



Work by new and emerging  
writers and artists

Interview with  
Author  
Jennifer  
McMahon

On writing process and  
inspiration

E X  
N E

Cover Contest  
Winner  
Tony Murray

Autumn/Winter 2020

EAST BY NORTHEAST  
*Literary Magazine*

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Nothing was lured by the ruse. In time, the cold sand numbed his feet and his head felt wobbly. His arm ached from holding up the lamp.

And then a glow appeared out at sea, blurred silhouettes at its trembling edges. K continued his impersonation with renewed vigor and purpose.

Slowly, the schooner edged closer to shore than was safe, entering a harbor that wasn't there. K heard water lapping against the hull as rocks rose from their bed of sand and bit into the ship. He heard rumbling, wood cracking, a bell ringing; the shouts of men bleated through the air.

Now K stood in place and steadied his beam of light out to where the ship was breaking up. He hoped it would guide Josiah's way.

Wreckers with lanterns held low to the ground stampeded onto the beach. Amid the debris and cargo, the ship's crew began to wash up. K dropped his lamp and ran into the commotion. From one ragged man to another, their fingers inching across the sand like kelp as they coughed and groaned, he searched for Josiah.

When he couldn't find him, K began to yell out his name. The land pirates ignored him. But one sailor, roused from his bed of wet sand, waved K to his side again. "This Josiah you cry for. If it be the same lad, he jumped ship some days ago." Then he squinted his eyes and asked, "You one of them, these mad dogs on the beach?" Blood began to trickle from the man's nose. K offered his handkerchief.

K returned to the haystack and sat on the far side, hidden from the scrabbling on the beach. Stalks poked through the burlap coverings and dug into his back. "Why did Josiah leave the ship so close to being home?"

Thinking about the sailors on the beach, choking and broken, K looked up into the darkness and quietly asserted, "No." As if by repeating that simple word, he could oppose the night, the ocean, the rocks. As if there were any chance he could push back against time.

Then wretchedness like a bonfire consumed him.

## Closing Time

D. P. Snyder

*The museum will be closing in 15 minutes.*

The security guard standing a few yards behind the woman clears his throat loudly. He is posted at the door of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's permanent exhibition of 16th-century Dutch paintings. Perhaps he didn't notice her when other people were in the hall but now she's the only visitor left, and he can't help but see this woman who holds him up at closing time.

Nancy doesn't react. Her eyes are fixed on Gerard David's painting of the Passion and Resurrection, which covers two panels. On the left, surrounded by soldiers and tormentors, Christ carries a wooden cross that's smooth and flat as a cartoon. But she would recognize His persecutors in a police line-up, so carefully are they drawn. There He is again in the background, crucified on Golgotha, His bloodless body gray as the rocky hill. In the foreground, the risen God-man is pink and salamander smooth, draped in a carmine cloak that's secured at his neck with a jeweled brooch. His soft, boyish chest and belly are provocatively bared, the neat red wound on his right flank exposed like a tattoo meant to be seen and admired. The risen Christ regards Nancy through the fathomless dark slits of His eyes.

The guard sucks his lips in annoyance and jingles the keys in his pocket. Nancy is irritated. She has a right to stay until it's time to go. She sits at a hard right angle and presses her sneakered feet more tightly together, gluing her arms to her sides like she does on the subway at rush hour.

Nancy is proud to be a member of the museum and she can come whenever it is open without paying extra. She believes in self-improvement. She likes to say, *why live in the city if you don't take advantage?* She comes on weekdays after work when there are fewer people. During these last minutes in the grand halls, each one of which could hold her studio apartment twenty times over, she fills herself with stillness. Her right hand rests on her well-worn black purse, her nail-bitten fingers feeling for the objects within, traceable through the thin fabric; a tic left over from her small-town upbringing in New Berlin, Ohio where they used to boast about *screen-door living* and express disbelief that anyone would *ever* want to live in New York City. *I would never. Aren't you afraid?* Nancy is not afraid. But after thirty years in New York, she retains the bumpkin habits of caution and thrift and she is always steeled against discovering that something's gone missing. Her



fingertips now report she is whole: keys, wallet, phone, mace, the little notebook in which she writes down her expenses with a sharp pencil, a pair of scissors.

