Relational Lens
Photographs that admire, probe, and “flinch from” family members.
by STEVE POTTER

For Geoffrey Biddle ’72, photography has been a way of earning a living, practicing an art, and understanding his family. Or rather, families: Biddle has had two marriages and fathered four daughters, and his family of origin is the renowned Biddle clan of Philadelphia. His lens has proven a potent tool for probing the closest relationships in his life.

“Although my family has been in America since the 1600s and is well established, my own childhood was marked by divorce, death, and a cast of adults who were largely consumed with their own dramas, interested in children primarily as reflections of themselves,” Biddle says. “I picked up the camera to reverse their scrutiny—I became the one looking and assessing.”

His passion for photography burgeoned in high school. In college, he led the photographic board at The Harvard Crimson and took courses at the Carpenter Center before setting out on a lengthy, successful career in commercial photography. His photographs ran in Time, Newsweek, Fortune, Forbes, and GEO, and corporate clients included IBM, GE, Citicorp, and GAF. His work has been published in 15 books, and the Museum of Modern Art and other institutions have his prints in their collections. In the 1990s, he spent seven years as assistant chairman of the photography department at Parsons School of Design.

The death in 1998 of his first wife, the noted sculptor and curator Mary Ann Unger, after 14 challenging years of battling breast cancer, confirmed Biddle’s six-year-
old decision to give up commercial work in favor of a more deeply personal approach. He was left in his grief with their daughter, Eve, then a junior in high school and today a successful artist. "Dealing with death," he says, "has made me give more time to the things that make me happiest: being with my family and taking pictures."

Biddle now lives in Berkeley, California, with his second wife, Jane Gottesman. They have three daughters under the age of eight, who are, of course, frequent subjects of Biddle photos. Yet his current work also embraces earlier generations: one series of annual photographs begun in 2008 captures images of him sitting beside his father, who's now 92 years old. Biddle describes it as "a gentle way of looking at death." He is also putting together a project titled "First Wife/First Life." It is a kind of photoessay on his family history with Mary Ann and Eve that fuses a 60,000-word text with scores of carefully chosen images. It's a cross between a memoir and a visual and verbal documentary on the Biddle clan, as seen through the author-photographer's lens and memory; he plans to publish it as a book.

Another product of Biddle's exploration of family resides on his website, geoffreybiddle.com, on a page titled "Family." There, the viewer finds 17 black-and-white images produced between Eve's birth, in 1982, and 1991. All but one feature Eve: with her mother, father, or occasionally both parents, and at times with Geoffrey's parents, a family friend, or a hired caregiver. In one, Eve is in the foreground and her grandmother in the background, both out of focus. The only object that is sharp and clear is a framed fifth-grade photo of Geoffrey. "Eve had gone upstairs to wake my mother, and she asked her grandma about that picture, which was on the dresser. I saw the opportunity to make a three-generation photograph without actually getting in front of the camera, and I loved that the ages were mixed up: a four-year-old, a fifth-grader, and a grandmother."

At first glance, Biddle's work could come from almost any family album of that era. What sets it apart is the powerful nature of the images, chosen from perhaps thousands made by a master photographer coming to terms with a central fact of his own life. Because Biddle's pictures are taken with wide-angle lenses in the "real" world (rather than a studio), they resemble typical family snapshots, which include many inanimate objects as well as the human subjects. In amateur snapshots, such elements often produce a distracting, even chaotic background. But for Biddle, they are elements in a thoughtful, considered composition that integrates the primary subject with a larger context.

His photographic involvement with the concept of "family" goes back at least to the late 1970s, when he shot Alphabet City, an ex-
"This book," writes Matt Freedman '78, "reproduces a journal I kept in the fall of 2012 while I was undergoing care at Massachusetts General Hospital." Friends gave Freedman, an artist and writer who lives in New York, a sketch book before he went to Boston, and "I decided I would gradually fill the thing up with whatever came into my head during the course of my treatment." The result, hand-lettered and illustrated, is Relatively Indolent but Relentless (Seven Stories Press, $23.95), an unfiltered record as matter-of-fact as its subtitle, A Cancer Treatment Journal. The following is the first day's entry, with some of the subsequent drawings.

Yesterday my colleagues and students gave me this sketch book to fill up over the next two months while I undergo radiation and chemotherapy. I'm going to get proton radiation to fight the tumor in my tongue. I will also get protons to fight the tumors in my lymph nodes in my neck. There will also be chemotherapy to sensitize the cancer cells. They hope they will get a "two-fer" out of the chemo and it will also attacking the tumors in my lungs.

It's October 3 and I've known for about two months that I have adenoid cystic carcinoma, a rare cancer that is "slow and indolent." It moves slowly but is hard to stop.

No one knows how long the cancer has been in me. It could have been years. I've had a bad earache for years. For most of that time I thought it was caused by nighttime tooth grinding. I had mouth guards made that sort of worked, but not really, and not for long. And besides, the dog ate them every time it could.

I'm very sloppy and I let things go when I shouldn't. Maybe that was the root of all the trouble.

“Chorus of Soloists”

The Chinese people's individual acts of self-transformation

by Edward Steinfeld

Recent months have brought so many reasons to worry about China's rise: rapidly expanding military capabilities, an increasingly assertive foreign policy, deepening tensions with regional neighbors, and a new leadership that as one of its first acts pledged to fight the "perils" of constitutionalism, civil society, and "universal values"—the favored official euphemism for human rights. The list goes on and on. In the current climate, even the most ostensibly benign aspects of China's rise—the phoenix-like rebirth of cities like Shanghai and Beijing, the dazzlingly futuristic public infrastructure, the lifting out of poverty of tens or even hundreds of millions of people—take on an almost overwhelming, intimidating feel.

Perhaps it has something to do with the scale of it all, or maybe even the tempo. But for most observers, the real problem lies in the politics. Beijing's official line is that the "Chinese Dream" is first and foremost about national "rejuvenation" (伟大复兴) and the development of "comprehensive national power" (综合国力). Upon hearing this, one could be forgiven for treating all of China's recent achievements as merely vehicles for...