

Digging

James Priestman

Cuts in the turf, precise,
well thought-out as if written by a pen.

I pulled it all back with my hands
and there was the wiring with a meaning
I didn't fully understand.

We'd slogged
four hours through a hot October day;
avoiding tracks,
careful to climb through or over hedges
and barbed-wire fences –

one had snapped and slashed my palm;
I'd gone to explain at a farm nearby
where a woman said we were stupid not to use gates.
But when I pulled up the turf it justified the damage
because she wasn't just keeping cows.

Back at six o'clock two mornings later,
frost resting on the field and our helmets,
tired in trenches we'd spent the night digging,
projecting thoughts onto paling darkness.
We blackened humour to camouflage feeling:
"This better not be a hoax – I'm fucking freezing."

We were glad for sunrise but it was the hurtling blades
of helicopters unloading machines to test and prod
that gave us comfort. It was a metal mug that warmed us:
tea shared with the heavy-suited man
who then followed the numb point of my finger,

alone, up to the cut turf to trace the wire
("will he use one of those machines, sir?")
to follow the wire to find a milk churn
snug by a gatepost, full, high explosive,
unpasteurised.

Safe. Everything seemed so worthwhile.
A helicopter flew us back to Dungannon;
I wondered at the wiring. And the pens:

whether they could ever cut meanings
that would ever let us stop

our digging.