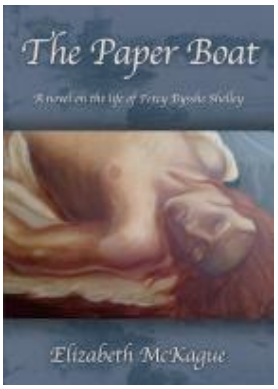
The Paper Boat

A novel on the life of Percy Bysshe Shelley

Elizabeth McKague



The Paper Boat *is a novel based on the life of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Shelley's relationship with his wife Mary is tender yet complicated and his alternative bond with the poet Lord Byron, an outrageous, extravagant character, is somewhat absurd yet courageous and intellectually provocative. The novel illustrates the fullness of the poet's character, a vibrant conflict between imagination and reality, and the radical pendulum of idealism in the Romantic era.*

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A novel on the life and works of Percy Bysshe Shelley

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First Edition

I.

O wild west wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing...

He made them in crafty, rapid gestures, folding the pages of a manuscript he'd carried to the river. Thinking he would read it, he planned to sit on his favorite rock until the mud of the bank crept into his only pair of leather shoes and the October dusk erased what light was left in the sky.

The white sheets of paper were slick and delicate. His tiny boats easily drifted from the water's edge in measured breaths and sailed down river in a balanced breeze. The Arno looked murky and heavy, a green shade in the last pale slants of daylight. He creased and folded his stanzas and cantos, turning the corners of each page into lips that held a silence. A silence before voyage, a silence released from the futility of whatever permanence he had originally

intended by attempting to write the damn thing. He started to work faster in a synchronized fury, setting each paper boat upon the water as soon as it was made. He got a paper cut, then another, and his fingers grew cramped in the sharp, cold air hovering over the river with the approaching night.

At last he folded his hands together in a buckle around his knees and relaxed. His posture copied the shape of the rock. He stared hypnotically at the flotilla of paper boats he had made. Spreading out along the river's dreary current, they passed beneath the Ponte Solferino until page one was a white speck in the distance. Then page two and page three, until the entire paper fleet, like defeated warrior ships, slowly disappeared into a blinding mist, moving westward toward the Mediterranean Sea. The sun sped away and the Arno became gray and opaque.

As a child, he had made paper boats with such concentration that nothing existed in his mind but the movement of his fingers against the sheets of paper. He tore them from a random notebook he had discovered about the house. They felt at once flimsy yet stiff, soft and cold. It was the autumn of 1802. He had left his sisters to their music lesson and wandered out of doors alone. He descended the wide steps in the front of the mansion, crossed the circular drive of

gritty stones where the carriages came in, and continued through a maze of clipped green hedges in the courtyard. He was not even aware that he had left the house without a guardian. He remembered a sense of freedom and the sad scent of his mother's neglected garden. Fading, pink chrysanthemums and frosted white colored roses danced, nonchalantly withering in symmetric rows. He walked beside the white washed fence that was then twice his height and passed the stables without being noticed. The horses were being let out from their stalls into the meadow. He strode over a damp, grassy hill and finally came to Field Place pond. The gray-green water quivered in a slight breeze. He found a flat spot of dry pebbles situated amongst tall yellow reeds at the edge of the pond. He sat down and felt hidden. He watched some fallen maple leaves drift in the water, aimlessly spinning this way then that. He sat there that day for hours, making boats and watching them float. At one point, the sun broke through the late afternoon clouds and illuminated the pond. His paper boats shone. He took a stick and made ripples. He was ten years old.

Perhaps he was punished for wandering about the Estate alone that day. He didn't remember. He didn't remember much from his childhood. Just the boats, the ghost stories he wrote with his eldest sister,

the airless smell of the perfumed ladies who visited his mother's tea room, the fear he felt each time he passed the door to his father's stale library, a book of poems by Thomas Chatterton and that particular day when he sat at the pond alone. For something happened in the late hour of that afternoon. He sat watching the rings of ripples grow around his tiny spinning boats in the water, listening to the croak of a concealed, lone toad and the hoots of wild geese hunting for their winter home across the gray sky. Then it happened. It lasted for a moment but a moment that appeared to throw away all time.

He looked up to watch the flock of geese pass by. The black branches of an ominous oak clawed at the sky like some ancient, crippled beast scraping its tentacles against a pane of silver light. He looked down into the water for a sudden burst of light in the atmosphere nearly blinded him. He saw his reflection in the pond. He held his breath or could not breathe, maybe he had shrieked for the image terrified him. He was standing now and could see his entire figure in the water; a thin little boy with messy golden locks and blue eyes like gleaming sapphires and... wings! The whole world seemed upside down. He saw himself as an angel and it horrified him. He dared not look back up into the clouds for he was afraid he'd

find a hole through which perhaps his subtle body had fallen. He never saw the angel again.

A discarded light from the street lamps along the quay beside the Arno made sharp arrows over the river that had by now gone black. Shelley rose and ascended the bank, snatching his long gray coat at the collar where buttons were lost and tried to bow his head under the harsh current of the wind.

He reached the Piazza Solferino where the very last rays of a tangerine sunset seemed to singe the edges of brown leaves drifting clumsily off chestnut trees. The square was fairly empty. A few parked carriages, a street musician wrapping his guitar in a tattered wool cloth, the shadowy lamplighter making his rounds and the rose colored glow in the two tall windows of a crowded restaurant. The bells of San Nicola struck at six o'clock. He stopped to listen, a habit he had developed since his exile into Italy, to simply stop and stand still for those few moments of ringing. He didn't pray, he didn't think, he didn't speak, just breathed and listened. San Sepolcro, Santa Croce, Saint Marks, Saint Peters, San Giorgino Maggiore; the bells of each church unique to his attention. The bells of Westminster Abbey or any cathedral he'd lived by in England only reminded him of time, wrung his nerves, made him worry. A sort of

bell toll anxiety he experienced even on his wedding day, or rather, both wedding days.

He turned onto the Lungarno Pacinotti, a wide avenue that traced the river. The chilly air forced him to quicken his stride. He watched a fisherman ahead, dragging his net out of the water and onto the shore. It was filled with silver perch flapping away. But that's not what Shelley saw. He saw a woman's body; silver, bloated, frozen, dead. The same body he saw in his mind when Mary returned from the post that afternoon and read him the letter, the only way she could, quickly, without expression, her voice laden, calm and dry.

"Harriet Westbrook, age 26, found drowned in the Serpentine. Cause of death, suicide."

He had neither seen nor communicated with his ex-wife for ten years. The news did not shock him and his demeanor remained as blank as Mary's. He went into his attic den alone for an hour. Then tucking the manuscript in his jacket left the apartment quietly, telling her he was off to Byron's early. Instead, he went to the river, knowing 'the haunting' was about to return. He had seen ghosts all over Field Place as a child. He even discovered their hideouts and would often sneak into the pantry, the coal cellar or beneath the stair just to sit with them for the moments before

he was found out. In college, in London, in Whales, in Ireland... wherever he'd traveled since, the ghosts would follow. By now such episodes had become a kind of state that was so familiar, that although it made him ache, like bouts of loneliness or sadness, he saw the spectral visitors as natural invitations into the enigma of the mind. He accepted his visions as markers or signs, invisible notices of eviction from one house of the spirit into another. The doctors called his visions 'hallucinations," but Shelley believed more in the ghosts than the doctors.

"Good evening!" The happy fisherman called up to Shelley who was scuffling along the road above the riverbank.

"Good evening." Shelley echoed, "Looks like you have a good catch there."

"A very good catch. Buona sera, Signore."

He felt free of the haunting as he crossed the Ponte della Fortezza where the reflection of the street lamps blurred on the dark river. He walked on until he reached the steps of the Palazzo Lanfranchi, which he had named, "Lord Byron's Circean Palace," for the enormous rooms were forever littered, with not only a tropical menagerie of plants but also all kinds of exceptional animals.

"What a sorcerer you are, my Lord." Shelley had commented when he first encountered Byron's collection of pets in Ravenna, "I see you've brought Cicero back from the underworld in the form of a ferret and metamorphosed the old stoic Seneca into an owl!"

Byron had laughed, then added quite seriously, "You know, when I was at Cambridge I kept a grizzly bear in my rooms and I must confess that at one point I truly believed he was Marcus Aurelius Antonius himself."

Although the bear was no longer a part of Byron's zoo, the spectacle of his domesticated animals never ceased to amaze Shelley. As he crossed the Palace's threshold, even though he'd done so one hundred times before, the scenery helped to lighten his thoughts and soon enough he became almost giddy.

In the foyer he was greeted by two German shepherds, composed as the Queen's guards, while a majestic falcon perched on the head of a statue of Hermes in its center. Next, in the front hall, he paraded past an army of cats curled up upon the embroidered cushions of French rococo chairs that were set flush against the long frescoed wall. Byron's three white monkeys were swinging in mocking gaiety from a monstrous glass chandelier. One of the monkeys bounced down into the corridor and the cats hunched up

and hissed. He turned into a gallery where he was spied upon by the incandescent eyes of peacocks opening their feathers like a lady's fan and when he reached the stairs to the second story, he was forced to experience a philosophical confrontation with a wandering Egyptian crane. At the entry to Byron's private lodgings, a set of purebred Russian wolfhounds lounged on wooden benches at either end of an enormous hearth, perpetually oblivious to the sporadic swarms of yellow canaries flying in and out of the lush green ferns of potted plants. And finally, as he climbed the stairs, the echoes of fiery red and mint blue parrots aligned along the banister sang out in scratchy harmony, "The King is dead! The King is dead!"

Byron's butler informed Shelley that the gentlemen were in the billiard room. He entered through the open door very quietly, clinging to the shadows elongated against a paneled wall by a blazing fire. They were playing a close game, Williams and Byron against Trelawny and Robert Southey. He sat down in a green velvet chair that was tucked into a discreet corner. Across the room sat Thomas Moore, crouched on the sofa, reading the fresh ink of Byron's newest poem with a crinkled brow. They were all sipping sherry out of thin crystal glasses whilst Robert Southey captivated them with an animated review of his

recent encounter in Switzerland.

