Janet Frame

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When considering the late Janet Frame's oeuvre, critics often focus on the autobiographical aspects of her writing. Frame was, after all, widely known for her life, particularly her movement in and out of mental institutions during a twelve-year period. Yet Frame's creative enterprise was not autobiography; her writing is first and foremost the rendering of the imagination. In fact, Frame's three-volume autobiography, which appeared as the penultimate project of her literary career, attempts to elucidate, not to justify, her creative project. To borrow the title from her third novel, Frame's project was sharing her imagination—to capture what is at the edge of the alphabet in writing.

Frame's autobiography is a type of bildungsroman. From childhood she was a voracious reader, particularly after winning a grammar-school award that gave her a membership to the local (membership only) library. As she sketches her artistic development, Frame considers the distinction between her life and her art, specifically the time she spent in mental asylums. Reducing Frame or her work to the equation asylum = Frame = writing = Frame is extremely problematic. Yet it is impossible to dismiss the importance of life experiences, as Frame herself freely admitted. She readily accepted that writers do not exist in a vacuum, and she believed life experiences are acutely intertwined within the workings of the imagination, be they childhood experiences in rural New Zealand or incidents within mental institutions. However, at each creative moment, at each imaginative moment, Frame was aware that writing is a construction. This awareness is made inextricably clear both by the manner and the mode of her writing.

Much of her writing, in fact, is metafictional—metafictional in the sense that the process of writing and the constructedness of writing appear within the narrative. In her autobiography Frame defines the constructedness of autobiography: "Writing an autobiography, usually thought of as looking back, can just as well be looking across or through" (191). Writing, for Frame, regardless of whether it is autobiography or fiction, is always a construction. In one of the most useful critical readings of Frame's work, Judith Dell Panny argues that Frame's work is allegorical where "the work's moral purpose will be achieved through contrasting examples and highly equivocal situations. . . . The reader is impelled to think and
judge... leaving space for each reader to connect images and ideas and to draw individual conclusions" (7). By examining the allegorical nature of Frame's works, Panny establishes a discourse that considers Frame's playfulness as well as the ethical dimension of her writing. Yet for Frame, the ethical is always entwined within the creative; she is never didactic. Some critics, like Gina Mercer, fail to do Frame justice when they establish arguments that are solely political. When Mercer defines Frame as "other," she conveniently ignores that Frame participates without reservation in literary discourse, specifically high modernist discourse. When Frame read works by William Faulkner or Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for instance, she felt her creative project wholly justified and unabashedly situated within literary discourse.

Frame valued literary experimentation as a means to more fully explore the imagination, which she considered, to use one of her favorite metaphors, a mirror city, the metaphor at the core of her third volume of autobiography. In that volume Frame writes that the "self must be the container of the treasures of Mirror City, the Envoy as it were, and when the time comes to arrange and list those treasures for shaping into words, the self must be the worker, the bearer of the burden, the chooser, the placer and polisher" (405, italics added). The craft of writing is a craft of manipulation. The craft of writing is the craft of shaping into words the imagination. And in line with the Coleridgean notion of the artist, it is the Envoy who is able to imagine most fully. Yet to live life in the imagination carries burdens: "Writing a novel is not merely going on a shopping expedition across the border on an unreal land: it is hours and years spent in the factories, the streets, the cathedrals of the imagination, learning the unique functioning of Mirror City, its skies and space, its own planetary system, without stopping to think that one may become homeless in the world, and bankrupt" (Autobiography 406). Having grown up poor and having chosen a profession that provides at best an erratic income, Frame was often concerned with her material well being. Her pattern of checking into the hospital, in fact, usually corresponded to her anxiety of managing worldly logistics.

Janet Paterson Frame, born in August 1924, changed her legal name to Nene Janet Paterson Clutha: "Nene because of her admiration for the Maori chief Tamati Waka Nene, and the fact that she had been called 'Nini' as a child; Paterson, her Scottish grandmother's surname, had previously been her second name; and Clutha was a tribute to the river that had so impressed her on her fruit-picking summer in Central Otago in 1944, as well as being the Gaelic name for Clyde, in whose valley her father's parents had been born" (King 191-92). In her later years, after giving up publishing,
she lived contentedly in New Zealand, the home of her imagination. Even as she lived and traveled extensively, Frame's heart was never far from New Zealand, largely because the physical landscape captured her so completely.

When exploring Frame, we cannot escape contradictions. Even as she lives in her imagination, she recognizes her surroundings. Even as she insists that *Owls Do Cry* is not autobiography, she argues that moments of the novel are factual. Even as she writes autobiography, she admits it is a construction. At each moment Frame forces her readers to pay attention to the specific and particular constructedness of each work; each work operates within an assembled framework. Yet the dualities do not work in opposition, but rather in dialogue, a dialogue that occurs within the imagination. When readers read her work, be it her fiction or her autobiography or her poetry, Frame empowers their minds. Frame allows readers to participate in the imaginative process.

One of Frame's narrative trademarks is the use of radical jumps within narratives. Yet Frame never asks readers to traverse spans that are not unmanageable. From her perspective, narrative and social constructions exist because of language; they are entwined. And neither construction is seamless. As Frame imagines the world, she is bombarded with remembrances of her sisters who drowned, Myrtle in 1937 at age sixteen and Isabel in 1947 at age twenty-one; of her mother, a struggling housewife who vastly preferred scribbling poems at the kitchen table to managing the household; of her father, who left New Zealand to fight in Europe only days after getting married, who worked for the railroad on returning to New Zealand, who enjoyed embroidery and playing bagpipes; of her brother Gordon, who as an epileptic had seizures and problems with alcohol and stable employment. Her memory also contains remembrances of a shy adolescent with poorly fitting clothes and frizzy red hair; of being forced to stand in front of her classmates until she admitted she had stolen money from her father; of feeling an outcast at the teachers' college; of spending the better part of twelve years moving in and out of mental institutions; of having a miscarriage while in Andorra; of being erroneously diagnosed a schizophrenic.

Within days of entering Colquhoun Ward, the psychiatric ward of Dunedin Public hospital, on 18 October 1945 at the age of twenty-one, Frame was diagnosed a schizophrenic, and within two weeks, she was sent to Seacliff Hospital, the most notorious mental institution in New Zealand. While she spent only six weeks at Seacliff during her initial period of hospitalization, she would readmit herself to the hospital periodically over the next twelve years. During one stretch, she spent four-and-a-half years out of six in the hospital, and
by her count, Frame, "received over two hundred applications of un-modified E.C.T. [electroshock therapy], each the equivalent, in degree of fear, to an execution, and in the process having my memory shredded" (Autobiography 223-24). Frame left Seacliff for the last time in 1955 though she was still legally a schizophrenic until October 1957 when, after voluntarily entering Maudsley Hospital in London, she was told that she was not nor ever had been a schizophrenic: "Finally I was summoned to the interview room where the medical team sat at a long table with Sir Aubrey Lewis at the head. The team had already had its meeting and formed its conclusion, after a few minutes’ conversation with me, Sir Aubrey gave the verdict. I had never suffered from schizophrenia, he said. I should never have been admitted to a mental hospital. Any problems I now experienced were mostly a direct result of my stay in hospital" (Autobiography 374-75). In the years that followed, Frame would visit and keep in touch with her Maudsley psychiatrist, Dr. Robert Hugh Cawley, who unfailingly recognized and supported her literary aspirations.

Frame would probably never have made it to England nor broken the cycle of hospitalization had it not been for Frank Sargeson, a pre-eminent New Zealand writer with whom she lived while writing her first novel, Owls Do Cry. Sargeson not only provided her with the opportunity to live her life as a writer, he also convinced her to travel. Once leaving New Zealand in July 1956, Frame would remain abroad until 1963. When she returned to New Zealand, given her publishing success in England and the United States, she was an eminent author. Though she would make subsequent trips overseas, often to the United States, Frame always considered New Zealand home.

Once Frame returned to New Zealand, she would again have to deal with her earlier diagnosis. As late as 1974 Frame asked Cawley for a letter, explicating her mental state: "Miss Janet F. Clutha has told me that a number of literary scholars and editors of anthologies are publishing biographical comments which refer to her previous state of mind as sick or disordered. I understand that some people are going so far as to suggest that her creative ability is in some way related to a history of mental illness. . . . She has been seen by a number of eminent psychiatrists all of whom agree with my opinion that she has never suffered from a mental illness in any formal sense" (qtd. in King 388). This problem was particularly endemic among New Zealand critics who were concerned with biographical links, believing her work romans à clef.

