

Randell Cottage Residency Report n°. 2 – Caroline Laurent

Experiencing a return.

I was lucky enough, immensely lucky, to be able to come back to New Zealand, to the Randell Cottage, a year after my first stay.

Experiencing a return means losing that pure feeling of novelty that is sometimes too dizzying, full of illusions; it's like putting on warm, comfy little slippers that you mustn't get too used to wearing. When I pushed open the Cottage door on November 1st, 2023, I was immediately struck by familiar sensations, here I was in a setting that wasn't a setting because I recognised every room, every detail of the house, the raised yellow stain here on the wooden floor, the terrible little porcelain dogs over there that had made me laugh so much; I remembered every lovely willow-patterned cup and plate, just like the ones I had seen at my neighbour Katherine Mansfield's; I knew everything by heart, right down to the texture of the sheets and the colour of the towels. Not to mention the garden, of course, flourishing and aromatic, where the flowers grew and opened as the summer wore on. This wasn't a residency anymore, it was my home.

Over the next two months, I wrote on rainy days and walked on sunny ones. When the rain drummed on the Cottage roof, I felt perfectly safe, a blanket round my shoulders and a cup of Earl Grey in front of me, like some ageing lady already, at peace with my characters and my peculiar ideas. Sunshine, on the other hand, propelled me toward the sea. I had to go out, to discover more, to stroll through the city and its nooks and crannies, to find new restaurants, to seek out fruit and vegetables when I got sick of eating chips, to dream, to dive into the icy water.

But if I stayed in the same place too long, I became afraid. Solitude suited me only intermittently, and so I would take off to unexplored regions of the country to find greater silence. Napier, the Coromandel, Whangarei, Cape Reinga. The South as well, Christchurch, Kaikoura, the West Coast and my secret stay in the little village of Runanga, so moving, the glaciers, Abel Tasman Park. I wasn't travelling on my own, actually, because everywhere I went I was accompanied by the words of Katherine Mansfield, Patricia Grace or Janet Frame, wonderfully translated by Jean Anderson. Adventures presented themselves, they came to me spontaneously and I didn't try to avoid them; the only thing to do was greet them with a smile. The most extraordinary of them was and will remain my encounter with the Māori community in Tokaanu on the shores of Lake Taupō. Being invited onto the marae, the karakia chanted in my honour to protect me, our visit to the tupuna in the cemetery overlooking the lake, our discussions amidst the geysers, near the sacred waterfall.

A house is a roof and four walls, but most of all it's the family that gives it life. I found a family in Wellington, the Roberts family. I would like to thank here Winston, Laura and Fiona for the welcome, the openness, the tenderness they showed me. I shall never forget those fabulous moments, Christmas and the Noche Buena, a trip into the Wairarapa, the birds, a white lighthouse turning red, orange, green and blue at night. My thanks also to all those who welcomed me warmly, whether French or Kiwis, weaving through my stay a shining thread of many bright reflections.

As I write these words, my Pacific novel is taking shape, absolutely. At heart, my story needed to adopt me, even though I had thought I was its originator. How strange

the creative process is. Yes, it will have taken me all those long months, over there then here, between my home and the unknown, to grasp what it was that I went to look for on the other side of the world. I think I've understood now, but perhaps I'll have to return to Aotearoa to be absolutely sure.