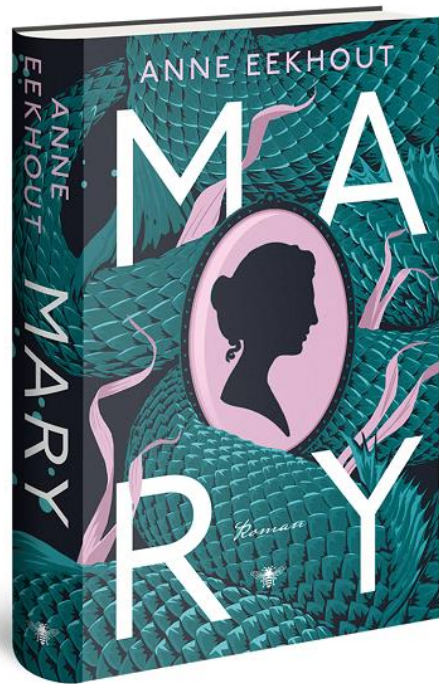


Anne Eekhout

Mary

What mysterious events fed Mary Shelley's brilliant imagination?

The year is 1816 when Mary Shelly, only eighteen years of age, creates the iconic story of Frankenstein's monster. It is the same summer that Mary and her lover Percy Shelley visit Lord Byron and John Polidori at Lake Geneva. The friends spend long evenings by the fire, drinking laudanum-infused wine while reading one another ghost stories. One night Lord Byron suggests that they each write a ghost story of their own and this triggers a memory in Mary, taking her back four years earlier to Scotland, where she spent the summer and met Isabella Baxter. As Mary falls in love with Isabella, they are plunged into an enigmatic adventure in which imagination and reality prove to be equally strong components. It is from this memory that her story about Frankenstein's monster arises. Anne Eekhout brings the young mother, feminist *avant la lettre* and writer Mary Shelley to life in a highly original novel that is crafted from real historic events and imbued with great imagination.



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Excerpt from *Mary*

Translated by David McKay

- The Witching Hour –

This is the hour. Every night she dies – her daughter dies. She never finds out until morning, although deep in the night she does see her lying so still, her head full of sleep. But she knows it must have happened at this hour, the witching hour, because she always wakes up. Most nights she doesn't stay awake for long: she pulls the slipped-off sheet up over her and presses her nose into Percy's warm back. He's fast asleep, she falls asleep again. But once in a while it lures her out of bed. She doesn't know quite what. She doesn't want to, she's tired, she wants to go on sleeping, go on with the night, move past this hour, but she already knows the truth: she has to feel it. Every minute of this hour must burn against her skin. Because this is what she brought into the world. And this is what slipped away so fast.

The veranda keeps her dry, her cape keeps her warm, but out there, close by, the world is destroying itself. They have been here for two weeks now, in Geneva, and almost every day since they arrived, storms and gales have performed a frenzied ritual. Mary loves it when the lightning lasts, when it stretches like a cat over several seconds, illuminating the sky, tingeing it light purple like a canvas, a tent that roofs the earth, making the things below unreal, a story, yet more meaningful than ever: her bare feet on the veranda, the weeds in the grass, the willow by the water, the Jura rising across the lake, the boat rocking in a bowl of light.

In the other direction, up the hill, a weak light burns at Albe and John's house. It reassures her: she may awaken at three every night, but at least Albe has not even gone to bed yet. He is keeping watch – over the sheet of paper in front of him, no doubt, where his quill performs its chaotic dance, writing what dwells within him into the world.

She spins and wobbles on her toes. In the darkness, she couldn't find her boots. Little William is quick to wake up, though indifferent to thunder, and her stepsister Claire is finally sleeping too – in her own bed for once. She is like a small child, and Percy takes her by the hand like a father. No, not like a father. Decidedly not like a father.

Lightning spears through the air and the buzz lingers, second after second, over the surface of the water, among the treetops, on her skin. A thunderstorm here is not the same as in England. More awake. More alive. More real. As if she could touch the light, cling to it, as if it clings to her. The roar, the deep rumble feels somehow embodied, like a thing that at any moment could join the living. Could enter her chest, her heart, her blood. There seems no end to the series of days like nights, the sun rarely



shows its face, the garden is a swamp, the landscape dumbstruck, and sometimes they turn to each other and say, maybe this is the end of the world. The Last Judgment. But then they laugh. Because they all know God exists only in dreams and nursery rhymes. Mary rubs her hands together for warmth. The chilly air nips at her toes. No, not only then, she thinks. He is there, sometimes, when you're very, very frightened.

