

I'm having my tattoos removed.

I have quite a few tattoos. No one ever believes this—because mostly they're covered up by clothes—but I do. I had the first one done over a decade ago, and I still remember exactly how it felt, sitting there in the chair while the needle etched a picture into my body. It was, in many ways, a spiritual experience. The image reflected how I was feeling at the time, and it was a visible marker of my growth. I also thought it was just plain cool.

Since then, I've had four more, each one marking a particular moment in my life. I've enjoyed getting each tattoo, and each one means something to me. But I don't need them any more. I don't know why, really, except that one day I was looking at them in the mirror and I realized suddenly that it was time for them to go.

So now, once a month, I go to the dermatologist and lie on the table while he takes off the tattoos with a laser. Because we're doing all my tattoos at once, this takes a while. I have a lot of time, as he moves the laser over my skin, to think about it all and what it means.

My first tattoo was of the White Rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland*. I've always been a lot like the White Rabbit, and I thought he would make a good talisman of sorts. The woman who inked him onto my shoulder was used to doing things like burning skulls and naked women, and she thought my rabbit was great. She even had me model in a tattoo show when it was all over.

A year later, when I told her I wanted another tat, she suggested doing the same rabbit, only in a very butch motorcycle jacket and boots. She thought it symbolized the two sides of my personality, kind of a gay boy yin-yang thing. I agreed, and on went the rebel rabbit, back to back with his more refined waistcoat-wearing, umbrella-toting twin.

Now the White Rabbit and his brother are being burned off my shoulder. One laser burst

## Invisible ink

Getting a tattoo marks a special moment in life—and removing a tattoo reveals another milestone

at a time, their lines of ink are being broken into small bits that my lymph system gobbles up and swallows. Tattoo removal is a long, painful process. The laser only takes away so much ink each time, and you need to wait a month between treatments. It will take me about six months to be wiped clean, like a blackboard stripped of chalk.

Right now my rabbits are about half gone, ghostly reflections of their former selves. When I look at them in the mirror, I see them just below the surface, as if they're staring up at me from underwater. While from a monetary and pain-management standpoint I would prefer it if one treatment wiped away all signs of the tattoos, I kind of like this gradual goodbye. I've lived with these pictures for so long that I don't remember what I look like without them. This way, I have time to get used to the idea.

When someone asks me to describe what getting a tattoo is like, I can't really do it. I can tell them that it sort of feels like having a pin dragged along your skin repeatedly. But that's inadequate. I can't explain that the rest of it, the wonderful part, is feeling something being written on your body, a visual record of who you are at

that particular moment in your life. I can't really explain how having to trust someone to paint your skin with a steel needle and colored inks is one of the most intimate moments you can experience.

All I can tell them is that it kind of hurts, but in a magical way.

Similarly, I can't really explain how having my tattoos removed feels. I can tell you that the physical pain of being

burned with a laser is like being snapped with a rubber band repeatedly. In doing research on tattoo removal, I found one source that described the pain as being splattered with bacon grease. While hardly encouraging, this is a fitting description, but mainly because the smell really does remind me of bacon cooking. (The other day, while undergoing another treatment, I sniffed the air and had the sudden, horrible realization that the only thing that really keeps humans from becoming someone's breakfast is the fact that pigs can't manipulate machinery.)

