

DEBRA FRANKE

## Two Poems

### Summer Photograph

Imagine your childhood, birch groves  
and singular maples hovering over the high-gloss  
paper of memory, textured morning towing a small boat  
of half-light and the silver sea lazing in the background,  
gulls on waves like white bandannas.

The multi-narratives of photographs arranged  
and rearranged according to what we think we know,  
what we've had to make up to fool ourselves.

Grainy downpour and its water-marked borders  
of silt-smudged memory ghosts, the cankerous grit  
of teeth puncturing soft-gummed mossy groundcover,  
grey acupuncture needles penetrating soccer fields  
and the porous sky, all it can absorb in a glazed afternoon:

white-matted trim of birch bark outlining these town-property  
boundaries, how skin tone lingers around marsh edges  
like a wind-flared silk robe, clings to hammered-tight  
corners and grey-tiled roof of the photograph

as if the camera will somehow transport itself  
out of this small, two-timing factory town, and you along with it.  
You can't tell if the tide is coming in or going out,  
all that foaming water paused mid-stream: directionless,  
purposeless, the flooding inlet and the boundaries  
it gave up to a hot-tempered, trolling sea.

End of a line waiting at the snack bar, another generation:  
blonde boy digging with plastic yellow bulldozer  
into mounds of wet sand, pig-tailed girl clutching a dandelion  
and gazing toward her newest fixation point beyond  
the margins, horizon only she can see and one  
that will abandon her before nightfall.

Perhaps she is looking for heaven  
one last time before growing out of her faith;  
perhaps she is on her knees from remembering  
that slow leak of natural light, hands shielding her eyes  
like an aperture suspending truth.

There is no sandcastle in the photo but you'd like  
to airbrush its edges into existence since every beach  
longs for a castle: mud-dense, shovel-sculpted  
walls it can hide behind and its very own garrison  
narratives, the high formations of rock

preventing you from being swept to sea  
in this story you've always been promised  
would have a happy-ever-after ending:  
that radiant prince, that white, sky-bucking horse.

## The Dying Years

Every morning I have the same things for breakfast:  
toast with raspberry jam, English Breakfast tea,  
the obituaries. I demand of myself that I stop  
reading them, but I'm obsessed with the stories  
of those who have died. The dying years.  
The after-dying years. Our lives folded up and stapled

crisp as cardboard boxes that our scarves, books, ribbons  
will be packed in, squared-off like backyard vegetable gardens  
twined taut and knotted, the rusted iron stakes standing  
watch like black-suited pallbearers, our lives packed  
into word-rationed columns of black and white,  
twelve-point font on beige foolscap, the newsprint

of memory leaving black thumbprint smudges like ash  
on skin. When I watch the sky change colour at night  
from blue to blue-purple to black as though inhabited by  
altering moods and transitioning souls, I imagine, hope,  
that this is how death will feel: as though I am pollen stirred  
between trees, lightly sifting between leaves, the wind

catching the edges of my sleeves, the weightlessness  
of afterlife, birds flying my burdens out of sight and bright  
rain pouring onto my grace-thirsty skin like thousands  
of welcoming hands, the tents of light they'll peg down  
around my feet, hoisting me up on the shoulders of  
a madrigal, blue choral hallelujahs, unabridged light.