

## Dried Flowers on a String

By: Deanna Imfeld

*"A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.  
I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day."*

—Emily Dickinson ("A Word is Dead")

*Some day we'll be able to measure the power of words. I think they are things. They get on the walls. They get in your wallpaper. They get in your rugs, in your upholstery, and your clothes, and finally in to you.*

*-Maya Angelou*

....

A family is walking down Coney Island with cotton candy in their bellies and their faces full of laughter. A girl with dark black curls tugs on her mother's sleeve and points towards the Dreamland Circus Sideshow. The castle-like tent is adorned with flags and vibrant, eccentric posters displaying the most popular freaks in the show.

Omar Sami, Dreamland's best barker is galloping around the tent, mesmerizing passerby with his grandeur gestures and thick Indian accent.

“Step right up! Step right up to the newest, most fascinatin' freak here in Coney Island! Ladies and gents'. Boys and girls. You gotta see it to believe it! Part girl, part monkey! She has the body of a woman and the hands and feet of a monkey! Covered in fur with the most beautiful eyes! Step right in and be amazed.”

The family moves through the line of attendees and into the decadent tent. A man swallowing swords walks by the girl as she runs through the stations of interesting folk. The Monkey Woman smiles at the girl. The girl waves and tells the woman how beautiful her fur is. Jolly Irene sits atop a throne like chair humming her favorite show tunes.

The girl moves to the tent of a tattooed man. In his mid-30s, the man looks handsome yet hardened. He has a strong jaw and deep brown eyes. He is sitting crossed legged on a large pillow with no shirt and worn dress shorts. He is reading an old book with a tattered binding. The sign next to him reads, “JJ The Tattooed Mute.”

He looks up from his book, his body adorned in riddles of words in all shapes and sizes.

“scuse me sir. Are your tattoos real?”

The man holds up his right palm to show the girl and deepened black **YES**.

The girl moves closer.

“Can I see some more?”

“Ah, take a look little girl. See what stories you can find.”

A man with jet black hair, slicked and cut down the middle steps up. He is wearing a velvet green suit jacket, a purple bow tie and glasses perfectly circling his eyes.

“Samuel W. Gumpertz's the name, but you can call me Sam.” He winks down at the girl.

“cuse me Mister Sam. Why does Mister JJ have all those words on his skin?”

“Well, I'll tell ya. Gather 'round everyone. This story's one ya won't wanna miss!”

Most of the crowd moves away from The Alligator Man and gathers at the feet of Samuel. The man stands up, his tattoos glistening with each movement.

“This strappin’ fellow used to be like all of us. Rumor has it, he angered a witch. The kid spoke too much, that’s right kids, mind your words.”

Samuel pauses, feeding off the excitement in the crowd.

“And the witch cursed him so that everything he ever spoke was written on his skin... forever.”

The audience starts chattering and gasping. The audience claps and start dispersing through the other attractions, quickly forgetting about the tattooed man and arguing over which freak to gawk at next.

Samuel pats the girl on the head and continues onto Jolly Irene, convincing audience members that she is the largest woman since 1850.

The man sits back down and picks up his tattered book. The girl softly knocks on the cover, hoping to be let back in. The man puts the book back down and holds up his right palm.

“Sir, is that story true?”

The man smirks at the young girl.

“Were you really like everyone else?”

The man shows his right palm.

The young girl’s mother comes by and grabs the girl’s arm. The man looks up at the mother. The girl sees the glistening of the man’s tattoos fade.

“Say goodbye dear, it’s time to go.”

“Goodbye sir! I’ll come back again!”

The man waves to the mother and daughter.

....

