

Snapshots

1.

Instead of children, your old Kodaks dance
Across this floor. Squatting, arranging them in
Albums with the logic that was never
Your style, my acid reflex blossoms sour
In my chest. I am heavy with living.
I mule my revolving debt, writing checks,
Losing my edge in glass after glass of wine.
The phony, Camelot tints of your trips
Reflect the lamp light, blind me like the sun.
In one, you stand before the ocean's edge
Taller than I ever was, tan as jute,
You aim your perfect rack into the lens.
Never skinny, never fat, never shy,
Your poker face beguiled the men, teased them
With unattainability. Your eyes
In hundreds of snapshots still mark the spot
Where I was young. Your laconic features
Were never broken by love. Wined and dined,
Mounted and battered, slick as the surface
Of these heavy prints, no man's touch remained.
Can you see me now? Do you hurt for me,
Your orphaned, aging child, handcuffed to life,
Stockaded in my body, living out
My compromises. Nervously keeping
A humiliating contract with life.

2.

Something there is that doesn't love a boy
Beyond a certain age; throttled by glasses,
His narrow face, maniacal for attention,
Or made glum by the effacement of a group,
Ruins every Christmas shot. He's not
Quite like his brothers, their wives and babies,
And the camera moves on through the party
To another spot. The turkey's almost done!
A guiding star has misdirected him here,
Seated between a highchair and a cloud of smoke.
An awkward age, an unlucky slot: so much younger,
Yet not quite young enough. A final son,
With a different father, dead - unremembered,
And hardly the same mother - so transformed by pain,
Cauterized by cocktails. The softness had gone,
Evaporated by the heat of rage. A boy remained -
Fatherless and girly, fragile as a glass ornament
That is tucked within the branches, out of sight,
For its protection. His mother's Instamatic
Lacks a setting that might flatter him. A special boy,
A gaping problem, subsumed by a mother's final
Tour as a woman, even as her grandchildren appeared.
A childhood of satisfactions repeatedly deferred,
Like a thousand Christmas Eves,
Compacted his hunger, intensifying it -
A fire banked, with nothing to burn. An auxiliary heat,
A radiator in July. His eyes
Could not contain their wealth,
Which pranced before the camera like a deer.

3.

The kitchen sink is full of dirty dishes
That sort of passed out after dinner,
Spending the night like drunken guests.
But this September morning doesn't want
The lingering duty. A perfect Sunday's getting started,
Slapping its brilliance down on this floor
As violently as the paper hit the porch at six.
Still, all that wine had me awake at dawn, or just before.
That hateful place on my mattress, always cold,
Where yesterday clashes with today - conceding,
Yet not without harangue, a final scream of woe.
I'm wide awake, my chest pounding,
Indicted in the darkness.
You, too, are carried forward; a personal balance
I pull over my shoulders each morning.
A private inheritance: a million snapshots.
Four sons, and three husbands, yet somehow
I am the solitary bard who has your story whole.
Was it really me all along Mom?
Or did you just run out of people, out of love,
Out of time? You deserved more
Than your life could spare you.
A little sepia girl frowning at the fair,
A young woman laughing at a New Year's Eve party
Frozen in the silver tones of pencil lead.
You went blonde just in time for color,
And Kodachrome's gentle primaries, its softened outlines,
Sigh with your full beauty, blushing your face
At its moment of supple perfection.
Your cashmere sweaters purr in its light.
But as the gallery harshens, your stare
Accommodates its mounting betrayals, matches their nerve,
As life pulls apart. As it breaks your heart.
When, exactly, was it you began this retrospective
Annotation, the scribbled names and guessed-at dates
In trembling penmanship?
Thumbing through your TV Guide, halving your Paxils,
For God's sake, Mom, when was it you discovered
You were being robbed?
Nevermind. Everything's intact – a perfect hand-off.
And your secret confidence warms me, at last.
Yet, I'm sorry, after the months of work,
The tall albums shoulder-to-shoulder like acid-free soldiers,
That your story ends with me – a lonely curator, I'm afraid,
One eye on my own capitulation, as I clutch your Kodaks,
Which advances one morning at a time.

