

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 precious? 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