

**Katherine Mansfield Society**  
**Online Creative Works Series**  
**Poetry**  
**Iain Britton**  
**‘K’**

**“K”**

***iain britton***

Kokiri te manu  
Takiri ko te ata

The bird awakens  
Dawn breaks

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K1

***RISK ANYTHING***

*'Risk! Risk anything!'*

*Journal entry (14 October 1922), published in The Journal of Katherine Mansfield (1927)*

intervention

punctures an aquifer's skin

the amniotic sac of a half-formed moon

the worn faucet of a bible's blocked well

::

my shoes

scuff at gravel /

townsfolk

bedeck the walls of churches

the band rotunda /

Friday night and the choristers sing

*holy holy holy*

::

someone calls

sells fruit

to passers-by / to the couple

concealed by shops

by the bright lights / who think

invisibility

act out instant opportunities

trade secrets / swap

intakes of intimacy

::

the woman

lives in a doll's house

coffee for two / & then dancing /

today's fragrance

spills from the frangipani

& i observe every movement

every twitch every sentence she

blots /

::

she coughs / converses on the phone

she shifts dolls

without consultation

from kitchen to lounge

to verandah / she talks to family /

\*

piano & cello

compete

for

air space

for

the dolls all listening

in a row

::

the choristers sing

the churches puff on spirituality

& i take notice /

she coughs repeatedly

::

intervention

is the hot effervescence

which fizzes from a fractured stream

the moon's divisive splashes

of light / a stone-god's rising

from his dust bowl  
of powdered bone

::

the couple

sit motionless

facing one another / they are

painted / wooden-like / transfixed

eyes dipped in eyes

hands interlocked

their cue call suspended

she writes poetry / in red ink

reads bedtime Chekhovs / cosmology /  
aspects of alchemy / a tourist's guide  
to Gondwanaland

::

i add my name to her shopping list

my initials my aliases / / she adds

Katya  
in waiting

she shifts dolls  
without asking /

the afternoon tea

starts with sitting in the sun

speech marks

are blotted /

Virginia prefers milk not sugar  
her husband prefers rock cakes  
baked by his mother

\*

today's meeting

is about proofing *Prelude*

i keep notes of hot memories /

travel / the fragments of islands

still afloat / /

of Kupe's

second transpacific crossing

::



i risk living in the doll's house  
cohabiting with silence / outside

the choristers sing

*for all the saints*

& The Chapel of the Holy Child

slides into Zion

with consent forms

carefully

folded

&

filed

::

the woman

uncouples her late-night dependencies

she writes poetry /

in red ink

K2

***SLEEPERS***

*'The world to me is a dream and the people in it are sleepers. I have known a few instances of intensity but that is all'*

the forest has  
its own  
reincarnations

the city's  
war horses  
are waking

the hooves  
the snuffles  
the smell

of body heat  
passes / my house  
switches off

its night lights  
& the morning  
clicks open

like a lupin pod /  
the woman  
at the store

shuffles cards  
reads of coronations  
of thorns of crowns

the slow drip-  
feeding of one's  
personality

taking sides  
changing roles / of  
being delusional

the woman  
at the window  
stares out

at the gusting  
pumice dust / her  
daughter

jots down notes /  
sulphur burns  
the tongues

off boulders  
glossy frogs  
leap pools

i hand K  
the small feathered  
smear of a fantail

which flutters  
messages  
from aunts & uncles /

from Virginia  
& Co come  
weather reports

life's fluctuations  
the sunshine hours /  
the girl

sees her image  
snapped by a window's  
box camera

she picks white-  
starred manuka  
for the men

who live with codes  
grooved  
into their skin

who mix with trees  
earthed  
to the floor /

carved sleepers  
who never close  
their eyes

who collectively  
stare then rake  
at the acrid air /

i help fashion  
their language  
from silica particles

which sparkle  
& duel /  
the woman

joins the exodus  
of birds / bats  
sprites

the patupaiarehe  
the forest's tellers  
of tales /

with the lights of  
my house  
flicking at ghosts

she chooses the best-  
looking war horse  
for her daughter

K3

**FONTAINEBLEAU COLOURED**

*'I'm going to Fontainebleau ... and I'll be back here Tuesday night or Wednesday morning'*

