

# Nancy Hale

on the life and work

of a lost american master

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Dan Chaon, Norah Lind & Phong Nguyen, Editors

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*Nancy Hale: On the Life & Work of a Lost American Master*

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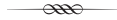
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# The Influence of Art on Nancy Hale

Norah Lind

During the early decades of *The New Yorker*, the short stories of Nancy Hale appeared with a regularity that acted as a shaping force, defining the young publication. Her stories provide a cultural account of the changing role of women in 1930s New York, and her novels tackled new subjects by depicting the complex lives of a series of brazen young women. She shared the attention and encouragement of legendary Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins with Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe. Despite tremendous recognition during her lifetime including ten O. Henry awards, Nancy Hale's star had faded by the time of her death in 1988. Her longtime friend, *The New Yorker* editor William Maxwell, wrote at Hale's death that "...it must have seemed to her that her work, in later years, had gone largely unappreciated. At the moment Willa Cather isn't read as much as she once was. One can depend on time to correct myopia of this kind."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Tribute" 227

Reflecting on Nancy Hale's writing necessarily also evokes her life, for despite any claims she made to the contrary, her work is largely autobiographical. She writes of her remarkable artistic family, successful career years, troubled marriages, and emotional breakdowns. The author is present in the characters who fill her narratives—often youthful and lovely women from privileged social backgrounds. Hale's precise descriptions shape with warmth the world that she knew. She builds characters, settings, and scenes through astonishing sensory detail, allowing the audience to share her world—a skill that was nurtured during a childhood of engagement with literature and art, and by a family which for generations counted its members among the most significant creative professionals in America. The thought processes of the visual artist creep through Hale's writing, bringing vital images to readers who followed her work.

Despite Nancy Hale's early recognition as a writer during her academic career at Boston's Winsor School, she followed graduation with two years of study at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Her father, Philip Hale, was a prominent instructor there throughout her childhood. Her mother, Lilian Westcott Hale, gained recognition within the respected Boston School of artists during its heyday.

In reviewing Nancy Hale's memoir of life with her parents called *The Life in the Studio*, Diana Loercher notes: "Artists have grown like leaves on the family tree."<sup>2</sup> Certainly, Nancy Hale's life was surrounded by art. Her mother moved her studio into their home when Nancy was born, maintaining the decorum of a maternal image while pursuing her art. Philip Hale sketched during the evenings after his days of instructing art, or he worked on one of the many articles, books or lectures about art that he produced to supplement his wages from the museum school.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Life in the Studio* 22

Despite the proliferation of Hale artists working around the turn of the century, the popular historian Van Wyck Brooks describes a more widely recognized family attribute in *The Flowering of New England 1815 -1865*: “To write a book for one of the Hales, was as natural as to breathe . . . [They] were all authors by instinct.”<sup>3</sup> Philip Hale’s father Edward Everett Hale, well-known patriarch of the Boston Brahmin family, was arguably the most powerful figure in Boston at the turn of the century. Edward Everett Hale led a large congregation before his appointment as the chaplain of the senate. Of his prolific writings, perhaps the most recognized titles are *A New England Boyhood* and “The Man without a Country.”

The abilities of the family’s women were respected as well and provided proof positive for Nancy Hale that women were capable of writing; indeed, in the Hale family, they were expected to write. Her grandfather Edward Everett Hale frequently enlisted the skills of family members, including daughter Ellen Day Hale, to meet his formidable literary obligations. His sister, Lucretia Peabody Hale, published heavily in her own name including *The Peterkin Papers*. Edward Everett Hale’s wife was the niece of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*— the best-selling, and arguably the most politically influential, book of the 19th century. Her own niece was the struggling feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Nancy Hale absorbed the paired influences of visual art and literature, and the marriage of the two forms provides the descriptive quality that distinguishes her writing. Because of the Hale family’s significance to the early history of New England, their correspondence is archived in a number of libraries. Within these records, the combination of visual art and text is apparent in the correspondence of various Hale family members who enhance their letters with sketches of daily life. Nancy

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<sup>3</sup> *The Flowering of New England* 499

Hale said that “people who can do one art can usually do one or more of the others,” but few of Hale’s contemporaries possessed her deep level of understanding of the visual arts.<sup>4</sup>

Her father’s career clearly embraced the family’s convergence of skills. Philip Hale was a painter and a writer, and his critical reviews and books on art topics led him eventually to supplement his instructor duties with popular public lectures on art topics. All of these pursuits were assumed to fulfill the obligation that he felt to support his small family. He recognized his wife as the superior artist, and rather than challenging her success like many other men in artistic unions, he insisted that the family employ a household helper so that Lilian Westcott Hale might devote herself to her artwork. The thorough shaping influence of art and artists led Nancy Hale to entitle her book of reflections about her parents *The Life in the Studio*. In that collection of stories, which focused on her life as the only child of two artists, she relies upon the critical eye that she developed living with them, to record visual effects in highly sensory terms—with the nuance of an artist.

