

SNAPSHOTS OF A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW



POEMS / ADRIENNE RICH

AUTHOR OF NECESSITIES OF LIFE

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SNAPSHOTS OF A
DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

◆
POEMS

◆
1954–1962

◆
Adrienne Rich

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A JOHN SIMON GUGGENHEIM MEMORIAL FELLOWSHIP
~~AND AN AMY LOWELL TRAVELLING SCHOLARSHIP BOTH~~
CONTRIBUTED GREATLY TO THE YEARS DURING WHICH
MUCH OF THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN.

◆ SNAPSHOTS OF A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

◆ AT MAJORITY

—for C.—

When you are old and beautiful,
And things most difficult are done,
There will be few who can recall
Your face that I see ravaged now
By youth and its oppressive work.

Your look will hold their wondering looks
Grave as Cordelia's at the last,
Neither with rancor at the past
Nor to upbraid the coming time.
For you will be at peace with time.

But now, a daily warfare takes
Its toll of tenderness in you,
And you must live like captains who
Wait out the hour before the charge—
Fearful, and yet impatient too.

Yet someday this will have an end,
All choices made or choice resigned,
And in your face the literal eye
Trace little of your history,
Nor ever piece the tale entire

Of villages that had to burn
And playgrounds of the will destroyed
Before you could be safe from time
And gather in your brow and air
The stillness of antiquity.

1954

(The World Book, 1928)

“Organized knowledge in story and picture”
confronts through dusty glass
an eye grown dubious.

I can recall when knowledge still was pure,
not contradictory, pleasurable
as cutting out a paper doll.

You opened up a book and there it was:
everything just as promised, from
Kurdistan to Mormons, Gum

Arabic to Kumquat, neither more nor less.

Facts could be kept separate
by a convention; that was what
made childhood possible. Now knowledge finds me out;
in all its risible untidiness
it traces me to each address,
dragging in things I never thought about.

I don't invite what facts can be
held at arm's length; a family
of jeering irresponsibles always
comes along gypsy-style
and there you have them all
forever on your hands. It never pays.

If I could still extrapolate
the morning-glory on the gate
from Petersburg in history—but it's too late.

1954

◆ RURAL REFLECTIONS

This is the grass your feet are planted on.
You paint it orange or you sing it green,
 But you have never found
A way to make the grass mean what you mean.

A cloud can be whatever you intend:
Ostrich or leaning tower or staring eye.
 But you have never found
A cloud sufficient to express the sky.

Get out there with your splendid expertise;
Raymond who cuts the meadow does no less.
 Inhuman nature says:
Inhuman patience is the true success.

Human impatience trips you as you run;
 Stand still and you must lie.
It is the grass that cuts the mower down;
It is the cloud that swallows up the sky.

1956

◆ THE KNIGHT

A knight rides into the noon,
and his helmet points to the sun,
and a thousand splintered suns
are the gaiety of his mail.
The soles of his feet glitter
and his palms flash in reply,
and under his crackling banner
he rides like a ship in sail.

A knight rides into the noon,
and only his eye is living,
a lump of bitter jelly
set in a metal mask,
betraying rags and tatters
that cling to the flesh beneath
and wear his nerves to ribbons
under the radiant casque.

Who will unhorse this rider
and free him from between
the walls of iron, the emblems
crushing his chest with their weight?
Will they defeat him gently,
or leave him hurled on the green,
his rags and wounds still hidden
under the great breastplate?

1957

◆ THE LOSER

*A man thinks of the woman he once loved:
first, after her wedding, and then nearly a
decade later.*

I

I kissed you, bride and lost, and went
home from that bourgeois sacrament,
your cheek still tasting cold upon
my lips that gave you benison
with all the swagger that they knew—
as losers somehow learn to do.

Your wedding made my eyes ache; soon
the world would be worse off for one
more golden apple dropped to ground
without the least protesting sound,
and you would windfall lie, and we
forget your shimmer on the tree.

Beauty is always wasted: if
not Mignon's song sung to the deaf,
at all events to the unmoved.
A face like yours cannot be loved
long or seriously enough.
Almost, we seem to hold it off.

II

Well, you are tougher than I thought.
Now when the wash with ice hangs taut
this morning of St. Valentine,
I see you strip the squeaking line,
your body weighed against the load,
and all my groans can do no good.

