

**The Turquoise Bird in the Goose Bath:  
Janet Frame's Posthumous Poems**

**Susannah Whaley**

Janet Frame died before she could collect and present the poems of her later years postdating *The Pocket Mirror* (1967). The task was passed to others, who acknowledge that *The Goose Bath: Poems* (Auckland: Random House, 2006), published posthumously from drafts Frame kept in a receptacle once used as a bath for geese, is not the book as Frame would have presented it.<sup>i</sup> Its very name references its transitory and in some ways incomplete origins. These are poems picked up from where they were left at the writer's desk, extracted from amongst polished and unpolished works. The poems are fragments, reflections of experience snatched from the world and Frame's mind, perhaps forgotten, picked up again, added to, discarded - built up over 'decades of composition' and 'decomposition'.<sup>ii</sup> Bill Manhire notes that Frame's goose bath often contained several versions of the same poem, and it was up to the editors to choose the one which they believed was the most finished.<sup>iii</sup> *The Goose Bath* therefore represents not only Frame's writing, but the choices of its editors.

*The Goose Bath* is arranged by its editors (Pamela Gordon, Denis Harold and Bill Manhire) to follow the shape of a life, beginning with poems on childhood and ending with poems on death.<sup>iv</sup> Evoking Jacques's 'Seven Ages of Man' speech in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the book has seven sections. The 'I' that emerges within the poems, states Manhire, is the 'I' of Frame's autobiographical trilogy.<sup>v</sup> Like the autobiographies, the poems consider how Frame interacts with the world, and how she uses writing to represent her experiences and navigate her own sense of identity. However, the book's posthumous editing and publication raises the question of agency. Frame always planned another book of poetry. In ill health, she intimated that the long awaited project would have to 'wait until I am dead'.<sup>vi</sup> How can we view this resulting book and the representation of Frame that it portrays, considering that it is not in its entirety of its writer's making? Is the relationship established between Frame and the reader authentic?

One way to consider this question is to look to the poems for evidence of the author. How does 'writing' relate to a life lived? It is notable that the editors have chosen as bookends for the collection two poems that foreground this relationship. These are 'I Take Into My Arms More Than I Can Bear To Hold' and 'How I Began Writing'. The final poem highlights the book as the journey of Frame the writer. *The Goose Bath* is a representation of a life lived writing.

### *An individual in the world*

Manhire writes that *The Goose Bath*'s first poem, 'I Take Into My Arms More Than I Can Bear To Hold' points 'to the aim and often the activity of these poems. They make a wide embrace, gathering in whatever they can hold'.<sup>vii</sup>

I take into my arms more than I can bear to hold  
I am toppled by the world  
a creation of ladders, pianos, stairs cut into the rock  
a devouring world of teeth where even the common snail  
eats the heart out of a forest  
as you and I do, who are human, at night

yet still I take into my arms more than I can bear to hold.<sup>viii</sup>

The poem points to the threatening instability of the world and yet the richness of being human. The journey does not promise to be easy, as 'ladders' and 'stairs' confront the speaker, and the image is one of unencompassibility. The 'I' is prominent in the poem, but it is complemented by the 'you'. Placed at the beginning of the collection, the poem reaches out to the reader, inviting them to share in this journey with Frame. It is a 'human journey', a 'devouring' one, but the one basic experience in which we are all united. Interpreting the 'you' of the poem as the reader, the placement of 'you and I' together, at 'night' indicates that life is a journey that all must figure out, and that even though we may feel that we are alone, in the dark, so to speak, we are all walking down the same paths. There is a commonly held perception of Frame as a shy, reclusive writer. The poems of *The Goose Bath* are significant in that they portray a self immersed in the world's challenges and aware of her connections to others. In 'I Take', the speaker is surrounded by the world and its experiences, more than she can possibly hold and understand, more than she can possibly represent. She expresses living as conscious engagement, and despite the enormity of the load and its unbalancing effect, makes the choice to 'still' try. 'I take' is active, indicating the speaker's own role in consciously and constantly redefining

the self. This poem shows a writer who is acutely aware of the world's ongoing contribution to her self and her individual journey.