Nancy is just five years short of her full pension at the big media company. Indexer was her first and not her ideal job, but she stayed. She has spent twenty-five years carefully typing précis of magazine articles on the small cards that fill long rows of filing cabinets in the Research Department. She has seniority and supervises others. She's trusted by her manager, vested in the pension plan, and enjoys a measure of security, even in the chaotic climate of corporate takeovers. Once, she dreamed of working in the art department at one of the magazines, but it was nearly impossible for a woman to rise up from the catacombs back in the '70s and '80s. Especially for a woman whose degree in Art History is from a small Catholic college. Especially for a plain woman, like Nancy.

Now, the obliging public drains from the museum and out onto the street. She imagines bodies scattering on the sidewalk like water drops on a sizzling pan. She senses a vacuum in their wake, a change in the museum's atmosphere, an infinitesimal drop in temperature that raises goosebumps on the skin of her forearms. This painting is why she returns to the same bench over and over again. This bench, this room, this image both perplex her and offer a familiar refuge today from what happened at work and Peg's words.

The security guard shuffles his feet and then unwraps something. Gum, perhaps. He crinkles the wrapper and chews noisily, cracking and snapping the thing in his mouth. Nancy stays still as stone.

In the painting's upper right corner, there's a medieval castle with an Islamic-style dome set in a landscape of naively drawn grass and plants. The men and rocks, though, are detailed and craggy. They remind her of the boulders that form the escarpments along Riverside Drive where Manhattan Island hunches its shoulders up to the Bronx where Nancy lives in a small, rent-controlled studio. Nancy's New York is a leviathan, a beast she's ridden her whole life. How could she go back to New Berlin with her big New York dreams having come to so little? She couldn't face the I-told-you-sos of her family. And an unmarried woman is so obvious in a town of barely three thousand people. Here, she is one among millions. Here, no one pays any mind to a solitary woman whose dowdiness is a kind of camouflage. If she were not so unusually tall, she would be invisible. Her short, self-cut gray hair gives her wide face the aspect of a fierce, abused doll. She might have been a nun, but she did not have the calling.

The guard coughs, shifts, sighs, yawns. She deflects his intrusions by letting her eyes travel around the painting until she feels as if she's inside it.

The Risen Christ's rosebud mouth, sharp nose and broad unwrinkled forehead betray no signs of suffering or passion. With one hand, he holds a golden cross-shaped staff and, with the other, he points at the sky to say:

I am the Way.

Through me, salvation.

Through my death, life.

I, me, my. How arrogant he is! His soft belly reminds her of the moist, white hands of Father Donegal when he used to slip the communion into her open mouth, his eyes focused on her uplifted child's face as if he were having a private thought. Nancy can imagine the Risen Christ wearing a bespoke suit and college tie, gliding down the wide hallways on the 42nd floor where the corporate executives maintain a sanitary distance from the anxious, undercompensated hive beneath their feet who scurry every morning to their cubicles with the trash smell of the subway still lodged in their nostrils. Christ, she thinks, he should look more beat up.

Nancy lifts her gaze to Golgotha where three women cluster around the base of the cross. They are small, their faces mere smudges. Even the little spaniel prancing in the foreground has more personality than they do. Posed in extravagant gestures of prayer and mourning, their bodies are hidden inside lumpish dark, heavy garments. They look up at the man on the cross, they look down in prayer, but never at each other, as if there was nothing to find in other women's eyes.

Behind Nancy, the guard clears his throat. He speaks into his walkie-talkie, not even bothering to be library-quiet when he says, *I got one straggler here*. She hears him take a couple of steps; his footfalls echo in the massive hall. She stiffens. Now a musky, floral scent tickles her nose. This Christ looks as if He was at a party in Tribeca waiting for someone to fetch Him a drink. Nancy does not know what parties in Tribeca are like beyond the images in the lifestyle magazines she indexes—Photo: Warhol, Andy. Tags: The Factory. New York. Pop Art—and so on. The smell becomes stronger and the exhibition hall seems to start slowly revolving around her. Did she eat today? She can't remember. Nancy slides a hand into her bag and runs her fingertips along the cool blade of the scissors, company property she snatched from her desk as an after-



thought when she left too early today. Her fingers feel for the label she put on with tape years ago to keep others from taking what belonged to her. It is still there.

