

Sea Change

Alix Nathan



First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
SERPENT'S TAIL
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

Copyright © Alix Nathan, 2021

Lines from 'The Wild Iris' by Louise Glück reproduced
by kind permission of Carcanet Press

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Tramuntana Text by MacGuru Ltd
Designed by Nicky Barneby @ Barneby Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 349 1
eISBN 978 1 78283 612 4



whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice

Louise Glück, 'The Wild Iris'

*The celebrated Aëronaut M André-Jacques Garnerin
will Ascend in his gas Balloon
at Ranelagh
on 28 June 1802 at 5 o'clock
during an elegant Afternoon Breakfast
given by the Directors of the Pic Nic Society
in recognition of the new Peace of Amiens.
M Garnerin will be accompanied by
the renowned Artist and Engraver Mr Joseph Young
and, to prove the Safety of such Travel to
Members of the Fair Sex,
the well-known Proprietress of Battle's Coffee House
Miss Sarah Battle*

They walk through the crowd towards the enormous balloon, thirty feet in diameter, forty-five feet high, as big as a four-storey house, shifting gently against its anchoring ropes despite a hot, almost breathless day. Its alternate dark-green and yellow segments are encased in a net, its oblong car draped in tricolours and Union Jacks. On the ground around it lies a cartwheel shape of barrels and pipes in which acid and iron filings have generated the hydrogen that fills the great globe.

The aëronaut waits for them in an elegant blue coat and French hat bearing the national cockade, chatting to bystanders and smiling, as if he were a showman at Bartholomew Fair encouraging people into his booth. Jacques Garnerin is sinewy and slight, his noble nose and thin, sharp features wind-burned, his skin toughened like a sailor's.

Sarah, in a large beribboned bonnet, her best dress with its low neckline and short sleeves fashionable enough to quell her anxiety about what to wear, steps forward slowly, weighed by regret. Her jibe, fired off in annoyance, that women are just as able to fly in balloons as men, has brought her here. She is red with heat and

self-consciousness. It's not unlike the first day she stood at the bar in her father's coffee house, replacing her newly dead mother, when men scanned her perpetually till she felt skinned.

Joseph strides ahead, can't stop himself, bags and satchels hung about his tall, ungainly person.

Sarah turns to hug her daughter Eve, to kiss the girl in her pretty blue gown, who looks with bright eyes from her to the balloon and back, understanding only that her mother has chosen to travel in it, aware of a vast murmuring, a heaving sea of smiles.

'I'll be back soon, my love. Tonight, I hope.' She moves over to the basket, wanting it all to be over.

Garnerin, the small, foreign entertainer, hands his two British aëronauts up steps into the car, springs into it like a boy. There's only just room, for in the centre is ballast, bags of sand marked in quantities from kilos down to grams, suspended by four cords from the hoop at the base of the balloon's netting. Attached to the car's ropes are a thermometer, impressive compass, telescope and a barometer for measuring altitude. Baskets of provisions are stowed in lockers under the seat where Joseph will sit together with all his boxes of pens, pencils, chalks, brushes, paint, sketchbooks and blocks, perspective glasses and his own telescope. Jacques calculates that large Joseph, his equipment and a basket of food and drink will balance the weight on the opposite side of the car to Sarah and himself.

A band strikes up 'God Save the King'. The Official Aëronaut of France, fidgeting throughout, stands to attention for the succeeding tune, which no one recognises.

'But that is not the "Marseillaise",' says Joseph, puzzled.

'It offend Bonaparte. I tell them they must play "Veillons au salut de l'Empire"'. Soon he become Emperor.'

After four verses, during which it is the crowd's turn to fidget and chatter, Garnerin unhooks bag after bag of ballast, hands them over the side of the car until the captive balloon pulls at its tethers.

At last he signals, assistants untie the ropes, restrain the great ball solely by muscle power. The crowds hush.

