

The Truth Jumps Out in Fragments

Danny Lyon, Nan Goldin

by Barry Schwabsky

I can already imagine certain readers' objection—maybe that of some editors, too, though not (I think) mine at *Border Crossings*: “What? **Danny Lyon** again? You just wrote about one of his books in the last issue. With so many remarkable artists doing so many different things in the medium of the photo book, why repeat yourself?” I can imagine my response, too: “Danny Lyon isn’t repeating himself and neither am I.” In the last issue I wrote about *Junk: America in Ruins*, a collection of images of derelict cars made in junkyards in the American Southwest. His new publication, *The Rebel’s Scrapbook* (Bleak Beauty Books, 2026; edition of 500), is very different in subject and approach. In fact, it might not even qualify as a photo book at all—but it’s certainly a photographer’s book, and so I bring it into this column in the interest of expanding the scope and blurring the definition of what might count, for my purposes here, as a photo book. It’s not that this slender paperback includes a good many photographs. It’s just that only some of them are by Lyon. And besides, more space is given to Lyon’s writing than to the images. The text begins as a sort of fable, in which Lyon speaks in the third person of a man who is, transparently, himself, and this beginning concerns precisely the coexistence in him of the writer and the image-maker: “A writer kept an album. Not really a writer, a photographer, a photojournalist, a picture maker who wrote. He loved books with pictures, and pictures with words, and he loved to make them.”

The Rebel’s Scrapbook opens with the tale of Lyon’s maternal uncle, Abram Henkin; the images in the book’s first sections are mostly ones that came to Lyon from his father. Between these two representatives of his family’s history, Lyon has gathered the material to create something more than a reconstruction of the past. It becomes, he says rather grandly, “a history of the world, from the Pale of Settlement in Russia under the Czar, to images and memories of his own lifetime, all the way to the end of the world, which was the future.”

Trying to plumb his uncle’s and grandfather’s experience of a 1903 pogrom, Lyon finds an account by a journalist named Vladimir Bogoraz and, in it, the wise counsel that “if you want to find out the real truth even from a lying person, just let him speak. Eventually the truth will jump out of his soul in sudden fragments, similar to instant photographs.” As Bogoraz recounts the trial in which, grotesquely, the Jews of the town of Gomel, Belarus,



Danny Lyon, *The Rebel’s Scrapbook*, edition of 500, published by Bleak Beauty Books, 2026.





were prosecuted for resisting their attackers, and the discussions of it among the city's Jews, Abram's father, Jacob (identified under a pseudonym), rails against the passivity of the community's leaders, and asserts that "Spinoza, Heine, Bern, Marx, Lassalle, these were real Jews"—in other words, those rebels and excommunicants whom Isaac Deutscher would later dub the non-Jewish Jews. "You made them absentees, took them away from Jews and donated them to other people." Lyon, too, would become that kind of rebel, sending much of his energy outward, devoting to people other than those among whom he was counted at birth.

The violence and horror of Jewish life under the Russian czars; the struggles of immigrants in early 20th-century New York—difficulties that led Lyon's mother to briefly try returning to Russia, now under Stalin's rule; the fear experienced by Lyon's German father on the rise of the Nazis and his good fortune in obtaining a visa to reach the US; the growing political awareness of the young photographer-to-be growing up in Joseph McCarthy's America—written reflections on all these are accompanied by family photos that give no hint of life's encompassing dangers, only of the sweetness of the life that is invisibly being threatened. Or little hint, anyway. One has to wonder about the photograph of Lyon's mother at the side of a group of smiling young people in Russia in 1933; her image has been roughly cut away from the rest—then later the photo was taped back together. Who was erasing and restoring whose memory, and why? Grimmer facts are conveyed by pictures from other archives: corpses after a pogrom; the czar and his family awaiting execution.

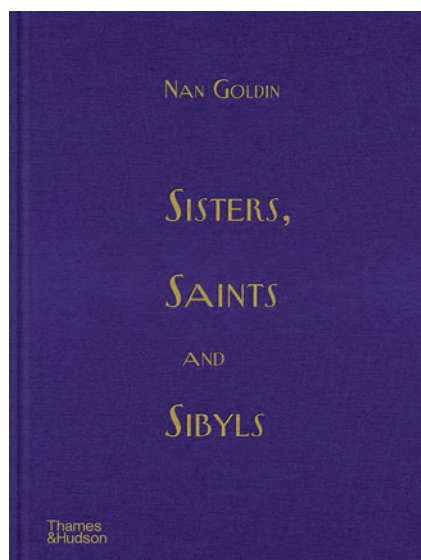
With the 1960s and the civil rights movement, a few of Lyon's own photographs begin to join the flow. He sees the movement, rightly, as congruent with the freedom struggles that occurred in 19th-century Russia, and the enemies of the two movements—the Black Hundred, the KKK—are likewise of a piece. His task as a photographer was, like that of the Russian journalist Bogoraz, to let the truth jump out at him. The violence of a White Mississippi cop with his arm around the neck of a 16-year-old Black protester is one such truth. A different kind of truth is borne by the book's final image, showing civil rights hero and congressman John Lewis seven months before his death in 2020, in bed under a couple of quilts, looking more defiant than ever and more disgruntled with the state of the world, for all that his situation implies comfort and rest and for all that the colourful

