

Timo Feldhaus

MARY SHELLEY'S HIDEOUT

Rowohlt Buchverlag

320 pages / 12 April 2022

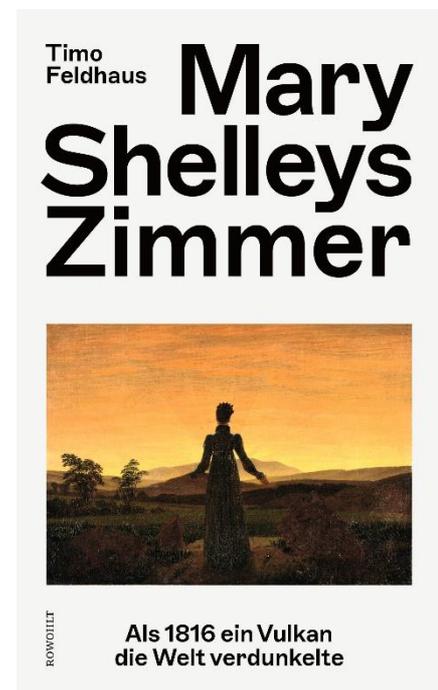
Under the volcanic cloud: when modern day monsters were created.

In 1815, Mount Tambora erupts on an Indonesian island. It is the most violent volcanic outbreak of the new age and causes immense climatic anomalies. Everything turns cold and dark, and even Europe experiences a year without summer. Timo Feldhaus follows the huge sulphur cloud that darkens the world and takes a look at what happens beneath it: Goethe discovers the science of clouds and never goes on holiday again; Caspar David Friedrich paints venomously yellow sunsets; Napoleon has been abandoned on the island of St. Helena and has lost everything. A girl sees her family die of hunger and wanders through the land where the national idea of Germany is budding.

There is an artistic eruption in Geneva: 18-year-old Mary Shelley, who has recently fled from London with her lover Percy Bysshe Shelley, hides out with Lord Byron, the first popular icon of poetry, escaping the frost and storms. This is where the quiet, highly talented woman with the mad friends and famous parents has the idea for her first novel: the story of Frankenstein and his monster, one of the first science fiction stories. Timo Feldhaus describes a sky and a world in turmoil – which is surprisingly similar to today. It is an adventurous love story in the midst of a climate catastrophe. This is exactly how it happened.

Timo Feldhaus, born in 1980, is a journalist and author. After studying literature, he began writing for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Zeit Online*, *Monopol* and the *Welt am Sonntag* about art and society topics. He lives in Berlin and Munich with his family.

- "One follows Shelley's crazy life devotedly, as it is told so enthusiastically and melancholically." *Der Spiegel*
- "A successful cross-over between Florian Illies' principle of *1913* and Kehlmann's *Measuring the World* – without educated bourgeois conventionality, *Stern*
- An expressive epochal painting that reads as powerfully as a novel and as detailed as a work of history.
- English sample translation available.



TIMO FELDHAUS

MARY SHELLEY'S HIDEOUT

CHAPTER ONE: LONDON

Mary Godwin sat leaning against a gravestone in the St Pancras churchyard. It was the 26th of June 1814, a Sunday, and one of those indecisive days that combines the lingering wetness of spring with an already deep golden light of summer. Birds were singing occasional songs. Several times a week the sixteen-year-old made her pilgrimage to this spot to read, to write or simply to have some peace from the city, which was rapidly becoming the centre of the world. Mary was wearing a high-necked dress of demure elegance. She was tall and thin; her blondish brown hair fluttered in the wind like a flag over a strangely beautiful house.

Now the iron-barred cemetery gate quietly opened and a man entered through it. His name was Percy Bysshe Shelley and he tossed a nut into the air, which followed an elegant arc and landed in his mouth. Percy was a committed vegetarian. He was accompanied by Mary's half-sister Jane, who was supposed to bring him here as a secret courier and now broke away, cartwheeling out of sight into the greenery. Mary's heart was pounding as she got to her feet. Percy saw her, gave a little jump and quickened his pace. The highly intelligent student had attended the elite school of Eton, then Oxford, and had just recently renounced religion publicly, leaving the institution of the university behind him, or vice versa, and wilfully breaking with his own family. At that moment, the twenty-year-old Percy had that buzzing sensation in his body when a thought never before thought, not in his epoch, a completely new thought, assails a person. Namely, that after religion, family and state, he would now also free himself from that remnant of an ideal of a two-person relationship that clung on in a crumbling society. Love would only become all the greater because it would be truer, he thought euphorically, bouncing his way over. Percy was almost in front of Mary, wanting to tell her quickly and fulsomely about what was aflame in his skull. But Mary Godwin took his head in both hands and kissed him on the mouth. She had thought it through and yet she was incredibly startled nonetheless. It was the first kiss of her life. "I want you," she whispered hoarsely, and her head was fit to burst.

