**Dying Wish**

by Eric Machan Howd

When I can no longer stand

and breath becomes a labor

place me in the middle of an orchestra

black in a cavernous hall

with the fourth movement

of Shostakovich’s

Symphony Number Five.

Let the iron hand loosen

its grip on my spine.

Let shivers of turmoil

explode from my fingertips

toes, and tongue.

Let timpani attack my heart

bursting every molecule

beyond the chains and locks

of the body.

Let Pushkin’s artist barbarian

glean greys and mottled tones

from my skin as strings

slice me into involuntary ecstasies.

Let convulsions of shimmering rainbows

from brass and winds and triangles

be my spiritual hospice.

Let my skeleton be ripped

from my body and offered

to the stars in one last

crescendo of being.

Leave my heart to receive

a thirty-minute ovation

on the tilted conductor’s stand

as one final recognition

of what blood can and cannot do.

**First Denunciation**

by Eric Machan Howd

While my mother danced

to classical music behind

a locked door I was made

to sit outside with girls

and my box of crayons.

This was the first time

I was humiliated in public

for coloring outside the lines

of the pages given to me

for showing the auras

of animals and sun.

Pigtailed girls in prairie

skirts and ribbons pointed

to the book in my lap

and cackled among themselves

chastising me

for doing it the wrong way.

Perhaps this is what drew

me to Shostakovich

who made Stalin shudder

with loud brass and percussion

who made Stalin laugh uncontrollably

at lovemaking.

My *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*

began outside a ballet class

and a locked door

and I have never been accepted since

nor grasped the true meaning of passion.

**To Shostakovich**

by Eric Machan Howd

When I was born

he wrote in a letter

*Target achieved so far: 75%*

*(right leg broken, left leg broken*

*right hand defective). All I have*

*to do now is wreck my left hand*

*and then 100% of my extremities*

*will be out of order.*

The bitterness of aging

rises in my throat

and is washed down

with communion wine

every Sunday at an altar

lit with anonymous votive candles.

The darkness of a sanctuary

has become my hiding place

where I release my music

on grateful two-faced parishioners.

The old organ breathes

heavy in between hymns

and the discolored keys

of many hands click and clack

under the slow spider-like movements

of my wrinkling fingers.

I conform to the communion

chalice and spill over the corners

of the gulping priest’s lips.

Brother Dimitri, I absolve thee

and carry the load of your message

that *life is beautiful*

in my aching, failing arms.