

My husband told me a story about buildings before we came here. In the central district the old Hongkong and Shanghai Bank looms proudly above the other buildings, full of British bankers and rich Americans. When the People's Bank of China built their rival headquarters several blocks away they designed the top of the tower to look like a knife's edge thrusting towards the British bank. It was no accident, Joseph laughed. In Hong Kong nothing was left to simmer under the surface.

It must have been during those first December days that he told me the story, before he got caught up in the suspended time of the interior. Perhaps on one of the days we walked together up a mountain path and saw the vista of

islands rising up from the China Sea, curving smoothly out of the green glassiness like the contours of a body, the mist of early morning a canopy against the blue of the sky. We looked at one another, each about to say something, our double gasp of awe fading in the air.

It was these luminous moments, rescued from days of waiting and silence, that I was trying to hold on to.

I had never seen real flamingoes until I came to the Kowloon Gardens in Hong Kong. On the lake there is an island pink with them. You can sit on the benches and watch them standing still and straight in the reeds. There are green tortoises too, which tip the surface of the water, and great orange coi. Businessmen in suits mill around the edge of the lake, smoking sweet clove cigarettes and squinting into the sun. Beyond the lake there is an aviary where murmured conversations are held under the squalling of white cockatoos and galahs.

Walk out of the gardens past the White Mosque and the Mirimar Shopping Arcade and you come to Kowloon Square where fountains send drifts of spray onto grimy tables. There are noodlehouses and fruit shops selling bruised mangosteens, and jackfruit that smell rancid when you break them open. Grey apartment towers lean over the square and sometimes you can see laundry flapping from bamboo poles on the balconies.

On the south side of the square, next to the Go-Go

Club, is the Sun Hing Lung Medicine Company. Here you can buy cream made from crushed black pearls to smooth away wrinkles, and Japan Wonderful Oil to improve the constitution. In summer they sell Pa Po Tang Seal pills and Red Flower Oil to stop heat rash and in winter there are Golden Gun capsules to warm up the blood. In a room behind a blue curtain old Mr Lung mixes cures and potions and sells sex tonics and prophylactics to girls and businessmen.

We live at the university. The flat comes with Joseph's position. There are a dozen of us in the residents' apartments, all living in spaces carved out of what must once have been a grand old house. Inches behind the head of our bed is someone else's shower and at night I can hear the water dripping slowly, drop by drop. The halls smell of ginseng and dried fish. I hear cooking noises and washing noises so I know there must be other people living here, but I never see them. I saw a hand once, reaching out of a window to catch a dust fairy.

After Joseph leaves in the mornings I wander through the apartment, staring out the windows. The glass is old and disillusioned; it warps the surfaces of things. It's not a home, this place. Some of our things are still in the boxes they were shipped in. The Mexican plates are carefully wrapped in newspaper at the bottom of a crate. There is a formica table littered with Joseph's books and papers, all of them written

in the strange box-like characters of his second language. I stare at them, the shapes and lines that I know are letters, but the eye skips uneasily. They defend their secrets, geometrically.

I lean against the counter as I wait for the kettle to boil, for the hot cloud of steam from a glazed cup. Joseph brings me packets of tea leaves from oasis towns in the desert. The same brews, he says, the desert people have been drinking for thousands of years. The tribes of the Taklamakan Desert and the salt flats of Lop Nor, a vast shimmering mirage of the lake that was once there. He tells me about their abandoned villages. The slender trunks of desiccated fruit trees and the corner posts of dwellings. There are lintels and doorways and beams falling across each other, with the mark of the carpenter's adze still clearly on them. Shards of pottery, scraps of leather.

I walk down the stairs and into the sunlight. At noon the courtyard is deserted, the students gone to the cafeteria or the street food stalls. There's a stone bench by a small pond. I like to sit against the coolness of stone with the smell of damp, dark air rising up from the pond, my bare feet tucked up under my skirt. Everything is still. Joseph has told me about the famous water gardens of China, the canals and fountains carved out of men's imaginations, this desire for stillness at the hearts of cities.