Katya is waiting  
she sketches a bowl of tricks /  
a glass font  
for goldfish

for coral polyps  
for dipping  
the afterthoughts  
of children

she pours in more water  
acknowledges my birthdate  
braille-taps numbers /  
spells Fontainebleau

vividly in colours  
spells Te Wairoa  
a festival of light  
and sound / jostles

for clear perspectives  
of the lake / she  
spins her parasol  
and thinks of LM's

letter from France /  
which she  
reads /

---

which i read from Te Wairoa

tangelos talk  
into their orange-ribbed  
sacks / the sun  
pulls up hills

macrocarpa  
a buried village  
from the ashes /  
we pick mushrooms

wild mushrooms  
we pick at their hoods  
their fungal hoods /  
we stand in whiteness

a primitivism / the vents  
of a newly-  
scalped horizon

we explore the eruptive fields  
of Ruaumoko /  
two phantoms  
sharing simplicities

---

i sleep in her bed  
of charred enclosures

K4

***OUT OF THIS / THE EXPRESSION****'This is what I want. And nothing less'*

today's meeting dream-whispers the intimate acceptance of K's cello / her word rhythms gently resonate / she climbs the persimmon tree and someone calls for her for Katya for she loves being lost in the green shower of her renaissance & a man at the bay collects stones for her cleans them takes them like shiny mementos for their mantelpiece their window sills where he shows them to the monarchs which grab at their nervous reflections like glitter in a glass orb / this Sunday on the beach children from the street play cricket & a dog chases a stick's shadow into the lake

as a boy i could kick a ball until it rained i could watch Katya until she went out of sight out of the picture i hung of her on my wall / as a woman she stands beside the sweet-pea trellis polka dotted in blossom bush orchids about her hair a mamaku locked onto her shoulder / from this shoreline Tumatauenga kissed the missionaries & made them cry Katya kissed her father too & when she kissed the philosopher's stone i had planted in the garden it rolled over & over with her words trapped in water / she dried them out like raisins for the picking / as a woman she writes /

LM's letter is a congestion of love songs from a London summer / at Te Wairoa mud steps onto the verandah smells of Tarawera's afterbirth / Katya plaits her hair in the burnt-grey sun / plays petanque in her garden / studies a bee-sucked buttercup the anatomy of a conversation she last had with her brother / & while it rains we read Chekhov / we strip off & swim through the alphabetical gabble of the lake / we feel Ngatoroirangi's lungs haemorrhage / his hands scoring the hills the valleys old wounds on people's faces he spits fire at the night / suddenly K revises her work on someone else's summer

K5

**14 SONNETS****BLISS**

*'driving through Eternity in a timeless taxi'*

the couple sit motionless  
they are alone / transfixed / 2 people  
in a room in a terrace block  
packed against a park & a Novotel / 2 people  
    in a street  
populated by hawkers tourists  
down&outs reading DH Lawrence / a girl  
who hides her Maori lover in a hitch-hiker's bag /

the couple  
    roped together  
by intertwining their pulses  
seize the moment / split the starlight's dominion  
& all paradise breaks loose / like war horses  
sparking steel hooves at the sky



***FLOWERS PLANTED BY THE MIND***

*'I love ... wild places'*

i keep alive hot memories / travel  
the fragments of islands / the figure  
of Maata Mahupuku tumbles earthwards  
through grass  
    through the fragrance  
of a hillside with summer  
fingering at the soil / the worm-casts  
the uncorked cicadas

gannets plunge / rocks breach  
the surf / i love wild places  
& the girl walks through a profusion  
of fuschias / family names  
exhilarate at the feeling / this news  
exclusive pretends to pull us closer

***KATYA FIRST***

*'don't lower your mask until you have another mask prepared beneath'*

from Virginia & Co  
come pastoral clay samples  
of an ancient society  
of woodland witnesses /  
in their deepest of bones  
they hold on to glade / copse / bush  
an esplanade  
of earthly responses /

in Katya  
there's this disarticulated assembly  
of natural longing / this upheaval  
of native origins / obsessive she might be  
unavoidable she isn't / she habitually  
washes her face her hands / her face

