

Behind the Image:  
*Reflections on Memory,  
Grief, and Identity*

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SIT

there,

*love*

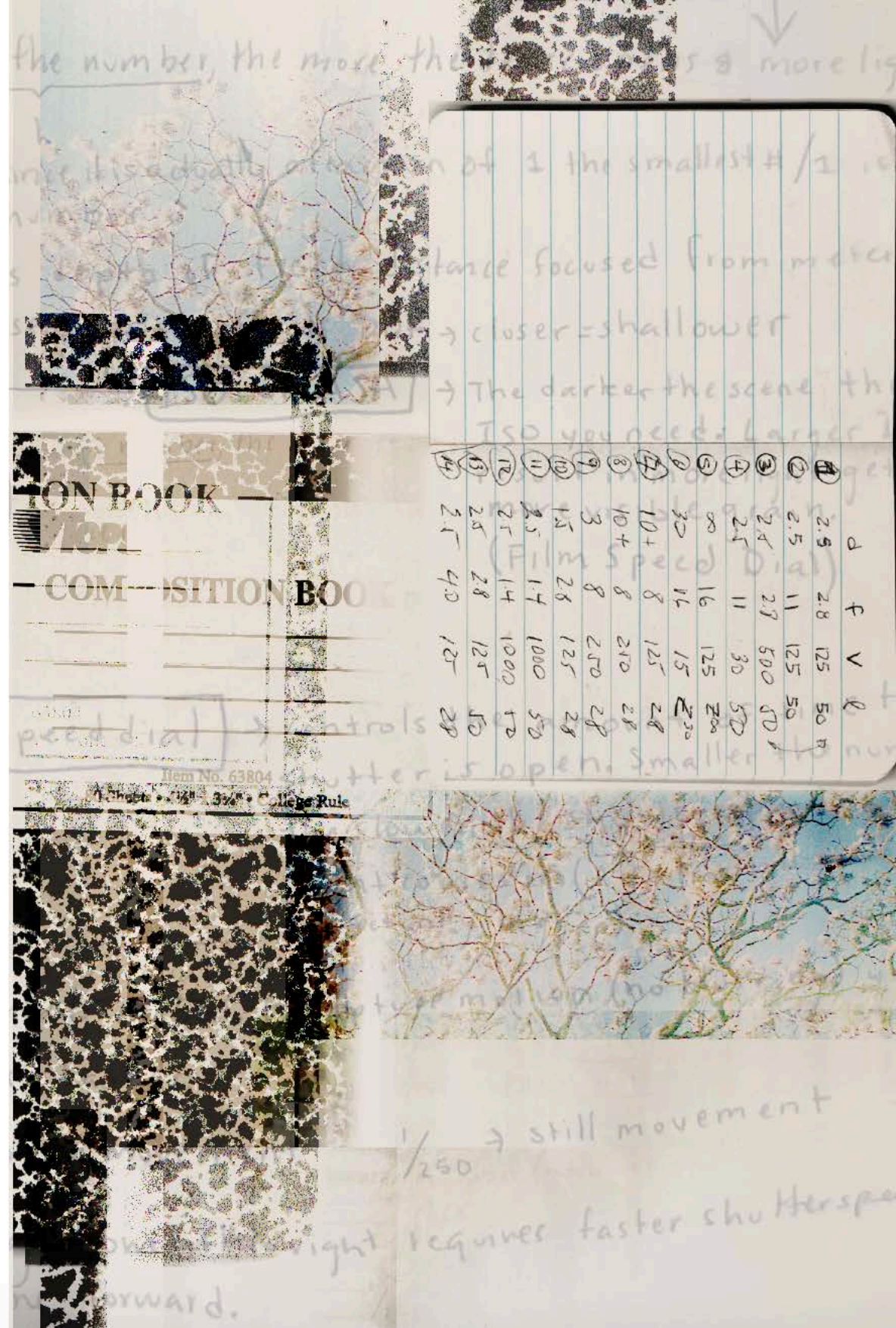
Almost eight years after I lost my father, I saw, for the first time, the last photograph he took of me: my 17-year-old self sits cross-legged on the grass, looking back at my father, now looking back at me. My arms hang close to my sides, refusing to move away from my body. My hands, partially interlaced in front of me, show that my fingers were fidgeting right above the ground as if still searching where to rest. My mouth reveals traces of a resisted smile, while my stare, too, is rather sulky. But there's also a softness in the atmosphere. A softness in the light, in the movement of my hair, even in my clear discomfort with my body. A softness that asked me then, when I first encountered the image, to reconcile with the person in the photograph. To finally let go and move on with my grief.

