

# The waterhouse

By Tara June Winch

She's telling me about life, certain that I know none of it. She's leaning into the space between us as if the more words that drop from her mouth, the more they are muted with our difference, or time. I need to come close for this talking. Speaking over the lectern of knowledge, my ears can be diary pages for her. She knows that now they cannot deflate her heart if they don't know where the old punctures lay.

I'm watching the sinewy red wool that edges her neck, brushing against the lines that I imagine were once less permanent, old back road creases that became highways in the encroachment. Time nudges us closer and she forgets to keep the book partly closed for fear of falling in. The kettle is warming, moistening the blotching fibro, and we sit at the table. There is no need for place settings she says, he isn't coming back. She's at the counter looking out onto the yard now as she stirs the sugar, old sugar that needs crumbling with the end of the teaspoon and a good stir.

'Be careful going back to that city girl .... the city will take you for granted.'

My mother never saw my young stomach balloon, it'd just appeared on the doorstep, too much time had passed to still own a spare key.

My mother gave me pegs for the baby, they lay on the guest bed when we'd arrived back from the ward. Two big packets wrapped in the smooth white muslin. She knew that I'd need them. So many nappies and singlets and bits and pieces, always needed to be clean, soaked, drudging them in and out of the bubbling vinegar and bi-carb soda.

Let the water take its toll, soak them for as long as you can, she would say. She needed the water, lapping at her feet in the yard, cold weather mangroves and mud, slipping her flimsy dresses into the mildew flinching.

My mother knew how to clean the linens. A traditional woman with a hard working back. The warm wet against her forearms, sliding laundry in and out of tubs, the chemical powder stripping the skin of age, smoothing out a memoir. She'd loved him back, more I suppose than he had known, she always meant to say it, but thought too much that the word was overused in sentences beginning with I.

Maybe it *was* too much, for him, finding her cradling her wounds in bloody sheets, love gone wrong. Out to the earth, slipping her hands between the she oaks and soft clay. The backyard is trimmed with pines and oaks, they say that if you want a baby plant a she oak, only the lemon trees will know your secrets, those unborn and loose skinned little darlings.

My mother had planned the big family, purple she said was a good colour for the baby's room, best whether it was a boy or girl. But left her with sour milk and still breath instead. She never thought that all those unflinching hearts could take her husband away. It wasn't just the babies that didn't breathe I imagine, maybe in the unyielding land her heart too fluttered less and less.

It wasn't on purpose filling holes with babies and cages with dogs. It just happened that way she says. Holding on too tight to the countertop, her knuckles colour, poking out through her skin. The dogs now howling from the slide of the creek where the land seeps to the collapsible water. Water, that couldn't anchor or keep you afloat, the dogs run the yard, fleeing, happy enough for meat and bones and cages at night.

'There is too much those dogs could do wrong at night, the cages are best for them and the bush, love, they're not bad dogs, just instinct I suppose for the blood and the hunt'

He'd taken her home to warm fires and gargled liquor language, Gadigal country. Home it is you know. Beige walls and all. 'We were young lovers once too.'

'The city took us for granted. Not knowing our spirit, in the grey, the glue, the paste sky of crying.' Blowing hard in his mob's ears between streets and walls and sharp flat things. Tussling you between now and when your shift ticks, clocks and your times up crumbles you back into the flow.

So she pleaded for the quiet of the suburbs, an acre or more resting a crested shoulder against the creek, better roaming for the kids she begged.

Now the paint chips collect themselves under the window of your perfect purple room where the babies never slept, and the dust settles for good.

Paint parcels that dad would bring home. Ironing the metal. Zincing until it heats up scolding ready for the coating. Dad cooking the metal for fences. Wire lines for barbing. I wonder if he ever thought about who he was keeping in, or keeping apart. The hinges that still slung him to his skin and what that all meant.

The life that they'd never wished for or imagined, all day without each other, then moments that seem generous enough to ease them into sleep, before the night tremor, bursting the load, all the blood, all the quiet those empty rooms

And mum and I now, locking hearts for good in the purple room. Coming home to the she oak country, the creek taking our babies again. 'My girl, it isn't fair but you're not to blame, the cot has stolen her breath not you, just sour milk now girl and pullin' through'.

She couldn't bear it anymore.

The trees that is. They needed to go., there isn't room enough for love in the waterhouse only tears here and the floor-boarded halls we wade through instead of tiptoe.

Mum, you came here with pride on your shoulder. Over the years in these hallways you've let it slip into the dark part of your apron pocket. *You asked coming here, take me to something that tells me I'm alive.*

And I tell you girl walk the ache of grass down to the creek, alive with all our wailing, the wind bringing the she oaks screaming, rustling, soaking our blood, our water, our babies still hearts. Even then this pain more alive than anything in the city with no heart that still takes us mob for granted.