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Family Albums

by Daniel Baird

When I was a child on summer visits to my grandmother's house, built in the 1860s on an embankment above railroad tracks, I spent hours playing in its dusty, spacious attic. There were the shreds of lacy, moth-eaten wedding dresses clinging to mannequins, saddles and harnesses, piles of yellowed, disintegrating newspapers, alongside a collection of Winchester rifles and buckets of live ammunition. There were also wooden crates full of photographs, many of them so scratched and overexposed they were indecipherable. My grandmother hated my trips to the attic and would face them with a grim, superstitious zeal. It was only decades later that it occurred to me that the reason was the photographs: they pointed toward stories that she, blind and aged, could neither remember nor control. They were part of a fragmentary world of the lost she herself was swiftly sliding into.

When I first saw Jaret Belliveau's old family photographs, they reminded me of the images I had sifted through in the burnished light of my grandmother's attic. Here again were amateur photographs imbued with a talismanic aura that promised revelation and saga, the opening and recuperation of the past and the irradiation of an often incoherent present. One shows a funeral procession. The bridle of the dark lead horse is embellished with tailored black flowers. A jockey stares gravely at the camera. In another picture, there is a woman and her father at the seashore. She sits on a stretch of battered wall, dressed in a long skirt with a scarf loosely tied beneath her chin, her hands cradling her father's head on her knees. She looks at the camera directly, squinting uneasily so that her eyes are just black spots. And in still another, a girl of ten or eleven poses with her arms draped around her younger brother and sister in front of a dark, stained brick wall—the wall of an old church, or a factory. They are dressed in their rumpled, white Sunday best, attending a wedding. The girl is sneering as though anxious for the picture to be taken; the brother frowning in misery; their little sister gnomic and melancholic, holding a sprig of withered flowers.

These photographs do not exactly form a family album, which suggests a chronology stitching together generations. Instead, they show a smattering of fragments, of random moments. One can easily imagine them littering the rough wooden floor of the attic of a long abandoned house. The allure of old photographs, as has often been pointed out, rests in part in their factualness, that these events really took place and these people were really there in an ineluctable, physical



Unknown, *Untitled*, circa 1940

present. And by preserving the past, these photographs constitute a world that we as viewers cannot wholly identify with or participate in: they are part of a world from which we are excluded, discontinuous from our own. Confronting the pastness of the past, its eerie finality, we are drawn to old photographs because of the peculiarly modern difficulty of grasping the reality of the present. One gazes at old photographs morosely repeating “this really happened... this was really there,” our words and gestures passing through the images into empty space; one exists in the exactitude of the present, as though lurching from a crumbling precipice, without language at all, and facing a windy place devoid of the comfort of images.

Born and raised in Moncton, New Brunswick, and educated at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Jaret Belliveau began his current body of work five years ago when he was still a student. “I drove to Chiapas and originally planned on doing something on Mexico,” he told me, “but then I started taking pictures of my family, my mother, who was a minister, my truck driver father, my brothers Trevor and David.” He continued: “My dad would pick me up in Halifax and drive me home and I would take pictures of my family in the places where they grew up—dad at the farm or in his dad’s junk shop, mom back in Bayfield near Prince Edward Island. I wanted to see them in places that were outside of my life, in places that we weren’t sure were even there anymore, and to listen to them tell stories.”

From its inception, photography has thrived on

documenting family life and death, and that is especially true of photography that has since aspired to an art form. One thinks of the photographs Harry Callahan took of his wife Eleanor in the late 1940s and 1950s, her shapely white body compressed into abstract forms, yet real, alive, and present; Nan Goldin’s shabbily luxuriant and heartbreakingly diary of artists, punks and addicts on New York’s Lower East Side in the early 1980s; Larry Sultan’s tensely posed portraits of his parents; and Malerie Marder’s awkward images of her family members nude. But Belliveau’s work is less concerned with detailing the complexities of family life than with searching for an underlying sense of identity.

In one image, Belliveau’s father, dressed in a bright yellow jacket and baseball cap, walks down a path between the tangled remains of old farm equipment. Set on the near horizon is a barn; clouds sweep across the sky. In another image, his mother stands with her back to the camera, gazing toward autumn trees, the sky darkened almost purple with an approaching storm. Both of these pictures are lush with moody, seasonal colours and show figures facing away from the camera, absorbed in the moment as they attempt to rediscover and remember a place. The prominence and force of the sky makes these ruminative figures feel small and vulnerable. And in a third picture, Belliveau’s mother is shown in the church where she was a minister. The church is simple, elegant, and bright, with peaked arches and warm wood paneling, sunlight raking across the plush red carpet. She is halfway inside one of the pews, a bowl in one hand, looking down. She might be cleaning up and getting a ready



