

L O R D ' S E Y E :

An Epilogue in Search of Political Tattoos

M A T T H E W S . H I N T O N

Author's Note: A shorter version of this story appeared in the 2018 issue of Provincetown Arts, and the author is grateful to the magazine and its founding editor, Chris Busa, as well as editor Susanna Ralli, for their willingness to publish it, and for the permission to re-work the piece for The Mailer Review. This extended installment is an experiment in Mailer's third person point of view. Finally, a debt of gratitude is owed to John Buffalo Mailer for making this meeting possible.

MATTHEW HINTON SPUN THE RADIO KNOB and edged his way into Brooklyn in search of Buffalo's apartment. 1010 WINS was reporting barricades up and down Manhattan; 8th Avenue was pumping with protesters from Columbus Circle to the White Horse Tavern. It was November 12, 2016—a Saturday. Four days earlier, Donald Trump had won the Electoral College to be named the 45th President of the United States, and worse—there would be traffic. The yellow lights of the Holland Tunnel felt oddly safe, and Hinton needed to be subterranean for the weekend.

He drove into Bed-Stuy, wondering if he would witness any of the protests later that night. Hinton turned onto Dekalb Avenue and cut the wheel into a parking spot directly in front of Buffalo's seven-story walk-up. He was a full hour early and knew that Buffalo would still be busy being interviewed by Chris Busa, the publisher of a beautiful glossy piece of high culture called *Provincetown Arts* (Busa's ongoing mission to include "a little touch of Mailer" in every issue complimented Hinton's own mission to display Mailer in his campus office; this meant that Hinton had several copies of the mag-

azine in a prominent location by the door—in particular, the 1999 cover featuring Mailer walking a tightrope on the deck of his P'town home regularly caught the eye of Hinton's students). To kill some time, Hinton found a package store around the corner and bought an ass-pocket of Jameson's. Given the amount of imbibing which took place throughout the eight installments of "Lord's Eye," Buffalo's serialized memoir that *Inked* published between 2012–2014, Jameson's was a fitting beginning for Hinton's quest to get a tattoo at the talented hand of Josh Lord.

Hinton and Buffalo were last seen carousing little over a month earlier in Long Branch, New Jersey, during the annual Norman Mailer Society conference, where the two were among the youngest Mailerians within the society's ranks (Hinton a scholar of the legendary author, Buffalo his youngest son – both of them playwrights). It was in the cold, constant rain of that October weekend that Hinton revealed his admiration for Buffalo's profile of Josh Lord for *Inked* magazine. He admired it so much, in fact, that he had been assigning the installments in his writing courses at Misericordia University (a sleepy institution nestled in the quiet hills of northeastern Pennsylvania) to great effect. He told Buffalo how the piece was well-received by his students; how it inspired one student in particular, a young African American mother of two, to write a profile about a local stripper and the heroin doled out private rooms of local clubs. "Lord's Eye" elevated the conversation of the classroom, and one afternoon Hinton's students began rolling up their shirt sleeves and pant legs to compare ink—this story about a working artist-cum-entrepreneur gave students permission to tell their own stories. It was enough to inspire Hinton to get his first tattoo: an Al Hirschfeld portrait of Groucho Marx on his right arm by one of Hinton's first writing students—a talented young tattoo artist and illustrator by the name of Whitey Ellis.

Buffalo was impressed. He was touched. He was maybe even a bit drunk and inflated. And then he was inspired. He told Hinton that his "Lord's Eye" series was perhaps the first instance of an *Inked* article being taught at a University. Hinton shrugged dumbly, admitted that it may be true, and Buffalo proposed that an epilogue might be in the stars.

"How would you like to get tattooed by Josh Lord?" Buffalo asked Hinton.

Hinton was an only child, but in that moment he imagined what it felt like to have an older brother and be invited to a night on the town with the

boys, replete with an R-rated movie, a few dozen beers, and illicit jokes told in an empty parking lot.

“That sounds like fun,” he said.

The planning took several phone calls, pitches, and patience, but finally he was here: Professor Matthew Hinton was about to become a character in a piece that he taught.