"And just as we were leaving the hotel with the predicted blizzard upon us, Mr. Wordsworth wrapped his scarf around his long neck and ended our conversation about 'Mad Shelley' by saying, 'A poet who has not produced a good poem before the age of twenty five, we may conclude, cannot and never will do so.' In all earnest, I mentioned Shelley's *Queen Mab* but Mr. Wordsworth just growled and said, 'Won't do. This hairy fellow is our flea trap!' The words of William Wordsworth I tell you! Straight from the mouth of the man who is sure to be England's next poet laureate." He then grew silent to watch Byron nudge his last ball just to the edge of the middle bumper. Southey grinned, tapped his cue stick three times on the floor, then bent over the table, squinting through his awkward monocle and biting a mole that hung, gathering spittle upon the bulb of his lower lip as he muttered, "Sorry, old man," and pounced forward on his stick to win the game. The rest of the group laughed at the amusement but Byron did not. He rolled his dark eyes about the smoky room and noticed his friend hiding in the green chair and limped toward it instantly.

"Shelley! We didn't hear you come in."

"I didn't want to disturb your game." He stood and took a deep breath. The room was stuffy and

smelled of burnished wood.

"Southey here had a run-in with Wordsworth in Geneva." Byron gripped Shelley's slim wrist.

"I heard." He warmly shook his hand.

Robert rushed to meet the young poet, his face pink with embarrassment, "I don't think he's ever even read your work, really. And the weather was abominable that day, we were all out of our wits, truly."

"Pleased to see you again too, Robert." Shelley bowed his head slightly, "But my dear sir, there is no need to apologize. Now I know what England's finest contemporary poet has to say about my work and I respect him all the more for it." He leaned toward Southey's quivering shoulders and whispered bitterly, "As a matter of fact I never did write a good poem before I was twenty-five. I suppose that means the last four years have been quite a waste of time." Shelley straightened his posture and tugged at his waistcoat as he turned to Byron with a clandestine wink and announced, "You know, I do believe that as of this very moment I shall throw away my quill and commit my life's work to perfecting the art of bird watching."

Southey's meaty shoulders began to shake. Byron chummily slapped his back, "Come now ol' chap, let's don't get unruffled. Shelley is teasing us. Let Wordsworth have his say! Our boy here probably

doesn't give a damn!"

Robert's eyes widened then narrowed into slits like a snake before its prey. Byron quickly leapt between them and challenged Robert to another game. Trelawny offered Shelley a glass of sherry that he declined. Instead he accepted the loose pages Tom had finished reading, the seventh canto of Byron's *Don Juan*, which he took to the green velvet chair with a sense of relief. But as he settled down to read it, Byron, who had crossed the room to obtain a better cue stick, stopped abruptly behind Shelley's chair and whispered, "Shall we throw him to the dogs?"

Shelley grinned, "No. Let the monkeys have him."

Southey's vindictiveness toward Shelley was not uncommon. The younger poet's name carried with it the reputation of an outspoken radical, a dangerous rebel, a pathetic revolutionary, an atheist and 'ladies man,' to say the least. And for this he was awarded by his fellow men of letters a malignity and rejection that never failed to surface at literary gatherings such as these. Their own fears extruded a great sense of disparity. Exasperated to be in the presence of a real, live heathen, they would often make crude remarks, gossip and joke about Shelley's publications, all the while betting on whose stone might cause the final

blow. Yet experience had taught him to endure the style of their abuse, and both Byron and Shelley had become accustomed to the snobbery they received from the English writers or journalists who would come to Italy on holiday. They would call the natives barbaric, curse the inconveniences of Italian tradition and culture, complain of the heat, devour the pasta and finally seek out their country's two poets in exile for the same reason they might Michelangelo's David or the ruins of the Coliseum. Not because they actually wished to experience the occasion, but so that they could make haste back to their regimented manors and manners and tell everyone about it. To loudly blurt out in a London cafe the phrase, "I met with Lord Byron in Italy," would turn just as many heads as one saying, "I was invited to ball given by Gioacchino Rossini."

Shelley despised the hypocritical charade, but like Byron, found a bit of nostalgic novelty in entertaining the bastards from back home for an evening. Even when their nasty ridicule hurt him deeply, as it sometimes did, he absolved the urge to rise to his own defense by realizing that he felt more of a sense of pity than antipathy for these men. Their lives were so arid with boredom that their judgments of others actually aroused them. He was in fact quite proud of his self-exile from England and would

occasionally, as he planned to do tonight, make an effort toward giving them a good show. Yet while Byron's inimitable defense was his sturdy barricade of wealth, Shelley knew his only fortification could be found in the solitude of the poem. Only then did he find the recognition he knew to be genuine, an affirmation of purpose given by a welcome crowd of souls who honored the personality of his work. Mary knew him that way also; she always would, he had nothing else. He let out a sigh of joy, thinking, "That is so much!"

They were soon called into the dining room and after the first course was served, Byron coaxed the party at his table for their opinions of his own latest poem.

"There certainly has never been a piece of its depth written in English." Moore concluded.

"Remarkable! Gentlemen- we are faced with genius and left dumbfounded by the stupendous credulity of this poem. *Don Juan* is a masterpiece and shall live on through the ages as Dante, Milton and Spenser." Southey exaggerated.

"Why, I wasn't aware I'd shown you a copy yet, Robert. You're too kind and I do hope your predictions shall prove true!" Byron laughed, "I've been of a mind to quit the damn thing, a project of such magnitude begins to eat away at one's soul. But you have all

convinced me that the agony it's causing me might, after all, be worth while."

"After the first two cantos I began to enjoy it, thoroughly." Williams spoke frankly, "Your sense of wit is, well, quite creative."

Byron jerked forward with his hands crunching the folded napkin in his lap, "Please Mr. Williams, we must not use *that word* until we are absolutely sure of what it means. The word 'creative' is a ruse and genius is a burden. We are lost between the isles of wretched devils and martyred saints and somewhere out there the word creative has a meaning. But until someone like Shelley here discovers its proper use and makes such a word available to the naked ear, we must keep our lips closed. More wine?"

"The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact." Trelawny blurted with his wine glass held in the air as they all toasted. Shelley raised his water glass with them but could not avoid Byron's pleading stare.

He shrugged and spoke his mind freely, quietly, almost as if he were whispering directly to Byron from across the table, so that the other men had to lean forward to hear.

"You unveil and present in its true deformity what is worst in human nature, and yet endure the

scrutiny of such a light. We are damned to the knowledge of good and evil and this epic carries with it the stamp of originality and a defiance of imitation." Byron's eyes met Shelley's and an awkward silence occurred. The party waited, watching the two poets speak an ineffable language of their own in the glow of melting candles spotted across the table. Trelawny raised his fork and was about to spank it against his glass when Shelley, in a startle, continued, "Believe me, sir, it is a work such as these lisping days could not have expected and I congratulate you from the recess of my heart."

The table applauded and they proceeded to banter on about the chivalry of poetry and the treachery of criticism while Shelley sat contentedly before a plate of bread and cheese.

"I've never seen a grown man reject a leg of mutton." Southey commented.

"Percy is a vegetarian." Byron answered.

"Yes. You see I read Ovid when I was very young." Shelley added, then continued to pick at his salad while the rest of the diners cut out geometric shapes from the lamb upon their plates with a bit of confusion, until Shelley realized they were waiting for him to explain.

"At the end of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,

Pythagoras speaks of his own reasons for not eating meat, something about his grandfather coming back as a side of beef... and the thought of it horrified me, as well as making perfect sense for other, health reasons as well. Yes, I've not tasted a morsel of anything that once had a face on it since."

Byron cleared his throat and changed the subject to his forthcoming project, a "very wild, metaphysical and inexplicable drama."

Trelawny, who was seated beside Shelley, nudged him playfully, "You're really quite good at alienating yourself at parties, aren't you?"

He grinned and asked Tom Moore to pass him the bowl of grapes which otherwise would have sat in the middle of the elegant dinner table as a mere decoration.

"And what is it you are working on Shelley?" Moore asked as he did so.

Shelley swallowed hard yet no food was on his palette. "I've just sent off a new piece entitled Hubert Cauvin."

"Sent off!" Southey mocked, "Directly to Parliament I assume?"

Shelley picked a single grape from the bunch before him and held it to the candle flame, peering

through its purple skin as if it were a tiny, dark crystal ball.

"No. I've sent it off to the wind." He ate the grape. "I found there was no use for it anymore."

"Use?" Byron commented. "Is there ever any use for literature? Or is there ever any use for anything except it! However, it has become much too late for that discussion again, never talk about philosophy after a good meal is my motto."

"And what was your piece about?" Moore asked Shelley.

"It was about the failure of the French revolution to benefit mankind."

Byron stood. "Ah, now we have our topic for brandy in the library! Politics does wonders for the digestive system."

Shelley stopped Byron before he followed his guests down the hall to tell him he wouldn't be joining them."

"Very well. Shall I call my carriage for you?"

"I want to walk. The moon is full tonight."

"But the weather is dreadful." Byron insisted.

Shelley turned up his collar. "Yet we make choices, don't we my Lord? Slavery and pleasure or freedom and pain..."

"So I assume you've chosen the latter. Very well, see you tomorrow." Byron smiled into his friend's eyes and limped proudly off to the library.

Trelawny, who had also decided to take his leave early, accompanied Shelley to the street. "If you stay along the left bank, the draft of the river won't affect you," he suggested as they walked out the Palace doors.

"The river affects everything, regardless of where you are in this town. It is like an artery."

"And all cities are built on blood." Trelawny commented.

Shelley sighed, "Perhaps culture cannot be achieved without it."

"Perhaps. 'The fleetest beast to greatness is suffering,' I think it was Meister Eckhart who said that."

Shelley nodded. He had become very fond of John Trelawny in the past few months that the Welshman had been in Pisa. He was very tall, strong but lean, his complexion was dark and his head of black hair and thick, wildly curled mustache gave him the look of a Moor or an Arabian, disguising his origin of well-bred Cornish gentry. He had sailed around the world many times, lived in exotic lands and conquered such hardships a European could barely imagine. His

piercing, ebony eyes at first sight appeared to be filled with a vehemence that was frightening until one understood that his lust for adventure was unquenchable. Shelley's experiences of the sailor had always been favorable, the gleam in his eyes was harmless, promising and somehow encouraging.

"I am sorry about your ex-wife." Trelawny said in a low voice directed more toward the damp stones of the landing than Shelley's ears.

He nodded, "Thank you."