In one of the most thorough books on Frame’s early work, by Patrick Evans, published in 1977, the problem is explicit. Throughout his book, Evans unflinchingly critiques her works through his selected mode of criticism, biographical criticism. It is not until the
epilogue that Evans even attempts to discuss "issues which are not intrinsically a part of the biographical approach to criticism" (195). Yet even as he attempts the shift the discussion falters. When he argues, for instance, that "The single trait which most often reveals the introspectionness of her writing is her obsession with language" (203), he places the argument back within the realm of biography with his definition of introspectionness: "Her imaginative world is possessed by a force of gravity that draws all things to a center at which she herself stands..." (203). The fundamental difficulty with this type of criticism is that it insists on a particular, and in this case erroneous, perspective. The works are seen less as creative enterprises and more as essays or expositions, since attempts are made to discern the "biographical intent" of each work. Evans's critical perspective removes narrative concerns from consideration. Because he removes narrative concerns, Evans is not in a position to mention that Frame broadened narrative possibilities. Yet her primary purpose, of course, was not to expand narratology but to render her imagination, an imagination that positions her as one of the great writers of the twentieth century.

The Lagoon and Other Stories (1951)

While Janet Frame was still in Seacliff, her first collection of stories, The Lagoon and Other Stories, was published. The collection not only won the prestigious Hubert Church Memorial award, it literally saved her from undergoing a leucotomy, the New Zealand equivalent to a lobotomy. When the hospital superintendent, Geoffrey Blake-Palmer, read about the award, he scratched her name from the procedure list, saying, "I've decided that you should stay as you are. I don't want you changed" (Autobiography 222); Frame, it seems, was within days of having the devastating operation. While Frame was spared, the daughter of a college lecturer of hers, Audrey Scrivener, or Nola, underwent the procedure: "When I was eventually discharged from hospital, Nola remained, and although she did spend time out of hospital, she was often re-admitted... Nola died a few years ago in her sleep. The legacy of her dehumanizing change remains no doubt with all those who knew her; I have it with me always" (Autobiography 223). Frame, realizing that she could easily have ended up in the same incapacitated state, wrote Audrey a stream of letters.

The collection of stories was submitted for publication by John Money, a graduate student studying psychology. He had encouraged Frame's writing for diagnostic purposes and believed her stories would give him insight into her mental state. Unfortunately,
unlike Robert Cawley, Frame’s British psychologist, Money did not have the literary foundation to recognize that Frame often played with literary conventions during their conversations and in her stories. It was Money, in fact, who facilitated her first admission to the hospital.

While Frame did not select the title nor for that matter the stories included in the collection, the title story nicely locates the collection as it deals with the slipperiness of truth. The female protagonist in “The Lagoon” revisits a childhood haunt with her aunt. Having always heard stories from her now deceased grandmother, the protagonist asks the aunt to tell her the truth, so her aunt tells a story: “your great-grandmother was a murderess. She drowned her husband, pushed him in the lagoon” (5-6). This story exhibits many conceits that Frame would use throughout her career, including woman as storyteller, fabrication as truth, and death. The story also establishes a discourse around societal, or patriarchal, institutions.

Frame, throughout her oeuvre, comments on the danger of reified social structures. Her mother, after all, was more of a poet than a homemaker, and her father, a painter who also liked to embroider, lugged sacks of coal home to fuel the stove and in winter to heat the house. Since her family did not have the money to send her to the university, Frame was forced to attend the teachers’ college, though she would have vastly preferred to study at the university. As an adolescent with uncontrollable flaming and frizzy hair, she read and heard much about eugenics, and Frame appropriately locates the discussion not only in Germany but also in the British Commonwealth: “This increased attention to ‘purity’ of race had come to our town no doubt by way of Nazi Germany and the British Empire, and there was much talk at school of eugenics and the possibility of breeding a perfect race. Intelligence tests became fashionable, too, as people clamoured to find themselves qualified for the ‘perfect race’ and to find others who were not so qualified” (Autobiography 110). It is by way of the imagination that rules are dismantled. As people’s imaginations take them to new spaces, they will recognize inequities and discover possibilities. As she would do throughout her life, Frame explained her isolation during her late adolescence by exploring the mechanics of language: “I tried to use ‘we’ when I talked of my life as a student, but I knew it was futile, that I was describing what ‘they,’ the students did, where they went, how they felt, what they said, and in order to survive I had to conceal my ‘I,’ what I really felt, thought, and dreamed about. I had moved from the second person plural to a shadowy ‘I,’ almost a nothingness, like a no-woman’s land” (Autobiography 161).
Throughout *The Lagoon and Other Stories* Frame engages the established literary tradition. In “Keel and Kool” she makes reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” specifically the albatross. Coleridge is an important figure for Frame because as a student she read, relished, and memorized his position on imagination. One useful way to consider Frame’s notion of the imagination, or mirror city, is by considering it alongside Coleridge’s. The writer, who manages the mirror city, is empowered with Coleridge’s secondary imagination; in other words, the writer is “An Envoy from Mirror City.” “Keel and Kool” is also important because the story exhibits another Frame tendency, playful alliterative phrases where meaning becomes secondary. Sound is used to manifest the feeling—language is unmitigated; language and imagination become one. The story ends: “Boots, shoes, slippers, clodhoppers, whispered Winnie. But there was no one to answer her. Only up in the sky there was a seagull as white as chalk, circling and crying Keel Keel, come home Kool, come home Kool. And Kool would never come home” (30). While meaning can be assigned, the story’s purpose is to stimulate the imagination through the sounds of seemingly disconnected utterances.

There are some autobiographical moments in the collection. “The Bedjacket” is about a woman in a mental hospital. “It was almost Christmas time and everybody in the mental hospital was wanting to go home” (31) is the powerful beginning of the story. The hospital inmates are being herded downtown to buy Christmas treats. The trip to town is a trip into the whirlpool of life: “And then, after going round and round in the little exciting whirlpool that was Friday and shopping day, they would return to the dead still water of hospital life, the dayroom and the park” (32). To locate the mental hospital as “dead still water” suggests the hospital is a place vacant of life. The vacancy also exists at the level of staff, as they fail to treat the inmates as human beings.

Some stories in the collection are metafictional. In “My Last Story” the protagonist writes, “I don’t like writing stories. I don’t like putting he said she said he did she did, and telling about people, the small dark woman who coughs into a silk handkerchief and says, excuse me would you like another soda cracker . . . well I’m not going to write any more stories like that” (163). So while Frame deals with social constraints, she also explores reification within writing, within language. In the end “My Last Story” represents the last of a certain type of story, not an end to storytelling, but a beginning: “I think I’ve got the wrong way of looking at Life” (166). The writer will write other stories, telling them the right way. As long as the story is true to the imagination, without contamination, the story is right.
**Owls Do Cry** (1957)

In *Owls Do Cry*, written in only four months while Frame lived with Frank Sargeson, Frame establishes two trends that in some sense define her career in letters. The first is formal innovations. Her innovations represent an acute awareness of the malleability of narrative structures and the compatibility of genres, usually poetry within prose. The second trend is the use of gaps. Frame uses form and content to situate readers in an imaginative space that allows for relatively dramatic leaps. Yet even with her innovations, Frame does not disregard literary tradition. In fact, her innovations are all the more startling because they are grounded in tradition. She is simply continuing the experiment, an experiment that she traces back at least as far as Shakespeare. The title *Owls Do Cry* comes from *The Tempest*.

The novel’s first chapter, all in italics, establishes an imaginative space, a space codified by the chapter’s end: “*Sings Daphne from the dead room*” (11). It is a refrain that repeats throughout the novel. Daphne, the novel’s protagonist, is in a mental hospital, and near the end of the novel Daphne is slated for a leucotomy. The day before Daphne is to have the operation, her father and brother visit. Toby, the brother, waits in the waiting room while Daphne’s father visits her. He tells her, “Daphne. Everything’s going to be all right” (202). Yet, “… Daphne knew he was talking to himself, telling himself not to worry, that everything would be all right . . .” (202). At the same moment that society wants to cure the insane, society segregates itself, securing the insane within antiquated citadels where everything will be all right. Yet the dominant voice within the asylum is terror: “The women scream. They fear drowning. Or burning” (56). Daphne realizes the most insidious use of electroshock therapy. The medical advance is not only being used for treatment; electroshock is being used as a tool for punishment. Punishment to mitigate creativity.

Throughout the narrative, the italicized sections establish a nonlinear, nontemporal environment, an environment that exists beyond the boundary of the hierarchical structures of the mental institution and society yet an environment that provides alternatives or at least a space that offers options. For instance, “*The hollow house will never be filled*” (113), and, “*And the grey crater of the long-dead mad lies empty enough to be filled with many truths together*” (166).

The more traditional narrative is also disrupted, though, because of the events occurring within the novel. When Daphne has electroshock treatments, the syntax falls apart. Four complete paragraphs follow:
and a black blanket laid like an elasticised and bordered beetle upon the bed, and the women lying upon its furred shell with their temples washed clean in a purple gasp of liquid ethereal soap concealed in cotton wool. And the gabbling jibbering forest-quiet women wait in crocodile for the switch that abandons them from seeing and fear (56)

Frame’s innovations work because they operate in concert with the organic whole of the piece: a wonderful melding of form and function. Frame bends innovative syntax with the narrative to affect an imaginative space.

Though *Owls Do Cry* was written in four productive months while Frame lived in a shack on Sargeson’s place, it was inevitable that Frame and Sargeson would not live together indefinitely. The dissolution of their living arrangement was made somewhat easier when Frame was awarded a three hundred dollar scholarship to travel abroad. Sargeson supplemented the amount by raising additional money from friends and admirers in Auckland. Janet Frame would write her second novel, *Faces in the Water*, during her trip abroad.

