

How can a visual depiction of the
afterlife as a familiar world ease

Grief?

research report

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Intro

In this report, I aim to explore how the afterlife can be depicted as a world that parallels our own, and how historical and contemporary artworks represent it like a memory. I explore how this type of depiction can ease grief and the ways we can find comfort within it. Drawing from my personal experience with loss, I consider both contemporary and historical portrayals of the afterlife as a familiar space.

Foundations

Having grown up in a mostly nonreligious household, I was left to search for meaning in the world around me. Media has shaped my conception of an afterlife: books, movies and TV, as well as the bits of religious imagery presented to me in school and conversations with friends. I always found it to be a fascinating topic, but I was not faced with it in any large way until my grandmother's death last year. We had been close, and it was hard to process as my parents fed me updates on her quickly declining condition while I was away at school. She lived a long full life of 93 years, and in the back of our heads, we knew this was coming. Still, it was difficult to conceptualize not talking to her on the phone, not having dinner with her every Sunday, not having her at the annual Christmas party.

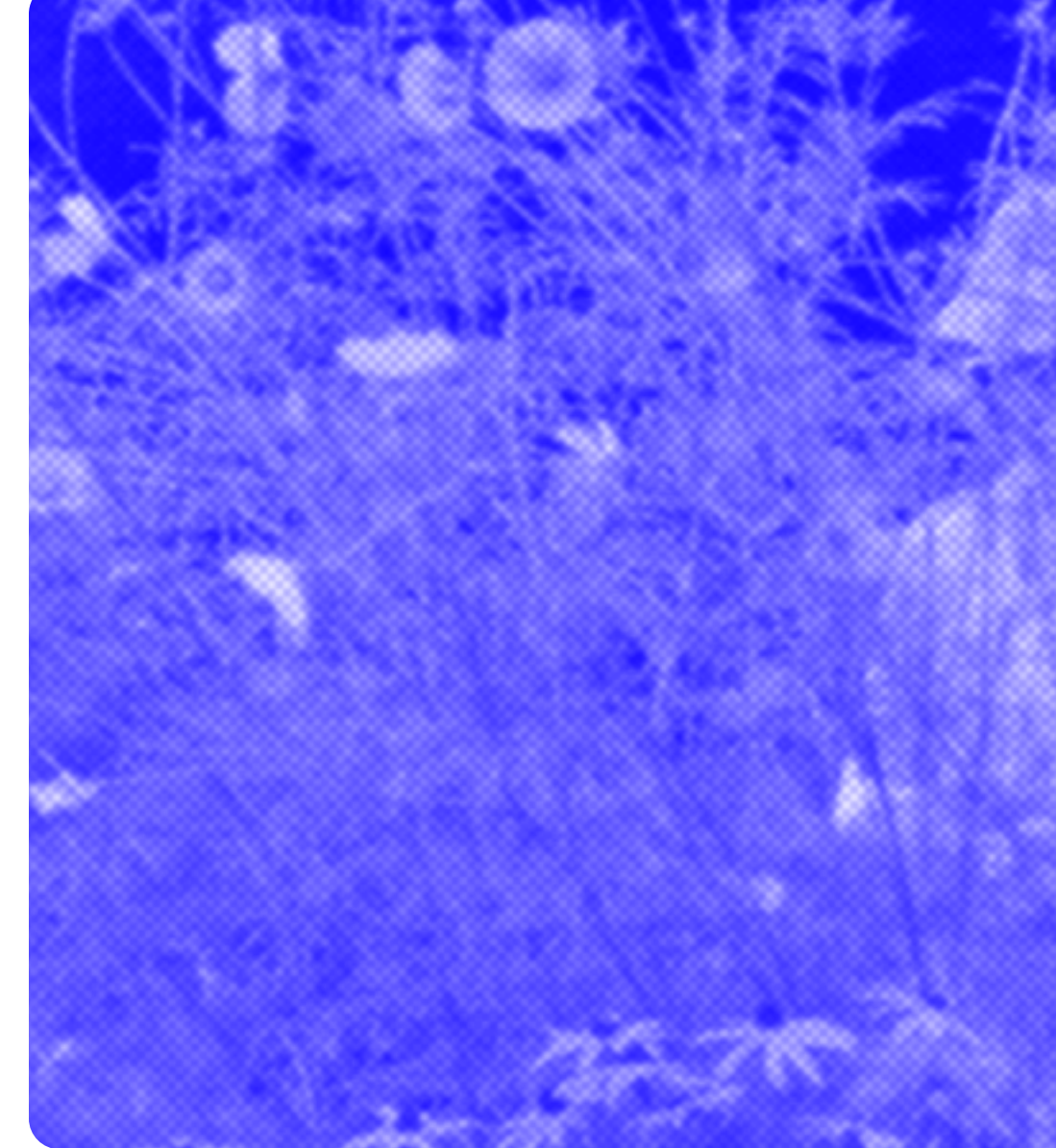
Through it all, I had the weirdest dreams—abstract imagery of landscapes and nature, all of it strangely calming, all of it I knew was related to her. In one dream, I stood at the doorway of a room with huge windows that looked out into a forest. Sunlight streamed in through the branches and the whole room was illuminated in gold. In the center of the room was a bed with a bedspread covered in pink tulips. The occupant of the bed, whose face I couldn't see, was whispering into the light something secret, almost like an unknown language, that I knew somehow I wasn't supposed to understand. Yet the scene felt peaceful, as if the person was whispering some sort of last goodbye or thank you.

I was hooked on this idea of the afterlife being a place that can be mapped out: a world that mirrors our own, something that has an atmosphere, the world of a dream or a memory, like a parallel dimension.

The image of afterlife is so complex, shaped by so many different religions and cultures, because everyone in the world deals with loss. Many people, like my parents, do not even believe it exists at all. But I think there is something valuable in conceptualizing the possibility that our loved ones are going somewhere after all and that they are at peace.

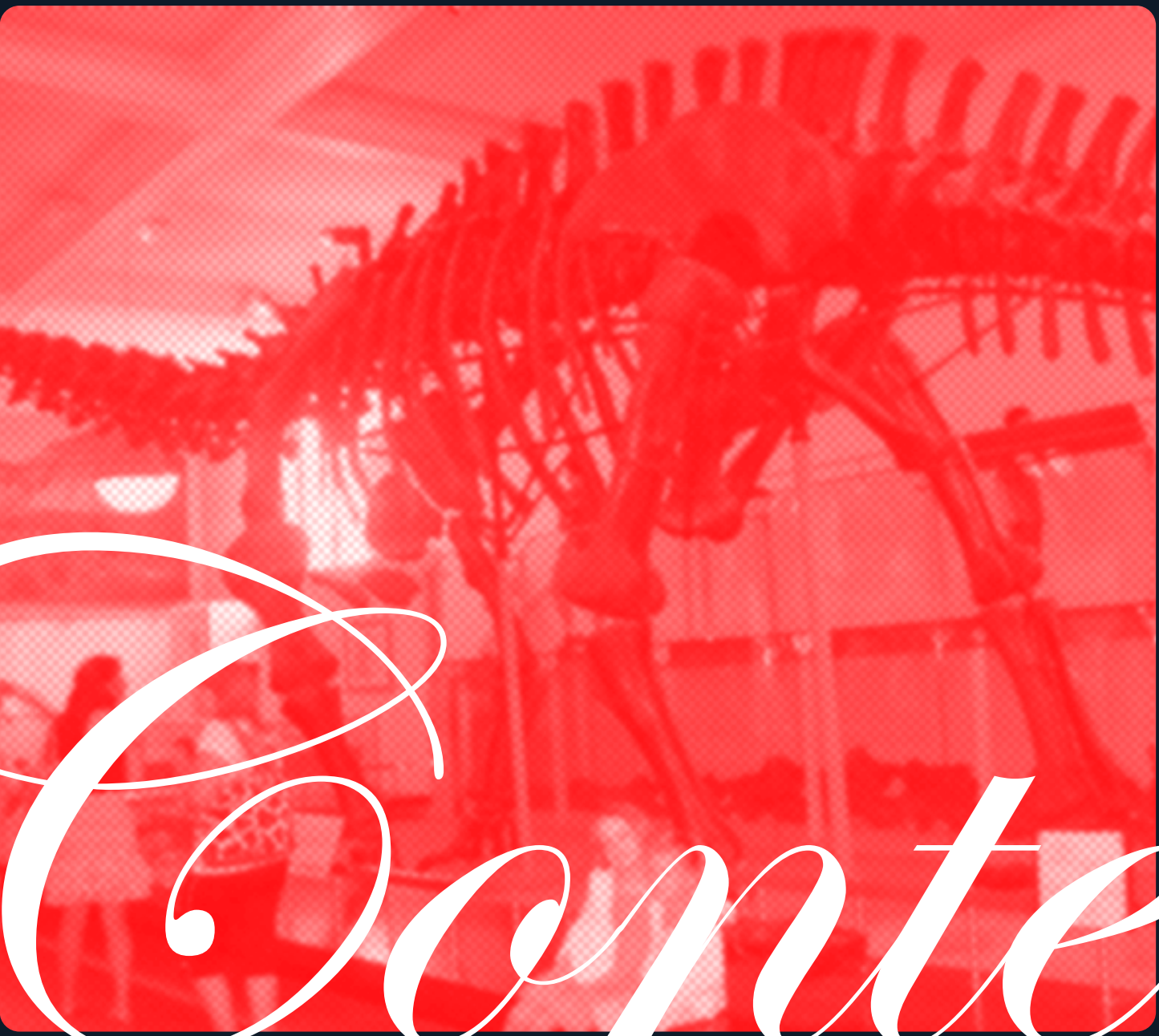
When I woke up I sat in bed thinking about it for a while. The dream had such a powerful atmosphere, I felt I had just traveled to another world. Whether there was something prophetic in what I was seeing, or simply how my brain processed the grief, or whether the cliché “go-into-the-light” concept stuck in my memory, I found the dream both comforting and fascinating.

