

EXCERPT FROM

## NAN GOLDIN: THE WARRIOR MEDUSA

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After growing up in a middle-class Washington suburb, her father a professor, her mother a housewife. After seeing her sister Barbara interned for misbehaviour and violence against her mother. After learning that her sister took her life on the rails of a train line... after all that, the woman who would become Nan Goldin, one of the most significant photographers in contemporary art, left Washington for Boston. She escaped her family. She escaped the suburbs. She escaped to save her skin and the transference that was occurring. "I thought I had to kill myself at age eighteen. My parents started to treat me like Barbara. At thirteen I wanted to grow up to be a junkie. At fourteen I left home [...]. At eighteen I started to shoot dope, and shoot pictures. That saved my life."

Shooting up. Shooting other people. Nan Goldin's life became a long photo session. She did not kill herself as her sister had done but, drugged by memories, the remembrance of her sister, she was forever haunted. Before her eyes, the faces she wanted to preserve. In art's demand for attention, she became a warrior-photographer, a Medusa mirror of what we must not forget: human suffering.

Instead of having her head lopped off by parental revisionism, Goldin placed a camera's eye in front of her own. Positioning the lens between the world and herself, she set out to produce an archive of present time to fight erasure, the trauma of forced forgetting imposed by her parents who wanted to wipe away their older daughter's suicide. Since that day, Goldin has gone through life holding a lens in her hand, her shield against the world. She tore that shield from other people and thrust it before them, a mirror whose reflection they did not wish to see. Goldin is both Medusa and Perseus: no one can vanquish her gaze, and she will not die of its reflection. Her seeing, her witnessing gaze, her eyes never closed to the truth, yet not threatening. For Goldin, there is nothing terrifying about the truth; therein lies her freedom. She fights for truth like a vigilante, unshakable, never exhausted, a resister and survivor in her desire to bear witness.

Goldin believes in real life. She grabs it and takes a stand. She isn't afraid of the risks or effects of random chance. Taking pictures is neither an artifice nor a sacrifice. Goldin shoots images and, through them, fires on reality. In art's *hic et nunc*, the lens is her weapon.

If, as a warrior woman, she inspires fear, it is because she will never surrender. Goldin does not quit, she imposes her gaze. She is a monster of perseverance, one take after another, carrying a love that cannot die; she projects its images so others can carry it too. Passion can freeze the blood as hatred does, and Goldin makes us imagine the Gorgon in love, as ugly as she is frightening, but alive and full of desire, whose eyes never close. Goldin's dark curls conjure up snakes, those vectors of evil, the Medusa head that Perseus bore like a trophy after lopping it off, though it continued turning others to stone even after death. Women refused to be victims, and so Medusa's face is reborn. It changes: Lilith, Eve, Salomé, Mary Magdalene... We discover it among the woman saints of the first centuries; their struggle for faith set them against the men with whom they lived. It became the face of all those girls who left their families to keep from being swallowed up, artists who dared show their bodies and made them speak, a whole army of women, foot soldiers in the war against the images people want to stick them with, images to

paralyze them, anaesthetic figures to confuse them, exclude them because they are terrifying or unworthy, the flags of countries where a woman still does not have the right to exist.

The year is 1986. Goldin is thirty-three years old, the age of the crucifixion.

A plague has fallen upon us. It began with a rumour that spread, grave and frightening. It was still only a whisper, sounds echoing around something unformed that people knew almost nothing about, but that was becoming more worrying. The rumour swelled, the number of cases increased, mostly men, young men, they died quickly and in terrible suffering. It was a state of emergency. There was talk of a virus that attacked needle users and homosexuals, there was talk of a plague come from heaven, a punishment, an expulsion. People refused to look upon these men covered with sores, sickness written on their bodies, stigmatized. The rumour grew ever darker, fed by forces of fear, arrogance, and contempt. A bad dream, the end of the world through the exchange of blood and liquid love.

The year is 1986 and I am seventeen years old. AIDS has arrived. We will come into adulthood with this sword of Damocles over our heads, a constant threat, as our parents look on in panic with their nostalgia for the peace and love of their youth. I am seventeen years old; I take my first steps toward love that will never be completely free. We will always be uneasy. We will always be in mourning. Rock Hudson, Klaus Nomi, Freddie Mercury, Liberace, Gia Carangi, but also that neighbour in the suburb where I grew up whose body I watched waste away almost overnight, the light gone from his eyes, his head slumped, his shoulders bent until one day the man he loved returned home alone. Death came quickly, without warning. It would leave us no hope.

I am seventeen years old and I have begun reading Michel Foucault, Guy Hocquenghem, and Hervé Guibert, whose death I mourned in December 1991, incredulous, thinking one day I would be as old as he was, and like him perhaps I too would be stolen from life. His words will always shine like the revelation of what words can do, and images too, the faces Guibert loved and photographed. Soon I would be pondering the photos of Robert Mapplethorpe in wonderment and silence, faced with his disappearance. How is it possible? What will we become? I listen, I hear, I tremble, and I cry. People tell me, "You have your whole life ahead of you," and I see my hand in the hand of AIDS. "There's life before AIDS, and after AIDS," Nan Goldin said. For me, there was only one life, the only one I know because I grew up with AIDS, I built my life with it. I learned to love with it. I have never pictured myself without it.

The year is 1986. I am seventeen. Chernobyl. I lift my eyes to the clouds and imagine them radioactive, haunted by images of bodies turned to dust on the other side of the world. I wonder, why not ours? Death is everywhere, in the classrooms and the hallways at school. The iron curtain has fallen on free love. We did not escape the atomic mushroom after all. A reign of distrust settles over us, paranoia like a prophylactic between our bodies.

AIDS and Chernobyl mark the beginning of our adult lives. We are the generation identified by Robert Capa, the war photographer, the generation of anonymous figures, faceless, without a future, disabused, disengaged, disaffected youth who grew up with the death of Elvis, leftover disco, and the superheroes of TV series. We are Generation X. Challenger blowing up live on TV, Pan Am Flight 73 hijacked, welcome to the Oprah Winfrey show. Above all this, the shadow that took the place of the nuclear hotline. Generation X is the AIDS generation. The Cold War is over, and AIDS is the new trench warfare.

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