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Serinity in the Cracks

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Serenity in the Cracks

By Joshua Christian

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Introduction

Serenity in the Cracks is a micro chapbook of poetry born out of my ENG 594 “International Poets” course and addresses the effects of alcoholism on the life of my mother through the words and story of an international poet. The project began by searching for an underacknowledged, international poet, lost, “in the cracks” of time and revive them by utilizing bits of their own letters and poems in my own work, in the form of documentary poetry. However, given my own writing subjects of addiction and trauma, I also wanted to find a poet who had been similarly affected. Nancy Cunard (1896-1965), a flapper, heiress, poet, editor, and activist from England, was the answer. *Serenity in the Cracks* is the product.

Using bits of Cunard’s letters as well as published and unpublished poem collected from Special Collections Research Center and Morris Library, this micro chapbook resurrects her to bring her in conversation with my own experiences of an alcoholic and drug addicted mother who is on death’s door after years of using. The poems question the years and dreams that were lost in all of the using, the holes that were trying to be filled, and still, honors what they did achieve in spite of it all. The work aims to destigmatize addiction as well as show that morality is not the issue when it comes to addiction, that is drug addicts aren’t bad people; rather, they need help and care from society.

Yet must some sad spring be the symbol of all hope,

As ever reputed is? I do not see

Why spring should have this strange monopoly:

My faith is rather in continuity

In the change of season to season, of day to night

Then back again...

Nancy Cunard, *The Vision*, "Despite, Despite," 1964

After years of Chronic Smoking, she Develops COPD, Stage 4 and PAIN

For Mom

After *PAIN Sonnets I-III* by Nancy Cunard

The breathing part is by far the worst. I cannot walk, or hardly, without suffering suffocations.

Nancy Cunard, Dec. 3, 1964

My mom's text tells of the doctor's duties

his gentle nudging, to ready her will and test-
ament, to work out any loose ends, to warn

her family. That like *a viper's lance*, like the *down*
hurling of arrows-rain, a *battle rages* in her lungs.

And she can't breathe. Not without the easing,

the oxygen tank's *black ecstasy*, which let her rest,
let her dream in *purple agony*, until *PAIN* pierces her
chest, sharp as an arrow head and she wakes.

Coughing, hacking, her throat retching up the rot,
the mucus of her lungs, which I remember. The nights
when I lived under her roof and *unknowable roots* of rot

crept and scrawled between pulmonary sacs
and like the *outburst of swords* sending sparks through her.

She coughed loud and late on the living room couch,

laying awake, with no sleep. It has to *end* sometime.

For I cannot continue this violent vigil,

her on her back, *cupped in a swath of pain*, thinking only
how long the stinging will last, the labor that is dying.

Portrait of Nancy Cunard

But (Nancy) had an infinite capacity to love peasants and children and great but simple causes across the board and a grace in giving that was itself gratitude...

Langston Hughes, 1965

Do not put away your flapper gowns or bracelets
those thick ringlets of armor, small shields that guarded
the heart you wore on your wrist, thin as *wire*, but firm
with force and cocked sure conviction. You wore them
as pained mementos, reminding you of the suffering,
each for another plight— Civil Rights and fascist Franco
and African nations—friends and family sputtering out
like smoke, money dissolving like liquor you poured
to tire, to type. Though you chose not to be a mother,
you gave your body for injustice, a *mere skeleton*, a breaking
open for words, for injustice, the sweet vision you nursed
until it outlived you, becoming *a club*, a sword, a shield,
a hammer brought down on society's head. So come, pick up
your hammer, and break the boarder walls you once wrecked.
We welcome, no wish, you would.

