SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things

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9 MONTHS

Album

I'm looking at an album, card-bound, with felty black pages fading at the edges. Black and white—or sometimes sepia and ivory—photographs are tucked into brittle photo corners. The album cover is a soft, pale brown, lightly embossed, with a small, circular excision for an inset photograph, which has been lost. Because we live in Israel and this is an Israeli photograph album, the chronology moves, like the Hebrew alphabet, from right to left. Dating from the first two years of my life, the images exude parental excitement, delight at my very existence: a first child. On each page, my father's perfect script in white ink memorialises, in English rather than Hebrew, the day, the time, the event of *me.*

My childhood is a time that I generally examine in relation to my mother: her big personality, her moods, her self-involvement. Her famous legs, free of varicose veins, free of dimples or puckers. In my father's record keeping, however, I see a different kind of construction of that childhood, one in which my mother is adored; but also one in which I am centre-stage.

I am especially taken by a sequence of images covering four double spreads. They are purposefully arranged in twos and threes on the thick pages, and they span—absurdly to contemporary eyes, used to seeing grids of digital images captured within a single hour—a period of four months. Whatever is meant to be happening developmentally to a child between the ages of six and ten months—I could look it up, but I don't—it seems to be *all happening* for me. I look abundantly in possession of faculties and sensations, ready for call and response. Delight and displeasure too. I am in the thick of life. My hair is coiffed into a sprightly arrangement of curls with an avian crest, wild atop my head. I am solidly built, with huge eyes and curling toes and, damn it, rolls of flesh on my thighs. I am alert and engaged: whoever it is catching my attention—*look at the birdie!*—is doing a fine job.

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Bizarrely, I recognise myself in these photographs: I identify with that baby, especially in the ones where hilarity gets the better of me.

When I look at this album dating from my early infancy, my attention oscillates between interest in the conventions deployed (down to the diagonal placing of photographs on the page) and the uniqueness of their subject: *me.* On the page that I have opened here, the family trio is at a table.

Digression: My Parents

This is how my parents converged at this point. I am not one for genealogy websites, for visiting eroded sites of possible familial meaning. Although more than half my professional life has been in the field of art history, I do not have the makings of what I think of as a 'real' historian. And so, my parents' lives remain mostly unresearched. I have been a lazy custodian of the family archive. What I know: in the mid-1930s, my father's family escaped Riga, Latvia, where Dad—Theo—had been born in 1925. His father, Boris, had been one of ten siblings born in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Liepāja, a city on the Baltic Sea, and the third largest in Latvia. Two of the siblings died in childhood, while a few eventually emigrated. Those who, with their families, remained in Latvia until the German invasion in 1941, perished under the Nazis. The brother who was to become most successful financially, Gutmann, and his wife Berta and their two children James and Eva, moved to London, establishing a lucrative veneer business in Shoreditch. Boris and Mary—my father's parents—decamped to Hadera, a small, dusty town in Palestine, approximately midway between Tel Aviv and Haifa, where Boris was the foreman of an orchard belonging to his brother, Gutmann.

All his life, my father regarded London as the seat of the good life. It epitomised the pleasures of refinement and an abundance of that incalculable attribute of prestige: *quality*. London, where my father failed to complete the degree that he began in aeronautical engineering in the second half of the 1940s, had become, by the time I was in existence, a mythical place for him, and then by extension, for me. The cornucopia of gifts he brought home from his visits, and the bequest of abstract gifts too, in the form of words like *Savoy, Aquascutum, Liberty, Stanley Gibbons,*

Hamleys, Wheeler's of St James, Foyles, reflected endeavour, longing, and the borrowed gleam of his cousin's affluence.

While my father's family arrived in Palestine in the mid-1930s on an early wave of Zionism—the term was not then perjorative as it is today—like many Russian Jews living in China, my mother Fusia (already in China, her name was sometimes anglicised as Fay) arrived in Israel in 1949. She was twenty-one. Harbin, where she was born, was a provincial capital in north-eastern China, famous for its frosty weather and Russian architectural legacy. Harbin is closer to the eastern reaches of Russia than it is to Beijing. But Fusia lived most of her young life in Tientsin (now Tianjin), another north-eastern city 130 kilometres south of what was then Peking. She spent the year before emigrating to Israel in Shanghai with her friend Rosa.