A year later in London, I picked up a book on a whim called “A Field Guide To Getting Lost” by Rebecca Solnit. She writes that early cartographers included Paradise on their maps, thinking it was a real place that explorers had not found yet.



After experiencing my own dreams of what was possibly the afterlife, I wondered: why did certain symbols stick with me? Why did those images form in my mind? In my abstract conception of the afterlife, the tangible world flourished, sentimental objects became talismans of the love, and ordinary experiences became prophetic.

Constructing my own map, while exploring afterlife depictions in media and culture, will give me a better understanding and appreciation of the fleeting moments we have with those I love; and simultaneously a way to cope with something as terrifying and all-consuming as death--by making it familiar.



Context

Medieval explorers believed they could reach Paradise if they worked hard enough, and many myths and legends spread about pious monks and skilled adventurers who found Heaven. One myth follows three monks who leave their monastery (which is located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) to find Paradise. Their journey leads them to strange lands where they encounter uncanny creatures such as “dog-headed men” and “giants” before finding a cave where a hidden saint resides. The saint tells the monks that Paradise is close by and he had tried to enter, but mortals are forbidden and an angel guards the gates (Scafi 2006). It was thought impious to try to access the gates of heaven before God willed it.

As death is at the heart of human experience, the afterlife is certainly not a new fascination in art and literature. In the Middle Ages, many medieval people believed Paradise was located in the furthest eastern corner of the world because biblical manuscripts describe it as being ‘in the sunrise’. “Wherever [Paradise] is,” Greek philosopher Strabo wrote, “we know that it is on earth”(Scafi 2006).

One popular European theory held Paradise at the summit of a mountain so high that it reached the moon. It was believed to be a “separate and alternative reality” tethered to the earth by four rivers that link to the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates (Scafi 2006).





There is an interesting poetic element to believing Paradise is so close that the spices from its trees can fall into your local river. It is interesting to think that those in God's presence are not far away, the ones who have passed on still have some connection to us. It is an attempt to quell the terror of the unknown, to think that human life has some sort of pleasant end in reward for hard work. Being human can be painful and exhausting—there is something appealing about a rest at the end of a long journey. Lying at the feet of something divine while they cup your head and tell you it's okay, you can rest now, you've done enough, you were good.

Another twelfth-century legend follows Egyptian fishermen who discover expensive spices like rhubarb and cinnamon in their fishing nets, supposedly blown into the river from the trees inside of Paradise (Scafi 2006). Upon hearing this, the Sultan of Cairo organized many missions to retrieve more, but all attempts failed as they encountered an insurmountable mountain surrounding the gates of Paradise.

Many people in ancient Asia also believed that the underworld was parallel to the world of the living. Melia Belli explores Asian funerary art in her paper *Between Heaven and Hell*. She outlines how in early Buddhist tradition in ancient China and Korea, indigenous belief systems said that death was a “continuation of life on Earth” (Belli 2014). Mourners built tombs for the dead that mirrored the world in which the deceased had lived so they could be in familiar surroundings in the afterlife.

Similarly, according to Belli, in monastic Thai tradition, the dead were buried with “transition objects”: art and familiar household objects that would “help the living and the dead at the transitional moment of rupture between life and death” (Belli 2014). The importance of a conception of the afterlife located on earth lies in a paradox.

Art made for the good of the dead is equally beneficial for the living. It is consoling for the living to think that the afterlife will be familiar and that many of the joys of human life remain consistent. It makes the terror of grief more manageable—to think the ones you lost are still, as ever, going about their routine.

Case Study



The movie *La Chimera* (2023) dir. Alice Rohrwacher explores the afterlife as a parallel world connected to our own. The main character, an English archaeologist named Arthur is linked to the afterlife through his grief for his lover, Beniamina (Yile Vianello). He appears ghostly in a disheveled white suit roaming around 1980s Tuscany from place to place: his lean-to house on a hillside, the rundown antique house of Beniamina's mother Flora (Isabella Rossellini), and the Tuscan streets alongside his accomplices, the "tombaroli", a close-knit group of grave robbers. Visual images of chipped murals and worn city architecture remind us of the temporariness of the mortal world.

At first, Beniamina's death is ambiguous. When Arthur visits Flora, she tells him not to give up hope of finding her. "You were always good at finding things," she tells him, a hint at his magical realist superpower. We learn that he can sense where the tombs are from above the ground with a divining rod, making him a vital component in the schemes of the tombaroli. Each time he senses a tomb beneath the earth, he falls to the ground and we get an eerily beautiful shot of the camera panning upside down—the inverse imagery reminiscent of a Tarot card—Arthur's divine connection to the underworld.



In his visions of Beniamina, only fleeting dreamlike shots of her in a field, the vivid film quality blurs like the world of memory. The landscape is indicative of the Tuscan region where the rest of the movie takes place, but the space she's in is solitary, quieter than the busy streets filled with parades and singing that Arthur roams in with the tombaroli. In this remote expanse of what we can assume are Arthur's visions of the afterlife, she is alone, searching for something, with a red string hanging from the train of her dress. She follows the string, trying to find its end, and finds it stuck in the ground and cannot pull it out. She looks up, off-screen to Arthur for help, but he cannot reach her.

Yet the red string follows him. In one scene after the tombaroli comes home from a tomb-raiding expedition, Arthur lies in the car's back seat and watches a red string blowing in the wind, slightly obscuring his view of the landscape. This moment is a representation of Arthur's mindset. He's in the land of the living but always his mind is slightly obscured, distracted by the world of the dead and his visions of Beniamina. His grief is what keeps him connected to it.

The movie ends as Arthur descends once more into a tomb where something goes wrong and he is accidentally buried alive. In the tomb, lonely and quiet, he looks up and sees a red string hanging from the ceiling. He pulls it and emerges into the sunny world of Beniamina—at long last they gleefully reunite—Arthur pulls her into a tight hug as if to say, I will never let go of you again.

Alice Rohrwacher says of the story in *La Chimera*, "I've got this desire to catch traces of memory, but it's not my personal memory. It's a shared, collective memory, it's bigger than me." In this film, Arthur is a vessel for the audience. We can relate to his grieving and his distracted longing for his lost love, which plays into this idea of a collective memory. By depicting Beniamina in an afterlife that looks familiar, like a memory, Rohrwacher has created an almost nostalgic comfort. The image of death as a recognized world helps subside the existential fear of the unknown. There is solace in knowing your lost loved ones are somewhere they have already known and been happy in. This solace allows for a fullness of life, an uplifting assurance that at the end of it, there will be a happy reunion with the ones you have lost.

