

“Frankenstein’s Weather!” by Gillen D’Arcy Wood

Deep in our cultural memory, in trace form, lies the bleak image of a summer, 200 years ago, in which the sun never shone, frosts cruelled crops in the fields, and our ancestors, from Europe to North America to Asia, went without bread, rice, or whatever staple food they depended upon for survival. Perhaps they died of famine or fever, or became refugees. More likely, no record remains of what they suffered, except a faintly recalled reference in the tattered rolodex of our minds. 1816 has, for generations, been known as “The Year Without A Summer:” the coldest, wettest, weirdest summer of the last millennium. Reading *Frankenstein* for the first time, you probably gleaned some version of the literary mythology behind that year. Mary Godwin, with her poet-lover Percy Shelley, joins Lord Byron on the shores of Lake Geneva for a summer of love, boating, and Alpine picnics. But the terrible weather forces them inside. They take drugs and fornicate. They grow bored, then kinkily inventive. A ghost story competition is suggested. And boom! Mary Shelley writes *Frankenstein*.

Given this terrific story behind “The Year Without a Summer,” how strange that interpretations of Shelley’s novel almost entirely avoid the subject of 1816’s extreme weather. Call it English Department climate denial. More tellingly, our too-easy version of *Frankenstein*—oh, it’s all about technology and scientific hubris, or about industrialization—ignores completely the humanitarian climate disaster unfolding around Mary Shelley as she began drafting the novel. Starving, skeletal climate refugees in the tens of thousands roamed the highways of Europe, within miles of where she and her

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ego-charged friends were driving each other to literary distraction. Moreover, land-locked Alpine Switzerland was the worst hit region in all Europe, producing scenes of social-ecological breakdown rarely witnessed since the hell-scape of the Black Death.

Shelley's miserable Creature, in the context of the 1816 worldwide climate shock, appears less like a symbol of technological overreach than a figure for the despised and desperate refugees crowding Switzerland's market towns that year. Eyewitness accounts of the "Year Without a Summer" frequently refer to how hunger and persecution "turned men into beasts," how fear of famine and disease-carrying refugees drove middle-class citizens to demonize these suffering masses as sub-human parasites, and turn them away in horror and disgust.

200 years on, in a summer of more record temperatures, and worldwide droughts, when refugees once again stream across the borders of German-speaking Europe, can we really afford to ignore this reading of *Frankenstein* as a climate change novel? The novel is a cultural treasure, but it doesn't belong behind a glass case. It's alive, like the monster itself. It's on the loose in our world and our minds, stoking our darkest terrors. Shelley's untameable tale of human pathos, suffering and destruction is headline news. It was Shelley's proleptic genius to manufacture a Creature who foreshadows both the climate change victim of the early twenty-first century, and our rising fears of that victim's threat to Western civil society. And he's everywhere, this terrifying victim! He's landing on the beaches of Greece. He's traipsing the fields and forests of Europe, and lurking about the railway stations. He's on the TV and internet, in a million images, filling well-fed, well-housed citizens of the developed world with horror, as he tightens his deadly grip on our imagination.

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I have been teaching the Romantic poets to American undergraduates for twenty years. I am ageless; but my students, oddly, grow younger every year. I tell them about the Year Without a Summer, 1816, by the lake in Geneva. It's my favorite class of the semester, to pass along a myth almost as enthralling as *Frankenstein* itself. I prefer it larger-than-life, as befits myth. I debunk nothing, critique nothing. Poets gone wild, I tell them. Drugs. Free love. College kids, and dropouts, on summer vacation, lucky enough to be staying next door to a rock star (Byron). Just like your summer holidays. The only difference? By summer's end, between them, this high-octane group has sketched out two totems of our cultural modernity—Frankenstein's monster and the Vampire—written the first great climate change poem “Darkness,” the opening of *Manfred*, a further gripping instalment of the best-selling poem in history, “Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,” and tossed off another smash hit, “The Prisoner of Chillon” (all Byron). And, oh yes, there's Percy Shelley's phenomenal “Mont Blanc” and “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.” That's your summer assignment, I say: I want world-changing cultural icons and a thousand lines of imperishable verse on my desk, first day of the Fall. My students don't see the humor in it, to be honest.

