

The Divine Artistic Hand in My Late Mother's Beauty

As I sketched her face, I reconnected with her, and with a creative pursuit from my childhood.

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As a child, I was encouraged to practice the arts. I took piano lessons and was given paper and paints with which to draw. My parents praised me for writing stories, poems, and plays and pushed me to recite and perform them for company. I did these things with pleasure until my



Ms. Cohen's drawing of her mother, Ruth Marantz, at age 20.

teens. Although I went on to study literature and write essays and books as part of my vocation, I did so in the prescribed, often ugly style of academic discourse—without the whimsical and graceful manner in which I wrote as a child.

But following the dictates of classic narrative form, in which the end echoes the beginning, I returned to my childhood pursuits once the arc of my life began its downward turn. I started to write stories again in middle age, and later I returned to the piano. Recently I came back to painting and drawing, seeking subjects that jibed with my limited skills—still-lives with simple objects, muddy renderings of the view outside my window, crude sketches of my husband asleep in a chair. One day I chose to copy a photographic portrait of my mother that had sat unnoticed on the piano I didn't play for years.

My mother was a beauty, and the photographer had worked to highlight this. Taken when she was about 20 years old, the image showed her in perfectly delineated profile, her head bent forward, her cheek softly illuminated, her hair swept back in terraced waves.

In my newly inspired artistic state, I took out my sketch pad and my sharpened No. 2 pencil with its excellent eraser and prepared to copy my mother's profile. I was aware that I was looking at an image taken at least a year before I was born. Because I had known her afterward, this image of my mother, like an unopened flower, spoke of what she would become for me. Its serene and silent beauty anticipated the expressive face I saw during the prime of her life, as well as the debilitated visage she later acquired as a result of the degenerative neurological disease that eventually killed her.

The image in the photograph was as simple as the life that followed from it was complex and turbulent. But contrary to my expectation, it was difficult to duplicate its lines. Each time I traced the curve of the chin or outlined the triangular wedge of the nose, I somehow missed the mark. I erased—and there is nothing like erasure both to humble the artist and to renew the sense of possibility.

Each time I tried to capture the image, I brought something new into existence. The wonder of my mother's beauty became more apparent as I saw how close each of her features was to not being beautiful. Whatever forces had conspired to create her face had moved with great care or luck along a tightrope that at any moment could have tipped her into plainness or even ugliness.

It was also a source of wonder to think that my pencil could carry me across so many aesthetic possibilities. Put the nose a bit too low or make the forehead a bit too long, and there was another woman on my pad than the one in the photograph. The gift of erasure allowed me to correct each time I moved in the wrong direction. One might argue that the human population is mostly mistakes left unerased, images that an artist would discard, and that those few that we gaze on with delight—my mother, in her youth, being one—reflected those moments when the divine hand somehow got it right.

I was also struck by how many ways there are to be beautiful. How is it that the perfect proportions of my mother's face did not render her generic? How is it that I could create an image with pleasingly arranged features that individually corresponded to hers without capturing her likeness in the least?

As I erased and drew, erased and drew, I began to approach something that evoked my mother's face—or rather evoked the image that resided in my head of my mother, for the photograph was only a gateway to that memory. The relative proportions that governed the distance between chin and mouth, nose and eye, forehead and cheek grew more correct. At one point, the sketch looked more like my sister, approaching its goal by way of family resemblance, until finally I approximated as closely as I felt possible the image both in the photo I was copying and in my mind's eye.

The photograph was the double witness to my separation from my mother. It was a reproduction of her as she was before I was born and the marker left to me after her death. But it was also the bridge across separation. It allowed me to bring her back by my own hand; it gave me a deep and concrete understanding of her unique beauty; and it revived the pleasure I had once found in drawing, a pastime central to the childhood over which she had presided.

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