

Belfast in my Mind

Belfast formed in my mind
from newspapers
spread
across our green Laminex table
burning cars uniformed soldiers smashed
windows balaclavas rubble and streets
full of people
just like us.

I could see children walking to school
not knowing that around the corner
a gunman nursing his rifle squatted.

I wanted to stop them
to yell at them
to go by a different route
but by the time
that photo lay open in our kitchen
the children had walked.

I would never hear if they had made it to school.

I wanted to know
what happened
to that picket line of women who were standing
arm in arm
across Falls Road when the bus backed

but next day and the next
there were new stories to tell –

women who looked like neighbours
opening their bags to be searched
and men in suits
lying on the ground

soldier soles holding them down.

What did they talk about at tea that night?
Did they get home for tea that night?

News reports tumbled from the radio.

Names like Bobby Sands
Bernadette Devlin
Ian Paisley

as recognisable as decades of the rosary.

Belfast roads –

Falls Malone Shankill Springfield
embedded into my geographical lexicon.

Though we weren't there

we took it in

our world view forming

smells of

slow burning roof beams rubber

gunshot
and images of girls
mini-skirts and bobby socks
flirting
behind
burnt-out buses and barbed-wire barriers
while at mass
we were led in prayers
for reconciliation
between Catholics and Protestants
the concept
more difficult to understand
than
transubstantiation.

Sydney Opera House – 9 November 1960

I'd heard the story. I could picture them swinging down from the construction site. I could smell sweat and hear anticipation as they arranged themselves onto scaffolding, over that vast expanse of concrete.

I'd listened to their waiting in this unexpected break in a workday, the shuffling, the flick of a match and the sighs as they dragged on their fags. It was into this gathering he came

through the swamp of hard hats and felt hats, in amongst the cotton shorts, rolled up sleeves and a suit or two, wearing, under his overcoat, a white carnation on his three-piece suit.

I could hear the high notes hitting the rails of the bridge, hear "Old Man River" rippling out to the harbour. I could see those men raised up by this hero of the working classes.

Yes, it is all there for me; the incongruity, the men hanging fags in their mouths to free their hands for clapping, the depth of his voice the mutual delight, the November warmth.

But now I am left with a single question. Whatever happened to those men who downed tools to listen to the singer reminding them that life could be lived differently?

The workshop

Each month they meet
in the 'blue as cornflowers' sitting room
to toughen poems.

Perfume drifts from the roses
softening the night
recalling the overlooked sense.

On the scattered tables
columns of poetry books wobble
as they jostle for seats

make space for their offerings.
They read to one another
listen in

pass around possibilities
rebuild their own poems
their versions of self.

It is the task
that brings them
clamps them tight.

In this snug circle
they table words
chart their lives.

Discontent in the Australian Bush

All morning they trek along bush tracks. Leaves would have crackled under their feet were it not for last night's rain.

Squishing along, they pad out their own pace. Sunbeams shimmer through the canopy, wash over the convoy. A bright blessing of shadow and light.

They speed from this haven, push towards hot space, crowd to a ragged swagger along the edges of the track seek respite under the overhanging branches.

Every twig that catches, swishes a small shower of wet. Though the whole forest steams now, they wince. Sudden damp. Shocking cold.

They bend and duck and push into the heat. A jumble of them criss-crossing to the distant openness, away from what they most need.

In the car park, the convoy disbands to a huddle. Sweat soaked, twig scratched, they unzip cans of sugar, light cigarettes, crave what they had.