No one is born fully-formed: it is through self-experience in the world that we become what we are.

Paulo Freire, 1921–1997

Author's Note

While this novel is inspired by historical events and personages, it is a work of fiction. Elizabeth Barrett's narrative includes extracts from diaries and correspondence with her family and friends. Some of these passages have been edited considerably and alterations have also been made to grammar and punctuation.

10 January 1845
New Cross, Hatcham, Surrey

I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett, – and this is no off-hand complimentary letter that I shall write . . . I can give reason for my faith in one and another excellence, the fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought – but in addressing myself to you, your own self, and for the first time, my feeling rises altogether. I do, as I say, love these Books with all my heart – and I love you too . . .

Yours ever faithfully,
Robert Browning

The extract is from the opening of *Strange Music* (Jonathan Cape, 2008).

Prologue

Kaydia

CINNAMON HILL ESTATE
14 February 1840

In blue light Mister Sam lies, sickly face sweating yellow. Hips, shins, spine – him body curl up making spiral-shell shape.

Lifting him into bed don't go easy. He retches, shudders, gasping for breath. But I can't feel pity. Did him lips touch my cheek? Did him hands stroke my body? How we did share four-poster, I'm thinking, when he fills my soul with grief? Grief and deep dread.

Mister Sam moans weakly. Spit strands link lightly parted lips. I dab him mouth dry on my grey skirt, wrench mattress straight against wall, tug shoulders forward, wedge lace pillow beneath him head. Neck floppy, him head lolls back sliding into softness – Mister Sam mustn't go. Not yet. He told me to wait at bedside. But I choose to run because I can't cure bad fever like this.

I go from blue bedchamber to tell Pa to fetch Doctor Demar. Sea's facing me. Silver-pink clouds. Cordia flowers bright and orange speckle coarse blades of grass, buckle beneath my bare feet.

Below great house I pass overseer's house by sugar works, barracks for bookkeeper, masons, carpenters. I pass trash-house, plantation path sweeping round and down to coast road. I reach wharf planks. Ship's sails flap as rigging grows taut.

Pa's heading for main wharf hut. Striding along wood strips cool-like he gives me a glance. Him face kinda snarl up like a dog's but inside him starts laughing. Pa slams hut door shut in my face, grey-green gecko shoot down wood shafts.

Pa's refusing to open up. I knock to tell him Mister Sam's worse again.

Pa don't know why Mister Sam mustn't go. Not before a will's made.

I run back up coast road to plantation path. Evening air comes cooled. I turn, looking for Pa. Orange sun ball perches, fuming, on blue ocean rim.

Pa squats beside sugar winch now. Running faster onto coast road, towards wharf hut. 'Pa,' I shout, approaching him back. 'Pa, fetch Doctor Demar fe Mister Sam.'

Pa stretches bony arms; legs slowly clamber down from plank wharf, wade into clear shallow sea; water laps round him knee. He leans against strong sour evening light, angry ocean blue. He don't speak. My head's burning. Pa, you can't see?

Wet up to him waist, wading onto shore, Pa's soaked overalls stick on him body. Waves wash my feet, shifting worry lines on yellow sand. Pa bends over, wrings frayed trouser bottoms. Salt water trickles into star shapes on sand.

Pa shakes him feet, saying, 'Yu hot wid fiah. Wot yu waan?' Then he strides back onto coast road, salt water running from clothes.

Pa's spirit unleashes like green-bronze flash of gecko. 'How come yu come on such a day as dis? Yu don't know wot day is it?'

I say, 'No.'

'It Friday's birthday.'

Inside I'm moving so I say, 'Wot bout May's or Mary Ann's or mine? Yu don't know wen dat is?'

'No.' Him voice leave no questions. But I look at him, questions whirling round my head.

