

The Body as Revelation

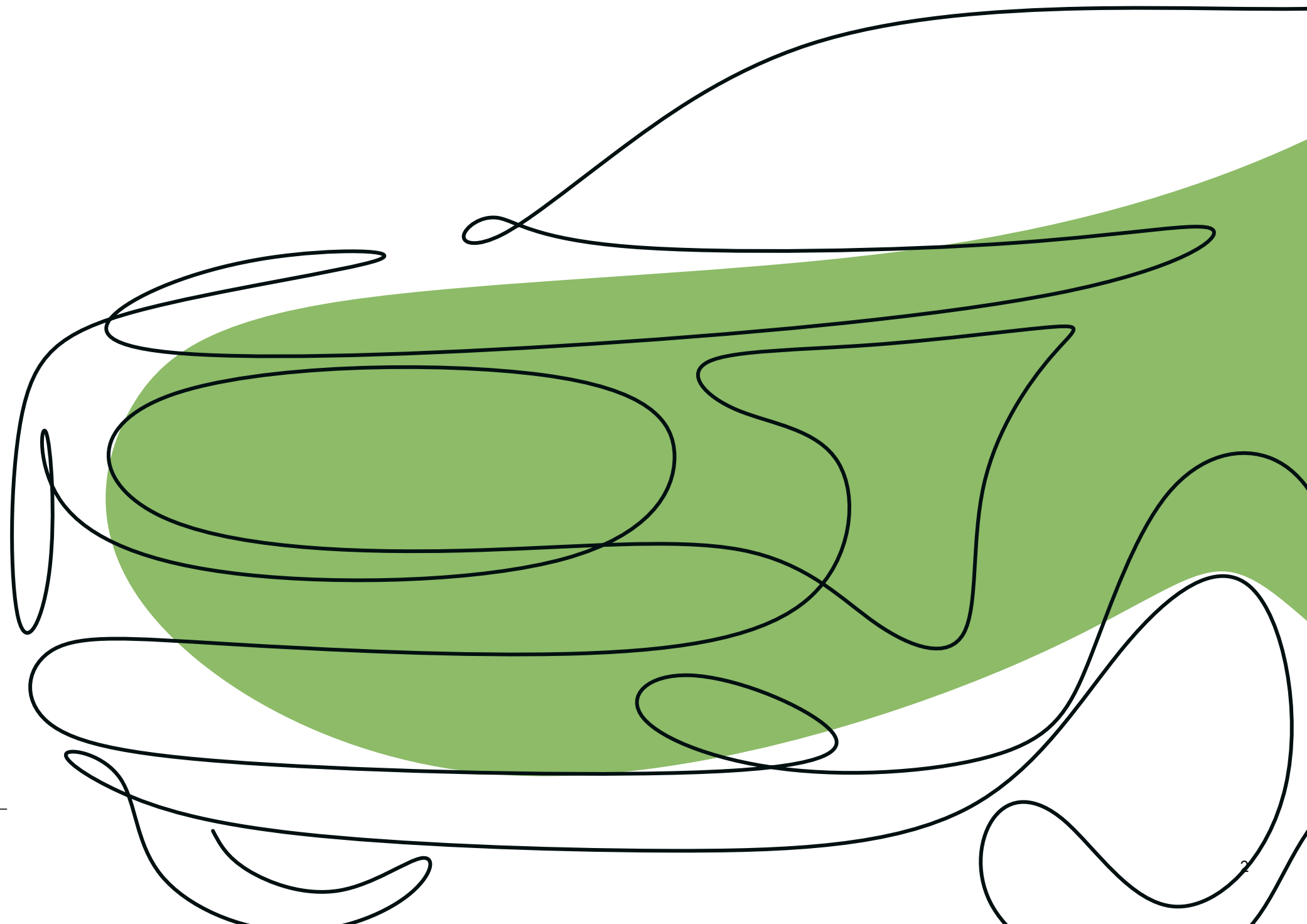
in Jan Carson's "Grand So"



Karolina Ulloa, MA

TODAY'S STOPS

- (1) Introduction to Jan Carson
 - (2) The Irish short story tradition
 - (3) The Troubles (and its specters)
 - (4) Quickly, While They Still Have Horses
 - (5) “Grand So”
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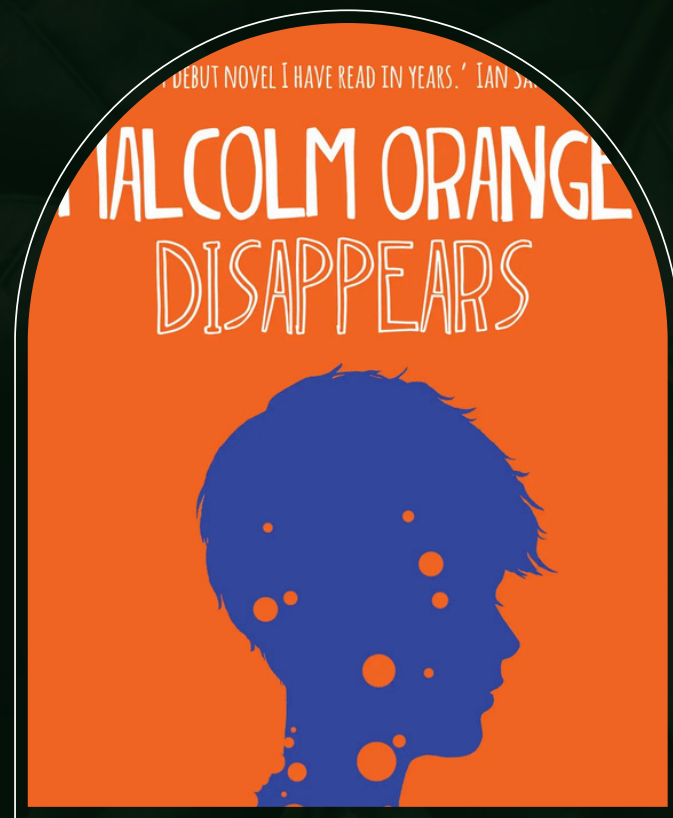


Jan Carson

BELFAST, 1980

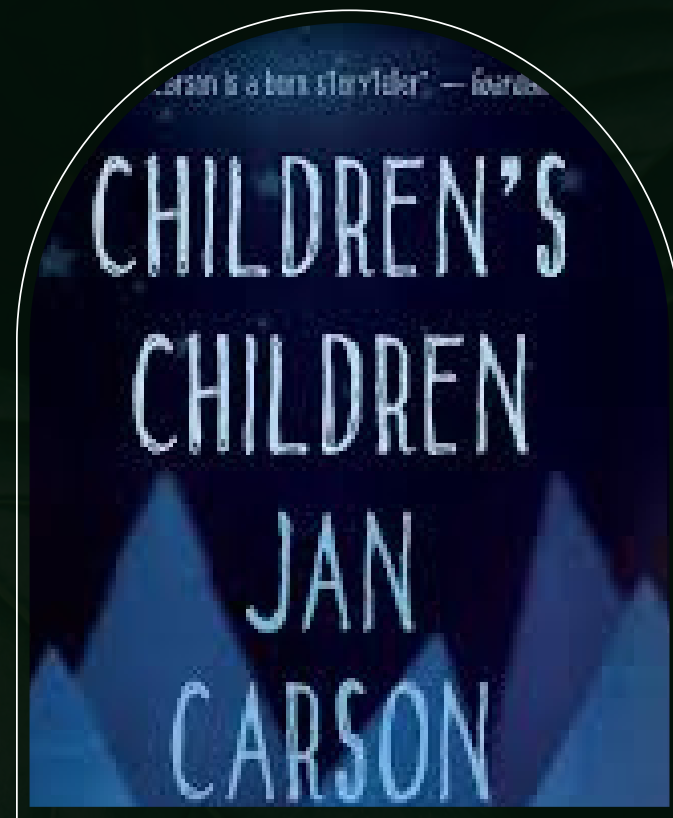
- Raised within a rural evangelical Presbyterian community
 - Socially conservative upbringing
- Community Arts and Elderly advocate
- Four novels, three short story collections, and two micro-fiction collections
- Seamus Heaney Centre Fellow at Queen's University Belfast in 2025
- Magical realism: a way of re-seeing Northern Ireland's political and social complexities
 - Surreal or speculative elements to revisit familiar histories "with fresh eyes," especially in a society where the Troubles risk becoming narratively repetitive or overdetermined
 - Everyday Northern Irish life with uncanny or supernatural disturbances, transforming landscape, memory, and trauma into something simultaneously intimate and strange
 - ∴ less on direct violence and more on its residues
- Carson occupies an important transitional space:
 - Generation of authors—including Wendy Erskine, Lucy Caldwell, and Louise Kennedy—who move beyond direct representations of sectarian violence while still confronting its enduring affective and cultural legacies.