There are things I could do here in Hong Kong. I could

teach English at one of the private language schools. I could befriend some of the other expatriate wives and we could meet for lunch at the Hong Kong Club and shop for Chinese silk at the markets in Repulse Bay. I could learn to play mahjong.

The women in the square play mahjong. They call it swimming without water. The sweeping movements of the arms across the table look like the movement of flesh through water.

Joseph is always tired when he comes home in the evenings. I see him in the doorway, a tall man in a pale coat running his hands through his hair. In my dreams I find a way to make his arms remember their desire, but when I wake he is the same silhouette of a man, sighing as he turns in his sleep.

He sits there in silence, balancing a glass of gin on the arm of the chair. He is a man who has never become accustomed to the slow, quiet ways of domestic life, never wanted the smell of soap and pine needles and stew bubbling on the stove in winter and the bother of possessions. China, and the lost cultures of its deserts, was always among us. He is a man who slips away on expeditions into the desert and returns suntanned and exhausted, unused to the ways of cities.

I sit at the table with my new pen and a clean page before me. My head aches, the light shines through the glass.

Last week I saw a man buy a nightingale. It was near the souk-like shops on Hong Kong Island. In the mornings the lane markets are crowded and noisy and the dipping awnings create a false twilight. It is a world of alleys and dim passages. Take a wrong turn, which is easy to do, and you find yourself staring into the doorway of somebody's house, six sets of dark eyes returning your gaze.

The Chinese love birds. Few apartments are without at least one songbird. They hang in intricate cages made from fine bamboo. Perhaps they love the quiet swish of trapped wings, the flare of colour, the high notes of song.

In the markets the lane they call Bird Street rings with the chatter of a thousand birds. The cages sway with movement,

one hanging from another. The air is slightly fetid and thick with the dusty flutter of contained feathers.

A Chinese man is pointing to a nightingale. He is old, his face is lined and dark, but his hair is thick and black. He stares at the nightingale tenderly, almost lovingly, and hands over a thick pile of notes. I don't know how much it costs to buy a nightingale.

Holding the cage high, he walks away down the lane. Passing a row of electronic stalls, blazing with neon and noisy with computer games and gadgets, he looks like a kind of allegory. Like a tender story from another time.

He walks away from the markets and I find myself following him. I want to know where he is going, see where he is off to. It is just a bit of fun, I tell myself, a little holiday from reality. So I clutch my shopping bag to my chest and pick my way through the swarms of locals and tourists.

It is easy enough to keep him in sight. I fix my eyes on his bobbing dark head as he strides purposefully along the edge of the sidewalk, weaving his way past all the peddlers and the sleepy-eyed men standing outside their shops. Sometimes I lose him, only to see the rattan cage again in the middle of the throng waiting at the traffic light.

A bicycle cuts in front of me and I jump back, my heart suddenly pounding, my hands shaking. The man with the bird is nowhere in sight.

I stand in the square. The sun is misty, the sun of the hot season. People look at me. People will still look at a white

woman here. You don't have to wear silk stockings to be a lady in the colonies any more, but people still look at you with curiosity and an old, muted hostility.

Then suddenly I see him again. He steps out of a teahouse, still holding the cage, and stands looking across the square for a moment before he turns and heads north.

We walk all the way to the Convention Centre by the harbour. It's a spring afternoon, a Saturday, and the harbour is full of brides. I count seven Chinese girls in full tulle skirts smiling anxiously into cameras on the steps of the centre. The pastel skyline of the island is a good backdrop for wedding photographs and on spring weekends you have to weave your way through bridal parties. The brides' smiles stretch across their faces and they move daintily and coyly but I cannot believe that they are all as serene as they appear. One of the brides, a young girl with gold at her throat and ears, turns to snap at a clumsy flowergirl with a foot on her frothy skirts. For an unphotographed, unnoticed moment her eyes are hard and her voice is sharp before she turns back to the camera and smiles again.

