

The Mutilated City Belfast

Psychiatrists believe there are many factors that compel people to cut themselves. Some slice their arms and legs to express rage or emotional pain. Some “cutters” draw blood to relieve a persistent sense of unreality; pain feels real even when nothing else does. Others cut for control, carving lines into their bodies when their flesh seems their only jurisdiction. For some, the cutting brings pleasure rather than pain. Shallow wounds summon endorphins that bloom into bloody pharmacological joys. The sensation, though, can cause addiction. Cutters learn to crave what their blades can bring. They open more and more wounds until their bodies become relief maps. Geographies of intimate scars.

Walls, steel fences, and barriers scar the map of Belfast. Some slice several kilometres along major roadways. Others block narrow lanes a few metres long, or lacerate schoolyards and parks. The walls cut neighbourhoods into tiny enclaves of Catholics and Protestants. Bright paint attempts to beautify some of the Walls, but profane graffiti mars most. The scrawled-upon walls demand “KAH” and “KAT”— Kill All Huns and Kill All Taigs, derogatory terms for Protestants and Catholics. Barbed wire spins cruel calligraphy atop steel fences. The entire city feels bristled and spiked. I arrived in Belfast in June 2011 and spent a month walking alongside the barriers. Nowhere in my travels did the walls create such intimate incisions. No city I had seen engaged in such compulsive self-harm. And nowhere did the walls seem less likely to fall.

On my first Belfast morning, I walked from my hostel in downtown Belfast to the eastern reach of Falls Road. From here, a near-continuous series of barriers cuts a line west between a Catholic area known as the Falls and the predominantly Protestant Shankill. I walked past “Solidarity Wall,” where murals honoured nineteenth-century abolitionist Frederick Douglass, expressed support for Basque separatists, and called for a free Palestine. I turned the corner onto Northumberland Street beneath a painting of Barack Obama, who, in a 2008 speech to a multitude of rapt Berliners, said: “Not only have walls come down in Berlin, but they have come down in Belfast, where Protestant and Catholic found a way to live together.”¹⁶ I found it hard not to smirk at Obama’s claim as I crossed through the 2-metre-high steel gate separating the Shankill from the Falls, Protestant from Catholic, and walked to Cupar Way.

British army chief Sir Ian Freeland erected Belfast’s first “peaceline” on Cupar Way in August 1969. His soldiers unspooled a line of barbed wire to separate Protestant and Catholic rioters just as his colleagues had done across Ledra Street in Nicosia six years earlier. When the line went down, Freeland said, “This will be a very, very temporary affair. We will not have a Berlin Wall or anything like that in this city.”¹⁷ Freeland could not have imagined that the barricade would outlast the Berlin Wall or that the barrier would mature from a line of wire into a three-metre wall of concrete. The Cupar Way Wall grew further when sheets of corrugated metal were added, then again as tall spans of wire mesh were fixed to the top. Now the triple-level wall stands six metres high and stretches for more than half a kilometre.

The Wall multiplied as well as it grew. Since 1969, the Northern Ireland Office, or NIO, has put up forty more “official” peacelines. The Housing Executive, responsible for providing social housing, has also erected barriers. And so have various other developers and agencies. If one tallies all forms of “defensive architecture” purpose-built to separate Catholics from Protestants — gates, strategically planted hedges, vacant lots that form no man’s land between communities — the number of barriers carving up the map of Belfast approaches one hundred. Their proliferation, though, remains poorly documented. No one knows the location of all the barriers, who built them, and when. They have grown constantly and organically

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over the last four decades, and few records are kept. What is certain, though, is that Obama got it wrong. No interface barrier erected in Belfast has ever come down. They have propagated, extended, and grown — but they have never fallen.

Freeland coined the term “peace-line,” but few in Belfast use the term much anymore. The word was as much a misnomer as “the Troubles,” which sounded more like a stomach upset than a thirty-year conflict that claimed the lives of more than 3,500 people. Protestants and Catholics have wrestled over Ireland since the 1600s. The Troubles, though, refers to a distinct period of struggle, beginning with riots in 1969 that pitted Protestant Unionists who supported sustained British rule in Northern Ireland against Catholic Nationalists who wanted the North to sever all ties with London and form a unified Ireland with the Irish Republic. Civilians made up the majority of the casualties, but the conflict itself was fought by various elements of the British armed forces, the police, and Loyalist and Republican paramilitary organizations. Their acronymed names gave rise to an alphabet of Irish violence: UVF, UDA, UFF, UDR, RHC, INLA, and various manifestations of the IRA. I struggled to keep the initials straight.

A series of ceasefires in the 1990s coaxed the guns out of paramilitary hands, and in 1998 both sides signed the Good Friday Agreement, effectively ending the Troubles. No signed document or press-conference handshakes, however, could abruptly bring together two communities who’d fought each other for four hundred years. And the agreement could not stop the Walls from going up. More barriers stand today than before the Good Friday Agreement. The last wall built by the Northern Ireland Office, a 4.5-metre weldmesh fence, was erected in 2007 through the playground of Hazelwood Elementary School following attacks on Catholic homes in the area. The most recent wall, though, was erected by the local Housing Executive in 2010 on Hillview Road alongside a new property development as it was being built. The Wall went up even before there was anyone for it to protect.

Coloured graffiti and bright posters on the Cupar Way Wall attempted to mask the grey severity of the concrete and had turned the barrier into a tourist attraction. As I walked past, a quartet of young Americans scrawled on the Wall with black markers. Sightseeing buses and taxis regularly ply Cupar Way and invite their charges to add their names and personal messages of

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peace to the thousands already scribbled over the concrete. “When the guns stop you can hear the birds of freedom,” wrote Maeve from Australia. Adam from Houston implored, “May God help us all.” Perhaps all my time along the world’s conflicted edges had made me cynical, but I harboured no patience for condescending clichés about peace and brotherhood. They were gestures of foreign vanity penned by the momentarily engaged. (I laughed out loud at one contribution, however: “Do what John Lennon said.”) Besides, all the wall art and feel-good nonsense did not keep one’s eyes from glancing upwards at the wire mesh and imagining a brick sailing over it.

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“I abhor the day I went around with a petition to put that wall up,” Teena Patrick told me.

I reached Teena through the Interface Residents Group, one of many organizations in Belfast that promoted peaceful coexistence between those who lived on the “interfaces” — the term used for the borderlands between Catholic and Protestant areas of Belfast. Teena picked me up in her yellow Nissan and drove along the interface barrier standing on Springfield Road. The Wall divided the Nationalist communities on the west side from Unionists in the east. The barrier consisted of a brick wall slicked with greasy “anti-climb” paint and topped with a vertical expanse of tight wire mesh that reminded me of the graph paper I used in high school chemistry labs. The Wall spanned about four hundred metres, from the gate at Lanark Way to the barrier blocking Workman Avenue. There, a corrugated metal door allowed pedestrians to pass through, but only during daylight hours: the door was locked shut at night. The Wall severed four residential streets that once connected the neighbourhood to the shops and pubs on Springfield Road.

In the late 1980s, before the Wall, men regularly hurled bricks and petrol bombs at Protestant homes along Springfield Road. When fearful residents of the houses closest to the road fled the attacks, Republican arsonists set their homes on fire. A whole row of Protestant houses were torched and destroyed. The government erected a small fence, but the barrier did not stop houses from getting “bricked” almost daily. Teena and other Protestants in the area realized that they would continue to lose homes without a proper barricade. Teena went door to door to collect signatures on a petition demanding the

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government erect a barrier along Springfield. Initially, the residents called for a fence made of corrugated iron, but then they decided what they really needed was a wall.

Some residents refused to sign the petition. They didn't want to see a wall rise in their neighbourhood. Teena understood their concerns. She had no love for the barricades standing elsewhere in Belfast and the divisions they enforced. But her community needed preserving. "When times are bad, we want a quick fix," she told me. Enough residents signed, and Teena brought the petition to the Northern Ireland Office. "It didn't take long for the Wall to go up," she said. A wall was cost-effective. Erecting a barrier was far easier, and cheaper, than actually policing an interface. In 2005, the NIO augmented the Springfield Wall by erecting a steel fence on top to protect a row of newly built houses from thrown stones and bottles.

Looking back, Teena wondered if they might have challenged the violence in a different way. Perhaps the community could have held the police and politicians to account for the damage done to their neighbourhood. But she wasn't sure. "The Wall protected us from loss," she said. "But we imprisoned ourselves." The police locked the gates on Workman Avenue and Lanark Way during times of tension in the city, often with little warning. This forced residents with their own cars to make long detours around the Wall to reach Springfield Road. Residents on foot, especially the elderly and the infirm, were effectively trapped either inside or outside the Wall. Teena regularly received phone calls from neighbours who'd stepped off a city bus from downtown only to find themselves locked out of their own neighbourhood.

As with the other barriers I'd seen, the residents of Belfast built their walls for their own peace of mind — to feel protected and secure from outside dangers. But the walls had turned against them. An abruptly locked gate could exile them to the other side. For those living along the interfaces, the walls were Frankenstein's monsters: far easier to build than to control.

Still, there were few calls to take the Springfield Wall down. Residents on both sides saw a need for the protection the Wall provided. At best, Teena hoped the Wall could be granted a facelift to make it look more aesthetically pleasing and less crudely militaristic. I didn't tell Teena that I found this idea profoundly depressing. I didn't believe that brightening the barriers with a lick of paint or ornamental brickwork would soften their tragedy. This was



not the same as Glenn Weyant in Arizona, or Faris and Yusuf in Ramallah, who used art to subvert their walls. Prettifying the Belfast barriers was a cheap attempt to forget what the walls had set out to achieve. I remembered what Faris in Ramallah had said about painting the West Bank Wall: "You do not notice the nail polish on the hand that is beating you."

Teena drove her Nissan through the gate on Lanark Way. She parked on the edge of an empty lot where a group of teenage Protestant boys kicked a soccer ball around. Boys like these were the most affected by the Walls. "Because of gates and barriers," Teena said, "young people are afraid to cross gates and barriers." The structures themselves breed fear. Just like the fences standing along the Indo-Bangladesh border, Belfast's walls declare that danger lurks on the other side, and that those who live across the line wish us harm. The reality of the threat becomes irrelevant; the perception is all. "If you are told, 'Don't go out. Be on your guard. Watch out,' you don't want to cross," Teena said. "Not to visit your relatives. Not even to go to work."

Belfast's youth have never known a city without the walls. "Those kids have never lived in a shared space," Teena said. They lack the psychological strength to cross through the shadows of their fortified lines. Before young people cross through the gates, they always look first to see if anyone from the other side is watching.

"Where do they learn to be afraid?" I asked her.

Teena laughed at my question. "They learn on the interface. You don't live on the interface without being challenged about being on one side or the other." Young people from either community know each other only through conflict, and they base their conflict purely on relative geography. More than religion, in Belfast your neighbourhood defines you. A few days earlier, a group of twenty Catholic teenagers came across the interface at Lanark Way and began hurling stones at houses. The Protestant kids rallied and began to stone the Catholics in turn. I asked Teena the reason for the "invasion." She told me there was none. Sometimes kids cross the interfaces just to spark a reaction. "I don't understand where half of their anger comes from. Or half of their hate. I know some come from lovely families."

Teena aimed to coax these angry teens away from the violence they saw on the streets. "I try to talk young people into doing something different." In her work with Belfast youth, she employed the mediation skills she'd



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learned during her service with the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), an infantry division of the British army formed to defend Northern Ireland against bombers and gunmen. Teena enlisted in the UDR as a young woman. "I always thought it was right to serve my country," she said. She had wanted to sign up for the regular British army, but a pair of tattoos disqualified her. She had her husband's name encircled with a heart inked on one wrist and her own name on the other. The UDR was less strict about the tattoos. Had her inscribed wrists not kept her out of the regular British forces, Teena might have been sent to Cyprus to stand between Turks and Greeks. Instead, she stood in Belfast trying to keep Catholics and Protestants from killing each other.

Teena spent fifteen years as a Greenfinch, the name given to the UDR's female soldiers, eventually being promoted to corporal. Her English father served in the Royal Marines and was already a member of the UDR by the time Teena signed up. Her brother and sister also served in the UDR. The family supported Teena's military service at first but opposed her decision to stay with the regiment after she had children. "Some nights my son was crying and keeping my other children awake until I came in at four in the morning," she said. "I had no idea." Republican militants often targeted UDR soldiers and their families, and Teena's children knew never to answer the door and to keep the blinds closed. "You didn't tell anyone where your mommy worked."

Teena had her tattoos removed when her son was born, but the inscriptions on her psyche endured. Like the walls themselves, her inner defences were still standing. Even now, whenever Teena entered a room, she tried to sit where she could see a door. And she always dropped her purse on purpose before getting into her car so she could surreptitiously check for a bomb underneath as she bent to pick up her bag. "It's something that doesn't leave you," she said.

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Belfast was filled with men like Breandán Clarke — men with close-cropped hair, iron handshakes, and bodies built like welterweight boxers. Their muscles were tightly packed into small frames that seemed hardly able to contain them. They walked the streets like unsprung snares. As a small man

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myself, I admired how dangerous these men looked. I envied their fighter's stride.