When my father took the photograph that would unknowingly become his last portrait of me, he had long stopped using his 35mm film camera to capture our—my family's—life. It was 2012, and digital cameras were now commonplace. Although he was never as enthusiastic about the digital form as he was about film. But that day, he



came to my room, bringing his old Pentax K1000, a box full of lenses, and a couple of light meters. "Do you want to try it?" he asked, "I can show you how to use it." I suspect he had picked up on my interest in photography and thought it would be a nice way to spend that Sunday afternoon with me. It was a way into my life. He was not a photographer per se, but as our family's self-designated photographer, he knew enough about analog cameras to teach me all the technicalities I needed to learn to start practicing.

I dragged myself out of bed as if my father were begging me. And still in pajamas, I followed him to the kitchen to grab film from the fridge, where he stored his old rolls. We spent the afternoon outside taking pictures, trying the different lenses as he explained how to adjust the exposure: ISO, aperture, and shutter speed combined to control the light that would pass through. We documented the settings for each photograph in a tiny notebook along the way. The plan was to compare the different results in exposure and focus once we had the prints. But my father kept reminding me that both the lenses and the





camera were old and could be defective. There was no certainty that the images would come out alright or that they would come out at all.

The breeze was crisp, and so was the rustling of the leaves. "Sit there, love. Let me take a picture of you," my father said. I didn't want him to photograph me, and I refused. Unbothered by my lack of excitement, he insisted. That was always his strategy back then, to maintain his enthusiasm and ignore my adolescent bad temper. As per usual, that bothered me even more, but that did not stop him.

"Just one, please. You look so pretty."

"No, Dad. I don't want to."

"Just sit there—it's only going to take a second." Rolling my eyes, I succumbed to his plea. I sat on the grass as he kneeled in front of me.

"C'mon, don't be so cranky! Give me a smile!"

For the last time, without knowing it as such, we shared this photo-taking ritual. But I continued to resist until he clicked. I resisted in the same way that I sometimes avoided conversing with him during car

rides or refused to hug him before bed. At least, that's how I remember it. The way I remember rejecting his love and affection whenever I was moody.

Afterward, we went back inside without unloading the camera. We postponed taking the film to a photo lab due to reasons that I don't recall, the way you postpone mundane things thinking you have all the time in the world left. But a few months later, my father was diagnosed with cancer, and he died very quickly.

I'm unsure why it took me eight years to develop this film. At first, I avoided unloading the camera, afraid that I would do it wrong and ruin the film. But when I finally dared to do it, I placed the undeveloped roll in a drawer and kept it there, telling no one of its existence. I struggled silently with this object for a long time. To an extent, I feared the prints would turn out washed out, overexposed, fogged, out of focus, or even blank. And as the years went by, the higher the chances that the humidity had destroyed the film, at least partially. I avoided seeing ruined images by not developing the film at all. It let me tint my dread with a hint of hope. Hav-



ing hope was better than having nothing. But at the same time, I also feared that the photos would come out alright because I feared looking at them. I feared looking back. Looking at a proof of my resistance.

I'm unsure what prompted me to finally reach for the film roll those eight years later. I was struggling with my grief in unexpected, new ways, feeling lost and confused, consumed by a resurgence of suppressed feelings of guilt. And yet something was telling me that it was time, so I took it to one of the few photo labs left in town. When I got back the stack of photos, my heart raced. I skimmed through the palms, the trees, and the glistening leaves. Some were better exposed than others, some grainier, some foggier. Then I reached the portrait. The stare of my former self suspended in time, surrounded by all things green: fresh grass, trees, leaves, vines. Its quality was intact, better than the rest. It was just a photograph, yet it was everything to me. Like a lighted message from the past.

I'd often heard that it was hard to heal wounds we could not see, that the pain free-floated inside you, but you couldn't

trace its source to look after it. I recognized a version of myself in that photograph that I had long reproached—and for the first time, I looked at her with a sense of understanding rather than self-hatred, feeling an inward sense of release that sounded like an honest and comforting, “It’s okay.”

Perhaps my father had orchestrated the whole thing, knowing all along the strange ways in which inanimate things outlive us. He was a collector, after all, a firm believer in the potential for material traces of the past to transcend time and space. Maybe he did find a way into my life that afternoon we played around with his old camera. A way into my life to come back, long after he was gone, to reassure me that he could see right through my moodiness and that his love was unconditional. Maybe he found a way back into my life to show me, when I needed it the most, how much I'd grown from that adolescent self. To tell me, in some otherworldly way, it was time to let go of the burden I carried. Perhaps, it took me eight years to develop this film roll because I knew deep down that I needed time to attune my senses to listen to him. To really listen.



