

## The Ecstatic Vision of Sally Mann

Years before she would begin exhibiting and publishing her photographs, before she received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation and was named America's best photographer by *Time* Magazine, Sally Mann was a teenager at a Vermont boarding school, hiding in her closet after lights-out, writing "long, verbally dense" poems about her Lexington, Virginia home.

"Writing came first," Mann asserts, "I was frequently the poet on duty when the Muse of Verse, likely distracted by other errands, released some of her weaker lines, but that didn't stop my passion for it."

Photography did not take long to follow. Mann writes of being seventeen years old, "holding my dripping negatives to the lightbulb, and voicing to my parents in exuberant prose my roiled-up feelings." Mann had found what she calls "the twin passions that were to consume my life." Throughout the pages of *Hold Still*, interspersed between her writing, Mann shares her first contact sheets, snippets from poems, and teenage journal entries. Her reflections on the Virginia landscape of her childhood range from unadorned descriptions of the weather to expansive, abstract interpretations of the author's relationship to her place. The grown-up Mann writes, "I have loved Rockbridge County, Virginia, surely since the moment my birth-bleary eyes caught sight of it."

In this way, the book's first chapter lands on love. And love is where *Hold Still* itself ultimately arrives and consistently finds its strength. Mann's lyrical prose is most vivid and charged when writing about what she loves most: her father, her farm, and those moments of pure, distilled focus, what Mann calls "ecstatic time," as she works to capture the right image. Most people know Sally Mann as a photographer, but *Hold Still* introduces its readers to Mann the writer and avid reader, the devoted mother, daughter and wife, and the wonderstruck Southerner compelled to reckon with her place and its history.

I asked Richard Dillard about the Sally Mann he first met, when she was a young Hollins graduate student and poet in 1975. When I referred to her as "brave," Dillard corrected me. "To be brave," he said, "you have to be afraid of something. Sally's not afraid of anything." In *Hold Still*, Mann writes, "Most people who know me well, and even those who don't, will eventually

use the word ‘fearless’ to describe who they think I am...But that mettle, the recklessness, self-possession, and hauteur—I know where that comes from.”

This is one of the first links Mann makes between her personality and her father’s, one of several mirrorings we follow throughout the book as Mann seeks to unravel the deep, uncanny kinship she feels for her father. Mann’s wrenching love for her father might be the most intimate and revealing aspect of this memoir. This love is fearful in its naked loss, and fearless, too, in its vulnerable depiction and meticulous dissection.

Mann is, of course, a human and therefore experiences at least some moments of fear. She is occasionally afraid, for example, “that the good pictures won’t come, as usual...” She writes of her maternal fears of injury, illness, and the outside world intruding on the privacy of her family farm. When she photographed her daughter Jessie, her face swollen with hives, Mann thought, “Maybe this could be an escape from the manifold terrors of child rearing, an apotropaic protection: stare them straight in the face but at a remove—on paper, in a photograph.” Later, in a letter written after witnessing an accident in which her son Emmett was hit by a car, Mann wrote that she was afraid “that by photographing my fears I might be closer to actually seeing them, not the other way round.”

But in the making of her work, Mann is indeed fearless. Whether photographing twelve-year-old girls on the cusp of adulthood, her own children exploring their secluded farm, the sites of historical trauma and incomprehensible violence, decomposing bodies on a Tennessee hillside, or her own husband’s deteriorating body, Mann’s drive and vision are unflinching.

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While I’d encountered Mann’s photographs fairly frequently over the years—in museums or in contemporary art textbooks—I’d never been to one of Mann’s exhibitions or sat down with her books of photography, and thus had never experienced her photographs collectively, as cohesive bodies of work. I’d never held these books in my hands, seen for myself how she organized and ordered the images, or how she addressed—or, perhaps, did not address—their subject matter. So when I finished reading *Hold Still*, I went to the Hollins University library and returned home with a canvas bag full of photography books so heavy the straps cut into my shoulders. I was surprised by how much writing—both Mann’s own writing—and that of legends like C.D. Wright, Reynolds Price, Ann Beattie, and Jane Livingston—is included in these books of photography.

