

The Black Madonna

by Ulrica Hume

They say I am filthy. On this high pillar I perch like a stuffed avian relic, flightless, no prey. The horizon before me is broken by scuff and foreign tongue, by atomized evil. Pleas, and there are many, are answered by the only prayer I know, the one prayer, which is that of a wooden tongue.

The centuries pass like clouds. You wander by, as you are meant to wander here, and then you pause, look up. A face of shades, crowned by fairy stones, emerges, a beguiling homeliness. I am the caretaker of tears, breakdowns, other treasures, rose and ash. I offer you courage, a rare sort of peace. Maybe you accept this. Maybe you see it as an unnecessary intrusion.

The planners meanwhile plan their restoration. Candle smoke has ceremoniously blackened me, causing an accretion of sins. But is it the soil or its cause that so offends them? The stained glass windows are murky jewels. The leprous walls must be power washed.

Darkness holds us. It is dark in the cathedral when you quit me, music tumbles from the choir, the breeze is archaic. Dark when a lone planet tips out of alignment, the crash of a chalice, and the merciful crest of dreams comes not by force but in the gentlest way. The wicks are bent, the wax has pooled. I am consumed by a lunar light. Hope, despair, and persecution, a wad of gum stuck under the altar. All can mutate, change form. What is my admired body but wood from the walnut tree? What are the planners but slaves to perfection?

To ravage is to beautify—this is their logic. But there is no going back to what once was without undoing its gains. It is done: I have been whitewashed, my affections sanitized, now I gaze with an alarmed and empty air at the licking flames, mildewed Passion, the irresponsible martyrs—let us turn and in the turning forget them as well. Forget me. Tomorrow is cold, the ice on my lashes a sign, the apple rolling down the aisle apocalyptic, it has led us here, seekers

in this starry structure, open to the heavens, but with chains holding us down, we are spun with the colors of a candied sorrow.

One can resist, but holiness cannot be taken. My dark skin was the gateway of the simulacrum, mirror of forgotten origins, of primitive eyes and ears and mouth not seeing hearing speaking, my mind a flash in holy water, my greeting paralytic as it cleaves the empty part of you, and in remembering, exclusion, numbness, and in forgetting, the snow-white provocation, and I must watch, in hoary magic, I must retreat into infinity, be the one who bears the same child after same child, who is preternaturally tender, mortified by flowers laid.

You will know me by a lingering grief, a wisdom hard got. We will communicate in a new deviant language, our interactive prayers like hand buzzers, mood rings. A golden ratio of high forehead, blush, and eyes whose votive color is inconstant. In the new world, my flesh will be rubber, my womb a holy drama of wires. Yet I will be ageless and so unmoved, virtual and cold. A sabotaged sex-shop creature, *dame de voyage*, save the brocade gown, amen.

This is a different miracle. Here, in this house of flowers and flames, my staff is raised, but the way to you, dear pilgrim, is too clear now. Gone is the impenetrable darkness, residue of mystery. The vantage of time, which stills, which ruins. A reckless murmuring as I remember hearts soft as wax, the humble imprint belonging to no one. The space between us as synapse, an elegant anarchy.

These eyes, which know you. This desecrated holiness. Hold not to appearances, says the lover reaching out, but to what is inside.