They came to the Baroque wrought iron gate of Byron's mansion. The leaves of trees tingled in the light of the bright moon, rustling in the west wind like many tiny, far off bells. Trelawny turned toward the stables to get his horse and Shelley walked home to the Casa Chiesa. The air seemed to be crackling with ice and the fierce wind suddenly gathered behind his back to form a mob of hissing ghosts repeatedly echoing the words Mary had read to him that afternoon.

When the lamp is shattered, the light in the dusk lies dead.

He saw the dark windows of his apartment from the street. Insipid moonlight painted the walls of his room as he slithered into the bed where Mary lay curled to one side.

The snapping of a branch against the window soon startled his sleep. He opened his eyes. There was a child standing in the doorway. His long white nightshirt glowed in the stark moonlight, swaying in a draft that seemed to howl across the wooden floor. His cheeks were flushed and his blue eyes moist with innocence.

Shelley sat up. “What is that? Who is that?”

Mary woke. “Why it’s little Percy.” She smiled tenderly at the boy, “What is it sweetheart, did you have a bad dream?” She got out of bed quickly and took their child into her arms. She turned to Shelley, “It’s only Percy, dear. Perhaps he was frightened by the wind. Come on little one, I’ll get you a glass of milk.” She left the room, shaking her head at the reaction of her husband and returned in a while. “He’s fine now. The wind is rather wicked tonight, though, isn’t it?”

Shelley slunk into the deep leaves of the bed sheets and whispered, “Sometimes we live in the shape of our own image, or think we do- that we can simply pass by, un-noticed, like ghosts.”

“You’re talking in your sleep again, dear.” Mary jostled his shoulder.

“No, I’m wide awake, Mary, and I’m trying to tell you something.”

She laid her head on the pillow, staring up at the ceiling, listening.

He continued, “I fear that the river will soon be disembodied from its banks... and then what? We will have nothing to hold on to anymore.”

“Shelley, stop, please don’t terrify yourself!” She shuddered.

“I saw Harriet’s body in the river tonight, a fisherman was dragging it out in his net.” He spun to face her in a ghastly light from the ominous moon that had tucked its sphere into the black frame of their bedroom window. “Oh, Mary! How long am I to survive this way? It is becoming so much more difficult. Sometimes I can barely distinguish between the two worlds.”

She took his hand in her own and held it tightly. “This is life, Shelley, right here, now. It’s what matters most, you, me and little Percy.”

“But I do not live here always, Mary. I’m committed to other realms, other beings. If I ignore them, they’ll swallow me. They call me relentlessly, and if I don’t pay attention I fear I would be lost. They are the only ones I can really speak to.”

“Who?” Her voice trembled, “Who can you speak to? The people in your imagination?”

He said nothing, just stared at her. She stroked his tangled, blond hair that was still damp from the night air outside. “Oh, Percy, but they don’t exist.

They're not real."

"Yes, they are. You don't understand. It is a different sort of real."

She sighed and kissed his lips several times, sweetly yet desperately. "When you were young you wanted to change the world."

Her sentiments made him laugh out loud. First, at himself because of the enormous sense of failure he felt and secondly, because he knew he could never give up his belief in the impossible. "You mean I haven't?"

She smiled. He kissed her then and moved his body close to her. He could tell she wanted to make love.

When his wife returned to sleep with a vanishing smile on her lips, he lay awake feeling stuck inside the shaft of moonlight that would not leave their room. A few lines from Rousseau whirled through his head, "it is not the hour of possession, it is the hour which follows it." That one misses, he thought, I suppose that's what he meant. He placed his head on Mary's chest and listened to the rhythm of her soft breath for a long while before he slept.

Monarch of Gods and daemons, and all Spirits
But One, who throng those bright and rolling Worlds

Which Thou and I alone of living things
Behold with sleepless eyes!

When Shelley woke, the sound of a distant melody diluted the mental anguish that had toyed with his thoughts the night before. The bright morning sun streamed through their thin curtained window along with the music as it moved steadily closer. He sat up keenly, "Do you hear that? Who is singing?"

Mary yawned and rose from the bed. "I don't know." She stretched out her arms to the ceiling then swung round to face him with a somewhat mischievous brow, "Maybe it is Clare, come to barge in on us again."

His jaw dropped, "I thought your sister was in Milan."

"She is. I was teasing you. It's probably Rosa."

"Our new maid sings?"

"Occasionally, sometimes... after she's been drinking."

He sighed, "That is preposterous. We must be able to afford better help."

"Well we can't right now and Rosa is just fine." She began to braid her long hair. "It's getting louder."

"Yes, and I don't believe Rosa plays the drums!" He jumped out of bed and went to the window.

Grabbing Mary's hand, he led her through their small apartment and out onto the balcony where Rosa and Percy stood laughing and clapping their hands at a parade marching down the Lungarno Fibonacci, just below.

Shelley picked up his son. "Look at the clowns and the minstrels! Do you like that, my boy?"

They all watched the procession continue by. An assembly of choirboys faded down the avenue and a marching band of tubas and drums passed directly beneath their balcony. Next came a flock of whining fiddles followed by a group of male university students jumping up and down as if they were acrobats.

"Just look at those boys in their skin tight red shirts and pointed beards, dancing like a pack of devils!" Mary exclaimed.

School age children ran outside the aisles of the parade, swaying long silk banners tied to wooden poles, making eights in the air like the alchemical figures of snakes swallowing their tails. Groups of town people in their Sunday best clothes joined the festive pilgrimage as it made its way along the river.

"They are going to Santa Maria. Pisa opens her new basilica today." Rosa explained.

Shelley looked to the end of the procession where a swarm of priests and nuns solemnly closed the

colorful trail. “It seems your devils have not forgotten the angels, Mary. That is what I love about the Italians. They are both savages and saints at once. Hmm... we should all be so lucky.” He leaned his body over the wooden rail of the balcony and stared at the nuns in their dove white habits and somber, oval faces. He blinked in the bright sun and concentrated his gaze upon one young girl with attractive dark eyebrows and deep, round, emerald colored eyes. He thought for a minute that he knew her. Although he could hardly see her features clearly from his position above the avenue, her mannerism and composure made him positively sure he had not only known her but had somehow been very close to her before.

“Do we know any nuns?” He asked Mary.

She grimaced and took little Percy from his arms into her own. “No, my dear. I’m afraid not.”

Shelley moved into his attic study later that morning, when Rosa began to sing. He was still at his desk toward evening when Mary climbed the old narrow staircase and stopped for some minutes in the doorway. She moved stealthily into the small room and peeked over his shoulder at a clean sheet of paper stained in the top left hand corner with a few shaky drops of brown ink that had escaped from his hovering

quill. “Why you’ve been up here for hours. I believed you were writing more.”

“More of what?” He carefully set his quill back in its stand, “I doubt if I shall ever write *more*. I could be content with the hell or paradise of poetry, but the torments of its purgatory vex me...” he leaned his head back against the chair and put his fingers through his hair, “and without even exciting my power sufficiently to put an end to the vexation!”

“Stop moaning. Where is it anyway?” She began to shuffle through the piles of pages he had stacked upon his desk.

“What?”

“Your new work.”

He suddenly became very stiff. “Why?”

“You said we were ready to send it off, remember? But now I can’t find it anywhere.”

He nodded, “It’s gone.”

“Gone? How could it-”

“I lost it.”

“Lost it? When? Where?”

“Yesterday, at the river, I think. It is gone. That is all. It exists no longer.”

“But I was going to send it to London, I’ve already written to several publishers.”

“That is too bad, then, isn’t it?” He stood and

buttoned his jacket, "Why don't you come to Byron's with me tonight?"

"You know I can't." She headed down the attic steps into their living room and he followed her, bellowing, "Why women are never invited to these engagements I've yet to make sense of. They always assume, on the surface, a purpose of mixing comradeship with the pleasures and etiquette of high society jargon, but why the absence of the feminine insight must be a prerequisite is something I've yet to realize."

"Oh, I suppose it has something to do with the masculine comforts of laziness and *ennui*." She remarked.

"How right you are!" He blew her a kiss from the front door but turned back for a second before he closed it behind him, "Will you miss me?"

Mary gathered little Percy into her arms from his wooden blocks on the floor and raised her dark eyebrows, "Yes, Shelley. I already do."

II.

Life may change, but may fly not
Hope may vanish, but can die not,
Truth be veiled but still it burneth;
Love repulsed- but it returneth!

The year was 1811. He was eighteen and the world was rapidly changing. He had closed himself up in his room at Oxford and challenged himself to read the entire works of Shakespeare in one week.

It was his first semester in college. He attended classes for only a month before the adolescent Percy Bysshe decided he would prefer to educate himself. After conquering the twelve volumes of tragedies, histories and comedies in exactly twelve days, he spent his Sunday in the park beneath a willow tree with the sonnets and chose to memorize numbers 92, 116 and 129. In the following week his seat at the head of each classroom remained vacant as he felt his days would be much more productive if he rode into London on horseback where he could purchase all the necessary

equipment he needed to conduct 'further experiments in scholarship' as he had then termed it. So, without of course excluding the traditional academic disciplines of the humanities and sciences, he extended his course work to include the areas which he believed his own revised syllabus required. Scientific invention bordering on the edge of pyromania, political investigation drawing toward a conclusion of anarchy, and his own version of religious studies which ultimately resulted in an acquaintance with the practices of ritual magic. But most of all, his continual occupation within the pure and exalted concentration of poesy did not dwindle. He soon found it necessary to forgo the regular hours of sleep and meals that the other students depended upon. The result of this experiment was that not even halfway through the term, he had gained the reputation of a rebel, a radical and a recluse.

The occasional appearances he did make on campus fulfilled the provisions for his personalized curriculum. These included running across the lawn at 4 o'clock in the morning to fly kites in a lightning storm, or sneaking into the chemistry laboratory (during a session) to 'borrow' not just a phial but an entire case of hydrochloric acid. The library's morning janitor would often discover the wild haired boy asleep on the marble floors of the reserve room with some precious,

ancient text he'd used as a pillow when his eyes grew too heavy the night before. Because the unusual student was recognized as not only very bright, but the son of a wealthy Baron who had paid the full tuition well in advance, the University's faculty members let most of these outrageous incidents pass without intervening. They also saw that the boy was suffering, from their point of view, his own punishment. He was constantly laughed at and mocked by his fellow students and considered to be a raving lunatic by all who knew of him. There was one lad in his class, though, who was brave enough or curious enough to break through the misconception of the masses. Thomas Hogg was innovative and daring. He was willing to risk his own sturdy Oxford education, in order to pursue an understanding of greater things than the orthodox university had at that time in history to offer. He soon befriended "Mad Shelley," as the whole department had named the rebellious youth, and began to aide him on his escapades. Hogg joined forces with him in an argument against the regimented format of the entire institution.