A dramatic sign, the ropes are loosed, a huge cheer breaks out, the ascent begins. Sarah feels the basket leave the ground, an upward pull through her body that makes her laugh aloud. Even as her child slips further from her, the little girl's face blurring in her

sight, her legs weaken with pleasure and she grips the car to steady herself. Jacques, so many successful flights in hand, moves about with panache, making the balloon rise slowly, letting it hang over the gardens for maximum effect. He holds a flag of the République, gives Sarah a Union Jack and, with Joseph waving his sketchbook, they all three salute the crowds thronging the Gardens and all roads that lead to Ranelagh. The great vehicle moves massively, elegantly in a north-east direction, away from the packed banks of the river, from the waterworks, the creeks and sluice gates of Pimlico fenland. Still low enough for onlookers clustered in every window and housetop, perching in trees like cawing rooks.

Joseph, breathless with excitement, sketches rapidly as they sail over Green Park and St James's. Ducks rise up, quacking from the lakes as the huge shadow passes. Westminster to the right, Charing Cross beneath.

'Sarah, look! See the pillory in Charing Cross?'

'I hope there's no one in it.'

'Come now, it'll cheer a prisoner to see us fly over. At least it will distract the pelters. Here! Use my pocket telescope. I've not enough hands for it.' His steel spectacles have a second set of lenses, tinted, hinged up until needed, for all like mad eyebrows.

Everywhere upturned faces.

'Strand!' Jacques points out.

'The whores will lift their eyes instead of their skirts, Jacques,' Joseph smirks at him.

They gather speed, move between road and the river. Or rather, road and river seem to move past below, for they feel no motion, borne at the wind's pace.

'Over there in the distance, are those St George's Fields?' Sarah asks Jacques, whose thin brown finger traces a line on his map. She remembers a shining day.

'I think St George's Fields, yes. Now we release the bird.' He opens a small wicker cage and a pigeon with a tiny Union Jack round one leg, a tricolour round the other, flies out and away without hesitation.

Small boats jostle each other on the river. At this point there are no masted ships, held back by the multiple, stumpy legs of London Bridge. Anchored, the little vessels rock to the movement of their

passengers, who follow the balloon, cheer the pigeon's flight, soon lost.

Fleet Street, Ludgate Hill and the glory of a dome from whose pinnacle stone seems to cascade like water. They're so near they almost touch it.

'Who wouldn't give their eye teeth to touch St Paul's?' Joseph's pencil runs over page after page. 'If only we could stop!'

'No balloon have ever flown this route before,' says Jacques. 'Look at the people. They leave their houses like in an earthquake!' He reads the altitude barometer. 'Three thousand feet. I keep it low for them.'

Cheapside. Sarah peers down. Somewhere near here is Winkworth Buildings, City Road, the place of her dismal marriage. Poultry, where her mother and adored childhood friend Ben Newton were killed. Can she see 'Change Alley with Battle's Coffee House in its dark corner? Her life passes beneath her.

The wind still carries them north-east. Such density of brick. Streets, insect tunnels bored through the heart of a great tree.

To their right, masts and sails appear beyond London Bridge.

'Look where they've pulled down the granaries in Tooley Street,' Joseph announces. Gulls screech. Foul grey smoke from a brick stack puffs up, floats away. The Tower, flag flying.

Goodman's Fields, market gardens, pastures where cattle stand. The wind is blowing them due north.

'Now we ascend,' says Jacques, the city finally behind them, the fields and hamlets of the East End shrinking to dabs of colour.

'Mme Battle, you will feel the coldness *un petit peu*.' He unhooks sacks of ballast and throws them out.

They rise through cloud mass. Sarah shivers, reaches for her bag of winter clothes, two shawls, a cloak, gloves. Someone had assured her she would freeze.

'Thermometer reads fifteen degrees,' says Joseph, ghostly in the mist, layer upon layer, three full shelves of cloud.

Then they are through: vast blue opens above and all around. The quicksilver shoots up five degrees more than summer heat. Whiteness lies thick beneath them.

'Have we stopped moving?'

'Non, Mme Battle, we merely *seem* stationary.'

'We can see nothing against which to locate our movement,' Joseph remarks, his sketchbook temporarily abandoned, his tinted lenses lowered against the glare.

'Yes! *C'est vrai*. And so we eat now. What have you brought for us, Mme Battle?'

They pull out the basket, balance plates on napkins on their laps, hold glasses cautiously, eat, drink, smile at each other. Sarah is famished, having eaten nothing since early morning, and then, too nervous for more than tea. There's ham and cold fowl, best plum cake and three bottles of orgeat, wine and spirits too dangerous to take because of the air pressure. Balloons and champagne: those were the early days, before war with France.