*“Step right up! Step right up! A freak like you’ve never seen! Come gather ‘round and see the amazing James the Tattooed Man! He’s not just covered in any ol’ tattoos though! Come see it to believe it! This cursed young lad can never forget again! Every word he ever speaks becomes tattooed onto his skin! Step right up here ladies and witness the impossible!”*

*James stepped onto a stage in nothing but briefs. His limbs were spotted with words of all shapes and sizes. He spun slowly, the words glistening in the sunlight. His back bare, except for a large scar. Some of the audience gasped at the sight.*

*Samuel W. Gumpertz beamed at his friend and prized freak. The pair had been performing together for a little over a year.*

*“Miss, would you like to treat this fine audience and ask James some questions?”*

*The brunette in the front row took Samuel's hand and stepped onto the stage.*

*"Let's start with something easy. Ask a yes or no question darling."*

*"Are your tattoos real, James?"*

*James held up his right palm and the audience cheered. His voice rang out to the crowd and the blackened **YES** began to pulsate to his heart while black ink dripped onto the stage. The crowd roared.*

*"Amazing! Spectacular!" Samuel moved to the center of the stage.*

*"Now, miss, how about you give James something to say so we can all get to go home with some real excitement? Just not your name though. Don't want the misses to get mad."*

*The audience laughed with Samuel as he put his hands on his stomach, just like every time he made that joke. A woman in the audience pushes her golden hair out of her face. She and James made eye contact and she smiled.*

*"Hmmm. How about, I love Dreamland!?" The brunette grinned and moved back to the audience.*

*'Bloody perfect,' James thought. 'Another novelty.' He moved back to the middle of the stage and stretched out his arms in either direction.*

*"I LOVE DREAMLAND!"*

*His voice soared through the audience and out to the seagulls flying over the pier. The audience waited in complete silence. The words began to vibrate across James's stomach. Ink began to run down his side. Silence.*

*The words deepened into full admiration for the circus sideshow and the phrase started pulsating to his heartbeat. James bit down on his tongue, holding in the pain. Samuel watched James's arms, waiting for his friend to give the signal.*

*The crowd blew up. People were laughing, some were crying and no one could understand what they saw. James twitched up his right palm to flash a sign to Samuel.*

*Samuel stepped back into the light and quickly thanked everyone for coming. James was quietly carried off stage by the Strong Man, clutching his stomach. The Strong Man's hand laid over top James's mouth as he screamed in agony, the ink left a trail as they walked.*

*James lay on his sweat and ink soaked cot, barely conscious. The tattoo stung more than most. Samuel brought a towel and some ice.*

*"Never again James. No more speaking. You're my best freak. I can't have you killing yourself up there. I found ya and I promise to take care of ya."*

*James nodded through the pain. Samuel put his hand on James's shoulder. He felt sorry for the kid.*

....



The man walks over to his station in the tent to get ready. Most of the freaks are already performing. He places his book on the table next to his pillow and sees a blueberry muffin; the steam still rising.

The young girl is trying to tell Jolly Irene a joke she just learned and notices the man picking up the muffin. She skips over to him.

“Me and mother baked em’ this morning. She said I could come bring one to you. I hope you like it.”

The man smiles at her and smells the sweet aroma of blueberry. He sinks into the muffin while the girl chirps about all the great folk in the tent. She particularly loves Monkey Girl and Alligator Man and is convinced that they will get married. She stops mid-sentence and stares at the man.

“Wait if Monkey Girl is getting married to Alligator Man, who are YOU going to get married to!?”

The man smiles and shakes his head at the girl. She notices a small box of photographs and forgets what she was speaking about.

“Oh! Sir, do you think I could have a look?”

The man holds up his right palm and hands the girl a few photographs. Her eyes grow even brighter.

An old photograph of the man as a kid holding his mother’s hand. A more recent photograph where he is standing in front of Dreamland with Samuel and the Strong Man, all three smiling with pride. She pauses and sees a woman with light colored hair and round eyes. She has her hand on her necklace, smiling sweetly at the man holding the camera.

The young girl’s mother returns and prepares her daughter for the rest of the day.

“Sir! Who is this!? She’s so pretty!”

She hands the man back his photographs. He simply smiles a goodbye and places the photographs back in the box.

Later that day a woman is walking through the shows, her nose higher than her eyebrows. She pauses when she reaches the man, disgust looming over her like a cloud.

“All this, for what? A little money!?”

She gestures towards the words. The man yawns as he places his book back on the table.

She moves closer and points at a tattoo, darker and more uneven than the others. The man points his hand over “I’m a freak.”

“Who did this to you, son? Did they hurt you?”

