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Ann Shelton

The Three Fates

1.

Not so long ago, three feet under the waters to the bow of the charter yacht *Ursitoarea* the chief steward floated on her back – arms wide, eyes open. It was 3 a.m. and the light from the moon and the dark of the sky made the underside of the surface of the sea a shimmering screen. She'd left the bottom bunk of her cabin, stepped with hardly any weight through the crew mess, past the galley, up the stairs through the main salon and onto the swim landing. No one stirred. They all slept – she made sure of it.

'You should leave the swim landing down,' she'd whispered earlier while she and one of the deck hands were having dinner.

'Sorry,' he'd said.

'You have lovely eyes,' she'd said.

She'd slipped from the open landing into the water. She had no desire to dive. Diving was something people who didn't live on boats did. Diving was a tourist move. She was underwater now. She'd always been less buoyant than anyone she met. Just like her grandmother, just like her grandmother's grandmother. She could lie on her back and sink. She'd shown someone once and their face had gone gray, like all their blood had turned to ice. So, she never showed anyone again. So, she did it in the dark. Off the back of the yacht. With as little splash as possible. And this was where she was now. Under the waters off Šibenik. Looking at the screen of the underside of the surface but mainly listening. Mainly listening to the sea rising and falling to the boat, the slap and the glug, and through it, amplified almost by the crest and the trough, the noises of the people sleeping inside the boat. The bosun and his two deckhands, one awake on watch in the bridge. Her first and second stews, both asleep now – finally the captain.

The master bedroom was huge – for a yacht. It was gauche and gold and every morning while the guests were having breakfast, so it happened for them like magic, she or one of the other stewards would pick up their clothes, clean their bathrooms and iron the linen on their beds. The cleaning was like ritual at this point in the season. They polished the chrome like the yacht was a large, living thing. They talked to it, whispering their dreams into the showers and toilets as they cleaned up the parts of the guests that were left behind.

'There's a hair in my shower,' he'd said, and he'd stood there while she got on her knees and removed it from the stall with a piece of toilet paper.

When the stewards were alone in the cabins, they carried round a spray bottle of Febreze and they would spray it then iron the bed linen then spray it again. Like bringing the outside down into the cabins which were almost below the water line. The people who came on the charter yacht were the worst kind of people. Rich enough to charter a yacht but not rich enough to own a yacht. Rich enough to purchase a serfdom but only for three days, only in the boundaries of yachts like the *Ursitoarea*.

This was a particularly bad bunch. The night before last he'd thrown a hundred-dollar bill at her. The captain had told her to cut him off because he was very drunk and he'd been terrible and then he'd thrown the note at her and shouted, 'That's to pay for my terrible behavior.'

'I can't accept it,' she'd said as it bounced off her arm.

It was still on the floor of the salon in the morning. The second and third stew had cleaned up around it. No one wanted to touch it because they knew he'd be back for it. He knew what it meant if someone picked it up. All of them knew how that would tie them to him. Or how it would make them look like a thief. Last night, he'd tried it on with the third stew. Wanted to know who she slept with. Wanted to know if she'd sleep with him. Back in London, three days before, a teenager had his baby. All the crew were good at it. Talking to drunk, rich men, but none of them enjoyed it. It all went a bit smoother when she was the chief stew. The guests got tired faster, they decided to go to bed as if it was their own idea. They ran out of puff when they wanted to complain. They left better tips.

'I don't know what you do,' the captain had said. 'But I always want you on my boat.'

She'd smiled. She had a winning smile.

'I'd rather have you with me than against me,' he'd said. And her heart sank but only a little because he had said the nice thing first and he had no idea and she cleaned his cabin too.

'I'll do the turn downs,' she'd said, once the third stew was safe. Once the guests were all on the aft deck looking at the city talking more shit, sneaking him drinks when they thought the stews weren't looking. The yacht was big for a yacht but it was small, the crew lived very close together but there was a corner in the engine room where there was a tarpaulin and under the tarpaulin she had hidden them. Plants and parts of plants she'd pushed into olive jars and empty tequila bottles then suspended in water then sealed again. She moved them around the boat when things got bad like this. Left them under beds, inside cupboards, to fix the men. Not repair them – make them stay where they were. Make the women of the yacht safe. And as she did the turn downs, Febreze in hand she'd hidden jars in the master stateroom, in both the twin cabins. And when she got back they were all tired.