Hale captures a moment, an image, a character, or a scene through visual descriptions that reflect a childhood surrounded by art. In a story from *The Life in the Studio*, she describes a distinguishing feature of her role in the household—her repeated service as a model:

My mother had drawn me at the age of six weeks in my bassinet; propped up against pillows, at the age of six months, on a background of patterned roses. At the age of one, seated in a baby carriage [...] I had to pose so much in my childhood that when I reached the age of about thirteen I finally figured out a requirement of my own. I wouldn’t pose, I said, unless I could be painted with a book. So all subsequent pictures show me in the act of reading [...] some show the book, some don’t; but all have the eyes downcast.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Loercher 22

<sup>5</sup> *The Life in the Studio* 18-19



This control of her situation provided her with hours of reading time. The writing habit followed naturally, according to family standards. As a young child, she surprised her mother by asking for a printing press for Christmas, and Philip assured his wife that most Hale children requested printing presses during childhood. By the age of eight, Nancy was producing a family newspaper. She published her first story in the *Boston Herald* at age eleven for the purpose, she said, of remuneration. Surrounded by the tools of both trades, the young Nancy Hale may have felt that only two professions were open to her. She chose to write, but her parents' devotion to art profoundly influenced her writing technique. In a tribute to Nancy Hale after her death in 1988, William Maxwell reflected on her use of the senses in her descriptions. He noted the continual influence Hale's childhood exposure to art played on her writing. Maxwell references the popular story "Midsummer," recognized by the staff at *The New Yorker* as one of the finest stories the magazine had yet published:

The child of painters, Nancy Hale was brought up in a world where it was inconceivable that beauty of one kind or another would not be an essential part of her art. Her writing reflects this assumption. Her descriptive powers are remarkable but seldom used in the service of the merely visual. For example: "The sound of the horses' feet was like a confused heartbeat on the swampy ground. They both felt it. They used to get off their horses, without having said a word, and helplessly submerge themselves in each other's arms, while the sweat ran down their backs under their shirts." Writing like that doesn't age.<sup>6</sup>

Her early novels were handled by the legendary Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins, who was so certain of Hale's ability that he published her two early novels to retain her on the company's literary clients' list for the day when he sensed her true gift would

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<sup>6</sup> "Tribute" 226-7

emerge. Both of Hale's first two novels made little impact, but Perkins related to mutual friend Elizabeth Lemmon that he instantly recognized in Hale a writer of unusual talent: "—like you Virginians think a colt could run when he could barely stand. So I watched her and got us to publish her when she couldn't sell. Now she has a great name in the magazines, but she hasn't yet sold for us. So I want to be vindicated."<sup>7</sup>

Nancy Hale was fortunate to find an editor as understanding as Maxwell Perkins. She maintained a routine whenever possible, and her stories flowed in a steady stream to publication. She clearly outshone both of her first two husbands, who were also writers, and the resulting personal conflicts contributed to the only significant interruptions in her writing—the troubling emotional breakdowns which rendered her physically and mentally drained. With the understanding of a psychologist, Perkins supported Hale through each crisis, receiving his vindication with her 1942 best seller, *The Prodigal Women*, which Hale referred to as the story of her second marriage.

Hale struggled to come to terms with her failed relationships in *The Prodigal Women*, but she experienced difficulty coping with the novel's large scale. She wrote to William Maxwell, whom she referred to as "a kind of artistic conscience"<sup>8</sup>: "The whole scale is so big and you have to keep your mind on the big side, the whole picture, and somehow you can't also write in careful detail; I mean you can't write the kind of accurate semll-and-sound [sic] stuff that I know I can sometimes do well, but must write on a larger, looser scale of which I am unsure . . ."<sup>9</sup> Her editor, Maxwell Perkins, sympathized with her difficulties in writing *The Prodigal Women*, but for different reasons than the length. He wrote to her on Oct. 21, 1942:

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<sup>7</sup> Berg 206

<sup>8</sup> SSC, NHP, 14.20, 1943

<sup>9</sup> SSC, NHP, 14.20, undated letter

I know that this book was a very hard book, for specific reasons, and that it was one of those books that a writer must get out and get through with before she can go on. But I am getting more satisfaction, and just as much pleasure from your triumph, even upon egoistic grounds alone—for, from the very beginning, I believed in you and said so, and while I don't believe that sales are in themselves a proof, they are the only proof and the irrefutable proof to a lot of people to whom I have to say things—book-sellers and such. So don't thank me for any pleasure. It is I who must thank you.<sup>10</sup>

The publication of *The Prodigal Women* was followed by the longest interruption to Hale's writing career, resulting from an emotional breakdown. She found the short story form more comfortable, allowing her to exercise her stylistic precision which brought her a sense of control. The incorporation of her artistic eye in producing short narratives lent a painterly nuance to the visions that she brought to the audience, layering her language like brush-strokes on a canvas. Hale's stories encourage mental imaging, providing details which color and texture the thoughts. She speaks to the reader's eyes. Artistic hybridity dominates *The Life in the Studio*. The collection of linked stories opens with a visual description of the studio that Hale felt compelled to clean out following her mother's death, which demonstrates her painterly technique:

All this accumulation is of no immediate use to anyone alive today. "All this junk," my husband calls it, as he views the half-empty pots of glue and linseed oil and turpentine; the balsa-wood plane models, broken, my son made while my mother was painting him; coils of wire used on boats for some purpose; cigar boxes of dried-up paint tubes; the conch shells in the still-life composition that was the last thing my mother painted before she died; the rotted leather

