

– My Katherine Mansfield Project –

I began of course to plan a visit to NZ . . . – to start this autumn, late . . . I wish I could work it. I should like it more than anything in the world.

– Katherine Mansfield, letter to Ida Baker, 7 March 1922

A couple of years ago I came ‘home’ to Wellington. I came at first alone, and then I brought my daughters with me. It was winter, lashing rain and high winds – the coldest winter they’d had for years, everybody said. I had a bag with woollen jerseys and thick black tights. I had a sort of wrap thing that I could use as an enormous scarf because my sister had phoned me in London from Scotland, just before I’d left the UK, with a terrible, panicky warning: ‘Don’t forget how cold it is in those Wellington houses! They don’t have central heating, remember! Please take something warm for inside, I’m worried about you. Why are you doing this?’

It was a question I couldn’t answer. The week before, I’d been in Dundee where I teach, and as I’d come out of the classroom and looked across the flat expanse of the wide river Tay I’d sensed the beginning of summer. The light was lifted into a beautiful pale violet, full of soft warm air, and I could smell cut grass,

water. Birds were singing. After a long dark Scottish winter there was a sense of benediction, the promise of evenings just like this one stretching on and on into the summer equinox when it would be barely dark at all. What was I doing leaving the light to go down to the bottom of the globe where it was beginning winter? To the place where my sister would be worried for me, where I would need a big black cloak to wrap around me to stay warm. ‘I don’t think you should go back to Wellington,’ Merran had said, much earlier in the month. ‘It’s not too late to change your mind. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to put yourself back there.’ And then she’d added, later, as I’d continued to make my plans, ‘I don’t know how to describe this properly, but I think going back to Wellington . . . It will be a dangerous thing for you to do.’

So begins this writing, this book of thoughts, ideas – something I have been thinking of for a long time as a kind of journal or workbook, calling it ‘My Katherine Mansfield Project’ – that came together as a reality when I returned to live, for a winter, in Wellington, the place where I was born and grew up, and where Katherine Mansfield, the writer to whom always I have felt most connected, was also from and left behind her.

It had started, the seeds of the idea for the project planted, in London, having attended the inaugural International Katherine Mansfield Conference at Birkbeck College and meeting and talking with Katherine Mansfield scholars who were there from all over the

world. To be in Thorndon, you might say, the exact area in Wellington where Mansfield had been born and knew so well, was a natural extension of the same impulse that had drawn me to the conference – to surround myself with knowledge of the writer and her world. And so I was working on essays and various pieces that were published in New Zealand and in the UK, and I was re-reading all the stories Mansfield had written, and parts of the journals and letters. I was meeting with Mansfield scholars and readers and critics to talk widely and intensely about the details of her life, her fictional trajectory and her sense of home. It was a totally immersive experience, overlapping my study with visits to the places she had made stories from, those inevitable facts of her life that she'd then turned into fiction. I would read and walk – and then, swiftly, easily, like making cuts into paper, would find that I was producing pages of stories in draft, and ideas for pieces of writing, one after the other, that, while not at all like anything Mansfield had written, and not taking anything from them by way of setting or character, nevertheless had Mansfield in them, some note, or sense, or colour . . . It was Wellington.

And ‘a dangerous thing for me to do’? My being back there, as my sister had suggested? To have taken myself out of the awakening summer of the Northern Hemisphere down into the heart of those dark hills, that cold winter? I would find out as I wrote.

So, yes, a project, this kind of deeply imaginative,

questioning undertaking. ‘Project’ was the word that, from the very beginning, described exactly the kind of book I had in mind: one that might be a reflection of Katherine Mansfield’s life in my own terms, using my own writing experience and knowledge of the city she and I were both born in as a way to understand both her and my own aesthetic and drive. And though I soon realised that to write that book would be a much larger, grander undertaking altogether, one that would take a great deal more scholarship than I possess, with more time and research and years of planning, nevertheless this ‘Project’ of mine indicates some of the ideas that may be developed further, as part of that other, larger study. In this sense, then, my workbook can never be complete, but is more like something that seems to make itself, add to itself, accrue detail and moments of fact and fiction as I go along – a piece here, a fragment there . . .

All these thoughts, these parts of my writing taking form and shape as the beginning of ongoing themes and subjects, come out of that winter while I was living in the mid-nineteenth-century cottage that is home to Randell Fellows from around the world, in a little house that is a stone’s throw from the road where Katherine Mansfield lived, set amongst the streets and hills where every day she walked and dreamed and imagined . . . leave me with these pages. And to make a book about a place that is itself a place to hold my writing – about my going back, to return in the middle of my life to

the Wellington of my past in the way Mansfield herself was never able – that is enough for me now. Here, then, is my own Voyage, my Doll’s House and my Sun and Moon, here my own playing out of the cycle of leave-taking and return, of summer into winter, light into dark, a writing into the stories of place and history and home, as I came home to Wellington, to a place half remembered, half real, half fantasy, half fact, remembered and a dream.

‘Yes, indeed, I too wish that I were taking a trip home with you,’ Katherine Mansfield wrote, in another letter to her father, in 1922, the year before she died, knowing surely that she never would. ‘The very look of a “steamer trunk” rouses the old war horse in me. I feel inclined to paw the ground and smell the briny. But perhaps in ten years’ time, if I manage to keep above ground, I may be able to think seriously of such a treat.’ And yet that ‘treat’ was a Wellington she had also left some fourteen years before with no intention of returning. ‘I hated it,’ she wrote to a fellow writer. ‘It seemed to me a small petty world; I longed for “my” kind of people and larger interests and so on. And after a struggle I did get out of the nest finally and came to London, at eighteen, *never* to return, said my disgusted heart.’

In the same way might this Wellington – ‘the singular charm and barren’ness of the place’ – that she never came back to in person yet returned to constantly in her letters and notebook, that she both dreaded and

yearned for, be the site of my own sense of destination? I wonder – this journey of mine that’s as much a psychic migration, that takes me deep into the heart of my imagination, as a biographical fact. So home, as it was for Mansfield herself the place of safety, of the familiar, of all that is remembered and beloved. And home, too, as the trap, the danger and the end.

I remembered, just before I’d left New Zealand, years and years ago, when I was really still just a girl, I’d met a broadcaster, English, who’d emigrated and now lived in Wellington. He’d called me into his office at the NZBC, as it was then, to discuss a short story I’d written, that he’d arranged to be read on the radio, and we talked about my going away. He looked out the window and said that the thing about Wellington was that you couldn’t really leave, the geography of the place forbade it. Oh I know there’s a road, he’d said, two roads to take you north, and the airport . . . But none of that really counts. The place itself is designed to keep you in.