If I hadn't spent time with each of Mann's previous books, I wouldn't have known that much of the writing in *Hold Still* explores themes and aspects of Mann's life that she has been exploring, through writing, since her earliest publications. The importance of place and Mann's relationship to her father, two of the predominant themes explored throughout Mann's career, are present in Jane Livingston's introduction to Mann's first book, *Second Sight*.

*Second Sight* is less stylistically unified than Mann's later bodies of work, but within it, I found aspects of Mann's work that she will revisit throughout the rest of her career. In addition to an epigraph by Theodore Roethke and a dedication excerpted from Wallace Stevens, lines of Mann's own poetry are included at the beginning of each of the book's four sections. The landscape photographs in the first section show mist-covered creeks, peeling cabins, and rolling hills of Rockbridge County in crisply-focused realistic images, which call to mind the more abstracted landscapes of her later works. The portraits of women, with their imploring expressions and windblown, haphazard surroundings, are echoed in the photographs published in *At Twelve*.

The final section of *Second Sight* is made up of closely-cropped photographs of objects and parts of the body, sometimes cloaked in transparent or wet folds fabric. Of these images, Livingston writes, "The crucial transition in Sally Mann's work, from fundamentally conventional (if idiosyncratic) photography to thoroughly *owned*, crafted, almost sculpted images, is made with the platinum prints of 1978-80." These images mirror the much later photographs of Mann's husband, published in *Proud Flesh*, which focus on individual parts of his body in isolation from the whole.

Mann dips back into her own photographs, writing, and to the figures that have inspired her, over and over again, as to a well that never runs dry. The resulting work does not appear to be influenced by outside culture or trends, but by itself and its maker, as Mann deepens the reach of her exploration with each new pass.

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Published in 1988, *At Twelve* features images of twelve-year-old girls photographed in Mann's hometown. In her prologue, Mann acknowledges the girls' parents, "who allowed me to search for a general truth within their very intimate and well-guarded personal ones." For this, Mann also thanks her father, writing that her subjects' trust "was in part due to the act that my father delivered literally thousands of their babies during his long medical practice here. His loyalty

and dedication for those many years were repaid to me in that slow but unalterable cycle of reciprocity played out in a small community.”

The opening pages of *At Twelve* include a photograph of Mann herself at age twelve, with absurdly high pigtails framing her serious face. The inclusion of Mann’s portrait makes the project feel collaborative. She has been these girls, she herself—with the combined gravitas and silliness—and here’s the photo to prove it. Underneath the image, a quotation from Anne Frank at age twelve: “Who would ever think that so much can go on in the soul of a young girl?”

With the images published in *At Twelve*, I am reminded how utterly different twelve year old girls can look from each other. Within these photographs there are braces, bows, curled hair, old-fashioned nightgowns, and tight shorts. There are crutches, high heels, legs spread wide, tutus, strands of pearls, transparent polka-dotted dresses and white panties, butterfly nets, deer carcasses, and many clotheslines hanging heavy with stained quilts and wet denim.

Mann’s writing accompanies some of the photos, elaborating on particular girls’ stories, or exploring the precipice they rest on more generally. Next to a photo of a girl in a long white nightgown leaning wistfully against the side of a rope bridge, Mann writes, “As in all transformations, there is an element of sadness. Something very familiar, very comforting is being left behind for the unknown...”

Some of these images portray a heightened sense of drama, or an element of staging, like the girl with a butterfly net tucked into the crook of her arm, lying on the hood of a car with the word “DOOM” scrawled into the dust next to her body. Other images speak plainly and quietly of the drama inherent in these girls’ lives. Theresa, an African-American girl whom the caption tells us became pregnant at eleven years old and was talked out of an abortion by a Catholic agency, is shown lying next to her baby on a four-poster bed. In the corner of her room is a bookshelf lined with baby dolls—black dolls on the top shelf, white dolls on the second—many of these dolls bigger than the real-life baby lying on the bed beside her.

On the next page, a white girl is wearing a white dress and tights, sitting before a window, framed by heavy curtains. The girl sits upright with a sad, nervous expression on her face as her mother adjusts her headband. In her arms the girl holds a baby doll similarly dressed in finery, with ribbons in its glossy hair, curled into ringlets.

