

MOONFLAKE

press.

VISITOR



ISSUE #8

DEAR READERS

visitors aren't always welcome.
we hope for comforting parents or friendly faces,
but,
sinister presences and looming strangers
can just as easily tumble through the doors of life.
our eighth issue will guide you, warn you and
reassure you -
what do we do with visitors?
read on and find out...

we hope you enjoy

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WEATHER

At dinner, as the wind whips at the window, Annie remembers the muffled clops of their horses when she returned from riding with her father five days ago. A man was there, by the garden gate. Still, stone-eyed. As she took the horses round to the stable, the voices behind her dropped, low and brittle. Later, when Mam asked, Da shrugged: *He's Walsh. From the...the dock.*

"Where—" Annie's little sister presses her lips. "Where'd he go then?"

"I don't know, Kitty," says Mam.

Kitty shovels peas around on her plate, her fork scraping the enamelware.

"Finish up now."

"Well, the last I saw him was that night," Kitty says, "And he still hasn't—Have you been ro—"

Mam slams the table. "Well you've seen enough of him, haven't ya?" She stands and storms off to the kitchen with her food. "Feckin' on and on..."

Kitty looks on after her, her eyes wide and glinting in the flickering lamplight.

Annie nudges at her knee, whispers, "Come now, don't mind it. Might just be another row, wouldn't you say?" She nods.

Early mornings, the sisters go down to the town market to sell eggs to Séan. The cobblestone's still slick with dew, and golden-brown loaves appear out of ovens behind foggy windows. And they both walk slowly round the corner, where Mr. Leary fries up bacon and potato farls, and the sisters are wrapped in the smell of melting butter and sizzling bacon.

Séan asks about Mam after the first week. "Has she taken ill?"

"No," says Kitty, twirling her pigtail while Annie sets the crates on the counter and he counts out the coins to give her. "Mammy's got a job. She's housekeeping for the Doyles."

The day Mr. Walsh appears again, Mam curses through the evening after he leaves pointing to the horses and saying she could make something off those.

But then, over the next few days, a sort of gaiety, like a fever, spreads in her. She's always bright, always calling her children love, kissing them goodnights. Annie bores down on her dinner as Kitty prattles on about their days; pretends to sleep as Kitty kisses Mam back goodnights.

When she goes riding, Annie looks everywhere. At men coming out of taverns. At every cliff. At every dock. At ferries going out of the island. When Mam finally said it, while tying Kitty's hair into a plait, while the last rays of the August sun spilled across the kitchen, she lifted her chin, and the words rolled off her tongue like waves on shore. Annie gasped at the needle that poked blood out of her finger. But she never looked up from the frock in her hand. Kitty never opened her mouth. Only at night, when Annie lay turned to the window, licking the tears off her lip—the salt of seaweeds in her mouth—did Kitty ask, her syllables soft and purple, *When's he coming back?* And Annie never found her voice.

And now, when the words have become a bass percussion underneath all she speaks and all she doesn't, they roll off her tongue almost naked. *He left.*

Mr. Walsh visits more often. A dream visits Annie often: she's running in the dark towards a figure standing at the edge of a cliff. She's sure it's Da. Every time. And she calls him out. And the figure turns. It's Mam. *Come back here,* Annie yells, *you can't swim.* And Mam smiles, and falls backwards.

On a quiet afternoon, when the sky sprawls leaden and moisture chokes the air, Annie shucks clams sitting at the kitchen table. Kitty's out back feeding the chickens. There's a knock: it's Mr. Walsh.

“Mam's gone to get the quid.”

“Ah! I'll wait then.” He walks in and pulls up a kitchen chair in front of hers.

“Would you li—”

“No, no,” he sits. “I'm fine.”

She goes back to her clams. He talks in his gravelly drawl about the weather. His fat fingers, nails trimmed well past the edges, strum on the bare boards. Money to drink, to gamble, to abandon.

His hand is rubbing her knee underneath her skirt. Her eyes drop to it, to

this hand that's sliding effortlessly now into the small gap between her thighs, and she's a stone as it travels up, warm and rough, squeezing her inner thigh and her ears burn with screaming that she's not screaming and she's not smacking his head and she's not even looking up at him. The world is a din and a blur. The world is this hand. He stands up and walks away.

The door creaks open. "How d'you do Mrs. Flynn?"

He leaves a while after Mam hands him the money. *Crunch* of the dead leaves in the garden. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

When she breathes again, the clam in her hand loosens from where it buried itself in her palm.

She looks at the dent. At the doll hands.

The dark grays, then dissolves into the morning.

Annie goes down with Kitty to the town market. Annie looks everywhere. At stone walls slick with the night's rain. At sheep on hills that blur behind mist. At the sea that goes on and on and on.

