

AMOR

FATI

# AMOR FATI

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography in the Department of Photography of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

By

Keavy Handley-Byrne  
2020

Approved by Masters Examination Committee:



---

Brian Ulrich, Head, Department of Photography, Thesis Chair



---

Anne West, Senior Lecturer, Graduate Studies Department, Thesis Advisor



---

Laurel Nakadate, Senior Critic, Photography Department, Thesis Advisor

•

“I’ve learned that some mourners experience anticipatory grief, mourning their loved ones before they have died, while others experience delayed grief—a postponed reaction to the loss. It might sound strange, but I used to think that I experienced both.”

Ruth Margalit, *The Unmothered*

# ABSTRACT

I am searching for a way to grieve someone I never knew. At age 26, I was lucky enough to meet the woman who would become my wife. We quickly discovered that there were many coincidences and connections that could be found when we examined our lives a little more closely - our parents shared a wedding anniversary, our fathers each had five siblings, Alice's parents shared their names with my grandfather and his second wife (Walter and Joan). But what quickly became apparent to me were the links between Alice's mother and my grandmother. Apart from photographs and memories shared by those who knew them, I would never know them. Both lives ended tragically young. Both died from genetic diseases.

Photographing, for me, is to write a metaphor. There are things unphotographable - how do you create an image of someone who died a quarter of a century ago, a person you have never known? In varying sizes and at varying heights, my photographs act as constellations within which relationships begin to form independently of the connections that I draw between them.

By searching for visual pleasures in the world around me using multiple formats of photography, I make visual the abstract histories that are known to me about Joan and Jean. Through examinations of heredity and meditation on coincidence and predetermination, I cling to what will inevitably be lost, trying to view grief not as something that passes, but something we are always in the midst of.

# INTRODUCTION

Jean, my maternal grandmother, died at the age of 44 from a heart attack following lifelong hypertension. My partner Alice's mother, Joan, died at age 37 from a kind of breast cancer caused by the BRCA gene mutation. These losses weigh on me daily, despite Jean's death 17 years before my birth, and Joan's death more than 20 years before I would meet Alice.

Through contemplation and investigation of the coincidences between these women, my photographic work has become a way to put to paper the grief that links these figures. I have been exploring the reach of their deaths into the wider expanses of our families, and by extension, the way in which medical systems have failed women and their bodies for generations. For my partner and I, their deaths foreshadow our own potential for future illness, which draws us even closer.

With visual metaphor, I explore this sorrow that I feel, but also reach towards the joy that Alice brings to my life as my partner. By searching for visual pleasures in the world around me using multiple formats of photography, as well as collecting archival imagery, my work functions to focus a lens on commonalities of experience among disparate people, and how these patterns repeat amongst people that love each other.

# GLOSSARY

algorithm	A procedure or set of rules used in calculation and problem-solving; (in later use spec.) a precisely defined set of mathematical or logical operations for the performance of a particular task.	columbarium	the building in which the urns containing the remains of cremated persons are placed.
<i>Amor Fati</i>	from Latin: love of one's fate. Friedrich Nietzsche's term for: a state of mind in which one willingly accepts one's fate as opposed to being simply resigned to it.	floriography	the Victorian practice of assembling flowers in accordance to their individual meaning to send secret or coded messages.
anthophile	a person or organism that is attracted to or enjoys flowers.	heterotopia	Michel Foucault's term for: a space holding two contradictory characteristics at once.
<i>basherte</i>	a Hebrew term of endearment, literally translated as 'destiny;' used to refer to one's soulmate or spouse.	Hidden Mother	a genre of photography common in the Victorian period in which young children were photographed with their mother present but hidden in the photograph. It arose from the need to keep children still while the photograph was taken due to the long exposure times of early cameras.
BRCA	an abbreviation denoting a genetic mutation that predisposes one to malignant cancer of the breast tissue.	<i>kismet</i>	destiny; fate (borrowed from Turkish, Persian, and Arabic).
cisgender, cis-	referring to those whose gender identity is in line with their sex assigned at birth; abbreviation cis- can be used as a prefix to describe a particular subset.	<i>mandorla</i>	from the Italian for almond; in art history, refers to the shape of a panel or decorative space surrounding holy figures (often the Virgin Mary or Christ in medieval religious art).
collective unconscious	Carl Jung's term for: the idea that a portion of the unconscious mind derives from an ancestral memory.	moiré pattern	a wavy or geometrical pattern of light and dark fringes (stripes) observed when one pattern of lines, dots, etc., is visually superimposed on another similar pattern, or on an identical one that is slightly out of alignment with the first.
		patronage	in Catholicism, guardianship of a certain group or class by a saint.

<i>Pietà</i>	from the Italian for pity; in art history, refers to imagery of Mary holding Christ after his crucifixion.
<i>punctum</i>	Roland Barthes' term for: the point in an image which is the most important focus of attention or consideration; the point of revelation, seeing through or beyond. Literally that which pierces, the thing that pricks the viewer of a photograph.
prophylaxis	action taken to prevent disease, especially by specified means or against a specified disease: <i>the treatment and prophylaxis of angina pectoris</i> .
Rust Belt	a phrase popularized in 1984 and first coined by Walter Mondale, who referred to the industrial Midwest as becoming a "rust bowl" because of Ronald Reagan's economic policies, particularly those having to do with steel imports. This region is loosely defined as reaching as far west as Milwaukee, WI, and as far east as central Pennsylvania.
<i>stephanotis floribunda</i>	Latin name for Madagascar Jasmine; an aromatic five-pointed vine flower, also known as a Hawaiian wedding flower.

# BASHERTE

My marriage was made legal on the 35th anniversary of both my parents' and my wife Alice's parents' marriages. This shared date, in addition to the repetition of familial names and couplings, shared experiences in our childhoods, and more, make our algorithmic match on the dating app Tinder all the more serendipitous. Ideas of divine providence situate my work within questions about fate and chance; where does a line appear between predetermination and random occurrence?

The kismet nature of the relationship I share with Alice is something I explore through my photographic work, with my practice centered around a sense that the universe is sending me signs through both natural and man-made convergences of the ordinary and the sublime. One such sign is representations of the moon, in any phase, and its associated meanings.

Maximilian Hell, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit priest for whom a crater on the moon is named, believed that he could cure ailments by redirecting the forces of the moon. This attention paid to the Moon by Hell anticipated the same in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which included both the literary and artistic movement of Romanticism and the industrial revolution. In the era of the Romantics, communion with nature was seen as a manifestation of the sublime. "In manifold ways," writes Lukas Feireiss, "poets, painters, and musicians have taken [the Moon] as a source of inspiration" (Feireiss). In Caspar David Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819), for example, there is a mood of contemplation; both figures are seen from behind, creating a perspective such that the viewer is also participating in this transcendent relationship to the celestial body. The swath of rosy light surrounding the waning crescent moon in the painting serves to further emphasize Feireiss' assertion that moonlight's "aesthetic of obscured vision...created a moment of altered subjectivity." For the Romantics, moonlight created an atmosphere that allowed for introspection.



Astrological, magical, and alchemical symbols have a centuries-long history in visual artworks. In Revelation 12:1-2, written in approximately 95 AD, the writer, thought to be John of Patmos, sees the moon as a part of a miraculous vision:

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.



This depiction of the Roman Catholic Virgin Mary is one that persists through the ages, likening celestial imagery with the virgin's superior status to non-Christian gods of night and day, and indicating that she comes from heaven. Cosimo Tura's 1460 painting *Madonna of the Zodiac*, for one



example, has zodiacal symbolism along the left side of the painting, near the shoulder of the Virgin, who is further depicted in the style of lunar divinities of more ancient religions (Battistini). In Cristoforo De Predis' 15th century miniature of the Moon, he depicts the Moon using



symbols at the time associated with several feminine deities: Hecate, represented by a torch, the new (or black) moon; Diana, represented by a hunting horn, the crescent (or horned) moon; and Selene, represented by a serene face, the full moon. Other symbols within this painting, typical of German codices, include both wheels and water, making reference to mutability, and by extension the Moon's "governance of terrestrial time" (Battistini). For me, seeing this history portrayed so clearly through visual means (and over an expanse of centuries) indicates artists' long-standing obsession with coincidence, and suggests the Jungian idea of the collective unconscious, or the idea that a portion of the unconscious mind derives from an ancestral memory. More directly, artists have invested a series of symbols with potent meaning by putting them into conversation with each other. Through this interest in visual representations of fate and fortune, I began to investigate more deeply a form of divination that I was already familiar with: the tarot deck.

Tarot cards are derivative of a 15th century card game, which began to be associated with the occult by the end of the 18th century. Pamela Colman Smith, the illustrator of the immensely popular Rider-Waite-Smith deck, followed the traditional Medieval/ Renaissance model with the depictions on the major arcana cards.

In contrast to a more common practice of fortune-telling or future-reading, My personal attachment to tarot cards is through a practice of introspection – that is, the meaning of the cards is not taken literally, but rather as a symbol; an idea attached to that symbol within my own psyche shows me what might be preoccupying me. Smith represents the major arcana as “allegorical – that is, they are meant to refer to ideas, concepts, and action on another level from that which is literally depicted.” (Auger)

This same analysis is one that can be applied to my own work; while a set of freshly cut stumps of trees alongside an urban home (*Prophylaxis*, 2019) may directly refer to ecological decline and collapse, or even the ability of a system of roots to surreptitiously capsize a house with their strength, a more metaphorical reading might see the blackened stump

in the foreground as an augury of illness, requiring a peremptory action to remove even the healthy trees. Alongside the stumps is a narrow cement path, drawing the eye along a timeline; though the time for the blackened stump to live has passed, the others have thinner bark, not yet becoming an incubator for rot. This reading can be applied directly to an understanding of my own life and relationship, as in both my and my partner's family

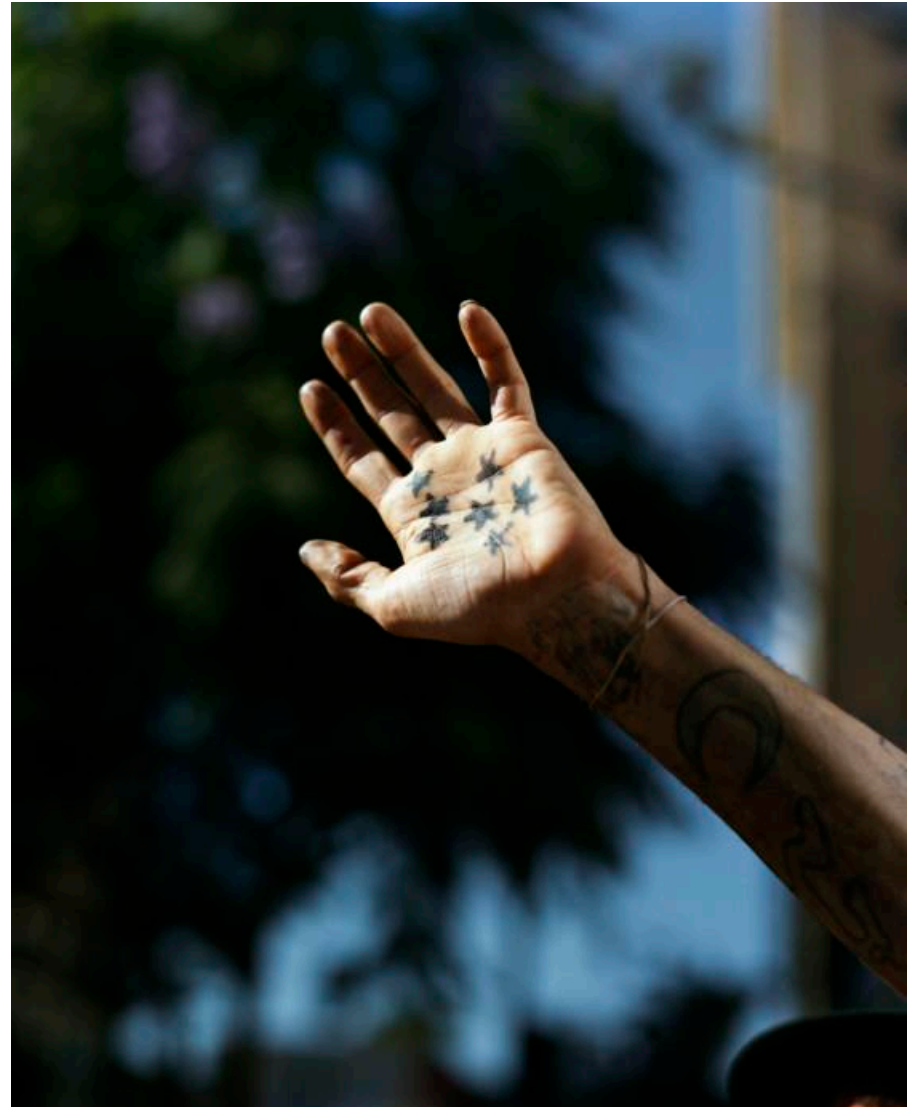
there are instances of genetic diseases which have required preventative medical measures to be taken for each of us.

