

'A Shankill Mantel'

Neil Young

Each back-to-back had one as its shrine
and matriarch as guardian who sheened
its photo-gallery as if to neglect
just one day's dust would be a betrayal. She was
the keeper of myths the wars leaked out
down every narrowed lane; she was
the one who tuned or hardened hearts
to extremities; the insulator to gluts of grief.

A brother's, father's and uncle's coats
still hung beneath the stairwell. Though they
could never return to shoulder them
normality draped from those old pegs
as surely as if the Good Lord had ordained it so.
All outside might change to reds and blues
of a louder lens, but this world
had the certainty of date-stamped monochrome.

Each day as the kitchen clock struck seven
she'd kneel to scrape the grate
and spruce the uniforms and smiles
that kept un-ageing kind expression
in the aspic of their last going-away.
Hushed talk and jokes could be overheard from the hall;
mementoes – buttons, badges, stubs
of dance-hall tickets – she kept in a childhood biscuit tin.
At supper-time, as coals glowed low,
she'd smarten the picture-frames as if
to brush the hairs off dead men's suits
and parade-wear epaulettes.
They would be there to greet her
again after breakfast; she would be there
in her apron, with tinder, wax and cloth.