

Night Birds

Shannon Anima

At a house party, the cedar-sided sauna goes up in flames while Suzie and I stand naked in the snow, passing cheap whiskey and singing ‘old Dixie down’. The boy who had inherited the house on the death of his father, his only parent, dead by suicide, this unpopular boy, suddenly popular for a brief and blazing time for parties that lasted all weekend, leaving cigarette butts extinguished on windowsills and a truckload of empties for him to bin up with a wicked hangover, he shivered and cried, ankle-deep in trampled snow.

Once, I went into the woods with him, back of his house, which was the last house on a dirt road, outside town, poor shack part of the outskirts. It was autumn, the hills incandescent with golden candles of tamarack trees, the birches with their bold white columns and wavering yellow haloes. We were looking for *amanita muscaria*, those fairytale mushrooms, red caps and white spots. The kind the leprechauns dance on, as opposed to *amanita pantherina*, with pretty much the same red and white camouflage but a potentially nasty death following ingestion, rather than the hallucinogenic fairy-freakin trip we were after.

We had my Royal BC Museum Handbook of Mushrooms, a thirteenth birthday gift from a kind aunty assisting my new interests in fungi and plants — cultivation of cannabis in pebbled grey egg carton cups on the windowsill of my basement bedroom. This boy, Billy, I really had little interest in him then, beyond the location of his house as a destination for parties in the plunging temperatures of fall and winter, following on the epic parties of summer, bonfires on beaches fed with green branches, pillaged woodpiles, and the wreckage of stolen patio furniture. As I reflect, maybe Billy liked me, hoped for a friend in this girl, or a girlfriend. A runny-nosed boy, sniffing, unfashionable ginger crewcut, maybe a remnant from his dad’s funeral — I thought myself to be creative and *avant garde*, a female Jack Kerouac without his mother’s New York apartment to return to, and I was indifferent to the devotion of Billy. Though, I was — as this reveals, the page turned back and bent with memory — a desperate girl, in a dark smelter town, running wild and dancing on the blade of a razor.

I began hitchhiking at eleven, a twig-thin child, lank hair revealing poor hygiene and already overabundant oil production resulting in possibly the first pimples in my classroom. I had read *The Drifters*, a big-ass Michener book, following the hippie trail across Europe, kids with thumbs out, roaming far from their suburban homes and families. Books piled like

flotsam in my house, and I read them all: the porn and cowboy tales of Uncle Dickie, and the English lit reading of studious Nathan, black-rimmed glasses long before they became funky and nerd-cool, and I cried over *Black Like Me* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and stole his thesaurus with its dog-eared rust-tinted pages. My mother, a night-shift cleaner, carted home brown shopping bags full of romances in lieu of groceries and I had my first orgasms, a pillow between my thighs, rocking to the unconsummated but gently hinted at ecstasy of someone named Heath or Jude or Lord Ponce with a shy but radiantly beautiful girl of good virtue.

Not me. I was going to be reckless. A rebel. Far from the Catholicism and nuns' morality as I could run, far from the brick house with its shadows and bitterness. Taking rides from strangers, sometimes to the town library, sometimes to hang at a park hoping someone had weed to smoke or a mickey of something to make the time pass and the laughter roll. Sometimes I'd just ride to a neighbouring town and hitch back, something to do when I'd exhausted the pleasures of television, *Dark Shadows* too scary for me, but I'd take rides from strange sweating men, bald heads and pudgy roaming fingers.

Billy and I came on a pond, formed by the busy work of beavers, and for the first time, I saw one swimming, his brown nose above the water and his eyes like plumped dark sultanas, a birch branch held in a tiny brown hand like a baton or a stick of dynamite. *Slap*, the woods sounding with the alarm, and we jumped and laughed, quietly though, for we had seen a wonder, and watched for a long time as a line of bubbles trailed the surface back to the lodge, where I imagined a cosy woodstove and chimney, little red plaid slippers, and a brown teapot with a lid shaped like an acorn cap.

Later, we found our magical mushrooms, which were indeed magic, exuding a glow as red as red riding hood, scarlet as kisses, or clots of blood on the brown damp of the forest floor. On our knees, mud seeping through the knees of our Levi's, or maybe he wore Lee Riders, or even some cheaper variety, never cool, too navy blue, or too new, or not yet ragged in the worn casual way popularity and money can buy. We examined the treasures, some nibbled at the edges, a good thing surely, no dead carcasses tits up in the leaf litter. We snapped them at the base of their thick stalks, the pungency of fall rot and the sharp air here in this more remote spur valley, upstream of the river that carried smoke, sewage, and roaring tons of chemical death across borders to deposit it along farmland and Indian reserves, our gift to southern neighbours. Dead fish and poison, but what did I know, and less now, a girl, not much interested in the alphabet soup of chemistry, a girl on the lookout for fun and a ticket out.

Billy and I hitched a way further to some other hapless cluster of houses and plastic-sided trailers, big dogs chained by the doors, bared teeth, and the yards worn down by their restless energy and boredom. There was a couple here, older than we were, maybe their thirties, Jack Sprat and his wife. She, a beautiful girl with thick-lensed glasses, obese and in carpet slippers, her chubby dimpled skin squeezing out of the pink fluffy tops, and an Indian print caftan or maybe it was a bedspread with seams up the sides. He was paper thin, a grey and stooped man-boy, already balding, and their kids, a baby and a little naked diaper-dragging boy, or maybe a girl, hair straggling over their shoulders, jam like a rash over their face.

They were a go-to for mushrooms and homegrown. The open kitchen shelves stocked with glass pickle bottles, the large five-gallon type, with screw-on tin lids. They held herbal products, *psilocybin* like dried up tadpoles, the dark buttons of peyote cactus, and these *amanitas*, they'd slice them up like mushrooms for a salad or a burger, thin slices dried and ghost white, the red just a brown stain like a scab when ingested.