Photographer Gregory Halpern's work functions similarly to my own in this way, drawing together truncated narratives through the use of evocative imagery and light. His book *ZZYZX*, named for an unincorporated region of California, contains photographs made from



East to West around Los Angeles, sequenced to reflect this movement. The photographs bring the viewer through the surreal landscape of southern California; an indescribable western light renders the scenery and its inhabitants both sublime and tragic. The darkness of the images is not overwhelmed by the beauty, nor is the beauty undermined by the decay surrounding the subjects. Halpern's photographs convey an understanding of a place often thought of as paradise and the loss of paradise. The balance between these things is what I hope to achieve when I photograph. My images fall somewhere in between the transcendent beauty radiating through me as I look at someone I love, and the deep despair I feel when thinking about what will be lost to the world when that person meets their ultimate fate. But without the threat of death and darkness, what would beauty mean in my life? These are the questions that Halpern's work poses for me, and the questions my photographs ask of viewers in turn.

Even the title, *ZZYZX*, conveys a sense of rules and reason lost but not forgotten, describing a place without telling anything about it. In an interview for Magnum Photo, Halpern clarifies his process: "I've always been interested in how [the real and the sublime] intersect, or are related, although we tend to think of them as separate. I love the way Magical Realism, for example, allows for multiple realities to intersect" (Bourgeois-Vignon). This sentiment is one that resonates with my own practice; the idea that multiple realities can exist – and therefore, that fate could coexist with random universal occurrences. With *A*, Halpern's work explores Rust Belt cities (and particularly my hometown of Rochester, NY), and with *ZZYZX*, the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Both books create a mythical landscape. Halpern writes of the latter: "I wanted the pictures [in *ZZYZX*] to evoke something simultaneously contemporary and ancient, a response to the Los Angeles of the moment, but also something not so literal. I wanted the space to also be somewhat mythical, the timeline somewhat Biblical" (Bourgeois-Vignon).



In a 2014 article for the Canadian Journal of Sociology, Mike Sosteric writes: "[The] lack of sociological interest and almost dismissive orientation [towards tarot reading] can perhaps be traced to the dominant assumption that secularization and scientific rationality would eventually kill such practices outright" (Sosteric). This relationship of the wider socio-scientific world to tarot makes the questions my work poses even more prescient; how is it that I am able to see the importance of something like faith or destiny when I so

highly value a logical, rational understanding of the world around me? Sosteric provides a few explanations from other authors for this, including “an attempt to explain the world where science seems unable to work, as a tool for developing the ‘inner eye’, or perhaps a way to tap into the knowledge contained in the unconscious.”

In looking for a way to understand astrological explanations for confluent events in my life and Alice’s, Kabbalist thought and Jewish mysticism offered an explanation. Moshe Idel writes: “Many astrological and Kabbalistic discussions make an evident effort to subordinate the naturalistic conceptions of astrology to the biblical vision of divine free will and individual providence” (Fishof et al.). He goes on to detail the idea from many Jewish thinkers that “[though] the stars and signs of the zodiac exert control over the gentile nations, [these thinkers] hold that God extends special providence over the Jews, excluding them from the domination of the astral powers.”

The word *basherte* comes from Hebrew and Yiddish. *Basherte* means destiny, and is often used in the same context of the English word “soulmate” (“TORCH: Torah Weekly”). In Kabbalah, it is thought that spouses are each half of one soul, or, in a more new-age parlance, could be considered to be “twin flames.”

A twin flame, according to most sources, is a person to whom one is bonded through a shared or similar catalyzing force. For Alice and me, the force that feels particularly present is a shared space of grief; we are each mourning someone whose memory is limited to objects, as neither of us have first-hand memories of the decedent. My grandmother died nearly a decade before my parents met, thoroughly eliminating the possibility of any direct memories of her. Alice had just turned three when her mother died, too young to have any clear memories formed. We share an unspoken grief for someone whom we love without knowing, someone with whom our relationship will always remain unrequited.

These mystical connections provide a framework for my own understanding of events that occur in such specific concertina as to seem fateful.

# CAPTURING LIGHT THE WAY EYES DO

Colorblindness is a genetically passed deficiency of one of the types of cells in the eye, called cones, which detect light in three colors: red, green, and blue. Generally, color blindness causes difficulty in distinguishing red and green tones, though in rare instances it can cause confusion with blue tones as well. This is the type of colorblindness with which Alice is afflicted. Color blindness is passed down on the X chromosome; for a cis woman with two X chromosomes to be color blind, she must have inherited the gene from both parents – a color blind father and a carrier mother (Rogers). As a result, only one of every 200 cis women will be color blind, as opposed to 1 in 12 cis men. There are corrective glasses that filter certain wavelengths of light so that a wider range of colors can be seen, but they do not work for every colorblind person, nor do they always correct for all colors of light along its visible spectrum.

Rainbows are a meteorological phenomenon in which light refracts and reflects through water droplets, separating sunlight (which human eyes perceive as white) into seven, visually distinct colors along the visible spectrum (red, orange yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet). They are seen only when the observer is faced away from the sun, and the light is refracted at a 42 degree angle (Dunlop).

Photographer Paul Graham, in his book *Does Yellow Run Forever?*, explores the resonance of rainbows when pictured alongside other imagery (Graham). Through sequencing and spatial relationships, Graham reinforces the idea of the rainbow as a symbol of hope which

lives just out of reach by placing these photographs high up on the page (and, in exhibition, on the wall). Near the centers of the pages sit photographs of a woman asleep, in various colorful rooms. Finally, along the bottom portion of the pages, there are gold stores – their yellow awnings offering cash for items made of gold, to be melted down, representing base desires, personal wants. The dreamer hovers between hope and desire, herself photographed lovingly and with elegance by Graham (“Paul Graham - Does Yellow Run Forever?”). This body of work, with its gold-edged pages, soft velvet cover, speaks to Barthes’ assertion that “...if Photography belonged to a world with some residual sensitivity to myth, we should exult over the richness of the symbol: the loved body is immortalized by the mediation of a precious metal, silver (monument and luxury); to which we might add the notion that this metal, like all the metals of alchemy, is alive” (Barthes). *Does Yellow Run Forever?* positions the value of gold – as Barthes positions silver – as falling short of the dearness of a loved body, that of the dreamer in Graham’s photographs, and the corporeal being of the dreamer aspiring to the hopeful beyond of the rainbow.

We had been together several months the first time Alice and I saw a rainbow together. It was early summer, perhaps six or seven in the evening. I pointed it out to the East of our apartment in Flatbush as we were getting in the car to visit friends on the North side of Brooklyn. She squinted.

“I can’t see it very well... just yellow.”

I was bewildered. My mind had settled on the idea of color blindness applying only to things that were solid; rainbows seemed like the most democratic of phenomena. To learn that Alice could not see the magic of a rainbow, a symbol that brought her comfort as a baby queer ten years earlier in New York for the first time, felt devastating. She shrugged – she couldn’t imagine seeing it any other way. She used to draw brown grass instead of green when she was very young, she said – in the years following her mother’s death. Her drawings of houses always had spiky brown grass; animals and people in parks with shining suns above stood on brown fields, the trees around them filled with brown leaves.



“They thought I was a very depressed child,” she said – and then she laughed.

“I mean, I was. But I was also colorblind.”

As a photographer dealing largely with ideas that are not easily visually described, the word itself, ‘photography’ – from the Latin “photo” meaning light and “graph” meaning writing – has come to represent those ideas, especially that of the presence of something unseen. Alice knows, for instance, that there are more than just the colors she can see, but she is unable to quantify those colors. She has sometimes had to ask me the details of something, especially text, if it is written in a color she cannot see; though she is able to understand that she is not seeing the full scope of a piece of text or an image, she is unable to confirm what she cannot see without my aid. Like Graham, my mode of photographic making builds relationships between disparate subjects, such that the unseen may be quantified not only within the picture plane itself, but in the space between the images and their positioning.

Light’s behavior is something that continues to fascinate me, especially through my return to film photography. In digital and cell phone photography, light does not fundamentally alter the sensor which creates the image. When I make an image using a 4x5 camera, the sheet of film is exposed to light, which alters the chemicals on the surface of the film. The sheet of film cannot be used as a pure sensor of the light; it is chemically changed by the introduction of light, whether purposeful and controlled, as in the making of an image, or accidental and uninhibited.

Light refuses to fall neatly into one category or another – matter or force – much like my own relationship to gender. Barthes writes: “If only photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing! ... For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity” (Barthes). A friend, an anthropologist, once relayed the similarities between light and nonbinary identity: “Light is either a wave or a particle depending on its state of being observed or captured – external forces demand that it be something less than its pure state.” Barthes’ desire for a body that signifies nothing resonates with me; especially in its impossibility.

The first time I visited Alice’s hometown of Arlington, Texas, we had not had our feet on Texas soil more than a couple of hours when a woman hissed at us for holding hands in a store – just one word: “Jesus.” Alice rolled her eyes. My hometown was not without homophobes, but the explicitness with which the comment was aimed

at us felt jarring. There is no dearth of underlying prejudice in the northeast and other coastal communities – just an unwillingness to acknowledge it by members of those communities. I have grown accustomed to being ignored, having lived in New York City for nearly ten years, especially when those around me might disapprove of my choices, my existence. The straightforwardness of the homophobia in this case felt like a slap in the face rather than a slow grinding.

A couple of days later, a thunderstorm hit Fort Worth while we were visiting with Alice's father. We spent much of the day indoors, shopping, still defiantly holding each others' hands and receiving some sidelong glances from others. The storm began to clear as we merged onto the highway that runs between Dallas and Fort Worth and headed toward Alice's sister's house, where we had been staying.

As we went through downtown Fort Worth, a vivid rainbow splayed across the eastern clouds. I pulled out my camera, frantically adjusting my settings to capture this moment before it disappeared from view, assurance, it seemed, even if those occupying the land held back.

Months later, I asked Alice if she remembered the rainbow. "Not really," she said. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. "But," she continued, "I remember how excited you were. Watching you take pictures of it brought me so much joy."

# BLACK DIAMOND

During the summer after I turned 19 years old, a clerical mistake caused the federal government to deny my college loan applications. This forced me to take a gap semester, during which I visited a friend in Ojai, California. It was the longest flight I had ever taken at that time; six hours in the air with no cell phone reception, before WiFi was a common amenity on cross-country flights.

We visited San Francisco on Saturday, October 16th, and spent the day in a city that seemed absurdly hilly to me, in and out of patchy reception areas and dense buildings at the pier. On the way back to Stanford, a voicemail popped up on my cell phone from my mother, giving no details, sounding tense, telling me to call her. I was afraid I was in trouble – perhaps she’d found my package of clove cigarettes, a self-destructive habit I’d taken up in the depression and anger of the gap semester – and I debated with myself whether I should call her back.

I called her back and she told me I had to come home, not because I was in trouble, but because my father was in critical condition at Strong Memorial Hospital following a cardiac event. It did not make sense to me at first: how could my dad, an athlete, having been a runner since age 14, have had a heart attack? His 50<sup>th</sup> birthday was three days away.

Through the blur of airports and a red-eye flight and a forty dollar cab ride from the Rochester, NY airport to my parents’ house, the story pieced together at an agonizing pace.

My dad had been in the Black Diamond Duathlon that weekend in Fishers, a small town in the neighboring county to Rochester. He had made it through the first two legs of the race – a trail

run and off-road biking segment. In the second running portion of the duathlon, he had been found by fellow runners on the ground, eyes open but unresponsive. One began rescue breathing. When his heart stopped, a second began chest compressions alternating with a third. The fourth called 9-1-1 and the race director, Brian Emelson, who brought an automatic external defibrillator (AED) on a four-wheeler to my dad’s location.

When he arrived at the hospital he was unidentified, as his medical bracelet had fallen off at some point during compressions and shocks. The hospital began by inserting two stents – small devices used to hold arteries open – and then induced a coma, lowering his body temperature significantly to prevent further organ damage. While he was in this coma, they predicted that he would be in the hospital for ten days, perhaps longer depending on any other residual issues – whether he had brain damage or other complications from being deprived of oxygen.

He left the hospital, recovering, four days later. He was running again within eight months.



Sarah Russell, the woman who started rescue breathing, had waffled about racing that day, as she was recovering from an earlier marathon and an asthma flare-up. She chose to do the duathlon with a partner, who did the biking portions of the race, while she did the running portions. Her biking partner experienced a mechanical failure, which put Sarah slightly behind in the second running portion, during which she came upon my dad.

