This is not a designated day:
feet echo somewhere on the marble floor of the corridor
a digital phone bleeps in a closed office
dust settles on the picture frames
of dignitaries in bow ties and tails
or frock coats and powdered wigs
on waxen moustaches and full beards

brochures and news sheets hang from racks
bus tours of city trouble-spots
community-centre art festivals
and safe taxis, ethnic self-help groups and forums:

I was a man who believed
in something more than all this
in the destiny and sanctity of every man
in sodomites and barmen and butcher boys
and blood that flows from silver pens—

my grandfather climbs the narrow staircase
to the whitewasher room where all his children sleep
and dresses in this same room
where his heart gave three loud beats and stopped
to cycle thirty miles to the docks
where as an apprentice he watched the men
throw and hammer together bits of rough wood—
all now dead, like the rattle
of rotten sash windows, or a dry religious heart.

As swallows dip and swoop under the city bridges
a ring of lights come on one by one
along the river mouth and the derelict harbours
a siren shrieks on one of the problem housing-estates
Europe sits on the border now like a dark forest
of palisades and barbed wire
America hugs the coast with guns
and emotional lack of understanding

while those who sit in parliament
see Muslims in the woodpile:
a security-guard scared by his own shadow
and myths as black and white as his shoes and shirt
shines a thin torch over the chambers
where Carson’s table sits solid and ugly
like a BT cable spool in the dark
and names in blood are always the first
to dry-up, flake, and blow away.

THE SPACE WHITE

In his madness, my brother saw young girls
hanging round the legs of aunts and uncles
and looking into the house—
they were really there, white and ghostly

who would believe him?
in his world, there were windows behind the clouds
sounds in the morning downpours other than the rain
that only he could hear
his paintings taking him beyond boredom and violence.

The last knife used in Ireland by a father
was drawn across his throat
just breaking the skin
under the Patriarch’s hand, like a biblical sacrifice
for daring to walk out with a Catholic girl

who didn’t really exist
but who made lurid gestures from behind the wall
of the Parochial House as he walked from school
and covered the badge on his Protestant blazer.

Galloping with the horses in Galway strand
or parading the colours in Portadown
was not an option for an untrained hand

but he saw beyond the wall of mangled furniture
barricading the many divisions
and existed in the only true madness, between the lines.
Sometimes, in a moment, the mind gets a rush
like a train entering and leaving a short tunnel
like the first time I saw a bomb going off

the excruciating silence, then the strange barking of dogs
before the pavement began to tremble under your feet
and the buildings shuddered, followed by a deafening bang
the crazy sound of sirens, walls imploding, screams
dust billowing out like sea clouds
the million flapping shredded office blinds—

and I didn’t realise until much later
that I was bleeding, streaming down my face
it all seemed so impersonal
that I never thought of blaming anyone

or like the rush of speed in a girlfriend’s flat in Amsterdam
that left me sick and seeing not beauty but the ugliness of things
of how man can corrupt what is natural in life
of how a girl’s face can seem ravaged with death—

and then I looked beyond the level of the Belfast street
to the God carved mountains, and listened to each blade of grass
as it grew towards the sun, and was filled with the understanding,
that eternity is only a second.