GENTLY WORN OUT SISTER*

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“ To Homes
And the people who have made mine ”

In her 1987 memoir *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde reflects on her diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer, and on how its presence altered the course of her life:

> Living a self-conscious life, under the pressure of time, I work with the consciousness of death at my shoulder, not constantly, but often enough to leave a mark upon all of my life's decisions and actions. And it does not matter whether this death comes next week or thirty years from now; this consciousness gives my life another breadth. It helps shape the words I speak, the ways I love, my politic of action, the strength of my vision and purpose, the depth of my appreciation of living.[1]

Since entering remission from my Hodgkin's Lymphoma in December 2015, I have been slowly recalling memories of the diagnosis and treatment. Many cancer patients who receive chemotherapy report "chemo brain," characterized by a sustained lag in sharpness or clarity in short-term memory. Since cancer cells characteristically grow abnormally fast, the medicine is concocted to target the most rapidly-growing cells in the body, which incidentally include those of hair and brain. Cancers of the lymphatic system attack the chain of lymph nodes throughout the body whose purpose is to fight disease. If one "link" is affected, the whole chain is compromised.

The Ice Palace Is Gone, my ongoing body of large-format color photographs, has functioned as a filter for such recollections. I would have a chemo infusion every other week, and started writing down what I could remember during the "good" weeks in between. Eventually the writing would hold some kind of picture-seed. Recalled memories would usually take the shape of short pieces of fiction, no more than a few paragraphs long, in which the protagonist is an unnamed "she." They eventually existed as a series of vignettes that couldn't be stitched together cleanly, in much the same way I was experiencing the recalled memories, and also how my photographs tend to operate when culled into a sequence.

To help provide context for the pictures' origins, I will be interjecting these vignettes throughout as they relate to my research.

> *She walks across the yard diagonally, making sure to step hastily, never more than one foot touching the grass at a time, like horses in photographs. Not because it is not her own yard – in fact, she has never received a complaint from her neighbors over this every-other-Monday ritual – but because today she had a doctor's appointment before her bimonthly volunteering. And furthermore she forgot to spring ahead.*
>
> Spring ahead, fall back *was the mnemonic device, but in recent years her cell phone had performed this footwork for her. Something about this new phone, refurbished by the manufacturer, couldn't comprehend a single concrete time.*

She presses the "Hour" button once to adjust the time, still not allowing more than one foot on the ground at a time.

Again diagonally walking across the street and onto the grass as if it could be any more sufficient by now, she stopped abruptly before a telephone pole, having forgotten to look up from the antiquated phone. It was wound in some twine, and she had to walk around to realize that the twine was looped between grommets of a taut vinyl banner, brand new and unweathered, its ink's smell still hanging in the air. She had time for the smell of vinyl banner ink to enter her nostrils, but none to read the words it depicted. Something big and black.

"He'll meet you in Exam Room 4" said the nurse, or just an attendant wearing nurse's scrubs -- she wasn't sure. The person who actually met her in Exam Room 4 was not the doctor, but another nurse or attendant whose name tag said LINDA with a little graphic of a person's spine. This time she was more sure the person was actually a nurse. The game had changed so much. From her childhood she just remembered doctors, who were men, or nurses, RNs, who were women. Now it seemed like there were several classes or types of nurses, each having gone to school for a different length of time. The ones who stick it out the longest get the better paying jobs, but no one could deny that the less educated ones were still needed.

"Step on the scale. How tall are you?"

"Sorry, do I need to take off my shoes?"

"Oh no, honey, it don't matter," she laughed. "I just had a woman in here ask me that same thing. Hmph, we women will take anything off to get weighed. We'll take our earrings *off when we get our weight taken!"*

She tried to laugh with Linda, but something that felt disingenuous came out. She didn't think Linda would mind. She wondered how much genuine laughter took place in Exam Room 4, but it probably was seldom. She hadn't done this before really, so she didn't know how accurately they wanted her weight to be taken, or for that matter how much her shoes weighed.

On its surface, *Ice Palace* can be described in the same way as my work that came before it: pictures of queer people. My longtime inclination toward this subject matter could never be synthesized in terms of a lack of straight people; I'm not sure how productive that would be. They are friends, and friends of friends. I don't see my work in terms of series, as much as long-winded, expansive trains of thought. There's a path, but it often leads to more paths.

One unique path that emerged in this work was a sort of mini-series of *Nurse* portraits. In the beginning of the diagnosis (which itself can take months), and subsequent treatment, I felt an extreme sense of isolation, compounded by a sheer lack of knowledge on how to traverse a caretaker-patient dynamic. I felt a huge, very palpable barrier between myself and the care I was beginning to receive, both inside and outside the hospital institution. When I make a portrait I feel I am setting up a particular kind of communication platform between myself and the sitter. I went into the nurse portraits with this barrier in mind.

A primary source and, in part, inspiration for this writing is Catherine Lord's 2002 breast cancer memoir *The Summer of Her Baldness*.[2] I listened to Lord speak about the mundane interactions she had with hospital personnel described in the text. I remember seeing her lecture at Purchase during a campus tour before I was accepted, in which she talked about photographing inside the hospital. The pictures feel as banal as the interactions might have been: harsh flash on a "double flush" sign in the bathroom, or the weird white donut of the PET scan machine that some will recognize while others will not. She explains that in retrospect, the snapshots and the small talk were ways to break through the singularizing effect of having and being treated for cancer within such institutions. Perhaps it was a way to connect on some boring, human level with one's environment, particularly when that environment is the frigid, impersonal one of the hospital or doctor's office. The socially constructed "illness" is applied to individuals in this space. Lord felt the need to pierce this veil, forge something that felt more collective and resistant to this isolation.

Moyra Davey is interested in that pierce as well. In *Notes on Photography & Accident*, she makes the case for several writers' and artists' relationships to accident, equating them to Roland Barthes' "punctum," the inherently unplanned or spontaneous aspect of a photograph which might hold its most potent information or meaning:

> [Janet] Malcolm generally operates at a metadiscursive level—in some ways it's her signature as a writer—but I'm thinking here of instances that are more localized, of remarks almost having the quality of a Freudian slip, that crop up in the essays and give the reader pause. A small aside, perhaps having to do with aging or the unhappiness of artists, or families, or childhood, will unexpectedly open up a window of emotional life onto what had otherwise been a fairly hermetic discursive field. It is tempting to call these punctum moments, small ruptures in the studium (Barthes' term for the aspect of a photograph that gets taken for granted, doesn't surprise) of Malcolm's flawless, expository prose. For Barthes the punctum could not be willed, and while Malcolm's interjections are clearly not accidents; they have a strong unconscious quality.[3]

With the *Nurse* portraits, I establish a sort of mythologized version of this collectivity, a grasp for something human. Like Lord, I longed and reached for a more complicated network of care that exists outside the medical industrial complex, but for which I may not have had the right language at the time. Asking friends working in healthcare to pose for the photographs, we

created these fictions together. They always wear scrubs, which themselves are rife with associations. I wanted them to function similarly to other signifiers in my pictures like earrings or leather or rainbow flags: bordering on corny.