Shanghai was where Fusia had always yearned to be. Shanghai was an open city and had, at that time, offered refuge to Jews escaping the Nazis; the neighbourhood of Tilanquiao especially served as a safe haven for Jewish refugees. Fay's stories of the last few years spent in China, in Tientsin and then in Shanghai, were filled with the breathy excitement of picnics, glamorous parties and balls, the Jewish Club, as well as descriptions of occasional military drills and having to learn the Japanese national anthem, as though the war had been merely a thrilling backdrop. Most exhilarating of all the distractions for a popular, outgoing girl, had been the presence of the American marines, part of a large corps deployed to north-eastern China between 1945 and 1949 for Operation Beleaguer, whose mission was to repatriate the hundreds of thousands of Japanese and Koreans who had remained in the country after the end of World War II, while keeping the resident Americans safe.

These marines were handsome, tall boys whose accents reflected the movies my mother loved, and who surely fortified her already exuberant confidence, her sense—or at least, so I imagine it—of her own desirability. She used to gleefully describe the gifts of chocolates and flowers. And stockings to sheathe her fucking legs. Many small black and white photographs bundled into the box that my siblings and I would often rifle through, were of young men in uniform. In one, she is standing, radiant and slender in a floral dress, surrounded by three uniformed men. All are smiling, one has his arm around her shoulders.

Many of these photographs carry written messages on their verso side; I considered them mysterious and steamy when I first read them. They are signposts to a network of relationships forever buried. They confirm my mother's reputation, the alpha status that she used as salt for her daughters' wounds. I hardly understood her injury, since her places of hurt remained hidden by her flamboyance and exotic beauty. *Remember me is all I ask*, written on one photograph; *hoping to be back with you soon*, on another. And, most intriguingly and nauseatingly, *hot kiss from top of cold snow*.

She clearly loved a man in a uniform: my father was in the Israeli army when they met, introduced by a well-meaning friend of a friend. Although they were both fluent in other languages (my mother spoke Russian to her family and had a smattering of French, my father spoke Russian, German and Hebrew), English was usually the language in which they spoke with each other. I remember English and Hebrew at home in Israel, but my sister, born nine months after we moved to Johannesburg and living all her adult life in Israel, now speaking Hebrew fluently, was brought up in English.

My mother travelled to Israel possibly a little earlier than her parents, in 1949, precisely a year after David Ben Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the state. As a child, I had no sense of the vexed, pained history of the place; like most children, I was physically and ideologically located in a habitat that seemed natural and obvious and that incontestably belonged to me until I was made to leave it.

In Tel Aviv, Fay found a job as a secretary for the American company Trans World Airlines, which was in business from 1930 to 2001. It was at the office of TWA that, as a young divorcée, my mother awaited the arrival of my father for a blind date. My siblings and I had heard nothing about her first marriage and would have continued to be ignorant of it, had my brother not come across a document while helping my mother with admin and paperwork in the mid-1980s, after our father's death.

Theo arrived at the TWA office bearing two *Life* magazines, a gift I know Fay would have loved. I can imagine how dapper he must have looked: trim, mischievous and shy. He had a large, auburn moustache. My parents got married in Tel Aviv on Christmas Day, 1952. The bride did not wear white, and there doesn't seem to have been a party.

Photographs

I am dressed in a pair of dungarees, and though the photographs are in black and white, I know the dungarees are red, with blue and white trimming. I don't know how I know this. My parents look impossibly young, good looking and insouciant, smiling in a posed way that gives nothing away, but I can't help thinking that they look genuinely happy. In the bottom photograph, my mother's fingers peep around the top of my father's white-clad shoulders: a detail that I notice now, would it be for the first time? It is certainly, for me, the punctum of that photo, the place through which the photograph reaches out and pierces me. And then: *we all have curly hair,* I think, looking at the familiar image this time round.

In all three photographs, I look unusually disgruntled. I say 'I,' but there is a disconnect between this aged self, writing now, and that small infant speechlessly negotiating boundaries with her parents. A disconnect, but also a continuity, created by repeated visits to the album over the years, so that the photograph itself lodges in my brain as a memory. In the picture in the middle of the page, I am held in place—there is the visible pressure of her hand on my shoulder—by my smiling mother, but clearly, I am on the verge of squalling.