"D'you want to buy some potato farls today." She crouches by the side of the road, resting the egg crates on the dirt. Kitty prods mud with her feet beside Annie. A moth is sitting on a blade of grass, its wings folded upright.

"D'you think maybe—" Kitty clears her throat. "D'you think he'll come back?"

"Who?" Annie reaches out, her doll fingers steady.

"Wh-Da!"

And she catches it, pinching its velvety wings between her doll thumb and doll forefinger. With a gentle tug, it's off the grass. Kitty slaps her shoulder, tells her to leave it alone. Annie's mouth tastes of dust. The moth kicks the air, wriggles in her hold. And she watches it wriggle. And she wonders when it'll stop.

DEEP IN THE FOREST

The buck is missing. I say 'missing,' though I might as well imagine the worst because that's how things always turn out anyway, like when Anthony never recovered despite our vow to be together forever.

Even with an apple or carrot in my hand, the doe won't approach me so I can stroke her tan fur, soothe that nervous twitch of her ears, tell her I'm sorry about the buck, or say, 'I'll take care of you' even if that's not actually true because there are hunters in the forest who've probably already hung and gutted the buck, not to mention that a doe is easy prey for those blood-thirsty, wily coyotes.

I follow a family on Instagram that allows their pony inside with the kids. I've no kids myself though we tried for years until suddenly one day, Anthony was gone, not missing, just gone, leaving only me, elbows on the kitchen table, hands propping up my head, staring out the window, always watching for the doe, eager to say, 'Come in, come in.'

Tonight, while the clock's tick tock marks the lonely distance between seconds, I hear her bleat, immediately recognize the distressed tone, then head to the garden, my bare feet cushioned by damp spring grass, my eyes adjusting to the darkness. I hop over the brook she drinks from, swollen from the afternoon downpour, duck under the drooping branches of evergreens on the narrow path that will lead me to her, deep in the forest, farther and farther away from the house, its rooms so terribly cold and empty.

elizabeth murphy

IT'S A SWEET TOWN, YOU KNOW?

you look forward to october because it makes your small town seem less strange. at least it's not just you who is mistaking rolling fog for dark silhouettes, distant crows for over-sized moths, or rustling leaves for muffled screams. at least it's not just you who is closing the curtains before it gets dark, glancing over your shoulder as you ascend the stairs, avoiding the woods for fear of it latching onto you. at least it's not just you who is catching strange lights in the sky, feeling unease crawl into your ribcage and hollow you out.

you again politely decline the older lady's offer of ancient objects and broken knick-knacks. everyone knows they are cursed. she sometimes waits for you to return from work to ask if you're sure. *it's a sweet town, you know*, she reminds you before returning to her house across the street. you never see her frown, even when sweat rolls down her aging face during the middle of winter. when you walk past her home you can hear the structure groan and whine under the weight of mildew and age. the doberman in her front yard watches your every move.

you're out of excuses for your loyalty to the town after all the headaches and nausea caused by the lingering smell of sulfur. the sunken holes in the ground, the pipes emitting gas fumes, the earth so hot it could melt your skin, all to remind you of the network of mines still burning under your feet. and yet, you remain, being sure to wave at the waving children on the side of the road for fear that they will follow you home again. you ignore the visitors who search for answers here, the look of restlessness as they struggle to leave after they realize.

it's your own obsessions that unsettle you. intruding visions of bad omens in the shape of flying creatures, collapsing bridges and red eyes, Christmas presents floating in frosty water, grinning men, and silenced conspiracies. no one talks about the missing bodies, but we've all searched for them. the cemeteries here are some of the best in the nation. the owners are the nicest people in town. it's a sweet town, you know, they endorse. they never lock the gates, even when they should.

your window showcases the maze of a town that is always shifting. with the unforgiving fog and watchful buildings, it's no wonder people go missing. yes, people go missing here. they never learned the rules. running to your car shows you're scared to be caught and staring into the darkness for too long means you are curious about its depth. people here aren't the same at night. they usually have an agenda. mirrors aren't off-limits, but they shouldn't be questioned. don't hide from the thing under your bed because it is hiding too.

your friend from across the river comes to visit. this town looks different to everyone. she asks how long you've lived here. her eyes are locked on something over your shoulder. the radio describes a series of recent murders. you reach to change the channel, but the radio host warns you not to touch that dial, that we're just getting started. your friend asks about the unblinking animals, the guilt-ridden nurses, the waving children, the ash covering the ground. you smile, aware her time is limited, and say it's a sweet town, you know.

