S(words)tories

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S(words)stories

The Lagoon and other stories demonstrates Janet Frame's use of several recurrent rhetorical strategies: (1) contradiction inherent in simultaneity, (2) paradox engendered by category (e.g., definition, identification, even "story" itself), (3) illusions of hypothesis, (4) convention as misdirection, and (5) parenthesis as a form of language. Reading the book for its "dance of alternatives" – its distinction between the told and the heard – elucidates Frame's counter-narrative practice.

The lagoon is full.

The lagoon is empty.

Start here.

Or And

When Janet Frame's *The Lagoon and other stories* opens, the reader (or, in context, the *listener*) immediately hears both a denial and a narrative justification. "[I]here is no lagoon" (7)¹ *because* at low tide the water withdraws into the harbour. Move further into the early paragraphs and the reader discovers that despite the absence of the lagoon, pools persist. Moreover, "there is a bridge over the lagoon" (7) where you may see your own image "tangled up with sea-water" (7), and "sometimes" there is a dim, secret "underwater moon" (7). Very shortly the narrator and reader are called upon to "See" this lagoon (that which is and that which is not) – a "dirty lagoon, full of drifting wood and sea-weed and crabs' claws" (7).

This opening passage invites several responses which I call "*Or And*" strategies of reading the world. (1) The lagoon is full *or* empty depending on time and tide, alternatives imagined in relation, but sequentially or cyclically. (2) The lagoon is full *and* empty, constituting a contradiction, which will be explained *or* justified *or* dismissed *or* otherwise dealt with according to rules of logic. (3) The lagoon is full *or* empty, expressing rigidity, because accepting one position refuses absolutely the validity of the other. (4) The lagoon is acceptably both full *and* empty, expressing simultaneity, which might refute the rules of logic but will articulate the contradictoriness in non-linear thinking.

In the guise of a simple, even naïve tale told by a child's grandmother, that is, Frame opens *The Lagoon and other stories* with a complex evocation of what it means to hear and/or devise stories, accept and/or question explanations, follow conventions and/or pursue a personal understanding of the world – an understanding that conventional or ostensibly normative readings of behaviour (and reality) will characterize (possibly self-defensively) as creative, or idiosyncratic, or peculiar, or irrational, or mad.

1. All quotations from *The Lagoon and other stories* (1951) are taken from the 1961 New Zealand edition (Christchurch, Caxton, 1961). The titles of the stories in this edition employ non-conventional uppercase and lowercase conventions; I have taken this practice to be deliberate, and so have retained her practice here.

Given this dance of alternatives, it is possible to read Frame's fiction as a covert critique of any and all forms of pacifying cultural normativity (in politics, in religion, in social and gender role-determination, and in education, for instance) or to read it as an extended indirect autobiography, probing her own desire for freedom of mind and/or possibly ingrained fear of where such freedom might lead. I focus here on *Or And* – on the choice of words that *The Lagoon and other stories* dances to – on the ways in which the book of stories unpins narrative from the tropes and strategies of conventional story-telling. *Or* tells of refusal, resistance, on the part of (or perhaps to) the boundary-lines of acceptability and probability; *And* tells of relation, connection, even contradictory overlap. *And Other*, here, implies not just some casual form of addition but a deliberate inquiry into the reverberations of otherness: the empty fullness, possibly, and the full emptiness, of the tales we listen to, and those we tell each other, tell ourselves.

Is

The stories in *The Lagoon and other stories* are short, often very short, several only 300-400 words long, lasting scarcely three pages. The longest (among them, “The Lagoon” and “Keel and Kool”) range from 1500 to 2500 words. There is a category in short fiction commentary that speaks of very short stories as “flash fiction” or “postcard fiction” or “the short short story”; such stories attempt to accomplish what “classic” short stories accomplish (rising action, climax, denouement) but in highly condensed fashion, depending for effect on implication.² It is tempting to think of Frame's stories in this context, but to do so would be misleading, for her stories resist “classic” short story form. Nor is it constructive to think of them as “fragments,” for the *Lagoon* stories do not represent bits of a larger whole so much as angles onto a larger conception. The very use of a “category word” to describe these fictions, moreover, would go against how Frame's stories behave. In *The Lagoon and other stories*, the stories appear to stand alone *but also* interact. To read the book is to engage in a process (of re-seeing, re-learning, in part by being exposed to *not* re-seeing or relearning) rather than to identify a solution.³ Identification asks for equivalences, answers, whether dogmatically absolute, conventionally unquestioned, or even indirect and embodied in allegory. Process asks for openness to indeterminacy. Frame's impulse is to embrace indeterminacy. And yet, throughout these stories, one of the most recurrent words is the classic verb of absolute stasis: *Is*.

