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## Language, Knowledge, Power: Janet Frame's 'The Reservoir' [II]

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[This essay is the second of two parts.]

The second half of the story begins with a rehearsal of the sort of themes with which 'The Reservoir' opened: being forbidden to go, the distance to the Reservoir, its mysterious nature, how it might be talked about, and the legendary people who have knowledge of it. The child narrator starts by noting that 'one of us' timidly reminds the children that they have been told not to go to the Reservoir, before confessing in the next sentence, 'That was me'. This passage, devoid of any of the ironies of the sophisticated adult narrator, also further serves to highlight that it is the child narrator who is now telling the story as it happens. The narrator's little sister supports her with 'It's a long way', and then someone retorts, 'Coward!'. It is not clear who says this. Is this the reaction of some stronger member of the group? Does the child narrator say it, her pride wounded at seeming as timid as her younger sibling? Or is this perhaps the mood of the group itself, somehow being expressed? Group dynamics are often mysterious and opaque in just this way. It is also an indicator of the new immediacy with which the children's direct speech and thoughts are being presented by the child narrator, rather than through the adult narrator's recollections.

In any case the narrator feels the need to agree that 'it was a long way', so that perhaps the children might have to stay out all night. Since they know the Reservoir only as somewhere far and dangerous they can only imagine it: a place bordered by owls, warrens and wind in pine trees. The children think of the warrens, fantastically and somewhat illogically, as holes full of pine-needles reaching down to pools of molten lead and 'waiting to seize us'. Like the warrens, the crying of the pines is imaginatively personified, as 'a sound of speech at its loneliest level': full of its own feelings but lacking coherence for others. At first, the children focus upon the struggling quality of this sound because it reflects their own struggle to articulate the nature of the Reservoir, and so, paradoxically, they explain what they know about the sound at length. The



children know that the pines' speech produces in them, through imaginative sympathy, feelings of isolation and helplessness; but this is really because the pines, though they have already attained a superior language of pure expressiveness with the wind, are reduced to a kind of despair at their own isolation in having no superior interlocutor separate from themselves that they can communicate with properly. Ominously, the attainment of superior language at the Reservoir has not brought on happiness, just as the children's attainment of superior knowledge of their childish world brought them only ennui. And so in reaction to this the narrator exclaims, 'we could not spend the night at the Reservoir among the pine trees'. Significantly, perhaps, the Reservoir as a body of water is not even mentioned here. The children do not dare face what is so unknown to them that it cannot be further articulated than in this roundabout manner.

The children's fear of night at the Reservoir means they are in danger of reaching a mental and physical impasse. But this possible recurrence of paralysis is prevented when someone, again unnamed, recalls that Billy Whittaker and his gang have already been to the Reservoir. The speaker even notes in passing that Billy Whittaker went 'one afternoon', implying that he did not have to stay overnight. Billy Whittaker did not say what the Reservoir was like, but the children are heartened. Clearly Billy Whittaker is someone already experienced — he has actually had infantile paralysis two years ago and thus been treated for it in an iron lung. This information, confirmed as true by parental authority, rouses 'envy' as well as 'dread' among the children. Dread arises as their Kierkegaardian fear over an undetermined future and envy as their feeling about those people, like Billy Whittaker, who have already faced down dread. Naïvely, the children feel Billy Whittaker is lucky to have been in an iron lung. Because the children don't really understand what an iron lung is, they are free to interpret this, too, imaginatively. But this time they imagine something benign. They conceive of an iron lung as like a suit of protective armour, an emblem of glamour and strength rather than of physical weakness. In contrast, the children feel that their own flesh lungs are 'paltry'.

