
NON-FICTION | FALL 2020

John in the Rain

By Gary Hunter

15 July 2020. I'm sitting on the sofa in my ground-floor rented apartment. Bob Dylan's latest album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, is on the CD player. Bob's crossed the Rubicon. He contains multitudes. He's no false prophet but I've always known that. There's a 17-minute track called "Murder Most Foul." It begins by referencing the JFK hit then opens out to take in so many cultural references I can't keep up. Bob sings about the Beatles conquering America while the country is mourning its slain king. The songs are saturated in references to writers such as Walt Whitman and Shakespeare, and contain allusions to Indiana Jones and Anne Frank.

My laptop is balanced on my knee and I'm writing about my old friend John who became a killer and ended up being murdered, aged nineteen. I recall William Faulkner's line, 'the past is never dead, it isn't even past.' I'm thinking that past and present might exist at the same time. Nothing is linear.

I moved here in March to shield from COVID-19. I have cancer. I had a good friend but things between us turned bad and she left. I don't blame her. It's probably for the best. I was sinking into a deep and violent depression. I treated her badly. I hope to God she's happy. She deserves to be happy. I live alone now and think about her all the time. I don't remember if I ever told her what she meant to me. I hope the pain in my heart eases. I'd like to forget her but I don't think I can. The rug she gave me is on the floor and all the bits and pieces she selected for me are here. There's an echo in the empty spaces. I lie in bed and listen to my heart bang in my head. Living this way hurts worse than cancer.

I'm trying to write something each day. It's difficult. I've had the mental health home treatment team here every day for the past two weeks because I'd expressed a death wish in answer to a question about suicidal ideation: 'Do you feel like you might hurt yourself?'

'Yes.'

'Have you made plans?'

'For what?'

'To kill yourself.'

'I think about it all the time. Doesn't everyone?'

'You're in a bad place.'

'Yeah'.

'You want to die?'

'I certainly do.'

It's becoming intrusive, if I'm honest. I don't care enough anymore. They're talking about admitting me to a psychiatric unit as a suicide risk. Give me terminal cancer over depression any day. You 'fight' cancer, you 'beat' cancer or you die after a 'brave fight or valiant struggle.' No martial language where depression is concerned: You just 'suffer' from depression and hide in the corner with your knees drawn up to your chest and you feel like a failure for being weak.

But I can't shake off this sense of sadness. I don't know what else I can do. I'm lonely but when people call, I can't wait until they leave again. I cry at nothing. I watch kids play outside and I cry. I can't help it. I can't stand being with people and I can't stand being alone. I'm defiant then I'm broken. Maybe I'll be stronger in the broken places but not now. I've fought my whole life but I have nothing left in me.

Anyway, I'm sitting on this sofa, facing the window when there's a bang like thunder. I drop to the floor. The front window shatters. Cracking glass growls and hisses. I think at first something has blown up. No, the TV is still on. CD player is ok. I get up and walk across to the window. There's a small hole in the middle. Something's hit the glass with enough force to pierce the window. A small-calibre bullet? I go outside just in time to see a car speed off.

The landlord calls the police who come out about an hour later for statements. An officer asks if I'm aware of anyone with a grudge against me. No, I keep myself to myself, I say. Sectarian? Don't know. Maybe. I sit and write or walk. I don't bother anyone. CCTV footage emerges that shows a hooded, masked skinny figure standing in the green about 100 yards away. He's filming something on his phone. He gets into a car and drives off. The local paramilitaries aren't pleased with an attack they claim to know nothing about.

Word spreads through social media via my outraged children. I wish they wouldn't bother. I'm alright. No harm done. As the adrenaline wears off, I'm tired but still too wired to sleep. I want to touch the perfectly round hole in the window I can't see through anymore. I want to touch the glass and see it shimmer, sparkle as it falls down into the room. I thought I was strong and I'm not.