Sarah Russell is a registered nurse with cardiac experience. My dad was already surrounded by three others, uncertain of what to do. Sarah immediately stepped in to begin rescue breathing. When his heart stopped, she told the second runner, Jamie Beaujon, to perform compressions; the third runner, Sarah Geno, a physician’s assistant, alternated with him.

If it were not sign enough that two rescuers had the same name, one of them has a son who shares my brother’s name, Declan. Even Sarah Russell herself said, “I’ve watched babies born, I’ve seen people die. I have done CPR on hundreds of babies and on older compromised patients. But this was a little more personal thing – I held

that man's face in my hands for about 20 to 30 minutes and I was breathing the whole time — with my asthmatic breath. It (felt like) the breath of God. As a Christian woman I have always believed that the hand of God is on everything - that He is in control of everything.” (Burri)

It's hard for me to reconcile the Christian idea of God with my parents' beliefs - they jokingly refer to themselves as Fallen Away Roman Catholics, both having been raised within Catholic families, gone to Catholic schools, and mutually made the choice not to baptize me or my younger brother. My dad even told my mom, about a year after his heart attack, “I think I'm an atheist.” When she asked him when that had happened, he laughed, and said “When I died for several minutes.”

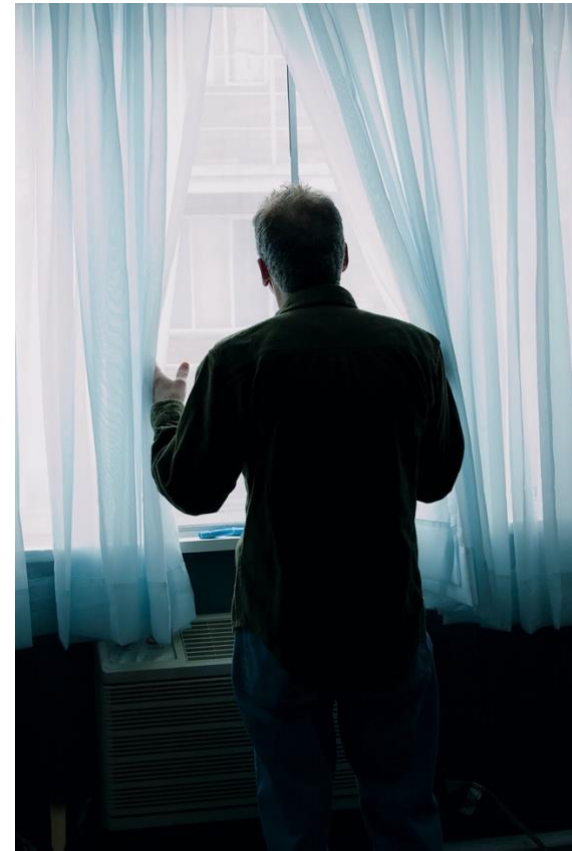
But the feeling that the universe had a different plan persists, now ten years on from the day my dad, as he says, died for several minutes. It has encouraged my obsession with names, with what a name can mean beyond its use as an identifying marker for an individual person. That fixation has been one I've had as long as I could remember - growing up with a name few could pronounce, and fewer could spell, certainly must have had an impact on it - but the indication that this fixation had some kind of tangible evidence became clear through this event.

I had already determined that I wanted to be a photographer by the fall of 2010. My dad had been an amateur photographer when he was younger, and my first exposure to photography had been through his pictures of the Alaskan wilderness in Denali National Park, where he and my mom had gone on their budget honeymoon the summer of 1985, nearly seven months after they got married. I had mostly been dealing in self-portraiture at that time, trying to understand my place in the world as a young queer person, not really understanding the impact his photographs would make on my practice. His photographs from Alaska would make their way into my undergraduate thesis work, and created in me a new appreciation for landscape photography, archival photographs, and photographing others.

When the local county paper wanted to write a story about my dad and the events surrounding his heart attack about eight months later, in the summer of 2011, they asked him for a photograph. My dad is a terribly shy person, so he didn't have any handy; he asked me to take his picture. So I did, on our back porch, in the t-shirt from the race

that remains his only DNF - “Did Not Finish” - in his half-century of running.

I kept photographing him, if surreptitiously. He stiffens in front of the camera, unable to keep the discomfort from creeping into his expression. By 2019, I had plenty of failed pictures of him, where he was blurred from movement or his jaw had tightened, belying his nerves.



Still, I kept photographing him when I could. Finally, I photographed him looking out the window of the apartment he shares with my mother and my brother, sweeping the translucent blue curtains out of the way. It was, after the portrait for the newspaper, the first photograph I had made in which he looked at ease - likely because he has his back to the camera.



The curtains obscure the details of what lies outside the window, diffusing the light entering the small, dark apartment into a set of ethereal pastel hues. The small section of window that can be seen behind his head acts as a bright tunnel, reminiscent of a mandorla in its shape. The blue color recalls the curtains of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' memorial artwork *Untitled (Loverboy)*, made in 1989 as his partner, Ross Laycock, was dying of AIDS. In Gonzalez-Torres' artwork, the curtains, hung across gallery windows, evoke the domestic, "a sense of home, a place of rest, like a bedroom or its surrogate in a hotel or a hospital" (Worley). The everyday shifting of the curtains caused by movement within the gallery or the wind from the windows themselves creates a space for contemplation, a space in which to hold our grief.



In *Dad at Home*, 2019, the light being filtered through the translucent curtains in this manner builds the same elegiac atmosphere present in *Untitled (Loverboy)*. The gaze of the figure through the window as he parts the curtains - an impediment to clear sight - reflects the search for meaning experienced by mourners following the death of a loved person. In this case, my dad is not only searching, but the subject of a search; his stance, with his body turned completely away from the camera, is representative of my desire to find meaning in his near-death experience, and in the deaths of those who I never knew.

# DEAR JOAN,

I'm writing to introduce myself. I am marrying your youngest daughter Alice in forty-eight days, on the date of your 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, which shares a date with my parents' 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

At our bridal shower, your siblings and my parents each gave us a holiday decoration of some kind, since a month after the wedding we will celebrate our first Christmas as a married couple. This Christmas is also the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of your final Christmas on earth. We are trying to make plans to be in Texas, so that we can visit you where you are buried. I hate to put it this way, but I am excited to meet you there, even if you are not there.

It is strange to talk *to* you rather than *about* you. I have known your face for several years, and we sometimes joke that I wake up next to it every morning. It is strange to know that I have seen you at your sickest but never heard your voice. I mourn you every day even though I never met you, but I like to think I know you a little. I think your laugh was probably like Alice's, a rich and musical giggle. I wonder if you hated going to the doctor like she does - but maybe she gets that from Walter.

I know that you would be proud of the person she has become. She is sensitive and kind. She thinks about you every day, but I think you know that already - she thanks you aloud when we hit a string of green lights in the car, and takes a friendly cat as a sign that you are there.

We spent a few weeks trying to figure out how to invite you to our wedding. There is the empty chair, the scrap of fabric from your dress, your rings that Walter kept. But Alice felt too much pressure, too much weight from wearing your rings. Ann had an empty chair at her wedding, and Alice did not want to make Walter sit next to an empty chair all over again, something that had been devastating to her as the maid of honor. Ann and Alice agreed between the two of them that

they wanted to keep your dress whole; that it was important to them both to keep it as it was when you wore it.

Ultimately, our invitations to you are quiet; they are in the *stephanotis floribunda* that will sit on our sweetheart table, in the photographs of you on your wedding day that will attend the wedding on their own special table.

I have so much to tell you. But I think it can wait for now.

Love,  
Keavy

# ON VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE BOUNDARIES

I am unable to stop myself from photographing barriers. I point my camera at something hidden, turned away, creating a barrier between the viewer and the object or subject at which I point my camera - I am hiding as much as I am showing, one might say. Often, my photographs do not include a horizon line, keeping a viewer trapped in the space I've photographed - perhaps this is because I want the viewer to feel as closed in as I do, within a mortal life that at times seems impossibly short - for some more so than others. As Barthes writes, "The horror is this: [...] The only 'thought' I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting" (Barthes, 93). The boundary, then, between the death of a person who is precious to us and our own death, is a space in which we wait, rather than an impenetrable wall.

In her essay *Photography Between Desire and Grief* within the anthology *Feeling Photography*, Shawn Michelle Smith writes of *Camera Lucida*:

"Photography,' Barthes proclaimed, 'has something to do with resurrection.' The photograph presents 'reality in a past state: at once the past and the real,' and

therefore the photograph's subject is always simultaneously present and absent." (Brown and Phu)



By photographing a boundary between my camera's lens and the subject of my photographic inquiry, Joan's shoes become simultaneously there and not there, indicated only by Alice's twelve-year-old handwriting on the lid of the Adidas box, sitting in the borderlands between known and unknown. For me, a constant presence, both seen and unseen, informs my understanding of grief with regard to a person as important as a parental figure.



Anthropologist Victor Turner describes liminal spaces as sites of ritual passage, which induce transformation in participants, moving them from one position in life to another. For me, Turner's

investigations of transitional rites profoundly affected my reflections on loss, and ideas about the temporal liminality of mourning (Turner).

In western cultures, mourning rituals are given a finite amount of space and time. The idea that grief might be indeterminant, extending throughout the rest of one's life, actively, stands in stark contrast to the expected processes in which 'acceptance' will occur relatively soon after a loss. Celebrated psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is credited with a model of the process of grief that lays out five distinct stages:

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Depression
4. Bargaining
5. Acceptance

Kübler-Ross conceived of these stages as an observed pattern in the experience of those diagnosed with a terminal illness – that is, these are stages undergone by one who is experiencing death ("5 Stages of Grief™"). These stages can also be applied to those facing the loss of a loved one. David Kessler, who continues to write on the subject of grief, wrote alongside Kübler-Ross, asking the question, what comes after acceptance? For Kessler, the answer became a sixth stage, acknowledged by the Kübler-Ross estate: meaning.

The idea that these stages go in an order, though, that one comes after the other, is one Kessler rejects. "[W]henever I talk about the stages of grief, I have to remind people that the stages aren't linear and may not happen in this order. It's not a map but it provides some scaffolding for this unknown world." (Berinato) This acknowledgement that the Kübler-Ross method outlines a kind of linearity, a kind of timeline that indicates a finality to grief and mourning, takes into account the criticisms that use of this model has received over time, allowing for these stages not to be seen as finite, but as spaces between which one moves – giving further credence to grief as a liminal space.

Perhaps certain deaths are liminal. Perhaps memories summon this condition and strong ritual expression. Someone who has had a profound effect on my life, though they may have died, stands somewhere between life and death when memories are recalled. Rumination over memories has been shown to affect the content of

those memories, and engaging with photographs that trigger memories has this additive quality as well.

For me, the ideas confronted in Turner, Kübler-Ross, and Kessler's writings mingle with Michel Foucault's lecture on the idea of a heterotopia, a space which is contradictory or transformative in some way (Mirzoeff). The cemetery is one of these complicated landscapes. True to form, the part of this lecture that struck me was the topic of cemeteries and their movement from within city limits to the suburbs. What cemeteries are "for," their function, became a discussion between Alice and I when she discovered my pastime of visiting historic cemeteries, notably Green-Wood in Brooklyn, the borough's largest cemetery, which is situated on the other side of Prospect Park from where we live.

A visit to Green-Wood offers me peace and quiet, as it is such a large cemetery one can walk alone for a long time in any direction. This is a durational space rich in silence. While absent of distraction, it is rich with symbology. It allows me to engage with the history of New York and understand the age of the city itself, finding names that have fallen out of fashion, finding the symbols which the bereaved use as a source of comfort in their grief. During a summer visit in 2019, I found an abandoned bird's nest along with feathers from a red-tailed hawk – a glimpse of nature I rarely see in my urban home. I find the longevity of life, the importance of solitude in this space.

Alice, on the other hand, having lost her mother so young, has a much different relationship to the liminal charge of the cemetery space. For Alice, these are places in which one spends a short amount of time, usually somber, interacting with only one gravemarker.

For both of us, though, the space is transformative in that it is a ritual space to meet the ground between the visible and invisible. I engage with the ritual of walking, of absorbing and observing, while Alice's ritual is one of remembrance and mourning.

it is morning  
and your spirit lies  
underneath this tree  
in a dream

beneath your face  
I see your mother's

feel, and yet be still

go forth and live

for what else  
opens the eyes of the flowers?

# TIN & SILVER

We had been in Arlington for several days. Alice took me to see the house she grew up in, and then the house in which she'd lived with her step-family. Everything seemed so close together, in spite of what I'd heard about Texas being wide-open space.