But back in bed, she can sleep no longer. The cold has sunk into her body and nothing – not a sheet, not the thought of a blazing hearth, not Percy's warm back – is now capable of warming her.

It is because of Claire. She's hardly any younger than Mary, and sometimes she thinks it would do Claire good to regard her as a true sister. But every day Claire becomes harder to tolerate, let alone to help, to console, or to entertain. The men seem less irritated by it. Albe calls it womanish, whatever that means. Would Mary ever rise to her feet mid-conversation only to hurl herself sobbing onto the sofa, all the while protesting it's nothing, no, nothing at all? Such conduct is not womanish, but Clairish. It pleases Percy, she knows it does. It pleases him when Claire throws her arms around his neck, begs him to read her poetry till she falls asleep, laughs at his jokes with her head tilted back, exposing the pale skin from her chin to far below, where her breasts plead for a look, a touch, attention. Claire cannot exist without attention. She would probably die if ignored for three full days. She inherited the sickness from her mother, Mary Jane. Mary suspects her father had no idea how hysterical, how vain, how imperious Mary Jane was, until he married her and she and her daughter Claire became part of their household. Ever since Mary had been old enough to know, with her rational mind, that she had no mother, this knowledge had been a body for her sorrow. All her sorrows had settled into that exact shape for scrutiny in the mirror. But from the moment her father remarried, every incident was weighed in a balance: this mother or no mother? And she always arrived at the same answer: no mother. Or at least, she would have preferred to live with the stories of her own dead mother, with the painting over her father's writing desk of the woman who had meant so much to so many: so brave and intelligent, so unconforming in her life and beliefs. She was no longer there, and Mary had never known her, but she was everywhere. And above all, she was perfect. She would never lose her temper with Mary. She would never disapprove of her decisions. Mary would never be ashamed of her mother. And she would never have to be frightened of losing her love. Her mother would always love Mary as she had loved her on her deathbed, when she held her tiny baby in her arms – that pure, complete, spontaneous love would never grow stale or be tainted with the commonplace. This was how Mary's mother was, in her mind. The perfect mother, really. Despite and because of the fact that she no longer existed.

The thunder bursts; Percy rolls over with a groan. His knee pokes into Mary's side. In the moonlight struggling in through the cracks in the closed shutters, she can make out his face. Her beloved elf, so ablaze with beauty. She knows no other man who with



such refined features and translucent skin, like a satin moth, almost like a girl, could exercise such a power of attraction on her. And she is his one true love. Of course she knows that, but it isn't always easy. His philosophy of life is not entirely her own – in theory, maybe, but certainly not in practice – and it puts their love to the test again and again. Perhaps she can still accept the fact that he makes love to another woman every now and then. Perhaps. But to see that it means nothing to him, that he even encourages her to share a bed with another man... that feels like a lash biting into her soul. At the same time, she can feel his eyes on her when she talks to Albe about his poems, or about her father. Those are the times when he feels jealous, she thinks, that's when a cool fear comes into his eyes. The jealousy he feels then has nothing to do with her. Percy is not afraid that she will choose Albe over him. He is afraid that Albe will choose her over Percy. That the great, wild poet Lord Byron will find her more interesting than Percy Shelley, who still has so much to learn. Does he really have the talent? The eloquence? Percy is counting on Albe, wondering, will he lead him into the light? Will Albe counsel him, be his mentor, maybe even become his friend? Once in a long while, when Percy is so insecure – oh, he doesn't tell her, but she sees it in his face, the weak hope in his eyes, the childish impatience in his movements – then she fears for an instant that she does not love him.

She kisses him softly on the cheek. He groans again. He rolls over. The knee in her side is gone. And sleep comes, at last, to enfold her. She feels sleep's arms spread like wings and wrap her tight – sheltering, not ghastly – and bear her consciousness away.

