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The Tattoo in Time

In the late Australian summer of 2013, a man showed up to the house that my mother and I were minding in Palm Beach. Flanked by a team of reporters, he ascended the stairs to the pool where my mother and I were lounging. I watched him, a stranger, come towards us and I felt completely overwhelmed as he, in rapid succession, told me that he was my father, that he had been searching for me for the last decade, that I had a half-brother in Norway. He was telling me these things from across the pool, as the camera crew filmed my reaction. Later that night, a photo of my mother and I with her arm around my shoulder was broadcast on TV, along with the information that my father's decade-long search had finally ended.

His name was Brozzi. Tattooed on his shoulder, encased in an orange and yellow sun, was the name I was given at birth – Reya. Also, the surname Lunetta handed down by my father's father. I had been stamped with a marker of *his* identity. I carried the name he chose for me.

The name I carry now was given to me by my mother when I was two years old. It is a name that I gave up, switching between other adopted names for a few years, before reclaiming it upon entering my early teenage years when I was asked to choose a permanent name. The name is gender neutral. It translates as 'diamond' in Hindi. I still feel somewhat detached from the name, from any name. I believe this to be the consequence of my name feeling like a temporary placeholder for much of my youth, signalling little more than a current mask I had donned for a short time. The permanency of 'Hira' feels as if the mask's cord has tightened uncomfortably against the back of my head, expecting to be loosened for another mask to take its place.

The image of my father's tattoo, my birth name forever imprinted on his skin, carries the weight of so many questions. I ask myself, what could the relationship have blossomed into if my mother had not left and taken me with her? This question is laden with an awareness that, if we had stayed, the relationship may not have blossomed; rather, it may have started to rot, the proximity to abuse through my mother's relationship with Brozzi already hinting at what ugly tendencies he had hiding under the surface.

In thinking of my father's tattoo, I think of Henri Bergson's theory of time and duration. In *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature,* Genevieve Lloyd examines Bergson's notion of time, referred to throughout Bergson's work and Lloyd's text as 'duration,' as engaging the past, present, and future in one fluid, continuous 'flow' (Lloyd 65, 66). Lloyd writes, 'For Bergson the coexistence of past and present is not a matter of holding together in unity a succession of discrete states, but rather a coexistence of different elements within one state' (68). Bergson's theory signals that the temporal existence that our bodies exist in is a loop, refuting the image of a static time. For Bergson, duration *is* movement, motion, and fluidity. It becomes counterintuitive to attempt to imagine memories, or pockets of duration, as isolated, as they will always exist in this loop.

I have a complicated relationship to permanency when it comes to the act of naming and renaming, to the expectation that one's identity must now stay the same. A name feels somewhat too static and unchanging, is in direct opposition to the inherent fluidity of our bodies as they live, age and fluctuate.

Yet, although it seems contradictory, I find the commitment of tattoos comforting. This comfort stems from the knowledge that the artwork, etched onto my skin in a ritualistic moment of sincerity, signals a brief moment in time in which I found that particular drawing to be beautiful. I know that my taste changes, that I may or may not find that same artwork equally beautiful in a week, or month, or year from that moment. The fear that so many I know have, the question of 'what if I regret it?' never occurs to me, because, whether or not I continue liking the original artwork, the ritual itself symbolises a check in as I, for a moment, am entirely grounded in the present. Like framed paintings hung up around someone's house, my tattoos are artworks scattered around my body. They are images that act as doorways, or portals, into my inner most thoughts, glimpses of my past selves, turned into something tangible.

And yet, in tattooing my name, I see that perhaps my father was attempting to immortalise a signifier of my identity. My identity, as can be expected, has changed, and my relationship to the name shifted as I chose to discard it long ago. The act of tattooing a name, when names and the bodies they belong to are everchanging and evolving, resists the fluid nature of our temporal existence. Taking into account my non-existent relationship with my father, this attempt at capturing the essence of an identity outside of his own, the transferral of name to skin, of making physically tangible an intangible concept, is counterproductive and, frankly, jarring. To me it signalled a wish to control what he could not.