Nurse II (fig. 1) was made in the church rectory where I'd spent Easter with my husband's family a few months prior. The sitting room, with its ornate gold-framed paintings of retired priests and cool grey walls, felt like the perfect combination of elaborate holiness and boring understatement I wanted in the picture. I never thought they'd let me in to make it there. It's astoundingly funny but completely appropriate that more than one photograph in *Ice Palace* was made in a church residence.

Vadim extends out his hand. I asked him to mimic a Jim French photograph of an oily, burly bodybuilder on a red studio background. He ended up more like a Caravaggio. Another nurse (fig. 2) in a brightly lit doorway lifts up his scrub top with a tantalizing *Grey's Anatomy* expression. Looking back on this shoot, I realize I needed humor, but maybe a little melancholy too: you might cruise, get cruised.

These stories, as is the case with my portraits broadly, are told through the body of a third-party individual in the photograph. As in Davey's description of Janet Malcolm's writing, my photographs are meticulously planned, sometimes months ahead of time, but a little room is reserved for potential accident or impulse. They adhere to exacting specification, but only on reflection can I articulate their codes.

Now as I write this, three years after treatment almost to the date, the feeling of isolation is echoed by nearby queers. Nicky was introduced to me by a concerned mutual friend when they were diagnosed with Hodgkin's. They told me in an email that, since they had a different nurse every visit, it was hard to broach the subject of gender pronouns. I think of Catherine's sense of "breaking through" the walls of pre-prescribed patient-caretaker dynamics. What nuance could exist there? Hearing Nicky's story jogs a memory of one particular ultrasound technician with god-awful bedside manner.

"Your friend has to wait out there," she said, gesturing my husband toward the waiting room.

In Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, the author recalls an interaction with a representative from her breast cancer support group Reach for Recovery.[4] She informs Lorde of her options for post-surgery prosthetics, pointing out that they are just like the real thing. She offers herself as an example of their level of discretion, asking if she can tell the difference, to which Lorde silently protests:

> I admitted that I could not. In her tight foundation garment and stiff, up-lifting bra, both breasts looked equally unreal to me. But then I've always been a connoisseur of women's breasts, and never overly fond of stiff uplifts. I looked away, thinking, "I wonder if there are any black lesbian feminists in Reach for Recovery?"

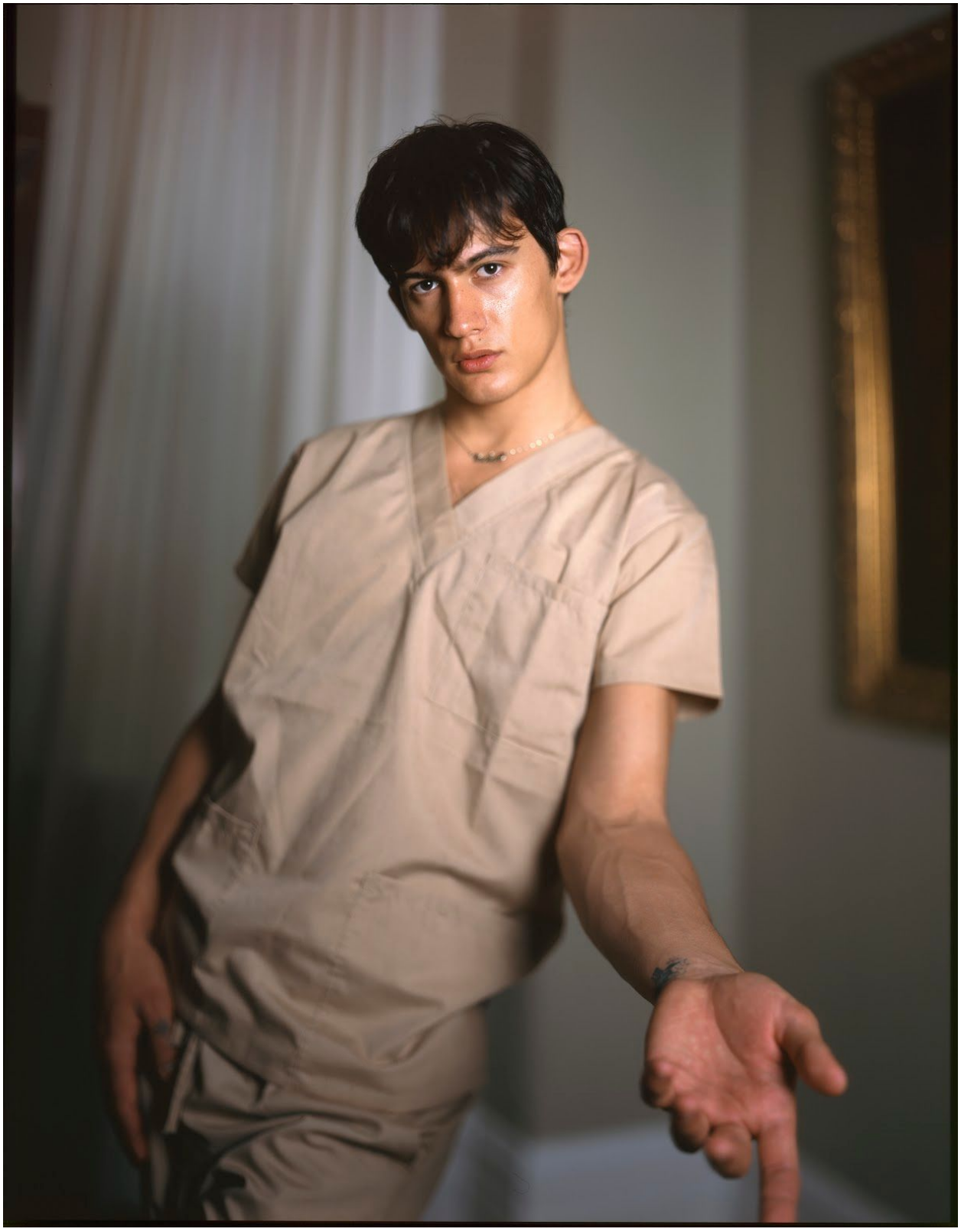

fig. 1: *Nurse II*, 2018. Photo: Ian Lewandowski. Archival inkjet print. 23 x 28 inches. Courtesy the author.

fig. 2: *Nurse III*, 2018. Photo: Ian Lewandowski. Archival inkjet print. 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy the author.

She had several odd jobs, and her desk at this one was shared. Maybe with several people; she was only around a couple times a month. But she did know that the person to leave right as her shift started was named Peter. They'd spoken only casually in passing, as he was leaving, she entering.

She remembered seeing a file on the desktop once called something like "PHwill," and laughed audibly considering this could actually be his last will and testament. He must have sent revisions of it from this *word processor on* this *computer. She'd overheard him say to someone in the office before that when you get to a certain age, things aren't really necessarily good or bad anymore.*

"You figure you've already had the worst experience of your life, simply because you've had so many experiences. Probably millions of them by now."

