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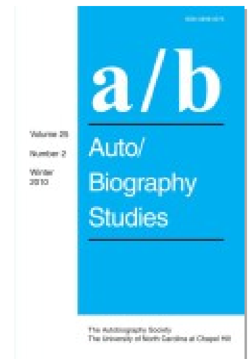

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Mourning the Family Album

By Tahneer Oksman

> *The oval portrait*
> *of a dog was me at an early age.*
> *Something shimmers, something is hushed up*
> —*John Ashbery, "This Room"*

Many memoirs begin with youth—not just as a convenient mode of organization, but because the early years represent a kind of clean slate of consciousness, a time before the full range of possibilities for self-reflection can be realized. As literal relics of the past, photographs are especially interesting objects to use to think about the past idyllic image of a self, the image that is forever being held up against the present self. In Jo Spence's photographic memoir *Putting Myself in the Picture,* for instance, there is a photograph of the face of a six-year-old smiling girl with light hair and short bangs. The note beneath the photo reads, "Six years: looking like an uncared for, but rather cheeky 'orphan'. This is a 'face' I still see on me even now. Less often though" (86). However much Spence has moved away from this photograph both in time (as an adult) and in perception (as a photographer who examines and destabilizes the idea of a fixed image/identity), she is still trapped within its frame. Part of Spence's autobiographical project involves examining and readjusting/reclaiming just such images—images imbedded in her personal history to such an extent that they still seem representative of the idea of a unified and recognizable self.

Spence is especially interested in this project because she understands the power of such images to frame and trap people's realities of themselves through restrictive constructions. She needs to revise this image of herself to find "a range of possibilities, or subject positions, which are not forever fixed" (Martin and Spence 67). In other words, to assert herself as an active creator and interpreter of her own identity, she must go back to the past, to the time when the first seeds of an image of herself were formed outside of her own self-reflective consciousness.

In an article entitled "New Portraits for Old: The Use of the Camera in Therapy," Jo Spence and Rosy Martin outline a "photo-therapy" based on this notion of the important influence that childhood

photographs have on adults. In this group therapy, "We take a specific piece of behaviour, history, or in this case an image, examine what we think it represents to us and how we would like to change it—that is, change our impression of what we think about it. Put crudely, reframing is a kind of internal permission-giving: permission to change, to re-view, to let go, to move on" (67). In a sense, Spence and Martin here are outlining a set of directions for mourning a past image of the self as opposed to holding on to it and continuing to live within its oppressive and restrictive boundaries. The process sounds close to Freud's description of "normal states of mourning" as he outlines them in his famous essay, "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud talks about mourning as a response to the loss of "a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (243). In the act of mourning, "[e]ach single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected" (245). This psychic attention to detail echoes Spence's and Martin's approach of "counseling each other over a period of time about how we presented ourselves in the everyday world through our personal styles: make-up, fashion, body gesture, facial expression" (68). For both Freud and Spence/Martin, the process of mourning involves a long period of obsessing over the lost love-object until it can finally be released from its frame.

Spence and Martin look at the process of mourning as an act that can be triggered (in this case, by a photograph), whereas Freud describes mourning as an immediate and "natural" reaction to the loss of a love-object, a reaction that is "overcome after a certain lapse of time" (244). But what if we keep looking at the same photograph over time—when does this act trigger a response if the photograph is a part of our daily routine? As Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida,* "[w]hat the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (4). If photographs continually reproduce the past even after we have learned to forget or let go, how do we view old photographs without continuously repeating a completed process of mourning? And what is it that marks the movement from the photograph as a stationary relic, perpetuating or reinforcing myths (of family, for instance, or of beauty) to the photograph as a vehicle for deconstructing myths and for mourning or letting go of the past?

The work of two artists—photographer Nan Goldin and filmmaker Jan Oxenberg—both of whom use photographs as starting points for understanding and coming to terms with the past make especially good objects of study for examining photography's deconstructing

and perpetuating elements. Goldin and Oxenberg use childhood photographs of their sisters as focal points for their projects of mourning, of revisiting and revising the past images they have of themselves as well as the past images they have of their sisters. Their projects convert static relics of the past into shimmering, responsive, transformative animations. These transformations come about only when they immerse these photographs—which always contain the memories of past selves and identities—into the current of their present selves and identities. As Adrienne Rich writes, "The continuing spiritual power of an image lives in the interplay between what it reminds us of—what it *brings to mind*—and our own continuing actions in the present" (227). How is this spiritual power brought to life?

