

Beyond the Rectangles

In family albums we often see parents and children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, aspiring to look their best in the photographs. They will often respond to the camera by posing together, forcing glazed smiles while affirming the family bond. Looking at the lens for approval they may intuit that someone—perhaps even themselves—will return the gaze decades later, searching the image for its hidden meanings.

Framed in ways they cannot completely control, vulnerable and mute, they may be concerned that one day they will be judged. Will they appear successful? Handsome? Beautiful? With enough dignity, money and status? Will their lives be thought worthwhile?

Might they appear once to have been desirable? Cute? Strong? Loved?

If only for a fractional second the rectangle of the image promises order, allowing the family to cohere, to be publicly validated, as its members take or are given their relative places. In the permanence of the image, life's struggles can be discounted, time's passing celebrated, its logic revealed. Consciously and unconsciously, the album may attest to what the family frozen in the moment wanted to be or to become, momentarily "picture perfect," the chaos arrested.

The careful reader, of course, will probably find the cracks in the presentation. Did the couple really love each other? Was the graduation all that distinguished? Did the wide-eyed baby ever amount to anything? Why was the uncle's face so red—was he drunk?

In Beth's case, the façade was barely sustained. Perfection, even of the official, superficial photographic kind, vanished all too quickly. Now Beth's all-too-public family album, circumscribed by the limitations of well-intentioned social service agencies, eroded at its core by the malignancy of her family's cancerous emotions, was rapidly gutted, its pages sadly renouncing even the intimations of *Paradiso* while parading various forms of hell.

Now that she is nearing sixty, when family photographs from one's youth should shine at the very least with the sparkle of possibility, the album staring back at Beth, and at us, is one replete with the myriad consequences of small-mindedness ensconced in the murky netherworld of unrequited love. It is an encompassing torture that seems only to have been abated but never ended. Rarely has a soul's suffering been so revealed.

Having attained some domesticity, Beth now lives with the "old man" and his fish. There is an aquarium in the apartment that allows them to study other creatures' lives. One day Beth's mother will die and she will feel some relief, she thinks, and perhaps many other emotions. She is illuminated, and apparently also warmed, by a long association with the photographer, Kent Klich, who cares deeply for her, even though she is not always sure why.

The Book of Beth (Aperture 1989) is followed, nearly two decades later, by *Picture Imperfect*:

two overlapping families of intimate and raw photographs that resonate with loss. Photography, which is expert at showing what is, here reveals the agony that comes with losing in advance the invisible, what one never had.

Kent's two books on Beth, with Beth, serve as painful counterweights to all the iconic photographs that have attempted to limn upward mobility while attesting to familial strivings. There is no Madonna to be found here, no transforming spirituality or redeeming social ideology. It comes as a sweet surprise then to see Beth begin, in recent years, to emerge, to transcend the sharp corners, to become larger than the spaces that have confined her, to become a more prominent collaborator in the telling of her own story, in the investigation of her life.

Too long a subject, fleeing the punitive judgments of others, now Beth is also an author, creating pictures herself. Two peaceful images she made of her cat, are in this book. A large portion of the accompanying film she photographed as well. Autobiography has slowly emerged from biography. In the telling, at least, there is strength.

Working for years with Kent, Beth has flung doors and windows to her shadowed existence wide open. It is a vast enterprise for anyone to try and speak of her in these tiny rectangles of image and text: the wounds written on her skin and recounted from her soul are of a severity that is rare even among soldiers returning from the horrors of war.

Alongside the enormous literature of consumerism, or of its manifest destiny promoted as globalization, *Picture Imperfect* attests to deeper and truer needs. To be loved unreservedly is a child's right, anywhere. It is a right unrelated to the commodification of the planet, the desperate attempt to find a place for every price tag. But it has everything to do with the catastrophes that face us as human beings, on the most intimate and vastest of scales.

Here the violation of this basic human right is given a face, a body, and a soul. As a result, our own family album has been painfully, and inexorably, enlarged.

Once again our smiles freeze on our faces. Only this time there is little question as to why.

Fred Ritchin