The impetuous and very tender kiss, which lasted for exactly one minute and twenty-four seconds, felt spectacular. Shortly afterwards, Percy wrote to a friend on the subject of Mary: "I do not think there is any greater perfection that human nature could attain. How deeply I felt my inferiority, how readily I admitted that she far surpassed me in originality, genuine sublimity and brilliance, before she consented to share her mental faculties with me."

Mary laughed in his face, and he could say nothing. P. B. Shelley, who wanted to be a writer incidentally, was lost for words. They embraced and fell into the grass by the gravestone.

And so it began like the oldest story in the world, a young woman and a young man. His parents were rich and tedious, barons from Sussex. Hers were Londoners, often strap for cash, but extremely interesting. Percy adored them, especially Mary's mother. She was one of the world's first feminists, a European intellectual. Respected by many, held in contempt by many others. Her mother had died giving birth to Mary, and the daughter could not forgive herself. Her mother's name was the same as hers, Mary. But in her stead her own inadequate existence seemed nebulous. Mary mourned every day, and from all that the sixteen-year-old had discovered about her mother, she knew full well that was the last thing she would have wanted.

That left her father, social philosopher and writer. "Everything belongs to everyone" - William Godwin had practically invented that idea. Now he was angry with his daughter because of Percy. They spent too much time together. Mary could not be angry with her father, not yet. Like so much else, Percy had come into her life through him. Mary and he had known each other for eight weeks.

She could smell his sweat and the grass beneath them. It had hurt; now she felt proud. She looked up into the leaves; her father had taught her to read here, running her little fingers over the gravestone and the letters carved there, M A R Y. She was introverted, a veritable bookworm, and sometimes Percy felt almost spooked by Mary, as if she had come from the future. She was convinced that in him she had found a companion. She found people strange, was bored by them, they were too alike, stupid. But she never said that to anyone, because it was arrogant. So she often kept silent and simply let her eyes shine. People thought it was becoming, for people really had no idea about anything, in the most annoying way.

“Wow,” said Percy after they had kept silent for a long while.

“You know,” Mary said, “I’ve been thinking about what we were talking about yesterday as we walked through town.”

“What do you mean?” sighed Percy in a reverie. Dusk was settling, and he was absorbed in caressing the hairs on her arm.

“How we live. The smoke from the factory chimneys.”

“Ah yes, the new machines.”

“Exactly, yes.”

They had both seen what the workers had no words for, but felt all the more in every tired fibre of their bodies. The machines were superior to them, they required no sleep, and soon they would make them obsolete. There was a revolution stirring in the streets, but it was not man-made.

“I think we were wrong. We humans are greater and stronger than ever before. Although each one of us singly feels weak. That’s the curious part. We are setting mighty things in motion against one another. It’s all in our own hands.”

His mouth slightly agape, Percy listened as Mary slowly got to her feet and dug a book out of her backpack. “I found this in father’s library last night, it’s by Herder, that German philosopher. It must have been shelved in the wrong place, I was looking for frightening tales for the two of us.” Mary flicked through the book. “There’s a odd word in it, ‘climate’.”

“Climate?” asked Percy.

Mary had found the passage. “Wait a minute, I’ll read it to you: ‘Ever since he stole fire from heaven and his fist positioned iron, ever since he forced animals and his brothers together and trained them as well as plants to do his bidding, man has contributed in many ways to changing it. Europe was formerly a marshy forest, and other regions now cultivated were no less so: it has thinned out, and with the climate the inhabitants themselves have changed. We may therefore regard the human race as a band of bold, though diminutive, giants, who gradually descended from the mountains to subjugate the earth and change the climate with their puny fist. How far they may have gone in this, the future will teach us.’”

The words spun around in Percy’s head and set his neurons crackling. What he did understand perfectly, and could also feel in his gut, was that Mary was to him like that climate. She could change everything.

CHAPTER TWO: WEIMAR

For several months, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had been feeling as ancient as a rock. Often when he got up in the morning, he could hardly smell himself. Not in a particularly negative or positive way, no, he just seemed to be totally odourless. That had passed. The universally acknowledged most original genius, sixty-five years of age, was walking excitedly through his large garden on the Frauenplan, reached from his study via a short path and in all its glory in this early summer. The apple trees were out, the tulips, the imperial fritillaries alongside, all was singing and exuding perfume. And he himself smacked of salt and vitality again. He walked past his collection of botanical plants, which the Privy Councillor kept in the allotment for the purpose of metamorphic observation. He walked past them because he suddenly had bigger, newer, different and ever stranger things on his mind. "It's as if I'm going through puberty," everything inside him screamed. He looked up and smiled at the sky.

His glands and senses were unlocked again. Goethe read and wrote as he had not done so properly for a long time. He rushed from desk to desk in his study, against the walls of which stood three spacious tables in total, heaped with material for each of his many varied activities. These days, the material consisted of a single book. Transported by its contents the German poet was transformed into a Persian from the Arabian Nights.