***THE WONDERS THEREOF***

*'to enter into it, to be part of it, to live in it'*

the husband knocks / the moon knocks  
& sidesteps & catches a woman  
unwrapping stars  
the new spring leaves  
a man's luminosity / she applies moonlight  
to her lips / *he loves me* / she wears  
a white veil for the occasion / she's  
    a silhouette in the making

in London / in Te Wairoa  
the daffodils push upwards  
in their selected sockets / the birches  
explode green confetti / the world tilts acutely  
    & blossoms  
shower the eyes of the blind

***FROM THE VILLA***

*'Should I never return, all is in order. This is what life has taught me'*

Africa floats on horizons  
of altar-blue cloth  
a warm shimmer  
unrolls the afternoon  
& rooftops  
gather to talk / K  
labels her garden  
attends to unravelling

the cobwebs  
of an antipodean dynasty  
i pick up a feeling of fragility /  
tomorrow's  
unpredictable gesture / this woman  
    with a lamp

*AT THE LAKE*

*'Why don't I fly out again? There's the window or the door or whatever it was I came in by'*

the girl fondles supplejack creepers  
brushes off pumice / walks

under wild flowers & listens  
to the lake's gravelly susurrations

          memories  
pour through windows / doors

Te Wairoa shifts on its hinges  
the tohunga who lives on bread

& wairua / & people's thoughts  
is guarded by black knuckles of mamaku

a visible twilight cuts through this placenta  
of trees rippling in green veins

the lake is all to do with Katya  
to realise nature's savagery entirely

***POUNAMU***

*'the rainbow shell ... sings in the profoundest ocean'*

my birthdate is acknowledged /  
husband & wife meet for servings

of Cornish weather / for an intimacy  
squandered at a table / they love hate

the philosophies of tandem living  
the companionship of isolation

they baulk at their dependence on  
primal reactions / the grey

asphalt skies / the hymn-struck foxes /  
rainbows which dip double-headed

into the sea / a candle  
burns in a window / my birthday gift

perhaps / tonight Katya  
pins her brother's pounamu to her scarf

**45 COURTFIELD ROAD**

*'One feels half disembodied, sitting like a shadow ... while the dark tide rises'*

often streetworkers on night shift  
pass my flat / some sing

American Pie or smoke  
rolled-up grass clippings

from Columbian jungles /  
others like K come to my room

displaced / split skeletally down  
the middle / dispersed individuals /

i study the lifelines that crinkle  
my walls the Mansfields the Baxters

the Curnows / K lives in my  
encyclopaedic entrails of thoughts

in Courtfield Road we analyse  
the constellations which strip us bare

***GLORIOUS EXPECTANCY***

*'with a rapacious appetite for everything'*

*ko Maata ahau* she whispers  
pushing her reflection

under the soup-foamed lake  
*ko Maata & Katya*

tastes the name on her lips / on the tip  
of her tongue / on the soil of her teeth

*Maata* with island stains  
rubbed into her skin / her dark features

indistinguishable from the silhouetted  
smudges of Katya's lovers in waiting

at Te Wairoa i dine on a roll call  
of gratifications / i pack & unpack

our suitcases our books & photos  
her nine short lives portrayed in sketches



**SOMETHING ANYTHING**

*'I long ... above everything else, to write about family love.'*

in Katya there's this upheaval  
of native origins / the tyranny  
of lost & found forces her to change sides /  
traverse two worlds / she reads another letter

from LM /  
the missing link the go-between  
for the living & the dead / she furnishes  
K's spaces she is mother father sister

a terror to appease /

under the purple-fisted wisteria  
K's family pause permanently in shadows /  
i step into a child's story of parents  
offering gifts of something anything  
personally wrapped

***THE BURIED VILLAGE***

*'and if the other can keep calm, it is all the help we can give each other'*

the iwi dug it out of grey mud  
grey ash grey rain / the iwi dug up  
the corpses of cats  
& dogs  
chooks / people / the iwi  
resurrected Katya's dreams

they washed them  
scrubbed them  
hung them out to dry /

from the darkness  
she feels their heartbeats hears  
breathing hears songs she  
emerges echoing distantly  
from a broken room

***A TANGLE OF CAMELLIAS***

*'Let it be at that. A child of the sun'*

Virginia prefers the river  
    the done days the hiking across paddocks  
the oozing  
of water through green recesses  
ghosts past which loiter under trees