All in all, it's a tougher sell than you'd think. Take that knock-down brilliant reality episode of “Year Without a Summer” when Percy Shelley, high on laudanum, freaks out at Byron's recitation of “Christabel”—the lines where Geraldine undresses to reveal her hideous hide—and runs screaming into the hall pursued by his friends. Worst opium trip ever, Shelley gasps. I thought I saw Mary naked, with eyes instead of nipples. For me, I always try to imagine the look on Mary Shelley's face at that moment. Or maybe she just rolled her eyes, wherever they were. I'm always sure my students will

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love this. They'll laugh, and wink knowingly at each other. Instead, they're rather shocked at the story, in a prudish kind of way, as if I'd just told them about some unprintable escapade their grandmother had been involved in back in the 1950s.

For us hard core fans of “Year Without a Summer,” the minor character storylines are as compelling as the principals, Byron and the Shelleys. First, there's the Biggest Loser—John Polidori—whose naked literary ambitions and guileless arrogance make him a tedious companion indeed for a wet summer. Then there's Byron's other hanger-on, Claire Clairmont. Did I say “hanger-on”? Anyone looking for readymade master's thesis material on misogyny in Romantic literary criticism should look no further than Claire Clairmont. If I've read that barely eighteen-year-old Claire “threw herself at Byron” once, I've read it a hundred times. Slut-shaming of the Internet Age, meet your Romantic prototype. It's the censorious tone mixed with secret pride in Byron's no-regrets sexual voracity that ruins it for me. I have a suggestion moving forward: let's not judge either of them. The facts are enough: Claire is pregnant with Byron's child after a brief fling in London, follows him to Geneva, and persuades her step-sister Mary Godwin and her high-born lover Percy to accompany her in an improvised group elopement.

It's worth remembering then, that without Claire's Byronic agenda, the Genevan “Year Without a Summer” would never have happened. Mary and Percy wanted Lucerne or somewhere in Italy. The Shelleys end up loathing the city itself. Geneva was provincial, sourly Calvinist, and stuffed with tourists. But Claire prevailed, mainly because Geneva was cheap—plus, of course, the vampiric lure of Lord Byron. Claire is blamed for having no shame, but it's the entire Shelley group who descend on Byron at

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the Hotel d'Angleterre and then arrange to rent neighboring houses on the lake. Who's throwing themselves at Byron now?

But by June, 1816, Byron has become dimly aware of what we all still marvel at today, two hundred years later: the groupies living next door happen to include geniuses. The concentration of literary talent by Lake Geneva in 1816 is a freak cultural accident, just as the summer itself will turn out to be a freak *climate* event. And here we've arrived at the strange, dark heart of the story. What was supposed to be a summer of literary confabulation, Alpine metaphysics, and boating on the lake, turns into the dreariest wet squib of a holiday in living memory. Actually, in a millennium. 1816 produces the wettest, coldest summer in Geneva in 450 years of weather records. Frightening storms. Flooding in the streets. Bridges washed away. Snowpacks and glaciers encroaching down the Jura mountains, swallowing up farmland. Crops drowned. Dead cattle floating down the river. The price of bread rises inexorably with the water level of the lake, 5, 6, 7 feet above normal. At dinner parties in Geneva, guests are asked to BYO bread. Outright famine is avoided only by the arrival of shipments of Russian grain from Odessa in November.

