

Katherine Mansfield Society

Online Creative Works Series

Short Story

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One Thousand Selves

One Thousand Selves**by Órfhlaith Foyle**

I have tried to lose the stray dog in the mountains, but it has followed me here to the Select Hôtel in Paris...to these queer, cheap rooms that overlook the roofs of the Sorbonne.

I can see the sky and there are vacant windows like those vacant holes in my lungs, gobbling up my air the way a dog gobbles up meat...

...and LM is stretching to light the lamp now. She wants to tempt me with pallid egg on toast. I want champagne.

The fire licks my slippers.

I am so full of blood.

'No egg then?' LM says.

I shake my head, reach my hand to my face and she reacts.

'Are you too hot?'

She planks her body in front of me. I can see her chest. Her breasts would smother me if I let them. I stare at the small lace frill of her blouse. She smells of egg. I hold my breath and her face pushes down to look at me. Then she smiles and plumps the edges of the pillow behind my head.

'There...' she tells me.

She pokes the fire hard and its heat climbs up my face. Sometimes I think that LM would like to preserve me here. Not really dead, but not able to live away from her either.

'Did you write any letters today, Katie?'

'I wrote to Jack,' I answer.

LM tightens up her lips. I lean back against my chair and push my hands through my wrap. I would like Jack's head to be in my lap; just to hold him and make him listen.

But I've torn out the page from my journal. Even as I was writing the words I could see all of me change. All those other KM's, Katies, Japanese Kate, Russian Kate, Tinakori Kass, falling into one

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thousand selves.

The self with Lawrence.

'You are a loathsome reptile,' he wrote to me in Capri. 'I hope you will die.'

Jack never really saw Lawrence. I saw Lawrence.

Lawrence playing with a string between his fingers. I loved his eyebrows how straight they were across his eyes. I used to try and straighten mine in the mirror. I tried to put myself inside Lawrence once. Closed my eyes under the sun one day and I felt the heat crawl in through my fingernails. I tried to feel all that heat boil in my heart, then roll down to between my legs. Is that what it was for Lawrence when he saw Jack? That boiling heat, ready to make flesh wrestle?

He put me as Gudrun. I put him as myself.

All my selves spattering at my feet. If I look hard enough they soon disappear into the carpet; my mouths trailing into rose thorns, my eyes rolling behind rose leaves; all my faces spreading out, then being eaten by LM's shoes as she walks about the room, undoing the frill at her throat.

She stands facing the locked hotel room door and she twists her fingers. She whispers something before she turns and faces me.

'Cocoa then?'

'Champagne,' I tell her.

LM shakes her head, then wriggles her fingers in front of her bosom.

'No,' she says. 'No...no...too many bubbles...they aren't good for your lungs.'

I look towards the window. LM has not yet drawn the curtains. I'm afraid that the dog is out there waiting for me; his large paws placed one above the other; his tail a fat brush of hair and dirt. He has ticks and loose gums.

He reminds me of Wyndham, all long with the hang-dog jaws of his self-portraits. I had all my 'Ts' with me when I went to lunch with Sydney and Violet Schiff in Cambridge Square, and there was Wyndham, wiping his hands clean from painting Violet, and my 'Ts' bristled beneath my skin. I

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felt them pull and squeeze my words as I talked. Wyndham licked his moustache. Violet smiled and Sydney poured a little wine.

'I have not read your work, Miss KM,' Wyndham said. 'I have read the notices.'

I tried to like him I tried to please him like you would a dog, but I was never fond of dogs. I prefer cats. I mentioned my selves, my 'I's', running around my body like screws working a machine. I mentioned Ouspensky who had said that Leonardo and Michelangelo were not artists; but very fine machines.

'All the art we know is mechanical and subjective.'

Wyndham laughed at me. He called me a vulgar writer. My characters had sliding smiles like small sharks and lived dull café lives or hid in the New Zealand bush, brushing their hair in front of mirrors, contemplating some minor fantastical lover.

'A magazine story writer of the machine variety,' he announced to Violet and Sydney, who did nothing; who only remarked on the weather for this time of the year; who said how they liked Sundays and how the day was always perfectly suited to its name.

And LM was saying now:

'You have to have a little something for your birthday, Katie.'

I stare back at her. All that love for me inside her. It twists me.

I remember Granny Dyer in the bath and I wish I was a little girl again, watching Granny lift the sponge to her arms and her beautiful face. I wish I saw Maata again, or even had that moment on the ship when Papa looked at me as if he was afraid of how I was made.

