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.

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 throat its song to the delicate day.

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

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.

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.
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 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.*