HENRIETTA ROSE-INNES SOUTH AFRICA

ONE WORLD: A GLOBAL ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT STORIES (2009)

PORCELAIN

THE PIECES OF broken pottery in the sand revealed themselves subtly. Marion tried to be patient, letting her eye pick out the particular shade of blue, dulled by a crust of sand and salt. She took small steps, eyes fixed on the ground, squatting for a closer look when soft color glimmered up from between the stones and shells. Mostly, it turned out to be nothing more than a mussel shell, the surprisingly pure blue of its inside margin tricking the eye. So far she'd only found five bits of porcelain.

She couldn't see the breakers from here. The beach sloped up quite steeply from the water, then flattened out into this broad stretch of sand before entering the low milkwood forest. Here, in a series of oval depressions, was where the high-tide debris of the Indian Ocean had gathered over centuries: cracked pieces of fine old porcelain along with rubber flip-flops and sand-frosted bottlenecks. Not a few old sailing ships had come to ruin off this part of the coast – Dutch, Portuguese, British, journeying eastwards or hurrying home, laden with fancy goods.

The china was dry and porous, the glaze worn off and the edges smoothed. The triangular shards held no trace of the fury of the waves that had shattered them. The pieces grew warm in her palm, and clicked against each other when she opened and closed her hand in time to her steps. She crouched to examine a piece of bone – slender and white, probably a gull's. Perhaps there were sailors' bones here too.

Standing too quickly, Marion was struck by a sudden dizziness, as if the world were surging backwards, or as if her own life had sped up for an instant; but it was only the cold wind quickening. She stood still, waiting for this little tremor, this moment of imbalance, to pass.

An observer would see a tall, voluptuous young woman with a pink-and-cream complexion, her coarse gold hair twisted up and caught in a tortoiseshell

clip. Her cheeks were flushed and her brown eyes clear. The hands cupped around her finds were dimpled and pink and slightly blotched in the cold, and the tapering fingers delicate. Hers was not a modern beauty. Marion looked like the women carved on prows of old ships: the heart-shaped face, the creamy bosom, the small mouth with its rose-petal lips, the strong, classical nose. Looks that would have aroused admiration two or three centuries before. As if to enhance this impression, she was given to wearing layers of lace and corduroy, long dresses, blouses with low bodices to show off her neck and cleavage. They were impractical clothes for beach walking: the hem of her skirt was crumbed with sand, and the dark-red crocheted shawl draped around her shoulders was damp at one end.

The wind picked up, strafing her cheeks with sand so that she had to pull the shawl around her face. The other hand closed tighter around the porcelain chips. Then the rain came in a cold, loose curtain from the sea, damping down the sandstorm and wetting her through, tightening her clothes against her breasts and thighs. She started to trot towards the trees, skipping awkwardly in the damp skirt, gasping with pleasure. She was young enough for such moments of animal exhilaration to speed her along without warning.

Breathless, she peeked into her palm, where the blue-and-white china gleamed. The rain had washed the dullness off. It was bluer than new, as if the pigment were still wet and the glaze just applied in some faraway workshop. As if it did not know that it had been mortally damaged.

She allowed the squally wind to pull her up the beach and along the gravel road, towards the old wooden house that stood beyond the milkwoods. Pausing just before the veils of rain obscured the view completely, she saw, far out on the horizon, the faint suggestion of a ship – just a hint of tall masts, misty shreds of sails unfurling, palest smoke on pearl. Eyes closed, she put her head back and gave her neck and chest to the rain. When she looked again the ship had dissolved into cloud; but she stood for another minute or two in the downpour, staring out at the gray.

The wet steamed off her in the firelit house, where the walls were festooned with dry seaweed and strings of sea-urchin shells. Aunt Amelia was sitting in her swivel chair at the trestle table in the corner, gluing together the pieces of a fine porcelain vase. She scowled through her spectacles, which had mauve plastic frames that clashed with her brown eyes. Aunt Amelia had a special technique: she would construct an armature of chicken-wire, vase-shaped, onto which she would fasten the broken bits of Chinese porcelain with Prestik -- a lark here, a pagoda there, two lovers on a bridge. So fragile, these ghostly vases,

more air than porcelain. All around her, arranged on shelves and bookcases and tabletops and in big woven baskets on the floor, were other pieces and assemblages: piles of shards, cracked plates with triangular bites taken out of their rims, undone jigsaw puzzles of smashed china.