In *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory,* Marianne Hirsch attempts to deconstruct the myth of family—along with the myth of photography—by analyzing various kinds of family pictures. She sees photography as "the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation" (6) and, as such, a carrier of "family memory." The problem, then, is that family albums consist of photographs often selected for their portrayals of the romantic ideals of family life, as opposed to the messy realities. The term "photogenic," which means "forming an attractive subject for photography or having features that look well in a photograph"("Photogenic"), reflects the value system taken for granted in all photography, including the family album. Photos are meant to capture our "attractive" poses, and an attractive family is tame, poised, and unrealistic. If these albums carry the collective memories of families, what happens when our personal realities go up against these collective, constructed ones?

Hirsch believes that the power of family albums often surpasses the lived reality. She writes of the family myth, "This myth or image—whatever its content may be for a specific group—dominates lived reality, even though it can exist in conflict with it and can be ruled by different interests. It survives by means of its narrative and imaginary power, a power that photographs have a particular capacity to tap" (8). If family myths are carried by a narrative power that stems from the photographs themselves, then it is through narrative that these myths can be rewritten. In *On Photography,* Susan Sontag argues that "one never understands anything from a photograph." Understanding, she explains, comes only from contextualizing, from placing photographs in time—"[o]nly that which narrates can make us understand"(23). Thus, one means of destabilizing the myth of family is to create a new narrative around an old family photograph. This is exactly what Goldin does with the image of her sister in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency.*

Nan Goldin dedicates her visual diary to the “real memory” of her sister, Barbara. Her sister committed suicide at eighteen when Goldin was eleven years old, and Goldin’s memoir is clearly an attempt both to identify with and separate herself from her sister. Goldin admits that “I was like my sister. I saw history repeating itself.” In photographing her “re-created family without the traditional roles,” Goldin attempts to redefine her relationship to her sister and parents and, in the process, her understanding of her own identity (9). She begins *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* with a picture of her sister standing at the steps of a brick suburban house framed with trees and a low, white roof. Barbara is dressed neatly in a blue fitted sweater tucked into a red pleated skirt that hangs past the knees and tan boots about calf-high. She stares off into the distance, and it is difficult to determine whether the focal point of the photograph is meant to be Barbara or the house itself. It is a decidedly isolated and isolating image. Yet, as soon as we turn the page, we are faced with Goldin and her then lover, Brian, their faces definitely the focal point of an indoor kitchen scene. Now, Goldin seems to be saying, we are on the inside. The couple stares directly at the camera, the color and shape of their eyes reminding the viewer of Goldin’s words of longing about her sister on the previous page: “I don’t remember the tangible sense of who she was, her presence, what her eyes looked like” (9). If the photograph of her sister is the image that Goldin is attempting to recreate, then Goldin seems to be saying that it is through coupling, through turning the image of a single person into an image of two people, that she can rewrite her sister’s (and, consequently, her own) history.

Yet, obviously, this rewriting of history—from isolation to coupling—is not without consequences of its own. On page 83 of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,* Goldin includes a close-up of her own face (her eyes, again, focused on the camera) after having been severely battered, presumably by this same Brian. Goldin’s staging of this violence—her lips reflect freshly applied bright red lipstick—brings to mind the somewhat performative death of her sister, who laid herself down onto the railroad tracks of a commuter train. In a sense, Goldin here exposes the violence of her sister’s death—a suicide that, presumably, was never physically documented and occurred at a time “when teenage suicide was a taboo subject” (8). At the same time, Goldin documents the consequences of her own escape from family into a violent relationship. But what is revealed here is more than just a repetition of history, a performance of the fear that “I would end up just like [Barbara].” In the very act of photographing her history—violence and all—Goldin reclaims the isolated childhood image that started it all. In the battered photo, she is alone again (like her

sister), but she is looking directly at the camera and the shape and color of her eyes are clearly visible. Goldin seems to be saying that history can never entirely be rewritten—the violence that once was her sister's death will never turn into anything but violence. Yet, if the context or narrative surrounding that violence can be claimed, as Goldin does in putting together this book, then there is hope for some kind of continued existence outside of the image. In other words, reclaiming a childhood trauma does not mean letting go of the memory of the event, but rather adjusting the memory—and the pain that goes along with it—to an existence outside of the time/space of the trauma itself.

