

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

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HOURS AFTER MY mother took her last breath on earth, after I heard a scream that must have come from my mouth, after I wiped the snot from my face and chanted Buddhist sutras as each of her three sisters took turns kissing the crown of her head, her skin cooling by the minute, and we opened the windows to let the spirits out, after I covered her face with a Pikachu blanket and held her claylike hand in my own, after we sat around lighting one incense stick after another — for the chain of smoke must be unbroken until they take her away — my brother and I went down to the basement and watched mixed martial arts fighters beat each other into bloody masks.

When my brother abruptly got up and left our mother's deathbed and I followed him to the makeshift room in the basement to make sure he was OK, the fights were already on. We found ourselves, in our shock, sitting between the boiler and the crumbling brick wall, our faces lit blue by TV light, watching the Vaseline-coated fighters punch and kick each other under stadium LEDs. This spectacle of combat, which has coursed through our civilizations at least since the days of the Roman Colosseum, felt both quintessentially and absurdly American now as we sat, motherless in the still of an autumn night in New England, our bodies inches apart but not touching.

Our mother's body, according to our Buddhist custom, was to stay in place until dawn, undisturbed. My relatives took turns holding vigil beside the body upstairs. Then it was my turn, and then my brother's, and we went back upstairs and

circled my mother's bed as the fighters circled each other before the empty couch in the basement.

After living with my mother for more than two decades — his whole life — my brother would soon move in with me.

MY BROTHER WAS born on a chilly November evening in 1997, when I was 9 years old. We were born to different fathers — our mother, Rose (Hồng), was the only bridge between us. I stood beside her in the dim room at Hartford Hospital as she cradled him, hours from the womb, his eyes shut tight against the world. “What should we name him?” she asked. I looked over my shoulder, assuming her question was intended for an adult behind me, but there was no one there. My mother looked at me with a waning, exhausted smile, as if to say: Go on, I trust you.

“Nicky,” I said. “Like Mickey Mouse — but with an N.”

“Nicky,” my mother nodded to herself, her gaze fixed on the frost-lit evening outside. “Nicky,” she said again, grinning through the dark. “That’s easy to say. I can say that. He’ll be Nicky, then.”

When my stepdad returned from the bowels of the hospital, a banana and a paper plate of pasta salad in his hands, my mother told him the name of their son. He looked around the room, as if there might be alternatives written on the wall, his overalls stained with grease from his shift at Colt’s Manufacturing, then finally shrugged. “Nicky it is.”

THE SUBJECT OF the first surviving photo was time. In 1827 the French physicist Joseph Nicéphore Niépce captured a shot

from his upper-story window overlooking his property by inserting a specially treated pewter plate into a camera obscura and then exposing the plate for eight hours. The photo is a palimpsest of a single day's sunlight hitting both sides of the rooftops and trees, a compound layering of time's play on landscape akin to a hypercompressed time-lapse video.

One of the oldest photos in my family is also a photo of time. Taken by an unknown photographer sometime in 1974, a year before the fall of Saigon, it is the earliest photo I have of my mother. The frame holds my grandmother Lan and her three Amerasian daughters: Hồng, my mother, and her sisters Sen and Kim. They are huddled at the doorway of a banana-leaf thatched hut, erected haphazardly at the edge of a rice paddy, their former home having been destroyed by American bombing raids during the war.

Although the photo holds four faces, all I can see are the decades since the shutter clicked.

Everyone is smiling, whether because of the camera or because they are genuinely happy, I'll never know.

THE COVER OF my first book, "Night Sky With Exit Wounds," is a photograph of my mother, my aunt Kim and me taken in 1989. We are framed by the entry to yet another shack, this one with a tin roof, built by the United Nations for the Bataan refugee camp in the Philippines.

A professional photographer, also a refugee, was walking around the camp trading his portraits for three cups of rice — the daily ration for each family. My father had left on an errand and the two women decided to have our picture

taken, a luxury my father would have never allowed for such an exorbitant price.

What was it about these women that made them forgo nourishment in order to capture themselves, ourselves, in time, thereby orchestrating their own witnessing? What compelled them, through this act of domestic disobedience, to abandon the body's needs in favor of its archival preservation?

My T-shirt, I notice only years later, reads: I Love Daddy!