Buffalo opened the door just as Hinton made the top stair, overnight bag and paper sack of whiskey in tow. “Hey brother!” Buffalo greeted him and gave him a hug (Buffalo was a hugger). Hinton hugged back (Hinton was a hugger, too). Chris Busa smiled from inside the studio apartment, and Buffalo asked, “Do you mind hanging out? We’re just finishing up.” Hinton didn’t mind. Hinton knew Busa, had spent four nights in Provincetown under Busa’s roof—a saltbox bursting with abstract expressionism at the mouth of Commercial Street. Hinton spent much of his visit sleeping on the porch hammock, but Busa made it his mission to introduce him to the secret treasures of Ptown, from its art galleries to paint brushes owned by Motherwell to the famous Beachcombers club. It was on that very same excursion that Busa and Hinton had dinner two tables away from John Waters (Hinton’s treat) and collected cheap plastic beads like they were currency during the Carnival Week parade. Later that same week, Hinton met Buffalo for the first time. The two young men wandered out from the famous red brick Mailer home and into the Cape at low-tide; they made it nearly half a mile before turning back, their pockets brimming with shells. Together again in Brooklyn, the three men reminisced like old shipmates—they were happy to see each other, and bottles of suds were introduced to the equation, then quickly finished. They talked about heroes of American fiction, told stories about spies and betrayal, which soon turned to talk of relationships. Buffalo tried to convince Busa to join the boys, and to get the same tattoo as Hinton. The three generations of writers went up to the roof, smoked half a deck of cigarettes and looked out at the setting sun, its gold washing over the city. They didn’t talk politics. It was as if elections didn’t exist. Only booze and cigarettes and tattoos existed. Something to drink, something to breathe, and art that lasts as long as the body does.

Busa eventually bade his farewell (he would not get a tattoo that evening, much to the relief of Hinton), and Buffalo and his young compatriot soon found themselves in a hired minivan driven by a kindly Asian immigrant. The rickety vehicle careened down the streets like a great red pinball, en

route to Josh Lord, all the while Buffalo recorded snatches of conversation on his phone, and in all of them Hinton seemed to be rambling. He was nervous, and maybe a little buzzed. He wanted to do right by the assignment.

Hinton was only just old enough to remember when tattoos signaled that one was an outsider, a rebel, and possibly a threat to social order. He didn't do it himself, but Hinton had witnessed people cross a busy street when they saw an ink-covered, leather-clad ne'er-do-well strolling or standing in their way on the sidewalk. Since those days, Hinton was fortunate enough to witness a sea-change in America—a shift away from seeing every person with a faded black heart on their forearm as Thompson-stomping member of the Hells Angels, and toward something that gave permission to the storyteller in everyone. In the months, weeks, days, hours leading to this moment, Hinton found himself asking any be-inked individual about their tattoos. “What's the story of this one?”, he would say, and without fail, bits and pieces that make up a life would tumble out of their mouths: Auto-biographical bookmarks, skin-murals that catalogued milestones, fandom, inspirations, births, deaths, rebirths, all replete with oral annotations. All Hinton needed to do is ask. In his limited travels, he met sisters with matching Irish knots in Kelly green, their three points symbolic of each of the young women, bound in sisterhood; cartoon characters of sentimental value; quotes written in Aramaic, Latin, Spanish, and American English. He had seen precision-point artwork, carefully crafted, but he had also uncovered the “bad ink” of sloppy lines drawn by amateurish hands; ink that had been injected too deep into the skin, resulting a cloudy “blowout”; tramp stamps that spoke for themselves; poor likenesses of faces famous, infamous, and unknown. (That last bit always made Hinton cringe a little, and he vowed never to pursue photorealism on the premise that his skin was to flexible and often too flabby – he imagined faces melted like Dali clocks emphasizing the sag and heft of his elderly body, and it made him shudder). Through anecdotes, Hinton learned what he liked (mostly the stories), and what he didn't like, and why. The same thing that drew him to read Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* at the age of twelve, that drove him to assign Buffalo's original profile of Josh Lord, or to tell tall tales into the wee hours, is what compelled Hinton to appreciate and eventually sit for this own tattoos – it meant a desire to share, a need to listen. Tattoos and tattooing, he realized, were an exercise in empathy.