Fast I run to plantation path to Pa's brother, Dick. Because he my uncle and knows about Pa. Dick's bamboo hut's raised off soft sandy earth, keeping cool. Each dusk Dick stumbles back from masonry, chipped, grey from grinding stone. Dick's humming, 'Hi! De buckra, hi!' Having no more work till Mister Sam sends orders, he sits on top-step edge, waiting, watching like he knows why I come. Dick, him eye walking up and down, spying from under hat brim, says loud, 'Why yu flee like devil chase behind yu?'

'Yu cun tell why Pa's mad at me? E treat me like me not a dawta. Pa's same Pa to Sibyl an me.'

Dick's strong hand, bathed in white stone dust, wipes silvered streaks down sweat-polished cheeks. 'Because yu are of one blood an still e treat yu bad, ave noting more to do wid im.'

'But we living in same place.'

Dick sighs long. 'Me cyaan say wot mek Pa wot e is.'

I think it's a nigger I see on horseback for him clumping so quick up silent slope swerve.

'Yu betta go back to de great house,' Uncle Dick says. Standing up, wordless, he turns round. I feel him wanting to break talk off. Him feet siss then, edging away.

Conch-blow bellows *Fuuuuffuu-ffuu* like it struggles free from a monster's heart swooping through air, roaring towards quietly hunched tamarind trees edging plantation path. I'm staring past Dick at hut's outline, washed-out sky – there's space for sky between branches, leaves – and as conch-blow hurries into it, Dick's cold words close in on me.

Dusky air falls silent. Waiting for something. Someone. Darkness steadily sweeps across deepest blue fading to deeper black.

Duppy was on great-house track? No, its body too thick, too bold. Must be a nigger. Then I'm running down plantation path hill to coast road, running round wharf-hut back. Pa's shape's a smear behind grimy glass. Wharf room holds a stale wood, stale fish smell. Where boards don't overlap Pa's smear shape shifts, fusing with rough-edged planks. I run to hut front, thump hut door. My shadow don't follow me round any more.

Door opens. Earthy floor looks sameway but a gap between we widens. My armpits tickle, tingling.

Pa says I'm a bully coming back again, he getting ready to fetch Doctor Demar and because I've come back he won't. Says I'm to serve and save white buckra. Pa says, 'De devil widin yu.'

I'm struggling to tell what is it. 'Eeee? Me cyaan ear yu.'

'Don't be renk. Mek me tell yu.'

'Yu's dawg. It mek yu too ugly.'

'Don't ax me. Me cyaan go now, me busy. Me head a-hurt me.'

Sibyl walks in. Then I can't throw insults at Pa. 'Sibyl. Sibyl,' I'm calling to she, because she also don't know where's we mama. Rebecca Laslie's we mama for sure. Sibyl's face answers silent. Empty. She don't understand sickness I live in. *Me was back*

because me was smashing an tearing, wanting to be rid of wot's in me belly.

Pa says, 'Yu behaving white again.'

Inside I'm warring. I'm saying to Sibyl, 'E too hard,' running out. Running from wharf. Running back to great house.

Chapter One

Elizabeth

3, BEACON TERRACE, TORQUAY
13 November 1838

My dearest Miss Mitford,

My beloved father has gone away; he was obliged to go two days ago, and took away with him, I fear, almost as saddened spirits as he left with me . . . His tears fell almost as fast as mine did when we parted, but he is coming back soon – perhaps in a fortnight, so I will not think any more of them, *but of* that. *I never told him of it, of course, but, when I was last so ill, I used to start out of fragments of dreams, broken from all parts of the universe, with the cry from my own lips 'Oh, Papa, Papa!' . . . Well! But I do trust I shall not be ill again in his absence and that it may not last longer than a fortnight . . .*

Just weeks ago I swooped down on my dear brother Bro in a storm of emotion which quite wore me out, hence my recent removal to Torquay; yet this detail need not be revealed in correspondence – it is safer to say a blood vessel burst during one of my coughs and I fell gravely ill, which is also true. To have stayed in London would, Dr. Chambers said, have been suicidal, so here I must remain.