In a photograph of a girl identified as Kelly Conner, she leans, legs spread wide, against her bicycle. Her hair is cut short and she wears a bow-tie with her white, collared shirt. She is

surrounded by the skinned, beheaded carcasses of deer killed on the first day of hunting season, hanging upside-down, their legs spread wide like Kelly's, their sinewy muscles exposed. At Kelly's feet lie scattered deer heads, legs, and hooves.

In the caption, Mann details the array of Kelly's family members present for the photoshoot. The girl's "mother, her aunt and uncle, her grandparents, cousins, and a few other[s]" stood behind Mann and watched as she photographed the girl. Mann is specific about the influence she had on the staging of this photo: "As I pulled her jacket back, to separate her white-shirted figure from the darkness of the shed, I thought I might have heard a murmur. After a few minutes I relaxed enough to identify the prevalence of the V shapes in the scene and without thinking I asked Kelly to spread her legs. This time the murmur was audible, but I could see that the picture was complete."

Mann's desire to get this picture right pushes her beyond any of her own fears and even past the discomfort of others. This drive will prove itself, again and again, throughout Mann's career.

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Even with the knowledge of the place-based photographs that would come later in Mann's body of work, I was surprised to see in *At Twelve* the integration of place within such early and seemingly unlikely photographs. Mann writes that the element of place is inseparable from the subjects themselves: "In evoking them, as I tried to do in these photographs, that reality, the spirit of the place, invariably is manifest."

*At Twelve* provides a glimpse into the ever-present obsession with place that feeds Mann's work. Place is a more explicit aspect of Mann's next book, *Immediate Family*, featuring strikingly beautiful photos of her three children—Emmett, Virginia, and Jessie—on their Virginia farm. *Immediate Family* opens with Mann's writing, which hones in on place: "The place is important; the time is summer. It's any summer, but the place is home and the people here are my family."

The place is Mann's family farm, bought by her father for seventy-five dollars an acre in 1960, and which Mann and her husband bought from her brothers in 1988, the year their father died: "Of the predictably biblical, epic, and divisive negotiations involved in establishing a value for the farm, the less said the better," Mann writes in *Hold Still*. "Only a gorgeous piece of good land can provoke that kind of piercing despair and dispute."

In the prologue to *Immediate Family*, Mann characterizes the family in which she grew up: her “Bostonian” mother retreating from the afternoon heat; the African-American maid Virginia, “the big woman who raised me;” and Mann’s physician father, “both a moralist and an atheist” who was “quiet and unassuming in his persona, and extravagant in his vision.” Mann writes that she and her brothers were the only children in their school required by their parents to leave during Bible study and sit in the hallway. These characterizations serve to remind her readers that Mann’s immediate family might not resemble their own: “As a family,” she writes, “we were simply different.” In *Hold Still*, she writes that the farm was the place “where who we were seemed normal.”

As Mann photographed her children exploring the land she herself once roamed as “a feral child running naked with the pack of boxers,” Mann sensed the “confluence of past and future, reality and symbol.” Of *Immediate Family*, Mann writes, “These are photographs of my children living their lives here too. Many of these pictures are intimate, some are fictions and some are fantastic, but most are of ordinary things every mother has seen—a wet bed, a bloody nose, candy cigarettes. They dress up, they pout and posture, they paint their bodies, they dive like otters in the dark river.”

Some of the images are plainly funny, like “Emmett at Halloween,” in which Emmett is a blur in the foreground, wearing a paper bag on his head as he crosses a verdant, pastoral landscape. In “The New Mothers,” Jessie leans one hand on a stroller, her baby doll strapped in for the ride. She cocks her hip, stares at the camera, and flicks her candy cigarette. Just behind her, Virginia wears heart-shaped sunglasses and pouts her lips. One proud fist rests on her hip, while the other hand clutches her stiff, fuzzy-haired doll.

By the time we reach “Candy Cigarette,” we’ve come to know something of these children and their distinct personalities and postures, so clearly on display throughout the book and especially in this image: Virginia’s curious, bold, hands-on-hip stance; Jessie’s lithe form and serious, uninterested expression; and Emmett—whimsical, so often sliding out of the frame—here marching away on stilts, becoming a blurred, tall shape in the background.