For the life force that had been overflowing in Goethe, for a few days now, was due to a collection of Persian poems poorly translated into German. Their author was Hafiz, a poet and mystic who knew the Koran by heart and who had died 300 years ago. They struck Goethe right in the heart. Incredibly inspired, he paced the Orient of his imagination, even abandoning for their sake the ideal according to which he had lived for so long, that of an antiquity in which the framework of the world seemed always firm and clear, austere and clearly visible. He imagined how it would be to live in a tent. Dreamed of travelling with camel drivers and ancient patriarchs, wandering from one place to the next, with only the stars above. All alone in the world, but connected to everything. Perhaps he would start mixing with shepherds henceforth. In Hafiz's poetry he discovered a reflection of the world empire just toppled, as Napoleon's had. He found a faith he could imagine believing in again. And above all, what he found within it was: himself.

Goethe had evaded this "I", this ego, for decades. He had always regarded this going round about oneself in circles an infantile waste of time. But now it had happened. For some time he had been writing and talking constantly about this feeling of "becoming historic". The third volume of his autobiography *Poetry and Truth* had been published and Goethe was convinced that there could not be one without the other. Because facts exist and fictions exist and both, as soon as the sun rises, mix in the atmosphere like the colours of light. Every biography was a living being that transformed itself as soon as you looked at it. Voices were involved, ghosts, too. Goethe did not care for ghosts. It seemed to him inevitable that the people of the future would be interested in him. He did not want to leave this creature to fend for itself. Goethe wanted to provide guidance, an instruction manual to himself.

CHAPTER THREE: SUMBAWA

On the other side of the world that summer, a Scottish explorer and, later, diplomat was sailing through the limpid waters of the far-flung Indonesian archipelago. He had just turned thirty years old, his name was John Crawford, and he was alerted by a sailor to the cloud towering upwards in front of the expedition ship, turning the sky black. A storm, the explorer thought. The captain also called on the crew to brace themselves accordingly. As they drew closer, however, Crawford realised that the cloud was not a harbinger of a storm at all, but owed its monolithic majesty to the volcano Tambora, which they were approaching. Tambora was the largest mountain in the archipelago. Ever since ships had been sailing, they had taken their bearings from it. Now it had apparently awakened. As if to prove this, a soft, dry rain fell on the deck. Crawford shook the fine-grained material through his fingers, tasted it and held out his finger towards the sailor: Yes, it was ash, volcanic ash.

From the jungle the screeches of invisible birds pierced the unsettling silence, and the ship made gentle progress through the waters. The ethnologist had his telescope handed to him, stared through it, and trained it back and forth in a grand gesture. Through its glass he glanced through the black smoke over to the islands on the flanks of the huge volcanic mountain. On the Sumbawa peninsula, as the ship skimmed the edge of the beach, he espied a man standing at the window of a house, his arms behind his back, with the appearance of a chieftain. The man, whom Crawford could make out, albeit somewhat out of focus, looked worried. The explorer's experience was that even though he did not master a single Asian language, he somehow could understand the local people well. He could interpret character traits from a few movements, that was his strength. At that moment, the Scot was observing the Rajah of Sanggar, whose territory lay on the southeastern slope of the volcano, and he was looking not only with anxiety at the volcano but with naked reproach. As it quietly exhaled smoke into the sky, occasionally accompanied by a barely perceptible tremor of the earth, the Scotsman, standing on his ship, suddenly grasped it all. He could see one piece of it, and the rest of the enormous puzzle fell into place in his mind: the man at the window had a problem, because he had to interpret the smouldering volcano.

Of course, the Rajah's tribesmen, too, would be pondering every day and in great fear what the smoke signals might mean. Beyond him, Crawford fantasised, a brazen band of them had already gained entry. The ruler had no choice but to listen. The Rajah was respected among the people because he ensured order. He regularly sent children of his tribe as gifts to the whites who had long ruled over them. This hurt him to the core of his being, but he could live with it. The awakened volcano, however, brought disorder. "The gods will punish us, their wrath knows no bounds!" people shouted in the streets. His kingdom was a paradise and recent times had seen excellent development. They harvested rice twice a year. Coffee, precious stones, honey and cotton could be sold for good money to all those who wanted to spend it. There were birds as big as goats and more colourful than anything in England. Their horse breeding was famed far beyond the shores of the island. Attracted by the Elysian affluence in which the inhabitants lived, countless languages and ethnicities had made this their home. The overwhelming power of nature gave rise to a permanently intoxicating exceptional status, it gave and gave and gave. The sun shone the whole year over. However, the Rajah, did have two problems, or three in fact. Firstly, he suffered from a constant, irrational fear that something might happen to his youngest daughter. Then there were the pirates who, with knives between their filthy teeth, sailed round the island on their swift boats,

kidnapping his subjects and offering them for sale in the enormous slave markets of the East Indies. And now there was the volcano.