Recently, for the first time, she'd actively thought about her own death. It's easier to do this hypothetically, like the thoughts occupy different parts of your brain, the part that acknowledges death and its possibility, and the part that really feels that acknowledgment, really knows how possible it is.

"I've cried a couple times, that's it. Once caught myself at work and had to make myself stop immediately." She was surprised how casually her lunch buddy answered.

She considered the last time she'd really cried. Maybe that time at the mailbox. She remembered just thinking, No. It couldn't be. A postcard stuck back here for a whole decade?

It was actually a drugstore print. The photograph had a cat dressed up in green and gold and purple streamers and beads. The print was glued or rubber-cemented onto a piece of cardboard, and this must have been why it got stuck up there ten -- ten! -- years ago. She flipped it over, inspecting it furtively even though no action on her part could bear any kind of fruit ten years later. The back was addressed to some office in New York and contained a short note:

> Please consider this adorable picture of "Pebbles" for your Kitties Kalendar submission pool !! Pebbles is a black calico mix, age 8, very sweet and loves nesting in my lap right as i sit down to watch TV! sadly we lost her sister "Amelia" last year in a car accident….. God works in mysterious ways indeed, but I think He knew we needed Pebbles. He can work through even the smallest creatures.
>
> Sincerely,
> Donna

She was struck by Donna's use of "car accident," like it was their child. She was slowly realizing that the cat pictured is almost certainly dead if it was

eight in 2006. This made her think of the kitten she was given by a classmate's mother after its litter was brought in for show-and-tell when she herself was about eight, an occasion partly for showing and telling, but also for advertising the too-many kittens messing up the classmate's mother's carpeting. She begged and begged her parents for one after that day; she was the last one to be told that show-and-tell was over, and that the kittens had to go home now. She had to have been the absolute least equipped person in this world to care for it. Swinging it around by its front legs and prying open its mouth to marvel at its fangs lent itself to the cat's subsequent cynicism and distrust of humans altogether, except her mother, the one with the wet food.

Her mother's long hours at work left such activities unknown. She hadn't thought about this in years, maybe not even once except right there at the mailbox, where she suddenly began to cry. Both for her dauntless, inadvertent abuse of the fostered kitten, but mostly for Donna's dead cat, a tragedy from which she must have recovered years ago.

Finding support from others affected by blood-borne cancers was a surprisingly easy hurdle. Announcing my diagnosis with Lymphoma on Instagram was like an unintentional invocation of those in my life who, mostly unbeknownst to me, have or had it. I came out to them, and they me. An old employer of mine who I had assumed hated my guts, called me immediately to ask how I was doing. She'd been diagnosed in 2000, non-Hodgkins in her sternum. I remember thinking it was what Hannah Wilke had, what prompted her final work, *Intra Venus*. It's near impossible to see this work in archives, but after several months of communicating with her gallery I managed to get hold of original install shots (fig. 5).

The body of work, debuting at Ronald Feldman Gallery in January 1994, has been discussed widely for its direct and visceral engagement with the realities of cancer treatment, particularly at a time when treatments were experimental and yielded low success rates. Lord speaks of the haunting feeling that *Intra* was not meant to be Wilke's last work, that if given the chance, she would have shuffled the photographs into a different order to ensure a happier ending.[5] Janine Antoni offers that Wilke's exploitation of her own death is perhaps a defiant acknowledgement of the misogynistic critique of her earlier work, which ultimately returns it to the subject of corporeal beauty: "Those pictures are horrific, they're so difficult to deal with. They're not very different from her early work."[6] Moyra Davey, who herself was writing amid a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis, posits that part of *Intra Venus*' legacy has been its successful use of large-scale printing without crossing into advertising territory:

> One of the rare instances where large-scale photography seems to be justified is Hannah Wilke's Intra-Venus series. Here there's a reason for the massive size: these pictures of Wilke's delicate body rendered monstrous and bloated by cancer treatments are meant to

> be an affront, in-your-face, a gutsy cry of rage and defiance... They were a little warped and fraying around the edges, not precious or commercial looking, or well preserved. Probably not very saleable or collectible.[7]

Upon finally seeing the installs, I found one self-portrait that sticks out in particular (fig. 4). When Davey described the photographs as large-scale, she meant around 48x72" and glossy. Wilke sits at bust height within the frame, totally central and with a harsh, flattening flash that would later be popularized by assholes like Terry Richardson. She wears complementary blue and yellow, a loungewear T-shirt and scarf, or maybe sweater sleeves tied around her shoulders. There is some concern for fashion, or at least for faking it. The accessorizing combined with her expression, an almost grotesque, defiant tongue-out shriek, keys me into the type of haunting Lord describes. Her tongue and mouth are almost blood red, perhaps some side effect of one of her drugs.

I always found it hard to really take on the identity of a patient, a feeling I gather most feel to some degree. The isolation felt following my diagnosis fostered a desire to break with whatever illusory system was there to supposedly protect me, a system that advocated for the binary thinking of "healthy" and "sick." I wanted to build my own language around my illness and, thankfully, my subsequent recovery. Wilke's photographs pervert that confining notion of how a cancer patient should be.

Intra Venus is usually accompanied by caption information denoting that Donald Goddard, Wilke's husband and primary caretaker, took the photographs of her during her treatment and eventual death as a result of the disease, that this was a premeditated, agreed-upon facet of the work. This practice wasn't uncommon for her considering her previous self-portraits, which she coined "performalist."

I asked *my* husband and primary caretaker Anthony to help me take pictures of myself after I'd had surgery on my neck to remove the offending lymph node. He is a good sport, as I suppose many photographers' partners are conditioned to be. It's difficult for me to give up control of my camera, both because I am someone prone to micromanagement and someone who uses a very finicky antique process. The two go hand in hand.

During that time, we often argued over whose pain was worse, as if that is an argument that could end well. It took most of my remission to see that perhaps other people felt the effects of my cancer besides myself. I admittedly used it like an armor.

> *In the car her mother loved Sheryl Crow. One could relate to Sheryl because she was edgy. Her voice sounded like gravel.*
>
> *"They don't make 'em like her anymore. Just what we needed," she said from a cigaretted mouth. "The Anti-Britney."*
>
> I got a feelin' / I'm not the only one …

"You better believe they roll 'em down the assembly line every year. Like they were clock radios. 'Made in China.' This is the real stuff." She pointed at the sound of Sheryl's guitar. For as long as she could remember, her mother started most sentences with: You better believe…*, and that's how she knew to really believe it.*

Her mother's car slowly crept up the winding driveway that was actually not like a driveway at all, more like a path someone cleared in the woods. She remembered this path -- her grandmother had said once that, by the time the kids were her age, the branches on this (left) row of trees would stretch all the way across to the other (right) side of the "driveway" to meet those (right) branches. Everything about this statement proved true, except that she was not yet approximately 75.

