

AIRPORT PHOTOS

Doug Ashford

(Read as if seen through Lucite.)

A COUPLE EMBRACES ONE LAST TIME in front of the metal detector, his tears touching the other's lips that press on his cheek. A gray man in a brown sweater looks nervously through a crowd. A couple taps on a vinyl security barrier, a little more loudly or a little more fervently than the child entering the gate can tolerate comfortably. Silent hands wave from airplane windows thick as mud, signaling to a now formless departure ramp, all the faces too milky for recognition. Bored laughter echoes from a bar as someone fights to remember the last time he was with someone he really liked. The quiet cry of a man who has heard some very bad news is barely audible. He is stuck at the baggage claim, where the suitcases are coming out and circling. He circles the carousel, as everyone jostles for a position from which they can see their possessions.



SHE ALWAYS SAID THAT SHE CHANGED when she entered airports. It was either the need to get from one distant place to the next, or the recognition of her body as now so much older, moving amongst others, that caused her to pause on entering these great avenues. Being between places, being on-her-way at such a velocity was exhausting, and within the complex space that modern engineers have designed, completely confusing. Airports seemed, she said, to be built in order to contain her privacy, but simultaneously to disallow its effects. She occasionally saw others as more distantly associated comrades. She felt protected from the embarrassment of other people's emotional abandon in such a seamless environment. Such intensity of feeling seemed out of place in edifices designed for the smooth transition of bodies from one containment to the next. The generic curve of a hallway, the lines of an automatic faucet in the lavatory; such rationalism always seemed surprising. Such surprise, she said, seemed strangely terrifying.

DOUG ASHFORD

So she tried to be ready. She prepared herself for infractions, either personal or public, with snapshots carried in her closest bag. An envelope of ten or so pictures that she could handle in those brief moments of reflection. She called this envelope a "power-pack"—the name referring to the portable energy systems often associated with appliances or toys. But these pictures supplied an energy neither



traditional nor expected because the subjects they depicted, seemingly random, were never exactly recognizable as photo album fare. Instead her pictures were of things like a piece of furniture, or the turned covers of some pages of an old book; a Polaroid of a sand covered towel, or a bouquet of zinnias.

NEITHER ALBUM NOR MEMORIAL, the "power-pack" was something she first heard about from a man on a plane many years before. Sitting next to each other on a particularly arduous trip and trapped in the middle seats, they shared origins. He showed her a small envelope of snapshots, images that gave him, he said, the energy to make it to the next city. The pictures were barely captionable with descriptions, but densely associated to each other through shuffling and re-arrangement, and the juxtapositions of content that color photography provides so wonderfully. (A blue sky in Florida goes with a blue blanket in New York.) His pictures insisted to her that the configurations of memory could be re-arranged and perhaps even changed. Images and memories could function like an amorphous list that let him, and her for that moment, feel the form of the present as a malleable and, somehow, a caring system—sensitive to the sentimental needs of one day, singularly different from any other.

DOUG ASHFORD

She declined to have photo albums all the years since that chance meeting on the plane; preferred instead to watch the images pile up in various drawers and on all the surfaces of her house. To her, the modest separation of one picture from another, ordered by place or time or both, meant the organization of memory as an oppressive presence: an authority without transparency. (Something like an air-



port.) The permanence of such orderings seemed incongruous with the charm of returning to people and places that were already gone. When she lost snapshots in her boxes or on her shelves, it seemed to make a strangely consistent sense.

She received a photograph or two from time to time, occasionally with notes on the back, from the man she had met on the plane. These joined the others she was accumulating, now freed from the order of albums, and together establishing a sense of memory that she could build on, or sometimes even invent. Her archive became wonderfully unfamiliar, or even estranging, but more encompassing of its subjects. In viewing the isolated photos, she felt as if she could see into a luminous disruption that existed just beyond the frame in all of them. The photos she collected were writing different histories for herself than any she could self-narrate; histories not excavated from beneath but voluntarily drawn from all the spaces around her, from

DOUG ASHFORD

the airports she was growing to love and the whispered conversations therein, to the thoughts arranged in the rooms of her home.



THE FAMILIARITY OF SOME PHOTOS gives great pleasure because they relieve the tension between the idealizations of life and the ambivalence toward actually lived experience. They negotiate the struggle between what is wanted and what is had. In a way all personal photo collections ask a similar question: What wishes are there that should be preserved? Which *can* be preserved? The scale of the personal will always be so out of proportion to the public that the photo will grow sentimental and dear. Meanwhile, some of the things we are encouraged to make public have been eroded in their power to transform, as a glance to any medium will confirm. By sharing photos of things that are not easily identifiable as part and parcel of a family, a city, or a nation, a kind of forgetting is taking place. Perhaps a social act, this kind of forgetting clears the mind to the possibility of reconciliation and identification with others. Pictures treasured by those telling a story, pictures traded and collected, can be used to forget a sterile past invented by others and make the present more our own.