We dumped our bounty onto some newspaper on the tables amidst the paraphernalia of blown glass pipes, scissors for clipping weed, spilling dinner plates with pasta and cigarette butts, and a bowl with a pink sludge of donut-shaped cereal. Ichabod examined the fungus with the practiced eye of an expert in his field, he scraped the white spots away with an oily butter knife from the table debris. While he worked at rendering our crop into precise slices on cookie sheets to put on slow bake in the oven, we sat with the big wife on sagging furniture amidst plastic toys, a pop-eyed troll doll, a deflated clown, the kind you bop in the nose with small fists, now a sad clown wilted and grinning under a tire jack. In a ceremonial manner, the Mrs tamped some small dry bud from the open jar on the coffee table into a pipe formed and crafted from a burl. A carved and carefully oiled thing of beauty that pipe, the small face of a child or a cherub carved on the side, tiny lips pursed to blow a smoke-ring. We passed the pipe around, the smoke intense like a bog-fire in my lungs. I think we missed passing to the child, though I don't truly recollect. But the smoke in the trailer lounge room, and the aromas of drying mushrooms would surely have some effect on infants. Perhaps they slept better, or dreamt brighter dreams, or their small brains formed habits they'd be chained to forever, like the snarling dogs outside the door.

Not long from then, Ichabod passed away from something unexpected in a man of his age, a stroke, I think. I went to the wake, people clustered in the trailer's lounge room, smoke thick as the smelter haze obscured the yellowed ceiling, and I comforted the widow, or thought I did. Her eyes so blue and vacant, a summer sky, cloudy behind smudged and

jammy glasses. She left the town, or maybe just the business of providing herbal remedies to underage children, and I found other dealers, for there was always employment in this line of work. Dull your sorrow. Belong to a tribe. Blast your mind. A line up of customers.

We raged on. One time, Suze and I got stoned on magic mushrooms, stewing mushroom tea in a steel thermos, an earthy evil brew. It was the most still clear night, the sky deep and truly indigo and alive with a snowfall of stars, our cross country skis whispering along the tracks, the full moon lighting our way, we girls all alone, in the magic kingdom, the skis speaking swish Swiss, the snow, that perfect compact powder crisped by the clear night and the dropped temperatures of a dog moon rainbowed round with colour, particles of crystals, everything pulsing, our laughter like notes from two wild birds, night birds, our breath a misted smoke, the trees lacing their limbs above, you could not say how large and how silent the world was that night, with only we two downy birds, and the hush of our skis. Our laughter rose and shattered in the frozen night, scattering like crazy jazz notes into the tilting sky. We wore impractical woollen mittens, jeans of course, for there was no other choice for any teen of the time, the night knifing into us, plunging into the sub-zeros. Laughing, we fell into a midnight meadow with our skis poking upright to heaven, and made the clumsiest of snow angels, her hair a sable pelt spread around her Madonna face. My dirt-blond hair, never a hat, too cool and insecure for that, wet with warm breath and effort, freezing into golden Medusa coils in the shallow graves we formed with our beating wings. Two little girls, tripping on the mystic, hearts racing too fast, laughing with loopy owl hoots, howling our teen rebellion into the night.

I was sixteen, by then, Suze was fifteen, and I had my driver's licence. I'd taken a test exactly a week after my sixteenth birthday, a couple lessons on a backroad and some practice parks in a night-empty parking lot. That was it. Sometimes Aunty loaned me her VW van — she had a racy rusted Corvair she hooned around in — the family likely relieved I wasn't hitchhiking my way to tiny pieces in a psychopath's car trunk. Instead, we were soaring on black ice, music pumping from the tape player, '... ain't nothin' I can do or nothin' I can say, that folks don't criticise me, but I'm going to do just as I want to anyway...'. If I concentrated very hard, slow blinking my myopic eyes, I could keep the tires on the dark ribbon of road when the van wanted to wing into the sky and beyond.

At the time, we said we'd never forget that best of nights with the best of friends. The sopping wool of our mittened hands, clasped tightly, holding on to the bliss, before we came down that mountain to reality. I remember, Suze. Do you?

Years later, visiting from across an ocean of saltwater and time, I tried to call Suzette. She'd never answer. I heard she'd had a string of bad lovers. She'd been a clerk at a pharmacy, lost her job due to disappearing medications. Still fuckin beautiful with junkie scored arms and sores on her aging skin. No kids, just a posse of hungry dogs in the trailer park. The local paper told she'd been to court for a little incident at the liquor store. Caught on camera, a bottle in the pocket of her coat, while her old man, Billy, stayed warm in the car in the winter-grey parking lot.

I offer my respect to the First Nations elders of the lands I live on, the Gundungurra and Dharug peoples, and to those I grew up on, the Ktunaxa and Sinixt peoples, who walked, paddled, tended, and owned these unceded lands for all generations.

Shannon Anima is a Blue Mountains writer and a trauma psychotherapist, originally from the Monashee Mountains in Canada. Recently, she won a Varuna WestWords residency, a Dentre la Terra residency, a WestWords Academy selection, and was shortlisted for the Deborah Cass award, a Mascara Varuna residency, and a Tasmanian Women Writers' award. "Night Birds" is a chapter from her manuscript, *The Furnaces*. All characters are fictional, though the settings in the forests of her childhood are very real. Some mushrooms may have been ingested for the purpose of research. Find out more at www.shannonanima.com on twitter [@shannonanima](https://twitter.com/shannonanima) on Insta [@the_creative_remedy](https://www.instagram.com/the_creative_remedy)