Shelley's recusant conduct increased and toward the end of the first term, the day occurred when, what the world surrounding him took to be his downfall, became in his mind the very first day of his freedom. It

was the day when the events of all of his efforts toward liberating his soul from the government of college life culminated in his own crucifixion. Thomas Hogg had come into his room early that morning, burning to know how his friend "does it."

"Do what?" Shelley looked up from the scattered papers of his translation of Plotinus' Enneads, which were spread about him on an oval shaped rug before the hearth. He spent most of his time in his room. His desk, chairs, table, and even his bed were cluttered with the chaotic debris of his unconventional habits and scholarly 'experiments.' Books, books, boots, socks, sweaters, jackets, pistols, prints, drawings, charts, diagrams, a crockery of dirty tea cups, ammunition, glass jars and tubes brimming with colored fluids and chemical solutions; scattered paper money and purses of coins, a microscope, a telescope, electrical contraptions that lit up or caught smoke upon their own accord; more books, ink bottles innumerable, and a neat stack of unopened parcels which Hogg had never noticed before.

"How do you go about your own work with such optimistic expectation, regardless of the obstacles that are constantly present to us, as human beings, in this world, this society we must belong to, we must adhere by, we must survive by..."

"What obstacles?" Shelley rose from his cross-legged position on the rug and went to his closet where an avalanche of the same items listed above, came tumbling out as soon as he opened its door.

"The rules, Shelley. The routines, the dictated formats of modern life."

"Oh, those obstacles." He stood amidst the rubble that had fallen on the floor about him and came to a summit at his knees. "Well, I suppose I've never paid much attention to them. They are falsehoods, propaganda, something like those pharmaceutical advertisements in a newspaper that promise a cure to all those who are ailing from unknown reasons when the unknown itself is their very remedy! It is a ruse, Hogg. You know what I mean?"

"No. I don't know, but I want to. I want to live a life of liberty and passion as you do, to develop my mind day and night. Yet I get weary, the responsibilities and pressures of mere existence usurp me and I refuse to fight, feeling as I do, like a wasted Achilles."

"Then do you be my Patroclus. Here-" Shelley tossed him a manuscript which he spontaneously pulled out of the heap upon the floor, "Take from me my armor."

Hogg lifted the papers from his lap and farcically held them up to read the first lines out loud,

"From my earliest youth, curiosity and a desire of unveiling the latent mystery of nature was the passion by which all the other emotions of my mind were intellectually organized. I was led into a train of labyrinthine meditations; I thought of death..."

Shelley burst into laughter upon hearing the purple of his own words, then grabbed the manuscript out of Hogg's hands and threw it back onto the junk pile. "No, I suppose that won't do." He pushed some books out of the way and sat on a tiny corner of his bed, across from his friend, who was huddled in a chair draped with dirty laundry.

"It's sacrifice." He finally said quietly, almost painfully, looking Hogg in the eyes and understanding that this fellow was the first real friend he ever had in his life. "It's how I 'do it,' as you put it, how I go about each day so deeply involved in this work you seem to view as being such a great challenge. I must admit that this is very often true for it is also a great burden. I am the ox with the yoke, Thomas, so please, do not think more of me!"

"I still don't follow you." Hogg pouted.

"Sacrifice, Thomas, it's the only way. Belief, truth even... faith if you want to call it that. Yes, these elements have something to offer. They keep one going forward to a degree. The real key to survival, a survival

of the soul in a world so full of obstacles- as of course, I do know what you mean by the routine of each day. It's sacrifice that must occur in great and small measures in order to achieve our goals. The great secret of morals is love. Going out of our own nature toward another type of identification, be it one with the beautiful or true or absolute even, if you wish, as the Sufis do, to call it that. This going forth is a kind of communion with wisdom that must be excavated by way of certain principles of an order most high. It is a kind of Gnosticism you might even say. The Nazarene knew that. And it's the one aspect of his mystery this corrupt community has chosen to exploit. The church is a lie; the state is a hierarchical farrow... How can these farm animals speak of morals when they operate to separate passion and reason? We are aware of the fallacy yet believe we can do nothing about it. But we can, Thomas, we can in ourselves by remembering that the secret to happiness is love, not as in loving such as another person or the embodied identity of a deity even. It is to love always what is superior to ourselves; to love what we seek in all these forms of ideas called knowledge, to love the eternity of love itself... do you understand? It's all we have to offer one another and somehow, in this world that is base, my poor fellow, the only way to live honestly within that sort of love must

mean that we make a sacrifice."

"Ah." Hogg nodded his head, looking relieved and confused as hell at the same time.

"Oh, don't listen to me, Thomas. I'm just an undergraduate. Anyway, we have more important things to do before the evening comes." He jumped up then and began to open the parcels. "Look, I've published my essay and wish to send a copy to all those wonderful professors and priests who have helped me so fortuitously in my youthful career." He held up a pamphlet, showing Hogg the cover that read:

The Necessity of Atheism
by Anonymous
Oxford University, 1811

"You finally had it printed then?" Hogg flipped through the pamphlet with anticipation.

"Yes and I wish for every last one of these three hundred copies to be on the streets today."

They spent the afternoon stuffing both faculty and student mailboxes. As they had only emptied one of the packages, they decided to continue on and send the pamphlets to almost every robed authority of organized religion in Oxfordshire, as well as the major newspapers and journals in London. On their way to the

Post office, they stopped at the Oxford Book Shop and stealthily slipped a copy in the center of its window display. When they returned to Shelley's lodgings that evening, he sat on the edge of his bed holding the last set in his lap and burrowed his eyebrows at the twilight that shone through his single dormitory window as he heaved a great sigh.

"What is it?" Thomas asked, worn out, hungry and under the spell of Shelley's mission.

"Well, we can't hold on to rest of them, can we? We must get every copy out there- into the world so full of your obstacles- today. Today! But how?" He pondered the chaos of his room for a moment then exclaimed, "I've got it!"

He began digging through the pile of things that had previously tumbled out of his closet and found the bag he was looking for. It was filled with miniature hot air balloons. He tucked a copy of his publication into the basket of one of them, then took a contraption he'd designed as a sort of blow torch, opened his third story window, filled the small canvas vessel with hot air and watched it float down onto the quad below. "Ah-hah!" He yelped with glee then quickly began to gather the necessary tools they would need for his plan. Hogg, because he had never felt so much excitement before in the eighteen years of his life, followed the crazy lad to

the top of the university's bell tower where, one by one, they sent the balloons to drift out into the deep blue atmosphere of the evening sky. The tiny hot air balloons floated off in many directions, carried by changing winds, until each colorful canvas bubble lost its stride and wavered down to the ground with the treasured pamphlets nested in their baskets, to land safely across the path, sooner or later, of someone passing by.

The next morning, a knock that reached the level of pounding against the solid oak door of Shelley's dorm room woke him at 8 a.m. He had overslept and missed the mandatory morning service for the twentieth time that semester. He opened his door to see the proctor standing in his doorway with a growl adding centuries to his aged face. The next thing he knew, the old man pulled him by his messy hair into the thick folds of his blackish-green robe. Shelley smirked, believing he was being called to the Head Master's office for his absence in the chapel. But as he was dragged in a headlock down all the long halls, almost every dormitory door opened just a crack. He sensed the prying eyes of his fellow students and began to feel as if he were being led to the gallows. He kept his eyes diverted toward the ceiling, feeling more aggravated

than humiliated, telling himself he was no longer a child and should no more be required to attend a church he didn't believe in, than he should be made to eat a vegetable he despised. He finally entered the Head Master's office and saw a jury of university authorities seated at an oval table upon which lay one of his copies of the pamphlet. He suddenly realized the crime might perhaps be a bit more serious.

There was nothing he could say, so he said nothing. An orbit of white haired, purple faced heads protruding out of prune colored gowns poked and prodded him with questions, yet he remained mute. They presented adequate proof as to the authorship of the essay. They had procured his own distinct signature on a contract from the printers as well as a description of the boys given by the postal receptionist who helped Shelley and Hogg with their bountiful mailing. They had eye-witness reports given by several individuals who happened to look up at the clock on the university tower last evening during the spectacular event of hundreds of miniature hot air balloons flying through the air. The two students were perfectly recognizable because of their informal attire, Shelley's long, blond hair and the bushy, bright red mop on Hogg's head. Yet the author's name did not appear on the pamphlet and Shelley refused to claim it as his own work. Ultimately,

although everyone present in that musty, cramped room understood the true reasons for his verdict, he was expelled from Oxford on the grounds of an act of 'contumacy in refusing to answer certain questions put to him.'

He accepted his fate and returned to Field Place only to be banished a second time. When he appeared on the doorstep of the mansion, his mother and sisters wept with tears of joy, mixed with terror. They knew that his father, Sir Timothy, was outraged by Percy's actions at Oxford. Timothy Shelley was a Baron and a Member of Parliament. His views were rigid and his life style practical and stern. He spent very little time at home when Percy was a child and knew his son not as he actually was, but through an idealized portrait of the young 19th century aristocrat; charming, educated, wealthy and most of all- tamed. The boy, therefore, had failed disastrously in the last category and there would be no reprieve for the culmination of Shelley's actions. Most of all, Sir Timothy had been thoroughly embarrassed among his colleagues. He found no reason or benefit in trying to explain, let alone defend, his son's termination from the university, his recent 'obscene' publications or even his personal association with people of the lower class, such as Thomas Hogg, whose father was a shoemaker, for "Chrissake!"

From Mr. Shelley's perspective, his firstborn child had destroyed the very foundation of his privileged upbringing and the whole aristocratic tower had collapsed.

Percy tried to persuade the Baron to see otherwise, to find a place in his militant value system for the boy's heartfelt pursuits. They spent hours for several nights in a row, speaking together alone in that gloomy library which had made Percy's hair stand on end as a child. But alas, the boy's passion meant only mischief in the eyes of his father and he decided that if Shelley could not adhere to the conservative future he had planned out for him then he could no longer face the boy as his own son, his only son, a boy born before his six sisters. This was the boy Sir Timothy had kept a certain place for in his pride, in the future of his family, in the fortune of his estate. Yet Shelley would not give up his views and the Baron would never change. Another verdict was passed and his father disowned him. Perhaps all those places he had kept for his son had been in vain, for the few times Shelley spent with his father as a child he had never once seen a place for himself in the old man's heart.

