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Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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My nightmares are like that—

after “The Empire of Light, II,” by René Magritte

A single street lamp, not illuminating anything, the street’s bathed in darkness, and I’m running and stumble, and there’s a house, maybe two, maybe three, I lose count as I’m running, out of breath now, and light from a window, here and there, but the street is deserted, no people, no cars, not even a stray dog, and yet behind one of those closed doors may be what I’m trying to reach, but I can’t stop to find out, so I keep on running, and will myself not to look up, because over the trees, above this desolate street, there’s a bright blue sky frothy with clouds, and if I could get a good running start, I could lift off and soar, leave this endless street where no one goes out, not for a smoke or to walk their dog, and if I stay steady, I could float forever in perpetual day, but I know that’s not what I’m looking for, so if I can reach the corner, I’ve got a hunch that on the next street, day is day and night’s night, and with my legs aching, I’d settle for that, so I keep on running, past the same windows, same trees, still hopeful I’ll make it, because as I said at the start, my nightmares are like that.
Author Notes

Nancy Scott is the current managing editor of U.S.1 Worksheets, the journal of the U.S.1 Poets’ Cooperative in New Jersey. She is the author of two books of poetry, Down to the Quick (2007) and One Stands Guard, One Sleeps (2009) both published by Plain View Press, and a chapbook, A Siege of Raptors (2010) published by Finishing Line Press.

About the Work

The idea for “My nightmares are like that…” was generated in a course in ekphrastic poetry that I took this spring. One assignment was to write a poem about a painting we’d selected from the volume, 1001 Paintings You Need to See Before You Die. From the hundreds of paintings I could have selected, I chose The Empire of Light II by Rene Magritte, because years ago I was captivated by the poster of The Son of Man, also by Magritte, which hung on my son’s living room wall (that painting was not included in the volume). The juxtaposition of images in both works didn’t make any logical sense but made perfect sense when I let my imagination flow, and the wit of the art intrigued me. Of course, I often have endless running nightmares.

The first draft of the poem was written in one sitting, which was unusual because I tend to belabor words until they feel right, but for this poem, words flowed onto the page in one long breath. So for this poem the easiest part was the actual writing; in fact, I can’t say that there was a difficult part. The poem was critiqued once in class, suggestions were made about revising a few line breaks, and that was it. Hardly typical of the effort that goes into most of my poems, some of which I’ve worked on for years and I still can’t finish.

I really don’t know why some poems are easier to write than others. I usually map out a poem in my mind before I commit any of it to the page and sometimes what seemed fine in the abstract doesn’t translate to the page and I start over, or maybe if I’m lucky I can rescue a phrase or two. The idea and the actual words are only part of the process. I’m particular about how the poem sounds when read out loud and how it looks on the page. I write many drafts for most poems.

One of the challenges in my poetry, which is typically written in narrative verse, is not to overwrite, which comes naturally. I have had to develop a thick skin when it comes to losing those precious words and even stanzas I worked so hard to perfect. I participate in two critique groups and we always read poems out loud. What I had thought was perfectly clear now raises questions, and sometimes a poem just begs to be judiciously pruned. I’m fortunate to be surrounded with poets, who are also good readers.

Another challenge is of a different nature. The first materials I drew from for poetry, which I started to write in 1996, were the stories I’d heard as a social worker for several decades with the State of New Jersey. I’d worked with homeless families, abused and foster children, and those with mental health issues. Their stories were intriguing and I felt they needed to be told. Poetic form seemed the perfect way to do it, because I was especially influenced by two anthologies: Carolyn Forche’s, Against Forgetting, and Martin Espada’s Poetry Like Bread, both containing poems of political and social commentary and witness. I wanted to avoid sounding patronizing, but rather to communicate the humanity of those too often faced with awful situations and /or choices, as in Paul
and Cheryl, where the young mother is dying and asks the social worker to raise her infant or The Haunting of Alejandro, where a young man with full-blown AIDS impregnates his girlfriend, both poems included in my books. It was from these poems, and others like them, that I developed a real emotional commitment to poetry.

Nancy Scott on the Web

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