Here Lays a Prisoner's Joy

To Nancy Cunard

Nancy, your decline is detailed in your letters,
laid bare and raw like your body when it fell,
not the first but the second time,
and like your wound after, your *right leg*

cut open (to bone or no?), an 8? inch slit
in the leg. And still you only think
of the Spanish, your thirty something
years fighting Franco, *the vision of the Spanish*

worker's forearm being lanced, without any anesthetic
at all, the surgeon looking for a "dum-dum" bullet
in a *star-shaped wound.* Did the trauma from
your time there tick in you like a bomb? Hold you

like a Spanish cell when you were arrested
for attacking an officer? Deported after.
Is this what began the end, the *total lack*
of energy, no want to move, the coughing and spitting out,

the *loathing of food?* You fought for its freedom
and do you think you failed? Did it keep your joy,
too, stitch it up in you like the *enormous cupful*
of 3-day old jelly layered into the muscle of your thigh?

They say you were only normal when you wrote

and you *composed mad* after a bit of rum or wine.

That you never stopped smoking or typing.

Did your vices hold you too? Tell me who

captured your joy, who gripped it as tightly as you

did your Manet. Or was hidden in the cracks

of walls or floorboards?

Let's find it for you, elusive as a star.

The Vision

The oldest crest should be "Despite, Despite"

On the ancient seal of "Continuity."

Nancy Cunard, *The Vision*, "Despite, Despite," 1964

Despite your low-born marriages, mother dreamed
of donning a diadem, of commanding a throne
covered in crimson velvet. *Despite* her home
in the hills of Eastern Tennessee, she spent hours
talking of Diana, how she wore her gowns, waved
her white gloves, gave speeches with perfect poise,
how the paparazzi pushed her to break, how she
was pretty sure our ancestral tree grew into hers,
into royalty,. She'd tell us our great grandma
was a Daughter of the American Revolution
that her great grandma came from England
that our DNA would still be the same, *despite*
the years, the generational seeds that have sprout
and split and now scrawl like weeds. And even through
the treatment centers, the pill bottles she collected
like prized broches in the bottom of her purse, pinned
to her breast pockets, she knew you should have been
an American heiress, as elite as an English Aristocrat,
as clean and crystal as a crown. *Despite, despite,*
she is closer to her vision now than even before.
She found serenity like she found silk robes and soft
shoes, like she found solid foods again. Somewhere
lost in the cracks of your grandma's vase, an inheritance,

a life she is gluing back together

a life she has broken to bear for us.

Addiction

I think (Nancy's) life , even before she went mad several years ago and sever before, was not worth living, especially when she was so ill and could not breathe, but persisted in smoking and drinking. It is all a tragedy.

Herman Schrijver, March 31, 1965

Best of all is to feel "possessed" by one's subject.

Nancy Cunard, "Reply to the questions of The Bookman," 1960

They say she'd drink and smoke till the end
staining her lungs and liver with a coat of yellow,
a constant bronchitis, a jibbed liver gone aghast

as an expired yoke. What they don't say is
how alcohol soaks the mind like a sponge, how it
has a close **association** with **all** mental illness, how it

can possess—the real tragedy. What is madness
about wanting to be loved by those you love?
What is insane about anger, anger at repression,

at not being able to speak, at being detained
in institutions of green rooms that caged her
like a lion? The sanatorium isn't a sanctuary full

of saints, can't exorcise the demons that sit
on a stomach like lead, wrecking an appetite,
washing away hunger. No. And a church couldn't

either. What she needs is a balm, an ether, a serenity
stuck somewhere in the stars, in the cracks
and crannies of a crepuscular sky.