**Faces in the Water (1961)**

Though the schizophrenic tag had been removed, Frame still made twice-weekly visits to meet with her British psychologist, Dr. R. H. Cawley. Cawley strongly encouraged her writing not only as a way of dealing with the events of her past but also because of her literary talent; he recognized the dynamism of her language. Cawley “came to believe that Frame’s periodic use of alphabetical codes, mirror-writing and even algebraic formulae reflected her simultaneous wish and reluctance to communicate. It was often easier for her to say things obliquely” (King 195-96). And what she was voicing was her imagination.

When she sent *Faces in the Water* to John Money, who at this point was living in Baltimore, she added a note, mentioning that the manuscript was “most private and not meant for publication: it is simply an almost truthful account of a few past experiences, and not entirely truthful because so many more dramatic things happened that if I had included them the whole account would have seemed invented. For things seem to fall into place in my life as if it were a work of fiction and not, which I doubt anyway, a real act of living” (qtd. in King 207). Yet Frame eventually decided to publish the work, explaining one of her reasons in a subsequent letter to Money: “if a few revelations . . . would help get [hospitals] improved
and perhaps help to change the public attitude to mental illness. . . . Old buildings can be pulled down and new ones put up almost overnight but it is harder to deal with the invisible structures, the medieval castles of suspicion and fear” (qtd. in King 207). This activist impulse within her writing represents an extension of her admiration for Coleridge, who believed, like Shelly, that poets are the moral legislators of the world.

As Frame was writing *Faces in the Water*, George Braziller picked up *Owls Do Cry* after it had been rejected by over twenty American publishers. The publishing of *Owls Do Cry* was the start of a long relationship between Frame, the company, and its principal. This though was a win-lose situation for Frame. While her works were being published in the potentially lucrative American market, George Braziller, for all his admiration and affection for Frame, was unable to actively champion her work. There was no substantive effort by Braziller or the firm to publicize her work.

*Faces in the Water* is written with a first-person protagonist, Estina Mavet. The protagonist quickly establishes her intent: “I will write about the season of peril. I was put in hospital because a great gap opened in the ice floe between myself and other people whom I watched, with their world, drifting away through a violet-colored sea where hammerhead sharks in tropical ease swam side by side with the seals and the polar bears. I was alone on the ice” (10). As the narrative develops, Frame employs a circuitous manner of writing that simulates Estina’s peril. The language parallels the narrative purpose. The narrative generates a circularity that aligns with the recurring shock therapy: “I was cold. I tried to find a pair of long woolen ward socks to keep my feet warm in order that I should not die under the new treatment, electric shock therapy, and have my body sneaked out the back way to the mortuary” (15). Confinement within the institutions of Cliffhaven and Treecroft is treated as a death experience by Estina Mavet.

One purpose of the narrative, then, is to give a voice to the inmates who are for all practical purposes dead in terms of society at large—a society that defines patients as inmates. “[W]hen you leave hospital you must forget all you have ever seen, put it out of your mind completely as if it never happened, and go and live a normal life in the outside world” (254), one of the nurses instructs Estina as Estina prepares to leave the hospital. Her response is the narrative. Only in the imagination does the reader have an opportunity to witness the full extent of the horror.

Throughout the narrative, Estina moves between various hospitals and exterior environs. Because of her “escapes,” she represents a particular threat to the institutions; she understands the cruelty
and is able to reveal it to the outside world. And there was tremendous cruelty. The “lolly scramble,” for instance: “The nurses, feeling bored because there hadn’t been a recent fight, would fetch a bag of sweets from the tin which was bought ever fortnight as part of the Social Security allowance for the patients. The paper lollies would be showered into the middle of the dayroom and it would be first come first served with fights developing, people being put in straight jackets, whistles blowing . . .” (97-98). Following the lolly scramble, the narrative shifts to an even more sadistic moment: “She’s down for shock. It will put her in her place I tell you. She needs to be taught a lesson” (99). Even though shock therapy, both shock and insulin, was originally conceived as a medical advancement, shock treatment was a tool to punish and torture. *Faces in the Water* is not a journalistic expose of abuses within mental institutions. It is a fully imagined space that establishes a more accurate account of life within and outside of the institutions.

**The Edge of the Alphabet (1962)**

Because Frame utilizes gaps and swerves throughout her texts, one complaint is that her works seem unpolished. Readers who prefer seamless narratives tend to have some difficulty with Frame. Yet for Frame, the leaps empower readers to participate in the imaginative process. In *The Edge of the Alphabet* she initiates the conversation between author and reader by layering the narrative. The novel starts with a note: “The following manuscript was found among the papers of Thora Pattern after her death, and submitted to the publishers by Peter Heron, Hire-Purchase Salesman.” This declaration asks readers to open their minds to the novel’s structure. The layering becomes even more interesting on the second page of the novel where Thora admits that she “made a journey of discovery through the lives of three people—Toby, Zoe, and Pat” (4). The thematic concerns shift as Thora inhabits the space of three characters: Toby, an epileptic who wants to travel and write a novel; Zoe, a midland school teacher; and Pat, an Irishman whom Toby shares a cabin with on his way to Europe.

*The Edge of the Alphabet*, like many of Frame’s works, deals with concerns surrounding death. In the novel the dead are powerful: “I walk day and night among the leavings of people, places and moments. Here the dead (my goldsmiths) keep cropping up like daisies with their floral blackmail. It is nearly impossible to bribe them or buy their silence” (3). The multiplicity of juxtapositions, like the dead and goldsmiths, like the dead and daisies, is typical of Frame’s writing. Frame is never content, settling; she desires
fluidity of representation. She gets this both through the multiplicity of metaphor (or simile as in this case) as well as through syntactic inventiveness.

The language variations complement her thematic concerns. In *The Edge of the Alphabet* death is a paramount concern, since, “The dead return, they mingle, their smell is layered over the living and the present” (17). For Frame, the debate exists within language, and language can either illuminate or conceal: “But it is imperative, for our own survival, that we avoid one another, and what more successful means of avoidance are there than words? Language will keep us safe from human onslaught, will express for us our regret at being unable to supply groceries of love or peace” (55). Her ethos remains relatively stable throughout her career; she cares deeply for the individual, and she is concerned with the systematic inhumanity of society. She believes that through language questions regarding the human condition can be investigated.

Throughout *The Edge of the Alphabet*, the protagonist questions how knowledge of the self is formed. For Thora, the inquiry continues until the moment of death: “So it is the end of self-discovery. I have arrived at the dead” (301). The concern though is what happens at this moment. Specifically, does language leave us? She asks, “What if we meet ourselves on the edge of the alphabet and can make no sign, no speech?” (301). While it clearly deals with the moment of death, *The Edge of the Alphabet* also postulates the import of language during life: “The edge of the alphabet where words crumble and all forms of communication between the living are useless. One day we who live at the edge of the alphabet will find our speech” (302). Beyond the alphabet is a tricky place.

*Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963)

*Scented Gardens for the Blind*, like most of Frame’s early works, utilizes a first-person protagonist, in this case Vera. Vera’s daughter Erlene has become mute. While tension is prevalent in many of Frame’s works, the first paragraph of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* is particularly wrought: “yet if I knew that her first words were to be judgment upon me I would kill her, I would go now to the little room where she sits alone in the dark, and kill her, and she would not be able to cry for help” (9). This image conjures up two interesting concerns. The first is the disaster of silence. The second, as in *The Edge of the Alphabet*, is the force of language; language can be so powerful that a mother is willing to kill her daughter if the anticipated utterance goes astray.
The novel also examines various perceptions of the world, as each individual sees the world differently. Vera contrasts her world, "in this small town" (12), with Erlene's father, Edward, "who travels fast, changing trains, planes, generations" (12). As Edward travels the globe, Vera attempts to come to terms with his absence by considering the functioning of time: "Some turn to the future, others to the past, others remain in the perpetual historic present. Edward was always out of step with accepted time; it was his way of keeping alive" (27). And for Vera, the position of the perpetual historic present is a dangerous place. All that is bad with social structures continues to exist in the perpetual historic present. When Vera writes, "Teaching people was cheating and dishonest" (31), she means a particular manner of instruction.

Not only does the novel account for the dramatic changes in modes of transportation during the twentieth century, it also recounts other changes: "My parents controlled the light and walked with it and their bodies were insignificant compared with their giant grotesque shadows striding up the wall and across the ceiling . . ." (41). Before electricity, candles and hurricane lanterns provided light that quite literally did not hold a candle to the electric light bulb. Light, of course, in coastal communities also empowers lighthouses: "Year after year so many lives were saved by the use of the lighthouse and the powerful beacon restlessly turning and flashing in the dark, controlled and guarded by the Keeper who lives alone in the tower and was supplied with food, fuel, medicine, by a ship whose journey round the coast was often a perilous one . . ." (45). While not a subtle metaphor, it is still wonderfully rendered, and even as this metaphor is being established, Frame manages an allegory. The lighthouse keeper, separated from society, goes mad. To the witnesses who listen to his screaming, it appears as though he has turned into a seabird: "So that I missed seeing whether the lighthouse keeper really changed to a bird, flying round and round under the sun, or whether they took him away along the sand to town where they locked him safely in another tower, as they lock people who have been alone too long with light" (47). There are all sorts of institutions to keep the world safe and secure. For Frame, the romantic notion of the imagination, the light, screens people from madness.