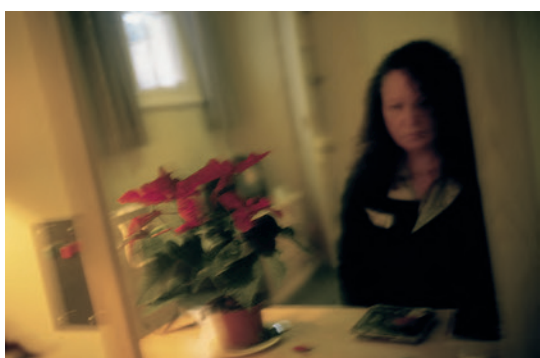
blankets communicate the human joy in making the world more amenable to our needs.

About a decade younger than Lyon, **Nan Goldin** was born into a family who was part of the same immigration of Jews to the new world as his, but she didn't have the advantage of being able to identify, as he did, with earlier generations of rebels. Her parents, as she has portrayed them, put their faith in the stifling promises of suburban conformity. Having seen Laura Poitras's 2022 documentary on Goldin, *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*, I knew the terrible story of her older sister, Barbara Goldin, who, after being institutionalized as a rebellious adolescent, committed suicide at the age of 18. I hadn't realized until now that Goldin had already told this story in *Sisters, Saints and Sibyls*, a book published in 2005 by Éditions du Regard in collaboration with Le Festival d'Automne, Paris, as the accompaniment to a three-channel video installation. Now the book—not unlike Lyon's, a kind of scrapbook—has been republished by Thames & Hudson (London and New York, 2026) in conjunction with Goldin's retrospective "This Will Not End Well" at the Grand Palais this past spring. The tale is told through the captions to photographs, more than through the photographs themselves—photographs from the artist's family archive and those she's made herself, starting as early as 1970, the year she turned 17. Among the pictures are ones that are very famous—*Nan and Brian in Bed, NYC, 1983*, or *Self-portrait on the train, Boston–New Haven, 1997*—but this is not a book of iconic images. It's really about the muteness of images, their efficacy as triggers of emotion and their abject inadequacy as instruments for conveying those emotions.

Most of what counts in the story is not shown, not showable. "I grew up to constant screaming and objects being thrown. The dinner table was a battle ground." The little black and white images, so redolent of 1950s suburbia, are full of smiles: a smile was the obligatory response to the presence of a camera. The photographs that would go on to make Goldin famous refuse this equation of photography with the veneer of happiness. They romanticize an outlaw lifestyle without falsifying it, presenting a counter-society free of the repressive sanctions under which the Goldin children were raised but with its own tendencies toward destructiveness and self-destructiveness. For the younger sister, "not ending well" seemed like a destiny that her family, beloved sister included, had fastened onto her: "My sister told me her psychiatrist said I would end up like

Nan Goldin, *Sisters, Saints and Sibyls*, published by Thames & Hudson, London and New York, 2026.





her. I thought I had to kill myself at 18. My parents started to treat me like Barbara. At 13 I wanted to grow up to be a junkie”—and that last wish came true. But she’d learned from her sister that rebellion was possible. Her own was the determination to survive. Drugs: rebellion heedless of survival. Art: rebellion as abundant life.

The images most specific to *Sisters, Saints and Sibyls* are ones made between 2002 and 2004, and set mainly in the Priory Hospital, London, where Goldin was evidently undergoing rehab; at Bellefaire, in Cleveland, Ohio, where Barbara Goldin was institutionalized in 1960–61; and at various sites in Maryland: outside the house where the siblings grew up, in a psychiatric hospital where, we can imagine, Barbara might once have been treated, and near the train tracks where she died. In the unpeopled images of places where Barbara’s story played out more than 40 years earlier, the gloomy light tells us that nothing has changed, that time itself has come to a standstill. What’s captioned *Empty Bed in Locked Ward, Sheppard Pratt Hospital, Baltimore, Maryland, 2004*, is an image of unmitigated desolation: not a bed at all, but a thin mattress and a rumpled cover, no pillow, on the floor of a blank, dreary roomful of shadow. The continuity between that double-page spread and another one, a few pages later—*Train Tracks Near Grace Church Road, Silver Spring, Maryland, 2004*—is as complete as that between any interior and exterior shots could possibly be. Even the reflections of sunlight on the tracks are bleak and forlorn. These spaces resound with emptiness. All they can tell us is that nothing remains of the person whose traces the artist has searched out, but her feeling that such traces must be there, somewhere, even if they can’t be seen, can’t be shown. I think of the lines from Frank O’Hara’s “A Step Away from Them”: “But is the / earth as full as life was full, of them?” The answer is always no. ■

Barry Schwabsky’s forthcoming books are a collection of poetry, *The Bone China Years* (Black Square Editions, New York), and *We Work in the Dark: Artists at Midcareer* (Ten O’Clock Project, Los Angeles).