For the Widow

Laura Rosenthal
Colby College, larosent@colby.edu

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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.

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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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