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<sup>10</sup> Perkins 206-7

trunks full of photographs mounted on cards in the Victorian manner, of ladies in bustles, gentlemen with beards, once somebody's friends but now forever unknown; a yellow luster vase; a pair of desiccated rubber gloves for handling the etching plates in an acid bath; a pile of old Transactions of the Bronte Society; several palettes, still set, the blobs of paint dried as hard as multicolored marbles; plaster casts, damaged, of Aphrodite, of a della Robbia bambino, or an écorché—a model of the nude stripped to show the muscles; a pile of oil pochades my father painted on one of his infrequent visits away from his Boston studio . . . <sup>11</sup>

Roberta White writes of such work, that “descriptive passages are analogs of painting, composed visual impressions that do more than provide a setting; they arrest moments in time and offer a perceptual point of view. . . .” <sup>12</sup> Nancy Hale, the writer and the artist, provides a clear visual image through words. Her list captures the look of the studio as surely as her parents conceived compositions with their brushes. Here we encounter her textural description: “rotted leather trunks,” “desiccated rubber gloves,” and “blobs of paint dried as hard as multi-colored marbles.” The value in these objects of dry decay has ended like her parents' lives, also marking the loss of Nancy Hale's childhood world. Her words preserve the studio forever; she is a sensitive participant, recreating the visual world as text, poignantly reflecting on the past through images like the pictures of Victorian men and women—“once somebody's friends but now forever unknown. . . .” <sup>12</sup>

Years after writing *The Life in the Studio*, Doubleday commissioned Nancy Hale to write about another artist, Mary Cassatt. Her inner view of that artist could not be shaped by intimate experiences such as she had of her own parents. She had never

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<sup>11</sup> *The Life in the Studio* 3-4

<sup>12</sup> White 76

met Cassatt; how was she to understand how this artist worked and thought? Hale writes in the book's prologue that she was forced to seek the artist by studying her paintings, looking for what the pictures revealed about the artist: "It was not that her pictures told about her, so much that they *were* her; just as the other side of the moon, hidden, is still the moon."<sup>13</sup> Hale's analysis of Cassatt's paintings, however, falls short of a truly penetrating insight into the artist. She did attempt to enter the world of Mary Cassatt in her own honest way—through direct experience. Traveling to Paris to research the Cassatt book, Hale visited the painter's favorite places. She sat on the sidewalk outside Cassatt's favorite café, in all likelihood sipping the artist's favorite tittle while watching passersby. She traveled in Cassatt's footsteps before facing the task of presenting the artist to her readers. Hale wrote of the effort:

. . . we talked to a variety of locals—peasants in wooden sabots standing deep in barnyard muck, old women wrapped in the ubiquitous shawl of France as they leaned against a cold wind sweeping down the village street. An hour was spent with the granddaughter of Reine, the cook-model Mary Cassatt painted so often. Again and again I was struck, less by the fact that so few of them had in fact met the artist, than by the way their faces would fall as they themselves became aware that, no, they never actually spoke with l'Imperatrice; but Yes!—the faces would brighten—they had seen her often, out in front of the chateau among the rose bushes. All were of one mind that they had, without doubt, known Mary Cassatt, known her well. For all the unsentimentality of the French, it was plain that Mary Cassatt was a living presence, like the images in religion, a sort of local saint. In speaking of her they seldom used her name; she was the Benefactor, the Lady of the chateau, the American. She was l'Imperatrice.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Mary Cassatt: A Biography of the Great American Painter* xxv

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 289

Again Hale paints her own picture for the audience, first of the peasants, then, relying on their accounts, she provides a sketchy image of the artist—not with paint, but with her own textual medium. Theorist W.J.T. Mitchell describes the type of interplay that Hale maintains between the visual and the textual: “Images always appear in some material medium—paint, film, stone, electronic impulses, or paper. And yet a crucial feature of the lives of images is their ability to circulate from one medium to another, to move from the page to the screen, from the screen to the performances of everyday life, and back to the page.”<sup>15</sup> Hale connects the artist’s and the writer’s forms through visual narratives.

The ability to capture the visual in text is the hallmark of Nancy Hale’s technical skill and her stylistic strength, yet she felt that her parents experienced the visual in a manner superior to her own. She describes her mother’s visual sensitivity:

When my mother looked at things (and her life was given over to looking at things; in any unfamiliar house she used to deep crying “Look at that! Look at that! About a chair, a picture, a china bowl of flowers, until she became embarrassed by the realization that nobody else joined her), she looked with a kind of innocent, once-born stare. I can see that now, too. She held her eyes very wide open and simply stared, as though confronted by the first day of creation. Often she saw things quite differently from other people. Colors, for instance, appeared different to her from what they seemed to me to be. She would keep talking about a blue house on the road to Gloucester, and I couldn’t imagine what she was talking about, and then one day we would be driving that road together and she would cry, “There’s the blue house! Look at that.” I would look, and it would be white.

