Melissa Shook, latency, and the possible

“When I look at these photographs I see a young woman, trapped in a body too attractive for her to manage, much less enjoy"

By Sarah McColl
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I’ve since taken to wiping the kitchen floor with a wet paper towel on hands and knees, but for a period of a few months, I spread pages of the Sunday paper under my son’s high chair. Overlooked articles surfaced as I stooped to clear fallen banana and beans.

One day, splat on tight columns of tiny text. The obituaries, the paid-for kind. The beautiful woman caught my eye, as they do, breezy 1970s center-part, direct gaze into the lens, and a camera in her hands.

Shook, Melissa, devoted single mother who documented her biracial daughter's life from the age of one to 18. Images from this 'Krissy' series were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY. Her kind and artistic spirit is dearly missed.

I ripped the four-inch column from the pages, stuffed the remaining food-stained paper in the trash, and pinned the obituary to my bulletin board.

I didn’t have a plan, though I liked her there as an image, a talisman of an artist mother looking over me. I didn’t get to Melissa Shook right away. Her image hovered there for weeks, amidst the oft-forgotten habit tracker and oft-consulted quotations copied onto index cards from Toni Morrison, Ali Smith, Robert Hass and our astrological oracle Rob Brezny.

For the last year I have felt hidden behind the private curtains of a new baby. Our lives were damp with blood and breastmilk, urine, diarrhea, saliva; bathwater, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant.

“The world seemed,” as Rivka Galchen writes in *Little Labors*, in one of my all-time favorite lines in literature, “sodden with meaning.”

Stay-at-home orders drew the curtains tighter against the outside world. We listened to the news and wore our masks, saw our friends on Zoom, then not at all, then outside at a distance, then not at all again.

The privacy suited me. I stopped scrolling through social media and shared my pictures and one-liners with people via text. I began to feel I was far away, on a distant planet. Was I on Planet Quarantine or Planet Baby,

I didn't know, but I liked the landscape between four walls, the slow hours, the minute focus: stacking blocks, soaking beans, wiping the counters. Boring, I've heard people call this stage, but that's not been my experience so far.

The highly structured repetition within the days reminds me of waiting tables, a job I loved. Each shift shared the same elements: rolling silverware, copying the specials onto a piece of scrap paper, carrying trays of glassware from the kitchen to the upstairs dining room; yet within that steady, predictable framework, the work was always different. So far, I think having a baby is a lot like that.

Politically, latency is an antidote to the tyranny of productivity. Creatively, latency—periods of incubation, gestation, what so often looks like *doing nothing*—is essential to process. It's a period of time artists don't often talk about, perhaps because we take it for granted, are dismissive of it, fear being called lazy. We forget the vitality of our walks, time spent looking out the windows of cars and bedrooms, minutes in the bath and shower, steam rising, shampoo lather, spacing out.

A mentor once told me: The same time you devote to exercise, you need to spend getting bored. (She also enjoyed eating popcorn and watching yoga videos. It was relaxing, she said.)

I began a practice this fall I called deliberate daydreaming. After I put the baby down for a nap, I returned to bed, pulled the covers over my head, and let my mind wander. There was no goal other than to enjoy the dark and the quiet. I might have called it the long way into a nap, since I often fell asleep, another form of necessary latency. I had made it past the earliest months of motherhood. I stitched myself back together by luxuriating in my mind, in the bed.

This is how, one day, I remembered. I came out from underneath the covers, googled Melissa Shook, and for an afternoon fell into her life and work, fell in love in a way.

In 1972, Melissa Shook gave birth to a daughter, Krissy, and days later began taking photographs with a Pentax camera, a gift from her father on Shook's eighteenth birthday. It was a bit of a lark; Krissy's father was the "official" artist in the house, everyone had called him a gifted painter at Bard, where he and Shook met.

"I was invested in him as the artist," Shook wrote, "had no idea that I would begin to slowly build up a body of work. I imagined little for myself, a common dilemma for women who graduated from suburban high schools in the late fifties."

That second sentence, it seems to me, could just as easily end after the word "women."

Shook continued to photograph Krissy for the next eighteen years.

They are tender, exuberant photographs of Lower East Side family life, a loft with rough wood floors and raking winter light. Around the same time, Shook also began a daily self-portrait series that would continue off and on throughout her life.

She wrote beautifully about her projects and her process on her website. Of the self-portraits:

"It was important to let my unconscious, rather than my intellect, dictate the progression. For reasons I don't entirely understand, being nude became part of the project early on. And working against that white wall, near the two front windows in the so-called living room, became a central point. By March, I was playing with the idea that if anyone got close to me, my urge was to cover my face, so the images that month alternate between close-ups of the body and the face."

