

# HOW TO LEAVE A MARK

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The first was a delicate rip in the skin revealing a motherboard underneath—grass green, neon yellow, and gold, as gold as one can possibly effect on the body. I was just eighteen, and all I knew is that I felt alone, though I was deeply loved, and that I was unsure of my body, though it was healthy and sound.

The second I do not recall, which is wild to recognize; that after the first, the large (now truly unattractive) motherboard on my hip, I cannot craft a chronology of the inked marks. After the first, they came more and more and have not stopped. They continue, often without reason, though always with duende.

I often think about the accumulation of tattoos on my body alongside my utter obsession with language and lyric. This is the thing: I feel the same way about my body as I do a poem. For that moment, that making, it is all mine. Sometimes a poem, like a tattoo, is simply about the experience of the making, is about surrendering to the generation. What happens next, is *next*. Not *now*.

A critical part of my tattoo accumulation is improvisational; only a very few of my well over one hundred tattoos were planned with an intentional meaning. Often, I go into a tattoo shop unprepared and ask the artist what they feel like doing. I nearly always start poems the same way, letting the poem decide. And when I do start a poem with an intention, it is critical that I am willing to abandon that intention.

To leave a lyrical mark, I must be ready to dance with the duende, with my truest self. To let go. As Lorca says, “The duende is not in the throat: the duende surges up, inside, from the soles of the feet. Meaning, it’s not a question of skill, but of a style that’s truly alive: meaning, it’s in the veins: meaning, it’s of the most ancient culture of immediate creation.”<sup>1</sup> I think of Jack Spicer’s practice of lyrical dictation<sup>2</sup> here as well, and I cannot help but bump up against the word abdication—how a

poem collapses into its own desires, and how my body so often does the same. When I surrender to the duende, to the edge of the wound, to improvisation, I go somewhere I could not have possibly planned. I innovate.

Aligned with improvisation is risk. By tattooing my body, I take several risks; the most obvious being the permanence. The literal mark. And like publishing or sharing a poem, this mark is visible. I have past lovers’ names on my body (in sexy places, yikes), kitschy cartoon characters long gone out of style, and *bad* tattoos—poorly done and fading bad tattoos! I have a big blue diamond on my neck, trashy and bleeding away into a shaped bruise, and a toothbrush on my shin that looks more like a torture tool. I do not regret these things—there is no space for that, and no reason really.

I approach my poetry with the same attitude. It sounds simple, tautological, but to leave a lyrical mark, I must make the mark in the first place. And to make the mark, an honest mark, I cannot consider an audience (or in the case of tattoos, my darling parents). During the making, I must put those voices aside. Otherwise, the mark is skewed away from myself, can too easily become something for others, and art is meant to be, or at least begin, in a self-centered place. The personal is always political, and the political is communal. Poem writing should be proud and perilous—Richard Crashaw’s “Flaming Heart,” Anne Sexton’s “Her Kind,” Wanda Coleman’s “Wanda Why Aren’t You Dead,” Jos Charles’ collection *feild*—it should involve a stiletto-on-a-tightrope risk. These poems go hard for their own sake, they are for themselves, and therefore, for the world. And because I am in the business of ma(r)king history, I go into a poem full tilt. It is critical that I embrace the unknown and keep it risky; this is how we effect change. And so I treat this one body the same: wherever it goes, you will know it is mine.

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1 Federico Garcia Lorca, “Theory and Play of the Duende”

2 Jack Spicer, *After Lorca*