Mount Tambora's shattering eruption in faraway Indonesia, the source of all the chaos, had occurred ten weeks before Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, in April, 1815. I helped celebrate that anniversary, if that's the word, at a conference in Bern last year, a region that suffered as horribly as any in Europe. By a sinister Napoleonic turn, therefore, the "Year Without a Summer," 1816, coincided with the return of English tourists en masse to Europe post-Waterloo, who had been denied access to continental sights and delights since the Peace of Amiens in 1802. A second British invasion, but with

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guidebooks and fed-up valets instead of the bloody bayonets and mortar shells of Waterloo a year earlier. Here's where the "Year Without a Summer" myth does us a disservice. The Shelleys were, on the face of it, just another set of tourists in Geneva that year, among a crowd of thousands. Not quite the penniless backpackers they were in 1814, but not exactly spreading the princely largesse, either. In this sense, the reality is even better than the myth. The supreme cognitive dissonance of that summer—the story stranger even than the one handed down to us—is of armies of tourists descending on Switzerland, literary geniuses included, just in time for an epic humanitarian disaster to unfold around them. Even through our telling the "Year Without a Summer" story over and over—the cold, rainy summer by the lake; Byron and the Shelleys forced indoors; the ghost story competition; *Frankenstein!*—we have never fully appreciated its layered atmospheres, its bizarre global pathways, its world-historical monster shapes. Call it "The Summer That Changed the World," where Romantic genius meets touristic banality meets ecological catastrophe. This is the blockbuster remake I want to premiere in this bicentenary year.

The "Year Without A Summer" is truly a misnomer; it criminally understates the ecological disaster that engulfed Europe, North America, and the globe for three full years after Tambora's monster eruption. "Years Without a Summer" is more accurate. Years of a global climate system gone haywire; floods and drought; storm tracks re-routed; ocean currents gone rogue; ruined crops; rampant disease; and a dull, meagre sun that seemed ready to fizzle out any moment. Millenarian cults—my main subject today—sprang up all over Europe, a mood Byron captures note perfectly in "Darkness." A death

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toll is difficult to calculate, but certainly 10s of thousands perished from starvation and disease across the transatlantic zone, and a million worldwide. That number multiplies exponentially if we include—as we should—the impact of global epidemic cholera originating from the altered disease ecology of the Bay of Bengal post-Tambora, in 1816. Try to imagine the nineteenth century absent cholera! You can't. The London sewerage system, bacteriology, modern medical infrastructure and training—all grew out of the decades-long cholera emergency. We don't say Tambora changed the world just to be cute.

But how to escape the “litany of disaster” trap in re-telling this story? How to avoid the merely morbid enumeration of human suffering in the post-Tambora era, the piling up of heart-rending vignettes like unburied corpses clogging the canals of Bangkok, lining roadsides from Yunnan in China to County Clare? The question is especially urgent given that the Tamboran climate shock of 1816-18 is the most recent, most vivid historical parallel we have to the global climate shock we are experiencing now. The temperatures of 1816-18 went down rather than up, but the flow-on impacts of extreme weather events—from agricultural collapse to unloosed vectors of epidemic disease—are entirely comparable to today. Indian drought, Canadian wildfires, record floods in Paris, the Zika virus: take your pick from our own weird climate headlines. There's an 1816 analogue. If the Tamboran climate shock is any guide, we are in for a rough ride, especially since there's no terminal horizon to the planet-sized chemistry experiment we call industrial modernity. So—again—how to rescue the “Year Without a Summer” from the realm of myth, and recast it as a vital climate change narrative, an

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historical prologue to our Late Petroleum Era of the twenty-first century and its converging ecological crises?

We will need a model, like the climate scientists and disaster demographers use. A model of climate shock response we can invoke to better grasp the enormity of the humanitarian disaster that occurred in the years without a summer, and its relevance to us. Luckily, we have Byron's "Darkness" for that, and *Frankenstein*, too. We could call it Romantic Catastrophism, or the Literary Theory of Disaster. But the catchy name doesn't matter, as long as it helps us scale up the "Year Without a Summer" story from an entertaining classroom anecdote of Poets Gone Wild on Lake Geneva, to a world-historical tragedy of urgent relevance.

Climate shock response—Byron and Mary Shelley teach us—has three distinct stages. These "stages" are not temporally consecutive, although time is a factor. Rather, they are class dependent—an index of economic vulnerability. In other words, all three stages of climate shock response occur simultaneously, among different social groups, according to their level of resilience. The three stages are as follows: first, creative sympathy; second, political violence; third . . . well, the third is a sinkhole of horror that really passes beyond description. I've called it "The Flight into Hell." The years without a summer, 1816-18, offer a luxury of instances of all three stages of climate shock response, as does our bicentenary world of 2016.

