

**JEANETTE
WINTERSON**

**FRAN
KISS
STEIN**

A LOVE STORY



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

*We may lose and we may win though we will never
be here again.*

Eagles, 'Take It Easy'

Lake Geneva, 1816

Reality is water-soluble.

What we could see, the rocks, the shore, the trees, the boats on the lake, had lost their usual definition and blurred into the long grey of a week's rain. Even the house, that we fancied was made of stone, wavered inside a heavy mist and through that mist, sometimes, a door or a window appeared like an image in a dream.

Every solid thing had dissolved into its watery equivalent.

Our clothes did not dry. When we came in, and we must come in, because we must go out, we brought the weather with us. Waterlogged leather. Wool that stank of sheep.

There is mould on my underclothes.

This morning I had the idea to walk naked. What is the use of sodden cloth? Of covered buttons so swollen in their buttonholes that I had to be cut out of my dress yesterday?

This morning my bed was as wet as if I had sweated all night. The windows were misty with my own breath. Where the fire burned in the grate the wood hissed like a dejection of nature. I left you sleeping and I trod silently down the filmy stairs, my feet wet.

Naked.

I opened the main door to the house. The rain continued, steady and indifferent. For seven days now it had fallen, not faster, not slower, not increasing, not abating. The earth could swallow no more and the ground everywhere was spongy – the gravel paths oozed water, and several springs had burst through the orderly garden, eroding soil that deposited itself in thick black puddles at our gate.

But this morning it was behind the house I went, higher up the slope, hoping for a break in the clouds, where I might see the lake that lay below us.

As I climbed, I reflected on what it must have been for our ancestors, without fire, often without shelter, wandering in nature, so beautiful and bountiful, but so pitiless in her effects. I reflected that without language, or before language, the mind cannot comfort itself.

And yet it is the language of our thoughts that tortures us more than any excess or deprivation of nature.

What would it be like – nay, what would it be? There is no like, no likeness to this question. What would it be, to be a being without language – not an animal, but something nearer to myself?

Here I am, in my inadequate skin, goose-fleshed and shivering. A poor specimen of a creature, with no nose of a dog, and no speed of a horse, and no wings like the invisible buzzards whose cries I hear above me like lost souls, and no fins or even a mermaid's tail for this wrung-out weather. I am not as well-found as that dormouse disappearing into a crack in the rock. I am a poor specimen of a creature, except that I can think.

In London I was not so content as I am here on the lake and in the Alps, where there is solitude for the mind. London is perpetual; a constant streaming present hurrying towards a receding future. Here, where time is neither so crammed nor so scarce, I fancy, anything might happen, anything is possible.

The world is at the start of something new. We are the shaping spirits of our destiny. And though I am not an inventor of machines I am an inventor of dreams.

Yet I wish I had a cat.

I am now above the roofline of the house, the chimneys poking through the damp cloth of steaming rain like the ears of a giant animal. My skin is covered in beads of clear water as though I have been embroidered with water. There is something fine about my decorated nakedness. My nipples are like the teats of a rain-god. My pubic hair, always thick, teems like a dark shoal. The rain increases steady as a waterfall and me inside it. My eyelids are drenched. I'm wiping my eyeballs with my fists.

Shakespeare. He coined that word: eyeball. What play is it in? Eyeball?

*Crush this herb into Lysander's eye
Whose liquor hath this virtuous property
And make his eye-balls roll with wonted sight.*

Then I see it. I think I see it. What do I seem to see?

A figure, gigantic, ragged, moving swiftly on the rocks above me, climbing away from me, his back turned to me, his movements sure, and at the same time hesitant, like a young dog whose paws are too big for him. I thought to call out but I confess I was afraid.

And then the vision was gone.

Surely, I thought, if it is some traveller who has lost his way he will find our villa. But he was climbing away, as though he had found the villa already and passed on.

Troubled that I had indeed seen a figure, equally troubled that I had imagined him, I made my return to the house. I crept in softly, this time through a side door, and, shivering with cold, I made my way up the curve of the staircase.

My husband stood on the landing. I approached him, naked as Eve, and I saw the man of him stir beneath the apron of his shirt.

I was out walking, I said.

Naked? he said.

Yes, I said.

He put out his hand and touched my face.

*What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?*

We were all around the fire that night, the room more shadows than light, for we had few candles, and none could be fetched until the weather bettered.

Is this life a disordered dream? Is the external world the shadow, while the substance is what we cannot see, or touch, or hear, yet apprehend?

Why, then, is this dream of life so nightmarish? Feverish? Sweatish?

Or is it that we are neither dead nor alive?

A being neither dead nor alive.