This reclamation of a childhood trauma may seem counterintuitive considering the importance in psychoanalysis of *letting go* of a love-object in order to move through a process of mourning.[1] Goldin's reclamation of the violence of her sister's death is dangerously close to an obsession—one which would turn her sister's photograph into a kind of fetishized object. Yet, in recreating the definition of family and intimacy—and, consequently, the definition of the relationship between her and her sister—Goldin is, in fact, able to let go of the love-object of her past.

According to Hirsch, "The 'family' is an affiliative group, and the affiliations that create it are constructed through various relational, cultural, and institutional processes such as 'looking' and photography, for example" (10). Goldin performs and then unsettles this notion of the constructedness of family throughout *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency.* If one of her primary interests is the intimacy between two people, then it is through the photographs of her parents that this intersection of construction and family can best be understood. For instance, after we turn the page on Nan and Brian in the kitchen, we find the Duke or Duchess of Windsor at the Coney Island Wax Museum (12) and Nan's parents ("the parents") seated at a French restaurant (13). The stiff and detached poses of her parents (not to mention the wax figures) look off into the distance, contrasting with Nan's embrace of Brian in the previous photograph. What is Goldin saying here about coupling and intimacy? If her parents are likened to wax figures, will the connections between them melt away when the right temperature (or outside circumstance) is applied? Or are they forever fixed in her memory as they were at that moment? As Hirsch explains about the work of placing family photographs into new frameworks, "Only in the context of . . . meta-photographic textuality and . . . self-conscious contextuality can photographs disrupt a familiar narrative about family life and its representations, breaking the hold of a conventional and monolithic familial gaze" (8). By juxtaposing the stiff images of her parents and the wax figures

with images of her own relationships, Goldin creates a narrative that questions the very concepts of coupling and family.

Goldin similarly disrupts the familiar narrative of marriage and parenting with a picture of her parents' wedding photograph (98). The photo sits alongside a small, round mirror and several other photographs, just another object on the dresser. The room is lined with yellow wallpaper, which has the same effect as the discoloration of an old photograph; it makes the room look ancient and untouched. The wedding photograph demonstrates the concept of the pornographic (as opposed to the erotic) photograph as Barthes describes it in *Camera Lucida*. For Barthes, the pornographic image is decidedly inferior to the erotic image in the truths that it reveals. Jane Gallop argues that Barthes in his discussion of pornography, "is writing *against* representation, which for him is a means of containing and coopting desire, pleasure, sexuality. He defines it as a situation in which nothing comes out, where everything remains inside, where nothing leaps out of the frame" (151). Goldin's photograph of the photograph of the wedding picture is just such a demonstration of co-opted intimacy. Next to the lively and flowing images of intimate, chaotic people and settings, the wedding photograph stirs up a sense of emptiness, in-authenticity, and, most importantly, a lack of movement. In addition, the double-framing surrounding the wedding picture recalls the pervasive presence of wedding photographs in our society. Just as "the surprise and bemusement felt the first time one sees a pornographic movie wear off after one sees a few more" (Sontag 20), the representation of intimacy portrayed in wedding photographs wears off the more one views wedding photos.