I met Breandán at the offices of the North Belfast Interface Network, which represented some of the poorest and most conflict-ravaged communities in Belfast: Ardoyne, Cliftonville, and New Lodge. These neighbourhoods suffered a disproportionate amount of sectarian violence. During the Troubles, more than four hundred civilians were killed in the one-square-mile area these communities covered, and fourteen interface barriers divided the neighbourhoods into tiny fragments. The NBIN strove to improve community relations and responded when tensions seethed into violence.

Before the ceasefires in the latter half of the 1990s, the conflict was waged mainly by, and between, the acronymed paramilitary groups. The British army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary also added their guns to the thirty-year tussle. Once the paramilitaries laid down their guns, a natural entropy took over the conflict. For the first time, a young man did not need to enlist to participate. These men, born too late to have fought in the "official" Troubles, inherited a more amorphous conflict that combined the medieval with the modern. Instead of semi-automatic rifles and intricately designed time bombs, today's combatants fight with fists and bottles. But they communicate, coordinate, and strategize through sophisticated cellphones and social media. Barbed wire and brick walls are irrelevant in an age when teenagers plan their fights on Facebook.

Breandán told me that boys from opposite sides of the divide often brought their video-game combat onto the streets. Two boys playing online games would arrange to meet on the interface to transform their virtual battle into a real fist fight. Other boys rushed to join in and the girls egged them on. "Two boys playing *Call of Duty* turns into a 150-person riot," Breandán said. The new violence may have a contemporary spark, but the street dynamic has hardly changed since he too was a fist-fighting teen. "The toughest guy in Ardoyne still wants to fight the toughest guy in Glenbryn," he said. I suspected Breandán, in his youth, was himself the toughest guy in Ardoyne. Breandán and the NBIN, along with other community groups, tried to prevent these conflicts before needing to intercede. "Once you get to the stage of intervention, you are already tits up."

Breandán and I left the NBIN offices and walked to Alliance Avenue,

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where a twelve-metre-high wall divided the Catholics in Ardoyne from their Loyalist neighbours in the Glenbryn Estate. During the course of the Troubles, almost twenty people were killed along the half-kilometre stretch of Alliance Avenue that forms the interface. The British army laid a temporary barrier along Alliance in 1971. The barricade matured into a permanent wall built of brick, mesh screens, and corrugated steel panels akin to the Gulf War landing mats I “played” in Nogales. Here, though, the Wall stood directly behind the houses, denying sunlight to the back windows of over a hundred homes.

I asked Breandán what he thought of the word *peace*. “The Wall doesn’t bring peace,” he said. “The Wall becomes, largely, a congregation point. It becomes a target. A site for graffiti.” Besides, the Wall along Alliance Avenue never stopped gunmen from attacking Catholic homes. Snipers erected scaffolding next to the Wall and shot into windows, or tossed bombs onto rooftops, using the Wall for cover. Breandán recalled touring Sinn Féin officials through the neighbourhood during the Troubles. They were drawn to the barriers and invariably stopped to peer down the alleyways at the walls, not realizing they were putting themselves within rifle range of Loyalist gunmen. Breandán, a faithful Republican, always made sure to stand between the officials and the Wall. “I would be ‘sandbagging,’” he told me. “If someone is going to get it, it won’t be one of the bosses.”

The walls no longer provide cover for snipers. Instead, they impose a sense of territorial constraint on Belfast’s youth that renders them unwilling to stray beyond their fortified familiar. Young people in Belfast favour segregated communities more than their parents do. Boys experience this geographical conservatism more than girls. Their tiny neighbourhoods become entire worlds they feel both duty bound to defend and afraid to leave. The walls may provide some protection from hurled objects, but they prevent people from either community from ever seeing each other beyond ossified binaries of Catholic and Protestant. Us and Them. The “solution” entrenches the problem. Breandán told me there were kids in Ardoyne who lived almost their entire lives within the single square mile of the community. He called these walled-in youth INLA, co-opting the initials of the Irish National Liberation Army to mean “I Never Leave Ardoyne.”

Breandán and I walked to where the Wall ended at the junction with

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Ardoyne Road. Breandán pointed north up the street to where Union Jacks and Ulster flags hung from lampposts. “That’s Glenbryn,” he said. “That pointy thing is a church. And up there is Holy Cross Primary School.”

I recognized the name. “The site of the Holy Cross dispute,” I said.

Breandán frowned. “Blockade,” he said. His voice was low. “It was not a ‘dispute.’ It was a blockade.”

Holy Cross, a Catholic girls’ school, stands on Ardoyne Road directly across from Protestant Glenbryn. In June 2001, Glenbryn residents decided they did not want Holy Cross girls walking past their houses on their way to school. The reason for their abrupt objection was never clear. Some in Glenbryn accused Nationalists of using the daily commutes of the schoolgirls as cover for stone throwing. Others feared the Provisional IRA was somehow collecting intelligence on the neighbourhood during these morning walks to class. Whatever the reason, Glenbryn demanded the girls take an alternate route to Holy Cross. The Catholic families refused. Loyalists in Glenbryn staged protests along the road and, in the final week of June, blocked the school gates. The police decided not to intervene, and the girls of Holy Cross, barred from entering their own school, broke for summer vacation a week early.

The two-month holiday did not ease the tension between the communities. Protests resumed when school reopened in September and they lasted for fourteen horrifying weeks. The intensity of the protests varied from day to day, but at its worst the Holy Cross conflict blackened into some of the sickest and most shameful scenes Belfast had endured in years. Each morning, parents and police officers in full riot gear escorted the Catholic schoolgirls, clad in their uniform red jumpers and black skirts, up Ardoyne Road. Loyalist protesters lined the street to blare foghorns, throw stones, and set off firecrackers. They shouted profanity and insults at the girls, called them “Fenian whores,” and held up pornographic images for them to see. One morning, someone threw a bottle of piss. “They exposed those girls to the fuckin’ most heinous and horrific ordeal,” Breandán said.

Like the migrant trails in Arizona, Ardoyne Road from Alliance Avenue to the school gates became for these girls a Via Dolorosa, their morning walk a Passion. Images from the blockades show girls crying in red-faced trauma, gripping their parents’ hands while their bodies twist with fear. At the



same time that the 9/11 attacks were commandeering the rest of the world's attention, the girls of Holy Cross endured a far more intimate terrorism.

The daily blockades bred nightly violence. Riots shattered the streets of northern Belfast for seventy straight nights. Strike marks from bullets fired during the Holy Cross riots still perforate the Wall along Alliance Avenue. A visit by Archbishop Desmond Tutu provided no calm. Only once First Minister David Trimble came to Holy Cross at the end of November did the conflict finally settle. More than a decade later, though, the memory of the blockades still hangs over the city. In Belfast, the phrase "Holy Cross" refers more to the clashes along Ardoyne Road than to the name of the school itself.

In the narrative of post-Troubles Belfast, this corner of Ardoyne and Alliance has become sacred ground. The two hundred metres of asphalt stretching north from the intersection to the Holy Cross School is now a sort of historic battlefield, one soaked with the tears of uniformed schoolgirls rather than the blood of uniformed men. Yet the corner itself, with its quaint brick homes and front gardens, seems too small and innocent to be gilded with such dark significance. Perhaps another tragedy of the walled places comes from their ability to debase quiet neighbourhood corners and short residential lanes into the front lines of miniature wars.

In the wake of the blockades, Glenbryn residents demanded another barrier be built across Ardoyne Road at this junction to prevent the Nationalists from Ardoyne crossing Glenbryn. The Wall would have forced the Holy Cross students to access their school through a rear entrance. Nationalists rejected the idea of the barrier. "This is not Birmingham, Alabama," Breandán said. "We're not taking a back door to anyone. That's our school."

Breandán wanted to show me how he aimed to defeat the walls. We walked south from Ardoyne to Flax Street, a road completely closed off by a steel wall topped with a garland of triangular metal spikes. A large-scale high-resolution photograph had been pasted over the Wall that depicted the actual view down Flax Street if the barrier were not there. According to Breandán, a photo covering the other side of the Wall showed the view from the other direction. In effect, the photos allowed passersby on both sides of the barrier to see through the Wall.

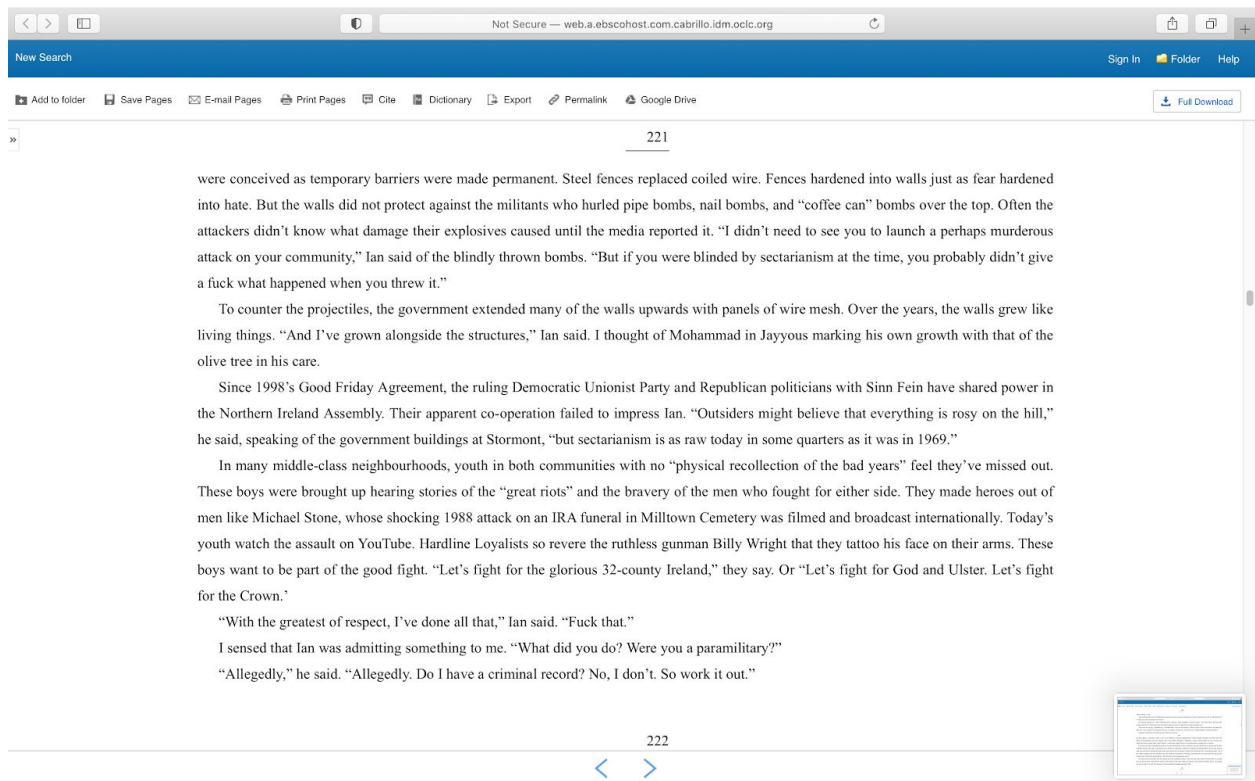
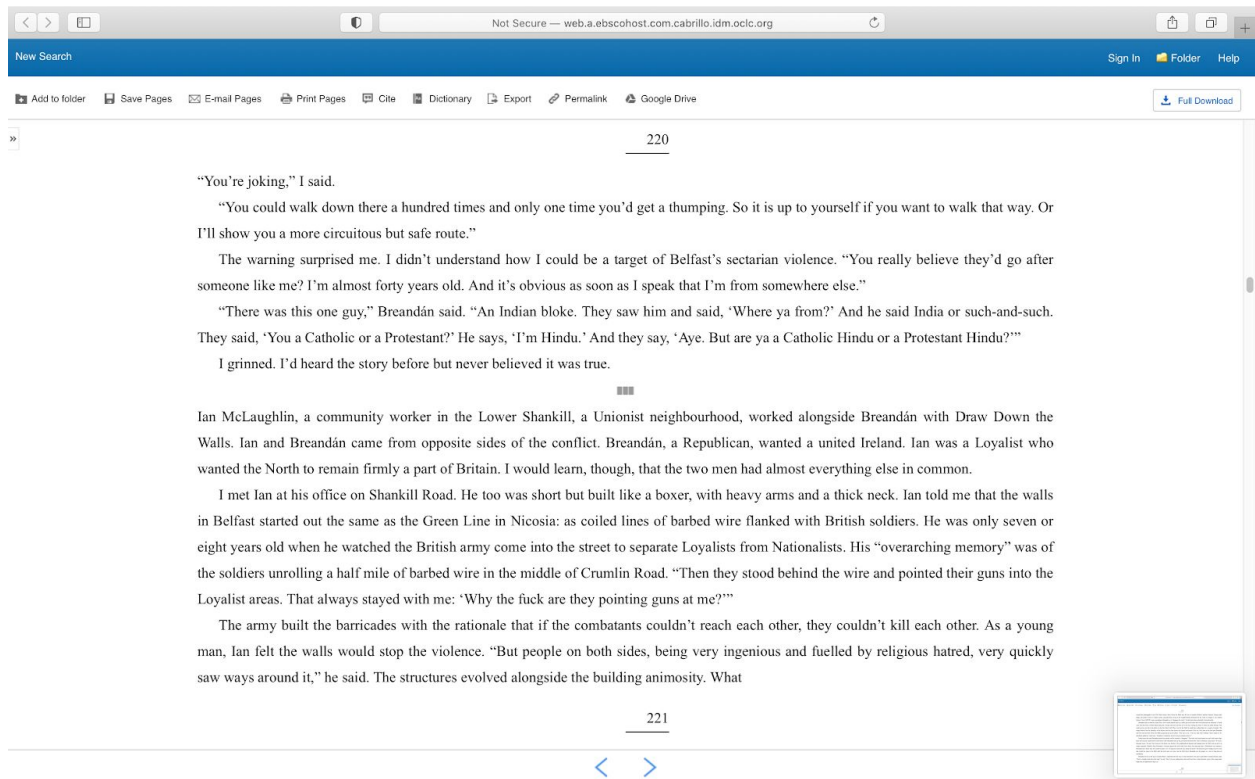
An artist with Draw Down the Walls, a project co-founded by Breandán,