At this point someone asks, 'are we going to the Reservoir or not?'. The child narrator notes that this is an attempt 'to sound bossy like our Father'. The speaker is usurping adult status in order to force the issue. The children's response is to play with the emblems of their status as pilgrims: their sticks. The sticks' whistling sound is similar to the incomprehensible sound of the pines. The children have tried to make musical instruments out of such sticks in the past and been frustrated. The narrator complains that they could never '*make* anything out of the bits of the world', in this way lamenting her childish inability to understand and control the world around her. This frustration is compounded when an airplane passes in the sky, and the children try to collect the number under its wing. An airplane is a fine example of adult



humanity's knowledge overcoming natural boundaries, in contrast to the children who can only wave sticks in the air. Even in the period before jet planes this version of transpotting would have been difficult, and when the plane is gone 'in a glint of sun' it appears that the children have failed at this, too. When one child reminds them about going to the Reservoir, another responds with the sort of display of knowledge that both child and adult narrator have had repeated recourse to, in this case information unrelated to the Reservoir but rather about the sun in the children's eyes. An eclipse is described as a merely temporary night — subconsciously reassuring perhaps, because it was spending the night at the Reservoir which most frightened the children before. With this, and with the children's mounting impatience at their own frustration, the decision to go to the Reservoir has been somehow made, without rational discussion, through the dynamics of the group. The children 'set out' again, but this time with a definite destination.

The decision made, the child narrator tries to imagine in detail what the Reservoir itself might be. Significantly, she passes over the simple truth, that it is a lake, to concentrate on something darker. She tries to invest the Reservoir with danger because of its importance to her. Thus she conceives of the Reservoir in terms of imagery related to medieval mystery painting, as 'great wheels' with a 'demonic force'. To shore such an unlikely view up, she relates this to a known danger: the possibility of being drawn beneath the wheels of a train. The arrival of the Limited usually frightens her, but she knows 'you had to approach' the train out of social duty: kissing arriving aunts. In a paradoxical way, too, breaking the rules of society and going to the Reservoir is also a social duty. Even if it involves challenging society's authority, to fail to pass through a rite of passage and thus remain in a form of infantile paralysis is to let society down. Society is organised in that way: its rules are relative to its members' age and situation. Mastering this is an aspect of growing up, the lesson implicit in a rite of passage.

And so, at last, the children begin to venture beyond their world bordered by the gully and the wild sweet peas of the creek's banks. The narrator lists the plants they pass before coming to 'strange territory'. This new territory seems hostile and is characterised by its barbed wire fences. Although the sun remains in the sky, the children feel cold, a reaction to fear and a projection of their feeling that they do not fit into this new environment. This is expanded on in the next paragraph. The child narrator describes walking through some bush, but the imagery and language used is of exploration. The trees are weirdly huge and their roots are compared to skeletons. Directions are 'plotted'. The children walk past signs warning them to go back, such as 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED BY ORDER', which hints at the authority behind the warning. In this strange land they begin to feel nostalgic, even for the remote sun which was



the source of their complaints earlier but which looks down on the life they have left behind. Through the associative link of the sun-mark on a school ruler, an instrument of measurement and knowledge, the children begin to feel nostalgia for school. School is also part of their past, where the experience of learning was safe. Even the school's bare corridors on wet days seem desirable. There is something fake about all this. The children are not explorers dreaming of home. In fact, though they feel they have set off on a daring adventure, they have not yet encountered any challenge. Facing no barrier beyond what is in their own minds, they romanticise their position and talk it up.

But then the children encounter genuine danger: they enter a paddock with a jersey bull in it. The child narrator begins by comparing the bull to a wardrobe. This unusual simile itself invites comparison with the 'rabbits eating like modern sculpture' at the story's start. Whereas the simile of the rabbits seemed forced and overly bookish, the comparison of the bull to a wardrobe is strikingly effective. A wardrobe convincingly suggests the bull's size and sheen, and the unnatural comparison also conveys the children's sense that the creature is eerie. Because the child narrator uses an object for comparison from within her own experience, this simile succeeds, and so does the one that follows which compares the bull's colour to copper. There is no false sophistication, even when the child narrator goes on to blend both halves of the wardrobe simile into something like a metaphor of 'heavy beams' creaking in the grass. This is, indeed, the sort of comparison an explorer's journal might make use of when trying to describe something genuinely new.