Despite having family in the armed forces – as many working-class people do – I had never been to a national cemetery where service members are buried. Between Dallas and Fort Worth is a cemetery bearing both cities' names. While Alice's grandfather – also named Walter – was not yet interred, her grandmother – also named Alice – had died ten years earlier to the date. The cemetery was different than the ones I have always frequented – orderly rows of uniform headstones marking 20<sup>th</sup>-century deaths, the dizzying physical

manifestation of a moiré pattern. At the entrance there was a computerized information booth that would print a loved one's lot number after searching by name.

We wandered through a maze of a columbarium, looking for Walter and Alice's shared wall space. When we found it, Walter (who, when his father was alive, went by his middle name, Gregory) led us in a Hail Mary and an Our Father before speaking directly to his mother; “Miss you mom.”

Between this visit and the next, we celebrate Christmas. Alice cooks, and we listen to Dolly Parton.

We arrived at the Moore Cemetery and Funeral Home in the early afternoon on Boxing Day. Walter had picked a neon rainbow of



Gerbera daisies at the grocery store. “Maybe real flowers, for 25 years?” Alice suggested when we found the aisles of the craft store picked clean for synthetic Christmas wreaths.

Walter and Alice walked instinctively to Joan's grave, barely needing to glance at the signs with lot numbers at the edges of the rows. Alice struggled to pull the built-in vase from the headstone as she had done many times before, quickly becoming frustrated, eventually walking back to the car to retrieve a screwdriver to pry it out of the muddied ground. When she was a safe distance away, Walter turned to me.



“When she was little, the first time we visited, she got on her hands and knees and kissed the ground. Took everything in me not to cry.”

Walter is a man of few words, so this story reaches into my chest and wraps its fingers around my heart. I nod. “She loves her mommy,” he said, smiling.

Elizabeth, our eight-month-old niece, sat in front of the headstone and reached for the flowers, still unsteady sitting on her own. Alice's hand hovered nearby

to keep her from toppling onto the metal headstone or shredding the flowers in her tiny fists – she was at the age where everything went into her mouth immediately.

This cemetery is Catholic, with massive stone hands clasped in prayer near Joan's grave, and saints scattered throughout the flat landscape, surrounded by dry, brittle yellow grass, it being December. Both Elizabeth and Alice share the middle name on the grave marker; it is Clare, the patron saint of sore eyes. They are named for Clare of Assisi. I photographed Elizabeth on the grave, meeting her grandmother for the first time. Alice's hand made its way into the frame, staying close to rescue her from crashing face first into the grave. I did not know this at the time, but her gesture echoed that of St. Clare

herself in Giovanni Di Paolo's 1455 painting, in which she intervenes to save a child from a wolf.



Later, I find letters and photo albums of Joan given to Alice and Ann by their aunts, Joan's sisters. I find the prayer card from her funeral. The Blessed Virgin Mary is on the front, contemplatively holding a mournful looking infant Jesus. I find a letter from Grandma Alice, addressed "Dear Greg + Girls." She writes about the grace with which Joan lived. I stare at it for a long time.

My religious practice is somewhat scattered and inconsistent, likely owing to my parents' identification as having 'fallen away' from Catholicism. The influence of the church is present even in our naming; my grandmother changed my mother's middle name the day she was born, having wanted to name her Sandra Lee Handley, and instead being told by her religious hospital attendants that my mother must have a saint's name (she ultimately chose Anne).

Since I was young I have been drawn to visual representations of Mary and Jesus – more particularly, the suffering portrayed by the Immaculate Heart/Sacred Heart representations (in which Mary's heart appears pierced by a sword and surrounded by roses, Jesus' surrounded by His crown of thorns, and each in flames). Further, my interest in religious artwork brought me to depictions of the *Pietà*, in which the adult Jesus is child-sized and held in the arms of Mary post-crucifixion. In her text *Representing Struggle: Raquel Forner's Social*

*and Political Engagement in the 1930s and 1940s*, art historian Diana Flatto writes:

Christianity maintains a tradition of female pain, particularly through *pietà* images, which underscore the trauma of motherhood. Forner projected her thoughts regarding the effect of war on women onto Mary, the mother of Christ, who witnessed the ostracization and crucifixion of her son in biblical narratives. (Flatto)

These representations of mothers' pain create a vision of suffering that is at once wrenching and shows an acceptance by those who are experiencing pain – or if not an acceptance, at least, a willingness to bear pain with stoic grace. Blessed Virgin portraits containing Immaculate Heart imagery points to a knowledge of the pain to come, and therefore an underrecognized strength on the part of a woman who was destined to be cast as a liar in her time, and who would be subject to grief later in her life.

The relationship between the Argentine expressionist Forner's works and my own are reflected further by examining specific works. Flatto continues:

With *¿Para qué?* (For What?), from 1938, Forner depicted a monumental woman seated with arms raised in strife (Figure 25). Her pose is that of a *pietà*, a swath of fabric lying across her lap in place of a deceased child. In addition to the compositional reference to Mary, the figure's womb is enlarged to suggest motherhood. The absence of a figure for the woman to mourn over avoids the direct correlation to Christian iconography, but draws attention to the loss[.]

The mother in *¿Para qué?* mourns something unseen by the viewer, with the black fabric standing in for what is unseen. In my photograph, titled *Cherub*, I employ this same principle by showing a human hand interacting with an object which represents a child, but is not a living child – a stone carving of a face, touched tenderly by my own hand – photographed from my own vantage point, which places the viewer in such a position that they might be able to understand the hand as their own. Forner was also known specifically to humanize and

anthropomorphize sculptures that depicted women in her work, pushing back against the mainstream (and largely male-dominated) artistic depictions of the female form that relied on objectification.

In this way, I feel a connection to Forner and her work; by making photographs, I am using a medium that has long been the



redheaded stepchild of the art world, with arguments continuing to this day surrounding whether or not the practice can be legitimately considered an artistic pursuit.

By using this medium and investigating archival imagery and family photographs, at times to an obsessive degree, I am looking for answers from those historically silenced: women, and in particular, women within a patriarchal religious system.

Joan's other namesake, St. Joan of Arc, is perhaps more well-known in the secular art world than St. Clare, and has certainly been depicted frequently in more recent artworks. Jules Bastien-Lepage's depiction places the teenage martyr

in the garden of her peasant parents' home in Lorraine. Her eyes are luminous, slightly too bright to be believed, and saints Michael, Catherine, and Margaret are depicted as translucent entities, very much a part of the surrounding environment. *Cherub* operates on the same plane, where the natural and unbelievable exist in congress with each other.

Each piece wrestles with a mystical communion of some kind; Joan with the saints, caught between the metaphysical and physical, and the owner of the hand in *Cherub*, engaging in an act of love and affection with an object that can only crudely render its intended subject.

Like Joan's, the cherub's eyes seem to be looking at nothing but also discovering a great truth, looking inward, finding a spiritual

understanding. In both pieces, the viewer gazes upon unseeing eyes which force self-reflection - what can be believed when sight fails?

"Here, when you gaze in her face, it unlocks your own internal gaze of looking into your own soul," reflects Robert Polidori on Bastien-Lepage's painting, and the same might be said of my photograph (Noey). Each, too, deals with loss. Joan experiences a death of innocence through the inability to unsee or unhear the saints of whom she had visions, whose encouragement to engage in the Hundred Years' War would ultimately lead to her death. *Cherub*, too, suggests grief for something that never was, something that might not be, or something with no evidence to reflect its existence.



While *Joan of Arc* is over nine feet in each dimension - a scale that invites the viewer to be enveloped by its lush, tapestry-like detail and which can fill one's entire line of sight - *Cherub* is six inches in its longest dimension, demanding that the viewer get almost intimately close to the photograph to understand its contents.

Though Bastien-Lepage's painting of Joan of Arc is dated at 1879, well after the period in which Joan of Arc lived, her era has been one of particular fascination for me, in both its artworks and its social histories. Joan of Arc died in 1431, during the later years of the Middle Ages (Smith). As a child, the period interested me particularly because of common girlhood obsessions with princesses, castles, and fairy tales. With time, my curiosity shifted to darker aspects of the Medieval



period, including the bubonic plague, the intrigue of royal life, and, of course, the Hundred Years War, which is now considered to have ended the Middle ages.

These obsessions have stayed with me through the years, becoming deeply intertwined with my interest in both faith and in art, and further, photography.

# A CREATURE ON FOOT

It is the magic of the outside that drives me to photograph. I am by nature a creature on foot - I've been walking distances of three or more miles since I was a teenager. I would sneak out of the house to walk to the grocery store with my best friend when we were fifteen or so, only to wander around inside the store for an hour when it was deserted. And then, we would walk back, getting sleepier as the wee hours marched on.

This continued as I grew older; I would sometimes take the commuter trains from my isolated college in Westchester County to New York City, just to walk for five or six or seven hours, once walking the length of Central Park, weaving across it in wavering lines. When I moved to New York at twenty-two, there were times when I could not afford to take the subway to work, let alone go out for a drink with friends. In lieu of this, I would walk, borough to borough, sometimes in excess of ten miles.

These later walks included a camera of some kind. Though I was without access to a darkroom, or even a laptop that could run quickly enough to support Photoshop, I brought either my small, introductory DSLR with me in a bag or on my shoulder, or I drained the battery of my iPhone taking pictures of anything and everything.

Any walk for me is a chance to see what is overlooked. It has become an exercise in noticing. The rhythmic movement of my feet is enough to keep my thoughts from being quite so loud, from spiraling out of control. There is something about a constantly changing perspective - I am not sure quite what it is - that empties my mind of these intrusive thoughts.

“...There's a sonneteer in our chests; we walk around to the beat of iambs” (Ackerman). We walk to iambs to learn what we are; I hear the “old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am,” a phrase of Plath's that resonated deeply with me as a heartbroken proto-adult living in poverty. I still walk in time with my heartbeat most days, which is faster than most prefer to walk. I have heard from Alice that I am a nightmare to walk with, since I go so quickly and yet stop so often to make a photograph, shifting my weight from foot to foot as I inspect a bobbing silver balloon in a closed restaurant window, or a chalk drawing by a long-disappeared child on the sidewalk.



This practice started when I first came out as trans. To move through the world being seen as someone I was not was something that caused a constant psychic pain. With hair down to my waist, there was no way to be seen the way I needed to be seen. So I walked to be invisible; I walked to stop feeling the boundaries of my body, or maybe to remind myself I still lived inside this one. I made pictures that made me feel euphoric, since the rest of my life had become so dysphoric. If not by walking, how else to remind myself that my own body could still

bring me joy? How else to feel that body meld with the external world if not to place feet to concrete, heel-toe, heel-toe?



*Pink Window (I)* and *(II)*, both made in 2019, perhaps most clearly reflect my practice of walking. They are photographs of the same window of an always-closed antiques shop in Providence, Rhode Island, between my studio and the apartment I lived in during my second year of graduate school. A friend also lived nearby, only two blocks from the window, which sits beside the back door. The view of a passerby is always blocked by a floral sheet on the interior of the window, slightly sun-bleached. Because of the

building's position on College Hill, light from the setting sun can be reflected in the window with few impediments, and casts the faded paint on the surrounding shingle-sided wall a rosy pink.

I had passed the windows many times by the time I made these photographs. To account for the dusky light, I opened the lens to a wide aperture, creating a shallow depth of field, which revealed the disparity between the focal plane resting on the reflection of the light, or resting on the window and curtain itself. The light began to mediate my experience of the window itself, and the window in turn affected my experience of the light and its reflection.

Initially, I placed the images side-by-side, displayed as a diptych, in an attempt to emphasize their inexact mirroring of each other. But as I sequenced the images, seeing them together diminished their power. When I placed other images in the sequence between these two photographs, the shift in focus became related to the space of time between seeing the images, echoing the return to the window I had made on my walks home from my studio.