Contradiction? Yes. A contradiction that the words of the stories revisit. For example:

2. Influential in this commentary was the publication of the anthology *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories*, ed. James Thomas, Denise Thomas, and Tom Hazukan; a “flash fiction” was to be no longer than 750 words and occupy no more than two facing pages. Terms for even shorter stories, such as “nanofiction” (a 55-word story) and “postcard story” (<250 words), developed later. Numerous forms of very short fiction of course also preceded 1992 – forms such as the fable, the vignette, the sketch, the 17th-century “character,” and others; for a clear quick guide to the genre, see Ian Reid, *The Short Story*.

3. Obviously one could re-visualize a problem or re-learn a body of data by being *given* a clarifying answer or a relevant formula to apply; but Frame resists answers and formulae because *they* take observers directly to someone else's standard solution rather than ask them to immerse themselves in possibility. Admittedly, possibilities that lead nowhere (into *not re-seeing*) might confirm observers in place (i.e., not change them at all); but possibilities that lead “somewhere else” could prove illuminating.

That night Nan was sick. ("The Bedjacket" 33)
 Mavis and I were very good friends. ("My Cousins who could eat cooked turnips" 39)
 They were ready to go. [...] Dad was away at work. [...] [I]t was true sea. [...] It was the
 wrong sea. [...] Gypsy was dead. ("Swans" 43, 45, 47, 48, 51)
 Here is your leaf. ("Spirit" 69)
 My father's best suit was light grey. ("My father's best suit" 75).
 Edgar was a tidy man to have in a boarding house. ("A beautiful nature" 78)
 My name is Alison Hendry. ("Jan Godfrey" 97)

In each of these instances, taken more or less at random from the beginnings, middles, and endings of seven of the stories, the variations of the verb *to be* establish a condition that (from one perspective) encloses the characters and (from another) places the characters in a mindset beyond reach of enclosure. Nan, for instance, the patient (or inmate) in the mental hospital, knits a bedjacket for her favourite nurse but (being "sick" at a critical moment) ends up keeping it around herself (preserving the vitality of creative difference? or surrendering to incarceration by convention?); she gives Nurse Harper a "box" and a "cellophane"-wrapped "face-cloth" instead – closing the story with an implicitly open-ended question: which of the two is the more wrapped, the more contained?

As for the other examples, when the narrator of "My Cousins" turns into Mavis's "good friend," she is surrendered to all the conventions of behaviour that she has resisted beforehand. In "Swans," being *ready to go* and being *away* establish states of inactivity and absence, not the movement of *already going* and *present and active* (the two conditions – and two seas – providing variants of the full/empty lagoon motif); *truth* and *untruth* function in this story as definitions of the sea (as death defines Gypsy the cat) rather than as responses to its vitality. Relatedly, Spirit 350 is given static everlasting rather than new possibility in a hypothetical reincarnation. The suit of a particular unmatchable grey proclaims the father's threadbare claim on propriety, and (by extension) his wearing it to union meetings suggests the likely ineffectuality in the current climate of any claim on social change. Characteristically, he makes do. And in a different way, so does Edgar. Edgar's tidiness produces fatuous judgments from fellow-boarders, clichés that arbitrarily and inconsistently enclose the man's character, never insights into the dynamics of his life. And the story of "Jan Godfrey" makes clear that Alison Hendry's claim on identity exists in a living world of words more than a codified world of social convention.