Questing heroes in ancient literature typically encounter a mythical beast obstructing their path. The children apply their knowledge and experience to their problem. They know how to check and see that the bull is not a steer, and they consider how tamed it may or may not be. They are aware of the bull's 'massive shape against the sky' but then note coolly in the next paragraph, 'The bull stood alone.' This is in contrast to the romanticising that characterised their walk through the bush. Next, the children apply their experience. They remember the case of Mr Bennet, who was gored by 'his own tame bull'. Deciding on discretion, the children creep around the inside edge of the paddock, near to the fence. When the bull paws the ground, the children's knowledge warns them to escape through the fence. Then, gathering courage from their experience of creeping inside the fence, the children re-enter the paddock, skirt some bushes and then leave to continue their journey. How much danger the children really feel they have been in is left open. What is clear is that the tone of the writing follows the flow of the children's emotions, alternating between calm and a fear that is reasonable but steadily diminishing.



The children are now reunited with the creek, their erstwhile guide. But on seeing it they feel no genuine relief, because they no longer recognise it as their own. It seems 'foreign water'. Like someone keeping his cards close to his chest, the creek 'seemed to flow close to its concealed bed' and, drawing this into a full personification, the children feel that the creek no longer wishes to communicate with them. They have 'lost possession' of it as a point of reference, and so they are thoroughly in new territory. Their first reaction is to try to understand what has happened by using their imagination. If they have lost possession of their creek, they wonder, 'Who had taken it?', and why is it not theirs? But now this imaginative thinking offers them no intuition about their situation. In any case, the children are not in any immediate danger. They again wave their pilgrim-like sticks in the air, as they did when deciding to go to the Reservoir. They forget their dismay and even become cheerful.

But such happiness is short-lived. The children worry it is getting late, and their fear of possibly staying out all night swiftly returns. They give in to the thought that the sun may set very quickly, dropping them into sudden nightfall. Robbed of any point of reference, the children's ability to harness their imagination to their reason continues to fail them. Although this process allowed them to understand the nature of water-treatment at the story's start, here the children conclude that the sun's immobility is proof that it will move suddenly — a travesty of their knowledge. They reason by comparing the sun's immobility to an object fixed with a drawing pin and by comparing a possible quick downward movement to an eel's head falling into the water — but this a travesty of their experience. Such reasoning by analogy is not the sort of intuitive leap that the children managed in order to understand water-treatment; rather, it is logic in its most primitive form. The reported speech of this paragraph is moved up into the present tense, to give it more immediacy and to prepare for the passage of dialogue which will soon follow.

Indeed, the children are on the verge of unreason. An unnamed speaker, in an attempt to restore rationality, claims that the sun sets suddenly only in the tropics. The story returns briefly to a narrative paragraph reported in the past tense, in which the children accept that they are not in the tropics — but not that the sun sets swiftly only in tropical areas. Harking nostalgically back to school once more and the measurements in school geography, the children think of the world contained, comfortingly, in an atlas. Nevertheless, this only serves to highlight the fact that there must be differences among the world's various places, and also the difference between abstract book-knowledge and the unknown present, because next the story proceeds, in stages, to leave narrative behind for an extended period. What follows is a passage of unattributed, seemingly meaningless dialogue, indicating the children's confusion through their confused language. The



reader is suddenly pitched into the kind of conversation which has always been going on among the children during the journey, but which is now in the foreground. Any sense of distance from the story's action has vanished.

