From the book - The Ballad of Sexual Dependency
Nan Goldin (1954- )

THE BALLAD OF SEXUAL DEPENDENCY is the diary I let people read. My written diaries are private; they form a closed document of my world and allow me the distance to analyze it. My visual diary is public; it expands from its subjective basis with the input of other people. These pictures may be an invitation to my world, but they were taken so that I could see the people in them. I sometimes don’t know how I feel about someone until I take his or her picture. I don’t select people in order to photograph them; I photograph directly from my life. These pictures come out of relationships, not observation. People in the pictures say my camera is as much a part of being with me as any other aspect of knowing me. It’s as if my hand were a camera. If it were possible, I’d want no mechanism between me and the moment of photographing. The camera is as much a part of my everyday life as talking or eating or sex. The instant of photographing, instead of creating distance, is a moment of clarity and emotional connection for me. There is a popular notion that the photographer is by nature a voyeur, the last one invited to the party. But I’m not crashing; this is my party. This is my family, my history.

My desire is to preserve the sense of peoples’ lives, to endow them with the strength and beauty I see in them. I want the people in my pictures to stare back. I want to show exactly what my world looks like, without glamorization, without glorification. This is not a bleak world but one in which there is an awareness of pain, a quality of introspection. We all tell stories which are versions of history—memorized, encapsulated, repeatable, and safe. Real memory, which these pictures trigger, is an invocation of the color, smell, sound, and physical presence, the density and flavor of life. Memory allows an endless flow of connections. Stories can be rewritten, memory can’t. If each picture is a story, then the accumulation of these pictures comes closer to the experience of memory, a story without end. I want to be able to experience fully, without restraint. People who are obsessed with remembering their experiences usually impose strict self-disciplines. I want to be uncontrolled and controlled at the same time. The diary is my form of control over my life. It allows me to obsessively record every detail. It enables me to remember.

This is the history of a re-created family, without the traditional roles.
My favorite book, as a child, was Richard Hughes's A High Wind in Jamaica, in which a group of children are separated from their parents and taken away by pirates. The parents are constantly worrying about the children, wondering how much the children are missing them. The children, in fact, hardly think about the parents. They adapt immediately to their new reality and are caught up in the adventure of their own experiences. In my family of friends, there is a desire for the intimacy of the blood family, but also a desire for something more open-ended. Roles aren't so defined. These are long-term relationships. People leave, people come back, but these separations are without the breach of intimacy. We are bonded not by blood or place, but by a similar morality, the need to live fully and for the moment, a disbelief in the future, a similar respect for honesty, a need to push limits, and a common history. We live life without consideration, but with consideration. There is among us an ability to listen and to empathize that surpasses the normal definition of friendship. The people and locales in my pictures are particular, specific, but I feel the concerns I'm dealing with are universal. Many people try to deflect this by saying, "we don't look like the subjects of these pictures; they're not about us." But the premise can be applied to everyone; it's about the nature of relationships.

I often fear that men and women are irrevocably strangers to each other, irreconcilably unsuited, almost as if they were from different planets. But there is an intense need for coupling in spite of it all. Even if relationships are destructive, people cling together. It's a biochemical reaction, it stimulates that part of your brain that is only satisfied by love, heroin, or chocolate; love can be an addiction. I have a strong desire to be independent, but at the same time a craving for the intensity that comes from interdependency. The tension this creates seems to be a universal problem: the struggle between autonomy and dependency. The Ballad of Sexual Dependency begins and ends with this premise, from the first series of couples including the Duke and Duchess of Windsor-the epitome of the Romantic ideal—crumbling in the Coney Island wax museum to the picture of the skeletons crumbling in an eternal embrace after having been vaporized. In between I'm trying to figure out what makes coupling so difficult.

I've seen how the mythology of romance contradicts the reality of coupling and perpetuates a definition of love that creates dangerous expectations. This mythology doesn't allow for the ambivalence that's natural in any sustained relationship. The friction between the
fantasies and the realities of relationships can lead to alienation or violence. If men and women often seem unsuited to one another, maybe it's because they have different emotional realities and speak a different emotional language. For many years, I found it hard to understand the feeling systems of men; I didn't believe they were vulnerable and I empowered them in a way that didn't acknowledge their fears and feelings. Men carry their own baggage, a legacy based on a fear of women, a need to categorize them, for instance, as mothers, whores, virgins, or spiderwomen. The construction of gender roles is one of the major problems that individuals bring into a relationship.