The young Percy Bysshe was deeply hurt yet still believed there was another way, his own way. He hugged his little sisters, kissed the tears streaming down

his mother's cheeks and used the pain of abandonment he truly felt to fuel his confidence as he crossed the circular drive and left Field Place for good, with just a few books and the clothes on his back. He walked the ten-mile road into Sussex to wait for a coach. He passed a coal mine buried in the hills just before he reached the edge of town where he saw throngs of boys, ranging in age from perhaps six to fourteen years old, were being released from a twelve-hour day's labor. The soot on their arms and faces was black and thick as ink and their eyes red with weariness. He watched their scrawny bodies lingering toward a camp of shacks where they'd get a cup of onion soup, maybe a crust of bread if they were lucky. Shelley wept that day, and although he felt great pity for their starving, tortured bodies, he wept because he felt such a fervent anger upon perceiving that these children had been rent of the one gift they might have relied on to give them happiness. Imagination. No play, no air, no sunlight. The sun set. The sky was streaked with golden ribbons and blooming roses. The young miners walked past him with down cast eyes into their valley where rows of low roofed, ramshackle huts had turned black like coffins from the constant soot in the air. Shelley realized how sheltered he had been. He did not know that day that he would spend the rest of his years as a wanderer, but he

did feel a direction move into his own thin limbs. He would seek justice, wisdom, truth. He decided to become a lover and vowed to admit no errors which would not participate in that love. So he bravely went out alone to wander in the streets of London, as a poor man having nothing to show for his honor except what remained and fiercely continued to burn in his heart-the search for independence and freedom.

He found an attic room in the house of a kind lady who was able to offer him simple meals in the evenings. He wrote a short poem his first night in London Town, a longer one the next night, then another and another, putting into words all he saw and felt in this new way of life. He told himself each lonely midnight hour before the single burning candle in his attic room, that it was a life he would mold out of his own clay, and nothing, at the age of eighteen, could have been more important to him. He developed utopian visions and became determined to ascend the winding stair of intellectual idealism that had become the core of his purpose for writing. It was the fight for a life lived from the spirit that kept him striving through each day, and he knew that in the end nothing more than a final sense of freedom would be his reward. He could envision nothing more perfect, harmonious or absolute than that light. So he vowed to move forward,

to make the sacrifice and leave a destiny of formal academia, his own fortune, his own family and his childhood dreams. He understood now that this goal had been clouded by an inner battle to make his father proud, his mother healthy and his sisters happy. He would miss them, yes, but he still had his ghosts.

His first weeks in London were brutally lonely yet taught him that he had an emotional responsibility, above all others, to his soul. His soul had become his only vessel of sanctuary against the recent tempest. He learned to cherish its authority and trust the will of a truth that resided intrinsically, a truth that was woven into the fibers of everything he knew and did not know, vowing to let it guide him from then on through whatever trials and tribulations were to come. It was the only thing he had learned he could rely on. It was a love, a knowledge that he was living out his true fate, the kind of knowledge that makes each moment of one's existence almost sacred. He was mastering a talent that he trusted would somehow always shine through the pain by questioning existence and by being honest to that forever buried origin of the human heart that continued to meet him on the back steps of his uncertainty, like a king disguised as a beggar. True, he was often times sad but told himself that sadness meant a struggle toward change. He drew water from the

mythical well, drew hope from the enigmatic well of his closest companion, his own imagination.

Our whole life is thus, an education of error.

Soon enough his lonesomeness disappeared as he continued to meet Thomas Hogg regularly and quickly befriended several other kindred souls residing about town who were mostly from the middle class, he was proud to acknowledge. One day a new chum invited Shelley to his cousin's cottage home in the London suburbs. There he met Harriet Westbrook. She was a distraught girl at the vulnerable age of sixteen. A neurotic sense of hopelessness pervaded the delicate features of her face and gave a troubled amber glow to her greyish colored eyes. But in her own timorous way she was eager to learn and her mercantile family had made sure to provide her with a decent education. Shelley began to call at her house, for although he knew she was spiritually disturbed to a degree, ironically this had made her even more attractive to him. He thought he could save her, free her, give her faith in her own individuality and like a shining prince, make her happy forever after. He began to sleep with her and even believed that he loved her. He was adamantly opposed to marriage, but she insisted that they wed if their

relationship was to continue. Her pleas grew stronger and Shelley found it necessary to absence himself from her side for a short while.

He went to Wales, where the misty cliffs and lonely castles brought him the solitude he needed to try to make a decision. Each day Harriet sent him letters loaded with torturous expressions of sorrow, begging him to return. He knew that such subterfuge was a function of her 'woe is me' syndrome, and did not take her pleas seriously until her sister wrote, saying that Harriet had attempted suicide. At this, he rushed back to England, married the girl and made the best of their situation. He was not unhappy either, for he still believed that he did love her. She gave birth to a baby girl, whom he named Ianthe, and was pregnant again just beyond the six months following.

Shelley idolized his daughter and looked forward to his second child, yet the thorns in Harriet's single rose-colored window fastidiously began to prick at the tenderness of his liberalistic soul. His devotions broadened and started to lead him frequently astray from the total commitment Harriet had expected when she became his wife. His writings began to address issues of political and social reformations. He joined underground parties involved in emancipative efforts whose heated, late night meetings took place in

clandestine basements or the sordid, dimly lit rooms of depreciated hotels. His life became directed by an energy that dragged him emotionally, and more often than not, physically distant from Harriet. A great suffering slowly began to destroy the delicate framework of her sanity. Her states of dejection, mania and irrational threats, however, only served to drive him further away. Increasingly, he fled her isolated abyss for the depths of larger chasms concerning philosophical reform, revolutionary change and programs that attacked the crisis of a world corrupted by prejudice and tyranny, which his own desperation caused him to view on a mental scale involving the many as compared to the few. His vision expanded, and he put all his volition into seeking answers that might one day free the oppressed multitude of his century and soon forgot his original mission; to try to somehow save the single, tortured soul of Harriet Westbrook, a misguided, frail girl who once looked into his eyes with a naiveté he assumed was purity, and consequently ended up promising her a fairy tale.

Is not thy youth
a vain and feverish dream of sensualism?

One day Shelley attended a lecture by William Godwin, a philosopher whose opinions and works were the most liberal of the decade, and the young poet's enthusiasm promptly awarded him several invitations to the writer's London home. He temporarily separated from Harriet, baby Ianthe, and the child still inside his wife's womb, and took a small room at an Inn on Fleet Street.

Being single in London and enjoying Godwin's keen intellectual company brought Shelley into his own once again. He felt new and relieved from the oppressive domesticity that had been destroying him. Finally he had escaped living with Harriet, the nurses and maids, her four Irish setters and episodes of smashing teacups, which made up daily life in the quaint, rural Berkshire cottage that the Westbrook family had leased for them. Godwin's leftist politics provided Shelley with an alliance toward his own pursuits in humanitarianism, and he revered Godwin's deceased wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, whose writings had been the first to vindicate equal rights for women. He already admired the daughter of such interesting parents even before he met her. He was sure she must possess a character of adventure, unity and strength beyond any he had ever encountered in the opposite sex before.

The first day he saw Mary, she was sitting in the garden of her father's London home, reading Goethe. The lavish June sun illuminated the long waves of her burnished auburn hair as it spilled over the glossy, silk embroidery of the bodice on her white summer dress. Her expression was lofty, far off, and dignified while she lost herself in the engaging pages of *Werther,* her lips pursed and her bonny, brown eyes reflective of a sorrow she had yet to learn. Her posture, her mannerism, her mood that day in the garden pouring with sunlight was like a painting, a masterpiece continually re-making itself, and he hesitated behind the glass panes of the garden doors, watching her for many minutes from inside her father's house, frozen by the tenderness her image had created within him.

Mr. Godwin returned from his library where he had been called away by a casual visitor.

"Oh, have you met Mary?" Godwin said, finding his neophyte's cheek glued to the windows in the garden doors. "I'll introduce you, and then you must excuse me for the afternoon, there is some informal business I need to attend to."

Shelley followed Godwin into the garden and stood shyly before Mary in the warm sunlight that seemed to be enclosed just for them within the latticed wooden fence surrounding that Eden like patch of

foliage and flowers.

"Perhaps Mary can entertain you for the afternoon. She's been reading Goethe; that should give you two something to talk about." Her father kissed her high forehead and returned to his study without another word.

The two looked at each other somewhat awkwardly, being as they were then, two strangers left alone to do whatever they wished with such a gorgeous day. Before Shelley could bring up a subject, Mary stood, smoothed out the billowing skirt of her frock and said, "So, shall we visit the cemetery?"

Alas, she was a woman after his own heart.

In the St. Pancras churchyard, Mary stood stoically before her mother's gravestone for some minutes.

"This is why we came here." Shelley whispered to himself, believing the young girl must be experiencing such grief and longing for her buried mother that he dare not disturb her. Soon enough, however, she turned to him and spoke in such an impassive tone that he thought she was perhaps too proud or was trying to hide her true sentiments. Then he realized that the grave before them belonged to a soul whom Mary had never known in person. Her own mother had been fabricated solely out of the occasional

remarks Godwin might have made or the books that the deceased had written.

"She died the day I was born." Mary told him.

"Yes, I know." Although nearly an hour had passed since he even met the girl, he then found himself taking her hand into his own upon instinct, and to his surprise, she did not let go.

He began to visit the philosopher's Skinner Street home every day and spent more and more time alone with Mary, taking walks to the churchyard where they would sit for hours with books beneath the shade of what became their favorite plane tree. Her mind was so alive and her erudition impressed him greatly. Her ideas were profound and he felt he had met his match in the intellectual realm. And she was pretty, young, filled with inspiration and desire. He soon realized he could never return to Harriet for he had fallen in love with another.

