

Essay on *Camera Lucida*



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Reflections on Love in Death

I would imagine that it is equally, if not more, difficult for my mother to see this photograph as she flips through endless pages of them. The first time I encountered it, I too was looking through the photo albums desperately trying to see her again, as I knew her or perhaps as I now imagine her to be. The memories I have of my aunt are fleeting, and yet this photo seems to encapsulate her persona, her essence. When I look at this photo, it almost feels as though I could speak to her and she would answer me in the same voice I can hear only faintly now. It does in fact feel like I am reopening a wound each time I see this image because while I feel comforted knowing she has not disappeared entirely, it pains me to recognize that I will never again be able to see her, truly see her. Such a photograph is, for me, a synthesis of love and death and thus demonstrates that the two phenomena are not so dissimilar as they might seem.

In terms of the *studium*, "...that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of varied interest, of inconsequential taste..." (Barthes 27), that quality which every photo possesses regardless of how dull or how inspiring; there are a great number of ways in which my knowledge, both personal and public, allows me to make sense of this scene. My aunt, Lori, was approximately 25 years old in this photograph, making the year it was taken 1984. This polaroid photograph teaches me how many American women dressed in the 80s (which after all I am unaware of): hair permed, simple turtleneck layered with a neutral sweater, a plain gold ring on her middle finger. Lori had just finished her undergraduate education and had taken refuge in her home

office, complete with stacks of disorganized papers and charts and lists tacked to the bulletin board, as if their position in plain sight would force her to remember everything she agreed to do. She was never known for her ability to be meticulous or thorough; she began each project with a sense of invigorated passion that would, each and every time, succumb to her own boredom and restlessness. That look of pensive agitation and impatience that reads all over her face captures her temperament - how she could switch so effortlessly from one mood to the next. Lori studied architectural design at university in Massachusetts and despite her commitment to such academic goals, it all came naturally to her, so much so that it was difficult for her to decipher whether or not she truly wanted anything she pursued. I think the setting “speaks” precisely such sentiment - the disheveled nature of herself, and thus her surrounding environment. I knew her, or as much as an eight year old could attempt to comprehend, and since her passing I have relentlessly been piecing together the fragments of a woman I perhaps only ever knew incompletely. And yet, despite that, this photograph conveys to me the totality of her existence as I, specifically, knew her to be, and I suppose that is all I could ever hope for in the aftermath that is grief.

The quality of this photograph “...which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (Barthes 27), in other words the *punctum*, the detail of this image that I cannot stop envisioning even when I am no longer seeing this photo: the hand resting in her hair that appears simultaneously in motion and somehow stuck there. This partial detail is, for me, a very physical one; especially because I myself make this exact same gesture on practically a daily basis. It seems that “...paradoxically, while remaining a “detail,” it fills the whole picture” (Barthes 45) and continually feels as if it is expanding to fill the entirety of my vision. The *punctum* is not meant to be subjected to any degree of rational thought or societal expectation; rather I feel drawn to this detail in particular because it interrupts every piece of information I can apply to

my aunt. I have been painstakingly trying, either consciously or not, to create an image of a woman that I now realize that I never knew in all of her complexities and nuances. Despite this deficiency, I still possess an irreducible mental image of Lori - one that precisely reflects the woman as I experienced her. The way in which I came to recognize her as an individual is undoubtedly different from what my mother experienced; thus, this photograph's *punctum* bruises me, and only me. The position of her hand is merely one aspect of her total image and yet, it is the one that speaks the loudest and refuses to be overshadowed.

The photograph, the physical manifestation of authenticity, is rooted in its *noeme*: the "that has been" quality which is inherent in the medium itself. Since "The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*" (Barthes 85), the *noeme* reinforces the fact that the camera has captured the subject with perfect accuracy at this singular moment in time. The *noeme* is implicit to photography; if an artist had painted my aunt, I would be unable to "see" her as I can in this photo; similarly, any amount of profound language would fail to capture her essence - words operate solely in generalizations. There is a reaffirming quality in the *noeme* as "The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed" (Barthes 82). I undeniably feel a "shock of discontinuity" each time I encounter this image because it feels as if I should be able to speak to her or hear her or touch her; and yet I remain unable to do so. The *noeme* of this photograph is the quality which is simultaneously comforting and destructive as it reaffirms for me that this person was once within my reach and now they are gone.

Grief is a very particular emotion and yet, it is all-encompassing. Despite photography's persistent attempts to recreate a moment that has been lost to the relentless continuum of time, the past can never again become the present. I must confront the fact that my aunt is gone, but

that does not mean I must relinquish the representations of her that I am fortunate enough to possess. This photograph is the closest portrayal of her persona, her essence, her aura that I have and thus, I will forever cherish it. I feel as though it represents not only my aunt, but also the connection I shared with her. She was perhaps unaware of our similarities, but here they are presented clearly. The love I have for her is unrelenting, and perhaps it has been reinforced in her death, as paradoxical as that sounds. Love is equally as fulfilling as it is destructive and it is when we feel love that we are both the closest to liberation and the closest to total detriment.