



Bold Centuries

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY ALBUM

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Lost and Found

KYLA MCFARLANE

I

As part of his extensive personal archive, cultural critic Walter Benjamin made an inventory of his son Stefan's first words and phrases. This intimate catalogue of childhood experience was gathered alongside his other collections of 'things' including picture postcards, wooden Russian toys, notebooks and scraps of writing. Benjamin was still recording his son's thoughts in 1932, when Stefan was fourteen. In April 1929, on Stefan's eleventh birthday, he noted his son's response to one of his birthday gifts, a stamp album. 'The word "album"', said Stefan, 'is the only one that signifies for me a flight, a flight into the wonderful, what one otherwise only dreams of.'¹

The eleven year old is enchanted by the idea of the album as a conduit to possible worlds beyond the reach of his childhood experience. His analogy of flight describes the romance of stamps: the intrigue of places unknown, the fascination of a journey from one place to another, the unidentified sender. It also operates against the process of containment and classification that gathering stamp sets and ordering them in an album entails. For Stefan, the album is a repository of small objects whose meaning is generated from their traversal across space and time. Yet the album, as the material container for the ordered accumulation and storage of things that bring about this imaginative flight, has significance for his father, whose passion for collecting and archiving is well documented.

Benjamin's record of his son's words and phrases turns the ephemera of spoken experience into object, melding memory and the moment into material trace. The words become record as Benjamin, father and archivist, carefully writes them on a sheet of gridded paper, pasting four of Stefan's homemade stamps above it. The paper, now brown at its edges, is itself a discrete object. Finally, this delicate little record is interred in the formality of the public archive of the cultural theorist, and is accordingly stamped and numbered.² In contrast, Stefan's words, despite being so carefully entered into the archive, dislodge the collection from its thing-hood, loosening it into the imaginative sphere. This Oedipal turn of events suggests a series of dichotomies that have the album – as idea, as object – at their centre. The intimacy of the father and son relationship is set against the intrigue of the unknown and the outside; the collector's drive for ordered accumulation rubs up against the child's imaginative flight.

II

When I was a child, I had a collection of picture postcards which I kept in large scrapbooks. I used paper photo corners to hold them in place. It seemed important to be able to read the back of the cards, to rediscover their origin and message, and to read the small captions detailing the location of the image on the front. The stiffness of the cards and the flimsiness of the newsprint pages of the scrapbook meant that each

time the book was opened, the postcards would become dislodged from their inadequate moorings.

Some cards were sent from relatives, some had been addressed and sent to others and had made their way to me via old cardboard storage boxes. Some I had bought myself. One postcard had been sent to me from my grandparents, which I received after my grandfather had died. He had been on his way to visit family he had left behind in Scotland decades before, and by the time the postcard reached New Zealand he had already been dead for a few days. How strange it was to view, to hold, this object. On one side, there was a message written in the familiar, curled handwriting of my grandmother who had signed off with her name and his. On the other, there were generic images of a foreign city, destined to arrive in so many other mailboxes around the world. The postcard has since disappeared from my life, into the flotsam and jetsam of the lost and found.

III

The internet, the current cataloguer of our collective desires, has folded the found photograph into its vast and unwieldy archive. On *Look at Me: A Collection of Found Photos*, one of many sites dedicated to the topic, you can browse through hundreds of photographs made rudderless by their dislocation from their subjects, their owners, and their time. Submitted as scans by contributors and uploaded by Frederic Bonn, the site's creator, the images are filed numerically, with verso details, where available, recorded alongside them: '608 Ethel and "Princess". Kennesaw, Georgia. August 25, 1973.' '601 May 13, 1946. To my Aunt Ang and Uncle Tony. Love, Lola'. Photograph number 595 depicts a dead woman in an open coffin, without caption details.

Bonn writes that 'These photos were either lost, forgotten, or thrown away. The images now are nameless, without connection to the people they show, or the photographer who took them.'³ Collectively, the photographs posted on *Look at Me* have a melancholic air, born of the assumptions we might make about the circumstances of their rejection, or perhaps the assumption of the demise of their anonymous makers and subjects. Like all photographs from the past, they are reminders of both the fleeting nature of human life and the singularity of death. The anonymity of these images makes this especially present.

All photographs are silent in some way. Yet the silence of these images and their inability to speak in much more than generalities – as the tropes of family photographs, or the collective drive to record our lives – allows us to build our own wayward narratives around them. Perhaps it is this muffling of the photographic 'voice' – a voice that gives certain clarity of record, locale and subject – that intrigues us most about these pictures. Set free from the boundaries of recognition, we observe these photographs in a different light. Number 18 is a photograph of three women posing on the street in 1929. One woman crouches awkwardly

in a pose that is neither standing nor sitting. The image itself is so faded that she has lost her entire head to the ravages of time. In number 20, we see two elderly women sitting neatly on a couch at the corner of an image, almost pressed out of its frame by the drape of a lounge room curtain. In photograph number 94, a young man stands on a stony riverbed, holding his sweetheart in one arm as he pulls at her foot with the other. Laughing, she is about to fall to the ground. In photograph number 95, they stand together, she with her arm draped casually over his shoulder, he with his arm placed neatly on her waist. They smile.

It is ironic that the nature of these photographs as objects is emphasised by their inclusion on this website. We cannot hold them in our hands, or see both sides back and front, but we can observe them as little squares and rectangles floating against the white space of the page. Edges are serrated, corners are crumpled and curled, and brown stains edge across the photographs where old pieces of sticky tape once sat. Some have dusty black photo corners still intact. An anonymous photographer has written 'Mother's Day – 1959' at the top of their photograph in dark blue fountain-pen ink, then labelled its subjects below: 'Genera, Mama, Emmet, Lee'. This, along with the creases and folds, sizes and shapes of these photographs give shape to their place in time. I remember similar square, coloured prints with little white frames from my childhood in the 1970s, whilst the crinkled black and white photographs on thick white paper from the 1920s have the gravitas that accompanies old photographs. We do not know the subjects of these photographs, but we know that they are now dead.

IV

The desire to know, and the pleasure that arises from not knowing, pervades our engagement with found photographs. Dislocated from their origins, their allure is that of the elusive and the mysterious. The photographs we know, through intimacy and recognition, don't allow for the same imaginative flight offered by the ambiguity of the found photograph, whose circumstances remain opaque. Unlike photographs we know, the photographs we take, found photographs seem to bind intimacy with elusiveness. This is the lure of the found photograph: its drag, its pull. As idea and as object, found photographs allow us the possibility of remaking small histories that are gratifyingly not our own.

NOTES:

1. Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwartz, Michael Schwartz, Erdmut Wizisla (eds.) *Walter Benjamin's Archive*. Trans. Esther Leslie. London and New York: Verso, 2007, p 149.
2. This page from Benjamin's inventory is reproduced in *Walter Benjamin's Archive*, p 148.
3. Frederic Bonn, *Look at Me* website introduction, www.moderna.org/lookatme/about.php







Reading Room