The first thing she noticed upon walking in was that chart. That chart that some people maintain when they have children in order to record their heights. While her own home did not have one, her grandmother was the archivist of such information in the family. This particular chart was initially created on the molding of the doorway between the foyer and living room of the house, but in friends' homes through the years she'd seen them on long totems, in the garage somewhere, on the door itself. A certain sense of sacrifice had to take place. The ground on which the information would be drawn had to be a permanent fixture of the home, but one the family didn't mind carving into or inscribing. Coming closer to the chart she realized it'd been shellacked over since the last time she saw it. Under the shellac was every imaginable method and medium of making a mark, and in several different handwritings: ballpoint pen, felt-tip, some more impressive carving work next to a child's first spelling of its name. With how improvisational the recordings were over the years, she could sort of understand wanting to shellac it.

"Let's get down to business," she announced, holding up an overstuffed manila envelope. This envelope was probably designed to hold about ten sheets of paper max, maybe 5 résumés to be carried around and dropped off. It had that official looking manila color of a thing that would hold résumés. But this one boasted about 100 sheets of different colored, sized, textured papers, a few long and narrow receipts completely illegible and faded from age, the carbon-copy ink long gone. One wafted out of the envelope and made its descent to the kitchen table where they would be sitting.

She had beautiful hands. Almost every finger housed at least one gold ring. She had hands that had done work, seen generations, and that labor and patience was rewarded with precious metals.

"As your mother's power of attorney, you have certain responsibilities."

The next several hours were spent inspecting every piece of paper that had lived in this envelope, and writing some, about 10%, of their information onto a yellow legal pad that had several columns, among them "date," "amount," "check no." They took frequent breaks, she to use the bathroom, her mother to smoke cigarettes on the covered wraparound porch.

For the past year, Anthony and I have been visiting the Pat Parker/Vito Russo Center Library at the LGBTQ Center in the West Village, which holds the Center's image archive. We're particularly interested in their *Outweek* collection, a backlog of any and all photographs used, owned, or commissioned by the New York publication, which ran from 1989 to 1991. Our long-term goal is to mount an exhibition of works inspired by the archive. Existing photographs heavily inform my work conceptually, so I inevitably started to invoke some of the collection's images in *Ice Palace*.

Despite an investment in those parts of the archive directly related to protest and organizing around the AIDS crisis and gay rights, I found myself most drawn to more mundane moments: an afterparty for a benefit in which several women pose together on top of a pool table, a street shot of a plastered-over billboard displaying a safe sex PSA placed by the S.F. AIDS Foundation (fig. 6-9).

Every so often, I came across an envelope full of obituaries and their accompanying portraits (fig. 10). The men pose. Some are taken on vacation, in a crowded train car, or against a wall, in yellow shorts, ACT UP T-shirts, or a work uniform or semi-formal attire. Some are black and white, some taken from low, cinematic angles. The light spills through a gate somewhere in the Village. Some friends or family even submitted baby pictures. There's a picture of Ross Laycock, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' partner who inspired his 1991 *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*. Ross stands by a window, smiling. The pictures are sometimes paperclipped to handwritten obit drafts. Attached to Richard in his tight black tank-top:

A MEMBER OF THE FRONT RUNNERS RUNNING CLUB AND NEW YORK STATE NURSING ASSOCIATION.

I made a special trip back to the library after realizing I hadn't written down or photographed any credit or caption information for the "Unclaimed Obit" folder contents. Such information is usually adhered to the back of each item in the collection on acid-free stickers, presumably by the previous holders of the collection before it was housed at The Center, but I initially only took pictures of their fronts. I asked Caitlin, the very generous archivist who granted me access, if I could see Boxes #2 and 3, as I couldn't quite remember or glean from my iPhone photos where that folder lived.

When I finally found the pictures again, there were no credits on the back, and it dawned on me why they are filed as "Unclaimed." There are captions though, from which I try desperately to retain something. There are cursive locations and dates in corners, probably

penned by the friend- or lover-photographers, but updated in bold print across the middle of the white “THIS PAPER MANUFACTURED BY KODAK” chromogenic backing with only the late subject’s full name. At one point, a subject’s last name, maybe also his nickname, in black felt pen is updated in blue with his first name, as well as the word “obits.” I made sure to record this almost totally useless information before returning them to their new box.

My niece Olive shares a middle name with that of my maternal grandmother Iris. Iris got the name from her father, a violent, abusive alcoholic. It took me until now to consider what purpose there is in upholding this legacy. Why carry on this name? But on the other hand, what is even meant by naming? Is genealogy something reliable, something in which to put faith? I realize I am coming to the end of this bit without mentioning his name, and the middle names of my grandmother and niece. Does it even do anything productive not to mention it? I'm not sure, but it's Rae.

My parents had gotten far enough in the user manual to omit MTV (Channel 37) from the options when channel surfing, but it didn’t occur to them to also forbid its less offending sibling VH1 (Channel 36). Programming consisted of mostly "The Most Shocking Moments in ..." type segments: Red Hot Chili Peppers headlining Woodstock ‘99, The Day the Music Died, Kurt Cobain's suicide, and lots on Drew Barrymore's troubled childhood.

I remember a *Rolling Stone* magazine subscription. One cover, or maybe it was just an interior spread, of Tori Amos -- not to be confused with that iconic *Spin* Tori-PJ-Bjork trifecta. She reminded me of my mom. Tori, that is: similar hair texture.

The pictures on the covers were wildly theatrical and anecdotal. No Doubt, but as dentists. Gillian Anderson being grabbed by some black lagoon creature. Matthew Rolston shot this particular cover. He has one of those websites with music and moving graphics. He's shot Taylor Swift, Christina Aguilera (in fact for another *RS* cover), Michael Jackson, whose childhood home in Gary IN is now a national monument. There are bronze plaques and Peter Pan statues around the Jackson family home, which is unsettlingly small considering the sheer volume of Jackson children: nine. On the "Jackson family" Wikipedia page, ten children are listed under parents Joe and Katherine; all but one are hyperlinked. Brandon, Marlon's twin, a stillborn.[8]

In November 2015, one month into treatment for Hodgkin’s, I flew to northwest Indiana to photograph a knotted, rusty chain in my brother-in-law’s auto body shop near my childhood home. Several presences were drawing me there. I couldn’t get the lymphatic “chain” out of my head, and so I texted my sister to assess whether there were some old ones lying around. Some doctors theorized that my illness was caused in part by pesticides used on the farm outside my high school, which ironically was heavily invested in agricultural education. Steel was the principle export in this region until rust-belt narratives befell the physical and social landscape in the ’70s and ’80s, long before my seven-year-old nephew Isaac was asked how he helps his dad at the shop: “I drag the chains.”

I boarded the plane almost completely bald and was granted a seat in the front row among the octogenarians and service dogs, although I think they thought I was lying.

She watched the bride scurry off to hide behind a shrub right before the ceremony began, knowing she was the only one who saw. She watched her mother finish removing the plastic wrappers from exactly ten disposable cameras, balling up the waste and shoving it into the hands of her helper, a son of a cousin of someone, no more than nine, whose sole responsibility seemed to be to dispose of this ball of polyurethane camera covering.

