

# Squall

*Poems in the Voice of  
Mary Shelley*



*Essential Poets Series 274*



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Chad Norman

*With illustrations by  
judith S bauer*



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*for Ana Rosa,  
another woman I am filled with  
and taught by.*

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## Mary Shelley's Tempest

*For Jaime Augusto Shelley*

What if the *lady*—Jane Austen's contemporary—who conceived the world's most intriguing modern monster (Doc Frankenstein's creature)—was also a proto-suffragette, precursor-feminist, and, simultaneously, much to her chagrin, wedded to a narcissist poet, whose liberalism urged on his libertinism? How would such a woman think? What would she say about her majuscule Romantic dilemma and miniscule romantic predicament? Such are the questions that Chad Norman pursues in his act (and art) of sympathetic re-animation: *Squall: Poems in the Voice of Mary Shelley*.

What have we here, in this narrative, this assembly of dramatic monologues? Well, Norman presents—in flashback—the musings of Shelley (1797-1851), positioned on a Philip Glass-abstract “beach” (historically, the strand at Viareggio, Italy), lamenting the death-by-water of her radical—sometimes caddish—husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), and recalling a coupling that was, for both, a love-match, but harassed by PBS's first—and spurned—wife and creditors and lawyers. Norman lets Mary Shelley revise PBS's political attitudes. Yes, her hubby inked exquisite verse about doing-the-right-thing and dreaming-the-right-governance (Utopia), but his personal life exhibited much of the reverse. In a sense, then, the widow Shelley corrects the immor(t)al Shelley.

Each poem herein begins with Mary on a beach, a box in her possession. We should guess that the box contains PBS's heart—the one part of him that would not burn when his cadaver was hoisted upon a waterside pyre. Thus, the symbolic



box is a treasure chest, but one that Mary treats as if it were her dead husband's physical chest—his trunk (as it were); so she rests beside it, handles it, and is never far (or divorced) from it.

Located on this beach, Mary registers, “the aimless quality of the sea,” a phrase that could also refer to PBS's peripatetic and meandering life, that ends so dismally prematurely. One thinks of the widowed Jacqueline Kennedy commenting on the loss of JFK: “All his bright light—gone from the world.” If PBS was both beneficiary and victim of his “whimsied mind,” Mary yet had to face, stoically, the wayward results of his wrong-headed thinking and deeds: “Sadly,” Norman has her say, “I found you beautiful.” That admiration permitted her to endure, “the blasted cell of a love / our lives began to pace.” Arguably, Norman's Mary foreshadows Margaret Atwood's Susanna Moodie: Both had to plant their deceased offspring in foreign soil. Painfully though, Mary's loss is due partly to PBS's “benign neglect” (Daniel Patrick Moynihan's phrase from another context) of their offspring, perhaps due to a predilection for abstract *Imagination* rather than attending to infants' bodily needs.

Despite adultery, debt, disease, and drownings (including of PBS's first wife, a suicide), Mary yet recognizes, “There is no other Heaven ...,” presumably, than the here-and-now and the love that she lived with PBS:

I gaze at the edge of Italy,  
unable to forget  
we shared all  
we dared to,  
the effort holy,  
enough ....

Surely, *Memory* is half *Nostalgia*, so that what was bitter becomes beautiful:

memory saves:  
the undulant hair,  
the open mouth,  
the muted bubbles ....

Lost is PBS—the genius incarcerated ultimately in lethal liquid.  
Still, Mary did know—has known—*Love*:

the dually-sired girl I was  
sat wryly open-thighed,  
exposing my eager whitened cleft  
done with the dark red drop  
found in the chair, by the fingers  
I knew I needed to taste ....

