# THESE THINGS I HOLD

by

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Abstract

I fear losing the people I love, and worry about how I will remember them when they are gone. Making photographs feels essential to my personal process of remembering and expressing the significance of my personal relationships, yet it may lessen my ability to truly appreciate time spent with these people. By altering my photographic process to emphasize the material and ephemeral qualities of light, dirt, and silver, I hoped to reconcile the sense of tension I felt in using photographs to record the things I care about.

From the first time I picked up a camera, photography has been a tool for me to document my life and the things that are important to me. Photographing friends and family members has always felt special to me — a way of expressing the significance of these people and my relationships with them.

I fear losing the people I love, and worry about how I will remember them when they are gone. I know that my own memory will never be accurate; how I remember people is not necessarily how they were. A photograph feels like a more "stable" way to preserve the things I want to recall.

During the year of 2019, I made a lot of photographs with people I loved. While I was going through the images later, I thought about how they made me feel and what they meant to me. The best ones reminded me of what it was like to know those people, and told interesting stories about our time together. At the same time, I worried that making these photographs was distracting me from truly experiencing the time spent with these people, that all I would remember later was what the photograph told me.

I began burying my film in response to these feelings. I wanted to alter the story that my photographs told. Rather than creating straightforward depictions of the people I care about, I wanted to ask, through my process, how I might remember them when they are gone. Subjecting film to the process of physical weathering and decay is a way for me to interpret how I experience the passage of time, loss, sense of place, and memory in my close relationships.

As I bury my film, I think about everything I have slipping away. All I have known, know now, will ever know. I see the moon flash behind the clouds as I crouch in the dark,

sinking my fingers into the dirt. I put the film to rest beneath the rhododendron tree in our backyard, near where my parents buried our cat years ago. Down the hill lies the creek. I can hear it from here, its quiet gurgling as it wears its way through rock and red clay. When my brother and I were younger, we would spend hours in our waterproof boots, mucking up and down its expanse through our neighborhood. We spent plenty of time, too, in the woods that cradled the creek: a thin strip of steep hillside that leveled off gradually before meeting the backyards of the next street over. To us, it seemed wide and long; an unlimited expanse. It could take us a full afternoon to travel a distance through the woods that would take only minutes by road.

I pat the dirt down and stomp on it a little, making sure the sensitive film beneath won't be ruined by daylight. I cover the spot with leaves and return to the house. This is the house where I spent my later childhood and adolescence. Over the course of the several months I spend burying and unburying my film here, going from house to backyard and back again, I feel the presence of my memories in this place. They shape who I am today, what I hold important and how I relate to the world. This place is an anchor in my life.

The sense of home and belonging I feel here is something I hope will never go away, yet as I grow and change, so too does my relationship with this place. I can feel in it, as I can feel in all my close relationships, the inevitability of death and change. Although this sense of transience is something that I recognize as a natural part of life, I resist it. I am afraid of what I don't know, and like most people, don't want to think about the pain of losing things that are dear to me.

Sometimes, recognition of impermanence strengthens my ability to appreciate the present moment: to appreciate things just how they are, even though (and especially because) they will change. But I also find myself searching for ways to make it permanent; to hold these moments close so that when things are different, I will have a certainty of where I was before, of what brought me here, and of the people, places, and experiences that were special to me then.

In some ways, my memory serves this impulse to preserve, while in other ways it defeats it. On the one hand, I can recall at will dozens of moments that were special to me or shaped me in some way. These moments give meaning to my life. On the other hand, these memories exist in my mind — I have no physical, stable referent to return to, only the slipperiness of thought. Moreover, so many experiences slip through the cracks or become blurred with time that I often feel lost and uncertain of what happened in my past. Recently, a friend asked me if I remembered the first time we met. He then described our first encounter, several years ago, in great detail. I remember none of it. It bothers me that what should have been a deeply memorable experience, and one that is important to my friend and I's shared history, is missing from my memory.

I rely on my memory to tell me who I am, but if I cannot trust it to be truly "accurate," I need to find some other way to hold on to the things that I love, if only for my own peace of mind. I enjoy making recordings for this reason. A recording seems more stable than memory. It tells a form of the truth that feels closer, to me, to "what actually happened." However, there are problems inherent in substituting a (machine) recording for a (human) memory. Although they may make more "objective" records of existence than those that exist

in the mind, machine-made recordings are still framed by humans. They can lie, misrepresent, and denigrate, depending on the context in which they are placed. Eventual loss, decay, or destruction of the artifact is inevitable, as technology becomes obsolete and the storage of objects changes hands. Recordings also change the way we remember things. Revisiting a recorded moment, such as a photograph, may supersede the original memory we stored of that experience. Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, recalls such a moment: "One day, some friends were talking about their childhood memories; they had any number; but I, who had just been looking at my old photographs, had none left" (91). Sally Mann, too, writes about the treachery of photographs: "Photography would seem to preserve our past and make it invulnerable to the distortions of repeated memorial superimpositions, but I think that is a fallacy: photographs supplant and corrupt the past, all the while creating their own memories" (xiii).