I lose him for a minute and then I find him again, leaning against the Clock Tower and lighting a cigarette. The Clock Tower, tall and brick and British as bulldogs, is one of the more picturesque remnants of a different time. It sits staunchly there on the harbour by the ferry terminals and every time I pass it I can't help thinking of tea and sponge cake and sweeping skirts. I find a low bench nearby and sit,

watching the outline of his face, just the cheekbones and the swell of the lips.

Sometimes I watch the lines of Joseph's face like this when he turns away from me in bed at night.

The nightingale man flicks away his cigarette and, holding the cage high, walks away from the harbour, from the late afternoon haze and the ferries rubbing their sides against the docks. I slowly uncross my legs and follow him, falling back far enough for him not to be able to hear the tread of my feet.

He picks up the pace now, turning abruptly down a side street and holding the cage closer to him. He walks bent slightly forward, like someone leaning into a wind. I look down at my feet, at the sidewalk, trying to fit just one step into each square before the crack. We weave around corners and down other streets I don't recognise. I begin to grow nervous, I don't know this area, we are far now from where I live and it will be dark soon. The evenings are thick and warm here but the shadows fall quickly.

Perhaps I should not have come, perhaps I should have turned away, fallen back, stayed sitting in the sun by the harbour.

We walk on, up some steps to a low bridge. Suddenly, in the middle of the bridge, he stops short and turns to face me. I wait for the accusation, the question, but he says nothing, just stands there staring me straight in the eye. I stand there, clutching my hands around my elbows, feeling

foolish, trying to think of some excuse, some explanation. He must have known all along, yet I never saw him glance back. He is still standing there, looking patiently at me. I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. Unnerved, I uncross my arms, turn around down the steps and walk away, back the way I thought I had come, towards home, towards my husband.

When I first came to Hong Kong I saw that I had not even begun to imagine it as it really was. On that first morning six months ago, across the dark water, I saw the lights of an enormous city glowing. Joseph's Hong Kong, a royal white city built on a rock. Hong Kong, a string of islands, silent in the haze, rising up from the dim blue coast of China.

We came by ship from China. 'It's the best way,' Joseph said, standing beside me on the deck, his arm lightly around my shoulders. 'You have to look closely. It's a city that only reveals itself in details. There's no straightforward beauty. Not like an Australian city.'

I held up my hand to shade my eyes from the sun. This was a new world he was showing me.

The night before, our last night in Perth, he had started awake violently, calling out something before lying back against the pillow with his eyes wide open. I slipped my arm across his chest.

‘Nightmare?’

‘Mmmm. Don’t worry.’

I brought him a glass of water and watched as he drank in the darkness, his throat contracting with each gulp.

I slid close to him and placed my head on his chest, feeling the brace of bone and the thump of his heart. We lay in each other’s arms with the light from the moon on us until he moved almost imperceptibly, signalling that he wanted to turn over, wanted to sleep free from hot limbs and awkward weight. He has never been a man who can spend a whole night in someone’s arms.

On the ship there was only the pulse of the engines, the swish of the wind and the faraway lights of the villages that line the estuary. They slipped by, faint and distant, as the river broadened towards the sea. And then, after the long hours of the night, after the thick white mists of the open sea, the fog lifted like a curtain and there was another harbour. A harbour full of ships, hundreds of ships floating motionless in the thick whiteness of the dawn. One by one they loomed out of the darkness, shapeless freighters with foreign flags above their sterns hanging in the clammy breeze, the layered ferry boats, the junks and sampans

cluttered between them.

And then, like another flotilla, the buildings. Rising up from the mist, pressing upon each other, immense and clean. White, silver and shimmering gold with masses of windows like portholes on a ship. The jagged rooflines, the glimmering towers and peaks, and beyond them all the looming greenness of the mountains, the still white villas and winding roads.

Sometimes I can’t trust my memories of the city, the physical truth of them. I walk through the city every day, gaze out at it, live in a high room above it, but it becomes for me the point around which stories and memories coalesce. It is a world half-invented out of memory and desire.