The journey begins with childhood. The poem 'For Paul on His Birthday' describes a childhood spent using imagination to transform everyday ('night') scenes (36). In the 'candlelit' house, the sister becomes 'a princess trapped in a maze'. Already, the sense of Frame the writer is coming through, the creative trickster who is able to take reality and transform it, to imbue it with a level of fiction.

Our world was a hush-hush world. We both found a wand,  
pencil and paper, to enchant our silence.

[..]

*Rest tranquille, si soudain*

*l'Ange à ta table se décide*

The angel figure of the poem is also that of the title of Frame's second autobiography, *An Angel at My Table*. Both reference a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke:

Stay calm, if of a sudden  
The angel at your table decides;  
Gently erase the several ripples  
That the cloth makes under your bread.

You will offer your rough sustenance,  
That he may enjoy it in his turn,  
And raise to his pure lip  
A simple everyday glass.<sup>ix</sup>

Gina Mercer has evaluated this poem and its 'simple everyday glass' to signify that Frame's autobiographies are the least unconventional of her varied writings. In writing autobiography, Frame as winemaker has consciously chosen from amongst her many 'good wines' ones that will appeal to the popular palate.<sup>x</sup> However, the lines from Rilke's poem that appear in 'For Paul' allow us to interpret the writing process a little differently. If we consider the angel figure as muse, Frame in 'For Paul' equates inspiration with the use of everyday material – that which sustains her on a daily basis. The muse figure takes from the everyday 'rough' sustenance and associates it with the 'pure' light of understanding. The word 'sustenance' is important – life 'sustains' writing. These are experiences shared with the world, and yet the view of the individual matters and is vital to the process of transformation.

Also near the beginning of the volume, and proclaiming a certain youthful obstinance, is 'I Do Not Want To Listen' (42-43). In 'I Do Not Want to Listen', Frame emphasises her right to 'taste' the world her own way: '[m]y big colourful mouth / has enough to eat thank you / without tasting / a plain triangle or two'. She wants what she wants, and likes what she likes. Such a forceful statement implies she has already had some experience and made decisions about how she sees herself in the context of others. In 'I Do Not Want to Listen', the speaker's head, the source of her creative energy, is 'red and yellow' in a 'black and white' world. Red and yellow are colours of energy, of warmth, unlike the 'disembodied black / and white flowers' of the dull mainstream world. '[B]lack and white' highlights conventionality – a 'black and white' view. Frame asserts her right to be different. There is a hint of romanticism:

poor as rainbows are  
against the pressure  
and purity  
of no-colour

It is worth noting that Frame grew up with Existentialism emerging as the dominant progressive and bohemian world view. There is a clear sense in this poem that social structures and conventions do not control the individual, that hers is an individual struggle. Nevertheless, forming an individual perspective requires Frame to define herself in the context of others.

'I Take' demonstrates that individuality relies on continuous choice and remaking, highlighted by the poem's final line: 'I still take' (25). The poem acknowledges constant process and change – the process of climbing ladders or stairs, the 'devouring' in which the heart of a forest is eaten. This takes place at 'night', signifying that Frame is fumbling in the dark without being able to see where she is going, but that she defines herself through her continuing attempts. Martin Heidegger claimed there is authentic and inauthentic existence. In an inauthentic existence, one lives one's own life, but this life 'carries me along familiar paths walked by others'. Authentic existence is 'intrinsically social, cultural and historical', but authentic individuals live in the everyday world with 'a clear and open sense'.<sup>xi</sup> In 'These Poems', the writer implies that when we stop actively living (seen in the physical process of taking what is outside the self and gathering it to the self), we die: 'it is the stillness / of the body / measures the coffin' (138). Frame in *The Goose Bath* is never still. She is constantly looking at the world around her, transforming it. The journey is taken for oneself, but in company with others. The constant process of gathering, of struggling, in its imperfections, is essential to authentic life.

