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The Mushroom

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Summer nights we played in the dark.
I hovered in the kitchen's steam and ceiling
light, waiting, while my mother—tired
of what asking meant—
sent me out.

But her friend, whose children
had no bedtime,
passed me a mushroom—white
—its flesh drew back
from my fingers like a sponge.
I held it
going down the stairway,
where other suppers—over,
crept into the common hall
like the pale private
light seen through
a stranger's curtains.

Outside, children
—smell of grass
and gravel—ignored me.
I stood opposite
the cement fenced-in building
with no doors.
I never asked,
What's there?

A tall boy, too old
to be among us—came, drawn
by my cupped hands.
He took the mushroom,
smelled it, broke the stem,

threw it inside the chainlink fence.
It's poison. Don't eat it.

Silent again, months later,
I lay at four a.m.
beside my brother
on the shag carpet of the boy's bedroom
while our apartment burned.

I stared at the stray
broken toys beneath his bed.
I never tried
to explain the mushroom's spell,
how it would delay
the interval alone.

His mother washed
inside his mouth—
I watched her hold his head
on their front porch
then ran lightly
through the yards, escaping.

I would have taken my mushroom,
turned back into the fire
to avoid my voice.