To contrast the light, Mrs. Walters, Erlene's teacher, expresses the dangers of a noncritical education. Regarding poetry and life, Mrs. Walters instructs, "Why the world is full of hope and joy! You must remember, girls, that when poets write in this way it is usually because they are ill or overstrained; the despair is a part of their illness" (55). For Vera, movement provides a means for escaping the
confinement of New Zealand. Using money willed to her by her aunt for "a 'journey overseas'" (67), Vera visits Europe, only to return home after Edward leaves: "Edward left to pursue his circular interests. The day he left, Erlene was wearing those cream satin ballet shoes which cripple the feet under pretense of teaching them how to dance" (69). This is simultaneously an adorable and an abhorrent image. Yet for Frame, this imaginative disjuncture places the reader firmly within Coleridge's notion of imagination, specifically the oscillation that results from combining "cream satin ballet shoes" and "cripple the feet."

Edward travels to New Zealand because he figures that he will be able to solve the problem; he will be able to compel Erlene to speak: "She must regain her speech. They must do all they can for her, quickly. The loss of speech of one person . . . means the beginning of defeat for us all" (105). Again Frame introduces an important juxtaposition. After all, the speech that Edward mandates is speech that conforms to the patriarchy. Yet forced speech is not free speech; forced speech is as problematic as silence: "Nothing must be allowed to silence our voices" (106), particularly a true unmitigated voice. "We cannot withdraw now, and stop speaking. Erlene, and all others who are mute, must learn to speak, not mere animal cries, demands for food, warmth, love, nor human pleas for forgiveness salvation peace of mind, but the speech which arranges the dance and pattern of the most complicated ideas and feelings of man in relation to truth; truth; it, the center; the circus, the crack of the whip, the feeding time of the spirit; then the great striped tigers leaping unharmed through the fire. It is something to hope for" (153). In a dramatic transmutation near the end of the novel, the reader discovers that the entire narrative has been running through Vera's head. Vera is the one who is silent before society. It is Vera who is dumb, and she is in a mental institution after succumbing to muteness at thirty.

Science remains determined. A newly appointed psychiatrist says, "How do we really know? But we'll have her talking, in the end. A shriveled little spinster of sixty pouring her heart out in the English language, providing us with information that has eluded us for so long,—who knows?—perhaps throwing new light on the human race, giving us the final answer to the Problem . . . the breakthrough . . . hope for humanity, the future . . . " (249-50).

The Reservoir: Stories and Sketches (1963)

The same year Scented Gardens for the Blind was published, Frame's second collection of stories, The Reservoir: Stories and
Sketches, was also published. While Frame’s forte is the novel, the shorter pieces provide an interesting look into her creative development. The title is apt because many of the pieces feel like preparatory sketches for her longer works.

In “A Sense of Proportion” the narrative develops and affirms language as an imaginative space. The first-person protagonist is in an uncomfortable position since her teacher, Miss Collins, insists that it is only through visual representation that the imagination lives: “I had no imagination. My poverty could not even provide shadows or proportionate rainbows. The paths in my head stayed the same width right to the foothills and over the mountains which were no obstacles to vision, as mountains are agreed to be; they were transparent mountains, and there was the path, the same width as before, annihilating distance, at last disappearing only at the boundary of the picture” (31-32). While the narrator is unable to paint with watercolors, she is able to paint with words.

Other stories in the collection, like with Scented Gardens for the Blind, survey the human condition. “Stink-Pot” is a story that concerns the relationship between a mother and a daughter: “How I hated my mother! There was never any variation in her advice, it was always, Love one another, and at night when darkness threatened it was always, Think about nice things, about sunshine and fairies” (48). The story’s narrator also deals with her sister’s death. When trying to come to terms with the death, she is at an absolute loss. The death is portrayed as a void, both in terms of space and memory: “I was lonely in the big bed that night. I unscrewed one of the knobs at the foot of the bed and picked out the piece of paper with the code message that we had posted to each other weeks ago. Alas, it was so long ago that we had played that game, I couldn’t understand the message, I had forgotten the code” (50).

Snowman, Snowman: Fables and Fantasies (1963)

Snowman, Snowman: Fables and Fantasies, which, like Reservoir, shows her dexterity with language, overtly reveals what is at stake in Frame’s project. Frame is simultaneously interested in the fable (the moral aspect of literature) and the fantastic (a concept she aligns closely with Coleridgean imagination). Language, in the form of fable and fantasy, empowers the reader to reimagine the human condition.

“Snowman, Snowman” is a novella-length fable that follows a snowman from its creation through its allegorical death: “I flew at midnight to the earth, and in the morning I was made into a human shape of snow.” “Snowman, Snowman,” my creator said” (1). The
snowman's life is bounded, instead of by the natural repercussions of aging, by the cycle of seasons. The snowman wonders what follows death: "My flesh is wasting. I cannot deceive myself. I have no treasure-house of time or imagination to provide for my survival after death" (101). There are other threats, including children: "Another small boy passed me just a moment ago and struck me across the head, knocking off the top of my head, and I begin to be more afraid for my thoughts are exposed to the sun . . ." (101). It is impossible to read this passage without wondering whether the scientific advancement called lobotomy is man believing a little too much in scientific light. Importantly, the fabled snowman has foreknowledge of death: "I was beginning to wish that I did not know how to read my newspaper shelter. It seemed full of references to fire and sun and spring . . ." (78). The world though is topsy-turvy for the snowman; spring, instead of bringing life, brings death.

Frame realizes that in the final analysis we are all individuals, and, as such, we must manage and validate our own existence. In "One Must Give Up" she makes this position clear: "There comes a time when one must rely upon one's own news, images, interpretations, when one must resist the pressure upon one's house of conforming orthodox, shared seasons, and, using the panel in the secret room, make one's escape to fluid, individual weather; stand alone in the dark listening to the worm knocking three times, the rose resisting, and the inhabited forest of the heart accomplishing its own private moments of growth" (175-76).

Karin Hansson, in her well-considered book The Unstable Manifold: Janet Frame's Challenge to Determinism, examines how Frame positions the individual with respect to the hostile world and theories of evolution. Hansson argues that from "the point of view of Western civilization, the vision she presents is extremely pessimistic: human beings have long ago passed the point of no return, and are gradually becoming dehumanized by a society which has curbed their inborn capacity and made them mere operators, existing only on the terms of technology and materialism" (19). This provides an interesting perspective; yet even with the pessimism, Frame does provide an alternative to the evolutionary track. By way of imagination, the human condition and notions of progress can be scrutinized. Hansson believes that "reality . . . is continually being reappraised and resynthesized" (128). With the reappraisal and resynthesis, to use Hansson's terms, the reader is a party to new realities, realities that question the existing epistemological hierarchies.

"The Mythmaker's Office" starts, "'The sun,' they said, 'is unmentionable. You must never refer to it!'" (125). There is no better way to
pressure epistemologies than to put them under a microscope. Each conceit has possibilities, even as each conceit possesses potential problems. Another institutional taboo for the makers of myths is death: "Death is unmentionable. Surely that will please all concerned. Death is obscene, unpublishable" (126). Yet as the story makes clear, "The denial of Death became also a denial of life and growth" (129). Frame takes great care with her fables. While they are not innovative in any formal sense, they are well considered philosophical snippets.

The Adaptable Man (1965)

Frame recognizes that individuals exist in communities. In The Adaptable Man, set in Britain though written in New Zealand, Frame makes clear in the novel's prologue: "I, Reverend Aisley Maude, suddenly fashionable, but inwardly out of fashion. . . . I, Russell Maude, dentist. . . . I, Alwyng Maude, university student, budding novelist. . . . I, Greta Maude, housewife, former nurse. . . . I, Vic Baldry, farmer. . . . I, Muriel Baldry, second wife to my second husband. . . . I, Lex Unwin, milkman, needing plaster for my back. . . . I, Dot Unwin, milkman's wife, needing a new dress to wear at my niece's wedding. . . . I, Nelly, an old mongrel bitch with twisted back legs. . . . Botti Julio, Italian farm worker. . . . I, I, I, I, I" (5-7). The community is a collection of individuals, or "I"s. The Britain described in The Adaptable Man is first one of exclusion. While Botti Julio, an Italian traveling to Britain for work, is allowed entry, others "were denied entry because they were old or mad or diseased" (20). Yet Botti's fate is worse: he is murdered because he is a foreigner.

