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# Demystifying Ruth

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Demystifying Ruth

by

Georgia Hatchett

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Fine Arts

in

University Honors

and

Graphic Design

Thesis Advisor

Meredith James, M.F.A.

Portland State University

2019



demystifying ruth

Demystifying Ruth is the result of my thesis research in which I delve into the memory of my paternal grandmother Ruth, a woman who was a complete mystery to me for most of my life.

Through investigating her memory, I sought out to understand the greater cultural context of sharing family history and its complicated relationship with memory and the photograph.

# Demystifying Ruth

## Introduction

In my thesis work I have been mulling over the idea that you can construct a memory of a person you've never met. Specifically, I've been focusing my efforts on demystifying the memory of my paternal grandmother, Ruth.

Ruth died before I was born, and for my entire life she's been a mysterious figure that I've felt connected to despite never knowing her. Besides the bits and pieces of information of I've gathered over the years, my grandmother's memory has not really been shared with me. The extent of this can be proven by the fact that I only saw a picture of her for the first time last year. Her face was unrecognizable to me, I wouldn't have known it was her without context.

This discovery of her image sent me to a place of deep curiosity, which I decided to delve into despite my initial fears and anxieties about sharing research that is so personal to myself and my family. However, I ultimately believe that it's crucial to ask these questions I've always wondered about my grandmother Ruth. I must at least try to create a semblance of her memory before I no longer have access to it. For my research I've been interviewing my family members, digging through an extensive archive of family artifacts, and examining how my personal research relates to a greater cultural context of family history and it's complicated relationship with photographs and memory.

# Demystifying Ruth

## Research & Process

A part of my interest in looking into my own family history stems from my obsession with investigating the complicated nature of the photograph. After reading works of critical photographic theory from philosophical influencers such as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, my world view became rattled with the understanding that something as seemingly straightforward as the photograph was actually incredibly complex. I couldn't unsee the varying problems and complications surrounding the photograph as an object in society.

In my thesis research I honed in on the problematic nature of the family photograph. Through reading texts from scholars such as Marianne Hirsh, I was able to gain a theoretical understanding of the specific problems and complexities that surround the photograph as an object of "truth" and memory in family history. What I found is that the family photograph is typically a regurgitation of cultural norms, and the idea of what a family "should" look like. It's a fragmentation of family experience that is used as a piece of evidence to aid a familial narrative (Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, 241). I define familial narrative as the ways in which we use story telling to share our family histories through image, language, and memory. I argue that often we don't view our own family narratives critically because they are so personal to us. These histories are thought to be matters of fact, but there is no denying that just like any retelling of the past, memories are skewed, and photographs don't show us the whole picture.

I also researched family memoirs to examine how others have navigated their own familial narratives in relation to their identity. The ways in which authors such as Sally Mann and Shannon O'Brien went about blending their memories and identities with familial research was my biggest source of inspiration. What I took away from reading these memoirs is that the most interesting part wasn't necessarily the research, it was the author's perspectives on what they found and what it meant to them.

I took this secondary research into account when delving into my own family history. The bulk of my research was interviewing those who knew Ruth, and analyzing archival documents. I found the interviews I conducted to be incredibly informative and compelling. Along with these oral histories, I was able to look through the family archive of documents, videos, and photographs. I was amazed by how much had been kept over the years, and that it was still in good shape. My Uncle Steve has been extensively researching our family history, making him a great resource for this project. As we looked through the many boxes of archival materials he recounted the history and memories that went along with the objects. This moment of passing along history was quite special, and I learned an incredible amount about Ruth, and my family history in general.