“You’re so *literary*,” my father and mother used to complain to me. This was in no sense a compliment but

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<sup>15</sup> Mitchell 294

referred to the instantaneous reflex of reading into color what I figured it had to be, instead of seeing it for what—in that light—it was.<sup>16</sup>

If Hale was less visually sensitive than her artist parents, she compensated through a heightened awareness of her other senses. In “My Mother’s Solitudes,” for example, she describes a day spent home from school sick. She constructs her recollections the way an artist plans the details of a composition. Rather than relying on visual elements, Hale highlights her separation from her mother at work in the studio, through careful attention to sound rather than sight. That is the only part of her mother accessible to her in her illness:

From far away in the back of the house came faint domestic sounds—the coal range being shaken down, the black iron door to the oven opened and shut. I have no recollections of the hum of a vacuum cleaner. Somehow things got done about the house, but not by my mother. Her mornings were, properly, for work. The sounds of her working made a principal part of that tiny accenting to the snowy silence, and I could identify each sound.

There was the sharp, steady sawing of charcoal (sharpened to a needle point with a razor blade) up and down against the sheet of Strathmore board on my mother’s easel as she worked on a snow scene from the windows of the front hall that, with the aid of a wardrobe and a chest of drawers, my father used as a dressing room. There would come a pause in the sawing, and a faint rattle, while she rummaged around in the blue-edged box that French charcoal came in. A clack—she had dropped something on the floor. If it was charcoal, it fell with a small explosion. Then a scratchy, rubbing sound, which was the careful filing of the sides of her stick of charcoal against the board covered with fine sandpaper which had a handle to keep one’s fingers clean. A pause. Then would recommence the sawing

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<sup>16</sup> *The Life in the Studio* 21-22

of the point drawn rhythmically up and down. I would go back to Miss Bronte, or make a stab at arithmetic, but every now and then I would give myself over again to rest in the long morning's stillness.

Sometime near noon, the day's letters would come pouring in through the slot in the front door, onto the hall floor, with a splash.<sup>17</sup>

This particular passage relies heavily on the sense of sound as Nancy Hale creates a picture by writing through senses unavailable to the artist. She records the quiet in another description of an afternoon with her mother:

We sat together then for a while before she got up to make tea, in one of those long silences when tiny sounds become brilliantly distinct—the occasional *clunk* of the electric clock on the wall of the kitchenette in that small, peaceful apartment; the creak, as my great-grandfather's sea chest in the parlor settled a bit; the sound of a chunk of wet snow as it slid off the roof onto more wet snow; the sound of a car passing outside, coming to us muffled, as though from far away.<sup>18</sup>

The technical element that defines Hale's writing is the blend of senses in her descriptions. She conveys scenes with the details of an astute observer. Here she relies on smell to describe the delights of the studio:

... when I would come in from a swim or a walk on the moors, on entering the studio I could smell distinctly not only the oil paint and turpentine from my mother's reign but, rising from the layers of years upon years, the nitric acid used in solution to bite the etching plates of my old aunt who had built the studio back in 1911.

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<sup>17</sup> "My Mother's Solitudes" 40

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 42



Once or twice, to my astonishment, I burst into tears. What astonished me was not so much that I should be crying as what, I realized, I was crying about. It was not because my mother or Aunt Nelly was dead, or out of sadness for all those other artists, Aunt Nelly's friends, who also used the place long ago; but because, in the silence of the studio, I remembered what a wonderful time they all had.<sup>19</sup>

Raymond Carver, who died the same year as Hale, wrote that a writer should avoid gimmicks in writing, favoring instead the act of viewing the world and handing that world over to the reader in his own unique way. The Hale method was a nuanced blend of sensory images rendered with the technical precision of a master craftsman—of an artist. This particular aspect of Nancy Hale's writing is perhaps the reason that her short stories outshine her novels. She captures glimpses of life—frequently her own life. Hale commented in a speech that while her autobiographical writing is rooted in reality, it is created with awareness that the perceptions will be shared. The author's purpose is to bring the reader to a sense of identification with the writing, to make the reader a part of it.<sup>20</sup> The life of the author contributes to the process, but the reaction of the audience, Hale felt, was the measure of a work's success. Hale cautioned others about the importance of the reader's position in the process, "...your life is important, it is serious and tragic and pathetic and frustrated, right down the line. But if you are going to make it seem in the slightest degree important to that sea of blank faces, your possible public, it has got to be on their terms. They are viewing you coldly from outside."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *The Life in the Studio* 99-100

<sup>20</sup> SSC, NHP, 26.2, card 26

<sup>21</sup> SSC, NHP, 26.2, card 16

Whether writing with humor or poignancy, Hale shares a depth of perception with her readers that results from her own instinctive recording of observations. She persists in her effort at clear recall even when the struggle is hindered by the pain of childbirth and the era's efforts to eliminate that discomfort with drugs. Lilian Westcott Hale wrote to her sister-in-law, Ellen Day Hale, about Nancy's first labor in March of 1930: "He came on the exact day he was expected at one minute past one daytime and while it was a rather long process, Nancy said she didn't mind it a bit." The letter continues that despite morphine and gas, "She was very keen about trying to remember what it was all like and all the sensations. She described them to me the day after and she is going to write them down when she is allowed to sit up. She has asked so many people what the thing was like and they always answer that they can't remember!"<sup>22</sup> Nancy Hale records the sensations in "The Bubble," a heavily autobiographical account of childbirth:

I said, "I know what this pain feels like. It feels as if I were in a dark tunnel that was too small for me, and I were trying to squeeze through it to get to the end, where I can see a little light."