gina gidano

PANOPTICON

The door is creaking.
We wait,
Under the weight of anticipation,
For a visitor.
I invite them in
To sit down comfortably
And tell me their ailments
And what initiated them
Motivated them
To move their feet
All those miles.
They said it wasn't really that far at all,
Not hard going,
Nary a misstep,
When one is driven by revelation,
Or a divination to help another see,
The path is easy.
I query,
What is it they ought to show me?
A mirror is held up to me and I see,
Me in three days,
Dusting the
Me in when I was twenty,
Moving the
Me when I am married,
Crying at the
Me when I am willowed,
Loopy at opacity
And when I am dust,

Ready to be sundered,
Flowing In utero.
I move the view to my bed,
Where an onion skinned clump of
cells,
Dozes with its translucent arms,
Twisting into comforted mandalas,
Sagging my mattress,
Gravely.

I watch myself closely,
In this weakened chair,
And I am reflected back,
A thousand times,
A thousand lives,
As omniscient as the,
6 hands about my temple,
Agonising in symmetry,
Two faces repulsed,
Unamicable in profile,
Monitoring,
All about the room,
All the days of me,
Running in parallel,
Silently stuck in eternity,
And it sounds like,
A million tapes,
Running through at once.



india southgate

ARE YOU READY FOR YOUR PUPPIES?

I am exhausted, that's what the doctor called it. But the pills don't really help because my soul is exhausted, not just my body. Well, okay, the fact that my brain is operating on like four hours of sleep a night doesn't exactly help. But I have a six-month old who is still sleep training, a toddler who gets night terrors, a job that I can, mercifully, do from home but has strict deadlines, and no help. That too is my own fault, since I left the father of my children when the baby was only a month old. I told everyone it wasn't an abuse thing, but my therapist and my psychiatrist would disagree, I think.

I have done my best to make my bed as comfortable as possible. I bought a fancy gel-pillow top queen and swathed it in silky, 500 thread count sheets. The fan is on, spraying cool air over me in slow, steady waves. I lie on my back, counting my breaths – in, one, two, three, out, one, two, three.

Behind my conscious focus on my breathing, my thoughts chase themselves around. Tomorrow I need to finish up the paperwork for the rent assistance. Nola seemed like she might be teething, I should pick something up from the store for her. Matt broke that elephant Grandma gave me, I need to glue it back together. Can I really afford the lease payment on my car? I do the math again. There's a set of emails to send to clients, they must be out by Friday.

Sleep will not come, no matter how many breaths I count or how many times I remember to relax the muscles in my face. I am ready to get out of bed again and find something useful to do when I feel the depression of something heavy on the bed. Too heavy for the cat, too heavy for Matt.

"Are you ready for your puppies?" a soft voice asks. My eyes fly open.

"Mama?"

“You need to sleep. It’s late. Are you ready for your puppies?” She looks as I remember her, not from last year when she died but from my childhood. She had shoulder length auburn hair, sun-tanned skin, yellow-green eyes that sometimes had specks of blue in them. Her middle is rather round and she is wearing that green shirt she always loved, the one we found still in her drawer when we cleaned them out and I now had tucked in mine. She is sitting on the edge of the bed beside me, brushing her fingers lightly across my forehead and around my ear like she’s tucking my hair back.

“How are you here?” I ask. I know that what I mean is that she isn’t here, that I must be dreaming. I don’t feel asleep.

She smiles, gently. “You’re tired. Too tired. My sweetness needs to sleep. Now, are you ready for your puppies?” The puppies were a visualization she’d invented for me when I was five. We had moved into a big new house and I had my own bedroom for the first time and I was terrified that the creaking floors and windows meant there was a ghost in the house. I would scream and cry whenever my mother went to say goodnight to my brother, and absolutely refuse to stay in bed if she went downstairs. I had been in love with dogs, so she started walking me through an “imagination game” with these seven puppies every night. After a while, it became so ritual that I’d start yawning the second she started saying the words, a soothing technique I used for anxiety attacks, even all the way through college. But I hadn’t used it in years.

“Okay,” I say.

“Remember,” she says, and I do.

*There’s a black one
And a white one
And a gray one
And a brown one
And a gold one
And one with curly fur
And one with fizzy, fluffy fur*

I don't realize that I have slept through the night until I look at the clock. It is six-thirty, the sun is up over the horizon, and I have not woken since my mother put me to bed. Realizing that that is impossible, I still feel better than I have in weeks, maybe months. Nola will be awake in a few minutes, hungry since I'm still nursing her, but for the first time in six months I have not woken to the sound of a baby crying and that in itself is a relief that energizes me. As I go through my day, the energy depletes and the tension sets back in. There's a diaper disaster in the middle of a phone call with a client, a tantrum over orange Goldfish, a teething baby who seems to be unable to find peace. I understand, little one, believe me!