Norman's Mary Shelley reminds me of French filmmaker Jean Rollin's daemon-nymphs, his beach-haunting Ophelias, often fanged, who, rather than drowning themselves, prefer to set boats and sailors alight or to see them entombed in coffins set adrift at sea—like so many bottles with dead letters within, the detritus of romance stories remaindered or pulped. Then again, Rollin's cinema merges eroticism and horror; he's Tinto Brass offering sensual elegance and Quentin Tarantino rendering surreal gore. There's a tinge of both in Norman—or, rather, in his version of Mary Shelley's self-portraiture .... Even so, the style—the diction—of Norman's Shelleyan verse is clearly Canadian, given his delight in abstract adjectives and/or airy-fairy nouns coupled with physical nouns or set to enact physical verbs.

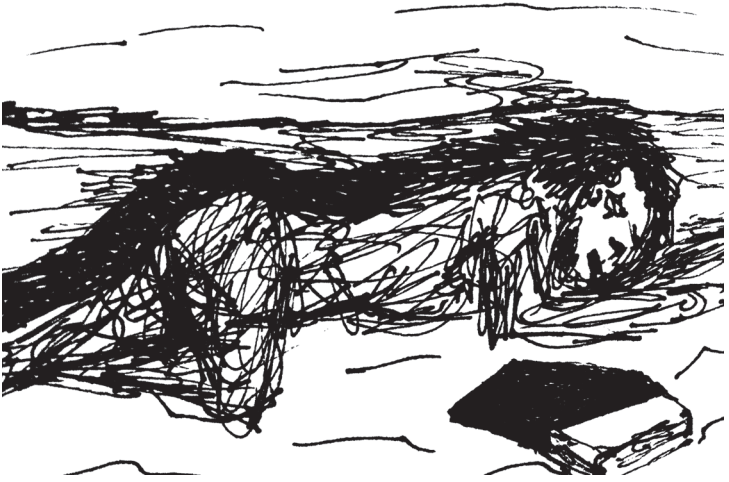
Whether or not Norman has read American poet Robert Cooperman's dramatic monologues, *In the Household of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1993), one should leaf through his book in tandem with Norman's *Squall*. A second fellow-traveller text, so to speak, is work by Basil Bunting, who's also keen to blend the vernacular and the oracular: See *Briggflatts* (1966). I recommend Bunting because Norman's tone—or atmosphere—is that of the séance. In *Squall*, we witness Mary Shelley in communion with her own soul ....

I've known Chad Norman for thirty years. He's written fine work before, but *Squall* is one of his best. Kudos to him for giving a vital woman voice. Certainly, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is rendered brilliantly herein, both as the creator of a masterpiece (*Frankenstein*, 1818) and as the critical curator of a spouse-maker's legacy.

George Elliott Clarke  
Parliamentary Poet Laureate (2016 & 2017)  
11 *Messidor* (1 *juillet*) mxxvi



*The last voyage of Ariel, or Don Juan.*



*This parting the earth whispers.*

## This Parting The Earth Whispers, 1822

*Mary with a cheek to the land;  
a small sealed box by her face*

I

I have rested on  
the bosom of a man  
the sea consoled  
as if it were the wife  
he forgot  
in the centre of his final wish.  
To enter the Earth,  
by the waves' bright gate  
willing to hinder  
the lungs' helpless cycles,  
boat or no boat,  
for the squall's facile rescue.

II

Rhythms of this planet  
entertain one ear;  
from the imagination's reach  
his heartbeat begins  
to roll about in the other,  
broken by the sea's tease,  
a damp tapping gust  
eager to play the Past.

III

Deceive my cheek no more!

Earth,

I want promises ....

## The Laws Of Italy, 1822

*Mary at the sea's edge;  
a small sealed box in her hands*

By the guilty sea  
I hold the heart of Shelley  
as my body moves to view  
the hated distance,  
the way weather chars  
the flower's new petal,  
under the window he loved to be in  
or behind; the pyres  
long after the laws,  
shadows of fires  
built for the bodies  
the squall knew a short night,  
pools where the sun leads  
my eyes back into his,  
the stare, I, Mary,  
fell into gladly at Bracknell.

We, decisive & damned,  
began what led this beach  
to be the first reality  
our lives must relinquish,  
a drowning now between us,  
no guesses were necessary;  
the thievish waves  
attempt to console my conference  
as the heart prepares  
to serve another extraction.