As I have experienced the impulse to make recordings, primarily in the form of photographs, I have tried to come to terms with the sense of tension I feel in using this medium. On the one hand, through photography I am able to create representations of my life that feel meaningful and valuable. Conversely, using a camera can make me feel a sense of distance from reality. It is at this nexus, between the perceived positive and negative effects of making photographs, that my anxiety resides.

I have never been good at multitasking, particularly where my senses are concerned. Reading while music is playing, or writing while people are talking? Forget it. This may be one reason why I feel a sense of distance from reality when I am in the act of making photographs. When I am making a photograph, my senses are intently focused through the

lens in front of me — on all the details of the scene, on whether my aperture and shutter speed are at the right settings, on getting the image in focus — and it is difficult for me to maintain secondary interactions. Even when there are no people around, my experience of a place becomes vastly different when I have my camera with me. It means, instead of experiencing the place for what it is, I am looking for things to photograph. In some ways, this can make me more attentive to my surroundings, but I also feel that if it becomes too much of a focus, I don't really enjoy the place, or my company. I appreciate it more as a photographic opportunity than as a genuine experience.

I don't always feel so separated from my surroundings, but some form of that sense is always with me when I have my camera. There are many times when I choose not to carry it for that reason. There are many times, too, when I think about all the things I consider damaging about photography, and consider putting down my camera forever.

But I know that being human means that I am compelled to share what's meaningful to me, that I need to process my experiences and emotions, and that I need a creative outlet. None of us can keep thoughts and emotions bottled up inside and still be healthy, happy creatures. When I think about how I process things and what I want to share with people, it doesn't feel like enough just to write about it. Art is special because it enables us to communicate things that words alone can't. Art is not objective truth, but a way to tell stories about our experiences. Whether these experiences coincide with purely objective reality doesn't matter. It's the spirit — what we remember, and what we make of it — that matters.

During the past year, I thought extensively about the properties of photographs, and about how I was using photographs to make sense of my life and relationships. I came to the

conclusion, as elucidated above, that photographs were a tool to record things that were special, yet fleeting, in my life. At the same time, they had the potential to replace my memories and distance me from the situations I found so special. Making photographs was a way for me to save something I loved from the reckless annals of time and memory; yet doing so was perhaps to miss experiencing it firsthand. One of my goals for this project was to reckon with the tension I felt in making photographs.

Altering the way that I made photographs seemed like the best way to start. Elizabeth Edwards, in her essay "Photographs as Objects of Memory," suggests that the material qualities of photographs make them important to us as carriers of memory — that is, photographs as *objects* are just as relevant to our understanding of them as photographs as *images* are (330). Because I was interested in the role photographs played in my own life, I began thinking of ways to make photographs that would function as both image and object. I wanted to make images that would help me understand my feelings of fear, anxiety, and love *through* their material qualities — through their object-ness.

The path to the object-ness of photographs begins, for me, with silver. Silver is an organic, material substance. Its particles, dissolved in acid and bound to a surface with gelatin, physically change when touched by light, creating an impression of what they see. Much like memory, silver is subject to change as the processes of time and its environment affect it. But silver remembers the light that touches it. Undeveloped photographs can survive as latent images for decades. A friend once told me that growing plants was easier than she had expected; the plants *want* to grow, and will do whatever they can to do so. I would posit

that silver *wants* to remember. It will carry the latent image as long as it can before it is erased by time. The material holds the memory.

To make a photographic object, therefore, it was important to begin with a physical process. I considered making lumen prints, a process in which an object is placed on a piece of silver-gelatin paper and exposed to light, creating an impression of the object that will gradually fade if not fixed. I also considered coating organic materials with silver emulsion and then printing my negatives onto them. In the end, I chose to alter the film itself, by burying it, to create a physical object that I would enlarge onto photographic paper in the darkroom.

Burial is, of course, a somewhat literal metaphor for death, but I like to think about the whole cycle that burial is a part of. Soil is not only where our bodies go to decay, but where life on earth begins. When a body goes into the earth, it decomposes, providing nutrients for organisms that live in the soil, which plants absorb and use to grow. Plants give us life — the air we breathe and the food we eat. Burial is not just a way to put the dead to rest; it is an act of faith in life.