*The museum will be closing in ten minutes.*

She turns the memory of Paul's face over in her mind, his nearly colorless eyes watching her leave Peg's office this afternoon after the meeting. Was he afraid she'd demand an explanation? She thinks of him as the White Rabbit because of his pale, acne-scarred skin, white hair, large wristwatch and fussy ways. They're the senior employees in the department and their friendship is based primarily on longevity. Like Nancy, Paul arrives at the office at eight-thirty sharp and leaves at four-thirty on the dot. *They're not paying us for overtime, children*, he trills loudly, tapping his watch face as he exits promptly at noon or at day's end. Paul, like Nancy, lives alone. He kept using his heavy, green electric typewriter until they forced him to switch to the new computers. But Nancy took to the digitization of the Index Department with the same obedient, workmanlike attitude she applies to everything. She figured the transfer of all the cards in the metal filing cabinets to computer would extend her employment at least until she could retire. The machines will make them all redundant soon enough.

It's an entry-level job, but both of them have made a career of it and for decades Nancy has eaten homemade sandwiches at her desk, flipping through art catalogues or reading up on history and politics—Monday through Friday, 12:00-1:00. At lunch, Paul heads to the streets: *It's time to get some fresh air, children*, he cries, flapping his short arms like an angry pelican as he bustles out carrying the soft leather briefcase where he hides the British novels he reads secretly behind his desk during work hours. The knowledge of his little cheat eats at her.

But sometimes Nancy and Paul take pity on each other and share a dinner at one of the second-rate French restaurants on the fringes of the Theater District. Nancy doesn't like spending money unnecessarily and she always hesitates before accepting his invitations. He shamed her into it: *Live a little, why don't you?* Then they share some watery vichyssoise and too-sweet chardonnay, and she feels naughty laughing at his dead accurate parodies of their coworkers and bosses, his spot-on vocal impressions and comic eye rolls. She has headaches afterward.

She reflects on the dinner last week when she told Paul about Jacqui. Three months ago, Peg had put Nancy in charge of the new hire, so naturally she took a special interest last week when the young woman ran from the office as if in distress. She told Paul how she had followed Jacqui into the bathroom and found her leaning over a sink as if she were about to be sick. Nancy insisted on knowing what was the matter, she told him. Her baby-daddy hadn't paid for their son's tuition at the charter school, Jacqui said, desperation choking her voice. She had one week to come up with the money—one week!—or they would ask her boy not to return. Jacqui told Nancy she simply didn't have the money and then burst into tears. Nancy told Paul these facts. She did not tell him how Jacqui's trembling mouth, brimming eyes, and the soft heaving of her thin shoulders had provoked a peculiar soreness inside her chest that both surprised and disconcerted her. It felt like a dense fabric tearing open very slowly.

"I was moved to offer assistance," Nancy had told Paul, as the waiter delivered their meals. Prawns for Nancy, a trout for Paul.

Indeed, Nancy had been struck with a novel inspiration to get involved in her mentee's life and it felt as if a fountain of new life had been uncorked inside her, flooding her body with excitement and pleasure. She had the power to fix this dilemma for Jacqui. Her purse, so carefully monitored, clasped and guarded for so long, could bear a loan. The amount of money was not so great. Of course, she had only known the young woman for a few months, and certainly the decision to have a baby out of wedlock, Nancy thought, spoke to a certain personal fecklessness in the woman. And yet.... Nancy had taken a special interest in Jacqui whose earnest, respectful attention gave her a feeling that she was doing something worthwhile.

"She's a good girl," Nancy told Paul. "Not a quick learner, but sincere. And I've put so much time into training her! If she starts falling apart now, all my effort will be wasted."