Dreaming, I See you Both, Brick & Mother

fortitude and decision belong to us, and even when we are ailing, even when we die, the mark of them will be forever there

Kay Boyle, Letter to Nancy Cunard, December 7, 1963

Though they were both discarded
 between decade's ditches, between
cracks of massive marble slabs
 and limestone sprawling along

the highways of the Appalachian
 mountains my mother *walked in, drunk,*
furios, swollen *with black wine, rough*
 and sour from some Tuscan Hill,
they learned to be mothers. *Drunk*

and silent between the beggars
 and broken bodies, they didn't go
to church and but gave up their two
 pennies to strangers and lay at home,

spewing fumes of smoke, spiraling mania
 like descending stairs. They were
exhausted, busting their bodies open
 several times, birthing new generations,
more heirs hanging from their limbs

than fine gowns. My mother made me

marvel at the myriad of mouths
she nursed with her own milk, clothes
she cooked dry, dishes she dipped

then dropped in front of our bulging bodies,
with little help from an abusive father,
an addicted partner. They both drank
but Nancy never stopped slashing words
of others, of authors she labored over until

they were fully formed, no foal, no clumsy
sentences. No, she worked *in fury, in order to defend,*
she attacked discrimination of race and injustice
the same things that drove her mad, *her mania*

a key which turned her angry pen to a piercing
sword. They swung and slashed and stabbed
and beat back a path, mother and Nancy,
two distant twins of nature, two makers, two fixers,

stitching together, stacking high the bricks, the mortar,
walls raised around paths they made for us.

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Notes

- Pg. 4- Epigraph from: “Despite, Despite,” *The Vision* (Long poem in Troubadour Times), Poems by Nancy, Box 2, Folder 10, Item 24. Herman Schrijver Collection of Nancy Cunard, 1944-1965. Special Collections Research Center, Carbondale, Illinois.
- Pg 5-6.- Epigraph from: N.C. to H.S. ALS Jean-Cap Ferrat. December 3, 1964, Correspondence, Box 2, Folder 3. Herman Schrijver Collection of Nancy Cunard, 1944-1965. Special Collections Research Center, Carbondale, Illinois.
 - Italicized words and phrases from: “Sonnets on Pain,” Poems by Nancy, Box 2, Folder 10, Item 22. Herman Schrijver Collection of Nancy Cunard, 1944-1965. Special Collections Research Center, Carbondale, Illinois.
- Pg. 7- Epigraph by Langston Hughes and other italicized words and phrases from: Gordon, Lois. “Epilogue.” *Nancy Cunard*, Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 372-374
- Pg. 8- Title from: “Three Prisoner Sonnets.” Poems by Nancy, Box 2, Folder 10, Item 23. Herman Schrijver Collection of Nancy Cunard, 1944-1965. Special Collections Research Center, Carbondale, Illinois.
- Pg. 8-9- Italicized words and phrases from: Gordon, Lois. “The Last Great Glare.” *Nancy Cunard*, Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 343-371.
- Pg. 10-11- Title and Epigraph from: “Despite, Despite,” *The Vision* (Long poem in Troubadour Times), Poems by Nancy, Box 2, Folder 10, Item 24. Herman Schrijver Collection of Nancy Cunard, 1944-1965. Special Collections Research Center, Carbondale, Illinois.
- Pg. 12-Epigraph 1 from: James MacGibbson to H.S. TLS, London, March 31, 1965, Box 2, Folder 8. Herman Schrijver Collection of Nancy Cunard, 1944-1965. Special Collections Research Center, Carbondale, Illinois
 - Epigraph 2 from: “Nancy Replies to the questions of the Bookman,” Box 2, Folder 10, Item 26.b.Herman Schrijver Collection of Nancy Cunard, 1944-1965. Special Collections Research Center, Carbondale, Illinois.
 - Italicized words and phrases from: Rehm, Jurgen. 2011. The risks associated with alcohol use and alcoholism. *Alcohol Research & Health: Preventing Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism—An Update*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2011, pp. 135-143.
- Pg. 14- Epigraph from: Gordon, Lois. “Epilogue.” *Nancy Cunard*, Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 372-374
 - Italicized words and phrases from ending of: Cunard, Nancy. “Two Sequences from ‘Parallax.’” *Poems by Nancy Cunard: From the Bodleian Library*, Trent Edition, North Trent University, 2005, pp.24-25.

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