

Olive Pierce: Children, Cambridge, Iraq

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Note: this is the text without the photographs! To see those, please look up the online, Zeteo complete piece.

Memory heals the scars of time. Photography documents the wounds. — Michael Ignatieff¹

It requires constant vigilance to see people as they are. — Olive Pierce

The Portraits of the Jefferson Park Housing Project in Cambridge and No Easy Roses

Olive Pierce was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1925 and died on May 23, 2016. She was a lifelong photographer and political activist. She was educated at Vassar College and, in 1948, she traveled with a post-World War II medical mission to Poland. After returning from Poland, she decided to be a photographer and began to photograph extensively in her hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

When I first saw the Olive Pierce collections in a Duke University library, I couldn't take off my eyes of them. I have been a particular admirer of two collections, of Pierce's work from 1973 to 1985: *The Portraits of the Jefferson Park Housing Project in*

¹ [Online ghosts—an old photograph, Moldavanka, and a little girl](#), *Odessa secrets: the 1905 pogrom*, October 7, 2015. Accessed via the Web, March 2016.

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Cambridge and *No Easy Roses*. These are photographs of students at the Cambridge school where Pierce worked. Here childhood is portrayed through photographs taken in and around a large urban, American high school and through the students' testimonies that have been published with the photographs.

I have heard it said, "A good story of real importance is at once a presentation and an invitation." And I think, for photographs, an invitation means creating the possibility for a viewer to have an imaginative response to the existence captured by the photographer. Good photographs invite viewers to find their own connection to the story and coax them into an imaginative realm where they can fully participate in the life of another. Pierce captures vivid moments of children smoking, socializing, dating, and learning. Her photographs deal with flesh and blood, as these children are trying out adult roles while struggling to be true to themselves. I feel I could have known each of these people; they could be me, someone I know in real life, or characters I once read about in books.

Girl in window, 1964

As a small-town girl who was born in northwestern China, I had a thrilling and glorious childhood until I turned 11 when the economic condition of my family finally began to improve and the emotional fabric that held the three of us together gradually deteriorated. I remember my parents' endless quarrels and fights, and that would have broken my heart if it hadn't already been so familiar. The loneliness I experienced as a result of their mutual discontent and anger began to occupy a bigger and bigger part of my life, and I grew more and more sensitive to that sort of thing. I have become interested in photographing children's lives partly because I want to seize the feelings that belong only to the childhood—the upheavals in family relationships, different choices of friends, fantasized romance, and new inner demands.

The girl behind the door. Havana, Cuba, January 13, 2016

The girl in Pierce's photograph is reminiscent of a picture I took in Cuba, where a girl is also looking out at the window. In both of the photographs the girls are lost in their thoughts. Their eyes are fixed somewhere, and they are daydreamers, staring themselves into a scene and consciously wishing for something to happen. There is vulnerability and sadness flickering in their faces, and these faces, while pale and haggard are also gentle and sensible, and their brown eyes have warm, kindly twinkles. The darkness behind them forms a stark contrast with the lightness before them. It left me thinking that this background could be the circumstances they were trapped in at that time. Maybe both of these girls were standing, for the very first time, at a crossroads in their lives, at a point where the darkness and light intersect.

Maybe the truth is that all of us were once dreamers but few of us have time to dream after we reach adulthood. We tend to be overtaken by the day-to-day routines. We work hard and constantly in pursuit of wealth and success, but fail to remember what it was like when a boy, in his games, becomes a pirate, a soldier, or a sailor, or a little girl plays with a doll and imagines she is the princess. When you look at photographs, you rarely see things as they are, but rather as you are.

Like the two girls in the photographs, as I was growing up I dreamed. I dreamed that my parents would get back together. I dreamed my friends would not lie to me. I have been angry, I have trusted, I have been a kid, a loner, a student, a neighbor, a girlfriend, and a friend, and I have also been the opposite, dismissing failed relationships for the glimmer of new ones, escaping the hard truth of my own history, assuming that somewhere, some day, someone would fill those blanks that only people from my past could fill.

It was in childhood that I encountered for the first time uncertainty, betrayal of expectations, forgiveness, love unrequited or offered, and these encounters were rarely on terms I would have chosen. Only later, growing up, I realized that I have to

understand the roots, the trees, and the leaves in order to understand the seasons, and I should not be afraid of my own shadows.

Cooking Class, 1983

There is a humor in the picture above, as the boy has covered his face with a piece of tissue. We cannot know what his face looks like, nor his inner thoughts. He is immersed in his own world, and we are not allowed to enter. Unlike in other pictures by Pierce, there is no eagerness to be seen in this photograph; on the contrary, there is insecurity and insulation.

Even though Pierce sought to capture many details in her photographs, we find here that there is something that she could not capture. There are two worlds existing in this picture. One is what we can see as she presents it to us, and the other world is in this boy's mind. The coexistence of these two spaces left me wondering what is at the heart of this boy's life?