My father's side of the family have known me as 'Hira' for the past twelve years. Yet this time and the relationships that have been and continue to be built between them and me seem altogether outweighed and overwhelmed by the brief connection they had formed to the baby that was 'Reya,' the name tattooed on my father's shoulder. The absent 'Reya.' A version of myself that was innocent and vulnerable, too young to recognise my father's abuse for what it was. Instead, to them, I came back a stranger.

In writing this piece, I struggle with the budding anxiety at the thought of my father's side of the family reading my portrayal of Brozzi. As I unpack my complicated feelings towards him – anger that his treatment of my mother, the abuse she endured, ultimately deprived me of a stable and consistent father figure, accompanied by a profound grief for the relationship that could have been – I worry I am being too ruthless in my writing of him. I wonder, what will his mother think?

My mother moved from Norway, where she grew up and where the entirety of her side of the family is based, to Los Angeles to pursue a career in music at the age of twenty. There, she met my father and after a little while my mother became pregnant with me. The two eloped. Gradually, my father's alcoholism and abusive tendencies ruined what could have been a healthy, loving relationship, and my mother became increasingly isolated in the process. By the time I was born, they were already separated. My mother, lacking community and financial support, unable to access lawyers, tried, unsuccessfully, to divorce my father and acquire full custody of me. After fighting an uphill battle for months, she made the radical decision to leave the United States and take me with her.

My mother had broken the law. We fled in secret, without having acquired my father's permission to do so. According to the authorities, I was considered an abducted child for the first decade of my life. Throughout these years, my mother and I would routinely change our names to avoid being discovered. I was unaware of the reasons, as my mother kept our situation a secret from me up until the moment my father found us. This ritual process of re-naming did not seem strange or out of place to me.

One of the names I chose for myself was Layla. I had re-named myself after Glenda Millard's 2006 children's book *Layla, Queen of Hearts*, the second in The Naming of Tishkin Silk series. The illustrations were so delicate, the soft watercolours reminiscent of my mother's Steiner school upbringing, a world which I would myself enter after we moved to Norway to reunite with my mother's family.

After he found us, my father agreed to the divorce and gave my mother full custody of me. However, because my mother and I had been living in Australia illegally and without the proper visa documentation, our lives were uprooted. We moved to Norway two weeks later. I changed my name back to Hira and attempted to mould myself into a body that spoke to my new environment, all the while pining for home.

My father made a short film, titled *Reya*. I never watched it. On my birthday, he gave me a folder with every newspaper clipping, every printed-out interview and article, documenting his search for me. He wrote me a letter, addressed to Reya. *His handwriting resembles yours*, my mother said upon seeing the folder.

On August 14th in 2015, my father died from a heart attack in the middle of the night. He was staying at his cabin in the remote Norwegian woods. He died where he was happiest, the cabin outlooking a fjord acting as his magical forest haven.

This year is the tenth anniversary of his death. I will never be able to ask him what his favourite film was. I cannot go to him for advice about relationships. I cannot ask him to read my drafts when I feel stuck. He was not there when I came out as queer. He did not get to see me grow up.

In Andrew Haigh's 2023 film *All of Us Strangers,* Adam, an orphaned queer man in his 40s, is visited by the ghosts of his parents. Stuck in time, his parents have ceased to age after their deaths. A heartbreaking detail, the thought of growing older than your parents. In a particularly tender scene, Adam, drenched from the rain, is being offered his father's clothes to change into. His mother remarks, 'You know who you look like? ... Like my father. Or how I remember him when I was a little girl. Isn't that mad? It's like seeing both of you at the exact same time' (28).

This theme of a child mirroring their parent, and the inherited similarities across their lineage, is similarly explored in Joachim Trier's *Sentimental Value* (2025). I was struck by the portrayal of the relationship between Nora and her father, Gustav Borg, a Swedish filmmaker whose most recent screenplay is written for and about his daughter. As I continued watching, I became acutely aware of the parallels between the film's characters and my own life. Nora's deceased mother is a therapist. My paternal grandmother is a therapist. Gustav was absent for much of her childhood. Nora refuses to read her father's script, repeatedly claiming she 'wants nothing to do with it.' I have not yet seen the film Brozzi made for me, and I do not know that I

ever will. More importantly, Nora is angry with her father. Gustav recognises this in her and, in an uncomfortable post-dinner scene, he tells his daughter, 'I recognise myself in you. But you're so goddamn angry.'