Within each photograph I saw a glimpse of a life once lived by my grandmother. I was especially drawn to the photographs of her and my grandfather in their youth, as well as the letters he sent while he was serving in the Navy. There were also objects from my grandmother's childhood that I would have never expected to see: her doll, a piece of paper with scribbles of her name, and a Valentine's Day card she gave to her mother. I was attempting to demystify my grandmother's memory using this primary research, but I knew that I would not be able to attain this completely. The photographs and films I analyzed could only tell me so much. The oral histories of my family members were tainted by effects of time on their memories. Essentially, when I looked critically at my own family narrative unfolding before me, I knew that the story I would eventually tell would be based on my fragmented understanding of Ruth. However, I didn't necessarily see this as a negative thing. I leaned into this problem. I began to view this project as if it were an experiment in which I was critically looking at the process of creating an idea of a person using photographs and memory. I was no longer interested in capturing her memory as it was, but rather capturing it as I understood it.

# Demystifying Ruth



## Visual Research

In my visual research, I found myself intrigued by textural, overlapping layouts that felt tangible even on the screen. I feel that this aesthetic speaks to me because it reminds me of the textural nature of family photographs: folded corners, yellowed photo albums, an old shoebox filled to the brim with artifacts. I knew that I wanted my project to reflect this visual language.

I also considered the potential for using blurred photographs as a visual metaphor for the haziness of memory. When I think about the process of getting to know more about who my grandmother was, it was like a camera coming into focus. Little by little, her image in my mind turned from an unfocused mass, into something that resembled a person, though never quite crystal clear.

Typographic research for this project was difficult at first. I tried to find the perfect typeface that was delicate enough to tell the story, but without being obvious or cheesy. Everything I tried felt wrong, it felt impersonal. I came to the conclusion that my own handwriting would be the best option because it's intimate. By using handwritten typography, the presence of my voice as the storyteller becomes prevalent to the viewer.