The moon is sinking back over its zenith by the time that I wrap up the day and climb into my gel-cooled, silky soft bed. I think of the dream about my mother again, imagine the feel of her fingertips drifting over my skin.

"That's right," her soft voice says. This time, I do not open my eyes. If she is there, if I'm hallucinating or dreaming, who cares? I feel her brush the hair from my face, the weight of her body on the mattress next to me.

"Remember," she starts, and I repeat the words with her this time, recalling the images of each of the puppies I had conjured in my early years.

The next morning, the sun peaking through the curtains wakes me. I have slept again and I now start to worry. How is it that Nola is suddenly sleeping through the night? How is it that Matt has not once called out for me? It seems more likely that they have, and that I have simply slept through it. Is it possible to be so tired that you simply don't wake up when your child calls for you? What if there were a fire, would I sleep through that? A tornado? An intruder?

I spend half the day Googling sleep deprivation and symptoms. I am not comforted. I decided to send my doctor a message via MyChart. She had promised me that the medicine would not put me so deep under that I wouldn't wake up to care for the children, but what if she was wrong? What if I was some weird one in a thousand who was overly

sensitive to it?

But if that were true, why hadn't it been helping me all along?

The next thing I Google is post-partum disorder. I saw that movie with Charlize Theron. Was I hallucinating my mother to help myself cope? Was I hallucinating other things, like the fact that I'd turned the oven off, or locked the front door, or finished that project for work?

That doesn't seem to be how post-partum works. Only rare cases have hallucinations. I don't have the other symptoms. I am already seeing a doctor, a therapist, a psychiatrist. Surely someone would notice if I was going off the rails. Wouldn't they?

But the puppies do help. I don't remember when I stopped using the exercise, but it is so rooted in my brain that even thinking of them starts to make me sleepy. For the next two nights, I say it to myself, without my mother's prompting, and I fall asleep quickly. Matt does not have any bad dreams, Nola sleeps through the night without waking to eat. The pediatrician says this is fine, this is good, even. We are all starting to settle in.

A few nights later, I wake to the sound of Matt moaning in his room. I do not leap from my bed, but my heart is already racing. I can tell he is getting ready to go into a full blown episode. He sometimes gets up from bed and runs, screaming, through the house. He is completely asleep, though his eyes are open and he seems to react when I speak to him or touch him. I wait for the moaning to increase, praying that this time he will simply roll over and go back to sleep.

And then he does. Or, at least, the moaning stops. There's some murmuring, I can't quite make it out over the sound of the fan and the white noise machine in his room. I hear the creaking of his bed as he shifts, a thump against the wall as if he's kicked it. But there is no screaming. After a while, my heart rate evens out. I breathe more slowly. My body relaxes, though I am still listening closely for any more signs of disturbance. After a while, I fall back to sleep again and even in my dreams I am grateful.

The next day goes better. We have all slept. My work projects are on target. Nola seems to like pureed peas. Matt is content to play with some stuffed animals while I get her ready for her nap. I lay Nola gently in her crib, pushing my boob back into my bra, and stealthily back out of the room. Matt is still sitting on the floor in the living room with his stuffies, so I take my place behind my computer at the kitchen table. Tapping away, I am focused on what I'm doing until something familiar catches my ear and I look up from the screen.

Matt is talking to himself as he separates his stuffed animals into piles, pretend walking them across his lap from his left to his right, then moving the whole pile back and starting over again. I furrow my brow and actually listen to his two and half year old voice, sure I'm not hearing what I thought I was hearing. But as he starts over again, I can't pretend that it's anything else.

"Black one, white one, gray one. Brown one, gold one. Curly one, fuzzy one." He notices that I'm looking and grins at me.

"Mama," he says. "You ready for puppies?"

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

After Mum's funeral we head to the house to see if there's anything of value, sentimental or otherwise. I pick my way around towers of books, CDs, DVDs and VHS cassettes, everything covered with a thick layer of dust and an even thicker layer of despair.

I should've done something about this mess ages ago. But it's not my house. And my brother Jamie hasn't exactly been much help.

He appears in the living room doorway. "Come on Saz." His wife, Fiona, is waiting in the car, no doubt tapping her manicured nails. I give up on finding anything worth salvaging and walk towards him.

There's a faint meow, coming from the direction of the stairs.

"Did Mum have a cat?" I ask.

"She mentioned she'd been feeding some stray," he shrugs.

"But it's inside."

"Come on." He starts towards the front door and I trail after. We step out into the chill spring air and are about to close the place up when I hear it again, louder.