Eat, drink and smile again. M Garnerin leaps up constantly to check ropes, instruments, his markings on the map. His mood is imperturbable, his movements disturbing.

'Jacques,' says Joseph, 'stop for a minute and tell us about your imprisonment in Buda Castle.'

'No! It is without purpose. The past is finished, it is dead. I never think of it.'

'Oh, I can't agree with that,' Sarah says. 'You're quite wrong, M Garnerin.'

'The past, *c'est passé*! Only today is important. And tomorrow of course.' He checks the barometer.

'For me the past has the greatest importance.'

'All of it?' Joseph asks her.

'No. Not all of it. But some of it lives in my mind. My memories are alive.'

Joseph is searching through his baskets of materials. She wonders if he, too, thinks about his past, what she knows of it, so conveniently abandoned. Yet she is glad he's there with her now, excitable though he is. Over months, they have become used to each other, talk easily, even if his ideas are often wrong.

He shows her his sketchbook.

'Oh, Joseph, they're wonderful! Look at St Paul's, the ships on the river. Even people in the trees at Ranelagh. You seem to have drawn everything. Such skill.'

'You are not drawing me?' says Jacques, flicking through the pages.

‘They’ll make a most excellent book,’ Sarah says, ‘and increase your fame, too, M Garnerin.’

‘Now that we are cut off from the earth by these clouds, Sarah,’ Joseph says, ‘are you afraid?’

‘Mme Battle have no need to be afraid. I have much experience. I have ascended many times. You are safe, *Madame*.’ Sinewy Jacques is practical, has never known doubt.

‘I feel quite safe, M Garnerin, and not afraid at present, though a little apprehensive about the next stage, perhaps. It is not like anything I have ever known.’

They pack away the remains of the meal, plates, bottles, wrap glasses in the napkins, stow the basket. Joseph has removed his greatcoat, both men take off their jackets.

Suddenly the clouds below disperse and the world appears. The whole country spreads magnificently beneath and beyond them. Sarah gasps and Joseph, elated, grasps her hand.

‘We are in heaven, are we not? To look down like this is perfection. I never felt so happy!’

She takes her hand from his, gently, holds on to the edge of the basket.

‘Mme Battle, you feel dizzy?’

‘Certainly not, M Garnerin.’

‘You feel well?’

‘I feel exhilarated.’

They are fifteen thousand feet above a boundless land, which at first appears as swathes and blocks of greens and browns like a canvas in preparation. The balloon’s shadow moves across it, the only cloud. They lean over the side and are amazed to see objects picked out in extraordinary precision. Once again Joseph insists Sarah use his snakeskin-covered pocket telescope, but even without magnification, they point out to each other ruts in roads, furrows in fields, thatch in hamlets, chimneys in towns. Their hearing, too, has sharpened strangely, so that sounds reach them: the rattle of carriages, lowing of cattle, mewing of kites and buzzards, shouts of surprise and joy.

‘This is remarkable,’ Joseph says, ‘quite remarkable.’

‘When people ascend first time, sometimes they talk of God,’ Jacques tells them.

'I can understand that,' Sarah says. Tom had spoken of the ordered beauty of the natural world. That day at the Schuylkill River. 'But then think of the thousands of lives below us. What tragedies, pleasure, what love, sadness, cruelty and kindness that we can neither see nor hear! Like the ship's captain who cares nothing for the mice on board.'

She thinks: My own life, too, is as nothing in the universe. Yet now for me each second is full, so full of everything that is happening, all that has happened.

They ascend higher and a west wind drives them over a forest. Jacques attends to his map.

'Here the forest of Epping.'

'The easiest thing to sketch so far, let me tell you. Look, it's like a great gooseberry bush.'

He daubs and streaks, trying out greens merging into blue, black shadows, a distant sift of cloud while yet the sun still burns.

They move rapidly, high, to the east.

In the huge blueness Sarah's senses are keenly alert. She feels her body glow with the sun's heat, her mind open so that past and future spread like a magnified map. She sees like a blade.

And knows what she must do. Knows with complete clarity what she must do for Eve and for herself.

She must leave Battle's Coffee House. Sell it. Its darkness and smells, closed, inward-looking, a standing pool, black, stagnant. She will remove Eve from its influence. Sail once more to Philadelphia. Live there, work there. Publish and sell books herself. Take up where Tom and she left off.