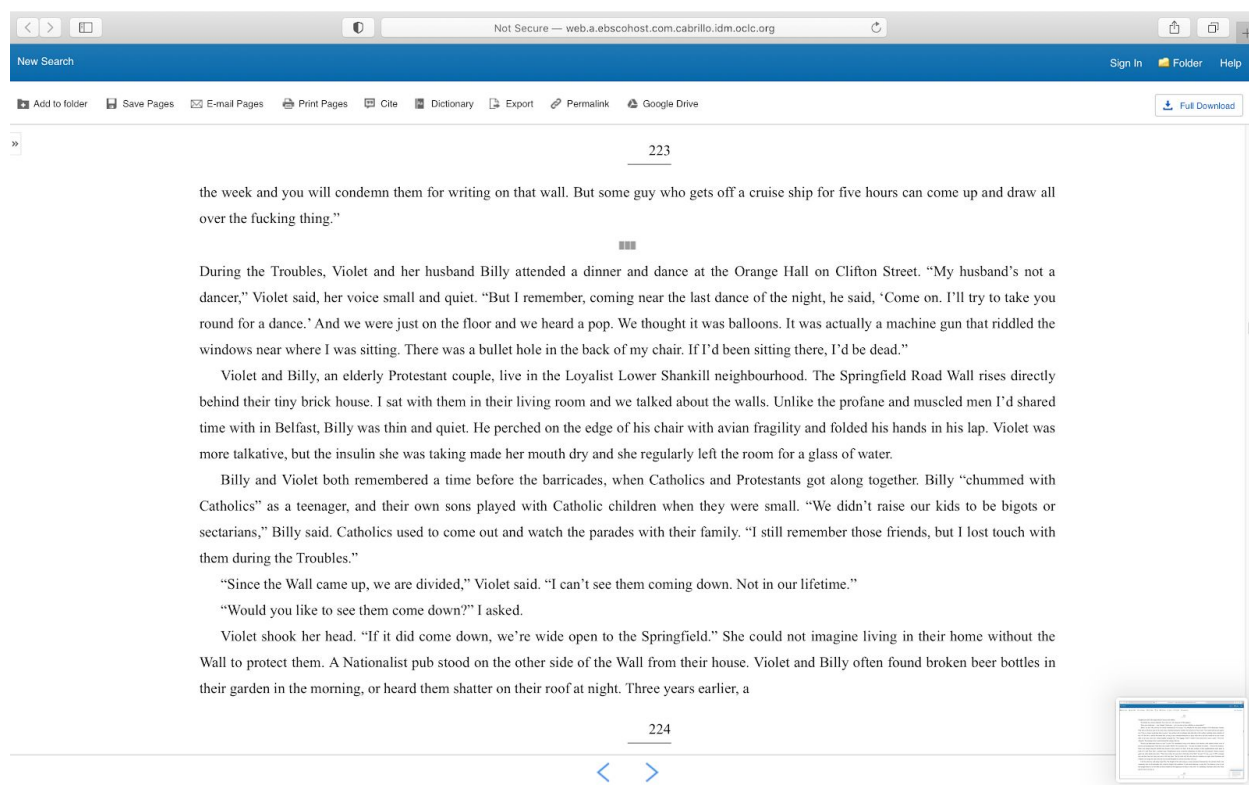
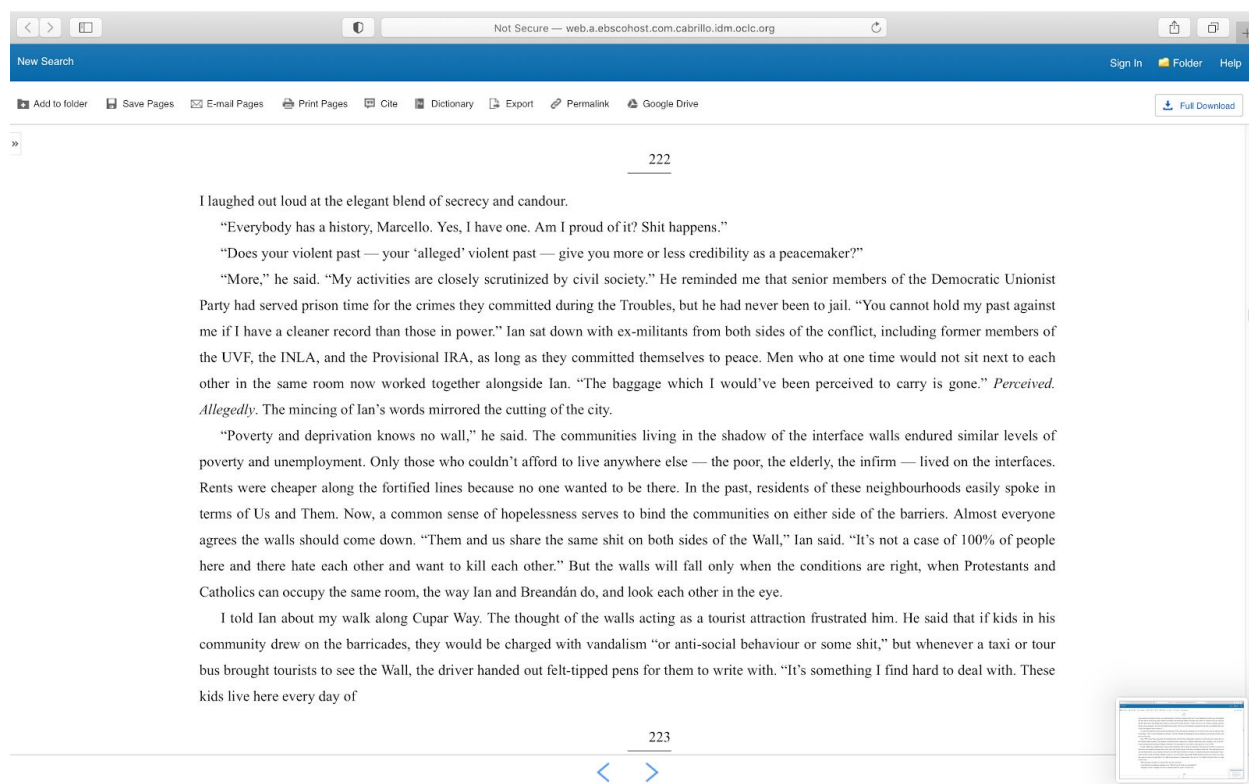
created the photographs on the Flax Street barrier. Draw Down the Walls uses the arts to examine Belfast's interface barriers. Among other things, the project strives to inspire youth, especially those living in the neighbourhoods bifurcated by the walls, to imagine a city without barriers. One of DDTW's aims, according to Breandán, is to "disappear the walls." To take them down artistically if not physically.

Breandán told me about his friend Tom, who'd found himself stuck in a traffic jam on the other side of the barricade one afternoon. A bomb scare had shut down Crumlin Road during the evening rush hour and Tom sat on his bus waiting for police to usher the traffic through. Tom could see his own flat in the photo on the Flax Street wall. Were it not for the Wall, he could have walked home in a couple of minutes. The image showed Tom the absurdity of the barriers and how they destroy the logical movement of the city. Over pints at the local pub, Breandán told Tom that his Draw Down the Walls group had put up the photo. "Tom says to me, 'I tell you what, that's brilliant. That's nailed on. It's absolutely nailed on.' And I says, 'Actually, it's pasted on, but let's not get semantic about it.'"

Farther down the road, Breandán showed me another wall he wanted to "disappear." This brick wall stood almost two and a half metres high. Steel and concrete reinforced the metre-thick walls. Breandán told me the government had built this wall to withstand a tank attack. "It'll last a thousand years," he said. Now, however, the barrier was obsolete. The neighbourhood dynamic had changed since the Wall went up and it no longer separated Catholics from Protestants. Everyone agreed this wall could come down, but removing such a fortification was expensive. Breandán had a better idea. He wanted to plant a row of Japanese knotweed trees along the barrier. The knotweed grows highly-invasive roots that would lay siege to the Wall, split the brick and, over time, tear the Wall down. Breandán saw the project as a sort of long-term art installation.

Breandán left me at the top of Crumlin Road. I asked him the best way to return downtown. He said I could follow Crumlin directly south. "That's a straight walk down that road," he said. "But if you are walking down that road from here, in that direction, some of the young bucks might take an opportunistic dig at ya."





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two-pence coin had hit Billy in the ear while he sat in his backyard. "What if they hit him in the eye?" Violet asked. If nothing stood between their home and Springfield Road, Violet and Billy believed the attacks on their house would escalate from the occasional thrown bottle into a full assault. "If that wall wasn't there, we'd be afraid."

"People were glad to see the Wall go up," Billy said. "But were they really happy about it? No."

"I can't see peace," Violet said. "Not proper peace coming to this country. I just can't."

I glanced out their window to the Wall looming six metres tall over their home, both ominous and protective, sheltering them from violence while shutting out their light. It was no wonder Violet couldn't see peace. From her windows, she could hardly see anything at all. For people like Violet and Billy who lived on the interfaces, the only view was a backward glance into a fright-darkened past.

Violet talked about the young men who fought for the Loyalist cause during the Troubles. They felt they were fighting for their country, but were abandoned by the very system they battled to defend and ended up serving life sentences for their efforts. Protestant politicians who encouraged Loyalist action did not attend the funerals of Loyalist paramilitaries. She harboured special loathing for Ian Paisley, a long-time voice for loyalism and a Unionist politician. "I hate him," she said with a firmness I hadn't yet seen from her. "I listened to him at first, but then he turned his back on the boys and called them murderers. He was the one who opened his big mouth and kept mouthing until things started. I think if I ever came across him . . ." She stopped herself from finishing the sentence.

Even the Protestant clergy abandoned the boys. Church ministers refused to visit convicted paramilitaries because they considered them terrorists. "I tried to get a minister to see this one lad," Violet began, but again she stopped herself. "If I went into detail, it would be too private." Later, though, after she told me about her compassion for mothers on either side of the conflict who wept over their sons' graves, Violet relinquished the story. The "lad" she spoke of, the young prisoner the Protestant minister refused to see, was her son Thomas.

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When he was fifteen, Thomas graduated out of the British army's boys' service. Four years later, the police arrested him for his role in a

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When he was fifteen, Thomas graduated out of the British army's boys' service. Four years later, the police arrested him for his role in a shooting. The court convicted him and sentenced him to life in prison. Thomas served seventeen years of his sentence, all but the last two in the Maze, a notorious prison purpose-built for convicted gunmen. "They never told me what he did," Violet said. "And I never wanted to know."

The anxiety of losing Thomas to the Maze, and the feeling that her own Protestant community had abandoned him, nearly destroyed Violet. When she visited Thomas in prison, the guards would not let her touch him. At home, Violet continued setting a plate for him at the dinner table. Her thoughts of Thomas completely overwhelmed her, and Violet's other children felt emotionally forgotten. Eventually, her psychological problems grew so severe that she was hospitalized. While Thomas sat in his prison cell, Violet lay in her hospital bed. "I served time with him," she said.

When Thomas was released from prison, he returned to a country he didn't recognize. He wondered what he had been fighting for. His enemies, men with alleged or confirmed ties to the IRA, now occupied the halls of power. "We are not happy about terrorists and ex-terrorists being in government," Violet said. Members of the UDP and Sinn Féin now shook hands for the television cameras and shared power. "They're pretty much up each other's backsides now."

"But isn't this progress?" I asked. Former rivals shaking hands and sharing power seemed a positive step forward to me.

"It's progress, but it is hard to take in, knowing what they've done through the years."

Before I left the house, Violet repeated her opinion that the walls were not coming down, at least not in her lifetime. "My father served in the British army and the B-Specials," she said. "He told me there was never peace in Ireland. And there never will be."

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Martin Adams — a gay medical worker and former Catholic seminary student who lived with his Protestant boyfriend — wanted me to meet "regular people." By regular, he meant those who lived away from the walls. Martin

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knew of my interest in the barricades and that I planned on spending most of my time in Belfast meeting interface residents and community activists. He wanted me to understand that a sort of normal life existed for families like his own who were not involved with the conflict in any intimate way.

