

Nineteen Eighty Five

The old man goes AWOL for once and for all.
On my bedside table, from one end of the year
to the next, a press clipping of Mengele's skull,
a second-hand copy of *L'Étranger* in translation.

Our maths teacher is a big noise in CND.
Somewhere between Easter and the post-exam hoolie,
the local paper snaps him in his fallout shelter,
the first of its kind in the twenty-six counties.

There follows a summer of drizzle to break records,
of coaches daily from the square to Ballinspittle,
of leaflets explaining procedure in a four minute warning,
of believing the nuclear winter can be sat out

with back issues of *Reader's Digest* and curried beans,
of afternoons rewinding through *When The Wind Blows*
on a video recorder the size of a dialysis machine
at a time when nobody wonders if it might never.

And little else. Jimmy Hill blubs over Heysel.
Rock Hudson kicks the bucket. September is unsettled.
Mexico City sifts for what's left of itself in rubble.
I make the first of several bids for freedom.

A bit like the wheaten pup a couple of doors down
that chases shadows across the field of a new estate
and isn't seen again despite its owner's weeks of hope
and the ads in shops about it answering to "Gorbachev".

There I am—sixteen or so, going on eleven—
thinking myself the last word in a navy Crombie
fetched from the wardrobe of the middle bedroom,
a PLO scarf, a Flock of Seagulls haircut;

smitten with the romance of an umpteenth bomb
on the line in as many days, with my new-found
existential loneliness borne of having nobody
(*nobody*) on the platform to wave me off.