

Bough Break

by

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From the moment they're born until the day they're laid to rest, a person is defined in relation to their family. The family name, the family house, the family legacy, the family plot; a lifetime of both obligation and support presumed as soon as the birth certificate is signed. Some of us, however, go through life without that assurance, and the quest for a sense of belonging replaces it.

When I was a toddler, my parents divorced. Being so young at the time, this disrupted my life very little, aside from a hyphenated name and some shuffling between weekends. It wasn't until I was seven that my world shattered: my mother died suddenly from a heart attack brought on by her lifelong illness. I found her in her bed, dying, and ran from the room in tears to bring someone who could help. I never saw her again. Watching the ambulance drive away from an upstairs window, I was still too young and in too much shock to understand how my life was about to change.

I moved in to another house, living with my dad and my new stepmom full time and leaving behind the relatives who'd helped raise me. I started writing a different last name at the top of my school papers. My stepmom became pregnant. We moved again, and I went into a new school system. My stepmom formally adopted me, and my baby sister and I received our Hebrew names side by side. I was thrilled at my new family: I promised that I was going to be the best big sister in the world, and always be there for her. Yet as all this was going on, I was also making my way through the first stages of mourning, and not successfully. As a young and traumatized child, I took all my grief and locked it away, without even realizing what I was doing. I thought that mourning was a chapter of my life that I could leave behind, a book I could

close for good once enough time had passed. As an adult, I know now that mourning is a journey on a winding path. Walking it will last me a lifetime.

As a teenager, I fell into photography, and almost immediately discovered what I wanted to do with my life. The more I studied it, the more I fell in love. When I was younger, I couldn't articulate why, but I started to make sense of it as I got older: photography is the medium of time. The death of my mother was an open wound inside me that, untreated, only grew over the passing years, and that sense of loss amplified all other losses. With the camera, I could preserve moments in time which would otherwise be lost forever. The little death of each moment could be halted on film, trapped in silver like a fly in amber. Rising slowly into my own adulthood, I documented my younger sister's growth as she went from child to preteen to teenager, without any of the upheavals which had marked my early years. My practice evolved with her: my photographs of her as a child are eager and clumsy, but as the two of us matured, so did my skill. The care and confidence in my later portraits of her reflect her own internal development.

Although the two of us became even closer over the years, our differences also became more apparent. I was told often that I was the spitting image of my late mother, and right from the start, my sister took after her mother. An eye familiar with our bloodlines can look at the two of us and pick out the similarities handed down from our father, but to the rest of the world, we look like strangers. Studying our faces through the camera lens is a bittersweet action for me. She has always had the luxury of being able to find herself in her mother's face, while I've carried the burden of being the living reminder of a dead woman to all her loved ones.

I love my adopted mother and I owe her my life, but it's not easy to grow up questioning your place in a family. I was always different, and sometimes I felt like I didn't fit, a tacked-on

addition to the family portrait. I had my own branch of family, with their own problems and obligations, that no one else was connected to. When there was a crisis on their side, it wasn't something my parents would be involved in. My teenage years were difficult, full of the normal growing pains of burgeoning womanhood, and I was always left wondering about the kind of life I would have had if my mother hadn't died. I wondered about what kind of relationship we would have had, if given the time, beyond the dependence a very young child has for their mother. How would I have seen her as an adult? As photography became more important to me, I started to mourn the lost opportunity to photograph my biological mother the way I did my adopted mother. I tried to photograph all the transitions of my later life, documenting milestones and preserving the images of aging relatives, hounded all the while by my fear of loss. It snapped at my heels, urging me on with vague sense of panic, of pre-grief: *now, before it's too late.*

Photographing loved ones became a vital process in my work, a way to both honor them and map out the connections between us. I would never be able to do the same for my mother, and tried in vain to substitute her lost face with my own. This preoccupation with our shared appearances, and the complicated ties between my sister and our mothers- shared and singular- crept into my work as I began photographing for my senior project. At first, I knew only that I had to photograph my family; I felt that my heart demanded it. Months into the project, I looked back on what I had done and noticed a recurring theme in each contact sheet. I saw that I had almost no portraits taken straight on, but instead many that came at the question sideways, in the form of hands or obscured faces. It was then that I realized the true shape of my project. I had thought the work would be about conviction born of love: instead, it was about the uncertainty I feel despite that love, and the tension that comes from living with the fear of what will happen next.

Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography by Roland Barthes was a great inspiration to me during this project. Although he wasn't a photographer himself, I have related to the way he saw photography, treating it not as a matter of fact, but as an inherently bizarre phenomenon whose strangeness he sought to understand. *Camera Lucida* is a very personal book for Barthes, combining his ruminations on photography with his feelings over the recent death of his mother, and his reaction to seeing photographs of her. "In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die ... Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" (Barthes 96). I feel that way whenever I see old pictures of my mother, unable to look at them without thinking of her future/past death. This feeling of being displaced in time jars me. Barthes calls photographs "a new form of hallucination ... a temporal hallucination ... (on the one hand 'it is not there,' on the other 'but it has indeed been') : a mad image, chafed by reality" (115).

In a box in the attic, I discovered photos of my mother as a twenty year old, and saw her in her youth for the first time. So alike was her face to mine that, in a split second of vertigo, it registered in my eyes as one of my own self portraits. Just as my mother *was not there* but *had been*, so too did the subject seem to be both myself and not-myself in a moment that chafed against reality. As a photographic negative is not merely a copy of an image, but also carries in it physical traces of the same light that once illuminated the subject, so too do I carry the remains of the mother who bore me in my blood and skin, and not just a likeness of her in the contours of my face.

Inspired by one of the photos of her in a meadow, with her face tipped towards the sun and her eyes closed, I sought to recreate it. As I sat in the grass, waiting for the timer to go off,

the sun suddenly burst out from behind the clouds, blazing on my face. All my careful metering was ruined, but in a fit of irony, this served the final intent of my project greater than I had imagined, by creating a self portrait with those features that so troubled me nearly whited out.

Aside from *Camera Lucida*, I read a lot of poetry during the creation of my project. *Averno* by Louise Glück particularly resonated with me. The title comes from the name of a crater lake in Italy, which was believed by the Romans to be the entrance to the underworld. In *Averno*, Glück winds through the myth of Persephone with poems that reflect on the experience of womanhood, as well as what it means to be a daughter, a sister, a mother, and a lover. Time is a major theme in the book: the narrator goes back and forth between past and present, childhood and adulthood, and ruminations on the future; the latter often in the context of death. The first line in the first poem of part one is “It is winter again” (Glück 5), and the next poem begins with “Summer after summer has ended” (7). The poems frequently orient themselves in terms of seasons and different times of the day: sunset, sunrise, night, etc. This ties back to the story of Persephone and her cyclical existence: each year she emerges from the underworld and brings about the start of spring, and her return later in the year is what causes winter.

While shooting my project, I was often trying to make sense of my present by looking back to the past, studying what my childhood had left me. Glück writes of this kind of internal excavation in the twelfth stanza of the poem “Fugue”:

My childhood: closed to me. Or is it
under the mulch- fertile.

But very dark. Very hidden. (1-3)

I could not photograph myself as a child, so I photographed my sister instead. She is nineteen now and a college sophomore; a transitory period, full of growing pains. For a year now I have watched her become less of a little girl, catching up to me gradually. Over these past few months, I could see in her the same struggle I went through at that age, that we all go through: getting older, trying to find your place in the world, questioning your identity. Before she returned to school for the semester, our mom showed her how to cook farina on the stove, so she would know how to do it for herself in California. I was drawn to this kitchen scene, a quintessential passing of knowledge from mother to daughter. I photographed their feet as they stood over the stove, their bodies leaning toward each other, my sister's leg cocked in a way that is so characteristic of her. When I hung my show, I placed a photograph of our mom to the right of it, with my sister's strong young dancer's legs leading to a close up of our mom's older, work-roughened hands. I implied the passage of time in other ways, with a photo of a massive, twisted tree in the center, placed after the photo of an empty hospital bed, along with photos taken in the dead of night and in the brightest daylight.