I discern as entirely and recognisably mine the irritability that I see scribbled on the child's face.

I am interested in how, finally in the third image of the sequence, the infant breaks away from the desired pose—wedged between her parents in a perfect image of beatific triangulation—and expresses, instead, a wilful irascibility. Tearing away, she de-centres the image, introducing a dynamic diagonal into the composition, messing things up. She introduces noise, too, I can almost hear it. In that last photograph, my father is touching me, gently restraining, but I whine and pull away from both my parents. *Leave me alone*.

You were teething then, my mother always explained, as though to ensure I did not misinterpret my fretfulness. Words have cushioned the photograph and offered it to me in a particular way, in the way my mother wished me to see it. And indeed, I cannot look at this image now without the word *teething* popping into my head. *I was teething*.

Photograph albums are, after all, resources not only of visual events, but also of verbal ones.

Because of my interest in family photographs and documents and in what it means to keep records—my interest, in other words, in the technologies and practices that construct and narrate family memories—I have become the family archivist, partly conscripted, partly self-appointed. My brother and sister and their children expect, one day, to receive ordered, digital files containing all these images, all ephemera pertaining to our small group of kin. The task of scanning and sorting is, however, endless and daunting. I fail at it repeatedly. I change methodologies, technologies, forms of tagging, systems of storage. I save to hard drive, time machine, cloud. I think of the misleading metaphor of the cloud as the place that holds all my information. I winnow duplicates. I start again.

My need for order—I am constantly chasing it down rabbit holes—is as great as my sense of its encroaching opposite: randomness, unpredictability, chaos. To be obsessed with indices and tags and filing and keywords and systems is to acknowledge the messiness of experience, its obstinacy in eluding just those categories that we use to contain and frame it. And then there is this: clearly, if you think about it, you know that a photograph is more a thing *made* than a thing *taken,* an artefact and a fiction. Yet still, to be obsessed with photographs as records is to recognise the special status of photography among all the technologies of image production. That status originates in the imagination and technologies that brought photography into being in the nineteenth century: the capture and fixing, through the medium of light, of something fleetingly out there—seemingly empirical—onto a chemically prepared, photosensitive surface.

Regarded as a photochemical trace of something that once existed in the world, photography enjoys a special relationship with place, with things and with time. Photographs have been, and continue to be recruited as evidence, as proof of what has been and gone. Michelangelo Antonioni's celebrated film *Blow Up* (1967) hyperbolises this notion and vexes it, leaving the viewer in doubt as to whether the photograph in question, enlarged into granulated, pointillistic eddies of dots, confirms the occurrence of a murder. At the heart of the blow up, nothing is

visible. The film invites us to probe our deeply held belief in the truth-value of photographs.

Of all the evocative objects that people keep, photographs are the most cherished. They have become our quintessential memory objects. In the so-called developed world, most of our images are held and circulated digitally.

As material objects, however, photographs continue to carry a weight in excess of their frail materiality. We might find them in boxes, in envelopes, in bags, in lockets; framed and displayed on desks and mantelpieces; pinned on walls or arranged in albums; held singly in wallets or bags or pockets. Muhammed Muheisen's *Memories of Syria* and Adi Safri's *Home and Away* (ca. 2015–2017) are photographic projects illustrating how important actual, material photographs are to people who have lost everything else. Those photographs serve as testimonials to lives lived, links lost. Photographs ratify the past, as though in them, memory itself were lodged and embodied.

And yet, what sort of memory object is a photograph?

Although photographs serve as prompts, their static nature (particularly in the posed photographs that were the norm before cameras were more portable and shutter speeds quicker) represses or occludes much of what constitutes a remembered person or scene. A fugitive expression, an idiosyncratic gesture, the timbre of a voice, a particular tactile pressure, the smell of cloth or skin or breath, the air whipping the hair about her head and causing his shirt to billow, the sound of a step, the little tick at the corner of your eye when you feel observed, turns of phrase: few of these make it into a photograph. Roland Barthes finds that he can only pinpoint the fugitive resemblance of his recently deceased mother in an image of her as he never actually knew her, a photograph that long predates his birth. Captured in 1898 in what Barthes calls a winter garden (in photographic theory *the winter-garden photograph* no longer requires the name of Barthes to be recognised as a signifier), when his mother Henriette was five years old, the photograph reveals to Barthes a recognisable image of the essence of his mother. This suggests that in the ways that a photograph activates you, its viewer—in its capacity to work you up—it is capable of replacing the inert certainties of history with a thrill of fleeting sensation.