They tumbled out of the minivan on Lorimer Street, and the fading November light made the overpass at the corner look like Brooklyn's answer to Stonehenge. Spray paint tags of "Pranik" and "211" peppered the steel pillars holding up the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, some resembling hieroglyphics, others looking like prison tattoos reading "Kilroy wuz here"; opposite these, colorful murals up and down the street signaled that the men were at the edge of gentrification. Amid this intersection of modern city-life, framed by black brick and glass garage doors, warm light highlighted the welded letters of the parlor: GRACELAND. Buffalo heaved the door open. The sound of Leonard Cohen's warble bled out into the street. "Dammit," Hinton muttered to himself. Cohen had just passed away on the heels of Trump's election, forcing America to simultaneously say farewell to a poet and endure a madman.

In the right half of Graceland, women sat beneath towering portraits of Elvis Presley as stylists with sleeve tattoos teased, steamed, snipped, twisted, and colored their hair into bobs and bangs. To the left sat more barber chairs and wheeling surgical stools and lights, mirrors flanked by bottles of pigment, needles, trays, and on the back wall a floor-to-ceiling library of books of art, volumes of all manner, most of them pregnant with transfer paper bookmarks (a telltale source of inspiration for tattoos of all styles and influences). Josh Lord, the legendary New York tattoo artist, stood in the back among the tomes, looking somewhat bookish despite his t-shirt, jeans, and soft spiky hair – his glasses and goatee suggested that he might be a half-brother to American humorist John Hodgman. He had a benevolent smile and was nearly finished bundling his right arm in plastic wrap. Lord was protecting a fresh tattoo of a crow's head, a cover-up done in onyx-black ink, the effect of which captured the shine of feathers and eyes—its beak was poking out through the torn edge of cellophane at Lord's wrist, and throughout the evening Lord would gesture with it and "Ka-CAW! KA-CAW!" wildly, Hinton usually joining in. The artist welcomed Buffalo with the standard hug and rejoinders of an old bar buddy, but with news: Josh Lord had just returned from a well-deserved vacation, and he was now married. Hinton waited with a smile and when he shook hands with Lord, heard himself say: "A pleasure to meet you. Is that an Orc Sword on your wall?"

"It *is*!" Lord jumped with excitement. "We just had an art show here, and I bought this from it. I wanted it. Had to have it." Lord recognized something in Hinton – a whiff of nerdiness and an appreciation for handcrafted

weaponry. “Do you want to swing it?” Both of them were already reaching for the dark chunk of metal dangling precariously in the shop of mirrors and needles and scissors.

Hinton tried to contain his excitement: “Well, maybe for just a minute.”

It was a sturdy length of steel—a massive dull edge with a welded hilt. Lord and Hinton posed with the black blade—first Hinton alone, then Hinton pretending to assault Lord, then Lord assaulting Hinton, then Lord solo, then Hinton committing seppuku, then Lord, and on and on like that for far too long. Buffalo used Hinton’s phone to take photos.

With introductions out of the way, Hinton showed Josh Lord his first tattoo. “Hey, you had a good artist”, Lord said. “The ends of Groucho’s hair are excellent—those curly tips are a hard detail.”

Hinton swelled with pride, said, “A former student of mine did this. A kid by the name of Whitey Ellis.”

“It’s good work. I like it. I like the swooping lines. He captured Hirschfield. Great tattoo.”

Hinton then produced what he hoped would be his next tattoo design: a caricature of Norman Mailer’s head in the style of a New Yorker cartoon, with the words MAILER FOR MAYOR above and below the author’s coiling hair and impish grin. (Mailer ran for Mayor of New York City in 1969, with Jimmy Breslin as City Council President. They ran on a platform of making the city the 51st state and instating “Sweet Sundays”—a monthly break from all non-emergency electricity and vehicles in the city. Their campaign buttons featured slogans like “I’d sleep better if Norman Mailer were Mayor,” and “The other guys are a joke,” and Hinton’s favorite, “No more bullshit.”) The image and words had been moonlighting as a drink coaster at the Waverly Inn, and soon, Hinton hoped, it would have a permanent home on his left arm to balance out Groucho. Hinton felt that in some way tattoo artists were almost like fortune tellers, and that their craft is in the family of what Mailer called the “spooky art.” Hinton needed this tattoo, needed to wear his own quest of a lifelong fascination with Norman Mailer on his sleeve.