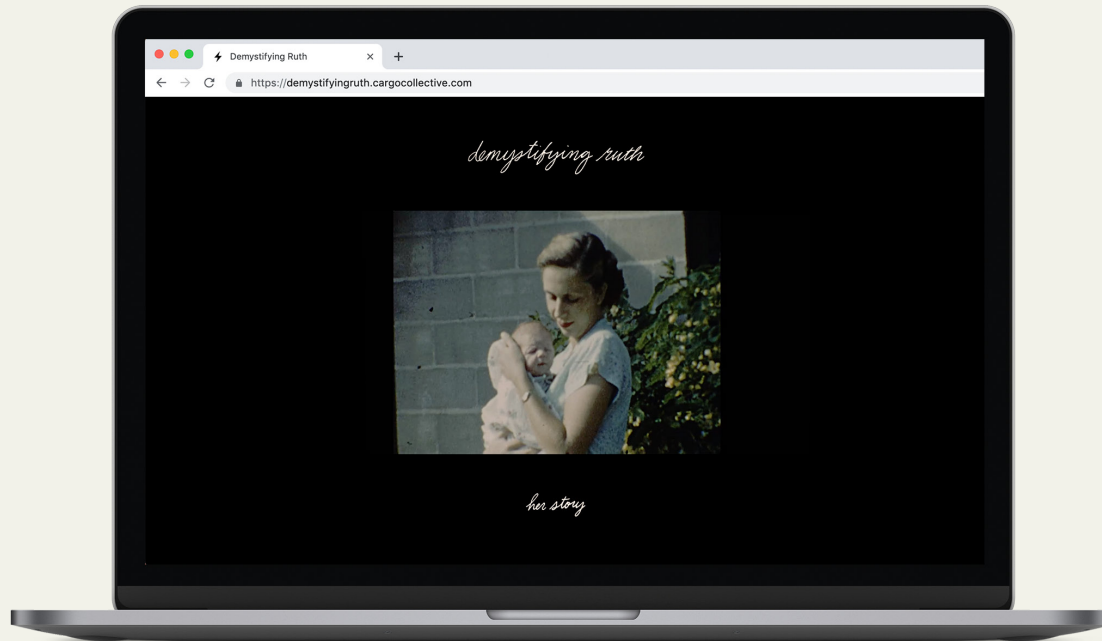
# Demystifying Ruth

## Research Conclusion

The overall conclusion I've come to from conducting my research is this: I don't think it's possible to fully form the memory of someone you've never met. These archival documents and oral histories shared with me have brought me closer to constructing a memory of Ruth, but I still can't and won't know her. Just like a photograph can show someone's likeness, it's not the same as them being right in front of you. There are things about my grandmother that I just can't know. I can't know her voice, or her smell, or what it felt like to hug her. However, this does not mean that this is all meaningless. I'm so much closer to knowing her than I was before. A fragmented memory is better than no memory at all. At one time I would not have recognized my grandmother if she were right in front of me, and now I can see her face in my own. With design and my newfound knowledge, I have the ability to create a beautiful narrative and documentation of this process of demystifying Ruth. I can make something precious from the fragments that have been left behind. I feel proud and honored to do this for my family, and for Ruth.



# Demystifying Ruth



## Result

What I ultimately ended up creating is a website that is a visual and written interpretation of Ruth's life and memory. In each section I focus on one aspect of Ruth's life, creating a familial narrative using photographs and my commentary.