I have, similarly, found something poignantly recognisable in photographs of my parents as children, and indeed, of myself as a child, in the occasional image that breaks out of the familiarity established by the ensemble of photographs contained in the album or box, knocking down the walls of viewing habits that I have formed in relation to a finite set of images, seen many times over. Mostly, I know myself in childhood from these frozen tableaux in which I have been enshrined; but not only from these static tableaux, also from the word-textures woven around them.

It is as though a photograph—and especially one I have looked at many times—gave me the past as always-already *déjà vu*, but occasionally, one of these photographs will reach out to grab me, tantalising me with the promise of something new.

Photograph Album

Analogue photographs—photographs made using a technology that preserves a photochemical trace—were imbued with a past tense that transformed them into the perfect vehicles for nostalgia: a longing for a past that never existed in that crystallised form, but that came to be remembered through that form. Once selected, ordered and stashed in albums, the individual images became constituent parts in the construction of personal, family and group narratives. The album tells a story through and in time. Until the digital age, albums provided ordinary people with a physical site for the production, in images and words, of an autobiography. For parents making albums around their children's lives, the storyline would begin perhaps with the maternal bump, and then track the little triumphs of child rearing. It would accompany the child through outings and landmark dates, and perhaps be continued after the arrival of a sibling or several, splitting into distinct but interlinked biographies and leading up to weddings, which might, especially as the twentieth century marched on, merit their own separate album. At this point, the next generation would take up the genealogical baton, and new albums would be launched.

An album is, in the first instance, a blank book: etymologically, a white tablet. As a *tabula rasa*, the album has a long history originating in florilegia or commonplace books: handwritten ledgers containing

collections of quotations, poems, lists, recipes, letters, tables and personal reflections. The Greek version, with precisely the same meaning as *florilegium* (both refer to gathering flowers) is *anthology.* Commonplace books, which are personal anthologies or compendiums, date back to antiquity and became popular in fourteenth-century Italy, where they were known as *zibaldone:* hotchpotch books, or *salads of many herbs.* They enjoyed more widespread popularity from the Renaissance (Dante, Petrarch, John Milton and Francis Bacon kept such books). Arguably, all writers' notebooks are a version of commonplace book, especially if they included gathered fragments of other writers' texts. Collected fragments and quotations can and do, together, constitute a biography of sorts—or at least the self-portrait of a sensibility—as with Walter Benjamin and W. H. Auden's famous published versions. *The Hundreds* (2019) by Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart stretches the concept, grafting excerpts to create what they call 'the new ordinary' which is 'a collective search engine, not a grammar' of blurred authorship. In the history of commonplace books, engraved images appeared after citations, and then photographs.

The dedicated photograph album originates in the nineteenth century, where—though photographs play the principal role—other materials (postcards, newspaper clippings, memorabilia) were incorporated. Verbal annotations and captions play an important part too, and their material and graphic qualities contribute to the aesthetic of the album. I wonder about the changes in sense from *commonplace* in its archaic meaning—something notable or striking, to be copied or incorporated—to its opposite, something trite and ordinary. I wonder if it is linked to the idea of 'the pose,' with its undeclared normativity, extracting and distilling something from the exceptional, and in so doing, rendering it banal.

Photograph albums share with scrapbooks—also heirs to the commonplace book—a commemorative function in a prospective construction of nostalgia: *so that we might remember* would be their collective motto; *making memories,* in that annoying tautology that some people now seem fond of using, as if one could channel and direct the paths that memory chose and control the unexpected and possibly unwanted eruption of fragments not incorporated into those fabricated mnemonic artefacts.

Still, it is no surprise—given that memory is mercurial and its anticipation widespread—that a photograph album is something onto which we project fantasies of wholeness, idealised formulations, continuities. From an elaboration of the past in brief bursts of light and shadow, we piece together a storyline. Photographer Rosy Martin writes about being struck

> by how photography and memory relate in a poignant and perverse way, through a sense of loss, predicated upon the unconscious wish to somehow arrest the passage of time by holding it in fragments of a second. How much are the images from the past that I visualize in my mind's eye constructed and mediated through the few photographs that have survived in my family album? How else might I aim to re-connect with my memories?