In *Hold Still* Mann shares three initial photographs she took of Emmett wading in the river. In the first image, he stands in the water, his hand gently resting on the water’s surface. In the second, he’s underwater, the current a silvery blur above his body. In the third, he’s leaning against the back edge of his inner tube, the bright sky reflected on the water around him. Mann

writes that there was something in each of these photographs that she liked, though none of them was quite right. On the following pages, Mann shares attempt after attempt as she seeks to capture what it was she almost saw in the first three photographs. Her notes accompanying each photo share her editorial and compositional eye with the reader. “Maybe lose the snorkel,” she writes of one image. “In this one he’s too far out of the water,” she notes on another. The light-meter strap has fallen into the frame in a third.

Mann writes that she was “obsessed with getting this damn picture right.” She would carry her camera and a film holder to the middle of the river each day, setting up in waist-deep water:

After shooting the two sheets of film in each holder, I would swim, the holder high above my head, and get another, while dear, patient Emmett waited. I had six film holders, so we’d generally take twelve negatives each day—and most of them were failures. They failed in many ways, sometimes because my wet fingers ruined the film, once when I dropped the film holder in the river, once because a flotilla of canoes came through, but usually because of dumb compositional mistakes on my part.

The work Mann (and Emmett) do while chasing the right image is, I think, what Mann means in her foreword to *Immediate Family*, where she writes, “We are spinning a story of what it is to be grown up.” Some elements of this story have been dramatized, crafted by both the artist and her subjects. Other images came to Mann as gifts. Photos shared in *Hold Still* show Mann’s camera set up at family gatherings, lunches, and at the beach, just in case the opportunity for a good photograph would rear its head. Mann describes shooting hastily, while life continues on all around her: “...before me the brilliant angel no longer radiant with the sun snatches up the towel and heads to the beach, the tomatoes are imperfectly carved up for supper, and my heart, my pounding heart, sends from my core the strength for me to rise.”

Though each of these images could stand on its own, presenting their own individually strange tableaux and stories, in aggregate, these images reveal the large themes and slanted truths Mann hopes to explore about “those familiar complications of time” which “all play harmlessly around [Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia] as dancing shadows beneath the great oak.” While art and life were melded in the making of *Immediate Family*, in the aftermath of the book’s publication and resulting controversy, Mann considered her roles as an artist and a mother: “I knew that the

crucial questions for me as a mother was not whether the pictures were going to be respected in twenty years, but this all-important one: ‘I wonder how those poor, art-abused kids turned out.’”

But, she writes, “Even now, when I look at the arc of my work, those pictures, those pictures taken on the farm and at the cabin seem more balanced, less culturally influenced and more universal, than those taken anywhere else...”

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When readers first meet Mann’s mother, in the first chapter of *Hold Still*, she has “huffily left” the bed she shared with her husband when his Great Dane, Tara, begins sleeping there. This is one of many poignant characterizations of Mann’s mother as a woman who always seems to get the short shrift. In her parents’ marriage, Mann describes her mother as “helplessly astride her insubstantial end of the seesaw.” Part Two of *Hold Still*, “My Mother: Memory of a Memory Past,” is the shortest section of the book, taking up only thirty-four out of 478 pages.

Mann and her mother bear little resemblance to each other. Mann characterizes her mother as having a “narrow emotional bandwidth,” describing her as “naturally suspicious of passion, of exultation, of fervor.” Mann’s understanding of her mother is challenged after her mother’s death, when Mann must make what she calls a “postmortem readjustment.” When a parent dies, Mann writes, “The parental door against which we have spent a lifetime pushing gives way, and we lurch forward, unprepared and disbelieving, into the rest of our lives.”

Mann does sense a connection between herself and her mother’s Welsh ancestors, especially Mann’s maternal grandfather, described as a sentimental and hard-working Welshman: “I am reasonably sure that some aspect of...my mother’s father, are woven through my psyche and have emerged in my own landscapes...”

Mann finds her connection to her Welsh ancestors manifest in the Welsh word *hiraeth*, which Mann defines as “distance pain.” *Hiraeth*, Mann writes, “always refers to a near-umbilical attachment to a place, not just a free-floating nostalgia or a droopy houndlike wistfulness or the longing we associate with romantic love. No, this is a word about the pain of loving a place.” And, she notes, “I know all about it.” Throughout the book, *hiraeth* becomes a touchstone for Mann’s exploration of place and its influence on her work.