## *Words as agents*

And yet the question that rings throughout this volume of poetry is, how can Frame as writer represent herself? Words are consistently bemoaned for their inability to convey what Frame wants. Words have ‘complexity, confusion, fluidity; / we hurt, and eat’ (137). Words can build a sanctuary, but they also ‘dress the Prince of Genocide’ (136). The imperfection of language is something to be aware of when looking at Frame’s poems. Frame critics know well that there has been a tendency to align Frame the writer too closely with Frame the person, to apply rigorously details from her autobiographical essays and writings to the literary reading of her writing, fictionalising her life into the story of her work. So what do the poems represent to the world? How does writing relate to a life lived?

The poem ‘Words Speak to Jakow Trachtenburg’ tells the story not of a writer, but of a mathematician imprisoned in a concentration camp during the war (136-137). As the title indicates, it is words that speak, offering themselves to Jakow as

We, your servant words, prepared ourselves to bear the weight of your anguish  
to build your sanctuary city- or world-wide  
- were there not enough of us to fill a million rooms of fantasy

Instead of words Jakow chooses numbers to help him survive:

Plain guardians, neither faithful nor faithless  
[...]  
You could hold them safely in two hands at night  
like a child’s treasure, and sleep.

And yet it is words that speak to us through the poem. Numbers ‘have no memory’. Words ‘can speak’ and so ‘we embrace [the numbers’] silence and tell their pattern’, transforming Jakow’s numbers into more than still stones, expressing what they really were for a man living in a concentration camp. Numbers kept Jakow company: they were ‘ten birds on the wire / ... / ten stars jaggings in the darkness, / ten prisoners trying to distil and count / the grains of salt in their tears’. Words are not accurate like numbers, but words connect numbers with the world, carrying feeling, meaning, drawing us back to the tears, the struggle, and the ‘breaking heart in its darkness’ of a man who is now dead.

The last poems in the collection, completing the life cycle arranged by the editors, deal with Frame's anticipation of her own death. However, 'The Turquoise Bird' occurs not from the perspective of Frame in the grave, but from the perspective of the living.

In fairy tales death  
always invites the blossoming of a flower or bird  
the creation of a beautiful creature  
who stays in the same place forever  
and is disconcerting to the world  
because it stays and does nothing but be what it is  
and stare down surrounded by light  
upon the darkness of what used to be.  
*The turquoise bird stares into the grave.*  
(196)

'[D]eath' has occurred, and yet this is not the end. The newly created bird 'stays in the same place forever'. The turquoise bird stares into the 'darkness' of the grave, 'of what used to be', of what now is not. The bird calls to mind the person who has gone, Frame herself. This is a poem about death, and yet the bird 'blossoms' – suggesting something new. The bird is also 'disconcerting', something that perhaps defies understanding, that requires interpretation. There is the sense of 'light', the bird's vision, always being thrown down, backwards into the hole of the grave, into the past, what is literally unseeable. The turquoise bird in the poem 'stays' outside the grave – it is living.

Frame indicates in 'The Turquoise Bird' as in the autobiography the difference between living and dead subjects in writing and memory. In her autobiography she says, 'the dead have surrendered their story.'<sup>xii</sup> *To The Is-Land* begins with the story of her ancestors, possibly once Flemish weavers, highlighting that 'I strengthen the reality or the myth of those ancestors every time I recall that Grandma Frame began working in a Paisley cotton mill when she was eight years old, that her daughters Polly, Isy, Maggie spent their working lives as dressmakers...'<sup>xiii</sup> Her active remembering contributes new aspects to her ancestors' story, ensuring that their memory is not static, but lives and grows with new additions to their tale. Frame's belief in the myth of her ancestors in the tale grows in light of her own circumstances. When young Janet's cat dies, she feels an 'obligation' to poets who had helped her through her sister's death to write about her grief for Winkles. Experiences, she realises, are 'not for individual use only like household linen and cutlery, but for common use within a stream which, I was beginning to sense, might be called history'.<sup>xiv</sup> The poems in *The Goose Bath* were selected posthumously, so this book in particular functions as a turquoise bird, 'blossoming' with death, adding new layers to the writer's presentation of herself, and drawing renewed attention to