Conclusion

What makes the afterlife so terrifying is the fact that it is completely unknown to us. These visual depictions challenge that idea and provide hope that it is not so unfamiliar. Paradoxically, these conceptions of the dead are made to comfort the living. For me, I am still exploring where I stand on whether or not Paradise exists, but the idea that it is accessible through dreams and memory lessens the weight of grief. Perhaps we are all prophets who have seen into the afterlife already. Perhaps when we encounter it, we will know it like an old friend.

For Unit 8, I was inspired by media depictions of the afterlife, in which filmmakers represent the afterlife in the world of memory. In the research and examples I chose to inform my project, depictions of the afterlife in a physical space correlate to a memory of where the deceased grew up. For example, three of the brothers die in the film *The Iron Claw* (2023) about the Von Erich family's pursuit of their wrestling careers. But when they reunite in a dream-like depiction of the afterlife, it is at a sunlit creek that mimics the landscape of rural Texas where they grew up. This idea of death as a familiar physical land, a place that holds memories inspired my work. In my project, I try to show how it can be comforting to think of the afterlife in this way.

I decided to create a publication, rather than a film because I liked the idea of building this project as a physical structure. I divided it into two parts, inspired by the publication "Tidy Spaces". The book is split in half and opens right side up on one side and upside down on the other. It is a dynamic structure—it can be read from both sides without hierarchy. I structured my publication in the same way—representing a blending of worlds. I want the book to feel like it is a sort of different dimension in itself. Each cover has an arched door that I decorated to mimic stained glass, allowing you to 'step into' the publication.





In one half of the publication, I briefly analyze different examples of depictions of the afterlife as a magical realist real world. The other half of the publication are spreads with imagery of me as a child. I took them from my mother's large archive of digital camera photos from when I was young. The grainy shaky quality adds to this idea of a dream or a memory. The photos, which I edited to be black and white, have an eerie quiet atmosphere which I think compliments the topic.

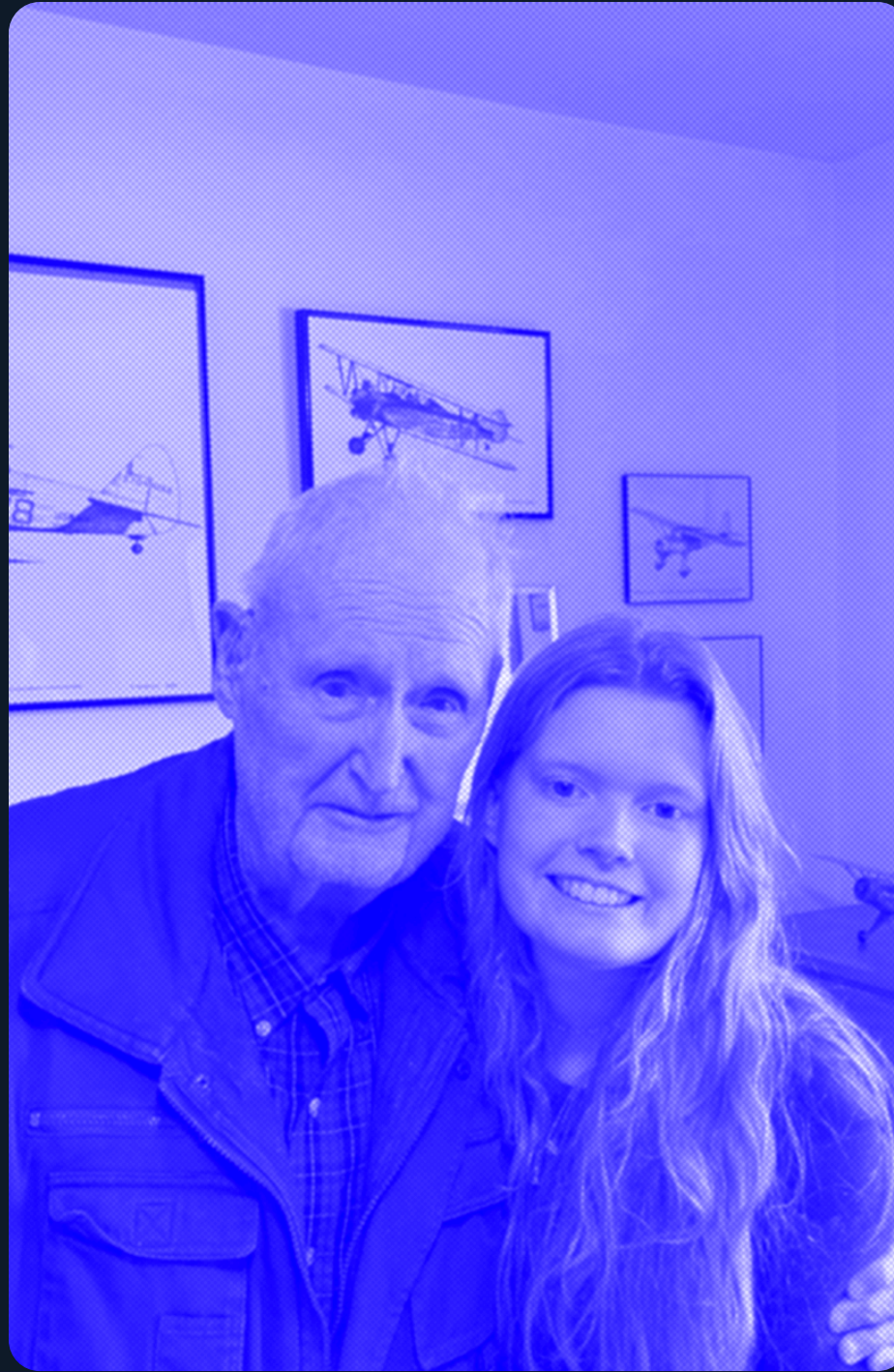
Overlaying these photos on acetate is a fictional story inspired by my personal encounters with grief. As I have stated in my report, my topic idea was inspired by an atmospheric dream I had after my grandmother's passing. So, for my fictional story I wanted to use dreams and memory. I thought about the landscapes that were important to me in my life. One such was my grandmother's house in Florida. When I was young, my extended family reunited there in the summers; they are some of my happiest memories. I felt a real sense of love when I was there, and I tried to communicate this in the story.

Color is also important to the story—it starts with a dream where an angel of death emerges from "an empty expanse of a sanguine red the color of life, of blush, of sunburn." I wanted to use the color red because it is so vivid, and indicates life in a bold way. The idea of life and death is big and overwhelming, and by presenting the story with this bold capital text that is almost screaming from the page, I thought it could represent that enormity. I also tried to write the story in these short, snappy sentences, almost like a sermon, also connoting spirituality.



This work was a deep self-exploration that encouraged me to question my own values—not only in my personal life—but also in my design practice. The project became even more personal than it already was when over its duration, my grandfather passed away. It was hard for me being abroad, so far away from him. I was left with a great sense of loss—a strange emptiness at the lack of evidence of his passing.

What I did take comfort in, however, was in a phone conversation I had with him just before he died. He was in the hospital in Wisconsin, but being so close to death, was slightly disoriented. “Well,” he said, “we’re all here in New Hampshire,” which is where he lived when he was young. And he paused and then realized gently that that wasn’t quite right. “Oh, no, we’re in...” he couldn’t name it. “Oshkosh,” I finished, which is the city they were in. He had a moment in which he was engulfed in memory. I found it comforting that he had been drifting off thinking of the place he lived in childhood. It was a confirmation of the link between memory and death, and I found that it did help ease my grief.



Moments so heavy as these are hard to display in a delicate, respectful way. Design is about communication, and exploring such a personal topic challenged me to come up with a way to strike the balance between personal exploration and open communication. I centered my project around metaphors and a narrative that reflects my spirituality. Writing an experimental fictional story paired with nostalgic imagery was a good way to portray the emotion and atmosphere of grief without explicitly stating it. I aimed to ask questions about grief and death but did not concretely answer them. With this topic I find there is value in ambiguity as it encourages viewers to question and reflect on their views on death and the afterlife. I tried to have my work act like a mirror—to offer up a vulnerability, to try to relate, and hopefully evoke a recognized feeling within viewers, so that they may share one in return.