Oh, the hours she'd spent at the young woman's side teaching her the indexing system, managing spikes of impatience as the junior indexer struggled to learn the headings and codes! *Write it down*, she had to keep telling her. *Write it down so you don't forget again*. And when Jacqui made a mistake, she would say *Sorry* and blush. *Sorry!* As if a coding error were evidence of some more shameful flaws just beneath the surface. That despondent *Sorry* is what had kept Nancy from filing a negative evaluation. *Don't be so sorry, just pay attention....* Once, sitting there with Jacqui in front of the ranks of computers, Nancy's forearm came into contact with the other woman's warm, smooth skin and she was surprised by a spark of



pleasure. She drew her arm away as if from a fire, but she retained the memory of skin-on-skin; warm, soft, and alive, like a fine electric current. Last week, when she stood there in the ladies' room watching the tears stream down Jacqui's reddened cheeks as she explained her dilemma, Nancy felt a slender opening appear between them, one through which she might reach her hand.

"I felt I should help, Paul. I had a strong feeling about it," Nancy said. The word *feeling* felt strange in her mouth.

"A maternal feeling, perhaps?" Paul said, pursing his lips.

"Goodness no!"

Neither said anything for a while. The only sounds at the table were the clink of silverware on plates, chewing.

"Anyway, it isn't the little boy's fault his father's a good-for-nothing, is it?" Nancy said, trying to erase Paul's inquiry into her feelings with a judgement. "And she's a good girl."

"So has the poor thing become your debtor now? Goodness, what a fate!" Paul said, his tone sarcastic. "What happened?" His eyes were gelid as those of the trout on his plate.

"Nothing, as it turns out. I offered to loan her the money and she said no."

Nancy remembered how stunned Jacqui had looked when she offered to write a check for the full amount owed to the school, how she had stepped back from Nancy and raised the palms of her hands outward in a gesture of...what? Self-protection? How she said she couldn't possibly accept such an offer, she couldn't *possibly*. Thank you, but no. How, her grand gesture rebuffed, Nancy watched the slender aperture between her and Jacqui start to close up again.

"Well frankly, I was relieved," said Nancy, snapping the head off of a prawn and separating the soft meat from the shell with a sharp pick. "It would've been awkward, wouldn't it? Money between colleagues. I asked her to please keep in mind going forward that it's best to keep our personal troubles out of the office. One can't have...." Nancy didn't finish her sentence. The gentle chiding was meant to restore both of them to when their personal lives were safely hidden from each other, before the tentative opening and decisive closing. Jacqui had nodded and said *of course, of course* while blowing her nose into a paper towel. Then she looked up at Nancy, her eyes still brimming, and said: *Sorry! I'm really sorry!* And Nancy had felt that awful-pleasant soreness again. It blossomed in her chest, filled her up, almost stopped her from breathing.

"It's unwise to mix friendship and work," said Nancy to Paul, cracking the head off of the next prawn. She glanced at him to see if he'd taken offense, but his expression was unchanged. Was it possible he didn't really consider her a friend, even after all these years? "Of course, it's nice to have the means to help, but it's even better that I didn't have to go through with it!" They chuckled, complicit.

"And then?" Paul hung onto the story, trying to reel it in like a weight on his line that he hoped was a big fish and not merely rubbish or a lump of seaweed.

"And then? Nothing," said Nancy.

She buried her nose in her wineglass and she wished for a new topic of conversation. But she remembered how she had spread her arms slightly with her palms up and said, *there now, stop crying, everything will be alright!* And how Jacqui had taken the gesture as an offer of a hug. How she had fallen into Nancy's arms, thanking her for giving a shit, because no one else gave a shit, especially her baby-daddy, and how sometimes she felt so alone in the world, so very alone. Alone! And while Nancy didn't say so to Jacqui or to Paul, that was a feeling she knew something about, and it relieved her to hear someone else say it. It felt like salvation. Or maybe love.

"We just had a little hug and went back to work. And I hope that's the end of the matter," she said, giving Paul a look as if to say, let's move on.

