

Jennifer Nagle Myers

An Artist's Perspective on Loss in the 21st Century



Part I: The Archive

The Archive measures 10' x 20' x 4' and contains 94 photo albums. The ones you get at Rite-Aid for about \$9.99 with 50 adhesive pages covered in thin plastic sheeting. These albums are chronologically numbered starting with 1 in the year 1972, spanning to 82 in the year 2012. There are an additional 12 albums dedicated to trips, summers, or milestones that exist outside of the numeric system. The Archive lives at my mom's newly purchased, small home in Williamsburg, Virginia, on the right wall of her bedroom, spilling into the closet. It includes within it 10,097 photographs. And counting.

The Index of The Archive is one of my favorite parts. Each album is boiled down to its most essential components, a place and a time, in a one-paragraph summary—like reading through the past in fast forward. The Archive is the product of my highly organized and systems-driven mother. She refers to it lovingly as “My Albums,” and it is the only heirloom ever mentioned. When fire or disaster is predicted, my mom throws up her hands and says, “What would I do with my albums? The albums ...”

The Archive does not have a back up— analog or digital—that exists in this world, save for the memories inside of our minds that correspond, in some instances, to photographs in the albums. These pages are yellowing; the photographs are permanently stuck to them with glue, tape, fingerprints, and the occasional stray hair once attached to a person or a dog. The words archival, preservation, and acid-free are not part of the vocabulary of The Archive. Is it my job, my duty as daughter and artist, to scan and preserve all these images in a digital database? Once I have a copy of the 10,000 images, I will need a back up of the copy, and so on into eternity? And who is to say what will last longer anyway? Flood or fire, wind or wave, my death—the digital back up can't last forever. The truth is, I'd prefer a heavy, awkward album in my lap any day. Give me the weight and the bulk of the thing itself as a reminder of just how cumbersome the past really is.

It is not coincidence that The Archive begins in 1972. This is the time when my mother meets my father, the father of my four half-sisters, the four sweethearts. My mom's life forever changed from that moment on, and I wish there were a

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photograph of that first moment, a meeting of two souls. My parents would be together for the next 42 years, the best years of their lives, and only the most powerful force would separate him from us. Almost immediately, she began to take photographs, documenting this new period of her life. And my dad, always a weekend photographer, began to take many more photographs as well. He would see the four sweethearts mostly only on Sundays, as they lived with their mother the rest of the week. He took rolls of film of them on these special Sundays, and they line the pages of these early albums.

The ritual was established: pick them up in the blue Volvo and just start driving towards somewhere. Find a natural spot, get out, and take a hike. Spend the whole day this way. Go home at night. Repeat

next weekend. Most of these Sundays, Gaysie, my mom, was there too. It was just perfect that my mom had a system to contain and preserve these images, and this encouraged them both to take as many pictures as possible. Thank goodness. A roll of film would not be in my mom's purse for longer than a day before it was dropped off and developed at the corner drug store, only then to be pasted into the album later that night over wine, cigarettes, and laughter as she wrote captions beside each image.

I find myself thinking about these albums, but I keep a certain distance from them. They are like spells or magic, blessings or curses. They hold our childhoods inside them. Powerful things indeed. I can only visit The Archive when I go to visit my mom who is now a resident of Virginia. I admit to like it this way.



PART II: The Woods

Lately, I've been missing my dad a whole lot. An unusually long Indian summer in Pittsburgh, where I live, has extended this ache. Leaves exploded with color: simmering-orange, electrical-yellow, fire-purple, red, really-red, ruby-red, cherry-red, humming-bird-green, wine-brown. I try naming them, but it's never enough. Words fail, and I thank the universe for color and light.

It seems to me this is the time of year of the artist. It is also the time of year of missing my dad. He passed away January 4, 2012 at around 5 am. He died of complications from Alzheimer's disease. For over ten years he struggled with a mind that was a wilderness, where alternately he was lost and then found. His death was a long time ago. His death was just yesterday. In time it has been over a year. In memory it has been just a moment ago. I have spoken to my sisters and my mom, and they all agree. This is the time of year

of missing him. Nature, the natural world, and in particular the woods was the motif of his life. The landscape of his soul. Bodies of water would for some years challenge this hierarchy, but I believe that the woods remained highest. It was the constant backdrop in each of our childhoods, the unifying force. Urban woods or country woods, they provided the same relief, repose and delight. Wherever we went, we always returned to the woods. In the woods, we were always home. So these bright autumn days make us all remember woods-walking beside him, on exactly this day. We are either in Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, New Jersey, or Massachusetts. He is beside us, behind us, ahead on the path. The smell of his pipe and his funny exchanges, curiosity in every rock and tree, noticing the birds and naming them for you. All this. Dogs or no dogs, tripping as you walked, his hand in yours, sweaters brushing

together. An appreciation of the wildness and the wilderness. The mystery in you and in him and in your sisters, longhaired and shorthaired, beautiful, beside you.

What gets lost in time? What gets lost in memory? What remains? What instantly evaporates? What moves in us later? What names us then and now? What becomes bone, deeper than bone, the marrow of bone, and the shape of the soul? Don't these good memories burn in us like we are soft wood, paper, then air—until we are lifted, small and unseen, full of wind and carried away?

In the spirit of this piece, and in the spirit of this issue *Spectator* that has been dedicated to my father, I visited The Archive and digitally photographed at a very high resolution every image we have that relates to my dad in the woods during the years 1972—1991. In some we are his subjects; in others he is our subject. I hope they last forever.

Please visit my website to see this collection:

<http://www.punkypip.com/index.php/2012/the-archive-the-woods-1972---1991/>

Jennifer Nagle Myers is a fluxus artist, a feminist, and a poet. She teaches at Carnegie Mellon University School of Art. Recent projects include a series of prints on paper dedicated to activists in each country, small sculptures that illuminate Women in Time, and one-day performances throughout the city of Pittsburgh. Her work has been exhibited throughout the US.