Taking its cue from the talk of the tropics, the dialogue begins, unsurprisingly, with a competitive display of knowledge. The children interrupt to correct each other over the terminology for 'bits of sand' in the desert, or to embellish on each other, comparing camels' necks to snails. Any information will do to manage the psychological displacement of the thought of spending a night at the Reservoir, so the mention of 'snails' even allows one child to think imaginatively about how to describe a snail's antennae and then ask for confirmation, 'with horns, do they have horns?'. The word 'horns' leads associatively to sex, and the mere gossip of 'Minnie Stocks goes with boys' is interrupted by the more accusatory, 'I know who your boy is'. This unnamed speaker then appears to think of someone '*Waiting by the garden gate*', perhaps anticipating some future sexual fall; and the simple rhyme, the use of italics and the gate image recalls the earlier rhyme of the man who fell over a fence and '*squashed out a baby*', shouted after the courting couples. Secondary fears of sex and giving birth, other rites of passage not yet undertaken, are breaking through and intensifying the primary anxiety of the journey to the Reservoir. Thus the same speaker ends up with a despairing, 'We'll never get to the Reservoir!'. This is followed by an attempt at scapegoating which, in turn, is overtaken by events: the first physical injury among the group. Someone claims to have 'strained my ankle.' The narrative returns briefly as something approximating a mere stage-direction in a drama, indicating that someone cries and the groups halts. Then the dialogue reasserts itself, with a repetition of the child's claim about a strained ankle that serves as an intensifier, and in a last splutter of redundancy, the narrative offers, 'There was an argument.' By these stages the narrative has gradually ceased to have a presence in the situation that is developing, and from now on there is only dialogue.

The injured ankle appears to be a symptom of rising hysteria (significantly, the injury vanishes later on arrival at the Reservoir). The children next proceed to argue over whether the correct term for the injury is 'strained' or 'sprained'. This is partly a matter of psychological displacement, but it also shows an instinctive attempt by the children to control their situation by first controlling the language of the situation, as they observed their parents trying to do while arguing over the pronunciation of 'potpourri'. The children compete over the right word. The loser, who is in fact the child suffering the injury, concedes, 'All right sprained then.' But the child makes up for this loss on the level of language by attempting reassertion further up the hierarchy of experience, on the level of knowledge. The child insists on the proper form of the



injured ankle's treatment, although this degenerates into a display of specialised language with 'bandage' and 'crutches'. This insistence is in turn challenged by an appeal to direct experience, when someone else talks about actually using crutches after falling off a pair of stilts. This child starts to show a scar on his or her shin from the incident, but then the child seems even more determined to control the terms of the scar's description, by announcing its colour and comparing it to a centipede. Thus, in this competitive dialogue, appeals to knowledge and experience tend to be overtaken by concerns with language.

Language is itself a world parallel to the realities of knowledge and experience, but one with an advantage in that it can be easily manipulated in a way that reality cannot. When the child with 'a white scar' describes the scar on his or her 'shins', the child is creating something in language which is unlikely in reality: having a single scar on plural 'shins'. Taking a cue from that, the next speaker is able to talk about the 'funny word' that is 'shins' and then, by association with the word, asks about the experience of being kicked in the shins. But being kicked in the plural 'shins' is completely impossible in reality, although the expression exists as a common phrase. The next associative link in the dialogue is purely linguistic: the expressions 'funny word' and 'shins' lead someone to say 'funnybone'. This then returns the children to the process of correction and embellishment which began the extended dialogue. A child corrects the everyday expression 'funnybone' with the more medical word for the same thing, 'humerus', which leads to the embellishments of knuckles, sprained and strained ankles, and then a list of random parts of the body and illnesses. Unwilling to face their reality, the children have begun to regress into a world of pure language-play, with words largely disconnected from their referents. This free-associative play that results only in a random list of body parts and illnesses can lead to another dangerous impasse for the children, and this is highlighted when the word 'infantile paralysis' itself appears in the list.

