Mary Wickham

Angel

It is not altogether clear whether angels grow old,
let alone resemble the avian-human hybrid
that artists have for centuries favoured in paint and stone.
They probably do grow weary, if like this one
they've waited seventy years to deliver a message,
committed so long ago to memory, preserved and murmured
during all the Anzac Day services, the persistent wars
and forays into violence, the incremental cruelties of domestic life,
all the seasonal shifts over nearly a century on an Adelaide street corner.

Aged three and a bit,
she saw her father, an alcoholic wreckage of war,
drop in front of her, convulse briefly and die
in their beige tinted lounge room.
Soon after, her mother sealed off the room,
her beige heart, and the child, in that order.

'We'll put Daddy out on the step so the angels can take him.'
That message was possibly meant kindly, possibly not,
but long after evoked the weekly garbage collection.
The child could never adjust the collusive image she held,
not of the moment he fell, but the after,
as a fierce winged creature wrenched him by the collar,
dangling him high, buffeted by uncaring air.
To her always he seemed not quite safe there,
swinging perilously, and above all else, scared,
on his way to an invisible destination never reached.

Seventy years later she walked near the war memorial,
drawn into its granite and marble and bronze.
The male angel on the façade stands in bold dignity,
unsheathed sword held the length of him,
a towering form with his unfurled feathers,
enshrining the efforts of war and those lost in it.

What prompted her to seek a different view
she could never explain, but around the other side,
facing slender eucalypts and a sky of generous blue,
she met the other angel
who had been waiting all her life for her,
a winged feminine figure holding to her chest
the wounded, fading soldier,
his head restfully glad against her,
his failing arm braced over her firm biceps,
her breasts full of the milk of angelic kindness,
the stream of compassionate memory – all those names –
flowing beneath.

It was to the child hunched habitually within the elderly frame
that the stone epiphany radiated a tenderness
so gently overpowering
she had to sit on the step
with her back to it
and wonder to herself
whether she could dare turn
to look at it again
and let so much love in.