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### **Abstract**

Grace Cleave, a New Zealand writer living in London and heroine of Janet Frame's novel, *Towards Another Summer*, undergoes a mysterious transformation prompted by weather reports of a slow thaw spreading from the west: 'you see, during the night Grace Cleave had changed to a migratory bird' (6). There are echoes here of Kafka's story 'Metamorphosis':

DOROTHY JONES

## Flying Godwits and Migrating Kiwis: *Towards Another Summer*

Grace Cleave, a New Zealand writer living in London and heroine of Janet Frame's novel, *Towards Another Summer*, undergoes a mysterious transformation prompted by weather reports of a slow thaw spreading from the west: 'you see, during the night Grace Cleave had changed to a migratory bird' (6). There are echoes here of Kafka's story 'Metamorphosis':

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. (9)<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Gregor's body changes completely, Grace's metamorphosis is psychic rather than physical, though she scrutinises herself for even the slightest trace of feathers, unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed by their absence.

... her heart beat faster as she felt on the skin of her arms and legs, her breasts and belly, and even on top of her head the tiny prickling beginning of the growth of feathers. ... she threw back the blankets and examined her skin. No feathers. Only a sensation of down and quill and these, with other manifestations of the other world, could be kept secret; no one else need learn of it. (7–8)

*Towards Another Summer* was written in 1963 when Frame was contemplating, with some ambivalence, a visit to New Zealand. In February that year, she had accepted an invitation from Geoffrey Moorhouse, chief feature writer for the *Guardian*, to spend a weekend with his New Zealand wife and two small children at their home in Stockport. This caused what Frame describes in a letter to her friend, John Money, as a 'roots crisis':

[To] spend a weekend having repeated, strong, undiluted doses of New Zealand has almost put me off my balance. I sit here ... dreaming of snowgrass and snowberries and tussock ... of the Southern Alps, and of rivers — where's the Rakaia, the Waitaki, the Maheno? Good God, I've kept asking myself, what am I doing on this side of the world? If I don't get back to New Zealand I'll die, or, which is the equivalent to death, my writing will get worse and worse... (qtd in King 243)

On returning to London, she stopped work temporarily on her fifth novel, *The Adaptable Man*, and spent April and May writing *Towards Another Summer*. In October 1963 she arrived back in New Zealand, for what she believed was a short-term stay, fully intending to resume her life in England yet writing to her friend Peter Dawson in January 1964:

... by Holy Holy I'm homesick for the northern hemisphere! At the same time I'm bursting with gratitude for the sun, the sea, the pohutukawas, and I want to stay in NZ

permanently ... [I think] that my home is in the northern hemisphere, but this is the land I want to write about. (qtd in King, 264)

Although Frame does refer to having written what she calls ‘a novel-length autobiographical essay, *Towards Another Summer*’, she never offered the book for publication.<sup>2</sup> ‘Later she would call it “embarrassingly personal”’, (qtd in King 245) perhaps because it alludes so directly and with very little disguise to actual details and events within the Frame household. A decision to publish posthumously was taken by the Janet Frame Literary Trust in 2007, and Pamela Gordon writes on the Trust’s behalf in an Acknowledgement section at the book’s end:

Janet Frame entrusted the care of her literary estate and charitable trust to us, but left no specific instructions about *Towards Another Summer*. She made it clear that it was too personal to publish in her lifetime, but since she bound two copies of the typescript and preserved them in separate locations, and made no secret of the novel’s existence, we have concluded that she anticipated posthumous publication. (241–42)

The novel’s first five chapters establish the character of Grace Cleave, who lives in a small furnished flat ‘which held a three-piece suite with floral covers’ (25). Outside is a garden where passers-by throw ‘Bus tickets, cigarette packets and papers, chocolate wrappers, all kinds of refuse’ (19). Very little seems to flourish amidst sooty air and harsh winter weather.

