

UN-POSSIBLE RETOUR

Clarisse d'Arcimoles

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TÉA OBREHT

If I Could, I Surely Would

The man in my life is, at best, uncooperative when it comes to posing for photographs. Our holiday albums are littered with images of his tongue, his teeth, the whites of his eyes, blurry triplicates of him that remain undetectable until long after the actual moment of picture-taking. When I ask him why he does it, he is adamant: 'I don't need the picture,' he says, 'I have the memory.'

The first time he said this, it was a revelation. Don't the memory and the photograph go hand in hand? How can you revisit a memory without access to some accompanying picture? More importantly, how can others – those not fortunate enough to witness the more spectacular moments in your life, such as moose sightings or inspired teenage costuming – share in the memory without visual aids? But then I begin thinking about all those unknown-picture stories, the ones that circle around the mysterious uncaptioned photograph, the universally seductive ring of 'Who is the woman in the picture?' And it occurs to me that perhaps my boyfriend might be right. Perhaps the relic of a life is not the visual residue, but the memory itself. We are, after all, always chasing: our own ever-changing recollections and reminiscences, so that we can understand ourselves; the memories of others, to which we can never really connect, because no matter how detailed a story, no matter how accurate the picture, we can only understand the significance of a moment in someone else's life through the scrim of self-reflection.

The moment I see Clarisse d'Arcimoles's *Un-Possible Retour*, it confirms my belief that the universal exists in particularity. Her memories are present in this photo essay. Yet, when I see her photographs, I think only of my own memories, and understand more than ever that the people in my life who are constant, though they have been reshaped moment to moment by experience, by a thousand unsaid things that can never be summed up in a single frame, are not the same people now as they were in pictures fifteen

years ago. I am reminded, too, of that near-inconceivable fact: that they were entirely different people, lives half-lived already, before I was even born; that by the time she was my age, my mother had already conceived me; that my grandmother had once summoned the courage to leave home and become a receptionist, the job that eventually united her with my grandfather.

I don't know what the moments recorded here mean to Clarisse d'Arcimoles; don't know a thing about her memories, except that the barest glimmer of them makes me want to hold on to my own.

If my interests lay elsewhere, if I were not still mourning the loss of my grandfather, I would probably be able to focus on how *Un-Possible Retour* subverts reality in the staged second half of each sequence, and perhaps question the notion of basing images on original, irreproducible memories. But, almost five years after his death, I still miss the man who all but raised me, teller of stories and believer of dreams, who perhaps more than anyone is responsible for the kind of woman I am today, and the last image of the sequence hits me like a gut-shot. ■



Contact Sheet (My mother)

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