In the photograph album, individual images are sequenced into desired narratives, and in the invisible cracks between those narrative stations are secreted un-memorialised events; events deemed unimportant or unpleasant or simply unrecorded and suppressed from memory. For many of us, the album's association with an inexorable chronology—excisions and deletions notwithstanding—is precisely that which is reassuring. The album becomes a tangible, intimate memorial to a chosen past and a bulwark against time's indefatigable, corrupting work.

I am in possession of three photograph albums charting my life from birth to the age of eight. At eight, my removal from a familiar world by emigration, from Israel to South Africa (or, as I experienced it, from Tel Aviv to Johannesburg) put an abrupt end to any cohesive sense of my world. With this rupture, the albums devoted to me alone ended and I was frogmarched into the postlapsarian phase of the collective family album.

On the open page that I have chosen to reproduce here—this is from the first of my three albums—veiled by a thin film of tissue paper, I am, at six months old, lying clothed and supine in the one photograph, rattle in hand; naked and prone in the second photograph, and holding what looks like a percussive toy and a plastic ring. My gaze is fixed on something or someone beyond the frame—probably my mother trying to catch my attention while my father is, I initially presume, responsible for the capture.

But it occurs to me that my parents may have employed a professional photographer for these artefacts. The images are crisp and purposefully framed, and I seem surprisingly biddable. I remember something written by Geoffrey Batchen, a historian of photography whose impassioned writings have brought vernacular photography into the frame of photographic history. Writing of family albums in *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (2004), Batchen notes that professional photographers are given the task of 'making a recalcitrant baby appear to be the ideal child.' The element of idealisation—I am thinking of the photographs in which Baby Me is the protagonist—is at once behavioural and formal. I am my best self, and also my best-looking self. The debt to the iconography of babies in the history of painting is often manifest in family albums of the early to mid-twentieth century. The positioning of Baby Me in the cot is conventional for that period. I remember one of these poses, the prone one, in British photographer Jo Spence's re-enactments of her own baby photographs, and I now search for that.

With Rosy Martin, Spence developed a practice of collaborative phototherapy in which difficult or traumatic moments from the subject's past (childhood abandonment, poor body image, libidinal anxieties, illness) are turned into performances staged for photographic reconstruction. Spence's adult body, inscribed and contained by gender, class, race, illness and trauma, becomes the site of self-care enacted as politicised therapeutics. Her practice shifts over time, and especially in response to her ordeal with breast cancer and then the leukaemia that would eventually kill her. In these early works, the subject inhabits her past skins, while the photographer takes on the role of therapist, watching the scene, activating it, coaxing it into being. In the sub-series *Beyond the Family Album* (1978–1979), Spence skewers the viewer's expectations founded on the notion of the album—and the individual photographs within it—as a site of ideology, embedding the gendered and classed expectations that underpin the very notion of 'the family.' There she is as a fleshy adult, shockingly naked, prone on the blanket like a baby, learning the strength of her arms by performing a yoga sphinx pose, just as I am doing in my baby picture. As an adult mimicking poses from her family album, Spence invites the viewer to recognise how conventional family photograph albums are, while simultaneously cracking open

their clichés of cuteness. The violence of these images, presented both as re-enactment and as surface disturbance created by montage and double exposure, throws light on all that remains undocumented in family albums, all that is stuffed into dark corners under the brightly lit facade of the album's self-affirming tautologies.

In thinking about albums and the sequencing of photographic images within them, I wonder if one of the significant functions of conventional—that is, material—photograph albums is to foster communality, camaraderie, membership in shared acts of viewing. Family albums are central elements in the cultural construction of the family, and they also serve as focal points and conversation pieces for concentric and interlocking circles of family members. *Look at this! Remember that? You have her eyes! Who's that?* These queries and exhortations secrete a social glue; they generate interaction and in doing so, they are arguably the connecting nodes in an oral history, seminal to the collective memory of a family.