Percy! Percy!  
My knees on this innocent shore,  
my tears on the sand  
moving like cries in a crowd  
the mind meanders

far off to where the Past  
was pure when the poems & children  
made the days a haven.

The insects,  
shadows the clouds share,  
dive in heat  
the day decisions mean  
you live bodiless in my body,  
gone under forever,  
as this loud hour brings a dusk  
willing to save our farewell,  
afloat in the orange foam.

## The Reflection Where Time Floats, 1822

*Mary seated in grass by the sea;  
a small sealed box at her foot*

Heaven, heaven,  
stop pretending to be the sky!

Whisper?  
*The Church has lost a voice,*  
still sinking,  
the flames out & over,  
Percy,  
my nearby husband,  
speaking up through  
the divine learning fathoms,  
unwanted by air,  
the expulsive minds of England.

Look, see a time,  
behind my veiled hair,  
the Godless clouds  
led his quill to revolt  
as we were tender beside  
a more silent shore,  
the soft & pointed grass  
against our backs  
no greener than the tufts  
surrounding my dress  
unable to leave this body  
since his bright hand  
waved above the final goodbyes  
I tried to bar.



*Storms are thieves sent to replace thought.*

For a first, my face,  
verifies the colour of voids:  
the sun,  
his other equal,  
searches to set on  
the fated boat  
*docking* after Byron & Leghorn.  
Squall!  
Define it?  
Storms are thieves sent  
to replace thought  
like reminders tighten on wrists  
resting in my lap—  
what did he want?  
Not this,  
night parting us  
in the pool's soft fading advice.



*A day came for the face when it longed to be a mask.*

## The Unknown One, 1822

*Mary crawling through the surf;  
a small sealed box washed ashore*

A day came for the face  
when it longed to be a mask,  
the gaunt mould  
Death grants the mother  
as her womb collapses,  
to force the waters aboard  
the blood's wise fear,  
her fate for a future *you* gladly haunt.

Fortunately I saw  
nor see no face,  
no asking fingers,  
the gasping finality  
*your* recent siblings wore  
in Rome & Venice.

Fortunately I was rescued  
from intentions,  
fatal, understood,  
the hope of our last  
to lead my life,  
cold & closed,  
off to end.

Neglect ...  
whom I was to carry about instead!

And less weighted  
meant the mother's watch  
change from the child  
to the saved woman,  
emptied, encased,  
profoundly eager to examine  
the block of ice I owe;

the hands of my husband  
red with excessive flow  
caught in shreds of a shirt,  
once white, & once warm.

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### *About the Author*

**Chad Norman** continues to do things his way ... as any true poet must in the current age. His poems are published in countries around the globe. He continues to arrange/host events, helping other poets. His collection, *Selected & New Poems*, out from Mosaic Press, brings together 30 years of poems. Chad makes his home in Truro, Nova Scotia.

### *About the Illustrator*

**judith S bauer** is a poet, painter, and sculptor of wild paper based in Parrsboro, Nova Scotia where she and her partner operate the Main & Station Nonesuch arts centre and residencies.

## ***Other Works By Chad Norman***

- On The Urban Prairie & Other Shorter Poems* (1986)  
*And If A Man Be Divided* (1991)  
*Lives Of The Year* (1994)  
*Standing In The Corner* (1995)  
*The Breath Of One* (1997)  
*What The Wind Brings* (1999)  
*These Are My Elders* (2001)  
*The Kulling* (2001)  
*The Soft Furnace* (2006)  
*Going Mad For The Love Of Sanity* (2008)  
*There Is Music In The Word Impeachment* (2009)  
*Ants On The Rainbow: Poems To, For, And About Children* (2010)  
*Hugging The Huge Father* (2011)  
*Hugging The Huge Father, Expanded Version* (2012)  
*Masstown* (2013)  
*Learning To Settle Down* (2015)  
*Selected & New Poems* (2017)