In the back yard there were three tubs of plants — two of evergreen trees, evergreen in name only, for their stout leathery leaves were shrouded in soot; and one geranium, its leaves withered, its stalks like tendrils of ageing hair growing from the soot and slush-covered earth. Were the geraniums dead? Every time she looked at them she asked were they dead, for in her own country she had never known geraniums not to be in blossom, they possessed too much fire to let themselves lie dormant, ‘banked’ during the long winter night with their own death-grey ashes. (4)

As the novel progresses, the account of Grace’s immediate experiences in England is interspersed with vignettes of her New Zealand childhood, but despite apparent comparisons between bleak, wintry England and a sunnier, more relaxed New Zealand, both countries are shown to have their drawbacks. Immersed in her writing, which has clearly achieved a measure of success, Grace finds her encounters with interviewers and reviewers quite excruciating, comparing them both to London soot and the sooty stain left after walking through a paddock of *paspalum* near Auckland.

Being a writer and returning home tired after every venture, you are so surprised to find on yourself a slowly spreading stain of publisher, critic, agent. You turn in panic to the household hints in *Pears Cyclopaedia*.... Then you realize there’s nothing, you can neither identify the stain nor remove it. (13)

Uneasy and painfully self-conscious in her dealings with others, Grace decides her inner transformation into a migratory bird makes sense of who she is, and this partly prompts her decision to accept an invitation from Philip Thirkettle, who had interviewed her as a writer in London, to spend a weekend with his

New Zealand wife and young children in Relham in northern England. The bulk of the novel recounts Grace's journey there and the day and a half she spends with the Thirkettles, while Frame portrays with considerable humour the social awkwardness and insecurities of the occasion.

*Towards Another Summer* explores the theme of migration, particularly through images and description of journeys. Migration inevitably involves an act of imagination as Grace acknowledges when, passing New Zealand House in the Strand, she observes English people staring at 'displayed photographs of sun and sky and sheep' wondering whether to emigrate and experience 'the sun, the beach, your own home', but content at last to complete 'the regular mid-morning migration ... through the simplest cheapest and most satisfyingly unofficial procedure of dreaming' (33). In her ambivalence over where she really belongs, Grace too has an impulse 'to go to the Emigration Department, enquire, fill in forms' (33). The visit to New Zealand House occurs immediately before her train trip north through a snow covered landscape, 'as if they journeyed on the face of the moon' (40), and this journey is later echoed by memories of childhood train travel in New Zealand, for Grace's father, like Janet Frame's, has been a train driver and her family has moved from one railway posting to another in southern districts of the South Island.

In 1964, shortly after her return to New Zealand, Janet Frame gave a radio talk claiming we are all travellers.

[At] the moment of birth every human being is an exile — or at the moment of consciousness of the first thought we are exile and home comer, we make both landfall and departure; there is nothing remarkable in our journeys unless it is that human beings ... celebrate their movements in works of art ... (qtd in King, 273)

Journeying takes on a mythic resonance in *Towards Another Summer*, since for Grace Cleave artists are mythmakers and journeys an important motif through which myths are structured.

Most music began on earth — in the tradition of the mythmakers who named a definite place of departure to Heaven or Hell; setting out for other worlds you journeyed first to Land's End or North Cape of New Zealand or some spot in Italy, and when you felt the need to return you retraced your steps and were comforted by the sight of familiar land — or sky-marks: rising (or descending) 'we beheld the stars'. (222)

Frame combines journeying with another significant mythic feature — metamorphosis — in the figure of the migratory bird. Her heroine reflects on Classical legends of women changed into birds as she considers her own inner transformation.

Birds too, Grace thought, remembering that she had been changed; Philomela; Procne; it was an old tradition; we must tend the myths, she thought; only in that way shall we survive. (109)

Commenting on the transformations recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Marina Warner suggests that 'the subjects achieve final personality in this new form:

from the perspective of creation and the life force, the shape into which they shift more fully expresses them and perfects them than their first form' (4). For Janet Frame, the migratory bird image expresses Grace's situation, divided, as her name 'Cleave' indicates, between two countries, while also signifying her true nature as someone who refuses to be earthbound.

Just as Kafka does not specify precisely what sort of insect Gregor Samsa becomes, so Grace Cleave is not actually linked with any one particular bird. When contemplating her transformation, she lists many different varieties: 'she was a migratory bird; warbler, wagtail, yellowhammer? cuckoo-shrike, bobolink, skua? albatross, orange bishop, godwit?' (8). Nevertheless, Frame's choice of an epigraph from Charles Brasch's poem 'Islands', not only provides the novel's title but also draws attention to one particular bird, the godwit.