The doctor laughed, "That's not what you're doin'," he said. "That's what the baby's doin'."

But that was the way it felt, all the same [...]

But I was feeling very strong and full of power. I was working my way down that long tunnel that was too tight for me, down toward the little light that showed at the far end. Then I had a terrible pain. That's all I'm going to stand, I thought calmly. Deliberately I opened my mouth and screamed.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> SSC, NHP, 98.15

<sup>23</sup> *The Empress's Ring* 35-36

Nancy Hale's short stories are snatches of life largely drawn from her own experience, which open possibilities for the audience. Hale attempts to evoke memories and thereby provide the members of the audience a sense of belonging in the world. In Hale's words, "offering a seat to them in that same boat we are all in."<sup>24</sup> In *A New England Girlhood*, which she wrote in response to her grandfather Edward Everett Hale's *A New England Boyhood*, Nancy Hale comments in her introduction on a reader's response to a story about losing a ring in childhood. She recalls:

... I did not, moreover, own a ring that once belonged to the Empress of Austria; the ring I did own [...] I never lost. Things did get lost; and that I was not the only child to lose and mourn something indefinably precious was demonstrated to me by such letters as the one from a man in Canada, who said "I too lost something, when I was six—the little pearl-handled knife my father had given me. I know how you felt about losing your ring, and I know you are only calling it a ring."<sup>25</sup>

Hale recreates and shares universal human emotions. Her rich description brings incidents to life, but it is her expression of feeling that provokes the audience's response. She wrote in a speech:

... people do like to get together and have a good talk about their youths. Nobody listens to anybody else, except to be reminded of something that happened to them when they were ten. I have come to believe that this is a basic impulse. For the writer of autobiography it means something important: that here is something in readers which can be reached, an instinct to share memories, a desire to compare notes on living.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> SSC, NHP, 26.2, card 29

<sup>25</sup> *A New England Girlhood* xvi

<sup>26</sup> SSC, NHP, 26.2, card 28

Hale revives for her readers moments which are universal in nature, allowing them to reflect on a past incident in a fresh light. She writes of the glimmers of old memory that fill her stories of childhood, “What interested me in writing them was to try to catch the reverberations from childhood that sometimes make it seem as if the first few years of all our lives constitute a riddle which it is a lifework to solve.”<sup>27</sup> Nancy Hale was guided by her desire to translate her sharp visual acuity onto the printed page. The effort brought her deep into her own past, reviewing times of sadness and joy and regret. In a tribute at Hale’s death, John Frederick Nims quoted from a letter that she had written to him: “‘Isn’t it extraordinary how easy it is to not remember the past but just plain be in the past, for an hour or a half an hour? I mean it’s all in the mind, but so is now”<sup>28</sup> Nancy Hale’s ability to look back and capture the freshness of a moment is the hallmark of her fiction.

William Maxwell, by reputation a tough editor, considered Hale’s writing “flawless” in technique and revealing in its subject matter, which he called “the bedrock of human experience.”<sup>29</sup> Hale provided the readers of her era a clear vision of her world—a world so easily related to their own. Her glimmers of recollection provide the reader a sense of belonging in the world. Hale describes the sense of community she inspires, as like “. . . sitting on some cosmic front porch together, rocking, exchanging long, gratifying accounts of our happy or unhappy lives. At any moment the writer is trying to make it seem that the reader can break in upon the writer’s stream of discourse crying, ‘Why that is just the way it was with me!’”<sup>30</sup> It is difficult in writing about Hale, to limit the selection of excerpts from her work. Each seems to say more, to show more than the last, revealing universal images, glimpses from each of our lives.

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<sup>27</sup> *A New England Girlhood* xvi

<sup>28</sup> Nims 227

<sup>29</sup> “Tribute” 227

<sup>30</sup> SSC, NHP, 26.2, card 31

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## Six Short Stories by Nancy Hale





## Midsummer

They would ride through the hot, dim woods that sultry, ominous August. From the hard ground, littered with spots of sifted sun, on the hills their horses would carry them in a minute to the hollows. There was something terrible about the hollows, deep-bottomed with decaying leaves, smelling of dead water and dark leafage and insufferable heat. The sound of the horses' feet was like a confused heartbeat on the swampy ground. They both felt it. They used to get off their horses, without having said a word, and helplessly submerge themselves in each other's arms, while the sweat ran down their backs under their shirts. They never talked there. They stood swaying together with their booted feet deep in the mulch, holding each other, hot and mystified in this green gloom. From far away in the upper meadows they could always hear the cicada reaching an unbearable, sharpened crescendo.