All my life I have feared such a state, and so it has seemed better to me to live how I can live, and not fear death.

So I left with him at seventeen and these two years have been life to me.

In the summer of 1816 the poets Shelley and Byron, Byron's physician, Polidori, Mary Shelley and her stepsister, Claire Clairmont, by then Byron's mistress, rented two properties on Lake Geneva in Switzerland. Byron enjoyed the grand Villa Diodati, while the Shelleys took a smaller, more charming house, a little lower down the slope.

Such was the notoriety of the households that an hotel on the farther shore of the lake set up a telescope for their guests to watch the antics of the supposed Satanists and Sexualists who held their women in common.

It is true that Polidori was in love with Mary Shelley but she refused to sleep with him. Byron might have slept

with Percy Shelley, if Shelley had been so inclined, but there is no evidence of that. Claire Clairmont would have slept with anyone – on this occasion she slept only with Byron. The households spent all their time together – and then it started to rain.

My husband adores Byron. Each day they take a boat out on the lake, to talk about poetry and liberty, whilst I avoid Claire, who can talk about nothing. I must avoid Polidori, who is a lovesick dog.

But then the rain came, and these downpouring days allow for no lake-work.

At least the weather allows no staring at us from the farther shore either. In town I heard the rumour that a guest had spied half a dozen petticoats spread out to dry on Byron's terrace. In truth, what they saw was bed linen. Byron is a poet but he likes to be clean.

And now we are confined by innumerable gaolers, each formed out of a drop of water. Polidori has brought a girl up from the village to entertain him, and we do what we can on our damp beds, but the mind must be exercised as well as the body.

That night we sat around the steaming fire talking of the supernatural.

Shelley is fascinated by moonlit nights and the sudden sight of ruins. He believes that every building carries an imprint of the past, like a memory, or memories, and that these can be released if the time is right. But what

is the right time? I asked him, and he wondered if time itself depends on those who are in time. If time uses us as channels for the past – yes, that must be so, he said, as some people can speak to the dead.

Polidori does not agree. The dead are gone. If we have souls, they do not return. The cadaver on the slab has no hope of resurrection – in this world or the next.

Byron is an atheist and does not believe in life after death. *We are haunted by ourselves*, he says, and that is enough for any man.

Claire said nothing because she has nothing to say.

The servant brought us wine. It is a relief to have a liquid that is not water.

We are like the drowned, said Shelley.

We drank the wine. The shadows make a world on the walls.

This is our Ark, I said, peopled here, afloat, waiting for the waters to abate.

What do you imagine they talked about, on the Ark, said Byron, shut in with the hot stink of animal? Did they believe that the entire earth sat in a watery envelope, like the foetus in the womb?

Polidori interrupted excitedly (he is a great one for interrupting excitedly). In medical school we had a row of just such foetuses, at varying stages of gestation, all abortions; fingers and toes curled against the inevitable, eyes closed against the light never to be seen.

The light is seen – I said – the mother's skin stretched over the growing child lets in the light. They turn in joy towards the sun.

Shelley smiled at me. When I was pregnant with William, he used to get on his knees as I sat on the edge of the bed and hold my stomach in his hands like a rare book he hadn't read.

This is the world in little, he said. And that morning, oh I remember it, we sat in the sun together and I felt my baby kick for joy.

But Polidori is a doctor, not a mother. He sees things differently.

I was going to say, he said, a little resentful at being interrupted (as interrupters are wont to be), *I was going to say*, that, whether there is a soul or there is not a soul, the moment of consciousness is mysterious. Where is consciousness in the womb?

Male children are conscious earlier than female children, said Byron. I asked him what caused him to think so. He replied, The male principle is readier and more active than the female principle. This we observe in life.

We observe that men subjugate women, I said. I have a daughter of my own, said Byron. She is docile and passive.

Ada is but six months old! And you have not seen her at all since shortly after she was born! What child, male or female, does more than sleep and suck when it is born? That is not their sex; it is their biology!

Ah, said Byron, I thought she would be a glorious boy. If I must sire girls, then I trust she will marry well.

Is there not more to life than marriage? I asked.

For a woman? said Byron. Not at all. For a man, love is of his life, a thing apart. For a woman, it is her whole existence.

My mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, would not agree with you, I said.

And yet she tried to kill herself for love, said Byron.

Gilbert Imlay. A charmer. A chancer. A mercenary. A man of mercurial mind and predictable behaviour (why is it so often so?). My mother jumping off a bridge in London, her skirts making a parachute for her falling body. She did not die. No, she did not die.

That came later. Giving birth to me.