I shall do what he would have done had he lived, what we would have done together. I learned something of the business there, enough to try. Sell reprints cheaply so as to publish more pamphlets and unknown writers. Universal suffrage. Education of women.

I can do it with the money from selling Battle's. Tom thought I was wasted in the coffee house. *She will find a new way in this new world*, he said. I shall!

I shall have his name once more as I did when we lived as man and wife. I can see it all set out: Sarah Cranch & Daughter, Books and Printseller, Market Street, Philadelphia.

Oh! It's like the moment when the clouds dissolved! I shall leave the darkness of England for the light of America again.

Joseph notices the change in Sarah's face, her features seeming both to sharpen and to shine. An inner exultation. Sketches her as well as he can without her knowledge. Catches illumination.

The balloon moves with speed towards lines of light and dark.

'Joseph!' Jacques shouts. 'For God's sake, we must descend. Look, la mer, la mer!'

The wind has driven them eastwards, over the marshes of Essex, extremely close to the sea. At the same time a summer storm cloud wells up immediately beneath them, black, heavy with disturbance.

Jacques shows no sign of panic – indeed he never feels it, he is coolness personified. But he must keep the worst from Mme Battle.

'*Il faut que nous passions à travers de ce drôle là,*' indicating the cloud. '*Accrochez-vous ferme car nous allons nous casser le col.*'

'He says to hold on tight,' Joseph tells Sarah as Jacques pulls on a rope to open the valve at the top of the balloon. 'We shall have to pass through this storm. Do you see it?'

Gas spurts, they plunge down into the cloud and the squall's centre, beaten by wind and rain as they descend with sickening velocity. They grip the sides of the basket and Sarah cries out as a particular buffet hurls her onto the floor.

Both men help her up. '*Vite, vite!* We strike the ground in a moment,' Jacques yells above the wind. 'Hold the hoop so. Do like this. Lift the feet!'

The basket is held by a hoop attached to the net around the balloon. Joseph lifts Sarah up, bids her hold on to the hoop for dear life, raise her legs, does the same himself. Jacques, monkey-like, jumps up, tucks his feet into the net, holds an arm out to Sarah and the three of them, newfangled acrobats, swing from the massive gas-emitting globe as the basket hits the ground.

Sarah, her bonnet long gone, her dress soaked against her body, her muscles jarred, is too cold to cry. Survival is all. Gusting wind pulls the balloon across fields, the car dragging behind it at speed, banging over the ground, knocking against trees while they hang on to ropes with both hands, glad to be down, though jolted mercilessly. At last the grappling iron fastens its claw-hooks onto a tree stump.

'Mme Battle, you are well?'

'I am alive.'

'We could have done with your parachute, Jacques,' says Joseph, half joking, watching Sarah.

'*Mais non*. Only madmen jump in this weather. *Regardez!*' People are running out of a nearby farmhouse and stand gawping and pointing. Not too close.

'Surely they will help, will take us in?' Sarah's hopes rise.

Jacques and Joseph throw ropes towards them.

'Anchor us! Tie the ropes to your trees!' Joseph yells. The people stare. Some of the men confer with each other, gesture violently to the women, who turn and run back to the house. A woman stumbles as she runs, shrieks with terror.

'They think we are Napoleon's invasion! With our tricolours,' says Sarah, for the Union Jacks blew off some time before. 'They have not heard of the Peace. *We are friends!*' she shouts. '*Please help us!*' But her voice is lost in the wind's roar.

'They think we're devils dropped from the sky,' Joseph says grimly. 'I'll jump out and secure a rope, Jacques.'

'You cannot, alone. You are not strong enough, even you. So much gas still in the balloon, *comprenez?* Many men are needed to secure it. *Ils sont idiots, ces gens!*'

And then a sudden blast of wind grabs them like a hand, breaks the anchoring cable and with extraordinary speed shoots them hundreds of feet into the air. Tosses them back in the direction from which they came. The flight resumes just when they want it to end.

Jacques stretches for the gas-release-valve rope, but it's blown out of his reach.

'It have slipped away,' he shouts. 'I cannot make us to descend. We shall continue.'

Sarah pulls her cloak about her tightly to calm her shivering body.

