

1972: Telegrams From Mashhad (2016)
Reconstructing Polaroids: Emulsions and Skins

LAUREEN ANDALIB

After a tense argument with my grandfather, my grandmother decided that she wanted to stay back in Iran with my mother and her siblings. As the former Diplomat of Bangladesh, my grandfather's first post was in Istanbul, Turkey, and during this time, my grandmother's decision "as a concerned mother" became unawaringly buried by cruel and unfortunate circumstances.

During the hardship and poverty of Iran under the corrupt Shah, the Revolution would occur in 1979.

For safety's sake, my grandmother told my grandfather to stop writing her, and put her hopes into hearing about my grandfather's health from the Turkish embassy from time to time.

All letters (sent by women) had to now be approved, written, and sent by the the newly-coined "intermediaries" at district checkpoints.

However, there was one exception permitted:

Any person could send photos to a loved one almost as "visual telegrams;" so long they were not labeled with anything politically-charged or "intrinsically codic or suspicious"-- a commonly false charge the Iranian government notoriously imposed on the innocent.

During the next few years, women were also aggressively oppressed.

In being alone to deal with it as the "Ambassador's Wife," my grandmother fearfully shut the door to the streets of Mashhad and turned the camera in on herself using the polaroid camera my grandfather had once bought her for her birthday. This became her diary, survival, and only record of documentation.

As time went on, basic Persian needs, such as the "ritual" of milk arriving to the door (the foundation of Persian diet) disappeared, and food accordingly became scarce. Words also started to circulate around town:

Off with his head! For his wife bathes in all of Persia's milk!

Water supply started to be cut in the household by town municipalities. Women were now encouraged to bathe in milk "for their men," according to the Shah.

• • •

The following polaroids are in commemoration of my grandmother. A reconstructive project in which I reincarnate the polaroids she took of herself, or asked my mother and siblings to take of her.

Today, the box of my grandmother's polaroids sit stashed away in our house, hidden by my mother. I have seen them only once, and have not been allowed to ask questions.

Today, I realize my family keeps them hidden for our, and my grandmother's safety. Images my grandmother took started to unravel a complex narrative: a degradation into isolation, loneliness, curiosity, and self in beautiful, jarring, emotional, yet melancholy ways-- all of which could seem daring to extremists from the Revolution-- or even, to a "paranoid" Iranian government today in portraying "rebellious" images of a woman.

It is through my grandmother's images I have come to know her, beyond the brief encounter I had with her when she visited me when I was eight.

It is through her images I learn about her growth-- but also her physical emotions when she started to project her feelings onto the polaroid itself through manipulation, strikeout, and gesture.

Although I myself feel more free and privileged in the present day as a woman, I have become caged by the fields which exist in the negative space of the polaroid, and also by the world of my grandmother.