In contrast, for Barthes, the erotic photograph, much like the erotic relationship (as opposed to the pornographic or constructed relationship), "takes the spectator outside its frame"(59). The photographs of Goldin's "re-created family" perform this kind of erotic relationship. As she photographs everything around her, Goldin extends her desires—and, inevitably, her identity—outside of the frame of her own reality. She resists a fixed construction of her own identity or her relationships with others because she is always adding to the repertoire of her already inter-dependent book of photographs: "The meaning of Goldin's pictures, seen repeatedly over time, in different combinations, is fluid and never completely fixed" (Heiferman 282). Similarly, no single photograph within Goldin's photographic diary is meant to stand on its own. The ever-repetitive cast of characters, spaces, and subjects are continually in dialogue with each other. Indeed, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* was originally a slide show displayed by Goldin herself for groups of friends with the order and selection of the photographs always changing. This resistance of a

fixed and readable narrative is in direct contrast to "the wedding photograph," an object that is meant to stand on its own and represent intimacy but that in reality brings to mind only isolation and, at best, a public performance of an idea/l of intimacy.

Much like the typical wedding photograph, the typical family album—the album that Goldin is working against—consists of these pornographic, photogenic images, images meant to portray a comforting myth rather than a reality. It is only by destabilizing the very foundations of the family album that Goldin is able to build a new narrative around her sister's photograph. Yet destabilizing the myth of the family also means that Goldin has to rewrite (or re-photograph) the idea of sisterhood. She does this throughout *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* by exploring the constructions that stem from the term "sister." These constructions unravel as she plays with the boundaries that separate a self from an other, a separation that is often established in childhood through the mirror of a parent or a sibling.

Relationships between siblings often highlight the formation of various aspects of identity. As a text analog to Goldin's, Jo Spence's photo-therapy sessions in *Putting Myself in the Picture* powerfully illustrate the divided experience of siblings and, specifically, "sister" versus "brother." Spence is looking at a photograph of herself as a child (the photograph mentioned earlier, the face she still "see[s]" on herself), and she recalls "I'm sitting at a dressing table and it's got three mirrors. I love sitting there because I can see both sides of my face and when I tip the mirrors in certain directions I go on forever. There are thousands of me and it's lovely. Then when I put the light on above it I look terrible. Immediately it forces me to realize that it's an illusion because I can see all the detail in the face now and I look tired . . ." (143). Here, in looking in the mirror, Spence first experiences the possibility of understanding herself as a multitude of selves, a liberating possibility. But the fantasy is quickly shattered when she realizes that her face—her self on the outside—will forever be trapped in the reality of its own "ugliness," like the tired lines around her eyes. Similarly, she finds herself, even in play, trapped in the expectations attached to being a girl: "So, I'm looking in the mirror and on the dressing table are glass objects and in them are different things like hairpins and little trinkets. . . . [T]here is some powder and there is a thing for polishing your nails. . . . And [mother]'s got a crystal necklace which I loved putting on. But I've got to be careful with it because my brother has already broken his grandfather's watch (laughs). He doesn't put the jewelry on. . . . [M]y brother would never try on the things that I'm trying on and I wouldn't dream of playing with the things that my father had. . . . And we probably wouldn't be doing that at the same time either.

They would be little secret things that we both did" (143–44). Even in secret, Spence and her brother are supposed to perform their genders, to play with the objects meant for them. For her brother, the acceptable play-object is his grandfather's watch, while for Spence, it is her mother's crystal necklace. This incident reflects the varying levels of knowledge that Spence and her brother are allowed access to as a result of their genders. They are each trapped in their own predetermined positions in the family.

The experience of exploring identity differs when the two subjects are of the same sex, in which case a shared access to knowledge is *presumed* to exist (in much the same way that it is *not* supposed to exist between a brother and a sister). While Spence and her brother were meant undergo varying experiences because of their differing sexes, sisters are supposed to stand in as reflections of each other. The concept of sisterhood implies an inherent knowledge and understanding of one another. Sisters are meant to be mirrors of each other. For this reason, Barbara Goldin's suicide caused her psychiatrist to worry that Nan would turn out exactly like her sister. Yet Goldin includes only one photograph of Barbara at the very beginning of her diary. The photograph is not even included in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* itself. What is Goldin saying here about sisterhood and knowledge?