In the future, I would like to center my work on others’ experiences, look at their beliefs, their unusual depictions of the afterlife. Grief is evidence of our love for people and there is incredible beauty in how we experience it, difficult as it is.

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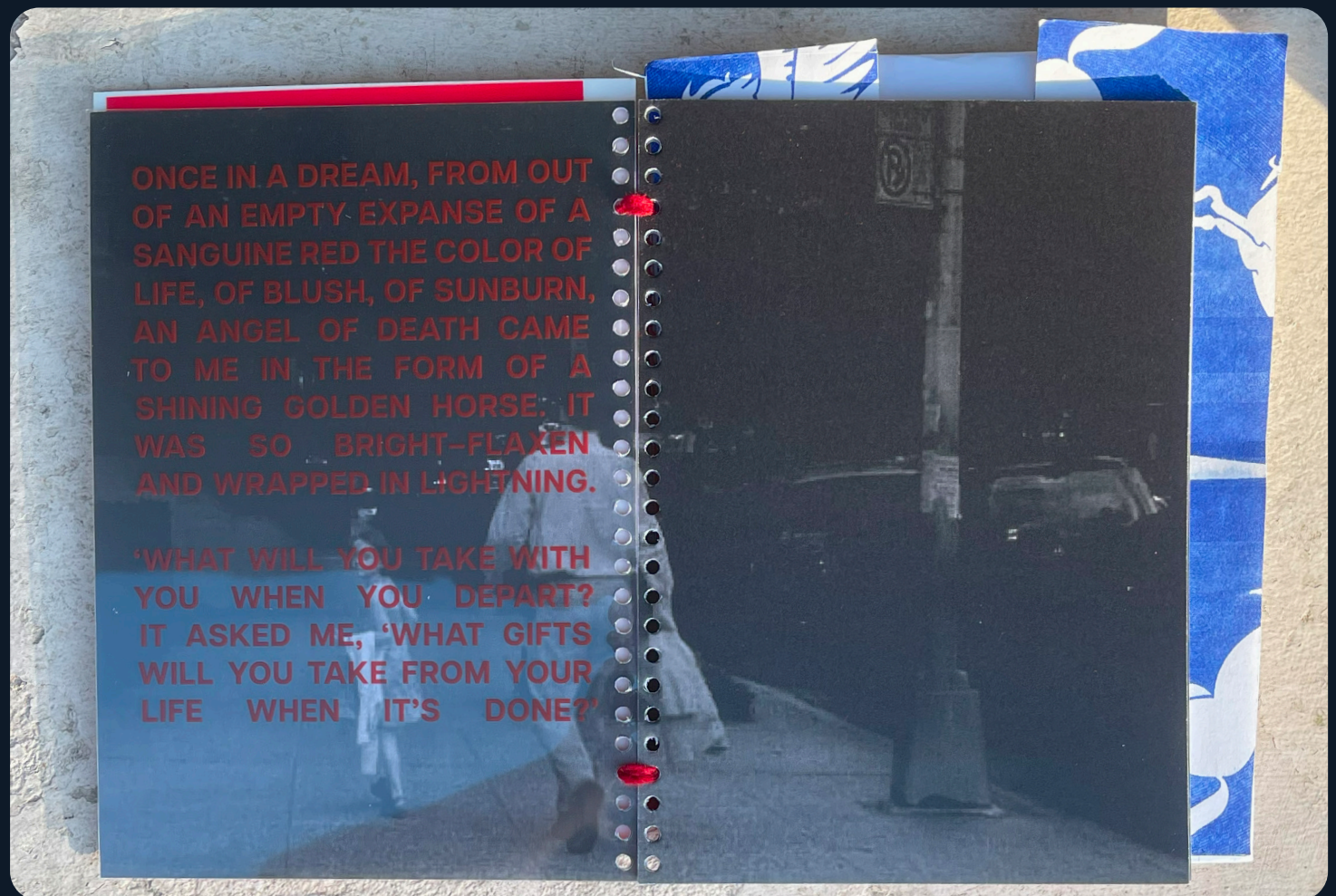