If Mann had worked solely as a writer and had never ventured into photography, I wonder if her emphasis on place might’ve pigeonholed her as a regional writer. It is a testament to her vision that her obsession with place has not limited the reach of her work, as we see so

often with Southern or Appalachian writers and artists. As another chronically homesick writer from the deeper South, I initially sensed within myself the teeniest bit of resentment toward Mann's *hiraeth*. (To be fair, I also find myself occasionally resenting Virginia itself, where I live now, for its abundant natural beauty, simply because it is so unlike Memphis, my home, a place for which I suffer heaps upon heaps of *hiraeth*.)

After all, much of Mann's work and life has been based out of the very place she so longs for. But I think we can feel *hiraeth*—distance pain—even when we're in or not far from the place we love most. Because these places are always changing, because relationships tied up in these places are in flux, because our own fleeting lives are diminishing on a different timeline than the one places adhere to. Perhaps this feeling of being out of step with the places we love contributes to the feeling that these places are elusive, lost to us, even when we haven't strayed from them.

Mann's preoccupation with place, her rootedness, is a compelling thematic thread to follow throughout her body of work. It is Mann's first shock of homesickness for Virginia, upon leaving for boarding school in Vermont, which leads her to hide in her dorm room closet at night to pen poems, overwrought with longing, to her homeplace. Place is the context in which *At Twelve* and *Immediate Family* must be understood. And place is the thread Mann returns to, following the completion of *Immediate Family*, when Mann's letters to friends detail her anxiety over what the next body of work would be.

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In one of Mann's last photos of the three children together, their figures are blurs on the horizon. As the children recede into the landscape, the land itself begins to emerge as a subject: "This gradual move from the family pictures to the landscapes, "Mann writes, "was a shift from what I thought of as our private, individual memories to the more public, emotional memories, those that the past discloses through traces inscribed in our surroundings."

Commissioned by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta to contribute to a show entitled "Picturing the South," Mann returned to Michael Miley's glass negatives for inspiration. Mann originally discovered Miley's work in 1973, when she stumbled upon 7,500 of Miley's glass negatives in the attic of the Washington and Lee journalism building. Miley, a Civil War soldier who returned to his home in Virginia after fighting for the Confederacy, is best known for his images of Robert E. Lee astride his horse, Traveler. But Mann loved Miley's lesser-known photographs of landscapes and his stirring portraits. Mann even recognized her own farmland in

his negatives: in *Hold Still* she includes one of her images of her farm's cliff face alongside Miley's almost identical photo, taken many years earlier. While a student at Hollins, Mann wrote poems in response to Miley's work and included them in her graduate thesis. Mann returned once more to Miley's negatives, years later, as she transitioned from the technically precise work of *At Twelve* and *Immediate Family* to the more experimental, process-driven photographs of *Deep South*, *What Remains*, and *Proud Flesh*.

"[Miley's] pictures," Mann writes, "completely changed the direction of my work for the next fifteen years." Mann was entranced by the solarization of his photographs, their flared white edges and "ghostly radiance." "If Michael Miley were peering over my shoulder as I make comparisons between his work and mine," Mann writes, "I'm sure he'd be appalled by the shoddy technique of my pictures and the way I am inspired by what, for him, were probably his most embarrassing failures: the overexposed, weirdly stained, solarized and fogged images that he, for whatever reason, didn't scrape from the glass."

Mann's dogged pursuit of this aesthetic led to drastic changes in her process. For the High Museum commission, Mann mimicked collodion plates by using ortho film—a messy departure from the "capital T Technique" of her earlier images. When Mann set out on a journey to photograph Southern landscapes, she made a moving darkroom of her Suburban and embraced the experiment and surprise of the collodion wet plate method. The collodion process was, Mann claims, "the perfect technique...for the granddaughter of that sentimental but methodical Welshman to use on her travels to the nostalgia-drenched Deep South."

The effects of the collodion process are visible throughout *Deep South*, in the ghostly haze of the two-hour exposure taken at Lake Pontchartrain at night, or the Van Gogh-like swirls in the sky above silhouetted trees, or the star-like flecks of white spattered across a dark and solemn field. The images appear timeless, sometimes dreamlike and otherworldly. In one image of a river, a haunting white form hovers on the bottom right side of the photograph. Is it a sandy beach? Foaming waters blurred in a slow exposure? The white shape radiates from this spot upward, over the trees, eluding definition, as many of these images do.

