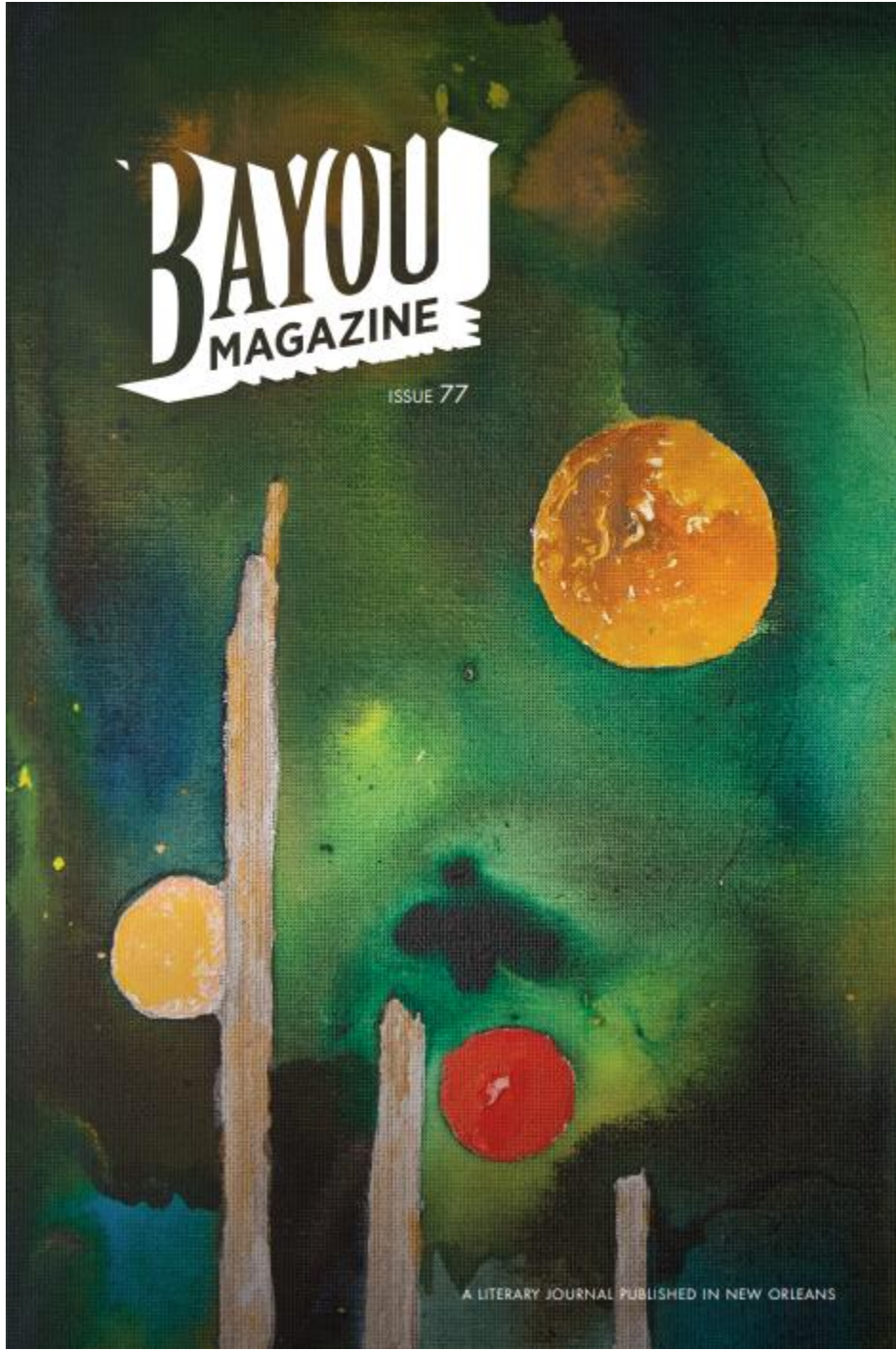


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## *I Prefer the Praying Mantis*

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In 2004 my mother and I bent spoons sitting in a circle with 15 other women on the floor of Reverend Anne's tiny pink Victorian, in the Spiritualist village of Lily Dale, New York.

"Tonight you are capable," Reverend Anne said, patting her loud red hair.

She opened the night by telling the circle about her past jobs—locating oil in Texas, helping the FBI find missing women and children. The Pentagon once asked her to bring down a plane with her mind. It had been Vietnam and she was 25. She didn't take on the assignment, because she would never use Spirit that way.

She said, "I share these stories not to brag, but rather to indicate what a human is capable of. You are made up of that energy.

The circle nodded and hummed.

## X

The National Spiritualist Association's official website defines Spiritualism as *the Science, Philosophy, and Religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of mediumship, with those who live in the Spirit World.*

According to the FAQ, there are three distinct types of Spirit:

*Those who are so bound to earth conditions that they will try to come in contact, and communicate with it through any avenue they find available.*

*Those who are naturally attracted to us by the ties of relationship and the laws of love.*

*Those advanced and developed Spirits who return from the higher spheres for the purpose of guiding and leading us to higher knowledge and further light*

## X

Spiritualism belongs to my mother, not me, but my father's death, at the onset of the pandemic, left me borrowing from her to answer my 3-year-old's question: where did he go?

I blurt out, "He's in the sky now, all around us! He's energy."

The child nods. I let him sit there with distant eyes. I will not push the child out of his murk. I am not built for the job.

“Where in the sky?” the child finally asks.

“The whole sky!” I belt out.

## X

It’s easy to mother poorly, I know this now. Every hour presents a new way to mother wrong.