Shelley saw my hurt and discomfort. When I read your mother's book, said Shelley, looking at Byron, not at me, I was convinced by her.

I loved him for that – then and now – he first told me so when I was a young girl of sixteen, and the proud daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin.

Mary Wollstonecraft: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* 1792.

Your mother's work, said Shelley, shy and confident in that way of his, your mother's work is remarkable.

Would that I might do something myself, I said, to be worthy of her memory.

Why is it that we wish to leave some mark behind? said Byron. Is it only vanity?

No, I said, it is hope. Hope that one day there will be a human society that is just.

That will never happen, said Polidori. Not unless every human being is wiped away and we begin again.

Wipe every human being away, said Byron; yes, why not? And so we are back to our floated Ark. God had the right idea. Begin again.

Yet he saved eight, said Shelley, for the world must be peopled.

We are a little half-ark here ourselves, are we not? observed Byron. We four in our watery world.

Five, said Claire.

I forgot, said Byron.

There will be a revolution in England, said Shelley, as there has been in America, and in France, and then, truly, we shall begin again.

And how shall we avoid what follows revolution? We have witnessed the French problem in our own lifetime. Firstly the Terror, where every man becomes a spy against his neighbour, and then the Tyrant. Napoleon Bonaparte – is he to be preferred to a king?

The French Revolution gave nothing to the people, said Shelley – and so they look for a strong man who claims to give them what they do not have. None can be free unless first he is fed.

Do you believe that if every person had enough money, enough work, enough leisure, enough learning, that if they were not oppressed by those above them, or fearful of those below them, humankind would be perfected? Byron asked this in his negative drawl, sure of the response, and so I set out to disaffect him.

I do! I said.

I do not! said Byron. The human race seeks its own death. We hasten towards what we fear most.

I shook my head. I was on firm ground now in this ark of ours. I said, It is men who seek death. If a single one of you carried a life in his womb for nine months, only to see that child perish as a baby, or in infancy, or through want, disease, or, thereafter, war, you would not seek death in the way that you do.

Yet death is heroic, said Byron. And life is not.

I have heard, interrupted Polidori, I have *heard*, that some of us do not die, but live, life after life, on the blood of others. They opened a grave in Albania recently, and the corpse, though one hundred years old, yes, one hundred years old (he paused for us to marvel), was perfectly preserved, with fresh blood visible at the mouth.

Write that story, will you? said Byron. He got up and poured wine from the jug. His limp is more pronounced in the damp. His fine face was animated. Yes, I have an idea: if we are to be kept here like Arkivists let us each record a story of the supernatural. Yours, Polidori, shall be of the Undead. Shelley! You believe in ghosts . . .

My husband nodded – I have seen such, surely, but what is more frightening? A visit from the dead, or the undead?

Mary? What say you? (Byron smiled at me.)

What say I?

But the gentlemen were pouring more wine.

What say I? (To myself I say . . .) I never knew my mother. She was dead as I was born and the loss of her was so complete I did not feel it. It was not a loss outside of me – as it is when we lose someone we know. There

are two people then. One who is you and one who is not you. But in childbirth there is no me/not me. The loss was inside of me as I had been inside of her. I lost something of myself.

My father did his best to care for me as a child, motherless as I was, and he did this by lavishing on my mind what he could not give to my heart. He is not a cold man; he is a man.

My mother, for all her brilliance, was the hearth of his heart. My mother was the place where he stood with the flames warming his face. She never put aside the passion and the compassion natural to a woman – and he told me that many a time when he was weary of the world, her arms around him were better than any book yet written. And I believe this as fervently as I believe in books yet to be written, and I deny that I must choose between my mind and my heart.

My husband is of this temper. Byron is of the opinion that woman is from man born – his rib, his clay – and I find this singular in a man as intelligent as he. I said, It is strange, is it not, that you approve of the creation story we read in the Bible when you do not believe in God? He smiles and shrugs, explaining – It is a metaphor for the distinctions between men and women. He turns away, assuming I have understood and that is the end of the matter, but I continue, calling him back as he limps away like a Greek god. May we not consult Doctor Polidori here, who, as a physician, must know that since

the creation story no living man has yet given birth to anything living? It is you, sir, who are made from us, sir.

The gentlemen laugh at me indulgently. They respect me, up to a point, but we have arrived at that point.

We are talking about the animating principle, says Byron, slowly and patiently as if to a child. Not the soil, not the bedding, not the container; the life-spark. The life-spark is male.

Agreed! said Polidori, and of course if two gentlemen agree that must be enough to settle the matter for any woman.

Yet I wish I had a cat.

Vermicelli, said Shelley, later, in bed with me. Men have animated a piece of vermicelli. Are you jealous?