Lord suggested the trio have a drink to unwind and get to know each other. He’d had a long day. They soon found themselves in the Battery Harris, a Caribbean-themed surfer bar a mere block and half away from Graceland, but with all the trappings of a Key West dive: airy windows and chalk drink boards, palm trees wrapped in multi-colored Christmas lights, and walls of cracked, faded puce. Hinton sat across from Lord and Buffalo as

they caught up on their respective relationships. Lord's recent marriage had been a surprise ceremony, intimate and sweet. They were loving being newlyweds. Buffalo, on the other hand, had gone his separate ways from Katrina Eugenia (a key figure in the eight-part *Inked* profile), the two having grown in vastly incompatible ways over the six years they were together. Now there was no communication between Buffalo and Katrina, and so he could not update Josh on what had become of her. Yet Buffalo was not crying in his beer over it. He was grateful for what he had learned from their time together, and even more grateful their time together had come to an end. This was due in large part to Claudia Maree Peters, a friend and colleague of Buffalo's on the last two movies he made. Once they discovered both of them were single, it did not take long for them to find the courage to admit that they loved each other. A New Zealand Brit with Maori roots, Claudia was just beginning to take New York by storm, and Buffalo was blatantly smitten. She would be joining them later in the evening.

Sometime during all of this, Lord revealed to Hinton that, when melted, the plastic linings of government issued bootlaces make for good black pigmentation in prison tattoos. Hinton managed to log that bit of trivia for one of his writing endeavors and drew a line in his notebook back to some scribbled words about the overpass at the mouth of Lorimer Street. The trio then left Battery Harris, nearly skipping back to Graceland arm-in-arm. When they arrived, Lord announced that he would need 20 minutes to prepare the image, and recommended a corner bar. "They have a drink you *need* to order," Lord told Hinton. "It's called the 'Gunther'."

Hinton found himself in the dark well of a cocktail lounge known as the *Night of Joy*, a room of high-backed upholstery, wall paper, and antique sconces that led the eye to a ceiling painted to resemble a bed of stars (Hinton later learned that Josh Lord had painted the constellations himself, he was an artist of all canvases). Hinton ordered a "Gunther" and paid for Buffalo's drink as well. "Hell, he got me a tattoo from Josh Lord", Hinton mused, "The least I can do is buy his drinks."

By the time they returned to Graceland, Hinton and Lord were ready. A rather serious-looking Japanese man wearing headphones was sitting for an elaborate chest tattoo – an ancient pattern in blood red and black. Hinton removed his jacket and button-down shirt and attempted to hang his clothes on a hook (a challenging task after beer, an ass-pocket of whiskey, a pair of vodkas, and the 'Gunther'), Buffalo asked the stoic Japanese man if he would

care to be interviewed, but was turned down. Lord and Hinton talked about the placement of Norman's head, and Hinton declared that his tattoo was to be a badge of sorts, smacked the top of his left arm at the shoulder like a good soldier of academia, and cried "THIS SHALL BE MY AUTHOR ARM—first Mailer, then a gonzo fist of Hunter S. Thompson, then Dashiell Hammett over here, and Raymond Chandler beside that. And maybe something about Gilgamesh to honor John Gardner, probably a quote in the original cuneiform!" The other arm, he heard himself slurring, would eventually be home to all of the Marx Brothers, and possibly Buster Keaton, Bart Simpson, and Charley Chaplin; a comedy-sleeve for the ages. The rush felt only by those who have gotten ink had intoxicated him as much, if not more than, the booze.

A trace of the design was made and applied using a thin transfer paper, something akin to tissue wrapping that fills boxes and bags at Christmas-time. Hinton lowered himself into the barber chair and relaxed his arm on its padded edge. Buffalo was recording as Lord donned surgical gloves, tilted his glasses a touch, and made his approach with the needle.

