

A person wearing a red, textured robe is shown from the side, with their right arm extended and hand open, palm facing up. The background is a solid, vibrant red color. The overall image has a monochromatic, high-contrast aesthetic.

NANCY JO CULLEN

NOTHING WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE

POEMS

**NOTHING WILL
SAVE YOUR LIFE**

OTHER TITLES
BY NANCY JO CULLEN

Poetry

Pearl

Science Fiction Saint

untitled child

Fiction

Canary

The Western Alienation Merit Badge

NOTHING WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE

NANCY JO CULLEN



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TK

For Helen

ONE

GHOSTS

I think it's fair to say that even before her death our mother gave up the ghost
her body troubled by the clogged arteries of her mind
by her arch sadness and by her affection for sugar.

She dragged us through our childhoods
angry and anxious
Her epic silences –

On the plane to our brother's funeral she forgot she was afraid to fly,
forgot our brother was dead. To think he endured the mishap of his birth
and paper routes only to find himself in that predeceasing position.

But first, he gave up his tender shadows;
he gave up drink, then the tip of his baby finger to the oil rig
and then cigarettes – too late, I fear.

For a moment our mother remembered who was lost
and grief shuffled out of her throat
on the icy day our brother's coffin was lowered into the ground.

Later we tucked our mother into bed. We left her teeth in a cup. We
poured wine and lit a smoke. Who knows what we talked about,
our brother's giggle or the furious chain that tore off his finger?

TBH

1.

Teenagers are pulling their braces off with their bare hands
Illuminating the unlit valley of adolescence with their exposed midriffs
Subjecting mothers to the Sacrament of Contempt
Mothers are crying into their cold-pressed, non-GMO organic juice
The mothers of the mothers have had too much sun
Fragile little snowbirds, their bones are disintegrating
Such extremely low thresholds for enduring discomfort
They can't even; they just can't
Nobody asks to be born
Not to mention all that plastic accumulating in the landfill
When they said crisis response planning they meant anti-wrinkle cream
Accustom yourself to plaintive disregard
Nobody asks to be a YouTube instructional video gone wrong
Not to mention all that human trash accumulating in the belly of the whale

2.

Not to mention all that human trash accumulating in the belly of the whale
Nor the invisible doctrine of the invisible hand and its invisible backers
Nor the offshore holdings of the Father and the Son & Sons
Currently in a loss position for tax purposes
Devastating, that feeling we failed ourselves in the land of opportunity
The uncertain sickly appetite to please¹
Think of something meaningful to say to the kids:
TBH, freedom for the pike is death for the minnows
The body keeps the score, our long history of anxiety
In the province of ongoing extirpation
Still, there is the miracle of the softening mud and dog shit, flagrant
Uproar of the Hermit Thrush, the White Throated Sparrow
The Brown Creeper, the Earth turning again toward warm days
The wonder of the Body, TBH, is Its capacity for punishment

¹ Sonnet 147.

3.

The wonder of the body, TBH, is its capacity for punishment
We told our daughters, do not walk through that park; we said
You are a public space & it will not soon end
You are open for business 24/7, sweetheart
That age-old Madonna / “she has no respect for herself” divide
The need to think critically about a safe space
Say yes, say yes to the dress; say no
Say sorry, say my fault; say please
Anyway, what she can or can’t eat is practically all she will think
About, a nuanced dance of tactics and selection
And the Instagram effect now that nature isn’t natural
Confession of our faults is the next thing to innocence
Follow the thought of envy
The rich live, the rich live longer everywhere

4.

The rich live, the rich live longer everywhere
The rich think, the rich think about think-pieces
By think-piece they mean hip & knee replacement surgery
By hip and knee replacement surgery they mean inheritance
By inheritance they mean embrace sincerity
By embrace sincerity they mean deposit the proceeds of social conditioning
They mean to say, efficiency algorithms are their jam
They mean welcome to the so-called sharing economy
We push the walk button; we push the walk button again
We push the walk button again; we are on fire at the intersection
Our bones consumed in the noise, the weather
Some girls *imagine* they feel worse than they do
They get into a dither just by thinking too much about themselves²

² *You're a Young Lady Now*, 1961.

5.

They get into a dither just by thinking too much about themselves
Their informational appliances are always at their fingertips
Their fingertips are always on the receiving end
Of the global supply chain, always on the receiving end
Of stand-out online dating profile photos
Always on the receiving end of palatable versions of
Demographically segmented market variables
Always on the receiving end of the body in trouble
Brought on by an insufficiency of imagination & upcycled
Dresses; brought on by the absence of absence
And the plastic particulate matter of a bifurcated heart
Your continued participation serves as express consent
Bring your noise cancelling headphones
The Lord helps those who help themselves

6.