My rationale for using this digital medium is that I wanted to challenge the traditional ways of sharing family narratives which is typically a physical, tangible experience. My family is rarely together, so I felt this was a way that I could reach them without having to wait until our next reunion. The audience for this project is mostly myself and my family, but I tried to explain her story as if I were an outsider looking in, making it accessible to anybody who views it. Though, I've ultimately decided that it would be best to keep this website private, only sharing it with those I trust. I have the utmost respect for Ruth, and I feel it would be exploitative to share this project with the world.

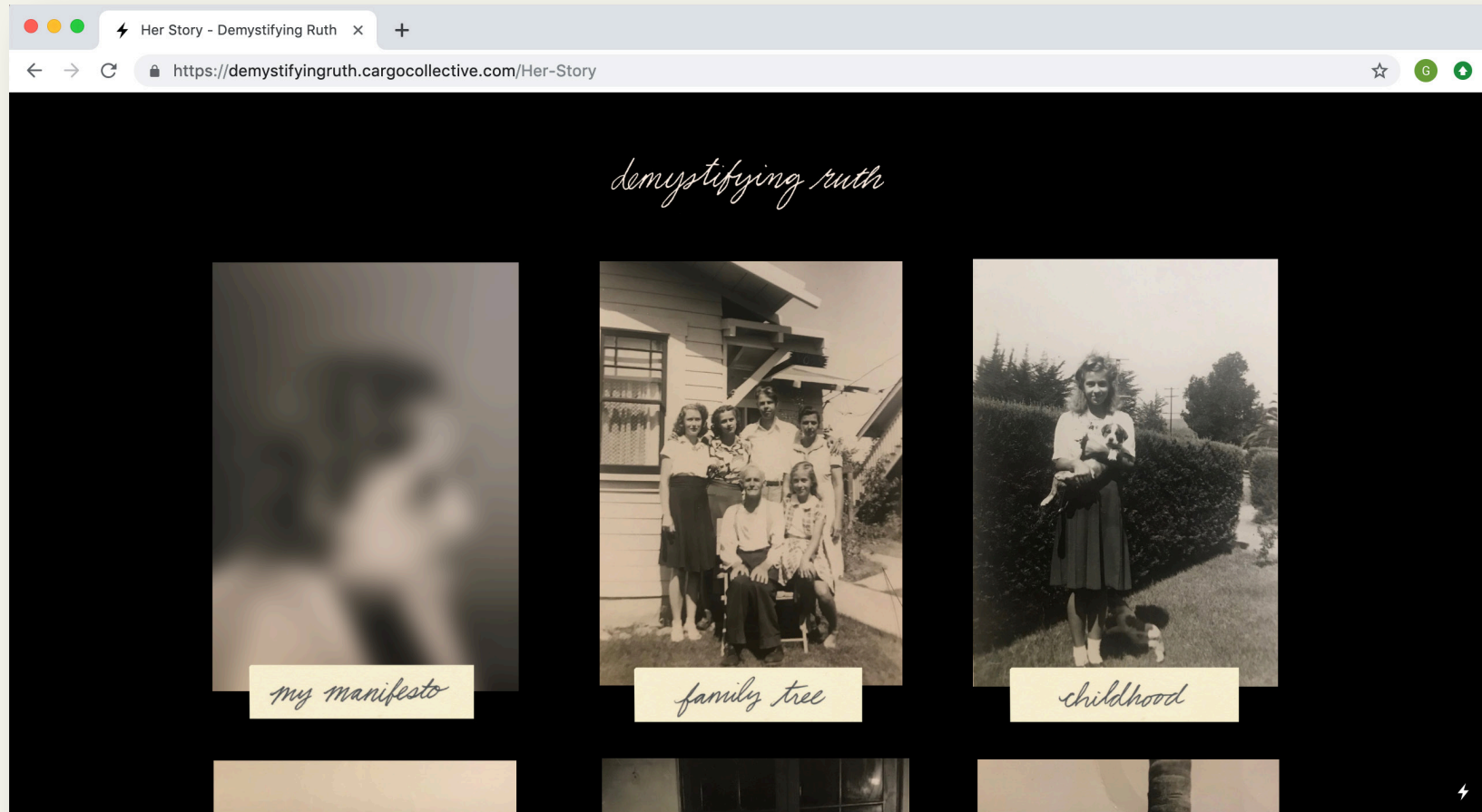
The design challenges of this format was that I wanted it to still feel personal and textural even though it was a digital experience. I achieved this by emulating my visual research: creating a scrapbook-like texture in the digital sphere. Another challenge was deciding what to include. Despite having a conscious awareness of the problematic nature of curating family history, I found myself actively participating in depicting a curated history for a couple of reasons. The first reason is ethics. Through my research, I found that my grandmother was incredibly private. I had to take a step back and ask myself what I thought she would be comfortable with me sharing. The second reason is that I was dealing with a wealth of information. I had to distill and organize all of the research I gathered, and present the narrative and visuals in a compelling way that didn't exhaust the viewer.

