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Photos That Are Too Hard To Keep

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MITO HABE-EVANS

The snapshot might not be the most beautiful of images, but that doesn't mean it can't be art. Maybe not on its own merits, but with context, more conceptually, it can teach us something about how we create our life stories. Jason Lazarus, a photographer and instructor at the Art Institute of Chicago, is interested in the way people organize their experiences, and in the personal archive of images we create. In a way, Lazarus brings photos back from the dead.

More specifically, Lazarus is interested in images with intensely personal meaning to their owners — even if he doesn't know what that meaning is. That's why he started his project, "Too Hard To Keep," in which he solicits emotionally charged photographs that people might otherwise destroy.



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Photos courtesy of Jason Lazarus

The project exists as a blog and as an exhibit, and Lazarus accepts digital images as well as actual prints, on the condition that any other digital copies be deleted. Why this requirement? The idea is to make the contribution a final gesture. "If you're going to part with it — part with it," he says on the phone. "Then what you're seeing has traction ... it is the remnant of the decision to relinquish the image from their archive into a public archive."

Often people will tell Lazarus the stories behind the donated snapshots, but he doesn't impart that information. He's not interested, he says on the phone, because that would complete the meaning. "We have this image ... to enter this field of experience or relate to this experience but not know exactly how it unfurled." The value of the photos, for Lazarus, is in the unspoken.

Contributors can request that their photos not be shown to the public at all, and in these instances Lazarus shows the backs of the prints, which have a different kind of character: What is written there? Is the photo worn, torn, has it been handled a lot? How old is it? So it's not about the image in the photograph, "it's also knowing that this image is charged with some sort of trauma narrative or meaning."

We all have images — both mental and physical — that are too hard to keep. And, thanks to Lazarus, at least the ones we purge might be resurrected.

