTOO AS TEXT

Unless you have a tattoo, and I'm talking about a real tattoo, one with swirls and swishes and lines and edges, you may not know what I mean when I talk about the sound the needle makes when it hits your skin. The unrelenting buzzing marked only through the pain that slowly diminishes with time. Pain that fades, only as pain can, gently into a dull throb. It's a productive pain. The production of this text, that of a tattoo, is one that is built on the foundations of desire buttressed by walls of pain. We all get tattoos for different reasons. But we all started with desire that led to pain.

In this way, the tattoo becomes the text. A text that is living on our bodies that shows our fortitude in the face of that buzzing needle. Whether we were drunk, like my father, or underage, like me—we all have our tattoo stories. We wear them on our bodies proudly (well, some of us do). And, as we age, so does this text. Unlike many other texts, tattoos slide through life with us—the tattoo on a woman's belly swells under the weight of a pregnancy. Or, the person not so different from my father, whose tattoo is spliced with the scars of a life marked by violence.

Our tattoos speak in many different voices and tell many stories. Others have engaged in the autoethnographic (Spry, 2000), ethnographic (Pritchard, 2000), and interpersonal (Doss & Ebesu Hubbard, 2009) explorations of tattoos. But this tattoo, this cacophony of roses mixed with the layers of grime accumulated through countless hours under countless car hoods, is my father. His tattoo is a polysemic text written, with indelible ink, upon his aging bicep.

As a polysemic signifier, my father's tattoo positions him in multiple ways to different people (Ceccarelli, 1998; Dunn, 2011). I'm not interested in rehearsing the negative connotations that are forced upon the bodies of those who fit the preconceived biases of the white working class. In this moment, it hurts my heart to see my father perceived by others through the lens of classist prejudice. That's not what this essay is about. Rather, this tattoo-as-text marks the various ways that the relationships between those with blood ties can fail. This is about our relationship. A relationship that becomes reflected through a tattoo inked on a drunken night in New Jersey.

#### ON (NOT) TELLING THE STORY

As time weathers our skin, and as the dark black lines become an almost green outline of our past, our memories wear away too. My image of my father in my youth is framed by the very few pictures of my childhood. The important moments. He holds me, as an infant, while he smokes a cigarette and proudly looks into the camera. At 7 I am wearing his sunglasses at the circus. There aren't that many images I have to reference. I rely on the fogginess of my memory and the contradicting stories of my long-divorced parents.

I am not telling the entire story of my relationship with my father because that fogginess has settled into my memories. It's not shame, or embarrassment, or pain that compels my vagueness but a creeping sense that some things are better left unsaid (Goodall, 2000).

There was trouble in my childhood, just like any childhood. I have memories of the police and late-night rides down dark highways towards my grandparents' house. Bruised skin and loud words. There was failure in those places. Failure that changed who he was, who I am, who we are.

#### SPELLING IS FOR LOSERS

It is important that I attempt to mark the familial entanglements between my father and me as entanglements that I am trying to write through. The polysemic nature of Al's signifying tattoo is my focus, and the (mis)spelling of my name on my own father's bicep helps me to trouble the false narrative of generational continuity that goes (mostly) unspoken within our lives. It took me a long time to realize that I am not my father's daughter. Rather, I am part of a larger community and system of alliances that, yes, include my father but do not start or end with biological family.

The (mis)spelling of my name constitutes a break in the normative frame of the family, a living break that allows me to rethink my relationship with my father through the lens of failure. A break that reappears every time I see him and his arm. As Halberstam (2011) explains about the disavowal of the traditional family, "this queer form of antidevelopment requires healthy doses of forgetting and proceeds by way of a series of substitutions" (p. 73). We have never talked of my

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perceived misspelling of the tattoo, just as we have never talked about the dark history between us. I remember the tattoo and I remember to forget.

I see the misspelling of the tattoo and I realize that our relationship is built on conversations we will never have. Just as he will probably never read this essay, we will probably never talk about what the misspelling signifies. My name has been on a man's arm for over thirty years and, unlike my mother's name, has never been covered by dark green leaves. My name is allowed through normative forms of understanding to remain on his skin, a "visual text which installs the national narrative as a basis for the personal narrative of marriage and childbearing" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 77). My perception of this misspelling complicates our relationship and his claim to my personhood.

I pause here to mark that I cannot give up my own ability to fail. I might be wrong about the misspelling. It's deeply embedded in my understanding of my father. Our relationship is built on my perceptions of his failure. But I could be the one who is, and has always been, wrong.

Back to theory. Back to forgetting. Back to his claim.

My mother is a small woman. Tiny. I outgrew borrowing my mother's clothes in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. My father is the big one. My body reflects his and, through this tattoo, his body reflects mine. I see myself in him though I try to reframe our relationship in ways beyond father/daughter. We are bound together by our bodies that are closely matched. His hair, my hair. His fair skin, my fair skin. I work to forget and move forward. The tattoo on his arm reaches towards a constellation of meaning that branches, like a rhizome, into contradictory directions.

There is no easy ending to us.

I see his arm and am amused. Have you figured out why yet? Do we know each other well enough for me to really tell you the truth?

The failure of my father to get the spelling of my name correct in a (permanent) tattoo is a metaphor and a reminder of all the wrongs he committed as a father.

And I know that I should not believe this.

I should be able to complicate my sense-making more.

That's why I rely on Halberstam (2011) to grant me the permission to give up the ghost of the failing father, the deadbeat dad. To move on. To get over it. To push my understandings of what failure is beyond the heteronormative understandings of father. Of what should have been. I am trying to write through my own bias of his failure for me, and to hear the other voices that emerge from his tattoo as text. But, it's hard. Damn hard. I can't keep that from you anymore.

And now I am the one who is failing.

“The end is the beginning, and yet you go on.”  
—Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

I have a horrible sense of direction, and when I disobey the wishes of the GPS, the feminine voice scolds me with a dry, “recalculating route.” She sounds disappointed in me because I went off the path that she so carefully assembled. She knows I should know better and she knows that I always turn south instead of north. She knows that I make mistakes and her voice registers that disappointment. I turn around when possible and make my way, forgetting my mistakes, towards my destination.

The picture of my father’s tattoo that hangs in my office reminds me of the possibilities that exist within forgetting and failure. I work to remember the failures. The paths almost taken and the relationships that mark mistakenly travelled relational paths. This forgetting, and remembering, and forgetting again allows for movement within my relationship with my father, a shifting of generational logics that allow me to move through the misspelling of his daughter’s name to a place that, each time I see him, allows me to read the text of our relationship again (un)forgetting and (un)remembering just like the first time.

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