

KATHRYN MAYO

Ryan Bergeron, 33, 2017
Wet collodion ambrotype, 11 X 14 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

LAURA HEFFINGTON

Ventura

Sometimes I went to stay at Graham's house while he was on tour, which was most of the time. I'd been doing this for years. Before this he had lived in an apartment I'd found him in Highland Park, but this place was about an hour and a half away in Ventura. One time I looked up the meaning of the word *ventura*, and it said, "fortune, luck, or chance." Then there were some examples of the word used in sentences.

This apartment looked a lot like the other one. The same kind of built-ins, the same record collection. He'd used the same paint colors. He had the color swatches taped to the inside of a kitchen cabinet door along with all of his passwords and personal information: his social security number, etc. He'd always been very deliberate and well organized. For a brief flash I thought of all the things I could do to him with this information. But I wouldn't do any of that. We were friends.

Since I had known him, he'd been in six different bands, worn suits and then stopped wearing them, gained and lost weight, grown a beard, gone through three different trucks, been through the death of his father. I'd said I loved him, and then I'd said I hated him. I'd seen him cry, known what positions he slept in. I'd punched him in the face, knocked two teeth loose, pretended to forgive him, then finally given up and really done it. By the time he had said he loved me, it had been much, much too late, and anyway, he didn't. But all of that was a long time ago. Most people who know him now probably don't know I ever existed, and most of the people who knew him back then hadn't known either. That part had always stayed the same.

I walked through the place. It was a two-bedroom house behind another house. Nothing in the refrigerator but a container of honey. He was away playing guitar in some hippie band with a guy who had been famous in the nineties, one of those bands with fans who follow them around all over the place. They have a special connection to the music. It speaks to them, personally. Such a thing seemed vaguely embarrassing to me, but I'd had far less rational preoccupations than that.

I used to wait for when he would be finished touring, but he didn't like to stay in one place, and I realized that the sequence of temporary situations was, in a sense, permanent.

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I called Graham on the phone now. “I’m inside the house,” I said.

“How’s it look?” he asked.

“Great,” I said, “clean.”

I’d never seen it not clean. He always cleaned up after himself.

“Hey, I brought you a present,” I said. “My friend makes these ceramic pots. I put a cutting in it from my yard, but you probably won’t want to think about keeping something alive, since you’re always gone. Anyway, I thought you might like the pot. You can throw change in it or something. Guitar picks. I don’t know.”

“Thanks!” he said.

I went out to get the mail because he asked me to. I did as he asked. There was a book in the mailbox that my father had sent him. It was a book about singing, which is what Graham did for a living. They’d made up because I said it was all okay now. They had been friends originally. That’s how we had met. My father had been established in the music community, had taken Graham under his wing when he moved to Los Angeles.

I looked around at the yard. There was an avocado tree, heavy with unpicked fruit. There was a chain-link fence. No grass, no one to water it. What would be the point of grass?

It wasn’t what you’d call a good neighborhood, but it wasn’t a bad one either. A man I presumed to live in the front house was working on an old silver truck in the

driveway. He had the hood up and was poking around in there. I thought perhaps we would wave at each other, or nod, or say hello, but he didn’t see me.

I walked to the end of the driveway, and then I saw a little child on the sidewalk. She was a baby. A toddler? She was wearing a diaper and holding a doll. She waved at me with a dimpled hand. She saw me and looked at me all quiet and still. Then her mother yelled at her to come inside. She shouldn’t have been out there alone, but it wasn’t her fault. It was someone else’s job to keep her safe, and now she was in trouble. Her mother came out and was angry, pulled her in. I thought about saying something, but what are the chances of changing someone’s entire perspective on child-rearing by arguing with them on the sidewalk?

I went back inside and I got a glass of water and sat down on the couch. He’d said I could play the records, but I didn’t. I sat there and remembered things.

When I’d had enough of remembering in there, I went to the spare bedroom to see what I could see. In that room were more records and a huge filing cabinet that went almost to the ceiling. I knew what was in there. It was full of film negatives. I knew because I had taught him how to use a camera years ago, and then later I had nearly destroyed all of those negatives. I’d still had a key to get into his house, even then. He’d been gone again, and he didn’t know how close I’d come.

Years later he would publish a book and would write inside to me in dark ink, “I think it is safe to say that this book would never have existed had you not taught me how to take photos.” But it wasn’t printed in the book, of course. It was only written, just to me.

Going back into the living room, I saw something on the couch. It was a spot of water. It was still wet, so I must’ve put it there, but I didn’t see how. I got a towel from the kitchen and started wiping at it, which only spread it around. After a few moments it settled into being a large, conspicuous, ring-shaped stain, which looked even worse when I turned the light on, so I got the entire towel wet and tried to sort of feather the edges out, which expanded it farther.