Walking, as a practice, is a time-based medium. To give oneself the time and space to notice the overlooked is something that relies on the slowness of walking. In *Outside Lies Magic*, John R. Stilgoe, who teaches a course on the art of exploration, writes:

Why not explore by car? Automobile exploring insulates the motorist from every sort of nuance. The car moves too fast for its driver to notice much, and when it slows, it obstructs then jams traffic. [...] Always its engine drowns out whispers; always its windows, its air-conditioning shut out odors. Always it bulks too large to turn easily into eight-foot-wide roads left from wagon days. Even when it is equipped with four-wheel drive, trees and gates and mud and great rocks herd it back onto pavement, onto rutted roads meandering between obstacles. But worst of all for the explorer, the car attracts notice. Exploring requires the cloak of invisibility bicyclists and walkers quickly take for granted. (Stilgoe)

Through walking, I become invisible. In New York City, most people are pedestrians, if only between public transport and destinations. It is not unusual to see New Yorkers walking, and this allows me to be unseen, or at least, only noticed in passing by other walkers. "Outside," writes Stilgoe, "lies unprogrammed awareness that at times becomes directed serendipity." This is the way that I approach photographing while walking. I have been known to take public transport to an unknown area and simply walk in any direction that strikes me, making photographs as I go. Each discovery during a walk sparks a new line of inquiry, but many lead back to the same place for me: are these signs being sent to me from some beyond? Walking shows me patterns in the world, which confirms the truth of a logic to the universe as well as allowing a belief in magic, a belief in the ley lines of fate that draw me close to those I love. Photographing is one way that I keep track of all of these patterns. Making photographs is a way to collect moments where reality is rendered translucent, to be able to return to those moments, examining even more closely what struck me about them in the first place.



slow,

the evening sun is low.

coming home

they love to see

sparks  
fly

on sunday      the church  
sits              pray

singing

it sounds      like her mother's voice,  
singing in paradise!  
                 think of her  
how in the grave she lies;

onward through life they go

# THE HIDDEN MOTHER

There are plenty of photographs in the home I share with Alice; they range from larger, staged, custom-framed family pictures from Sears, and pixelated digital prints of photographs from the fifties of great aunts and uncles at their weddings. But there's one photograph of Joan that I have been drawn to since I discovered it in a box with other pictures of my partner Alice's family. It is a drugstore snapshot from the 1980s, lightly textured on the surface and with poorly corrected color (everything in the background is an orangey-yellow hue). It was taken by my father-in-law of his then-new wife, Joan, in Hawaii; they were in their late twenties and on their honeymoon. She is backlit so severely that she can barely be seen – she is more an outline than anything, with the vague suggestion of her green and white striped rugby-style shirt and the barest hint of an expression on her face. She is smiling.

This is the only print of this picture and would likely be



considered a failure by the rest of the family. It is perfectly preserved, however; the corners are crisp, uncreased, the colors are vibrant and unfaded. It is a photograph that has not been handled and viewed and handled again and framed and unframed.

I chose to put the photograph on display in our living room. Alice likes it, but then, who would not want even a poorly crafted picture of the mother they never got to know? Joan died in 1994, a little over three years after my partner was born, and just over ten years after the photograph was taken. The photograph feels as though it was never meant to be displayed. It reflects a time when pictures were still taken on film no matter your socio-economic standing; most families in the early 1990s owned a point-and-shoot camera (or bought disposable ones), and had their film processed at the local drug store or pharmacy. This practice is now nearly entirely extinct – the pharmacies now make discolored inkjet prints of photographs on memory sticks instead of underexposed c-type prints that were easily ruined by fingerprints and water damage.

At the turn of the century, shutter speeds needed to be, in some cases, arduously slow, making photographs of children – especially infants and toddlers – exceptionally difficult to capture (if you've ever had to try and keep an infant still for a picture, this comes as no surprise). The 19th-century Victorian solution to this was to have the child sit in its mother's lap, while the mother was covered with a cloth or concealed behind the chair (aside from her arms, propping up a wobbly, uncertain child).

Sometimes the fabrics were black; sometimes they were floral; sometimes the concealment was near-complete, only visible to one knowingly searching for another figure; and sometimes a mother's face could be seen peeking through the spindles of a chair. I began collecting these images in my mid-20s. Their spooky aesthetic appealed to me – the implication of covering someone with a sheet brought to mind not only ghostly spirits, but also the wrapping of a dead body in a sheet.



Seeing an image that was so like those in my collection, but which was more modern and had everything to do with someone I had come to know through stories and pictures almost exclusively, made me begin thinking about the relationship between them. Though Hidden Mother photographs were intended to bring attention to the children, they became known and collectable for the emphasis they placed on the mother in the image, though her likeness is hidden from the camera. So, too, this photograph began to have an impact on me: though the emphasis falls on the brightly lit background of palm trees and mountains, my mind instead fixates on why Joan is in the frame, though she's all but occluded. "I didn't realize how young she was," writes Terry Tempest Williams, "but isn't that the conceit of mothers – that we conceal our youth and exist only for our children?" (Williams) The photograph of Joan perfectly encapsulated this feeling.

Collecting photographs became a practice in itself, an obsession that I was unable to shake. Through Hidden Mother photographs, I had a window into history. Not only was this a view of the Victorian era, nor only the history of photography, but more particularly, this practice of picturing women in such a way as to erase them began to take shape in a tangible way for me.

The practice of collecting is one whose exploration influences many artists and writers. For Terry Tempest Williams, the collection of journals bequeathed to her upon her mother's death became the impetus for *When Women Were Birds*. Upon the discovery that her journals were blank, that her mother had not carried on the practice of Mormon women's journaling, Williams was led to wonder, in the words of Muriel Rukeyser, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open."

And so the world of photography split open for me in two ways, too. The photographs of mothers without mothers, the simultaneous absence of their visage but presence of their comfort, became something to try and capture in as succinct a way as the hidden mothers, to try and collect images that held this same metaphor.

Just as much as I was looking for the presence of Joan by making the photographs, collecting the moments where her presence and absence might both be seen, I was looking for my grandmother,



Jean. She was notorious, my mother says, for blinking or closing her eyes at exactly the right moment to be photographed with her eyes closed. This began to reflect a kind of absence in photographs, based in an understanding of eyes and sight that pervades Western culture at large. From the biblical Matthew 6:22 ("The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light") comes the more common proverb that the eyes are the window to one's soul. Being unable to see my grandmother's eyes – there are

only a few photographs of her that I can call to mind, and fewer still where her eyes are open – became a point of fascination. If I could not see her soul through her eyes, what might the photographs tell me of her soul, instead? It struck me that, though I could call forth photographs of her in my mind, I didn't know what color Jean's eyes were, as there is only one color photograph where her eyes are open. My mother told me they were brown.

So I began collecting photographs of other women with their eyes closed, trying to find what I could of my grandmother in the faces of others. They are, largely, incidents of flash, where the light has struck the subject's eyes at exactly the right moment for them to react (usually unconsciously) by closing their eyes. Most of the images, for that matter, are only as late as the 1970s, long before the advent of digital photographs. Like Hidden Mother photographs, the results of these snapshots could only be known after development, once the photograph was delivered to the intended recipient. By the time this was done, perhaps another photograph could not be made of the person within that reflected the circumstances under which the 'failed' image was made.

I continue to collect photographs that remind me of those of my grandmother. Perhaps I expect the eyes of the women to open, to reveal that it has been my grandmother all along. I keep looking for a photograph that can tell me the truth about her life, just as I look for the truth of Joan's life in all of the photographs of her that hang on the walls in our home.

"What else are we to do with our obsessions?" asks Williams. "Do they feed us? Or are we simply scavenging our memories for one gleaming image to tell the truth of what is hunting us?"

My search continues for this one gleaming image, and at times I have a hard time maintaining the belief that I might find it – a criticism leveled often at Barthes' Winter Garden Photograph. As Douglas Nickel writes in *Keeper of the Hearth: Picturing Roland Barthes' Unseen Photograph*, "We know a photo is actually just a flat surface marked by optical means with a pattern of tones or colors, yet in our imaginations the subject we see there seems so like the thing recorded that we readily ascribe the same feelings to it that we do to the original referent. It is a quasi-perceptual image: imaginary, in that all its information is present in it from the start, but perceptual in the kind of responses it kindles in us" (England).

This is perhaps why the collection of photographs has fed into a collection of moments, instead; though the one gleaming image of my grandmother, and the one of Joan, of each of their simultaneous presence and absence, may be imaginary, perhaps through making my own photographs, I can be animated by the images the same way they are animated by me.

# TO SAY THE NAME IS TO BEGIN THE STORY

Alice, Maternal
Alice, Paternal
Keavy, Maternal
Keavy, Paternal
Our generation + younger

## Alice

*Greek* - truthful one. Patron Saint of the Blind and Paralyzed.

Alice Elizabeth (Trainor) Seiberlich

Alice Handley

Alice Crumbley Simmons

Alice Seiberlich Gaibler

Alice Clare Simmons

## Ann(e)

*Latin* - favored; grace. Maternal grandmother of Jesus.

Anne (McDermott) Brennan

Marie-Anne Estell "Estelle" (Therriault) Morin

Ann (Rusnack) Sorgenti

Annie "Tuggy" (Brennan) Alicandri

Ann Elizabeth Seiberlich

Ann Elizabeth (Simmons) Bunnell

Annie Reynolds

Sandra Anne Handley

## Clare

*Latin* - bright; clear. Patron Saint of Eye Disease and Good Weather.

Joan Clare (Seiberlich) Simmons

Alice Clare Simmons

Elizabeth Clare Bunnell

## Eileen (var. Ellen, Helen, Helena)

*Gaelic, English* - bright, shining. Patron Saint of New Discoveries.

Eileen "Lee" (Brennan) Byrne

Eileen Byrne

Ellen (Seiberlich) Hardy

Keavy Eileen Handley-Byrne

## Elizabeth

*Hebrew* - my god is an oath. Patron Saint of Hospitals, Nurses, and Widows.

Alice Elizabeth (Trainor) Seiberlich

Elizabeth "Liza" (Therriault)

Elizabeth "Liz" Agnes (Seiberlich) Duffy

Elizabeth "Beth" Sorgenti

Ann Elizabeth Seiberlich

Ann Elizabeth (Simmons) Bunnell

Elizabeth Clare Bunnell

## Gregory

*Latin* - watchful, alert. Patron Saint of Students & Teachers.

Gregory "Greg" William Byrne

Walter Gregory "Greg" Simmons

Peter Gregory Byrne

## Harold

*Old English* - Army Leader.

Harold "Hal" Sorgenti

Thomas Harold Handley



Joan (var. Jean, Jeanine)/John (var. Jean)

*English, French* – God is gracious. Patron Saint of Soliders and France.

Johnie Ruth (Wakefield) Crumbley

Joan Mary (Rusnack) Seiberlich

Marie-Joseph Jean-Baptiste Theriault

Mary Joan “Joan” (Brennan) Wedow

Jean “John” Theriault

Jeanine “Jean” Marie (Theriault) Handley

Joan (Clarke) Handley

Joan Clare (Seiberlich) Simmons

Joseph

*Hebrew* – God will increase. Patron Saint of Fathers, Immigrants, and Happy Deaths.

Marie-Joseph Jean-Baptiste Theriault

Joseph Félix Leonard Theriault

Joseph Prime “Pete” Theriault, Jr.

Joseph “Joey” A. Seiberlich

Margaret

*Latin, Greek* – pearl. Patron Saint of Losing Parents, Mental Illness, and the Falsely Accused

Margaret (Simmons) Whitehead

Margaret “Peg” Brennan

Marie (var. Mary)

*Hebrew, French* – rebellion, wished-for child, sea of bitterness. Patron Saint of Laughter.

Marie-Joseph Jean-Baptiste Theriault

Marie-Anne Estell “Estelle” (Theriault) Morin

Jeanine “Jean” Marie (Theriault) Handley

Mary Joan (Brennan) Wedow

Joan Mary (Rusnack) Seiberlich

Patricia Marie (Handley) LeVan

Patrick/Patricia

*Latin* – noble. Patron Saint of Paralegals.

Patricia Marie (Handley) LeVan

Patricia (Morin) DiPonzio

Declan Patrick Handley-Byrne

Peter

*Greek* – stone. Patron Saint of Bakers, Butchers, and Fishermen.

Herbert Vincent “Pete” Brennan, Jr.

Joseph Prime “Pete” Theriault

Peter Gregory Byrne

Thomas

*Aramaic* – leader; twin. Patron saint of Academics and Learning.

Thomas Harold Handley

Walter “Bud” Thomas Handley

Thomas “Tom” Brennan

Thomas “Tom” Brennan Byrne

Walter

*Old English* – army ruler. Patron Saint of Prisoners.

Walter “Bud” Thomas Handley

Walter Bernard Simmons

Walter Gregory “Greg” Simmons

William

*English* – resolute protector. Patron Saint of Adopted Children.

William Charles Seiberlich

Gregory “Greg” William Byrne

William Charles Seiberlich, Jr.

William “Bill” Charles Seiberlich (III)

# BLANK PAGES

To try and justify a belief in fate in the age of information is no easy task, even if the only person who is asking for that justification is me. Belief in science, in logic, keeps a full belief in fate at bay. The intersection of science and fate, for me, becomes a visible one within the idea of heredity, of inheritance, especially in an age where people marry more commonly for love rather than duty. To meet someone – one person of nearly 7.6 billion on earth – and choose them as a lifelong partner certainly feels like something akin to serendipity.