As children, we're programmed into the limitations of gender distinction: little boys to be fighters, little girls to be pretty and nice. But as we grow older, there's a self-awareness that sees gender as a decision, as something malleable. You can play with the traditional options-dressing up, cruising in cars, the tough posturing-or play against the roles, by displaying your tenderness or toughness to contradict stereotypes. When I was fifteen, the perfect world seemed a place of total androgyny, where you wouldn't know a person's gender until you were in bed with him or her. I've since realized that gender is much deeper than style. Rather than accept gender distinction, the point is to redefine it. Along with playing out the clichés, there is the decision to live out the alternatives, even to change one's sex, which to me is the ultimate act of autonomy. The women shown together in The Ballad offer a sense of solidarity, almost Amazonian strength, united with deep tenderness, openly tactile without self-consciousness. The solitary male is shown with his tenderness and vulnerable sexuality, but when the men are together, they become tougher. There is a competitive, erotic, gaming situation displayed through fighting, drinking, proving their ability to withstand pain.

What you know emotionally and what you crave sexually can be wildly contradictory. I often feel that I am better suited to be with a woman; my long-term friendships with women are bonds that have the intensity of a marriage, or the closeness of sisters. But a part of me is challenged by the opacity of men's emotional makeup and is stimulated by the conflict inherent in relationships between men and women.

Sex itself is only one aspect of sexual dependency. Pleasure becomes the motivation, but the real satisfaction is romantic. Bed
becomes a forum in which struggles in a relationship are defused or intensified. Sex isn't about performance; it's about a certain kind of communication founded on trust and exposure and vulnerability that can't be expressed any other way. Intense sexual bonds become consuming and self-perpetuating. You become dependent on the gratification. Sex becomes a microcosm of the relationship, the battleground, an exorcism. For a number of years, I was deeply involved with a man. We were well suited emotionally and the relationship became very interdependent. Jealousy was used to inspire passion. His concept of relationships was rooted in the romantic idealism of James Dean and Roy Orbison. I craved the dependency, the adoration, the satisfaction, the security, but sometimes I felt claustrophobic. We were addicted to the amount of love the relationship supplied. We were a couple. Things between us started to break down, but neither of us could make the break. The desire was constantly reinspired at the same time that the dissatisfaction became undeniable. Our sexual obsession remained one of the hooks.

One night, he battered me severely, almost blinding me. He burned a number of my diaries. I found out later that he had read them. Confronting my normal ambivalence had betrayed his absolute notion of romance. His conflict between his desire for independence and his addiction to the relationship had become unbearable.

After two years of anger and mourning, I was face to face with him on the street for the first time since that night. We said hello. I looked into his eyes. Later I was able for the first time to remember my real desire for this man and I understood how intense that bond was. Despite all the destruction, I could still crave that love. I had to face the irreconcilable loss.

I was eleven when my sister committed suicide. This was in 1965, when teenage suicide was a taboo subject. I was very close to my sister and aware of some of the forces that led her to choose suicide. I saw the role that her sexuality and its repression played in her destruction. Because of the times, the early sixties, women who were angry and sexual were frightening, outside the range of acceptable behavior, beyond control. By the time she was eighteen, she saw that her only way to get out was to lie down on the tracks of the commuter train outside of Washington, D.C. It was an act of immense will.
In the week of mourning that followed, I was seduced by an older man. During this period of greatest pain and loss, I was simultaneously awakened to intense sexual excitement. In spite of the guilt I suffered, I was obsessed by my desire. My awareness of the power of sexuality was defined by these two events. Exploring and understanding the pennutations of this power motivates my life and my work. I realized that in many ways, I was like my sister. I saw history repeating itself. Her psychiatrist predicted that I would end up like her. I lived in fear that I would die at eighteen. I knew it was necessary for me to leave home, so at fourteen I ran away. Leaving enabled me to transform, to recreate myself without losing myself. When I was eighteen I started to photograph. I became social and started drinking and wanted to remember the details of what happened. For years, I thought I was obsessed with the recordkeeping of my day-to-day life. But recently, I've realized my motivation has deeper roots: I don't really remember my sister. In the process of leaving my family, in recreating myself, I lost the real memory of my sister. I remember my version of her, of the things she said, of the things she meant to me. But I don't remember the tangible sense of who she was, her presence, what her eyes looked like, what her voice sounded like. I don't ever want to be susceptible to anyone else's version of my history. I don't ever want to lose the real memory of anyone again.