lazarus snapshots too hard to keep

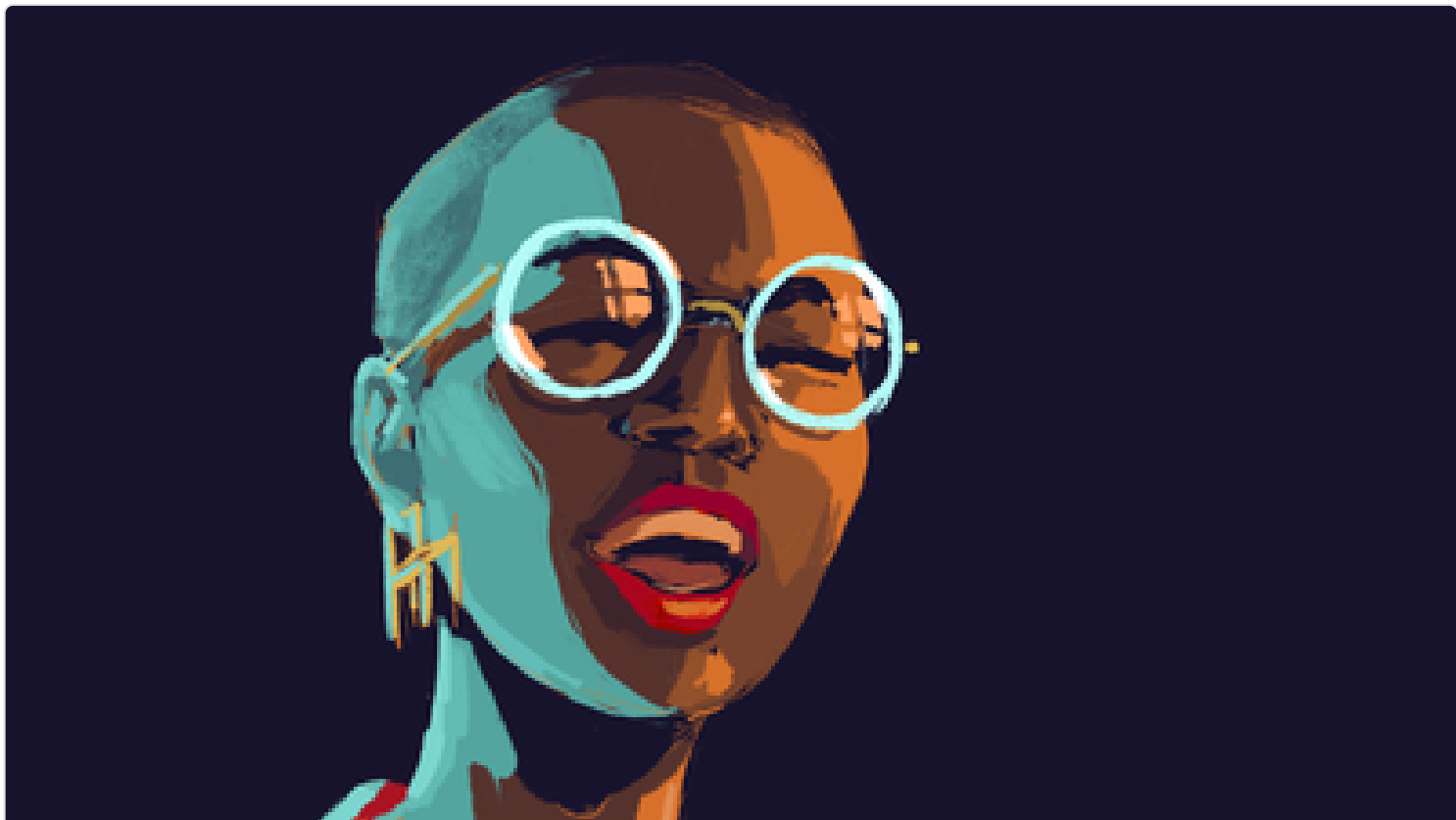
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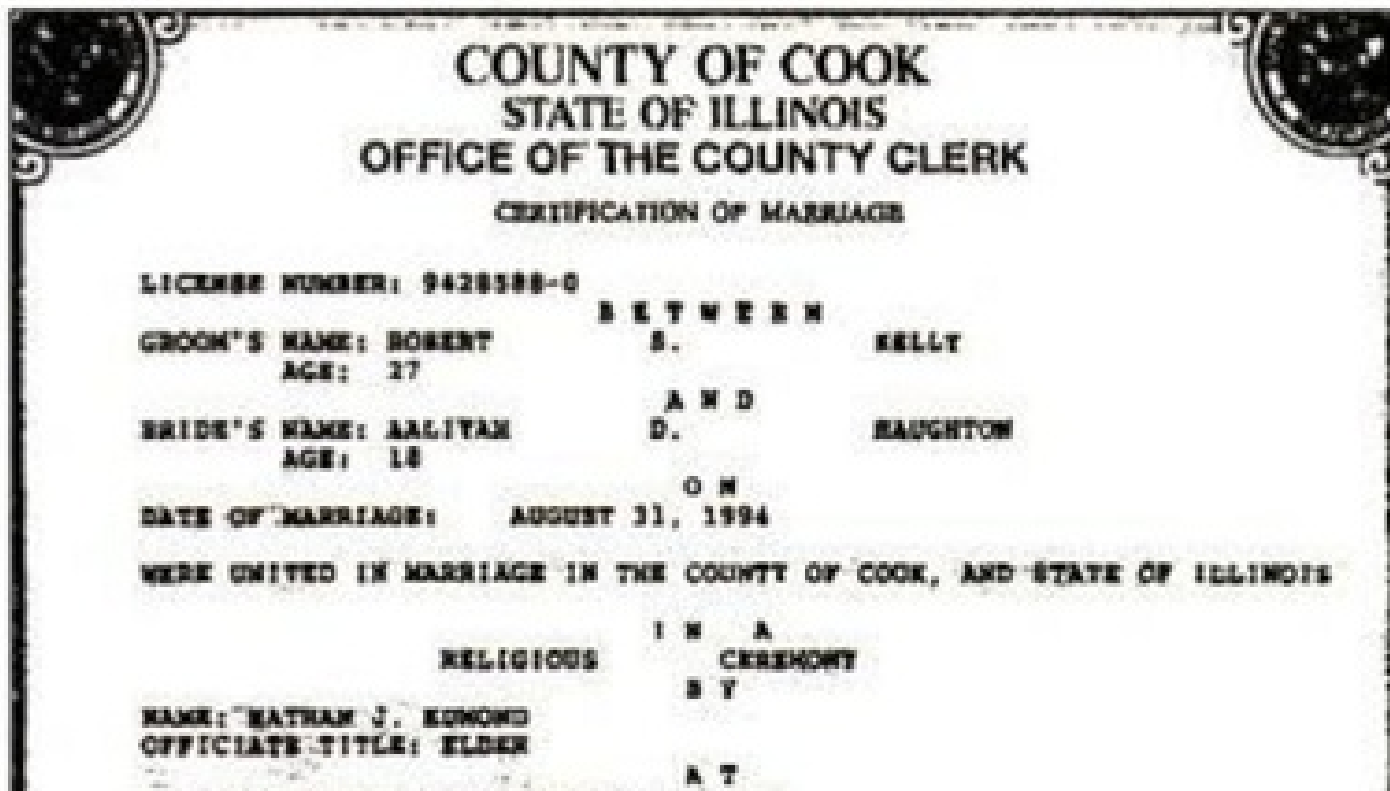
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