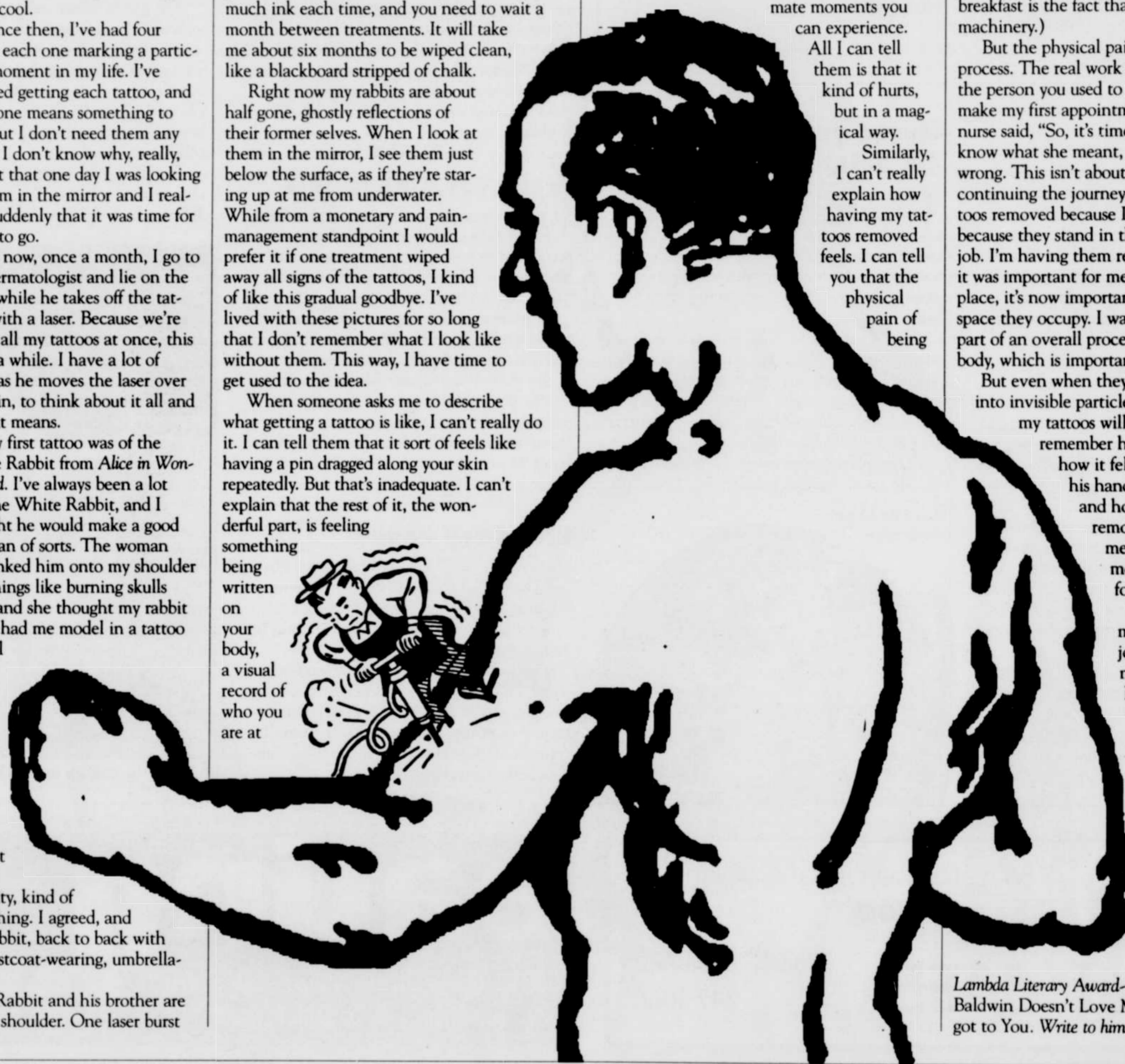
But the physical pain is only part of the process. The real work is in saying goodbye to the person you used to be. When I called to make my first appointment for laser surgery, the nurse said, "So, it's time to grow up, is it?" I know what she meant, but she's got it all wrong. This isn't about growing up. It's about continuing the journey. I'm not having my tattoos removed because I don't like them, or because they stand in the way of my getting a job. I'm having them removed because, just as it was important for me to get them in the first place, it's now important for me to reclaim the space they occupy. I want my skin back. It's part of an overall process of reclaiming my body, which is important to me right now.

But even when they're gone, the ink turned into invisible particles eaten by my system, my tattoos will still be there. I will remember how it felt to get them, how it felt when someone rubbed his hands over them admiringly, and how it felt having them removed. Each of these memories is important to me, and I don't want to forget them.

There is pain in memory, but there is also joy. So, as the laser zaps my skin and the White Rabbit and the other tattoos grow fainter and fainter, it's with a mixture of sadness and relief that I let them go.

I just wish I smelled less like bacon frying and more like a Pop-Tart toasting.

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