The man shakes his head. He turns and she sees the whip mark on his back.

“Boy, who did that to you?”

The man smiles. He points at her.

....

*“Say it ya dick. You wanna hang with the carnies so bad, put it on your skin. Show us you’re not a fraud. You’re not a mute you’re James! Damn coward. Couldn’t face reality so had to join these shmucks?”*

*The men threw James to the ground. He shook his head. He was outnumbered.*

*James moved to get up when he collapsed to the crack of a whip against his shirt. He wailed.*

*William moved and ripped the back of James’s shirt to reveal a softened burn from the whip.*

*“I’m real sorry James. They’ll whip me too if I help ya,” William whispered before running back to the others.*

*“Say it boy or we’ll open that soft back of yours.”*

*James laid, motionless.*

*Another crack. His back began to draw blood.*

*“Say it!”*

*Another:*

*James looked up to see the moon. “She looks like she’s weeping” he thought.*

*Another:*

*He clawed at his arms to brace the pain. The men laugh as his shirt mixed with the blood and ink pooling out.*

*Another: “Say it!”*

*James laid in a pool of his own blood and ink as the words rip through his bicep, the letters fraying with his fear.*

*Satisfied, the men leave him to suffer. James rose to find a coat left on the pavement, William’s last act of friendship.*

*James limped home, droplets of blood staining the sidewalk. He entered the small apartment, braced for the next lashing.*

*His mother was asleep upstairs. He could hear her soft breathing as he braced himself on the slanted kitchen table. He pulled out a piece of paper as he began to pack. The best he could offer his mother was an idea that he had to move for work.. He wanted her to at least know it wasn’t his drinking that drove him away. He left with his secret and his old life, unable to confront his truth.*

*He shut the door behind him and began to cough quietly. Ink stained his hand.*

....

The following day, the tattooed man is walking through coney island. His favorite place is near the pier; you see so many people fall in love there. He takes a sip of coffee when the young girl tugs on his petticoat.

“cuse me sir, but I was wondering if you had any more pictures I could look at? I don’t get to see pictures much.”

The man smiles and starts walking back to the tent. The girl skips behind him. He opens his cart up and lets the girl inside. Doe-eyed, the girl looks around the room. It is covered in jewels, tokens and books that she had never even heard of.

The girl sits at the small fold-out table as the man brings her a box of photographs, each one more interesting than the last.

“Your Mom is real pretty sir, do you still see her?”

The man shakes his head. The girl opens her mouth to say more, but her attention is taken by poster photos of other freaks.

“Woah, you met so many cool folk! Look it’s Jolly Irene! She’s so nice. And The Strong Man!? Is he really that strong? And Lion-Face and.....”

The girl’s excited chirps rang through the small cabin cart; songs the man had not heard in a few years. He began dancing to the rhythm of her joy, the jewels lighting up like fireflies.

The girl pauses as the man’s shirt loosens at the nape of his neck, showing a fresh, small, cursive word on the left side of his chest. It looks as though it is dancing with the man’s heartbeat.

“Who’s Marjorie?”

The man stops. He pulls his shirt back to his neck and begins to blush. He shakes his head to lose the thought of her.

Tauntingly, “Is she the woman in the photo? Ooooh, do you looove her?”

The man shakes his head again and packs up the photographs. He pats the girl on the head and lets her out of the cabin cart.

“But, sir, I wasn’t done! Can I at least come back?”

The man holds up his right palm and smiles the girl a goodbye.

He shuts the door and collapses in his bed with the weight of his secret.

“Marjorie,” he whispers with a smile. The word on his chest glows with affection.

....

One day the man is rereading a book an elderly woman once gave him. He turns the page. Elegant words glisten on his skin with each movement. He pauses to look at the words on his legs. Words like “aurora,” and “serendipity” move with his breath. *If I’m going to be given this curse at least I’ll be covered in beauty*, he thought.

A cough sings throughout his ears. He looks up from his legs. A woman is standing in front of him, smiling. The sun pools into her eyes and he sees the world. She is ethereal. Her delicate fingers move her golden hair from her shoulder. She serenades the man with a Hello; her voice as gentle as the summer breeze.