Is is suspect, worrisome, cautionary. *Is* contains. And in Frame's stories, "containment" (locks, walls, lists of rules, catalogues, conventions, categories, and other paradigms) shows how external forces and systems of arrangement shape and define individuals; they do not characteristically reveal the individuality of what they ostensibly organize. Hence criticism of these stories is fraught with challenges. Even such a category as "story" or "short short fiction" might be suspect – allegory and fable as well, too often used as fixed determiners of the link between "tale" and "meaning"⁴ – and any list of sub-categories (1,2,3) in this set of notes on Frame's *Lagoon* might be seen as yet another convention, as if imposed from without.

4. "Raw" allegory, that is, depends on readers seeing a one-to-one correspondence between a set of characters, events, phenomena in a story and a parallel set in the real world on which the author's tale is elliptically commenting. Conventional fables lead to a declared "moral" or interpretative commentary. In both instances, irony and satire can of course destabilize any "fixed" connection between narrative and "message."

As if

Recurrantly the characters in *The Lagoon and other stories* come up against the force of convention, many of them complying with its rules or its patterns. The stories nevertheless carry counter-narratives that empty convention of its attractiveness (though not its power to attract). Such counter-narratives are worked out in *words* – their closeness, their distance, their speed, and their sound. A reader *bears* these words not simply as linguistic markers and the agents of linear meaning, and not only as patterns of repetition and echo, but also as an evocation of the whole world being continually exposed to and in denial about the possibility of *other* ways of understanding. Often the stories read like implied dialogues between [&] and [>] – symbolic gestures that differentiate joining from becoming, simple addition from transformative change. The conjunction *As if* is one repeated marker of this boundary territory. At once, *As if* engages with a recognized (social, literary) paradigm and draws attention to the disjunction between a character's reality and whatever reality the paradigm presumes to be a norm.

"The Lagoon" sets up this dialogue on its first page. After the story establishes the complexities of reading the lagoon itself (whether as geography or mindset), the narrator quickly draws together two narrative threads: (1) the story has been told her by her grandmother whose mother "had been a Maori princess very beautiful they said, with fierce ways of loving and hating" (7); and (2) the narrator *remembers* being at the dirty lagoon, playing on sand: "this is my castle we said, you be father I'll be mother and we'll live here [...] for ever" (7-8). Remembering, telling, calling, saying: each is a strategy of claiming truth. "The Lagoon" at the same time undercuts these strategies because the stories are clichés out of 19th-century colonial romance (in which the idea of a Native "princess" ostensibly elevates even while it distances) and fairytale domesticity. The artifice of this kind of story becomes even more apparent when the narrator claims that the lagoon never had a "proper" story (8), that the "real" one (8) lay elsewhere, that the Maori don't sing "real" Maori songs but American pop tunes (9), and that to tell the truth, the grandmother was a murderess (10). When, after a sidelong reference to film (10), the narrator's aunt is then quoted as saying "I prefer Dostoevsky to Truth" (11), passionate illusion is once more privileged over empirical history. But with an allusion to "Christopher Robins"⁵ on the sand (11), the narrative twists yet again – reaching for one more paradox: *All empirical history might be false, but not all artifice is true*. The narrator returns to her contemplation of the shadow lagoon, the story closes with the narrator living *As if* – inside the false artifice constructed by a second reference to memory, when being father and mother and playing sand castles for ever seemed real.

The marriage/family trope runs throughout Frame's book, one of several motifs (among them, secrets, birds, water, numbers) suggesting that *The Lagoon and other stories* is more than a miscellany if still not as deliberately organized as a story sequence might be.⁶ Despite the effects achieved by these echoing figures, that is, the

5. Frame could well have been aware of the disparity between the idyllic world represented by A.A. Milne's portrait of his son Christopher in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books and later real-life tensions reported in Milne family relationships. Is the name Winnie Todd, in "Keel and Kool," another allusion to Milne? Perhaps.