...and from their haunted bay  
 The godwits vanish towards another summer.  
 Everywhere in light and calm the murmuring  
 Shadow of departure; distance looks our way;  
 And none knows where he will lie down at  
 night. (ll. 7-10)

Allusions to this passage and adaptations of it recur throughout the novel. Brasch's lines evoke the yearning behind a perpetual search for summer and all it represents, whilst conveying the restlessness and uncertainty which inevitably accompany it. 'Distance looks our way' sums up that sense of remoteness so many Antipodeans have long been used to feeling. Uncertainty, however, also conveys a sense of freedom, and Grace Cleave finds her migratory situation liberating as well as unsettling.

Frame may also have been influenced by an earlier New Zealand novel, Robin Hyde's *The Godwits Fly*, which uses these birds as a central metaphor.

Of the immense northerly migrations that yearly in New Zealand, when summer is gone, shake wings into the sky as if from a giant's salt-pot, nothing is told. But this is true: every year, from sandy hollows in the north of the northernmost of those three islands, the godwits set out on a migration beside which the swallow's blue hither and yon is a mere stroll with wings.

And it is true, too, that the godwits flying north, never go near England. They fly to Siberia. But to a child in this book, it was all more simple. A long way was a long way. North was mostly England, or a detour to England. (xx)

Hyde describes young New Zealanders, particularly aspiring artists who yearn to experience a fuller life, as godwits. 'Our youth, our best, our intelligent, brave and beautiful, must make the long migration, under a compulsion they hardly understand; or else be dissatisfied all their lives long' (xx). The novel explores this compulsion with a mixture of understanding and irony. Hyde sympathises with young people's desire to travel to the 'centre' whilst demonstrating how an education system which focuses on English literary and artistic achievement distorts responses to one's own country.

You were English and not English. It took time to realize that England was far away. And you were brought up on bluebells and primroses and daffodils and robins in the snow — even the Christmas cards were always robins in the snow. One day, with a little shock of anger, you realized that there were no robins and no snow, and you felt cheated; nothing else was quite as pretty. The tall sorrel heads of the dock-plants were raggedy under your hands, and the bush of daisies with brown centres stuck out from under the bedroom window.... (34)

Although young New Zealanders' urge to visit England may arise from an impulse to try their wings, and seek new experience, Hyde also shows how deeply conservative the longing can be. Augusta Hannay, the heroine's mother and a great traditionalist, constantly talks of 'dear old England', which she has never seen, having been deflected by marriage in the midst of her journey there, and cherishes throughout her life an ideal of a 'white house like a Greek cross, just outside the New Forest' (101).

*Towards Another Summer* emphasises not so much the urge to migrate as the migrant's simultaneous involvement with two different countries and cultures on opposite sides of the globe. Grace's surname 'Cleave' means 'to adhere' as well as 'divide in two', and although she is now established in England, her life and personality have been formed in New Zealand and her visit to the Thirkettles reveals how profoundly she cleaves to her native land. The household's untidy confusion is a comforting reminder of Grace's childhood home, 'where the rooms had been a muddle of possessions and furniture and food and chamberpots' (51). She sleeps in a room belonging to Philip's New Zealand father-in-law who is temporarily absent on holiday, and is drawn to a map of New Zealand hanging above the fireplace. As she traces with her finger 'the once familiar towns between Oamaru and Dunedin and further south', the effect is not unlike Alice's experience of climbing through the looking glass as Grace and the reader move directly into scenes from her childhood. One odd detail in her bedroom is a tray of seed potatoes left on a shelf, references to which keep recurring throughout the novel. They seed memories of her early New Zealand life as she remembers feeding potatoes to the family cow while it is being milked. Her host, hoping to plant part of New Zealand in his English garden, tells her he has sought out this particular variety of potato because it tastes like kumara — 'She remembered kumaras, creamy-golden and sweet, and the flax basket that old Jimmy had given their father, a special kumara basket' (90).

Psychologically, Grace Cleave moves not only between two distant countries, but also between the ordinary, mundane world and an inner region of intellect and imagination.