In response, the children begin to display genuine knowledge and experience again. First, one child truthfully describes the results of poliomyelitis: a wheelchair, leg braces and difficulty walking. Another child then chimes in by saying that 'in an iron lung you can't get out' and by comparing an iron lung to a cage. This is in marked contrast to the children's imaginative interpretation of Billy Whittaker's iron lung as being like armour, when they were trying to decide to visit the Reservoir. It seems the children knew all along that an iron lung was not glamorous or desirable. Under pressure such unpleasant and even ominous facts, which they have earlier been repressing, are coming out. The result is somewhat like a brief confession. Whereas earlier the children had sublimated Billy Whittaker's iron lung into protective armour in order to bolster their own courage, here they implicitly acknowledge the suffering and danger in



Billy Whittaker's experience of physical paralysis. They are also acknowledging by association that the mental paralysis which would result from not going to the Reservoir might be similarly painful and dangerous — and thus that there can be no going back. Approaching this truth, the children regress again rapidly into the world of language. This time they are reduced to arguing about the pronunciation of the words 'ambulance' and 'hospital'. They have fallen exactly to the level of Mother in her inability to pronounce 'potpourri'. The children cannot get the words right in their near-panic, even though these are words of rescue. One's mispronunciation of 'ambulance' leads another to the mispronunciation of 'hospital', and no sooner is this corrected than 'ambulance' is wrong again. The words 'Infantile Paralysis' then return to the dialogue, after which three of the children begin to chant loudly the names of patent medicines, like a primitive prayer.

What saves the children from complete panic is one child's sudden observation, 'The creek's going on high-flow!'. It is a comforting return to the known and measurable in the form of the children's earlier, if essentially meaningless, system of classification. It is also a re-establishment of the connection between language and a physical referent; indeed, it is the sort of use of language that leads to a sense of knowledge of, and power over, its referent. The story's form mirrors this development: the panicky dialogue ends. The comforting use of language to manage reality lets the children see 'the same old creek'. It dispels their doubts and allows them to manage the troubling, incomprehensible sighing from the pine-tree plantation just in front of them. They have, in fact, arrived. The children stay as close to their knowable creek as they can until they find it has 'deserted' them, and then they are completely among the pines — emblem of the incomprehensible unknown. But this lasts only for an instant, because next the children come through the pines and see the Reservoir for the first time. The body of water dazzles them, making it difficult to see as well as to comprehend, and they mentally compare it in its newness to a lake, a river and a sea, rejecting each. The children cry, in the first of three outbursts into direct speech, 'The Reservoir!'.

The children begin to comprehend the Reservoir and its surroundings through their various senses: the smell of the pine needles, the sound of the trees' sighing, and the sight of the water. When they gaze at the water clearly, they see 'an almost perfect calm which we knew to be deceptive'. They are already beginning to feel let down: there is a gap between the fear others express over the Reservoir and their own perception. Already the children see the fringe of pines at the water's edge as 'like toy trees', and they feel that the pines' sighing, which the child narrator can now explain prosaically as caused by the wind, has become understandable. The pines 'told us their sad secrets' — though what these secrets are is not specified at first. Instead,



the children decide that the Reservoir's appearance of neatness 'concealed a disarray too frightening to be acknowledged except, without any defence, in moments of sleep and dreaming.' As when the children first began their visit to the Reservoir and felt the need to talk the journey up, because they did not encounter any immediate danger en route, so now they talk up the Reservoir itself to hide their letdown at arrival.

The children are consciously beginning to realise that the hitherto unseen Reservoir is really a paper tiger, invested by adults with a danger that allows them to draw a specious authority from it. The children's reaction to this is to imitate the behaviour of the grownups, as they did earlier when trying to understand the creek and imagine the Reservoir, and similarly to invest the Reservoir with a sense of danger. This danger, they reason falsely and rather unimaginatively, must be something hidden from perceptible reality through people's denial, something so frightening that it can only be perceived in reality's alternative version: the world of sleep and dreams. And this, the children argue to themselves with circular logic and in their own form of denial, must be so because people are so afraid of the Reservoir.