Malcolm Orange Disappears

2014



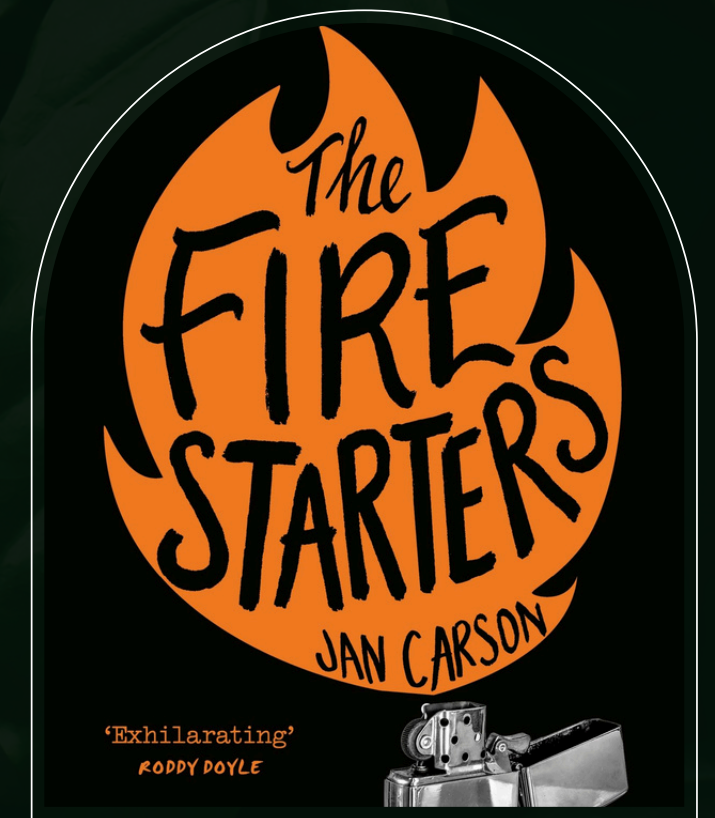
Postcard Stories

2017



Postcard Stories

2017



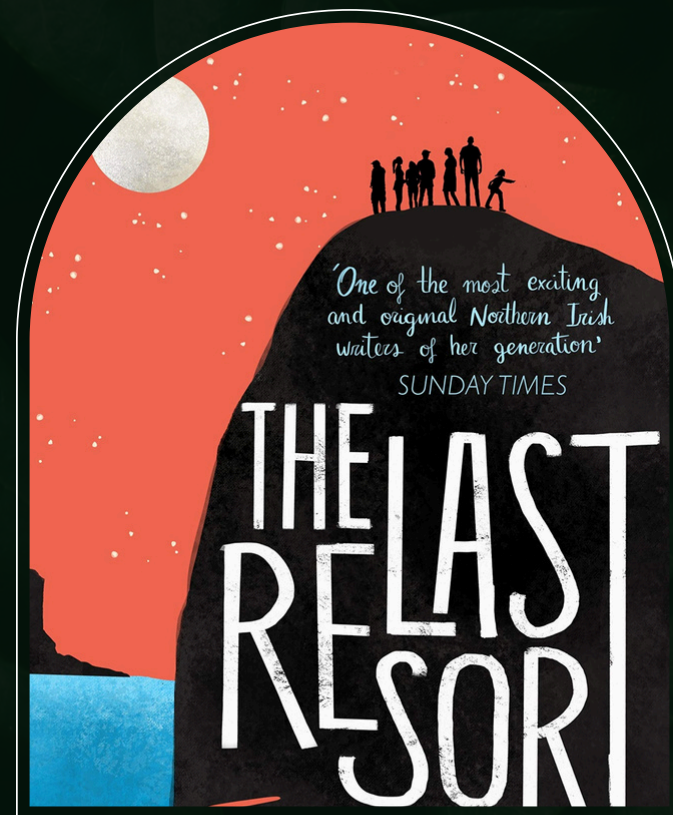
The Fire Starters

2019



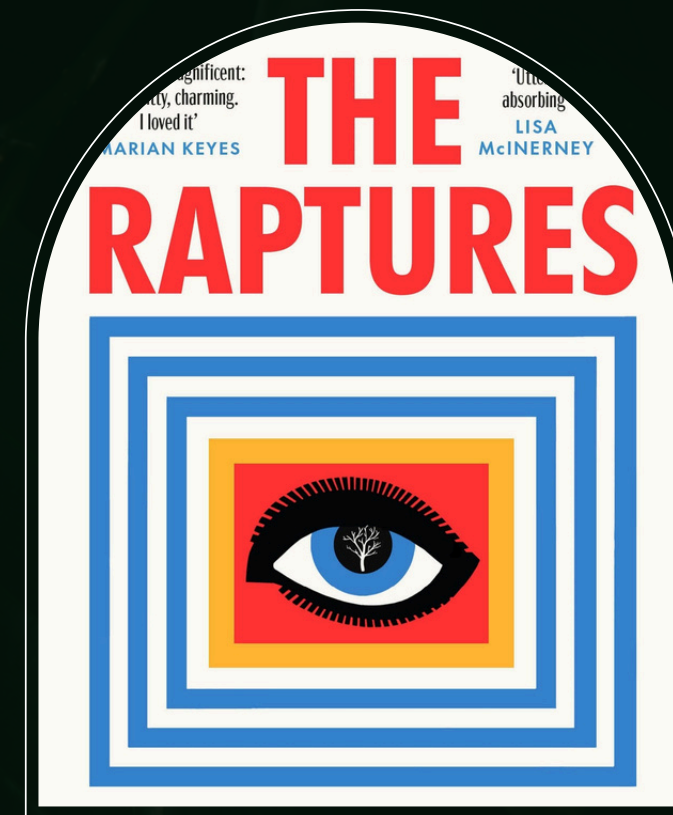
Postcard Stories 2

2020



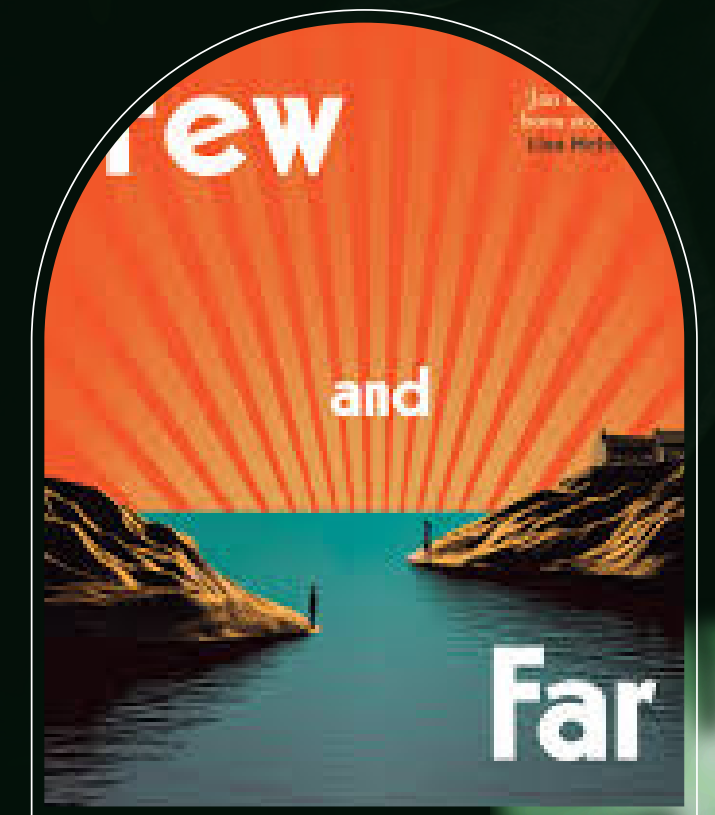
The Last Resort

2021



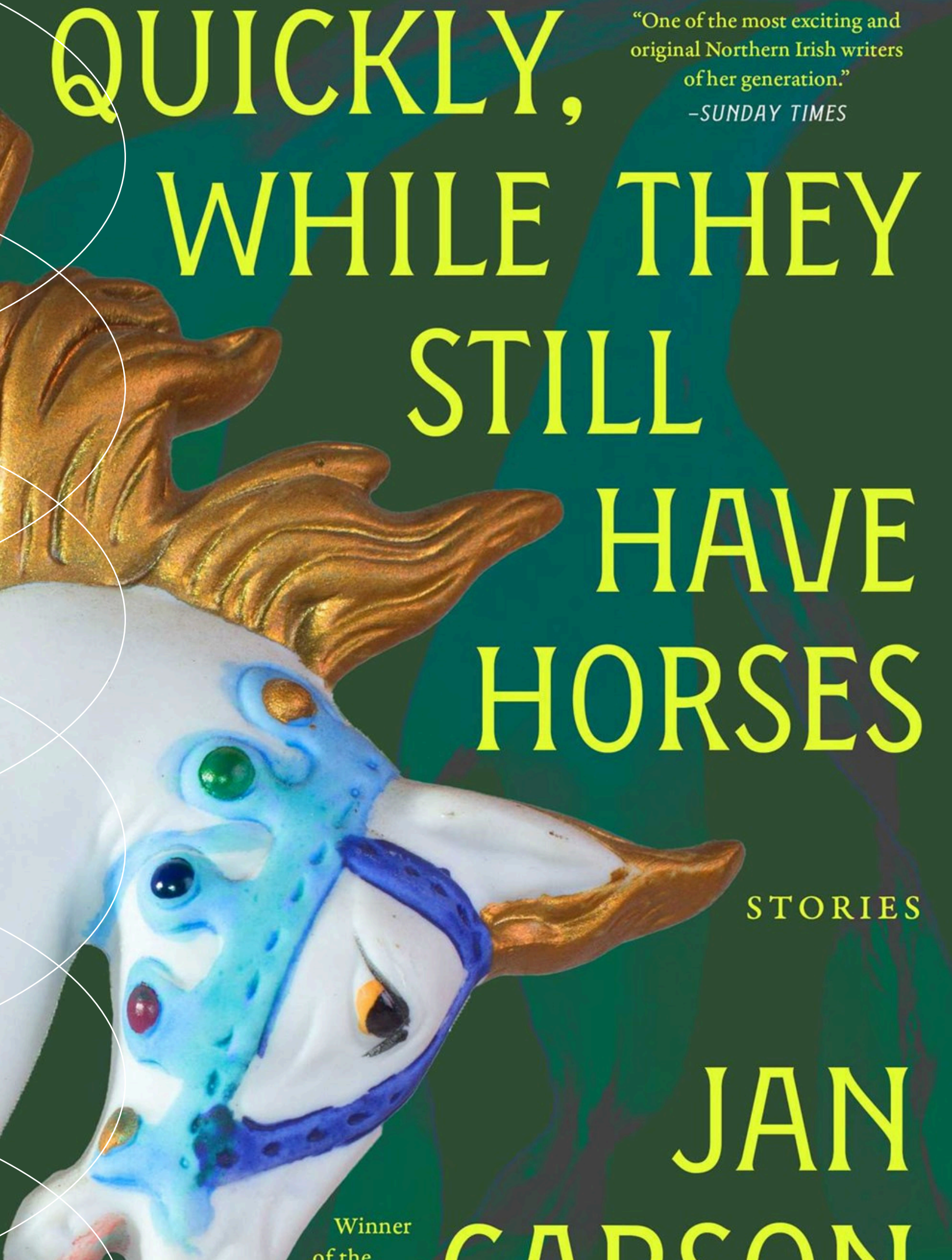
The Raptures

2022



Few and Far Between

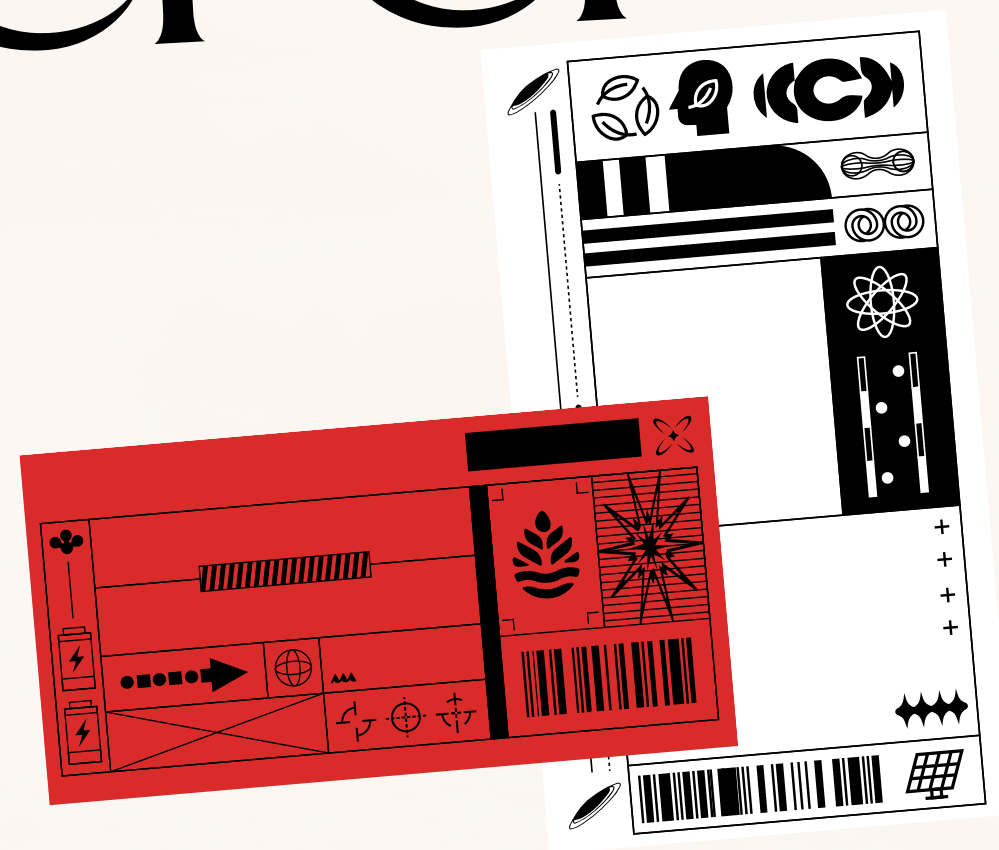
2026



2024

- Winner of the EU Prize for Literature
- A "reminder that even the smallest of worlds can be filled with weirdness" (Patterson)
- "Jan Carson knows how to make a reader feel uncomfortable. ... Carson excels in offering an accumulation of detail, deftly painting portraits that convince even as they alarm" (O'Regan)
- "Humorous and horrifying, tender and absurd, the stories in *Quickly, While They Still Have Horses* offer a fresh, irreverent look at life in post-conflict Northern Ireland"
- Carson turns Northern Ireland into speculative terrain: archipelagos, flooded histories, fragmented memory-spaces (Brown)

“The North whisperer”



(O'Connor 00:03:36)



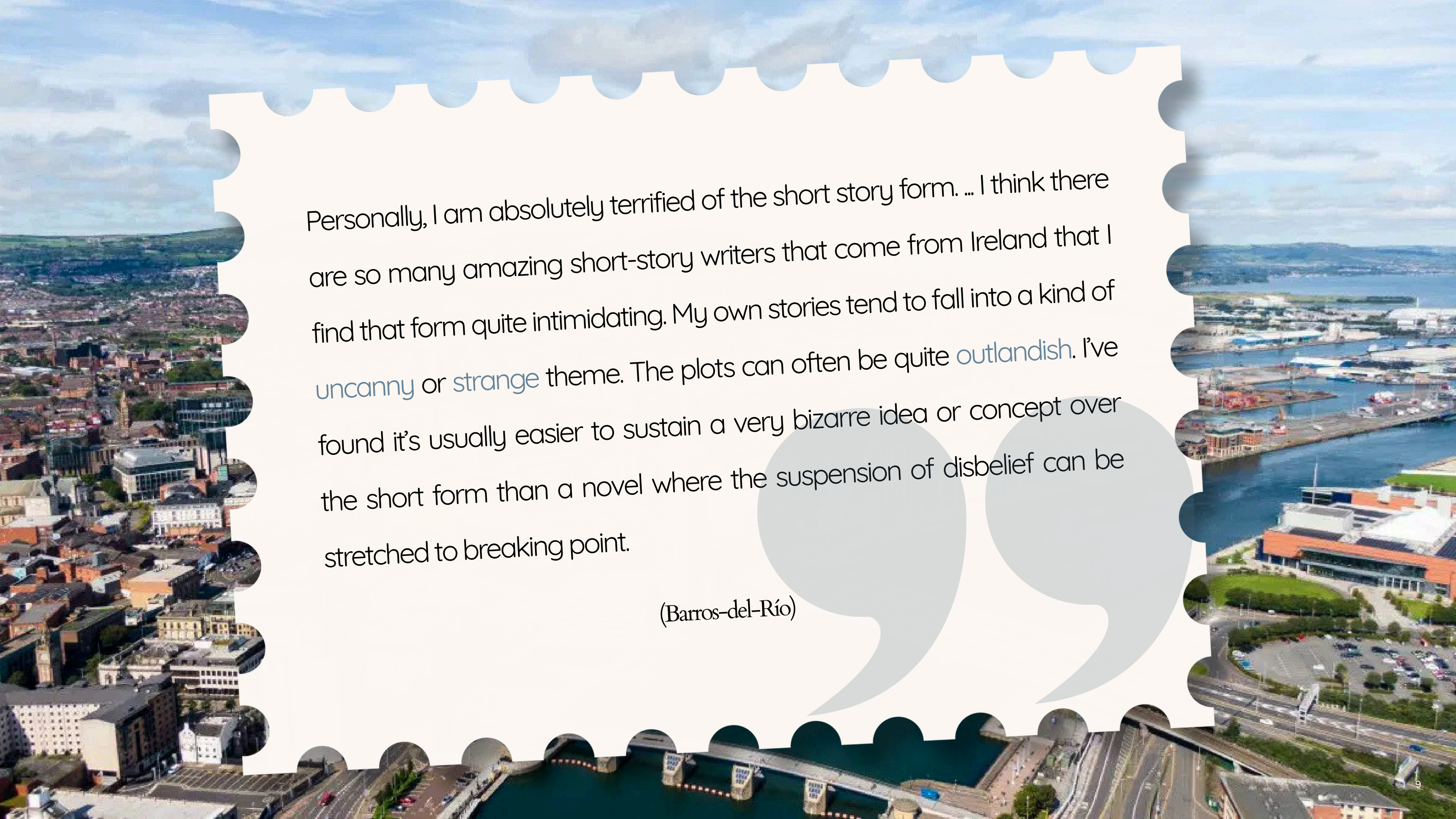
The Irish Short Story Tradition

- The most eminent prose form of literature in Ireland (Ingman 1; Kenneally 16), an epithet nurtured during the second half of the twentieth century due to the impulse to define it as the national genre (D'hoker 3)
- Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice*: his was a “submerged population” (10) embodied in “outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society” (11). According to him, the “intense awareness of human loneliness” (11) made Irish authors satisfy “the standards of the individual, solitary, critical reader” (8)
- Underlying this differentiation, there is a “perpetual fantasy to wield against insularity and underdevelopment” that has “been reclaimed by the Irish as virtues” (Townsend 48–9)



