John Barton / THE TROUBLES

until what centres no longer holds us, we compose
pictures along the Falls Road, our car stopped
shoppers window-gazing and unaware of the feints
of shadow and light we insinuate among pyramids
of fruit or trail across headlines in the newsstand
tabloids as we jump quickly in and out, frame time
with our viewfinders, the countless murals we snap
drafted by sympathizers on the long overexposed
exterior walls of the steep-roofed, red-brick, soot
tarred houses, grocers, haberdashers, and hardware
shops, murals about strikers who, two decades ago
in Armagh, starved to death by choice, the English
prison not far from the seat of my mother's family
who left the North years before the Famine, later
Loyalists settled in Upper Canada west of Kingston
the first house standing still in the plentiful winds
gusting over the lake and Amherst Island, its crawl
space scooped from shale damp with the panic felt

hiding with the family silver carried with care all the way from Markethill, Johnson's gang of Yankee sympathizers tacking across the lake, staging raids during what at school we labelled the Rebellion the unsettling climates trailed behind my ancestors becalmed into what is now a quaint four-poster bed and-breakfast where I would've taken you, another adventure in the *Boy's Own* story of Ireland we had hoped one day to expatriate, the history of two men who through their troubles unite as one, despite what might hold them apart, checkpoints and pipe bombs, this uncentred and sudden widening maze of streets turning us away from where we thought to go, visiting from elsewhere, driven by a friend who has lost any faith she knows where to take us so keeps us lost, hers an entire life of roadblocks and Guinness, having learned she is who she is where she is — the best and the worst — and, hoping

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to drive us clear of danger, turns us into the centre of a riot, the car dividing perspectives while rocks skid across a fragmenting windscreen, this woman at the wheel living in an eternal present that is not Belfast, her vision of this intensely passionate city a long-fallen capital where, despite every wrong turn, couples meet and love, where despite herself she drops us off so we can shoot murals to the dead mothers and their missed children — they shame her far more than they trouble us — these commissioned vigilante works of art vitalizing the Easter Rising and Civil War two stories high in green and orange or blacks and sombre greys in contrast to the coat of arms painted by paramilitaries at every corner of the Shankhill Road, the Red Hand of Ulster held religiously palm flat and forward, complex URLs of the UDA, the UUF, the UVF, and the UYM blazoned in scrolls beneath crossed machine guns

and mute black-masked men who through torn slits look at us while we block our shots, you filling up your throwaway until it consumes itself, my hands shaking, my Minolta unable to track however few exposures my film still can make accommodations for, both of us cropping similar photos of the same wayside towns as we are later driven cross-country on the grand tour, sheep-crazed and whiskey-wise the kamikaze switchback roads along the jagged coastline turning and turning us into unexpected vistas, promontories sharpening against the azure our separate records overlapping, as if something untoward will drive us apart, a gesture or veering look at a stranger, cognizant already of the troubles we might import and give anxious voice to at home love's terrorism, his sweet erasure so annihilating it undoes the existence first of one of us and then the other, the briefest of excursions across the most

faint of lines there is never any coming back from
the Republic a haven where the North goes to relax
the air on either side of the border acrid with turf
smoldering as it has for centuries in village hearths