[...]

CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMBAWA

Tambora erupted on the 10th of April 1815. Three glowing columns of lava spouted up into the sky, collapsed downwards and transformed the volcanic mountain into an inferno of fire. Millions of tons of rock, gas and dust battled up through the abyss, blasting in all directions with an unimaginable thunder. It was so dreadfully loud that people many islands away were terrified. Molten avalanches chased down the flanks of the mountain at the speed of sound, devouring the surrounding villages. The magma flow looked like it was moving in slow motion, though those people standing at the foot of the mountain, watching its current making towards them in the few seconds before their bodies melted. It hit the ocean with such force that a mighty tsunami formed. Simultaneously, the hot air emerging from the volcano's maw created hurricane winds that carried houses and people out to sea. The earth shook, everything burst into flames, even the tiniest flies combusted.

A group of around fifteen people on horseback rode as if they had lost their minds, between two bubbling rivers of lava. Out in front, whipping and shouting was a man dressed in the bright robes of the tribal chieftain - it was the Rajah of Sanggar. Upon his galloping stallion, its flanks a sheen of sweat, he held his child in his arms in front of him. For a few more hours, flocks of screeching black birds circled through a hailstorm of debris also issuing forth from the earth's interior, then appeared to drop from the sky. Shortly thereafter, practically every form of life had been extinguished. On Sumbawa and the neighbouring islands, thousands of people died within a very short time. The six days that followed passed in complete darkness, as Tambora raged on. When darkness yielded to light once again, there was no one left to see: the four-thousand-metre-high mountain had shrunk to half its size, and an entire ecosystem had disappeared with it. The first victim, experts are sure of this, would have been a certain Mr Israel, the man who had been invited to examine the volcano. He had arrived the day before and had been on his way to the summit.

Far from the site of the eruption, on the island of Java, the British chief civil servant and head of the colony of Indonesia was startled out of his nap. Thomas Stamford Raffles, thirty-five years old, born at sea, also an explorer, a Freemason and known for the humanist leadership of his colony, interpreted the roar of the mountain as distant cannon fire. The British had taken Java and the surrounding islands from the French just four years earlier, they in turn having taken them from the Dutch, who had won the island states from the Portuguese to become the first Europeans to take over the spice trade, which had previously been controlled by the Arabs and the Chinese. They took over the spice trade, and of course the people who had lived here for millions of years. Raffles clicked his tongue wearily and turned all the way over on the creaking cot. The booming did not stop. He sprang up from the camp bed, got into his clothes and discovered his men were in a flurry of activity. Shortly afterwards, a wide-spreading mist blew in over Java. The sun grew pale, the air oppressively humid. Everything seemed so quiet.

The next morning, the surrounding area was covered with a thick layer of dark grey ash that smelled like clay. Raffles banged his fist on the table. A candle was jolted out of its holder, landed on the

floor, and petered out - it was pitch black again. Yet it was just approaching three in the afternoon. It was the second day completely without light after the cacophony. He decided not to blame crazy Indonesian pirate and slave trader wars for the din. No, it must have been a distant volcanic eruption. His thought may have been a ray of light, Raffles ruminated, but darkness persisted. For several days, not that he could have known this at the time, in many hundreds of kilometres surrounding Tambora, the world was experiencing total darkness.

[...]

CHAPTER NINE: SUMBAWA

On Sumbawa and the surrounding islands of Lombok and Bali alone, 117 000 people died as a result of the volcano's eruption, it destroyed the habitat of the survivors for years and brought terrible famine. When Tambora erupted, it did so with a pressure beyond human ken sending tonnes of sulphur exceptionally far into the stratosphere. This was a Plinian eruption, which can be explosively violent in a very short time and can therefore scoop the maximum magma out of the Earth's interior. Tambora, which erupted with the highest measurable index of 7, is considered the most egregious explosion of historical times. If it had shot up just a few kilometres less, the rain would soon have washed the volcanic material out of the atmosphere, but instead the gases and the small ash particles developed into an ever larger structure. It floated around for a while in that still place between the clouds and the sun. And then it happened, and it was set in motion. It took just three weeks, for it to wrap belt-like around the equator. During the subsequent year, it spread across the entire globe. The grey cloud interfered with the sunlight. It reflected the light back into space, and the earth began to cool. People started to miss the sun. And they had no idea that this was only the beginning.

It was as if a black blanket had been draped over the earth to slow down the bustle that had driven its inhabitants for some time. People had been behaving as if they were cloud-makers themselves, as if they wanted to compete with the clouds through the smoking emissions from their industrial chimneys and the poisonous smoke of the steam engines. With a mighty roar, the blanket was pulled from the depths of the earth and wrapped around them as protection.