"Hurry!" her mother whisper-screamed and waved toward the few remaining empty seats. The wedding had already started and flies were already beginning to swarm around the bridesmaids' stiffened hairdos.

She realized she'd just taken the last exposure -- that familiar unending wind at the end of a drugstore camera. Even though neither guests nor the wedding party was supposed to, she stuck it in the "clutch" she was required to carry. She wanted these pictures all to herself. It felt sinister! Depriving the happy couple of these recordings. But furthermore she was terrified of never getting to see her *picture, the one she actually wanted to take. She figured hers would be judged as a mistake otherwise. Not spotting a definitive smiling partygoer in the picture, it'd be the one they'd overlook, reject it from the pool of potential e-wedding album photos. Best case scenario, the glossy prints would no doubt be kept in some collage or scrapbook, but she'd never be able to access that anyway.*

"& Video" had been added to their sign, yet the idea of old cameras still lingered here. They were mostly for decoration. Glass cases full of them, the kind of cabinets she'd thought were made exclusively for Precious Moments figurines or Beanie Babies.

"Fill this out. We gotta send it out."

"Out where?"

"Uh. To our regional headquarters. We ain't got the machine here. It takes seven to ten business days."

"Seven to ten business days from now, or from when it gets to your regional headquarters?"

"Well, we'll call you when it's ready. It's a process."

The camera-store clerk spoke to her like she'd never had film processed before. And he was right. Looking around she noticed a faded laserjet printout of a roll of film transforming into a compact disc. Today was overcast, but it'd clearly been in direct sunlight for several years. For whatever reason, these fairly

commonplace graphics denouncing outdated technology made her profoundly sad, and this profound sadness in turn made her very angry at herself:

Why can't you just laugh along like everyone else? It's hurting no one.

She remembered dimly a memory of shopping for a computer with her mother. In the memory, she just grabbed her selected model, in its cardboard IBM box -- the most vivid detail of the memory is the IBM logo at the time -- off of a metal shelf and placed it into an orange shopping cart, like it was a box of cereal or a potato chips variety pack. In the memory she and her mother are at a Toys 'R' Us, but it was probably the Best Buy next door.

My friend Ariel Goldberg makes photographs mostly about newspapers: in windows, wet and mottled on the ground, one announcing the incarceration of Chelsea Manning. Ideally their pictures are viewed in slideshow format with their voice describing the contents. I need a walkthrough. One picture is of a bulletin board on Fire Island. They say something to the effect of "the gesture of making contact." I think this describes their work aptly.

When I asked Ariel on the phone roughly a year after seeing the show that contained the bulletin board slide, they told me they are drawn to bulletin boards because they represent a sort of hodge-podge communal space. It's an analogue, paper forum, the origin of online message boards and Instagram posts. There's a sense of aspiration in a bulletin board, but they get the sense its contents compose a romantic picture.

"A queer-specific bulletin board is like an already failed version of a queer utopia," they say, "partly because no bulletin board could ever encompass all queer issues."

In part, Ariel's words and images inspired my *Community Board* pictures in this body of work. For a while I have wrestled with the idealism behind the implication of a singular "queer community," as if the lived realities of queer people could be simplified into such a moniker. This always feels like a negotiation because I do not dismiss the possibility of widely felt communal experiences across sexualities, generations, genders, races, or abilities, and furthermore do not dismiss the power of this gesture. I improvised walls of information to illustrate this multiplicity, to stand alongside pictures of bodies which are themselves sites for information.

As a "part II" to the rusted chain, in 2018 I again traveled to my childhood home to take a picture. This time it was my and my siblings' height chart that'd been in our garage, which was actually a rusted-out refrigerator door (fig. 3). It's from a time when fridges were made of steel; this one was originally thrown out from some relative's house in Griffith, about 50 minutes north. It was Memorial Day and I stood before two ancient machines. I propped the door against the side of my parents' garage in an optimally sunny spot using several cinder blocks, and then set up the view camera.

The decision to repurpose the door of the broken fridge probably started out responsibly enough, a wall for carefully recording heights without bias: no tiptoes, backs straight and chins up. But what ensued was madness. It became a place for neighborhood kids' drawings and adults' potty humor. An anti-gun-control bumper sticker emblazons it with white heat; another sticker is from the motocross school my uncle attended one summer; I recognize my father's handwriting:

THE WORD FOR TODAY IS "LEGS" HELP SPREAD THE WORD!

I tried snapping the shutter right as a fly entered the scene, but I kept missing its landing. The fridge door is like a community bulletin board for a group of people I'm embarrassed by, but to whom I'm unavoidably linked. I can't look away, despite having to negotiate the misguided pronouncement of "unfair" taxes my parents lament to this day, among markings of my literal growth and early artworks. My parents always kept an arsenal of permanent markers close by. In trying to help me take the picture, Isaac, now eleven, wants to write his name, but I'm reticent to let him. Black letters creep around a relief emblem of a surely defunct appliance company, probably the musing of an old babysitter's daughter

BOYS HOW WIRD CAN THAY GET!

> *She had been seeing this man her whole life. Naively thinking he'd been made up. He only came out at night, only in the dark where others had denied her interjections, invalidated what she thought, but now, knew, was true. Sometimes he was easy enough to tune out. And now he was undeniable and everywhere.*
>
> See. He *was* real.

The Ice Palace is a nightclub within the Grove Hotel, located in the Cherry Grove district of Fire Island, a mostly queer resort destination parallel to the southern shore of Long Island. The Grove is situated in a busy crosswalk, near the neighboring Sunken Forest. A few bulletin boards are posted outside, littered with sun-faded postcards produced by local businesses or sole proprietors, ads for AA meetings, "All Are Welcome" church services, HIV testing facilities. Locals, maybe tourists, make contact. Weekly parties and shows, some that maybe have ended since it is mid-September. They flap in the sea wind.

Popular culture's relationship with and understanding of the closet has yielded a few narrow pathways for queer life to play out. The Coming Out Story, that exhaustive higher-and-higher-stakes performance of marginal identity, revises the varied and complicated realities of queer people and the negotiations of personal safety they make daily, into flattened notions of pride, visibility, and aspiration. Even after stripping away the impossibly heavy baggage of capitalist structures trying on queer signification and "It Gets Better" sentiment, I

fig. 3: *Community Board II*, 2018. Photo: Ian Lewandowski. Archival inkjet print. 30 x 36 inches. Courtesy the author.

feel safety is at the center of all such language. In 2015, and now, I am thinking about how fragile this safety is -- the illusion of a universal social contract.

A portion of the Grove burnt down in March 2015. Although the fire was not one of malice, the violence that later took place at Pulse nightclub in Orlando does not feel altogether separate. It helps me to visualize such illusions of safety for queer people (and their subsequent ruptures) as grandiose yet temporary structures that must constantly be mourned and rebuilt simultaneously. It is imperative that this cycle be generative. Who will protect us if we don't protect each other?

It's coming now.

This was the moment she was trained for, the moment upon which entire courses and workshops are based: Unconventional Birthing *or something to that effect.*

She sprinted across the parking lot, having definitely not grabbed enough lap sponges nor remembering to tell anyone to follow her outside.