After a while the queer possession would grow too much for them, and, dizzy and faint, they would mount the horses again. The path carried them up to a long field where they would kick their horses and gallop wildly. The meadow grasses were dusty gold in all this heat, and when they galloped a hot wind pressed by them and all the million flies flew away from the horses' necks. Streaming and throbbing, they would pull up at the end of the field, and could laugh and begin to talk again. Dan would pull the squashed package of Camels out of the pocket of his wet blue shirt and they would each light one, with their horses' wet sides pressed together, and ride along at a walk. Then it would be time for Dan to go back to the stables to give his next lesson.

The country-club stable-yard was bright and normal, hot as thunder as they rode in, with the water in the trough near boiling and the brown horses looking out of the boxes into the sunlight. Dan put the horses away in the dark straw stalls, and then he would walk back to Victoria, standing at the precise point where she had got off her horse. He would walk toward her in his blue shirt and brick-red breeches, his black hair mounting damp and thick from his red forehead, and his eyes as blue as an alcohol flame, lighting another of his Camels. He would offer her one. Then they would walk over to the stable-yard well and he would pull up a bucket of cold water. He would say, "Will you have some water, Miss?" and hand her some in the glass that stood on the well's edge. She looked at his shoulders and his big red throat as she drank, and pushed damp ends of hair away from her face. Then he would have a drink.

When Dan rode out of the yard again, with some group of children perched on the high horses following him, she would wave at him as he turned the corner into the road, and he would make a little bow from the neck, the bow of an Irish

groom. Then he and the children would trot noisily down the macadam, Dan riding so beautifully and carelessly, half-around in his saddle, with one hand on the horse's rump, telling the children to keep their heels down. Victoria would climb into her big green roadster and drive out of the stable-yard as fast as she dared, skidding the corner and going up the road in the other direction with the ball of her foot jammed down on the accelerator.

Victoria Jesse was sixteen that sultry summer. She lived on White Hill in her parents' Italian villa with the blue tile roof, so gruesomely out of place in the New England landscape. Her parents were in France, but the servants and old Nana were in the house and the garden was kept up by the disagreeable gardener, always on his knees by the rose bushes, which dropped thick petals on the turf. The water in the cement swimming pool was soup-warm and dappled with tiny leaves from the privet bushes around. The tennis court was as hard and white as marble, and the white iron benches drawn up around its edge were so hot all day that they could not be sat upon. The Venetian blinds in the house were kept drawn, and the rooms were dim and still, with faint sweat upon the silver candlesticks and the pale marble of the hall floor.

Victoria was sixteen, and sometimes, at the end of the afternoon, when she sat in a rattan chair on the shadowed lawn, when the grass grew cooler and a breeze sprang up and the exhausted birds began to sing, she thought she would go wild with the things that were happening inside her. She wanted to stand on the edge of the pool and stretch upward until she grew taller and taller, and then dive violently into the water and never come up. She wanted to climb the huge pine tree on the lawn, throw herself upward to the top by some passionate propulsion, and stretch her arms wildly to the sky. But

she could only sit around interminably in chairs on the lawn in the heat and quiet, beating with hate and awareness and bewilderment and violence, all incomprehensible to her and pulling her apart.

She could only drive her car as fast as it would go, wrenching it around corners, devouring the ribbon of road with it, driving for hours with the unformed hope of adventure; she could only be cross with Nana and so passionately disagreeable to her old playmates on White Hill that she was not asked to play tennis or picnic, which gave her a melancholy satisfaction. She took a dizzy pleasure in going to the dances at the club with nothing on under her dress and a belt pulled tight around her waist, and dancing with the fuzzy, pink-faced boys of her age, pulsating in all her muscles to the jazz music, and then suddenly walking out and leaving as she had come, alone in her roadster, streaming along the white moonlit roads in the middle of the night, until she was so tired that she had to go home and fall into tossing sleep on the slippery white sheet of her bed.

She could not imagine what was happening to her; she had never imagined such violent sensations as beat at her; inside she was like the summer itself—sultry and fiery, and racked by instantaneous thunderstorms. At the end of the day the air relaxed into moist, nostalgic evening, but she had no relaxing, only a higher tension in the poignant secretness of night. She thought, with defiance, that she must be going crazy.

She had grown thin from her own fire and the unrelenting fire of the weather. She was white, and her green eyes burned unhappily in her pointed face; her bright, thick hair seemed thicker from being always a little damp.

Superimposed on all this ferment was the incessant preoccupation with Dan. She began to take riding lessons in June, to work off a little of this torturing energy, since she wanted

to be away from the infuriating “younger crowd,” and felt it might satisfy her to ride as violently as she drove a car. Dan took her out, and within half an hour, with this tropical immediacy with which she was feeling everything, she uncomprehendingly desired him and wanted to touch him, and could not take her eyes off him. She gave herself no time to be frightened at such unprecedented emotion. She got off her horse to get a drink at a deserted well in the middle of a field, and he got off to help her. With some kind of instinctive simplicity, she went and stood against him, facing him, touching him, waiting for him to do something. He acted; he put one arm around her, holding the horses’ reins with the other hand, and leaned and kissed her hard. For a moment she had the first relief she had had in weeks, and from that moment she wanted him more and more to touch her and to kiss her. After his first reaction, Dan became very stilted, with a recollection of his “place” and his job, but by this time the turmoil inside her had concentrated itself on him, and she would not allow him to remount his horse or help her mount hers; she threw her arms around him with a wild relief.

