

Remembrance Days

My uncle Mike
ran a battery repair shop
in his basement.
Unpainted work benches
ran the length of the room
battery cells, lids removed
scattered everywhere.
Spring sun sparkled
in stout green flasks of acid
the door to the garden open
the cherry tree by the fence.
I sat on the stairs
watching him work.
Sometimes the door
to the basement was shut
and slurred voices from below
shattered the peace
in the kitchen overhead.
I sat on the floor
and watched my aunt grow silent

at her washing.
For days afterwards
it seemed
neighbourhood women
braced themselves
to cajole
the ancient warriors
forever young and wandering
far from home
singing, cursing, weeping.
Once up the middle of our street
a man marched unsteadily at dawn
wheeled outside my uncle's door
stood to attention, saluted
and hoarsely cried
"Sergeant Mike, better than the best!"
At supper my uncle
spilled his soup
unable to make the spoon behave
in his shaking hand.
Then peace would be restored.
He knelt every evening

for the family rosary
every week dutifully
attended mass in Sunday best.

In his workshop
I'd watch him slip
tires from their rims
with a lug wrench
releasing the inner tubes
like organs exposed for surgery.

Sometimes he'd let me
turn the scary iron vise.

Once it grabbed hold
it did not let go.

That day
sitting on the stairs
guileless I repeated
what we'd been told in school.

Christmas 1917
during a lull in the fighting
allied soldiers heard
the familiar carol
"Stille nacht, Heil'ge Nacht!"

On both sides
men left their frozen burrows
exchanged cigarettes
personal belongings.
War came to a halt
to mark the birth of Christ.
Sober now
my uncle's eyes went
cold and empty as space
his voice unearthly quiet.
"There was no Almighty God
in those trenches, Adrian,"
was all he said.
I knew enough to say no more
no words in any language
no prayer to any God
to still the horror in his head.

© Adrian Fowler 2022