

KATIE CATER

Petaluma, 2001
gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in



courtesy: the artist

EVA SAULITIS

Nonexistent Black- and-White Photograph

Nothing is stronger than the instinct to return to where they broke us, and to replicate that moment forever. Thinking that the one who saved us once can do it forever. In a long hell identical to the one from which we came. But suddenly merciful. And without blood.

—Alessandro Baricco

A girl's face stares out the window of a train stopped at the station in Riga, Latvia. The year is 1944. A war is on. It's raining. The girl is seventeen years old. She's bundled in a black coat, her brown hair rolled softly up and bobby-pinned in place, one loose curl lying on her shoulder. Hers is a small, serious face with large, dark eyes and long brows that arch slightly toward the temples. She stares at something, someone, past the vague reflection of a figure in the window glass. That figure is me, holding a camera to my eye. In the girl's face there is no fear, no anticipation, no premonition. On her face is the expression of waiting, of inevitability, of resignation, of exile. It's an expression one might call open. Her face is an open book, but the text is unreadable. Why is the image blurry? Is the train's billowing steam misting my camera's lens? Is it time? Is it rain? Is it ash?

I'm that young girl's daughter. It's 2012, February, a cold, clear day in coastal Alaska, wind gusts swaying the frozen sheets on the clothesline. You'll understand now why the photograph I just described can't exist, why the image is blurry as though still submerged in a developing bath. I wasn't there. No one was there, on the platform, taking such a photograph. There is no documentation. No photograph I have shows her face on that day. The face is a palimpsest, an image and a story superimposed upon a story that's been effaced. And yet this moment in time haunts me. This image of my mother is very real to me, more real than any other. I'm looking at it right now.

I sit at my desk, staring at her face and simultaneously staring at my laptop, which perches on a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. On this laptop, I'm trying to write a crown of sonnets. It begins with the scene of a girl staring out a train window. I lay the words down across the image until I come to a gap. It's said that the space between the two stanzas of a sonnet indicates an abyss. I'm trying to write my way across this abyss. You see, as surely as I sit here listening to February gusts rattle the window glass, watching a nearly extinct candle gutter on my desk, I'm standing on that train platform. I'm watching her face through my camera's viewfinder. I'm trying to retrace her steps, how she got from her home to that train, that moment, and how, consequently, I got here. I'm standing on both sides of the abyss at the same time.