He had no sophistry to combat her abandon and no way to reason or cope with her obvious passion. He had a conscientious feeling that he had no right to let her have her way, that it would be much better if he somehow put a stop to things, and he saw how young and bewildered she was. But he had never seen anybody as strange and as beautiful as she was, or had the sense of being so dangerously loved, and he saw her lack of reserve and her lack of coyness, and the vulnerability of her youth, and all his vague Irish mysticism made him respond to her as something akin to his horses and the wide countryside he loved. He had the simplicity to sense her quality of being lovely and lost, and different from the fat-legged Irish maids who were his normal social lot.

He left the extent of their relationship up to her, at first because he was impressed by the difference between their stations in life, and later because he loved her, too. He was nearly as bewildered by the queer, sultry passages between them as she was; he was nearly as lost and puzzled as she was, for different reasons. He thought she was a strange little thing, and sometimes when he lay on his mussed bed in the room off the tackroom where he slept, he felt a conceit that he was so irresistible to her, and that she had started it all; but in those submerged, lush hollows where they kissed, he was as bemused and possessed as she was.

None of it was leading to anything. Nothing in the world seemed to be leading to anything. Victoria had no idea of making Dan run away with her, or of young dreams of happiness—she was conscious only that her relief was in him. She got the nearest thing to peace in those dim hollows. The rest of her life had a fabulous, dreamy aspect to her; she lived through these days minute by minute.

One evening she had a telegram from her parents. She was having strawberries for dessert, and sitting limply at the end of the table while two white candles flickered in the wind from the west window. Her fresh yellow dress clung slightly to her shoulders, and her hair felt heavy. The telegram said that they would be home the next day.

She heard the mail plane to New York muttering its way through the evening sky. She heard the servants talking and rattling the dishes out in the kitchen. As long as she might live, she could never forget the immediacy of the streaky pink strawberries and cream before her, the wan look of white wax trickling down the candles, and the little wind stirring in the short hair at the back of her neck.

She got up and opened the door that led out into the garden, and all the renewed scents of evening flowed in like sweet

liquors. She walked out on the grass and the dew wet her stockings above the tops of her slippers. The vicious sweetness of the summer night was intolerable and she leaned against a lilac tree, thinking, What is going to become of me? What is all this beauty and this desire that I cannot touch or take within my hand, and what shall I do? They will try to take me back, and I will never be happy again. What shall I *do*? Oh my God, what is the matter with me? Why do these desires for I don't know what run through me like hot and cold? I don't want to see my mother and father. I couldn't face them, because I am not their child any more, I am nobody at all, I have become only these desperate desires that drive me wild. Why am I so lost?

Her mind went round and round and helped her no more than ever, but seemed to be submerged by the smells, the touch of bark under her fingers, and the taste of flowers on the air. As usual, her vague desperation resolved itself in a need for action, and she went out to the drive and got into her car, whose seat was wet with mist. She roared out into the road and down through the town and tore out along the country roads. The bobbing glare of the headlights showed up the leaves of the branches that hung over the road, and the white road, and the grass along the edges. Outside this, the night was immense and breathing and terrible. She could only cut a white hole through it. She had worn no hat, and the wind scraped her temples and raked her hair.

She drove for two hours as fast as she could, at the end finding herself headed for the stables and Dan. As she turned in the drive into the stable-yard, she thought, How ridiculous! I must have known I was coming here. Why didn't I come at once? She stopped the car and went around to the back, where the little room off the tackroom had a light in its window.

She knocked, and Dan came and let her in. He was surprised and very much embarrassed. He was dressed in his riding things, but he had taken his boots off and his breeches

fitted to his bare white legs. She came in and sat down on his narrow bed. Several moths whacked against the chimney of the oil lamp. Dan had been reading the *Rider & Driver*, and it lay on the bare floor with his boots.

“You mustn’t be here, Miss,” he said. “It’s not the place for you to be coming.”

“My family’s getting back tomorrow,” she said.

“Will you have a cigarette?” He held his crumpled package of Camels out to her. Their little ceremony of lighting took place, with them looking at each other over the flame, solemnly.

They sat and smoked. There had never been any real attempt at verbal communication between them, and now they said nothing at all, but sat by the oil lamp and listened to the sawing of the crickets in the marshes outside. Far away somewhere, someone was playing a harmonica.

She made no reply to his telling her that she should not be there, and he said nothing about her family’s return. They both forgot. They looked at each other gravely, with concentration, and said nothing.

“What am I going to do, Dan?” she asked after a long time.

“I dunno.”

“What is life all about?” she asked, not really caring about an answer.

“I dunno,” he said again. “I like the horses, but I dunno, if you mean about dyin’ and all.” His face was beautiful and simple, cut in the sharp, lovely planes of the Irish.

She had nothing to talk to him about, really. She wanted to be with him. She felt a relief now, she was almost perfectly happy, in a dazed, numb way. They simply stared at each other for a long time. She could not take her eyes from his face. All the wild, furious bewilderment in her seemed to leave her as she looked at him, and she felt she wanted to go on looking forever. Then the lamp flickered and faded. Dan got up and turned it up. The queer magic broke like an eggshell.



