Sandy Longhorn, *The Alchemy of My Mortal Form* (Ponte Vedra Beach, FL: Trio House Press, 2015, 75 pp, $16 paper)
Bradford Tice, *What the Night Numbered* (Ponte Vedra Beach, FL: Trio House Press, 2015, 109 pp, $16 paper)

I must have been five when I realized that, unlike other kids, I had no father. Suddenly, it seemed clear not only that one kind of family passed as standard but that there were also deviations, mine one of them. It would be years before I'd get the details—my eighteen-year-old mother a cocktail waitress, my father a man she'd met in the bar, in his thirties and with another family a few towns over. I couldn't fathom this adult drama. In short order, though, I'd produced a tale that explained my father's conspicuous absence. He'd been in Vietnam, I said, and he didn't make it back. The more sophisticated I became (and the more movies I saw), the more detail this mythos accrued. I saw him crawling through a burning field, abandoned to die as his platoon lifted off in a helicopter bound for safety.

This fiction, however bleak, was a comfort to me. As Joseph Campbell has noted, myth teaches us the social order, conveys an understanding and respect for the way things are, this grasp of norms a matter of literal survival. Myth stirs in us "a sense of grateful affirmative awe before the monstrous mystery that is existence." I needed the bigness of war to understand my monstrous world and to transmit to that world the size—the significance—of my loss.

For similar reasons, artists turn to myths, finding in them all they need for grappling with cosmic forces and the human drama of every era. Poets often refashion the tales they borrow, critiquing the sociological systems those tales reflect and reinforce. Reginald Shepherd has written that such work sets about "questioning [the myth's] terms, bringing out what it represses or excludes, giving voice to those whom it silences, giving presence to those it makes invisible." Poets also engage in mythopoesis, adopting mythology's moves to confer upon intimate terrain the weight of long tradition.

In *What the Night Numbered,* Bradford Tice applies the myth of Cupid and Psyche to the story of the 1969 Stonewall riots, offering the perspective of those who resisted homophobic

harassment and gave rise to a movement. In *The Alchemy of My Mortal Form,* Sandy Longhorn mythologizes life-threatening illness in an effort to illuminate the struggle to survive intact the efforts modern medicine makes to save us. That both make the leap to myth so easily, so convincingly, lets us know their own stories were always big enough, their worlds monstrous enough, to inspire our awe.

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The Alchemy of My Mortal Form portrays a young woman with an unnamed disease characterized by the fevers common to leukemia patients. During a year-long hospitalization, she seems to undergo chemotherapy. Words like *stethoscope, prescription,* and *DNA* signal that the speaker of the book inhabits a near-present moment in which a high-tech medical establishment wields an arsenal of pharmaceutical weapons. The doctors, she tells us, "prescribe more medications meant / to hold me here, their fragile fool." Several poems depict her receipt of blood transfusions and a bone marrow transplant, treatments that seem to result in remission.

This contemporaneity wouldn't be notable if much of the book's language didn't put us nearer to an ancient or alternate historical moment. In "General Orders of a Whitecoat," Longhorn describes the physicians' work in terms more medieval than modern; they "battle the degenerate blackness of night" and "approach the body by preying without distinction." Their methods appear violent and imprecise, drawn from an era of superstition and misapprehension: they "lance the wounds & let the poison seep." To be a whitecoat's patient is to suffer near obliteration via a cure in which it's impossible (at least at the outset) to have much confidence. By braiding contemporary and archaic images and diction, Longhorn suggests that, while there may be a chasm between bloodletting and chemotherapy, patients treated for cancer still experience tremendous pain, confusion, and fear.

Lack of control appears another distressing holdover. Longhorn's speaker describes her room as a jail; the staff drugs her with regularity, her "dreams induced to knock / [her] damaged crown askew." She's robbed of privacy, procedures taking place while she's unconscious. "When I wake," she says, "my bones /

have been replaced with porcelain, sinew / altered to wire, & my tongue, my tongue / lets loose what once was barred & guarded." Since all the whitecoats are male and the patients female, this powerlessness seems gendered, calling to mind a mythic tradition in which women are variously punished or trapped (in towers, under glass) and awaiting rescue. The female body as alternately docile and rebellious becomes, then, another crucial link between the book's two timescapes. Longhorn's blurring of them suggests one of two possibilities: that treatment for catastrophic illness feminizes everyone or that medicine is persistently patriarchal.