The largest volcanic eruption in human history had the power of tens of thousands of Hiroshima bombs. It set in motion something the impact of which was to affect the lives of millions of people all around the world. It began ever so gently. The first rain from the cloud soon started to fall on Europe, too.

CHAPTER TEN: WATERLOO

Field Marshal Blücher was hit in the eye by one of those raindrops. It was not his biggest problem. The Prussian lay on his back like a beetle, his arms tracing circles in the air, a battle raging around him, and all he could do was to stare up at the sky in a panic. The field marshal, seventy-two years old, who, everyone knew, loved nothing more than beautiful women and killing Frenchmen, had fallen from his horse in battle with a mob of those very fellows and had lain wounded in the open field. It was possible to rescue him, and Gneisenau briefly but resolutely took command of the Prussian troops' retreat. And this Gneisenau sent his troops not eastwards, as Napoleon and the others involved here in the battle of the century assumed, but northwards. Straight to the very centre, close to the small Belgian village of Waterloo, where the future of Europe was to be decided on that rain-drenched late afternoon of the 18th of June 1815.

A small group of volunteers were insistent on being the vanguard, and Gneisenau, who had more important decisions to make, thought to himself: Let them run on ahead. And he had to hand it to them, these student lads, all of whom had volunteered to join the corps as an unit of the Prussian army to put a stop to Napoleon, might look rather silly in their black uniforms, most of them homemade, and nor were they great shots with the crackle muskets they had cobbled together, but run, that they could. They were already out of sight.

When, a good day's march later, the young vanguard of forty-two men arrived at the edge of the battlefield where the final battle was already raging, they threw themselves into the grass of a hilly depression softened by the rain with the cover of some woodland. All except the very strong and very stupid comrade Peter Höchst, who was sent back with instructions. He was to report back and show the way to the rest of the Prussian troops, 120 000 men. Two of those young volunteers, whom life had thrown together by chance, were lying in the mud, looking into the greenery in front of them, and they struck up a conversation:

"It's raining."

"Yes, the rain's not letting up."

"Any idea where we are now?"

"Somewhere in Belgium. In the mud."

"What's your name?"

"Georg."

"Do you have a girl back home, Georg?"

The young infantryman did not answer immediately. There was Agathe in Berlin. Perhaps she was sitting by the window in her living room at that very moment, thinking about him. Or perhaps she was thinking about Josef. Who had fallen behind them somewhere and who was his best friend. He looked around, looked for Josef. They had not yet arrived. Georg was lying at the front, and ahead of him was a hill. And beyond the hill were hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen and their emperor and general, the little devil Napoleon. The French were their enemies and they were already fighting with the British, who were their friends. They were fighting hard and noisily, that was clear to hear. The infantryman Georg clutched his rifle.

"So, which is it?" asked the man next to him, whose name was Friedrich.

"Yes, yes, there is someone," Georg answered quickly. As a precaution. For the young infantryman was superstitious, at any rate he believed in self-fulfilling prophecies, and if he had said no or perhaps now, then Agathe probably would not become his wife in the future, or only perhaps. When he thought about it carefully, and he had many times, he found Josef the purer and clearer character. He did not voice that to anyone though, of course, because he wanted Agathe to be his wife. Beautiful she was, really beautiful.

Georg, however, could only think of Agathe and her beauty for a moment. His extremely stressed brain grasped for a second what he was, just a little eighteen-year-old student of the German language, who had started studying in Jena because he had got a place there without enrolment

restrictions, that he liked to write romantic poems that thrummed with unrequited love. Then he thought of his Mama and had to swallow. But then he thought of Germany. And a jolt went through him. His small black eyes became even smaller and blacker. He wiped the tear from his cheek and smelled the war. The gunpowder, the sweat, the excrement, death. And what was steaming out of the earth's crust torn open by polished cannonballs. Georg breathed it in, deeply. On the battlefield, the trumpeters trumpeted, there were bangs, and over everything else the animal screams of pain and death of men. The British, Prussians, Austrians and Russians had assembled an army in the greatest haste and confusion to eradicate the French predator once and for all. Georg had not slept much in the last few days. He wanted to plug his long porcelain pipe, on which the coat of arms of Jena was painted. When he pulled it out of his pocket, his hands were shaking badly. He wanted to put it away again quickly.

"You're from Jena then?" his comrade asked, pointing at Georg's trembling pipe.

"Oh yes, that I am!" Georg almost shouted, a few of his soldier brothers glanced over at him, harassed.

"So you're a gymnast?" the chap next to him asked.

"Why do you think I can run so fast?" Georg smiled a little and added proudly, "Yes, I'm a gymnast. And I was there when we founded the original student league."

"You're not serious?"

"Absolutely serious."

Georg fell silent. What days the last seven days had been. How he looked forward to telling everyone about it. When it was over. Firstly, it was true, yes, really true, and secondly, really incredible. Where to begin?

[...]