I hang by a thread between life and death, and can feel with each morsel my weight increase. Bro says I have grown vain. But I am bloated with guilt. Any desire to eat left me in March last. Since then I have shed weight as a snake sheds skin. In but three months I shall be thirty-three yet my anxiety increases as does my weakness. My new doctor, Dr. Barry, believes blisters and leeches will remedy this. I can't see how such a miserable treatment will

effect the shedding of guilt and anxiety. Doctors can be full of absurdities.

This doctor forbids me to write *anything*! Especially poetry. Which is good, for I never can write when ordered to, but when refused, *that* is when I can. And do. It is a mercy Bro is with me in this conspiracy. I would not dream of sending my verses to anyone without first passing them under his keen and critical eye.

Although this morning Dr. Barry caught me in the act – I was mid-way through 'The Sea-Mew' – and I have sworn not to write again, already I know what I shall write next. And there is another poem I am thinking on while I sit watching over this mesmerizing sea.

14 November 1838

Kind Papa has written permitting my sister, Henrietta, to stay permanently during my confinement to this room. Bro is to remain too – *I* shall see to *that*. Dearest Georgie travelled here with us but Papa says he must soon return to London. Weaving a tapestry of comings and goings my other brothers – Stormie, Henry, Daisy, Sette, Occy – circulate as regularly as their other engagements will allow; as will my sister Arabel. Hopefully Sam is sailing back from Jamaica – he is a constant cause for distress. Papa himself has promised to visit every two weeks.

My beloved Arabel, do pray *write, & don't wait for me to do it . . .*

. . . Now mind! – you are not to fancy that I am in the least worse if you hear of any more blisters. Dr. Barry made up his mind from the first I believe that he wd. give me plenty of them – & the better I declare myself, the firmer became his resolve . . . he really does take most incessant pains, & everybody says with a corresponding ability, to do me good – and doing good does not always mean, in this world, giving pleasure. You see, I had made up a hope of my own, encouraged by Dr. C's permission, to manage here without medical visits, & to trust simply to God's sun & air as the means of accomplishing whatever mercy He intended for me. So that I had the less ready patience for certain persecutions – & for not being allowed to write or read or eat or drink or go out or stay in, or put on my stockings, without a certificate from Dr. Barry. And really it has come to this.

Now fancy – on the occasion of my writing-case being accidentally visible – 'Have you been writing today, Miss Barrett?' 'No.' – 'Did you write yesterday?' 'Yes.' 'You will be so good as not to do so any more!' – And again – 'You have observed my directions & been idle lately, Miss Barrett?' 'Yes.' 'And within these last three weeks you have never written any poetry . . . Well then! I may as well take my leave! I have told you the consequence. You must do as you please; but if you please to do this, neither I nor anyone else can do anything for you.' And then there are flannel waistcoats up to the throat – & next to the skin – & most of the most disagreeable things you can think of besides . . . provided that you happen to be particularly imaginative whilst *you think!*

My bed is shaken with vibrations! The steam packet departs. Soon Crow, the maid, will knock with my tray, for that dreadful hour, eleven o'clock, is close at hand – as are letters to me from Papa and Arabel. Bro's rowing across the bay to the steam packet will not have been wasted.

Every morning at eleven o'clock I am made to take asses' milk and soup, and a meal in the evening at six. Oysters or macaroni. At these times I have no appetite; this surprises me not, for ever since my eyes first opened I have felt hunger only for books. Though oysters have on occasion proven reasonably palatable.

Bro's footsteps are upon the stairs.

'No mail today?' I ask. Bro shakes his head, licks his pale dry lips and rubs his wind-chaffed cheeks with an open hand. 'Dr. Barry left hours ago. Why did you not come to see me immediately after the examination?'

'I was afraid of what he might have said,' Bro replies, 'and I've been working below with water-colours.'