Taryn Simon's work straddles this same boundary, falling neither clearly in the scientific camp nor one that supports the existence of fate. In *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII*, Simon traces family lines both through genealogy and through oral histories, weaving together disparate histories in a way that emphasizes the patterns that appear within what she refers to as “bloodlines” (Bhabha and Batchen).

Simon's work particularly focuses on the relationship between internal and external forces acting upon a particular family. In nearly all cases, heredity and lineage act as the internal force, which draws family members together or splits them apart. The external forces vary; sometimes it is science, sometimes religion, sometimes politics. This relationship means that the human body becomes the liminal space, in which two conflicting forces both act, but neither rules completely.

In both book and exhibition form, Simon uses blank panels to indicate a missing or dead family member within the bloodline, or an otherwise vague piece of the story. This strategy emphasizes that which is absent. As Sarah Parsons wrote in her review of the Tate Museum of

Modern Art's exhibition of this work in 2011, “In the larger bloodlines, it is these blank spaces amid the sea of repetitive images that catch the viewer's eye—like frustrating missing pieces of an almost-complete puzzle.”



Terry Tempest Williams uses a similar device in *When Women Were Birds*. To reflect the empty pages of her late mother's journals, the book contains stretches of several blank pages at a time, offering a space for reflection on absence.

For both, the processes used to formulate the books involve practices that are adjacent to science in some way. For Simon, the language of documentary ethnographic photography is used to picture her subjects, while for Williams, ecological collapse becomes an illuminating allegory for the cancer afflicting women in her family.

Perhaps the turn to more mystical or spiritual explanations, for me, is catalyzed by the uncertainties of scientific data analysis. Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.'s book *The Body Keeps The Score* popularized the idea among laypeople that traumatic events in one's life could have a physiological impact on one's brain and body (Van Der Kolk, M.D.). Van Der Kolk's theory relates to the wider field of epigenetics.

The study of epigenetics examines changes made to genes within a DNA sequence, but which do not change the sequence, but rather the behavior of the gene itself. It is the foundational theory for what is called “generational trauma,” the idea that distress can, like disease or physical traits, be passed from parent to child without the child having experienced the same distress as the parent. Generational trauma is frequently discussed in relationship to events like the Holocaust, the American Civil War, and more insidious environmental factors such as racial discrimination (Khazan).

Epigenetics as a subject of study remains in its infancy, with a great deal of uncertainty surrounding its validity; some critics charge that “epigenetic similarity between the generations could be a statistical [sic] fluke rather than a hereditary connection” (Zimmer). In other words, some scientists are skeptical that these epigenetic changes can be inherited at all; through sexual reproduction, genes are (to greatly simplify the process) reset and stripped, altering their epigenetic information again and again through the process of conception.

The contradictory evidence, both in support of and against inherited trauma, has made the entire field a controversial one to say the least. To be frank, just trying to summarize this in a legible way was exhausting for me; though I am curious about these scientific inquiries, I am far from well-versed in the topic, and struggle to understand what is thought of as “hard science.”

So what to do, with a wealth of information but a dearth of ability to decode it? Taryn Simon’s pseudo-scientific, proto-anthropological approach to photographing such connections – whether she would name them as related to epigenetics or not – supports my own practice in its tracing of uncertain connections.

Genealogy and its tracking mechanisms, especially within catholic communities, in which many people are named for saints or biblical figures, proves to be an inexact science. Within my mother’s family, the frequency of variations on the names Marie, Jean, and Elizabeth created a great deal of difficulty in tracing my grandmother’s siblings, with their legal names differing from the names my mother knew them by. The winding, incomplete histories of our families necessitate a practice of archiving, rather than scientific tracing – a softer science, in a way.

Of her work *Girl Stowaway* (1994), about an Australian girl who stowed away on a ship in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, artist Tacita Dean writes:

“[Her voyage] had a beginning and an end, and exists as a recorded passage of time. My own journey follows no such linear narrative. It started at the moment I found the photograph but has meandered ever since, through uncharted research and no obvious destination. It has become a passage into history along the line that divides fact from fiction, and is more like a journey through an underworld of chance intervention and epic encounter than any place I recognize. My story is about coincidence, and about what is invited and what is not” (Foster)

This kind of collection of traces becomes “an artistic equivalent of the uncertainty principle in scientific experiment” (Foster).

The work of all three of these creatives – Simon, Dean, and Williams – destabilize the notion that either science or history, medicine or the archive, have a fixed or regimented meaning. Just as an independent viewer of a piece of artwork or a reader of a novel may come away with a unique impression of the work, the same may be said for scientific and historical pursuit.

In *Archive Fever*, a response to the Derridá text of the same name, art historian Okwui Enwezor dissects this idea further in response to photography and the notion of an objective truth. “The archive achieves its authority and quality of veracity, its evidentiary function, and interpretive power – in short, its reality – through a series of designs that unite structure and function” (Enwezor)

Enwezor gives the example of intelligence archives created during the Iraq-United States war, explaining that although we often look to historical data to validate political or scientific positions, “[t]he calculated manufacture of ‘intelligence’ to fit the policy of Iraq’s invasion disturbs the integrity of and confidence in the archive as a site of historical recall, as the organ through which we come to know what has been, that is to say, the raw material constituting knowledge and a reference in which to read, verify, and recognize the past.”

Enwezor’s analysis holds true for the archive, and, for me, creates a relationship to all sciences that are considered to be “hard” or

“masculine.” Without recognizing bias in the production of scientific knowledge, how are we to verify or denounce the ‘truth’ to which that knowledge lays claim?

Taking these disturbances of fact into account, it seems reasonable, then, to think of the magics of fate, of connection and entropic patterns throughout the universe as simply a blank page in our understanding. Science offers some answers. I am interested in the gaps.

# I DREAM OF JEAN

The photograph of my grandmother that I can recall the most clearly is in a white, porcelain frame which has a vague shell motif. This photograph has always been displayed in my parents' home. The image is black and white, about 7x5 inches, a vertical portrait where she has short, curly hair and is at a three-quarter turn. When I was very young, I thought that it was a portrait of my mother, because they look so much alike.

My mom dreams of Jean more now than when she was young, more than when she had just died, she says. In most of the dreams, my mother is angry at Jean for 'leaving her' - In the dreams, she is alive. In the dreams, she had to leave, but cannot, or will not, explain why.

I wonder how she looks in the dreams. In most of the pictures I have seen of Jean, she is very young - just married to my grandfather, or at 19, just about to emigrate to the United States. I wonder if this is the Jean that she is angry at - or if that Jean looks more like my mother, who is 58, older than Jean was when she died.

I have been looking more like my mother as I get older. Our noses are the same, an identical ski-jump terminating with a round ball. My father was sometimes asked, in jest, when he was going to have some kids that looked like him. Answering our landline as a child, I would often be mistaken for my mother - her friends would say hello and immediately start speaking, thinking they were relaying a story to her. I would correct them and wander through the house to find her, rolling my eyes, usually - "Aunt Pat thought I was you again."

This has made me wonder what my grandmother's voice sounded like. My grandfather had a thick Maine accent, often referring to where he would "pahk his cah;" my grandmother, being French-Canadian, doubtlessly had an accent as well. But nobody is able to tell me what she sounded like when she spoke; there are no home movies,

no recordings, nothing to even give a hint - even if my mother and her sister remember, how could they even begin to relay this to me? I can guess that perhaps she sounded like me, that my mom inherited not only her looks but her voice from her mother, as I have.

I asked my mom about her mother in an email, as I dug deeper into the French-Canadian portion of the family. She wrote: "Mom had deep brown eyes with rather severe eyebrows, which was the style at the time... But her eyes softened her appearance, often betraying her sensitivity at how hard the world was for us sensitive souls, and other times bright with laughter and love."

Besides the eyebrow grooming (or lack of, in my mother's case), I can't help but see this same softness in my mother's blue eyes. As a sensitive child who constantly felt out of place, my mother taught me to dream, and that kindness and love were the two most important things to engage with in this world.

My mother, like my father, is shy about being photographed. She is often self-conscious and tense before a camera. I caught her, finally, when she visited in the summer, taking a nap on the bed Alice and I share.



She is curled in on herself, as is our cat Ruth, a small and sensitive cat without a tail. They are facing each other - Ruth's face is visible, but my mother's is not. Her shirt has a lace detail that looks like wings or a ribcage, either way emphasizing the mortal nature of her

body. Even the white sheets show the depression in the bed where she lies, and where the cat lies, holding their imprint physically.

Alice's great uncle, Hal, passed away six months after we got engaged. He was Alice's de-facto grandfather, and had helped to raise Joan, who lived with him and his wife after her mother passed away. We visited Hal in a Philadelphia hospital a month or so before he died. His eyes welled with tears when he saw Alice and she said hello to him - he called her Joanie. On her mother's birthday, Alice sometimes posts a collage of her face and her mother's face, half of each, on her Instagram. The pictures are always of the two of them around the same age - ages at which neither of them had the time to know the other. The caption, often, is a variation on "thanks for the face."

This is as close to a confirmation of what Joan looked like, what she sounded like, how she moved, as any of us will ever get. My grandfather Walter died in 2015; I wonder, if he were alive, if he would think the same when my mother visited him - if he would call her Jean.

by and by she  
closed her eyes.  
she felt afraid

her sick mother, just like  
roses

opened  
in her lap

# THE WAKE

In Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the protagonist seeks a scholar who has rearranged a novel written by Ts'ui Pên, protagonist's ancestor. The scholar, Stephen Albert, has come to the conclusion that the novel takes place within and without time; which is to say, Ts'ui Pên weaves a world in which all possibilities are simultaneous, each occurring and not occurring at the same time. Through the process of translation, Albert discovers that the novel never once mentions the concept of time.

"To omit a word always," Albert says, "to resort to inept metaphors and obvious periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing it" (Borges).

Photography is one such shorthand for me. My photographs act as a syntax; each one functions as a fragment of a sentence, as punctuation. Light becomes a tone of voice, making the words of my subjects mutable just as tone does for most languages. Some photographs whisper, others shout; some are a short phrase, others ramble.

My mother in law's death is a ferry wake in the Hudson River, churning our lives into a froth, returning along the same path again and again; there are calm and quiet moments in which we are undisturbed



by her absence, but the presence of the ferry pushes water into the Atlantic or eddies it to the floor of the river. It resurfaces as the natural movement of the water, continuing in perpetuity with or without the ferry.

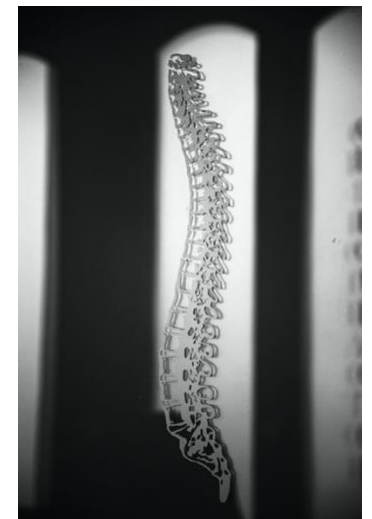
*Wake* (2019) is one such photograph

that rambles. Its exhibition print size is approximately 30x40 inches, with a resolution high enough at this size to invite the viewer close, allowing the water to swallow the edges of one's vision, enveloping them in the churning water. The elliptical path of the wake itself keeps the viewer circling through the photograph, finding the subtle change in color as the light filters through the water, fizzing white where the water crests, suspended droplets alongside ones blurred from motion. The photograph, like Ts'ui Pên's novel, never mentions my mother in law, or death, or the length of our grief. By making the photograph and displaying it in such a way as to swallow the viewer whole, I emphasize the perpetual movement of the water. Through the surrounding contextual imagery, the lack of human presence is further stressed, hearkening back to why a person might be absent.

Where the limits of words become apparent is where photographs are useful to create understanding - "It's not a question of drawing the contours, *but what escapes the contour*, the secret movement, the breaking, the torment, the unexpected" (Cixous and MacGillivray). The exact power of a photograph, the truth to be found within, is not that which is contained or imaged within the photograph, but rather, the associations to be drawn by the viewer. In the sequencing of the photographs that surround *Wake*, the image becomes infused with the meanings of the surrounding photographs, as well.

*Spine* (2019) precedes *Wake* in the book sequence. The image depicts a vinyl diagram of a human spine, displayed on a frosted window, behind which no details may be seen. The reflection on the glass is vague and dark, creating an arch-topped frame around the depiction of the spine.

The curvature of the spine echoes the curved paths of the waves cresting in *Wake*, drawing the images into conversation with one another. To create a dialogue between these two images is to make space for comparison and contrast between our knowledge of the two subjects; the water of *Wake* is undefined by any geographical information within the frame, as is the decal in *Spine*. Water





is seen as mutable, without form when not dictated by a container, where the human spine is seen as a rigid, an essential structure to retain a body's form. The relationship between the two images heightens when the affects of water erosion are considered; over time, water changes landscapes and coastlines with persistence rather than force. The human body sustains such changes, too, as one moves through life from birth to death.