Overall, I'm happy with the final result of my efforts. I've created something that speaks to my research, and means so much to myself and my family. Using this format of digital documentation gives this story the ability to last forever. It also has the ability to evolve. I can always add and subtract to this project, I don't see myself ever fully putting it down.

# Demystifying Ruth

## Navigation

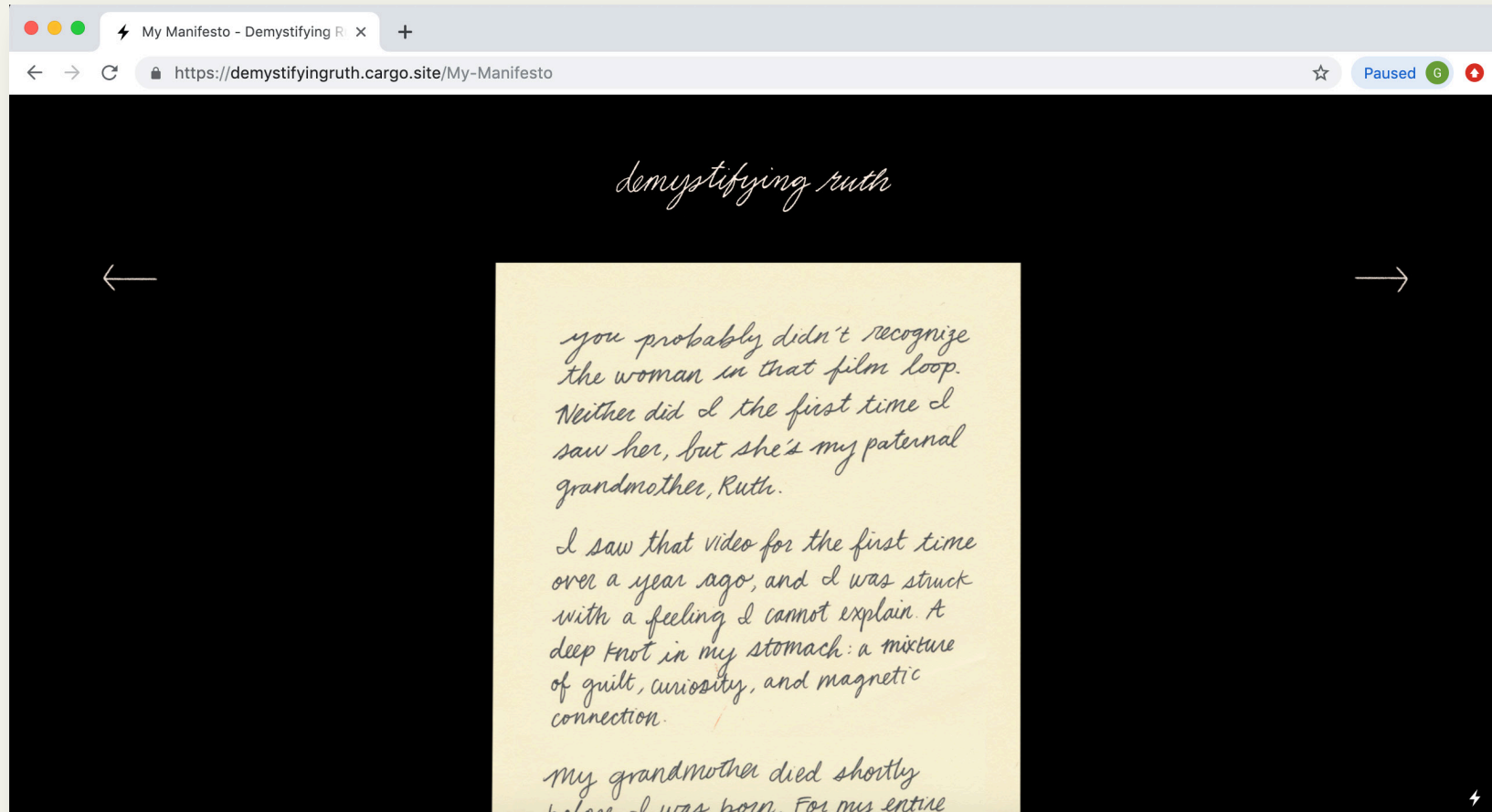
The website is split up into six sections: My Manifesto, Family Tree, Childhood, Young Woman, George, and Motherhood.



# Demystifying Ruth

## My Manifesto

First is my manifesto where I explain the purpose of the project, and introduce my role, as the storyteller.



# Demystifying Ruth

## Family Tree

In the next section, I layout the groundwork for who Ruth's immediate family was. Both of her parents immigrated to the U.S. when they were young. Her father was from Latvia and her mother from Sweden. I go into some depth about her mother's callous disposition and lasting effects it had on her children.





