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The Best Story I Read in a Lit Mag This Week: “Birthright” by Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson

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I believed in ghosts as a kid. Since then, I’ve wondered why I wasn’t ever fascinated by the lore of other supernatural creatures. I think it’s in large part because ghosts—unlike angels, demons, vampires, or werewolves—didn’t seem to have such a strict set of rules governing their existence. In my understanding, ghosts could pretty much show up wherever they wanted, for any reason, and all manner of mysteries could be attributed to “ghost activity.”

REVOLVER

Living a childhood where ghosts were real meant that any suspicious noise, weird animal behavior, or missing object could not only be explained but also imbued with significance. A door closing on its own didn’t happen

because open windows in the house caused a difference in air pressure that made the door move. No, an angry ghost slammed that door because it was once a girl like me and she had died. But how? And what did she want now? And why was she angry?

In other words, I liked ghost stories because they at once solved and created a mystery.

I loved [Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson](#)’s story “[Birthright](#)” when I read it on [Revolver](#) earlier this month for the same reason. Clocking in under 700 words, “[Birthright](#)” is about a girl, never named, who resembles her dead

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grandmother. The story reads like a myth in its straightforward, naked aim to account for the girl's likeness to her father's mother, mixing modern pragmatism with fancy. The girl, referred to as an "Old Soul," is visited by the ghost of her dead grandmother at night, both in dreams and reality, a distinction that doesn't seem to matter because, as the narrator points out: "It is always late and dark and dreamlike."

Much like the kid that I was, the girl is someone who wants answers (although she's not nearly as impatient and eager). The neighbor's description of her as an old soul is accurate: she's patient, discerning, and practical. She's described as believing in ghosts "as characters in a plot who will be debunked in the end when masks are lifted and there, underneath, exists a real person with motives and a face that is wrinkled and fleshy and naked and exposed" which was an unexpected characteristic that delighted me.

Most notable in this story is the authority of Dickinson's narrator. Although it stays closer to the perspective of the girl than any other character, the narrator remains distant yet opinionated, which is part of what gives the story its mythic quality.

While far from truth, myths are narratives that aim to explain and elucidate, passed down from the wise to the less experienced. Our narrator establishes itself as a sage voice early on by revealing the reason for the mother's disbelief in God and then immediately presenting convincing evidence that her disbelief may be unfounded. Not only does the narrator have access to privileged information, but it also makes a compelling argument that the mother's opinions are shortsighted and naïve without sounding pompous or condescending, which is key. After all, wisdom is contingent on more than just knowledge; equally important are good judgment and compassion, which the narrator shows us. As a result, we feel like we're listening to someone who is insightful, and the narrator earns our trust.

As the story continues, the girl does find out why she resembles her grandmother in a turn I found lovely and moving. Without giving away the ending, I can say that much like the ghost stories I told myself as a kid, Dickinson's story answered my questions while also presenting a greater mystery, one that stuck with me for weeks after my first reading. What is identity? How do we become who we are? Are we ever individual? And finally, what and how do we inherit?

So if you have extra time this week and you're looking for something fantastic to read, you'll want to **head on over** and check out [Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson's story "Birthright."](#)

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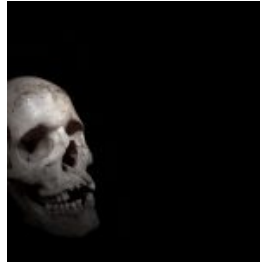
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