

Katherine Mansfield Society

Online Creative Works Series

Poetry

Tom McLean

Birds

Birds

I walk behind her in the botanical gardens,
Kass with her enigmatic smile.
When I speak her name, she turns
Looking through me to a future
Which became our past.
Towards the end of the day,
When the light is long and golden,
And her smile is as enigmatic
As the movement of birds, I walk in the botanical gardens,
Following her.

I never catch up to her. She is three or four people
and most of a century away. To touch her,
A handshake at a seminar, a cup of tea with an old woman
Who touched the academic's shoulder
As she was touched by a girl, dark hair moving with laughter.
Each generation she is a touch further away,
And her eyes become golden.

A net of hands interlinked, pulling me away.
Running away together into the brown-gold maize
Where we hid, and were lost, and wandered to the edges,
Watching the dried stems drooping under the weight
Of food for cattle. A grasping hand worming for comfort,
Grubby fingernails into her palm. She pulled me with her,
On her determined quest for the edges of things.

The albatross woman with the clumsy hands touched her,
And the touch was like a redemption and a blessing,
A way of saying that she loved her.

The invalid squirmed away from it,
Revolted by our hands
And the heavy breath of cows,
Which reminded her of the smell of home,
And the cows standing at the fenceline
With brown and placid eyes.

An adolescent diary has something written.
'Nothing remains but the shelter of her arms.' Home from the gardens
I rip sheaves of green stuff away from sweetcorn,
And observe how the husking reveals
Leaves more delicate at the centre.
I smile at the inversion.

She is a revelation, tougher the closer you get.
She needed no-one to hold her hand;
except, perhaps,
at the very end,
maybe.