# Demystifying Ruth

## Childhood

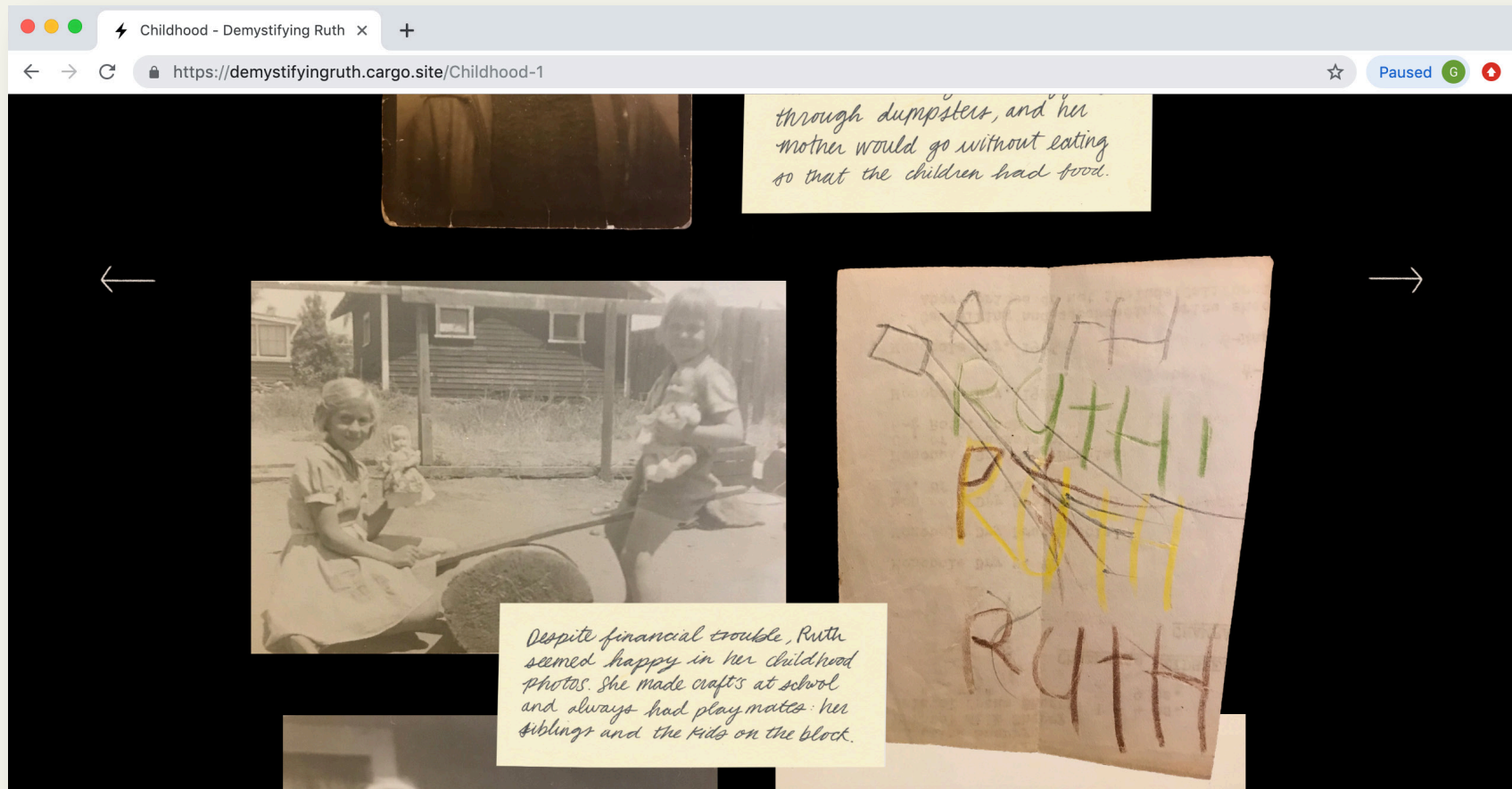
In the section about Ruth's childhood, I experimented with using content outside of what I found in the family archives. I did her birth chart and found her childhood home on Google maps, I think this juxtaposition of past and present is really interesting.