The movement from the precision of Mann's family pictures to the more unpredictable processes involved in her landscape photographs was guided by Mann's vision: "When I was shooting with collodion," she writes, "I wasn't just snapping a picture. I was fashioning, with

fetishistic ceremony, an object whose ragged black edges gave it the appearance of having been torn from time itself.”

The section of *Hold Still* which explores this shift—as Mann moves from one monumental body of work to the next and sets out on her journey through the South—is particularly thrilling. Process, inspiration, and discovery dovetail, each story layered over the next one in breathless prose. History collapses into the present moment, the artistic process melds into the product, and Mann’s internal vision is manifested in a body of new work. Of this time, Mann writes:

My memories are of those euphoric moments of visual revelation, still fluorescing for me like threads in a tapestry in which most other colors have faded, leaving a few brightly, and sometimes wrongly, predominant. Tightly woven in the tapestry are the images I made, themselves informed by the inextricable past and its companions: loss, time, and love. In these pictures, and in the writing of them, the dropped stitch between the sentimental Welshman and his descendent is repurled. And the story depicted in the irregular weave is of a place extravagant in its beauty, reckless in its fecundity, terrible in its indifference, and dark with memories.

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Throughout *Hold Still*, but especially in the book’s final quarter, Mann investigates various aspects of her father’s personality: he was intelligent, “emotionally inaccessible,” fascinated by death and his own “twin passions” of medicine and art. Her father’s 1938 journal entry, written before spending a year traveling abroad, demonstrates the division he felt within himself: “Do you know how a boatman faces one direction, while rowing in another? I feel as he must: striving to obtain one goal (medicine), & looking longingly in another direction (travel & literature & art). Let’s hope the current is not too strong and the stream straight.”

At the end of his year of rapturous travel around the world, Mann writes that her father “dutifully came back to America, picked up his oars, and resumed rowing, against the current of desire, back toward science.”

Theirs was not an affectionate family: “I don’t think I ever heard the words ‘I love you’ from any member of my family,” Mann writes, “but I don’t recall missing them, either. Looking back on it, they would have seemed superfluous, even suspect.” Mann’s mother once wrote that her husband “reserved his love hierarchically, ‘for Ideas, for Art and then for People...and very much in that order.’” Mann adds one other love: his dogs. Her only memory of her father crying

was when the Great Dane, Tara, was dying of cancer. “Loving dogs,” Mann writes, “seems to have been my father’s telescopic way of getting around to loving us... There’s no question that he loved his mother and his dogs, but for us in his family, the abiding and soul-niggling question was: did he love his wife? His brother? His children?”

And though Mann cites letters his patients sent to her father as proof that they loved him and he loved them back, she can’t help but comment that although “he would not show his own family the slightest bit of concern for any illness with a fever under 103 degrees, he would lavish attention on patients with a litany of specious complaints as long as your arm.”

Mann’s father was suffering from brain cancer when he wrote two attempts at a fairly minimalist suicide note, took thirty Seconals, lay down on the sofa, and waited to die. When Mann and her family members realized what was happening, they gathered around him and waited, trying to maintain their “irreverent humor as he lay dying on the couch.” His suicide note instructed them not to call for an ambulance.

In her memoir, Mann includes the photograph she took of her father lying on the couch, a sheet of plastic placed beneath him, a small bunch of wildflowers tied around his wrist. He wears a wool bathrobe, which Mann describes as “thin and moth-eaten in places, the same robe that clothed his body when it was shoved into the crematorium and which I would willingly march back through all the crowded years to roll him out of, if only I could have it.”

Years later, as Mann reached the bottom of the boxes filled with her father’s writing, records, and other ephemera, she found photographs he’d taken outside of New Orleans in 1939, sixty years before Mann herself would take her own Deep South photos: “I could have taken any of these pictures,” Mann writes, “In fact, I *have* taken these pictures, almost every one of them, without the benefit of ever having seen them before.”