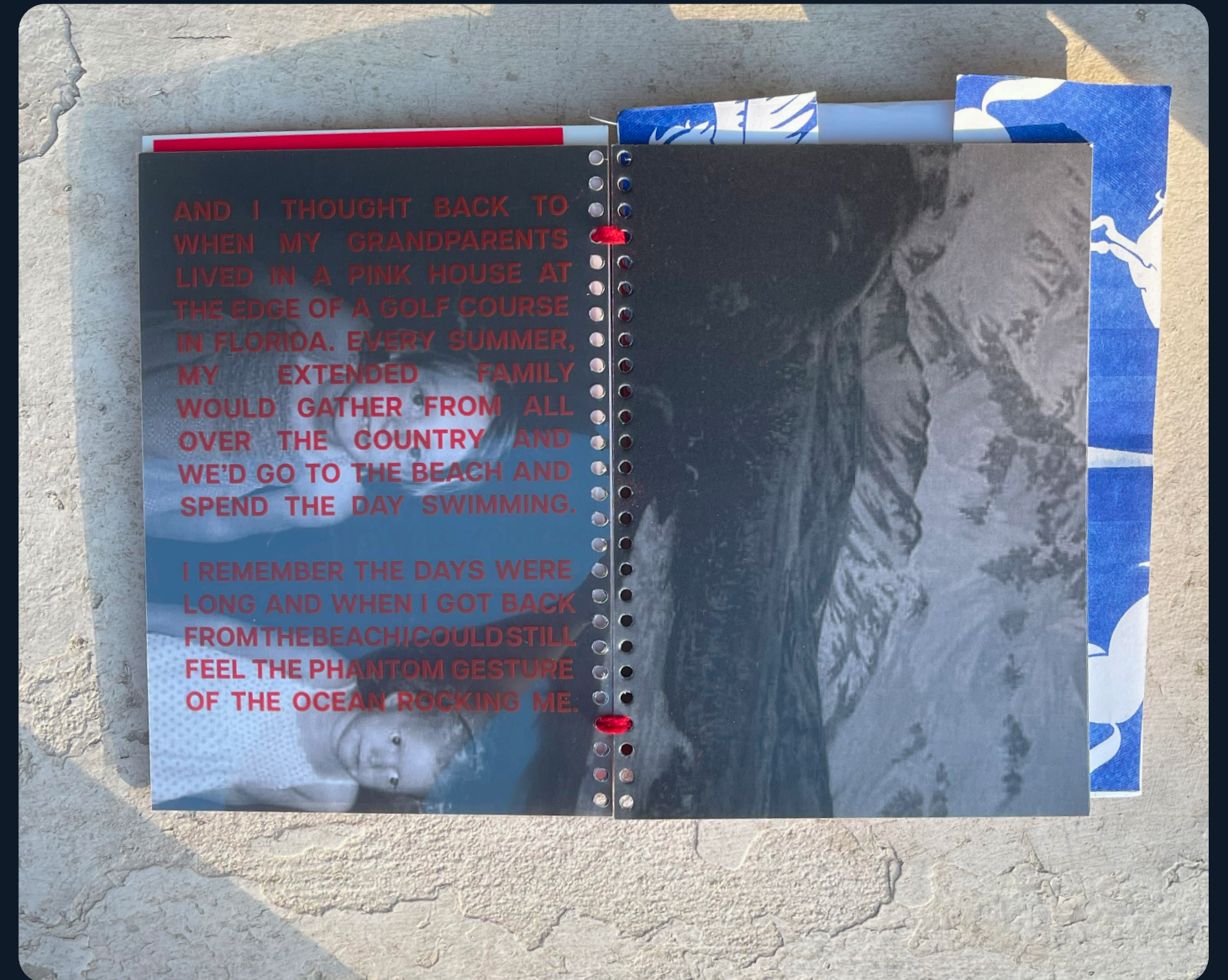
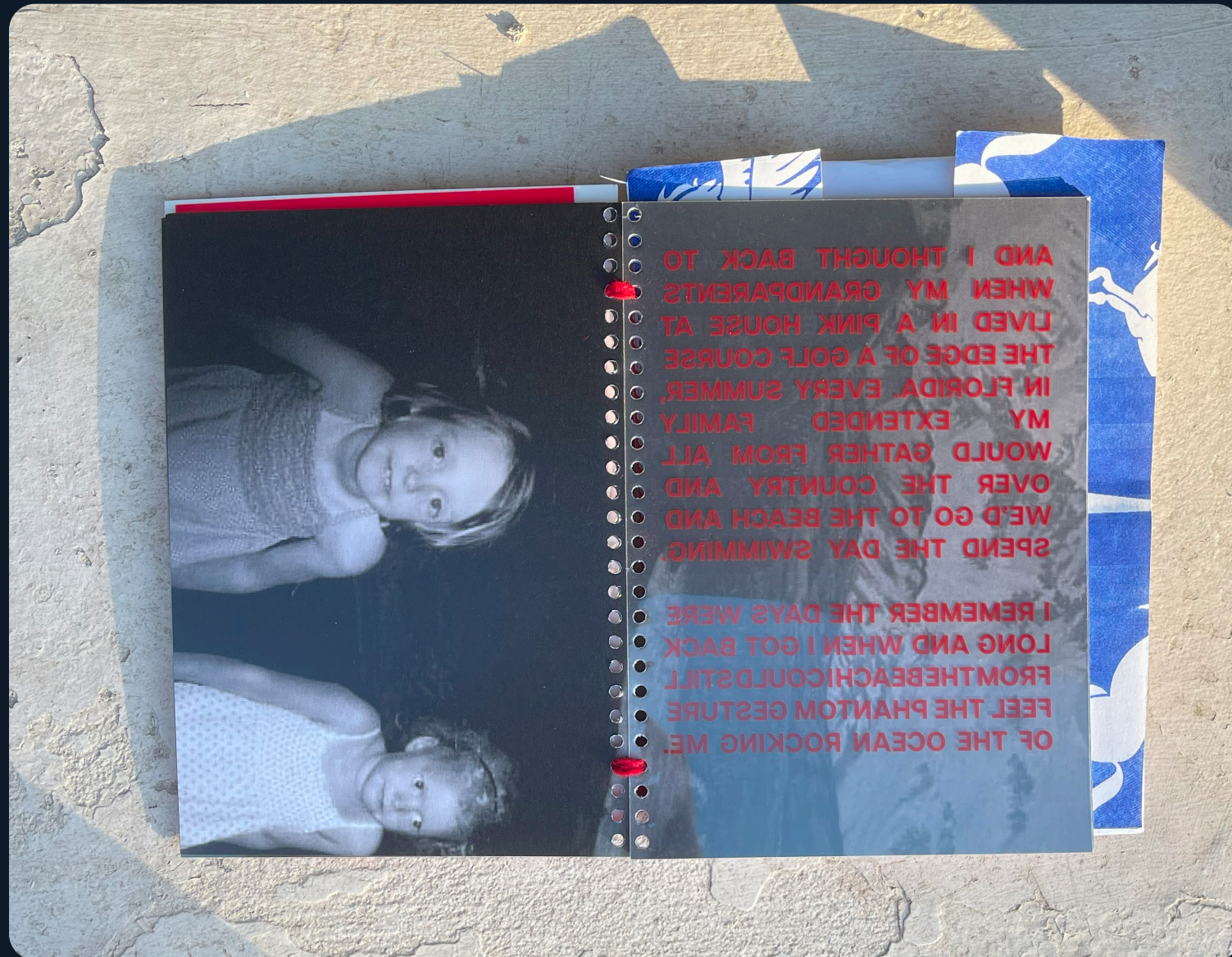
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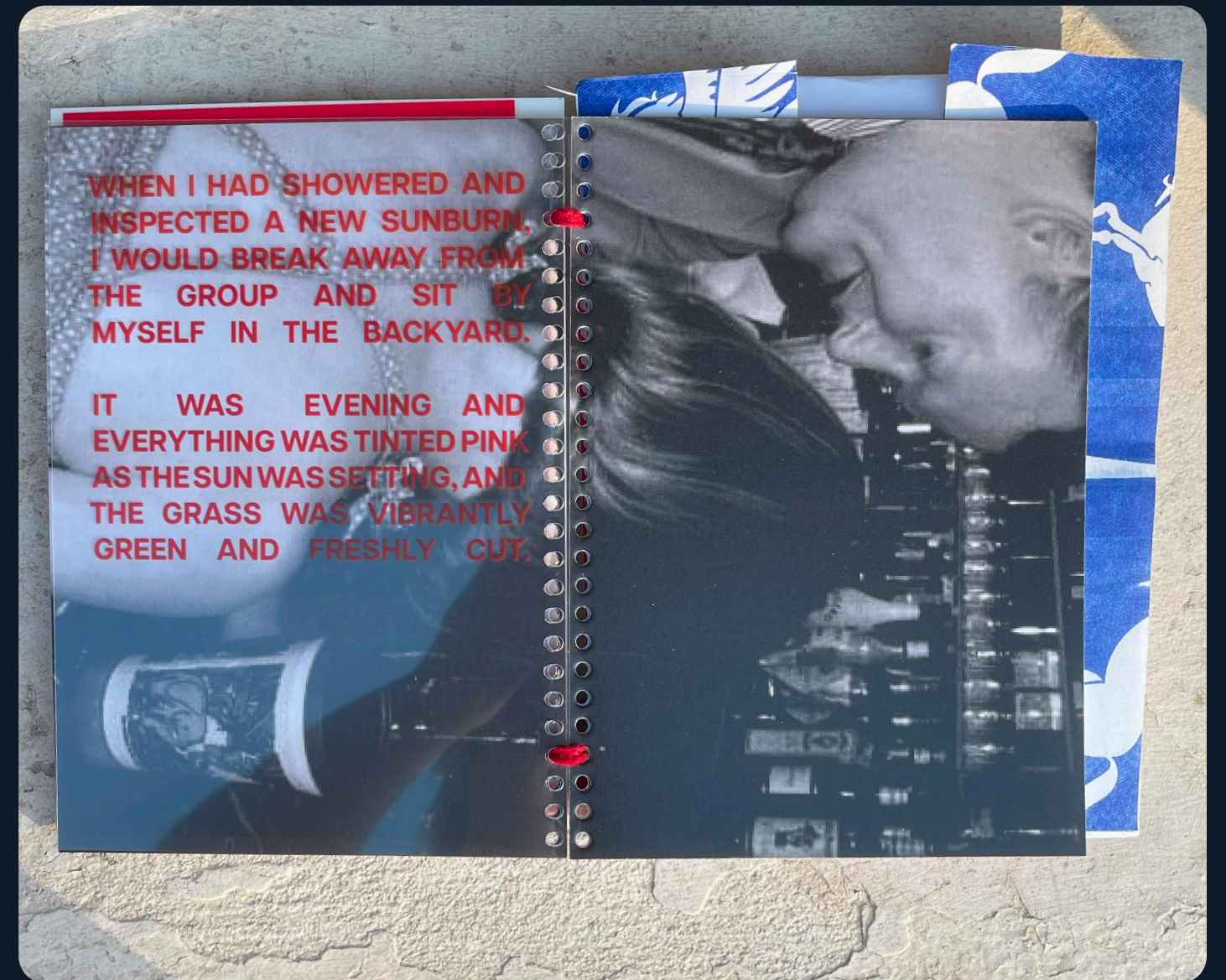
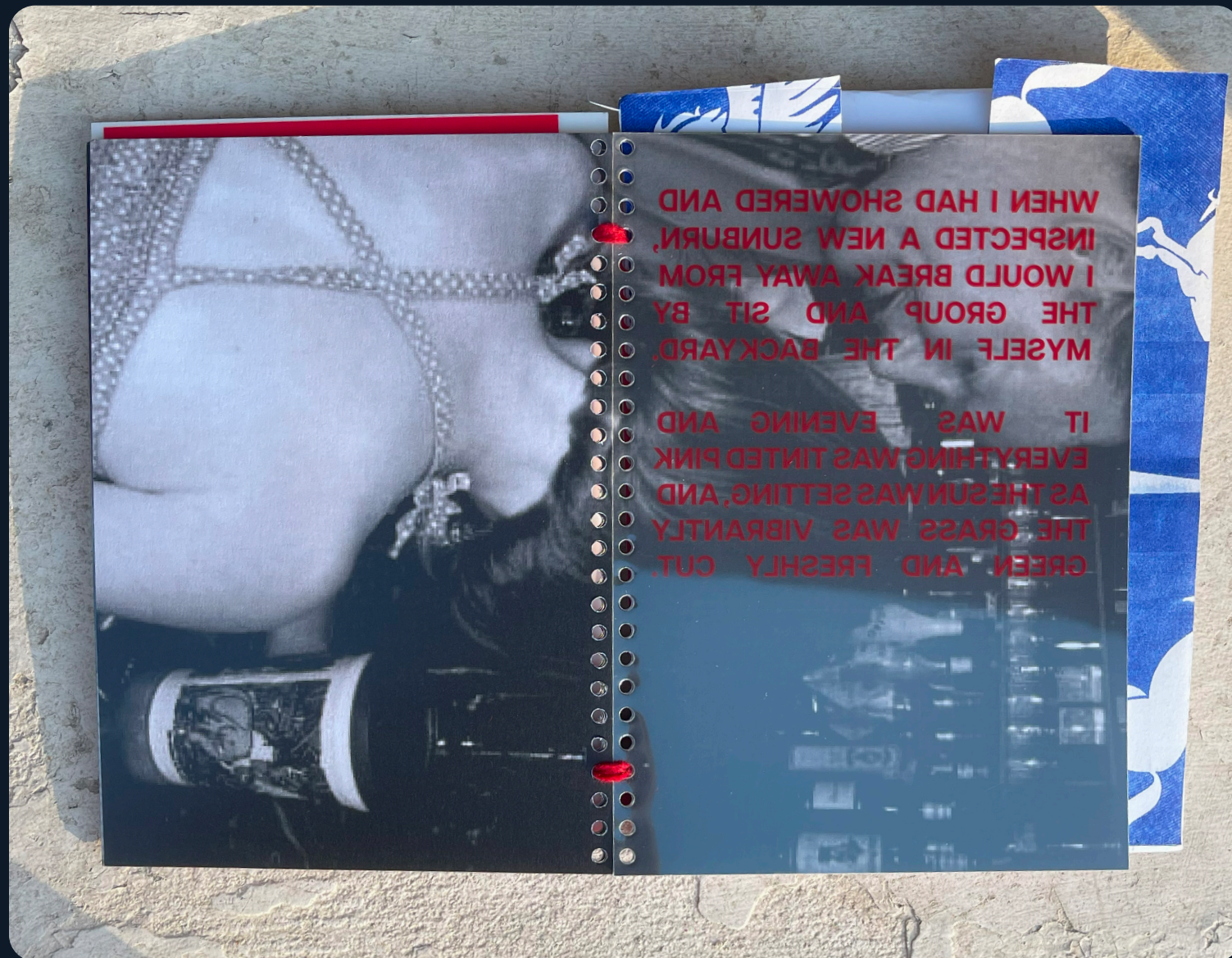