When we lose someone, they sometimes speak to us in unearthly, nonverbal ways. But desperate to hear a whisper, we often blind ourselves from the signs around us.

This is a book about identity, loss, grief, daughterhood, and memory, and its strange interactions with photography.





## Between presence and absence

"The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time."

—Roland Barthes

"A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists. All photographs are *memento mori*."

—Susan Sontag

Sometimes I still find myself staring at the last photograph my father took of me, trying to understand what about it speaks to me, and what exactly is it saying? Is it my surly expression that pricks me, reminding me of how I looked back at my father, wondering how he looked at me? But could it be that my fidgeting fingers simultaneously touch me, revealing a poignant unease about growing up and being looked at that incites me to empathize with this younger version of myself? Or is it something vaguer, more abstract, yet all-encompassing, that wounds me, like the uncovering of a search for selfhood that was shortly there—



after troubled, rerouted, and elongated by loss? I am not sure whether it is none or all of the above, but what I am sure of is that something about this image—or rather, about *looking* at it—feels equally lacerating and transcendental. I feel sorrow, and at the same time something magical happening as I stare at it.

One could say that the sensitive point I try to identify as I gaze at the last photograph my father took of me is what Roland Barthes coins the photograph's *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*, "the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me."<sup>1</sup> I look for that photographic detail, which is a "sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice."<sup>2</sup> But it seems to expand, saturating the whole picture with its power. What is this "mark of something" that triggers me, that both attracts and repels me, that "provokes a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void"?<sup>3</sup> I contemplate my intense immobility, studying the teenage girl I once was, much like Barthes scrutinized the little girl in the Winter Garden Photograph of his recently deceased mother. *Do I recognize the girl in the image?* I ask myself. *Do I recognize her*

*as myself?* I'm not sure if that teenage girl is still somewhere deep inside me, if she's a fragment of me, an old version of myself, or apart from me. Begging for acknowledgment. From me or from someone else. As I examine her, I remember the search for identity that once consumed my mind before it was overcome with grief. And at last, something clicks. In Marianne Hirsch's words, the photograph "provokes a moment of self-recognition which, in the reading process, becomes a process of self-discovery, a discovery of self-in-relation."<sup>4</sup> Looking at the last photograph my father took of me, I rediscover my self-in-relation.

In my senior year of high school, when my father died, I took a class in Chinese philosophy, where I stumbled upon the notion of the self as a center of relationships, as an entity that exists only through its interactions with others. But as much as this understanding shaped my perception of the self, it never prompted me to think about what happens to the self-in-relation when it loses a respective Other, one with whom it shares a bond strong enough to define it, at least partially. Does the self-in-relation suffer from a void after a loss? Is it



forced to redefine itself? How does it exist ‘in-relation’ to an absent body? Perhaps when I lost my father, not only did I lose him, but I also lost my relationship with him. Perhaps this is what my “thinking eye,” as Barthes calls it, unknowingly adds (although it’s nonetheless already there) to the last photograph my father took of me.<sup>5</sup> And thus, as I look at my portrait, I recognize my self-in-relation, which heightens simultaneously my grief at my father’s death and my grief at our interrupted relationship. A second grief that had hitherto remained untraceable.

It is probable that my photograph’s *punctum* (if I can in fact call it mine instead of my father’s) isn’t a “detail” but is instead what Barthes describes as the second kind of *punctum*, that is, “Time,” “which is no longer of form but of intensity.”<sup>6</sup> A piercing accentuation of his theory of photography’s *noeme*, “*That-has-been*,” which holds a superimposition “of reality and of the past.”<sup>7</sup> The subject’s presence, *my* presence as a teenage girl, cannot be denied: “The thing [I, or that younger version of my *self*] has been there.”<sup>8</sup> “It has been absolutely, irrefutably present.”<sup>9</sup> It is because of

this “evidential force” that the photograph’s “testimony bears not on the object but on time” itself.<sup>10</sup> I could continue scrutinizing my 17-year-old self to decipher how exactly the photograph might represent me only to come up with subjective answers; the only seemingly objective truth is that “*this-has-been*.” As a 17-year-old, I sat on the grass as my father clicked the shutter button. The photograph authenticates the existence of my younger being, and, consequently, the (visibly absent) presence of my father behind the camera. The assurance of “the past of a thing,” in this case, of my *self*, is “true on the level of time.”<sup>11</sup>