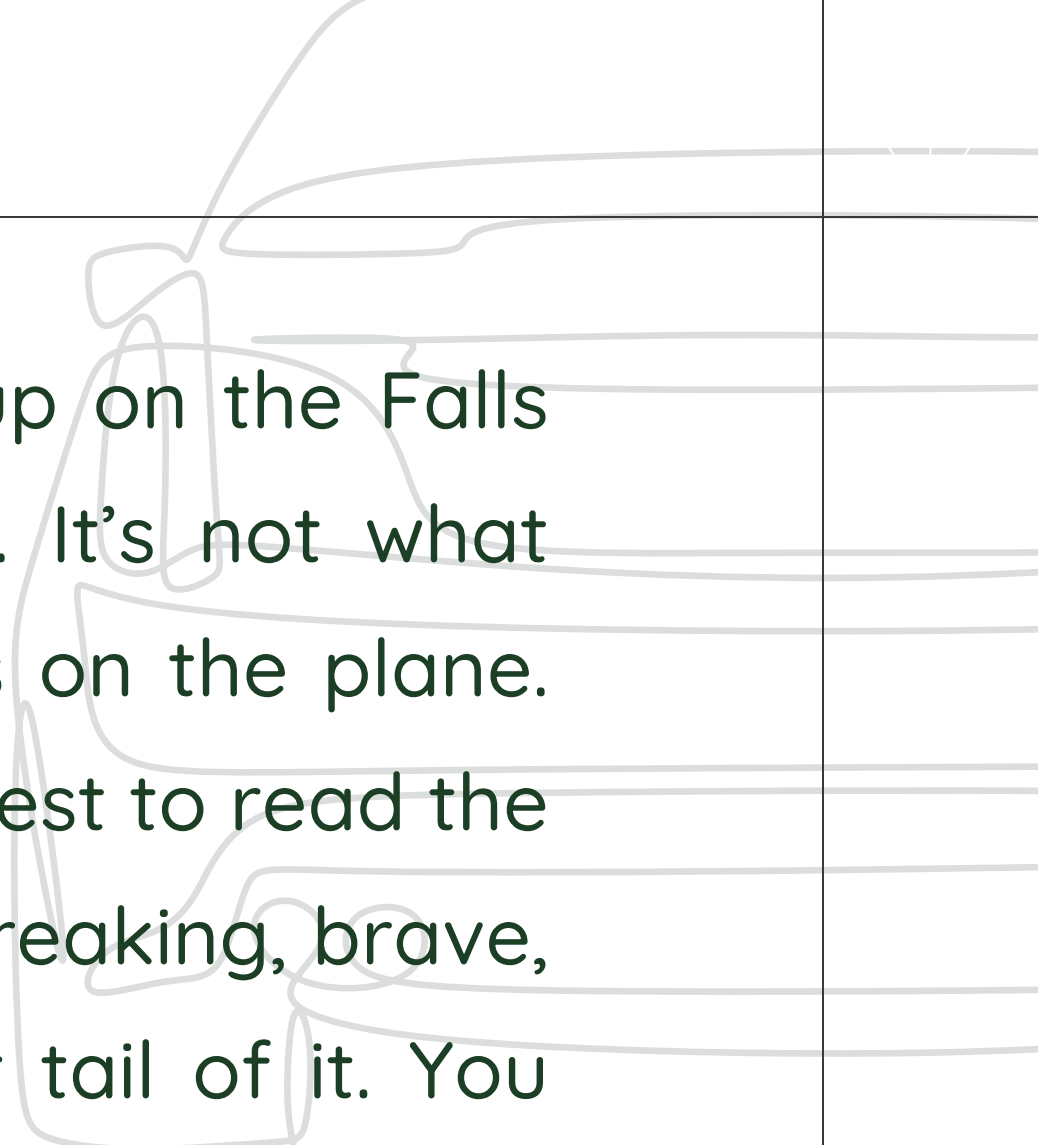
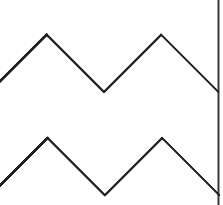
The Irish Short Story Tradition

Given that the short story is an “**in-between place of shifting identities, of change and transformation**” (Ingman 12), during its ongoing “renaissance” (Kenneally 18) this genre is an appropriate vehicle for the exploration of what lies outside the margins of what is considered “containable” (Smallwood).

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Belfast, showing a river, a bridge, and various buildings. The image is framed by a white scalloped border. A large, light gray speech bubble is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

Personally, I am absolutely terrified of the short story form. ... I think there are so many amazing short-story writers that come from Ireland that I find that form quite intimidating. My own stories tend to fall into a kind of uncanny or strange theme. The plots can often be quite outlandish. I've found it's usually easier to sustain a very bizarre idea or concept over the short form than a novel where the suspension of disbelief can be stretched to breaking point.

(Barros-del-Río)

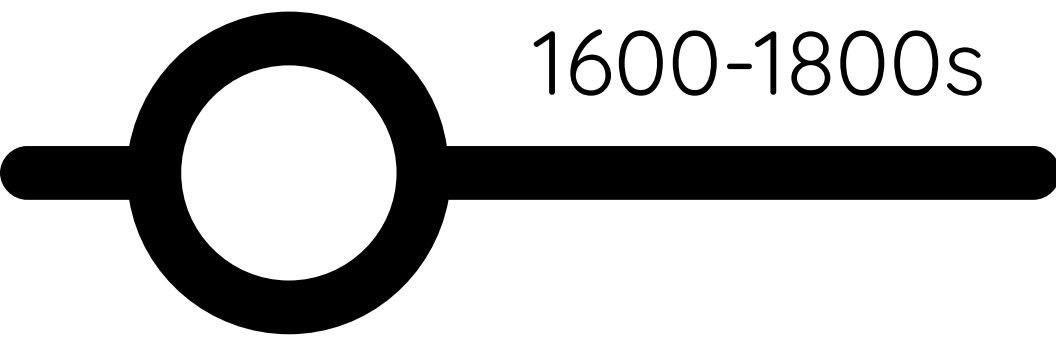


When you nod, he launches into a speech about growing up on the Falls Road during the Troubles. Tourists probably love this shit. It's not what you're after this afternoon. You've Wikipedia'd the Troubles on the plane. And you've watched both series of Derry Girls. You did your best to read the novel that won the big prize. Your official take was “groundbreaking, brave, a worthy winner.” Unofficially, you couldn't make head nor tail of it. You wouldn't have given her the Booker yourself. You thought the woman couldn't write. You know more than most about Northern Ireland. Enough for a short human interest piece. You don't require a taxi driver's ten cents on the NI Protocol.

(“Mostly People Just Throw Bricks”, Carson 122)

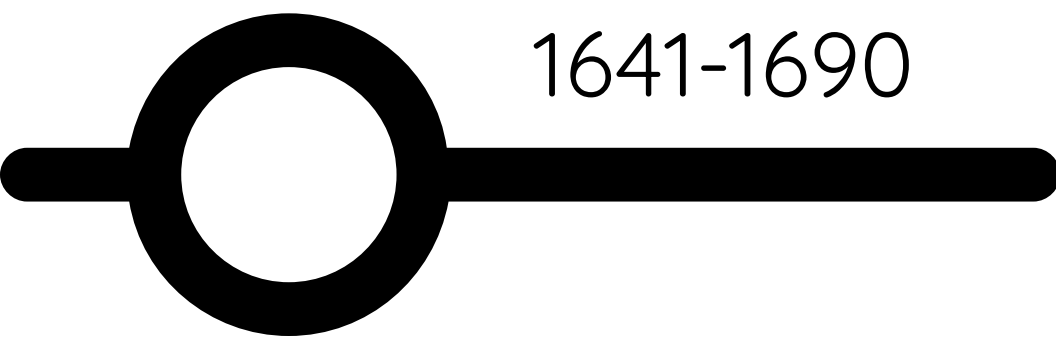
TIMELINE

Northern Ireland (2002), Marc Mulholland:
communities become territorialized



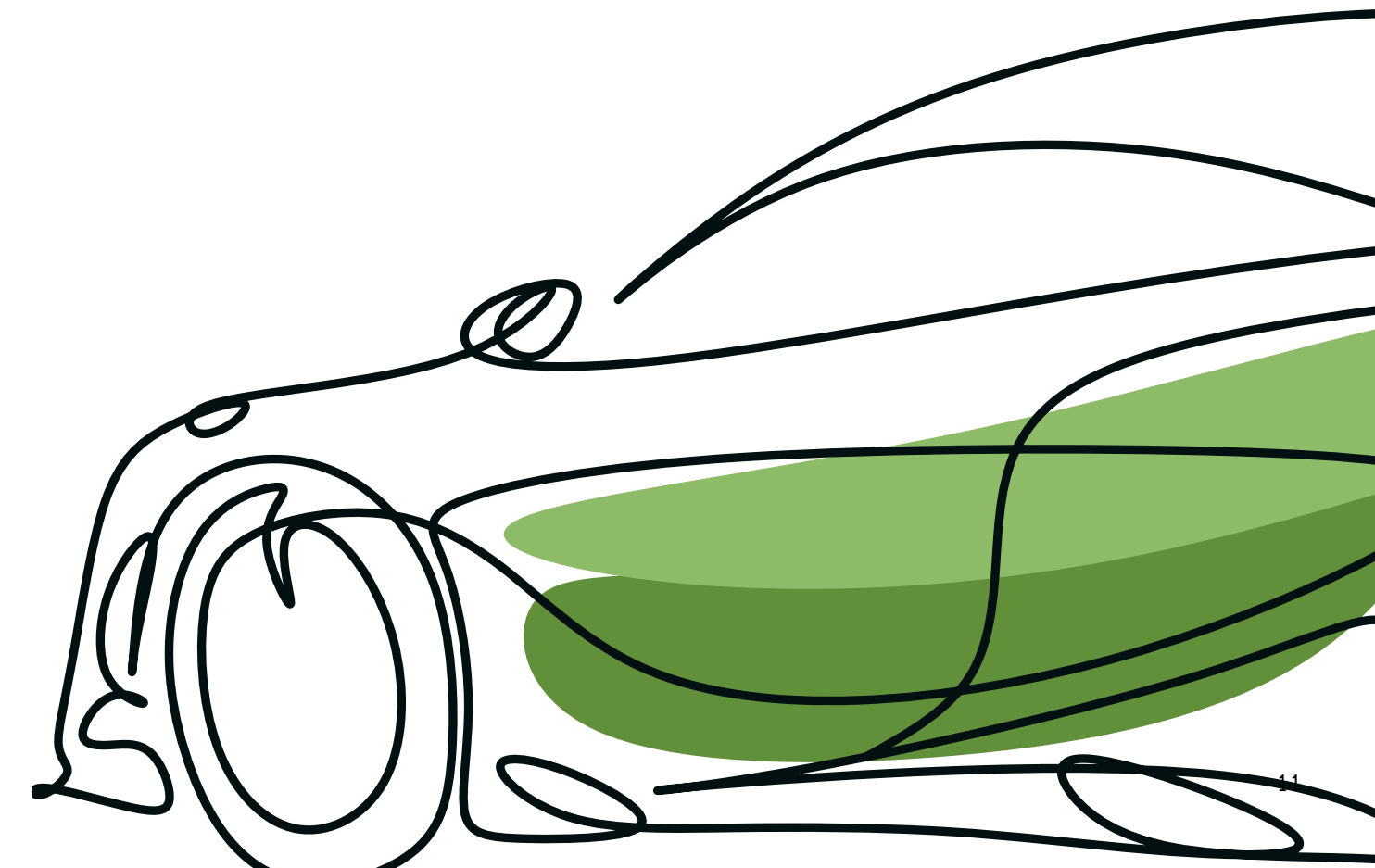
1600-1800s

English and Scottish Protestant Settlement in Ulster after the Gaelic defeat



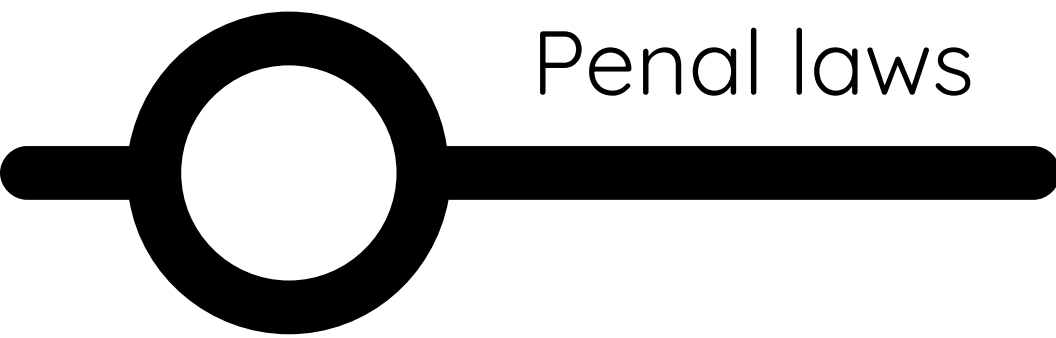
1641-1690

Wars of religion: memories of massacre, siege, and revenge



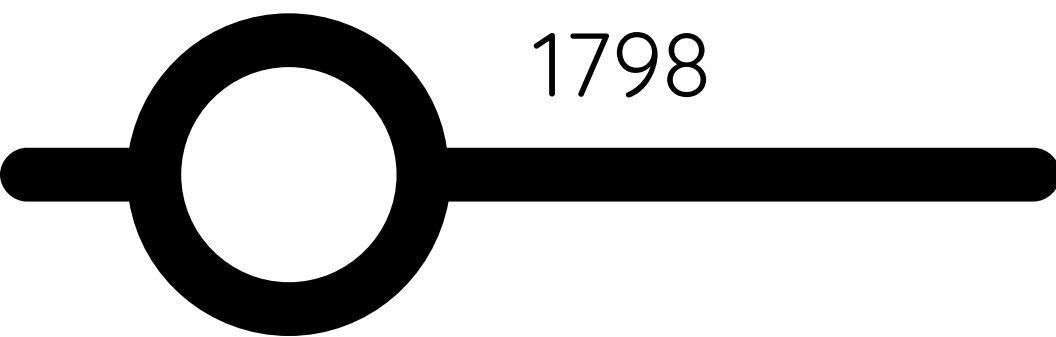
TIMELINE

Northern Ireland (2002), Marc Mulholland:
communities become territorialized



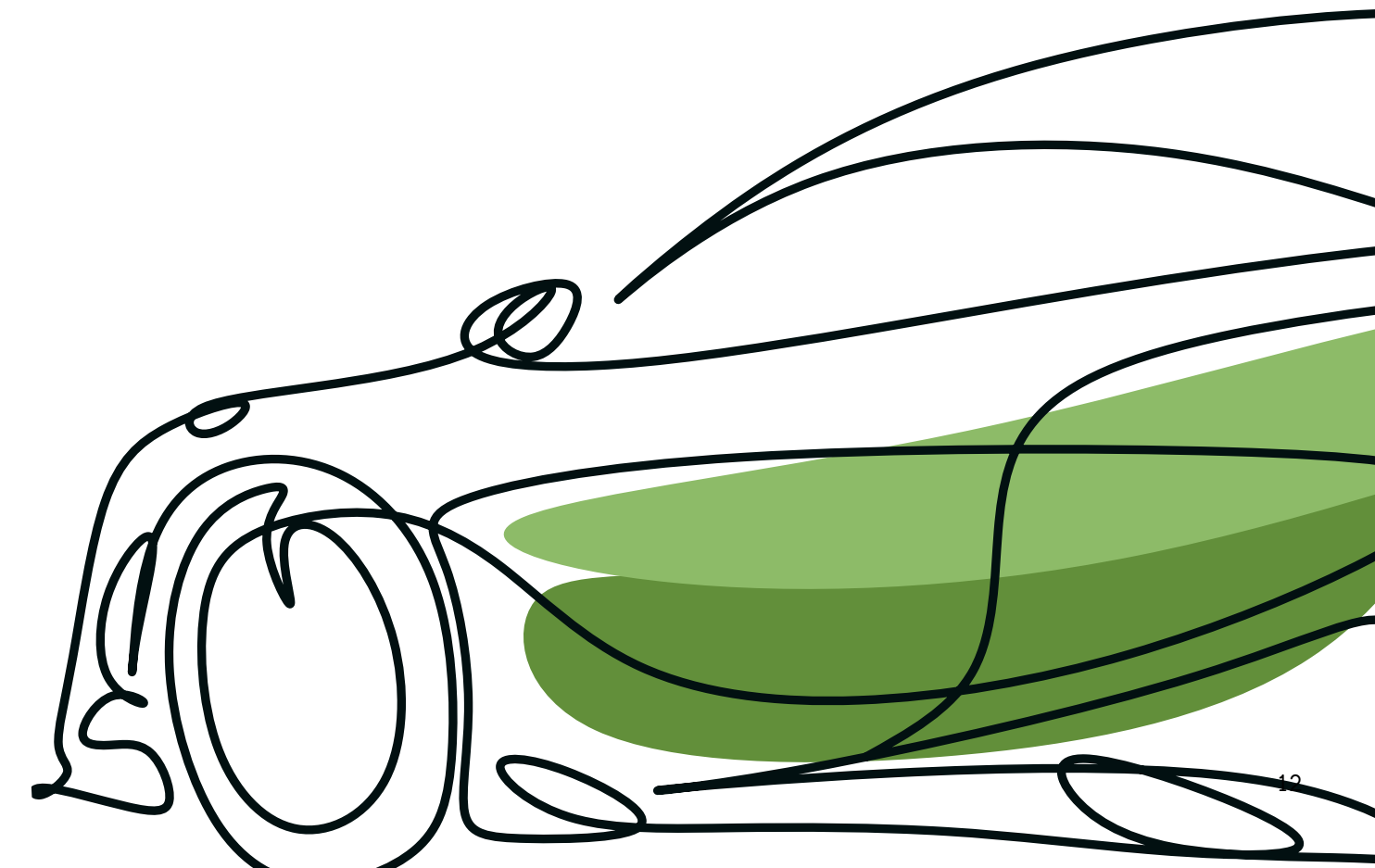
Penal laws

Catholic power becomes constrained and Protestant
insecurity is encoded defensively