At lunch with a friend we discuss the topic because we are preoccupied with it. We have recently decided in our middle years that our mothers are responsible for all our little built up traumas.

My friend says he agrees it’s easy to mother poorly and father poorly, too, but adds it’s also easy to parent good. I don’t know if I agree, because just four days before this conversation, I stood in my laundry room and I screamed at my child, a scream drug up from some dark pocket I didn’t know was there. A terrible animal failure-mother scream.

My mother never screamed but she did lock herself in the closet. She did dash across rooms to flee through front doors sobbing. She was more of a shrinking, feral animal than a primal-rage animal.

## X

My mother didn’t always give me much but she always gave me ghost stories, collected from her home in the Ohio Valley. She is from a world well bolstered by the legends of beasts and spirits. Cryptids who roam the foothills of the Appalachians. Orange eyed, hairy, frog faced. Her favorite story is of Jonathan Koons—a 19<sup>th</sup> century fiddle playing farmer, who built a seance cabin on his land, atop Mt. Nebo, per the specs that the spirits advised him to follow: 12 x 14 feet, three windows, one door and a seven-foot ceiling. Once the cabin was completed, the spirits left a note on a table with a list of all the instruments Jonathan Koons would need to fill the cabin with for the seances to be successful.

They came from states away to hear the orchestra, the nights beginning with Koons blowing out the candles and picking up his fiddle, inviting the spirits to commence. Tambourines would bump arms, triangles brushed over heads. There are varying accounts of why the Koons family left Ohio, and why the cabin no longer sits on Mt Nebo, but most signs point to the cabin being burnt down by neighbors who thought the family was doing the devil’s work.

## X

Shortly after his death, my mother claims the praying mantis as a sort of symbolic logic that my father’s spirit orbits us closely.

Even I must admit there’s something to it. The day before my father died, it was a praying mantis that crawled across the window screen above his bed. And again the day after his death. I, too, came home to a praying mantis at my door, a week after his passing. And then the week of his birthday, a nest of them burst open. Hundreds of tiny brown nymphs, marching along the slight branch of a laurel brush in my yard.

The internet likes to call the praying mantis inherently spiritual. They represent *introspection*, *intuitive abilities*, and *spiritual connection*.

The blog Chrystal Clear Intuition says the insect *is often a sign that the energies from other dimensions are sending you a message to trust your own inner guidance and to be patient to wait for the flow of the universe to sort everything out.*

I study the lifecycle of the praying mantis and learn that the brown fibrous sack of up to 400 eggs had been on that laurel bush in my yard all through that cruel winter of 2020, just as my father's cancer was quietly reloading under his rib cage. The mother attached the sack there some time in the previous fall, back before anyone knew what was coming. And the nymphs that broke from the sack three days after what would have been his 68<sup>th</sup> birthday—they would immediately take to eating each other. Those not eaten would shed their bodies a half dozen times in the following weeks and through those weeks, many would get snatched up by bats or birds along the way. And the few that would grow to adulthood would ride out the summer on a diet of mice, lizards, and frogs. When the weather began to turn, they found each other and fucked. Then the female consumed the male—starting with his head. She, too, died, once she'd released her eggs.

Maybe more interesting than the praying mantis as symbol of our beloved dead's energy, is the praying mantis being a praying mantis. That small miracle of time where they are there to be seen at all. Either way you want to take it, it's not a bad distraction from the terrible.

## X

A 2009 Pew Research study found that 65% of Americans believe in some aspect of the supernatural.

29% reported feeling they'd been in touch with the dead.

18% said they'd seen a ghost.

Up to 60% of widows have experience post-bereavement hallucinations, according to the DSM-5.

## X

My mother texts my sister and I that she is getting the three of us urn necklaces—offering the choices of a heart or teardrop in gold, rose gold or silver.

But I do not want to wear a mix of my father's bones around my neck.

There is too much weight in that. I want no weight beyond a wad of baby praying mantises, the quiet and tiny violence of them consuming each other on the laurel bush.

## X

I don't know that he moves around me but I move in the gauzy light of remembered scenes and that, for me, is where all the spirits roam. They live in ghostly spirit rooms. They repeat spirit conversations from my lifetimes ago. These spirit rooms stack up. A fun house constructed of all that got logged for one reason or another.

In one spirit room we are having our last family trip. Tulum Mexico My father, drunk and saying too much. I was only born because the pill didn't work. Or, he thinks, she skipped it in hopes she'd get pregnant. This, he says, has always been the mystery.

## X

A medium once told my mother that in a past life she had been a nun. My mother explained to me that, not only did this make sense to her, it also brought some sense of relief to have it validated. You could argue that the psychic read my mother's body language, her timid demeanor, and concluded she was made of nun-like qualities.

I will always remain a skeptic, I will always mostly believe in nothing, but I will always want to buy in.

## X

My mother begins to feel my father's presence in the house.

It begins with the smell of roses trailing up from the basement. If you Google smelling roses that are not there one of the first things you find is that it means angels are trying to communicate with you. And another thing you find is that it can be a symptom of Alzheimer's.

The rose smell incident is followed some days later by a nail file going astray, eventually returning to the same spot on a bathroom shelf later that day. Then my father's electric toothbrush, untouched and unplugged for two years, turning on and off, on and off.

Then my child visits my mother and they play a game called ghosts. They are both excited to let me know when I arrive that afternoon that while they are playing, the television's turned itself on.

I am comforted with these stories mostly because I know she finds comfort in them. But also, it's something else. I want her to have these stories for me.

"Has it happened again?" I ask all the time.

Sometimes it has, sometimes it has not.