

EXPERIENCE BEFORE MEMORY

Step slowly, carefully,
until you feel the fog between the trees.
Hear the heartbeat of air.
Let the ground open beneath you
and grant you forever to walk the first step.
Freedom is brief: watch smoke disappear.
Even with the best of wines
the second sip drowns the first.

LACKING AN EASEL

The compulsion to capture two children
geysering up and down on a seesaw—
balancing precariously on the air—overwhelms me.
If only I were an artist able to quick-sketch the silos
wobbling behind them
or draw the wheat field shrinking to stubble
beneath their feet.
Or paint the color of their squeals.
The boy reaches for a rooftop,
straddling the wood shed
with red and blue shouts.
The girl lifts bare legs—
shrieking purple cries
at the puddle drawing closer.
Two children divide the light—
each rising and falling with exultant yelps
that swoop like swallows into the hay loft.
But the exuberance of such a vision
can never be painted but only kissed.
And I'd rather savor it,
keeping my hands free to catch them
should one of them fall.

LEAVES BEYOND GLASS

For Peter Kaplan (1957-1977)

Father: open the windows before the trees go bare,
before the lawn is raked clean,
and one misstep buries me in mud.
Bring back the green leaves surrounding my boyhood.
Let me trot beside you,
two steps to your one.

My hand grips your finger,
as we trundle down streets,
pulling a wagon full of brothers.
I feel your chin when you bend down
to sort the bottle caps from the coins
I pull from my pockets.
Shining back from counter glass,
your eyes meet mine
above the pyramid of ice cream numbing my tongue.
Unable to look away, I'm lost in your reflection.

Confined by illness, I lay quarantined in your tattered robe,
gazing out while you frosted cartoons
to the outer side of my bedroom window.
You stood in the cold, arching your eye brows—miming laughter—
meant to carry me past all confinements.

Hearing you whistle around corners,
I came running.
I know you can't remove this sickness.
But lift me once more toward the ceiling
that appeared only an arm's length away
before I fall back—
entombed in the silence of this stale room.

SPRING

That well-spent hag was hardly awake
before—with a toss of her hair—
she changed beds.
Stealing the moon's protrusion,
she padded out her hips.
She filled out her flat bosom with green buds.
Crossing over the swollen creek, she trampled the lilies.
She squeezed blossoms over her body,
feigning a bath with perfume.
A breeze dried her clean.
Strapping on spiked heels,
she gave the turf its course.
Seed spilled everywhere.

But you've gotta hand it to her—
the old bitch.
Look at those meadows rise!

SHORT ORDERS

It's 2 a.m..
I stumble into a diner.
Bubbly-mouthed coffee pots attempt
to steam open the tight-lipped night.
I find an empty booth.
I'm not talking.
A waitress appears, hovering like an angel.
She turns her face away,
allowing me to stare at the back of her legs.
I want to thank her.
I signal for her pencil. She hands it to me.
I trace our lives on a napkin.
"Look, buddy. You'll need more than astrological signs
to get me into bed."
I open my jacket.
"Who do ya think you are? Pull down your shirt.
I've seen better tattoos on a dog's ass."
The food counter bell clangs.
"I'll be back when you're ready ta order."
I lick salt from the back of my hand.
"Hey! You givin' da girl trouble?"
I look up. The cook stands over me.
"Yeah. You. Don't act dumb. You can talk.
Now give her back her pencil. She's got work to do."
I hand it over, surrendering my tongue.

A drunken man and woman in rumpled wedding clothes
flop down in the next booth.
"Would you believe," the bride slurs, "I was going to be a *nun*?"
She looks around to see if anyone else is listening.
"Here's your eggs and Johnny cakes."
The cook bangs down my plate.
"Ya got syrup and whatever else ya need on da rack.
So no more lip outta youse."
The bride winks at me.
"Hey, sweetie," she whispers. "You'd better be careful.
Cupid might be lurkin' closer than you think.
Look: I've still got my garter on."
She bares her thigh and giggles.
"Whata ya say? Wanna try for it?"
The groom weaves as he wags a finger at me.
I shrug my shoulders and turn away.
It almost seems the coffee darkens
the more I add cream to it.