What passed for normal for a boy growing up in Belfast during the Troubles hardly resembles what I'd call a regular life. "We became hardened to bomb scares," Martin said after he picked me up from my hostel. He told me about hearing tense voices broadcast over a Marks & Spencer's PA, asking shoppers to put down their baskets and leave the store immediately. At the height of the conflict, entering Belfast's downtown meant passing through the "Ring of Steel," a military security perimeter where soldiers padded people down before allowing them to clank through the steel turnstiles. Security personnel lifted babies from their prams to check for concealed bombs and boarded buses to search for explosives.

"I remember thinking, if I were to bring a bomb on a bus, I would keep it in my lap because the soldiers only ever checked under the seats," Martin said. He became so conditioned to the searches that, while on vacation in Dublin, Martin instinctively raised his arms at the entrance to a shop in preparation for a security guard with a metal detector. His father placed his hands on Martin's wrists and gently pushed his arms down. "This is not Belfast," his father told him. "You don't have to do that here."

Martin and I drove over the bridge spanning the Lagan River into east Belfast and passed the house where he grew up. Martin's family was Catholic, but they lived in a predominately Protestant neighbourhood. He attended a Protestant school, where his father worked as the headmaster. All of Martin's boyhood mates were "Prods." He remembered how cool it was to talk to British soldiers in the Protestant neighbourhoods but not among Catholics, who considered the military their enemy.

The conflict did not collide with middle-class families like Martin's in the same way it affected the poor. They did not live on an interface. The Troubles, though, troubled everyone. "I have a recollection of some drama in the house one night in the early 1970s," Martin told me, "and Dad closing the curtains even though it was bright outside. I remember not being allowed to see something." Martin learned later that a family they knew, the Browns, were being "burnt out." The paramilitaries forced the Browns out of their

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home because they were Catholics living in a Protestant area, then torched the house afterwards as "extra punishment." Martin's parents wanted to shield him as best they could from such violence.

Explosions provided the bass line for Martin's childhood, even far from the interfaces. Martin remembered Loyalist paramilitaries bombing a church they used to attend and Republicans detonating a bomb at the top of the street in an attack on a civil servant's house. "I had nightmares the IRA would come and take my dad," he said. "I remember at night, as a kid and right into my adulthood, lying in bed and hearing a massive rumbling bang of a bomb. And the house shaking. And you normally switched on the news at midnight to hear where it was that got bombed."

Martin's closest encounter with sectarian violence came years later, when there was a bomb scare in the neighbourhood where he worked. The police were late evacuating his building and the bomb exploded just as he and his co-workers were being led out. "Pop. Off it went," Martin said. The blast knocked him to the ground and perforated one woman's eardrum. Paramedics took her to the hospital. "The rest of us thought it was a good excuse to go to the pub." Martin paused, as if startled by his own recollections. "It is funny talking about it now, because it's just so unreal."

When he graduated from high school, Martin studied for three years to become a Catholic priest, but he left the seminary before he was ordained. One night the racket from a British military helicopter hovering overhead interrupted students reciting the night prayer in the seminary chapel. The presiding priest saw how the noise frustrated his students, so he stopped the prayer. "Remember, God loves them too," the priest said, then joked, "Now let's say a Hail Mary for Her Majesty's forces of oppression." While Martin suspected some Catholic priests "might've got a wee bit too involved" in Republican activities, most clergymen engaged themselves in peacebuilding. The Catholic Church opposed the bombing campaigns of the IRA. Martin and his family saw Pope John Paul II when the pontiff visited Ireland. "I remember his speech because I saw it," Martin told me. "The Pope said, 'People of Ireland, on my knees I plead with you to stop the violence.' Of course, the Pope was ignored."

In spite of the Pope's censure and the violence meted out by the IRA and other Republican paramilitaries, the Nationalist side of the struggle always

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enjoyed better international press than their Loyalist rivals. I wondered if this dichotomy prevailed because Britain, with its dark colonial past, represented an easier and more traditional villain than “underdog” Republicans fighting the good fight. Martin agreed, though he thought cultural stereotypes also played a part. “The world, especially America, wants cutesy-pie Irish roots untainted by British oppression. They see Ireland as a country where people knit you a jumper and there’s a donkey tied up outside.”

“Where everyone drinks Guinness,” I said. I’d spent enough time in Canada’s faux Irish pubs to know the stereotype. “And where all the girls have red hair.”

“And they’re all named Colleen,” he added. “I’ve never even met a Colleen.”

Martin drove me past a series of Loyalist murals along Newtownards Road known as Freedom Corner. The paintings honoured Loyalist paramilitary groups with historical vignettes and slogans such as “The Ulster conflict is about nationality. This we shall maintain.” A hooded gunman pointed a rifle out from the walls alongside images of the Union Jack, the Red Hand of Ulster, the English rose, and the Irish thistle. My lack of interest in the murals surprised and relieved Martin. He told me that most visitors to Belfast insisted on photographing Freedom Corner, and he felt the propagandist celebration of armed men poorly represented his city. My lack of interest surprised me too. I suppose that after the years I’d spent among wall artists — watching Yusef and Faris in Ramallah transform their wall into a message board, playing a duet in Nogales with Glenn Weyant — these uninspired portrayals did little to impress me.

In recent years, community groups have painted over many of the Troubles-era murals depicting paramilitary groups and sectarian slogans and replaced them with images that might appeal to both communities. New murals told the story of Belfast author C.S. Lewis, for example, or famed local footballer George Best. But more threatening and sectarian murals started to appear in east Belfast in the weeks before I arrived. Martin drove the car past two of them, both painted on gable walls in ominous black, white, and grey. In one, a pair of gunmen wearing black balaclavas and clutching machine guns stared out alongside a message that read “We seek nothing but the elementary right implanted in every man, the right if you are attacked to defend yourself.” The artists had painted over a benign mural

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man, the right if you are attacked to defend yourself. The artists had painted over a benign mural

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celebrating a bi-communal football club. Across the road, the other mural depicted three more Loyalist paramilitaries with guns drawn and posing in front of a brick wall. A proclamation read: “We are the pilgrims, master; we shall go always a little further.”

“The paint’s barely dry,” Martin said, looking up at the freshly rendered gunmen. “It worries me, now that I think about it.” The move from neutral murals to these menacing images felt like a step backwards to Martin and made him wonder if they foretold a return to sustained violence. “You see stuff like this and you think, ‘Oh shit.’ Why else would they take the time to put them up?”

Martin believed that in spite of the new murals and the occasional riot, most people in Northern Ireland were satisfied with the status quo. “I was Catholic by faith, but due to my upbringing I accepted that I was a British national. If anyone asks me where I came from, I say I’m from an island called Ireland.” He was content with being part of the United Kingdom, especially considering the current economic strength of the U.K. in comparison with the floundering Republic of Ireland. No one with any sense would rush to exchange their pounds sterling for the Republic’s quick-sinking euros. “They wouldn’t be in any hurry to have a united Ireland,” he said.

“What would you like to see happen politically in the North?” I asked.

“I just want it to continue getting better,” he replied. “It is working for me. Every year has gotten better. Year on year, Belfast is more like a normal city. I am a gay man, who’s out, who has a career in a government thing, and there is no problem with that.” He added, “There are no more searches at the city centre. No more being thrown out of places because there is a bomb scare. When I recall these things for you, it seems like fiction. Like they never happened.” Martin was not naive. He understood his experience differed from that of people who lived alongside the walls or those who had suffered the deaths of people close to them. Martin lost no one. “I had a blessed and safe experience of the Troubles.”

I thought of Teena’s life as a mother and soldier. I thought of the girls of Holy Cross and Breandán’s work on the interfaces. I thought of the bottles crashing on Billy and Violet’s roof and their son’s incarceration. Memories are long along the Walls. They form the mortar between the bricks. Nothing about the interfaces seemed fictional or blessed and safe. Even

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now. I was grateful for Martin's kindness and hospitality — and for the fine chicken korma he prepared for me before I returned to Canada. I consider him a friend. But I suspect his wall-less experience of the Troubles was an aberration. Later, I told Breandán about Martin, about how his family was not affected by the conflict. "How lucky for him," Breandán replied, with something resembling a sneer.

■■■

Shankill Road was gearing up for the twelfth of July. British flags and red, white, and blue bunting hung from the lampposts over the street. Food trucks peddled hot dogs and burgers. Face-painted children tossed around parade batons, tagged the sidewalks with silly string, or drove their parents mad by hammering on tiny tin drums. Souvenir shops did brisk business. Alongside the Ulster flags and Union Jack key chains were T-shirts for infants that read "I'm so cute I must be a Prod." Tough-looking men drank beer on street corners while their equally menacing girlfriends downed neon vodka coolers. All to honour King Billy.

In the summer of 1690, the armies of Protestant King William of Orange defeated the Catholic James II on the banks of the River Boyne. James was William's father-in-law, and while the skirmish no doubt caused some uncomfortable family gatherings, the Battle of the Boyne grew to represent the ascension of Protestantism in the north of Ireland, especially over the Catholic Church. Historically, King William and his triumph on the Boyne make unlikely emblems for Protestant supremacy. William was born Dutch, not English; the Pope and most European Catholic leaders supported his campaign against James; and the Battle of the Boyne hardly stands as the decisive victory over Jacobite rule — William did not finally pacify Ireland for England until the following year. Over a century later, though, after killing a dozen mostly unarmed Catholic Defenders in a village inn, Protestant "Peep O'Day Boys" formed the Orange Institution and anointed "King Billy" their iconic and ancestral hero.

The Orange Institution evolved into the most politically influential religious fraternity in Ireland and throughout the British Empire. Orange Lodges arose, and remain, throughout the Commonwealth, in the United States, and as far afield as Togo. In Canada, four members of the Orange Order became

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prime minister, and an Orangeman wrote the patriotic though uncomfortably anti-French anthem "The Maple Leaf Forever." Between 1921 and 1969, every prime minister of Northern Ireland and nearly every government minister was an Orangeman, and by 1965 nearly two-thirds of all Protestant men in Northern Ireland belonged. The importance of the Orange Order has waned over the past decade and membership no longer grants such prestige. (I recommend the Loyal Orange Lodge reconsider their ancient acronym LOL if they want to be taken seriously in the digital age.) Still, every July 12 — the Glorious Twelfth — the Orangemen exercise their enduring relevance, or at least their guile, when they march in honour of King William's victory at the Battle of the Boyne.

