

Pencarrow Lighthouse

Mrs Mary Jane Bennett saw frost on the ground
circling the lighthouse where her children sleep.
At the cliff edge where wildflowers were,
gulls wash seafoam up the shore.

You gulls, over hoofprints on the track,
over the dunes, over pearl beams ghosting
out from the lighthouse,
in your thousands over clean seashells.

The wind spins dead things in circles.
Collect up the wintertime, won't you,
crack it on a rock,
drop it from a height.

But, you bird whose wing cuts the tops off waves,
shut your wings for the children
of Mrs Mary Jane Bennett.
Let loose a grey feather.

She will tuck it into the knot
of the blue satin ribbon
in her eldest daughter's hair, the one
who dreams of white things circling.

Volcanology

There was no twilight in our New Zealand days, but a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque—it frightens—as though the savage spirit of the country walked abroad and sneered at what it saw.

Katherine Mansfield, 'The Woman at the Store'

When I
was a child
I saw the volcano
pull a man apart. I keep
pieces of the volcano on my
windowsill, next to the honey
jars, so they don't forget. My store
is the only one for miles, mate. Men
think they can ride round the volcanoes
(past where the earth goes from red to black)
without so much as a biscuit in their tin. They're
thirsty when they come. It's dusk when they come. At
dusk, everything's stuck still and quiet. Gets dark, see, sky
burning round the mountain peak and the in-between air
thickening into a deep blue murk you can't get your eyes
through. My poppies turn black and my paua shells glow
like I've cursed them. Just now the wind's dropped
dead like the start of an eruption. I don't know
where those men are going, but here's
something I do know. I know one
hundred and twenty-five ways
to bury a man in earth
that was once
on fire.

Shipwrecker

Kaikoura, 1844

She plants daisies in a corner plotted out with bones
pulled from the ribcage of a sperm whale.

Her favourite thing hangs by the front door—
a string of whale's teeth polished wonderfully bright.
Her father brought them home for her eighth birthday

which was a particularly good day
for whaling. A pod of dolphin-eating whales chased
a humpback calf, breaking its jaw quite rapidly.
They are baby's teeth, he said, that's why they are so
white just like yours.

When whales forget their maps they strand. The first time
she thought they were rocks but the funny shapes spat air,
little cloud prints floating just above. By tea-time they had died.
The whole place smelled like sea-monster said her mother.
They had white patches on their skin where big eyes ought to be.

Her father always says a whale's tail can knock you
right out of your boat. The most dangerous part is just when
the harpoon goes in—you can see the white of the eye,
then blood and whale-groans and big waves. So it's very
important, he says, not to scare the whale suddenly.
She wonders how you kill a whale without
scaring it suddenly, and if down there
on the beach
is the least sudden place to die.