And then, groups other than families—political movements, school classes, teams, peer groups, professional units and sporting or cultural associations—function in similar ways. Anthropologist Terry Dennett has written about the importance of albums for the labour movement in Britain in the late nineteenth century when photography was beginning to be developed on a collective basis. Before the invention of the box camera, few working-class people could afford what Dennett calls the 'nonpolitical album' and photographs of individuals or families were staged in studios on special occasions. Albums of workers and clubs served as important symbols of social cohesion.

In her beautiful book on the album in the age of photography, Verna Posever Curtis incorporates a mesmerising collection that expands the remit of the album yet shows that most albums operate according to coherent principles of grouping and mnemonic prompting. Here is one chronicling a scientific expedition to Alaska in 1899; another charting the six-month locust invasion in the Middle East in 1915; an album from the Philippines Bureau of Prisons dated ca. 1916; three albums charting drought refugees and rural rehabilitation colonists in California in the 1930s; Leni Riefenstahl's album of the eleventh Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936; an album of contact sheets recording life in Pittsburgh in the 1950s; a guest register dated 1977 from a hotel housing homeless and

destitute people in San Francisco. Albums as miniature social histories, narrations of self-defined bracketed groupings or events, *this* not *that.*

As they invite the turning of pages, albums prioritise not only looking, but also touch. And then, as material objects, in their individual and idiosyncratic design and execution, albums also bear the haptic imprint of their maker. One of my childhood albums has a ruched leather cover; its distinctive texture under my fingers opens the door to unsolicited sensory impressions from childhood, and reminds me, if I need such prompting, how entangled sight is with touch. And as unique repositories of group narratives—photographs might be reproducible, but albums are usually not—albums are nothing short of miniature museums *filled with skilfully stuffed memories,* as one of my favourite poets would have it.

Since the album is a material residue of existing, changing or already-dissolved social bonds, the loss of a photograph album would, for many, be a source of significant heartache. There is a haunting paragraph that I read some years ago, then copied and quoted in my own writing more than once. In Croatian writer Dubravka Ugresic's fragmentary novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1998) the unnamed narrator recounts:

> There is a story told about the war criminal Ratko Mladic, who spent months shelling Sarajevo from the surrounding hills. Once he noticed an acquaintance's house in the next target. The general telephoned his acquaintance and informed him that he was giving him five minutes to collect his 'albums', because he had decided to blow the house up. When he said 'albums', the murderer meant the albums of family photographs. The general, who had been destroying the city for months, knew precisely how to annihilate memory. That is why he 'generously' bestowed on his acquaintance life with the right to remembrance. Bare life and a few family photographs.

The bequest of the right to remember is enlisted to speak for itself.

Ugresic then contemplates her mother's selection and ordering of photographs 'according to principles of a chronology of events and their importance,' describing how these settle into a fixed placement in an album. But ongoing time also intrudes. Her mother adds scrapbook bits: newspaper cuttings; scraps of paper with phone numbers scrawled on them; postcards filling the empty spaces between photographs. 'When

the genre of the album threatened to turn into the genre of collage,' the narrator observes, 'she would tidy them, throw out the "rubbish" which, escaping her control, had crept into her albums and disturbed the construction of her personal history.' Personal history, in this sense, may be described as the selection, by the subject—by me—of salient plot points in the development of a narrative, using those chosen traces of the past as evidence. Where do imagination and memory join? At which point do they part ways?

I am fascinated by the phenomenon of the album as it straddles the shift from analogue to digital. The physical photograph album is intimate and palpable. Its tactility is part of its attraction. 'Handling an album satisfies a shared human urge to touch and come in close contact with the representation of human experiences,' writes Posever Curtis.

Platforms of digital image sharing, by nature immaterial, obviously eschew the tactile. But they continue to employ the vocabulary and tropes of the old materials and technologies down to filters that simulate the ageing and physical degradation of analogue photographs. Image content is gathered into 'albums' far more capacious than the material album ever was, and these are easily shared with other physically dispersed members of a group on platforms such as Google Photos and iCloud Photos. On platforms such as Flickr, Facebook and Instagram, the members of such a group may or may not be known to the subject, while on Google album archive and iCloud Photos they generally would be. The group might have boundless capacity, yet the digital album shares with its physical prototype the availability of images to a collective and the construction of a sequenced narrative, whether of an individual, a family, a social body or a group linked by profession or interest.

