

[Invisible Gardener](#) [1]

September 30, 2019 [Grief](#) [2]

[Travel](#) [3]

[Politics of Place](#) [4]

Essay by Valerie Bacharach

A Mother's Ghost in Ireland



I'm tired, it's too late. I'll go tomorrow.

My mother sits on the side of a hospital bed. A pacemaker, two strokes, and failing kidneys have exacted a vengeance. She wears navy sweatpants and a zippered jacket, clothes too large for her diminished body. She is always cold now, her flesh insubstantial, incapable of holding heat. We wait for an ambulance to take her to a skilled nursing facility on the far side of Pittsburgh. Her eyes hold the panicked look of a young child left with a new babysitter.

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In May 2018, my husband and I land at Shannon Airport in County Clare. Early morning, overcast, rain so fine it's simply mist. Refreshing after a six-hour flight. This ancient land unfolds in undulations of green, every shade from celery to pine. It shines in damp light.

We've never been to Ireland before, have no Irish family connections, but we're vacationing with friends who are eager to show us the rugged beauty of this place. And it's here, even on the first day, that I find myself alongside my mother's ghost.

Our first stop, Dromoland Castle, once a private home, is now a hotel. We have a traditional Irish breakfast of sausage and eggs and scones, then walk around the garden, which is secreted behind Ireland's ubiquitous stone walls. A lattice of climbing roses, shades of pink and creamy yellow, front a long rectangular pool. Angels crafted from silver wire are placed among lavender wisteria and a burst of scarlet poppies. A sculptured duck and her ducklings nestle among rosemary.

I miss my mother, who's been dead eight months. I dream, awake, of us, strolling arm in arm, her body strong, her skin soft against mine.

This seems a magic place. An invisible gardener whispers: *look—here, and here, and here.*

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The ambulance still hasn't arrived. It's mid-afternoon in April 2017, and we're both exhausted by the sitting and waiting. My mother is anger layered over fear. Her words lash out, lacerate my skin.

Why can't I go home?

Why are you doing this to me?

Two strokes have mottled her mind. She won't accept my explanations, refuses to acknowledge her inability to walk more than four steps without assistance, to make sense of instructions, to read, to organize. She couldn't understand or remember how to use her stove, the microwave, how to find movies on TV. The book she keeps by her side has not been opened; it's too difficult for her to remember plot lines. On her last day in her apartment, she sat before her computer, crying, unable to turn it on.

Yet she knows what her life has been—those memories, unfogged, are tantalizing.

A successful real-estate career; the first woman president of the Board of Realtors in Columbus, Ohio; awards and accolades; the neighborhood restaurant, where the owner greeted her each time she entered, had a special table just for her. And her car—a black Mercedes that she could no longer drive. She grieved the most for that car.

Now she is told what to eat, when to eat, when to sleep, when to shower, what pills to take. And—most painful and insulting—where she must live.

She sees with perfect clarity what she is losing.

I am her daughter, witness to all the indignities forced on her, many of them by me.

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Our second day in Ireland. We stop at Saint Fin Barre Cathedral in Cork. It's an Anglican church—not Catholic despite its gothic appearance, but Protestant. I perch on a bench by the front, unwilling to pay the entry fee.

Statues carved from dull gray stone guard the heavy wooden doors. Five women on each side, with vacant eyes and abject expressions. A sign on the lawn labels them the Wise Virgins and the Foolish Virgins. They gaze outward past

tourists, traffic, the mourning doves flitting about the yard.

I don't know what makes them wise or foolish, or why they must be virgins, but a quick scroll through websites explains. The wise ones are ready to meet the Bridegroom, their lamps filled with oil. The Kingdom of Heaven is open to them. But the poor foolish ones have no oil for their lamps, so heaven is closed. It seems oil has always been an important commodity.

I am a Jew in this mostly Christian country. I have no icons, saints, or visible manifestation of God.

Later that day, I find a bookstore, more important for me than any church, and browse in the poetry section. A title slaps my face—*Jewtown* by Simon Lewis. I buy the book and read the short poems that evening.

They tell of some of the few hundred Jews trying to escape the pogroms of Eastern Europe in the early 1900s. Why did they come to Cork, Ireland? Not enough money for passage to America? Unsure of where they should settle? And yet they kept their faith in this land, mourning the dead as I mourn my mother—as in these lines from “When Father Died” in *Jewtown*:

We sat shiva and prayed Kaddish
and the community wished us long life.

Lewis's poems, many voiced by first-person narrators, speak of acceptance, of anger and mistrust, of danger residing next to shelter. The Jews of “Jewtown” (a neighborhood near the city center) are gone—the only synagogue in Cork closed in 2016.

When I was a young girl, my mother was active in our synagogue, Tifereth Israel, in Columbus. She sent my brother and me to Hebrew school, but as we became teenagers, she walked away from her faith, from whatever she believed of God. She would never discuss any of this, yet kept her candlesticks and *sefer* plate, giving them to me when I got married.

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I watch as she fights the tears and tremors of her body, gathering herself as much as she can. But I know her heart. She is bereft.

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In Galway, we take a ferry to the largest of the Aran Islands, Inishmore. It's ten kilometers long with 800 full-time residents. According to our guidebook, the land is bisected by 4,000 miles of stone walls, divided into oddly shaped plots, some square, some rectangular, some of no shape I learned in geometry. There are a few cows, horses, chickens.

Small tour buses and horse-drawn carts converge as we disembark. The air smells of sea and salt and manure. The earth is pregnant with rocks.

We hike to an ancient fort, Dun Aengus, the highest point on cliffs whose sheer walls drop 300 feet to roiling Atlantic waters, ferocious waves. Everything is gray or green—earth, water, sky. I think of my mother, how she barricaded herself from everyone but me in the last year of her life. Weighed down by the silence of her days. Thick, ponderous, depressive.

I don't know why I think of her now, standing at the cliff's edge, nothing before me but water.

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It's late afternoon. The ambulance finally arrives, in time for rush-hour traffic. I follow in my car to Vincentian Home, a skilled nursing facility run by the Catholic Church north of Pittsburgh. She will be here for two weeks, in the hope of

Invisible Gardener

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regaining some last bit of strength. The grounds are lovely, the walls inside replete with crosses and paintings of the Virgin Mary.

My mother sits on the edge of a bed in her private room. The window overlooks a garden just beginning to bloom with daffodils and lilacs.

She asks me to draw the curtains.

Publishing Information

- [Jewtown](#) [5] by Simon Lewis (Doire Press, 2016).

Art Information

- “[Porthole Garden](#) [6]” © Martin Stone; Creative Commons license.



Valerie Bacharach is a poet whose work has appeared in publications including *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Pittsburgh Quarterly*, *US 1 Worksheets*, *The Tishman Review*, *Topology Magazine*, *Poetica*, and *The Ekphrastic Review*. She is currently pursuing her MFA in poetry at Carlow University in Pittsburgh and is a member of the Madwomen in the Attic workshops. Her first chapbook, [Fireweed](#) [7], was published in August 2018 by Main Street Rag.

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- [1] <https://talkingwriting.com/invisible-gardener>
- [2] <https://talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/grief>
- [3] <https://talkingwriting.com/tw-issue-themes/travel>
- [4] <https://talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/politics-place>
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