Napoleon Bonaparte stood on the other side, observing the details of the battlefield as magnified through his telescope. The cold butcher of men, he had set off from France on that same 12th of June 1815 when Georg and the others were founding their student league in Jena. It was to be decided here, on the ravaged field, where soldiers, long since independent of any human command structure, choreographed as if by nature itself, were hurled against each other in ever new waves. That morning, in the little hut of Caillou, his headquarters on the battlefield's edge, Bonaparte had suffered excruciating stomachache. This was the most important battle of his life, but what could you do about stomachache. He took a sip of thin fennel tea, went into an even tinier room and got his Eau de Cologne out of his boot, held his curved beak of a nose over the round opening, breathed in the vial's bergamot scent, and felt a little better. Yesterday he had ridden down to the front at the evening hour on his majestic white mare. He had thrown up a couple of times from the saddle into the field, then slept badly for two hours and had known what to do when he woke up. But there was something strange going on. He was hesitating. He was dithering. Napoleon, who would turn forty-six years old in two months time, was feeling doubt!

Certainly, Napoleon had grown corpulent from his inactivity on Elba; exile had made him sluggish. But more than that, the emperor seemed to have lost contact with the most important thing of all, himself. He felt as if he was bumping up against his skin from the inside, as if he were stumbling around inside himself. He did not tell anyone about this, of course not, but it was rather as if he could not even tell himself, as if he had lost the art of conversing with himself, as if he was becoming a stranger to himself. A feeling of cantankerous impotence, which he had never known before, took possession of his mind. He was constantly astonished. As if there was suddenly another person growing inside him. And this other person was a fool.

He consulted his generals, who exchanged alarmed glances. Napoleon had never asked anyone what he should do. Blücher and his Prussians would soon advance again. It was essential to attack the British with gusto now. But Bonaparte waited half a day, ate and ate copiously out on the open field. "The rain ...", he murmured in a reverie, stretching out his hand. Later, the author Joseph

Roth would formulate the warlord's thoughts: "The rain soaks the soldiers' garments. The rain renders the enemy almost invisible. It makes the soldiers damp and sick. You need sun when planning a campaign. Rain turns the day into semi-night. When it rains, those soldiers who were farmers are reminded of their fields back home, and then of their children, and then of their wives. Rain is my enemy."

The rain was good for a defender like Wellington, the British Field Commander; it was bad for the greatest of all attackers. Because the horses could not make progress on the sodden field, and thus the cannons were also halted in their progress, but above all Napoleon could not make progress in his own thoughts. It was as if the wet weather and the churned-up ground one tried to find one's feet on had swallowed up the sleight of foot of his thoughts. It pained him as he remembered Russia; four years ago he had failed in his most devastating campaign on account of bad weather. He had lost 300 000 men and his nimbus of invincibility. He thought: and solely because of the sudden onset of winter! Napoleon was considered a mathematician of battle, who planned every detail of the campaigns and movements of his enormous armies more precisely than anyone before him, because he knew: it was all a matter of timing, of the men reaching the right place at the right time.

"We will wait," he said now.

The generals looked at one another.

"We will wait!"

And at some point it was time. He sounded the charge at last, mounted his horse, and rode to the crest of the hill. His beautiful leather boots were a pleasing fit; he was not a good rider, but once mounted he remembered and became aware once again that he was a gifted commander. And at that moment a hint of pale, hazy sunlight shone through the clouds and turned the tips of the thousands upon thousands of bayonets a gleaming white. A sign that he would, of course, win in the end. He was the sun. He farted loudly. From the beginning, the plan had been to tackle the hostile Prussian and Anglo-Dutch forces separately. If they were to unite, they would be too many. His soldiers were the better educated and the more manly, but that would not be do-able. He had inflicted major damage on the Prussians the day before yesterday. They had fled, and he had set a third of his troops in pursuit. Now it was turn of the British.

After a few hours of fierce fighting, however, it was clear both to Wellington and Napoleon, sitting on their horses and following the action, shouting orders all the while, that it was not the mutual ongoing massacre that mattered. It all came down to the simple question of whether the Prussians would arrive first and, reinforcing the British, overwhelmingly defeat the French, or whether the third of the French troops who had been sent in pursuit of the Prussians would return in time to rejoin their fighters and thus to destroy together the outnumbered British regiments. The soldiers were killing each other by the tens of thousands. They stabbed each other in the head, they shot, they fired canons, and the two commanders kept their telescopes trained on the surrounding woodland. Kept looking. Again and again. Who was round the corner? It was just like a movie. Wellington looked, then Napoleon, Wellington, Bonaparte, Wellington. And then there it was, the decisive moment when Napoleon, his right eye peering through the telescope, saw the Prussian troops storming out of the woodland. At the moment when the greatest general of his time turned away at the sight of the onrushing enemy troops and felt the certainty of defeat twitch poisonously and mercilessly through his body, Georg, like all his German comrades on the other side of that telescope, pressed his body up and, beside himself with ecstasy, ran exactly seventeen paces towards the battlefield. Then a volley of shrapnel pierced his face. His death took no time. Shortly afterwards, a cartridge tore off the right leg of the man next to him, Friedrich. He fell to the ground and lay there screaming horribly for half an hour until a riderless horse galloped over him. Josef made it through and married Agathe a year later. Jahn, who had not partaken in the war himself, created a heroic national myth out of what was in truth a rather negligible deployment of his gymnasts. Napoleon lost, he lost for good this time. Fittingly, evening fell at that moment. The