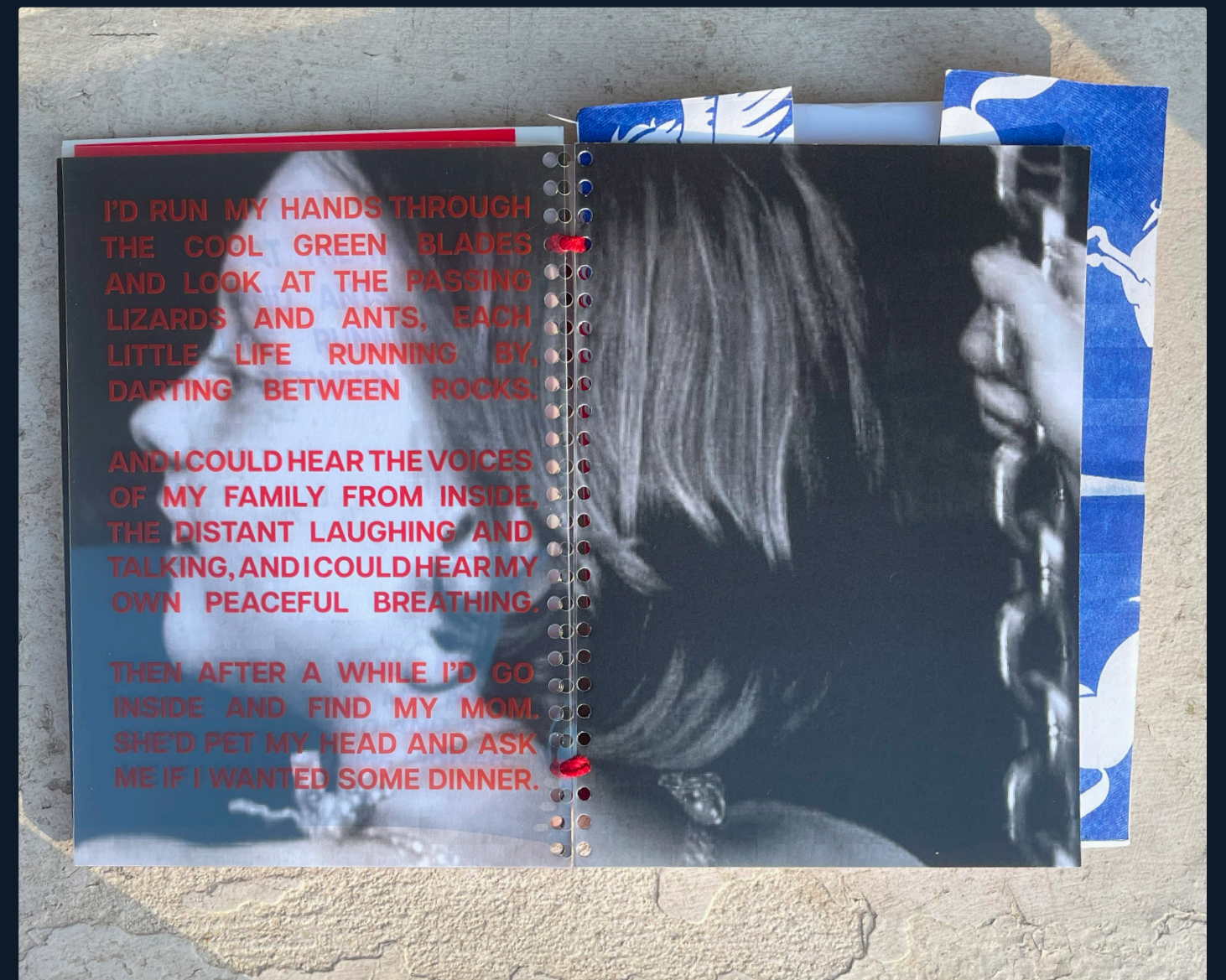
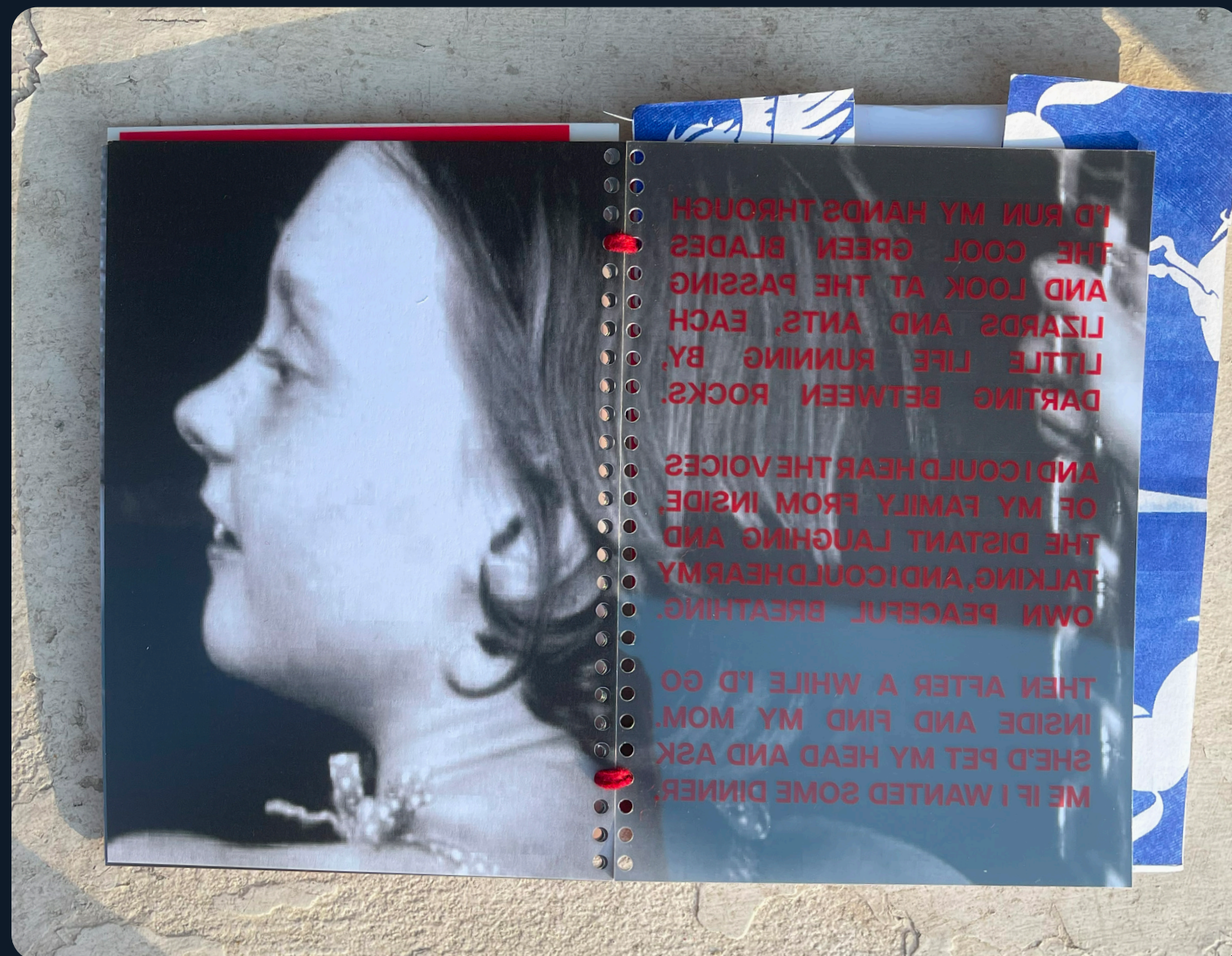