There was a lot she could have begun to talk about—her family, and what he and she were going to do about seeing each other when they returned, and a dozen other thoughts in the back of her mind—but she felt no real desire to.

“I wish I could stay here with you,” she said, breaking the long silence.

“Ah, you couldn’t do that, Miss,” he said.

He came back to the bed where she sat, and sat down stiffly beside her. She lay down and pulled him down beside her. It was the first time that they had ever lain side by side. She felt calm and peaceful.

“My little darling,” he mumbled suddenly in to her hair. He had his arms quietly around her.

“Oh, Dan, I love you so.”

After that they did not speak. They did not move. They both lay in drowsy stillness. She was plunged into a dreamless daze, wanting nothing, in a deep well of content. He felt the same strange, unreal sense of peace. Neither of them thought at all.

Finally they slept, with their cheeks together. The lamp went out after a while, and soon pale day streaked along the floor through the little window. Victoria got up, and Dan stood up too, and they moved and stretched themselves without saying anything. He threw open the door, and the fresh smells of the morning flooded the close air. On the other side of the wall, they could hear the horses champing and moving their feet.

They went out into the stable-yard. Hens were making a lot of noise and some birds flew low to the ground. The green car stood there in the early mist, bulky and practical. Victoria got in and closed the door. It made a heavy, solid sound. Dan stood beside the car and they looked at each other for a moment, vaguely. Then she drove slowly out of the yard. He walked back to his room, still in his bare feet, with the

breeches-ends about his calves. Victoria drove home along the country roads as it grew lighter, and threw herself into bed and was instantly asleep.

She did not wake until eleven, and then Mr. and Mrs. Jesse had returned and were waiting to have it out with her. They had had four letters from fellow-townsmen informing them that their daughter was carrying on with the riding instructor at the club, a common Irishman. The Jesses were the richest people in the town, and before Victoria was even awake they had arranged that Dan should be discharged immediately, with wages in advance. The club steward was having him packed off on the noon train. They had done everything they could. Now there was nothing left but the talk with Victoria.

They sat in the dim library, and she came in to them. The heat was already at its height. They talked and talked. They told her how common such an affair was, over and over. They tried to find out just how much she had actually done. They were furious and hurt and outraged.

Nothing they said made any impression on Victoria. She heard their voices far, far away, and she got a sort of detached impression of what they were saying. She sat in a big chair, languidly, while her dress wilted and clung around her, and watched the leaves outside make the light flicker between the slits of the Venetian blinds.

Finally, bewildered at her detachment, they told her that the instructor had already left, had been fired for his conduct. They told her four times before she understood what they were talking about. She looked at them vaguely and without saying anything for a few minutes, and then fainted and could not be brought to for some time.

Dr. Russell, with his little mustache and long tubes of colored pills, told them it was the logical result of the protracted

heat wave. She was as thin as a bag of bones, and as white as a sheet, and gave every sign of physical and nervous exhaustion. He prescribed two tonics, and said she must stay in bed for a day or two.

She lay in bed all afternoon, trying to concentrate. She couldn't get anything straight in her head. She would remember that Dan had gone, and then she would remember that she loved Dan, but by that time she had forgotten that he had left, and it was impossible for her to assemble things to make any picture of what her life was. She was not very unhappy. She was hot and tired, and the only things she could think about without an effort were the somber hollows where she and Dan had gone, with their curious green gloom and the smell of submerged decay. Her mind rested in those hollows, dim and steaming.

Her mother came in to see her late in the afternoon, with a plate of strawberries for her. She sat down on the edge of the bed and kissed Victoria gently.

"Darling," she said. "Poor little child. I shall never forgive myself for leaving you alone this summer. You mustn't be too unhappy. Daddy understands and I understand, and we want you to rest and be our happy little girl again. It's really our fault that you fell into the power of this dreadful man."

"He isn't a dreadful man," Victoria said, and closed her mouth tight. It was an effort to talk. She turned her face aside and pretended to go to sleep. After a while her mother went away, leaving the strawberries by the side of the bed. Victoria turned over and looked at them lying on the white plate.

It grew dusky in her room, and then it grew dark. The little breeze of the evening came faltering through the window. Victoria got up and went to the window and breathed the terrible sweetness of the garden at night.

In her nightgown, she climbed down the honeysuckle trellis below her window, and dropped to the grass. She had used the trellis for running away when she was small, and she stood at the foot and thought about that for a while, how impossible that that small girl was the same as herself now. She gave it up.

Barefooted, she walked along the terrace to the lilac tree where she had stood last night, and stood there again, swaying a little, remembrances and thoughts swirling in her head.

Suddenly she pulled her nightgown off over her head and threw herself down on the wet turf. The smell of it filled her nostrils. She pressed her body violently against its softness and fragrance, and ran her fingers desperately into the damp earth. Dan, Dan had gone and all her heart had gone, too. Everything had gone. If life was to be as terrible, progressively, as it had come to be at sixteen, she wished she might die now. She wished she were dead, and felt the exquisite touch of dew-soaked grass against her breast.