6. While the terms "cycle" and "sequence" have often been used interchangeably, "cycle" is now generally applied to story "composites" that emphasize circularity (e.g., ending by returning home) and "sequence" applied to those that

publication history of *The Lagoon and other stories* argues against too readily accepting the recurrent motifs as signs of a single uniform authorial design.⁷ Still, of the 24 stories in all, at least 18 deal with parent-child, grandparent-child, or sibling relationships. Read some of the others as studies of the *absence* of these relationships, rather than simply as stories dealing with alternative topics or individuals, and the number increases. Several stories also present families or individuals living in boarding houses – that is, in houses not their own: a striking way of saying that they do not shape their own mindspace. The stories set in hospitals emphasize confinement even more directly, and when Frame repeatedly goes on to talk about constraint-by-language (the paradigms of convention, the world of *not oneself*), she spells out further ramifications still.

These paradigms sometimes show up as literary or filmic tropes. In “The Secret” for instance, the eldest sister Myrtle with the heart condition has fairytale “golden hair” (12). In “Keel and Kool,” the vocabulary for the children who “play ladies” (21) comes from film, religious tract, commercial magazines (“Women’s Weekly,” 21), and schoolground chant – all of it a form of “code” (22) and none of it any more real than the “safe” photograph that their father takes at the beginning of the story, arranging everyone into “a happy family” (19) just before leaving to go fishing on his own. Yet a voice of ironic detachment sounds within the narration here, and in “Child” as well, and “Spirit” (the latter exposing the inaccuracy of obituary language). “On the car,” relatedly, permits a drunk to be the only happy person in a grim contained world.

Elsewhere, allusions to established English writers punctuate stories such as “Miss Gibson and the lumber room” (Tennyson, Shakespeare), “Keel and Kool” (Coleridge), “Tiger, Tiger” (Blake), and “A note on the Russian War” (also Blake, in the phrase “ah sunflowers,” 105), each heightening some form of notional disparity between New Zealand localism and the idea of European sophistication. America provides another image of an attractive Elsewhere (not necessarily with substance behind it), as in “The pictures,” which tracks the appeal of film cliché (the “world’s greatest love story” with the “wonderful ending,” 113) and the concurrent (seductive,

emphasize temporal succession (e.g., chronological excerpts from stages in a life). Some collections integrate both strategies. Sequences and cycles also generally focus on a single character throughout (episodes in a life, aspects of a personality), or explore a single setting (the idiosyncrasies of a town’s inhabitants, the changing faces of a social landscape), or run variants on a particular motif, attitude, action, activity. Not all recurrences are signs of cyclical or sequential organization – many story collections are assembled from wholly independent stories, and in such instances, the collection is designed to open at any point, the individual stories (however much they relate) not necessarily to be read in the order they are presented on the page. All short story composites, by contrast, in some measure direct the order of reading (beginning to end), insofar as they rely for their effect on the careful structural arrangement of the individual stories in the collection. While each separate story will read as complete in itself, it will also serve another function in the collection as a whole. As introductions to the short story sequence (or cycle or composite), see Robert M. Luscher, “The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book,” Rolf Lundén, *The United Stories of America*, and W.H. New, *Dreams of Speech and Violence*.

7. One must be wary of affirming a fixed authorial intention. Kim Worthington reports, in “Janet Frame,” in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, that Frame wrote many stories while she was in hospital and that “twenty-four of these were collected by her friend John Money, given the title of the main story, ‘The Lagoon’ and published by the Caxton Press in 1951 as *The Lagoon: Stories*” (187). Calling “The Lagoon” the *main story* attributes a special status to the story that I think shifts attention unduly away from the other stories. Nevertheless, the selection and organization of the stories (and the omission of the word “other,” added in the 1961 edition) must in some measure at least be attributed to Money. John William Money himself had an extensive (and not uncontroversial) career in New Zealand and the USA as a psychologist specializing in sexology and the social learning of gender roles. Worthington emphasizes “obsessive dualities” in *The Lagoon* stories, and asserts the influence of Katherine Mansfield on Frame’s use of childhood perspectives to probe the limitations of adults whose social roles are limited by convention.

interruptive) appeal of commercial advertising ("There were pretty colours on the screen, and pictures of how you ought to furnish your home [...], and the clothes you ought to wear if you were a discriminating woman, everything was planned for you," 111).