"I saw the ghost ship," Marion said, unwinding the damp shawl from around her neck.

Aunt Amelia held up her angled tweezer-tips and gave Marion a keen glance. "Did you really?"

Marion glanced into the round gilt-frame mirror on the wall. She understood at once what had given Amelia that apprehensive look. In the mirror she saw not her own face, but her mother's: high color in the flushed cheeks, bright hair darkened with dampness that could be rain or sweat, eyes glowing as if they were melting in her face. Celia's face. Marion quickly looked away.

"No, of course not *really*, Auntie A. It was just the cloud coming in." She went towards her aunt with her hands cupped together.

"Ooh, what have you got for me?" Amelia swiveled in the chair. She was in her late fifties, but with a body that was still strong: rounded and busty, like all the women in their family, but more compact than the others. Despite the rainy weather she was dressed as she always was, in a loose white short-sleeved shirt, khaki shorts and leather sandals. An outdoors woman: her calves were muscular and her biceps tight, beneath skin that was starting to crinkle from years of solitary beach-walking. Hair that had once been gold was graying now, cut short every month with the kitchen scissors by Auntie Belle. As a result it always looked a little tufty and irregular, with a wavering fringe.

Marion unclasped her fingers and let the chips of blue and white trickle off her palm and onto the table. They were still slightly damp.

"A good haul," Amelia said intently. The gleaming points of her tweezers picked out and separated the five shards, teasing them apart like a fussy bird's beak. One with a tight geometric pattern, mesh-like; two plain white; one white with a narrow double band of navy; and the last, the smallest, showing the roof of a tiny pagoda.

"Do they fit?" asked Marion.

"Hard to tell..." Amelia turned the pagoda fragment with the tips of the tweezers, flipping it over. "This one – possibly..."

Amelia was absorbed. Marion retreated to sit crossed-legged in front of the fire, watching her aunt sort through the pieces that lay heaped on the table and in the woven bowls at her feet. A few moments later, Marion heard footsteps behind her and felt firm fingers on the crown of her head. She twisted round to smile up at Auntie Belle.

"Hello, Auntie B."

Belle took a hairbrush down from the mantelpiece and started to untangle Marion's thick, damp hair, teasing out the knots. "Such beautiful hair," she said.

Belle was the second-oldest sister. She was less physically toughened than Amelia, softer around the middle; her face was rounded, her upper arms fleshy and a little sagging. But the two women had the same clear brown eyes, the same air of vigor and resourcefulness. Belle was also dressed in a practical uniform of sandals, loose shirt and slacks, her silvering hair cut into a pageboy bob that showed signs of Amelia's more painstaking handiwork with the scissors. Belle did not share her sister's fascination with smashed china. New pots were her thing. She enjoyed the company of the women in the village, where she ran a craft workshop: local women brought their clay pots to be fired in her kiln, and she arranged for the wares to be transported to town and sold to tourists.

There had been three sisters, all raised in this wooden house, all buxom and bright-haired. Only two remained. Marion's mother had been the youngest and prettiest, a brilliant child; but not strong. Despite her vital appearance, Celia had been secretly fragile.

When she was only 19, Amelia and Belle had started to lose their youngest sister. So careless. While they were busy on their energetic projects, Celia had floated away to the city. There she'd studied drama, sung cabaret, had love affairs, produced a child. She'd return to the beach house every now and then – always sparkling, always bringing too many gifts. But the soft sea mists had dimmed Celia's shine. When her mood darkened, she would leave at once; which meant she never stayed for long. Over the years, Celia had visited her sisters less and less.