The Britain presented is a country simultaneously steeped in tradition while focusing attention and energy on change. In terms of the church, "There had also been continual pressure from Diocesan councils to make the Church 'move with the times,' to give religion an appeal, a 'voice' in modern life. Aisley had been preoccupied in wondering, Move with the times—which times?" (21). Aisley, who suffers from tuberculosis, feels isolated: "He had been out of touch with everything and everyone around him. He was out of touch with modern diseases . . . with the church and its congregation, and with God" (21). Aisley recognizes the importance of adapting: "He was nothing more, he thought, than an ecclesiastical dinosaur. The solution had been put to him that he must adapt or be threatened with extinction" (33). Yet Aisley wonders exactly what it means to adapt.

Not surprisingly, particularly since the novel is set in Britain and modeled after nineteenth-century novels, the conflict is witnessed as one of city versus country. This divide is made clear by Aisley,
who, when shown a ladywhite, says, "I'm a city man, there's no
doubt of that. My sermons are not in stones and trees" (92). Yet this
discussion is not benign, as xenophobia reigns. Botti Julio is mur-
dered by a young university student because he is Spanish, because
he is foreign. Particularly troubling is the justification for the kill-
ing: "Alwyn is proud that he killed successfully. . . . Alwyn supposed
that his own murder of Botti Julio had been such a normal twen-
tieth-century act of a normal twentieth-century man that no suspi-
cion had been attached to him" (150). It is important that the novel
articulates Botti's story. Once the story enters the imagination,
Botti cannot be forgotten:

He will not be silenced by a young university student who, believing
himself to be a product of the twentieth century, and wishing to iden-
tify himself more fully with an age in which genocide is the basis of
survival, and wishing not to be known as one who retreated, like his
uncle the Reverend Aisley Maude, into the mists of an Anglo-Saxon
era, or like his father, who had built a picket fence of teeth about him,
and paved his life with colonies, commemorations, celebrations, na-
tions, has taken the first step toward being the truly Adaptable Man, a
Child of His Time, by murdering someone whom he did not know, whom
he had never seen in his life before, whom he neither loved nor hated, a
man whose only qualifications for being murdered was that he be-
longed to the human race. (149)

In fact, this is as overtly political as Frame ever gets. For her this
openness is justified because of the history of war and oppression
throughout the twentieth century.

A State of Siege (1966)

A State of Siege is a unified novel of terror. Malfred, or Mally, after
burying her mother, retires to a tropical island, Karemoana, inten-
ting to paint. Mally lives both in the world and in her imagination,
which she calls the "'room two inches behind the eyes.' . . . Perhaps
it would never be captured and named. Yet she felt that for the first
time in her life she was free to explore that room" (9). Importantly,
there is a narrative valuation given to that room: "the true images
were in her mind" (10). The novel not only explores the mind; it also
establishes the relationship between geographic regions within
New Zealand, specifically "up north" versus the south. Mally is told
that "The south nibbles discreetly. And thirty chews to a swallow!"
(11), while, "You can hear the north eating. Its table manners are
bad" (12). Mally, though, does make the move, justifying herself by
saying, "What about me?" Mally wants a "New View" (23), and "up
north" provides that opportunity.
When Mally arrives on the island, she articulates her duty: "My duty (she recognized in herself the characteristic need, developed and maintained through the years, to move from duty to duty) is to see, perhaps to have the energy, the courage, to paint what I see, and since my island is sparsely populated there'll be no intrusion of people into my scenes. Fifty-three is a ripe age to put aside entanglements with the human family" (29). As Mally settles into her new island home, she simultaneously contemplates the nature of painting in contrast to the external world, a world fraught with difficulties: "A painting doesn't leave the household, get married, get drunk, drown its sorrows; a painting doesn't grow up; it stays, it stays" (60). Yet Mally recognizes, during a thunderous storm, that "the whole world lay without, trying to get in" (62). During the storm, Mally is startled when there is a "thunderous determined knocking on the back door" (63).

Molly attempts to dismiss the knocking as a sound from the storm. She is successful until the knocking is heard again: "And now here I am, alone, by choice, at Karemoana. There's a storm, it's night, and the knocking keeps on and on" (71). As the knocking continues Mally realizes that the knocker is a "faceless Anyone": "The faceless Anyone persisted, and Malfred felt her head beginning to ache with an old woman's ache that reached out and gripped the roots of her gray hair. She dozed. The wind still screamed. The knocking went on and on" (75). Of course, her fears are not solely grounded in the moment, but bring to the fore all her fears. A lifetime of fears, faceless fears, are knocking; her imagination is in overdrive.

A State of Siege moves through three parts: the first, "Knocking"; the second, "Darkness"; and the third, "The Stone." In "Darkness" Mally accepts the harsh realization of her life: "I could be anyone. I could be the woman who died in this house, or the one who will follow when I die. I've come, with those retired people that walk the high roads of Karemoana to escape a derelict self by joining the derelict people. No matter what excuse I give myself or to others, I came here to practice a new way of seeing; forgetting, for the moment, that I brought my used eyes with me. They have been trained so long ago that they find it hard to give up their old tricks, let alone learn new ones" (116). For Frame, this is systemic both at the level of the individual as well as at the level of the communal. And, for Frame, it is absolutely a manner of seeing, of vision.

Mally understands why people and cultures value sameness; sameness, after all, provides the illusion of stability. Mally fondly remembers her childhood: "I remember that I've never known such a feeling of safety as I knew in Matuatangi when I woke each morning
and knew that the school day, with its fire shovels, lay ahead; that my lessons were planned down to the last shadow” (117-18). Even shadows are incorporated into the daily plans. Yet in the unfamiliar north Mally recognizes that “The dark and the storm and the sea and the knocking may go on forever” (139). This realization comes as Mally acknowledges the inevitable solitude of existence: “Now Malfred is lying asleep dreaming, her pictures set before her, her New View unfolding without hindrance, an island canvas that tries to make some pattern of her life. No one is going to mourn greatly when she dies” (175). And die she does: “Three mornings later, when they found her, both her hand and the stone held fast in her hand were ice cold; she was dead. The room, too, was cold with the sea wind. Outside, the sun, enriching the day, spilled its cleaned grains of light, and the sea lay calm at last” (246).

As The Adaptable Man resembles a nineteenth-century novel, A State of Siege resembles a philosophic treatise. Even when her novels reference other types of works, Frame makes them her own. As Frame accepts certain thematic concerns from nineteenth-century novels, she places them within a narrative that propels itself at a pace not seen in most nineteenth-century works. As she forms a philosophic treatment of the imagination, she couches the discourse within a narrative structure that forces readers to pay attention to the narrative drive (the mystery and horror of the piece).

The Pocket Mirror (1967) and Mona Minim and the Smell of the Sun (1969)

During the late sixties, Frame expanded her oeuvre to include a collection of poetry, The Pocket Mirror, and a children’s story, Mona Minim and the Smell of the Sun. When compared to her uncanny novels and compelling short stories, these works are relatively flat. Unlike her other works, where Frame challenged boundaries, her poetry and her children’s story uncharacteristically accept genre constraints. In the end the children’s story is too allegorical; the poetry, too sentimental.

Mona Minim, the protagonist of the children’s story, is a “house ant” that falls through a crack in the stairs to find herself outside with the “garden ants.” After concealing her scent so as not to be killed by the garden ants, she and her new friend, Barbara, have antlike adventures. Once Barbara is captured and placed in a child’s ant farm Mona tries to rescue her. When Mona returns to the house, she finds herself an outsider, though she ultimately convinces the house ants to accept her back. Since she has aged outside of the house, she is surprised to hear that her past is now
mythical. She overhears the story of Mona, a house ant who fell through a gap in the stairs. True to her goal of freeing Barbara, Mona finds her—she has become queen of the ant farm, and as a result she is content to remain where she is, even though it would be simple for her to escape. At the sentimental end of the story Mona hears the answer she was seeking: “You must go out, little ants, and see and smell and taste and touch for yourselves and then you will know” (94).

Frame’s poetic project has two readily identifiable problems. Frame is unwilling to dispense with narrative, and she is unwilling to take risks. Even the wonderful alliteration that is omnipresent in her fiction is for the most part absent in her poetry. Her poetry, not surprisingly, features many of the same thematic concerns as her prose project, for instance the notion of dwelling: “Her thoughts like poppies go to sleep in their clothes/with no west wind to iron out the creases in the morning” (Pocket Mirror 40). And:

Traffic and fashion have decreed
outmoded memories be thrown
in No Man’s land where all men leave
the past machinery of their lives.
A mental bombsite, nothing more,
empty of peace, empty of war,
where too many mouths are locked
where too many hands fester
with wounds from broken wheels and rusting knives. (41-42)

For the most part, Frame’s poetry seems like a sketchbook of ideas for her narrative projects.

**The Rainbirds (1968);**
**or, Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room (1969)**

There are many great moments in literature, and one of them occurs in *The Rainbirds.* After emigrating to New Zealand and marrying Beatrice Muldrew of Matutangi, Godfrey Rainbird dies on his way home from the Fellowship Society. The protocols of death quickly follow his accident, including the necessary cables back to England announcing his death, buying a coffin, and sending his clothes to charity. One cable, to Godfrey’s sister, Lynley, empowers her to act; she decides to emigrate to New Zealand as well.

