



# Poems

Tony Ullyatt



## Being Frank

in memoriam Frank Cameron, my maternal grandfather

1.  
He went to the First World War not much more  
than a youth like the rest of them.  
He returned a man, volcanic with the fury  
of war erupting in his stone-deaf ears  
the upshot of a shrapnel wound  
- or so the story goes.

His seven children were badly wounded too  
on the battlefield of his domestic rage.

2.  
Each morning, like a sacrament  
he dressed tidily, latched the wooden gate  
of his dull and dowdy dwelling  
then, relentless as a Mark I tank, rumbled  
to the corner shop for twenty cigarettes:  
Wills Woodbines, State Express 555  
or Player's Navy Cut. In his dour existence  
they were his daily ration of pleasure.

In the toilet at the top of the stairs  
an ashtray overflowed with butt-ends.

3.  
The corner shop closed years ago;  
my grandfather and his children have all since died  
in their own time and manner; but his grandchildren  
carry that wrath in their genes one way or another;  
their injuries invisible but no less incapacitating than his.  
I've never known who cleaned that ashtray.

## My Grandmother's Oven Door

in memoriam Frances Cameron, my maternal grandmother

My grandmother had an oven door  
she kept on the tea-rose quilt of her bed;

she would point to it with hands  
that fluttered like rare birds eager  
to land and rest in some soft place.

From time to time, she would ask me  
- then a child of only three or four -  
to take the door back to the kitchen.  
I couldn't see it, of course; I lived well  
beyond her delusional world,  
but she would guide me to it  
with her tremulous bird-hands.

Pretending to carry the oven door  
to where it belonged, I thought she was  
magic; she could see invisible things.

Now, I know otherwise: her terrible illness  
was no illusion, just one of life's tricks  
that took her mind wandering gently  
further and further away, into that place  
where her hands could be still as sleeping birds  
and the oven door hang on its hinges for good.

## You are the Music: A Birthday Poem

*for Gisela*

*you are the music/ While the music lasts*

T S Eliot

My mouth floods with words from the well  
of my artesian heart. Desert flowers bloom  
in your eyes fed by every poem's rain.

The ancient person of my soul kneels before  
the grace of your luminous psyche's dance.

The music and the movement of your mind  
leave me blessed like the single bird knowing  
it's not alone as it throats its song to the delicate day.

But I have lost the instructions for building dreams  
now roses sprout from the wound between my ribs.

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## Bloemfontein Sunday Blues: A Satire

*The feeling of Sunday is the same everywhere,  
heavy, melancholy, standing still.*

JEAN RHYS

### Early Morning

Woke up this morning just after dawn  
the sun blazing on the horizon.  
I had breakfast early, victimised  
by a long night's insomnia. I realise  
it's about 1 a.m. in New York  
as if that matters  
and about 6 p.m. in Auckland  
as if that matters either.

Insinuating rain some melancholy clouds  
hunched over the hills until a brisk breeze  
bustled the grumbling thunderheads away;  
another failed promise: clouds and people  
so similar ...

I watered the desiccated lawn, patchy  
as a chemotherapy patient's skull;  
the plants perked up afterwards  
the grass too. In the process  
I stood on a snail by mistake and killed it;  
its slime-silver path drying to powder  
where it had tried to make its urgent way  
across the backyard's hot cobbles.  
I felt guilty for a long while.

### Mid-Afternoon

I bought a Sunday paper, soon wishing I hadn't:

rapes, escapes, parliamentary japes  
divisions, revisions, misprisions, suspicions,  
corruption, disruption,  
strikers, bikers, brutalised hikers  
massive pollution, no solution,  
fornication, copulation, ever-increasing population  
the greedy, the speedy, the needy galore  
spiralling debts that no one regrets,  
the lies and spies no one denies  
all desperate to please the voracious Chinese  
secret discussions when speaking to Russians  
cruising, schmoozing, copious boozing  
drugs, bugs, hypocritical hugs  
hit-men, shit-men, utterly unfit men

bores, whores, endless wars  
vanity, insanity, no one says it cannot be  
blue lights through lights no one else has any rights  
the crack ou, the wacko, the profiteering frack ou  
playing lotto, getting blotto,  
ducking, trucking, fucking whatever's to hand  
Woema, Zuma, another vicious rumour  
Amandla, Nkandla  
feckless, reckless  
A million woes, and so it goes ... \*

I made coffee, ate a rusk or two, caught  
the drift of acrid braai wood firing up.

### Late Afternoon

Checked out the emails, nothing but spam  
from Bongo Maggi; apart from a Heinz  
I've never met anyone christened after a soup  
Maggi wanted my bank PIN to fill my account  
then the blessed Saint William wanted that number too  
promising me an inconceivable amount  
shortly thereafter God himself offered me the same deal.

How strange! God, Saint William, and Bongo Maggi  
live at the same address and make identical  
spelling mistakes: The new theology: Father, Son,  
and Unholy Scam? Risking the brutal retributions  
of Judgement Day and the certainty of eternal  
bankruptcy I deleted their pleas. But still I wonder  
why God's laptop doesn't have spellcheck.

### Evening

Now, it's lunchtime in New York  
and almost Monday morning in Auckland.

And I'm here. Still  
as if that matters.

Next Sunday will be much the same I suspect  
but

I'll take particular care not to tread on any snails.

\* The last four words in this line are taken from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House 5*.