I don't know if I've been targeted deliberately or if it's a mistake. There are rumours and threats and counter-threats. Local hoods in a paramilitary pissing contest. I tell people I don't care. I'm angry that the idiot missed me. If the landlord gets the window repaired, that'll do. Maybe whoever did it is pleased with themselves and recorded it as proof of a job well done. I'm asked if I want to move to emergency accommodation but I don't. I'm tired. I'm so tired. I want to rest; close my eyes, not wake up. Victim Support wants to speak to me. Mental Health are chasing up another appointment. They're coming for me. They'll take me away and lock me up; give me drugs to numb me.

The glazier is supposed to be coming to replace the broken window. I press the button on the CD control and listen to Dylan. Well I'm the enemy of treason, the enemy of strife, enemy of the un-lived meaningless life. I ain't no false prophet I just know what I know. I go where only the lonely can go.

The fact I was writing about John and political violence when my apartment was attacked gnaws at me until I record what happened. It's the only thing I know how to do. The cyclical nature of violence. The psychic damage inflicted by so many years of hatred and death. And it doesn't stop. It cannot die. It's a ravening beast prowling the hills and streets and it keeps coming.

The young men who attacked my house will undoubtedly be punished for screwing up: I've been assured of this by a local 'community representative.' I told him I don't want reprisals. I don't care. I'm too tired to hate the kids who did this. I don't want anybody hurt on my behalf. I shouldn't feel sympathy for them but I do. I'm clinically depressed so maybe that explains it: I'm supposed to hate and I want to hurt myself but I have no hate left for anyone else.

Something has to change. I've tried to be emotionally honest. I haven't found catharsis. Maybe recognising this is, in itself, cathartic? I don't know. Maybe there's no resolution for me or anyone else. We go on and that's all there is to do. Put one foot in front of the other and get on with it. Walk the roads until we can't take another step so we lie down and stay there, faces buried in dust.

What follows is what I was writing for John the night I was shot at.

The boy runs through rain into the gloom of an October evening. He slows down, twists and waves over his left shoulder. He shouts but I can't hear him. I shake my head. He turns away, stumbles over flapping wet laces, steadies himself, picks up speed and runs on, smaller, insubstantial, vanishing like smoke.

Maybe it was the rain that dredged the memory up, blinking into the half-light of a wet afternoon, years later and a lifetime away. I sat listening to music and staring out of the window at a drowned, green and red-brick world. A steady deluge pummelled remnants of garden flowers flat and pathetic. The heavy rain beat a steady tattoo on the window. An empty bird feeder hung from a dripping branch. I remembered John.

John Rankin and I were inseparable. We were primary school classmates and lived near each other in North Belfast. We loved the Beatles and "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."

John was a clumsy, awkward kid. His narrow, hunched shoulders and thick black horn-rimmed glasses made him look like he was always apologising. He embraced his role as class fool, talking to his pencil, drinking ink, clowning. Desperate to make people laugh, he was often in trouble. He was punished, sent to the Principal's office, made to stand in the corridor outside the classroom, caned and battered. But John kept smiling.

During the endless days of summer, we'd get nets on bamboo poles from the Academy shop and go fishing for spricks in the little river that ran through Alexandra Gardens. Sometimes we stayed until the wee man with the big built-up shoe came limping up the path to shout at us and lock the gates:

I overheard other kids' parents whispering that there was something not quite right about wee John's family, God help them. His mommy was lovely y'know, when she was young. Lovely girl. Great dancer. Won competitions n'all. He beats her y'know. Hits her where nobody can see the marks. John's mother was a thin, nervous woman who chain-smoked and muttered to herself. She'd disappear for weeks at a time. It was rumoured she was in and out of the mental home and couldn't look at herself in mirrors without crying. His da went to work in a blue boiler suit and smelled of cigarettes; John said you'd hear him coming home at night, the slurred songs, slow and steady thud of heavy boots. Thud. Thud up the stairs and the loud pissing into the toilet when he managed to aim properly.