"Let's get her to the back seat," said Jim immediately. "She said she saw the head."

"No. you can't move her now. It's coming now. Go get more nurses!"

As Jim ran toward the ER double doors, she crouched astride the ajar passenger side door of their Oldsmobile Bravada. The glove compartment made it difficult to get a good view, but the head was indeed visible. She cautioned against adjusting the seat back.

It's coming now.

The process is pretty straightforward without all the beeping and white curtains around you. But there is still the pain. That pain she'd been warned about for as long as she could remember, the kind that was supposed to quantify her womanhood, remind her of the debt paid.

She put a balled-up jacket under her head and propped her knees up carefully on the dashboard. Now all she needed to do was

"Push! This is it."

And she did. Through the screaming its head began to engage further. Strangely the screaming made it easier to coach and remedied the shaky hands. The fear and hot fervor rose in both women. This pain was stupid, absurd. So she screamed at it because what else was there to do?

"One more, we're almost there. Don't forget to breathe, then push: hee -- hoo, hee -- hoo." She hoped someone else was hearing the screams, someone with a gurney.

She took a long hee in, but replaced the hoo with another stupid scream. She made it a good one.

"It's a girl. A beautiful baby girl. Touch your skin to hers." She took off her zip-up sweatshirt and quickly threw it over mother and child. She could hear feet running from the double doors across the parking lot.

"It's a girl. It's a girl."

I'm often thinking about music when I sequence my photographs. Though I don't possess a musical background and am tragically un-musically inclined, I think of the pictures I make in terms of intros, bridges, choruses, pre-choruses, and outros.

Recently, and about fifteen years too late, I became a Tori Amos fan. Since her first solo album *Little Earthquakes* was released in 1991, a cult following has steadily grown. Fans of Amos, Toriphiles or "Ears with Feet", are often compared to Deadheads. In her VH1 *BTM2* feature, Tori describes attendees to her live shows and appearances: "It sometimes has that Grateful Dead appearance, except less patchouli oil… better shoes."[9]

I've listened to her music on and off for a few years, but am currently deeply invested. When I started to post on my Instagram story about this developing interest, a few Toriphile friends of mine revealed themselves. My friend Pacifico says in high school he wrecked his car getting too into "Sister Janet." Another two friends are planning their matching tattoos of lyrics from "Gold Dust."

I'm particularly interested in Amos' sense of invocation. In 2005, as part of her live shows on the *Original Sinsuality* tour, Tori instituted "Tori's Piano Bar," a portion of the night in which she would perform solo covers of songs requested by concertgoers during the meet-and-greet held before the show. She performed "Can't Get You Out of My Head", dedicating the song to Kylie Minogue, who had been diagnosed with breast cancer that year.[10] "Tori's Piano Bar" would later be permanently renamed "Lizard Lounge." It kept this name until 2017 when it was, perhaps temporarily, renamed "Fake Muse Network" (fig. 11). Amos' 2017 tour to promote her album *Native Invader* was her first tour since the 2016 presidential election.

Since they are user-submitted, the songs vary: Cyndi Lauper, Leonard Cohen, Britney Spears, Radiohead, Björk, Dolly Parton, Joni Mitchell. Tori, a classically trained, child prodigy pianist who straddles pop and rock circles, takes many artistic liberties in performing these covers, recontextualizes the songs into something entirely different. In recent years she's played them as medleys with her own songs by way of clever wordplay, for example splicing Beyoncé's "Crazy in Love" with her "Crazy," opting for an impassioned, obsessive ballad.[11] This practice feels more in line with folk or blues or country and western traditions, as opposed to a strict original-cover model of re-creation. Furthermore, it serves to consider Amos' long history as a bar singer and pianist before she began her solo career in the early '90s. Invocation of such a character ten years into her career brings to mind the role of a lounge act, a performer who keeps time or maintains the rhythm of a particular space. Amos' third tour to promote her 1996 studio album *Boys for Pele* was aptly titled Dew Drop Inn, after the legendary New Orleans jazz club.

I like to think my photographs and role as a photographer can exist in such a model. Rather than think of them as re-creations, I vie for re-enactment. When a person sits for a picture of mine, they and I are participating in a tradition of picture-making, or representations of the body using a camera. I will bring reference images and my sitter and I will decide which work for them, position their chins or eyebrows in the same way, find the right adoption of their gait, imagine and mimic the energy in the room at the moment of the initial picture's creation. I want to synchronize these two moments, the shutter of that photographer and my own, to complicate our relationship to this ad-hoc archive, to the bodies of the initial sitters. In this way I mean to invoke pictures when I make mine, to honor and recognize their contribution to a picture-world, regardless of "original" circumstances.

For me, honoring the pictures, the moments of their unruly or mystic creation, is not unlike the type of honor and recognition I wish to extend to my subjects. Even by virtue of being in the same room to make the photograph together, we share some common bond, despite varying contexts. We are links in a chain, expanding paths.

I've probably watched hours of Lizard Lounge video playlists on YouTube while writing this essay. During one segment in June 2014 in Warsaw, Tori dedicates a song to her queer fanbase on the occasion of Parada Równości (Equality Parade), sending them a "sonic rainbow," proclaiming that "Those motherfuckers can't take that away because it's sonic."[12] She plays a few notes of the intro and, as is the case with all her covers, the audience holds its breath until the first lyrics come to reveal what she decided to play. It's a cover of The Moody Blues' "Nights in White Satin." You can hear the person holding the camera audibly weeping. It's the song he requested.

> *Her college dormitory had an activity board. A few times a month, anyone living in the dorm could attend such programs as a movie night, a talent show, one time a sewing circle. One brave girl performed an acoustic guitar rendition of a song by Jewel.*[13]
>
> *"It's called* Hands*."*
>
> *She was brave because everyone else's talents seemed contrived and for show. Not that she could blame them. They were all new here and trying out about five different identities at any given moment.*
>
> If I could tell the world just one thing/ it would be, we're all okay…
>
> *She didn't come with a talent. It was always more comfortable and low-stakes to come without one. Not because she preferred being a critic -- actually she believed criticism was about the easiest thing in the world someone could do. No. Something about sitting among the lyrics of the song provided the most potent comfort she'd felt in months. She didn't know anything about music and was not musically inclined. One time, given the choice of Band or Art, she*

> *tried to play a hand-me-down clarinet, and that effort didn't get her much further than the school song. Regardless she knew the brave girl was talented. By the second chorus, this audience could catch a glimpse of her personality in her delivery of*
>
> they're not yours, they are my own…
>
> *which deviated from the original artist's. Something in the emphasis on certain words. She was now part-owner.*
>
> In the end, only kindness matters.