When I bury my film, I treat it as a sort of ritual. A ritual creates a safe space for a transition from one state of existence to another. In the dark, I hurry towards the spot I have chosen for burial. I dig a hole using a garden shovel and my bare hands, carefully interring the sheets of film. I pat down a layer of dirt between each one. The task is a balance between taking the time to make sure it is done with care, and doing it quickly enough that the film is not exposed to ambient street- or moonlight.

If burying the film is the beginning of the its transition, letting it sit in the ground allows it the time and space to transform. I leave the film in the ground for about a week at a time. It is long enough for the soil to make a permanent impact on the surface of the emulsion, but not so long that the emulsion will totally become part of the earth. After a week, I complete the next stage of the ritual. Going out again at night, I sink my hands into the earth. I feel for the film and as I disengage it from its earthly resting place, I carefully shake it, brushing off the moist, clay-like dirt. Returning to the house with the film in a light-safe bag, I go into our downstairs bathroom and load each sheet into its holder, readying it for its next stage of life.

Approaching the process of making these images with a mind towards the material and the ritual changed the way I made photographs. The process of burying, unburying, and exposing my film is not only a way to create a photographic object, it is also an act of engaging with place. I become connected — and my memory becomes connected — to the places where I bury film and make exposures with it. The film becomes connected to the soil of the place in which it was buried, and to the light of the place in which it is exposed. Washing film is the final step of the development process, and so the resulting negative contains physical remnants of dirt, light, and water — the elements of life. It is both an index of place and a container of memory.

In the making of the photograph itself, I became more conscious of making an intentional image, not just a snapshot. The medium I chose demanded time, care, and practice — not just in the burial and development stages, but in the process of making the exposure as well.  I had to intentionally ask people to be a part of my project, and spend a decent amount

of time with them in a chosen location to get the right picture, sometimes even meeting more than once if the first pictures didn't come out. I initially chose to use a view camera because sheets of film made more sense to bury than rolls, but I also came to appreciate the slowness that the process demands. Using a view camera requires a lot of patience, and I enjoyed the fact that I had to spend a lot of time with a person in order to make each image of them. Every part of the image-making process needed to be intentional: the light, the location, the interaction between myself and the person I was making a picture of. I chose to photograph people during the time of day when the light is just fading — right before it gets dark, but after all the harshness of daylight has subsided. I asked my friends and family members to close their eyes, hoping that it would make them feel a softness that I associate with that time of day and the feelings I have for those I love — hoping that, in the photographs, their expressions would reflect this softness. I tried to make people feel comfortable and at ease, while simultaneously making minute adjustments to the view camera to achieve the visual qualities I envisioned. Somehow, despite there being more technical work involved, I felt able to be more present because we were both there for the purpose of making a photograph, in the safety of backyards, fields, and woods, undisturbed by the outside world.

By changing my process to emphasize the material qualities of "painting with light," as Berenice Abbott called photography, I experienced a deeper connection with the thing that photography is and does (1). I found a closer understanding of the way analog photography works, and experienced the collaborative and intentional creation of images with people I love. I enjoyed the mystery of this project: the surprise in both success and failure that came with not knowing, or being able to control, how the process of burial would affect the film.

When I began this project, I was afraid of forgetting. I understood that memories are not objective placeholders for life events — that they are actively changing, intensely personal perceptions of experience. I was afraid of forgetting because to me, imperfect memory is equated with a loss of meaning in my personal experiences.

I am still afraid of loss and change. But I also recognize that these things are inevitable. Making photographs that felt like active memorials — like burying those who are still with us — felt like a step towards accepting that these things are a part of life. Furthermore, in spite of their so-called imperfections, memories are, like any other recording or thing we make, the stories we tell ourselves about our existence and place in the world. In the end, my photographs ended up reflecting my memories: not records of history, but a personal story about my human experiences.

