“I and my life”

This is an excerpt from the first volume of the author’s autobiography.

Where in my earlier years time had been horizontal, progressive, day after day, year after year, with memories being a true personal history known by dates and specific years, or vertical, with events stacked one upon the other, [..] the adolescent time now became a whirlpool¹, and so the memories do not arrange themselves to be observed and written about, they swirl, propelled² by a force beneath, with different memories rising to the surface at different times and thus denying the existence of a “pure” autobiography [..] with some memories forever staying beneath the surface. I sit here at my desk, peering into the depths of the dance, for the movement is dance with its own pattern, neither good nor bad, but individual in its own right—a dance of dust and sunbeams [..], or ideas that the writer, trying to write an autobiography, clings to in one moment only. [..]

I struggled with the events of those last years at school. I felt bewildered³, imprisoned—where would I go? What if my parents died suddenly? What was the world like? How could the world be at war? I asked myself that old question which haunted me as a child, Why was the world, why was the world? And where was my place? I had those recurring dreams of being grown up and returning to school only to be told, What do you think you’re doing here? You’re grown up.

My sisters and I immersed ourselves in our reading and studying. [..] We continued to send our poems to the *Mail Minor*, the *Truth*, and Dot’s *Little Folk*⁴ and one week memorable for me saw another of my poems, “Blossoms”, made Poem of the Week, and the other, “The Crockus”, also praised by Dot, whose remarks were: “Thank you for the poems, Amber Butterfly. They show poetic insight and imagination” [..].

Oh, how sweet were the words, “poetic insight and imagination”. This was the first time anyone had told me, directly, that I had *imagination*. The acknowledgment was an occasion for me, and, as often happens, this one affirmation led to others, and soon I was being told at school that I had *imagination*. My dream of being a poet, a real poet, was nearer to being realised. There was still the question of disability—Coleridge and Francis Thompson and Edgar Allan Poe had their addiction to opium, Pope his lameness, Cowper his depression, John Clare his insanity, the Brontës⁵ their tuberculosis as well as the disablement of their life about them... Well, my sister had died, and the cats had died, and my brother had epilepsy, but for all of that and for all my newly acquired or acknowledged imagination, I and my life, I felt, were excessively ordinary. I worried about my clothes or lack of them and my “fig-ewer”⁶, whether I had “curves” and “oomph”⁷ and “hickies”⁸, and having read *Ariel*, the life of *Shelley*, I felt keenly Shelley’s probable disapproval of me, for he had complained of Harriet that she was interested only in looking at *hats*. I had resolved I would never be like Shelley’s wife. (From time to time it did seem that my ambition of being a poet became confused with a fantasy of *marrying one!*)

I wrote in my diary, “Dear Mr. Ardenue¹⁰, They think I’m going to be a schoolteacher, but I’m going to be a poet.”

*Janet Frame, An Angel at My Table (1982)*