

Things We Both Know

By Greer Townshend

Jose, the butterfly, always came down in a silk petticoat and a kimono jacket.

I have never forgotten this line. I almost forgot from which of Katherine Mansfield's stories it came (*The Garden Party*), but I have never forgotten those fourteen words so sinuously sewn together, read aloud by my high-school teacher on a gentle summer's day. This is perhaps because when I first heard them, I immediately wanted to be Jose. In that one line, Mansfield creates an image of a woman who is at once delicate and self-assured, beautiful yet unassuming, and a woman who is routinely different. This is how I have come to see Mansfield herself.

I work as a visual artist, my primary practice being drawing. I am most enamored with portraiture and recently one of my sitters reintroduced me to Mansfield. Now, as I slip further down the rabbit hole of Mansfield's writings, I realize how much I wish for my drawings to be the visual equivalent of her work; elegant, mysterious, discreet, flittered with nature:

...Outside the sky is light with stars...

Or

...And away her little thin laugh flew, fluttering among those huge, strange flower heads...

Or

...in the forest, silence had cast a spell over all things...

I wish for my paper too to be a space where I prune and prune everything back, leaving nothing but the poetry. A kind of mysterious haiku, written in a language you think you know. A single, foreign, elaborate word you sound out on your tongue, which sounds so familiar, as if faintly recalling it from a dream. And all the while, this sumptuous collection of lines making you believe you are in on some delicious secret. Like reading someone's diary.

Thus, unsurprisingly, it is Mansfield's journals that most affect me. There is where you find her, sans the polite veil of characters, telling her quiet truths with grace. Mansfield's lust for life and quiet confidence pulse softly, ceaselessly, on the page. This is what I wanted to capture of her - her essence.

My recent exhibition, *With You*, explores the concept of the soul and the impact we have on one another. While researching the soul, I often read references to the deep layers of the unconscious being 'wild' or 'tangled.' I then discovered the following quote from Mansfield's journal, which directly inspired my portrait of her:

The mind I love must have wild places, a tangled orchard where dark damsons drop in the heavy grass, an overgrown little wood, the chance of a snake or two, a pool that nobody's fathomed the depth of, and paths threaded with flowers planted by the mind

Previously, I had been tangling my own subconscious up in Plato, Freud and Jung in an attempt to comprehend our 'vital force'; but it was Mansfield who helped me visualize it, define it. I soon discovered further delicate references to the subject:

...And when she breathed, something light and sad—no, not sad, exactly—something gentle seemed to move in her bosom...

Miss. Brill, 1920

She was part of her room—part of the great bouquet of southern anemones, of the white net curtains that blew in stiff against the light breeze, of the mirrors, the white silky rugs; she was part of the high, shaking, quivering clamour, broken with little bells and crying voices that went streaming by outside, —part of the leaves and the light.

This Flower, 1920

My portrait *Things We Both Know* is part of a diptych, in this case meaning two separate drawings to be viewed together. *Things We Both Know II* is of the sitter who reintroduced me to Katherine Mansfield: Lana Doyle, a London-based writer and fellow Kiwi I met whilst studying in France a few years ago. Upon reconnecting recently, I came away captivated by Doyle's passion and enthusiasm for Mansfield; she spoke of her as a kindred spirit, a *soul-mate*. I saw through my friend's eyes a Mansfield admired, luminous, confident – and unreachable. Mansfield herself, as noted in her journal, had a similar relationship with a writer from the past:

Ach, Tchekov! Why are you dead? Why can't I talk to you in a big darkish room at late evening—where the light is green from the waving trees outside? I'd like to write a series of Heavens: that would be one.

Ach, Katherine!

Undoubtedly you too, as a member of the KM Society, feel a petulant disappointment knowing you cannot meet Mansfield, feel the cumbersome weight of injustice that Mansfield only had thirty-four years in which to let words run through her fingertips, and that her words for us are finite. To sip tea with Katherine in her summer garden as she described the moments passing: that would be one.

As I gazed at photographs of Mansfield, deliberating over which image to draw from, I felt her knowing soul stare back at me. Mansfield's ardent desire for life, even in the face of the biggest unknown, compels me to continue trying to translate as much beauty as I can onto paper. For this I thank her.

And so, dear Katherine, this is not a portrait but my arms around you for a brief moment.

With love,
Greer