

Tea Cup Holds the Heart

by Virginia Hine

*The warmth of my hands against the cold of the ocean
like the moment of death closing,
poisoning my body with life.*

*I awake to the thrumming of my bones, until bed.
I need to feel the cold on my bones at midnight
To see the man
with a lion tamed on his inner arm.
A ghost man, a keepsake.*

The cracks started in Sydney, the mirror could not find my reflection

I am at the airport. *Allure* is in the air, it is powdery, sweet.
At the register the young woman takes my notebook
and camera film from the other assistant who runs away saying:
“I’ve got to get out of here, I can’t stand it anymore.”
I make a comment on the sickly smell; I think to myself
whilst paying, it’s as transient and shallow as the word.
Before the plane starts boarding, I go to the bathroom – looking in the mirror,
I feel that someone else has dressed me. I am wearing a blue Hawaiian shirt,
white cotton pants, black slip-on sandals, a straw hat, a yellow sports watch
and a New Zealand greenstone in the shape of an ornamental fish hook.
It’s over.

*After love has broken,
I will not go searching in the quagmire.
We cannot lie and rut forever.*

*After love has broken,
I will not rush into the pit of tongues.
I will stand like an American red oak catapulted from heaven.
Wind licked, I will inhale your memory into my shimmering leaves.*

*But my wounded roots pull at the grass with
muddy wooded hands spearing the earth,
screaming in short subterranean bowls.
I am splintered while I search for another you.*

A group of Japanese honeymoon tourists stroll towards the boarding gate.
Each couple is dressed in matching outfits. A Noah's ark of pale pink
polo tops and stone coloured shorts. They are playing love-games
like teenagers at lunch-time. One black-haired coquette is pawing her man

as she sits on his lap and pouts. The girl-flirt game. He pretends to ignore her, she hits and pouts again.

I fly into a long sigh of a sky too bright, too blue for my blood-shot eyes.

Dale attempts friendly conversation, he is from Pennsylvania. He has two teenage daughters one who changes her hair colour every week. He doesn't think he will recognise her one day. I nod, smile, nod again.

He starts asking me questions: how wide is Australia? How far is it from Sydney to Cairns? What is that Mountain range down there? I yawn.

He says he hopes it's not the company? I say no, your questions are keeping me awake. Being awake is painful, I think.

We land and walk across the hot tarmac towards a vibrating summer.

There was no war on my doorstep, no famine

On the bus from Coolangatta airport to my home town, the radio is playing *I Am Woman* by Helen Reddy. Once the monologue on toilet and smoking rules are over, we start the trip down the coast to Tweed Heads.

The passengers are dressed casually like locals, their tans are hard-core, their faces calmly gaze.

Outside, more sandals, more shorts in droves of two again, this time with oversized knees.

I try and meditate to stop you in my head.

You are a weak man – Helen and I are invincible, we are woman!

*You said you believed in fate, but you made a choice.
I was a background painting, you walked into and out of,
whenever it suited. It suited when I started asking questions.*

*You sat in the middle of our relationship like the Berlin Wall.
We couldn't go forward, to our future, even holidays
were a nuisance. You were irritating quietness.*

*Solitude and videos your favourite pastimes.
It was calm when we needed argument, careful when we keened for
passion. You worked hard and away from home and me.*

*I minded our possessions, our bills while balancing
sanity with yoga and meditation
to slay the anger caught under my skin, inside my throat.*

Sugar breathed on the east coast air

There is wildlife here at my brother's home, on a hill overlooking the Tweed River. Three hand-sized spiders, coloured red-gold, loom on webs every few steps up the hillside. I limbo under a black huntsman, the sentry of the front door.

No one kills spiders in my family. Cane toads yes, spiders no.

Except when two take shelter from humidity in the bathroom of a girlfriend's townhouse. She is weeping on her knees. I have to sweep, am too hasty, not brave enough, I kill nervously.