In *The Summer of Her Baldness*, Catherine Lord gives a chronological account of her cancer diagnosis and treatment through a queer feminist lens.[14] This account is composed diaristically, most of the information being given via reproduced email correspondence among herself and a CCed group of friends and colleagues. Lord's persona and the titular protagonist, Her Baldness, are often positioned as a filter through which the author can stream her recollection of experiencing the disease. She refers to herself in the third person as Her Baldness or simply "HB" in an email exchange or in describing a conversation with her cancer support group:

> In truth, Her Baldness does not deserve the title these days, but she doesn't plan to give it up. She earned it, like being Dominican or being a dyke. Whether she lives in the United States or checks out the occasional male body or has hair, she retains her title.[15]

Lord speaks of "passing" as a healthy person in the same way she speaks of passing as straight, or passing as a man versus a butch lesbian.[16] An overarching assertion in *Baldness* is that disclosing one's status as a cancer patient ("coming out") is not so unlike coming out, being recognizably and visibly queer. In his 2017 video *Weed Killer*, artist Patrick Staff adapts Lord's memoir into a series of monologues performed by transgender actress Debra Soshoux, paying particular attention to this turn of phrase: "Baldness is a scar… I want my scar." The current, or at least former, cancer patient has no interest in not appearing as such. Indignantly and proudly she proclaims "I do not want to pass. I do not want to get back into the world of people who are tired of looking at someone whose chances of dying in the short term are better than theirs, by a long shot … or so they think."[17]

Both states of passing, however mundane, describe a seemingly safe position. The position not to pass is posed as a potentially hazardous one. In *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde is told by a nurse that she cannot *not* wear a prosthesis for her amputated breast during an appointment with her doctor, as is would be "bad for the morale of the office."[18] In a 1989 interview, trans Latina trailblazer Sylvia Rivera, upon reflection of the Stonewall uprising and thereafter, assuredly refuses to pass: "I couldn't pass… No, not in this lifetime."[19]

Toward the end of *Summer* is a letter written to Lord's detached alter ego, HB, around the third anniversary of her remission from breast cancer.[20] Reflecting on her own network of care, that network with which she began to heal, she invokes the same hodge-podge of the bulletin boards described by Goldberg:

> You caused the people I knew to sort themselves into another kind of family, a revised and enlarged nuclear family, the new and improved version of blood kin, the gene pool chiropractically adjusted so that responsibility is distributed all round amongst mothers and fathers and amusing uncles and children who never grew up and divas who left town and brothers who know how to do things and other brothers with a mean streak, not to mention platoons of unmarried women and boatloads of tomboys. This has been called the queer family, but the collectivity is much larger than that defined by sexual preference. Anyway, it's best to make a clean break with some relatives. Others are wonderful once every few years. Most can only provide certain things. Some can only take, and that, if you have something to spare, has its own pleasures.

> *How can we, the ass kicking, enraged, unapologetically queer people we thought we were, begin to heal, be open to being healed, help each other heal? Like a family is supposed to do. Because that's what we are, right, a family? Not in the nuclear way but in the take care of each other way. My sister might be my neighbor but she's still my sister; my cousin the out-and-proud dyke who's the cashier at the pharmacy; my brother at the beauty counter.*

During the interview from 1989, Sylvia Rivera, who spent much of her life advocating for homeless queer youth and trans women of color with initiatives like Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), offers a generous and affirming origin story: "I was born July 2, 1951, at 2:30 in the morning, in a taxi cab, in the old Lincoln Hospital parking lot. The old queen couldn't wait. She says, 'Ooh I'm ready to hit the streets!'"[21]

> *It was nighttime, but a streetlight illuminated the vinyl banner she saw earlier and hadn't had the time to read:*
> ***FREE salon services for cancer patients, 3rd Monday of every month at Beyond Hair Design***
>
> *She thought it was inconceivable to regulate such a program. Do the patrons have to prove their victim status with something -- a bald head, a lack of eyelashes, brittle nails, maybe even an only partially covered doctor's bill? It all felt a little flashy and sanctimonious. She thought about calling in a complaint, or*

at least a critique, but immediately considered who the complaint would benefit. She thought about what could be gained from it as she continued home: the ability to congratulate herself? She thought about the board meeting that must have decided on this program at Beyond Hair Design -- maybe someone's family member had been recently diagnosed, and the program was simply someone's try at doing something nice for them. Slightly more grand than most, they even had a banner made. Officially declining her right to submit the complaint, she walked back across her neighbor's yard, this time at a 90-degree angle so as not to startle anyone who might still be up.

NOTES & PHOTOGRAPHS:

*TITLE: Diane Cluck, "Love Letter Launches," recorded 2015, track 8 on *Song-of-the-Week*, self-released, digital download.

"She is not heavy/ just a gently worn out sister" loosely refers to the American aphorism "He ain't heavy, he's my brother", signifying a concerted effort made, without complaint, for the protection of precious assets. The protagonist of the fictional interjections throughout this writing is an unnamed "she". Placing myself in conversation with Catherine Lord's "Her Baldness," I position her as a detached subject through which to filter reflections on my diagnosis and treatment for Lymphoma, discourses on photography in fine art contexts, and the mainstream treatment and appropriation of gay culture, baggage I feel poses a heavy load, but that I nonetheless feel a need to bear.

1. Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute, 1980): 16.

   Lorde's *Cancer Journals* and other cancer memoirs have heavily informed my thinking and writing. Written between 1978 and 1980, *Cancer Journals* mostly addresses the political and psychic repercussions and implications of cancer, both for patients and larger social context. In particular, Lorde discusses breast cancer and a societal expectation to wear prosthetics, to "pass."

2. Catherine Lord, *The Summer of Her Baldness* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).

   The Summer of Her Baldness is also a cancer memoir, written in a similar diaristic manner as *The Cancer Journals*. The author's account is given primarily through email correspondences with friends and, as she describes, her "queer family," often under the pseudonym or detached narrator "Her Baldness" to describe herself while in treatment and remission. Such ideas on role-playing and networks of care through a queer lens are at the heart of my works and writing.

3. Moyra Davey, "Notes on Photography and Accident," in *Long Life Cool White: Photographs and Essays by Moyra Davey*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 82.

4. Lorde, *Cancer Journals*, 42.

5. Lord, *Baldness*, 91-92.

6. Michael Blackwood, *Reclaiming the Body: Feminist Art in America* (1996: Michael Blackwood Productions, 1996), Documentary.

7. Davey, 95.

8. "Jackson Family," Wikipedia, last modified February 6, 2019, http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackson_family

9. *BTM2*, season 1, episode 5, "Tori Amos," directed by Michael McNamara, March 21, 2000 on VH1, accessed February 5, 2019, https://www.youtube.com

10. "Original Sinsuality Tour: The set list and comments for Tori's May 18, 2005 concert in Melbourne, Australia," The Dent, last modified May 18, 2005, www.thedent.com/more.php?id=2615_0_1_0_M

11. "Tori Amos- "Crazy" with "Crazy In Love" cover (Beyoncé)," YouTube video, 6:21, posted by user "Erin O'neilll," July 31, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8iichWbR3g

12. "Tori Amos - Nights In White Satin!!!(with sonic love to LGBT!) - Warsaw 2014 FULL HD," YouTube video, 5:58, posted by user "Badalamenti," June 13, 2014, http://www.youtu.be/D6i9b7ytXTg

13. Jewel, "Hands," recorded 1998, track 3 on *Spirit*, Atlantic, compact disc.

14. Lord, *Baldness*.

15. Lord, *Baldness*, 155.

16. Lord, *Baldness*, 118.

17. Patrick Staff, *Weed Killer* (2017; Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017), Single-channel video installation.