'Mme Battle, have courage.'

'There is no braver woman, Jacques,' shouts Joseph, shaking with despair. 'But look, we all need courage now. We're being blown back to the coast.'

He fastens the clasps of his sketchbook, wraps it in oilcloth, ties it firmly.

At least what I have drawn may survive even if I drown, he tells himself. Someone may find the sketch of her. It's the best thing I've ever done.

'Put on the cork jackets! There will be ships, boats,' Jacques proclaims, confident even though there's not a sail in sight.

Sarah longs for Eve. Rejoices in her plan of hope and reuniting as the damaged balloon scuds rapidly towards a lucent sea.

IN THE CARRIAGE NURSEY HOLDS Eve's hand between both of her own.

'You must not mind,' she says, sniffing.

Eve pulls away. The tears on Nursey's soft, wrinkled cheeks annoy her. Mama is dead and she *does* mind.

She heard them in the kitchen say, 'Dead fer sure. Er'll not come back from *vat*.'

'What'll appen to us now, I ask you? Sssh, the child!'

It's a knot in her mind. Mama's gone. Each day passes and she doesn't come back. Isn't there in the morning. Doesn't kiss her goodnight. A knot.

'I'll dry my eyes, my love. There now. We'll have a grand life, you and I.'

They draw up before a tall house and Joseph comes out. She's seen him often. He strides through the coffee house, nods to some of the men, calls for Mama, sits at a table drinking, eating, talks to Mama when she's not busy, interrupts her when she is. Sometimes they argue.

'That's ridiculous!' she's heard Mama tell him.

She's never been in Joseph's house with Mama. If only she were here to help her understand! She'd explain everything. One arm round her. Heads leaning together.

'Eve! Dearest child of dearest woman. Come! I'll show you my house. I'll show you your room. Nurse, bring the bags.'

He leans down as if he would lift her, but she dodges him and

he pulls her by the hand upstairs. To an enormous room with windows to the ground. She runs over to them to look out, to look away from Joseph. A groom is taking the last bags and boxes from the carriage, the horses' heads half hidden in nosebags. Across the street a woman looks out from her house, stares straight at her, unmoving.

'Put the luggage on the landing and come in, Nurse. This is where I entertain my patrons when they come to discuss their portraits. Hence best furniture and frames! You may not use the room without my permission.

'Here, look now, through these doors is a smaller room in which you two may sit and read and play. You can see it's where I read, myself. And smoke. Do you object?'

'It's not my place to object, sir. Are there housemaids?'

'I've not troubled with servants except a cook and groom. I read your mind, Nurse. You think it dirty, a mess.'

'Sir. Eve is unused to such surroundings.'

'There's a great funk in the coffee house!'

'Not in the family's rooms, sir.'

'Well, I live a bachelor's life. But I dare say you have a point. For her sake I'll hire a housemaid. Now I'll show you where you'll sleep.'

This time he succeeds in hugging Eve. The thick smell of his hair and clothes is like that of the room: she half likes it, half wants to choke. She struggles and he lets her go.

In the bedroom she's to share with Nursey at the top and back of the house, the walls are painted with lines of green leaves. There are pictures of animals and houses, of children with dogs and birds in cages. Two beds stand together opposite the window under which there's a painted red box. The head of a toy horse sticks out, she sees a doll's skirt, skittles.

'Oh,' she thinks. 'Toys for little children. I shan't play with them.'

'That's grand, sir.'

'You will breakfast with each other, Nurse, but we shall all three dine together and I shall read to Eve each night before she goes to bed. Although I'm not her father I wish to guide her, to protect her, to ensure she grows like her mother.'

A while later this conversation takes place:

'Must we live here? When shall we go home?'

'This is our home now, Eve.'

'It's not.'

'Joseph wants you to live here. And he also wants you to call him Joseph.'

'You don't.'

'I must call him sir or Mr Young. He will not have you call him Mr Young.'

'I *wish* Mama were here.'

'Mama is in heaven.'

'You always say that.'

'Your beloved mama is watching you from heaven; she is watching over you, taking care of you. God bless you, my darling bairn!'

The conversation is repeated often, sometimes several times a day. It's not consoling that Nursey always says the same thing. And Eve is with Nursey so much now that Mama's not here.