Like Goldin's deconstruction of the idea of marriage, her deconstruction of the idea of sisterhood comes out of her explorations of intimacy. In contrast to the photograph of her sister, throughout *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,* Goldin includes photographs of her friends, lovers, and herself in intimate and often seemingly unposed positions, half-clothed or naked, embracing each other or themselves, looking into the mirror in an otherwise empty bathroom or hotel room. There is, on the one hand, a sense of privacy and aloneness in these moments of sexual exploration or private contemplation. Yet on the other hand, Goldin is always somewhere in the background of the picture, both the voyeur and the captor (or even the creator) of these moments. This engagement between Goldin/the camera and her subjects constantly and persistently exposes the relational bases of gender, sexuality, and desire, of identity itself. Even when her subjects are most alone, looking into a mirror or masturbating, there is always the "Photographer's organ" (Barthes 15) intruding in on the moment and engaging with the subject. As Sontag writes, "Although the camera is an observation station, the act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening" (12). Every private photograph in Goldin's album exposes the relationality of identity, as well as the

relationality of sexuality and desire. Even when Goldin photographs herself, there is another version of herself that comes to life: "For the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (Barthes 12). The self portrait becomes yet another instance of the encounter between self and other: between the photograph*ing* versus the photograph*ed* self, the voyeur versus the gazed upon.

To return to the notion of sisterhood; the sister is meant to be a most intimate relation just because she is the sister, another woman born from the same mother. Yet the encounters between two sisters and the engagements of their minds and bodies are nothing but by-products of an initial, fixed relationship. As a result, it is possible to know nothing about the person who is supposed to be the closest to you. Compared to the little knowledge that Goldin relates to us about the terms of her sister's death, not to mention the distant photograph of her sister included in the book, the relationships between Goldin and the subjects of her "re-created family" reflect much deeper folds of knowledge, starting with the bodies themselves. Goldin recreates the idea of sisterhood by revealing that true intimacy does not result from the accident of birth but rather from shared experiences that provoke knowledge of the other.

It is important to note that Goldin has "re-created" a family as opposed to having started from scratch. The notions of sisterhood are not altogether done away with, but they are prodded and expanded upon with an ever-evolving cast of characters and situations. Sisterhood, in this way, moves from its fixed position in the family album (the photographic relic) to a series of ever-changing and moving images of engagement (the new family album: a ballad).[2]

Goldin's representations of relationships are an important part of her project of mourning because, as I have already shown, they destabilize the idea of family as reflected in the time and space of her sister's photograph and, thus, provide a means of recreating and inevitably letting go of the past. In her film, *Thank You and Goodnight,* Jan Oxenberg also struggles with ideas of family and intimacy in an attempt to mourn both her grandmother and her sister. Oxenberg attempts to redefine her ideas of family, but she does so, not as Goldin does, but through a distancing from them by becoming so intricately tied to the other members of her family that, throughout the documentary, she virtually strips herself of any identity outside of them. In the end, she finds herself with a "re-created" family as well, but it consists of the same original cast of characters.

Oxenberg's 1991 documentary, filmed over twelve years,[3] tracks the last days of the filmmaker's grandmother's struggle with cancer, as well as her family's reaction to the death. It becomes clear from

one of the first scenes of the film that Oxenberg's documentary is her attempt to deal not only with her grandmother's death but with the death of her little sister, Judy, as well. Oxenberg's narrative voice states, "I wanted answers. I enlisted everyone else in my search for them." In this case, "everyone else" is the cast of characters, from her brothers to her cousins, that make up her family. Finally, a photograph of a young girl appears in the middle of the screen, held in the palm of (presumably) Oxenberg's hand. "And this is my younger sister, Judy, who died when we were both kids. But we don't talk about her." Oxenberg's declaration of the silence surrounding her sister's death is obviously punctured in the very mention of this silence. Similarly, in tracing a moment in time of her family history, it is inevitable that her sister's death will leak out: "Showing our faces, telling ourselves, cannot help but betray the others who live on in our heads and dreams" (Miller x). It is impossible for Oxenberg to understand her grandmother's death—so tied to her notions and memories of family and to her childhood—without bringing up her sister's death. And, in a sense, it is the process of documenting her grandmother's slow death that authorizes Oxenberg to bring up the memory of her sister.