And Virginia, marvelling at the words in me, using her bird's eye to mark down each word I used to describe Lady Ottoline's garden. The *bright dazzle* of tulips, the *pairs* of walkers; the conversations like music *set to flowers*...and later in Virginia's story, it was all there, all that living light and bright air.

Who was I to her then?

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'It's not too far gone, Katie,' LM was saying. 'Your birthday...'

Her face eats me like a cow eats grass.

'Your birthday,' she says again.

The words sound so lovely from her mouth. They could be real if I could just live and work and write. In Fontainebleau I will be reborn. I will be that self of selves. None of them ever saw that self. Not LM, not even Jack, neither poor old Carco or Goodyear, nor Kot, who once gave me a bright Russian dress. Not even my brother Leslie, my Chummie...

He and I had been walking up and down the garden in Acacia road when a pear fell from the tree. Chummie picked it up and polished it with his handkerchief. He asked if I remembered the pear tree at home and the old Southerly Buster wind that would tear them down for the ants to eat.

'We shall go back when it's all over,' he promised. 'And find everything.'

I scribbled down something for him before he left. It wasn't a letter but just my arms around him. He died out there, blown to bits, showing his men how to throw a hand grenade.

In Bandol I sat and watched the red sun sink into the sea until a man found me.

'You are alone, Madame?'

'Alone, Monsieur.'

'You are living at the hotel, Madame?'

'At the hotel, Monsieur.'

'Ah, I have notice you walking alone several times, Madame.'

'It is possible, Monsieur.'

He blushed and put his hand to his cap.

'I am very indiscreet, Madame.'

'Very indiscreet, Monsieur.'

But one self of mine – a high, wild self who wanted to tear the dark red sun apart with her fingers – she wanted to say something so different.

She wanted to say: 'I am discreet. I am very discreet.'

And she wanted that quiet discreet to be nothing more than a white sheet brought over her head so she could sleep.

But she wrote for Leslie instead. She wrote about their childhood. She wrote about Kezia touching Pat the handy man's earrings – after he had chopped the head from a white duck – '*Do they come on and off?*' and Mouse, little Mouse – '*Je ne parle pas français*' – and there was a dog there too; and Beryl, the real Beryl behind the false one, a shadow behind the mirror...'*And then after six years, she saw him again*'...

...and Laura visiting the dead young man laid out on a table...that strange, sly beauty
Death...then her brother Laurie...

'Isn't life -'

But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.

'Isn't it, darling?' said Laurie.

But LM is at the curtains. She pokes her head between them, sighs, then pulls them shut.

'Is there a dog out there, Ida?' I ask her.

LM shakes her head, smiles and turns about the room, then taps her foot on the edge of the fireplace before she says:

'There is nothing out there, Katie.'

On the 16th of October, two days after her thirty-fourth birthday, Katherine Mansfield went to Fontainebleau in the hope of regaining her 'self' amongst an extended family under the guidance of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, founder of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man.

'Live in your body again,' Gurdjieff advised her.

She scraped carrots, inhaled cows' breath and she pinned back her fringe. On Boxing Day she

wrote:

'You see, my love, the question is always: "Who am I?"... "Is there a Me?"

On Katherine's invitation, Jack arrived on Tuesday the 9th January 1923, and Katherine decided to comb her fringe back down to welcome him.

After supper she ran up the stairs ahead of him, but her lungs loosened and her blood spurted out. Jack led her to her bed and rushed for the doctor. He was pushed out of her room and Katherine died minutes after.

Sources

On pp. 2-3 there is an imaginative re-working of letters and notes passed between Katherine Mansfield, Wyndham Lewis and Violet Schiff.

Letter from Wyndham Lewis to Violet Schiff at Roquebrune, 6 February 1921.

Letter from Wyndham Lewis to Violet Schiff, 20 September 1922.

Letter from Wyndham Lewis to Sydney Schiff, 20 September 1922.

Words in italics on p. 3 are from Katherine Mansfield's letter to Lady Ottoline, Wednesday 15 August 1917.

Dialogue in italics on p. 4 is from Journal of Katherine Mansfield, Sunday (December) 1915 – 'An Encounter'.

Prose and dialogue in italics on p. 5 is from Katherine Mansfield's 'Prelude,' 'Je ne parle pas français,' 'A Dill Pickle' and 'The Garden Party'.