

Speed Graphic

—for James Baker Hall

by Rebecca Gayle Howell

I snap a picture of your absence
A glass bulb exploding

The negative is true black
The emulsion, clean

I take your stiff finger, its yellow nail
Together, we scrape a tree there,
tall oak with a woman's hair

In the background, we draw
a blue-eyed boy afraid
of his own mother,
her gunshot, his penis
Afraid of what goes off—

In the foreground, we draw
a bald-headed man with his hand out

I take his hand

You who pulled delight to you
like it was on a leash—
leaning out of your chair:
calling *Come, back Come—*

You who laid cold in your bed
you are gone

My arms are heavy with the machine of it,
this work-horse of a camera you gave to me
when I was a girl

The Speed Graphic
The first camera for war and news
A case of chrome and timing
A case for ruthless truth

You showed me how to slide
the lens on its track:

*the business of focus, you said, is not a secret
It is a measured space, found between
where we both stand*

Tonight, my red leather bellows extends

I snap a picture of your absence
The negative is true black
Clean

I enter the darkroom
Turn on the safe light
Print

All I have left is a sun in a box,
my god—

a bright white frame