WHEN I WAS 18 and my brother was 9, I left for New York City to attend college. Nicky asked me to take one last walk around our tenement complex before I headed to the bus station. As we walked, his hand wrapped around my finger, I pointed out the names of trees, trees I only learned to identify the year before: birch, yew, maple, oak, dogwood, cherry. After a while, I felt my finger being yanked. He had stopped, his head hung low, the way boys do when they don't want you to see them cracking open. "I'm not good at people leaving," he said to the ground. "I don't know how to be good at you leaving."

"You don't have to be good at anything," I said, not knowing what I really meant. "You just gotta be good, OK?"

"OK."

UNLIKE WRITING, WHICH is a vocation mired with maybes, the camera, for all of its complex mechanisms, can only say yes. Photography is, for me, a medium of unanimous affirmation, the shutter creating a yes so total, so entire,

nothing in its frame can be denied presence. Though the impulse to fire the shutter can be entangled with doubt, the act is swift and irreversible. Once the photo is made, the only way to turn back is to destroy it.

If, as the photographer Garry Winogrand has said, we take photographs to see how the world looks when photographed, I make pictures of my brother to see the parts in him I cannot see in real time, my eyes too myopic, fleeting or faulty. The photograph invites true study, the frame fixing the world in place so that myth and truth accrue within our gaze. In this way, the image offers more of a person than what was first attainable at first glance. The shutter goes from saying *yes, yes, yes to more, more, more.*







WHEN I RECEIVED the Whiting Award in 2016, I used the prize money to make a down payment on a house for my mother. It was the first time anyone in our family had bought a house — a feat made possible by words my mother couldn't read, a reality I still can't, to this day, fathom, let alone come to terms with.

My mother ended up living in the house for just two years, her last breath taken under her own roof. On the fireplace mantel was the photo of her and her sisters at the doorway of the thatched roof so many years ago, her younger self now watching her older self die in a place beyond imagination.

THREE WEEKS AFTER my mother died, my brother moved in with me — a straight man with an affinity for collectible sneakers, basketball, sports cars, anime and first-person-shooter video games coming to live with his nerdy professor brother in a house full of books and afternoons filled with the immense and charged quiet of reading.

It had been more than a decade since we'd lived together. In a way, we were strangers, suddenly reunited in a small ranch house in Western Massachusetts. We were both grieving, but he, especially — a 22-year-old boy (to me, the big brother, he is always a boy) who had just lost the mother he had lived with his entire life.

I had become a kind of father, a queer father wherein my obligation to him was not dictated by the traditional ethos of the nuclear family, but through the funereal salvage of immense loss.

Somehow, as the weeks grew to months and months grew to seasons, we began to laugh.

One day, in the midst of this laughter, I picked up a camera and fired the shutter.

I said yes to my brother's laughter.

Inside the laughter, a tear had broken down his cheek.

WHEN I WAS 19 I borrowed my friend's Nikon and started taking shots of my mother at the nail salon, alongside the ruinous landscapes of postindustrial Hartford County, its

gaptoothed and gutted mills scattered around us like the carcasses of ancient beasts.

One day, flipping through a stack of prints I had shared with her, my mother paused and looked at me with an expression I still can't name.

"What's wrong, Ma?"

She shook her head, though she was smiling. "I just ... I just didn't know our life was so damn sad," she said.

I started taking photographs as a way to make our lives legible to my mother. And my mother's looking made the elegy legible in my work.

She was the first critic to define a mode in my work I am still only beginning to understand: I make things out of loss. I ask the ghosts to show us what to make of their lives.

WHAT DO I SEE when I close my eyes and the aperture widens? I see my mother's face, swathed in sheets on her deathbed, my brother and me kneeling beside her like a pair of porcelain angels ubiquitous in the Goodwills she loved to shop in.

I look into her face until, very slowly, it becomes my brother's. Until it is January 1998, the first big snowstorm of the year, and our tenement building is swaddled in a quiet only a New England blizzard can produce. I am standing at her doorway because she has called my name. I am 10 and ready to help, to be anything she wants me to be.

“Come here,” she whispers. As I step up to her, I see, in the TV’s underwater light, Nicky sleeping in a bundle of towels on the bed. “Look at him. Isn’t he beautiful? Isn’t your brother just beautiful?”

“Yes,” I said, peering into the past.

Yes, I say again and again, through the years, even after she is long gone, my shutter snapping down that one life-making syllable: *yes, yes, yes*.



These photographs were taken between 2019 and 2025 in the Connecticut River Valley.

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