# Demystifying Ruth

## Childhood

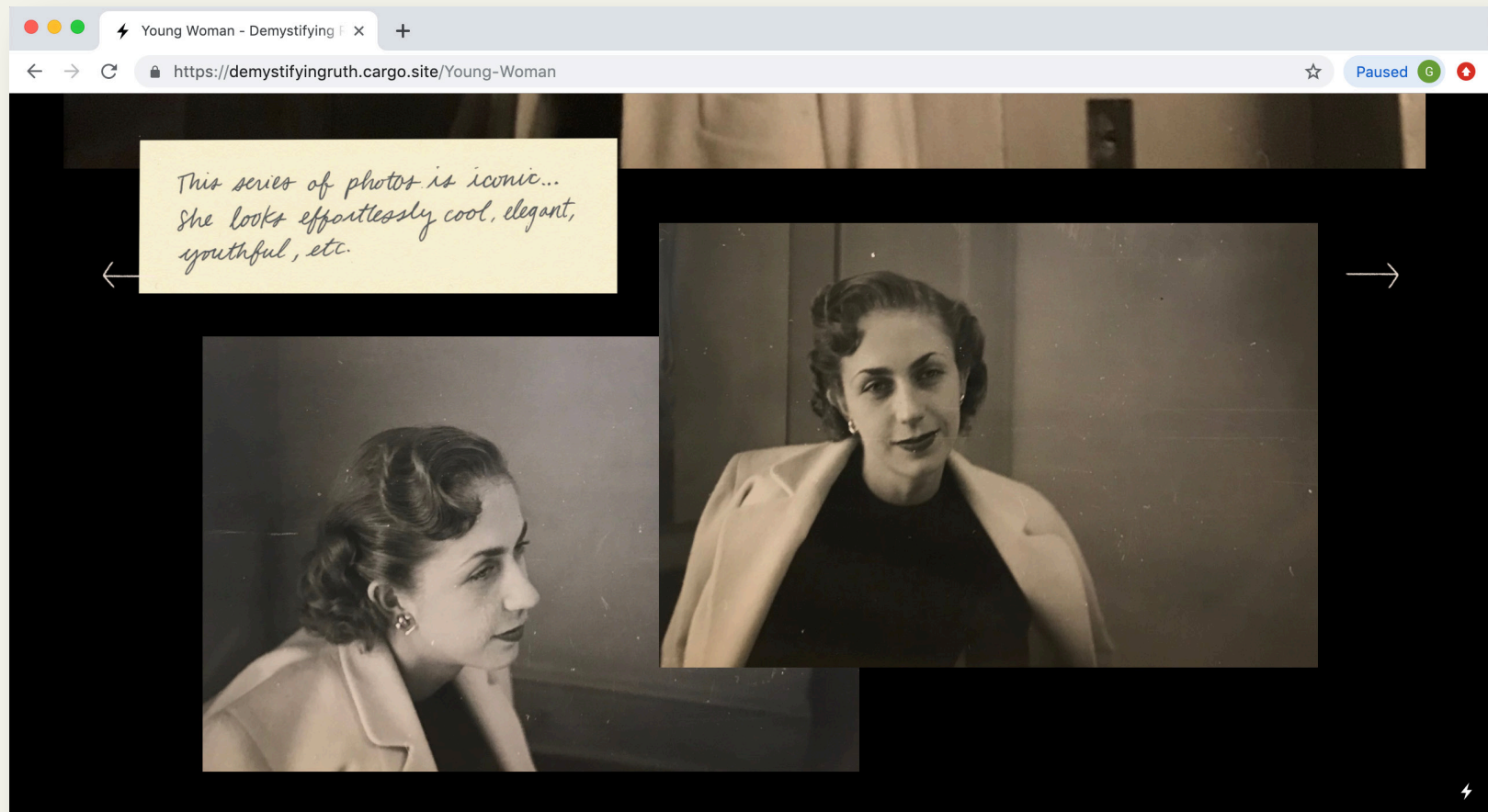
I was amazed by the amount of archival objects that still exist from my grandmother's childhood. I was stunned by this slip of paper in which she practiced scrawling her name.



# Demystifying Ruth

## Young Woman

Young woman was the section I connected to the most because Ruth and I are about the same age during this era of her life. Our lives are wildly different, but I feel like I can still relate to her.