Joseph is alarming. Sitting in the small room, he pulls her to him and looks into her face so that she turns away in fright.

'Oh you gem! Oh you child of your mother!' This is obvious, she thinks, yet his face glows like a lamp as he says it.

She looks over at Nursey, who smiles at her reassuringly, yet she can't help feeling that Nursey, too, is discomforted, knitting together her fat fingers.

But there are compensations.

'There's so much of Sarah in you, my child. As an artist I see these things, you know,' he says to Nursey. 'Eve, you will look just like Sarah when you're a woman and everyone will love you.'

She doesn't want to be a woman, though being loved by everyone is good. If only she could tell Mama.

On occasion, Joseph calls her into his drawing room. Faces in frames gaze down from pale-yellow walls, and she'd rather look out of the windows as she did that first day, in case Mama is coming along the street, but, obedient, she stands by his side while he introduces her to large men and women in furs and cloaks. Who beam and pat her head and laugh kindly at whatever she says in answer to their questions. She hopes these aren't the people who will love her. She hears her mother's name mentioned and the balloon, and the women look at her again from under their big hats and want

to hold her hand. She clasps her hands behind her back, not liking the feel of their gloves.

‘You must let them hold your hand, Eve. They are charmed by you,’ Joseph tells her later.

When the people make their slow way, stately and swishing, to grand carriages, Nursey says coldly, ‘I do believe you are useful to Mr Young,’ marring the complacency Eve has begun to enjoy.

There are other, bigger compensations. Joseph commands the cook to provide Eve with all the food she likes best, which for the most part is lemon tart with a jug of cream. There are rides in Joseph’s carriage to Green Park, Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, places she’s never been before. Mama always had so much to do in the coffee house they rarely went anywhere. In Green Park she runs into the great space like a freed bird, Nursey in ponderous pursuit. Cows look up, stare, move away, and Eve laughs and chases them till Nursey catches up and firmly leads her back.

A longer journey takes them up to the Heath at Hampstead. There they walk, Nursey and Stephen the coachman carry picnic baskets and Joseph breaks off from sketching to hoist Eve onto his shoulders so that she can see London set out below them. This time she lets him. He’s so tall she’s right up high above everybody, clings on to his head and his greasy pigtail, terrified and thrilled.

The best place in the house is Joseph’s studio, which he shows her one day and where, after that, she demands to go often. More large windows, but it’s the ceiling that takes away her breath: a huge glass dome which at first she thinks is open to the sky until a storm spits cracking hailstones, and she watches water stream down outside the panes. When the sun shines and Joseph longs for air, small windows can be opened with a long pole. Even on grey days there’s always light above, while below the space is dark with blocks of furniture and inexplicable objects.

He wants her to sit on a chair, addresses her from his great height.

‘I’m working now, Eve. Did you bring your doll?’

‘I want my book.’ But he doesn’t hear.

Once Joseph’s glance seems fixed on his easel, she drops the hateful doll, with its white porcelain face, pinpoint eyes and false smile, and slips off the chair and round into a chaos of extraordinary rubbish. Unwrapping balls of screwed-up paper she finds

faces half-formed, occasionally complete. Some she flattens out, others she crumples hastily, their stern looks intolerable. There are pages and pages of hands, against which she holds her own, which barely resemble either square, chalk-reddened palms or long, tapered fingers.

In whorls of dust she discovers the thinnest curls of copper, to wrap into rings for her fingers. Or she might tease Nursey by decorating her long grey hair with them when at night she unpins it from beneath her bonnet and it falls surprisingly far down her back. In the day Nursey is old, at night she becomes a girl. It's an unspoken secret between them.

Floorboards are splattered with paint, blobs, splashes, dried pools where jars were kicked over, their dribbling trails leading into the shadowy side of the room where the 'props' live. Here are bigger objects which Joseph instructs her to treat with care, as nothing must be broken or made unusable. There are life-size heads of men whose white eyes she tries to avoid, for they stare and stare. 'They're only plaster,' he says, and eventually she learns to ignore their disapproval.

