

MARY

Mother of Monsters

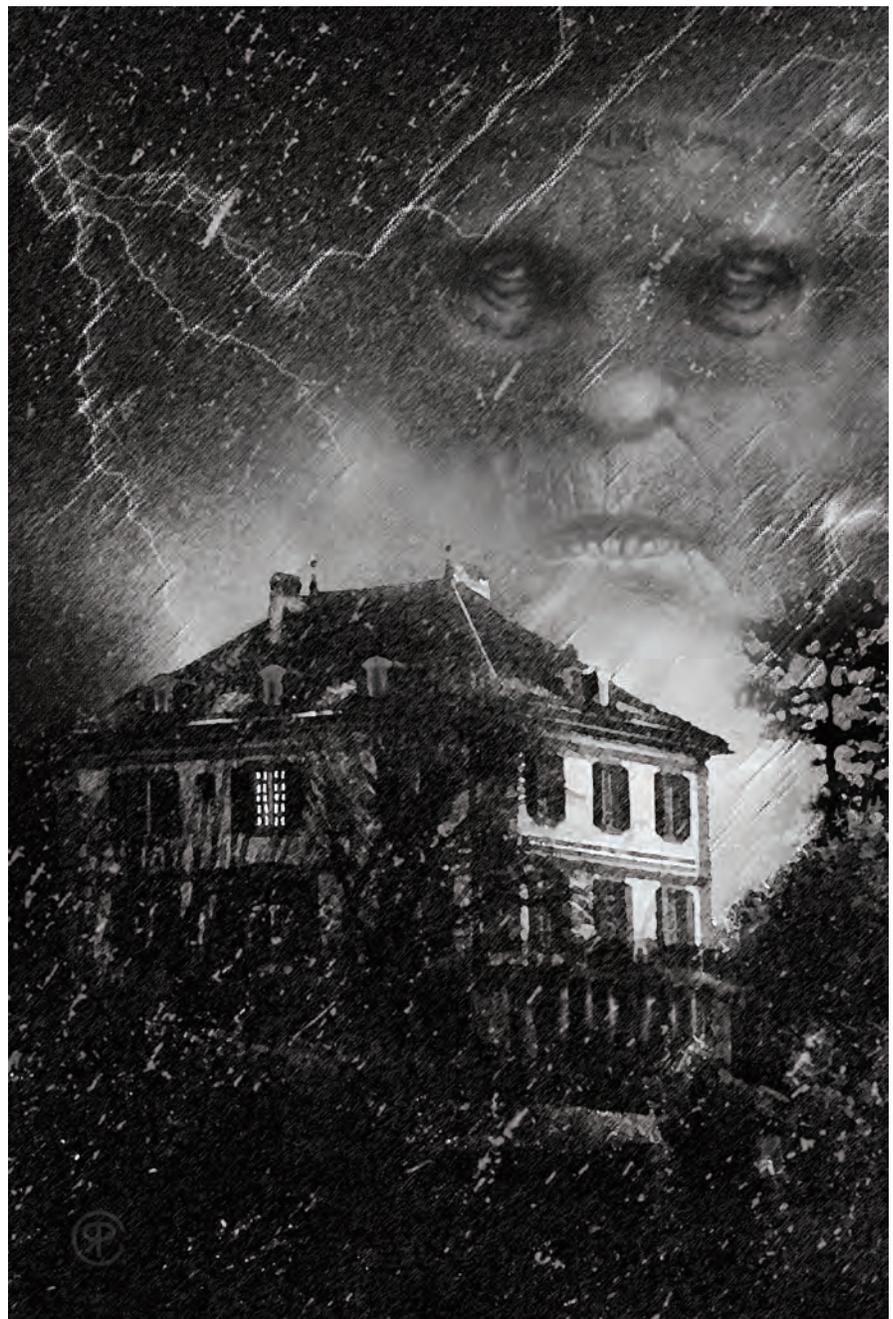
FFLASH. Floaters drift like sunspots beneath the red glow of your shuttered eyelids. They spring open. One thousand and one, one thousand and two—**BOOM**. High windows in Villa Diodati's cavernous salon clatter in their casings. You bolt to your feet from an over-stuffed divan and knock over a near empty bottle of absinthe. The last remaining candle stubs flicker nearby. Pools of liquid emerald shimmer on a marble tabletop.

FLASH. One thousand and one, one thousand and—**BOOM**. You hold your head for fear the concussion might scramble its contents. Alone, you call out for Mary, but her name disappears in the deafening assault of wind and rain that charges across Lake Geneva and attacks Lord Byron's villa, without any hope of quarter.

This may well be the summer without sun, but it surely is not the summer without weather.

You take a deep breath in an attempt to clear your head. The wholesome scent of charred birch, from the dying fire, cannot conceal the heady incense of opium, tobacco, and sex that permeates every fiber of the brocade draperies, allegorical tapestries, and lavish upholsteries.

I cannot think, let alone write, until this damnable storm passes. How does Byron do it? Three days have passed since he challenged us all to write a ghost story and I have thought of nothing. Doctor Polidori is forever



scribbling in his infernal journal and Mary grows more and more distant in her pursuit of phantasms. Perhaps tomorrow a vagrant apparition will make my head its haunted home.

You stumble toward the staircase. In your present, excess-addled state it looms like a treacherous wooden mountain.

How many valiant revelers have lost their lives on this foreboding, oaken slope?

As you begin your wobbly ascent,

you realize you cannot hold your head with both hands and the banister at the same time.

Of what benefit is a verse-laden skull if cleft asunder with its poetry outflowing upon an unforgiving floor?

You grab the banister and scale the perilous stairs. When you reach the summit, you strike a heroic pose on the landing and nearly tumble backwards. A faint glow flickers from below the door of an unfamiliar room at the end of the long corridor. You

trudge toward it. The walls provide welcome support as you navigate in the darkness.

My fingertips cherish this flocked wallpaper I so disdain in the light of day.

For a heartbeat, the storm subsides.

What is that scratching sound the sudden silence reveals?

When you reach the mysterious room, you press your ear to the cool,

lacquered door. Muffled scratching persists within.

Perhaps some night bird entered through a dormer window and no longer wishes to trade sanctuary for the freedom of the sky.

You open the door a crack and peek inside.

MARY.

Your teenage lover, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, looks up from her literary alchemy, none too pleased with

the intrusion. Completed pages and splayed books litter her table. She says nothing and neither do you.

I have seen that look before—at the births of our dear Clara and William. I clearly have no part to play in bringing this progeny of words into the world. I best leave her alone with her phantasms.

You pull the door shut and retreat down the long, dark hallway.

FLASH. One thousand and one, one thousand and two—BOOM.