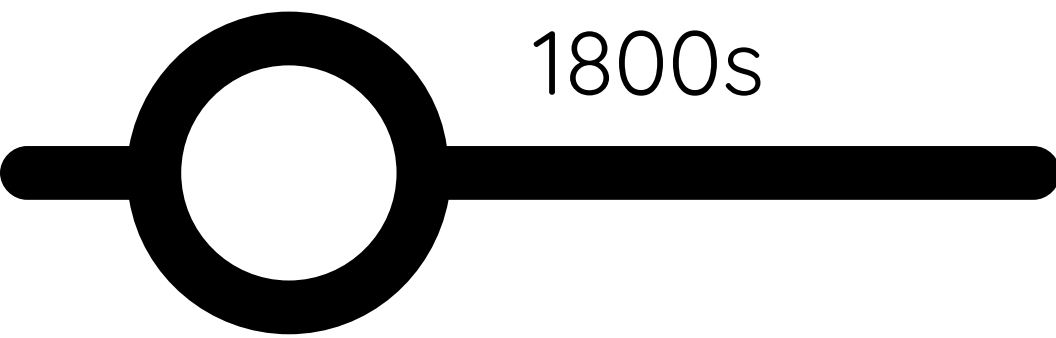
1798

United Irish republicanism briefly crosses religious line, but
then collapses



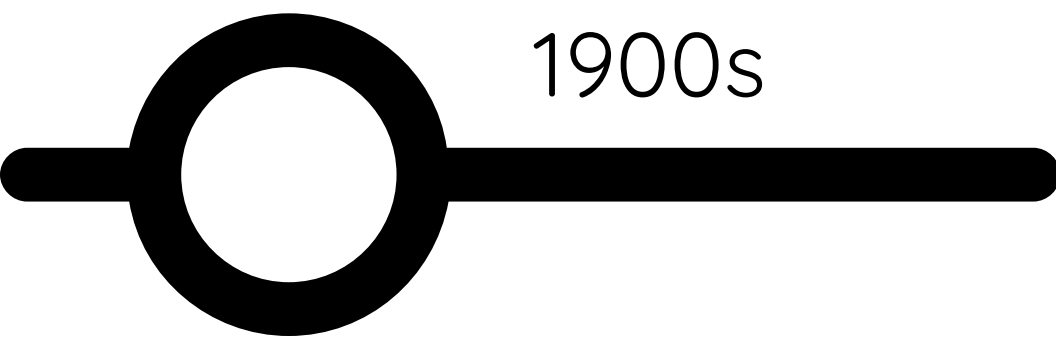
TIMELINE

Northern Ireland (2002), Marc Mulholland:
communities become territorialized



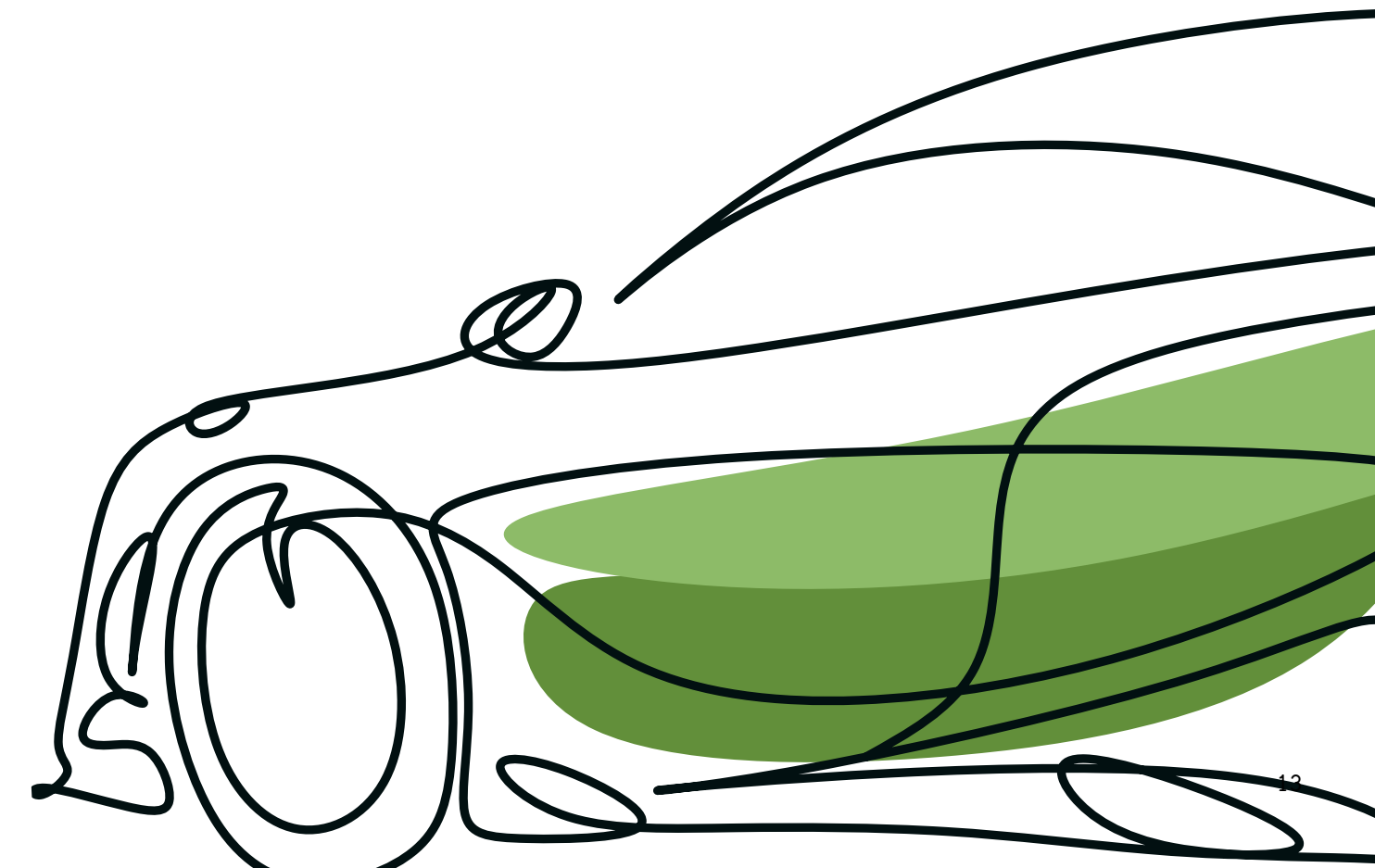
1800s

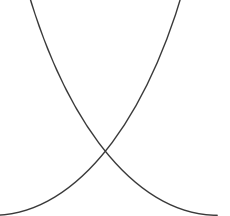
Industrial Belfast grows, and rural sectarian patterns become urban



1900s

Home Rule: Irish self-government efforts become a Protestant Ulster crisis





Memory becomes a political equipment.

- **Unionists** accept partition as a second-best option: protected Protestant-majority as a statelet
→ **vigilance**
- **Nationalists** experience the new state as an imposed loss: Irish identity trapped inside a hostile polity
→ **distrust**
- **Britain** treats Northern Ireland as a practical settlement rather than a syncretic unity



Insularity

Discrimination was “limited in scale” but pervasive enough to make Catholics experience the state as humiliating and illegitimate. Reform therefore became unstable: civil rights could quickly become a crisis of sovereignty.

- Electoral boundaries and local government control
- Housing allocations and urban planning
- Jobs, policing, and security-force culture.
- Exclusive Unionist symbolism: holidays, statues, parades





Derry/ Londonderry

The city as a sign of contested sovereignty, memory, and institutional power

- Nationalist/Catholic majority vs Unionist council control through ward design
- Housing concentrated in ways that preserved electoral advantage
- Economic development constrained by fear of altering the communal balance



Terence O'Neill

An exposition of the instability of the system

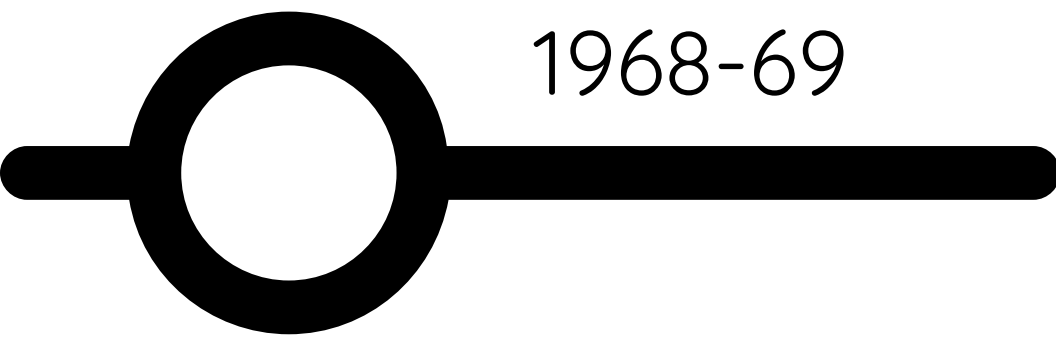
- **Modernization:** economic planning, welfare-state confidence, & tentative outreach to Catholics
- **Catholic expectation:** possibility of equal citizenship
- **Unionist anxiety:** reform as a threat of fragmentation of the Protestant unity and a weakening of the state's defensive majority

→ Who **owns** the State?



TIMELINE

Northern Ireland (2002), Marc Mulholland:
communities become territorialized



1968-69

5 Oct 1968

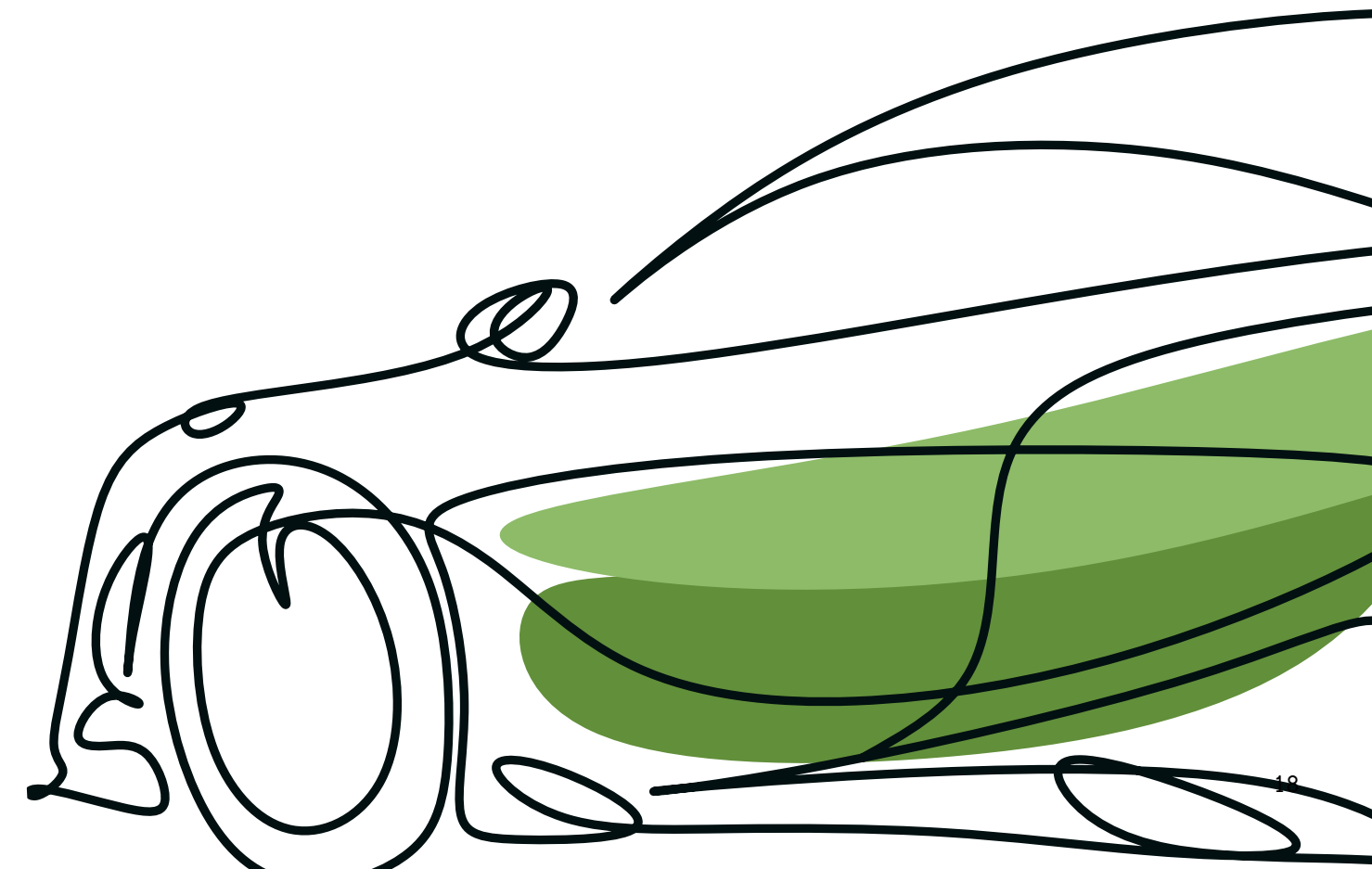
- A planned parade in Derry to protest at the allocation of houses, jobs and the limited franchise in local government elections
→ catalyst
- The violence of the Royal Ulster Constabulary gives civil-rights activists moral visibility

Jan 1969

- Attack on civil-rights marchers: intensification of the perception that peaceful protest cannot be protected

August 1969

- Battle of the Bogside





The IRA

Belfast Burnings (1969)

“Old” IRA

- Militarily weak and ideologically divided, shifting toward leftist politics
- Poor defense of Catholic areas → source of humiliation

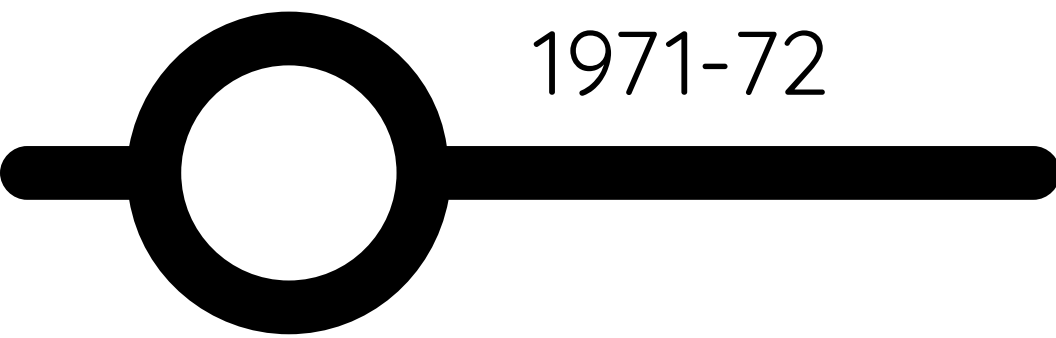
The split (1969–70)

- Official IRA vs Provisional IRA. The Provisionals inherit “physical force” republicanism and gain legitimacy as defenders of Catholic ghettos
- Army searches (intrusive patrols); feeling of occupation (surveillance and collective suspicion); “legitimization” of violence

Political violence is not only ideology; it is also shame, masculinity, defense, pride, and the need to narrate oneself as not abandoned.