I was stroking his long, thin arms, my legs over his long, thin legs. He was referring to Doctor Darwin, who seems to have seen some evidence of voluntary motion in a piece of vermicelli.

Now you are teasing me, I said – and you, a forked biped exhibiting certain signs of involuntary motion at the junction of trunk and bifurcation.

What is it? he said, softly, kissing my hair. I know his voice when it begins to break like this.

Your cock, I said, my hand on it as it gained life.

This is sounder than galvanism, he said. And I wish he had not, for I was distracted then, thinking of Galvani and his electrodes and leaping frogs.

Why have you stopped? asked my husband.

What was his name? Galvani's nephew? The book you have at home?

Shelley sighed. Yet he is the most patient of men: *An Account of the late improvements in Galvanism with a series of curious and interesting experiments performed before the Commissioners of the French National Institute, and Repeated Lately in the Anatomical Theatres of London. To which is added an appendix, containing the author's experiments conducted on the body of a malefactor executed at Newgate . . . 1803.*

Yes, that one, I said, resuming my vigour, tho' my ardour had flowed upwards to my brain.

With a fine movement Shelley rolled me onto my back and eased himself inside me; a pleasure I did not discourage.

We have all human life here, he said, to make as we please out of our bodies and our love. What do we want with frogs and vermicelli? With grimacing, twitching corpses and electrical currents?

Did they not say, in the book, that his eyes opened? The criminal?

My husband closed his eyes. Tensing himself, he shot into me half-worlds of his to meet half-worlds of mine, and I turned my head to look out of the window where the moon was hanging like a lamp in a brief and clear sky.

*What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?*

Sonnet 54, said Shelley.

Sonnet 53, I said.

He was spent. We lay looking out of the window
together at the scudding clouds that speeded the moon.

And you in every blessed shape we know.

The lover's body imprinted on the world. The world
imprinted on the lover's body.

On the other side of the wall the sound of Lord Byron
spearing Claire Clairmont.

Such a night of moon and stars. The rain had starved us
of these sights and now they seemed more wonderful.
The light fell on Shelley's face. How pale he is!

I said to him, Do you believe in ghosts? Truly?

I do, he said, for how can it be that the body is master
of the spirit? Our courage, our heroism, yes, even our
hatreds, all that we do that shapes the world – is that
the body or the spirit? It is the spirit.

I considered this and replied, If a human being ever
succeeded in reanimating a body, by galvanism or some
method yet undiscovered, would the spirit return?

I do not believe so, said Shelley. The body fails and
falls. But the body is not the truth of what we are. The
spirit will not return to a ruined house.

How would I love you, my lovely boy, if you had no
body?

Is it my body that you love?

And how can I say to him that I sit watching him
while he sleeps, while his mind is quiet and his lips silent,
and that I kiss him for the body I love?

I cannot divide you, I said.

He wrapped his long arms around me and rocked me in our damp bed. He said, I would, if I could, when my body fails, cast my mind into a rock or a stream or a cloud. My mind is immortal – I feel it to be.

Your poems, I said. They are immortal.

Perhaps, he said. But something more. How can I die? It is impossible. Yet I shall die.

How warm he is in my arms. How far from death.

Did you think of a story yet? he said.

I said, Nothing comes when bidden and I lack the power of imagination.

The dead or the undead? he said. A ghost or a vampyre; what will you choose?

What would frighten you most of all?

He pondered this for a moment, turning on his elbow to face me, his face so close I could breathe him in. He said, A ghost, however awful or ghastly its appearance, however dreadful its utterances, would awe me but would not terrify me, for it has been alive once, as I have, and passed into spirit, as I will, and its material substance is no more. But a vampyre is a filthy thing, a thing that feeds its decayed body on the vital bodies of others. Its flesh is colder than death, and it has no pity, only appetite.

The Undead, then, I said, and, as I lay with my eyes open wide with thinking, he fell asleep.

Our first child died when he was born. Cold and tiny I held him in my arms. Soon after I dreamed that he was not dead, and that we rubbed him with brandy and set him by the fire and he returned to life.

It was his little body I wanted to touch. I would have given him my own blood to restore his life; he had been of my blood, a feeding vampyre, for nine dark months in his hiding place. The Dead. The Undead. Oh, I am used to death and I hate it.

I got up, too restless to sleep, and, covering my husband, wrapped a shawl round me and stood at the window, looking out over the dark shadows of the hills and the glittering lake.

Perhaps it would be fine tomorrow.

My father sent me away for a time to live in Dundee with a cousin, whose company, he hoped, would improve my solitude. But there is something of a lighthousekeeper in me, and I am not afraid of solitude, nor of nature in her wildness.