Yet Godfrey, though originally pronounced dead, is repronounced alive: “Not understanding why suddenly he should be pronounced alive with as much certainty and ceremony as if he were being pronounced dead, Godfrey followed the examples of the mortuary
attendants and fainted” (39). Understandably, confusion abounds. Godfrey loses his job at the travel agency because his boss is reluctant to keep a formerly dead person on. The boss insists that he is only considering the clients; after all, who really wants to buy a holiday travel package from a person previously dead? Godfrey’s wife Beatrice similarly reestablishes the truth: “Her horrified glance returned. Her voice became shrill. ‘Forget it? How can we ever forget it? You’ve been dead!’ ” (54). Godfrey’s life cannot return to normal, as normal provides no room for returning from the dead.

The question of memory becomes folded into the narrative, since if someone is dead, he or she is no longer a vessel for memories. When Godfrey returns to life, Lynley, his sister, realizes that she has “no claim now as sole owner of his early memories” (93). Yet something fundamental to his existence is lost at the moment he is declared dead: “He spoke in a whisper. ‘I’m cold,’ he said. ‘Warm me’ ” (95). Along with being cold, Godfrey no longer cherishes the sun. When telling his sister, he “spoke of the sun with indifference as if it were no concern of his. Sensing this, Beatrice felt a premonition of disaster” (103).

The entire family is affected by Godfrey’s rebirth. At school the kids are taunted for having a ghost as a father. Besides, having been away from school, Sonny realizes that “New games would be in, new rules made for old games, and he would have to stand and watch before he knew what the rules were, and by then they’d be changed again” (126). Even momentary disruptions, momentary absences, are problematic. As the kids reenter school, Godfrey attempts to re-enter society, starting with the mundane: “There, he’s giving his ticket to the conductor. The routine has begun again” (130). Yet he is excluded. Godfrey finds himself repeating the words of King Lear: “No cause. No cause” (189). Yet Beatrice is the one who is most troubled; she kills herself by cutting her throat “with one of the newly sharpened silver knives; she seemed to be floating, surrounded by lilies of blood” (246).

**Intensive Care (1970)**

*Intensive Care* again puts formal innovation at the fore. The initial chapter is a free-verse poem with embedded tension. The poem begins: “In the dream in the dream/the child played a poem/protected by mild adjectives” (1). Yet in the third stanza, near the poem’s end, “All others were murdered or hanged/left out in the rain overnight” (1). The novel is in three parts. The first, “Kindness Itself, Happiness Itself, and Delphiniums,” is set in the contemporary present with a historical backdrop of the Great War. An English mansion
has been converted to a hospital. Early in the third chapter some patients discuss the hospital’s mandate: “This is a recovery unit. Patients don’t come here unless there is hope for them” (10), says a wombless Mrs. Bertha Noble, when referring to a “woman upstairs who never came to meals and who was waiting to be transferred to a nursing home in the same street” (10). The woman, the seventy-year-old Cecily Everest, was the adolescent love interest of Tom, who was wounded in the war.

Their paths, for fifty years, crossed only in memories, since Tom returned to New Zealand following the war to be with his wife. In his late sixties, Tom returns to search after his love. With age, Tom finds that “The older he became the more his childhood years became clear to him, seen in a new light manufactured by the accumulation of years and switched on, full voltage, day and night by the luxurious necessity of approaching death. A room with no corners shadowed” (22). Yet people age differently; Ciss does not recognize Tom: “Oh yes, I remember Tom. The love of my life. Did you know him?” (29). Her confusion is justified, is real, since the Tom sitting beside her sickbed is not the Tom of her memory: Tom too has changed; Tom too has aged. Life, as Ciss says, is transformation. They are now transformed: they are no longer young lovers; they are old age pensioners; they are near death. Tom returns again to New Zealand, and he dies a short time later outside a grocer’s shop.

In the second part of the novel, “A Kind of Moss, A Sudden Cry,” the novel positions the world following Tom’s death. Peggy, Tom’s companion in New Zealand, picks up some of Tom’s things from his brother, Leonard. Life and relationships are speedily reduced to a few miscellaneous items. After a few years, Leonard enters the RAF hospital only to find that he’s being transferred to a special chest unit. It is now his turn to ask about things: “Oh you don’t need things, she said, ‘We’ve got your bundle’” (148). After a couple of weeks in the hospital, he returns home, only to die after three months. Yet it is not war that is the problem; war is simply a more dramatic and more visible indicator of human nature gone awry. Tom’s grandson Colin is horrifically troubled. He is haunted by a woman, Lorna Kimberley; “The image of Lorna Kimberley began to occupy the background of Colin’s waking thoughts and sleeping dreams. . . . He tried to emphasize to himself that his feelings were madness, to remind himself of his list of responsibilities—father, husband, rate-payer, member of committees raising money for charity . . .” (169). He is unable to reason himself from his troubles, and

one warm early March evening of Indian summer . . . he took his rifle and went to Number 361 and rang the doorbell and when Mrs. Kimberley answered the door he shot her dead and when Mr.
Kimberley, hearing the shot and seeing what had happened, ran to the telephone he shot him too, dead, and then he went to Lorna's bedroom and she was in bed there and suddenly his life became incredible no longer because what he had dreamed had happened, Lorna was there, lying in bed asleep, but she was awake now and preparing to scream. He did not try to make love to her. He aimed the rifle at her and shot her and she fell back on the pillow dead, and he lay down beside her, still holding the rifle, and he kissed her, and there was blood all over her face. He aimed the rifle, then, at his own head and pulled the trigger. (195)

In the third part of the novel, a "Pear Blossom to Feed the Nightmare," the same Colin is given the task of determining who should be exterminated by way of the "Human Delineation Act." Colin is visited by an endless stream of people who hope to influence his decision. Colin ultimately has little control, as there is compelling societal acceptance for the designations. The delineation project is supported as valid, a horrific acceptance of eugenics: "Perhaps when it is all over there will not be many people left and those who are left will have more—that is what the radio announcer said. He said there will be more for everyone in a new world . . ." (242). The world is not new, nor is it brave. It is nasty and evil to its core. Every political agenda has a slogan, and the Human Delineation Act is no different: "Happy and Free with H.D." (270). There is also a television show, The Perfect World of Tomorrow.

Milly Galbraith, the village idiot, writes her story in a journal, hoping to prove that she too is human, hoping to prove that she should not be eliminated: "... I know I am truly Human because I have a mother and father and brother and I live in a house with a television and electric heater and I sleep at night in a bed . . ." (234). Her family believes that only Milly will be taken and that they will be spared. Yet if the science of eugenics is applied, the parents are the root cause of Milly's genetic failings. The entire family is eliminated: "The daughter was the first to go, naturally. She didn't go as docilely as we thought she would. Seemed to be expecting a miracle" (335).

**Daughter Buffalo (1972)**

*Daughter Buffalo* is Frame's American novel, set in and around New York, though it feels more like Baltimore. The novel is in four parts, followed by a brief epilogue. In keeping with the theme of death, the first part, titled "D.,” begins, "I am Talbot Edelman, medical graduate, a student of death, writing of a time now or long past which appears as a dream though I am not a dreaming kind of man. Let me tell you about myself and my experiences of three weeks of one summer” (5). His experiences include meeting a man named
Turnlung, a man Talbot studies. Near the end of the first section Talbot questions whether or not he actually met Turnlung: “If you read this you may laugh at me if you wish. I did not dream Turnlung. My God, I did not dream Turnlung” (21). And it is this undercutting that forces the reader to question how narration is pieced together.

In the first section of the second part, “The Bees in the Flowering Currant,” Turnlung explicates his name: “I am an old man, a traveler down Instant Street, with water in the corner of my eye and milkwhite seeing. . . . I said that to survive, from the moment we are born, we must be capable of turning against. Before birth we are against air, against breathing, yet we survive to breathe and love the air, we become turncoats—turnskins, turneyes, turnmouths, turnhearts, turnlings” (27). Life is turnings. The first turning is the first breath. Death, of course, is the final turn, and regardless of all attempts to live death through others, death remains a solitary adventure.

To deal with death we turn to memory. When Turnlung narrates his grandfather’s death, he does so using an image: “The sight of the spectacles and the blue lining brought a sudden pain of longing, a wild grief for Grandfather, the kind of grief I felt when I watched the bees dancing about the flowering currant bush, and it seemed as if Grandfather’s death, all those years, had been confined in the spectacle case and my opening it had released the death like a fume of memory” (37). Death, for the living, is inextricably linked with memory. The exploration of death includes not only contemporary moments, the death of a cat or calf or rabbit, but also literary accounts, and the catalog is extensive, including Poe, Coleridge, Browning, T. S. Eliot, and Shakespeare: “With death and burial having been taken care of by the obliging poets I was able to use the incomparable facilities for grief and mourning given by Walt Whitman . . .” (65). In this narrative as well as other Frame narratives, part of the discussion surrounding death is to affirm that every generation, every individual, has to come to terms with death. In the twentieth century the range of reporting has expanded dramatically with the advent of radio and television: “we were suddenly given more deaths than we could cope with, and now we not only inherited them, we are invited to witness them” (42).