Later at the bathroom in the house on the hill, I see a fat huntsman. For the next forty-eight hours my eyes circulate like a soldier on enemy lines.

Jake is at the door and his deep voice rumbles hello.

Jake is six-foot, lean, tattooed and hungry. He has a bear climbing over his shoulder and in the centre of his upper arm sits a wise bearded man.

He resembles me as we resemble our mother with her dark, wide-eyes.

He resembles me as we resemble our father, tombstone straight teeth.

We all have eyes that slice through the speaker once the joke turns sour, or when too many questions threaten the spirit.

His dog, this old wood house and his sharp cheekbones, needle at my heart.

The landlord is about to evict him and his flatmate, because they are late with their rent.

Jake is ready to leave, he is pissed off and talks of going North, fruit-picking with Silver in his rusted van.

Outside the door, attached to a large linked chain is Silver. He of mighty shoulders and balls, gapes his shark-like mouth and mutters an ancient roar of love. Twelve months old; they are needy of each other.

I decide I will treat Silver like a giant puppy who needs lullabies in his ear and lots of scratching under his jaw. Soon he is a huge muscled mass dribbling and adoring me.

Jake does that, he takes off when life gets cramped. Six-foot, angry and idea hungry.

Once, on a trip to Sydney, he stayed a couple of nights in my one bedroom flat.

It was hot; the carpet was too close to the ceiling, the shoe-box balcony offered no relief. Jake was playing his guitar, his long legs were stretched over the glass rail, beer on the floor. I set down a side table for a plate of sandwiches.

"Could you make it a bit squishier please, it's not quite poky enough yet,"

he said derisively. And that is what he thought of my city.

I wish to give him direction. I give him twenty bucks for cigarettes.

He takes off to an indigenous surf contest. I have just flown in and he's out the door.

Alone in this house of eviction I cannot go outside, I fear Silver will not be as friendly in the dark. Then there is the sticky-webbed stairs that creep down the hill.

Humidity gathers the dust and shafts of sunlight cut through shadows.

I am stilled. How does lonely meet lonely?

It is flat. This will be a journey of broken birds.

The next night we are cooking fresh seafood. Jake is making a vinegar-chilli marinade for the prawns. He tells me how he likes this girl, feels comfortable around her.

"We'd make beautiful kids."

He is nut brown, she is coastal black.

He rolls the prawns on the fry pan.

She's with someone who treats her bad.

The smell is sharp.
She is local, he won't do anything, because he's friends with her brother.
They roil and roast.
He doesn't like her boyfriend.
The prawn flesh pops.
He mutters and flicks the spatula.
"Why did you break up?" he asks me.
I crush garlic into soy sauce.
"He said he got cold feet, but after eight years together, I wanted to know our future, so I asked the questions."

Add the grated ginger and coriander.
"Anyway he is with someone else, just two weeks after I moved out."
Spoon onto raw oysters.
"That's a cop-out," Jake says. We move to the table.

*A small thud as my holiday self, hawaiian-shirted, leaves through the door.
Silver does not see her, he is looking directly at me, standing next to my
brother, his master. I will have to grow a new skin.*

"He must have been insecure, full of fear, running away from himself. God, I haven't had a long term relationship, but I know that if I broke up with someone after eight years, I would be devastated. You'd have to be wouldn't you?"
"Yes."

*The thud is louder this time and my lips are twitching, I haven't heard a
man speak to me like this.*

The sky always golden blue, dry, bright, cracking my holy heart

Jake's van has holes in the floor from rust. Like his bed, a mattress on milk crates, he will use it until threadbare. Youth is keeping him alive. He lives in this sunny town of rivers that glitter to the sea, red soil that once flowed from Mt. Warning crusts your hands and seeps into your dreams. Things grow. Create yourself anew as a tomato, oyster or avocado farmer. A real estate mogul, health food peddler, or any type of fisherman while under the lantana hills – the stealthy marijuana bushes spin gold. Tweed Heads is for the happily dying.
The retired spend their savings and the young people wither like veterans.
We walk into Coolangatta to take me to the bus transit centre. Down a back street, I see our past littered with people. Mango and banana fills my nostrils as a flatbed ute with fruit and vegetables loaded in baskets drives by.
Our father owned that truck before he ran away to Darwin to seek his fortune, again. That delivery run broke his back, and his marriage. I had left home by then, but Jake remembers washing potatoes, watching another business proposition of Dad's ebb and flow until he tired of it.

