

## **A once life**

Search your heart and join her if you will.

When you are young and mum and dad are everything,  
And can do anything, solve every problem, will always help,  
they never cry. You cry, but they don't  
(and if they do, you'll never see it).

But one day my mother cried.

I was about five or six and a bowl she cherished  
was somehow knocked down and smashed into several pieces.  
Was I to blame or my older brother?  
I don't recall. But it was in pieces  
and seemed likely not to be saved,  
and my mother cried and cried and sobbed and cried  
as though crying was now all she had  
and nothing more, and that she would and could never stop.

She had brought it with her from Germany when she arrived,  
the army bride of an immature man three years younger than she  
a man who, a new father to two young boys,  
had at just twenty-one led others into battle and seen many killed,  
but now he had just the one ambition:  
to buy himself the motorbike he could not afford to buy before the war.

I was five or six and (of course) knew nothing of marriage  
or being married or (as I now suspect)  
getting married for the chance of a cleaner, safer, less troubled life  
away from hunger, rape and bombed-out homes  
and a war-torn fatherland.  
Many did it. Some were also in love, others were not,  
but even love was (and is) no guarantee of happiness.

That bowl, the Lederhosen she dressed my brother and I in to wear at school,  
the German way of life we lived  
— napkins and napkin rings at lunch and supper,  
Christmas celebrated on Christmas Eve,

Max und Moritz tales read to us in German —  
made for her, my unhappy mother, life just a little sweeter,  
a little less lonely, and brought back memories of a time  
when she, too, was young and untroubled.

She was not happy in her new life, as I now know  
sixty years on. She and my father, now both long dead  
had taken with them to their graves their ill-matched lives  
which made anger and their rows a daily feature of life at home  
and drove my father to seek out other women  
(of whom my mother knew a little but not a lot).

The bowl did survive, patched up, badly,  
glued back together, badly, by someone or other.

If I subscribed to metaphor, I'd suggest  
that bowl, smashed within just years of leaving Germany  
patched up, but badly, and thus still existing to grow old and dull,  
described the life of one young woman  
who had sought a better life of less horror  
but had only half-found it.

I don't, though, subscribe to metaphor.  
But search your heart and join her if you will.