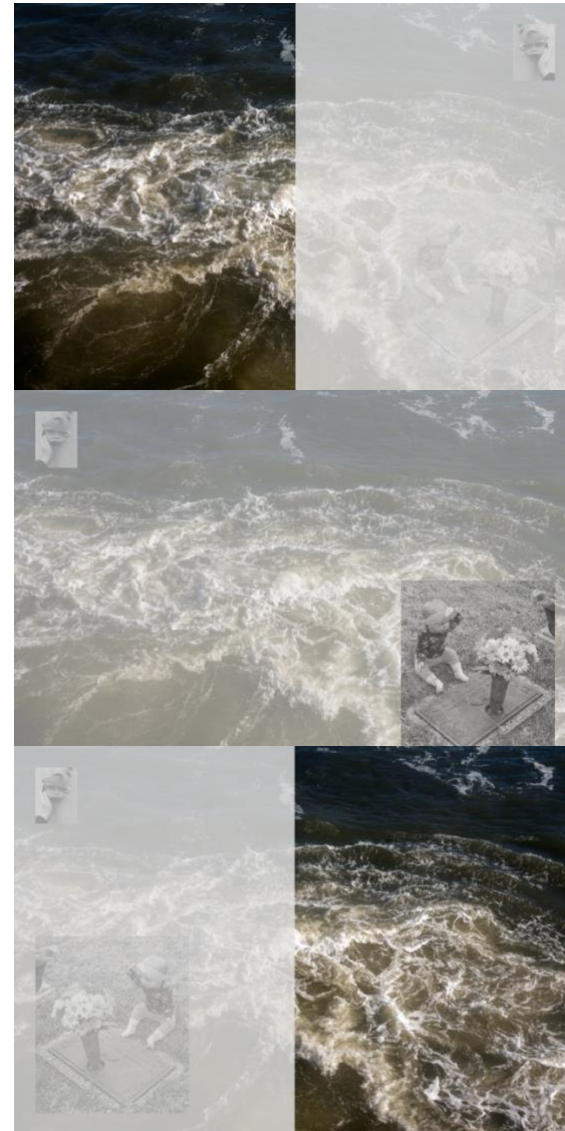
Though this photographic work has grown from a very particular set of concerns and a specific family history, the reading of the work is fluid. To use the photographs as a poetic syntax allows the viewer to “multiply the formal possibilities of the distribution of their elements” (Eco). A range of rigid interpretations, as in medieval works, is a kind of multiplicity that I hope to avoid with my work; photographs are sometimes seen as truth-telling devices, and therefore can fall prey to the idea that they are the absolute truth, rather than a subjective one. Though the photographs grow out of a particular autobiographical impulse, the symbolism I use may be interpreted by one's personal experience.

Using traditional forms of display - images in frames on a wall or sequenced in a book - I reject the definitive reading of the works when viewed together. Further, through this mode, the viewer receiving my work in an exhibition space brings the works to a subjective conclusion “at the same time as [they] experience them on an aesthetic plane” (Eco).

Through quantum physics, certain entities - for example, a photon - may be seen as a particle or a wave, depending on the method used to view it. This idea - that the reality of an entity is changed by the tools used to observe, or by the person observing - relates closely to my own existence as a nonbinary person. As Patricia Romney notes, quoting Tannen, “One problem with polarized dualism is that areas of overlap or similarity are obscured as we look only for points of contrast. Aspects of an issue - or of a person—that do not fit easily into one or the other polarity are rendered invisible or unacceptable” (Romney) The idea that there is a “truth” to be gleaned about any entity or person is dependent on those forces, leaving open the possibility for multiple truths. This reflects the contradiction contained in my work, that it can be based in so specific and personal a narrative, and yet be understood with a kind of fluidity that does not rely on the particulars of biography.

*Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad facem* - “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face-to-face.” (Eco). In order to view the subject of my work, to understand it in a straightforward way, I literally look through a glass at the world around me, narrowing my field of vision using a self-imposed darkness. Through the lens, I see one vision, and in presenting it, am confronted with many, and especially those that are not my own, but the viewer's.

This strategy is further achieved through use of transparencies



within the book sequence of *Amor Fati*, particularly that of *Wake* (2019), *Elizabeth and Joan* (2019), and *Cherub* (2019). By placing the latter two images on translucent paper that allows the viewer to partially see *Wake*, both through the white space surrounding the images and the images themselves, the images are seen within the context of the wake, imposing the rambling imagery of the water on the other images. Each functions as a phrase. *Cherub* is whispered imagery, and the oldest of the three; the quiet absurdity of the gesture, its tenderness, and the subdued contrast create a feeling of elegiac tranquility - “The language of women so often begins with a whisper” (Williams).

*Elizabeth and Joan* is a shout, placing three metaphors in close proximity: my niece Elizabeth representing new life, the headstone representing death, and the cut flowers drawing the two together: the process of life and death contained in one object. To place these images literally within the image of the wake suggests the circuitous motion of the water in relationship to both calm and the cyclical nature of life.

To divide *Wake*, to partially disrupt it with the insertion of two other images that so explicitly point towards loss, is to infuse it with loss as well. The idea that works of art can be simultaneously mirrors and windows, reflecting our own experience or allowing a limited view into someone else's, comes back to Foucault's idea of a heterotopia; these two truths can be contained in one entity, though they may contradict one another. *Wake* functions as both image and backdrop, event and memory, able to be viewed as an image independent of those that divide it, and then infused by them.

# IXI THE ROSE

When I was two years old, my father gave me a red long-stem rose. Though I have no memory of this, my mother tells me that I was immediately enthralled, naming it Ixi. I told her that I wanted to plant it in our backyard to grow a whole rose bush. She explained to me that a rose bush could not grow from a cut stem. When she relates this story to me, she tells me that I cried and she felt like the worst person in the world. The most recent time she told me the story, she said, “I could have just lied to you – the backyard was full of rose bushes.”

“But I would have felt betrayed when I found out that you had lied.”

A sign of passion since childhood, I am an anthophile. Being given flowers, to this day, is still something that brings me a great deal of joy. I have been fixated on photographing flowers in many forms – cut for bouquets, growing wild and in gardens, real flowers and faux flowers – in my most recent photographic work, but have had trouble pinpointing why.

At a wedding, traditionally a celebration of a new, joint life beginning for the betrothed couple, flowers are almost always a part of the surrounding decoration. They appear at the altar, at reception tables, and perhaps most notably in the hands of the bride. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, bouquets were specifically very fragrant to cover a bride’s body odor, as bathing was a yearly ritual (and women were generally last to bathe in already-used bathwater). Strong-smelling herbs were also thought to ward off bad spirits and have medicinal properties, and were therefore often included in bridal bouquets, as well. Perhaps closest to the modern reason for including flowers in a wedding ceremony is the Victorian tradition of using flowers to send a message. This renewed interest in 19<sup>th</sup> century western Europe had its roots in Ottoman

Turkey. Floriography, from Latin, “flor(a),” meaning flower, and “-ography,” meaning writing, remained popular throughout the Victorian era as a cryptologic form of communication (Patrascu).

This form of communication was necessary in a time when conversation was restricted by a deep sense of propriety and the sensitive etiquette of the time. A bouquet containing certain flowers could be “read” by the recipient based on meanings assigned in floral dictionaries, of which hundreds were published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Use of blooms at funerals grew from a similar need to express love, sympathy, and respect, as well as the more practical use of concealing unpleasant odors. This practice dates to 62,000 BCE, with definitive roots in Northern Iraq (Ansalone). The necessity of particular conditions for a flower to grow and thrive acts as a potent metaphor for human life.

More particularly, flowers are used to reference femininity – their beauty makes them a logical analog for a woman in a culture that values aesthetic beauty over nearly all else in a woman’s life. So too, flowers are often compared to romantic love and its growth over time. This becomes an unfavorable comparison quickly, however, when the length of a flower’s life is considered. Flowers as objects are relatively

short-lived. Once a flower is cut (unless it is from an easily propagatable plant), its bloom may last another two weeks, but generally will peak and wilt quickly – for example, a rose might last up to ten days if its water is changed daily, but any less than diligent care and its petals will begin to lose their softness, and indeed, the head of the flower will begin to lose its petals, much more quickly.

This comparison between a person’s femininity and flowers has never sat well with me; when flowers begin to wilt they are often thrown away. When women begin to wilt, they are deemed no longer desirable among consumers at large. In this way, I suppose it is an apt if infuriating comparison. It fails, however, to take queer femininity into account. What would it mean to queer flowers?

In Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, queerness is discussed as a kind of “failure” to live up to a heteronormative standard, and therefore a kind of “death” (where “life” is defined in no uncertain terms as being “straight”) (Halberstam). Given the perceived inability for a queer couple to sexually reproduce – though this is reliant on a very narrow reading of gender and sexuality in the first place – queerness is sometimes coded as being anathema to life itself. Leo Bersani takes this further, positing that the culture at large during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s considered queer sex acts in and of themselves to be a kind of death sentence (Bersani). In the failure to conform to a cishetero ideal, though, there is a kind of beauty, and a particular art, for Halberstam. So how would one “queer” a flower, in these terms?

One of the first gifts I gave to Alice, a few months into dating, was a bouquet of flowers, for which I paid \$6.99 at a Trader Joe’s. When they began to wilt, she hung them upside down in her kitchen window (later to be our kitchen window) to dry. Once she had let them dry out sufficiently, she kept them in a vase on our kitchen counter. They still live (though dead) in that same vase, perched on a picture rail above our bed in the apartment we share in Flatbush.

Drying flowers was a common practice in the Victorian era as well, considered a suitable pastime for women (Squires). Flowers and leaves, as long as they were dry, were pressed between the pages of a book and flattened, sometimes arranged in a frame to form a two-dimensional image and displayed, or pasted into an album with other dried botanicals.

After we were married, we brought our bouquets home from the hotel. I hung them on a dress form, using ribbons to suspend them

from its neck. Instead of being pressed, they dried in a three-dimensional, sculptural shape, and now hang on the wall, still upside-down. They are preserved, and continue to beautify, but show their age. For Alice and I, this is a queer bouquet; they are no longer living, no longer beautiful in the sense of the original bouquet, but their failure to die in the regular way of flowers dying – that is, rotting – allows them a new life outside of the normative life of a flower. This relationship to queer beauty – which also falls outside of the more normative understanding of what ‘beauty’ can mean – shows its death, its failure, with pride.

Now and then, I still buy her flowers. When her father had spinal surgery, she went to Dallas to take care of him. Though I knew they might be wilted by the time she returned to our apartment in New York, I bought her a dozen roses and placed them on the stove in a large green mason jar. I hoped that when she arrived home it might lift her spirits.

Flowers hold magic and connote life. While a wedding represents new life, the scenery in which it takes place is actively dying; though flowers can be used to mourn, they continue to live despite being separated from what makes their life possible. It is perhaps, aside from our own bodies, the only thing we consistently use to show affection that ages and dies from the moment we offer it. The way that a flower wilting can make life feel worth living, the way they can be kept indefinitely as a keepsake despite their death, is certainly a kind of magic to me.



# (TRANS) PLANTED

Alice's mother Joan was a Philadelphian transplant to Dallas, Texas, and my maternal grandmother, Jean, was a French-Canadian Immigrant to the United States. Aside from their names, which come from the same root (meaning "God is Merciful"), both Jean and Joan were married to a Walter - both my father-in-law's and my grandfather's name - and died of a genetically inherited disease.

My father's cholesterol was always diagnosed as "borderline" before his cardiac event. My maternal grandfather, too, had several instances of cardiac arrest during his life. Jean died in her 40s from a heart attack, though I always thought it had been heart failure. My mother wrote to me:

Mom was a lifelong hypertensive, known to her physicians, one of whom gave her Valium to keep her calm. The Rolling Stones had a song called Mother's Little Helper, which pisses me off to this day, a bunch of randy British bastards mocking middle-aged women for their drug use... The Stones are still around, but my mother is not. As far as I know, she had stopped taking Valium before she died, having seen the effects it had on some of her friends of friends, downed out and uninterested in participating in anything that did not dull their anxiety.

My own cholesterol is considered borderline; I have been prescribed a number of benzodiazepines for anxiety. Statistics on heart disease, since it is a medical condition that largely affects men and those assigned male at birth, are hard to quantify for me, being neither male nor female but having been assigned female at birth.