Because the Lord helps those who help themselves

Because all the cats want to dance with the natural mutation

Because of the heat trapping nature of sweet little sixteen

Because of the inability to recall the sequence of traumatic events

Because of the tendency of attention to be affected by recurring thoughts

Because of record breaking high temperatures

Because of mitigation and adaptation

Because of benzodiazepine

Because of twenty-one words used to describe only women

Because of sharks, dogs, mountains, elevators and mosquitoes

Because of black legged ticks and American presidential elections

Because of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors

Because of smiley face emoticons

Because of clinical levels of acquisitiveness

7.

Because of clinical levels of acquisitiveness
And all the angels & saints in their “spiritual gangster” T-shirts
All the latest patrons of leisure, style, and taste
All the latest patrons of teenaged girls, angular and hungry
Feeling their supreme moment of destiny
Teenaged girls waiting to spring into time
And by time they mean take their husband’s name
And by all the angels & saints they mean reality TV stars
They mean they have no sense of their over-determined circumstances
This poem is bitter; this poem has gone to fat
This poem is crushing the dreams of teenaged girls
It tells them they are still unloved
But those girls are laughing and this poem is an old bitch
And, teenagers are pulling their braces off with their bare hands

CURRENT MOOD

A mountain (the way we think of a mountain)
Assuming we think of the mountain as mean
A sudden, damaging turn in doctrine
The collision of songbird with windscreen
Immanent or occurring thunderstorms
A dog, alone and shaking in the dark
The feeling will pass, the feeling that warns
The dog, alone and shaking in the dark
So by the time we name it, it has gone
That madness has left the brain's stadium
My mood, a runaway phenomenon
A vestige of my old Catholicism
A remembrance of everything I lack
A tribute to what God might just take back

DUE

Perhaps it's the flu or, perhaps, fury
& the news is too fast for my feelings
in this political economy
where the profit wants what the profit wants.
I'm trying to lighten up, to sparkle
but my children are in their own cities
& my dog, mysteriously failing,
now sleeps under the stove. I'm paralyzed.

*In a small town fraught with sins and secrets*³
A day of concern for your waitress please
& The Maker you made in your own image.
Waiting on the trickle-down effect here
Wearied by The Patriarchy's patriarchs
I am trying not to hate this world –

3 Promo bumpf from Netflix's *Dark*.

BUBBLE

Everything we want is on our timeline
& all our fifty thousand thoughts per day
are a limbic reactivity feed
so the formation of our memories
(and also our higher mental functions)
spring from too many places of disease
in the nineteen eighties sense of the word,
when we shouted: yes means yes & no means no
dis/ease, 'cause we continue to reinvent
the fucking wheel & still call it progress,
like how we are starring in a shit show
of our own making proves we are still just sad
children of the children who were still sad
in this new winter of our discontent.

HEAVEN

My folks took me to Mass that I might adore
Jesus & fear God and by my fear comply,
bear patiently each day's disappointments
and calmly await my certain demise,
for even before my use of reason
sin was in my soul. No consolation
in my corporeal form & no joy
only terrible anticipation.

This short explanation of my youthful
dread reminds me of a joke I forget
and that our memories are so much false
belief about what we want to believe;
like we are deserving of our bounty,
that everything happens for a reason.



Nancy Jo Cullen's poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Puritan*, *Grain*, *filling Station*, *Plenitude*, *Prairie Fire*, *Arc*, *This Magazine*, *Best Canadian Poetry 2018*, *Room*, *The Journey Prize* and *Best Canadian Fiction 2012*. Nancy is the 2010 recipient for the Dayne Ogilvie Prize for LGBTQ+ Emerging Writers. She's published three collections of poetry with Frontenac House and a collection of short stories, *Canary*, with Biblioasis. Her first novel, *The Western Alienation Merit Badge*, was shortlisted for the 2020 Amazon Canada First Novel Award.

Uncorrected Proof –
Please check against the final bound book.

Nothing Will Save Your Life is an explosion of pop culture, femininity, sex, religion and motherhood held together with humour and lightened with fragments of joy. In this book Nancy Jo Cullen has created a collection that is deeply rooted in the messy day-to-day of life but takes on serious issues such as body image, aging, climate change, capitalism and even death – containing it all within traditional poetic forms. From kitten videos to confirmation bias to cucumber diets to vintage Vivienne Westwood, these poems are a whirlwind of constrained energy. Sometimes neurotic, sometimes bawdy, sometimes tender – they are always irresistible to the reader, drawing us deep into Cullen's world where she pulls apart society to show us just what it is to be alive in this moment.

Nothing Will Save Your Life

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