I found in those days that my happiest times were outside and alone, inventing stories of every kind, and as far from my real circumstances as possible. I became my own ladder and trapdoor to other worlds. I was my own disguise. The sight of a figure, far off, on some journey of his own, was enough to spark my imagination towards a tragedy or a miracle.

I was never bored except in the company of others.

And at home, my father, who had little interest in what was fit or otherwise for a young, motherless girl, allowed me to sit unseen and silent while he entertained his friends, and they spoke of politics, of justice, and more than that too.

The poet Coleridge was a regular visitor to our house. One evening he read out loud his new poem

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. It begins – how well I recall it –

*It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?*

I crouched behind the sofa, a mere girl, enthralled to hear the tale told to the wedding guest and to picture in my mind the awful journey at sea.

The Mariner is under a curse for killing the friendly bird, the albatross, that followed the ship in better days.

In a scene most terrible, the ship, with its tattered sails and battered decks, is crewed by its own dead, reanimated in fearful force, unhallowed and dismembered, as the vessel drives forth to the land of ice and snow.

He has violated life, I thought, then and now. But what is life? The body killed? The mind destroyed? The ruin of Nature? Death is natural. Decay inevitable. There is no new life without death. There can be no death unless there is life.

The Dead. The Undead.

The moon was clouded over now. Rain clouds rapidly returned to the clear sky.

If a corpse returned to life, would it be alive?

If the doors of the charnel house opened and we dead awakened . . . then . . .

My thoughts are fevered. I hardly know my mind tonight.

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There is something at work in my soul which I do not understand.

What do I fear most? The dead, the undead, or, a stranger thought . . . that which has never been alive?

I turned to look at him sleeping, motionless, yet living. The body in sleep is a comfort although it mimics death. If he were dead, how should I live?

Shelley, too, was a visitor to our house; that is how I met him. I was sixteen. He was twenty-one. A married man.

It was not a happy marriage. He wrote of his wife, Harriet: *I felt as if a dead and living body had been linked together in loathsome and horrible communion.*

It was on a night when he walked forty miles to his father's house – in that night and dreamlike trance he believed he had *already met the female destined to be mine.*

Soon enough we met.

When my household duties were done, I had the habit of slipping away to my mother's grave in St Pancras churchyard. There, I pursued my reading, propped against her headstone. Soon Shelley began to meet me in secret; my mother's blessing on us, I believe, as we sat either side of the grave, talking of poetry and revolution. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of life, he said.

I used to wonder about her in her coffin below. And I never thought of her as rotted, but as alive as she is in the pencil drawings of her, and more alive yet in her writings. Even so, I wanted to be near to her body. Her poor body no use to her now. And I felt, and I am certain that Shelley felt it too, that we were there all three of us, at the grave. There was comfort in it, and not of God or heaven, but that she was alive to us.

I loved him for bringing her back to me. He was neither ghoulish nor sentimental. Last resting place. He is my resting place.

I was aware that my father had secured her body against the diggers and the robbers who take any corpse they can for ready money, and they are rational enough – what use is the body when it is no use at all?

In dissecting theatres all over London there are bodies of mothers, bodies of husbands, bodies of children, like mine, taken for liver and spleen, to crush the skull, saw the bones, unwind the secret miles of intestine.

The deadness of the dead, said Polidori, is not what we fear. Rather we fear that they are not dead when we lay them in that last chamber. That they awake to darkness, and suffocation, and so die in agony. I have seen such agony in the faces of some new-buried and brought in for dissection.

Have you no conscience? I said. No scruples?

Have you no interest in the future? he said. The light of science burns brightest in a blood-soaked wick.

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The sky above me severed in forked light. The electrical body of a man seemed to be for a second lit up and then dark. Thunder over the lake, then, coming again, the yellow zig and zag of electrical force. From the window I saw a mighty shadow toppling down like a warrior slain. The thud of the fall shook the window. Yes. I see it. A tree hit by lightning.

Then the rain again like a million miniature drummers drumming.

My husband stirred but did not wake. In the distance the hotel flashed into view, deserted, blank-windowed and white, like the palace of the dead.

Strange shadows on you tend . . .

I must have gone back to bed, for I woke again, upright, my hair down, my hand clutching the bed curtain.

I had dreamed. Had I dreamed?

I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantom of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion.

Such success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handiwork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that the thing which had received such imperfect animation would subside into dead matter, and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench forever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had

looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps, but he is awakened; he opens his eyes, behold, the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.

I opened mine in terror.

On the morrow I announced that I had *thought of a story*.