'Dr. Barry said I look as though I carry the world's burdens with me and should worry less. He also gave his opinions concerning the situation on West Indian plantations, saying that although the apprenticeship system was in ruins it should never have ended early.' I feel a spirit of rebellion rising in me like flames from a burning torch. 'Was slavery not immoral?' I ask in a tone more heated than I had intended, but even my strident pitch belies the true feelings within my heart, which are more fiery than Bro would suppose. 'The emancipationists should have just waited, Bro, for apprenticeship to end, and done nothing?' Bro looks blankly at the

sea. Has he no sense of guilt? Not one breath of sorrow? 'People will continue to be hurt and it's no one's fault if we do nothing. Is that it?'

'Slavery's over and they are free,' Bro says finally.

'Many died cruelly. They needed our help.'

'They are dead. There's nothing we can do for them.'

That West Indian planters caused such grief is incomprehensible. I long to seek forgiveness for them yet I know not how. 'I'm not good at being alone, Bro, and I know you are here. But I *feel* wretched and miserable. I *feel* alone.'

Bro sinks heavily into the armchair opposite my bed. He takes from his pocket a small rectangular card. He emits a sort of lassitude as he turns the pale blue calling-card bearing Annie Shropshire's neat copperplated handwriting, and paints, with his eyes, her lively, determined, innocent face. He prickles with frustration. Something truly terrible happened between them.

'Papa said you attract all the wrong women.'

Bro's blue-green eyes are ready to turn to anger. 'Papa could not, would not, even join me in my room for tea before he left for London.'

'He was busy with business in the study. You know what happened, Bro. Papa had re-arranged his plans and was going to catch the stagecoach a day late for the sake of wishing us all a hearty farewell. Suddenly he changed his mind and almost flew from the house when an article on increased taxes for cargo imported at the London docks appeared in *The Times*. He barely said farewell.'

Quietly Bro stands and turns for the stairs.

Each farewell I endure feels like a preparation for death. A morbid notion to be sure – one that leads to a much exaggerated response – I am prone to faintings and uncontrollable tears when anyone I love departs. Good-byes remind me of leaving dear Mama for the sake of my own poor health. To live without a mother's love is to live without hope. Is that why my family avoids involving me in good-byes? Is that why, when Bro went to join Papa on business in London four years ago, what I was told would be a two-week separation ended with him sailing to Jamaica without any farewell?

Bro had to assist our uncle on the estates before the slaves' emancipation, how well I know *that*. The ship that took Bro away to

Jamaica, away from me, was the *David Lyon*, the ship in which I now have shares. That is a curse if ever there was one.

I lie on the bed in this chamber, with the shadow of my distant father – in girlhood I thought only of how to win his smile. Counting memories, I stumble across some forgotten treasure. Hand in hand, I – in a little white muslin dress and frilled pantalettes – am running with Bro; slipping, slithering in and out of the sheets of sunlight shooting down between parted leaves.

'Ba,' Bro says, 'let's not play hide-and-seek.' He has reneged on plans we made at luncheon, and at the last minute.

I return stubbornly, 'Yes, now. Before the school bell rings.' We race across the cobbled yard, under the great clock tower and along shady gravelled walks, round lily ponds fringed with bullrushes, past the home farm cottages, past the dairy and gun-rooms, by haylofts and back to the lake – a fine sheet of water fed by springs and well stocked with the fish it is our pleasure to catch – past cascading streams, over the Alpine bridge, by the summer-house and ice-house, which is under construction, the walled garden, the hot-house's massive flues where peaches, figs and grapes ripen, around the cinder shed, back through the gateway to the stables and harness-rooms, past the cider-house, brew-house and cellar to the laundry, and hide in the knife-and-shoe hole. We hear the bell and the governess, Mrs. Orme, calling all the way from the south gate, and tear down the subterranean passage, through the ornamental shrubbery to the chapel and school-house. Bro gazes from the school-room window to the lawn where at the weekend he played cricket with Papa and Sam; beyond, the obelisk of Eastnor Castle peeps above treetops.

Bro was aged two and I three when Henrietta was born and the family moved to Hope End in Herefordshire. After Henrietta came Sam, Arabel, Charles – nicknamed Stormie for being born during a thunderstorm – Georgie, Henry, Alfred – who we nicknamed Daisy – Septimus (Sette), Octavius (Occy). At Hope End we lived in a world of our own.