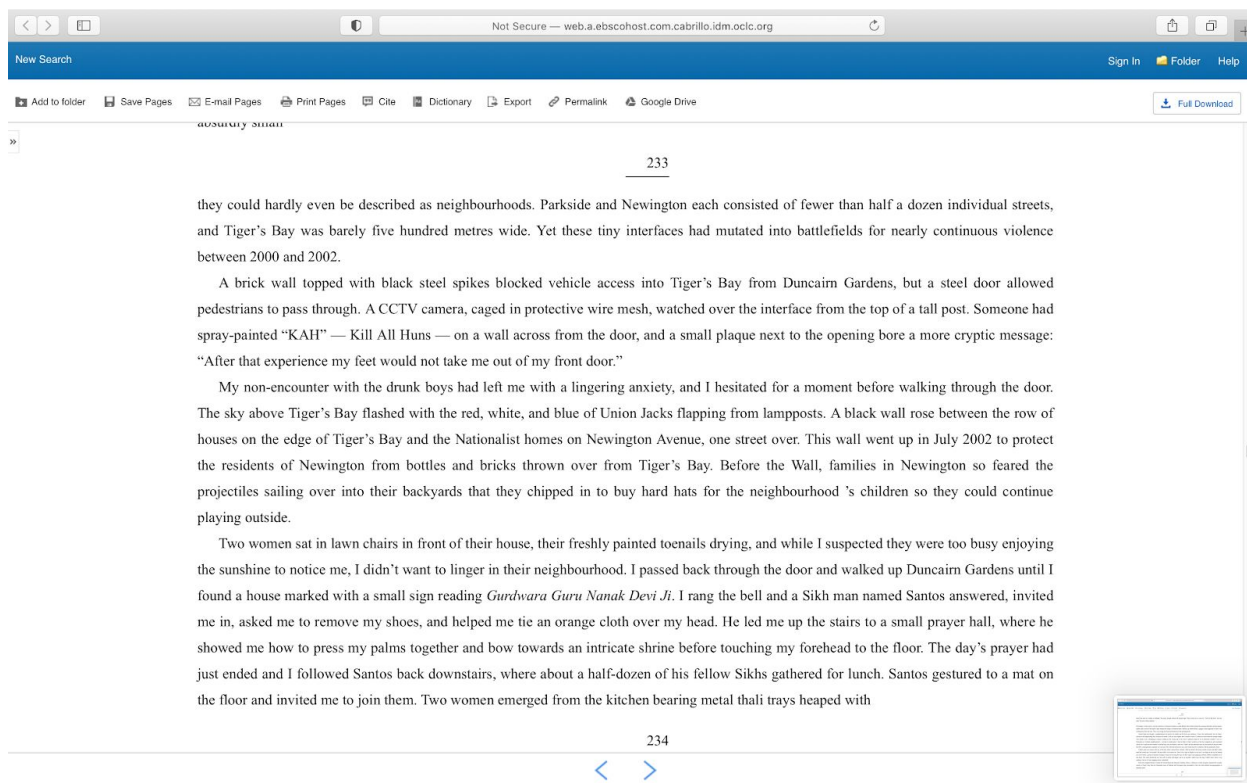
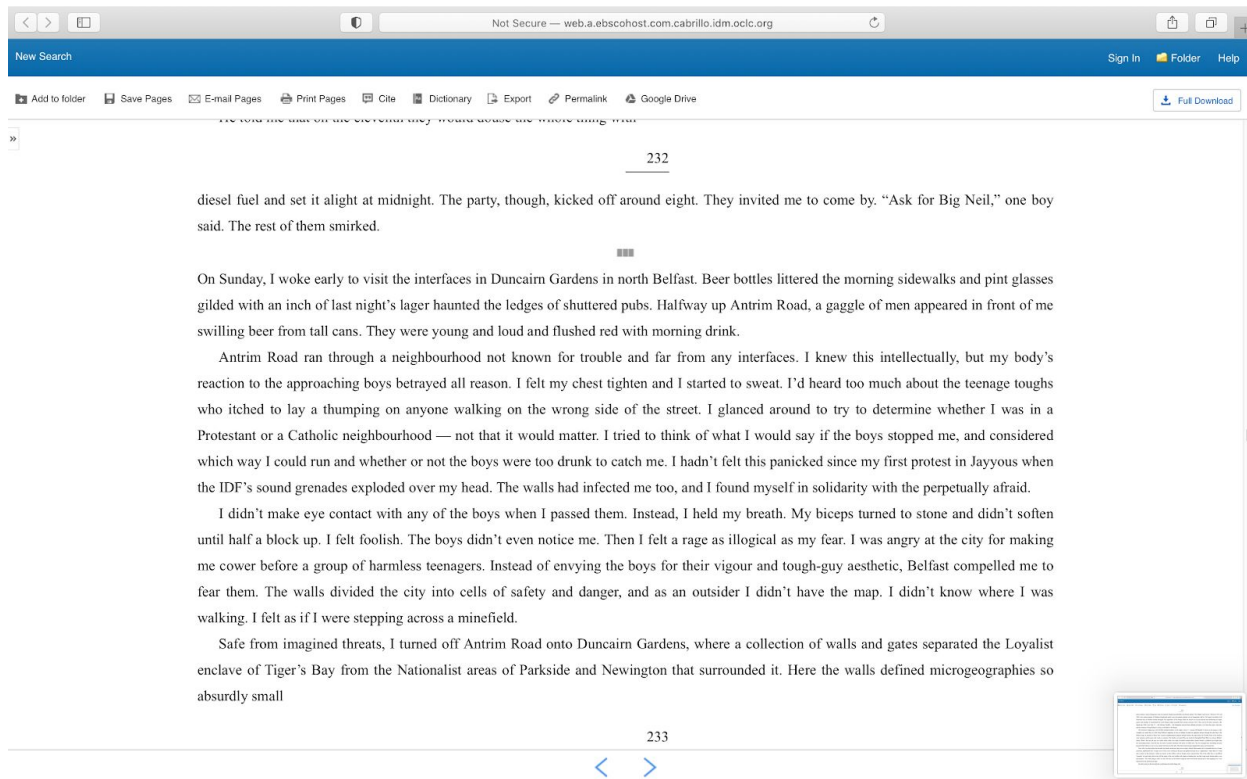
The festivities leading up to the Twelfth included bonfires on the night of July 11. I turned off Shankill to check on the progress of the woodpile on Lanark Way. In 1690, King William's supporters lit fires on hilltops to guide his nighttime advance through the mud flats of the Belfast lough. In memory of those fires, Unionist neighbourhoods gathered around bonfires the night before the Twelfth. Some of the bonfires were immense and the pyres took weeks to construct. The bonfire on Lanark Way, just inside the Springfield Road Wall, was always Belfast's largest. When I first saw the pyre two weeks earlier, about sixty rings of stacked wooden pallets already formed a cylindrical pyre higher than the surrounding houses. Near the base, the layers of pallets alternated with layers of rubber tires. The two teenaged boys assembling the pyre paused in their labour to wave at my camera from the top of the pile. Then they turned around, dropped their pants, and mooned me.

Now, still a few days before the eleventh, the bonfire stood more than twice as high. Almost fifteen metres tall. It resembled the hive of some enormous, nightmarish bees. A larger crew of boys were working on the pyre and gathered around me as I approached. I asked them if I could take a picture of the structure. I think my interest in their efforts, and my foreign accent, amused them. One of the older boys, an unofficial "foreman" of some kind, told me they fill the centre of the vast cylinder with whatever kindling they can find: scrap wood, broken pallets, even old furniture. "The whole thing is solid," he said. The tires on the bottom weigh the entire tower down and prevent it from toppling over. I was impressed by the architectural logic.

He told me that on the eleventh they would douse the whole thing with

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curried potato and eggplant, yellow dal, some soft suji, and a bit of salad.

I had arranged to meet with the Sikhs because I wanted to know what it meant to live in the shadow of someone else's wall. The Indian students I'd met in Nicosia had no interest in the Cyprus Problem or the Greek-Turk binary. I wondered about this same dynamic in Belfast. I wondered how the barriers, and the conflict they enshrined, affected residents who were neither Catholic nor Protestant, nor even ethnically Irish, and had no natural allegiances to one side or the other. The fact that their temple stood right on the interface and in an area known for sectarian violence also interested me. What did it mean to be a neutral party on a battlefield?

The man who sat next to me, Mohan, had lived in Belfast for fifteen years. "It is not very peaceful," he said by way of understatement. "We avoid certain areas. The strongholds of either community."

"What do you think of the walls?" I asked.

"It doesn't look nice. It is an eyesore. But safety is more important than the eyesore. If they can have the Wall, it keeps both sides apart. In God we are all the same, but people here are very territorial." Mohan was a man of faith — more so than the others in the room, it seemed — and he spoke to me in ambiguous religious slogans. He believed the solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland could be found within the lessons of Holy Scripture. "You have to rely on God," Mohan said.

From the other side of the room, Santos scoffed at Mohan's confidence in religion. He believed instead that a revolving cycle of violence and vengeance would prolong the conflict in Northern Ireland, as well as elsewhere. "If your brother dies by your enemy, you will not forget it. You will try to take revenge tomorrow. That is very, very bad. This is why there can be no peace in Ireland. Or in Kashmir. Or in the Middle East. Or anywhere else there is war."

I appreciated Santos's cynicism and asked him what he thought of the barriers when he first arrived in Belfast.

"I thought the other side must be a jail," he said.

"It is a jail for the people who live there," Mohan added.

Santos told me about walking along the Cupar Way Wall and trying to find a passage to the other side. "I asked the people, 'Can I go there? Is it a jail?' They said, 'It is not a jail.' I said, 'Then what is it? Why is it so high?' They said, 'It is a border.' I said, 'A border for what?' They said, 'That is a Protestant area

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and you are in a Catholic area.' I said, 'Okay, thank you,' and walked away." Santos laughed at the memory. He came from India, a nation preoccupied with marking and guarding international boundaries, and the idea of a city fortifying residential "borders" bewildered and amused him. "This is also a border area," Santos grinned, referring to the temple's location near the interfaces.

Aside from the occasional road closure, clashes between the residents of Tiger's Bay, Newington, and Parkside never affected the gurdwara. But while their temple enjoyed an immunity against sectarian violence, Sikhs and other visible minorities could not avoid old-fashioned bigotry. A young man who was listening to our conversation spoke up from the other side of the room. "Racism here is an altogether different thing. In Belfast there is hatred. People here intend to harm you. They can throw anything on you. That is not just racism. That is hatred." He suggested the barricades served to feed this racism by making it impossible to engage with anyone but your own community. Outsiders to the fortified monocultures were feared or despised. For most of Belfast's history, the bigotry manifested solely between Catholics and Protestants. But the city was no longer binary. Immigration was providing new Others to subsequently wall out in the same way. The haters had now added the words *paki* and *nigger* to *taig* and *hun*. "Because of the fences," the man said, "people are not getting comfortable with the multicultural city."

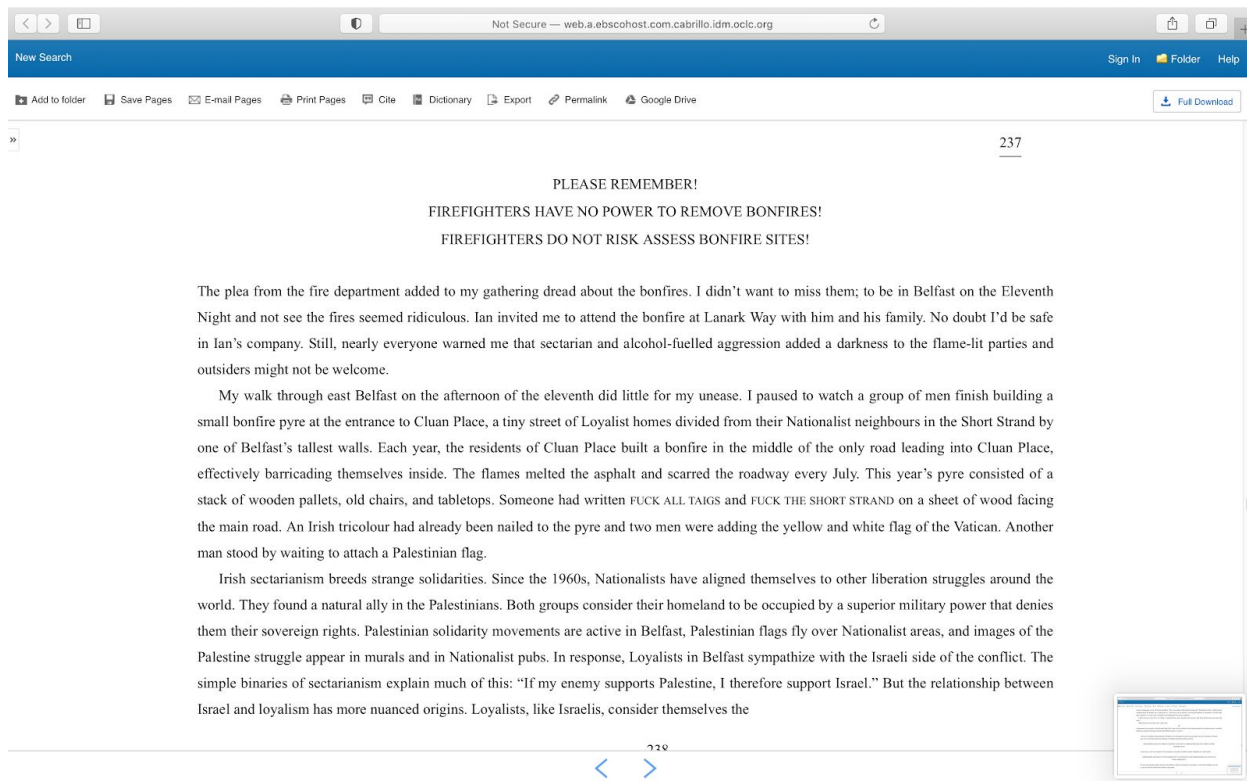
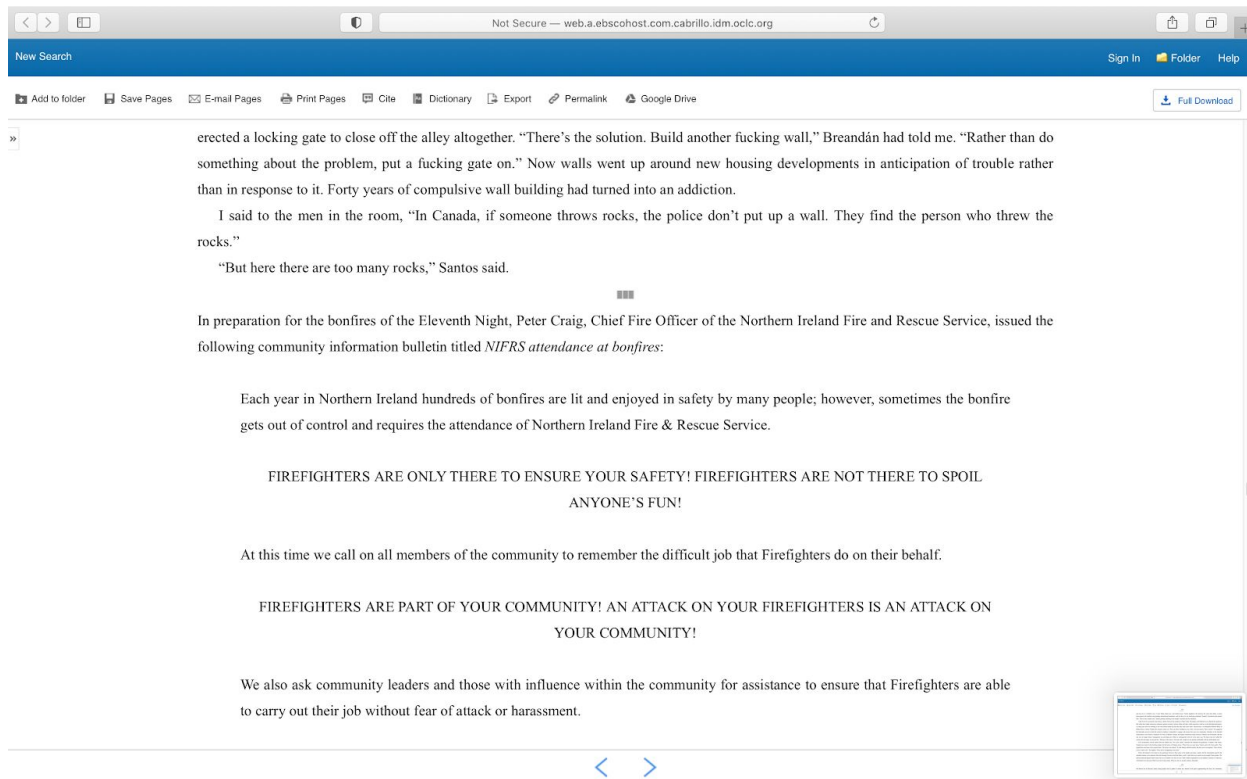
Like sectarianism, racism rained from the Belfast sky. Two years earlier, someone had shattered the gurdwara's windows with stones. Vandals also stoned a Hari Krishna temple and the homes of Filipina nurses. "These boys are crazy boys," Santos said of the Irish youths. They targeted his own home with a petrol bomb. "My house was burned," he said. Santos called the police, but they never investigated. "They told me it was a minor case." He laughed. "They said it is happening every hour."