Emperor skedaddled, leaving his troops to go to the dogs, and he dropped his instantly recognisable oversized hat as he left. At the end of the battle, someone brought it to the Prussian leader Blücher. Who then, donning Napoleon's beaver fur felt two-cornered hat, wrote a proud letter to his wife, and had three bottles of wine and two young women brought to him.

Later, Victor Hugo wrote about Napoleon's defeat, which was so great that a proverb was made of it: "If it had not rained on the night of the 17th to 18th of June 1815, the future of Europe would have been different. An unseasonably clouded sky sufficed to bring about the collapse of a world." But it would be 200 years later when the London researcher Matthew Genge, also a reader of Hugo, discovered that microscopic ash particles from Tambora, hurled into the ionosphere, and having moved from Indonesia to Belgium, were what had caused this weather.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: DIODATI

Mary had been set alight ever since Byron had suggested the competition, to finally write. She had to take her destiny into her own hands, to venture into unknown territory, as every hero in every story does. She withdrew.

Since Byron always wrote well into the morning, they breakfasted late. Servants brought fruit, cereals and juice. Byron and Percy discussed vegetarian theories, Percy had written a book about it some years ago, whilst Byron lived a vegan life, and they shouted at the servants when they brought the hated white bread. With tired, trusting and crazed eyes, they sat together until Byron asked Mary, "Have you thought up a ghost story yet?" Mary shut her eyes then, shook her head, slurped her muesli and headed back upstairs.

What was everyone afraid of, she wondered. Of rattling chains in the night, sexual offenders, headless horsemen, secret alliances and seductive witches? Of other gruesome figures from the cabinet of superstition and lust? Yes, of course. When Byron read the German ghost stories, she really did get goosebumps. But they did not truly frighten her. Mary thought about what was going on around her. She thought about their discussions in the salon. About Galvani and Volta and the experiments with electricity. What preoccupied her most of all in all this was what is the origin of life? The question hung in the air everywhere: might we soon be able to raise the dead and to create life ourselves by means of million-fold strengths of electric currents? If we had this power at our disposal, if we could store it in batteries and use it with human discretion - a new existence that we design ourselves. Would we then become, how else could it be, gods? Boundaries would be irrelevant if we could form another being from the spark of life, water and our reason, like Prometheus from clay. Mary lay stretched out on her bed; she sat hunched over her desk; she leaned up against the wall pondering; and she paced in her room. She did not write down a word, but her head was already writing.

Such an unknown life form would want to know who we are. What constitutes a human being and where we come from. What love is, how love works. Such an intelligence would learn faster and plan better than us, it would soon be cleverer and stronger, because that was the way of progress. After we, when little bacteria, became fish, we soon crawled out of the water equipped with arms and legs and subjugated everything on account of our brains - would the next age now dawn and would machines take over, surpassing us in all talents? The machines are here and they are here to stay, they will live with us, like the animals and the plants.

Mary formed little globes from the liquid blue wax of a candle. She liked it when the painfully hot wax on her fingertips slowly hardened and grew cold. Humans imagined a great deal with all their

feelings. But do we have any right to do that? Doubt! We have practised the art of doubting for centuries and taken it to the most decadent heights. The absolute fine-tuning of uncertainty, the adoption of contrary opinions, melancholy and depression. They will overtake us, in effectiveness, straightforwardness, hard work and perseverance, these were the characteristics of machines and automatons. But vulnerability and doubt - these were our strongest qualities. Love, destruction and doubt, these were the very essence of what it was to be human.

People began to feel that they were the rulers of the world, and their ideals became efficiency, straightforwardness, hard work and perseverance. But they were not the rulers of the world, Mary was certain of that. It was a fallacy, one only had to take a look outside. One only had to look at the impact weather had on us and how we had to retreat to caves in response. Man was big and strong and yet an animal after all, a clever animal, but part of nature, which was so much stronger. What I fear most of all is myself, Mary understood. I am most afraid of what is hidden in me. I can make children, give birth to them, this glowing spark that becomes matter. It was a mighty superpower. But beneath the baby's thin parchment-like skin lies a mechanism whose pendulum could simply stop swinging. Oh yes, she knew how easy it was to create life, but how hard it was to sustain it. What she feared most of all was what came out of her, what she would bring into the world, what she thought.