K plays her games / she eternalises  
privet-flung particles of air

she lies in a tangle of camellias  
& i touch her clothes / the shifts  
in her thinking / her looks / her  
country sleep  
    she imagines her body on fire

    nearby a nuclear divinity  
powers her silence forwards

***THE MONASTERY***

*'What am I guarding myself for so preciousy? This is the mystery'*

i add my name to hers  
to the aliases  
barred-up behind windows

she stares beyond the graffit'd walls  
of her home  
the crucifixes the gargoyles  
the small girl chasing a bird's shadow

she rubs her hands  
for a whiff of her brother's hair  
for words dripping in red ink

K deciphers her emotions

soaks her prayers in water / she feels

the twilight pains  
of a solitary white gardenia

**“K”**

*'for personal friends & family'*

please call her	kass	
	kathy	
	katya	
	katie	
	kezia	
	karenza	
	katerina	
	kate	
	katherine	
	katharina	
	katriona	
	kissienka	
	kathleen	
	katushka	many already do

K6

**THE VIGNETTES**

1

*'that reckless, defiant indifference that one knows only in dreams' - An Ideal Family*

intractable perverse  
because she is  
because i know her  
better than most i've  
lived with her in this  
place lived with her  
since she first grabbed her  
grandmother's Celtic shawl  
/ held it stroked it / this  
morning's no different she  
wears it for comfort  
for warmth / the window  
shuts firmly on a spectrum  
of light her focus turns  
inwards / Katya has shut  
herself in with 3 blue-  
painted apparitions 3  
jugglers tossing soft toys

2

*'Kezia and her grandmother were taking their siesta together' – At the Bay*

blowflies belt hectically  
into houses into hot  
gumless plants / cooking  
meat & the fly rage is on -  
white distances of memory  
invade my close past / we  
sleep under a chestnut  
swap bloodlines / comment  
on Dostoyevsky's *Notes from  
Underground* / Katya goes  
with her grandmother up  
the beach / a slow procession  
of figures follow / each  
trading whispers / near  
home the girl veers away  
& alone steps into a music  
hall of birds a forest  
of percussive shufflings  
in canopies / she senses  
an exploratory intrusion / a  
restless fierceness passing

*'A dark porch, half hidden by a passion-vine, that drooped ... as though it understood' – An Ideal Family*

at night the sweetness  
of wood burning / the smoke  
hanging above chimneys  
the sea-hug of baches  
amongst the sand dunes  
i can't get enough of it  
i live here with my warring  
selves / like K i write letters  
to friends parents mind-readers  
she tells me of England of  
God's bruises / his fingerprints  
on her lungs / his refusal to  
hang her from his conscience  
she tells me about *Sons and  
Lovers* / buildings made of  
poems the crossroad  
cultures of Wilfred Owen's  
guns / passionfruit loops  
down from my porch  
i can't get enough of her /  
she lies in the middle  
of a field of yellow grass



*'It was like a play. It was exactly like a play.'* – Miss Brill

my shoes scuff gravel  
early risers suck in  
the moist soggy air /  
bottle brush pregnancies  
tease / ferries unload  
day-trippers licking  
ice creams / K listens  
to an owl trapped in its  
day-time cage of sunlight  
it cries softly distantly /  
she shows me the imagined  
grave of her brother / the  
epitaph of no fixed  
abode / i offer solace  
in the shape of an orchid's  
speckled grin / a neighbour  
offers K an apple from her  
fruit bowl in the mirror

5

*'Out of the smudgy little window you could see an immense expanse' – Life of Ma Parker*

families return to homes  
clipped to the flanks of hills  
the harbour is a passage of  
stillness / a voiceless water  
of murmurs / the woman  
smokes / i smoke  
we share a pipe & a small  
funnel of peace endures /  
the beach is a reminder  
a white line of yesterday  
the city's streetlights drop  
like necklaces into valleys /  
we recall prophecies of visits  
to Te Wairoa  
visits to the talking stones  
to fables of people sniffing  
at breaths / out of this  
night watch a tohunga's lens  
is deliberately smudged