In the hall, 1983

I would not call *In the hall, 1983* a beautiful photograph, because, on one level, I don't like it. It reminds me of the "freaks" in Diane Arbus's photographs. Pierce's picture lacks warmth and compassion. Looking at it, I feel that everyone who sees these two people would know right away what labels to use: a bully and a victim.

In this photograph, the girl who has been "captured" appears reluctant and wooden; her tilted body shows her discomfort at being grabbed. The boy, who is staring straight at the camera, shows a cheerful, proud smile. Both of these people knew that they were being photographed. We can also feel the presence of the photographer. The inclusion of the boy standing in the background, watching these two kids and probably

waiting something to happen, makes it easy for us to imagine Pierce, too, standing behind, watching and deciding when to click the shutter.

Pierce spent a long time with these students, and became quite familiar with a community known for its independence and insularity. One thing I find interesting about Pierce's photographs is that there are the obvious images of the "privileged" characters in school cultures—athletes, cheerleaders, gifted students, and kids who know how to play the system. However, at the same time, she also shows us some things that are less "glamorous": the cliquishness that marginalizes the poor, the disabled, and the differently gifted young people, and those considered "freaks," those who are afraid that they cannot find a way to fit into this world. Pierce was not so much photographing the school, its events and key figures as relationships found in all walks of life. It just so happens that in this case the people have been thrown into this world called "school" and are trying so hard to live their own lives in the midst of others..

Glynis and Natasha, 1983

In the book *No Easy Roses*, Pierce shows an inside view of the lives of children by letting them tell their own stories, in words. Pierce asked the students about their home lives, future plans, and dreams, and included in the book excerpts from what they said. I thus came, for example, to know the story of Glynis and her baby girl Natasha. She is a teenage mother and also has two brothers who were born intellectually impaired. Thus Glynis's mother babysits three "children" while Glynis is in school.

It is not hard to imagine the heartbreak Glynis went through when her boyfriend said he did not want the baby, or the great difficulty of raising a baby on her own. She is only 15. However, I do not see impatience or self-pity on her face. This is a moment of reliance and intimacy between a mother and a daughter, and the words provided with the picture disclose a universal truth: love can be a source of power and healing.

Girl with a baby. Havana, Cuba, January 12, 2016

While the photograph Glynis and Natasha reminds me of a photograph I took in Cuba, there are important differences. In the Glynis and Natasha photograph, Glynis is holding Natasha's little hands, as if she had found some precious treasure. In the photograph I took in Havana, the girl's confused look suggests that she bears a burden of loss and frustration. She is 12. She told me she misses her friends at school, that her parents made her drop out of school because her belly will soon become too big. She was very shy, so when I took up my camera, she looked away. When I was talking to her, I found her eyes were vacant while also being sorrowful. I could almost hear her saying to herself: *Why did all this happen?* I wanted to sit down with her, listen to her story, but we couldn't find a common language to speak, so, before I said goodbye, we shared a bag of snacks.

If somewhere in Spanish, English, and Chinese we had found more room to speak, she might have told me that she had a wonderful childhood before she became pregnant. She might have said that she did not know why suddenly everything changed, and that the loneliness of not being able to attend school and meet her friends was like a sharp arrow stuck deep in her heart.

Hanging out, 1979

There are two couples immersed in looking at each other. The girls open their eyes wide, but I can't see the boys' faces. I imagine their eyes are closed and their faces are enchanted, as if they had left time behind and the world around them had become quiet. They are lost in "love" because they have found each other. To me, this photograph feels like such a gift, as it exposes me to something that, while common, I never would have been aware of otherwise. Sometimes I worry that one day I'll become one of those adults who can't relate to their kids because they can't remember what it was like to be a teenager. I want to remember the flowers that the boy gave to me when no other boy would, and the goofy poems my first boyfriend paid his friends to write and passed along

to me as his own compositions. It is a time when we have such an appetite for words and for love and the energy to pursue a world of questions.

In photography, there is a phrase: “the decisive moment.” This is when the photographer captures a vivid and magical scene and that scene is fixed and becomes a masterpiece. While looking at *Hanging out*, I thought there must be a decisive moment for love as well, and it happens if you are lucky. Somehow you master the most significant code of intimacy with someone, the code that resists translation. That is what happened with my first love when he talked to me for the first time. You know when you like someone for the first time in your life and you think you just stepped into another world.

The most fascinating thing about this photograph is the relationship that must have developed between the photographer and her subjects. This photograph, however, mostly presents an eagerness to be seen. To produce such intimate photographs, Pierce must have spent a long time with the children and students in Cambridge, becoming quite familiar with the community. It is clear that in these two collections Pierce became an insider; she almost became “invisible.” Through the lens of Pierce, these photographs remind me what courage is, what love and friendship look like, and what it means to be young. The testimonies accompanying the photographs make their personal stories come alive.