I peek inside as a tabby monstrosity emerges from behind one of the precarious stacks, its pupils huge in the half-light. Behind me, my brother sighs.

"We can't leave it here," I say. "It might starve."

"Unlikely," he snorts as the cat runs towards us, the sack of its belly swinging. On the front step it stops and looks up appealingly. One eye is green, one blue; like Mum's.

I wait for Jamie to offer. He's got the perfect pet lifestyle: big house and garden, and he works from home. My place is a first-floor one-bed flat with a tiny balcony.

"You know Fi's allergic," he says, then locks up and strides off through the weed-filled yard.

The cat weaves around my legs, leaving hair all over my black tights.

“It’ll find a new home,” Jamie shouts back over his shoulder. “Cats do that.”

His car door clicks open, releasing a tirade from Fiona, then slams shut. The engine roars and they’re gone.

The cat rolls at my feet, exposing its striped belly.

I can’t invite this animal into my home. I’ve got enough on my plate. I rush to the car before I change my mind, but it leaps up and dashes after me, surprisingly fast for such a large creature. As soon as I open the door it jumps inside and installs itself on the front passenger seat. I try to grab it, but it hisses, baring its teeth.

I haven’t got the energy to argue.

*

The cat sits beside me the whole way home, staring straight ahead. At first, I’m nervous about it causing havoc, but it seems pretty content. Until I go through an amber light; then it starts to meow insistently. Just what I need: another backseat driver, like Mum. She used to pump an imaginary brake every time I got anywhere near the car in front.

I turn on the radio to drown out the racket. Six Music, my usual station. The cat gets even louder.

“You like Radiohead, huh?”

The cat emits a low yowl that sounds like something from *The Exorcist*.

“All right, I get the message.” I flick through the stations. It’s only when I get to Radio Three that it calms down. I grit my teeth against the tinkling piano and finish the drive home.

The cat trots beside me into my block, up the stairs and through my front door. It seems right at home – or perhaps it’s just sniffed out the kitchen. Before I’ve even had chance to put the kettle on it sits in front of my cupboards, meowing. The noise is starting to give me a headache.

I rummage through my meagre supplies, finally digging out an ancient can of tuna,

which I dump into a chipped bowl and present with a flourish. The cat takes a mouthful then gives me a disdainful look, as if to say: you expect me to eat that?

I'm reminded again of Mum. Once I cooked for her and Jamie and she just pushed the plate away without a word. After that I finally agreed we should put her into a home, something he'd been hinting at for months.

"Fine. Starve then," I say to the cat, but it's already walked off. Perhaps it's realised its mistake and found someone more domesticated to move in with.

It reappears later as I'm sitting in front of the TV with some stale prawn crackers and a bottle of Blossom Hill. It starts yowling again then headbutts the screen, threatening to topple it.

"For God's sake." I put down my glass, haul myself to my feet and try to shoo it away, too scared to touch it again.

It ignores me and keeps headbutting.

"You want to watch something else?" I can't believe I'm having a conversation with a bloody cat.

It sits back and looks at me like I'm finally getting it.

I grab the remote and flick through the channels, quickly moving into dross territory. When I land on Midsomer Murders it starts purring like crazy and rubbing against the remote.

"Are you having a laugh?" Shaking my head, I sit back down. The cat jumps up next to me on the sofa, vibrating with happiness. I shift away, not wanting to get covered in even more hair.

Then it hits me: the eyes, backseat driving, classical music, picky eating and shit TV. It can't be a coincidence.

"Mum?" I ask. Getting reincarnated as a cat is exactly the sort of thing she'd do, just to piss me off.

The cat gives me an innocent look, then curls up at my side, keeping its gaze on the

screen.

I sit through the whole episode of Midsomer fucking Murders, occasionally feeding the cat bits of prawn cracker. Mum always liked those, too.

After a few glasses of wine, I start to wonder why she's here. We never talked much when she was alive – not about anything that mattered anyway.

“Meow once for no and twice for yes,” I say. “Do you have a message from the other side?”

The cat purrs and rolls over.

I close my eyes. This is ridiculous. Mum's not inside a cat. I'm just crazy with grief, or very tired. Time to go to bed; I hope the creature doesn't follow me.

When I open my eyes the cat's gone and Mum's sitting beside me, fat spilling over the top of her jogging bottoms, looking like she did before age and illness stripped the flesh off her.

“Here, give me some of that, I'm parched.” She grabs my glass and drains the rest of my wine.

I rub my eyes, convinced I'll wake up at any minute.

“Not a bad drop, that,” she says with a satisfied sigh.

“Ghosts don't drink.”

“Who says I'm a bleedin' ghost? Got any more?”

“What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like? Having a jar with me only daughter. Me pride and joy.” She cackles, giving me a good view of her silver fillings.

