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For the Nameless Girl in the Photograph

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FOR THE NAMELESS GIRL IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

Here, under a sky littered with cries
of gulls, Lake Erie redolent of algae,
deep fish, is where I found you, nameless
child, your photograph half-obliterated

by sand and a discarded paper cup.
All night I’ve tried to lose myself
in the lap of tide, distant cars
on the freeway—all those lives rushing

around me on the way to a future where maybe
someone waits, breathless, at the doorway,
the aroma of bread rising like a glimmer
of memory a second before any word is spoken.

But tonight, silence was all I wanted—
more than anything, to think of nothing
beyond this moment . . . not my father
whose body, on x-ray, is luminous with cancer,
or my mother with her thousand complaints
looking suddenly old, her face wreathed
in steam rising from her soup bowl last night.
And now you are here, insistent beneath

my fingers, wanting, like anyone, to be held,
acknowledged as someone valuable. My dark
treasure. Your small frame appears more spirit
than flesh, wrapped in the black envelope
of underexposure which earned you this careless abandonment. The camera flash captured blue flame in your eyes like the final, desperate signal our planet might hurl across the galaxy.

Candy foils, winks of gold at your feet, suggest you posed, not amidst the trash of this stinking beach, but stardust. And though I'm certain the photographer meant only to save the day and you forever,

he forced you into postures of adulthood, knowledge you can't yet possess, so that you stand, unnatural in your oval of light, the strap of your tattered bathing suit pushed off one shoulder so slight I can see the veins throbbing underneath, your right hand clamped over the spot on your waist which will, in years, assume a graceful, confident arc.

A woman's hand emerges from the corner of the frame, oddly predatory, as if she meant to rearrange you at the instant the camera flashed and whirred the already developing film out of its dark interior like a tongue which tastes something bittersweet.

How the bones of your hips protrude, like the backs of sleek fish cresting the water on their way to some destination I can only imagine. And your ribs, like skeletal hands, encircle, pull you toward a night some man will promise everything and probably leave you with the ghost of yourself, standing on this same beach, years from now but with the same haunted eyes. On your thigh is a bruise
so much like a bird it becomes my wish for you, 
whoever you are—what I offer to the wind 
which wraps around my palm, opening, as if 
this poem, this prayer, might reach you in time.

Elegy, 1822

This time it’s not so easy, holding a pose, 
shoulders back as he bends to gather driftwood, 
build that final bed. All he can offer 
is this pyre—frankincense and salt which turn 
the flames chameleon. Shelley’s dead. 
And two years from Greece, the marsh disease 
which will kill him, Byron turns from the smoke, 
dusky medusa-curls circling his friend’s face, 
the hand which held his own one summer in Geneva 
falling open as if offering something to the wind. 
What else can he do but raise his head, that posture 
of defiance which makes the others envious, 
Hunt and Trelawny ashamed of their own small love. 
Byron’s thinking he must leave before he thrusts 
his hand through the heat toward those lips, 
dark with their secret. He says he’ll take 
the skull for a goblet, swallow death whole. 
But now he will swim. Pushing away from shore,