And in the city, with its late nights and loud days, its electric light and shadow, Celia had started to separate. Her highs had become towering, her black lows abysmal, until there'd been little left in between. Gradually she'd got lost in the troughs and ridges, the heavy waves of her illness. An illness that had probably always been present in her, but that her sisters had not recognized until Celia was far, far out on a dark sea.

Marion had been 11 when her mother died, and although her aunts had never discussed the details with her, she knew that it had been no accident. Celia had been just strong enough to make her own exit.

She was aware of how much she physically resembled her mother; how she too could fly into moods and rages and transports of exuberance, fits of tears or laughter. And she knew how her turbulence provoked her kind aunts, how it summoned tension and anxiety into their eyes. They were vigilant for the

signs of distress and madness that they had failed to see in time in Celia. And so Marion tried to be placid and cheerful, to gentle their suspicions. She hated it when they went still and watchful around her.

"Why do you want to go back to the city, sweetheart? The sea air is good for you. Look at the color in your cheeks," said Belle. A quick watchful glance from Amelia, over the mauve rims.

Marion sat still, keeping her head motionless as the brush tugged at her hair, suppressing the strong impulse to leap to her feet and shake out her hair with a shout, to kick and jump about. As a child she'd hated having her hair done, hated the enforced stillness every morning as her mother hacked at the knots with a comb, the tugs painfully communicating Celia's own frustration.

"Leave the child, Belle, for heaven's sake. She'll go if she goes and she'll stay if she stays."

"What's in the city? Greed and grief, that's what. Greed and grief."

Belle had worked out the knots now. The brush made a few last passes through the damp hair, and then Marion could feel her aunt nimbly separating three handfuls, the weight lifting away from her nape as the strands were braided together and secured, the pleasurable tightened sensation at the base of the plait. She was calmed, like a groomed horse.

And sitting here by the fire, watching the rain outside the window, the wet frenzy of the milkwoods, one mad gull spinning high up in the turbulent air, Marion did indeed feel safe – in the warmth of her aunts' affection, in this house that her grandfather had built for his daughters. She wanted to be in here with them, not out in the storm. Perhaps it might be possible to stay for good this time.

Behind her, Amelia sighed with satisfaction. "Voilà!"

Marion turned to see her positioning a piece on the framework of the phantom vase. It hung there, disembodied, bellying out the lost curve.

"Well done, Auntie A! You got a fit." Marion stood and went to her, reaching out to touch the vase.

"Careful," said Amelia, and Marion smiled. After storm and wreck and tidal grinding, now to treat it like crystal. But she was careful.

"You'll never find all the pieces, surely?"

"Of course not. That's not the point. This is not a jigsaw. But we can make it more whole than it was."

"You and your old pots!" Belle snorted, picking out pinches of golden hair from the hairbrush. "Spoils of empire, that's what they are. Flotsam of greed and conquest!"

Amelia directed a private smile at her floating vase and pressed the abutting

pieces more snugly together. "But still, very pretty," she murmured.

"Rubbish. Why don't you collect the local pottery, Amelia – now that's beautiful. And useful."

"Stop fighting, you two," said Marion. It was an old argument, and the aunts were enjoying themselves. In this house, nobody raised their voices in earnest.

"Oh, don't go back to the city, darling child," Belle sighed, laying a hand on Marion's smoothed hair. Marion knew that she was thinking of storms and disaster, greed and grief. But her aunt sounded resigned, as one is resigned to history.

That night she dreamed again her dream of Celia: her young beautiful mother, burning, throwing again and again the clear glass vase against the wall of the bedroom. Marion woke with the shattering all around her. It took a moment or two for her ears to clear, her heart to still; to hear only the quiet of the night, with its distant hushing of waves.

Marion used to hide behind the couch or under the bed, barely breathing, waiting for her mother's frenzies to pass. The fits of destruction had been repeated many times, with accelerating rage, until, by the end, almost everything fragile in the house had been destroyed. But in the dream it was always that one episode, that particular glass vase, turning and turning through the air, while around her mother's tall ecstatic figure the room was filled with sparkling splinters and a constant grinding sound of breakage that never seemed to slacken or to cease.