It's hot walking, the humidity making it difficult to talk. Jake is working out how to leave and he tells me how the fruit-picking trip will give him some regular money and he

can visit a few old mates on the way. Even take his old surfboard. It sounds desperate to me, traveling North with a dog in a rusty van, in hope of work on the way.

I buy my bus ticket from a young girl with multi-coloured braids; she goes outside for a cigarette as soon as I have put my backpack on the rack. There is time so we walk across the street to a clothing warehouse and I buy Jake a black padded jacket he likes. I know it's the wrong season, but I think he's cold.

I walk onto the bus after a strong hug from Jake. I hope he has luck with his girl and another week's grace from his landlord. Goodbye Silver – you are his mate.

Aching to catch it in a tea cup, poised on a high white shelf

*During the session she said, "You have one hand holding one alone."
"Yes."*

*End of session, but these words at the door, "Real grief doesn't come
until hope is gone."*

Loneliness rises in my chest as soon as the bus door closes. Like a fortress I return to after day leave. If I swallow I will feel it. My throat aches, stretched taut to keep it out. Moving my body through space, if I stop, the questions start. I say to myself: I will miss him for half of the trip and then the other half I will plan my holiday in Byron. A baby screams the whole way, I don't care, his squalling fills my head and makes the angry thoughts less sharp.

*What are you doing? Who are you with? Why are you over there and not
here beside the warm air of my skin? Why did you not fight for us – make
your love for me stronger than your fear?*

The truth is, 'we' were gone as soon as I left the apartment. You found someone from your past. You claimed it fate, I call it choice. I found her too after I tidied my life into boxes. I found your love notes, your post office box number, her photo. I found too much.

*I will create new stars between us – navigate a stolen ship through time – a Chinese
dynasty will fall and Homer will finish his epic. All the lost children will be found. Only
then can I grasp reins of light and race my chariot back. You will be a memory reflected
in the eyes of crabs – stoically waiting for their death from the gulls.*

I remember how we broke after a party on a steamy summer's night, how after walking home, I lay flat on the carpet and you sat above on the sofa. I couldn't look at you as I punched the questions out in alcoholic bursts. You held your head in your hands, you knew the answer, you said: I think we should break up. What else could you do? You were happy with how things were. They were nothing. We did our own thing and met in the middle of the night and I talked and you slept. You had been offered an opportunity at work to transfer to London for a year. I loved London, all our visits there

had been for your work so that our dates were tacked onto the end of long business meetings. If we had been more in love, I would have gone, content to walk the damp streets alone.

Not in love, cold London was not possible – I would be creeping round the last pieces of us, I would find another you.

*Another business trip, this time two months to Canada,
New York and then the UK. He didn't seem to realise this was our last day
together. He must have slept all day, I went to work late after waiting for
him to wake up for breakfast. I came home at four and heard him
showering. He was whistling. I ordered home delivery. I told him about
my day, he didn't ask. Then at eight the television went on. He
watched all his favourite shows and then shuffled
through his Chinese video collection, chose one he'd seen a thousand
times and fast forwarded to the best martial arts segments. I waited to see
if we would talk.*

*I couldn't sleep, he started to pack around two. Nothing. Except this late
night packing for an early flight across the world.*

It took a year after the floor campaign for me to work out how to say goodbye. Someone had to move. At least he was consistent, Graeme did more of nothing and I packed and sorted the CD collection, photos and gifts. Divided and cleaned the rubbish of two lives down the middle into one suitcase then moved out of there before my heart had a chance to lie down for another year.

