

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 childhood.
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 as you bend down
to sort bottle caps from the coins
I hold out in my hand.
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 in your tattered robe,
gazing at you as you frosted cartoons
on the outer side of my bedroom window,
unaware that your breath wouldn't last forever.
You stood in the cold, arching your eye brows, miming laughter
as if 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.

AA MEETING
for Frank Quinn

Brothers...sisters...
I first got addicted to
poetry
reading the French writers.
A sip of port
with Baudelaire.
A glass of Bordeaux with Max...Max...you know who—
Picasso's little Jew.
A shot of brandy warmed me up
to Mallarme.
Dry sherry—straight from the bottle. That's all.
That's all it took and I was hooked
on Rimbaud.
Plenty of vermouth with that prince of poets—
what's his name? Verlaine?
That old so-and-so.
Finally, I uncork champagne and stumble
over Shakespeare. I find myself—on the floor—
with Emily. Ah, what the hell!
Some day I'll pour it all back into the bottle.
But I just keep turning the pages.
Night after night I'm intoxicated in that rush of stars—
drunken beyond any one sense.
I even got high on sacramental wine—with Hopkins.
What a trip—me, of all people,
in religious ecstasy!
Dylan's voice boomed like the voice of God.
He downed "18 straight whiskies"
at the White Horse.
I tried to
out-do him.
Lifted a bottle
of Campari.
But I chipped a tooth.
Ah, why complain?
Certainly poems relieve the pain.

SHORT ORDERS

It's 2 a.m..
I stumble into a diner.
Bubbly-mouthed coffee pots try
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, showing her the violets
I'm hiding from the world.
"Who do ya think you are? Pull down your shirt.
I've seen better tattoos on a dog's ass."
A bell clangs at the food counter.
"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?"
When 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 don't get wise."
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 wags a finger at me.
I shrug my shoulders and turn away.
It almost seems the coffee darkens
the more cream I add to it.

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't be painted but only kissed.
And I'd rather savor it,
keeping my hands free to catch them
should one of them fall.

ROADSIDING HAY

It hardly matters what holds the load in place.
My days are spent crossing levees,
dodging trees.
Up one windrow and down the other.
The clanking chains convey the bales
to the top of the wobbling load
growing a tier higher with each pass.

Tonight the full moon tempts the field out
from under me.
Open full-throttle, I abandon all directions.
Straps of light slip from blue shoulders.
Rut holes catch me dreaming:
my knees go down in sand.
Each time I genuflect, my wires jar loose.
Fog spills from the culvert.
Prayers hold the stars in place.

I should have warned you:
when you hear me coming,
throw open the gates.
Once I've cleared the field,
I have no way to stop.

A breeze wraps me in a swath of cow's breath.
My wheels flatten as I float through space.
How happy I'd be transporting those stars across the sky.