For reasons that will become clear, I will take the three stages out of order, and begin with political violence. This stage of climate shock response embraces both riot and seditious insurrection, and the authoritarian brutality employed to repress it. Starving

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mobs roamed County Kildare in the spring of 1817, looting granaries and attacking food convoys bound for Dublin. In nearby Ballina, British soldiers opened fire on rioters protesting the export of oatmeal, killing three of them. Continental Europe witnessed widespread rioting and looting in market towns. Bakeries were burned down in anger at the astronomical price of bread. On another plane of social protest entirely, peasant women of Switzerland were summarily beheaded for killing their starving children.

Meanwhile, back in England, riots broke out in the East Anglian counties as early as May 1816. Armed laborers bearing flags with the slogan “Bread or Blood” marched on Ely, held its magistrates hostage, and fought a pitched battle against the militia. In Somersetshire, three thousand coal miners took over the local mine to protest the high price of bread. When asked what they wanted, they replied, “full wages, and that they were starving.” The magistrate responded by reading the Riot Act, threatening all malingerers with death, and sending in the militia to attack the crowd with “immense bludgeons.” On an even larger scale, the following spring, ten thousand demonstrated in Manchester while in June the so-called Pentrich Revolution involved plans to invade and occupy the city of Nottingham. Lord Liverpool’s government responded to the desperation of the people with draconian force. Rebels were hanged in the town square. To quell panic, it suppressed publication of agricultural quarterly reports for 1816, and suspended *habeas corpus*. Provincial jails filled to overflowing across the kingdom, while scores of hungry rioters were hanged or transported to the penal colonies of Australia.

Countermanding this spasmodic exercise of state violence against a starving and desperate citizenry was an equally broad but fitful humanitarian impulse I am calling

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“creative sympathy.” Creative, sympathetic responses to the climate shock of 1816-18 took many forms, from the totemic art of *Frankenstein* and “Darkness,” to the *Kornvereine* in Austria—an innovative emergency government program for grain distribution—to the invention of the first bicycle prototype, to replace the tens of thousands of dead horses. Despite the deeply callous response overall from Lord Liverpool’s government to the social emergency of the years without a summer, the Poor Employment Act of 1817—which introduced the novel policy idea of public works programs to alleviate economic distress—was an act of creative sympathy. Likewise, the publication of the first modern weather map—by Heinrich Brandes in 1820—was a creative sympathetic response to the climate shock of that year.

So was the innocuous-sounding Dublin Association for the Suppression of Mendicity (street begging)—organized by a group of middle-class Irish doctors who kept meticulous records both of the weather and the sick, starving and homeless flocking to Ireland’s cities. These activist medical men harrassed authorities with pamphlets and street theater protests, and wrote letters to Parliament warning of the imminent collapse of the Irish kingdom. Robert Peel, Byron’s old classmate at Harrow and Chief Secretary for Ireland at the time, proved heartlessly obdurate during the crisis, even when a drowned husk of green corn arrived in the mail, addressed to him, at Dublin Castle. But Peel was not impervious to climate shock. Something inside his Tory soul stirred, and then rebelled against the entrenched modes of *laissez-faire* administration. In the wake of the typhus epidemic that swept Ireland in 1817-18, he quietly empaneled a committee to study disease and the conditions of the poor. This humble committee evolved, over decades, to become the first British Board of Health. Again, creative sympathy.