That's a laugh: my brother was always the favourite. “Why aren't you haunting Jamie?”

“God, it's always the same with you two. What's the point in having two kids if they won't play together?”

I snort. “I always wondered why you had us at all. You didn't seem to like us much.”

She has the gall to look shocked. “Of course I liked you. Loved you. Even though you

were pains in the arse.”

“Funny way of showing it.” I’m not sure what was worse: all the school events she never showed up to, or the ones she did, reeking of booze.

“You put me in that hellhole. You didn’t even say goodbye.”

I bite back my retort. We’d been told it was the end about three times before. I’d already used up all my annual leave sitting in that place, surrounded by zombies. I thought it was going to be another false alarm, that I’d see her at the weekend.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“I forgive you.” She puts a hand on my arm, her touch a breath of air.

“What?” I say, surprised it was that easy.

“Can’t have you worrying away down here. You were always such a worrier.”

Her face goes blurry, then I realise I’m crying.

“One more thing. Look after the cat, won’t you?”

I nod before curling up beside her and falling into a deep sleep for the first time in ages.

When I awake, with a gasp and a throbbing head, Mum’s gone and the cat’s back.

We’re lying so close together our faces are almost touching. I get a whiff of its fishy breath and rear back, but it just blinks slowly.

The TV’s still blaring. I turn it off and stumble to my feet; the cat arches its back, stretches out its paws.

“I’m off to bed. You coming, Mum?”

The cat meows and follows.

madeline armstrong

KNOCKING

Majda lived down the street from her parents in a rowhouse fronted by the white marble steps that made her city famous.

Like everyone else on the street, the washing of those steps was part of her daily chores. And there were so many chores. Every day she made codfish cakes to sell at her husband's bar, where the regulars in the neighborhood came to forget about the dust and grime they'd picked up alongside the little money they got paid.

Majda also took care of her parents, older now but unwilling to accept the almost-daily indignities that came with old age. Every day she'd clean their apartment, as her mother, Agnes, insisted upon absolute cleanliness. Dusting, scrubbing the floors, these were daily chores according to Agnes, who felt that cleanliness was next to, well, if not godliness, then acceptance from those who made disparaging remarks about immigrants like her. Or, she'd pick up their laundry or return the freshly pressed shirts and table linens on which her mother still insisted. But, her father was bedridden and Majda couldn't understand why he needed a fresh white shirt every day. She would never put such a question directly to her parents, though. She loved and slightly feared her father, even though she knew she was his favorite, the only girl among six boys. She always tried to please him, and when he was well, he would often come to her house where they'd commiserate about Agnes' demands that would forever preclude her from being pleased about anything.

Agnes would still address Majda in Polish, even though Agnes had been in America for 40 years. No one had insisted that Agnes learn English, and she saw no reason to give up her native language along with everything else she'd sacrificed to come here. And, until recently, her husband had provided well enough so that Agnes did not have to work outside the house.

Majda, though, worked all the time as there was always something to do and she was well-suited for hard work. Her large frame was Clydesdale-sturdy and she pulled the weights assigned to her, both seen and unseen, that came with her husband's business

and her home duties.

She grabbed a scarf from the hall coat rack and put it on her head and tied it securely under her chin.

'I look like an old Polish lady,' she thought, her plain coat buttoned tightly as if it could keep in her slightly spreading middle-age waist.

She locked the door and went down the steps to the front door. She and her husband, Frederick, rented out the bottom floor of the house, and the money from the rent came in handy.

Majda walked down to the end of the block to the house where they'd set up her parents.

"Majda, your father's restless today," Agnes said in Polish, as Majda entered the small living room, carrying a wicker laundry basket.

"I'll go talk to him."

"See if he'll tell you what's wrong. Or, maybe you can tell."

"How would I be able to tell?" she asked her mother. She wanted to say that Agnes knew what was wrong with her father. He had dropsy and no one could determine the cause of the edema that made his legs like tree trunks. But, she knew what Agnes meant. Ever since she was a little girl, Majda could "see" things, things that hadn't happened yet, things—and people—that were not strictly part of this world anymore. Seeing these ghosts did not scare Majda. She felt only embarrassed by it. So, she mostly kept these things to herself because there was no point in scaring other people more than was necessary.

"You were born with a caul over your face. It means you have second sight," Agnes told her so many times.

Majda would have paid her no mind, dismissing such talk as old-world superstitions from Poland. But, there were simply things that had no rational explanation. She remembered almost every time something had intruded upon her from another world, another dimension perhaps. Like the time she and her husband were walking home from a dance and a gauze-like fog appeared in front of the rhododendrons. Gradually, Majda could just make out her recently deceased nine-year-old niece, dressed in white and looking rather angelic, although the child was notoriously rebellious. And an uncle had materialized at the foot of the bed and with his appearance an icy breeze whipped the

bedcovers onto the floor. Majda had never liked this uncle and she wasn't sad when he died.