For all that, the Reservoir still perplexes the children by offering them nothing more to be afraid of than they would be of their own selves. Its waves are 'innocent'. The children's minds work to compare the waves' colours to petticoats and lettuce leaves, harmless objects, just as the pines have become like toy trees. By now the children have interpreted the pines' sighing as 'hush-sh', an injunction to be quiet. A little tentatively — the child narrator begins with 'perhaps' and ends with a question — the narrator decides that the pines' message is not to disturb something that 'must never ever be awakened' beneath the Reservoir's surface. If this implied menace is indeed the pines' secret, then the children are still in the process of talking the Reservoir up, since it seems that what must never be awakened is the same truth the adult narrator had the seagulls demonstrate at the story's start, when she described them muting on the town's garden gnomes: social authority does not exist in nature. Ultimately, the power of social authority is an artificial creation, and this truth is better left unacknowledged.

Nevertheless, having conceived that the Reservoir itself is not dangerous but rather that something separate is, hidden inside the Reservoir, the child narrator begins to ask, 'What was it?'. She asks three analytical questions. But at this point her imagination cannot assist her capacity for reason toward any answer whatsoever. And perhaps this is what she wants, since the non-appearance of any intimidating answer to these questions makes the children unafraid. In a paragraph consisting of one long sentence, the child narrator expresses the children's lack of fear, professing it just a little too much for the children to seem secure in their courage. Describing the Reservoir to herself as flat, with a fence around it, and trees, she notes the little



house on the far side and wonders briefly if it has 'wheels inside'. On deciding to journey to the Reservoir earlier, the child narrator had imagined the Reservoir as having 'great wheels' with a 'demonic force'. Her sense of caution remains, fuelled by what remains of her imaginative conception of the Reservoir. But feeling that they see the Reservoir as it really is, the children cry out its name for a second time.

In front of the children a noticeboard warns of 'DANGER', completely in capitals that demand respect. But unlike the earlier sign, 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED BY ORDER', which seemed so intimidating when the children began to journey to the Reservoir, this notice has become meaningless. Experience has rendered its language empty, just as inexperience at the story's start led the children to the language of cliché, jargon and empty description. Realising that any separate danger exists only in the sign and not actually in the Reservoir itself, the children react with glee and become genuinely unafraid. They swing on the trees which, only a short time before, they had been personifying as crying and sighing but which are now reduced to mere objects. They gaze 'possessively' at the Reservoir, reducing it to the status of their creek, and they enjoy the contradiction in its 'wonderful calm and menace' as a body of water. They feel masters of their situation, and so they cry out the Reservoir's name for a third time. Curiously, this causes the children to quarrel over the pronunciation and spelling of the word. It is the third time in the story that pronunciation has become an issue. Nevertheless, although this sets up an obvious parallel with Mother and Father's argument over the pronunciation of potpourri<sup>4</sup>indeed, the verb 'quarrelled' is exactly the word Frame used to describe Mother and Father's argument — here the process of argument is reversed. Unable to manage the real experience of making potpourri, Mother sought to gain a failing control over the word itself (and later the children, in their near-panic over 'amberlance' and 'hostible', sought to manage some failing connection between language and reality). But here, having managed to gain experience of the Reservoir through their journey, the children are arguing over how best to articulate, and thus shape and control, this new experience.

But while the children are preoccupied with language, reality of a sort intrudes again: the children think it is getting dark. The fear of spending the night in strange territory is the only fear that hasn't been discounted by the children on reaching the Reservoir. Immediately the trees, which the children were swinging on a moment ago, are personified once again. Perhaps the trees are 'stealing the sunlight'. The children begin to run in panic, no longer caring about niceties of pronunciation or even that, once out of the trees, they are in sunlight again. Earlier, on their way to the Reservoir, the children passed the gully, the orchards, a danger sign about trespassers, a bull, an unrecognisable creek, and the pine trees. The children having left the