Reaction to the shock experience of climate change—and its terrible human costs—is often violent and shatteringly inhumane. The 1816 case study offers innumerable demoralizing examples. But there is another strain to the years without a summer, a symphonic, finer tone. Out of the Tamboran climate emergency of 1816-18 we can also trace instances of seismic soul-searching, epic acts of charity and self-sacrifice, as well as rapid-fire bursts of artistic, technological, and administrative innovation. In rural Ireland—abandoned by the state—priests formed makeshift hospitals and died by the dozens at the bedsides of fever victims. In northern Germany, private co-operatives, led by the affluent elite, bypassed sluggish authorities to import grain directly from Russia to feed the starving in their communities. And at the Villa Diodati, of course, Byron wrote “Darkness,” a masterpiece of climate affliction buried, like an Etruscan vase, for 200 years, to be excavated and raised to the light in this our brand new era of climate shock. Byron’s “Darkness” exhibits the fullest extent of creative sympathy in that it crosses class boundaries, to contemplate the direst sufferings of the massed and defenceless poor.

Thus far, in the first two stages of climate shock response I have outlined—sympathy and violence—the social lens has been restricted to the social elite, the bourgeoisie, and urban working classes. The urban working class staged food riots, and held magistrates hostage. The bourgeois professionals formed new charitable organisations, and fought against a state-controlled press to publicize the crisis. And the ruling elite enacted legislation and wrote poems. Byron’s “Darkness,” its unique achievement, is to trespass imaginatively into the deepest Dantean circles of the years without a summer. To publish a letter attacking the government, even to smash a baker’s

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window, requires energy, which requires food. The worst of what happened in 1816 and 1817 unfolded more quietly, more heartbreakingly, away from the towns and cities, in the vast rural hinterlands of Europe, to people left with no food whatever. It is a recurring fact of social history that a subsistence crisis fosters political violence and uproar, while a true famine unfolds in eerie silence. Geneva, home to the Byrons and Shelleys in 1816, experienced food riots the following spring, but never starvation conditions. Whereas in rural communities across Europe, and in parts of North America, desperate countryfolk left their homes and everything they had, and took to the highways: the dead silence broken by only the shuffling of a million shoeless feet. One tourist in France mistook these miles-long columns of climate refugees for “armies on the march.” Such was the third and final stage of climate shock response in the years without a summer: “The Flight into Hell.”

I’m leery of fashioning my own description of the 1816-17 “Flight into Hell.” What words—from a well-fed, U.S. based academic in 2016, to his equally well-fed audience—could possibly do justice to the horror? For this reason, I will offer an account—one grim thread—of the humanitarian calamity in Europe, through the words and experiences of Juliane de Krüdener. The so-called “Lady of the Holy Alliance,” Krüdener was born in Livonia, married a Baron, wrote a popular romance novel called *Valerie*, which brought her—like Byron in 1816—into the Genevan circle of Madame de Staël. After her religious conversion, she became a close confidante of Czar Alexander during the post-Waterloo political chaos of 1815, and was rumored to be a co-author of the notorious “Holy Alliance” declaration. By the summer of 1816, this remarkable

Gillen D'Arcy Wood
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person had transformed herself into the leader of a travelling millenarian cult, and public enemy of Swiss authorities. She fueled her popularity through chiliastic sermonizing and munificent handouts to the starving refugees who followed her in droves.

My text is her hagiography published in Paris in 1849, a reverent memoir containing excerpts from her private and public letters, and including eyewitness accounts of her two-year ministry to the climate refugees of France, Switzerland, and Germany along the banks of the Rhine near Basel. This region served as a key traversal point for refugees heading west along the river toward the port of Rotterdam, hoping for passage to North America—also for those who, unable to pay for passage, had been expelled from Holland, and were now enduring the unimaginable misery of a return journey to their abandoned villages, a flight *back into* Hell. Drawing on her memory of touring the Rhine Valley in the summer of 1814, Mary Shelley describes its ecstatic impression on Victor Frankenstein, who delights in its “flourishing vineyards, with green, sloping banks, and a meandering river and populous towns.”