Because you still are beautiful,
though squared and stiffened by the pull
of what nine windy years have done.
You have three daughters, lost a son.
I see all your intelligence
flung into that unwearied stance.

My envy is of no avail.
I turn my head and wish him well
who chafed your beauty into use
and lives forever in a house
lit by the friction of your mind.
You stagger in against the wind.

1958

What do you look for down there
in the cracks of the pavement? Or up there
between the pineapple and the acanthus leaf
in that uninspired ornament? Odysseus
wading half-naked out of the shrubbery
like a god, dead serious among those at play,
could hardly be more out of it. In school
we striped your back with chalk, you all oblivious,
your eyes harnessed by a transparent strand
reaching the other side of things, or down
like a wellchain to the center of earth.
Now with those same eyes you pull the
pavements up like old linoleum,
arches of triumph start to liquefy
minutes after you slowly turn away.

1958

◆ EURYCLEA'S TALE

I have to weep when I see it, the grown boy fretting
for a father dawdling among the isles,
and the seascape hollowed out by that boy's edged gaze
to receive one speck, one only, for years and years withheld.

And that speck, that curious man, has kept from home
till home would seem the forbidden place, till blood
and the tears of an old woman must run down
to satisfy the genius of place. Even then, what
can they do together, father and son?
the driftwood stranger and the rooted boy
whose eyes will have nothing then to ask the sea.

But all the time and everywhere
lies in ambush for the distracted eyeball
light: light on the ship racked up in port,
the chimney-stones, the scar whiter than smoke,
than her flanks, her hair, that true but aging bride.

1958

◆ SEPTEMBER 21

Wear the weight of equinoctial evening,
light like melons bruised on all the porches.
Feel the houses tenderly appraise you,
hold you in the watchfulness of mothers.

Once the nighttime was a milky river
washing past the swimmers in the sunset,
rinsing over sleepers of the morning.
Soon the night will be an eyeless quarry

where the shrunken daylight and its rebels,
loosened, dive like stones in perfect silence,
names and voices drown without reflection.

Then the houses draw you. Then they have you.

1958

◆ AFTER A SENTENCE IN “MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE”

The month's eye blurs.
The winter's lungs are cracked.
Along bloated gutters race,
shredded, your injured legions,
the waste of our remorseless search.
Your old, unuttered names are holes
worn in our skins
through which we feel from time to time
abrasive wind.

Those who are loved live poorly and in danger.
We who were loved will never
unlive that crippling fever.
A day returns, a certain weather
splatters the panes, and we
once more stare in the eye of our first failure.

1958

◆ SNAPSHOTS OF A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

1.

You, once a belle in Shreveport,
with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud,
still have your dresses copied from that time,
and play a Chopin prelude
called by Cortot: "*Delicious recollections
float like perfume through the memory.*"

Your mind now, mouldering like wedding-cake,
heavy with useless experience, rich
with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

Nervy, glowering, your daughter
wipes the teaspoons, grows another way.

2.

Banging the coffee-pot into the sink
she hears the angels chiding, and looks out
past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.
Only a week since They said: *Have no patience.*

The next time it was: *Be insatiable.*
Then: *Save yourself; others you cannot save.*
Sometimes she's let the tapstream scald her arm,
a match burn to her thumbnail,

or held her hand above the kettle's snout
right in the woolly steam. They are probably angels,
since nothing hurts her any more, except
each morning's grit blowing into her eyes.

3.

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.
The beak that grips her, she becomes. And Nature,
that sprung-lidded, still commodious
steamer-trunk of *tempora* and *mores*
gets stuffed with it all: the mildewed orange-flowers,
the female pills, the terrible breasts
of Boadicea beneath flat foxes' heads and orchids.

Two handsome women, gripped in argument,
each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream
across the cut glass and majolica
like Furies cornered from their prey:
The argument *ad feminam*, all the old knives
that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours,
ma semblable, ma soeur!

4.

Knowing themselves too well in one another:
their gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn,
the prick filed sharp against a hint of scorn . . .
Reading while waiting
for the iron to heat,
writing, *My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—*
in that Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum,
or, more often,
iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
dusting everything on the whatnot every day of life.