Nancy finished her wine and Paul filled the glass up again to the rim. He looked slyly at her, but Nancy pretended not to notice and said nothing. How could she tell Paul how warm it suddenly became there in the small, tiled ladies' room when Jacqui was in her arms? How sweet it felt to shelter the smaller woman like a soft little bird against her chest. How, after the surprise passed, she had become aware of the soft contour of the woman's breasts pressed against her body and the perfume of Jacqui's nimbus of curly hair right beneath her nose. How she had breathed in the young woman's scent as if she were a flower, and how she forgot for a moment where she was. Did she squeeze a bit too tight? Did she forget to let go at the right time? How do you know when to stop hugging someone, anyway?

"A little hug, my dear? Might one ask *how* little?" Paul's unblinking eyes were like mirrors.

"Oh stop it, Paul," said Nancy, her face coloring. "I expect Jacqui will work her problems out by herself. She's embarrassed and frankly who wouldn't be? Losing one's composure like that in front of a colleague; I would die of shame."



Nancy shoved her fork into her rice and filled her mouth. Her face was hot, from the wine and the memory. She didn't know how long the hug had lasted, how many seconds—minutes? years?—it took for Jacqui to push hard away from her and extricate herself from the basket of Nancy's strong arms, mumble something about a phone call, and hurry away. Alone in the ladies' room, Nancy's chest had felt cold without the warm little bird nesting there.

"Well! The things the ladies do when not beneath the almighty gaze of the department head!" Deprived of his big fish, Paul put on a great show of being scandalized anyway.

"Enough, Paul," she said. "Not funny."

But now she remembers how her body's memory of the hug had persisted. For days, it was as if she had lost a piece of herself. But each time Nancy passed by Jacqui's desk to ask how her work was going and offer assistance if needed, the younger woman's eyes had remained fixed on the surface of her desk. *No, I'm good*, she said, staying motionless until Nancy walked away. She must be feeling ashamed of the incident, Nancy had thought. It would pass.

*The Museum will be closing in five minutes.*

Christ's persecutors delight in torturing the man-God who might have saved them, mocking and torturing Him. The risen Christ gazes at Nancy through His mail slot eyes. There is nothing behind them, just empty, black space, slits into nothing. Maybe that is what hell looks like, she thinks. A black hole. No light, no fire. Just nothing.

The sticky note on her computer screen this morning read: *Please see me today at 4:00. Peg*. She had to get through the whole day without knowing what it was about. Then, after twenty-five years at the company, regular merit raises and spotless annual reviews, she presented herself in her manager's office at the appointed hour to find Peg and the woman from HR awaiting her with unsmiling faces, without even a hello. They asked her to close the door and sit down in the one office chair on the other side of Peg's vast, empty desk.

"There has been a complaint, Nancy."

There was a long silence during which the two women watched Nancy's face carefully.

"I don't understand."

"One of your colleagues has filed a harassment complaint against you, Nancy, and another has backed up her story. We'd like to know what you have to say."

A swarm of wasps began to buzz in her head. The two women waited for her to speak. She felt faint, sick.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, conscious that her voice sounded too loud, too defensive. She was hot and cold all at once. The two women's voices seemed to be coming from underwater as they explained the company's policy regarding unwanted touching. The office darkened and closed in around her. Did she understand? Nancy was supposed to say something and did not.

"In short, Jacqui Benson has reported that she received improper touching from you," said Peg crisply, not meeting Nancy's eyes. "Of course, after all these years we've worked together, I was surprised to hear such a thing and, needless to say, I told her so, but we must address such complaints officially."

The HR woman exchanged a look with Peg and turned back to Nancy, measuring out her words. "This is a serious charge, Nancy. Is there anything you'd like to tell us?"

Silence filled Nancy's mouth. Silence was acceptance of guilt. The HR woman narrowed her eyes, scanning Nancy's face. It was as blank as an empty pan.

"As I said, I have no idea what you're talking about," said Nancy at last, swallowing drily.

"Well then, if you have no response to this charge we will proceed as follows: Miss Benson has agreed to drop the matter if there's no repetition of the behavior. To calm matters down, she will report to someone else starting immediately. Nancy, we have no way of knowing what went on between the two of you. Perhaps it is simply a misunderstanding. I would like to think that. You will have thirty days to respond to her charges in writing. Should you decide to do so, your response will be filed along with the complaint, but no action will be taken at this time. Do you have any questions?"