As recently as May, 1816, Lord Byron had travelled this spot, along the Rhine from Koblenz to Karlsruhe and south to Basel. His outlook likewise was luxuriantly touristic. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the Rhine valley offers a “blending of all beauties,” with “streams and dells/Fruit, foliage, crag, wood, cornfield, mountain, vine.” Byron devotes a dozen stanzas to Harold’s internal effusions on the “lovely Rhine,”

Where Nature, nor too sombre nor too gay,

Wild but not rude, awful yet not austere,

Is to the mellow Earth as Autumn to the year.” (III: 569-71)

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Within weeks this picturesque idyll Byron casually records will be the scene of an epic humanitarian disaster, cornfield and vine blasted, and the very road he travelled through Basel teeming with refugees. By June, the beginning of the “Year Without a Summer” disaster, Byron and his friends were established 150 miles south in the relative sanctuary of Geneva, trading horror stories around the fireplace at the Villa Diodati. As we shall see, the relationship between the Krüdener text and those of Geneva-based Byron and Mary Shelley rests on more than their uncanny propinquity. They share the ecology—volcanic, climatic, and human—of the “Year Without a Summer.” All three are testaments of that calamitous time.

June, 1816. Baroness de Krüdener has been drawing large crowds in Basel. Women, young and old, have been drawn to her example of piety, while the city fills with beggars, for whom she runs a sort of travelling soup kitchen. Fearful of her popularity, and her rabble-rousing, apocalyptic message, the Basel authorities expel the Baroness from the town. She is once again homeless and without funds. But God will provide. Money flows to her from wealthy admirers, and a friend offers her a small, riverside house on the Baden-side of the Rhine, called Hoernlein. There, on the morning of June first, she opens her bedroom window to the picturesque view Byron and Mary Shelley admired, only to be confronted instead by the soul-crushing spectacle of refugees in rags, in a miles-long column, stretching from the town of Grenzach to her door.

Three months of bad weather has reduced the countryside to misery and chaos. The rain never stops beating down. The wheat rots in the fields, so too the grapes on the vine. A loaf of bread costs 10 *sous*. The Grand Duke of Baden, the German territory

north of Basel, has ordered public prayers, twice daily, in every church of the kingdom. Anxiety is everywhere. Panic builds. The desperate pilgrims who seek out the evangelizing Baroness have suffered through this disastrous season, and are driven by dismay for their futures. Their numbers grow day by day, from the hundreds to the thousands. Enemies of the Baroness infiltrate the crowd, mocking her with blasphemies while she preaches. The Basel police, too, have followed her. Sometimes they surround the house, to keep the refugees at bay. Other times, they beat them furiously with their swords and drive them away into the fields and the forest. “Marche! Marche!” is the constant, bullying cry.

When winter approaches, the Baroness sells the jewels and fine clothes from her previous life as a salon belle to raise money: 30,000 francs, all to feed the poor at her door, now numbering 4,000 a day. “If you only knew my life now,” she writes to a friend, “the hundreds of suffering, miserable beings who cling to me: misery, misfortune, despair in a thousand forms, in a land of ruin and desolation.” Pale, skinny children, exhausted women bereft of even that clothing necessary to preserve modesty, pass under the windows of Baroness Krüdener. Their fellow citizens look upon these refugees with hatred, afraid that a growing population will drive the price of bread in the region still higher, and drag them all into the black hole of famine. For this, they blame the Baroness, who is harrassed by local thugs, and condemned in the newspapers. They call her “Devil Woman.”

The new harvest has failed utterly, and now even the affluent tradesmen and merchants in the towns are feeling the pinch of food shortages, on the brink of winter. Day after day, the starving poor come from miles around to Baroness Krüdener’s little

house on the Rhine for a ration of soup. In the heart of this worst of winters, the Baroness writes an open letter to Baron Berckheim, Interior Minister of Carlsruhe, who has viciously attacked her in the press, impugning her motives and Christian sincerity: “If only you knew, Monsieur,” she writes in her indignant reply,

