



faces in the water

a novel by

Janet Frame

author of "Owls Do Cry"

Janet Frame

*FACES
IN
THE
WATER*

GEORGE BRAZILLER

NEW YORK

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For information address the publisher:

George Braziller, Inc.

One Park Avenue

New York, NY 10016

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Frame, Janet.

Faces in the water.

I. Title.

PZ4.F812Fac 1980 [PR9639.3.F7] 823 79-25441

ISBN 0-8076-0957-9

Paperback reprint edition 1982 by George Braziller, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

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Faces in the Water

Also by Janet Frame

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Daughter Buffalo

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The Edge of the Alphabet

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The Adaptable Man

A State of Siege

Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room

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Living in the Maniototo

Stories and Sketches

The Lagoon

The Reservoir

Snowman Snowman

Mona Minim and the Smell of the Sun

Poetry

The Pocket Mirror

To. R. H. C.

Although this book is written in documentary form it is a work of fiction. None of the characters, including Estina Mavet, portrays a living person.

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flashed sudden sparks above my head and made it seem, with rainbow splashes of light, that I looked through tears. But the shopwindows were speaking to me, and the rain too, running down inside the window of the fish shop, and the clean moss and fern inside the florists, and the dowdy droopy two-piece sets and old-fashioned coats hung on the aged plaster models in the cheaper shops that could not afford to light their windows, and crowded their goods together, displayed with large warning tickets painted in red. They all spoke. They said Beware of the Sale, Beware of Bargain Prices. Beware of traffic and germs; if you find a handkerchief hold it up by the tip of the finger and thumb until it is claimed. For a cold in the chest be steamed with Friars' Balsam. Do not sit on the seat of a public lavatory. Danger. Power lines overhead.

I was not yet civilized; I traded my safety for the glass beads of fantasy.

I was a teacher. The headmaster followed me home, he divided his face and body into three in order to threaten me with triple peril, so that three headmasters followed me, one on each side and one at my heels. Once or twice I turned timidly and said, Would you like a star for good conduct? I sat all night in my room, cutting out stars from sheets of gold paper, pasting the stars on the wall and across the door of the landlady's best wardrobe and over the head and face and eyes of her innerspring divan, till the room was papered with stars, furnished as a private night, as a charm against the three headmasters who made me drink tea in sociability every morning in the staff room, and who tiptoed in sand shoes along the marigold border, sprouting pungent advice possibilities and platitudes. With my brib-

eries for good conduct I fancied I held them fast with flour and water in a paper galaxy of approval, when I was really giving to myself alone the hundred rewards, guarantees, safety measures, insurance policies, because I alone was evil, I alone had been seen and heard, had spoken before I was spoken to, had bought fancy biscuits without being told to, and put them down on the wall.

My room stank with sanitary napkins. I did not know where to put them therefore I hid them in the drawer of the landlady's walnut dressing table, in the top drawer, the middle drawer and the bottom drawer; everywhere was the stench of dried blood, of stale food thrown from the shelves of an internal house that was without tenants or furniture or hope of future lease.

The headmaster flapped his wings; he was called a name that sounded like buzzard which gave him power over the dead, to pick the bones of those who lie in the desert.

I swallowed a stream of stars; it was easy; I slept a sleep of good work and conduct excellent.

Perhaps I could have dived into the violet sea and swum across to catch up with the drifting people of the world; yet I thought Safety First, Look to the Left and Look to the Right. The disappearing crowds of people waved their dirty handkerchiefs held, fastidiously, between thumb and forefinger. Such caution! They covered their mouth and nose when they sneezed, but their feet were bare and frozen, and I thought that perhaps they could not afford shoes or stockings, therefore I stayed on my ice floe, not willing to risk the danger of poverty, looking carefully to the left and the right, minding the terrible traffic across the lonely polar desert: until a man with golden hair said, "You need a rest

from chrysanthemums and cemeteries and parallel tram lines running down to the sea. You need to escape from sand and lupines and wardrobes and fences. Mrs. Hogg will help you, Mrs. Hogg the Berkshire sow who has had her goiter out, and you should see the stream of cream that flows from the hole in her throat and hear the satisfactory whistling of her breath."

"You have made a mistake," Mrs. Hogg said, standing on tiptoe, her head thrust in the air. "I may have ginger whiskers but there has never been a stream of cream that flows from the hole in my throat. And tell me, what is the difference between geography, electricity, cold feet, a child born without wits and sitting drooling inside a red wooden engine in a concrete yard, and the lament of Guiderius and Aviragus,

*Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages . . .*

*No exorciser harm thee
Nor no witchcraft charm thee.
Ghost unlaid forbear thee.
Nothing ill come near thee."*

I was afraid of Mrs. Hogg. I could not tell her the difference. I shouted at her,

*Loony loony down the line,
Mind your business and I'll mind mine.*

What is a loony's business? A loony at Cliffhaven "down the line" where the train stops for twenty minutes to put down and collect the mailbags and to give the travelers a

free look at the loonies gathered about, gaping and absorbed?