In her father’s journals Mann found an entry, written in August 1950—the month she was conceived—in which he muses about artistic prophesy, and the “germ of creative art” that might arise from self-dissolution. Mann wonders if she was destined, somehow, to make the art her father was not able to make: “Am I suggesting here that I was born to redeem my father’s lost artistic vision,” she wonders, “Maybe I am, and maybe I was. God knows I have tried.” In a particularly poignant journal entry of her own, Mann wrote she was “Fighting the image of my father to become more like him.”

In their photographs, writing, and drawings, the reader sees Mann and her father obsessing over the same themes, haunted by echoing questions. She puzzles out her relationship with her father through the shared, overlapping passions that fueled their work. In the work, in the uncanny mirrorings she finds in her father's photography and writing, Mann finds proof of the love she seemed sometimes unsure of in life. She characterizes her entire creative life and work "as the inevitable result of my silent father's clamorous influence."

Her father's influence can perhaps be seen most clearly in *What Remains*, a book of photography and writing that meditates on mortality. In the prologue, Mann wonders about her father's death: "Where did all of that him-ness go?" Mann recounts the "peculiar" prayer her father said over holiday meals. Though her father attributed the prayer to Oscar Wilde, Mann writes, "we were pretty sure he composed it himself." The prayer is addressed to the "great Pelican of Eternity" and is emblematic of the "singular aesthetic" of Mann's father, who argued there were "three avenues for artistic expression: Sex, Death, and Whimsy."

Mann sees death and its associated iconography as her father's greatest creative interest. Working as a physician in a time when people still regularly died at home, he grew perhaps more accustomed to death than the average person, and certainly more interested—even obsessed—with the iconography of death in art and literature. Mann includes a photograph her father took of the mounded ground of a patient's backyard, where four children in one family had died and were buried in a single year.

*What Remains* demonstrates Mann's own curiosity about death. The book includes photographs Mann took of the bones of her dead greyhound Eva, exhumed from her grave. These images are illustrative of Mann's unflinching gaze—what some might see as an unimaginably cool, hardened edge. The first photograph shows her beloved dog's skin, hanging, after being removed from the body. Other photos focus on the dog's teeth, claws, and stacked bones.

Following the photos of the dog's bones are images Mann took while on assignment at Knoxville's Body Farm. In one photograph taken on Mann's 8x10 camera, the six-second exposure time transformed the multitude of maggots writhing over the corpse's face into "a beautiful diaphanous veil." Mann acknowledges that she is not particularly queasy about death. And it is this fascination with death that she shares with her father, and which ultimately leads her back to the questions she asked following his death:

Where does the self actually go? All the accumulation of memory—the mist rising from the river and the birth of children and the flying tails of Arabians in the field—and all the arcane formulas, the passwords, the poultice recipes, the Latin names of trees, the location of the safe deposit key, the complex skills...When someone dies, where does it all go?

Within *What Remains* she offers up an answer to these questions, as found in Ezra Pound's *Canto 81*: "What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross / What thou lov'st well shall not be / reft from thee".

In the final pages of *Hold Still*, Mann offers up her father's letters as proof of his love for her. Labelled "Exhibit A" and "Exhibit B," the first is a series of cartoons drawn on hotel stationery and depicting a young Sally pitching a tantrum over getting dressed. The cartoon is signed with "lots of love." Exhibit B is an elaborately footnoted, clever letter he sent her just before her seventeenth birthday. In one of several half-researched, half-imagined definitions, Mann's father defines love in relation to work done with "eager willingness, from the regard one has for the person for whom it is done..." Mann wonders about this "eliding of love into labor": "Perhaps hard work offered this man an outlet for the strong yet tender emotions he had difficulty expressing otherwise."

When I turned the last page of this final letter to find the 'Acknowledgments' section, I was surprised, and flipped back to make sure I hadn't skipped a page somewhere. Sure enough, Mann buried what could have been her own ending, enfolding it within her father's letter—so different from the scrawled, curt notes he left before taking his own life. In this way, she gives her father the last word on her own life's story, and ends it with love.

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In *Hold Still*, considering what will remain of her own life after her death, Mann writes:

As ephemeral as our footprints were in the sand along the river, so also were those moments of childhood caught in the photographs. And so will be our family itself, our marriage, the children who enriched it, and the love that has carried us through so much. All this will be gone. What we hope will remain are these pictures telling our brief story, but what will last, beyond all of it, is the place.