He smiles at her, his tattoos pulsating even brighter.

*I love you* vibrates through his entire being. He says nothing.

“I brought you some lunch James. Do you want to eat with me?”

The man holds up his right palm and places the book on the pillow. They walk out the back of the tent where they are greeted by Jolly Irene enjoying the sunlight. Marjorie wishes Irene a good day as the two pass over to the pier.

They sit at the edge of the pier, feet dangling to the water. They watch seagulls fly over in search of food and let the sun light the scenes of families and couples behind them.

“So, James.” Marjorie is unwrapping a sandwich. “We’ve been coming to this pier every summer for the last, what, three years? Three years of pier lunches and I still don’t know much about you. You have so many words. Do you remember where you got every one of them?”

The man continues to eat one of the sandwiches and nods. The summer breeze tugs at Marjorie’s hair.

“But why does it happen?”

The man smiles at her and points at his mouth. Marjorie pushes him away.

“No! I know how it happens, ya goof. I remember you when you would talk! I’m asking why. You’ve never told me why this happened. Or are the rumors true?” She teases.

The man weighs his words.

“A book.” The words begin to form on the man’s forearm. Marjorie watches the a small droplet of ink falls from the newly formed “k.”

....

*James flung himself out of bed and ran to get his petticoat. He noticed a crow perched on the windowsill, looking upon him. The lost night started coming back to him. He normally partied three or four nights a week. He thought for sure he would have gone to the local bar or strip club and made a fool of himself again. There were no drugs last night; no alcohol. He didn’t attend any of the usual antics. What he could remember was an old store he stumbled upon, with a sign that said “The String is Strung.” He couldn’t remember anything after that.*

*Fiery, James moved swiftly with the biting wind to find the shop and the owner. With the tattoo still throbbing, he tried to avoid eye contact with anyone that might try to speak to him.*

*“Oy James! Where were ya last night?! You missed some top floozies at the bar. Hey, whatcha dressed like a wino for? James!”*

*James waved, hoping William would take the hint and leave him alone, but the man was persistent.*

*“Hey James. Where ya going? I was just tryna tell ya about this sweet chick—hey, are you okay?”*

*James turned pale. His world turned into an overexposed photograph. He reached his hand out to hold himself up against the cold brick. Normally the center of attention, James could not utter a word without fear of it becoming engraved deep through his skin.*

*“Buddy, are you okay?”*

*James muttered, “yes” as quickly as he could. Hoping his body wouldn’t make sense of what slurred from his lips. He then turned and ran down the alley towards the shop, hoping to find answers.*

*He ran down down Oxford towards the park. His right palm began to burn as if fire had teeth. Ink bled down, leaving a trail of tar to the shop. James screamed out, tears escaping from the pain. He didn’t stop to see; he knew what had happened. He ran down until he reached the battered shop on the corner. Panting, he saw the same sign as the day before.*

*He walked up to the door, a closed sign dangled from the window. He started pounding on against the glass as he searched for any movement. James finally looked down at his palm. YES was carved, much deeper than the first. It looked as though it had already healed over. He looked back up at the sign. The String is Strung, he thought, What does that even mean?*

*He sat on the stoop and started crying. He wept. He could never speak again, he thought. He could never whisper poetry into a gal’s ear or scream obscenities through the streets with his pals.*

*“Help me”*

*He spoke his plea so softly that the wind would never even lift such a sadness. He felt a gentle sensation on the inside of his elbow. He lifted his petticoat and saw the sweetest etching of the words across the top of his vein. His tears magnified the words as they enveloped his skin. No ink. No pain.*

*An elderly woman opened the door and tapped James on his shoulder. He spun around to face a woman with long black hair, strong eyebrows and piercing silver eyes. She was wearing a jewelled hat, large black clothing and an assortment of necklaces all with different tokens or crystals wrapped in wired silver. The woman put her finger up to her mouth; she was mute. She guided James into the opening of a new world. A world covered in books he had never heard of and rare gems he never knew existed.*

*The elderly woman squeezed James’s arm as you would with an old friend. She looked at him with happiness glowing through her eyes. She brought him to the back of the store, where a familiar book laid open.*

Words may not be taken with the wind as we speak them.  
Words have the power to be with us just like the stripes are with a bee.  
The magnitude lies in what is felt, not always seen.  
You have been given the gift to see  
the consequences or beauty by which you speak.