    Commissioned by MoCA and featured in New Museum's *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and as a Weapon*, Staff's video piece is in part an adaptation of *The Summer of Her Baldness*. Lord's text on her physical and mental experience with breast cancer is recited and recontextualized to

discuss the intersections between cancer treatment and transgender hormone therapy.

18. Lorde, *Cancer Journals*, 59.

19. Eric Marcus. "Sylvia Rivera," February 18, 2019, in *Making Gay History*, produced by Eric Marcus, podcast, streaming audio, 13:03, https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/episode-1-1/
    In this interview from 1989, Sylvia Rivera reflects on the night of the Stonewall uprising and her experience as someone unable to "pass" in daily life in New York City, even since childhood. Accounts of the riots as a result of a police raid at the Stonewall Inn on June 28th, 1969, as well as of other gay liberation demonstrations and organizing at that time, often fail to acknowledge the involvement and activism of trans women, people of color, and lesbians.

20. Lord, *Baldness*, 238.

21. Marcus, "Sylvia Rivera."

fig. 4: *Intra-Venus #5, June 10, 1992/May 5, 1992, Performalist Self-Portrait with Donald Goddard* (detail), 1992-93. Photo: Hannah Wilke. 2 panels, chromogenic supergloss prints. 71 1/2 x 47 1/2 inches each. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

fig. 5: *Hannah Wilke. North Gallery--Installation view. Intra-Venus. January 8 - February 19, 1994*, 1994. Photo: Dennis Cowley. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

fig. 6: *Surprising Graffiti -- Cover-up of Rubberman Billboard -- 10000 to Replace the Billboards*, ca. 1990-91. Photo: Rink Foto. Gelatin silver print. 6 x 4 inches. Courtesy *Outweek* collection at Pat Parker/Vito Russo Center Library, New York.

fig. 7: *S.F. City Hall Marry-in*, ca. 1990-91. Photo: Rink Foto. Gelatin silver print. 4 x 6 inches. Courtesy *Outweek* collection at Pat Parker/Vito Russo Center Library, New York.

fig. 8: *Demonstration Against Amnesty International.* ca. 1990-91. Photo: Rink Foto. Gelatin silver print. 4 x 6 inches. Courtesy *Outweek* collection at Pat Parker/Vito Russo Center Library, New York.

fig. 9: *Pamela Sneed with the Gals at Clit Club.* 1991. Photo: Michael Wakefield. Gelatin silver print. 4 x 6 inches. Courtesy *Outweek* collection at Pat Parker/Vito Russo Center Library, New York.

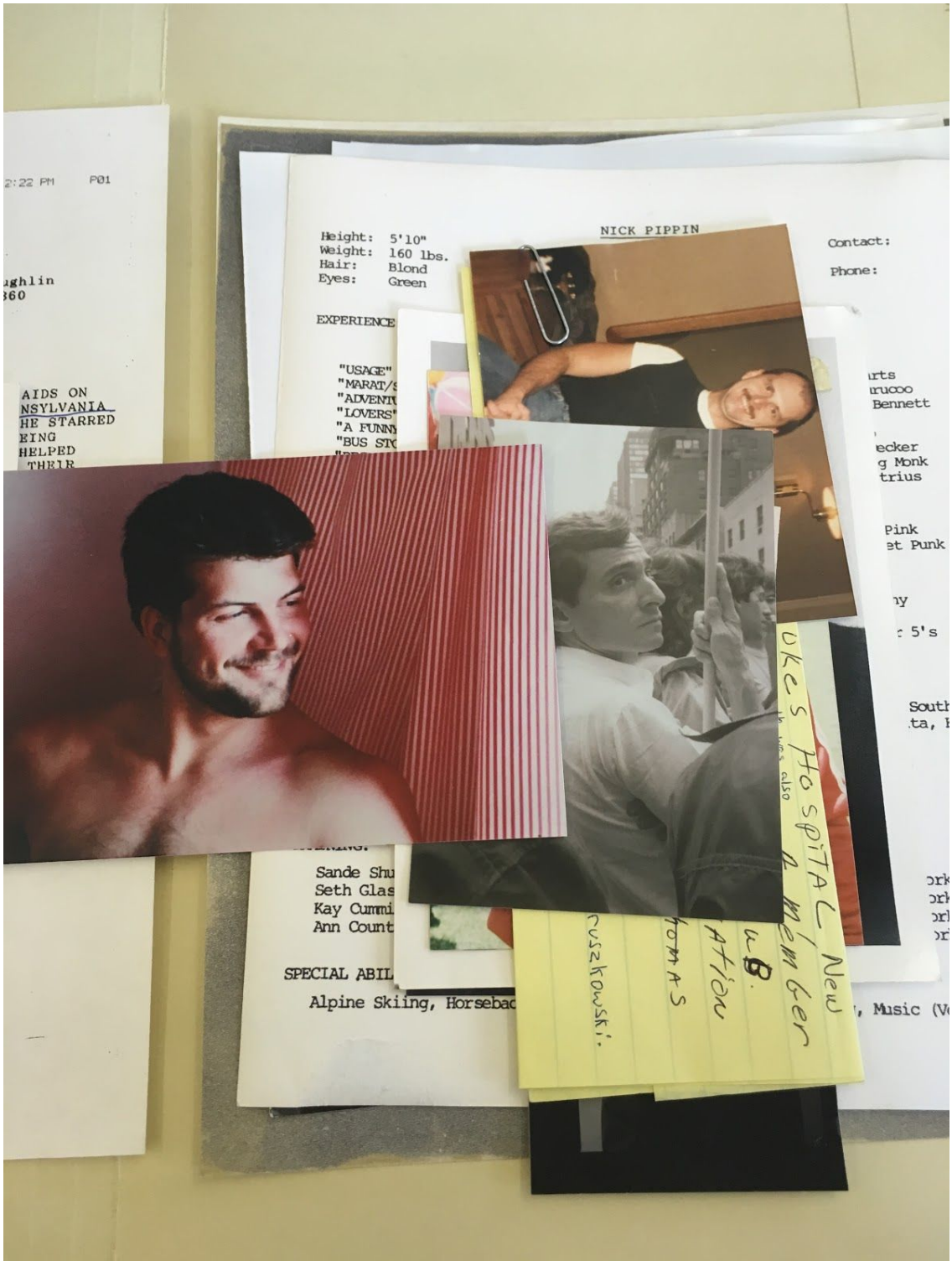

fig. 10: *Selected contents of "Unclaimed Obit" Folder, Outweek collection at Pat Parker/Vito Russo Center Library, New York.* 2018. Courtesy the author.

fig. 11: *Cover section called Fake Muse*. 2017. Photo: Twitter user “that angry fag” (@MrProgrammable). Courtesy the photographer.