the 'grave'. The bird itself 'does nothing but be what it is'. It is the eyes on it that continue to draw new meaning. Describing the bird as 'fairy tale' invites the reading of the bird as myth, and allows us to see the poems (once written) as static, set in stone, but with a living power of interpretation by those who interact with them. 'Fairy tale' comes close to another genre Frame worked in, that of allegory and fable. The bird acts as a symbol for the myth of Frame once she is gone. 'Words Speak' has already reminded us that words are symbols. Consciously or unconsciously they are mutable. They can be birds on the wire, stars in the darkness, but their meaning is found within the poem and between the poem and the reader, the writer's language a vehicle and a carrier. Sean Burke claims 'the author is never more alive than when pronounced dead'.<sup>xv</sup> He should say 'the author is never more alive *to us*.' The continued attempts to 'see' Frame (or versions of her) through her novels and her poems testify to the maintenance of a relationship with 'what used to be'. This relationship is now represented in the 'turquoise bird'. 'The Turquoise Bird' has not overcome death, but through her writings, the relationship of Frame with the world continues.

### *Representing Frame*

More than any other poem in this volume, 'How I Began Writing' emphasises the life journey explored as that of Frame the writer, providing a lens with which to consider the work of the whole volume. The speaker in the poem describes the pine trees standing on the hill. Thoughts pass between them, and she unwraps the thoughts like presents, uncovering the words 'lonely, sigh, night', words that she, not the pine trees, knows, and yet the pines 'kept their own meaning in the sky' (199). In Frame's third volume of autobiography, *The Envoy to Mirror City*, pine trees are part of Frame's childhood and encountered during her years spent overseas establishing a writing reputation:

now when I listen to pine trees by water, in light and blue, I feel the link, the fullness of being and loving and losing and wondering, the spinning 'Why was the world?' that haunted me in childhood... yet I remember the pine trees of Ibiza.<sup>xvi</sup>

This question, 'Why was the world?' indicates a desire to explore, to explain the world. As 'vowels turn like wheels', the writer consistently uses words to 'find a new, a birthday shape'. The poems are singular representations of experience, however, taken together they make this larger beast (or bird), *The Goose Bath*, that is, the life of a writer. This lens this last poem casts over the collection is not Frame's own. The bird is not Frame, but like her poems, an interpretation of her journey left behind.

'How I Began' provides a clue on how to read the poems as a whole, in line with 'Words Speak' and 'The Turquoise Bird'. In 'How I Began', words are the 'chariot', vehicles to find meaning, but they

turn up 'empty', expressing not that the world has no meaning, but that they are limited in what they can carry. And yet the poem moves towards resolution in its final stanza, as despite the difficulties of language Frame begins 'to write'. She is always moving towards articulating a world whose 'essence' is never truly understood. The essence is not 'found': rather the poem shows constant movement, always towards, in which a sense of her being in the world is continuously re-established. Frame continues to 'unwrap presents' and her recurrent feeling of 'hope' indicates the anticipation of moving towards a worthwhile understanding. Despite acknowledging the difficulty of finding a 'truthful' essence, Frame in 'How I Began' still feels the need to interact, to take the journey. She uses words to convey her perception of the pine trees, but the pine trees have a deeper meaning, 'kept... in the sky', and 'refuse' to share any more of themselves. Truth, as far as it is important to the writer, is individual, because it is in the journey, the choices, and the responses to the world that the self is found. 'I Take' ends with 'yet still I take into my arms more than I can bear to hold' (25). 'How I Began' does not use the word 'still', yet conveys the same sense. There is the risk that the light will not shine on anything meaningful. The writer knows she is limited. She still has the same words, she has only 'wheels' and 'light', but 'still' she begins to write.