*The woman smiled at the man with pride. She pulled up her sleeve. Dizzy, James looked at her arm covered in words from a language different to his own. Around her fingertips, in the crevices of her wrinkled arm, ebbing and flowing to the beat of her breath. James collapsed to the ground. The old woman put her hand on his shoulder.*

....

Marjorie comes back each day that week to have lunch. Out of happiness, the man speaks new words into existence. He uses the words he speaks to hinder the words he truly wishes to say, *I love all of you*. He could not bear to have the reminder on himself forever if she did not feel the same. He would rather keep her name sung above his heart. At least she would always be with him.

On the fourth outing, the man returns to his cabin with love over-pouring. He closes the door and puts his hand to his heart. "Majorie," whispers the man. He waltzes around the cart, letting the song in his heart guide his feet.

He makes his way to the small cot in the corner where he stops abruptly. There is a slow burning sensation in his chest. The man begins to cough incessantly and moves to brace the sink. A stream of ink pools, staining the sink. The man looks up to his reflection. His mouth is seeping with ink.

Unfazed, the man picks up an old towel and cleans himself and the sink. Now black, he tosses the towel and washes his face.

....

"Sir, I saw you and the girl on the pier yesterday. Is that Marjorie? Are you gonna get married sir?"

The man cleans up his station and shakes his head at the girl.

"No!? No? What do you mean no!? You love her don't ya?"

The man holds up his right palm.

"Well then what's the matter!?"

The man holds out his arms, gesturing towards the circus.

The girl refuses defeat. She follows the man through the back of the tent, past Jolly Irene sunbathing, past Alligator Man and Monkey Girl kissing, and through to the man's small cabin cart.

"You get to have your love written all over you! Why wouldn't you shout it from the pier?"

The man opens the door to let the girl in. He shakes his head and smiles.

"Well my mommy always says you can't keep words bottled up. It's not healthy. Otherwise all the words will bubble up one day and you'll explode! It's a fact, sir."

The man pulls a sandwich for the girl and sits down next to her. He enjoys her company. He hates silence in the cart. He has had nothing but silence since his violin broke.

"Well I think it's romantic. You need to tell her sir. You'll live happily ever after and I'll be the flower girl! I love flowers."

The girl pauses to the beat of a new thought.

“Hey sir. What was your first tattoo? Maybe we can point to tattoos for your vows! Even though I reckon you should have the vows tattooed across your whole back!”

The man stops eating and laughs. He rolls up his right sleeve and shows the girl. She looks saddened.

“Well that’s mean! I’m not talking that much!”

The man shakes his head and holds up his pointer finger and then points back at the tattoo.

....

*Sunday morning in Brooklyn: A morning perfect by anyone’s standards. The autumn breeze cooled off the brutal summer while the sunrise slid up the window pane like streaks of honey and spots of dew crawled in through the opening to escape the cold. James was lying in bed with the majority of his blankets shared with the floor. He just came home not two hours before, stumbling in an angered drunken haze; a complete contradiction to the softness he held in the morning. James rolled over to see the drops of dew sneaking into his room, almost smiling at the beauty of the morning. In his delirious state between comfortable dreaming and devastating reality, he attempted to piece together the night before, blurring old drunken memories with another night of the same emotions and experiences; the same shitty bar with the same shitty people and the same shitty beer. A normal night. As he looked for the final puzzle pieces, a sign flashed in his hazy memory. Another new strip club, he thought.*

*Tired of his memory, James was about to succumb to sleep once more when a crow flew alongside his windowsill, screeching out to the world that it was time to wake up. James groaned to the bird; “Shut up. Please.” Reluctantly he opened his eyes, allowing the sun to smash reality into his senses. While he stretched the day’s responsibilities away, his wrist started to itch as though an entire family of mosquitos were feasting on his forearm. He tried to ignore the feeling, pulling at his sleeve to fight the sensation and ignoring the crow that was still trying to speak to him.*

