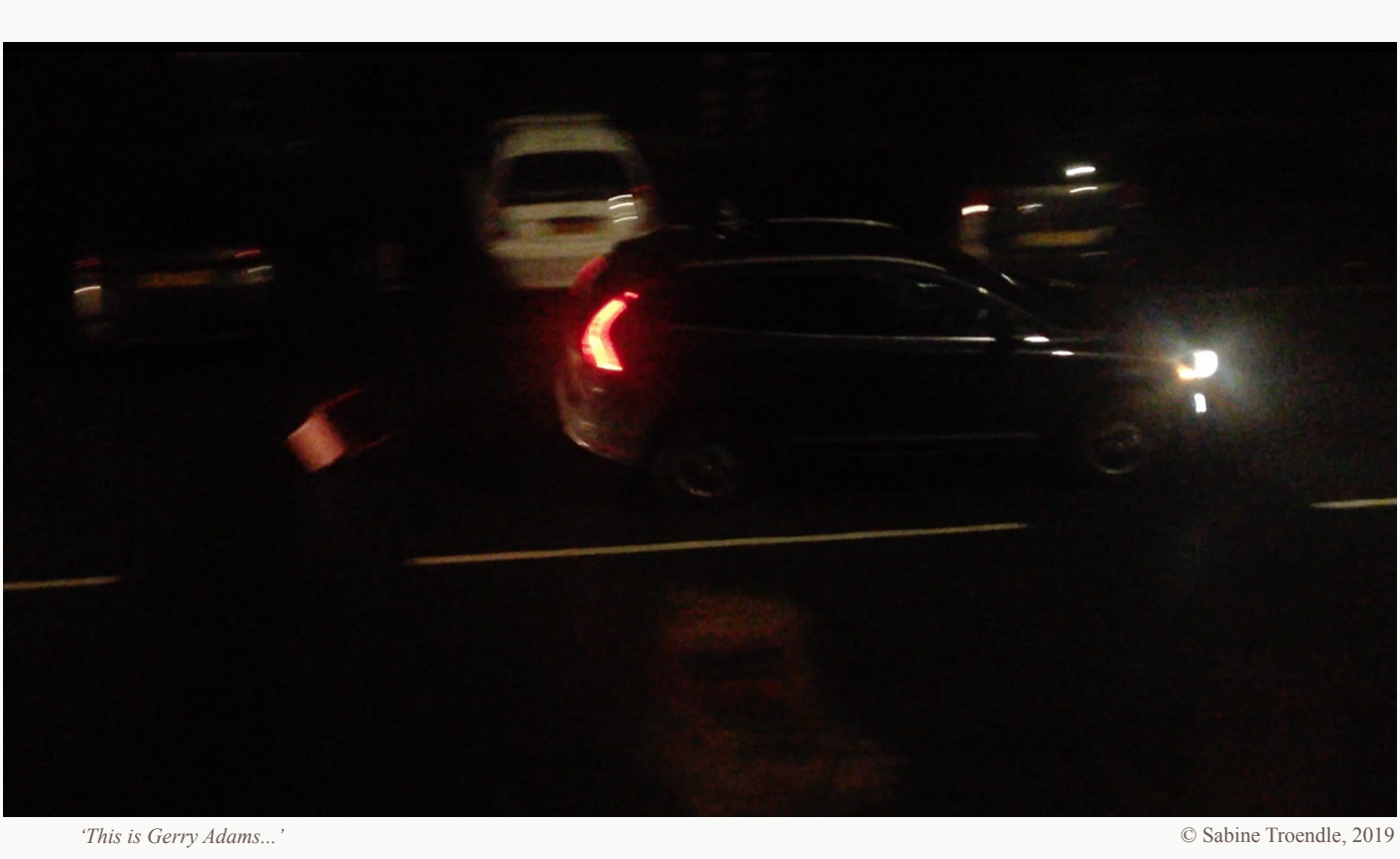
03 *Lost*

"And then you start calling them 'wee bastards' because they keep you awake at night. Part of you wishes they'd just crash and get it over with, and let you go back to sleep."