TIMELINE

Northern Ireland (2002), Marc Mulholland:
communities become territorialized



1971-72

Aug 1971

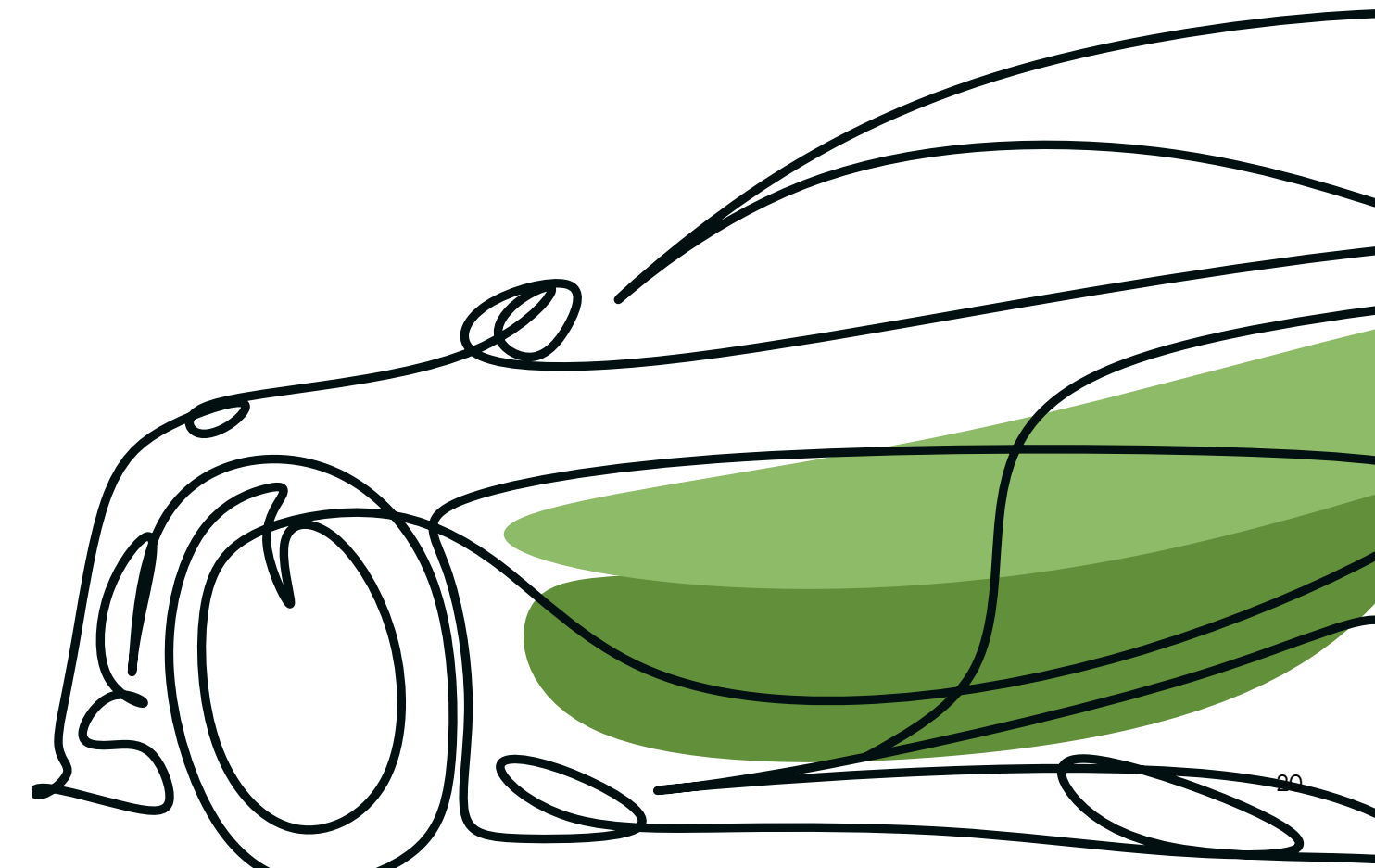
- Internment

Jan 1972

- Bloody Sunday
 - Collapse of Catholic faith in state neutrality
 - Violence becomes harder to condemn inside nationalist areas

21 July 1972

- Bloody Friday



Statistics

3,600+

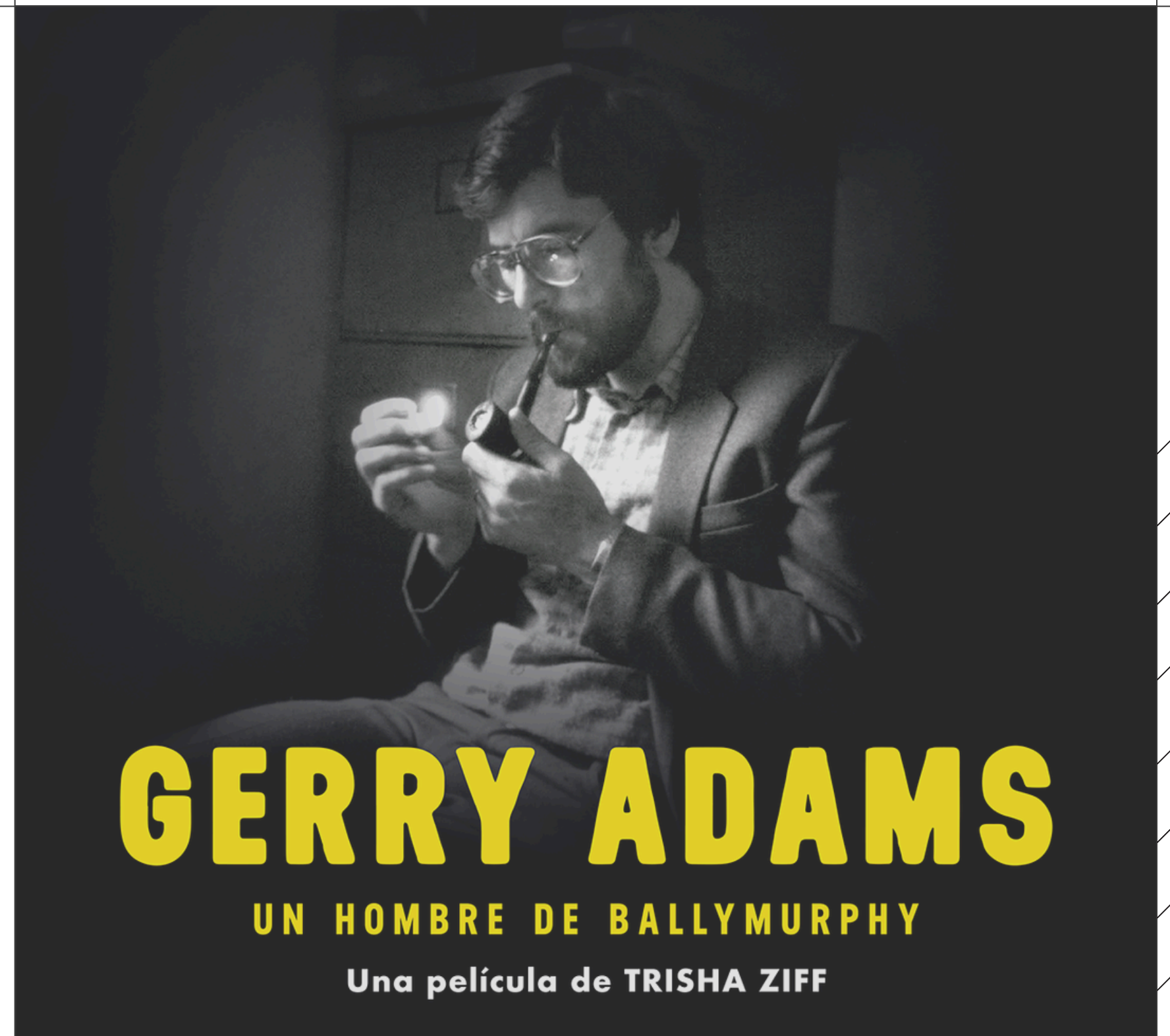
people killed by the early 2000s; most deaths were caused by illegal paramilitary action

40,000+

people injured

1 in 7

adults had experienced a violent incident by 1998





Suffering as a political language

1981 Hunger Strikes

- Bobby Sands
- Republican prisoners demand political status as captured combatants rather than criminals.
- The body becomes evidence of a war the state refuses to name.



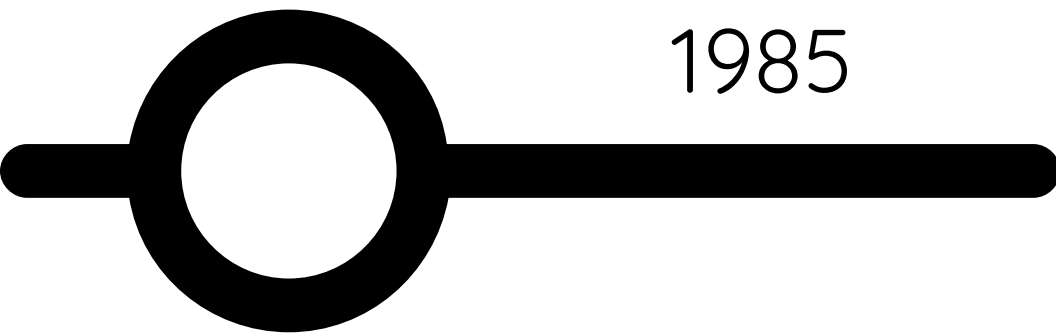
The city becomes a readable text.

Murals intensify around the hunger strikes, linking suffering, armed struggle, Irishness, and international liberation movements



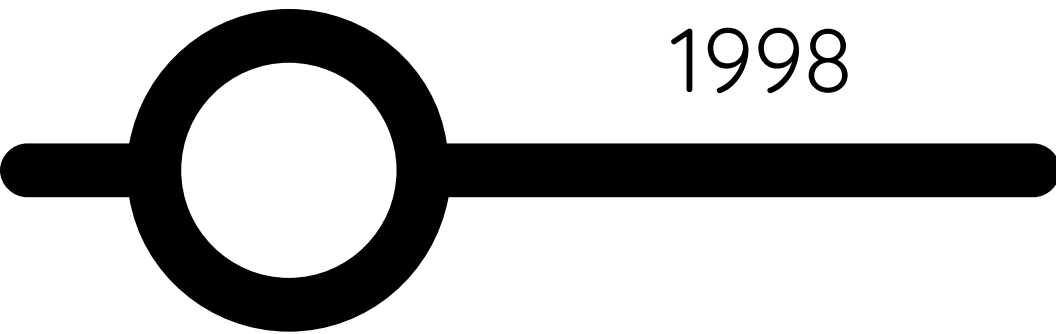
TIMELINE

The bombs recede, but their echo
remains a shaping force.