How can life be so treacherous as to take childhood away? But since he first moved on this earth Bro has always been my sanctuary. My adytum. It is true I was jealous of him when he abandoned me at Hope End to study at Charterhouse – how the tide turns.

Although Bro is wanting in his sense of direction and purpose – particularly passion – my love for him increases with each hour he spends at my bedside, with each passing day. We were jointly baptized, Bro and I. Never was there a truer love between brother and sister. The invisible sun burning within us feels as comforting as the distant lowing of cattle strolling across hills, past trees bent inland; the pale yellow sunlight streaming across moving waters reaching forever away from me.

Dearest Arabel,

Will Georgie really go . . . I am sitting up in bed wondering & wishing perhaps vainly about it . . .

15 November 1838

This afternoon, vain or not, I have felt particularly anxious, though dear Bro will say unduly, about my appearance. One can put up a mirror to oneself but can one turn the image back to truly see how one is viewed? Can a woman see herself from her own reflection? I have long been displeased with the plainness of the face that peers darkly from my glass. I am small and black. (Black, I imagine, as Sappho.) A thin partition divides us; why do I regard the woman who watches me with distaste? She has a searching quizzical look, slightly remote and mischievous; the features, wasted, compared with my sister Henrietta, who sits quietly sewing by the window overlooking the bay, and certainly *is* very pretty – there is no nose to speak of; the brow, furrowed and pain-worn. I take objection to the hands for they are the fairy-fingers of an invalid. The mouth is large, obstinate, projecting – she is full-lipped – and has dark eyes, deep and calm, and long thick ringlets, again, dark brown, almost black, which Crow must brush very, very soon lest they lose their silkiness. Funny though it seems when I think on it, the droopy locks resemble Miss Mitford's dear spaniel's long floppy ears.

17 November 1838

Darkness is lowering. The garish red sea, framed by my two bedroom windows, is shot with a jealous shock of yellow from the last light of a fast-disappearing sun.

Yesterday evening when Crow brought my opium draft I wore the silver locket inscribed with *Edward & Judith Barrett of Cinnamon Hill*, a family heirloom given to Papa by his mother and brought from Jamaica by Bro to be passed down to me. This evening the locket has vanished. We have shaken out the coverlets and the *couvre-pied* warming my feet, searched beneath the bed, under the carpet. Crow swept all four corners of the floor and emptied the small box of sharpened pencils by the oil-lamp on my bedside-table; she even scoured the stairs lest somehow the locket was transported down there.

I am naked beneath Papa's accusing gaze. All is undone. My relationship with Papa, with the great-grandmama I never knew. Gone.

A vivid sky of dazzling silence casts shards of ochre light which invade this space I already know too well. Gilt-edged scrolls on red-cushioned chair backs glint amber; the family griffin crest glows gold; the sofa's elegant claw feet shine sharply, waiting to pounce. Never has fear gripped me more firmly. An undefinable fear. I am inside a glass bowl surrounded by distorted bulging serpent-like furniture. Loneliness gnaws at my stomach like hunger as I reach across the bedside-table for my writing-case.

A sentence resounds in my head: *Ba, pull yourself together. Climb down from the bed, do away with the chair, and walk along the cobbled street!*

Crow once supported me to the door. She steadied me each time I stumbled, and when it became evident I could not walk alone, she wept into my hair, hiding her face. That was so many days ago I can barely remember. Opium colours my life here. Dresses my world in radiant crimson. Yet I want to cross this vast desert unaided, I want to walk once more.

Now, if I can practise sitting myself up, then spend time swinging my legs over the side of the bed until my toes reach the floor, I can begin the process of hobbling, or crawling should it come to that, to the door.

For a while I stare into the fire. The acrid odour of burning coal snags in the back of my throat. Flames can change their character, making extravagant shapes, but the wild forms into which they bloom only wither, fading to feebly glowing embers.