Belfast Resident H



'This is Gerry Adams...' © Sabine Troendle, 2019

When Gerry Adams made his election stunt for Sinn Féin, driving through the neighbourhood with a soundsystem on top of the car, he was met with flying recycling bins by local youth. I wouldn't read this as a political statement from young people to the former president of Sinn Féin, former internee at Long Kesh, partisan for the nationalist cause and crucial contributor to the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process. I don't think, that these kids are interested in politics. I think they are bored out of their heads. And I know from experience that boredom can foster your fantasy, it's a good precondition for creativity.

So if some youngster came up telling me, this was all performance art, well, why not. After all, trying to kill some politicians up in Stormont was said to be performance art and I must say, the leftovers of my wheelie bin are beautiful objects. Though as little the Stormont performance artist's performance was appreciated by the public, these boys and girls fall on deaf ears in the neighbourhood when it comes to their art.



Wheelie Bin © Sabine Troendle, 2019

A group of kids have dedicated themselves to bring havoc into the neighbourhood. They steal cars and motorbikes using them for joyriding. They take your wheelie bin and burn it in the middle of the street, trying to attract the police in so they can have a wee riot. They hijack cars at knife-point and they beat each other up at interface flashpoints. Masked boys and girls, some aged as young as eleven, attack police with bottles, bricks and petrol bombs. They have no fear of any authority.

You can find it in every city of the world, you'll find it in the deprived areas of these cities. Young people in deprived areas tend to have a hostile relationship with the police. What's different is the situations that spark those events and the readily politisation of it. Summer is always a good time, when Loyalists and Unionists celebrate an event that four hundred years ago resulted in the subjugation of the majority of the people of this island. And when Republicans and Nationalists commemorate the introduction of internment in 1971, which resulted in people being locked up for an indefinite time, the majority of them innocent.



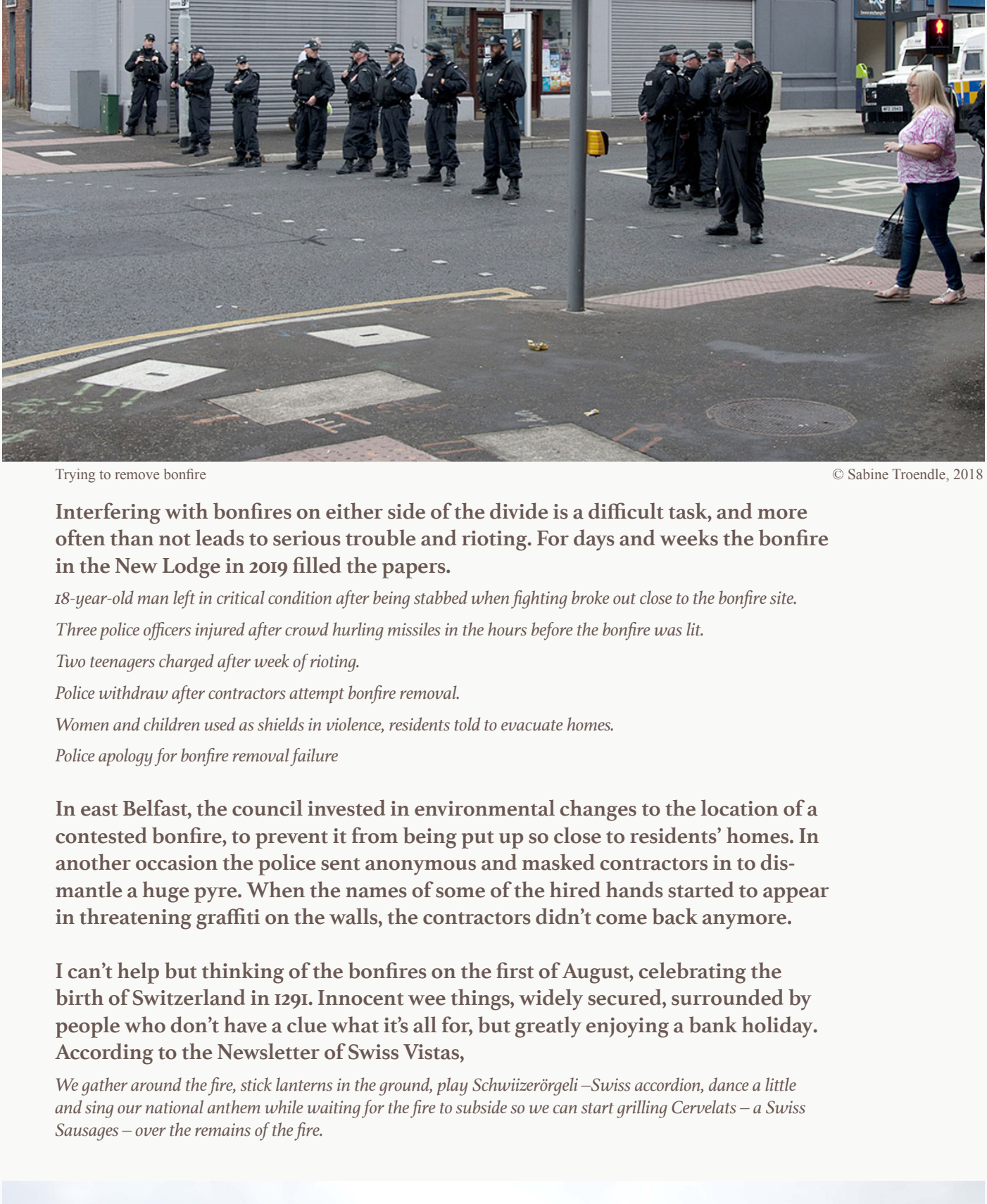
Bonfire in Cluan Place © Sabine Troendle, 2018