Mostly, she tried not to think about these things. She didn't want people to think she was odd. Her father, though, would say that she had something special, that she was someone special. But, Majda now was careful not to tempt Agnes' jealousy by dismissing any references to the specialness of the relationship she had with her father.

"He won't tell me any more than he does you."

"Ach, you could try."

"Alright, Ma, I'll ask him."

When she entered the bedroom, her father barely acknowledged her presence, his eyes closing after he'd looked toward her. In the bed, he looked like a zombie from the waist down, his legs wrapped in bandages that made them appear too big for his body.

"How are you, Papa?"

No answer. She turned to go after patting the quilt on his bed.

"Well?" said her mother.

"Well, nothing. He didn't even speak or know I was there."

"He's getting worse. He's hardly awake these days. The doctor says it won't be long."

"Did he really say that, Ma?"

"Yes, yes. Even with my poor English, I know what he meant."

Majda was well aware of Agnes' penchant for exaggeration, and the futility of arguing against it. She also knew that Agnes' understanding of English was far greater than she let on.

"I've got to go. I'll see you tomorrow."

"If we're still here."

Majda waved her hand in a gesture that could have meant dismissal or resignation.

Back home, Majda busied herself with her own washing and ironing. The afternoon moved on slowly as Majda pressed pillowcases, hypnotized by the thunk, thunk of the iron.

But, slowly, between the thunk, thunks of the iron, she thought she heard another kind of thudding noise and put the iron on its stand to listen. She stood still, not sure what she

was hearing.

But, yes, there it was. Thund, thund, thund. Someone was coming up the narrow stairs to her door. Someone with heavy footsteps. It couldn't be the tenants below as they were working and anyway, their step was light and quick when they paid the rent every month.

Bang, bang, bang, came an angry knocking that she thought might break the door down. "I'm coming. I'm coming."

She unplugged the iron and went to open the door not knowing what to expect except someone who was mad about something.

Dead air greeted her and surprise grabbed the anger that she'd had ready to meet the too-loud visitor.

She looked down the stairs. Empty. She walked down the steps and out onto the street, looking up and down. 'No one could have disappeared that quick,' she thought.

She shook her head and went back up the stairs. Still, she thought about what might've happened, what that knocking could have been.

When she went to her parents' house the next day, her mother said, immediately, "Go on in to see him."

She found her father propped up against several pillows. Awake.

"Hi, Papa, you're awake."

But, in the look he gave her, she saw something like terrible reproach.

"The next time I come to see you, open the door for me." Then, he closed his eyes.

Majda stood there, her mouth open and her spine like jelly. She thought immediately of the day before and the mysterious visitor who never materialized. She wanted to say that she had opened the door, but she couldn't speak. If it was her father who had come to see her, then she realized that his spirit was capable of moving, even if he wasn't. This was not something she had ever encountered and the knowledge made her body feel like it would not support her. She wondered if the window that his spirit could claim was so slight that she had missed the opportunity. She backed out of the room.

“What’s wrong? Is he worse?” Agnes fretted that her interpretation of the doctor’s words had come true and her husband was gone.

“No, no, he’s fine. But, he just said the strangest thing to me. He hasn’t gone anywhere, has he?”

“Oh, don’t be crazy. He can’t get out of that bed and you know it. What do you mean?”

Majda told Agnes about what her father had said.

“Jesus, Blessed Mary, and Joseph. How could that be?”

Majda’s father died the next day, without ever speaking another word. But, in the years following her father’s death, Majda, long after both of her parents were gone, would often tell the story of how her father had somehow sent his spirit to visit her. She no longer saw strange things and she missed that, and even enjoyed telling the stories of the things that used to embarrass her. Or, maybe it was that now, in her old age, she could claim her special relationship with her father without fear of angering Agnes.

Her family members rapt, Majda would enjoy building up the suspense as she told her stories. She always saved the story of her father for last, as, even all these years later, she could not explain how a living person’s spirit could move through a world so unporous in its dedication to facts. As her many nieces and nephews gathered around her table (for she never had children of her own), she would caution them all.

“Remember, always answer a knock when you hear one, even if you think no one is there.”

She braided my hair tightly and carefully.

She dyed my hair black like a dark cave.

“My mother is crazy, too,” my friends would say.

But the bats did not fly at their house.

Their walls were not covered in dead vines.

Their braids were not tight.

Their hair flew in the wind.