Does a sexist imbalance of power persist in hospitals? I'm certainly willing to entertain the prospect, and these poems imply it does. Nurses, always female in Longhorn's book, defer to "all whitecoats who may appear, even unscheduled, keeping eyes downcast & humble." Hospital staff act as handmaidens in the effort to subdue the female patient, her illness configured as sin or revolt. Like most people deprived of power, the speaker is by turns compliant and resistant. Sometimes she acquiesces because her physical and emotional resources are depleted, by both the illness and the cure. In "A Dark, Gelatinous Ruin," Longhorn writes:

> The whitecoat proclaims my body a stubborn
> subject that refuses. He shakes his head, scolds.
> Against my will, I wilt, weeping before him.
> I suffer & succumb. This body now
> his salvaged wreck to scavenge.

Later, the speaker sees her doctors' efforts as benevolent—because effective. Emerging from fevered delirium, she admits, "I must forgive the whitecoats / for how they forced / my hands to loose their hold / on the pyrite & the flint," and proclaims the doctors "saved the root" of her, affording her rebirth. Is Longhorn suggesting here that, though patients experience their care as painful and coercive, that care is necessary and its purveyors well-intentioned? If so, femininity becomes a trope for the experience of having been denied control, perhaps justifiably. I worry such a metaphor threatens to obscure the literal experiences of women. When powerlessness is equated with being female, we're in danger of naturalizing precisely what we ought to reveal as constructed.

I'll admit I'm not sure where Longhorn lands on this issue. It's worth reading her book, though, to grapple with the questions it engenders: Is medicine still predominately patriarchal? Do we rob patients—female or otherwise—of control over their care? Do the methods by which we seek to cure cancer still feel like torture, and can we do anything about this? When it comes to prolonging life, do ends always justify the means?

And in the end, the speaker's critical stance toward her care doesn't disappear when she starts to feel better. In fact, the book's mythic moves redouble in the final poems, as the ever-stronger protagonist begins to plot her escape. She is hounded by staff to pay medical bills she can't afford and may be refused release until they can locate a relative to take responsibility for her debt. Recognizing the troubling nature of a system that charges upwards of a million dollars for lifesaving care, she doesn't await permission to leave. Instead, like a world-starved and wily inmate or a Rapunzel prepared to save herself from the tower, she uses a "pilfered knife" to loosen the bars on her window. Longhorn writes:

My one regret,
that I won't see their faces
when they knock & wait
& eventually discover this room
emptied
of a now-hale body, emptied
of all my small possessions,
save the stub of this dulled knife.

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As Longhorn mythologizes the patient's experience of exile from the world of the healthy, Bradford Tice borrows the story of Cupid and Psyche to shed light on the exile of those who don't conform to heteronormative expectations. He focuses on the Greenwich Village drag queens who came to be known as the Stonewall Girls. Psyche, abandoned by her family because they fear her beauty might draw the wrath of the gods, and Cupid, who engages in forbidden love, make apt figures for the speakers of the poems in *What the Night Numbered.* An oppressive, punishing cultural mainstream stands in for Venus, Cupid's jealous mother.

Tice begins with the first exile many gay and transgendered young people experience: rejection by family members. The early poems dramatize the origin story of Tice's version of Psyche, who begins life as a Midwestern farm boy and then escapes to New York City, he tells us, "the night my father caught me / in Mama's wedding dress." Among the city's mixed squalor and glamor, the boy finds community, a social order with rules he can embrace:

> The world may think there is no
> category, slot, fit for a boy in love with the lick
> of glitz, but hooked to the pain as we are,
> there is always a grand gesture, a way to thrive.

Thriving, for the Stonewall Girls, is a matter of living authentically in the ferociously homophobic New York of the late 60s. The drag queens who adopt the fourteen-year-old farm boy must struggle to survive their work as prostitutes, the violence heaped upon them by everyone from johns to cops. In "Zazu Recalls Psyche's Birth," the speaker recounts being attacked by a couple of men in the park: "the blow to the back of the head came first, // then the names—*Faggot, thicklips, freaky nigger bitch*." At this moment, the boy she would rechristen "Psyche" "stepped out / from behind the dumpster" to become Zazu's unlikely comforter. She tells us:

> he pulled my head into his lap,
> hummed along with the band playing live
>
> from the Copacabana,
> used his sleeve to soak the blood

Here and elsewhere, Tice makes moral heroes of those the culture would make outsiders, thereby offering an alternative to the dominant narrative of the time. While the "normal" people, including police officers, behave in ways underhanded and cruel, Gin Phizzy, Zazu, Tommy, and the rest of the gang treat one another with tenderness, living by a shared ethics made explicit in "The Golden Rats": "*Be kind to someone every day, / make sure your makeup's never running . . . can't be dirty . . . / protect who's in trouble, attacked, someone queer.*"

