Figure 2.1 The finished ambigram with the shading and details.

The city of San Diego in the southwestern corner of California is where I keep my heart and soul. Twice in my career in the United States Navy I was stationed here, and both times I loved every minute. My daughters are definitely Southern California girls.

I'm sure a few followers of ambigrams and my work have seen the other version of my San Diego design. Let me give you a little background of how it came to be. I was in a meeting at work, not paying attention and doodling as usual on some yellow lined paper. That doodle would evolve and later take second place in one of the original Ambigram Challenges on Ambigram.com. Like many designers, I started designing ambigrams after seeing John Langdon's work in *Angels & Demons* by Dan Brown.

In the Ambigram.com challenge, I took second place behind John, which was quite an honor for me. So with all that in mind, a remake of one of my favorite designs just seemed to make sense. The newer version of the design is much larger and more detailed. I also made some changes along the way to add to the overall aesthetic. In addition, I took out the 619 in this design, but I did love the fact that the area code is a natural ambigram all on its own.

When I started reworking this design, I first took a step back and looked at the original. I thought about what I wanted to change and what I wanted to keep. I knew that I wanted the D in the middle to remain more or less how it was, but the S/O solution could be improved. I'm a big fan of lettering and typography, and my background
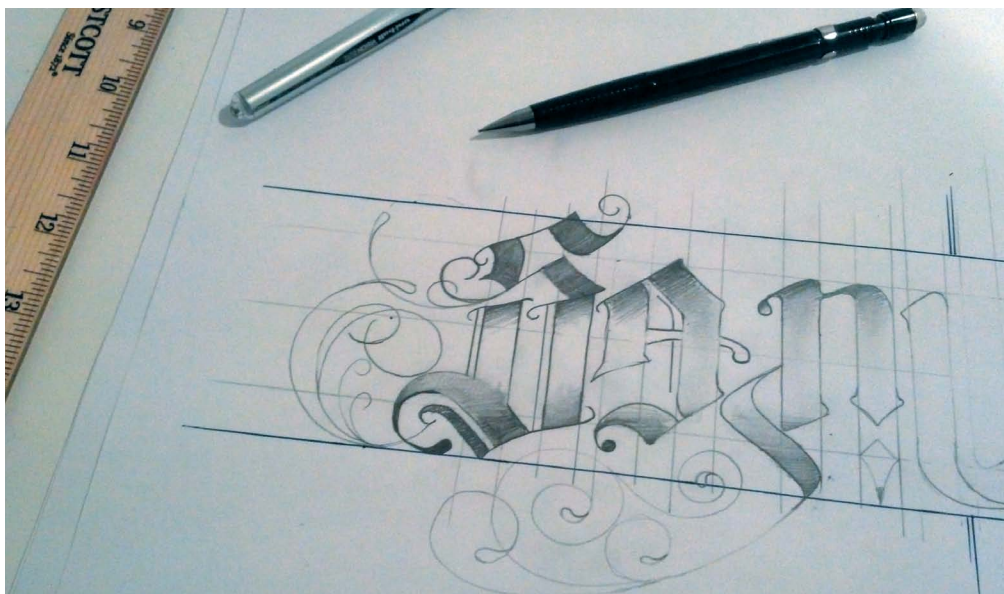
Figure 2.2 Initial sketch.

in drafting (in high school and in college) gave me some of the tools I use today to create my ambigrams. Fortunately, I knew the solution to this design prior to starting, but for discussion purposes, I'll share one of the thought processes I use when I'm designing ambigrams. I've reached a point that when I look at any word, I can come up with some sort of solution that relies on the number of vertical strokes in the word or words. By that I mean if you can match up the number of vertical strokes between the words "San Diego" for example, you can find your solution. I used the D in Diego as my center point, but there are three letters in front of it and four letters after it, so the solution required me to figure out how to match up the number of vertical strokes in each letter.

Unless I am doodling, I usually start with guidelines for the top and bottom of the letters and some lines in between, which are properly spaced to assist with the placement of other parts of the letters (*Figure 2.2*). If you have formal typography training, I'm sure you know all the proper terminology to use for these lines, but I don't, so please forgive me. This may sound a bit unusual, but when I start almost any of my designs, I have no idea how they will look when they are completed. Often, I don't even know I am done until I feel like I have run out of more to do.