What comes next is the cruellest line of dialogue shared between them. Gustav tells his daughter that it is her anger that makes her hard to love. Yet, we the audience understand that underneath this anger is grief.

In a later scene shared between Nora and her sister, Agnes, she questions how Agnes was able to experience the same childhood as Nora yet come out seemingly unscathed. Agnes has a partner and child. Nora, whose only significant romantic relationship we see her have throughout the film is with her married coworker, perceives this as proof that Agnes is well-adjusted and without the same grief and shame that Nora carries.

'You have a family. A home,' she says.

This mention of a home references a line of dialogue from Gustav's screenplay. In her monologue, the character written for Nora to play says, 'I want a home.' It is a line that is repeated, itself turning into a broader reflexive tagline for the film we are watching.

The title of Trier's film refers to things left behind in the wake of someone's death. As the sisters delve through their late mother's belongings, I think of all the things my father left behind. His films. His photographs, taken of and by him. The letter he wrote me. The folder with the newspaper clippings. His ashes. My younger brother. Me. My understanding that my past is interwoven with my present.

Bergson's understanding of duration as a continuous loop, our pockets of memory overlapping and interconnected, speaks not only to my relationship to my childhood self and the names that acted as containers for specific pockets within that decade, but also to my experience of lineage. The role my father played in my childhood will continue to underpin my perception of familial dynamics and the cyclical nature of abuse as I venture further into my adulthood, into the future. In many ways, we mirror each other. We share a love of film, tattoos and storytelling. Pierced noses. Longing for community. For a brief time, my head was shaved. Although he was already gone by then, I believe this to be the period of my life that I felt closest to his memory.

In unfolding the layers of my lineage here, I consider that, while not necessarily rewriting the narrative that my father wrote before me, I can fill in the gaps of his story with my own. I can finish his sentence.

The permanency of Brozzi's tattoo signifies, perhaps, a physical stamp of his desire for connection. I may feel resentful and detached about the jarring way in which he was reintroduced to my life. The grief of his passing still lingers along with the pain of knowing that he never truly knew me. Yet I imagine the wish for a true, pure intimacy was deeply felt by both of us. The image of a tattoo, how the artwork symbolises a moment in time, immortalising the moment in the painful act of cutting into one's flesh and feeding ink into the wound, signifies a sense of commitment and a welcoming in of ultimate permanency in a way that makes me feel simultaneously confronted and deeply exposed.

Recently, when I was visiting my family back in Norway over Christmas, my mother and I found an old photo album while going through storage boxes at my great-grandmother's house.

It was late in the evening, and we had just come back from a prolonged Boxing Day lunch at my great aunt's house. The album was dedicated to a party my mother and father had hosted in LA. The photographs were all in black and white, except for a single candid image at the back of the album. My father, in an unironed white shirt, captured mid conversation. He stands under an arch painted a rich aqua blue. This was a colour reminiscent of Frida Kahlo's Casa Azul, a childhood hyper fixation of mine. In another series of photographs, my mother and father are pictured together against an ornate wrought iron banister. A scarf wrapped around my mother's head, hiding her own shaved scalp, and tied in an intricate knot at the nape of her neck. They look deeply, profoundly in love. After extensive pleading, my mother let me keep the album.

The moment or memory pocket in which my father had the name 'Reya' tattooed on his shoulder may have occurred in the past. The existence of this tattoo was carried through to his death, when his body was cremated. The tattoo existed all the way up until the moment in which, along with the rest of his body, it was turned into ash. Then, it existed in this new form until my grandmother sprinkled most of my father's ashes into the ocean. The rest of his ashes were poured into an urn locket on a necklace and gifted to me by my grandmother. I keep this necklace tucked in a pouch that now sits in a nook in one of the drawers of my vanity. This vanity was sold to me in a deceased estate clearance in the wake of its previous owner's death. I never wear the necklace, feeling the adornment of it would signify an intimacy that was absent in our relationship. Still, I keep it close. Perhaps, if ever a sense of closure soothes the memory of his death, I will finally place it around my neck. For now, I hold with me, in the present moment, and will continue to keep into the future, the remnants of my father's tattoo of a name that I used to carry in the past.

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