Perhaps it had been three weeks, maybe two after that sunny June afternoon. They were walking back to Godwin's house after spending the morning at a bookshop in Chelsea. It began to rain and they stood in the doorway of a bank for half an hour, holding onto each other closely to keep warm. The rain did not stop and Fleet Street was just around the corner, so Shelley held his coat open above their heads as they ran in the

splashing rain to his hotel. He knew the concierge would be napping at that hour. Nevertheless, he cloaked Mary with his overcoat as they passed through the lobby where two male residents sat silently smoking cigars. His room was on the sixth floor and Mary breathed deeply as they climbed the winding stairs. When they came to his room, he turned to look into her eyes, at her downcast eyelashes, her wet hair, her blushed, cold cheeks that he kissed then, smiling tenderly, before he unlocked the door. She was perceptibly appalled when she saw the paltry room but spoke not. She shivered and Shelley gave her the one towel he had to dry her hair. She did so and he took the quilt off his bed and draped it around her shoulders but she let it fall to the floor and began to undress before him. They both remained silent. He took her wet clothes and hung them over the edge of the sink for the bath was down the hall. When he turned to see her naked on his bed he came to her gently and they kissed and kissed, their young flesh moist and warm in the damp room lit only by the heavy, rainy green sky outside. He wanted to tell her his deepest secret yet the single word itself took on multifarious forms and he wished he could gather them back into the lost word that at that moment seemed to move into her soft sighs. He pressed himself closer to her, empowered by his

furthest resources of faith and fear and felt himself drowning in the sound of the pouring rain against the windowpane, as his secret became their secret.

He decided to annul his first marriage but could not wait another moment to escape into a new life with Mary. It was certain that Mr. Godwin liked Shelley, but he would never consent to let his seventeen-year old daughter wed the lad, mostly because he had absolutely no fixed income. By the end of summer they both felt that it would be like death to part. It was decided between them that the only way they could live the life of liberty and love they were after was to elope, and that very night Mary snuck out of the Skinner Street house. Shelley rode up on a white horse to take her, and they raced out of London in the silver, yellowish light of a full moon so brilliant that the night surrounding them appeared beyond real and they both felt as if they were dreaming.

Shelley found the means to purchase a rundown, Shepherd's house in the country village of Marlow. They peacefully hid themselves beneath the moss-covered roof in a rapture of books and paintings that they began to collect to furnish the romance of a life of their own. Mary spent her own savings to buy the necessary objects of homemaking, such as plates and saucepans, a table, chairs and took great pleasure in

setting up a bed. Their very own bed, a husband and wife bed, set into a cherry wood frame with posts at each corner carved to look somewhat like thinner versions of Bernini's pillars, and she even special ordered an aquamarine colored canopy from her father's draper in London so that the bed itself at last looked like a work of art.

The early autumn passed by, filled with long hours of lovemaking, reading, writing and plans for renovating the old cottage. Both of them felt absolutely positive that the rest of their lives would continue with the happiness that blessed each present day. Alas, one delightful afternoon when they were planting rose bushes in the back yard, an unexpected visitor arrived.

Shelley was telling Mary about the time he left Harriet and sailed to Ireland to aide the revolutionaries in their fight for unions, religious emancipation and individual freedom.

He punched his shovel into the moist ground, "Our two islands are separate as dirt from dust. The Irish bleed for bread and Albion turns its head, content to hand out bandages for all the world's wounds. England has become a hospital for the sick, the meek and weary and every doctor employed is a despot! May the sun shine on that green isle of dispute until each man's heart- whether protestant or catholic- shall

finally see the annihilation of abuse and the birth of an embryo of melioration!"

"How long did you stay in Ireland?" Mary knelt beside him, packing fresh dirt around the red rose bush they had just planted.

"Two months or so. I went directly into Dublin and fought with the mill workers for labor unions. I wrote a pamphlet of essays on the entire national crisis that I then published and distributed all by myself. And although my courage was at its peak, I often felt lonely and sometimes rather out of place; a skinny, blond kid from Sussex holding his fist up in the air amongst all those big, strong, burly men of the Irish Revolution. Hah! I felt so invisible yet so powerful, like an elf, you know, something like the elfin knight in Spenser."

Mary laughed. "Well, you certainly look strong and burly at this moment, with dirt all over your hands, wearing only an undershirt, old trousers and heavy boots, standing amidst our rose bushes with that great big shovel in your hand!"

Shelley laughed and returned to digging.

"Why did you come back? From Ireland..." She asked him.

"I ran out of money. And," he wiped his brow with the back of his hand, "it was a bloody scene there, truly. I began to question whether violence was really

the only path to freedom for those people. Perhaps. Perhaps, I thought, only blood can fertilize the tree of Liberty."

"Hello? Hello?" A shrill voice echoed through the open house and trailed into the back yard where they were planting.

"Are you expecting company?" Shelley asked Mary, who immediately shook her head, shrugged her shoulders and wiped her hands on her apron. "Well, I'll go see who it is. Yes, right there-" she glanced back as he carefully placed the thorny bush in the soil, "we'll put the pink ones in next."

When Mary answered the door, she was not surprised to find her half sister upon their doorstep, for she had been expecting that the girl would show up sooner or later, although, later was highly preferable.

"Mary, darling! Oh, how could you leave me alone?" Clare whined frantically as she stood on the front porch with an over stuffed suitcase at her heels. Her chest was heaving in the heat, her hair was array and her face was somewhat sunburned for she had taken the cheapest seats on an open postal coach from London to Marlow.

"Father is infuriated with you. He hasn't stopped screaming at me since I came home. At me! At *me*! Why must I take the blame for your rash,

uncivilized behavior? How could you disrupt everything like this?" Clare mustered up a few desperate tears. "Running off in the middle of the night with some unknown poet... What kind of a man would turn such a level headed girl as your-self towards such mischief? Who is this Shelley anyway?"

Shelley came to the open door, having heard most of what had been said. He reached out his hand, "Please, come inside, Miss Clairemont. I am honored to finally meet you."

Clare retreated from his thin, barely dressed figure and soiled hands.

"Pardon me, we were gardening."

Miss Clairemont sniffed and curtsied then whisked past her new brother-in-law without the slighted gesture of courtesy.

During the summer while Mary and Shelley were falling in love, Clare Clairemont had been in Scotland visiting an aunt on her own mother's side. When she returned to London in September and learned of Mary's elopement she packed her bags and left Godwin sulking in his study. Mary also learned that she'd discovered their whereabouts by bribing the London draper, with what sort of payment Mary did not want to know.

After all was spoken and every one calmed down, the half sisters re-united and it was decided that Clare should stay on and partake of their blissful abode for she protested that returning to live alone with Godwin *sans* Mary would, 'put her in the asylum.' Shelley was glad to see Mary have some company; after all, they didn't know a soul in the provincial town. Since he would often have to go in to London for several days at a time to meet with his publishers, Clare's presence made him feel more secure. But as the weeks went by, he found that the girl's moods were much too unpredictable and an oppressive cloud began to hover over the mossy thatched roof. Clare was only a year younger than Mary but much less sophisticated, a child really, directed by her impulses. Although she appeared to be fairly interested in education, she was not well equipped with Mary's power of intellectual reason and control. She was full of flight and fancy one day and wallowing in self-pity the next. Her weakness for melancholy and proneness to sudden fits of hysteria soon began to create utter hell for the newlyweds. They tried to console her but the dramatics became intolerable. By mid November Shelley was on the verge of telling her she was no longer welcome in their home when she decided herself that she was bored to tears in that pastoral village, and one fine morning she packed

her bags, took the packet across the channel to France, then transferred onto a post chaise and rode directly into Paris.

When the Shelleys read of her destination in the farewell letter she wrote, they believed she'd chosen the city for the adventure and grandeur it promised any young, wistful girl. Yet Clare had not set off to Paris for those reasons at all. It was her secret infatuation with Lord Byron that led her there. The only thing that had kept her imagination occupied in Marlow had been the celebrity newspapers she'd pick up daily at the general store along with any number of items she absolutely could not go without, such as lemon drops, eye drops, talcum powder, hair pins, and of course, those delicious crumpets that the young grocery clerk would take out of his window one by one as Clare spent precious minutes selecting them. Then he'd skillfully wrap them up for her especially in a sheet of yellow waxed paper and tie it with a present of a gratuitous ribbon. His crumpet selling mechanics impressed her so greatly and gave the lad such pride, that even when she had forgotten a copy of her trashy newspaper, the good looking farm boy who worked the counter would remind her, "That'll be three pounds, six pence, Miss Clairemont, that is, with the paper."

When she returned to the cottage, Shelley and

Mary were often in a world of their own, either making love or writing. Clare would then sit on the front porch, read her paper and eat her crumpets spread thickly with jam and go into another world herself as she chronicled every piece of gossip regarding the infamous Lord Byron's licentious lifestyle. She read about his drunkenness, sexual obscenities, selfishness, outrageous expenditures as well as the gloriously horrific reviews of his shocking prose. Each devoted crumpet and blackberry jam morning, she found herself totally enamored and falling, beyond all hope, in love with him. It did not matter that Byron himself did not know that she existed, for Clare's mind was made up; all she had to do was find him and make sure that he did.

The papers said he was then living in Paris, in the vicinity of the Place Pigalle, where he had opened up his own stage. Clare took a room in a hotel across the street from Byron's theater company and began to masquerade amongst his associates, claiming that she was from a little English village called Marlow and had always dreamed of being an actress. She told false, fantastic tales about her past, mostly adopted, though considerably revised, from the very columns she'd read about Lord Byron. She was a voluptuous sixteen year old and her natural flair for drama hastened her into the leading role of an obscure play that Byron had vouched

to finance one evening in an artisan's salon, that is, after drinking two bottles by himself of the finest champagne. Although the production was a flop, Clare shone in her performance. She played a blood sucking seductress. Byron sat in the back row of the scarcely populated house, hiding his face beneath the hood of a red velvet cape, which, embarrassing him even further, happened to match the exact hue of the curtains surrounding the stage. He could not help becoming enticed by Clare's rosy lips, large brown eyes and large round breasts. As she did possess a gift for singing, that melodic voice of hers, clear and deep as an Alpine lake, captured his vital energy and lured his vanity away from the hisses and 'boos' at the end of the play. Having heard from friends that she was a no-body from nowhere, he believed his physical interest in her would prove harmless. That moonless night after the show, holding her close to his limping body beneath the massive velvet of his blood red cloak, he led her along the Seine and then up ten flights of winding narrow stairs to his grand, Parisian loft. The affair continued in spurts, when Byron was not enticed by someone else, or when he needed her talent to save his shame from another risky play. Soon enough, he abandoned her completely. So, after less than two years in the radiant city, Clare fell to pieces, quit the stage, cursed Paris and

returned to the Shelley's doorstep at Marlow; pregnant, bitter and alone.