In 'Words Speak', it is words that carry feeling. As Frame notes in this poem, words may not always be accurate, but they provide an emotional connection to figures and events distant or past. It is in the sense of 'fairy tale', or fable or allegory, that we can understand the poems. Frame's novella *The Mijo Tree* is a fable, a fiction that emerged from Frame's stay in Ibiza in the 1950s. And yet it acts as an allegory for the real life romantic disappointment that is recounted in her autobiography. Rather than providing a real representation of that autobiographical encounter, we have the tale of the little seed who falls in love first with a sick young wind and then a Don Juan-type goat. Another poem in *The Goose Bath*, 'A Journey', says this in a different way.

Yes. We will sleep together.  
We will mix juices  
to put out the fire,  
arrive at the Poles  
from the Equator  
without a scar,  
with only a handful  
of unidentified  
ashes. (78)

'A Journey' describes a passionate love, of which the 'fire' burns out. The lovers disperse to the 'Poles', they are now far apart. The poem ends with the statement that they carry no 'scar', nothing visible to mark their experience, only this 'handful / of unidentified / ashes'. Nevertheless, the irony of this poem is that its experience is identified. The poem is written, recording the experience and its emotion. Perhaps the difficulty the writer deals with is that the presentation cannot encompass all versions of reality: the nine lines that compose 'A Journey' cannot describe a whole relationship. What the writer presents to the world of her experience will always be a representation rather than an actual thing. The ashes are identified by the poem, but they are not the essence of *her* experience. *The Goose Bath* represents the version of Frame that comes from her self-authoring as it has already taken hold in the minds of others. Frame begins *To the Is-Land* with the admission that she recollects 'facts and truths and memories of truths', acknowledging that her writing moves her 'always toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth'.<sup>xvii</sup> This opening situates the reader in the expectation that the autobiography is a version of Frame's life. *The Goose Bath*, as a kind of autobiography, but one that has been collated by others, progresses the idea of the many versions of Frame's life and develops her origin story as a writer who is richly involved in the world. This volume is a kind of hero's quest, a life story of an individual's being in the world. The poems 'I Take' and 'How I Began' describe Frame's awareness of her authoring process, but it is the placement of these poems at the beginning and end of the collection as bookends by the editors that leads us to see Frame's poems as the many and varied fragments of a journey. This journey is open to interpretation, change – and perhaps in a posthumous volume, more so, as the responsibility for seeing shifts to the reader, the outsider. Simon Petch extends Carlos Fuentes's comment that "in fiction, truth is the search for truth, nothing is pre-established, and knowledge is only what both of us – reader and writer – can imagine" to autobiographical truth; in the poems it relates to the writer's relationship with the world and the world's relationship with her work.<sup>xviii</sup>

Frame is the self-acknowledged 'mapmaker for those who will follow, nourished by this generation's layers of the dead'.<sup>xix</sup> To use a map is to take a journey, and the editors of *The Goose Bath* present to us a map of Frame's life. But the journey of this volume belongs not only to Frame, or even to the editors. The 'you and I' of the volume's first poem draws us in and asks us to relate to Frame as the writer of the poems on a personal level. And yet while words draw us in, allow us to make an emotional connection with Janet Frame, this relationship is fraught with miscommunication and misunderstanding. Frame's short story, *The Triumph of Poetry*, follows the life journey of an aspiring and promising poet.<sup>xx</sup> This story is more about what the poet, Alan, does not write, than what he does. His thoughts are big and grand and as a young man he is thoroughly immersed in the world, yet he finds at the end of the day when he has time to write he can convey nothing to paper. Alan, who has dedicated most of his life to wishing to be a poet, has written little poetry at all. Here, in his poetry, we find distance between reality and expression, between feeling and articulation. We find an

incongruity of life and word. Perhaps, 'The Turquoise Bird' comments, the way in which we read the volume says more about us and our life experiences (it is *our* gaze that follows that of the turquoise bird into the darkness of what is gone) than it does about the life experiences of Frame. Does it follow that meaning, coloured by our own truths, is inauthentic?