Even the carpet is hard and hostile. I find the courage to stand up. I am groping, unstable at the window-sill. Someone is watching me – not through the window, for one cannot see up into here from the street. Torrents of sound gush in my ears like water flooding from sluice-gates. I turn my head – am thumped on one cheek – feel warmth on my face, and open my eyes towards the hearth, which holds the blackness of a grave. I must have fallen. I lie, unable to move, and the dark figure that haunted my thoughts disappears.

Footsteps approach. 'Ba, are you all right?' Henrietta's voice.

A biting wind dashes up stairs, awakening me fully to the perplexing view of Crow's and Henrietta's green and red slippered feet advancing across the spread of carpet weave expansive as the blue heaving sea.

'She must have attempted walking,' Henrietta is saying.

Once more I feel faint. In my dream I see the woman again – a dark shape flitting across the doorway, down the staircase where the wind whistles, and out into the hall. She is standing at the door to her life beneath the black pavilion of sky; branches sway like waving arms. She launches into the blustery night. Ebony ringlets swirl round her head, stream across her face. The fire lights easily. She is burning a house of memories. Flames, like some great beast, shoot through a bedroom similar to mine at Wimpole Street; a blazing heat consumes the chaise-longue, the armchair; drawers crowned with a coronal of shelves to carry her books. She moves past sheets of crimson merino paper. Smoke streams round the window where a box full of deep soil is fixed. The scarlet-runners, geraniums and nasturtiums are charred tentacles about a great ragged ivy root with trailing branches so long and wide the tops fasten to a window of the higher storey, whilst the lower feelers cover all the panes; her face; arms; legs. Ivy tendrils mesh with her wild matted hair.

As Crow and Henrietta peel me from the floor, the admonition resounds again: *Ba, pull yourself together. Climb down from the bed, do away with the chair, and walk along the cobbled street!*

18 November 1838

When Bro came to my bedside at his usual hour this morning worry was written across his face. 'Crow, Henrietta and I find

ourselves faced with a deuce of a dilemma: either we lie to Papa and hide the fact that you not only stood but are walking, or we live in blatant denial of who you are.'

'This act of which you speak entailed such appalling suffering it would be preferable to be dead,' I return. My thoughts are in harmony on this matter. But I long for contentment and a sense of peace without a draught of that dusky-brown drug. In my cloudless state of mind, I have discovered I think not less clearly, as I had feared, but with *more* precision. I have entered into what Papa and Henrietta call my 'rebellious state'.

Seating himself in the armchair, Bro stretches out a closed hand. 'Is this what you were looking for?' His hand opens gently, as though protecting flower heads. The locket and chain make a small silver mound on the opened flat of his palm. 'Henrietta found it beneath you by the fire-place.' Bro's words come soberly, 'You must try to live your life less cast down by the weight of sadness.'

He folds his fingers back over the locket and leans forward, talking with greater intensity. 'When I was in Jamaica, the number of Africans on the estates given to committing suicide had greatly reduced. The governor allowed them to air their grievances. In the newspapers I read of thousands of ordinary folk rallying in London's streets against the apprenticeship system. One churchwarden was reported as saying the traffic in human bodies and blood had injured the perpetrators as much as their victims, and was a disgrace to the religion they professed to preach, and to our nation – in fact, all those concerned had been plunged into an abyss of iniquity.' He pauses, clears his throat, and shows his sense of contrition by turning his eyes to the floor. 'Papa wrote to me of what you and Arabel did. Why do you fight Papa? Why do you fight your illness when what you need is rest?'

I think back to the churchwarden, an ardent emancipationist closely linked with the Society of Friends, and his merry band of children with their peaches-and-cream complexions of the moors. His enthusiasm was contagious.

The chapel door had flown open. Papa burst in. He bristled. His face a ghastly white. Needless to say, he heard that Arabel and I had volunteered to sign a petition to end the apprenticeship system on West Indian estates.