Jaret Belliveau, *Junk Yard*, 2003



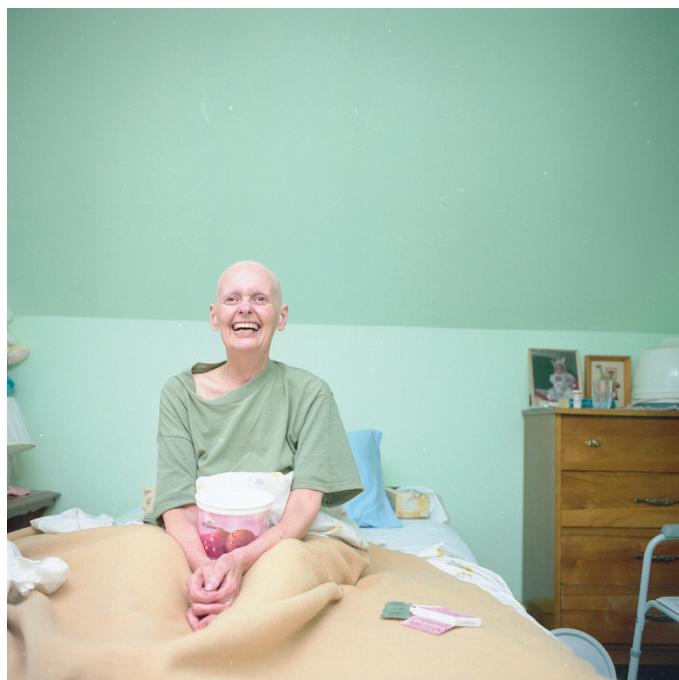
Jaret Belliveau, *After Service*, 2003

to leave, caught in a moment of mundane devotion.

After Belliveau had already begun this project, his mother became terminally ill. He spent the following eight months both tending to her and documenting her illness. "I photographed her illness as a way of figuring out how to make sense of it," he told me. "I had a discussion with her about it. She thought of it as a story about something she could overcome. But I told her I might have to take hard pictures. For the first four months I showed her the photos, but when she got too ill and started looking like she was dying, I stopped." Death is one of photography's great muses, for it is the moment in time—its nexus—when the soul flees the crumbling architecture of the visible, and photographers have pursued it with morbid obsessiveness. For example, in one of Richard Avedon's portraits of his dying father in 1972, his father is stooped forward, head bowed as though in supplication, half his face engulfed in shadow; the flat scorching chemical white background is about to erase him. The skeletal young men in Nan Goldin's portraits of AIDS victims are helpless and angry, thrashing inside their ruined bodies; and Annie Leibovitz's troubling images of Susan Sontag's death have a combination of grandeur and abjection that is operatic, the sores covering her body almost rhyming with her clothes and jewelry. Belliveau's photographs of his mother, on the other hand, are not metaphysical meditations on death; they present illness and the end of life as something that happens among the living. In one of Belliveau's photos his mother is sitting up in bed, beaming at the camera. On her lap is an empty

plastic container. On the dresser beside her are pictures of her children when they were young. On the bed are torn packets of medication. In another, she stares down disgustedly into a mug of soup, her face severe and pinched; behind her, her husband sits in a chair in front of a darkened doorframe, his hands clasped and his face weary and grizzled. And in one of the most compelling photographs in the series, Belliveau's brother David is shown in the foreground in the hospital room, gazing distractedly away; his mother is a receding blur in the background, propped up in a bed and attached to tubes, her mouth gaping open.

One of the most difficult things to come to terms with in the death of a loved one is the absoluteness of their absence, its "bad infinity," to use a phrase from Hegel; every ticking instant of time, every stretch of empty space, vibrates with their irrevocable negation. Mourning, Freud tells us in his seminal 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," is the process through which the grieving separate themselves off from their loved ones and acknowledge the reality of the world without them; melancholia occurs when mourning fails and the loved one is internalized, preserved as an object of ambivalent and solipsistic obsession. For Belliveau, the work of mourning took the form of a road trip in a rebuilt Volkswagen van, which he and his troubled younger brother, David, embarked on after their mother's death. "We grabbed a 1975 tour guide called *Explore Canada*," Belliveau said, "and we tried to find stuff that was in the tour guide, relics of Canadian history. We were especially interested in the



Jaret Belliveau, *Untitled*, 2004



Jaret Belliveau, *David's Last Visit*, 2005

things in the tour book we couldn't find. We were trying to deal with loss. And I was trying to show my brother how big the world is." This resulted in a series of photos that are not so much a travel log as they are a surreal meditation on familial loss. In one photo, David is standing on a hill on a grey autumn day dressed in a hoodie and a Jimi Hendrix T-shirt, his long red hair falling across his face, gazing pensively away from the camera. In another he is shown in the foreground in a down jacket with a bandana almost covering his eyes; a Tee Pee and mountains are shrouded in fog in the background. And in another photo he confronts the camera, standing in the middle of a road in ripped jeans; with foothills rolling in the background, he seems at once inaccessible and confrontational. What is most striking about these photographs is how isolated David is, how separate he is from the landscape and its narrative, and how deeply he seems to occupy another world to which we are not given access. "By taking flight into the ego," Freud writes concerning the loss of a loved one, "love escapes abolition"; it also means the abolition of one's capacity to know and love others and the world as they actually exist in all their porousness and indeterminacy.

