

Two Poems · *Frankie Paino*

FOR THE NAMELESS GIRL IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

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

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,