In some respects, however, the virtual archive operates differently from the physical album that it simulates. It is at once more ephemeral and more indelible; both immaterial and resistant to erasure, it remains stubbornly present through the proliferation of channels of circulation. Dates and tags are the categories through which individuals, now all photographers, also all become archivists and data miners. The occasional tropes—by which I mean the tropes characterising occasions such as birthdays or weddings and other celebrations of social and professional success—multiply. These albums and their content circulate among larger or smaller groups, inhibited or not by privacy settings,

generating comment that itself follows conventional lines. And unlike the material album, these are potentially infinite: capacious repositories of future memories.

Returning to this finite, limited resource that is my first photo album, I look at the very first image. It is blurred. At five weeks old, swaddled in pale flannel, I am laid on a checked blanket on the ground. There is nothing distinguishable in the background. The month is January and, though it is winter, it is a sunny day in Tel Aviv. The light is harsh and bleaches out half of my little face; the other half is cast in deep shadow, which also bisects the photograph diagonally. This stark play of light and shade erases all detail: not a single feature is visible. Inauspiciously, this image marks the beginning of my narrative.

Looking at it now, I think—as I have thought many times before—that just as this is the first photograph of me, there will be a last. There is a date on the calendar that will mark my finale, an anniversary to come. The end towards which every biographical photo album moves—its unspoken *telos*—is death. While Roland Barthes identifies death as the essence of photography, it seems to me that, more even than the individual photograph, it is the album, in its sequencing and forward momentum, that holds future death in its pages.

What will happen to these albums when I'm gone? Without descendants to take a glancing interest in my life's itinerary as it is laid out in ageing objects, this album becomes, at best, a piece of vintage ephemera (surface rather than meaning, borrowed from the past) for a new generation of collage or assemblage artists and purveyors of found photography.

Brian Dillon expresses a similar feeling in his memoir *In the Dark Room.* At first embarrassed by his small hoard of family photographs—by the sense that 'the world they depicted was no longer a part of me'—and then uncomfortable with the idea of the album as their repository, Dillon asks 'what unimaginable reckoning has taken place that allows a person to act as if at home with the archive of lost time?' He writes of family snapshots 'slipped into crackling albums, chronological depositories which assure the viewer of a frictionless unfolding of previous homes, notable occasions and beloved physiognomies.' Dillon considers the album not as a site of memorialisation, but, along with Barthes, as marking the failure of memory. Faced with the temporal

momentum intrinsic to the album—first this, then that—he finds himself horrified, unable to identify with 'this calm acceptance of time's implacable advance.' The album, in other words, spells out a kind of macabre annunciation, a death foretold.

Not usually incorporated in the narratives of family albums, death has commandeered its own albums. Duane Michaels' *Death Comes to the Old Lady* (1969). Jeff Wall's *Faking Death* (1977). Jo Spence's *The Final Project* (1991–1992). Stéphanie Baudoin's *Je Suis Morte* (1993–1997). Christian Boltanski's *La traversée de la vie* (2015). With historical roots in other types of records of the dead—painted portraits and masks, for example—the death album has occupied a special place in the history of photography, both in physical images and in the virtual album constituted by blogs and other forms of self-narrative online. Many of us in the UK watched, uneasy and spellbound, as, at the age of twenty-seven, media celebrity Jade Goody died of cervical cancer on camera. Blogging photographers have followed their loved ones publicly to the grave. Many documentary photographers and artists have recorded the last days of a parent, a spouse or lover: Peter Hujar, Nan Goldin, Hannah Wilke, Sophie Calle, Nancy Borowick. There is a stirring archive out there, images both literal and metaphoric, and I hunger to work on these mortal constructions.

One day.

Or maybe not.

But for now, here is this photograph album, put together by my father, who assumes the role of the narrator of our family. The album contains his handwriting. The signature marks of his patience—the style of his love, which was in *doing*—transports me to an inner place of sorrow that I seldom access. A cemetery of imagined images, unrecorded. It presents me, as I am today, and in my *unburthened crawl* towards my end, with this unremembered me*:* this chubby, lively baby, a baby with whom I absurdly fall in love as if she were my own child. In doing so, this album also suggests a progression of ghostly afterimages. Doors closed. Roads not taken. It prompts me to think not only of my unwritten future, but also of all those photographs not taken, the tableaux of all my living and my dead, and of the one or two who, though desired, remained unborn.