6

*'There is the whole psychology of a people; and how un-French—how un-French' - Je ne parle pas Francais*

the autumn crunches  
on thinly-webbed leaves  
broken twigs a storm's  
brief stopover / Katya  
listens to Elgar's  
concerto for cello & tugs  
contemplatively at her hair /  
i've decorated my flat  
in scenes from the antipodes  
i've placed her at the very  
centre of a lake which was  
once a crater a fracture  
a flesh wound in a red giant's  
thigh / i've placed her  
at the head of my table  
with Libra's planets orbiting /  
a carved gift knotted  
about her neck / birthday music  
plays from the bedroom  
while she reads  
*Je ne parle pas Francais*  
through the smoking threads  
of a candle

7

*'I know something you don't know, ' said the Buddha – The Daughters of the Late Colonel*

& Katya

tastes rain on her lips  
the river the moisture  
of the grass i take her  
badger-spotting / we  
shoot pheasants &  
grouse with our eyes /  
at the urupa the war dead  
walk in their wounds / the  
poets lick their suppurations  
the church still wears  
its gas mask / K knows  
something i don't / we  
pause amongst Salisbury's  
Neolithic stone humps /  
her mouth brushes  
against this consciousness  
of impermanence & she  
whispers it's how we dance  
with others that matters  
how nature's worm  
gyrates its comet-hard  
pelvis in the universe

8

*'and he turned over the pages until a title struck his eye – Something Childish but very Natural'*

amongst human lanterns  
i step into a girl's story  
a slideshow of a London  
vaudeville of night under  
a neon strip of coloured  
lights / inside this flat  
temptations split open  
a panorama of two people  
painting haiku verses  
on the blank pages of  
their bodies / Katya  
remembers her mother's  
maniacal habits of sitting  
in dark rooms / herself  
in a dark room / voices  
shaping an emptiness /  
a foetal image in suspension  
she remembers waking up  
daffodils / of feeling the  
excited heartbeats of children  
running into sand dunes

9

*'The windows were open wide, the shutters put back, and the light glared in' – The Man without a Temperament*

this ceremony for the day's  
burning fades / country flavours  
disappear / i've this empathy  
for the hangers-on who live by  
mirages alone for the ones  
whose bronze hands have been  
hammered into bowls / Katya's  
like this – she picks up  
cleans up / knows the delicateness  
of touching someone's frailty  
she opens her shutters to the  
chalk-scarred hillside  
of a war canoe with glaring  
white eyes & paddlers dripping  
sunlight / to the sight of a man  
clothed like a kotuku  
his family roots  
twisting from his body /  
she opens her windows &  
antlered branches climb in /  
the ceremony for something  
better begins

10

*'Haven't you got any Houses of Boxes?' she said - How Pearl Button was Kidnapped*

in London i sleep in K's bed  
only the landlocked fragrance  
of her departure remains /  
her birthright photographed  
for her house built on ruins

K7

## **STRIFE**

*'A story, no ... I should fill it with climatic disturbance, & also ... longing ' – a notebook entry for 21 December 1908*

### ***Tenei ahau***

K lives amongst my warring selves

amongst the residual proportions

of brothers sisters families /

she's with me in this place for soldiers  
off the streets

the shell-shocked  
the fallen from guns  
from the gory hollows of summits /

the unfleshed unstoppered

she's here waiting for the jacaranda to leaf  
for the editor of the Athenaeum to arrive / for LM  
to make her bed

she hesitates at the hotel's door

at these mud-hard steps

the hallway to nowhere / she coughs

in the thin sulphurous air

the observer  
the invited guest



the one amongst the residents

allowed to be a witness

a pretender to illusion

::

we drink coffee /

Te Wairoa's harsh sunlight

burns the plants the petalled lips

of the hibiscus / the skins

of white bodies /

we take the waters

via the belching breath

of a serpent

::

we've been to the village

seen the nurses seen the maimed

bathing / the sickly in chairs / the

doctors communing with coloured soils

::

i keep notes on the fragments

of islands

of Kupe's

second & third transpacific crossing

i feel his footsteps denting the clouds

::

the storm gathers its darkness

a caged shadow

still occupies Katya's garden / the

canary still sings in her bones / her brother waits

with berries in his hands ...

“Sister, take and eat.”

the first rain of summer

pounds heavily on the hot dry ground