Long Poem First Prize Winner: A C Clarke

A Year In Transit

The poem is written in couplets in 12 sections, each prefaced by reference to grim public events (bombings, other attacks) which took place in 1975-6; the public events occurred during the period when the poet was involved in a doomed love affair, linking private and public unease, but also highlighting the self-absorption of the affair.

November 20
Joan Harrison is found murdered in Preston

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Good days, transparent blue's tossed back
from water to salt air, heatless and clear

as if a dome of thinnest glass is all
that keeps the island from escaping

and we might chime infinity against it,
or shattering a flaw swoop through and up

into forever. Today the sky is thick
and grey as lisle, a stocking-mask,

the roads run muted, which in sunny hours
lift, sing towards the chalk dazzle that rims

the coast. We are sole visitors
to the museum I never knew existed

until you brought us. Light crawls in and dies
beside arrangements of stuffed mice

in bridal gowns, birds strumming guitars
with grounded wings, and without explanation,

at start or end – depending on your route –
a single, severed hand, palm outwards.

29 January
twelve bombs explode in London's West End

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On the chalk cliffs, rain driving against us,
we're kissing hard, can't tell

if the salt on our tongues is our own taste or the air
nor if the water running down our cheeks

is flung by the wind or whipped by it out of our eyes
our hair tangled together, we cling to each other

as if we could somehow tent ourselves from weather.
I want it never to end. Down in the bay

a grey hump-backed sea paws at the stack
arched like the nave of a ruined cathedral.

When we dry off in the pub with its smoking fire
your eyes rove over the panelling, the fake

horse brasses, looking for something. The bar
is empty. In an hour we'll drive away

rain sheeting across your line of vision
soon as the wipers clear the screen,

the cliffs behind us in their old routine:
slow attrition, random, shattering fall.