It is not only Oxenberg, however, who feels the need to break the silence surrounding Judy's death. In one scene, her grandmother recalls her life: "I had a happy life . . . I got two great-grandchildren. I have nine grandchildren. I have been sad because one of my grandchildren got hit by a car, which broke my heart and I've never gotten over that." Oxenberg's grandmother here traces her own life on the basis of the generations that came after or from her. And it is the rupture in this procreational narrative that she cannot get over—a rupture that determines the structure of her own telling of the story of her life. The camera now zeroes in on a black-and-white photograph of Judy held up by the grandmother (a repeat performance of Oxenberg's own grasping of another photograph of her sister). The grandmother's life story lapses into an almost obsessional re-telling of Judy's death: "I used to watch television and I used to see her there laying down by the road, blood coming out of her mouth and nose. And she tried to say something to me, her lips moved. But I didn't—couldn't—hear what she said. And it took a long time, as I said, to have a little more happiness." It is this inability to hear what the dead are trying to say that Oxenberg seems to be fighting against throughout her film. Like Goldin's fear that she will turn into her sister ("I saw history repeating itself"), Oxenberg's film reflects a persistent anxiety that her sister's unexpected death—a death without any last words—will repeat itself with her grandmother. For this

reason, to the very last instant of her grandmother's life, Oxenberg persistently asks if she has any last words, any advice, anything she wants to pass on.

But it is not only in obsessively tracing every last detail of her grandmother's drawn-out death that Oxenberg attempts to rewrite the history of her sister's sudden death. Throughout her film, Oxenberg also attempts to come to terms with her childhood notions of family and intimacy, notions that are inextricably tied to her grandmother. In an opening scene, we are taken into the Loew's Paradise Theater. Cartoon cut-outs of the grandmother appear everywhere: in the seats, at the popcorn stand, even on the ceiling. Oxenberg narrates: "[grandmother] was a big presence in my life back then. I felt like she was all around me." There is a sense of both suffocation and comfort in the omnipresence of her grandmother, and it is a feeling that extends throughout the film. In another scene, Oxenberg is on a row-boat, surrounded by pictures of her grandmother. ("I wanted to be alone with my thoughts of grandma. To sort things out. To remember. To obsess.") This desire to relive the surrounding presence of her grandmother is, in a sense, a desire to relive her childhood. And this familial intimacy without boundaries resonates throughout the entire film. There is almost no mention of a "private" life—a life outside of her family—for Oxenberg. During the film, the documentarian is either interacting with her grandmother or sitting Shiva with her family, taking part in a Jewish tradition of mourning. Even her ostensibly private moments, sitting alone in her apartment or in a rowboat, are haunted by her grandmother's presence: her grandmother's photographs and furniture surround her. The closest mention to a life outside of her family occurs when she asks her grandmother if there is anything she can do to make her happy. "She said I should get married. I asked her if she had a second choice." Since by the time of making *Thank You and Goodnight,* Oxenberg had already made several documentary films about being a lesbian,[4] this is an important omission on her part.

There is one other scene in the film that takes us completely outside of the interactions of Oxenberg's direct family and her grandmother's close friends. Soon after we see the family sitting Shiva for her grandmother, there is scene in which a multitude of strangers march through a tunnel to the beat of Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready." The crowd trudges slowly to the beat and includes a soldier, a sick old man pulling his IV, a child, a man with skis, a chef, a policeman, a gay couple embracing, a teenage couple embracing, and a nurse. Finally, a car drives through the crowd, blasting its horn, and in it we see people dressed in bear suits, drinking and waving flags. It is a kind of