In those first days, I watched Hong Kong as one watches a silent film, the roar of the city soundless beyond thick glass. From the stillness of the hotel room I watched the rise and fall of skyscrapers, the jets gliding through the television aerials, flashes of sun on windows, the Nine Hills of Kowloon looming through the shimmer of heat. I looked for the bank built like the slice of a knife.

And the street. If I pressed my forehead against the cool glass and looked down, it was there, in all its seething, silent motion. The clamorous shop fronts, the gilded dragons, the swarming crowds, the hawkers’ carts, the wavering bicycles. And always the cranes swinging, jackhammers drilling, the

groups of men in hard hats poring over plans. A city like a story, always under construction, buildings torn down and replaced with ruthless speed. Bamboo scaffolding folding like delicate cages around the skyscrapers. The skyline changing every month, like a work in progress, like a forest.

In those first mornings I lay in the deep, gleaming hotel bath. It was big enough to float in and the enamel was so smooth that you slipped beneath the water if you didn't hold yourself up. You could quickly find the waterline rising above your chin, the firm warmth pressing against your eyelids. There's an iron bathtub in my mother's house, with real claw feet and the old kind of enamel. Sometimes she would sit on the edge of the tub and talk to me. Not often, she's not a woman for idle chat.

There's no-one to sit on the edge of a bathtub here. Joseph sits in a dark room surrounded by maps and books. His office at the university looks like a base camp. One whole wall is taken up by a map of the Taklamakan Desert. Joseph's desert. On the map, marked in red, are the expeditions that have criss-crossed the desert. Stein 1985. Stein 1988. Stein-Wise 1992. Clean, sweeping lines that tell nothing of the billowing heat, the air so hot it burns the lungs. The dust storms, the false turns, the endless dunes, the toll on the body.

I remember when Joseph would stumble back to me out of the desert. Exhausted, like an animal that has found its

way home. His head in my lap, my hair long enough to spread over his face. His hand sweeping out, touching the side of my face.

On nights when it was too hot to sleep he took me travelling through his desert. In the Sand Sea the dunes pile up like tidal waves and great ribs of rock lie in lines like ships frozen at anchor. He speaks about the desert as if he was reciting a poem. 'No words can properly describe the beauty of those sweeping curves of sand. They have to be seen. In the early morning or late evening when the hills throw cool dark shadows. The world ends out there.'

The desert is a place of danger. At nights the temperatures drop below zero and there are winds laden with knife-edged particles of ice. And the winds of the day with their driving grains that sting your face and legs like needles. False oases shimmer like distant lakes but are really dry expanses of salt.

But what fascinates him is the buried history of the desert. The lost worlds of ten thousand years ago when the climate was kinder and men lived there, hunting and keeping cattle, and acacia trees grew in plains of sand. Pomegranates, fruit trees, villages with temples and wells. Trade routes and enmities, gods and kings.

He tells me about the desert storms. The infamous spring storms, which are called black storms. They come from nowhere, the sky suddenly grows dark, the sun becomes a dark red ball of fire behind a thickening veil of dust. There



is a fierce hissing and lashing sand and pebbles. The roar and howl of the storm can last for hours. The men wrap themselves in felts and wait out the violence, huddled against the sides of cars. I see him there, safe, encased in softness in the eye of the storm.

It was the desert that brought us to Hong Kong. For years, perhaps since before I met him, Joseph had been looking for ways to get back to the desert. In many ways he was a man living in the wrong world. He belonged to a time in history where high-born men spent their inheritances organising expeditions into jungles and deserts. But he had no inheritance, and there were no more benevolent Royal Societies to send clutches of explorers off to the vast and silent reaches of the world. The world was no longer dignified and leisurely and he had to scramble along with the rest of us for travel grants and research fellowships.

The posting here was a stroke of luck, as they say. Joseph's mentor, the great sinologist Aurel Stein, had landed a senior position at Hong Kong University and he had helped smooth the way for Joseph. To head up a research team and write a series of reports on the history of the northern desert. The university had money and Stein had vouched for his protégé.