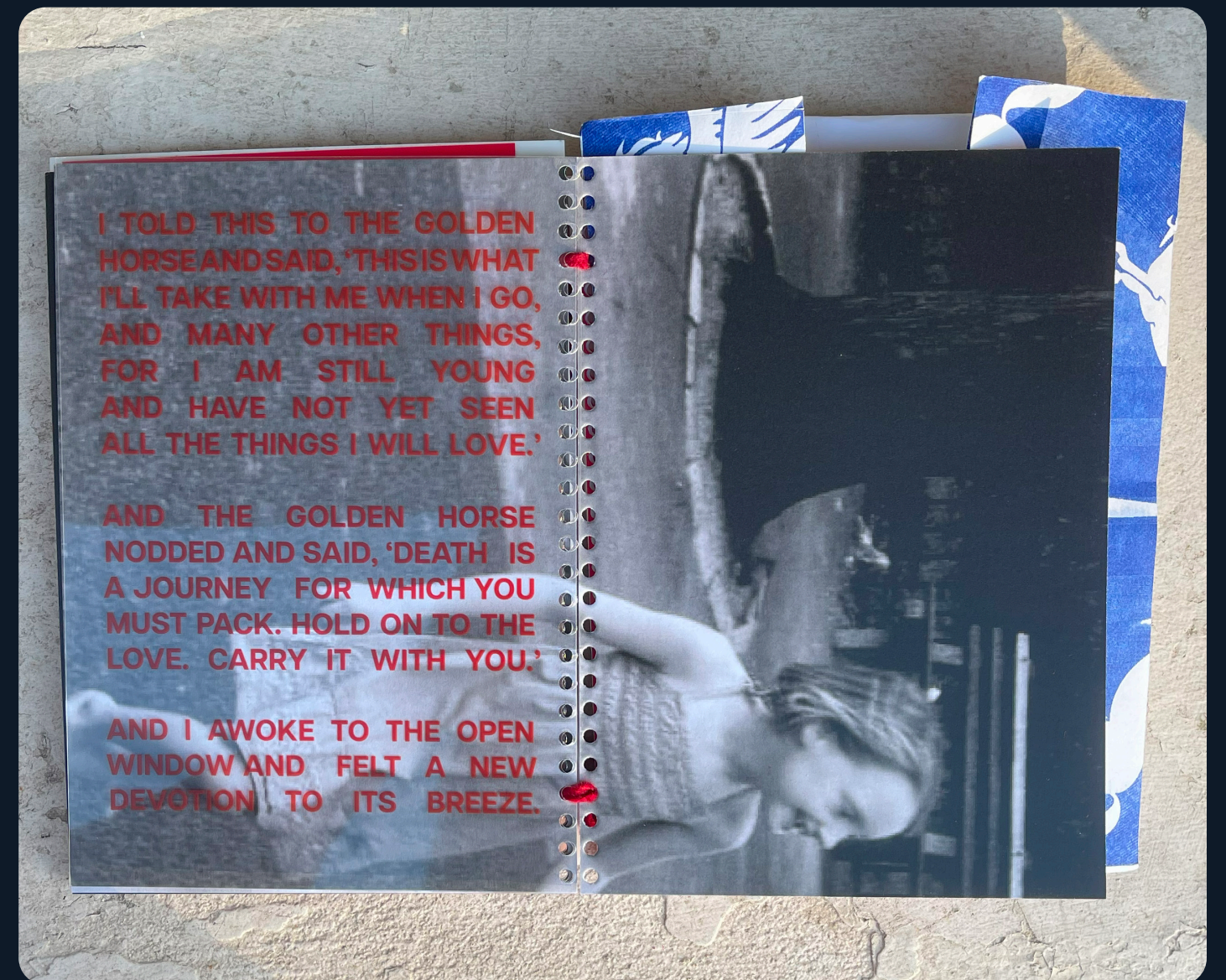
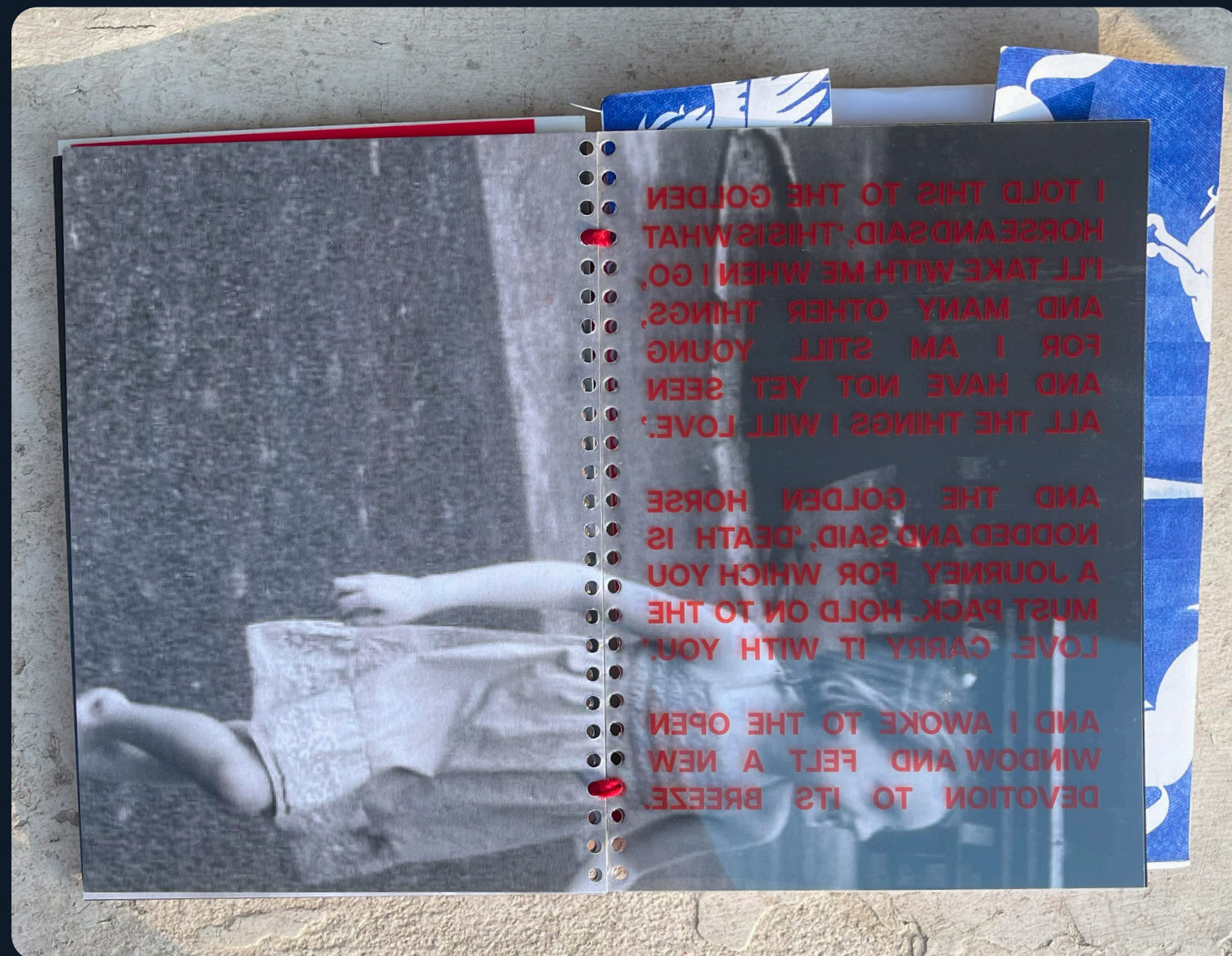