trees behind already, these other items reappear quickly in reverse order. They find the creek again, but the fact that it is not recognisable here as their own, which left them cheerful before, now seems unbearable to them in their panic. Its wild flowers and dead sheep they no longer acknowledge as friendly, and the children's only concern is that they will have to sleep among them. The child narrator notes, 'We had lost all account of time' — this is literally true, since the children have lost the ability to calculate that the amount of time spent going to the Reservoir will be the same as the time spent returning. Whereas earlier a seemingly mythic bull in a paddock had barred the children's way, here they worry that magic eels will come out of the creek and move through the paddocks, changing into people who will prevent them from getting home. Next is the danger sign, 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED', this time operating in reverse to prevent the children from returning. Throughout this panicked return-journey the fear of night pervades until, alloyed with the magic eels which the children imagine, it is personified in the children's minds as a row of malevolent, black-coated people who will devour them. The children's vestigial powers of imagination about the Reservoir have become a hindrance to them, even potentially dangerous. They long for the still distant orchards, and the gully and its known world.

Whereas before the relentless sun had been the accompaniment to the horrors of Infantile Paralysis, now to the children night personified seems capable of transmitting the disease. But this paralysis takes the form of permanent exile: being unable to walk home. In fact the children are anything but physically paralysed — they are running for their lives — and they have successfully negotiated the rite of passage of journeying to the Reservoir. However, because they have been changed by the experience, in a real sense they cannot go home again, and the children seem to sense this. They worry that they may not be able to take their place as properly experienced members in the adult community, even though Frame briefly characterises this position of superior power as a form of helplessness, being in 'an iron lung with its own special key'. Earlier the iron lung has served as an image both of protective armour and of an enveloping cage. Living as an adult in a community, with an adult's sense of power, is an experience which generates both aspects of this image, and the key which allows one to escape from this is special in that it is seldom likely to be used — perhaps never. The child narrator cannot yet understand this consciously, and the adult narrator seems incapable of displaying this degree of self-knowledge, yet Frame is able to hint at her point by gathering up images already used in the story and presenting them as a lesson that the reader will be able to interpret.

But when the children reach home, they are in fact no worse than 'panting and scratched'. Night has not come and the children see the sun 'in the same place in the sky.' Not yet ready to



acknowledge that their danger was all in their minds, they find this 'strange'. Yet 'strange' is a word that has been used repeatedly in the story to describe what is new or unknown, not what is familiar, and this is a further hint that the children's old world will no longer be the same for them. It is a paradox that this comes in an observation that nothing has changed. Certainly, however, one thing is already different: like anyone who has been through a rite of passage, the children are in a position to talk about it. They are no longer inarticulate, and the story they have to tell is, in fact, the one that the reader has almost finished.

However, the children's concern about whether to confess their new status to their parents is cut short. Mother greets the children with, 'You haven't been long away, kiddies', in a clear blow to their newly acquired, adult-like pride. As when Frame had Mother misplace the word 'strictly' in the sentence, 'I tell mine to keep strictly away', at the start of the story, Mother's misplacement of the word 'long' is significant. Mother does not say, 'You haven't been away long', referring solely to time. In 'You haven't been long away', 'long' refers ambiguously to both time and distance. Mother still seems to be worrying that her children might go to the Reservoir. Father looks up from his newspaper, which could report on the wider world but which earlier existed to announce the drowning of children, and echoes her concern in a scolding, parental tone. The children feel that this attitude is 'out-of-date'. It takes no account of their new status — and the feeling that older adults are 'out-of-date' is the attitude of rebellious youth everywhere on gaining new confidence. However, the children say nothing about their trip; they continue to assume, perhaps less comfortably now, the role of being children. And thus the children scorn their parents' words in secret, thinking 'They were actually afraid!'. Of course, the parents are not afraid of the Reservoir. The children are mistaking parental concern for fear. The children are also overcompensating for concealing their new sense of achievement — and perhaps for hiding from themselves any sense that their achievement has not really been so remarkable. In any case, by misunderstanding their parents, they show that they have not yet fully grown up. Nevertheless, going to the Reservoir is another significant step on the child narrator's march to maturity, and it will lead, as was made clear at the story's opening, into isolation from her parents and her town.

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