

from Juked #4
Fall 2006

ROBERT SHAPARD

Bare Ana

Tattoos are just one more thing we cozy middle-class American types are appropriating from native cultures. We do that, you know. We usurp native expression, replicate it and wear it in this ridiculous alpha-dog display of dominance.

—*Michael Tsai*, from "The Magazines"

WE'RE IN CHINATOWN, above the harbor. We make a great discovery. An ancient tattoo parlor. Get this, it has 2-D photos on the walls of tats from back in the 21st century. We're on a delayed honeymoon, I'm more in love with Ana than ever. She's eight months pregnant and we're here to get a pre-natal tattoo for our unborn baby. The parlor smells wonderful, like the ocean, like clove, with a hint of rotten banana. In other words gene serum. We call hello and a woman's voice in back calls Be there in a minute. Ana peers through the beaded curtain. There's a lab with a recliner and kitchen stool with a pulsing tat string hanging off it, held in place by a coffee mug. She looks panicky and I say are you sure? She says yes.

I have to tell you about Ana. She's unusual, not because she's so pregnant. You've heard of people who don't have tattoos but probably never saw one. Ana's completely bare. As for me, I'm normal, I was dark with tattoos by the time I was ten. When we fell in love last year in college, Ana said it was me she loved not my tats. I had to laugh. I said how are my tats not me?

They're me more than anything. I chose them, whereas everything else about me is a pre-nate gene correction including my straight teeth. I don't say that's wrong. If our parents didn't do that we'd probably all get diabetes or schizophrenia in our teenage years. Ana never had a father. Her mother was beautiful, covered with tats like vines that were really cursive letters of all the names of her huge family where she was no longer welcome. She was Malayan or Irish or something. Anyway she died young, and made Ana promise to never get a tat.

The tat woman from the back comes out wearing hospital scrubs. She looks African and has lavender Celtic spirals on her jaw that bring out the shape of her face. When she sees Ana her eyes widen. We want a pre-nate, I say, half-expecting her to warn us it's too late to be safe but she smiles, palms together in *namaste*. She says what's the child's name?

Ana flares, I don't want my baby's name tattooed on her like a label. She turns away quickly as if looking at the 2-D photos. The tat lady's eyes blink at me. She smiles again, did you have an image in mind? I say no. The tat lady goes to the stem in the middle of the room and tries to get it to work. The place is really ancient. She has to bump the stem with her fist—at last a holo rushes into the air, trembling. It's just a commercial. Drat, she says, just give me a minute. Ana sits on the bench by the window. It's supposed to be a joyous occasion but she looks like she wants to cry.

I'm not pushing her into this. Last year she told me what it was like growing up. People staring at her like she was a freak with some kind of skin disease. She said she didn't want her child to go through that. She and I know a pre-nate tat is a priceless gift. It's your identity at birth, it says your parents care. Anyway there's the negative to avoid—we all know what it means to be "born bare."

But call me crazy, I don't care. If it's not right with Ana I don't want to do this. I say let's go, but she says wait. She says I want you to choose a tattoo and don't tell me what it is. *I don't*

want to see it. I say Ana be serious. Most parents decide these things together. But she's pleading with her eyes and I think okay, so we're not like most parents. I see the logic. Refusing to choose, she can be true to her mother. Yet by letting me choose, our daughter can be born normal.

I like it.

I try to think of an image. Of course there's our daughter's name in *kanji* but that's writing and Ana just told the lady she didn't want that. So I start thinking of classics like Maori arm bands except in class last year Ana was against usurping native expression. I think of ancient images — panther, heart, rose — and nothing seems right. I begin to despair but just as I'm glancing at Ana something strange happens. Her face begins to glow from the sun in the window. Until now it's been dark and raining all day. What could be more romantic, sunset over the harbor, Chinatown. As the clouds break apart the sunlight streams through like a fiery dragon, flying ahead of the night. I'm completely excited. This is the image for our daughter's pre-natal tattoo. It's been given to us. I know Ana sees it, too, but we can't talk about it.

Instead I tell it quietly, so Ana won't hear, to the tat lady waiting at the stem. She brings up a series of dragon holos. I pick one — not Disney, not gothic, but Malayan, in honor of Ana's mother. We work on it, darkening lines, adding pearlescence — then there's positioning, *eeny, meeny, miney, moe, ears, buttocks, belly, toe*. Ana lets out a yelp. She's not looking at us but smiling to herself. Wow the baby really kicked, she says.

In the lab behind the beaded curtain we put Ana in the recliner. We inject the gene line and fix it so it's not uncomfortable. There's no problem keeping her from seeing any image, especially on the old equipment this parlor's got. You know the rest, basically a few keystrokes.

We pay and go out into the evening, laughing, feeling wonderful. It's like the excitement you have as a kid when you get tatted at the mall. Your parents tell you calm down, you won't see a thing for weeks. That's how a gene tat works, they say. Nothing

but bare skin while it grows deep inside you. Then because you're a kid you get bored and almost forget until one day on the schoolbus or in the mirror – *whoom* – there it is, the tat blooming in your skin. Of course for us that happens to the baby in the womb, not me or Ana, but the excitement's the same.

The funny thing is, over the next few weeks I start to worry. Ana says don't worry, nothing horrible will happen. It's true we don't believe that epigenetic stuff you hear, how methylation can warp an unborn's tat if you wait too late in a pregnancy. It's just with a pre-nate you can't be sure of anything until the birth. I wish we could delay it a week or even two. Instead, the baby comes a day early.

We rush to the hospital. All night nothing happens. Then in the morning it's moving fast again, Ana sweating, pushing, breathing, the baby's head crowning. I'm holding Ana's hand when the baby is born. I can't see because the nurse is in the way, but I hear the baby's tiny coughing cry. At last the doctor holds the baby up.

The dragon seems alive. The baby's scales are shimmery green, black talons reach over her shoulder and neck, fangs frame her forehead – I'm stunned, it's exactly what I wanted.

The doctors says in a hearty voice, congratulations, that's a fine dragon, pulling his gloves off. The nurse murmurs, yes it's the best one this week, not interested in the tat but in getting the baby into Ana's arms.

Ana doesn't say anything for a moment, looking at the baby. She seems exhausted by her labor, almost sleepy. Then she whispers, "Oh, she's beautiful."

But I know she's not even seeing the dragon. I start seeing things through Ana's eyes, like I'm on some kind of high. All she sees is the baby's little fingers, which are perfect and bare. The baby's little wrists, mouth, eyes, all bare, bare bare.