the calamities that have destroyed these lands, you would easily understand my situation. Judge for yourself: ask yourself if in this desolate time, when thousands wander from place to place without work or food, when mothers exhausted by hunger and sorrow come to me, laying their pitiable children at my feet, and confess their temptation, in the depths of their despair, to drown them in the Rhine, ask yourself, should I refuse them shelter? And what of the old who drag themselves to my door, and the sick, staggering with fever? . . . The time has come when all that is flesh shall perish. . . the time has come when all the kings of the Earth shall cry out, and there shall be no response to them but the gathering storm . . . The time is approaching when the Lord will come down, when famine will consume the people. I hereby announce, on His authority, that this great calamity will soon spread across the entirety of Europe. I well understand that governments are powerless in this time of distress. But to answer your charges against me, when the Rhine is clogged with corpses, the Black Forest echoes with the cries of the needy, and the cantons of Switzerland are ravaged by famine, I need only appeals to the tribunal of the Lord, whose authority is far greater than yours.

As the winter of 1816-17 lapses into another cold, wet spring, the Baroness de Krüdener calculates that she has spent 120,000 francs of her personal fortune in feeding an estimated 25,000 refugees, who would otherwise have died of hunger and cold. These desperate poor come from far beyond the Basel region, drawn by rumors of her largesse. But it snows the entire month of April, the harvest fails again, and all Switzerland teeters on the brink of collapse. The desperation on the faces of the refugees turns to a kind of dumb, inhuman stupor. From four in the morning, before the sun has risen, their groans and cries of hunger wake the Baroness from her bed. To the kitchen she goes in the darkness, where she and her small band of devoted followers prepare soup for another day in Hell.

But by the summer of 1817, the burghers of Basel have had enough of the messianic posturings of the Baroness de Krüdener. She is ejected from Hoernlein, and escorted by police to the border. Word of the Baroness's movements travels ahead of her. No one will take her and her refugees. In the town of Rheinfeld, her carriage is surrounded by armed townsfolk. She and her entourage face certain massacre but for the intervention of the police. It is the same at Möhlin, where only sanctuary in the house of the local priest rescues her from being stoned to death. In Zürich, the newspapers report that a young girl—in a waking trance—has foretold the imminent arrival of the Baroness de Krüdener, to be announced by a terrible storm. Once in Zürich, she draws massive crowds to hear her speak, and all are struck by the living spirit in her words, her intimate knowledge of the human heart and, most of all, by the irresistible charity in the tone of her voice and exhortations. After more than a year working at the frontlines of the humanitarian disaster of the “Year Without a Summer,” Baroness de Krüdener's rhetoric

in her sermons has turned full-blown apocalyptic: “Towns are collapsing,” she preaches, “oceans dry up, and lakes are filled with blood. Sun, moon, and stars fall from their paths.” Byron’s “Darkness” and the Baroness are preaching from the same text.

Alarmed at her celebrity, the Zürich authorities expel her. Outside of town, in the exposed and devastated countryside, horrors continue to mount, and the Baroness rejoins the epic struggle for survival there. The summer of 1817, it turns out, is more dire even than *das Hungerjahr*, 1816. A faithful remnant of 700 refugees follows the Baroness on her wandering route north and east. Every day, she provides each of them with a bowl for their subsistence ration. It’s a wrenching spectacle to see the voracity with which they consume their meager portion of soup. Hunger is their only thought, their sole preoccupation. Every natural sentiment has been extinguished. Even familial bonds are broken. One day a woman, having received her ration, snatches her child’s portion from his mouth and eats it herself.

That same day in the summer of 1817, the Baroness and her companions are at table eating their own frugal meal, when a hideous apparition appears at the door. It is a young girl, reduced to a skeleton. Famine has caused her hair to fall out, and her belly is prodigiously swollen. She throws herself under the table to lick up crumbs, as if unaware of the people around her. The Baroness seizes hold of the child, and questions her. But the starving girl is not capable of speech, only a raucous, guttural sound. Hunger is her only language. By this time, in the canton of Appenzell, where the Baroness now finds herself, thirty or more are dying every day of hunger, victims of western Europe’s last ever famine. Beggars who venture outside their villages are assaulted with sticks. Those who try to help them are threatened and fined. The starving poor are reduced to dying in