Both events are marked with bonfires. One community celebrates, the other commemorates. And whilst the bonfires in the protestant areas widely enjoy the support of community and politics, the internment-bonfires are anathema to most Catholics. As the peace process proceeds, they're no longer deemed necessary and indeed, have been replaced with the Félie, the west Belfast Festival. So when a bonfire emerged in the New Lodge in 2019, it was no political, cultural or identity statement – the kids wouldn't be able to explain the history of internment and the Troubles – it was a demonstration of power. UTH. Up the hoods. Orchestrated by some shadowy figures, performed by the kids. And of course, the kids got into trouble when the police tried to remove the bonfire, as it was dangerously close to two highrisers.

The same problem occurs in some loyalist areas every year, when they try to outdo each other with the size of their pyres. And when they burn tyres. And the Irish flag. And the picture of Martin McGuinness. (Or dead police and prison officers respectively in catholic areas). The problem is not celebrating their culture, the problem is that some of these bonfires got hijacked by the UVF. And when it comes to paramilitaries, law and order tiptoes around in circles.



Cluan Place © Sabine Troendle, 2018



Trying to remove bonfire © Sabine Troendle, 2018

Interfering with bonfires on either side of the divide is a difficult task, and more often than not leads to serious trouble and rioting. For days and weeks the bonfire in the New Lodge in 2019 filled the papers.

18-year-old man left in critical condition after being stabbed when fighting broke out close to the bonfire site.

Three police officers injured after crowd hurling missiles in the hours before the bonfire was lit.

Two teenagers charged after week of rioting.

Police withdraw after contractors attempt bonfire removal.

Women and children used as shields in violence, residents told to evacuate homes.

Police apology for bonfire removal failure

In east Belfast, the council invested in environmental changes to the location of a contested bonfire, to prevent it from being put up so close to residents' homes. In another occasion the police sent anonymous and masked contractors in to dismantle a huge pyre. When the names of some of the hired hands started to appear in threatening graffiti on the walls, the contractors didn't come back anymore.