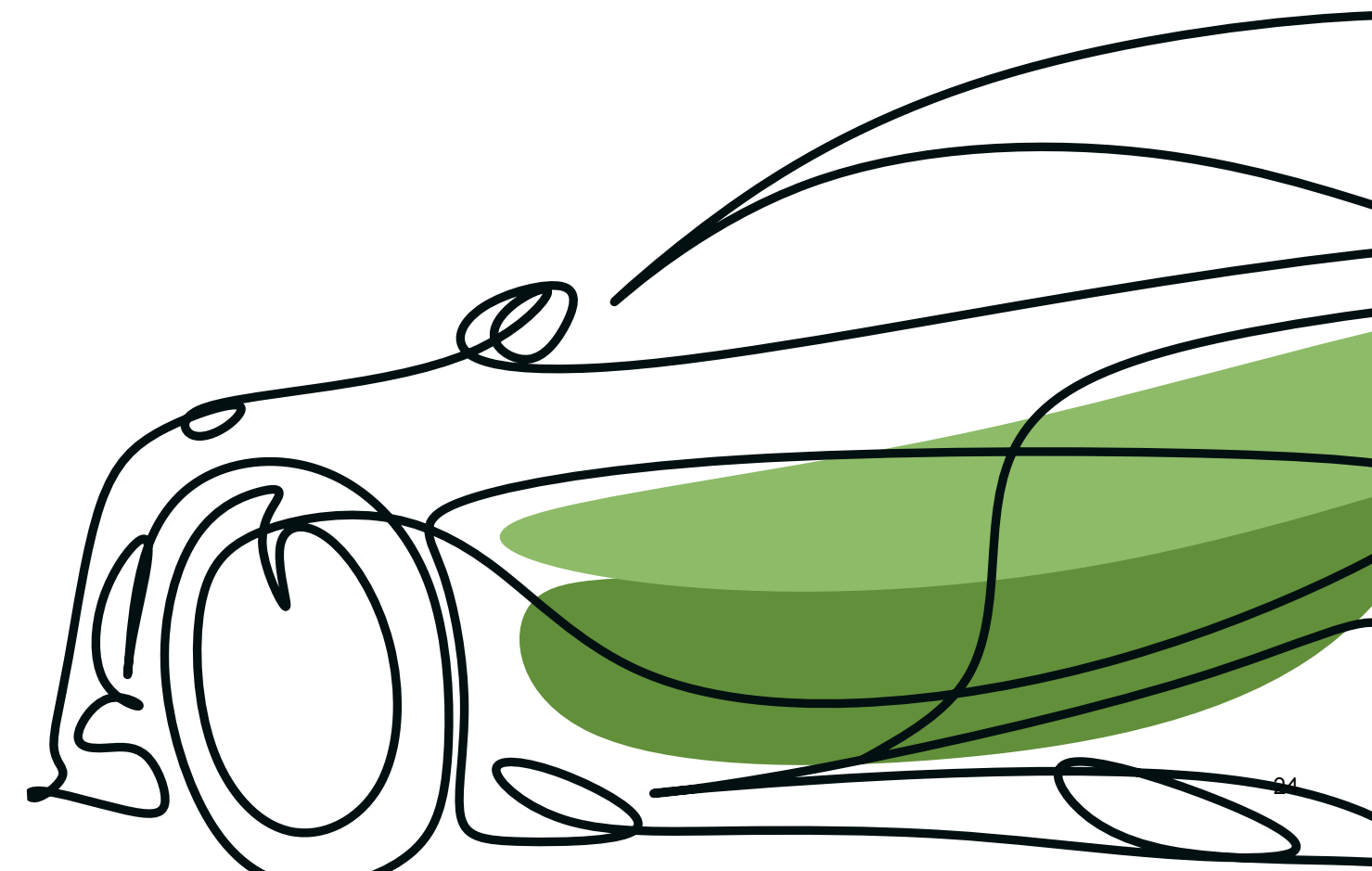
1985

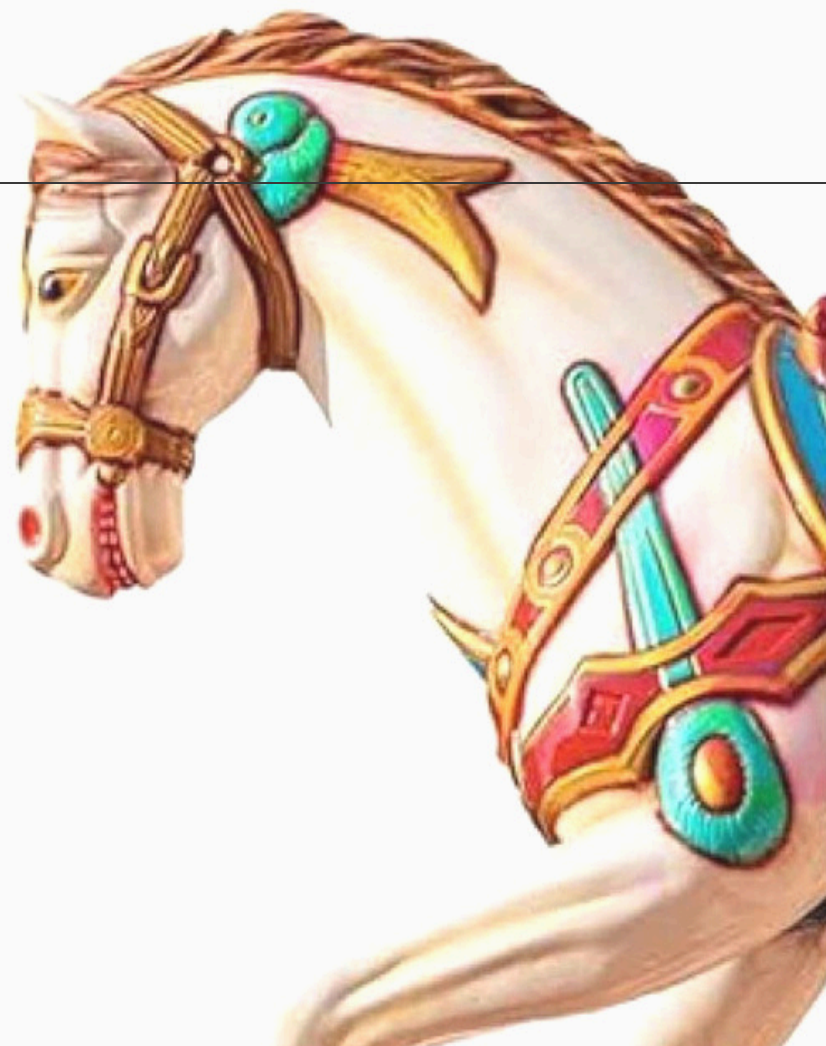
The Anglo Irish Agreement sets up the peace process logic: the conflict becomes a negotiation over recognition, vetoes, and institutional architecture.



1998

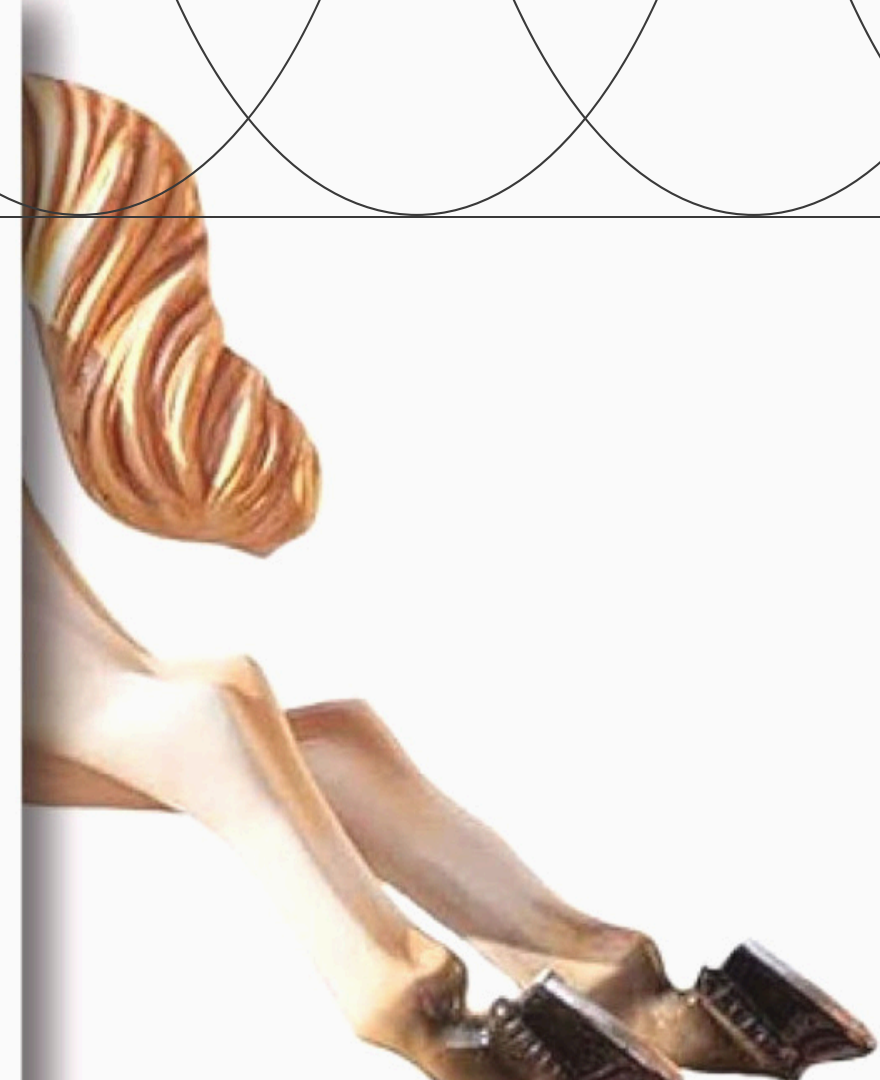
The Good Friday Agreement: “provided for equivalent protections for minorities north and south in rights and equality legislation” (Todd 54)
→ “open-endedness” (Lehner 136)





'ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING AND ORIGINAL
NORTHERN IRISH WRITERS OF HER GENERATION'
Sunday Times

Quickly, While They Still Have Horses



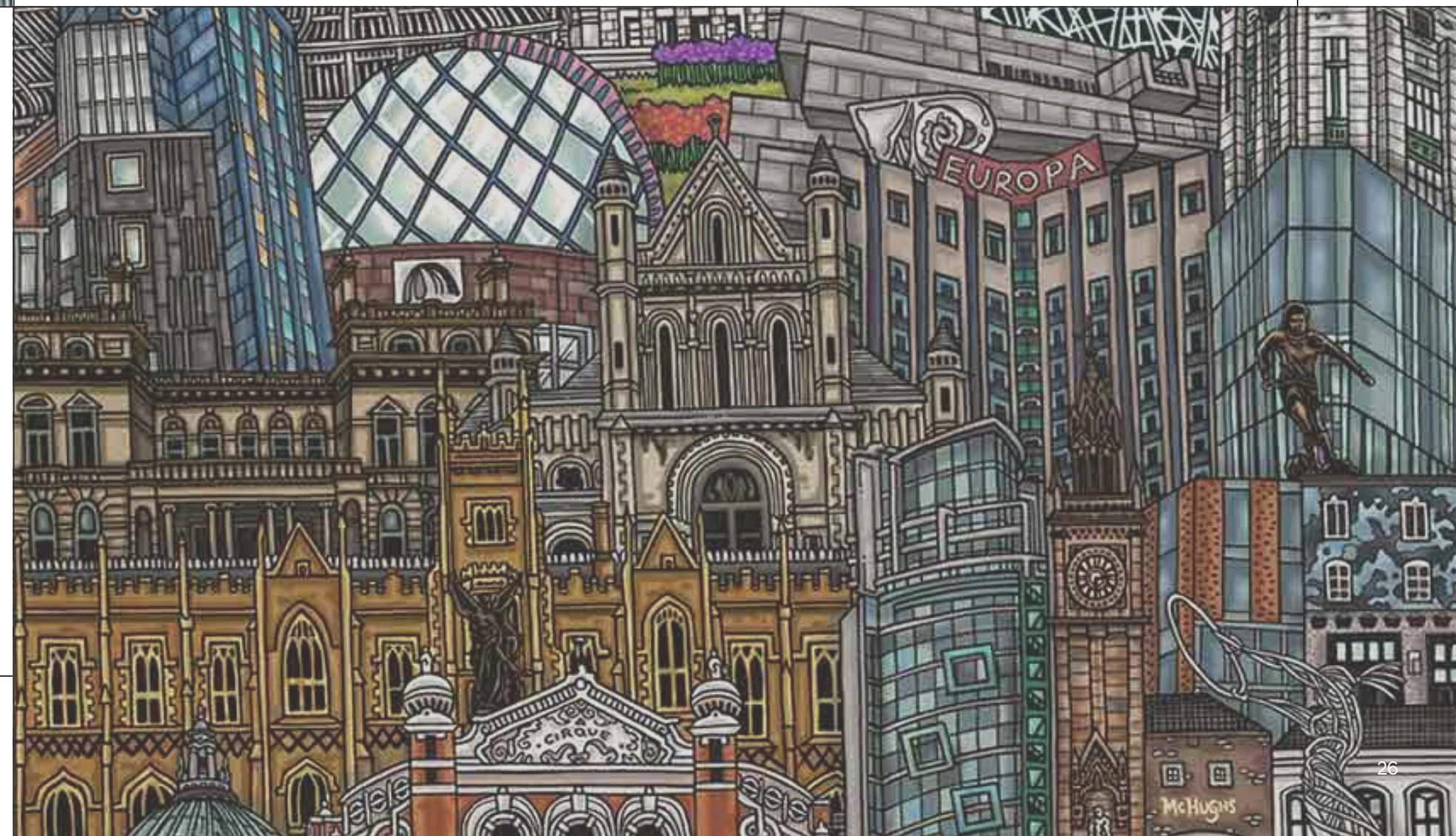
1. Ordinary life after extraordinary violence: domesticity as aftermath
2. Surrealism as social realism: the absurd makes visible what normal speech cannot
3. Belonging as bodily feeling: home as a threshold
4. Inherited scripts: family, religion, class, and community as a means to read the world
5. Childhood and parenthood: vulnerability as historically transmitted



“Troubled bodies”

Caroline Magennis

Peace does not erase conflict. The body becomes the site where unresolved political contradictions return.