The thoughts that came from a place inside her that she herself could not explain. She had wild, different, dark thoughts. You had to be so damned careful around people and thoughts, because they were the stuff of magic. Percy's passion had cast him out of society, her mother had been cast out of history by her too radical ideas. But then do we even have a choice? Mary remembered lying in her father's library, reading a book by a seventeenth century French mathematician. It was written there, "All man's misfortune consists in this one thing, his inability to remain quietly in one room." Although she had been far too young, this sentence had fully resonated with her.

She went to the window and looked out at the lake. A group appeared on a boat and pointed at her. One of the men started blaring into a megaphone, some made-up story in garish hues, with a bit of truth mixed in. There were tours offered on the lake now, the Byron and Shelley Hell and Sex Tour, and in the rain people stood on the little white-painted boat and they looked pitiful. The locals liked to be outraged by them for living a life beyond their imagination, Mary thought. A little girl or boy had his greasy hair, which had never been washed, swept up like Percy's, and looked over longingly at the villa. "Wicked," the child said. His mother slapped him hard on the back of the head. "They saw in me a human monster," Byron wrote later. That life is an experiment, that it itself can even be art, is something they would never understand. If they knew about Byron's fitness programme, Mary thought. And if they knew how many would follow in the years to come. Great poets like Byron, and Goethe, too, inspired torrents of tourists who had never existed before, carried by the ultra-fast railways and following the exact routes described, on the edges of which the poets experienced their most romantic of escapades. People loathed them, and they wanted to imitate them. Mary drew the velvet curtain. She walked through the villa and placed her cold hands on the furniture, the marble, the fireplace, the fragrant wood, the smooth glass of the cabinets. In the corridor to the drawing room she met Percy, and Mary remarked they had not seen each other for weeks.

"Perhaps we've been looking into the darkness for too long," Percy said, half in a panic, half smiling.

"Not long enough!" Mary answered, biting her lips, and they kissed.

The lightning that struck the house filled those gathered inside with a dark energy. The storms kept them prisoner in the villa for days, and brought them far too close to one another. The tension was too powerful, it had to be discharged. That evening, as Polidori noted, they “really began to talk ghostly”. Byron lived permanently close to outbursts anyway. Even though, during those days, he was more at one with himself than ever before, he nonetheless sought to heighten any mood. Because he himself had once come close to the brink of madness when the ghostly poem *Christabel* by Coleridge was recited to him, he wanted to do the same now with his young friends. They met at the witching hour in the shed that stood a little to the east of the villa beneath chestnut trees. Each of them took Polidori’s pills beforehand, and their pupils immediately flickered in their blackness and dilated, the wind howled loudly, the stacked wood creaked, a few candles guttered beams of light onto the filthy work equipment leaned up against the walls. Byron stood wide-legged in the small cabin and began to recite the poem with feeling.

Mary was still reflecting upon the fact that a poem by Coleridge, of all people, was being recited, the poet who had been in and out of her parents’ house back then and the one who had told her how to write stories, when Percy gave a sudden scream and ran out of the shed, his face ashen. They all went after him, through the garden, the villa, the rooms. Percy was quick, they could not find him at first, then Polidori discovered him next to the billiards table. Drenched in sweat and chalk white, he was sitting against the wall, holding the ball number 8 in his hand. He gave it to Polidori, who looked at it, and the others joined them. Polidori gave Percy a sedative, and they sent for an actual doctor. But the sallow Shelley was beginning to revive. “A vision!” he cried out excitedly. Looking at Mary, he had seen, quite clearly, a woman with eyes where the tips of her breasts should be. “She had four eyes, and they all looked in different directions. And they all looked at me!” They patted his pale cheeks admiringly. The breasts, ah-ha, four eyes, oh lala. Shelley groaned and smiled rather proudly, too. They looked at one another, and nodded, impressed: not bad at all, that outburst. They continued to shudder appropriately when they returned to the drawing room and shortly thereafter to their rooms.

Percy fell asleep quickly, Mary had her hand on his hairless chest. “When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think,” Mary described her state that night. “My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw — with shut eyes, but acute mental vision, — I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion.”

In her nightmare, Mary saw the creature imitating human movements. The artist and creator of the new life form, shuddering at his own success, turned away from his work and fled. “He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes. ...

I opened mine in terror. The idea so possessed my mind that a thrill of terror ran through me, and I wished to exchange the ghastly image of my fancy for the realities around. I see them still: the very room, dark parquet, the closed shutters, with the moonlight struggling through, and the sense I had that the glassy lake and white high Alps were beyond. I could not so easily get rid of my hideous phantom; still it haunted me. I must try to think of something else. I returned to my ghost story - my tiresome unlucky ghost story!” And then, in the Swiss night, Mary Godwin was suddenly

enlightened: “I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow.”