One day John and me were playing commandos on the first floor of my block. I kicked over three empty milk bottles that Mrs. DeCourcy had placed on the mat outside her door. I watched the slow-motion explosion, shards of light, sparkling silver, raining over the balcony onto the concrete below. Doors opened, footsteps and raised voices getting closer. Mrs. DeCourcy flew out snarling, skin and bone in a pink housecoat, face powder and ropey blue veins, smoke-stained fingers out to catch me.

I decided to run away. John said he'd run away too. He ran back to his house and returned with some crisps and Penguin biscuits and a carton of orange in a paper bag.

They'd look for us in the park, maybe the swings at the waterworks. We wandered along the length of the Limestone Road. I told John stories of witches; old ladies dressed in black, living alone, houses dark and blinds drawn, dreaming of the tender, smoking flesh of roasted children. Bad men around to take you away and do things to you. I scared myself and wished I'd shut up.

Streetlights came on so we gave up and skulked back towards home. As we turned the corner on to the Antrim Road, we met my father, stalking along staring straight ahead. He saw us and shouted for us to stop, he wasn't cross, he said. I cried, expecting a beating but he took us to Rossi's for ice cream. Nobody came looking for John so we walked him home. When we got back to the flats, I noticed that the broken glass had been swept away. Mrs. DeCourcy was inside listening to Matt Monro on her record player.

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On a dark, dreary October day, as the year began its slow descent into winter, John and I were playing round the back of the flats. We hurled stones at grey rats that squeaked and rummaged at the bottom of rubbish chutes. Rain fell hard and lights in the rear windows of the houses opposite were coming on. Near a dented bin, an old dog nosed through sodden papers. Rain water spluttered from a broken drainpipe.

John moved first. I watched him run off, jumping across oily rainbow-hued puddles. As I stood alone in the gathering gloom, the world fell silent. I felt an emptiness, a sense of loss, strong as a hard punch to my gut. Somehow, I knew this was the way things would always be: People ran and left you standing in the rain all alone. Rain would fall and wash everything away but you'd remember where the people stood when they were there and what they said. It was like their ghosts stayed around for a while.

John and I remained friends until we went to different secondary schools. I moved to a new three-bedroom house across town. My father died and my mother went mad. John and I saw each other infrequently, then not at all.

Years later, I was working for a local newspaper. I was sitting in the editorial library, studying a file on North Belfast shootings for an article on peace walls. I pulled out a brittle, bone-yellow news clipping from 1975. The piece described a shooting in a bar. The victim was John Rankin, nineteen, from Tiger's Bay. I held the paper close, studied the accompanying picture. It was a stark police mug shot. Even with his hair grown long and without the glasses, I recognised the sad smile on the open face of my friend John. He'd been shot in retaliation for a murder he'd committed a week earlier. He'd killed a man. The hit was unsanctioned so John had to go. He'd been shot twice in the face at close range. A witness said John saw the gunmen coming through the door but just sat on the barstool, waiting.

Police sources claimed the killings were part of an internecine paramilitary feud. A later report covered the funeral. There was a photograph of a flag-draped coffin borne by men in berets and dark glasses. Shots were fired into the air at the graveside. He was described by friends and neighbors as a hero and a lovely guy. There were, the paper stated, plans to dedicate a new mural to his memory. He'd live on, a legend in paint and song, a tale told in dingy clubs over pints and overflowing ashtrays and where hard men slapped each other on the back laughing.

Long ago and worlds away. But sometimes, when it rains and the days die early, I can hear John's voice and see his face. He's in the Waterworks and he can't see because it's all dark. He's lost his glasses and he's scared. His arms are stretched out in front of him and he's afraid of falling.

I'm tormented by those same feelings of loss and loneliness and futility. I think about my friend John and all the lost children, running blind into the distance, thin wreaths of smoke swallowed up by an immense darkness, unable to ever find their way back home again.

Gary Hunter lives in Northern Ireland and is a medically retired journalist. He has a Master's degree in Creative Writing and is currently working on a PhD at Queen's University Belfast. His non-fiction essay "John in the Rain" appears in the Fall 2020 Intima.