That *if* is critical. Repeatedly, allusions to literary and other conventions in these stories are constructed out of some form of *If*— *as if, what if, even if, not even if, if only*. *If* reads at first as a simple hypothesis, an imaginative conjecture; pausing over the language of the stories suggests that such forms of the imagination are often pre-programmed, trained in advance by notions of normative behaviour and normative value. From this vantage point, "playing ladies" or playing "happy families" or playing at telling "real stories" (meaning those that imitate some filmic or literary Elsewhere) expresses only a colonized mind. In "The birds began to sing," the birds stop when the narrator tries to name the singing (108). In "Swans," the dark water of a lagoon and the rustling air combine to make the children feel "as if they were walking into another world that had been kept secret" (30), and when they see [black] swans on the lagoon, it is "as if the visiting dark[,] tiring of its form, had changed to birds" (31).⁸ But this experience remains *as if*, not more than a passing sensibility, at best an approximation of something that (in this instance) their prior expectation of a "right/wrong" sea has led them to consider unsettling.

So with the characters in "A beautiful nature": Edgar the tidy man in the boarding house and the others, mainly judgmental women, who live not to know Edgar but to gossip about him, behaving with vapid politeness in public, and with an empty but competitive sense of superiority amongst themselves. When Edgar loses his job but struggles to express some gesture of Christmas cheer towards them, he can rise only so far as a conventional Northern Hemisphere card: "Some of the cards had robins in the snow and coaches racing through storms," scattered roses "for effect" and "kittens sitting in boots [...]" and little rhymes" (82). The women's studied responses ("how lovely," "a kind thought") and their cohesively acid irony after he leaves the room ("Would you believe it," "Oh I was so touched," even "He has a beautiful nature," uttered "profoundly" for performance's sake, and all spoken to dismiss, 83) prove equally shallow. Imitation controls who they are and all they are apparently able to become. This version of normative society has no place except "out-of-place" for the person who does not "fit" and the one who would be I.

I

And who is *I*? In a Frame story, *I* is more than a narrator. She or he (and Frame writes from both declared perspectives) can be at once:

- 1) the narrative voice of a story;
- 2) an imagined character within it;
- 3) the shifting identity of a speaker within a moment or over time and place;
- 4) an implied author;
- 5) a multiple identity of author and/or character, and

8. Further instances of bird imagery (and the related imagery of flying kites) appear in such stories as "The Lagoon," "Keel and Kool," "Child," "Tiger, Tiger," "The day of the sheep," "The Park," and "My Last Story."

- 6) a hypothesized (or felt, experienced) *more real* perspective that can emerge at a moment in time, because of an association, in response to a shift in light or colouration, or in relation to some other stimulus.

By extension, this “more real” sensibility can in some instances endure across time (beyond childhood, say, or sustained in the creative imagination), generally to the discomfort or incomprehension of those for whom such a plane of reality is beyond both their reach and their ken. In this literary world, characters with one identity are two-dimensional, like the language they use in the name of communication.

Examples of an I-narrator permeate the book – primarily these are child-narrators, at least on the surface. Frequently, however, the child figure has been reconstructed from a later perspective, apparently in a narrative attempt to retrieve some sense of free childhood imagination. Repeatedly these attempts are thwarted when an empirical reality (war, the death of a cat, locked doors, others’ cruel words) intrudes. The hospital tales construct variants on this design: a patient conceives of a creative life outside the walls, the walls close in, the imagined life seems more created than creative. In “Snap-dragons,” this narratological variant constructs the *I* by means of the third person, whereby the teller appears as “she” but “I” exists in the teller’s internal tale, a strategy that works out rhetorically the dislocation the narrator feels from herself and from her current distress.