Shapely urns, broken pieces of column, an enormous, brass-bound chest. He pushes open its heavy lid for her and she strokes deep red swathes of velvet folded inside. One morning she climbs in and Nursey, finding her dozing hours later, makes a great clamour. On a low shelf there's a large shell, spiked to her touch on the outside, smooth and delicately pink within; three thick books, so heavy she can't open them, statuettes of men fighting. Cobwebs cling to her clothes, spiders run off. In gold-framed mirrors leaning against the wall she watches herself trying to hook huge glass pearls about her neck, stick curled feathers in her hair.

Tiring of this, she turns to Joseph as he dots and streaks a canvas until one side of a head emerges, a shoulder, an arm. Sometimes she recognises a face from which she's smoothed the creases on the floor, or a person who's looked down at her and smiled pityingly. Joseph paints, steps back, paints, steps back, hums, smiles in her direction, paces about the room. Daubs again.

But a day comes when he stops and roars, hurls brushes, flings the palette across the room, bawls out to Nursey to come quick and take the child away.

She's terrified the first time it happens, thinking herself the cause. Runs behind the chest to hide, where it's dark and the blank-eyed men can't see her either.

'Nurse! Take her, get her out!'

'Eve, where are you, my bairn, where are you?'

'Find her, find her! I'll kill myself. Get her out!'

'Eve, where are you hiding, my darling? If you'd cease shouting for a moment, sir, I might discover her.'

At other times he rips up his work in silence. No roaring. Rather, his face takes on a resemblance to the plaster men: she can't catch his eye, he doesn't hear her. He tears up his drawings precisely, makes piles of them, cuts canvases into squares, loads the bits into the fireplace, sets them alight. Oil paint blazes.

Subsequently, she realises that she'll always be rescued, though she must indeed get away from him quickly when he roars. Just once, he throws the palette at her, its corner cuts her cheek and he howls at her gasp of pain, apparently hurt far more by his own action than she by the missile. Beats his head against the window frame as Nursey stanches the bloody gash and hastens Eve from the room.

And there are less violent incidents, like when he stops, groans and presses his head as if he wants to crush it between his fists.

'Does it hurt?' she dares to ask. At which he groans again in reply and sits down heavily. On the first of these occasions, she tiptoes over to him.

He covers his face with his hands and lowers his head to his knees, sobbing.

'It will be better soon, Joseph.' It's Nursey's formula for pain. She gently touches his arm, strokes this big child's hand, reaches up to wipe a tear with her fingers, but he falls forward and off the chair with a massive crash and she runs out of the room calling for Nursey. It's she who's made him fall!

When this sort of thing happens he doesn't appear for two days or more and she must occupy herself dully indoors or walk out with Nursey, who's so slow. And then there he is again, apparently unharmed, and all goes as normal until the next outburst. Baffling, but she gets used to it, and as time passes she becomes alert to a pattern. Notices growing quietness, slower movements, a tendency

to pick and tear violently at his fingers, an ominous dulling before the explosion. Notices, as any mother aware of her child's changing moods.

'It's not your fault. It's never your fault, Eve, when I, when I get angry like I do. I know I do though I can't always remember exactly what I say. *Don't tell me what I say!* I know you've seen and heard me. It's when the blackness comes, you understand. Please try to understand.'

'Blackness?'

'Oh, it won't harm *you*. It only comes to me. Into my thoughts. Spreading over all my thoughts like streams of acid eating into copper. Or like real streams that become a sea which swallows me up. Oh, dear God, like drowning.

'There's the little bottle, too. You've seen me whisk it out of my pocket, haven't you? Drop, drop, drop, drop, drop and more drops!'

She looks up at him. What does he mean? What is he talking about?

'The god Opium, my little one. Laudanum. Let's hope you never need it.'

'Lord? God?'

'Lord God, hah, yes! Drops of the Lord. By now I must be the holiest man alive!'

*

One hundred miles away, in late evening light, a young woman sits at a table by the window, looks out over the grey North Sea. A coast made bleak by Arctic winds. The room is respectable but meagrely furnished, the fireside rug worn and recently darned, cheap engravings of biblical scenes on the walls, uncomfortable chairs. A relentless carriage clock on the mantle competes with the sea's perpetual sigh.

She's nineteen, her expression too serious, confirmed by a narrow face, hair tightly drawn back, intense blue eyes. Only her mouth is too wide for harshness.

Every so often she stops, listens, glances towards the door. A cloth-bound ledger lies on the table, closed but within reach. She's not lit the lamp, begins to write.