Time. Time. Time. “In the Photograph, Time’s immobilization assumes only an excessive, monstrous mode: Time is engorged,” writes Barthes.<sup>12</sup> Why? Because as Susan Sontag states in her series of essays, *On Photography*, “the photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time.”<sup>13</sup> Photographing consists of freezing a single moment, which immediately turns the present into the past, transforming said moment into an object and transporting it into the imagined future with just a click. The photograph is essentially a memorandum for



posterity. And according to Sontag, it is this relationship with time what renders the photograph surreal: “its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past.”<sup>14</sup> Through such mechanisms, the photograph always implies a distance in time, however short that distance may be. A distance in time between when it was taken and when the photograph is looked at. “What is surreal is the distance imposed, and bridged, by the photograph,” Sontag adds.<sup>15</sup> A distance perhaps “engorged” (to use the same word to describe its “monstrous mode”) in the last photograph my father took of me due to eight years of remaining undeveloped, thus out of sight. And perhaps amplified even more by its status as the last one. As a clear mark of a reality “*that-has-been*” but no longer is. A clear mark of death and impending grief.

I’m unsure if this image animates my grief or if I project it into it, but either way, I don’t fully understand why its affect is so deeply intertwined with my mourning. It’s not a photograph of my deceased father that I found somewhere stored; it’s a photograph of me (or a fragment of me or an old version of me or her—who I no longer

am). When I look at it, I’m not looking at a photograph of the one who is dead, lost, now gone, like Barthes is. I cannot say that I’m looking at an emanation of my father, at the proceeding radiations from his body, “which was there,” and which “ultimately touch me, who am here,” as Barthes can say of looking at the photograph of his late mother.<sup>16</sup> In theory, the photographed body that touches me with its own rays still exists. I’m looking at a photograph of the one who will lose, who is also hypothetically still alive. But is she? Is the girl in the photograph still, fully, alive?

When I look at this photograph, I do recognize the girl in the image. But I’m hesitant about how to bridge the gap between her and me. There is an essence in her that feels extremely familiar but which I find hard to recognize in myself today. Her look is held back by something deeply interior; she has an expressive “air” (to borrow Barthes’s word) that coincides with her face, with the being I remember.<sup>17</sup> This familiarity may come down to the rediscovery of my self-in-relation. Maybe this photograph (and I say this with caution as I fear sounding grandiose) comes close to



what Barthes identifies as Italo Calvino's "true total photograph," "which accomplishes the unheard-of identification of reality (*that-has-been*) with truth (*there-she-is!*); it becomes at once evidential and exclamative."<sup>18</sup> Because when I first saw this photograph, I immediately thought, "*There she is!*" It was as if I'd found a lost being or essence I'd been unintentionally searching for: my self-in-relation-to-my-father. Perhaps when I lost my father, not only did I lose him and our relationship, but I also lost my identity in relation to him. Perhaps the photograph heightens simultaneously a third grief at my vanished self-in-relation-to-my-father. A third grief that had hitherto remained unnamed. Indeed, grief fragments, multiplies, mutates, and expands. The death of a body—and its respective self—brings along a series of relational endings, some more easily identifiable than others. Some concrete and some abstract. Some personal and some collective. Some immediate and some progressive. Some significantly more intense than others.

Here's a truth the last photograph my father took of me brings to the forefront: I no longer exist in relation to my father as

I used to. I may exist in relation to his absent body, traceable only through material echoes of the present-turned-past, rarely noticeable to the foreign eye. I may exist in relation to his lost self, traceable only through memory. But in his dead state, he feels more like a two-dimensional image ("As if the horror of Death," Barthes would tell me, "were not precisely its platitude!").<sup>19</sup> Like a found image I examine, add to, and use at my own disposal whenever I need a guarantee of his being. Perhaps because he's flat: he's stuck in time, his face doesn't age, he can't speak. He's static, unless I—or for that matter, anyone who remembers him—animates him. Brings him back to life in a way that may produce some sense of mutuality. But the truth is that I no longer am in his corporeal presence, and I can no longer exist, morph, or define myself with respect to it. I'm deprived of this relationality. A deprivation that leaves my daughterhood limping.

In the last photograph my father took of me, I'm posing (as implied) for my father. In posing for him, I'm performing, moving, physically being in relation to him. The photograph owes its existence,