I stress the *rhetoric* of identity here because *The Lagoon and other stories* continuously addresses the subject of words; in doing so, the collection inquires into ways in which words can clothe identity in definition (expectation, imposition, borrowing, mirroring) and also disclose the limits of definition. In “The birds began to sing,” for instance, the narrator loves to see words such as “andante” and “vivace” *in print* (108), but cannot sing. In “A note on the Russian War,” the conventions of pictorial perspective impose themselves comically on the narration: “We lived on the Steppes, my mother and the rest of my family and I, but mostly my mother because she was bigger than the rest” (105) – but comedy soon turns bitter. And in “Child” – a story in which numerous small rebellions serve large shifts in perception – one phrase in particular distills what it means to accept rules and what it means when the rules are followed only in name. When Minnie Passmore, the new “best friend” (i.e., more than “playmate”) of the narrator, invites her to “Come up to our place and see the kite grandad’s making,” the narrator replies: “I have to tell Mum first, I said, in case I’ve been kidnapped and she doesn’t know” (60). In the name of freedom, the child has already learned adult fear and adult warning, and yet the phrasing at this point ironically suggests that the rule has not yet imposed an unshakeable restriction. Such a moment does not last, for the story (after an internal narrative involving kite-flying and a quarrel) closes with an image of a thorn hedge, a reference to domesticated fowl, and a phrase that hinges on the distancing power of *as if*.

The closing of “My Cousins who could eat cooked turnip” extends Frame’s commentary on how this connection between language and limited possibility (or loss of independence) occurs. Repetition is one such training tool. Exclusion is another. Imitation is a third. In this story, the children who have resisted cooked turnip feel themselves surrounded by adults who all sound alike: “hearing the grown-ups talking again, really is that so just fancy they were saying importantly and deliciously, but it seemed sad too, really is that so just fancy, over and over again, and it got sadder

when we sat down to tea and saw the turnip" (38). A rhetorically interesting shift just precedes this moment in the narrative, carrying it through to closure. The familiar narrative ploy "and then one week-end" (37) introduces a whole series of "and then" clauses (38) and in the midst of this clock-bound set of changes, the phrase "really is that so just fancy," so innocently tucked into parentheses (38), as though (like "cooked turnip" in the narrator's mind) merely a subject for ridicule and dismissal, marks the end; very shortly it is the children's freedom from the rules that is set aside. From the distancing (but already capitulating) phrase "For a long time I could never," the narrative shifts to the specificity of "That night"; and through a series of phrases that each begin with "Perhaps" (the *If* hypothesis in another guise), the children find themselves "in cold blood, eating cooked turnip," suddenly mirroring rather than mimicking the violence of the adult world. The narrator then has one last try at freeing herself from her conventional cousin Mavis (and Mavis's preoccupation with domesticated thrillers): "I don't suppose you know what this word means, and I whispered a word in her ear, and Mavis said I do too. I know lots of words" (39). After that moment "I" has been co-opted. The narrator has become one with Mavis; she drinks "tea out of little china cups," says "really is that so just fancy," no longer has words of her own, and can swing *only as high* as the top of the outhouse.

About

In shaping a title for these notes on *The Lagoon*, I looked for a way to say "stories about words" without using the word "about." Hence S(words)ories. That this visual configuration might simultaneously suggest anything else is an accident of orthography.⁹ Happily, the use of parentheses redirects attention to Frame's use of parentheses as a form of language. The broke-backed title also hints serendipitously at the violence that so often surfaces in the collection, and at the power of words to subvert as well as to sustain the complacency of respectable emptiness, the superficiality of empty respectability.

About tends to serve this complacency, this superficiality, as though filling in the gap that characteristically follows "about" in literary/critical commentary (as in the phrase "this story is about" some subject noun: love, truth, reality, justice, health, society, childhood, values) equated somehow with the act of reading. Helpful it might be as a first step towards understanding, but not as a conclusion; nor are stories that lend themselves to this kind of summation anything more than formulaic. The stultifying effect of such formulae is apparent in the way Frame's characters so often fret about "true" or "real" phenomena in their world – and in the stories they hear, or tell. Parroted words and phrases can constrain. "I know lots of words," says Mavis, the turnip-eating cousin (39); yes she does, and so do readers – but to what end? While Frame's characters might well drift about, her use of such phrases does not; she draws frequent attention to words whose sound suggests difference but whose meanings coalesce, as in "Snap-dragons": "asylum, [...] mental hospital, [...] looney-bin, [...] still a prison and not a soft dark one where only bees pounded on the walls

9. Frame herself occasionally plays consequential language games. See, for instance, her anagrammatic deconstruction of *naphthalene coconut oil* ("Instructions for bombing with napalm"), where linguistic "play" elliptically but seriously criticizes the politics and consequences of the Vietnam War, in *The Pocket Mirror*.

let me out let me out" (70). Frame's dances with words, especially in those stories that deal directly with story-telling – "Jan Godfrey," for instance, "Miss Gibson and the lumber room," "My last Story" – call words and the conventional idea of "story" to account.