'You should go to bed,' she said.

'We should go to bed,' he said. Squeezing her shoulder as he said it.

And now, she was under the water, listening to the people, listening to the boat but ready now to speak to the plants. Suspended as they were in water, she addressed **the tree [...] with the respectful name of elder** and reminded the parts of it in the jar that she had known it for a long time, that for centuries they had called on Sundays to **sit down under the house elder when they wanted to visit with their descendants and relatives** wearing **pointed hats made of birch bark to make it clear that they weren't evil spirits.**¹ Her people had lived within its branches and when the tree bled red it was with their blood in its sap. She had never burnt an elder. Every man that came within 50 feet of her eventually said she was evil. A nasty piece of work. But surely the small white flowers in the water in the caper jar – slimy, breaking down – could see she had done the right things and would extend its help to her and the women of the boat.

She'd seen the leaves of the ginger in the ground cover of a castle where they'd set up a dinner for the guests.

'You go ahead,' she'd said to the second stew and she'd made herself invisible and dug the root that was now in the water in the jar from the ground. She understood that **the plant's root, which penetrates easily into the dark depths of the earth, penetrates easily into the dark interior of the body and with its strength can drive out the "worms" and render them harmless.**² Her grandmother had told her. And she hadn't taken all of it. She told the root now, she had only taken what she needed and it hummed back at her smoky pink like a toe and as he slept, in the golden cabin, it drove out the worm.

And as she said thanks and spoke spells, something made itself out on the underside of the surface of the sea, and she found herself saying, 'Once upon a time, beside one of the long tables in the restaurant *Soarta* a man was shouting at my sister-waitress.' And she reached out to pull her under, to take her away from the shouting man.

2.

The restaurant was deep and dark, lit in a way that made you feel like there was actually nothing there. There was a sense of the walls disappearing into the air and of the outside coming in. They served things ground to soil, and roots and lichen still on branches and tonight they were serving Fly Agaric for Christmas.

The waitress felt wet, all at once and all over her, soaked through and floating but she was dry and at a table and the man was talking to her, shouting at her, not to be heard over the Christmas crowd but still loudly because he was right and she was wrong. She was listening, actively, nodding, agreeing that she was wrong and then all of sudden she was wet, or she felt wet, the swish of something past her face, a leaf from the land slimy with being under water for too long.

Soarta specialized in foraged wild food, so maybe she had somehow inhaled something hallucinogenic. She put her hand to her eyes to sweep the water away but her skin was dry in the restaurant heating. He was still shouting. Surely, they didn't mean Fly Agaric because you can't eat Fly Agaric – even as a child he knew that and he pointed at the menu, at the picture of the five red-and-white toadstool fungi. He had paid a lot to be at the restaurant – everyone had. He had paid for all these people too, he explained, waving a hand over the long table at his employees. He thought it was the best but a mistake like this showed he was better. What seemed most important was that everyone knew that – that he was the best, that he knew more than the world-renowned chef. Maybe, in the end, this would make the expense worth it. This scene, she thought, is what he pays for. And now she had to explain without making it necessary for him to lose this. He was a baby. He had been a baby and maybe she had been at his christening, but he was being a baby now.

So, she nodded and let him talk to give herself time. He was wrong, of course, because of course you could eat them.

'Without hallucinogenic affect?' he said and she realized she'd said it out loud so there was nothing left to do but nod and say, 'With special handling.' And he was silent, finally and she filled the space with, 'If they are boiled in large amounts of water for a lengthy time and then drained and re-boiled and drained and re-boiled you can eat them. The Russians have always eaten them. It requires incredible skill.'

He was looking at her now and it was awkward so she said, 'So,' and ran through the drinks order.

