

THE DARLING NORTH

I have now all New Zealand before me to caper about in; so I shall do as I like, and please myself. I shall keep to neither rule, rhyme, nor reason, but just write what comes uppermost to my recollection of the good old days. – F. E. Maning, Old New Zealand

A Land Court

I woke in the morning when the clock dusted its hands
after an untidy night-time. Lips fluttered

travel plans into my back. My ribcage reverberated
like a cello. He had land so I called him Maning.

We were going up north, the thing to do
down here in the hemisphere.

I'd never looked at landscapes, only heard them,
which was safer, the ear a sieve for

devastation. I liked hubbub, how our apartment
undid the city like a corkscrew. A globe

webbed with lat. and long. and the tracks of former lovers
quivered in one corner. Every so often Maning or I

gave the Tropic of Capricorn a flick, exposing
the soft underside of the other, and the South Seas.

It was a disused schoolhouse in the Hokianga, a hang-out.
I'd been nearby, remembered mudflats, flatness,

nothing much, soundtracks mostly.
I had a compass. I'd had a friend (she moved to England)

who said you should always sleep pointing due north.
It sounded feasible. Finding her waterbed too big to shift

she slept crosswise, fitfully, due to the uncomfortable overhang
of her ankles. Maning and I favoured a clock tower.

All through the night bells rang changes. Half-waking,
I felt them in my heart and in my lungs. In sunlight

I lay close to the coiled hairs on his legs, degrees
Celsius, a cast in my eye, and I lived there

small, below decks. I liked the hardness
of his thighs compared with my own. They were landowners,

his people, crops, sheep, but what I discovered was
if there were no women in the world

he would starve to death. That's how the line
would die out. He was an artist: ideas, paint.

I once toppled through a sliding door he'd just cracked
a nut in. It jumped off its hinges. We lay on the bed,

rolls of dust under it: a childhood
belief that was where souls went and where they'd

come from. Air-born. Some afternoons
I mopped there and shook out the dead souls

into the wind above the clock tower. Evenings
I worked in a cardboard room, rather crowded, finding

mistakes in the newspaper. It was jovial – the proofreaders'
jokes, their anecdotes, although night was day

and up down. When the phone rang a subeditor's voice
was drenched in sunshine. After midnight

I'd find Maning with his pen dipped in a pool of rainwater
turned black by the action of many nights upon it,

drawing figures, scarved friends who bopped their heads
to the blues, to vinyl, vodka, moonlight. It got later

despite the clocks, which ticked towards the shores
of the Hokianga, and the weekend.

The friends said oh you'll love the north,
and not just north, Far North. The tip. Maning agreed:

Everyone goes north. I had listened to northness,
a hiss, a crackle, a buckle of air.

Auckland howled. A clock gonged at night, and at dawn
a bulldozer sorted the chunks

of a dream. I'd bought the alarm clock
so I could wake up in the morning. Maning took it,

set it every night for an obscure hour. At 8.23 a.m.
I blinked at his inventiveness, the way his hand

extended from his sleeve. I'd run my fingers
over my face to be sure of it. When we got to the land,

the disused schoolhouse on the shores of the Hokianga,
I would mop its floors. The night before

he is moving inside my body when the telephone rings.
At first I think it's the clock tower.

It rings and rings. By thirty rings he has shrunk away,
gone naked to answer the greater urge.

I lie on the bed watching him, my body like strewn hay
(I imagine). He replies yes to a question and laughs

into the receiver. *A love-nest is disturbed.*
Back in bed he says his friend from France (from the long.)

flies in and out dans le weekend. We'll be up north,
he says, so I'll miss her. He'll miss her

in the Hokianga. No no, I say, we don't have to go.
Oh we do, he says. We don't. (The deliberations.)

Shall we go north? No. *Shall we go north? No!*
We would stay in the south.

Stretch of Hokianga

His name by some stretch of the imagination is Stretch
and he lives with his parents in a little house

on the southern reaches of the Hokianga.
In a hundred years there's been small change

in the land,
the silver-dollar harvest of the Moreton Bay figs,

in the movements of the family
apart from the sandspit spend by the sea, a brother dipped

over the hill, they are keeping everything
just as it was. But lately, to make ends meet,

Stretch has taken weekend tenants. Friday evenings
are hilarious with car horns.

An uncle owned it. It stood on his ripped-off bit
of the family plot, biggest house on the Hokianga Harbour,

eighteen rooms at low tide. Being a bachelor, childless,
as is the wont of uncles, he left

the house to Stretch, younger brother, because the elder
had gone marae. Married. There were so many.

It's two-storeyed, wide-pillared, veranda attended by
Norfolk pines, a cypress thinner and more brooding,

wine bottles crooked in its arms,
banana palms shredded like important documents.

From the road at night, the house lit up,
a hundred diners rattle their knives and forks

and shake their frilly sleeves. In the house it's just Stretch
operating a circular saw. Weeknights he renovates.

On Fridays he bumps home to his parents' bungalow
across the valley, leaves the tenants

lugging their coffee-maker, their water-purifier. The tide
is stirred as it changes. They're professional girls

in the book trade, perhaps jilted. Stretch watches
in the rearview mirror as they drape the veranda

with ragged wedding dresses.

Once he told the lessee, a nice woman called Barbara,

he would like to live in the eighteen-roomed house with his wife,
whom he has not had the good fortune to meet yet.

(He is tall of course.) There are no eligible women
in the district. They all go to Auckland. His eyes

reflect all the blueness in the sky leaving the Hokianga
to silver. Later lights sit

in the cypresses, ghosts stalk the halls. He doesn't like
to think. He knows his history,

the way the north pulled his forebears (the Fortunes)
south with the moon, and on a neap tide

they entered the mouth. Coughed up
diddly-squat (said Barbara

later) through the Land Court. Clutching a document
and a cattle station, they called it Oke Hanga,

built a veranda'd house in the vicinity of a church, a pa,
flour-mill, fish-canning factory, a sprinkling

of cottages and a schoolhouse
for their many children, little north in the south

but better, better. They'd been peasants
in the true north, in the lemon-coloured last night,

and now they were squires. (Maning by the way
thinks the treaty should be ratified. His family land sits

on the land.) I'd never lived with strangers
but after six months cohabitating with the ghost of a man

who had left taking everything with him apart from
his presence which still hung in the wardrobe,

lay folded in drawers and beside me at night
making me gasp,

I also packed up and departed, moved in with
two women in the book trade. Monday to Friday,

dressing-gowns, wings, on the way to the bathroom.
In the weekend I met them: Barbara, Issy,

told me they hawked advance copies in the south.
Nice to meet you, they said, let's go north. Remember

The Navigator, when the boy shuts his eyes in order to see?
I soon found myself on the shores of the Hokianga

on the edge of a weekend
in the house next door to the disused schoolhouse,

Maning's (*my* Maning), that we planned to stay in
but we never did. Now I go north with

Barbara and Issy because you go north.
In my black car I buzz the coast like an insect. I watch

the mudflats hold the tide, quivering, indecisive,
until finally as if going back

for its dove jacket, the water floods in . . . *and so,*
putting on the most unconcerned countenance possible,