*

After the trip, which he didn't seem to enjoy – oh, well, children weren't made to travel – William seems to feel perfectly at home in Maison Chapuis. The rooms are large and bright; high windows offer views of the large garden, the lake, and the Jura beyond it. And of course the rain. The stone-grey sky. He is still too young to crawl around. Otherwise she would have had to spend all day chasing him from room to room, keeping him away from the fire, from bookcases, from corners of tables. But he has just learned to turn over from his back onto his belly, and she thinks that will keep him busy for a while. Her Wilmouse is five months old, and she delights in him daily. Still, she cannot let go of the thought of her – her firstborn. If she had lived, she would have been wobbling all over the place, her short, chubby legs and bare feet pattering off the hearthrug and onto the gleaming floorboards, tripping over the threshold, padding down the corridor to the stairs, no, you mustn't, come, take my hand, I'll lead the way, that's right. Look, there's your little brother, give him a cuddle.



‘Are you all right?’ Claire plumps down on the sofa next to Mary. William, who had just shut his eyes, opens them again. Claire tickles his chin. ‘You’re just staring into space.’

Mary nods. Even after all these years, Claire doesn’t understand the way Mary’s mind sometimes wanders. But Claire is so unlike her in many ways: in blood, in temperament, in sympathies. Only rarely have they felt a connection, a shared life – in a fit of hysterical laughter, for instance, as Claire’s mother and Mary’s father rushed about preparing the house for guests. They read the thought in each other’s eyes: only grown-ups can get so worked up about such nonsense, we’ll never be like that. But that was long ago. She hasn’t seen them for ages now, her father and Mary Jane. It’s so hard these days, since Percy came into her life, since her little girl.

‘I’m tired, that’s all,’ says Mary. ‘How are things at Albe’s house?’

‘Oh, fine,’ Claire says, winding a lock of hair around her finger. ‘He’s invited us to dinner. Crackers and beans, no doubt.’

Albe’s eating habits are a constant aggravation to Claire. As are Mary and Percy’s. She misses meat.

‘You don’t have to go,’ Mary says, instantly regretting it.

‘Of course I’ll go.’ Claire widens her eyes. ‘Albe wanted me to come. He said so.’

Mary rises; William has dozed off again. That pale, pretty mouth of his. Don’t turn too pale, now, Wilmouse, she whispers in her mind. Without another word, she leaves the room to put him in his cradle. Sleep well. You’ll wake up again soon.

*

‘Mary.’ Albe embraces her. He smells like chamomile and something sweet; his stubble grazes her cheek. ‘How lovely to see you. I’d like you to read something for me.’

Mary sees in Percy’s curt smile how incapable he is of joining them uninvited, and how much it frustrates him. He follows Claire into the salon. Albe takes a candle from the dresser and leads Mary by the hand through the entrance hall to a dark chamber in the rear of the house. Villa Diodati is a great deal larger than their house, but Chapuis is prettier, she tells herself. Albe’s house is darker, surrounded by trees with dense foliage like grim, eternal sentinels. Indoors you need candles or a lamp even by day. The doorjambs, the window frames and wainscotting, and the countless bookcases are made of dark, lustrous wood; the carpets stretch from wall to wall, dark red or dark blue with patterns almost as dark. In Albe’s study, again, the fundamental



colour is brown. The last glimmer of twilight shines in through the vines creeping over the windows. Albe places the candle in its holder on his desk and gathers together a few sheets of paper.

‘Come here.’ He beckons to Mary. ‘I’m working on a new canto of Childe Harold. It’s shaping up nicely, I think. I’d very much like you to read it and give me your opinion.’

There’s something in the way Albe makes his request that tells her she doesn’t even have to feel honoured – he considers her his equal. At least, as a critic.

‘I’d be delighted,’ she says. ‘I look forward to it.’

Albe rolls up the papers. ‘These are copies. Feel free to make notes on them.’ He hands them to her. ‘Shelley’s welcome to look at them too. If he’s so inclined.’

Percy will say – to her – that he doesn’t want to read them. He will read them. She nods.

‘Mary.’ In the glow of the candle, his light brown eyes look deeper. ‘I’d like to read more of your writing some time. Something that comes from your imagination, not the outside world. A real story, or a poem.’

‘Thank you,’ she says, ‘but maybe I’m the same kind of writer as my parents. The kind who can only write about what is real.’