Early on in "The Lagoon," the reader is placed in a position parallel to that of the story's narrator, listening: "All this my grandmother told me" (7), and readers at least initially have no particular reason to doubt what they hear. Increasingly, however – reinforced by such stories as "Jan Godfrey," where narrative declarations of identity openly contradict each other ("Everything is always a story," 92) – the truth of what is called *story* is rendered untrustworthy, while recognizing the paradoxical truth of untrustworthiness produces a different kind of narrative about living life. "Miss Gibson and the lumber room" opens with the narrator fulminating quietly, using the language of tedious schoolroom cliché against itself:

Dear Miss Gibson, I'll tell you the truth now I'm twenty-one and **independent** and not having to write a composition once a week the glory of the bush, the rata on fire the last rays of the setting sun touching the hill-tops with gold the beauty of nature the gentle zephyr caressing the meadow, dear Miss Gibson I was an awful liar. (100)

But what is a lie? By the end of her narrative she has shifted from Christmas card language (even in its New Zealand variant, zephyrs in the rata¹⁰) to a brisker set of localisms: no hundred rooms in her house, no French cook, and no prototypical gardener, but "a mother who [...] cooked nicely, and [a] [...] father [who] dug the garden in the weekends, and [...] a mouse in the scullery, and [...] visitors sometimes who swore, and I liked being alive" (103-104). Does she still feel this way? Or does her accumulation of realities from the past and her need to justify it against "literary" convention belie her declared commitment that it is "the present that mattered" (104)?

Other stories provide ample illustration of Frame's stylistic dexterity in demonstrating and so undercutting the multiple shapes of the banal. Romance stereotypes set up the unresolved conflict in "The Lagoon." Exaggeration gives force to Eva's tattle-tale and Winnie's taunt in "Keel and Kool": "Your uncle was eaten by cannibals and your father shot an albatross and had a curse put on him and your hair went green [...] Eva told me. You're a liar" (25-6). Gossip riddles "A beautiful nature." Advertising copy plasters the face of "The pictures." Gendered language differentiates the boarders, making no difference in strength of character. And run-on passages variously convey the potentially creative process of the associative mind and/or the excruciating shallowness of the simply additive talker. At the end of the book, then, "My last Story" – with an uppercase S – brings several of these strategies together in an ironic dismissal of the clutter of empty phrases that Frame (or society) calls Story.

"I don't like putting he said she said he did she did," writes the narrator (121), "and telling about people, the small dark woman who coughs into a silk handkerchief and says excuse me would you like another soda cracker Mary." A string of *perhaps* examples and incidents follows, the verb forms throughout revealing tensions in time: the drag of the past, the elusive hold of the present, the freedom implied by intention.

10. Cf. Frame's use of the vernacular words "dunny" in "My Cousins," 39, and "plop" in "Swans," 48, among other instances of mixed choices of diction.

"I'm not going to write about the snow and curly chrysanthemums peeping out of the snow and the women saying how lovely every cloud has a silver lining" (121), nor "about Harry who's got a copy of *We were the Rats* under his pillow and I suppose that's called experience of Life. And about George Street and [...] about my family [...] [and] about the fowls" (121). *About* in this story produces sentences with stereotypes in them, "a heart of gold, that's how they express things like that" (122). *They*. A powerfully distancing word. Refusing Story, the narrator refuses "expressing" (122). Instead, she announces plans to begin something else, to start after typing ("impressively": the pun at work again as the book comes to its close) three omission dots. But having affirmed the possibility of finding words to tell something different, the writer-narrator appears at this point to reach silence, declaring herself to be likely "frozen" in a present voice. Such a conclusion could imply paralysis; but it could also be read as a way of telling the reader to listen actively to the silences, the gaps between the conventional words, for the narrative alternatives she invites them to hear.

The Lagoon empties of Story.

The Lagoon fills with *Other*-stories.

Begin here ●

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