I did not hear their mother’s cry.

Mother’s head was wrapped in a thousand dead vines.

They were her crown.

She is gone. The vines are dead.

My hair is short and not braided.

I have grown, not the vines.

I am alive, not her illness.

I thrive, not the illness.

I have a large picture window.

I placed it there.

My mind travels through the cavernous room of memories.

Piano music at 3:00 a.m. Screams at midnight.

My mind travels there, but I no longer live in dark rooms.

My picture window has light.

I had the strange experience recently of watching a parade in my hometown, while for the first time not from my parents' porch. Mom loved a parade, especially because they passed right up her street. As a member of the marching band, I was less happy with that route because we lived on a steep hill. All the other instruments got to stop playing when walking up, only drummers like me needed to keep right on banging out a rhythm for the others to step to.

My father, when he was alive, was very active in both the library's and the historical (mom called it the hysterical) society's parade-day sales. The library was at the bottom of our hill, while the historical was at the top, and Dad spent every parade marching back and forth between them himself.

This year, now that our neighbors have bought my parents' house, my family and I watched from the front of the general store, instead. A great vantage point because it looks directly up the hill at our old house. And the new roof, siding, and back entrance can't possibly mask its life-long associations for me. I know the new owners would have welcomed us on to their porch. Maybe I am practicing being a visitor, no longer a resident, in the sleepy little town I have always called my home.

BETWEEN THOUGHTS

In thoughts,
in the blankness Between thoughts,
in the fullness of this lonely silence,
in my efforts to make free a word with voice,
When My Helpless Sigh is a prelude,
When an inevitable quaver hints fortitude
I write about You, I write about
Those Poems Which You Whispered,
Those Poems Which My Heart,
By-hearts each moment,
To whisper back to You
When You finally come.

ranjith sivaraman

NEVER SHALL
WE PART

A bell tolls in my mourning mind,
chiming through my dreams
for me to rise
and meet her at the hour of death.

Her memory digs into me with a spade
like a macabre collection of photos
I flip through
with every inch of dirt
it takes to reach her pine box.

I don't see decay or wilting flowers;
she blooms like night phlox
under the moonlight,
like the goddess of midnight gardens.

The color in her cheeks returns
as I drift off in her eternal embrace,
feeling my heart beat inside her
because I gave it to her a long time ago.

renee cronley

NIGHT VISIT

Curled into a comma, your tail twitches, guard hairs
limned in gold by the dawning moon. Lupine eyes glow
as breath to feral breath we stand, unmoving,
removed from time. A second is an hour, the night
kept wild when you leap then streak—a shooting star—
into the island depths. Where once you stood, moonsnail
shells, their rounded backs a gleaming path of
light, guide me to your perch, a mossy stump
as old as time. The tide ebbs, a loon calls, the
nascent night a reminder of our primal
days. When the sea wolf howled, we listened.

shirlee jellum

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Chelsea Allen is in love with people and things past, mostly. Her work has appeared in The Citron Review, Furious Fiction, ScribesMICRO, Flash Fiction Magazine, and elsewhere.

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Her essays and poetry have been published in Fathom, Gypsophila, Oddball, A.C. PAPA, and Of Poets and Poetry.

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Madeleine won the Hammond House international short story prize in 2023, and has been published by Flash Fiction Magazine, The Hooghly Review, LISP and WestWord. By day she's a journalist covering the pharma industry, and lives in south-east London with her husband, son and two cats. Her spare time is spent running for the mighty Croydon Harriers.

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Penny Nolte is a writer and educator from Montpelier, Vermont, whose gentle narratives explore connections to family and to place. Her work has found homes in literary magazines including Syracuse Review, PoemCity 2024, and The Avalon Literary Review Fall 2024 Issue. Others are upcoming in Loud Coffee Press and Tidings.

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Ranjith Sivaraman is an upcoming Poet from Kerala, a beautiful state in India. His poems merge nature imagery, human emotions, and human psychology into a gorgeous tapestry of philosophy. Sivaraman's Poems are published in International Literature Magazines and Journals across the US & UK.

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Renee Cronley is a writer from Manitoba that stepped away from nursing to prioritize her children, and has been channeling her knowledge and experiences into a poetry book about nursing burnout.

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Shirlee Jellum is a retired English teacher who publishes fiction, nonfiction and poetry, most recently in The McNeese Review, WayWords, Persimmon Tree, Last Stanza and several anthologies.

The image features a dark, textured background. In the center, two hands are shown in silhouette, reaching upwards with fingers slightly spread. Overlaid on the hands is the text 'Mpress.' in a gold, serif font. The 'M' is large and stylized, with a small 'p' and 'ress.' following it on the same line.

M
press.