I can't help but thinking of the bonfires on the first of August, celebrating the birth of Switzerland in 1291. Innocent wee things, widely secured, surrounded by people who don't have a clue what it's all for, but greatly enjoying a bank holiday. According to the Newsletter of Swiss Vistas,

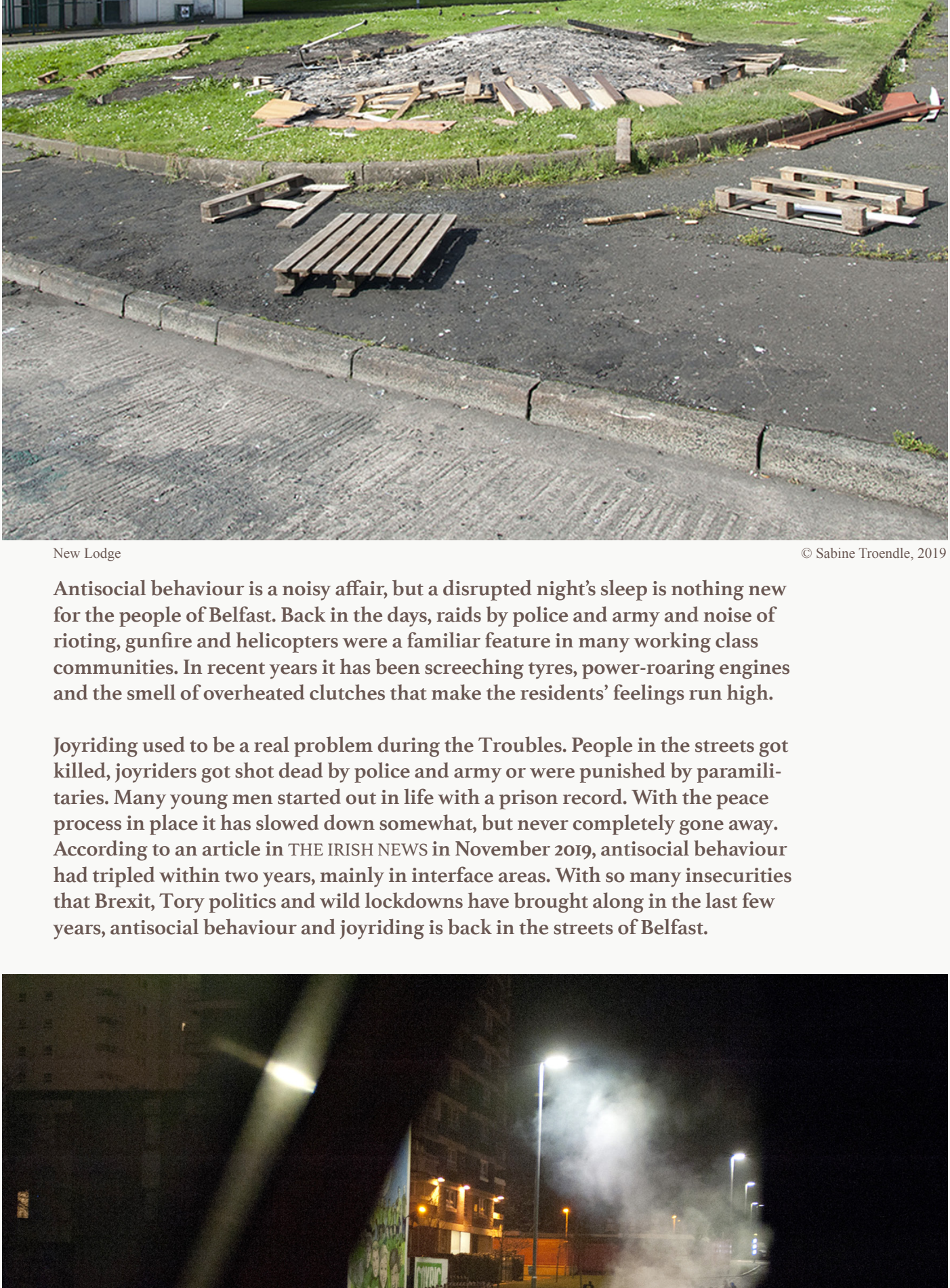
We gather around the fire, stick lanterns in the ground, play Schwiizerörgeli –Swiss accordion, dance a little and sing our national anthem while waiting for the fire to subside so we can start grilling Cervelats – a Swiss Sausages – over the remains of the fire.