Shelley listened to her story as she sat soaking up a kerchief in their living room. He could not help but feel sympathy for the naive girl and was outraged by Byron's conduct. At that time he only knew of the Lord from the printed page as well, yet his information came from literary journals, not the gossip rags. Having also read Byron's poetry, Shelley held its intelligence high above the rumors of his wanton private life that circulated every where. Clare's encounter with the famous celebrity disappointed him and he decided he would help Clare go after the gent who had fathered her child, partially to ease her pain, but also to discover the truth behind this man who was supposedly at once a genius and a villain. Clare discovered in one of her newspapers that Byron planned to quit France and spend his summer in Geneva.

"We must follow him! We must leave tomorrow! It is my only hope! I cannot have this baby alone, I'll be cast out of society, shunned, ridiculed, stoned!"

"I doubt you will be stoned," Shelley said, "but I will not let this Lord George Gordon Byron dishonor you."

"I'll pack my bags." Clare ran to her room

before either Mary or Shelley could stop her.

"You're not serious about going to Geneva, are you?" Mary asked questioning not the voyage, but her husband's own involvement with Clare. For although they had both learned to practice caution regarding Clare's moods and motivations, Shelley often found himself, unlike Mary, magnetically drawn into the fantastic circles of spontaneous, carefree behavior the girl's unstable mental states so easily created around her. A peculiar intimacy had developed between them during her initial stay at the cottage. Clare demanded more of life than she was willing to suffer for, simply flinging herself into circumstances without limits or a body of control. Mary had long ago grown weary of coming to her rescue and didn't like to see Shelley being dragged into her talent for wreckage. In the past he was always the one who ended up suffering from her wanton designs for the three of them. After all, it had been Clare's idea to take a rowboat down the Thames from Marlow to Windsor when Shelley nearly drowned, and again that day when she insisted on dining at an Indian restaurant on a trip into London after which his stomach suffered for a week. Although nothing involving the magnitude of Clare's present situation had been brought into their intimate triad, the same oppositions now faced them. For while Mary was able

to present rational solutions, Percy always found himself being pulled into the irrational alternatives that Clare felt were the only avenues open to her. She was the kind of girl whose dark side was too vain to admit responsibility for her own actions. In any of her moods she could never feign to stand alone. If she was dark, everyone around her must turn to darkness, if she was rambunctious or foolish or gay, it was the same. And even though Shelley's intellect never stopped shining, he lacked common sense and was easily persuaded by his sister in law's woes and joys. Mary worried the results would ultimately prove catastrophic each time the two of them trampled off together under the conviction of one of Clare's moody spells. But she was her half-sister, her own flesh and blood. Mary herself had gone through pregnancy and birth while Clare had been away, and all aside, she did feel a deep sense of empathy for the girl.

Shelley went to the window and stared out at the knotty black trunk of an enormous chestnut tree that shaded their house. The place was so dark inside they had to burn lanterns all day. Even now, at the end of spring, the room where Shelley wrote was often drafty and damp. His health had not been good for the past few months. He was beginning to notice lethargy ever moving slowly into the vigor and happiness that had

filled each day for him when they began their married life together. He had been thinking of moving for some time, not only away from Marlow but also out of England altogether. When Mary gave birth to his darling son William, he realized it would be much too complicated to uproot everyone. But now that William was almost one year old, the logistics of such a plan seemed feasible.

"There is no alternative," he finally said, turning from the window to face his wife. "Clare can't go back to Godwin's in her condition and she certainly can't remain in this hyper-orthodox town as an unwed mother. They just might stone her!"

"Shelley!" Mary scolded him for saying such a thing.

"Well, it's true. We must find a solution."

"We? Clare is a grown woman, why must we-"

"She is just a child Mary, you know this as well as I do. And I agree with you, it is not our responsibility at all... it's his, that devil. Therefore, we shall guide Clare to Geneva, place her at the mercy of the Lord and then..." he paused.

"Exactly. Then what?" Mary put her arms around him, "What about us?"

He shrugged. “I don’t know yet, but don’t worry, we’ll find our way. We always do.”

III.

Flee from the morning beam:
The matter of which dreams are made
Not more endowed with actual life...

Shelley sold the house in Marlow and crossed the Channel with Mary, Clare, William and a nursemaid named Elise who they hired for the journey. They brought little with them, a single trunk each, containing books and clothes, and sold off all the objects they had bought to furnish their first love nest. Mary was especially grieved to see the bed and the paintings go, and Shelley had become rather attached to his mahogany desk. Nevertheless, they left England with money, and by the time they reached Dover he felt secure that this trip to Geneva would not fail.

He had no interest in Clare's relationship with Byron. That was her own business, yet he was

determined to have Byron admit paternity and agree to provide financial support for the unborn child. The other side of his investment in the voyage was immaterial. He was actually very interested in meeting the notorious figure, for he had wished for years to speak with him about poetry. Mary was excited by the prospect of seeing Europe. Although she had reservations at first about traveling with the baby, they were immediately erased when Shelley found Elise. By the time they reached their first stop, Paris, she felt as if she were a new person, that she had somehow come alive for the second time in her life; the first being the day she loved Shelley. They took rooms at the Hotel Villiers where Mary and Shelley were beside themselves with joy at finally being able to be alone together. After Elise took William out for a stroll in the Jardin de Tuileries and Clare had set out for the boutiques along the Rue Rivoli, the young couple spent the entire sunny, perfect summer afternoon making love in their hotel room.

They visited the Louvre, the Opera, Notre Dame and the Cluny within the next few days, but Shelley didn't find Paris as lovely as did Mary, Elise and Clare. Granted, the architecture was splendid, the bridges quite handsome and the fountains and flowers sprinkled throughout the parks that lined the Champs

Elysees, very charming indeed. Still, he couldn't help but feel that he was somehow being lied to by the opulence of the city. He could see the scars of its past in every sooty facade carved into stone and each time he crossed a cobblestone square he could hear the evocative echo of a guillotine. He knew his disappointment in the French Revolution had discolored his vision of the city. How could any army, as Robespierre expected, ever be pure? Lafayette had used the words, 'For a nation to love Liberty it is sufficient that she knows it; to be free, it is sufficient that she wills it.' Somewhere deep beneath the city he could hear the buried cries of those who had fought and died for freedom from despotism. Yet the eye of the obelisk in the Place de Concorde remained a closed eye to the scorching of a nation's past, an eye forever sleeping in the dust of ash upon ash. Paris, to Shelley, appeared now as a catacomb over a catacomb.

He was lured to the Seine, but found that it didn't seem to move like a natural river; it appeared to him sad and tired, like a giant, viscous worm. The only unique aspects of the city that did capture his interest were the houseboats lining the river beyond Le Pont Neuf. He was fascinated by their tiny cabin windows set just above the level of the water and the slim lines of smoke puffing out of their chimney pipes from

petite fire stoves below. The houseboat decks were often furnished almost as living rooms, with round breakfast tables and weathered, wooden chairs, or hammocks and potted trees. One immodest tenant had hung out his red and black laundered underclothes to dry on ropes stretched from a bare mast pole that had apparently forgotten how it felt to be attached to a sail. His best hours in Paris were spent walking around the island of St. Michel amongst the unique houseboats, writing verse, or sitting on a bench facing the river to make sketches of them, all the while enchanted by the indesinent bell like toll of their chains clinking against the limestone quay.

Mary and Elise took William to play in the Jardin du Luxembourg on the last afternoon they spent in the city, and Shelley went out alone with Clare. She had been somewhat nauseous that morning, and he thought a long walk would do her well. Although it was not his intention to make her feel worse, they ended up in Montmartre, climbing avenues as thin and twisted as cooked spaghetti noodles and by the time they reached Sacre Coeur, she fainted on the Cathedral steps. Two sideline actors from a group of mimes who had been performing in the square came to help Shelley lift her. They fanned her flushed face with the angel sleeves of their costumes and she quickly regained her senses.

"Why, it's Mademoiselle Clairemont!" One of the Pierrots called out. "It's Clare Clairemont, from Lord Byron's Theater!"

Shelley stepped back as an entire flock of black and white clowns rushed forward to surround his sister-in-law, and before he could stop them, they had lifted her up and unfortunately began to dance in a circle with Clare bouncing about above their heads. He called out to warn them that she was not feeling well, but his mispronunciation of the French language did not reach their ears. Finally, Clare herself screamed, "*Arrêt! Arrêt*!" They seated her back down upon the steps and bowing before her with a Shakespearean flair, dropped handfuls of paper made flowers in her lap, then dedicated their next act to her as they continued their performance upon a platform they had set up in the square.

"Why didn't you tell us Paris had made you into such a celebrity?" Shelley sat down beside her.

"I wasn't aware of it myself until now," she heaved, "I wonder if they can find me some tonic water."

"Oh, I'm sure of it." He laughed and watched the show. "They're quite good aren't they?"

"Yes." Clare began to make out the features beneath their painted faces. "I recognize them now!

Why it's Jean-Luc, Jean-Louis, Pascal and even my favorite player, the most gifted, most handsome, dear Guillaume Melandrine!"

Shelley returned to the Hotel Villiers alone that evening and Mary scolded him for leaving Clare in the company of, "Actors, and to make matters worse-Frenchmen!" But he could tell by her good spirits, after a lovely day in the gardens with baby William, that she was glad to have dinner alone with him that evening. He decided to splurge and took her to a small, romantic restaurant where he even ordered a bottle of Bordeaux.

They boarded the post chaise out of Paris the next morning and headed south. France outside of Paris was not what they had anticipated. Small villages that used to be harmonious and simple had been plundered and destroyed by the Napoleonic Wars. The people of the central provinces, who once had a reputation for being the most hospitable, kept themselves hidden behind their scarred, turquoise painted shutters, huddled around kitchen tables with rations of day old bread. Although efforts had begun to rebuild Napoleon's devastation, it appeared that almost two decades of aftermath was yet not enough to erase the affliction from these frontier towns. Even the

forests that had once been so green and lush remained trampled, burnt and vacant.

"Liberty can never happen on a massive scale, for it is an idea that begins in the individual spirit alone. Only a leader, born to fight for a cause so specifically human, could change the civil environment of our forlorn planet. Napoleon was a hero, but he was not that man." Shelley muttered as they drove quietly through the Bourgogne, under patches of cream-colored clouds with the top of the coach down.