One ordinary evening two weeks before, Marion had taken each of 12 good dinner-plates – plain white china, which she had desired and saved up for and bought precisely because of their blank purity, the only complete set of crockery she'd ever owned – and thrown them one by one at the wall of her flat. For no real reason. A bad day in a bad week. A fight at work, a phone call from an old boyfriend. Not really reasons at all. It had frightened her, had made her feel that she was standing on the edge of a cliff, hurling her possessions into the void. In a way she was still standing there, waiting for the sound of them hitting bottom.

It was this incident that had brought Marion back to her aunts, to the peace of this old house, as consternation had often done in the past. Although never before had she done something so startling to herself, something so alarmingly futile.

But even so, in her heart Marion had not really believed. Her wrist had flicked and the plates had spun from her hand, hair whipping across her

cheeks and color flushing the skin; but even as she'd acted out her mother's mad ballet – performed so many times, long ago in another small apartment, when Celia was not much older than Marion was now – she hadn't truly felt the heaviness of madness under her arousal.

And afterwards, standing there with her bare feet – nicked and a little bloody – in the heap of shattered porcelain, she'd known that it had been an experiment. Drawing blood from the perfect skin inherited from her mother, cutting it to find what was inside. She had not entered the fury, had not been lifted away. And with the small wash of relief she'd felt at the ordinariness of her emotions – embarrassment, fright – there'd been a tickle of something else; maybe shame.

None of these things could she tell the aunts. To tell them would be to confirm all their fears; it would force them to make some terrible gesture of recognition. But although she'd said nothing, still they seemed to sense that danger had touched her, that she'd fled to them from some pursuing shadow. This visit, the aunts had been particularly solicitous, watchful, kind.

And so she must continue. She must allow Auntie B to brush out her hair as she had once brushed Celia's; she must go down to the sea and collect for Auntie A the pieces of broken plates and bowls. She must be serene; and so persuade them that Celia's heart had found in her own generous breast a peaceful resting place.

In the morning, when she was packing the car, Amelia and Belle came out to say goodbye. Amelia was carrying a large cardboard box.

"If you have to go, take a little something with you," said Belle.

It would be a clay pot from the village. Belle often gave her presents from the workshop; her flat was full of them.

Driving back along the dirt road, she passed through the village and saw the women walking in twos and threes between the *rondavels* and the pink-plastered hexagonal houses, carrying paraffin tins and plastic drums on their heads. Not porcelain or clay, but functional. They made pottery for tourists, but for fetching their water, they used what worked best.

Back home in the city, Marion opened up the cardboard box and found not a clay pot but Amelia's partially reassembled vase. It was carefully bound up in thin sheets of foam rubber and sticky-tape. She took it gently out of its wrappings and placed it on the dresser.

"Auntie A, it's beautiful," she said on the telephone.

"It's just an old broken thing," said Amelia, sounding pleased. "Of course half of it's still down at the bottom of the ocean."

"But what if you find more pieces to fit?"

"Then you'll have to come and get them, won't you?"

After the phone call, Marion stood before the vase on the dresser for a long time. She had positioned it not centrally, but to one side. Next to it, invisible, was another, vanished vessel: the clear glass vase that used to stand on this same dresser when she was a little girl.

She touched the sides of the vase, the smooth patches of porcelain, the rough absences where the chicken-wire showed through. And she was calmed by the feel of it. These broken pieces would not hurt her: spoils of empire, casualties of storm and wreckage, softened and blunted by time. Lovers on a bridge, a willow tree. And broken as it already was, she in turn could do the vase no further harm. Running her finger over the smoothed-off edges, she poked her fingertips into the gaps, feeling the parts that would always be missing, and the parts that were whole again.

Henrietta Rose-Innes was born in 1971 in Cape Town, South Africa. She is the author of two novels, *Shark's Egg* (2000) and *The Rock Alphabet* (2004). She won the 2008 Caine Prize for African Writing, for which she was shortlisted in 2007, and was also awarded the 2007 Southern African PEN short story award, judged by JM Coetzee. She has also compiled an anthology of South African writing, *Nice Times! A Book of South African Pleasures and Delights* (2006).