Bloomfield Walkway © Sabine Troendle, 2020



Kill All Taigs (Catholics) © Sabine Troendle, 2018



New Lodge © Sabine Troendle, 2019

Antisocial behaviour is a noisy affair, but a disrupted night's sleep is nothing new for the people of Belfast. Back in the days, raids by police and army and noise of rioting, gunfire and helicopters were a familiar feature in many working class communities. In recent years it has been screeching tyres, power-roaring engines and the smell of overheated clutches that make the residents' feelings run high.

Joyriding used to be a real problem during the Troubles. People in the streets got killed, joyriders got shot dead by police and army or were punished by paramilitaries. Many young men started out in life with a prison record. With the peace process in place it has slowed down somewhat, but never completely gone away. According to an article in THE IRISH NEWS in November 2019, antisocial behaviour had tripled within two years, mainly in interface areas. With so many insecurities that Brexit, Tory politics and wild lockdowns have brought along in the last few years, antisocial behaviour and joyriding is back in the streets of Belfast.



Joyriders © Sabine Troendle, 2019



The Baby Survived. His Mummy And Daddy Didn't. JOYRIDING. Where Is The Joy? © Sabine Troendle, 2017

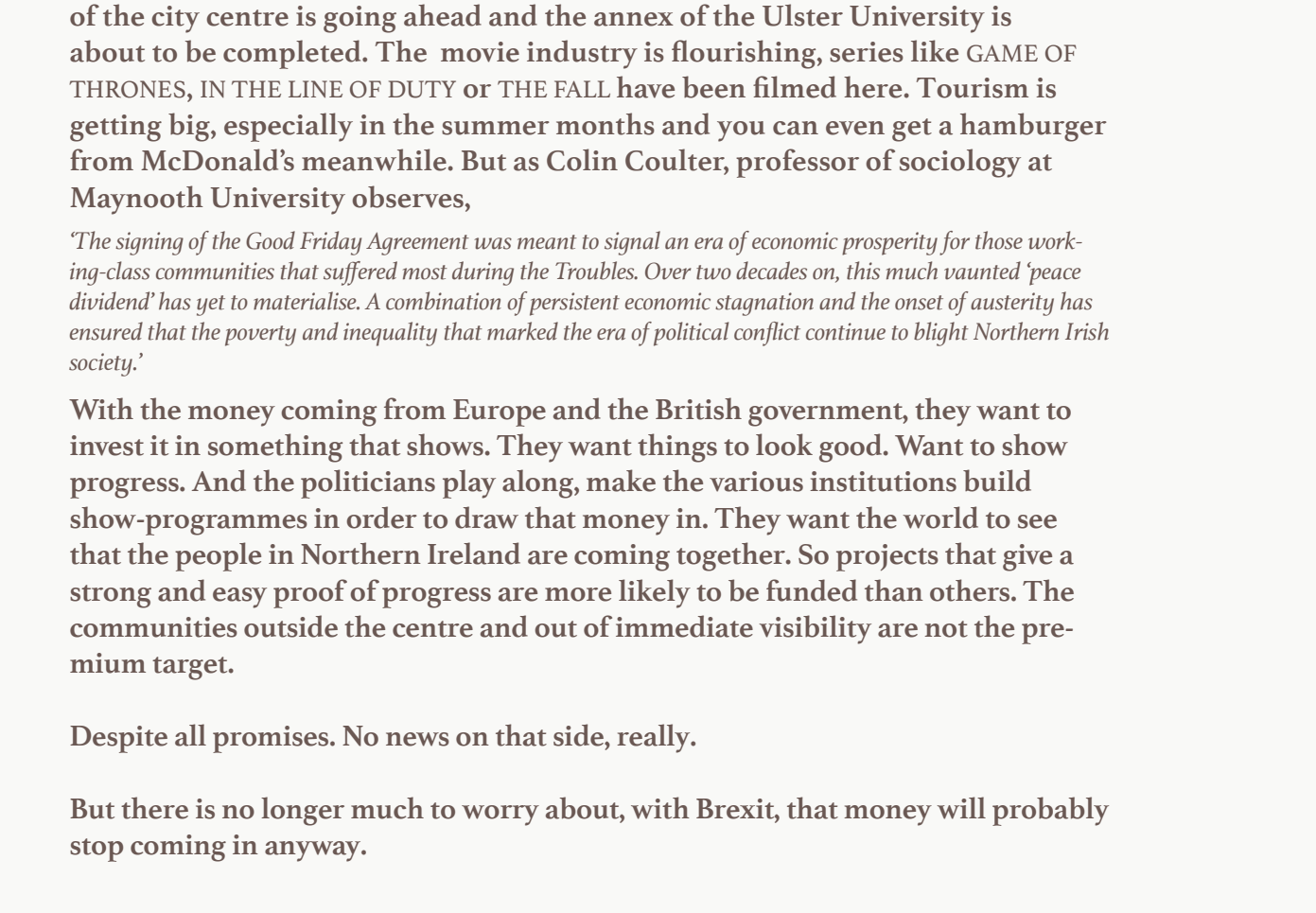
I was very impressed with the boy depicted in the mural, who lost his parents to joyriders when he was just a toddler and was then raised by his aunt. He made an appearance in order to raise awareness about joyriding. A teenager by then himself, he addressed and challenged the hoods of the community. It takes some guts in a climate where you risk being exposed if you don't fit in or threatened if you don't play by the book.