The postilion heard him and rebutted, "If it had not been for Napoleon, my head would not be where you see it now!"

"Oh, do not misunderstand me, Monsieur..." Shelley slipped into the driver's seat beside the coachman and they engaged in a heated discourse upon the tactics of warfare that lasted all the way to Dijon.

"I'm famished." Clare complained.

"Shelley, Clare wishes to dine again." Mary called up to the head of the coach.

"We just dined at three o'clock, Clare." Shelley called back.

The coachman continued on with their conversation, "Look around you monsieur, violence has become the mistress of my country."

"Yes, but you must understand that I am speaking of another kind of brute force, a type of violent attack upon human consciousness as we know it now..."

The driver grew contemplative and so silent, Shelley believed he had become one with the reins.

Clare called up to the front of the coach again, "Shelley, I really am starving."

He ended his debate with the driver by saying, "Power shall forever be a lie until it falls into the earth stained hands of the common man, and unfortunately, I do believe it will be an extremely violent fall." He returned to the passenger's seat and looked at Clare with a questioning expression.

"Well, I *am* eating for two, remember? And it seems the babe has his father's appetite."

"But from what I've heard, Mr. Byron's appetite exceeds that of nourishment." He scoffed.

"When I was pregnant with Willie I never gained an ounce over the weight of the womb." Mary smiled at the healthy boy on her lap.

"Yes, well, poor Mary, perhaps that's because you didn't have-" Clare stopped, as she was about to say, 'money,' but feared Shelley would take offense, and concluded, "that you didn't have the taste for sweets which I do."

"What about those petite madeleines we brought from Paris, there was a whole package around here-" Shelley began to search through their bags.

"I ate them."

"All of them?" He glared at her.

"Well, I gave one to William."

He shook his head and called to the driver that they would disembark at Chalon-sur-Soane. Although he had wished to feed Clare quickly and travel on through the evening, her highness refused to continue without a bed and a bath. Shelley paid for rooms at the first convenient hotel where they unloaded their luggage and took Clare directly to the dining room. He drank some tea and then excused himself from the table. He wandered about the streets in the vicinity of the hotel and came to the town square where a shoddy group of traveling comedians had set up a stage. He stood in the back of the roaring crowd for a few minutes, listening to the silly play. It was terrible, but rather funny in a ribald sort of way. He began to laugh with the crowd, but felt he should return to the girls and started to walk off.

A boy, maybe ten years old, ran up to him shouting, "*Monsieur, monsieur, pour vous, seulement trois sous!*"

He was surprised to then see the boy lift from his pocket a live squirrel with a thin rope loosely attached around its neck like a dog's leash. "You want to sell your squirrel?" Shelley took pity on the boy as he caught sight of the holes in his grimy suede shoes.

"*Trois sous. Si'l vous plait, deux sous! Regarde, elle est très gentilé*," pleaded the child.

Shelley pet the gray, furry creature that was actually quite friendly for a woodland animal. "You've trained her, then?"

The boy grinned widely and took some seeds from his pocket. The little squirrel nibbled at them straight out of his palm.

"Why it's remarkable." Shelley said.

"*C'est deux sous, Monsieur*." The boy let the squirrel jump into Shelley's arms and gave him the thin rope leash.

His brow crinkled as the squirrel dashed up his arm and sat on his shoulder, then pulled gently on the long yarns of his hair with its little paw. He laughed, took half a crown from his pocket and gave it to the child.

"*Merci! Merci beaucoup*!" The boy was gone in a flash.

He walked back to the hotel with the squirrel darting up and down his arm or hiding in the pocket of

his jacket, where it found a banquet of nutshells. William was delighted with their new pet but Mary believed it was unsanitary. They kept it in their room regardless and took it along with them into a private coach, which they hired to continue their journey the next morning. The squirrel ran back and forth across their laps along his little string throughout the bumpy ride, but Clare began to put up such a fuss that they had to stop in the forest just outside of Macon to let the happy creature loose. Shelley went alone into the trees to say good-bye, with some melancholy regret, to the curious animal. When he returned to the parked carriage, he found Mary slamming shut the heavy lid of her traveling chest, which she had been frantically searching through. She bolted the lock and threw herself back into her seat. "I don't believe it!" She raged.

"What is the matter?" He hopped in beside her and waved for the driver to proceed. Mary stared out at the road for some time, her chin tight and her eyebrows bent into a crevice.

"Mary, what has happened?" He put his hand on her knee.

She turned to face him, shook her head and tried to smile but he could tell that her eyes were slightly swollen and moist, that she wanted to cry but would not

allow herself to do so.

"Come now, it was only a squirrel." He said sympathetically.

"That is not why I'm upset, and I'm not upset, really. Tis nothing. Oh, I am such a fool!"

"Tell me what has happened, my love. What were you searching for in our luggage?"

"I seem to be missing my notebooks, tis all. See? I told you, it is nothing."

"Nothing? Your journals, your stories? Why, we must retrieve them at once, we must go back! " Shelley called to the driver to turn the coach around and he immediately pulled back on the reins.

"*Mais, quel chemin*?" The driver asked as the horses came to a fast, smooth halt.

"Yes, Shelley, where to?" Clare echoed.

"Well, where did you leave your writings?" He questioned Mary who shook her head. "I haven't the foggiest. It's pointless. The last time I wrote was in Paris, the first day we stayed at the Hotel Villiers."

"Then that is where they are. So, we return to Paris. Onward!" He called to the driver but Mary yelled instantaneously afterwards, "No! No! Continue southward please... what was our next stop? Lyon?"

The horses started up again, heading south.

"Mary, we must go back. I will not let you lose

your writings." Shelley leaned forward but before he could re-direct the driver again, Mary yanked him back into his seat with a defiant thrust.

"Don't, Shelley. It is ridiculous to turn back now."

"Yes, but-"

She continued, half lying bitterly, "Honestly, I care nothing for those old notebooks, I knew nothing when I wrote them, they are the stories of a foolish little girl. It is fate that they are gone, believe me, dear. It is best we travel on."

He twisted his lips and settled back in his seat, realizing what a devastating setback a return to Paris would be for them now, especially financially.

"Really, Shelley, we must go on toward Geneva. Byron is probably already there." Clare mumbled from the opposite seat where she had been sitting patiently with William and Elise during the outburst.

"Fine, we shall keep to our course." He called to the driver to pick up their speed and began to whisper consoling words into Mary's ear. She turned her face toward the powdery brown road with an invisible and impenetrable veil shielding her from his efforts of comfort. He retreated from her side and stared out at the passing simple fields as they traveled in silence for the rest of the day, reaching Lyon just in time to appease

Clare's expanding appetite.

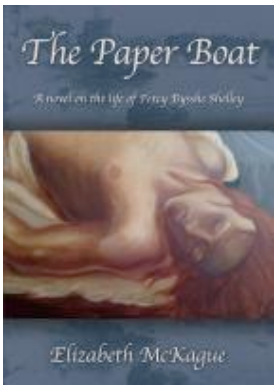
Shelley realized that his funds were already beginning to run low and found rooms at a rather sketchy looking Inn for the evening. Clare was shocked to discover that the proprietor, a stocky, middle-aged man with a very greasy forehead, was also the chef. "No wonder everything is practically raw!" She moaned, "It's like something out of Cervantes!"

It was just past three a.m. when Clare rushed into the Shelleys' quarters screaming that her bed was filled with cockroaches. Shelley himself went to sweep off her mattress but ultimately, near dawn, she had snuggled into the bed where he had been with Mary, pulling most of the thin blankets over to cover herself. Mary's sleep remained untroubled as she held little William to her breast, but Shelley soon rose out of the crowded bed and went out to walk in the amber light of early morning upon the desolate cobblestone streets of the still-slumbering city. He found a bakery that was just opening where he sat at a table by the window and drank coffee for the first time in his life. He wrote some verses there, bought croissants for William and the girls, then returned to the infested hotel where he was happy to see his party reassembled, packed, and ready to move on. They leased a closed, double horse drawn carriage that he planned to drive on his own for the rest

of their journey into Switzerland. He wished to take the route through the Alps at his leisure. The majestic mountain range had become a latent fascination of his, the geography picture books he'd studied with such wonder as a child having formed some of the most sensual images in his memory. He reveled in the scenery, carefully guiding the well-traveled horses up and up the ascending narrow roads that cut through the Alps. The spiraling miles and miles of uninhabited terrain kept them all in awe for the entire day as his tight grip on the reins gradually lifted the carriage into the heights of the snow capped peaks. Shelley stopped the carriage when they reached an icy crest that was barricaded from the strong wind by an alcove of pine trees and asked his dear passengers, who were huddled inside beneath an avalanche of blankets, to let him walk alone for a few minutes. He went to the edge of a precipice and listened. He heard... nothing, a sort of soaring silence. He felt that his hearing was blind, that his sight was deaf. The world of beauty before him had answered everything with something beyond human senses, a kind of knowledge only to be found then and there, as his toes froze and his hair turned to icicles and his warm blood spiraled inside him, making its own silence. He cast his glance down for a second and realized the enormous drop off the cliff, just a few

inches from where he stood. He shuddered and stepped back. William's distant whine echoed in the crisp air and he hurried back to the driver's seat where Mary covered him with blankets before he charged the horses on at top speed until they reached Collonges, just after night fall.

For the first time since they'd left Paris, they found a fine hotel and dined on well-cooked food and fresh bread. After dinner, Shelley stepped out onto the hotel's terrace while the girls took William up to their rooms. He watched a coral sun falling behind the crystal peaks of giant, violet colored rocks and felt the deep sense of an end upon the brink of a new beginning. It was as if he had turned over the death card in a Tarot deck, and he pictured a skeleton, the eternal ploughman cutting through mountains, sky, sea and stars to make life anew. The house at Marlow, the money problems and complicated bureaucracy of trying to exist in his own way in England all disappeared with that fast sinking sun behind the mountains, and he woke up it seemed, for the second time in his life; the first being that shining June day when he went to the cemetery with Mary and boldly reached for her hand.



The Paper Boat *is a novel based on the life of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Shelley's relationship with his wife Mary is tender yet complicated and his alternative bond with the poet Lord Byron, an outrageous, extravagant character, is somewhat absurd yet courageous and intellectually provocative. The novel illustrates the fullness of the poet's character, a vibrant conflict between imagination and reality, and the radical pendulum of idealism in the Romantic era.*

THE PAPER BOAT