Police did respond to the attack on the gurdwara, however. They came to the temple and made a report, and the municipality paid for the smashed window to be replaced. Then the Housing Executive built the Sikhs a wall. A steel fence now stood over the temple's back garden. The barrier protected against hurled stones but cut yet another scar into the city's flesh. Belfast responded to every problem, sectarian or otherwise, with barbed wire and steel. Walls were the de facto policy. When he took me around Ardoyne, Breandán

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had shown me an alleyway where young people used to gather to smoke pot. Instead of the police apprehending the teens, the community

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victims of terror, the bombers of Hezbollah akin to the IRA. Many Loyalists admire Israel's heavy response to terrorist attacks, and some feel the British army could learn important lessons from the IDF. Thus, the occasional Star of David flies in Loyalist Belfast — one hung outside a home in Cluan Place — and the occasional Palestinian flag gets nailed to a bonfire. I wondered what Mohammad Othman, the Stop the Wall activist in Palestine, would think of Loyalists' oddly placed hatred of his people and the burning of their flag.

In the evening, I walked up Shankill Road en route to meet Ian and watch the Lanark Way fire. I passed a few more pyres replete with Irish tricolours, Republican election posters, and Gaelic football jerseys before reaching the main street party. Three young women sang pop songs on a portable stage while blissed out children bounced on inflatable playground equipment. People danced and drank in the street. The air smelled of deep-fried things. Belfast's city government tries to market the Twelfth as a friendly event for tourists and families of both communities. But the juxtaposition of sectarian venom and family fun disturbed me. Burning flags and bouncy castles. Tiny drums and profanity. Balloons and scrawled calls to Kill All Taigs. I wondered, too, why the city government permitted such displays. Pubs in downtown Belfast refused entry to anyone wearing sports jerseys because team allegiance is regarded as bald-faced sectarianism. Yet on public streets, Protestants were allowed to burn the emblems of their Catholic neighbours. The connection between these wholesome delights and sectarian hate tightened my stomach. What hope was there for the walls to come down if children found joy in the hatred that erected them? For the first time in my life, I felt saddened by the happiness of others.

I turned down Lanark Way, crossing the street to avoid groups of drinkers, and reached the Lanark Way bonfire. The pyre had grown even more since I last saw it. "Big Neil" and his crew had added two enormous wooden spoons to the top and fastened a giant Irish flag. Gaelic football jerseys and Sinn Féin election posters were scattered over the sides like ornaments on a Christmas tree. Two boys wearing latex gloves climbed along the top of the tower pouring diesel out of a soda bottle onto the upper pallets.

Midnight was still a couple of hours away, but a crowd of young people had already gathered to drink and dance in the shadow of the monolith.

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Ulster techno music blared from speakers in a white van. I walked past the party up the road to Ian's house. He invited me into his kitchen and introduced me to his wife, Margaret. One of his young daughters came in to show me her most recent loose tooth; her two front teeth were already missing. "Some boy kissed out her front teeth," Ian teased. The girl turned away from me and begged Ian to take her to the bonfire. He told her the fire would not be lit until midnight, but she didn't believe him. She cried until he put on some cartoons for her to watch. Then he opened a couple of Budweisers and told me about the sunny day in September 1981 when Mark Stockman was shot.

Ian and Mark both worked at the Mackies factory by day and served as Ulster Defence Regiment soldiers at night. They had to check in their guns at the end of their nightly service; the UDR command deemed the men too young to carry pistols while off duty. Ian and Mark worked in different areas of the factory and planned to meet during their lunch break that day to play darts in the canteen. As they crossed the factory yard from different directions, Ian watched a car pull up and stop behind Mark. A man stepped out, rolled a black balaclava over his face, and pointed a pistol at Mark's head. Mark was facing Ian when the bullet struck. "The look on Mark's face, when he was shot, won't leave me," Ian said.

Mark was dead before he hit the ground, Ian is certain, but the gunman stood over him and kept pumping bullets into Mark's body. Then he raised his gun, pointed it at Ian, and pulled the trigger. The gun clicked. All the bullets were in Mark. "McLaughlin, you should be dead," the man said. He returned to the car, shouted, "Up the Ra!" — the IRA cheer — and drove away. Were it not for the savagery of a gunman so ignited by hate that he'd emptied his pistol into a dead man, Ian would also have lain dead in that yard. As he stood over Mark's body, Ian's first thoughts turned not to vengeance against the IRA for murdering his friend, but to contempt for a British army that failed to protect the men in their service. As a result, a twenty-year-old life lay wasted and bloody in a factory yard.

Ian left the UDR. He handed in his "sausage bag" — his army-issue duffle — to UDR command. Then he went in search of a paramilitary to join. As a former UDR soldier with weapons and tactical training, Ian was a coveted

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recruit. He "allegedly" joined the Ulster Defence Association because their armed wing, the Ulster Freedom Fighters, were, according to Ian, "the most militant." After watching Mark's eyes as the bullet tore through him, Ian was looking for ruthlessness.

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I was grateful for Ian's candour to this point, but he wouldn't speak of his actions within the UFF. According to the Sutton Index, a grisly accounting of deaths during the Troubles, the UFF killed almost 150 people, nearly all of them civilians. I cannot know, and perhaps don't want to know, exactly what Ian was involved in and whether or not he spilled blood. All he said was, "At the time, I didn't give a fuck." Republican forces pursued Ian constantly. He stashed clothing in houses all through Belfast, and for one eighteen-month stretch he didn't sleep in the same place two nights in a row. "It was no kind of life," he said.

"What finally stopped you?" I asked.

"Having a family," Ian said. Becoming a father "mellowed him." By then, he had decided that violence no longer served Loyalist ideals. Still, "no one ever leaves a paramilitary organization." They are either forced out or eliminated. Ian retained responsibilities within the UDA but did not disclose what they were.

"What if your peacebuilding efforts are at cross purposes with your obligations to the UDA?" I asked. "Which master do you serve?"

"This doesn't happen," he replied. "There are no cross purposes. The UDA also sees peace as the way forward."

We stepped out into Ian's back garden while he smoked a cigarette. "If having a family and mellowing with age brought you out away from violence, what would bring you back? Is there anything that could draw you back to that life?"

He dragged on his cigarette and looked past me through the living room window to where his daughter had fallen asleep in front of the television. "If my family was in danger," he said.

We drained two more beers before Ian cut himself off. Violence of some kind always marred the Eleventh Night and Ian needed to keep his head clear. He stayed in contact with other community activists around the city who tried to intervene when trouble inevitably arose. As midnight approached, we walked to the bonfire with another of Ian's daughters. (His youngest was

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still sleeping on the couch and would be devastated when she learned she missed the fire.) When we reached the pyre, the top of the tower had just been set ablaze. Onlookers cheered and raised their beer bottles when the Irish flag lit up, burned, and disappeared. The pyre grew into a raging column of fire, twisting into itself like some hellish tornado. The heat pushed everyone back. My cheeks began to redden and sweat. Sparks and embers formed new constellations in the sky over the crowd, the larger pieces still glowing by the time they drifted to the ground.

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Ian's daughter, looking up like the rest of us, caught a cinder in her eye. She cried until Ian plucked it out. When the flames reached the base layers of tires, thick pythons of smoke coiled upwards, black and acrid, until I could taste burning rubber at the back of my throat. I told Ian that no other place on earth would allow this. He agreed.

Ian's cellphone began to ring as the roar of the flames waned. Someone reported that youths were rioting on a traffic roundabout at the edge of downtown. The rest of the night would be busy for Ian as he marshalled community leaders to the scene to try to calm the clashes. I left him to his work. Before I walked away, he told me to call his mobile if I got into any trouble. "I could be there in ten minutes," he said. "Or I'll call someone else to get you." I thanked him for his concern and walked back down Shankill. No one bothered me, but the streets rang with the angry joy of drunken men. Broken bottles crunched beneath my shoes and the filthy tang of burning tires hung in the air overhead.

I hadn't taken a side. I didn't know whether I agreed that Northern Ireland should be part of the Republic or if links to Britain should be maintained. I wasn't certain which community had been most hard done by. I could not see the conflict here with the same clarity with which I viewed the Israeli occupation of Palestine or America's policies along the Mexican border. Along those barricades, the economic and military disparity between the wall builders and the wall dwellers was vast, and the walls' victims were easy to discern. In Belfast, though, the wounds all seemed self-inflicted. I couldn't tell whom to blame.

I was certain, though, that the Twelfth exposed the ugly face of loyalism. The Twelfth celebrated bigotry and appeased hate. I didn't believe for a moment that the bonfires of this evening and the parades scheduled for the following day had as much to do with a 400-year-old battle as they did

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with a contemporary loathing of Catholics. No one could speak of "shared futures" or of walls coming down while standing in the glow of bonfires and burning flags.

Everyone told me the sun always shines on the Twelfth, but Belfast's Catholics always pray for rain. Irish Catholics harbour little love for the Orange Order and their annual marches. Few can deny the Order's overt anti-Catholic dogma. The Order bars Catholics from membership and forbids its members from marrying Catholic or even attending a Catholic Mass. For Nationalists in Northern Ireland, the Orange Order

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represents Protestant and Unionist supremacy over Ireland and is therefore despised. Animosity towards the Order reaches an apex on the Twelfth. Loyalists maintain that the parades celebrate Protestant culture; Nationalists argue that the marches are blunt displays of vindictive strength. Not unlike the Turkish flag that lights up over Nicosia, the Orange parade pokes a triumphalist stick in the eye of Belfast's Catholics, especially when the marchers pass through Nationalist neighbourhoods. The Orange Lodges insist they have the right to march along their "traditional routes," even if they pass through Catholic areas where they are not wanted. The British-run Parades Commission imposes restrictions on the Orangemen to keep them from parading through most Nationalist neighborhoods, but not all, and the Twelfth always ends in ugliness and riots.

The impact of the annual parades on the city's shattered psyche cannot be dismissed. Belfast's peace activists, especially those who work on the Nationalist side, dread July. Negotiations with the Parades Commission invariably fail to reach resolutions, cross-community dialogue falters, and the resulting violence nullifies gains made during the rest of the year. "In July, the people who used to talk to you suddenly don't talk to you anymore," one activist told me. At no other time of the year do the walls seem as thick or as high or as necessary.

A cold morning rain was falling on the city when I woke on the Twelfth, but true to tradition, the sky cleared by nine-thirty. I walked to the Red Barn Gallery to rendezvous with photographer Frankie Quinn. Frankie planned to

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shoot the Orange parades for a new photography book and had invited me to join him. John, a photographer friend of Frankie's, came along with us.

Frankie and I had walls in common. He'd recently travelled to Palestine and Israel to photograph the Wall there and had produced two books of peaceline photography images in Belfast. He released his first book, titled simply *Interface Images*, in 1994, during the time of the first ceasefires between the paramilitary groups. In 2002, Frankie brought his camera back to the walls. He marvelled that none of the peacelines had come down — if anything, they'd been extended and strengthened — and nine new interface barriers had gone up. Frankie wanted to show the evolution of the walls to "capture them in that period of time." The new book, *Streets Apart*, came out in 2008. Comparing his two books revealed that the walls in Belfast were hardly inanimate structures. They had lives. The barricades in Nicosia degraded and died. The wood rotted, barbed wire rusted, and sandbags split and leaked. Belfast, though, fathered its barriers to a muscular maturity. They grew tall and strong.

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Only in Belfast did I see the walls reach a kind of manhood.

