

2015

For the Widow

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Recommended Citation

Rosenthal, Laura (2015) "For the Widow," *Inklings Magazine*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 18.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/inklings/vol1/iss1/18>

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Cover Page Footnote

Author's Note: I wrote this poem after a class on British Romanticism, where we learned about Percy Shelley's death. Shelley drowned in the sea, and when his body washed up on shore, his friends and family were forced to burn it because of the fear it would spread cholera. However, Shelley's heart had calcified and did not burn on the pyre. Mary Shelley, author of Frankenstein and Shelley's wife, ultimately kept his heart. My poem borrows imagery and language from the British Romantic poets, Shakespeare, and Homer to imagine what Mary might have done with the heart.

For the Widow

Poseidon took it upon himself
To prove to a poet the power of
Prayer, and with his waves like hands
Strangled an unprotesting
Percy Shelley.

For need of public safety
They burned the sea-swelled body
So his pearl eyes and coral bones
Would spare from cholera
The others.

They built a pyre on the beach
To honor Percy like Patroclus,
And the smell of the ashes appeased
The sea god, who left un-singed
Shelley's heart.

Mary Shelley fought her friends
For possession of the calcified organ,
And winning her husband's remain,
Held it in her living hand, like a pot
Of basil.

She could have placed it
Under her pillow or in her pajama drawer
Or displayed on a shelf for all women to envy
Or planted in her garden in place of
A radish.

But she went out at night to the graves
Of men who died too young and stole
From them two arms, two legs, two feet,
Two hands, one face. She brought them to
Her bedroom.

Mary sewed the limbs together
And left a space in this borrowed monster
Body for Percy's heart, which she tucked
Under stolen skin and prayed
It beat.

by Laura Rosenthal

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