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Exciting discovery of previously unknown Katherine Mansfield manuscripts at the Newberry Library

by Gerri Kimber

The Earth Child

It was whilst working my way through the rich holdings of Katherine Mansfield materials at the Newberry Library in May 2015 that I came across a thick folder of poems. On opening the folder and leafing through the contents, I realized that I had uncovered a large number of previously unknown poems by Mansfield dating from 1909/10, written when she was just 22. This is a period of her life where biographical information is at its most scant, since she systematically destroyed all her personal papers from this difficult youthful period in her life.

Of the 35 poems in the folder, only 9 have been published. The others are completely unknown and are mostly of the very best quality, representing, I believe, some of the finest poems she ever wrote, and, moreover, containing information about people, places, and events for which almost no other biographical evidence is available. In addition, the significance of the collection is that it reveals for the first time that just when Mansfield was starting to have stories accepted for



Newberry Library, Chicago

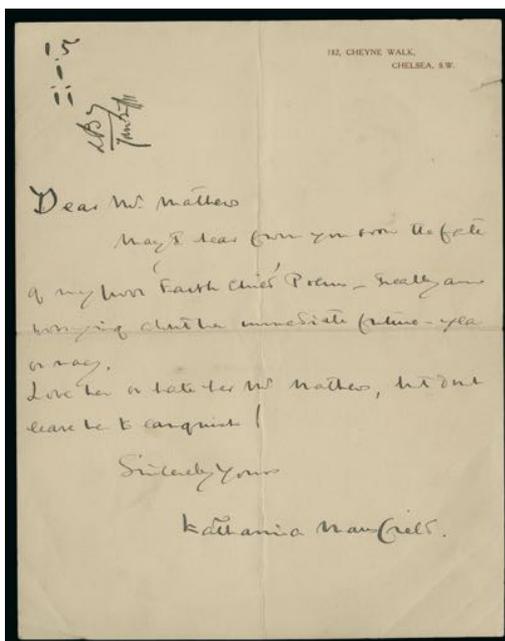
publication in London journals, she was also taking herself seriously as a poet. A couple of years earlier, when in New Zealand, together with her friend Edith Bendall she had also tried to publish a little illustrated book of children's verse, but that venture also came to nothing. Those poems, however, which are all now published, have no literary merit, whereas the unknown collection in the Newberry reveals Mansfield perhaps at the height of her poetic powers.

According to the two handwritten letters that accompany the poems, it appears Mansfield sent the collection in late 1910 to the London publisher Elkin Matthews regarding possible publication. Having heard nothing from the publisher, Mansfield sent a follow-up letter in early January 1911, written in an amusing style, explaining her frustration at not having received a response and asking that Matthews put her out of her misery. The manuscript was clearly never accepted for

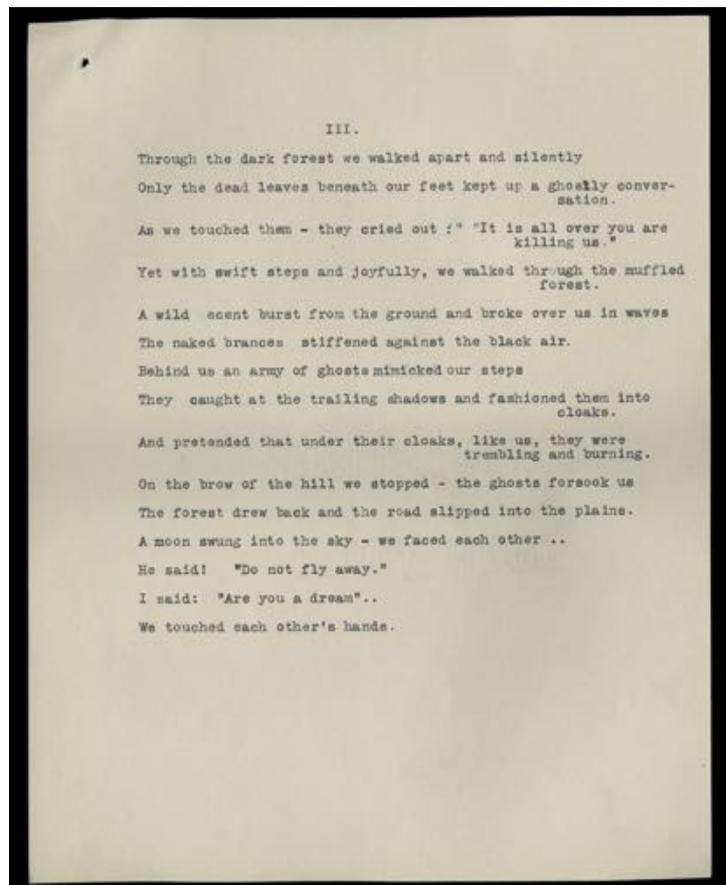
publication, but if she did receive a rejection note, it no longer survives.

Evidently the publisher retained the two letters, together with Mansfield's original manuscript, and many years later they found their way into an auction (the cut-out auction listing is also to be found in the folder, but with no date) and subsequently, in 1999, were bequeathed to the Newberry by the estate of Jane Warner Dick, a prolific collector of materials related to Mansfield. The folder also contains a small calling card, which must have been attached to the manuscript or one of the letters, inscribed with the name "Katharina Mansfield," and her address in Cheyne Walk, London. This was Mansfield's self-styled nom de plume at the end of 1910/early 1911, deliberately made to sound vaguely Eastern European. It was also the name she (illegally) used on the official U.K. National Census for April 1911. As far as I am aware, no other example of this calling card exists outside of the Newberry Library.

The poem collection will be published in its entirety in volume 4 of the Collected Edition, *The Diaries of Katherine Mansfield: Including Miscellaneous Works* (EUP, 2016), co-edited by Claire Davison and myself.



Letter from Katherine
Mansfield to Elkin
Matthews 1911



Through the dark forest, a poem by
Katherine Mansfield