It was a tasting menu. A nightmare and when finally the Fly Agaric arrived, she stood at the head of the table, next to him and said, '**The lovely, red fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) lives in symbiosis with birch and spruce. People have used this circumpolar mushroom to communicate with dwarves, gods, and ancestors in Eurasia as well as in North America since at least the Upper Paleolithic period, especially during the dark nights of the winter solstice time. The fungus seems to shine the sunlight caught by the birch directly into the depths of the soul, even into its darkest corners.**'³

And in the end, he applauded the Fly Agaric with everyone else and the chef came out and the music was stopped and everyone turned to the chef and he told the story of Christmas and the toadstool. '**Santa,**' he said, '**is a modern counterpart of a shaman, who consumed mind-altering plants and fungi to commune with the spirit world [...] as the story goes, up until a few hundred years ago these practicing shamans or priests connected to the older traditions would collect *Amanita muscaria* (the Holy Mushroom), dry them, and then give them as gifts on the winter solstice. [...]**

***Amanita muscaria* is found throughout the Northern Hemisphere under conifers and birch trees, just like presents found under the Christmas tree by excited and happy children. This explains the tradition of the Christmas tree and the gifts, wrapped in red and white, placed under the tree just like the magic mushrooms.**

***Amanita muscaria* is classified as poisonous, this might be a reason the shamans of that time initially hang the fresh *Amanita muscaria* to dry on tree branches, just like the colorful ornaments on a Christmas tree.**

Santa's flying reindeer have a similar connection to the *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms. Reindeer, in general, are common across Europe and Siberia, and just like the human inhabitants of these areas, they too consumed mushrooms. Harvard University biologist Donald Pfister suggests that Siberians who ingested the mushrooms may have hallucinated that the grazing reindeer were actually flying.⁴

With the darkness of the room and the chef's sonorous and practiced telling of the story and the amount of food everyone had eaten, and the warmth of the heat and perhaps the toadstool itself (because maybe she had taken the water the agaric had been cooked in and only disposed of most of it when she had been asked to dispose of all of it and maybe she had put one drop of it in each drink she served – maybe more than a drop in his drink) everyone in the room swam a little and the walls and roof pulled back to paleolithic times and the horizon spread out like a workbench and was sparkling and everyone looked up and into this ancient place an airplane rose into the sky, slowly, slipstreams behind it and the waitress said, 'Once, there was a private jet called *Moartea* and in it a man is preying on my sister-steward.'

3.

The air-steward felt warm all of a sudden, an outside cold, inside warm warmth. All over and all at once. He had called the plane *Moartea* because he thought it meant something else. He was leaning on her and maybe it was his leaning that was making her hot. He ran hot. He'd told her before. It was his plane so she worked for him. She was beautiful, he said and he leaned in even closer and touched her hair. Then his wife came out of the bathroom and he pulled back and the steward felt better but still hot, so it wasn't him after all.

'The arrangement,' his wife said and she pointed at it, and the steward nodded. 'Are these cornflowers?'

'I'm not sure,' said the steward.

'They look cheap,' she said. 'Can you get rid of them?'

'She can't get rid of them,' he said, laughing at his wife. 'We're 3,000 feet in the air.'

'Put them somewhere I can't see them,' she said, and she adjusted her suit jacket, the baby would come in three days, and she sat down and looked at her phone.

'Of course,' the steward said. 'Of course.'

The arrangement was huge, wired into a trunk. It had arrived that morning. His wife had asked for rustic but it wasn't what she wanted. She meant peonies, or rosehips. This was huge and sparse and didn't smell of anything but the forest.

The steward started delicately to reach in for the cornflowers. She knew they were cornflowers, she'd said she wasn't sure so his wife could feel smart, it helped but the steward knew they were cornflowers. And she knew that cornflowers could be **filtered through three layers of blue linen and then ritually consecrated beneath the full Moon with a moonstone**; she knew that then the linen **may be used to bathe the eyes, bringing an increased sense of clairvoyance, enabling one to see aspects of the creative forces of the Universe.**⁵ As she pulled them out she thanked them, gently crushing their petals, carefully, not enough to attract him but just enough so she could see them landing safely.