In the third part, “Down Instant Street, Jewels, and the Finishing Touch,” the narrative brings language into the quandary, from the perspective of Turnlung: “Words, first words, are as traumatic as first love and first death. When we are young, presented with mature experienced words and lacking the mental imagery to receive them, we hospitably give them what we have in our minds
only to find that we have invited them to live a falsehood which we believed to be truth" (92). Our mechanisms for understanding life are limited yet fluid; language becomes the way to grasp understanding: "I had opened the dictionary and I had been showered with the inescapable words which, if I worked, could become my allies instead of my enemies" (97). Society is the better for having language, and society is the better for having artists: "We need our solitary workers—our writers, painters, composers" (99). Yet Turnlung also recognizes in a utilitarian sort of way that we also need "the gardeners, fishermen, lighthouse keepers, tightrope walkers" (99).

Talbot, a medical student, experiments on his dog, Sally, breaking bones to set them, lacerating the skin to practice stitches, opening the chest cavity to explore the heart and remove organs. In a strange twist Talbot's girlfriend, Lenore, is the daughter of a Nazi experimenter. She is troubled with the human-status Talbot gives Sally, and when Sally dies, Lenore leaves. To continue his study Talbot invites the aged Turnlung to die in his apartment. Turnlung accepts the invitation and mentions arranging the custody of "their" daughter, Daughter Buffalo.

The fourth part, "Man, Dog, Buffalo, Do You Know Your Name?," begins with two poetic chapters before settling back with the prose narrative. In the first, Daughter Buffalo is more fully explained: "Surname Buffalo. Unemployed. Address Central Park Zoo/Zip Code?/ Former residence Prairie. Daughter Buffalo" (172). And in the second, death becomes a qualification for completion: "I said to die is to be complete" (179). When Turnlung does not show up, Talbot goes to his apartment; he is dead. The body is taken to the morgue. Talbot calls Turnlung's consulate to find that "the name Turnlung was completely unknown, and the books [by Turnlung] I mentioned were unheard of and had never been published" (191). In the epilogue the narrative openness is shifted; it is Talbot who becomes absent. Turnlung's letter to the Death Institute is returned: "Neither the Death Institute nor Talbot Edelman were known, according to the message written across the envelope" (210). Turnlung, though, continues to write to Talbot; the letters end up in the "Dead Letter Office" (210).

**Living in the Maniototo (1979)**

Published seven years after *Daughter Buffalo*, *Living in Maniototo* begins with a prologue titled, "Naming People and Places." Since the first-person narrator has buried two husbands and is endowed with an active imagination, she walks through her names: "And I, Mavis Furness, Mavis Barwell, Mavis Halleton, perhaps, in a world once peopled with Madges and Mavisess and Peggys, the
penultimate Mavis, yet remaining, as all good stories satisfy us by saying ‘to this very day,’ just Alice Thumb, or Ariella, Lokinia, or Maui’s sister, or mere Naomi, Susan, Ngaere, Belinda. Or Violet Pansy Proudlock, ventriloquist” (11-12). The narrator settles on Proudlock, though she simultaneously remains all of the former.

Proudlock’s life is one of movement, so she narrates events, starting in part 1, “Paying Attention to Husbands, Dead Writers, the Blue Fury, Debtors and Debt Collectors,” with her life in Blenheim, a suburb of Auckland. In Blenheim the narrator recalls, “... I spent twenty years living as Mavis Barwell with my drain-laying husband Lewis... Our marriage was not excessively happy. We plodded along because we’d been taught to, by the examples of our parents, in the same way we’d been taught to think of our country, its peoples and history...” (25). After Lewis dies, the narrator admits to writing a book: “... I wrote, very quickly, my first book, The Green Fuse where I described the years of my late teens which I spent in a psychiatric hospital because at that time it was thought to be a crime, a sin, a sign of disease instead of dis-ease, to be suffering from unhappiness” (27). The subsequent narration mirrors Frame’s life: “... I traveled to the Spanish Islands and Spain and the United Kingdom... and the United States, where I stayed... in Baltimore...” (27). Yet by reducing her life to a page, Frame dismisses the critics who are too eager to conjoin her work and her life. After all, no life can be reduced so easily.

Over the course of the novel the narrator travels and relocates a number of times. While house-sitting in Berkeley, as the owners visit Italy, she hears reports of their deaths, so she returns to Baltimore. In Baltimore she finds that her friend Brian has died; but she also hears that miraculously the couple did not die in the theater collapse. The rapidity of events is consistent with Frame’s interest in multiplicity, in the manifold. This is made clear on the last page of the novel: “I reminded myself as I fell asleep that night that, once again, Alice Thumb would take care of everything, in time, that she would direct the glances at or away from according to her judgment of the need, while I, Violet Pansy Proudlock, Barwell, Halleton, Alice Thumb herself, would continue to live and work in the house of replicas, usefully, having all in mind—the original, the other, and the manifold” (240).

*Janet Frame: An Autobiography (To the Is-Land (1982), An Angel at My Table (1984), The Envoy from Mirror City (1989))*

The first very brief chapter of the first volume of Frame’s three-volume autobiography is: “From the first place of liquid darkness,
within the second place of air and light, I set down the following
record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths
and its direction always toward the Third Place, where the starting
point is myth” (1). With this beginning Frame admits that even her
autobiography is a construct—a construct of fact, truths, and
memories of truths. These are substantially different entities,
though each carries value.

Against those arguing that Frame’s fiction is less fiction than
autobiography, her autobiography represents the best defense, as
Frame provides a superb example of autobiography. The autobiog-
raphy is always mitigated: “I remember, as my earliest memory,
something that could not have happened” (12). Even with the cagi-
ness, the autobiography, at 435 pages, provides a comprehensive
disclosure of her life and the life of her family. It is also, as I have
mentioned, a type of bildungsroman: “I began reading more ‘adven-
ture’ books, realising that to have an adventure, I did not need to
travel in the lost Lizzie Ford, getting sick on the way, to beaches and
rivers—I could experience an adventure by reading a book” (33).
With reading comes writing and choices.

When referring to an early poem of hers, Frame writes, “I dis-
agreed with Myrtle, who then insisted that there were words and
phrases you had to use, and when you were writing about evening
shadows, you always said ‘tint,’ just as you said the stars ‘shone’ or
‘twinkled’ and waves ‘lapped’ and the wind ‘roared.’ In spite of
Myrtle’s insistence, I preferred ‘touch’ to ‘tint’ but in deference to
her obvious wisdom and wider knowledge I changed the word to
‘tint’ when I took my poem to school. But later, when I wrote it in my
notebook, I reverted to ‘touch the sky,’ having my own way” (66).
Even as a child, Frame dismissed conventions and was true to her
imagination. While Frame’s mother understood Janet’s desire to
write poetry, Janet’s father was more pragmatic: “Dad’s interest in
words was formal. Words were to be sought and explained and not
used for ‘airy-fairy’ purposes, and although he was proud that I was
writing poetry, his special interest was in letting others know and
in hoping it might win prizes” (77). Janet, though, was her mother’s
daughter.

Throughout the autobiography, Frame articulates her creative
position or passion: “I wanted an imagination that would inhabit a
world of fact, descend like a shining light upon the ordinary life of
Eden Street, and not force me to exist in an ‘elsewhere.’ I wanted
the light to shine” (101). And at fourteen, Frame recalls, “My life
had been for many years in the power of words. It was driven now
by a constant search and need for what was, after all, ‘only a word’—
imagination” (113). Even as her essays were being praised by her
teachers, Frame shows concern: "I was painfully aware that I had no originality, no imagination, and I could not understand this sudden praise for my essays" (115). She kept a journal where she wrote to a fictional character, Mr. Ardenue. At fifteen, she wrote, "Dear Mr Ardenue, They think I'm going to be a schoolteacher, but I'm going to be a poet" (132). As poet, Frame is apart from they. And she did feel apart. While at the teachers' college, she recalls, "My only romance was with poetry and literature. . . . I did not realise the extent of my loneliness. I clung to works of literature as a child clings to its mother" (157).

Frame remembers her student days: "Writing now, I am impatient with my student self that was so unfitted, ungrownup, so cruelly innocent" (158). Throughout the autobiography, Frame plays with the dynamics and fluidity of memory: "Some memories have been diluted, mostly by the storms that followed or were given; the colour of those memories has been washed away, their shape is gone" (176). She also situates books like 

Faces in the Water: "In my book Faces in the Water I have described in detail the surroundings and events in the several mental hospitals I experienced. . . . I have also written factually of my own treatment and my thoughts about it. The fiction of the book lies in the portrayal of the central character, based on my life but given largely fictional thoughts and feelings, to create a picture of the sickness I saw around me" (194). The beauty of Faces in the Water stems from the portrait, not the fact.

Later in the autobiography Frame articulates the "processes of fiction. 'Putting it all down as it happens' is not fiction; there must be the journey by oneself, the changing of the light within that light, that city of reflections governed by different laws, materials, currency. Writing a novel is not merely going on a shopping expedition across the border into an unreal land: it is hours and years spent in the factories, the streets, the cathedrals of the imagination, learning the unique functioning of Mirror City" (405-06).

