

Love's Bonfire

One dark October evening
at the almost innocent age
of twenty-one
my love and I were walking in secret along a rough track
by the High School in Fivemiletown.
An army jeep passed down the road
(it was near the start of the Troubles).
We'd just started out
and had to be careful
not in the usual way
(that was a long way off)
but for fear of her extended family
– it was a time – it still is
of honour killings.
So we walked slowly in darkness
intent but tremulous
at this brave new so-tender thing between us
soft and tiny as a lark's egg.
We walked not quite a couple
always careful not to hold hands
(I knew that I must never
try to snatch a kiss).
So we walked slowly in the darkness
like a couple who didn't know where they were going.
By the side of the path we found
what looked like a dead bonfire.
We stared at it for a bit and then you took a stick
and began to stir
the dead embers.
From under the soft white ash
the red embers started
and as you raked and raked them
all the soft ash fell away
till they glowed and began to flame

on top of their bed of defeated ash.
So the bonfire started again and came warmly alive
as a whole big bed
of silent red embers.
I saw then I recall
that we were quite different people
– you were active
didn't want the arranged marriage
and believed we had a future
while I feared that it – the marriage
would happen for definite
and saw your mother weeping your father mad angry
the tough cousins massing
you saying no this can never be Tom
and me saying wanly
Giti I love you so dearly
and I will for always
but I see you can't bring shame
down on your family your tribe.
I had no trust we would ever
though we'd declared our love
in anguish for each other
– that we'd ever be together
for ever and ever
as the books used to say.
Forty years on
in a deep dark time
with a permanent pain always in my head
I see where that pain began.
I think if I asked you
could you call that moment back
– a moment we've never spoken of
all these long years
you'd say only
veteris vestigia flammae
– though I pray that you wouldn't.