*The crow moved closer to the window, screeching louder as the itching sensation festered into an unnerving pain. James ripped up his sleeve and tore his nails into his skin, the pain worsened and the crows revelations only got louder. James pulled his arm into the light, expecting an infestation of bed bugs, or needle marks from the night before. But, his flesh glistened as blood began pooling at the deeper cuts my nails caused me. The crow became silent, his black eye seeing what James couldn’t understand. His fingertips started tracing in horror, the very words that he spoke two minutes earlier. Disbelief and nausea overtook him as he watched the phrase carve into his skin with some kind of black ink; the worlds pulsated to his heartbeat.*

....

The man is unable to concentrate. Any passerby would see a lovedrunk fool, swaying to the music of his heart. He is just about to the crescendo of his love confession when the orchestra halts.

“James, is that you? Honey, what have you done?”

The woman looks up at her son. She is a bit older than when he last saw her; her hair greying, her cheeks less round and her pale eyes darkened with grief. The woman steps forward.

She remembers him as a young boy, hugging her leg to hide from the dark. She reaches out to him and places her gloved palm on his chest. Her eyes cloud over.

“My baby.” The woman no longer hides her tears. The man looks down at her and imprisons his tears behind his eyes. He touches her hand, but says nothing.

*I'm so sorry*

The woman searches for an answer in the words on his skin. Dissatisfied with what she finds, she begins to raise her voice.

“James. What have you done? You have to leave here right now. I’m taking you home. Did these wretched people do this to you? Who did this to you!?”

The woman grabs her son by the wrist and begins to tug out of desperation. He continues to look at her, immobile and unresponsive.

*I'm sorry I love you*

The woman, distraught, pulls even harder.

“Don’t do this James. Please speak to me. You can’t stay here.”

She lets go of his hand and hugs him with the full force of her petite body.

“James, please.” Her tears blend with the ink beating along his chest. His tears begin to blend with hers. He still does not speak.

The Strong Man taps the shoulder of the man’s mother. The man looks on, unable to move. ““cuse me miss, but it’s time to go.”

The woman grabs onto the man once more.

“I love you James. Don’t let them hurt you. My baby! Don’t take me away! Put me down!”

The Strong Man gently carries the woman from the tent. Her cries echo through the silent show. The man collapses onto his pillow, clutching his chest. The man wretches and ink soils the earth. The Strong Man comes back to find the man crumpled in a heap next to his book. He picks up the man and carries him through the back of the tent, past Jolly Irene, who did not seem too jolly in that moment, past a concerned Monkey Girl and over to the man’s beautifully decorated cart.

The man is laid onto his cot and the Strong Man puts his hand on the man’s shoulder.

“It’s not easy boy. We’ve all been through it. But, you got us now. We’re here to protect you. Get some rest.”



The Strong Man exits and the cart bounces back from his weight. The man tries to rest as droplets of ink gently fall from his nose.

....

Marjorie knocks a melody into the fragile door and let's herself in. She is carrying a book with a tattered binding. She walks over to the man's cot and sits down next to him. He begins to wake, his nostrils softly stained by the ink. She places the book next to him and pressed her soft hand against his chest.

"I brought you your book. Just so no one steals it. I know how infatuated you are with it." Majorie giggles.

The man tries to sit up, wishing he could explain. Majorie's hand turns to steel, gently pushing him back down.

"It's okay. Don't get up. Strong Man told me everything. I'm sorry you had to go through that alone, but I'm here now."

She lays down, forming with the curves of his body. Her head rests over her own name. The man lays his hand around her waist, hoping to never let her go. Her hair plays with the rhythmic tattoos and her lavender scent fills the small cart. The two drift in and out of their dreams of happily ever after.

When they wake, Marjorie presses her lips against the man's rigid skin. She kisses "tattooed mute," "dreamland," and "a book." She moves over to find her name, written in affection. The man touches her silk hair, waves of love and fear crash through his body. He fills up, ready to pour his love into her.

"Is this me?" pointing to her name. "It's written so elegantly."

