

Milltown Cemetery, Belfast, March 16th, 1988

The last of the three coffins had just been lowered
when the first grenade exploded. I was blown
twelve feet away yet landed on my back unhurt.

Over the PA a voice called out to get down.
The crowd of mourners and journalists scattered.
Some were gathering themselves from grave-plots –
underwater knells booming in the deep of their heads.

A woman was carried past, her face masked in blood.
Another grenade exploded. Pistol shots rang out
and an overweight man with black fuzzy hair
and a thin beard, appeared out in front of the crowd,
holding a nine-millimetre browning pistol in his right hand.

He raised both hands triumphantly up into the air,
one fisted, one bepistolled, inciting the crowd to *come on* –
his mouth, muted by the din, fish-gasped inaudible insults
as he produced another grenade and lobbed it into the air.

The sea of people parted as it sank and the dull sound
of the explosion lifted a cloud of dust into the overcast sky.
Film crews lay spread-eagled behind gravestones,
women were screaming, men were shouting,
the gunman was smiling.

He began firing from left to right in a steady line
across the crowd,
causing a sweeping domino effect, like a Mexican wave,
as, one by one, the mourners hunkered behind the headstones.
I waited,
then ducked as he levelled his pistol at me.

I held my face to the inscription on someone's headstone,
their life surmised into two monumental dates,
as the wave fell away to my left with the gunshots tracing
its fatal arc after the falling crest.

Before standing up, I stole a glance over the headstone.
The gunman had turned and was running
towards the motorway
where a white RUC van was parked on the grass verge.
A group of people chased after him – hares
bolting after the greyhound.

(Cont...)

The gunman stopped to turn and fire – the people chasing him
dodged bullets like boxers weaving fists.
The RUC van drove off. With no bullets left, no grenades,
exhausted, the gunman ran onto the deserted motorway
chased by three angry men.

At the graveside film crews scrambled out from behind
their protective tombstones,
frantic for interviews, cameras rolling.

A tall, blond presenter for the BBC with her microphone
held out like a pistol
turned to me and demanded: *what did you see?*

As I turned away, I told her what anyone from there,
in those days, would say:
“I saw nothing”.