# Demystifying Ruth

## George

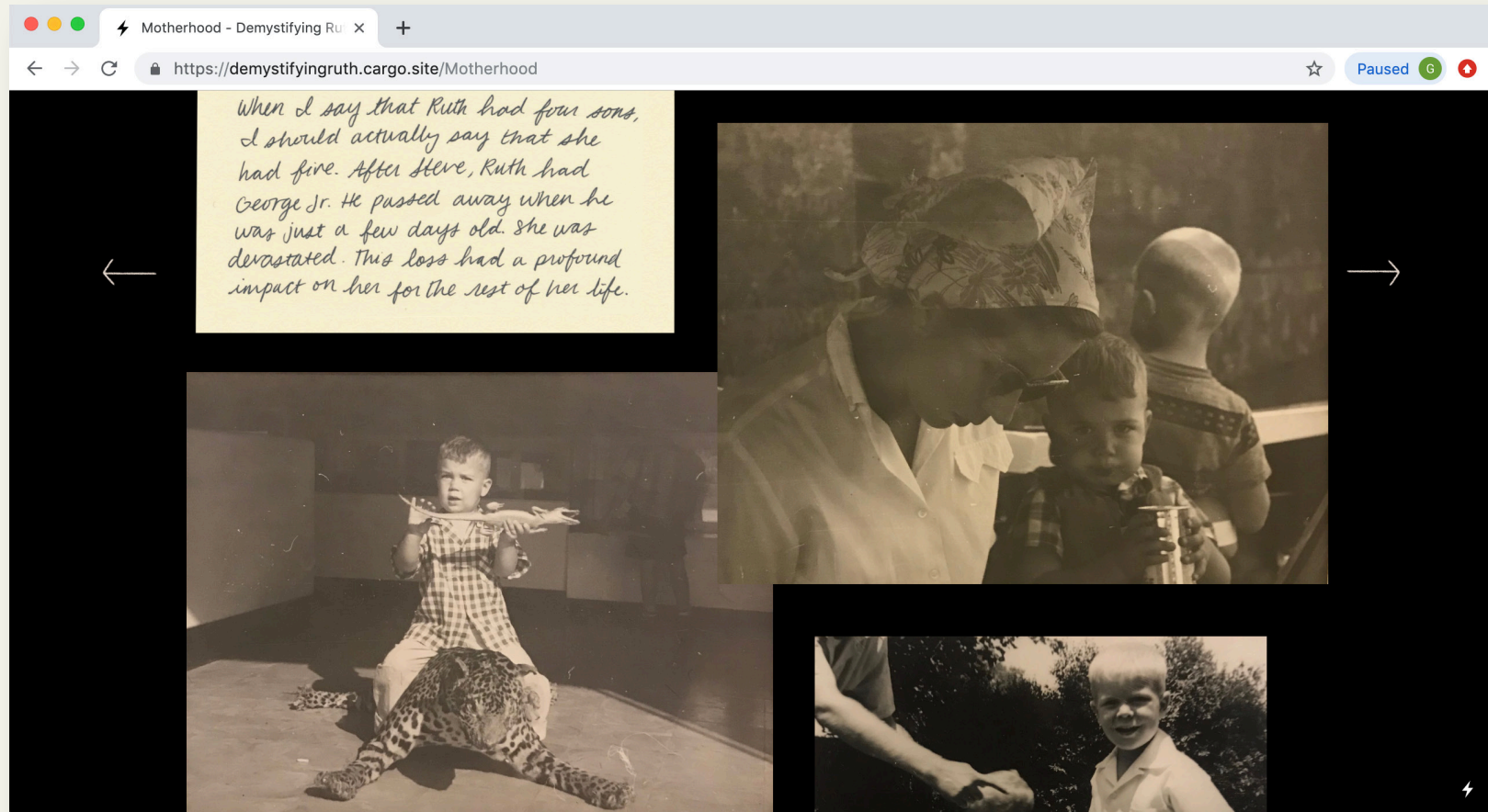
This section is about love. My grandmother and my grandfather fell in love in college and stayed together for the rest of their lives. This section is about life partnership and the ups and downs that come with it.



# Demystifying Ruth

## Motherhood

The motherhood section is about how she was a caregiver. She gave her whole life to her sons, she protected them and loved them deeply. Despite her difficult relationship with her mother, she didn't repeat the past.



# Demystifying Ruth

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## Thank You

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