The man smiles. *I would have said so much more by now, my love.* Majorie moves up his arm and kisses the man's unwritten cheek.

"James, I..I have to tell you something."

The man freezes. If he speaks, the words he writes may not be returned. He cannot bear it.

"James, I might have to leave New York. The ship leaves today. My family wants me to come with them. James, do you hear me?"

He turns pale.

"I'm sorry James. I don't want to leave. Do you have anything you want to tell me James?"

Majorie scans the man's face for any sign she should stay. The man cannot get himself to speak.

“I understand. You’re upset. But, unless you have something to tell me, then I have to leave. No? I guess this is goodbye then.”

Marjorie kisses the man’s cheek once more and moves to leave. She leaves the door open and the man jumps out of bed. His chest begins to burn and he collapses back down to the ground. Ink begins to pour from his mouth. He starts to weep.

“Help me”

He whispers so faintly the wind could not even grab hold of the word. The small words on his inner elbow begin to pulsate. A gust of wind enters the cart, searching for the faint word. The wind caresses the tattered book and opens to a page the man had not read. He turns and reads the book through ink stained eyes.

Beware of the words you wish not speak. Words do not just stain our bodies, but seep deep beneath our skin. Words are things, just as dried flowers. Hang them for all to see or keep them hidden in books indefinitely. They keep just the same, but one is with love and another with fear.

The weight of the words can be measured just skin deep or deeper still. Our heart speaks words louder than our mouth. Speak these with no doubt or hold them down and bury them deep. Our heart still speaks with or without the.

The man wipes his face on the old blackened towel. He pushes himself off the floor and let’s the wind take him away.

....

“Is that another carnie?”

“Yea. No one else will touch em’.”

“O ya, I recognize this guy! Real crowd charmer.”

“Great. Write it on his gravestone. Now get outta here so I can do my job.”

The coroner writes the description of the body laying in front of him. He notes every tattoo. Over 700 words adorn the body’s skin. Unlike regular tattoos, these appear to have lost all ink, as if they were just wrinkles formed into the man’s body. The coroner notices a cursive name written on the body’s left chest.

Each tattoo is carefully written. A medical marvel. Two men come back into the room and turn the body over. The coroner takes note of similar cursive handwriting covering the body’s back, as if a love letter was carefully chiseled like a plaque .

The body is turned back over and the coroner makes an incision. Ink begins to pour from the body, encasing the coroner’s gloves. He cuts deeper and opens the body to identify the organs. They lay in the body, pristine. No ink stains, no blackness, just perfectly pink organs. Then the coroner examines the heart in disbelief.

A man enters the room. He is wearing a tailored petticoat and a large hat.

“Oh, Hello Professor Wagner. Is this guy yours?”

“Professor” Sam Wagner moves closer to the body.

“Ah yes. He came on with me after Samuel passed. He was magnificent. Is everything alright?”

The coroner lifted the heart to show Professor Wagner. Wagner sighs.

“I thought so. I’ve only ever seen one other like it. He would want it preserved. Can you do that?”

The coroner nods and removes the heart and puts it in ice.

....

A woman with dark black curls walks down an older Coney Island. She watches the seagulls dance with the wind and kids running with cotton candy. She loves to watch the pier. People fall in love at piers.

She hears a man shouting words of excitement near a crowd.

“Step right up! Step right up to the newest, most fascinatin’ thing here in Coney Island! Ladies and gents’. Boys and girls. You gotta see it to believe it! A heart of a tattooed man! Tattoo ain’t just skin deep folk!”

The woman moves through the crowd and into the sideshow tent. She sees sword swallows, monkey girls and alligator boys. She makes her way through the sweet fat lady and over to a glass jar. She gazes and sees a string wrapped around a heart of a man with words unspoken. Perfectly dried and preserved, the heart is glowing with words in ink. She sees the phrase *I love you, I’m sorry* and *marry me*, elegantly written into the greying heart.

The woman looks over to see a card.

The heart of JJ the Tattooed Mute.  
All the things I did not say, before  
I was brave enough to say them.  
To my love, Marjorie.  
1890-1940

The woman smiles and places a book with a tattered binding next to the glass case and leaves the tent for the last time.

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