‘I am quite certain you are not.’ Albe smiles. ‘Anyway, is there so much difference between real and unreal?’

*

John is seated next to her at the table; on her other side is Percy. Claire is next to him – of course – and next to Albe, who mostly ignores her. Sometimes, when he’s drunk a lot of wine, or he’s had a smoke, or he’s simply in a good mood, he actually talks to Claire. Sometimes he kisses her and they leave the room for a while. At times like that, Mary tries to ignore Percy, because even if he does nothing out of the ordinary, she sees in his every movement the agitation of a complicated loss. She doesn’t know exactly what he’s afraid of losing. Maybe his fear is similar to hers.

Ever since she came back to the salon with Albe, the roll of papers in her hand, he has done his best not to look at her and to concentrate on Claire. That can be somewhat trying, because when you give Claire your attention, she doesn’t let go, and soon enough you may find yourself caught up in gossip about mutual acquaintances in London and all sorts of desperate fears that plagued her as a child, which she’s never outgrown: the devil, witches, patterns in clouds, patterns in flames, windborne



whispers. Sometimes she suspects that Claire enjoys it. That the reward of being comforted makes all her fears worthwhile.

‘Adeline found asparagus at the market,’ Albe says, terribly excited.

The asparagus is well seasoned but a little stringy. A murmur of laughter goes around the table. John grins at Mary. Adeline’s greatest expertise is in cooking meat – she told Albe so when he hired her as his cook and housekeeper. Fortunately, she can also bake bread, and there’s more than enough wine to go round. Albe keeps refilling the half-empty glasses.

‘How is William?’ Mary doesn’t know if John’s interest is sincere, but he does ask almost every day.

‘Oh,’ Claire cries, ‘William’s such a darling. He smiled at me today.’

‘What man wouldn’t smile at the sight of you?’

He doesn’t mean it, Mary thinks to herself, but he’s not joking either. The remark would have irritated Mary coming from any other man, but not from John. He has a way of putting people at ease; he knows just what to say, and in what tone of voice.

‘He went to sleep on time today, thank goodness,’ Mary says. ‘We’ve found a nanny. Her name is Elise.’

‘Well done,’ Albe says.

‘We can’t really afford it, but never mind.’ Percy takes a large mouthful of wine and avoids her eyes.

‘See it as an investment in Mary’s future,’ says John. ‘How can she write if there’s always a baby clamouring for attention.’

Claire nods hungrily.

‘None of your grumbling, Shelley, you’re hunched over your plate like a little old man. We’re in Switzerland, look around you!’ Albe throws his arms into the air. ‘You’re here with your wife, with your child... and with me.’ They all burst out laughing, even Percy, but Mary doubts Albe meant it as a joke.

‘I’ve given your wife something to read. I’d be honoured if you’d have a look as well.’

The change in Percy’s eyes, his face, his whole bearing is unbelievable. In a fraction of a second, the storm clouds vanish from his skies. He transforms from a sullen man to an eager, grateful boy. Mary feels relieved, but also disappointed. In Albe, in Percy, or in herself? She’s not sure.



*

After dinner they return to the salon, where the fire requires considerable stoking. Another thunderstorm this evening. The first clap is like someone's hand clutching Mary's heart.

John glances outside and says, 'It doesn't look good.'

Outside the window, the sky is churning in a repeated pattern of grey to dark blue to black. The last of the daylight will soon be gone. The rain beats against the windows like a cat-o'-nine-tails. Elise will stay with William until they have returned. The image of him wailing in his crib, no one to hear him, his cries whisked away by the wind, makes her chest tighten. It will never happen again, she has to tell herself. Now there is always someone with him. To keep him from softly and suddenly vanishing away.

Their glasses are refilled again, but this time the wine is mixed with laudanum, John warns them. He is a physician, so they trust him to prepare the draught. Mary knows that her father's good friend Sam Coleridge uses it often, he swears by it when he writes, so she's rather curious. She can't remember ever having been given it before, even though in the past she was frequently ill. The bitter taste summons up a vague memory – a feeling, really, like a dream – of a hand sliding towards her across silk sheets. Percy and Albe have become engrossed in a conversation about electricity. Percy is sitting next to her, absent-mindedly stroking her arm, as he listens to Albe tell a story about frogs returned to life by galvanism.