Together this makeshift family moves in and out of whatever gay spaces they can find or create. All such spaces, including

mob-owned clubs like the Stonewall, offer both tenuous refuge and the specter of danger. Tommy's lover, Joe, is a cop who comes to Mama's Chick'N'Rib (a diner that serves as a gay hangout after hours) both to enjoy the cover it provides and to collect "hush money" for the police. Tice echoes the Cupid and Psyche story, in which the beleaguered lovers can be together only at night, when he writes, "For eight hours every day, Joe forgets / Tommy exists." Aside from the Stonewall Girls, most of the gay men in the book (all called "Cupid" by Tice) live this double life. As in the original myth, Psyche and the other girls never know whether the men they love, always hidden from full view, are beautiful gods or monsters. The homophobic culture that contorts their lives makes the likely answer both. The pain of such contortion is evident when Psyche tells her Cupid:

> I know about your girl
> in that penthouse uptown. I know
> about your daughter.
> They don't breathe here. Only we do.

All Tice's Cupids struggle to maintain a split self, to contend with "what it feels like knowing / what you are, what they would call you if they saw." The risks of being outed are harrowing—wearing an insufficient number of "gender appropriate" items of clothing could result in jail time, and homosexual acts, if discovered, might lead to institutionalization. Once hospitalized, gay men were in physical danger. As in Longhorn's book, the patient in Tice's "Cupid at the Asylum" has been deemed unfit and consequently suffers legally sanctioned mutilation. Cupid tells us "Lobotomy, castration, sexual deviance. / The words are a part of a thing that's inside me / they say, a thing that will need to be lanced."

For years, the law tried to *lance* those who lived outside accepted sexual mores. The police raided gay bars constantly. For years, club goers cooperated. And then, in the wee hours of the morning of Sunday, June 28, 1969, during a raid, patrons of the Stonewall refused to line up or provide identification. As the police attempted to load them into wagons, a crowd gathered outside and began to hurl insults, coins, bottles, and bricks. The Stonewall Girls formed a kick line, serious play aimed at goading police and strengthening their own sense of solidarity. Protests continued throughout the week, crowds growing to over

a thousand, evidence that the days of quiet adherence to abusive laws were ending. Gay men and lesbians met in the aftermath to form coalitions and plan further action. As Tice has Psyche tell us, "The mythic / possibilities of that hour / were endless." Those so long left out of or denigrated by the central stories of our culture were in a position now to seize the means to shape that culture's future.

By the end of *What the Night Numbered*, we feel the full weight of the sorrow and pain experienced by the drag queens, transgendered folks, homeless gay teens, "Cupids," and others deemed unlawful by mainstream America, but we understand there has been among them no failure to thrive. An oppressed population, fed up, is radicalized before our eyes. Tice concludes the penultimate poem in the collection with the lines, "There we were in that new city. There we were / strolling our avenue, none of us dropping our eyes to our feet." This note of sudden pride and power feels perfect to me.

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Near the end of her book, Longhorn's patient writes to a woman friend on the outside, "Expect me three nights past / the new moon. I'll be insolvent, hungry, / in need of just enough to make my way." Still struggling and still stubborn, she's ready to locate salvation in herself and the possibility of help from a sympathetic quarter. Whatever may come, she has disrupted the conventional story of a woman simultaneously saved and subdued. Similarly, in Tice's revision of Psyche's story, Cupid fails to swoop in and save his bride from his mother/culture's impossible taskmastering. Instead, he tells us:

> It was one of your kind, a street kid, who took your hand
>
> and pulled you back into their number. Me, I was the one
> who watched all of your trials—suffering in the face
> of my desire for the grit of your jaw, brace of your back—
>
> did nothing but wait for the story to finish.

Here are calls to readers to do something other than wait for the story to finish. Alicia Ostriker describes revisionist myth as an "old vessel filled with new wine" capable of "initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural

change possible." When we tell stories of people left out or silenced in myth, Ostriker argues, "we look at, or into, but not up at, sacred things; we unlearn submission." These books by Tice and Longhorn, then, become not just retellings of old tales but new wine that might help us all unlearn submission. Perhaps I could unlearn submission by telling my personal myth a little differently; in this version, a young woman overcomes shame and fear to track down her father, to present herself to the man who failed to come for her. She braves a field of fire to bring him back from the brink, and though that salvage quest doesn't succeed and she must hitch a ride back to safety, leaving him behind, she becomes a kind of hero to herself. Such new wine, I think, might taste pretty good. The mythic possibilities of this hour, too, are endless.