The editors of *The Goose Bath* note that during Frame's lifetime she felt amused by typographical errors and the variations in meaning they produced.<sup>xxi</sup> Lydia Wevers acknowledges that Frame's "being in the world" has transformed into myth, into memory, into "literature".<sup>xxii</sup> Claire Bazin stresses that it is through '...her talent as a writer' that Frame 'has turned this life into a literary object that leads "a life of its own"'.<sup>xxiii</sup> 'The Turquoise Bird' suggests that Frame at least acknowledges this. That the turquoise bird is 'disconcerting' (196) proposes its potential for provoking re-interpretation. The many poems that fill *The Goose Bath* span numerous ideas and experiences, always looking forward to something more, expressing the fluidity and change that is part of human identity. After Frame's death, the relationship is no longer between Frame and her readers, but between her work and her readers. The editors' shaping of this collection give us a path to follow through the poems of *The Goose Bath*; this provides a perspective from which we make our own interpretations. Although death removes Frame from the world, the interpretation of Frame through her writing means that her relationship with the world has expanded. *The Goose Bath* (among Frame's other works) now contributes to the body of literature that continues to interact with the world and that the world consciously engages with. *The Goose Bath* ends in its own beginning, with 'How I Began Writing', indicating that the '[u]nwrapping' of Frame through her work continues. The only one who can speak for Frame is Frame, and she is lost to 'darkness'. Yet, in *The Goose Bath*, the turquoise bird emerges as Frame is viewed, discussed, and in this sense she continues to live and interact in new settings. Her journey changes, and gains new meaning. In this way the relationship between Frame and the reader continues to develop in a way we might call 'authentically Frame,' if only because it is no longer the same as it used to be.

---

<sup>i</sup> Gordon, "Foreword," in Janet Frame, *The Goose Bath: Poems*, edited by Pamela Gordon, Dennis Harold and Bill Manhire, 11-15 (Auckland: Random House, 2006): 13; Manhire, "Introduction," in *The Goose Bath*, 23.

<sup>ii</sup> Gordon, "Foreword," 11.

<sup>iii</sup> Manhire, "Introduction," 23.

<sup>iv</sup> Manhire, "Introduction," 23.

<sup>v</sup> Manhire cited in Charmain Smith, "Poetry reveals Frame as mischievous, witty," *Otago Daily Times*, 25 March 2006, sup.p.6.

<sup>vi</sup> Gordon, "Foreword," 13.

<sup>vii</sup> Manhire, "Introduction," 21.

<sup>viii</sup> Frame, *The Goose Bath*, 25. Text references are to page of this edition.

<sup>ix</sup> Mercer's translation in Gina Mercer, "A simple everyday glass: the autobiographies of Janet Frame," *JNZL: Journal of New Zealand literature*, no. 11 (1993): 46.

- 
- <sup>x</sup> Mercer, "A simple everyday glass," 46-47.
- <sup>xi</sup> Bret W. Davis, *Martin Heidegger: key concepts* (England: Acumen Publishing, 2010): 55, 64.
- <sup>xii</sup> Janet Frame, *An Autobiography* (Auckland: Random House, 2004): 418.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Frame, *An Autobiography*, 7.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Frame, *An Autobiography*, 129.
- <sup>xv</sup> Sean Burke, *The death and return of the author: criticism and subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, third edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008): 7.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Frame, *An Autobiography*, 338-9.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Frame, *An Autobiography*, 7.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Carlos Fuentes cited in Simon Petch, "Janet Frame and the languages of autobiography," *Australian & New Zealand studies in Canada* 5 (1991): 59.
- <sup>xix</sup> Frame, *An Autobiography*, 415.
- <sup>xx</sup> Janet Frame, *The Reservoir, and Other Stories* (Christchurch: Pegasus, 1966): 157-182.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Gordon, "Foreword," 14.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Lydia Wevers, "Self Possession: 'Things' and Janet Frame's Autobiography," in *Frameworks: Contemporary Criticism on Janet Frame*, edited by Jan Cronin and Simone Drichel, 51-65 (New York: Rodopi, 2009): 58.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Claire Bazin, *Janet Frame* (Tavistock, Devon, U.K.: Northcote House, 2011): 5.