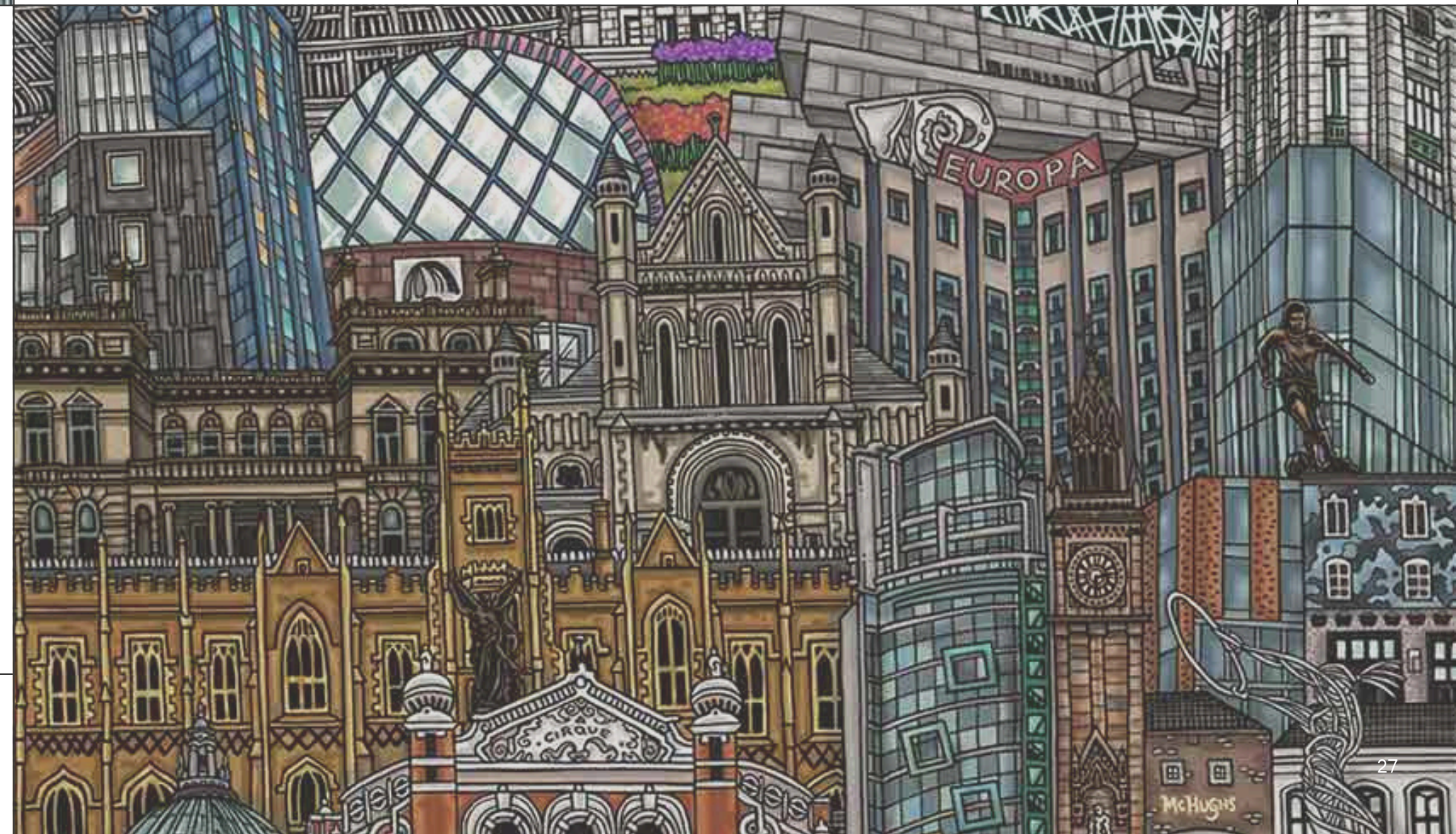




Weak men and silenced women

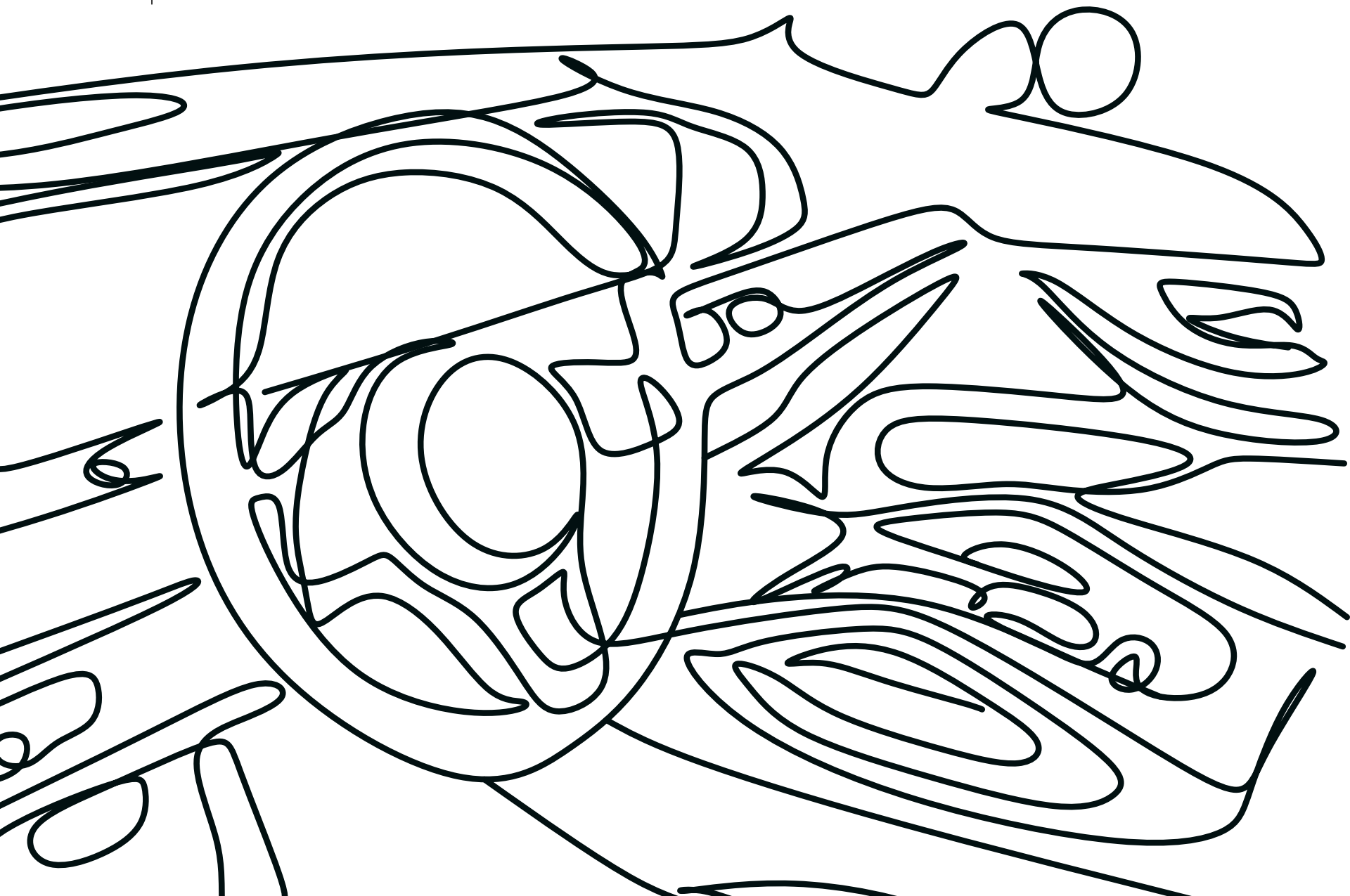
Rory Allen

Carson's fiction stages weak men, silenced women, failed patriarchies, and emotional inheritance in Protestant communities.



“Grand So”

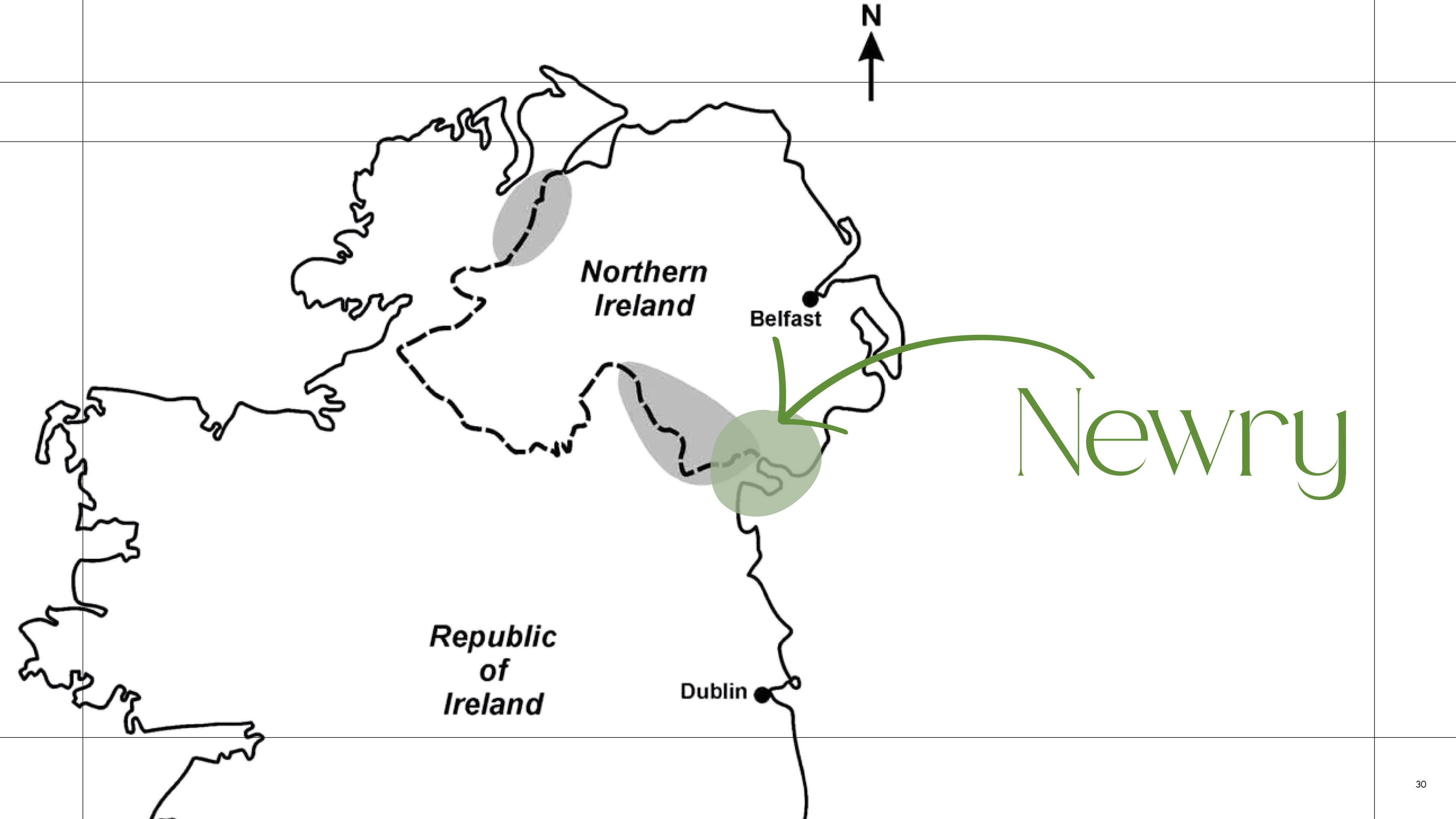
- The second of sixteen short stories
- Synthesis:
 - Ruth and her grandmother drive across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to sell jam.
 - “Coast to border. Border to coast” (7)
- Characters:
 - Granda
 - Granny
 - Ruth
 - Backseat Man
- Specters of the Troubles
 - Literal: the subtext
 - Other form of literality: the materialization of the ghost





Historically, culturally, and politically, Northern Irish literature has always been a nodal point for multiple crossings. ... [F]or [Edna] Longley, Northern Irish literature ‘overspills borders and manifests a web of affiliation that stretches beyond any heartland – to the rest o f Ireland, Britain, Europe’.

(Lehner 136)



Newry

NOBODY WANTS TO BUY LUXURY JAM.

This is Northern Ireland. In the eighties. People have other things on their minds.

(Carson 7)



(CARSON 8–9)

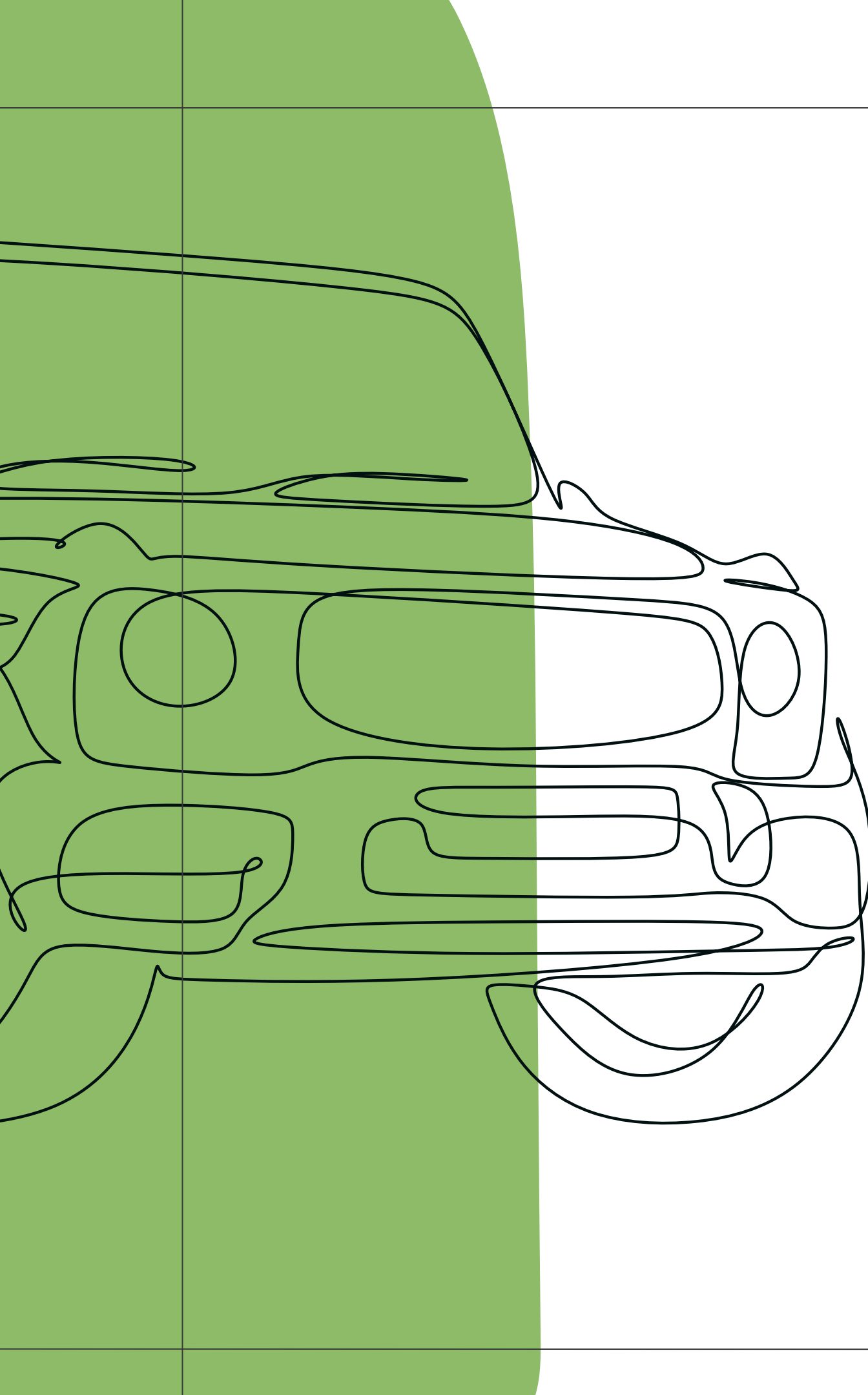
Granda finds a motor for Granny in *The Autotrader*. ...

