

For Reformers of Forgotten Religions

by [Mark J. Mitchell](#) (January 2025)



Sea With Two Smoldering Steamboats (Emil Nolde, 1930)

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*Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising.
Demons of the earth, they will not last. –Allen Tate, Ode to
the Confederate Dead*

You came off the mountain. Your lightning voice warned
us, called us back. You could recite the names

we'd misplaced while digging for the soft gold
we thought gods wanted. You remembered the forms
of worship, days of feasts, the dance the lame
king danced. You knew the real stories. You told
us, 'Come home or all is lost. The shifting warm
sand will cover you. Your cities will fold
like reeds. You'll regret the day you were born.'

You sang sweet as time's own thief,
And the desert danced back for a while.

You rose. The sea offered you like a wave.
Your crashing voice called, 'Our mother is warm.
She loves. Don't be fooled by the lewd Ishtars,
bold Astartes. Scorpion people won't save
you from her anger. She's mother of storms.
She'll crush you to sand beneath dying stars.
Remember only her name, all she gave
us—mornings, fish, our holy sailing arts.
Remember all those dark sins that she forgave.'

Your thief song called to water,
And while you sang the sea played

Stars shifted. Time opened, closed. Mountains shook.
Dark clouds crowned them. We prayed. You never came
back. No words. No old truths. The waves fell hard.
People rode them, killing us. They looked
like no one else. The mountain broke. Red flames
and rock rained. Now, our aging, croaking bards
forget songs. Prophecies fade. We mistook
form for mystery. Old widows search for shards
of our lost city. Dead scribes write our books.

You sang your lovely, stolen song:
Time's the thief. Time's the thief. Time's the thief.

Casida of Making

First,
worship water with fire
in your quiet kitchen.

Then
take the red gifts of earth
kissed black by flames—

bow
before crushing them to fine dust
while fire takes to water.

Fold
brown paper to a precise cone
to hold your offering, safe.

When
water smiles, just before she sings,
give her to perfect black dust.

Drink
and wake up.

Stolen Roses

All in red, he enters the grocery store,
his outlaw face searching only for more.
The door breathes open then closed. Cool false air
slapping at his face, making him aware
of purpose—his love's needs he can't ignore.

She's home and perfect as flowers. She pours
her love like a watering can. He swore
she'd have roses. Leaving, she made him wear
nothing but red

for Valentine's, she said. He smiled and tore
a bouquet from a stand, checking the floor
for eyes that might stop him. There were none there.
He walks, slow, to the sensitive door, where,
starting to run, he remembers she wore
nothing but red.

Moonlight

An Imitation of Fernando Villalón

You own this evening:
Joining your light with light
like music of bells
falling through moonlight.

Roosters never crow here.
The city is too bright
with cars driving fast
ignorant of moonlight.

So, so and so, it's past twelve.

The table's clear, no bite
is left unless you're willing
to eat this moonlight.

Clap, slap, clap your tiny hands.
Make a speech out of night,
give a gift of finger blossoms
thrown towards moonlight.

Ah and so, see how they look!
Your cloud of a blouse,
your legs, your breasts so bright
they guide sailors through rocks
on this ocean of moonlight.

A Found Temple

Plants mark a lintel
made for those gods
kissed lightly by stars.

Nature is quick here:
A sharp tremor
sets blossoms dancing.

Look low and high
as you step across, between
two pillars guarded by flowers.

No one will say
where this open, ancient door
may lead you.

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Mark J. Mitchell has been a working poet for 50 years. He's the author of five full-length collections, and six chapbooks. His latest collection is *Something To Be* from Pski's Porch Publishing. A novel, *A Book of Lost Songs* is due out in Spring of 2025. He's fond of baseball, Louis Aragon, Dante, and his wife, activist Joan Juster. He lives in San Francisco where he points out pretty things

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