'Vital force,' Percy repeats, staring into the fire. 'That's the proof, is it not?'

'Proof of what?' John asks.

'That there cannot be a god. If there is a vital force that holds sway over human beings, then it is illogical, if not impossible, for a god to exist.'

'What rot,' John says, 'That doesn't prove a thing.'

'If a god exists, then that vital force, and the power over it, would belong to him alone, wouldn't it?' Percy is served his second glass of laudanum-fortified wine.

'Still doesn't prove anything,' John says. 'Your musings about what does and doesn't belong to God are far from scientific.'

'Listen to this doctor of mine,' Albe says, 'Doctor Polidori knows everything.' 'I am very far from knowing everything,' John insists, much too seriously, 'but I do know a thing or two about proof. More wine?' he asks Mary, and she nods, because now that she feels the laudanum working, she's forgotten the taste.



Claire is slumped in a chair next to the hearth, her eyes wide. No way of telling whether she's listening. Now and then the lightning flashes behind her and she starts, as if given a brief shock.

'Claire's had enough,' John says. He sits on the carpet by Mary's feet, half against her legs; it's almost a gesture, a friendly, warm-hearted gesture, which suddenly touches her.

'But...' Albe leans in, 'the mere absence of proof that there is no god does not imply that there is one. So let's assume for the sake of argument that there is no god.'

'As is the case,' Percy mutters. He undoes the fastenings of his boots, pulls them off, and lays his legs on Mary's lap.

Since when do we all feel so at home? Mary thinks. She suddenly feels old, and old-fashioned. She wants to do something out of the ordinary too.

'In any case,' Albe continues, taking a small pipe from his jacket pocket, 'the idea that people can generate vital force themselves by means of electricity is quite fascinating. The possibility of bringing dead matter to life. Imagine: your dead grandmother, alive again.' He breaks into a broad smile.

But Mary is not thinking of grandmothers; her thoughts always return to her child, her firstborn. Because apparently everything is connected to that. Whether it's about death, or war, or wine, or nature, Mary's brain always finds a path to her little girl. And when she asks herself if she wants that ever to end, she does not know the answer.

They go on talking, the men, but she's no longer listening. She can't listen any more. She has laid her hand on John's hair. Thoughts no longer have any logical order, no beginning, no conclusion, no cause, and no necessity. They exist just as they are: untethered, ludicrous, yet overwhelming. Breaking glass, the pathetic scream of something unimaginable, a fish as large as a ship, moonlight struggling in through the cracks, a face frightful beyond description, a snake as slick as jelly, slipping through her fingers. Everything slips through her fingers in the end. That's the way of things.

At some point that evening, Percy kisses her, there in the salon with all the others. Why he does is unclear, or maybe her mind was elsewhere. Claire is sitting on Albe's lap, kissing him on the neck, as he runs one hand idly along her hip, holding his glass with the other, nipping at it almost constantly. John is standing at the window looking outside. Among the silhouettes of the trees, the lightning sometimes flashes for seconds on end, lending the world that silent strangeness again, as if the veil of reality is lifted and she catches a glimpse of the world beyond it: a world where reason holds no power to keep anything at bay, not a memory, not a menace, not a spirit.



Percy kisses her on the cheek, the temple, the forehead, the nose. Then he gives her a long, slow kiss on the mouth. In the back of Mary's mind she believes she was angry with him, but she can no longer remember quite why, and she breathes in his scent, his scent of oranges, but dark, but spiced, and she kisses him back, her sweet elf, her insecure, fretful, wonderful poet. And what happens next is unclear. They make love, or they fall asleep together and she dreams they make love. The sky is black, the thunderstorm has passed. There is someone outside the window, calling her name, but it doesn't sound like hers. This is when she knows for certain she is dreaming, because the person calling her does not exist.

In the night, Mary thinks she hears her little girl. She is crying. She is moaning. She recognizes her. She is so certain she was wrong: she's alive! Of course she's alive. She has been the whole time, for months and months. What a terrible mother she's been to think her child dead! But that time is over now, she must go to her, her little Clara. She must nurse her, look deep into her blue eyes, clasp her to her chest forever, so tightly neither one of them can draw another breath. Otherwise she will slip away from her, she knows it, no, she's already slipping away. Between the cracks of awaking, she knows it: oh god. This world. Oh god. And she loses her again.