"Who...backed up this charge?"

"I am not at liberty to say, Nancy. Let's just say it is a trusted employee. So, if you have no further questions, you are free to go."

Nauseated, her ears ringing and face burning, Nancy got up and left. She felt the eyes of the whole office on her as she walked the length of the big, open space and returned to her desk. What did they all know—or think they knew? She sat at her desk for a few minutes with her hands folded on her lap. Then she gathered her things and left early. She felt Paul's



unblinking gaze on her back. The scissors were an afterthought. What a strange souvenir after twenty-five years, she thought. But how could she go back to work the next day? She could not endure it. Maybe she would call in sick. Maybe she would never go back.

*The museum is now closing.*

Nancy hears the hollow footsteps of the security guard approaching her from behind, the reek of cologne gets stronger. But she cannot tear her eyes away from the risen Christ's face. Christ the traitor, Christ the arrogant, Christ the snake posing there in his scarlet robe. She slides her hand into her purse. His dark, empty sockets are the eyes of needles through which Nancy can never pass. They look without seeing. They judge without knowing. She closes her fingers around the scissors and tenses as she feels the warmth of the guard's body right behind her.

"Excuse me, Ma'am...?"

She grips them harder.

"Ma'am, it's closing time."

She sees herself leaping forward, closing the gap between herself and the painting, her arm upraised like that of a knight brandishing a gleaming sword. She sees herself opening up a gash in the wooden board on which the Passion is painted, stabbing the hateful figure until splinters fly in the air and she can cut away all the bad feelings inside.

"Ma'am...?" A finger taps her shoulder. Suddenly animated, she leaps up and whirls around to face him.

"Don't touch me!" she screams. "You have no right to touch me!"

She brushes at her shoulder furiously as if he had dirtied her. She doesn't hear his apology as she marches out of the hall of Dutch paintings, out of the museum, and onto the sidewalk where she is quickly swallowed into the crowds of pedestrians and disappears into the long, black shadows of the buildings on Fifth Avenue.

## La Leche

Mark Gallini

How could Laura act so calm? It's a mystery to Tim. He stops his pacing and gazes at her in the rocking chair, bathed in soft light, breastfeeding their new son. Okay maybe not a mystery. But still. Knowing that Natalia was coming to dinner. Natalia Szabo, Tim's uninhibited college girlfriend.... What does she look like, Tim wonders, pacing. Ten years later. With a baby of her own. Out in Seattle. Natalia Szabo. Jesus....

Laura begs him to sit down. Tim scowls, sinks down into a chair across from her. "You're like a caged animal," she explains. "It's distracting Lucas." She shames him with that matter-of-fact, school teacher gaze he hates, then returns to their lovely son, his tiny, plump hand on her breast, his mouth and his big brown eyes drinking her in. Lucas. She kisses the top of his head, whispers to Tim to check on their daughter, Abby.

Tim waves this off. "She's out like a light. I gave her the Motrin at six." He digs a knife into a wedge of Camembert on the coffee table and separates a large, gooey hunk.

"That's like eating butter," Laura says. "Worse, actually. It's like sixty percent fat." Tim cuts the hunk in half again and offers it to her. She declines, pointedly. "Whole milk is only four percent fat. So that stuff is, like—"

"—Enough with the math!" Tim groans.

"You know, you're not getting any thinner—"

"—I said enough." He doesn't need this. He knows well enough that he put on weight along with her both times, that hers melted away with breast feeding and aerobicizing, and his, mitigated by neither, would not. He also knows how pent up he is from all these months—years!—of pregnancy and infancy. He considers dredging up the subject, but knows she would either blame his mood on his "obsession" with Natalia—who left him, she would be quick to remind—or chide his cheese-rich diet. Or she would give him that piercing look. No, he won't bring it up.

"Maybe we should eat," she says. "Dinner, I mean."

"She said between six and seven."

"It's almost eight. Typical."

"So she's a little late," Tim says.

"She was always late. For everything."

Tim stiffens. "If you're referring to those pregnancy scares we had, that would be a cheap shot."