Earlier that morning, Orangemen from various chapters around Belfast and from abroad had marched from their lodges and converged on City Hall, along with their accompanying marching bands. Frankie, John, and I watched the parade stream through the downtown en route to the parade grounds south of the city. Loyalist spectators lined the route to cheer on the Orangemen and the bands. The marching Orangemen all hung V-shaped orange sashes around their necks emblazoned with badges that suggested their ranks and their home lodges. Some also wore black bowler hats and white gloves that made them look like archetypal British butlers. Nearly every short-sleeved shirt exposed tattooed arms, many inscribed with images of King Billy astride his horse. The Orangemen varied in age, though most were old enough for grey hair.

The marching bands, known as "kick-the-Pope" bands for their repertoire of anti-Catholic songs, accompanied the Orangemen on their long walk. Most were flute bands whose members whistled and trilled as they marched, filling the streets with military birdsong. Baton twirlers led some of the bands. The crowd favoured one young and muscled man in particular. He wielded his baton like nunchaku, flinging the steel rod behind his neck, under his arms,

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and into the air with the speed and force of a martial artist. I'd never seen a baton so resemble a weapon.

The bass drummers impressed me the most, though. Nearly every band had one, great bears of men with drums lashed to their chests and armed with a mallet in each hand. While the other members of the bands marched in formation, the bass drummers freely broke ranks and weaved and lumbered through the marchers, their elbows high, pummelling their drums until the centre of each skin resembled an immunization scar. Like the tattooed baton twirler, the big drum men seemed more warriors than musicians. I suppose this suited a parade meant to recognize a military victory, but the musical warfare lent the event a sense of menace and potential violence. Perhaps the images of the hateful bonfires still lingered, or maybe I simply dislike parades, but I shuddered each time I saw a bass drummer pound his drumskin into paste.

The Orangemen smiled and waved at the crowds lining the parade route. Many of the spectators wore red, white, and blue hats or held British flags. One woman, on seeing John's and Frankie's cameras, ran up to them and opened her eyes to show off her Union Jack contact lenses. Another woman, clearly drunk, rushed forward to lift the kilts on the marchers from Scotland. Dozens of people raised beer cans to the passing marchers and swigged toasts in King Billy's honour. Public drinking, though illegal, was part of the ritual. A police van bore the

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comically mild warning: "Alcohol *may* be confiscated." By the time the marchers reached the parade grounds, many of the spectators who'd been drinking all morning were pacing red-eyed and aggressive. "People are getting tanked up," Frankie said. "We should go."

We returned to the gallery and boiled water for coffee. I asked Frankie what drew him to the walls as a photographer. "I grew up in the Short Strand," he said, speaking of the tiny Nationalist enclave in east Belfast. Frankie's family had lived in "the Strand" for generations; his ancestors appeared on the 1811 census. The Quinns were there when the Northern Ireland government laid down the first barricade to separate Catholics from Protestants, in the early 1920s. At the time, the neighbourhood's Catholics suffered regular attacks from workers in the nearby shipyards, nearly all Protestants, who were easily roused by Unionist politicians to lay siege to the Strand. "All a politician had to do was go down and give a gay speech,"

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Frankie said. The workers came up from the yards and pelted the Catholics with metal bolts and rivets used on ship hulls. The thrown shrapnel gave rise to the ironic term "Belfast confetti," which became both the title and the subject of a 1987 poem by Ciaran Carson that reads:

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation marks,
Nuts, bolts and car-keys. A fount of broken type.¹⁸

The clashes escalated in 1921 when IRA gunmen shot into a mob of marauding shipworkers and killed two men. The British, fearing revolving vengeance, erected Belfast's first interface barrier. Frankie had a *Belfast Telegraph* article from 1922 that compared this barricade to Hadrian's Wall. "The language is striking," Frankie said. "To keep the warring tribes apart, we have to put up a wall like Hadrian did."

This first wall no longer exists. The Short Strand shrank over the years and the street where the Wall stood is gone. The Northern Ireland Office built new brick barriers around the Strand in the early years of the Troubles. Since then, the NIO has extended the walls with steel slating or wire mesh. Sometimes both. They added metal spikes and barbed wire as well, but only on the Nationalist side — an insinuation, Frankie believes, that Catholics are the aggressors. Most of the walls around the Strand now stand more than seven metres high, and only the western edge of the Strand, where the neighbourhood meets the Lagan River, remains unwall'd. "We're fucking surrounded," Frankie said.

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I thought of Qalqilya, the Palestinian city almost completely enclosed by the West Bank Wall. "Why do you stay there?" I asked.

"Comfort," he said. All his friends and family still lived in the Strand. And the walls, for all their imposing sins, inspired a sense of kinship in those whom they surrounded. Unable to look outwards, the neighbours looked out for each other. Frankie never locked his car or the front door of his house. He believed the Strand's sense of community came from its "total isolation." The neighbourhood was peaceful most of the time. "The shit only happens at certain times of the year," Frankie said. "During the summer madness."

And there was at least one other reason to remain in the Strand. Frankie

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spoke with affection of a neighbourhood pub where it didn't matter what religion you were, "you always get treated like shit."

John knew the place. "They check you for weapons at the door. And if you don't have a gun, they give you one."

John planned on going to Ardoyne to photograph the Orangemen from Loyalist "upper" Ardoyne returning to their home lodge. The intersection of the Crumlin and Ardoyne roads became a flashpoint every year as marchers came through and passed about a dozen Nationalist homes. The parade angered residents and their supporters, who wanted the marchers rerouted away from their neighbourhood. John wanted to shoot the inevitable clashes between protesters and police. Frankie, bored with photographing riots, opted out.

John and I arrived at the Ardoyne junction an hour before the parade was expected to come through, and the police presence was already massive. Rows of armoured police vans lined both sides of the street, and police wearing full riot gear took positions on every corner. Water cannon trucks, looking like brawny, post-apocalyptic RVs, were parked at the ready. The community, too, had turned out in numbers. Families grilled burgers in their front gardens. Teenage girls in half shirts and too much makeup pranced in front of tough-looking boys. Only the army of body-armoured police officers and their vehicles suggested something other than a block party was going on. No one knew exactly what would happen, but nobody wanted to miss whatever did. Especially not the young. For Belfast teens, the night of the Twelfth meant gathering your mates to watch the riots. The clashes always provided a bit of *craic*, the Irish word for fun.

Before the Orange marchers appeared, a group of noisy protesters advanced up a side street, Brompton Park, towards the intersection. A phalanx of riot police and armoured vans rushed to block them. The protesters held signs identifying themselves as the Greater Ardoyne Residents Collective. Some had placards reading "No Parades = No Violence" or "End Sectarian Marches." One sign said "FARUC" — Fuck All

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Royal Ulster Constabulary, the former name of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. (My ability to decipher Belfast-acronymed loathing had sharpened. FA always stood for Fuck All, just as FT was Fuck The and KA was Kill All.) I stood immediately behind the line of police officers. Black body armour covered almost their entire bodies.

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Their shins, shoulders, and necks were all plated against attack. They carried pistols and riot batons at their sides and hooked handcuffs to the small of their backs. Black balaclavas beneath their helmets ensured only their eyes and noses were visible. They resembled science fiction soldiers.

Despite the impressive gear, the police garnered little respect. I watched a photographer push his way past one of the officers and stand in front of him to get a clear shot of the protesters. The officer shouted at him to step aside. The photographer turned, glared at the policeman, and told him to fuck off.

"I said get outta the way," the officer shouted and pushed the man from behind with his riot baton.

"And I said fuck off!"

The officer jabbed the man again. "I'll put it up your arse!"

The photographer turned to the officer, glared at him through his bulletproof visor, and sneered, "You're no police force!"

"I'll put it up your arse!"

"Yeah? Fuck you!" The photographer pushed past and walked ahead. The police officer did not respond.

The demonstrators quieted to allow a spokesman to make a speech through a megaphone. First, he assured the police officers that their protest was peaceful. He complained that the Parades Commission and the police service were treating the Nationalist residents of Ardoyne as second-class citizens while allowing the Loyal Order to pass unhindered through their neighbourhood. Then he demanded the demonstrators be allowed to proceed to the roadside to protest the marchers. The police held their line. The action lay at the heart of the Nationalist community's grievance over the parades. Not only does the government, represented by the Parades Commission, allow Loyalist marchers to proceed through neighbourhoods where they are not wanted, but the police service forbids the local residents from demonstrating against them. The citizens of Ardoyne were banished from their own streets to allow outsiders to march through. For the Nationalist residents of Ardoyne, the action proved

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the Loyalist bias of the police service.

In the end, the police did allow a different group of demonstrators to reach the roadside. About a dozen men and women silently held placards with messages such as "Respect Residents' Rights," "There is an Alternative Route," and "Shame on You." As these quiet protesters lined up along

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Crumlin Road to wait for the Orange marchers, I saw Breandán storming up the sidewalk. He was scowling and barely stopped long enough to shake my hand. "I'm tired. I'm pissed off. And I'm fed up," he said and stomped away.

Farther up Crumlin Road, beyond the protesters and police lines, about a hundred Unionist supporters stood behind a banner reading LOYALIST ARDOYNE. The crowd resembled the start of a marathon, but this was more of a finish line. The group marked the end of the march for the local Orange Order, and they waved Ulster flags and Union Jacks and were ready to grant the marchers a hero's welcome. John wanted to photograph this homecoming. We rushed to the top of Crumlin Road just before the marchers appeared. The Parades Commission dictated that the parades must walk silently when they passed through Nationalist areas. Bands were forbidden to play and the marchers couldn't sing. The procession, then, resembled a military funeral: unnaturally quiet aside from a single drummer who tapped out a steady cadence for the marchers on his snare drum.

When the Order came within a few metres of their welcome party at the top of the road, the snare drummer offered a little drum roll. On cue, the parade burst into music like a bomb going off. The musicians started playing, the marchers started to sing, and the crowd threw up their hands and cheered. Then they all moved aside to allow the marchers to pass through.

The end of the march signalled the beginning of whatever was to follow. Everyone's attention moved from the parade on Crumlin to the young men who'd quickly taken the place of the peaceful demonstrators on Brompton Park. Most wore track suits and hoodies that they pulled up tight over their heads and zipped up over their mouths and noses. Others concealed their faces with scarves or bandanas. One man wore a black balaclava and a camouflage jacket and looked as if he'd stepped down from a paramilitary mural. Some also wore gloves to conceal wrist tattoos. Every hand, gloved or not, carried a stone or piece of brick. Teenage girls milled around among the masked men and smoked cigarettes. The residents of the neighbourhood — men, women, families with small children — watched from sidewalks and street corners. The police, in

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the meantime, parked armoured vans in two tight lines on Crumlin Road to flank the entry to Brompton Park. They had resigned themselves to a war and wanted to shrink the battlefield.

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Once the masked men assembled, they started to hurl rocks and bottles at the police lines. The officers took cover behind the vans. One by one, the projectiles sailed overhead. Onlookers applauded when a stone bounced off the roof of a van or landed on the protective steel mesh over the windshields, but the rioters rarely hit anything at all. Many of them threw blindly over the roof of the betting salon on the corner of Brompton Park, their stones clattering onto the asphalt. One boy's sloppy throw earned giggles from the smoking girls and a rebuke from the gathered crowd. "Get that rubber arm outta there!" the man next to me shouted. Another onlooker carried his three-year-old daughter on his shoulders. She was crying. The man reached up, pinched her cheek, and told her not to worry. He continued to watch the show as she trembled above him.

The melee escalated as the rioters multiplied and their boldness increased. Steady volleys of stones and bottles sailed from Brompton Park onto the street. A pair of rioters lit a Roman candle and pointed it around the corner at the police line. The flares shot randomly into the street and scattered a group of spectators who scolded the rioters' clumsiness. Nothing hit the police. Once the Roman candles were spent, the rioters moved on to petrol bombs. They lit cloth wicks stuffed into Budweiser bottles filled with gasoline and hurled them at the police. The first mis-thrown petrol bomb hit an overhanging roof just above the thrower's head and exploded against the cinder-block wall. The neighbours laughed and jeered. Better arms threw the next bombs, which crashed in front of the police lines, smearing orange flames over the pavement. Another exploded on a police officer's riot helmet and set it briefly on fire. The officer, though, appeared unhurt.

The riot police rumbled the water cannon truck to the edge of Brompton Park and blasted rioters who dared come within range. Then the rioters ramped up their assault. Two men in balaclavas sped a stolen car out of Brompton Park and spun it onto Crumlin Road. The drivers barely controlled the car, and I feared they would barrel into the crowd of onlookers. They managed to stop the car in the middle of the road, a few metres in front of the police line. The men stepped out, poured petrol onto the seats, and lit the car on fire. The water cannon fired a single ambivalent blast of water at the car, but the police seemed content to let it burn.

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I'd never witnessed a car on fire before; the speed of its destruction impressed me. The smell of burning vinyl upholstery filled the street. Then the gas tank exploded with a blast far less dramatic than in the movies I'd seen. The car horn went off and the sustained honk added a strange comedy to the violence. As the tires burned and melted, the car seemed to sink into the pavement. Black smoke shaded the street and granted better light for the photographers, whose shutters went off like machine guns. The water cannon-wet streets sharpened the stench of smoke and gasoline the way everything smells more intensely after it rains.