The sound that awakes her at this witching hour is alarming enough. She has shaken off the dream, the half-dream. A single candle burns in the room; the embers in the hearth still give off a slight glow. Mary sits up straight on the sofa, where she was lying half covered by a sheet with her neck in a twist, and tries to understand what is going on. The sound comes from upstairs. Someone is crying, shrieking hoarsely. She carries the candle up the wide staircase. Is it Claire? Again she thinks what she so often thinks when awoken by one of Claire's fits: we shouldn't have brought her. But it was Claire's idea to spend the summer here, near Albe, and it was Percy who saw it as a chance to make friends with the writer. On the landing, she heads towards the source of the sound. One bedroom is dimly lit by an oil lamp with its flame burning low. On the bed against the wall sits Claire, her legs pulled up, her hair mussed, with fluttering eyes and hands wringing her skirt. Percy is lying on his side in bed beside her, looking up at her and whispering things not intended for Mary's ears, or perhaps simply things Mary's ears cannot hear. She stands in the doorway; Percy has not yet seen her, and who knows what Claire is seeing. If you were to ask her if there is something ever so slightly theatrical in these episodes of Claire's, she would give one answer one day and a different one the next. Sometimes Mary sincerely pities her; sometimes she believes Claire is her own worst victim. And sometimes it seems clear to her that Claire's worst victim is Mary.

'I don't want to see this!' Claire shouts. She glares at the window, where there is nothing to be seen; the shutters are closed. Her hands are clawing at the air now.



‘Everything’s dripping,’ she says in a husky voice, ‘nothing is what it was any more, Perce. This is real! I can’t do this.’ She lets out a sob like a high-pitched snarl. A hyena, Mary thinks.

Percy sits up and puts his arms around her. Claire dangles in his embrace like a doll, never taking her eyes from the window. Percy strokes Claire’s back and kisses her tangled hair, his eyes closed.

‘I want it to stop,’ Claire wails. ‘I just want it to stop.’

Mary turns away. She doesn’t mind. It’s fine. He’s just comforting her, and what sort of man would not comfort a woman scared out of her senses? But in spite of all that, it makes her belly ache, a hard stony ache, not just pain but also fury. It is not Percy’s fault, she knows that. It is Claire’s fault. Back on the sofa, just as her thoughts are dissolving into fragments, she realizes she has to make water. In the corridor, on the way to the privy, a shadow presses her to the wall – it’s Albe. She lets him, knowing it means nothing. He’s drunk and wants to tell her something. Albe does whatever he has a mind to. Albe is her friend.

‘You know why I gave it to you, don’t you?’

His breath in her face feels dirty, smells like candle smoke or sheep’s dung. She tries a little push.

Albe gently pushes back.

She nods. Something is beginning to dawn on her, but it seems far away, unimportant. Now he nods too, and closes his eyes. He begins to sing. Ever so softly. Mary cannot hear the words, but it sounds like a lullaby. He stays motionless, his arms still planted on the wall on either side of her, his shoulder against hers, his breath in her ear. Then something comes loose in her head. It breaks off with a slight snap and tumbles down into her throat, her stomach, her underbelly. There it comes to rest, warm and insistent. She ought to know what it is.



‘Telling the best possible story is more important than the truth.’

– Mary Shelley

Intrigued by Mary Shelley’s life story, Anne Eekhout started to read biographies about Mary, her letters and diary entries. And reading about her, an image came to mind. This woman, this young woman, knew the importance of imagination. And she was not afraid to take her place in a world dominated by men. Through reading and researching Anne Eekhout found those wondrous, mysterious bits of life from which stories can grow, and she fell in love with them...

‘Anne Eekhout is one of the **most interesting young authors** writing today.’ – Hanna Bervoets, author of *We Had To Remove This Post*



ANNE EEKHOUT (b. 1981) made her debut in 2014 with the novel *Dogma*, which was nominated for the Bronzen Uil Prize for best debut. In 2017 she published *One Night* (nominated for the BNG Literature Prize), and in 2019 *Nicolas and the Disappearance of the World*, which was selected as the Best Book for Young Adults.