The needle. The initial sting felt like a pinch—a cat's claw probing the surface of the skin and staying there; it brought the same warmth as when he sat for Groucho, and Hinton felt himself understanding ink addiction. Each tattoo could easily be as exciting as his first and he imagined himself as a "collector"—an illustrated man on the hunt for only by the most talented of artists. People get tattoos that are intertwined with their personal quests, and Hinton was beginning to understand how permanently marking one's body with art was an exercise in existentialism, in journey-making. He realized that, despite the sense of permanence the tattoo would have for him, it would ultimately remain temporary; when Hinton died, the canvas would die, and with it, Groucho Marx and Norman Mailer—the quest would be over. From a barber chair in a refurbished garage in Brooklyn, the universe expanded and contracted before him. Leonard Cohen slipped back in the song rotation, his voice blending with the buzz of the needle, and Hinton asked Lord what he thought about Cohen dying after the election. Lord shook his head, raised his smiling eyes, and said, "What a poet." Hinton considered singing along to "I'm Your Man" but imagined what it would mean for his left arm and reconsidered.

It was nearing the end of the tattoo when Hinton thought to ask how he ranked as a customer. Lord, sensing the real question, answered, "Well, you

don't have any penises hidden in here, so that means you were on good behavior." Some tattoo artists are known for such shenanigans when forced to endure the worst of clients. Hinton smiled, but then examined Lord's work more closely, just to be sure.

Too soon, the buzzing stopped, Lord looked up, and in his best impression of President-elect Trump declared the operation a "yuuuge" success. He sat back a moment. Buffalo eyed the piece and said "sideburn." Lord had forgotten Mailer's right sideburn, and they all laughed (Hinton a little less) as Lord quickly made it right. Hinton could not know it, but Josh Lord had done six tattoos that day, and it was a testament to his powers of endurance that he was able to keep his focus on one more project afterhours in Grace-land. Lord was a true-to-life working artist.

With the work was done, the celebrating could begin, and Buffalo and Hinton headed to a local Williamsburg bowling alley and bar known as "The Gutter". Lord declined an invitation (he had a wife to go home to), and so the two friends, now bonded by having the good fortune to be tattooed by one of the all-time masters, forged on by themselves and met Claudia at The Gutter.

At the hipster bowling alley Hinton noticed the full-sleeve tattoos on the young woman who doled out the shoes and lanes, and told her about his new piece. The stories of their ink were shared like flash-autobiographies – a secret handshake that represented their respective quests – and with a touch of his own journalistic acumen, Hinton secured a lane in record time. He returned to the table with three pair of bowling shoes to find Buffalo and Claudia engaged in a deep embrace, exuding the lack of awareness of anyone else in the world that only two people who are truly in love can exude. It was strong evidence to support the notion that no matter how shitty and hard a period in one's life might be, if you give it enough time, life will make sense eventually.

Noticing Hinton's return, Buffalo gave him that by now familiar brotherly slap on the back, picked up a ball, and after a period of relative gutters, finally got himself a strike.

Sometime around 4:00 am, Hinton climbed the stairs at Dekalb alone. Buffalo had dropped him off and was staying at Claudia's apartment so Hinton could have a bed. He watched SNL's cold open on his phone—Kate McKinnon dressed as Hillary Clinton, playing a grand piano and singing Cohen's "Hallelujah." Hinton mouthed the words while unwrapping the

plastic around his arm. He eyed the reflection of Norman Mailer in Buffalo's mostly-clean mirror. The evening felt like a salve, a balm for the wounds caused by the election. It was dark out. Trump's America was coming, and apathy and confusion were already making the air sickly sweet. But Hinton was now armed with Groucho (the angel clown) on his right, and Mailer (the insatiable devil Hamlet) on his left. Two Jewish demigods. One a cheeky cigar-gesturing seraph with shoe polish on half of his face, a master craftsman of the American stage; the other was Norman Mailer, risk-taker, tightrope walker, wartime consigliere and contemplative soul, a captain of the American page. They would be Hinton's constant companions from now on, soldiers of his nighttime psyche, the comedy/tragedy masks ready to speak to his many appetites, his dualities. And with them would be the whippers of their artists—Whitey Ellis, and Josh Lord.