They were fighting now. Quietly needling at each other, although he was getting louder. There were sloe berries in the arrangement, a divining rod, she thought as she ran her hands over it, trying to look like she was busy with the arrangement and somehow invisible and somehow not less than a meter from the fight. A wishing rod. Then she just started listing them to try and drown out the terrible things they were saying to each other. Hawthorn, archilia, sloe, morning glory, elder, feverfew, cornflower, birch, apple – birch. **With a broom made of birch twigs, one sweeps rooms and sacred places; during the Alemannic carnival, the archaic, colorful festival at which many costumed and masked people parade as various "spirits" in February, the witches still carry a birch broom, occasionally "riding" it and symbolically swooshing it around to cleanse the atmosphere.**⁶ She lifted the birch branch out of the arrangement and swung it slightly, the plane lurched in the direction of her sweep. She swung it the other way and the plane lurched that way. She flung it up, then down. They were silent now. She drew a zig-zag with it and the plane thumped up and down.

'Sister-steward,' she whispered. 'Sister-waitress.'

And *Soarta* replied, '*Moartea*?' and she replied, 'Yes.' And they both said, '*Ursitoarea*?' and from under the water in the Croatian Sea *Ursitoarea* replied, 'Yes.'

And together, from across thousands of miles and at the same time so close they were touching, they say, in the ritual to recognize the immediacy of the threat, '**The rotten face of a corpse floating among the rushes and the plastic bags swept in from the road on the breeze, dark mask seething under a myriad of black snakes smiling.**'⁷ The slain are with us and we are with the slain, the grandchildren of the witches they couldn't kill standing in the responsibility that comes with the power to decide the fate of man.'

— *Pip Adam*

¹ Wolf D. Stori, *The Untold History of Healing: Plant lore and medicinal magic from the Stone Age to present.* (North Atlantic Books, Berkeley California, 2017), 180–181.

² *Ibid.*, 170.

³ *Ibid.*, 72–74.

⁴ Mustafa Itani, "Santa and Magic Mushrooms: The Shamanic Origins of Christmas Traditions," Medium, December 2, 2018, <https://medium.com/@mustaphahitani/santa-was-a-magic-mushroom-d3065b05e76f>

⁵ Paul Beyerl, *A Compendium of Herbal Magick.* (Phoenix Publishing Inc, Blaine Washington, 1998), 140.

⁶ Stori, *The Untold History of Healing: Plant lore and medicinal magic from the Stone Age to present.*, 70.

⁷ Fernanda Melchor, *Hurricane season.* Translated by Sophie Hughes. (*Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, 2020*), 13.

Ann Shelton has commissioned several short stories by Pip Adam for use within her artworks and books. Shelton provides Adam with access to her research materials and with key reference points that are critical to the conceptual basis for Shelton's artwork. For *I am an old phenomenon* Shelton shared her interest in a water-bound context which resonated with the 'over-articulated' figure of the witch and which embodied the extremities of the real and the imagined that are a critical part of her character. The quotations that are encased in the story are excerpts from Shelton's research materials. Adam crafts her narrative in response to these components in a manner that richly articulates and expands on the context of these artworks.

Pip Adam is the author of four novels: *Audition* (2023), *Nothing to See* (2020), *The New Animals* (2017), which won the Acorn Foundation Prize for Fiction, and *I'm Working on a Building* (2013); and the short story collection *Everything We Hoped For* (2010), which won the NZSA Hubert Church Best First Book Award for Fiction in 2011.

Ann Shelton, Pākehā/Italian (b. 1967, Aotearoa New Zealand, MFA University of British Columbia, Canada). She lives in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington and exhibits internationally. Her museum survey, *Dark Matter*, curated by Zara Stanhope (Director, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery) was hosted by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki in 2016, and toured to Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū in 2017. Shelton's work has been extensively reviewed in publications including *Artforum*, *Hyperallergic*, *artnet news*, and *Evergreen Review*. Shelton is represented in North America by Denny Dimin Gallery.

Cover image — *The loss of the oracle (Cornflower, Bluebottle, Hurtsickle, Bachelor's Buttons, Bluebow, Blue Cap)*. Archival pigment print on Hahnemühle Bamboo, 840 x 1119 mm.

Warning — plants are powerful and have fascinating histories, part of which the artist is exploring here. But many of them are toxic, deadly and poisonous. The artworks in this series and the text above do not constitute medical advice.

First published, *I am an old phenomenon* at Denny Dimin Gallery New York, 2022 and Alice Austen House, New York, 2024.

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