For reasons she doesn't understand. Isn't that the best of what we're up to, that feeling of surrender and not-knowing? How tedious control and order can be, how terrifying and free and numinous encounters with one's own unconscious are. What is there before you, what's this thing you've made without knowing how or to what end? What "end"? There's more of life's mystery in that process than one finds in the "so-called living room."

"When I look at these photographs," Shook wrote later in life on her website, "I see a young woman, trapped in a body too attractive for her to manage, much less enjoy, who was battling depression and struggling like the devil not to reveal the pain she was in. I was an unmarried mother, sole supporter of her daughter, with no skills other than typing and short hand."

Before Krissy turned one, her father had left for San Francisco. A friend helped Shook learn how to develop and print her photos; another friend, a mom up the street, convinced Shook to join a cooperative gallery; an assistant editor at the magazine *Camera 35* took notice of Shook's work in a group show at said gallery and told her editor; the magazine published a large portfolio that included the Krissy photos and eight months of daily self-portraits from 1972 into 1973.

"I can't remember all the things I did to put together enough money for Krissy and me to survive. After publication of the portfolio, I was offered two part-time jobs teaching photography at the New School of Social Research and at Brooklyn Community College. At last I walked into something I could do well. And then a number of the self-portraits were purchased by the Museum of Modern Art. That turned out to be a crucial credential."

So life changed on that crucial credential, Shook secured a full-time position teaching photography at MIT, and she packed up a truck and drove north. There, the rest of her life unfolded, art and motherhood, teaching and producing and exhibiting new work. There's a series of portraits and interviews with women living in a shelter, "Streets Are for Nobody." and another showcasing those who worked on the backside of Suffolk Downs, then lost their jobs due to the track's closure. Her portraits remind me of Alice Neel, or any portraitist with the ability to capture something essential of her subject. She must have liked people, I imagine.

I click through the pages of her blog. There's such intimacy and immediacy in her writing, its clarity and detail, the way she documents the world, all the charm and macabre underpinnings in an afternoon of thrift store shopping with a friend:

"I was horrified by this large room full of things people had worn and given away, coded by color and use. Blue sweaters, yellow, orange, red, green, brown, black. Jackets and blouses and pants. My eye was immediately caught by a boiled jacket, maybe a sea green, that looked just like my Aunt Marion would have worn. I walked around, holding it for a little while, knowing I'd never, ever put it on. I wear the same thing in winter, turtle necks with a vest, blue jeans or black pants. I've gone into supremo decorative mode because I now add a long scarf that hangs down in some inelegant way, but looks colorful. (TJMaxx has wonderful scarves...and Susan and I went there late in the afternoon and bought scarves.)"

Anyone who uses the phrase "supremo decorative mode" feels like a friend.

On Instagram, Shook shared self-portraits, daily details, her life with glioblastoma, an aggressive form of cancer in the brain and spinal cord. In her last photos with shorn white hair, that strange baby skin, she reminds me of my mother.

Why do I care? Why does it matter, feel even urgent to write about Shook, remember her? Her work is well-housed in a hallowed institution, so why do I feel such a sense of loss for a person I don't know? She herself was obsessed with memory, the idea of forgetting a driving force in her work.

"Though I was in spitting distance of seventy," Shook wrote of one of her self-portrait reprisals, "I felt as if I was just getting started."

A memory, proof this habit of grieving strangers is not new. When I was in third grade, a teenage girl at the local high school died. I can't recall the circumstances, very likely a drunk driving accident, which were a tragic annual occurrence among graduating seniors. I was totally preoccupied with the death of this girl. I may have cut her photograph out of the newspaper, too, or perhaps that is an invented memory. I do know I retreated to the backyard to converse with other mourners at her imaginary funeral in my playhouse. We all cried, what a tragedy it was, what a senseless death.

This imaginary play seems rather strange to me now. Putting aside what may have been a burgeoning penchant for psychodrama, I understand my reaction now as a child's need to express the the emotionally inchoate. The teenager's death brought forth what was latent in me. At the time, stress swirled beneath the adult surface in our household. Parents think they're subtle, that children can't sense these things, but they can. The death of the high school girl, unknown to me, allowed me to mourn a family life in the process of falling away, an end I felt but hadn't articulated.

Art by dead women—often marginal, unfamous art by dead women (and sometimes lesser-known art by living women)—puts me back in the playhouse. There's a wellspring of sorrow. All the work not made. Possibility, for the dead artist, has passed, but for me, something unformed gets stirred up, begins to find a passage; I have found my mother, my mentor, my sister, my friend, my colleague, my kindred, myself. The discovery is poignant, really, bittersweet, and potent in its sense of renewal.

"It is a joy to be hidden," wrote psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, "and a disaster not to be found."

Find Melissa Shook's website, which includes photos from the Krissy series, and take a look at her photographs in MOMA's collection.

p.s. Every time I type that museum's acronym, autocorrect asks if I might mean MOM?

All photographs copyright Melissa Shook