When I looked at other photographers for inspiration, I kept returning to Nicholas Nixon's work, specifically his book *Family Pictures* and related photographs. Although he shot exclusively with an 8 x 10 view camera, his photos have a "snapshot" quality to them, similar to the way I shoot. Black and white was also important to him: in an interview published in the monograph, he claimed that color simply didn't "thrill" him, that black and white "intrinsically abstracts [reality] more [...] makes it seem more pleasurable and wonderful to me" (Nixon 7). I feel the same way about black and white, and especially about film. When Nixon was shooting in the 1980s, digital cameras were a thing of the future, and the only question was between color

film or black and white. In the present day, my use of film and darkroom prints was a deliberate act. I wanted the kind of physicality that only film could offer, and the inherent abstraction of black and white.

Family Pictures is full of Nixon's two children, starting as infants and toddlers in their mother's arms. These shots are close-ups, an almost abstracted assortment of bare skin pressed to bare skin. As the book progresses, the photos show the children growing older, interacting with each other and regarding themselves as individuals. Some images are strikingly quiet and contemplative, while others show them caught in play. I, too, tried to capture both stillness and the promise of motion in my photographs, drawn to my younger sister's vitality.

In this study of my closest female relatives, I came back to Victorian era photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, famed for being one of the first and most prolific woman photographers of the 19th century. The book *Cameron's Women* documents the female sitters who made up the bulk of Cameron's subjects. Although most of her photographs were posed portraits, with subjects standing in for allegorical characters or acting out scenes from myth and poetry, they are ultimately just as much about the relationships between women as they are about the greater narratives. The book states that several of her photographs "display a poignant empathy and tenderness between women" (Wolf et al, 65). Cameron was also drawn to the ideals of feminine youth, with a focus on subjects with their hair long and unbound. The two photographs in my show that were the closest to Cameron's posed style is my self portrait in the grass, and the photo of my sister and I. The camera had been set on a timer, and I had gone to fix her hair the way I wanted it. Instead, she took my hands and wrapped my arms around herself, and the camera captured us in that embrace, our heads pressed together and our faces half in shadow.

I have often felt as though I were swinging from a tree branch, waiting for the bough to snap and send me falling. The branch of the family tree, with all its grafted trunks. I cling all the more tightly to it, fearing that there is nothing but empty air beneath my feet. In my senior project, I photographed the ones who I am always reaching out to, in love and in need, hoping that our connections can give me the answers I seek. Whose name do I take? Whose legacy do I uphold? Where will I be buried? With my camera in hand, I can map out these questions. With photography, I can immortalize the things I love.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography*. Hill and Wang, 1981.

Barthes' seminal book examines photography as a phenomenon and its relationship to death, time, and the act of seeing, using the medium as a lens through which to contextualize the passing of his mother. In his musings he explores photography's history and its present (at the time of his writing), grappling with its inherent strangeness. His dissection of the photograph and how subjects are seen within it show how loss can change the way we view all things.

Glück, Louise. *Averno*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

In this volume of poetry, Glück retells the myth of Persephone, weaving in a narrative about mothers, daughters, sisters, and the greater womanhood; growing up and growing old. Time is a prominent theme in this work, shown in its attention to the turn of seasons and reflections on aging at different stages of life. The narrative jumps back and forth between these different stages, giving the poems a dreamlike sense of dislocation as the narrator reflects on love and longing.

Nixon, Nicholas. *Family Pictures*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.

Nixon's photobook is an intimate study of his own family through large-format black and white portraits. Taken in the style of album snapshots rather than formal portraits, they are nevertheless precisely composed and often closely focused, showing just a portion of the subject. His work

provides a foundation of images that portray the intersecting lives of parents, children, siblings, and spouses during the early years of parenthood.

Wolf, Sylvia, Julia Margaret Cameron, Stephanie Lipscomb, Debra N. Mancoff, and Phyllis Rose. *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women*. Yale University Press, 1998.

This monograph celebrates the women who were the subjects and muses of Julia Margaret Cameron, one of the first female photographers. The book explores the women and girls who made up the bulk of her subjects for, most of them her close friends and her own daughters. The authors cite each known subject and the biblical and mythical origins of her narratives, as well as the mundane records of her wet collodion process. One author writes that the draw of Cameron's women is from the greater complexity and mystery suggested in her photographs of them, compared to her male sitters. Though often costumed and posed as figures from myth, the individuality of each subject shone through.



Untitled 2018
Silver gelatin print, 11x14 inches



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