

Gail Hanlon

IN LIFE

November 1, 1994, for my father (1920-1985)

Today they say the veil between the worlds
is thinner than at any other time of year.
I place a cup of milk and a lighted candle
on the sill, and think of you,
still yourself, not a shade
but somehow less sad than in life.
I do not believe in feeding the dead
but I do it as a mortal gesture, frail
as someone unable to comprehend
what it is like to be without substance,
without desire.

Whenever you appear in my dreams,
you wear the yellow sweater you loved
to let me know that you are well,
more peaceful than in life.
A few weeks ago, I put out one of the few
photos I have of you: in your thirties,
holding me, a fat, blonde, two year old
on your lap; so unlike what I became.
We are sitting out on the dry grass
in Marin, your khaki legs a wide corral.
Behind us a wide lawn. Suburban space,
cleared of anything but invitation,
and your face is as elusive as ever.

Even when you were alive
I could not decide what you looked like.
But your stories, your gestures,
a certain crisp delight you took in life,

opening the front door at six
with a bag full of lettuce and ice-cream,
these I remember well.

I never imagined that I would be alone like this
although I practiced being blind as a child,
arms outstretched, a priestess in my flannel gown;
feeling the wallpaper as I climbed the stairs to bed,
anticipating perhaps that my retinas,
transparent as egg sacs, would thin and nearly
break some twenty years later.

I always thought I'd care for you
when you were old. I think I said I would.
Instead, you didn't so much age
as slowly disappear; creeping away
like someone who doesn't know
how to ask for a divorce.

QUATRE CENTS COUPS

after Truffaut

Juggling white eggs
in your thin brown hands,
you bark at me and I sink
into it, ducking
out of range,
playful as a dog.
Little flags,
like brittle autumn leaves,
fly up in my brain
saying jeez.