Now journeys were not simple matters for Grace; nothing is simple if your mind is a fetch-and-carry wanderer from sliced perilous outer world to secret safe inner world; if when night comes your thought creeps out like a furred animal concealed in the dark, to find, seize, and kill its food and drag it back to the secret house in the secret world.... (5-6)

Such migrations, however, are hazardous. The secret inner world may prove elusive, or else transform into something out of nightmare or sinister fairy tale.

... if the strange beasts walk upside down like flies on the ceiling; crimson wings flap, the curtains fly; a sad man wearing a blue waistcoat with green buttons sits in the centre of the room, crying because he has swallowed the mirror and it hurts and he burps in flashes of glass and light; if crakes move and cry; the world is flipped, unrolled down the vast marble stair; a stained threadbare carpet; the hollow silver dancing shoes, hunting horns.... (6)

According to Marina Warner, tales of metamorphosis arose often in spaces, geographical and mental, 'that were crossroads, cross-cultural zones, points of interchange on the intricate connective tissue of communications between cultures' (17), and Grace's awareness of her own transformation into a migratory bird is preceded by a sense that 'boundaries were not possible' (6). Metamorphosis into another species is also Frame's way of indicating her character's sense of isolation and inability to fit comfortably into standard patterns of social behaviour.

I might change to another species. I might move on and on — where? I don't know, but farther and farther away from the human world. (8–9)

Grace continually toys with the idea of informing those around her that she is actually a migratory bird, wondering what their reaction would be. She also recognizes the possibility of transformation in others. Out walking one morning during her visit to Relham she observes a woman wearing a black and white dress.

Then she began screeching again. Grace stared at her black and white patched dress, listened to the screeching, and thought, — She's a magpie, she's not a woman, she's a bird. As she watched the woman more closely she saw the final change taking place in her — she had surprised her in private metamorphosis — she saw the arms mould themselves to wings, the black and white patched dress change to feathers about her body, her nose extend sharply to form a beak. (117)

She longs to tell her host and hostess that she has seen a woman change into a bird, but feels unable to risk it, for fear of embarrassing consequences, even though she suspects the Thirkettles actually have sufficient imagination and sympathy to understand what she would be telling them. Nevertheless she remains silent on the matter.

With all its strangeness, the novel is rich in humour, arising mainly from Grace's reflections on her difficulties in conforming to social expectations and her sharp observations of human behaviour. At one point, for example, she remembers her brief love affair with an American man.

How could she have made love with someone who at the moment of climax began to recite *Gunga Din*? Perhaps that was not so unfortunate — he could have recited lines from *If*. ... (24)

Just as Kafka's fantastical account of Gregor Samsa's transformation takes much of its force from the carefully detailed realism with which his house and family

life are presented, so Frame's story of metamorphosis is thrown into relief by her meticulously realistic portrayal of Grace's daily life in wintry London. For a New Zealander like myself, living on a meagre income as a postgraduate student in early 1960s England, the whole novel is remarkably evocative. Like Grace Cleave I was acutely conscious of the contrast between the great cultural riches within relatively easy reach and the bleak, dingy surroundings where much of my time was spent. It was in England where I first learned, with a mixture of dismay and resentment, to regard myself as a colonial subject and although I never actually entertained the idea of going to New Zealand House and filling in the appropriate forms to emigrate to my native land, I still read the episode in Frame's novel with a shock of delighted recognition.

Perhaps, however, the aspect of the novel which resonates most is Frame's skill in conveying a life poised between two worlds, the centre of Empire and one of its far flung outposts. In following Grace Cleave's awareness of herself as a migratory bird, the reader moves between countries, between hemispheres and, most importantly, between a world of mundane 'normality' and the transformative realm of the imagination. Migration results in metamorphosis. Living in another country, even if one has been taught from early infancy to think of it as 'home', changes perceptions of oneself and one's country of origin. Frame also suggests that a migratory existence, however unsettling, offers greater insight than remaining in any single location can provide.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The story was first published in 1916 and the Muir translation originally appeared in 1933.
- <sup>2</sup> *Beginnings*, with Introduction and notes by Robin Dudding, Wellington, O.U.P., 1980. Frame's essay under this heading first appeared in *Landfall* in 1965.

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