Frame also reveals why she kept returning to the hospital, which, interestingly enough, she links with her desire to be a writer: "Faced with the family anguish [the death of her mother in this instance], I made my usual escape, the route now perfected, and once again I was in Seacliff Hospital. I knew as soon as I arrived there that the days of practising that form of escape were over. I would go away somewhere, live on my own, earn enough money to live on, write my books" (221). And later, "A problem with such a simple solution! A place to live and write, with enough money to support myself" (224). The autobiography ends with Frame's return to New Zealand, which is roughly the moment in her life when she
had both a well-established reputation and enough money to support herself in relative comfort.

**You Are Now Entering the Human Heart (1983)**

This collection of short stories was published to capitalize on the popularity of the first volume of Frame's autobiography and in anticipation of the movie *An Angel at My Table*, based on her second autobiographical volume. The collection includes works from her three earlier collections of short stories as well as five stories that were previously published in various magazines, including the *New Yorker*, which published "Winter Garden" and "You Are Entering the Human Heart." The selection of stories was made by Frame and includes a roughly equal number of stories from each of her three earlier collections.

The title story, "You Are Now Entering the Human Heart," set in Philadelphia, follows the first-person protagonist through various museums. Instead of visiting the heart exhibit, the protagonist walks across the street to "catch up on American flora and fauna" (193). She watches a snake demonstration for a school group with the purpose of teaching young children that not every snake they come across needs to be killed. The naturalist chooses the students' teacher to hold the snake: "She must be near retiring age, I thought. A city woman. Never handled a snake in her life. Her face was pale. She just managed to drag the fear from her eyes to some place in their depths, where it lurked like a dark stain. Surely the attendant and the children noticed?" (194). The story is about the ability to perceive, yet the naturalist and the kids are oblivious to the woman's agony. When the teacher compliments two girls who come forward, the naturalist says, "It's not a question of bravery. The snake is *harmless*, absolutely *harmless*. Where's the bravery when the snake is harmless?" (196). When the snake rests against the teacher's cheek she screams and throws the snake up in the air: "I didn't feel I should watch any longer. Some of the children began to laugh, some to cry" (196). The protagonist, after checking the time, realizes she has just enough time to catch her train: "The journey through the human heart would have to wait until some other time" (197). Frame is a superb teller of short stories. As in her fables and fantasies, she is able to create an imaginative space that compels the reader to participate in the dynamics of the story. While the protagonist never enters the model human heart, the reader is forced through its chambers, even as he or she seems to know exactly what's going to happen at each moment of the story.
“Winter Garden” is the second New Yorker story in the collection; it is a tender story. Mr. Paget tends his garden in between visits to the hospital to visit his wife, who is in a coma. Though she dies in autumn, he continues his garden routine into the winter. His neighbors start talking: “Nothing grows in the garden in winter” (192). "They wonder why Mr Paget stands for so long looking at the dead twigs, the leafless shrubs, the vacant flower beds set like dark eyes in the middle of the lawn, why he potters about day after day in the dead world where nothing seems to change. And sometimes they think perhaps he is going mad when they see him kneel down and put his cheek against the skin of the earth” (192). Like “You Are Now Entering the Human Heart,” “Winter Garden” raises issues about how we perceive each other, alienation, and the resulting actions that we take. In “Winter Garden” the neighbors are always observers, never participants. They never open the gate to ask Paget whether he needs anything, say compassion.

The Carpathians (1988)

For The Carpathians, Janet Frame won the prestigious Commonwealth Writers Prize. While her autobiography is appropriately her penultimate work, it is fitting that her most ambitious and most successful fictional work should come at the end of her writing career. It is a crowning achievement.

The Carpathians is like a set of Russian nesting dolls, a book within a book within a book. In an introductory note before the first of four sections, J.H.B., who we later learn is John Henry Brecon, gives a brief introduction to the writing of this, his second, book. It starts with a disclosure: “characters and happenings in this book are all invented and bear no relation to actual persons living or dead” (7). Yet the purpose of this disclosure is confined within the structure of the narrative, as the note ends, “I have been greatly influenced by my mother (recently dead) and by my father. My mother’s short visit to New Zealand and my father’s lifelong marriage with words have inspired this book” (7). In the epilogue John Henry Brecon raises again the issue of his parents: “And perhaps the town of Puamahara, which I in my turn visited, never existed? Nor did my mother and father in the way they are portrayed, for they died when I was seven years old, and so I did not know them” (196). The novel is given over to the imagination.

In the first part, “The Gravity Star,” the narrative positions two fundamental metaphors. The first is the “town of Puamahara or Memory Flower” (11). “A young woman, chosen by the gods as collector of the memory of her land, journeys to a region between the
mountains and the sea to search for the memory. . . . The legend describes how the young woman released the memory of the land when she picked and tasted the ripe fruit from a tree growing in the bush. . . . For many years with no human function but that of storyteller, she recounted the memory, and one day when the listeners returned, they found the memory-collector had vanished and in her place a tree grew with one blossom named, then, the Memory Flower from which, it is said, fruit invisible to most eyes from time to time may grow” (11). Memory and imagination become inextricably intertwined.

Once the Memory Flower is established, the narrative quickly moves to the Gravity Star, which is presented as a recent scientific discovery where an object in the universe can simultaneously appear in two places. The initial disclosure is not surprising: “Poets who live in unimaginable reality have always known of the Gravity Star . . .” (12). However, for the narrative to place the Gravity Star within science is important, since, “Ordinary perceptions are denied, overturned, the mind is thrust into a channel of the formerly unknowable because then unimaginable” (12). This shift carries important political overtones, not only because science came up with electroshock therapy, but more important because science developed the atomic bomb, a bomb that can literally wipe out cities.

The Carpathians is also political in that it overtly defines the position of the Maoris within New Zealand: “the original dwellers, the Maoris, who here are mostly poor in the material possessions that the country values highly, who live in the streets of the orphaned cars, who are often out of work, staying home to repair or rebuild their cars and to cultivate their flower and vegetable gardens” (14). The subtlety of Frame’s syntax is wonderful. After establishing a rather bleak picture the sentence turns to that of cultivation—a cultivation that establishes a hierarchy of existence where the flower, the beautiful, comes before the more “pragmatic” vegetable.

Mattina Brecon, the mother of John Henry Brecon, travels to Puamahara, her penultimate stop before returning to New York to die. In Puamahara she surveys her street, scribbling in a notebook the names and natures of the people living on her street, Kowhai Street. The street, though, has recently changed with the murder of Madge McMurtrie, an invalid. New Zealand, like New York, is not immune from murder. Within the narrative the murder is discussed in metafictional terms: “. . . Madge, being dead, has no point of view unless (which is likely) she transmitted part of herself to the relatives who visited her or to the eighteen-year-old man (on leave from the Manuka Home) who burgled her house and murdered her. In the town of the Memory Flower she deserves a chapter written in
the course of daily work among memories” (27). Memories again become a component of the imagination, as does language.

The structure of the narrative also comes into play, as Mattina finds herself reading a manuscript left by Dinny Wheatstone in her mailbox. Mattina is surprised to find that she is part of the narrative, even though she has just arrived in New Zealand. The Gravity Star has altered temporality. Time too is not without variability. In fact one of the primary attributes of memory is temporal. Memory, after all, often folds moments together. Memories tend to nest together for reasons other than linearity, and particular memories often occupy more than one space. So while memory has temporal markers, the same is not true for the imagination, where everything continuously folds on itself or exists simultaneously.

Through language, people share memories and imagination. Alienation comes when people are no longer able to communicate. Near the end of the novel, letters rain down from the sky, as the street erupts into a cacophony of inarticulate wailing: “The people of Kowhai Street, still alive, were now unintelligible creatures with all the spoken and written language of the world fallen as rain about them. The only judgment likely to be made about them, should their plight be discovered, was a diagnosis of mass hysteria or insanity. They were alive, yet on the other side of the barrier of knowing and being. There might be those who would judge them as better dead, who might even wish to induce a ‘merciful’ death” (129). Our notions of being are so inextricably linked with language, it is difficult to render or imagine the “other side of the barrier of knowing and being.” Yet as a society, we define being by establishing and enforcing norms.

By dawn everyone on Kowhai Street is dead except Mattina, and before long the government has expeditiously removed their bodies, returning society, after an expected period of uncertainty, to normal. Conceptually, Mattina, within the narrative, describes what happened: “The midnight rain had fallen, its unique composition had been real, the events in Kowhai Street had been real. She and the people of Kowhai Street had entered the time of the coexistence of dream and reality, had absorbed and explored the principles of the Gravity Star” (131). Only Mattina is able to return from the topsy-turvy to language. Yet as the epilogue establishes, the narrative is constructed within John Henry’s imagination.

The Carpathians, a unified instance of Frame’s project, an exploration of the limitlessness of language and imagination, is a fitting final book. After it, Frame retired to New Zealand, living relatively reclusively until her death from leukemia on 29 January 2004.
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