IT'S STILL MY FAMILY. Ten years have passed since the Ballad was published and I don't really look at the book anymore. That was then; this is now. I continue to keep my diaries, both written and photographic. They take care of the past for me, and allow me to live totally in the present. I took the pictures in this book so that nostalgia couldn't ever color my past. I realize I took the picture of myself battered so I wouldn't go back to the man who beat me up. I wanted to make the record of my life that nobody could revise: not a safe, clean version, but instead, a record of what things really looked like and felt like. But photography doesn't preserve memory as effectively as I had thought it would. A lot of the people in the book are dead now, mostly from AIDS. I had thought that I could stave off loss through photographing. I always thought if I photographed anyone or anything enough, I would never lose the person, I would never lose the memory, I would never lose the place. But the pictures show me how much I've lost. AIDS changed everything. The people I feel knew me the best, who understood me, the people who carried my history, the people I grew up with and I was planning to get old with are gone. Our history got cut off at an early age.
There is a sense of loss of self also, because of the loss of community. But there's also a feeling that the tribe still goes on. AIDS altered our lives in every respect. The notion of self-destruction as glamorous became self-indulgent when people around us started dying: that romantic vision of the self-destructive artist, having to suffer or induce pain in order to work, that sense that creativity has to come out of euphoric crisis, or out of extreme excess, changed. With the advent of death in our lives came a real will to survive, and help each other survive, to show up for each other. In the beginning, drugs were about expansion; but by the end they became a prison. Originally, I did drugs to have more vision, to have more clarity, to lose all inhibitions, to be completely spontaneous and wild. For a long time it worked. But it's hard to sustain that for too many years. When I crossed the line from use to abuse my world became very, very dark-between 1986 and 1988.

In 1988, two years after the Ballad was first published, I entered a detox clinic for drugs and alcohol. I brought a copy of the Ballad with me. The first thing the nurses did was take away the book, saying it would cause drug and sex urges in the other patients. I wasn't allowed to see my work or to have my camera for the two months I was an inpatient. So for the first time since I was a teenager, I was unable to take pictures to help me understand and survive my experience. I think not having my camera to ground me added to my terror in going through withdrawal. Later, when I entered the halfway house on the grounds of the hospital, I was given my camera back. I began a series of self-portraits that were instrumental in my early recovery. Through photographing myself daily, I was able to fit into my own skin again, to find my face again. During this period, I also discovered daylight: I had never known before that photography was related to light. I had always thought that available light meant the red light bulb in an after-hours bar.

So this new work—my first pictures without drugs—became about coming out of darkness into light both literally and metaphorically. It was the starting point for all the work that I've done since. Now my pictures are more introspective, quieter, and not about extremes of behavior in the same way, although there is still that urge to push limits. The energy in the pictures is different now: they're more focused and there's more clarity. There is both darkness and light, and what's in between. Photography has been redemptive for me. It's kept me alive, and it helped me chart my descent and my reconstruction.
I continue to photograph my community, including many of the people in the Ballad: David, Bruce, Greer, Kdthe, Sharon, Vivienne and her son, who is now nine years old ... so there's also a continuation through the children. My family of friends is still based on interdependency, continuity, love, and tenderness. I make no emotional distinction between my friends and my lovers. I don't believe photography stops time. I still believe in photography's truth, which makes me a dinosaur in this age. I still believe pictures can preserve life rather than kill life. The pictures in the Ballad haven't changed. But Cookie is dead, Kenny is dead, Mark is dead, Max is dead, Vittorio is dead. So for me, the book is now a volume of loss, while still a ballad of love.

Nan Goldin, March 1996