In this design, I knew that I wanted there to be more lines and curves, and I wanted an old-school tattoo look to it because that is a big part of the San Diego culture that I love. With this design, I drew

out the first half of the design with all of its guidelines and errors on my drafting table. Once I thought that the design was good enough to continue, I moved on to my trusty light table that I built for my tattoo designs. This allowed me to trace the two sides of the design with more precision, creating a much more refined final piece. After I had all the letters drawn, the accents were all that were left to do. This is when I felt the nerves kick in a little (*Figure 2.3*). All the work I had done to that point could be ruined if one of my curves was not exactly like the other. I honestly wanted this design to be done completely freehand, so I didn't use any of my French curves or circle templates that I would normally use, which really brought out a quality in the end design that you don't get from ambigrams

created digitally. That is not to say that I don't love computer-generated designs. I do, and once I am more proficient in the use of drawing software, I will draw more ambigrams digitally. However, my passion will always be handmade designs.

As I mentioned earlier, I never really know when my design is final. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if over the next few days I add a line here or a curve there. But for submission to this book, I'm very pleased with what I created and look forward to seeing all the designs. Most likely, I'll frame the original print and hang it at home. Admittedly, I've wanted to take this ambigram for a spin for quite some time, and now that I have, I am happy to share it with you.
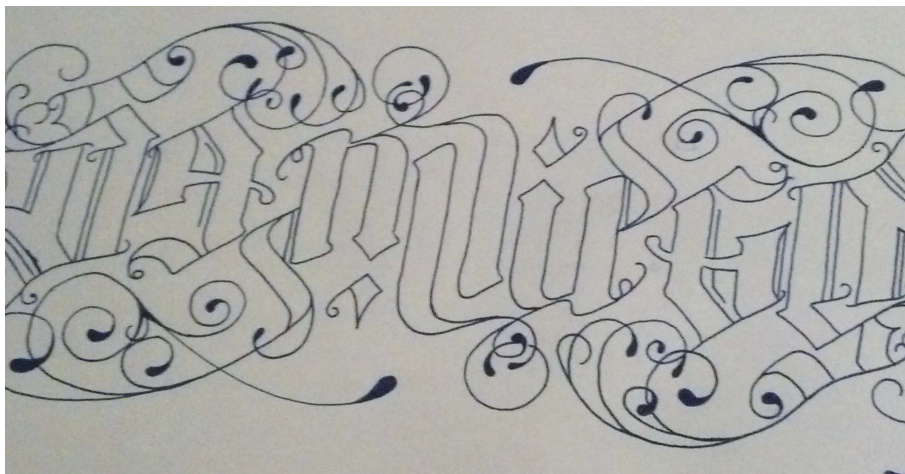

Figure 2.3 Outline sketch of the entire ambigram.

CHERYL SAVALA A beautiful design incorporating blacklettering and ornamentation. The high-contrast nature of the teardrop filigree detracts a bit from the lettering legibility. A solid fill to the letterforms and more closure on the d would enhance the readability.

JESSICA HISCHE This one is a very difficult read. I had to read through the creator's notes to realize what the word was. I keep wanting to make the S/O flip that the artist intended into an S/G because of the swash that makes up the top of the S. I do like how the additional ornamentation is treated, and although there is a lot going on, it doesn't distract from the letterforms.

JOHN LANGDON My favorite image of this ambigram is Figure 2.3—taking in the exquisite drawing and decoration before the problems set in. I was unable to read this ambigram until I found "San Diego" in the artist's write-up. The fatal problem is the D. Without being able to decipher that letter, I became unsure if the third letter was an n or possibly an m followed by a lowercase l. The inconsistent spacing of the letters (large space between the a and the n; tiny space between the n and the D) is a lesser problem, but one that may have exacerbated the difficulty with reading the n and D.

SCOTT KIM Every ambigram artist needs to decide how to balance the conflicting needs of legibility and visual style. Here, Elwin Gill embraces borderline illegibility as part of the counterculture aesthetic of tattoos, loading up his design with elaborate flourishes. The result is a secret message—hard to read at first, but easy to decipher once you know what it says.

STEFAN G. BUCHER I had to cheat and read Elwin's description to figure this one out, but that takes little away from this delightful piece. I like the asymmetrical ornamentation and love that it's an actual drawing. Leaving the letters gray was a good move. It keeps the letters hidden among the vines, which adds to the mystery.

NIKITA PROKHOROV Elwin's background in calligraphy shines through in this piece. Although slightly difficult to read at first, that is not the nature of graffiti art. There is a nice balance between the letters and the decorative flourishes. Some of the letters are easier to recognize than others, and that helps fill in the gaps between the slightly more challenging letters, eventually leading to recognition of the whole word.