Stretch to reach it, the handle cracks

Byron Bay and a cute English backpacker is driving the Hostel minibus, he has newly twined dreadlocks, thongs and the deep tan of the forever holidaying. I see a tattoo, the Asian symbol for luck down low on his spine. He keeps talking – how he loves it here, is planning to stay another month before heading to the 'big nature' – the Daintree. At the Hostel, my room is full, an olive-skinned girl from Israel is traveling with a freckled English woman – she is around forty. They met on the bus coming up from Sydney. The other bunks are occupied by two girls from Sweden, traveling before they enter University. The Swedish girls still have the puppy fat of their cold climate and are happily bronzing in the sun, in bikinis all day.

I refuse the offer of a swim and forget their names as soon as they introduce themselves. I have arrived at the Hostel but I feel heavy like I am still with the suitcases, the found photos and Silver and my brother. Who will take over while I am here alone in this full room at the hostel?

*It is raining, I wait, you arrive together. Our home is now yours.
I am clenched all over and trembling. I hear laughter, I knock, you answer
the door together. I am strangled by the trembling, your lips are in a
straight line. Cold. I ask my question: did you see her, sleep with her*

before we had ended? You answer no – together. Various remarks on timing, how it all just happened quickly, you had seen her a month before as a friend, she was ending a relationship slowly, it went on. I see past you, the red couch we bought in Newtown at a secondhand store. I remember the photo you took of me on the couch one morning after making love – my skin is rosy, caught in the perfect shaft of sunlight, and my eyes are quiet, safe.

I look back at you both in the doorway, blocking me. I can't deny it, it comes up inside me before I have the gall to stop it – you suit each other. You are mousey-looking. I leave before I have time to cry in front of you. That night, of course, all my hope is gone.

At night in a room full of strangers, in air so thick the ceiling fan is just mindless whirring,

I dream. I am alone on a dark street, scared. I flag a woman in a car to stop, and we drive towards bright lights, to a safer place. We are driving on a cliff road with the sea below. I look down and see young girls bathing and the tide is coming in, swirling around high jagged rocks. I worry for them – if I had a daughter swimming in the dark, near cliffs, I would be horrified. We arrive at a party in a big house. I am walking through hallways, weaving around groups of people, until I see an old friend from Uni, she is flirting with a dark man. I feel my stomach lunge – I know him, his face is as familiar as the wind on leaves, although I've never seen him before. He comes over to me and we start to walk down the corridor together, he kisses me on my face and mouth, as if this is the end. I feel his whiskers on my nose and lips. He raises his arm to brace the wall and there it is, I see it! Blue inked, a lion on his inner forearm. I think of my friend, if she is jealous, but we are nuzzling, languidly, as if always. Why am I doing this in front of these people? Then his lips are on my neck, longer this time. It is not safe, I wish to be as reckless as the sea girls swirling near the rocks.

The next day, the Swedish girls ask me if I would like to go hang-gliding off the cliff near the lighthouse.

Yes.

*The cracks started in Sydney, the mirror could not find my reflection
there was no war on my doorstep
no famine
sugar breathed on the east coast air
the sky always golden blue
dry, bright, cracking my holy heart aching
to catch it in a tea cup, poised on a high white shelf
stretch to reach it, the handle
cracks.*

*My shoulders were lined with people catching a ride, wardens of work and office
knotted with faces of the strange, they hung on my neck tendons
onwards they said, good friends pricked my fingertips
see you're alive, they rejoiced*

*under my ribcage, the convict fluttering of the lost
unrequited
too close to my heart, quickening, too many
to hold through the blue day.*

*Horizon self not yet feeding the earth, not yet
the tea cup is stretching its handle towards my boby heart.*