'Did your ancestors work for you to throw their achievements back in my face?' Papa demanded, quite on fire. To the warden he exclaimed, 'We won't need your help eating dinner tonight!' With Arabel and I, protesting, in tow, he marched through the arched doorway, proceeded along the road to the gateway of Belle Vue, our rented home, went straight to the dining-room, knocked back his gin aperitif, snatched the ham we were all to have eaten for dinner from the table, charged along the grassy path running behind the house, and threw the ham to the neighbour's dogs. After Papa blew that meeting apart he demanded we attend a different chapel and wrote banning the warden from Belle Vue.

Like a great wave despair rolled up, ballooned within my heart and burst. How the apprentices must have prayed for freedom's cool breeze, prayed to do whatever they pleased. A furnace of guilt smouldered within me. Sour hatred permeated through those Belle Vue walls which were more frail than even I have become – I feared the entire house would collapse under the weight of the atmosphere. Arabel scowled and moaned. I hid my emotions. But that night Arabel and I did not eat – we shared in the apprentices' suffering. Papa got no pleasure out of that whipping. Yet his expression of desolation purged my sense of injury. I determined never to cross him so again.

I say to Bro, 'I don't want to fight Papa. I'm scared inside. Afraid of who I am.'

'We mustn't fight him, Ba. There's more to this than you know. News reached Papa from the West Indies last year,' Bro says, 'news Papa has kept from me, news which gives cause for much more grief. Papa was advised that Sam is swayed by very bad influences and in conflict with church ministers, overseers, attorneys, even the Chief Justice of Jamaica, Sir Joshua Rowe, for hosting parties which have become notorious across the island.'

A few years ago, sweet Sam proudly announced in a letter to Papa that he was serving as an ensign in the St. James and St. Elizabeth Militia. Mention in our uncle's will of his approval of Sam's 'general conduct' implied that incidents concerning Sam had recently occurred which were not favourable. This was a great worry and brought tears to my eyes. Bro has now confirmed our uncle was alluding to some disgraceful behaviour. Yet Sam's rise

in rank and the overall tone of the will persuaded our dear, ever-forgiving father to pay expenses Sam ran up on an American voyage. We none of us have been certain of Sam's whereabouts since March last when Papa wrote to Sam that he didn't know whether he was still in Jamaica, or preparing to leave, or determined to remain. Needless to say Papa, Bro and I are worried sick.

27 November 1838

Double the usual opium dose tonight has not relaxed me in the least and leaves me wondering whether I should take less, or more. Slanted up against piles of cushions and pillows, taunted by screaming gulls, I am unable to find comfort and unable to sleep. I am troubled by a dream I had last night in which all the passengers of a West Indies vessel, except two rescued by Bro, were drowned. I fear I have dreamt this before – that makes my heart tremble and I fear it is a portent of something terrible. Sweetest Sam, I pray the angels in heaven are watching over you.

The woman in the mirror has returned. I hadn't seen her for days but have felt her presence outside the door. I've been aware of her moving about my midnight candle and amongst shadows clipped by dawn. I've sensed her creeping into my thoughts, smelt her in lavender-scented sheets. Tonight she stands in shadows on the far side of the room.

She is superstitious. I can tell because the way she stares at me is the way people gaze into a crystal ball, deeply, as I examine my own reflection in the mirror Crow holds before me now.

I have tried to talk to the woman but I can't speak when I cry. Crow comforts me like a child in her arms. The other woman cries too. But not in the same manner as I. She does not weep.

Then this small-boned woman with thick ebony ringlets, moving smoothly past the window drapes in a dress of magenta-coloured velvet veiled in black lace, vanishes into the wintry wind.

Am I possessed by fever, or drowsy from over-intoxication? I swelter yet am shivering, bound by sheets sodden with perspiration.

Whirling before me now is a wheel made of my brothers' and sisters' faces: Sette, Occy – noisy, smiling, fit and fair, they seem to be teasing me; eyes half closed, lazy Daisy's dozy grin lurches