'We're onto a good thing,' Joseph said to me excitedly. 'A pay rise and free housing. We'll rent out the house here. You can apply for leave. Write. We'll be all right for money.'

He knelt in front of me and slipped his hands under the sleeves of my shirt and cupped them around my shoulders. His open palms were smooth and warm. His face was so close to mine I could no longer see his features, only his curling hair against my skin. 'Say yes,' he whispered.

Three months later I found myself in a hotel room above the street in a Chinese city, my husband already packing for a month-long trip to the desert.

I sat and watched my face in the darkness of the glass and below, the whole city cast into a neon glare. The vast collage of fluorescent signs, their Chinese characters marching one behind each other all the way up to the mountains. All the neon signs are obliged by law to be motionless, Joseph told me, to avoid confusing the navigators of aircraft. And so they stand silent and unblinking. There is something unnerving about the huge, unwavering stillness of them.

In the hotel room I sat on the edge of the bed, leaning slightly forward so I wouldn't tip back into the sinking softness of the mattress. I looked down at my shoes, which were soft leather, made to look like ballet slippers. Wrong for this city. The first morning on the streets they were streaked with dirt and grime.

Three days after we arrived Joseph left on his first field trip. He bent down to kiss me but I could tell that he was already gone, his eye on the desert. He left me, my husband, to the wide empty evenings and the muted stillness of the

hotel. To the city. ‘*Welcome to Hong Kong*,’ one of the brochures says, ‘*the Last Crown Colony*.’

Who can best tell the strange history of the island? The sepia soldiers in British scarlet, their great ships furrowing the seas, the brass of their telescopes glinting against the milky blur of the Chinese sky? Or the unsmiling emperors in their palaces, safe behind so much fine gilt and vases blooming with delicate flowers? The broadfaced fishermen, their salt-stiff hands casting the fine lines of their nets against the darkening horizon?

Over it all hangs not the yellow patina of the past, but the slow, dim haze of opium. The forgetfulness of ether. An island, borrowed or stolen, depending on who is telling the story.

The story is the story of any colony. The men in their ships, in imagining a paradise, saw a paradise lost, and so one for the taking. It is written in all the books, again and again, the same story. Only the ending has not been crafted yet and it looms, vague and uncertain on the milky horizon. It is everywhere, the talk of June thirtieth, the Handover, the return of the island to its true owners. It seems to me a strange thing, to borrow a place and then to return it.

In the paper there is an interview with the commander of the British Forces. I can see him in his barracks, the shine of leather and brass, the clean fold of cloth. A man, firm and

resolute against a misty Chinese sky, speaking of the duties of Britain, the responsibilities of empire.

‘We cannot just throw the key over the border at midnight to the People’s Liberation Army and say: “Carry on.”’

I imagine a set of keys, glinting brass-bright in the darkness. Tossed, circling, arcing against the huge night.

I can rescue these things from oblivion, make the island some last testament to the meaning of empire, but in the end they will be forgotten and I will be alone with them.

I woke early on those first mornings in the hotel room. If I were at home I would be out of bed immediately, coffee made and at work by eight. But those mornings I lay in bed for a long time, staring up at the ceiling. The room felt too vast. I wanted a narrow bed, a low window.

In the afternoons I walked up to Victoria Peak, the colony’s hill station. After the spring rains the road is deserted and everything shines with moisture. The wax trees, the bowers of jasmine and wild indigo, the wavering butterflies, the birds scattering before me. The villas lie half-hidden in shrubberies, their names shining from brass plates. *Cloudlands. The Eyrie. Strawberry Hill.* And suddenly, through a frame of trees, the vista of the city. The sea, blue-green, island-studded. The pale skyscrapers of Kowloon, sleek and sun-struck, the ferries making lines across the harbour, the jetfoil streaming across the water. The city is

elsewhere, the huge endless stir of it is far from me.

These will be the things that I will save from oblivion: a young Chinese man stepping out of a pink Rolls Royce, the ceaseless clatter of the streets, the name *Cloudlands*, the pungent smell of ginger and the vision of a hundred islands rising out of a huge green sea.