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Dark Stars

Ethel Rohan

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Abstract

Those two pit bulls playing out on the street belong to that pink house right across from mine. A mother, son and daughter live there, too, more ink on their six fat arms than the bumper Sunday paper. I don't want to think about what they might have put over the rest of themselves. No, I'm not judging people by their cover. I got a tattoo, my very own constellation of stars. The most stars that could fit onto the back of my little neck. I always was skinny. Bones like a fish, some men said. Bones, my first husband said, that he could pick from between his teeth. I never did feel there was enough of me, especially not after all he took out of me.

Keywords

tattoos, ink, defaced, skin, internal, external, signs, scars, stars



April 13, 2012

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A Short Story by Ethel Rohan

Those two pit bulls playing out on the street belong to that pink house right across from mine. A mother, son and daughter live there too, more ink on their six fat arms than the bumper Sunday paper. I don't want to think about what they might have put over the rest of themselves. No, I'm not judging people by their cover. I got a tattoo, my very own constellation of stars. The most stars that could fit onto the back of my little neck. I always was skinny. Bones like a fish, some men said. Bones, my first husband said, that he could pick from between his teeth. I never did feel there was enough of me, especially not after all he took out of me.

I don't have ink anywhere else and only a handful of people ever saw that one tat under this veil of hair, hair black and warm as this cardigan once. My father hated tattoos, said they defaced God's work. Ever we meet in the next life, I'm going to tell him that men did more to deface me inside and out than any tattoo—

Oh, I'm laughing because I'm remembering I was like a fish. So hard to grasp and then slip away.

Feels good to laugh. I laugh often as I can.

Course fish don't always get away.

They tubby too, those three in the pink house, with greasy hair, flat faces and eyebrows

that look Sharpied on. Got those pit bulls as pups, but the beasts have grown. Huge! A hundred pounds apiece, if you're going to ask specifics, and chests wide and white and solid. Owners let those dogs run without leashes and both animals full stop with a scratch of nails whenever I come out my front door. Dogs seem to smile, soft and kind, like they want to play, but I knew several men that smiled like that in the beginning. It's always worse after you been hurt bad in body and mind, you know what can come again. Some days I can't get outside at all on account of those dogs. I know those dogs be well loved and looked after. They be happy, too, be playing, laughing, wagging their whole selves. But all beasts be unpredictable. Loaded.

I'm gonna call animal control, just as soon as I can figure out how to do so nonanously. Nights, I can't sleep thinking about those dogs tearing me apart, going for my soft throat, shaking what's left of my insides out onto the pavement. Then there's my mares about the mother, son and daughter finding out I done reported the dogs and coming after me with baseball bats. Beating me to stew in time to a chant I can't even hear anymore. Meanwhile the pit bulls, just sprung from the pound, put on bibs and tighten their paws around knives and forks.

Look! There they are again. See those eyes and teeth, gleaming wet. And those monster paws, bigger than any hand that ever touched me wrong. See the tall point on those ears, could cut through skin with a single twitch. Those damn dogs make the stars want to walk right off of me.

Every now and then, I look at my stars with mirrors. Have to catch up all my hair and angle and wangle, but I manage to see my masterpiece well enough. Watches that faded blue ink inside those strange-limbed shapes, like the night sky done bled into the stars. I should have just inked outlines and left those stars the color of God's work. But it's as if I experienced some foresight all those years back when I was a young woman and first went under the needle. Like I knew so much would go inside out on me in this world and right where I'd be sure to find light, I wouldn't.

Ethel Rohan is the author of *Hard to Say* (Pank, 2011) and *Cut Through the Bone* (Dark Sky Books, 2010), the latter longlisted for *The Story Prize*. Her work has or will appear in *World Literature Today*, *The Irish Times*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Southeast Review Online*, *Potomac Review*, and elsewhere. Raised in Ireland, Ethel Rohan now lives in San Francisco. Visit her at ethelrohan.com.

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