The pain of losing someone through a criminal act, the hurt and loss lasts forever and voices of those broken families left behind are mostly unheard. But antisocial behaviour will not magically disappear. The many problems that deprived communities are facing need to be tackled on a political scale. In 1988, west Belfast's answer to antisocial behaviour was a festival. Féile an Phobail – The Community's Festival. It was a huge dance night, with DJs from all over the place and free tickets given away to young people across Belfast, encouraging them to stay away from the bonfires. It's still going strong. (That is not to say that west Belfast is free from antisocial behaviour, far from it. And sadly, it's still deemed one of the most deprived areas in Europe.)

There are still a few of these places in the city, in catholic and protestant working class areas, with highrisers and council flats, where the council deposits troublemakers, mainly young men who were driven out of their own community. Young, disfranchised people with mental health issues, no education, no jobs and no perspective of any change. Just thinking, that's life. That's all there is. The dole office, then benefits and then –

'Welfare reforms brought in by the Conservative government have pushed many young people out of the benefits system entirely. They find themselves entitled to nothing at all unless they can show that they have been actively seeking work for 35 hours a week. Some simply stop registering. The state agencies have lost track of 40 per cent of those leaving the register. Literally, a lost generation.' Eamonn McCann

'They need intervention. They need intervention socially, they need intervention medically, for mental health, addiction issues, and they also need some sort of hope and pride in the place they live. If you have pride in the place that you live in, you wouldn't be trying to destroy it.' Allison Morris



New Lodge Road #1 © Sabine Troendle, 2021

Belfast now exhibits loads of fancy hotels and restaurants. The gentrification of the city centre is going ahead and the annex of the Ulster University is about to be completed. The movie industry is flourishing, series like GAME OF THRONES, IN THE LINE OF DUTY or THE FALL have been filmed here. Tourism is getting big, especially in the summer months and you can even get a hamburger from McDonald's meanwhile. But as Colin Coulter, professor of sociology at Maynooth University observes,

'The signing of the Good Friday Agreement was meant to signal an era of economic prosperity for those working-class communities that suffered most during the Troubles. Over two decades on, this much vaunted 'peace dividend' has yet to materialise. A combination of persistent economic stagnation and the onset of austerity has ensured that the poverty and inequality that marked the era of political conflict continue to blight Northern Irish society.'

With the money coming from Europe and the British government, they want to invest it in something that shows. They want things to look good. Want to show progress. And the politicians play along, make the various institutions build show-programmes in order to draw that money in. They want the world to see that the people in Northern Ireland are coming together. So projects that give a strong and easy proof of progress are more likely to be funded than others. The communities outside the centre and out of immediate visibility are not the premium target.

Despite all promises. No news on that side, really.

But there is no longer much to worry about, with Brexit, that money will probably stop coming in anyway.

Colin Coulter, Northern Ireland's Elusive Peace Dividend, 2018
Heather Hamill, The Hoods, Crime and Punishment in Belfast, 2011
Eamonn McCann, The Irish Times, 27/04/2019
Allison Morris, BBC Talkback 08/08/2019