Medical conditions are generally judged, in both their importance and their symptoms and effects, by the white male body. My mother writes:

Heart failure is what happens when your heart cannot pump enough blood to all its muscles due to prior damage. It is a gradual result of long-term issues. Grandpa Handley had heart failure, after suffering a major and a few minor heart attacks. My mother had one heart attack, an acute and sudden event that blocked the heart arteries and stopped her heart. Her big heart.

I have seen my partner be told that she is simply 'anxious' when in debilitating pain, or 'imagining things'. I have worked through an entire day with tonsillitis, thinking my pain was just dramatics on my part. My parents always say that hospitals are no place for sick people; more than that, they are no place for women; even more, they are no place for a queer couple.

The B-R-C-A (or bra-ca) gene mutation has become more widely known in the last ten years, in particular, following Angelina Jolie's radical bilateral prophylactic mastectomy. This gene mutation is described as damage to a gene which suppresses tumor growth; women with the BRCA1 mutation have more than a 50% probability of developing breast cancer by age 70. BRCA-related breast cancer appears at an earlier age than sporadic breast cancer - in the case of the BRCA1 mutation, about 20 years earlier than normal - and is generally associated with what is called "triple-negative breast cancer," which does not respond to hormonal treatments and is resistant to some drug strains.

The BRCA gene mutation can also cause ovarian and fallopian cancers, though these tend to be more treatable than sporadic cancers of these types. The risk of these cancers in BRCA2-positive women increases markedly at or shortly after the onset of menopause.

Women with the harmful BRCA1 mutation, by age 25, have an average 59% chance of living to the age of 70, barring prophylactic medical or surgical intervention, compared to an average 89% chance among women generally. Alice tested positive for the BRCA1 mutation at age 21.

The heredity of these diseases is not lost on either of us. We do what we can to try and de-escalate our risks; Alice avoiding foods high in hormones like dairy and soy, me avoiding foods with a high saturated fat content. She has stopped drinking; I have cut back. We still allow ourselves indulgences for special occasions – mostly for red meat, on my part.

On November 24th, 2019, I married the love of my life in Kings County, New York City, a home we had both chosen without knowing that the gridded streets would lead to one another. In the car on our way from our home to the hotel for our rehearsal dinner, we hit only green lights. Our wedding day was rainy, until the ceremony concluded; the New York skyline could be seen across the East River then, lit up gold, bouquets of blush- and lavender-colored clouds clearing at the edges of our vision. We were so excited to be married that we forgot to exchange rings during the ceremony. Instead of giving them to each other in front of our families, it was just me, Alice, and Joan, together in the orange light of sunset.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

“5 Stages of Grief™.” *EKR Foundation*. [www.ekrfoundation.org](http://www.ekrfoundation.org),

<https://www.ekrfoundation.org/5-stages-of-grief/5-stages-grief/>.

Accessed 25 Mar. 2020.

Ansalone, Amy. “The History Of Funeral Flowers.” *Petal Talk*.

[www.1800flowers.com](http://www.1800flowers.com),

<https://www.1800flowers.com/blog/flower-facts/history-of-funeral-flowers/>. Accessed 13 May 2020.

Auger, Emily E. *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Typology*. McFarland & Co, 2004.

Avery, Fannie L. *Prose and Poetry, Fourth Year: A Literary Reader*.

2nd ed., The L.W. Singer Company, 1932.

Battistini, Matilde. *Astrology, Magic, and Alchemy in Art*. J. Paul Getty

Museum, 2007.

Berinato, Scott. “That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief.” *Harvard*

*Business Review*, Mar. 2020. [hbr.org](http://hbr.org),

<https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>.

Bersani, Leo. “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October*, vol. 43, 1987, p. 197.

*DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.2307/3397574.

Bhabha, Homi, and Geoffrey Batchen. *Taryn Simon: A Living Man*

*Declared Dead and Other Chapters, I-XVIII*. Gagosian /

Rizzoli, 2012.

Bourgeois-Vignon, Anne. “Power and the Camera: Gregory Halpern

Talks Intuition, Reflection and Representation • Magnum

Photos.” *Magnum Photos*, 25 Oct. 2018.

[www.magnumphotos.com](http://www.magnumphotos.com),

[https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/gregory-](https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/gregory-halpern-profile-intuition-representation/)

[halpern-profile-intuition-representation/](https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/gregory-halpern-profile-intuition-representation/).

Brown, Elspeth H., and Thy Phu, editors. *Feeling Photography*. Duke

University Press, 2014.

Burri, Melody. “For Runner Brendan Byrne, Black Diamond

Duathlon Was the Race of His Life.” *Monroe County Post*.

[www.monroecopost.com](http://www.monroecopost.com),

[https://www.monroecopost.com/article/20101112/NEWS/3111](https://www.monroecopost.com/article/20101112/NEWS/311129943)

[29943](https://www.monroecopost.com/article/20101112/NEWS/311129943). Accessed 24 Mar. 2020.

Cixous, Hélène, and Catherine A. F. MacGillivray. “Without End No

State of Drawingness No, Rather: The Executioner’s Taking



- Off." *New Literary History*, vol. 24, no. 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, pp. 91-103. JSTOR, *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/469272.
- Dunlop, Storm. "Rainbow." *A Dictionary of Weather*, Oxford University Press, 2008. *0-www-oxfordreference-com.librarycat.risd.edu*, <http://0.www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199541447.001.0001/acref-9780199541447-e-3226>.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Harvard University Press, 1989.
- England, Odette. *Keeper of the Hearth: Picturing Roland Barthes' Unseen Photograph*. Schilt Publishing, 2020.
- Enwezor, Okwui. *Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument*. International Center of Photography / Steidl, 2008, [https://sites.duke.edu/vms565s\\_01\\_f2014/files/2014/08/enwezor2008.pdf](https://sites.duke.edu/vms565s_01_f2014/files/2014/08/enwezor2008.pdf).
- Feireiss, Lukas. *Memories of the Moon Age*. 1st edition, Spector Books, 2015.
- Fishof, Iris, et al. *Written in the Stars: Art and Symbolism of the Zodiac*. Israel Museum, 2001.
- Flatto, Diana. *Representing Struggle: Raquel Forner's Social and Political Engagement in the 1930s and 1940s*. p. 126.
- Foster, Hal. "An Archival Impulse." *October*, vol. 110, The MIT Press, 2004, pp. 3-22. JSTOR.
- Graham, Paul. *Does Yellow Run Forever?* First edition, First printing, edition, MACK BOOKS, 2014.
- Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Khazan, Olga. "Inherited Trauma Shapes Your Health." *The Atlantic*, 16 Oct. 2018. [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com), <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/10/trauma-inherited-generations/573055/>.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas, editor. *The Visual Culture Reader*. 3rd ed, Routledge, 2013.
- Noey, Christopher. *Robert Polidori on Jules Bastien-Lepage's Joan of Arc*. 2015. [artistproject.metmuseum.org](http://artistproject.metmuseum.org), <http://artistproject.metmuseum.org/2/robert-polidori/>.
- Patrascu, Cristina. "Symbolic Codes of Communication in the Victorian Era: The Language of Flowers in John Fowles's The

- French Lieutenant's Woman." *Cultural Intertexts*, vol. 1, no. 1, Casa Cărții de Știință Dec. 2014, pp. 95-102.
- "Paul Graham - Does Yellow Run Forever?" *Paper Journal*, 15 Sept. 2014, <https://paper-journal.com/paul-graham-does-yellow-run-forever/>.
- Rogers, Charles W., PhD. "Color Blindness and Genetics." *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Health*, Salem Press, 2019.
- Romney, Patricia. "THE ART OF DIALOGUE." *Animating Democracy*, p. 22.
- Smith, Rosa Inocencio. *Lepage's "Joan of Arc" Is a Coming-of-Age Story - The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/05/lepages-joan-of-arc/484940/>. Accessed 27 Sept. 2019.
- Sosteric, Mike. "A Sociology of Tarot." *Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie*, vol. 39, no. 3, The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie, 2014, p. 357.
- Squires, Mabel. *The Art Of Drying Plants & Flowers: Mabel Squires: 9780517099001: Amazon.Com: Books*. <https://www.amazon.com/Art-Drying-Plants-Flowers/dp/0517099004>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2019.
- Stilgoe, John R. *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places*. First Edition / First Printing edition, Walker Books, 1998.
- "TORCH: Torah Weekly." *Torah Outreach Resource Center of Houston*, [https://www.torchweb.org/torah\\_detail.php?id=129](https://www.torchweb.org/torah_detail.php?id=129). Accessed 23 Mar. 2020.
- Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Cornell University Press, 1974. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv75d7df>.
- Van Der Kolk, M.D., Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Reprint edition, Penguin Books, 2015.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice by Terry Tempest Williams*. Picador, 2013.
- Worley, Taylor. "From Hostility to Hospitality." *The Curator*, 18 May 2015. [www.curatormagazine.com](http://www.curatormagazine.com),

<https://www.curatormagazine.com/taylorworley/play-at-your-own-risk/>.

Zimmer, Carl. "Can a Parent's Life Experience Change the Genes a Child Inherits?" *The Atlantic*, 21 June 2018.

*www.theatlantic.com*,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/06/mothers-laugh-excerpt/562478/>.

# IMAGE LIST

1. Caspar David Friedrich, German, 1774 - 1840. *Two Men Contemplating the Moon*. 1819. Artstor, 0-library-artstor-org.librarycat.risd.edu/asset/MMA\_IAP\_10310749801
2. Cosimo Tura, Italian, c. 1430 - 1495. *Madonna with Sleeping Child, Madonna of the Zodiac*. c. 1460. Artstor, 0-library-artstor-org.librarycat.risd.edu/asset/SCALA\_ARCHIVES\_1039488049
3. Attributed to Cristoforo De Predis, Italian, c. 1440 - 1486. *Luna, miniatura dal codice De Sphaera*. c. 1430. Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luna\\_-\\_De\\_Sphaera\\_-\\_Biblioteca\\_Estense\\_lat209.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luna_-_De_Sphaera_-_Biblioteca_Estense_lat209.png)
4. Pamela Colman Smith, British, 1878 - 1951. Illustrations for the Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot Deck cards *The Tower*, *The Moon*, and *The Magician*. c. 1907. Fyehhistory, <https://fyehhistory.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/comm2.jpg>
5. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Prophylaxis*. 2019.
6. Gregory Halpern, American, 1977-. *Untitled*. 2015. Magnum, <https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/gregory-halpern-profile-intuition-representation>
7. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Outside Fort Worth*. 2019.
8. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Dad at Home*. 2019.
9. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Cuban-American, 1957-1996. *Untitled (Loverboy)*. 1989. MIT List Art Center, [https://listart.mit.edu/sites/default/files/styles/slideshow/public/GONZALEZ-TORRES%20\\_alt.jpg?itok=NfixxiIS](https://listart.mit.edu/sites/default/files/styles/slideshow/public/GONZALEZ-TORRES%20_alt.jpg?itok=NfixxiIS)
10. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Mommie's Shoes*. 2019.
11. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Walter & Alice at Walter & Alice's Grave*. 2019.
12. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Elizabeth & Joan*. 2019.
13. Giovanni Di Paolo, Italian, c. 1399-1482. *Saint Clare Rescuing a Child Mauled by a Wolf*. c. 1455-1460. Artstor, 0-library-artstor-org.librarycat.risd.edu/asset/AMHOUSTONIG\_10313877054
14. Raquel Forner, Argentine, 1902-1988. *¿Para Que?*. 1939. Fundación Forner-Bigatti, <http://forner-bigatti.com.ar/project/para-que/>
15. Jules Bastien-Lepage, French, 1848-1884. *Joan of Arc*. 1879. Artstor, 0-library-artstor-org.librarycat.risd.edu/asset/MMA\_IAP\_10310750416
16. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Cherub*. 2019.
17. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *A Drawing of A Cat*. 2019.

/attachment/mn11551442-2/

18. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Star Balloon*. 2020.
19. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Pink Window I*. 2019.
20. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Pink Window II*. 2019.
21. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Joan in 1984*. 2018.
22. Unknown Photographer. *Salted Paper Print [Hidden Mother with twins]*. c. 1890. From my collection.
23. Unknown Photographer. *Snapshot [Woman with eyes closed in front of a car]*. c. 1960s. From my collection.
24. Taryn Simon, American, . *A Living Man Declared Dead, Chapter I*. 2008. Art-Agenda, <https://www.art-agenda.com/features /233848/taryn-simon-s-a-living-man-declared-dead-and-other-chapters-i-xviii>
25. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Mom & Ruth*. 2018.
26. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Wake*. 2019.
27. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Spine*. 2019.
28. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. Three spreads from *Amor Fati*. 2020.
29. Keavy Handley-Byrne, American, 1991-. *Sky Rose*. 2019.