



Unknown

hand-coloured tintype, late 1800s

15.24 x 21 cm oval

Lost Relations

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Though I never met my mother's mother, it was strange to me that my mother's brother, Lee, made a mistake when choosing a photo of her to display at my grandfather's wake. The family intervened: "That's not really Bertha, is it?" No one could say whose image it was—least of all Lee, newly bereaved by his inability to distinguish between his long-dead mother's likeness and a stranger's.

Obscurity lurks in the family photograph. Though we entrust it to preserve memory in image, the photograph does not produce a "memory-image"—the image contextualized, the image beloved. The photograph preserves the likeness, but not the occasion or desire behind doing so.

The photograph can certainly invoke a memory-image, but human memory holds it, ex machine; the photograph merely invites its recall from the intangible archive of experience.

Live minds make fragile archives, however; our memories fail with us. We read this failure in the photograph's ersatz designation—"Unknown, hand-coloured tintype, late 1800s"—which allows us to infer that there was hand, pigment, camera, tin, emulsion, and sitter, all of which convened after the invention of photography to produce the image. Like photography itself, the designation offers no *raison* and no *être*—it offers only the *de*.

Raison and *être* are instead the affairs of the clan: the power of proper recall can't be outsourced or extended beyond clan lore. When society at large learns a cherished face, memory-image is reduced to symbol, life to association, rune to rebus. In this way do cause, nation, decade, and fast-food hamburger each acquire a face that lasts, that transmits, that sells.

The power of lore, however, extends beyond the clan, as narrative and even as fiction.

Attend again to the photograph. From its meagre catalogue—hand, pigment, camera, tin, emulsion, sitter, date—I might suggest a memory-image through a simple equivalence: sitter and hand are the same. Now we are looking at a self-portrait. Not a very good one, perhaps, considering that, when artists attempt self-portraits, they tend to exhibit more interest in expression or compositional flare than we see here. The woman's eyes have no flash, her body no pose. *No, it wasn't a great success, but I take so many portraits of society ladies that I needed a change. I dress plainly—in mourning for my husband—and my expression is humble but not drab. To amuse myself I used a bit of colour to retrieve some of the life in my face from the gray of the tin. Not an impressive portrait, but good enough, I think, to send to my sister, who complains of her bare parlour walls.*

I may overreach in my bid to save this figure from obscurity: women of her time, if not actively discouraged from taking up photography, were rare practitioners in the field. But I am anxious: Do all photographs, and not just the found ones, find the same fate?