



Introduction

IN THE PRE-DAWN OF 19 MARCH 2006, David Mitchell did a runner from the Alexandra Rest Home in Newtown, Wellington, where he had been housed for the previous year. It was no itinerant's flit, nor spur-of-the-moment thing. He was in trouble and he knew it. He needed help. His body systems were breaking down. He dressed in the dark and slipped out to a taxi waiting in Rintoul Street. He had with him his passport and an airline ticket bought with money scrimped from his invalid's pension. The driver popped the boot and placed therein a portable typewriter, a back-pack and a well travelled suitcase containing clothes, letters, papers, cricketing memorabilia and all the manuscripts that he possessed, both the originals and the photocopies bound into thick blue volumes. He left behind the usual detritus—and the bronze Katherine Mansfield Fellow medal he had been awarded in 1975. The taxi took him to the airport at Rongotai, where he boarded the early flight for Sydney. His daughter Sara lived there. He had phoned ahead and she would be at the other end to meet him. It was the latest, perhaps the last, of many flights to Australia. Steal away, boy . . .

HIS PARENTS CAME FROM ELSEWHERE. His father, David Eric Mitchell, was born into an Irish Jewish family in western Sydney in 1880; he was not partial to school and ran away to sea aged twelve; when he couldn't get a ship, he went rabbiting in the outback. In World War I he was a stoker on troop carriers and then a deckhand in the trans-Tasman trade; in 1923 he was paid off and put ashore at Napier after a cargo sling tore and dropped a length of rail iron that crushed his foot. Mitchell's mother, Rossetta Cousins, born 1903 in Strathclyde, was the fourth of nine children who,

A Letter

I am here my love
beneath an apricot sky.

Summer is a young girl,
her voice is thick

in these green islands.

The valley gorse was burning
last week. Quietly in the night.

Tonight it is warm. Just a song bird
and the hills.

It is not lonely, but very slow.

I am here my love.
This is all

my beauty.

day & tide

1.
today

in the small heat
of a morning courtyard
behind the sky stilled leaves
seven men sit
on seven small stools

hand chin
to elbow knee'd
while above them
in that clean blue arch
the steady sun turns to its timeless tune

before them
in the garden
lies the cool lady
spoilng in the stillness
of their regular gaze

i weep and walk down
the white chalk hill
to dine alone
at a bright wooden table
immaculate
on the beach.

2.
the tide has not quite come
and there are crescents in the sand
wind crescents
at the dry summit

round the baked rim
these thirsting elements swoon
in that blue reverence
enamoured am i of walking

the busies don't understand
the ironing board pleasure

of walking

the meet heat
of the slow solemn feet
and the sand !

3.
the tide has not yet come
and there are wet sea laps
where the lappings are

daisies ! daisies ?
yes. daisies in the sea.

daisies
in the dog eared shadow
of the daymoon

the sea, the sea, the
lunar, lunar sea

4.
i can afford to smile though
can't i ?
with my gullet an ecstasy
of jingling gums

i can afford to stand on the beach
at the limit

to toe the never settled line
with low embarrassed shoes
and a donnegal tweed coat

silent
with my hand a bone at my bony brow
and stagnant hair
my eyes darting this way or that

i can afford to can't i ?
that's the insurmountable joy of it !