

*Op Shop, 1985*

It hits you – the hot steam from the kitchen stove,  
the scent of starch, your father's detached collar  
hanging on the crook of the chair like a waxing moon.  
The long dark line of him, standing in pleated trousers and waistcoat,  
his pocket watch keeping time with his heart. Your mother's arms  
reaching towards him as she fixes the collar around his neck;  
lapping the left side of the shirt over the right, inserting the stud,  
running her fingers over the collar band to smoothen it.

The birch collar box lay in the centre of his suitcase the day he left.  
And you wondered about it later, whether or not it had been returned,  
if he had ever worn such a neat, rigid, clean thing,  
knee deep in rain and mud, with the boom of the guns deafening,  
the smell of the kitchen, the stove's warmth miles away.

So there you are, white-haired and eighty-five,  
old now as your father would never be,  
drifting through aisles of bric-a-brac,  
past unmatched tea-sets and chipped glass,  
garish dresses worn once, if at all. On a shelf,  
beneath a pile of old records,  
you see it – a collar box, its oval shape like a blank,  
polished face, a small latch holding it closed.  
You stroke its face, stretch your fingers over its surface.  
It is not the same. The wood a lighter colour,  
the box when you open it – empty.  
Still, you carry it to the counter, slowly count out two dollars.

In your room later you open it,  
and for a moment smell his starched collar again,  
glimpse his neat tie hanging just above his waist,  
stroke his moustache curved upwards like a smile.