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From "Life Stories"

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From "Life Stories"

-Paul Hetherington

1. Monterey Cypress

At the bottom of the oval
the twisted Monterey Cypress
was a green-fringed broken
corkscrew
where we climbed to hide
from the furious history teacher.
He was looking for the culprits
who'd chalked "liar" on the board
after he'd praised
America's cause in Vietnam.
Next to it we buried
childish, risqué comics;
nearby a broken drain
drizzled a stale aroma
like old washing-up
onto frothing soil
and the curved tongue-and-groove
of the gardener's shed
leaked smoke and whisky smells.
Under that Monterey
we found a clump of
mushrooms—
Agaricus bisporus—
growing in the grass:
upturned, pale boats,
bulbous, taut umbrellas
with tender brownish struts—
and you, at twelve, plucked five.
Sautéd lavishly in butter
in a shimmering smooth-black pan,
releasing and gathering
their copious, staining moisture,
the woody, earthy flavours
soaked our crunchy toast.
Only afterwards did we read
that, all too often, *Agaricus*
was mistaken for *Amanita*,
the notorious *Destroying Angel*,
even by experts—an imposter
with its own exquisite taste,
purveyor of organ failure.

2. Bombs

One of my father's stories
could have been a parable:
last from a mess hut
in Darwin during the war
he faced a line of Japanese bombs
with the slit trenches' protection
an impossible short distance away.
There was a moment
of seeing his own oblivion,
and, perhaps, because of his lapsed
Catholicism,
an aura of an afterlife
as death ambled near
in clumping, explosive steps.
His training had taught him
to lie on the ground
and, after bombs fell either side
and dirt sprayed his helmet,
to the surprise of his mates
he stood up, pale but cheery,
saying something they didn't catch.