Portraits taken of Iraqi children in Baghdad and Basrah in 1999

In 1999, Pierce went to Iraq to take pictures of Iraqi children. Since she had grown up in quite another culture and did not speak Arabic, she was an outsider in Iraq, but she managed to document the life Iraqi children were leading at that difficult time after the Gulf War, with sanctions having been imposed on the country. *Iraqi Children* is a powerful collection because it brings the themes of poverty, suffering, war, identity, and nation together in one book. I am struck by how moving and diverse the collection is. Each photograph serves as a witness to the wounds of the war and its aftermath, but it

also portrays the humanity that these children share with all children around the world. And the collection as a whole deepens our understanding of the life and imagination of Iraqis.

Girls' classroom, Center for Internally Displaced, Basrah, 1999

The girls' classroom is one of my favorites. I was amazed by how different these girls' facial expressions are. Some are eager to be seen; some not. In one photograph, so many different emotions and expressions are revealed: the tilted chin, the proud face, the terrified look, the praying eyes, the guarded arms, and the hair jauntily held-back with a ribbon or a band. These girls offered whatever emotions and meanings they had at that moment to the photographer and the camera, and we are reminded, too, how each photograph snatches a moment out of time and arrests it. It is hard through drawing or painting to portray people's emotions, but photographs can freeze a moment and, in this way, depict emotions seemingly effortlessly. A great attractions of the medium.

These girls remind me of children I met in an orphanage school in China. I recall the old, decrepit classrooms, the ragged shoes without socks. I recall how those Chinese children told me they wanted something that they could lay claim to, like books of their own—paperbacks, books they could give to friends, doodle in the margins of, or in which they could mark the paragraphs they liked and wanted to remember. Once I saw the connection between the orphanage children and Iraqi children, I couldn't see them separately. When I look at Pierce's *Girls' Classroom* photograph and my own photograph *Blackboard*, it strikes me that today we have higher buildings and wider highways in our cities, but narrower points of view and fewer expectations for our lives. Modernization has brought fine concrete houses, and also more broken homes in which people are trapped economically, and more children are entombed in obscurity.

Blackboard. Yangxinzhuang Orphanage, China, August 20, 2015

I feel I have found some nobility in the hard lives that these children lead. It seems that these girls and boys have been accepted and loved, but I am also led to wonder what would happen to these children were they growing up in a place that had been traumatized by war or poverty? What future would they have? What kind of friends, education, professional possibilities, and work would be available to them? What would their lives be?

Girl selling seeds, Safaafir Market, Baghdad, 1999

This image, like every other photograph in Pierce's Iraq collection, stops time and drags us back to the ordinary events in our life. I imagine the photographer standing in front of the little girl, not very far, not very close, watching the passing crowd, and waiting for the right moment to click the shutter. The girl is dressed in a black robe and looking directly into the camera. She is comfortable. Rather than nervousness, a slightly mysterious smile shows in her face. Pierce's camera is a vehicle for this girl and through it she says to the viewer, "Come and buy some seeds, please. If I had enough money, I could go back to school and choose a better way to live."

In *Iraqi Children*, children stare into the camera, study in the classroom, play in the street, yank at each other, and, in the most interesting picture, stops on a street corner in Safaafir Market to sell the seeds and give you an unreturnable gaze.

Five children, Basrah, 1999

After looking at this collection, I wondered how much the second Iraq war has impacted these children, and just how many have been affected? When searching "children in Iraq," I came across a presentation given at the Kuala Lumpur War Crimes Tribunal in May 2012. This Tribunal, of the Kuala Lumpur War Crimes Commission (KLWCT), is a

Malaysian undertaking established in 2007. In the presentation, the speaker Chris Floyd said:

Line up the bodies of the children, the thousands of children—the infants, the toddlers, the school kids—whose bodies were torn to pieces, burned alive or riddled with bullets during the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. Line them up in the desert sand, walk past them, mile after mile, all those twisted corpses, those scraps of torn flesh and seeping viscera, those blank faces, those staring eyes fixed forever on nothingness. This is the reality of what happened in Iraq; there is no other reality.²

The presentation made my heart tremble. It is not hard to imagine how the daily hardships—bomb blasts, gunfire, killings of family members, and sectarian violence have wrecked the lives of Iraq’s children.

When pouring over the photographs in Pierce’s work, I do see how children lead a poor life with the wounds of wars and the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq (1990-2003). However, at the same time, *Iraqi Children* is not entirely about despair, war, and decline. Pierce did not take pictures of suffering. Rather, she chose to portray the humanity Iraqi children share with all the world's children. There are children selling seeds, sitting in a classroom, and chasing each other down the street. Even in the midst of suffering, there is a sense of the brightness, freedom, and peacefulness that belongs to the childhood. Maybe Olive Pierce decided to let memory heal the scars of time, by using photography to document these children’s sorrow and joy to raise our awareness, that we are all children once, that we are all human beings.

² Bie Kentane, [The Children of Iraq: ‘Was the Price Worth It?’](#) *Global Research*, February 19 2013. Accessed via the Web, February 22, 2016.

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