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their homes, abandoned to a social and spiritual isolation total and absolute. The Baroness, on the road through Saint Gall, comes upon a great refugee tide, 4000 at least, staggering across the muddy fields, scrounging for grass and roots to stuff into their mouths, and picking at the carcasses of long-devoured animals. Dysentery, the famine's accomplice, devastates their ranks. The death toll spikes again. The Baroness continues to preach wherever she goes: "Turn to God. Time is short. Death and famine ravage the land. Be warned, I beg you!" At last, in October, in Fribourg, the road ends for the Baroness de Krüdener. The authorities break up her entourage and repatriate her to Russia. Her two-year-long humanitarian aid train, her remarkable ministry to the suffering masses of central Europe in the years without a summer, ends with a whimper.

Scenes from the suffering world *in extremis* of Juliane de Krüdener in 1816 and 1817 are drawn from the same world as Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Byron's "Darkness." For this world they witnessed in different degrees first hand, each of them—Baroness de Krüdener, Mary Shelley, and Lord Byron, exhibit their own forms of creative sympathy. *Frankenstein* and "Darkness," no less than the soup kitchen at Hoernlein House, are humanitarian compositions.

On his Rousseau-inspired tour around Lake Geneva in June and July of 1816 with Lord Byron, Percy Shelley encountered crowds of "crippled," "deformed," children, obviously in advanced stages of malnutrition. In Evian, where Victor and Elizabeth spend their bloody honeymoon, the situation is still worse. The two poet-tourists have never seen so diseased and poverty-stricken a community. Shelley brings these shocked impressions back to Mary, who includes them, in transmuted, symbolic form in

Frankenstein. Later in July, on the road to Chamonix, Mary sees for herself the endless stretches of farm fields underwater, barren of grain. Her monster treks inexorably northward in her mind, a creature of the ice age, of the boreal wilderness and icy tundra, while Victor is tormented by dreams of “a multitude of filthy animals inflicting on me incessant torture.”

From the beginning, Shelley’s imaginative conjuring of her famous Creature bears the mark of the famished and diseased European population by which she was surrounded in 1816, by what she calls in the novel, “the heart-moving indications of impending famine.” The abjected monster represents “the miserable and the abandoned . . . to be spurned at, and trampled on.” Like the hordes of refugees following the Baronness de Krüdener in 1816-17, the Creature, when he ventures into the towns, is “shunned and hated,” while the privileged families of the novel, the De Lacys and the Frankensteins—like Krüdener’s burghers of Basel—look upon him with horror and abomination. The self-pitying rage that consumes the monster first expresses itself in arson, which was rampant across rural Europe during the years without a summer. Like the hordes of refugees trudging across Europe that summer, bringing with them the twin scourges of famine and famine fever, the Creature is a wanderer and a menace to civilized society.

Such is the new literary history of 1816, a year we thought we knew so well. According to this new history, Mary Shelley’s legendary horror story, and Byron’s “Darkness,” exhibit the European urban, educated class’s literary response to the continent-wide humanitarian disaster unfolding around them in the Tambora crisis years of 1816-18. In *Frankenstein’s* Creature, Mary Shelley offers us the most powerful

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possible incarnation of the loathed and de-humanized refugee, while Byron's poem leads us, with full-blown biblical horror, through a starving civilization's descent into violence, then further, beyond the threshold of acceptable poetic effusion, to a still darker prophecy: to humanity's unspeakable fate in a climate-devastated world—a grim foreshadowing, perhaps, of the Flight into Hell on which we all have reservations confirmed.

The “Year Without a Summer” remains one of the best-loved biographical vignettes of the Romantic period. But now, 200 years on, as we commemorate that direful year, it is no longer the story it was. Re-reading *Frankenstein* and “Darkness” as climate change texts, and by adding the likes of the Baroness de Krüdener to the celebrity cast list of the “Year Without a Summer,” we unveil a true myth still grander, more totemic, and more urgent. Shelley's monster is back. He's alive and on a rampage. And because we are all of us Doctor Frankenstein, this suffering Creature, full of rage and hurt, is our responsibility now.