Mann has photographed her husband since they first met in 1969, and the photos taken between 2003 and 2009 and published as *Proud Flesh* depict the progress of muscular dystrophy in Larry's body. Mann, an avid horseback rider, took the book's title from the name for the tissue

that can grow over an open wound—an affliction that affects both horses and humans. The title's connotations of both pride and vulnerability are present throughout these images in which Larry appears virile in one image and frail in the next. Larry's body, articulated by light and shadow, speaks of both strength and woundedness.

C.D Wright's lyrical introduction sets the alternately sensual and painful scene of these intimate photoshoots:

Do they talk much during this *procedure*? Not much. What time is it? Does it matter? Rockbridge County time. This diminishing day will wed tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Only available light, Rockbridge County light. The seasons ramble through their routines. The alkaline soil beds under his nails. The Maury wends through him. The scent of woods clings to the hair, the skin...we are brought near enough to imagine calibrating our own breath to theirs. The frame tautly composed yet not claustrophobic. Instead, resolutely inward-moving.

In the opening image, titled *Semaphore*, Larry's bent arm rests on a table, and light falls on the palm, the inside of the wrist and the bicep, still rounded with muscle. In *Thinner*, the title directs the viewer to the visibly weakened left arm, raised above a torso that seems large in contrast. Similarly, *David* and *The Grand Perhaps* reveal the progression of muscular dystrophy in the right leg's withered thigh muscles and the crooked, stiff toes. Images like *Memory's Truth* and the wonderfully textured *Hephaestus* portray the strength and resilience of the body, the virility that persists despite the slow onslaught of disease.

In *Ponder Heart*, the final photograph of the book, Larry's back is a cool, flat plane, his head slightly blurred. His hand, held aloft just above his shoulder, is clear and crisp. Around his form are scattered the wonderful imperfections inherent to the collodion wet plate method. *Ponder Heart* is a masterful combination of textures and surfaces, with stray marks that look like mist or rain, almost as if he's just tossed a palm-full of water into the air.

These photographs demonstrate the “warm ardor and cool appraisal” with which Mann photographs the people she loves. She worries the process might cause her subjects—her loved ones—discomfort. When she tried to photograph her father as his health deteriorated, she ultimately decided to stop. She could see that with the progression of his illness, he would lose some aspect of his dignity, and she knew photographing that process could cause even more pain. Mann notes that some of the photographs of Larry cause her to “squirm with

embarrassment for him.” In C.D. Wright’s introduction to *Proud Flesh*, many of her lyric sentences contain a double meaning, highlighting both the tender passion and painful discomfort in the making of these photographs:

The mystery, thought the optimist’s daughter, in how little we know of other people, is no greater than the mystery of how much. The converse is also true. Do you need to stretch now? Can you open your legs more? Can you get closer to the edge and recline in the air a little more? Can you stay on that brink? Were you dreaming again? Of being choked off? Limb by limb? If she knew what he was thinking, would she turn away? Would regret trickle in, shame maybe? A spill of unsaids?

Wright’s questions suggest both the literal directions spoken by Mann to her husband, but also all that’s left unsaid between them. In these lines we hear both the simple, practical requests Mann makes for the composition of each photograph, and also the heavy, impossible task of balancing everything contained in this scene: how much Mann asks of her husband, to expose himself and his weakening body, all the trust they require of each other. The warmth of their love runs up alongside the threat of shame and betrayal hovering at the edges.

After a series of images of Larry’s body, his face always somewhere outside the frame or otherwise obscured, we reach *Was Ever Love*, the first photo of his face, in profile. Wright describes this image as “Clear, beautiful, frozen. His face, finally. Pain-free. Like a patient etherized upon a table. Would she turn away? Never.”

The double-edge of these final lines conjures Mann’s commitment to her husband, while suggesting that perhaps there are moments when Mann *should* turn away. But, Wright asserts, she never will. The photographs of *Proud Flesh* demonstrate the most powerful and consistent aspects of Mann’s entire body of work: her piercing, direct gaze and fearless vision; the entwined nature of her work and the lives of those she loves; and the place—her Rockbridge County farm—where that love still lives.