The riot continued with a randomness that made me nervous. This was not like the action I'd witnessed in Jayyous. There was no cadence to this battle. No apparent choreography. I tried to remain in a neutral space on the side of the action and out of range of the rioters. At one point, though, everything shifted. The police surged one way, the rioters scattered in the other direction, and as I scrambled to avoid standing between the two factions, I ended up among the rioters themselves. Nobody paid any attention to me, but I didn't feel safe. Returning to the other side of the street, though, would have meant crossing in front of the police line. So I hung back, watched a group of boys pour gasoline from a white jug into beer bottles and waited for a break in the fighting.

Instead of a lull, the rioters launched a surprise frontal assault. A battalion of about ten masked men burst out of a side street onto Crumlin Road and charged the police line of armoured vans. Using rocks, fence posts torn from nearby gardens, and their bare fists, the boys pounced on the police vehicles and forced them back several metres. The move was fierce. The police retreat, though slight and brief, emboldened the rioters. Being near them, I could feel them crackle with savage joy. "We need more weapons!" one of them screamed, and the rioters started to tear apart the neighbourhood like a pack of wild dogs. They ripped gates from their hinges and downspouts from the sides of houses. Broke paving stones into throwable chunks. Pulled street signs out of the ground. Kicked bricks loose from garden walls. Smashed anything they could find into things they could throw. They destroyed without hesitation, as if the neighbourhood were sacrificing itself, piece by piece, to be hurled at policemen in the name of some unclear cause. Hours earlier, protesters had gathered to demand

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respect for their community. Now the rioters seemed intent on breaking it into pieces.

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I thought of the clashes in Jayyous and of the shabaab. They too were young men throwing stones at armoured enemies. But the shabaab never seemed like thugs. They possessed a grace that these rioting teens lacked. Even when their weekly battle against the IDF resembled sport, the action was born out of ideals. They fought for something, and there was dignity in those slung stones. The shabaab would never destroy their own village. There was no such honour on these wet Belfast streets. The balaclava boys showed no sense of cause. No righteousness born of injustice. Water from the cannon streamed like black fingers over the road and into the sewers. The car, still smoking, was now a shell of hot metal. Shattered glass, rocks, beer cans, and broken bricks were spread over the pavement like a pox. No wonder so few people in Belfast want the walls to come down.

While the rioters armed themselves, and the police waited for the next assault, I slipped across to the safer side of the street and behind the police line, where I rejoined John. "This is so fucking stupid," I said. My time among Belfast's colourful profanity had loosened my own curse-valve, and the vandalism I'd just witnessed made me angry. "What's the point of any of this?" John didn't answer. He just looked at me as if I could never understand. "If I asked one of those boys why he was rioting, would he even know? What would he say?"

"He would tell you to fuck off," John said. "And you would risk getting punched."

The riot settled into a comfortable standoff. The police regained the short section of street they'd lost and effectively hemmed the rioters in at Brompton Park with vans and the water cannon. The officers seemed content to absorb the stones and bottles from their positions and wait until the violence burned itself out. When rioters tried to advance onto Crumlin Road, the officers fired flash bombs and 37-millimetre "baton rounds"—hollow-nosed plastic bullets—from their riot guns to punch the youths back. The photographers gathered the empty shells as souvenirs. John handed one to me.

I felt my cellphone vibrate in my pocket. It was Ian. "I am on the other side of the street," he said. "I can see you from where I am standing. I just want to make sure that you are all right."

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"I'm staying close to the journalists. They seem to know how to stay out of danger."

"Well, keep your wits about you." He hung up. His call surprised me and eased a little of my anger.

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John and I stood behind the police line for half an hour longer. By ten o'clock, the police officers were starting to lean, bored and weary, against their vans. Aside from the occasional stone rattling onto the street, nothing much was happening, and John figured we wouldn't miss anything if we left. Before we walked back up the road to his car, I saw two young boys, about ten years old, standing nearby on the sidewalk. One casually kicked at a loose chunk of cracked sidewalk. He nudged his friend and pointed to the concrete. "Help me get that out," he said. He wanted to hurl it at the police. His friend glanced down at the pavement, then both boys looked at me. When they saw me listening, they walked away.

■■■

Breandán fell in love with Joanne when he was ten years old, but he needed six years to muster the nerve to ask her out. Not that there was anything shy about Breandán; there was just something about Joanne. One night, when they were teenagers and walking home from a date, Breandán got into a fight with four Protestant boys. "My father always told me that if you are ganged up on, make sure you give at least one guy the same as you're getting," he told me. Joanne watched as the boys brawled from one end of Ardoyne to the other. They hit each other with fists and stones and bottles.

After the fight, as Breandán stood hunched and bleeding, Joanne told him they would have to break up. Breandán asked her why. "Because I enjoyed that too much," she said.

"I'm glad you had fun, because I sure didn't."

"Yes you did," she said.

Breandán told me this story in his kitchen as he stirred a pot of spaghetti sauce. He may have been an Irish Republican, but Breandán was part Sicilian and put together a fine sauce. He and Joanne reunited in their twenties and got married. Now they had three beautiful, clever daughters. "Are you going to talk about that sauce all night?" the eldest, Aoife, asked him as he extolled

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the recipe. I didn't suspect Breandán's girls let him get away with much. Like Ian, Breandán doted on his daughters.

After dinner, Breandán and I had a Bushmills and water before Joanne drove us, along with Aoife, to the Gaelic football match at Clarmont Park. "This is football," Breandán said. "That other game is soccer." Despite his enthusiasm for the sport itself, the squad from Down soundly

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trounced Breandán's team, the Antrim Saffrons. Afterwards, Joanne came to pick up Aoife. Breandán and I walked downtown to a pub where he planned to meet friends. It was a long way to walk, though, so we stopped to rest at a pub on Springfield Road. Then again at a pub on the Falls. Then another before finally reaching Madden's.

As we walked, I told Breandán what Ian had told me, that members of the UDA never really leave the UDA. Breandán said the same was not true for the Republican groups. He pre-empted my next question by saying, "I've always been active in Republicanism." The phrase was akin to Ian's "allegedly": his way of letting me know, without telling me outright, that he volunteered for the IRA.

Breandán told me Bobby Sands and the hunger strikers inspired him towards "active Republicanism" when he was a young man. In 1981, a group of IRA prisoners in British jails demanded to be treated as political prisoners rather than common criminals. They staged a staggered hunger strike. First one prisoner would refuse food. Then, a week later, another prisoner would join the strike. Then another. A new prisoner began a hunger strike each week. The strikers knew that if their demands were not met, their eventual deaths would roll out one after the other. The strategy was brilliant. Bobby Sands was the first prisoner to refuse food. During his hunger strike, Republicans entered him as a candidate in the U.K. election to bring more attention to their cause. Sands won his seat by a tiny margin but starved to death less than a month later. The next hunger striker died a week after Sands, followed by two more prisoners the week after that. Over the summer of 1981, ten hunger strikers starved to death in prison. Nationalists refer to them as "The Ten." "The men were giants to me," Breandán said. He compared them to suicide bombers — those who, when deprived of all else, turn their bodies into weapons.

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We spoke about the riot I'd witnessed in Ardoyne. Breandán insisted none of the rioters were from Ardoyne at all and certainly none of his Draw Down the Walls kids were involved. We spoke about art and books. When I asked him what novel I should read that best describes the conflict in Northern Ireland, he replied, "The *Iliad*." He told me about a woman he was with before he married Joanne and the daughter they had together. He told me that his nine-year-old daughter once asked him if he knew anyone in the IRA. He told her, "Yes, of course."

"I suspect her next question was whether you were in the IRA," I said.

"No. She never asked. And I never told her."

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Breandán's honesty and openness reminded me of my conversations with Martin, Billy and Violet, Ian and Teena. Each offered me, a stranger with a notebook, glimpses into their pasts and personal lives that I had done nothing to deserve. Perhaps this is part of the generous Irish character or their quickness to friendship, I don't know. I was grateful, though, that I found very little standing in the way of the people I met. I don't know if it is ironic or apt that those most divided by physical walls, most mutilated by barriers, were also the most willing to let me in past their own.

Breandán and I rang the bell at Madden's and stared up at the closed-circuit camera. The bartender buzzed us in. No other pub I visited in Belfast — and I visited plenty — had such a security measure. I never knew if the security door at Madden's was just a relic of more violent times or if there was actually something to fear. We went upstairs and found Breandán's friends already crammed into a booth too small for them. About a dozen "session" musicians sat around the table next to us playing their instruments and downing their pints. The bar only paid one or two of the musicians. The rest showed up with their instruments — flutes and guitars, pipes in black cases, bodhran frame drums — and squeezed into empty seats to play just for the *craic*. Men in plaid shirts, blazers, and blue denim. Women in pretty dresses. They creaked the wooden chairs as they battered their drums and bowed their fiddles.

A few more beers with Breandán's crew and the night started to slip away. I remember, though, hugging Breandán when we said goodbye. And I remember a moment in the men's room. I stood at the long communal urinal next to an older gentleman while Breandán used the toilet in the stall. When

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the man finished and walked out, Breandán tapped me on the shoulder. "The man you were pissin' with bombed the Brighton hotel. Tried to kill Margaret Thatcher." Then he put a finger to his lips. "Shhh."

■ ■ ■

In 1994, a three-metre corrugated wall went up in Alexandra Park, splitting a public green space into sectarian halves. The Wall divided Catholic trees from Protestant trees. Nationalist monkey bars from Unionist monkey bars. The barrier severed a pathway and even crossed the river — a wall built where a bridge should be. Authorities erected the barrier because gangs of youths used the parkland as a battleground. The Wall didn't stop the brawls at first; rival gangs used to tunnel underneath. Eventually, though, the combatants found more convenient places to fight.

In September 2011, the Alexandra Park Wall became the first barrier ever to open in Belfast. Thanks to the efforts of Breandán, Ian, and the community associations they represented, along with like-minded activists and city politicians, the two sides of the park reunited. Prior to the opening, a gate had been installed in the Wall. Then an artist with Draw Down the Walls “disappeared” the gate just as he’d done with the barrier on Flax Street, by fixing high-resolution photographs over both sides that depicted the view if the gate didn’t exist. Finally, before a gathering of dignitaries and media, the gate swung open. Two primary school girls — one Catholic, the other Protestant, and both too young to remember the park without the Wall — met at the line as the ribbon was cut. David Ford, the local justice minister, said it was an “important day for Northern Ireland.”

I had returned to Canada by that time and was disappointed the opening hadn’t occurred while I was in Belfast. Then again, the hate-filled days of summer hardly stirred acts of reconciliation, even symbolic ones; the parties involved had to wait until the flames died down. The news from Alexandra Park failed to hearten me, though, especially after I’d witnessed the fangs of July. The terms of the opening were not inspiring either. For a three-month trial period, the park gate would open on weekdays between nine in the morning and three in the afternoon. At night, and all weekend long, the gate would be locked shut, so children could pass through the new gate only during the times they would normally be in school. Even the symbolism of

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the gesture felt thin. Unlike most of the interface barriers, the Alexandra Park Wall does not stand in a residential area. The barrier never offered protection to people’s homes in the same way as, say, the Wall at Springfield or in nearby Tiger’s Bay. The barrier hadn’t accomplished anything for nearly twenty years. I couldn’t help but feel that this wall was relatively easy to open. I doubted that this was, in fact, an important day for Northern Ireland.

I recalled my visit to Belfast City Cemetery, a burial ground dating back, like Alexandra Park, to the late 1800s. Following a map I’d copied from a city website, I walked among the old graves on the southern edge of the cemetery. The plots were overgrown and unkempt. Plastic bags and empty cans of Harp littered some of the sites. Some gravestones had broken or the carved names of the interred had nearly eroded away to anonymity. Others were marked by ornate metal bars that reminded me of bed frames. The graves were not lined up in neat rows but scattered haphazardly over the grounds. In the southwest corner, though, I found what I’d been looking for: a narrow path of grass extending between



gravestones in a straight line. Buried beneath this line was a wall built to separate dead Catholics from dead Protestants.

When William Gay of Bradford, England, first designed the cemetery in 1867, he instructed his masons to build a nine-foot underground wall of black stone between the Catholic and Protestant sections of the cemetery. The division turned out to be unnecessary; a dispute between the Catholic bishop and Belfast officials meant no Catholics were ever buried on either side of the line. Still, the Wall remains. I walked back and forth overtop the buried barricade. Clover and white wildflowers grew out of the grass. Perhaps I was imagining it, but the ground felt firmer beneath my feet.

The underground wall provides a cheap and easy metaphor. I understand the idea of consecrated ground, and I know the cemetery’s founders built the Wall long before the Troubles sowed the peacelines I’d come to Belfast to see. Still, the buried wall speaks to the permanence of Belfast’s barriers. They rise between the living and follow the dead into the ground. The walls stand not just as architecture but as archaeology. Fossilized artifacts of enduring division. I found the deep scar tissue of an underground wall to be a more relevant symbol of the mutilated city than the image of little girls frolicking through a gate that opens every once in a while.