

Ash Wednesday, 1988

Graham Dowell

Today we have marking of walls.
Yesterday it was embracing the Base,
circling Jericho with the pure ring
of Hallelujahs, a rosary of silent hope
where doves flutter on the rusted wire
like washing, we supposed, on the Siegfried Line.

But today we have embraced each other,
presented arms for the holding, brows
for the imposition of dust and ashes
with which we must now, advancing
in due order and liturgical decorum
mark the forehead of the concrete Beast.

For today we have marking of walls.

Not 'daubing', you understand, the random
graffiti of bored suburban vandals;
but the precise placing of identical
symbols of life, death and incrimination.
For we are the criminals, make no mistake,
marked with the sign of Beast and Saviour.

So today, with walls, we have marking of minds
and bitter memories of that other ash
to which we once consigned one hundred thousand
and to which one day we shall all of us return.
Yes, today, before losing identity
in one blurred outline on a seared pavement,

We present our faces to the photographer,
fingers to the printer and willing bodies
to the gaoler. Tomorrow there will be others,
more ashes to bless, more Ethiopians to bury.
There will be others to fill the gaols
we have vacated; for the walls still stand

and wait for another Joshua.