Photography has an ambivalent relationship with history and memory. The picture of two middle aged women posing by a sign to the Lord Ashton Golf Club at some point in the 1950s, or an old man with a top hat in front of Bicknell's Furniture Stores in the 1920s, offer the thrill of making the past present—sort of. What amateur photographs lack is the quality of experience, of what it is to be inside the moment,

to be inside the unbounded stream of the world, and that is precisely what the great documentary photographers attempt to provide: the shadows striating the muddy road in André Kertész's "The Violinist's Tune," the stray reflections playing across the windows in Walker Evans' subway passenger photographs, the low, tilted angle and lengthening stripes of light in Garry Winogrand's "Hollywood Boulevard," the stark dawn shine on the endless ribbon of road in Robert Frank's "Highway 285, New Mexico." And yet, for all their subjective force, or perhaps because of it, these photographs draw the viewer away from the place or person or instant, and toward the iconic. One experiences their edges as part of the composition, as one does with paintings, rather than as an arbitrary limitation of the camera. After all, few would want to read R. J. Kitaj's portrait of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, or Lucien Freud's portrait of the Queen, or for that matter one of Rembrandt's great self-portraits in terms of the causal relationship between their brushes, hands, and eyes and their subjects; one does not stand in front of them thinking "The Rabbi was really there!" or "the Queen was really there!" though presumably they were.

Photographs may be memento mori, as Susan Sontag would have it, "allowing us to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability," but they are not at all like memories, which are not discrete images but heterogeneous forces alive in the entwined viscera of the mind and body. Photography promises possession of the time and space of the past, and then ruthlessly denies it. One might argue that photography's power's rests in that



Jaret Belliveau, *Slag Pile*, 2005



Jaret Belliveau, *Untitled*, 2006

moment of irreducible ambiguity and failure. Which is why it is appropriate that the effective coda to Belliveau's body of work thus far is a kind of elegy to his childhood home as it is in the process of being destroyed by its despairing and inebriated inhabitants; a living room with ratty old easy chairs and couches, garbage strewn on the floor, a bed with the sheets pulled back over the mattress, the pillow filthy brown, a dresser littered with debris, a wallpapered wall with a hole punched into it. These are images not just of neglect but also of aggressive repudiation.

Family albums. Reflecting on Belliveau's project, its mute culmination, led me back again to my grandmother's attic and its damaged pictures and moldering objects. In his notes dictated to G.E. Moore in the 1930s, Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked that art compels us to look at the world from a particular perspective; otherwise it becomes a mere thing, full of objects without meaning. "But now," he continues, "it seems to me that besides the work of the artist there is

another way... the way of thought which as it were flies above the world and leaves it as it is, contemplating it above in its flight." My grandmother's house was eventually robbed and pillaged of its contents, sold off at street corners and flea markets. I imagined pulling back, dream-like, higher and higher toward the vanishing point, the view from nowhere, and watching all of it—the sepia toned photographs, the crumbling newspaper pages, the guns with broken stocks, the tarnished jewelry—from a greater and greater distance as they drifted out into a world, that strange land of unlikeness, I did not have a specific claim on. Photographs—amateur or documentary—are also part of the physical world, part of its and our vulnerability and mutability. And in order to become part of memory, and of history, the house needs to be ransacked, its contents lost to us; we need to see them in their flight in order for them to be part of the present in what amounts to a continuous mourning for a world in which, for all that, love need not be abolished.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alongside **Jaret Belliveau**'s documentary practice his publications include editorial work for *The Sunday Times* magazine; *The Saturday Telegraph* magazine; *The Walrus* magazine; *Maclean's* magazine and *The Globe and Mail*. In 2005 Belliveau was selected by the Musee de L'Elysee for an exhibition entitled *reGeneration: 50 Photographers of Tomorrow* and has published images with the Magenta Foundation. Belliveau is currently editing his first feature length documentary film. He is represented by Stephen Bulger Gallery in Toronto.

Belliveau's work appears courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Daniel Baird is a Toronto based writer and editor. He is a regular contributor to *The Walrus* magazine, the *Globe and Mail*, and *Canadian Art*.

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