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## Five Tattoos

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# **FIVE** Dwyer: Five Tattoos **TATTOOS**

**JACLYN  
DWYER**

i.

On the subway, a stranger's rolled sleeve exposed  
blue numbers folded into his wrinkled flesh,

digits inked in a child's scrawl—even the tattooists  
trembled. My synapses returned to navigate the museum

in Prague, a labyrinthine display of arms hanging in frames.  
Not a face, not a name, just a recorded voice,

"They were lucky to get tattooed. It meant work. It meant time."  
As the stranger's unmarked limb moved to scratch an itch,

deep below the surface of the ink, the numbers  
moved in waves across his skin. I heard my mother

at the beach, eyeing tramp stamps and Zodiac signs  
as she threw her arms up to the heavens and asked,

"Why would anybody do this? Why?"

ii.

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I saw Aunt Martha naked in the daylight. Obsessed  
with the weight of her oblong breasts, like soft

aubergines, I missed the scattered constellations  
inked onto her torso, spores blown from a breeding

dandelion, buried deep in the dermis, the seven sisters  
on her stomach, Cassiopeia's chair on her chest.

The blue freckles forming a bull's eye to aim the radiation  
and zap the broccoli florets blossoming in cramped bouquets

over her lungs, which became heavy balloons congested  
with her own overgrown flesh. Her body needed to be weeded.

She was lucky to gain admission to Sloane Kettering, like getting in  
to Harvard, Yale. Lucky to be admitted to the clinical trial.

Lucky they let her try twice.

iii.

Each time Uncle John quits smoking, he pastes a nicotine patch  
over the image on his arm, a flimsy bandage covering the blood

red heart that bears her name on a rippling white ribbon: Linda,  
the girl who wore his ring. Dragged drunk to the tattoo shop

by his buddies, he awoke from a dream, thinking he'd been shot.  
Not nearly as drunk as the driver who hit her. Linda's brain

swelled like a can of compressed air pitched into a fire.  
Her spinal cord severed mind from body, past from present,

## Dwyer: Five Tattoos

forming two distinct lives. He was lucky he'd stayed home that night.  
Strapped into a chair, Linda doesn't know her own name.

He was lucky she'd shared my mother's name. "Oh, Linda  
is my sister," he explained to the woman who became his wife.

"I got that for my sister," he says when he starts smoking again.

iv.

In 1858, Olive Oatman was the first tattooed lady, marked  
by Mojaves and paraded on stage like a freak to sell her

autobiography. People came to see the story, to touch  
the tinted flesh, lines down her chin like a ventriloquist doll.

They came to lift her dress, push up her sleeves and inspect  
the tribal armbands. They came to ask, "Did they rape you?"

They came to tell her how lucky she was to be found alive  
among them, how lucky to find a husband willing to marry.

A husband willing to censor even the houseguests,  
to forbid any questions concerning his wife.

A husband willing to erase her past life, to invest  
in heavy white makeup and a gaping fireplace,

wide enough to burn all the books he could buy.

In the dark medina, I paid a crouching woman to paint  
my hands in henna. I thought the broken glass grouted

atop the tile walls would keep marauders out. Then, the heavy  
limb, like an unrelenting rip current, dragged me to dark bottoms.

The paste flaked and crumbled in his hand, paint chips  
falling to the earth like black seeds, before I broke free.

I could have been a miniature ship stuffed  
into a stoppered bottle floating out to sea.

I could have been Jonah's wife, swallowed  
inside the spare hump of a Bactrian camel.

You don't know how lucky you were. I forget  
what might have been, how lucky I am

when the dead cells exfoliate, erasing the stain.