5.

Dulce ridens, dulce loquens,
she shaves her legs until they gleam
like petrified mammoth-tusk.

6.

When to her lute Corinna sings
neither words nor music are her own;
only the long hair dipping
over her cheek, only the song
of silk against her knees
and these
adjusted in reflections of an eye.

Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before
an unlocked door, that cage of cages,
tell us, you bird, you tragical machine—
is this *fertilisante douleur*? Pinned down
by love, for you the only natural action,
are you edged more keen
to prise the secrets of the vault? has Nature shown
her household books to you, daughter-in-law,
that her sons never saw?

7.

*“To have in this uncertain world some stay
which cannot be undermined, is
of the utmost consequence ”*

Thus wrote
a woman, partly brave and partly good,
who fought with what she partly understood.
Few men about her would or could do more,
hence she was labelled harpy, shrew and whore.

8.

“You all die at fifteen,” said Diderot,
and turn part legend, part convention.
Still, eyes inaccurately dream
behind closed windows blankening with steam.
Deliciously, all that we might have been,
all that we were—fire, tears,
wit, taste, martyred ambition—
stirs like the memory of refused adultery
the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years.

9.

*Not that it is done well, but
that it is done at all? Yes, think
of the odds! or shrug them off forever.*
This luxury of the precocious child,
Time’s precious chronic invalid,—
would we, darlings, resign it if we could?
Our blight has been our sinecure:
mere talent was enough for us—
glitter in fragments and rough drafts.

Sigh no more, ladies.

Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.
Bemused by gallantry, we hear
our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation,
slattern thought styled intuition,
every lapse forgiven, our crime
only to cast too bold a shadow
or smash the mould straight off.

For that, solitary confinement,

tear gas, attrition shelling.

Few applicants for that honor.

10. Well,

she's long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.

Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents,

taking the light upon her

at least as beautiful as any boy

or helicopter,

poised, still coming,

her fine blades making the air wince

but her cargo

no promise then:

delivered

palpable

ours.

1958–1960

The landlord's hammer in the yard
patches a porch where your shirts swing
brashly against May's creamy blue.
This year the forsythia ran wild,
chrome splashed on the spring evenings,
every bush a pile of sulphur.
Now, ragged, they bend
under the late wind's onslaught, tousled
as my head beneath the clotheslines.

Soon we'll be off. I'll pack us into parcels,
stuff us in barrels, shroud us in newspapers,
pausing to marvel at old bargain sales:
Oh, all the chances we never seized!
Emptiness round the stoop of the house
minces, catwise, waiting for an in.

1959

◆ THE RAVEN

If, antique hateful bird,
flapping through dawngagged streets
of metal shopfronts grated down
on pedestrian nerve-ends,

if, as on old film,
my features blurred and grained like cereal,
you find me walking up and down
waiting for my first dream,

don't try to sully my head
with vengeful squirtings. Fly on,
ratfooted cautionary of my dark,
till we meet further along.

You are no dream, old genius.
I smell you, get my teeth on edge,
stand in my sweat—in mercury—
even as you prime your feathers and set sail.

1959

I

Wedged in by earthworks
thrown up by snouters before me,
I kick and snuffle, breathing in
cobwebs of beetle-cuirass:
vainglory of polished green,
infallible pincer, resonant nerve,
a thickening on the air now,
confusion to my lungs, no more.
My predecessors blind me—
their zeal exhausted among roots and tunnels,
they gasped and looked up once or twice
into the beechtree's nightblack glitter.

II

Let me take you by the hair
and drag you backward to the light,
there spongelike press my gaze
patiently upon your eyes,
hold like a photographic plate
against you my enormous question.
What if you cringe, what if you weep?
Suffer this and you need suffer
nothing more. I'll give you back
yourself at last to the last part.
I take nothing, only look.
Change nothing. Have no need to change.
Merely to know and let you go.

1959

III

Spirit like water
moulded by unseen stone
and sandbar, pleats and funnels
according to its own
submerged necessity—
to the indolent eye
pure willfulness, to the stray
pine-needle boiling
in that cascade-bent pool
a random fury: Law,
if that's what's wanted, lies
asking to be read
in the dried brook-bed.

1961

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