Tell me, what is the time now? The light-headed school bell is giddily knocking its head against its tongue; am I at school in time? The cherry blossom is budding in its burnished leaves, the velvet-tongued snapdragons are in flower, the wind is brushing sunlight into the row of green supple poplars growing outside on the bank, just up the path. I can see them from the windows open only six inches at the bottom and the top, and why are the doors locked by people who wear pink uniforms and carry keys fastened by a knotted cord to their belts and kept inside deep marsupial pockets? Is it after teatime? Violet light, yellow japonica, the children in the street playing hopscotch baseball and marbles until the blotting darkness absorbs even the color from the yellow japonica?

I will put warm woolen socks on the feet of the people in the other world; but I dream and cannot wake, and I am cast over the cliff and hang there by two fingers that are danced and trampled on by the Giant Unreality.

So there was nothing to do but weep. I cried for the snow to melt and the powerful councilors to come and tear down the warning notices, and I never answered Mrs. Hogg to tell her the difference for I knew only the similarity that grew with it; the difference dispersed in the air and withered, leaving the fruit of similarity, like a catkin that reveals the hazelnut.

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. Every morning I woke in dread, waiting for the day nurse to go on her rounds and announce from the list of names in her hand whether or not I was for shock treatment, the new and fashionable means of quieting people and of making them realize that orders are to be obeyed and floors are to be polished without anyone protesting and faces are made to be fixed into smiles and weeping is a crime. Waiting in the early morning, in the black-capped frosted hours, was like waiting for the pronouncement of a death sentence.

I tried to remember the incidents of the day before. Had I wept? Had I refused to obey an order from one of the nurses? Or, becoming upset at the sight of a very ill patient, had I panicked, and tried to escape? Had a nurse threatened, "If you don't take care you'll be for treatment tomorrow?" Day after day I spent the time scanning the faces of the staff as carefully as if they were radar screens which might reveal the approach of the fate that had been pre-

pared for me. I was cunning. "Let me mop the office," I pleaded. "Let me mop the office in the evenings, for by evening the film of germs has settled on your office furniture and report books, and if the danger is not removed you might fall prey to disease which means disquietude and fingerprints and a sewn shroud of cheap cotton."

So I mopped the office, as a precaution, and sneaked across to the sister's desk and glanced quickly at the open report book and the list of names for treatment the next morning. One time I read my name there, Istina Mavet. What had I done? I hadn't cried or spoken out of turn or refused to work the bumper with the polishing rag under it or to help set the tables for tea, or to carry out the overflowing pig-tin to the side door. There was obviously a crime which was unknown to me, which I had not included in my list because I could not track it with the swinging spotlight of my mind to the dark hinterland of unconsciousness. I knew then that I would have to be careful. I would have to wear gloves, to leave no trace when I burgled the crammed house of feeling and took for my own use exuberance depression suspicion terror.

As we watched the day nurse moving from one patient to another with the list in her hand our sick dread became more intense.

"You're for treatment. No breakfast for you. Keep on your nightgown and dressing gown and take your teeth out."

We had to be careful, calm, controlled. If our forebodings were unwarranted we experienced a dizzy lightness and relief which, if carried too far, made us liable to be given

emergency treatment. If our name appeared on the fatal list we had to try with all our might, at times unsuccessfully, to subdue the rising panic. For there was no escape. Once the names were known all doors were scrupulously locked; we had to stay in the observation dormitory where the treatment was being held.

It was a time of listening—to the other patients walking along the corridor for breakfast; the silence as Sister Honey, her head bowed, her eyes watchfully open, said grace.

“For what you are about to receive the Lord make you truly thankful.”

And then we heard the sudden cheerful clatter of spoons on porridge plates, the scraping of chairs, the disconcerted murmur at the end of the meal when the inevitably missing knife was being searched for while the sister warned sternly, “Let no one leave the table until the knife is found.” Then further scraping and rustling following the sister’s orders. “Rise, Ladies.” Side doors being unlocked as the patients were ordered to their separate places of work. Laundry, Ladies. Sewing room, Ladies. Nurses’ Home, Ladies. Then the pegging footsteps as the massive Matron Glass on her tiny blackshod feet approached down the corridor, unlocked the observation dormitory and stood surveying us, with a query to the nurse, like a stockman appraising head of cattle waiting in the saleyards to go by truck to the slaughterhouse. “They’re all here? Make sure they have nothing to eat.” We stood in small groups, waiting; or crouched in a semi-circle around the great locked fireplace where a heap of dull coal smouldered sulkily; our hands on the blackened bars of the fireguard, to warm our nipped fingers.