absurd Fourth of July celebration. In a sense, this is Oxenberg's take on death: a campy holiday that brings everyone together, drunkenly marching to the beat. Yet there is also a strong sense of comparison in thinking about this group—brought together randomly by the great leveler, death—and Oxenberg's family, sitting in a group, crying, arguing, and discussing the meaning of life. While Nan Goldin's take on family involved distancing herself from its myth of intimacy, for Oxenberg, the ties that bind family members together seem to represent a universal truth about relationships. Oxenberg rewrites her idea of family, the idea formed in her childhood, by allowing herself, as an adult, to re-immerse herself *willingly* into its suffocating depths (cut to a cartoon cut-out of five-year-old Oxenberg scowling at her grandmother at the movie theater). If as a child Oxenberg had no choice but to exist and identify herself through her family, including through the trauma of her sister's death, then, as an adult, she can revise the past by voluntarily immersing herself into its all-consuming clutches. This immersion necessitates the erasure of the parts of her identity that are exercised outside of the family, including any traces of her sexuality. For Oxenberg, in rewriting her notions of family, sisterhood becomes a relationship both thrust upon her and willingly explored/accepted by her. Her decision to mourn her sister's death and to record her grandmother's death are choices that hinge both on practicality (she *needs* to get over it and this is the only way she knows how) and an uncontrollable desire to record everything she sees, to obsess. Oxenberg similarly traces the relationship between her mother and grandmother to reveal the complexities and contradictions that come from being born into a status where you are supposed to love somebody. In one scene, she juxtaposes her mother's thoughts on this relationship with her grandmother's thoughts. She asks her grandmother, "Were you close with Mommy when you were little?" And her grandmother answers by talking about her daughter's hair: "She had curls. She was cute." Mom's take on the curls is different: "Ugh—all I really wanted was straight, long, glossy hair like all the debutantes." The grandmother tries again to define the roots of her love, to get to the bottom of her daughter. "She was like every child," she says. The mother echoes these thoughts as a question. "I was like every child? I guess. I don't know what that means." If she was like every child, then what is the basis of the love that holds mother and daughter together? Is it just a result of having been born? Is motherhood or sisterhood anything more than an accident?

Oxenberg's film suggests that the answers are both yes and no: sisterhood is an accident, like her sister's death was an accident. But it is only in facing these accidental relations and losses—in breaking the silences—that one can even attempt to move forward. As a therapist

in *Thank You and Goodnight* instructs the five-year-old cardboard cutout of Oxenberg in response to her grandmother's death: "So you're having difficulty letting go. See yourself opening the photo album. . . . Now, close the book. . . . If you don't close the door, you can't open the door." Mourning is a process that necessarily involves both remembering and letting go. Yet remembering, or opening the door, consists of more than just delving into the family album—a gesture that often leads to nothing but a reinforcement of myths. It requires a willingness to consciously deal with the remnants of an often painful past. For both Goldin and Oxenberg, this consciousness stems from old family photographs only when the narrative surrounding the old photograph is revised. And the narrative revision hinges on the birth and juxtaposition of new images that will eventually have to be revised themselves.

In the end, the process of mourning reveals a stubborn truth. As we trade images of our past selves, they are replaced by new images, just as each instance of mourning brings us closer to the next death (which will require a whole new process of remembering and then letting go). At the end of *Thank You and Goodnight,* as Jan and her mother pack up her grandmother's apartment and divide up the coveted objects (a chair, a colored TV, various sets of salt and pepper shakers), Jan narrates: "When grandma died, everyone moved up a step—one step closer to death. With her dead, there's just my mother between me and death." What is the reason that we willingly engage in these projects of mourning, if they only bring us closer to our own deaths? Perhaps the process of mourning is nothing more than a preparation for the final severing from the past that each of us will have to undergo with our own deaths. Like the people marching through Oxenberg's tunnel, perhaps we too are just heeding the song lyrics: "People get ready, there's a train a-coming."

New York City

Notes

1. Freud differentiates mourning from melancholia by stating that, in mourning, the individual is eventually able to let go of the love-object. In contrast, melancholia, a "pathological condition," (243) results from an inability to let go.

2. In 2006, Goldin exhibited a new show, *Sisters, Saints, & Sibyls,* that focused exclusively on an exploration of her sister's death. For more on this exhibit, see Saltz. In this essay, I am exploring *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* as an independent entity, though the two photographic projects can obviously be seen as one larger project of mourning.

3. See Holden for more on the making of the film.

4. For more on Oxenberg's film career, see Citron. More recently, Oxenberg's career has taken a more mainstream turn. She writes about her passage into network television in her article, "My Unexpected Life in the Mainstream."

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