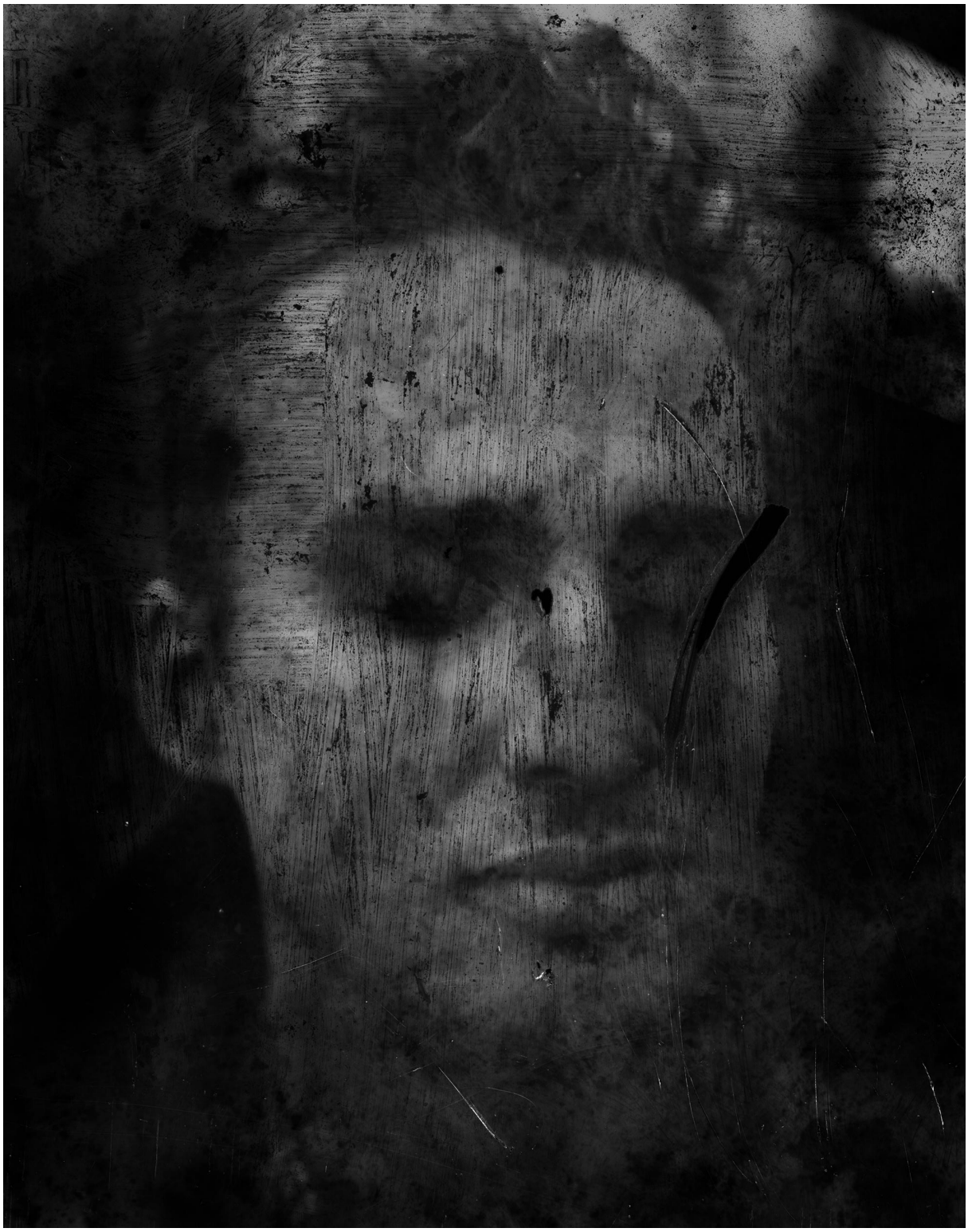
Many parts of the process were still anxiety producing for me as a photographer: namely, the fear that the images I was making would not turn out for whatever reason. I am not sure if I succeeded in coming to terms with the tension I feel in being a photographer. If it helps, most of the people I know and am comfortable with are used to me having my camera with me and making pictures when they're around. I don't know how I feel about devoting the rest of my life to this particular medium, but I do know that something draws me to it — something about it feels magical, and beyond my control. I feel almost like a witness behind the camera — not acting, just watching what the camera wants to record. Yet it’s still a connective process: it’s a collaboration between myself, who I’m with, the camera, light, and the place. Photographs do what no other medium can; that is, present us with the certainty that whatever light hit the surface, was once there.

As I unearth my film, I see that everything I have is already here: in this fragile sheet of plastic and emulsion; in this soil; in the life that is all around me. I feel the coolness of the night air, the grit of soil in my fingernails. I feel that this will change. I sink my hands into the soil and feel gently for the tip of the film; bringing it out of the soil into the dark, I shake it off and place it into the bag, in which I will carry it up to the house, through the backdoor, and into the narrow space of our basement bathroom, where I will slide the sheets carefully into each holder, to await the light of day.

Images

*Untitled (Harry)*

*Untitled (Emma)*



*Untitled (Jesse)*

*Untitled (Alley)*

*Untitled (Liz)*

*Untitled (Henry)*

*Untitled (Mom and Dad)*

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