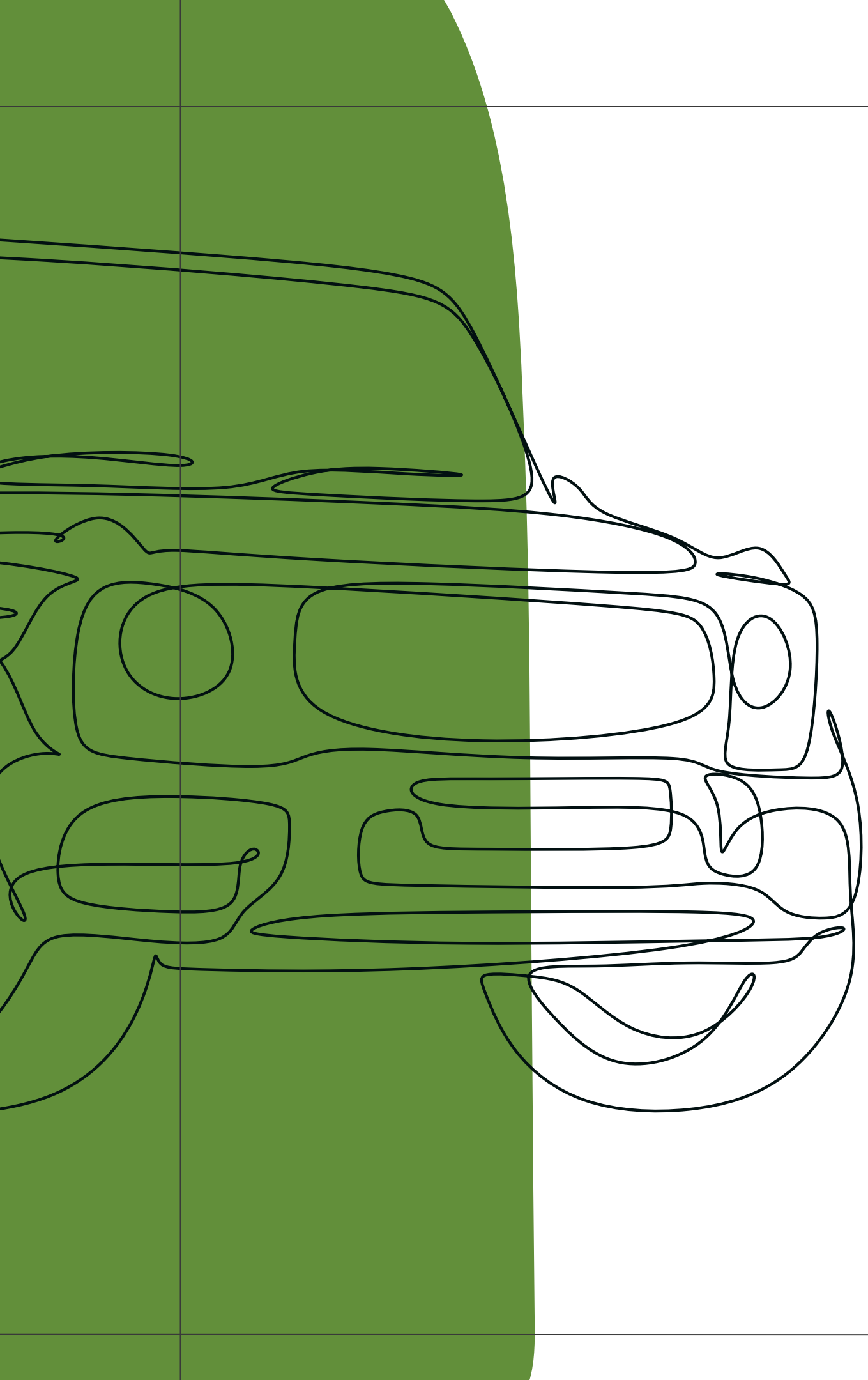
There is a man in the backseat of the car. Ruth spots him as soon as Granda pulls into the yard. He's a largish fella of farmer build. He wears reading glasses and a funeral suit. What remains of his hair is gray and swept across a gummy bald spot. It forms a kind of hairy flap. Ruth assumes her granda's given the man a lift, though it's odd that he's sitting in the backseat. It looks like he's being chauffeured around.

She waits for the stranger to emerge. He doesn't move. Granda hops out, leaving him there. ...

"Granny squeezes her substantial thighs in beneath the wheel. She doesn't acknowledge the man in the back. She places her hands at ten and two, turns the key, and revs the engine cautiously.

"Aye, she'll do rightly," Granny announces. She pauses then and sniffs the air. "It fairly stinks in here." She glances over her shoulder, straight at the man, who's lighting his next cigarette off the last. She looks right through him like he isn't there. "The last owner must've been a smoker. With secondhand motors you should always ask. You cannae shift the smell of fags."





(CARSON 10)

Ruth wonders if Granny's always been this strict. It's likely just since Mummy died. A thing like that would make you clingy. You'd be feared of losing anyone else. Ruth was only three when it happened. She has forgotten the time before. She remembers Mummy from photographs. Granny and Granda don't talk about her. Ruth could hardly tell you a thing about her.

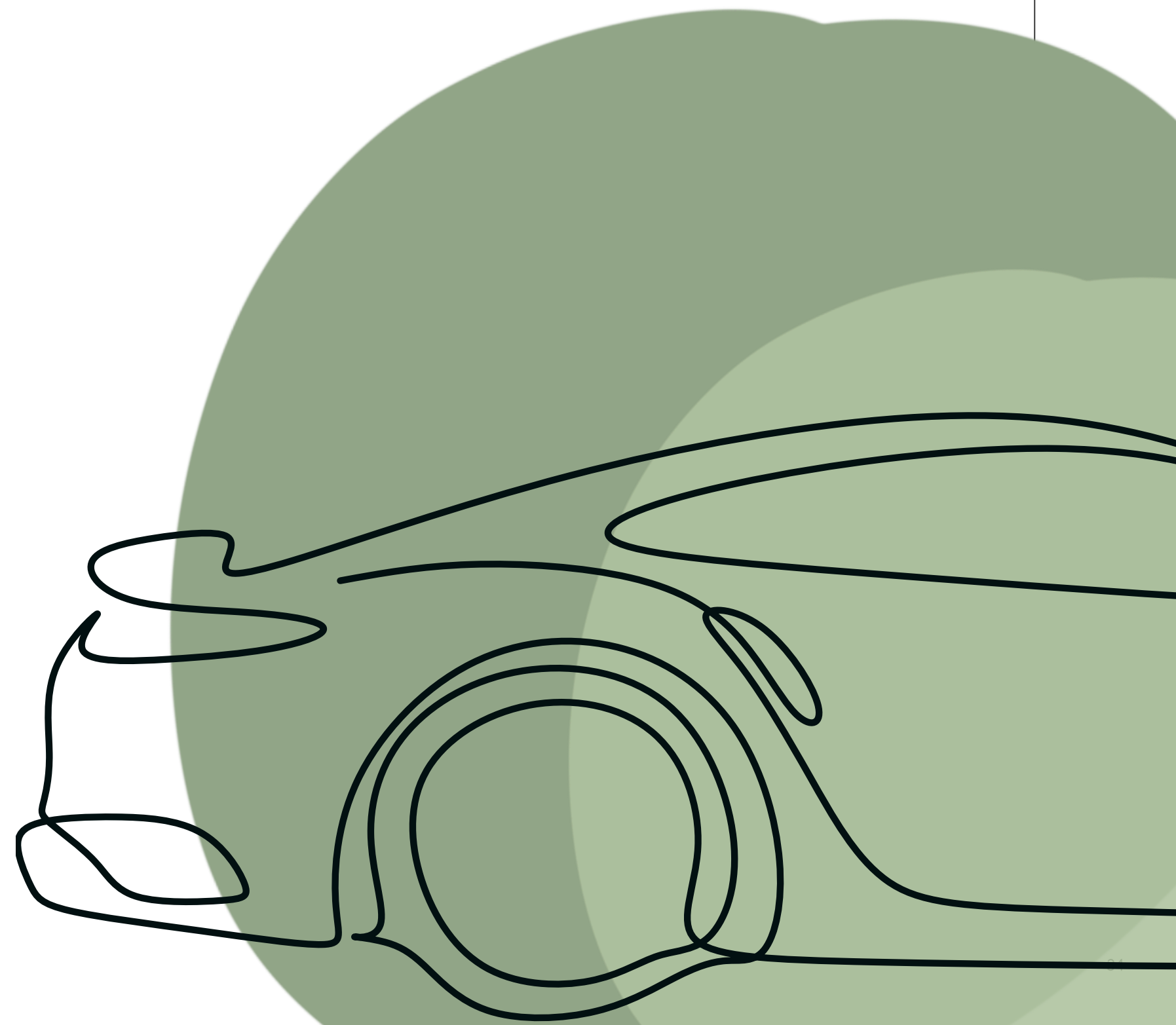
(CARSON 11–12)

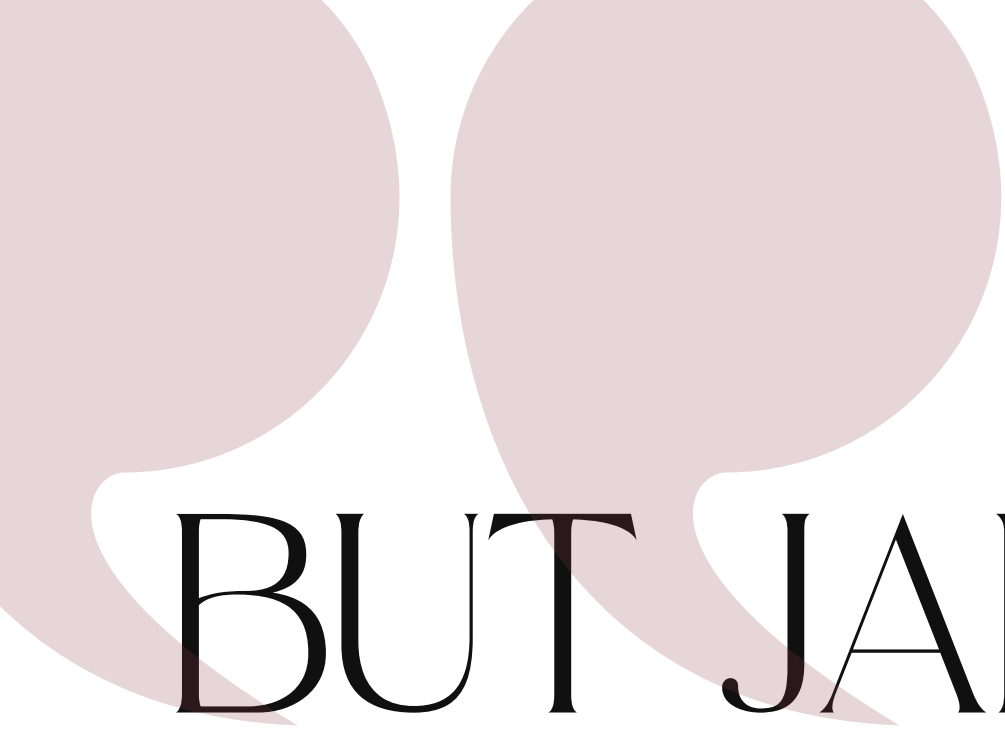
What's your name? Where do you come from? What's it like being dead? Have you been to heaven? Was it nice up there? Could you have a wee look about for my mummy? She got killed in a bomb a few years back. Angela Kelly is her name.

“[T]he *other sort* of ghost” (12):

Preconceptions of Catholics as the others:

Granny pulls in to let a combine pass and, noticing they're outside a chapel, the Backseat Man crosses himself. *Spectacles, testicles, wallet, and watch.* Ruth's heard this off the wee lads in school. This is the first time she's seen anybody do it for real. There are no Catholics in her world. She's not a baby. She knows they exist. *It was the Catholics who blew up her mummy*, not for any particular reason save being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Ruth knows the difference between their lot and hers. They fly a green, white, and orange flag and paint your man with Jesus hair on their walls. *Bobby what's-his-name* that died. They have crosses on their church roofs and Mary in a box by the gate. Ruth's lot fly the Union Jack and have the Queen or curly King Billy on their walls. They paint their curbs red, white, and blue; a fresh lick of paint every year for the Twelfth.





BUT JAM IS NOT SECTARIAN.

(Carson 13)



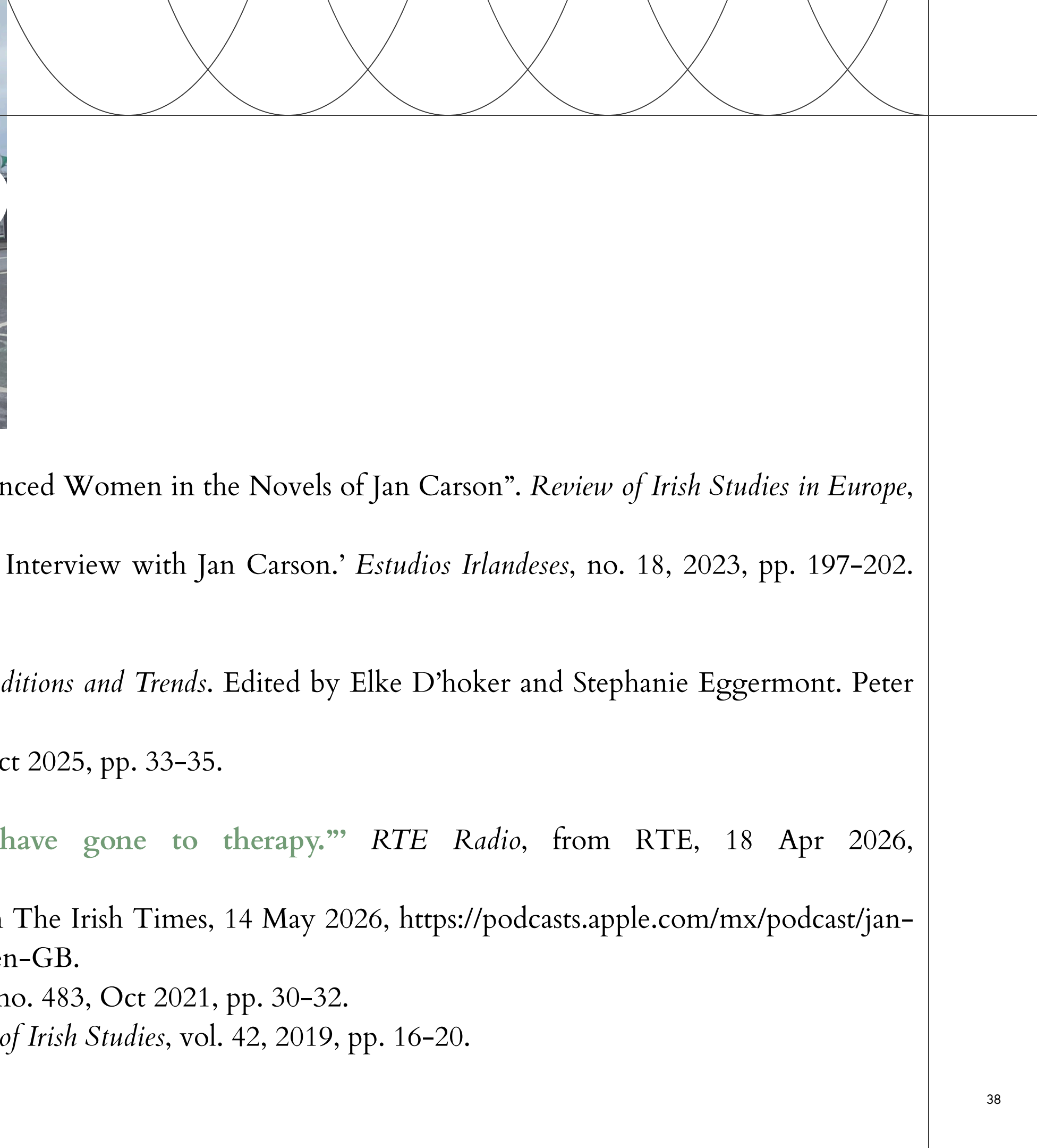


grandso

THANK YOU!



1. Cut out along the blue line
Take special care negotiating difficult coastal areas.
2. Carefully stitch all land to a suitable backing cloth.
3. Using small neat stitches work your way along the dotted red line.
4. Go slowly and methodically along the border.
5. Stand back and enjoy, you have peacefully united Ireland.



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