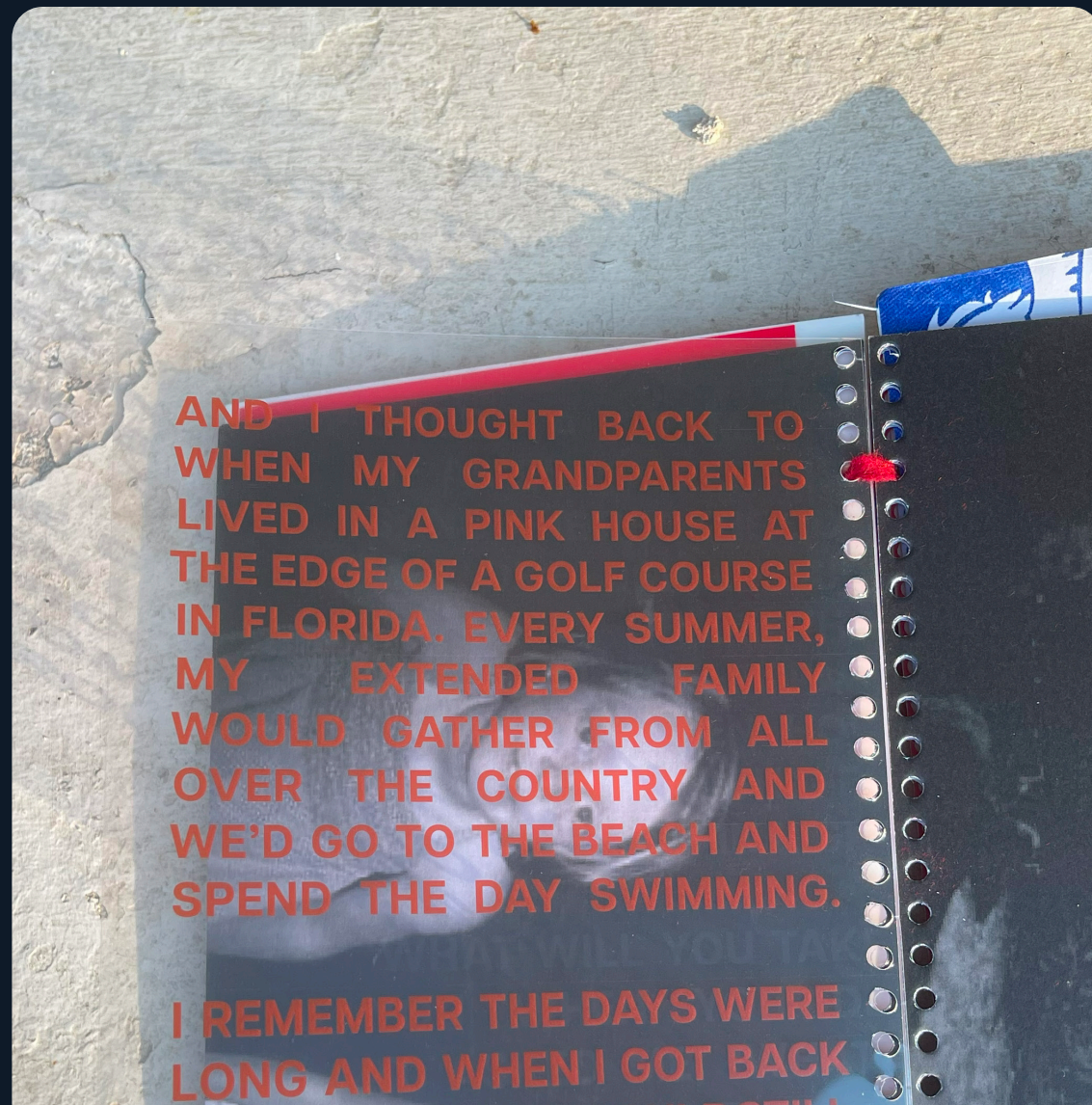
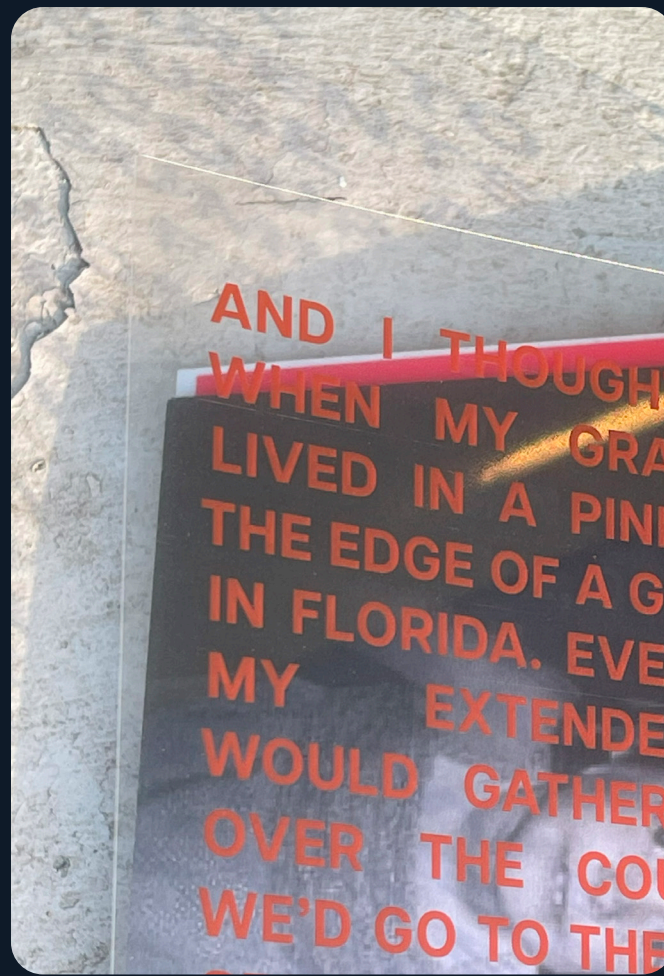












Thank you