I gave up.

I considered now what restorative thing I could do with the rest of this day at this beach house. Most people would think of this as a relaxing, advantageous arrangement, so

I tried to do that. The first thing I thought of was to take a bath. But in the bathtub I found a small culture of daddy longlegs spiders, each with a pile of crumpled dead ants beneath them.

“You’ve got five minutes to clear out, Daddies,” I told them. I waited. None of them moved, so I swished them out with a piece of toilet paper. Then I started to run the water. It came out all rusty, and I noticed there was no plug for the drain. I waited for the rust to clear up and then crammed an old sponge in there. It didn’t form much of a seal. No more than a couple of inches would collect in the tub. I got in anyway.

One spider was still in the corner of the two walls above the tub. He climbed up, up, up, almost to the top, then fell back down, catching himself just before he dropped to his death in the tepid water below. Then he repeated this action, again and again. This was not relaxing to watch. I felt stressed and chilly. I hugged my knees and urged him on.

“You can do it!” I told him. But he couldn’t, or else wasn’t willing. I was afraid to touch him with wet hands in case his spindly legs stuck to my fingers. Could make matters even worse, I figured. So I drained the tub and got out.

“As you were,” I told him. Or maybe it was a female. A mommy longlegs?

I put on a bathrobe I found hanging on the back of the door. It looked like it had come from a hotel.

Perhaps a book to read, I thought. I went into the bedroom. There was a night-light next to the bed made out of some kind of pink rock. Maybe it was Himalayan salt. And there were quite a number of books. The first section of books (all were organized into categories) seemed to be about other dimensions and the potential of the human mind. That’s all I need is even more crap to figure out on even more dimensions, I thought. I didn’t bother opening any of these.

Then I discovered a book from the sixties about building charming cabins out of reclaimed materials. According to this book, it seemed that anyone with a little gumption and a hammer could choose an attractive spot in the woods (never mind who owned it or how to pay for it) and set to building a rustic dwelling out of whose sideways salvaged antique window their naked hippie child would gaze, having no need for toys or companions, at peace, having been raised so close to The Source.

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I put it back, and I crawled into the bed, and I brought a Nabokov book with me, because I liked the Nabokov book called *Lolita*. When I got under the blanket, I was careful not to move it around too much so that I could put it back exactly. It was a well-made bed, all white, and for some reason I thought of that thing people say that goes like, “you made your bed, now lie in it,” or whatever. Except I hadn’t made this bed, I’d only be lying in it.

When I opened the book up, it was partially a bunch of poems, or one big poem perhaps. And it talked about snail slime and rubber bands. Still, I got the feeling it had to be something good, something higher than myself, that I could not muster the fortitude to obtain. I read on.

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the windowpane;
I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.

That’s what it said next. It made me feel like I was falling down an elevator shaft.

And just then I felt something beneath me. It was a papery thing. It was a note. And here is what it said:

“This is my heart, Graham. Keep it safe.” And then a happy face. No big deal. Just casual.

Dear God, I thought. Not another one.

Whatever her idea of *safe* was, I felt I could be sure that it wasn't me lying on the paper in the bed and folding her heart in half without even knowing. I wasn't sure where to leave it, so I tucked it into the covers with its top poking out as if it were a tiny person waiting, all snug, and I got out of there. I left the night-light on for it.

You can do it, I thought to the unknown lady friend. It's going to be different this time. Be strong and prevail. Please, somebody. It doesn't have to be me. I folded the top of the blanket down to reveal more of a sliver of the note so it wouldn't be missed.

There was nothing else for me to do there; I had run out of ideas. I put my clothes back on, and I looked the whole house over, making sure I had left no piece of myself behind. It looked exactly as it had when I arrived. Good. I closed the door and locked it, hid the key where it should be hidden. I could hear the freeway in the distance, and the moon hung low over the fence. The yard was barren. Like I said . . . who should water it? No one would do that under the circumstances. It was understandable. A matter of priorities. People are different, and I respect that.

I stood there for a minute thinking of it all. There was no way to change anything. I hoped Graham had been able to make some sense of it. The baby would've been thirteen years and two months old by now.

Photographer **Laura Heffington**'s writing has been published in *Fifth Wednesday Journal* and *Chicago Quarterly Review*. Born in Los Angeles, California, she lives there now. Her photo book, *Architectural Tour and Elements of Design*, is available through Big Cartel.

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Victor and Ruth Shaw, Both 58, 2017

Wet collodion ambrotype, 11 X 14 in



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