

TOUCHING INSOMNIA: A script for two voices

Voice One

Insomnia can bring about a sense of experiencing the world on slightly altered terms. Surroundings that we are familiar with can appear unfamiliar, or changed in some way. It is as though we are encountering the world through a different set of sensory lenses. Experiencing things at the threshold between different realms, if you like; entering a zone of liminality.

Leading life in the in-between space is, in fact, quite natural. So, I invite you to join me as we immerse ourselves in this land of liminality.

Voice Two

The call of a Barn Owl plays on a loop.

Voice One

The Barn owl heralds us as we prepare to enter her domain. She is a creature of the half-light. Her yellow eyes, perfectly suited to see in these twilight shades, gaze at us with curiosity, as visitors to her realm.

As the barn owl watches over us, I invite you to close your eyes. Allow your weight to sink towards the ground a little, feeling gravity's pull. Notice how connected you feel. Held in place. Part of the land and the wide round Earth.

We are about to join the liminal realm in which life exists and thrives at the edges. For the moment we pause before its vale. Focus your attention on the Barn Owl's call and the spaces in between. For now, that is all you need to do.

Voice Two

The barn owl's call plays for the last time.

Voice One

The barn owl now heralds us and invites us into the next realm: the twilight garden.

Voice Two

A scent generator is switched on. The fragrance of night-scented flowers fills the air.

Voice One

Again... I invite you to close your eyes.

Many species of flowers are specialists in life at the threshold of day and night. Another word to describe this is crepuscular, which means twilight. The petals of these flowers are usually white, as colour is less effective in lower light for attracting pollinators. But it's their scent that is the real pollinator magnet. Night-scented flowers have developed particularly heady fragrances.

In the case of some flowers, the clue is in the name: Morning Glory. Evening Primrose. Night Scented Stock and Night Blooming Jasmine, which is what you can smell now. Other crepuscular flowers are Honeysuckle, Wisteria, and Petunia

Do we have any tequila drinkers here? Well. It turns out that the agave plant, which is a vital ingredient in making tequila, is pollinated at night. Can you guess by what creature? Agave plants are, in fact, pollinated by Mexican long-nose bats!

Voice Two

The sounds of nocturnal insects fade in.

Voice One

As the fragrance builds, the air will become filled with creatures attracted by the scent. Insects, particularly moths, are drawn to feast upon the sweet, energy-rich nectar promised by the fragrance. We pause to listen and smell.

Voice Two

The sound of fluttering bats' wings fades in.

Voice One

The air now being filled with winged night-time pollinators, we hear another crepuscular creature arriving. Noctule and pipistrelle bats are drawn out in the twilight to feed upon these pollinators. We pause in silence to take in the whole sense-scape.

Voice Two

The sounds of insects and bats slowly fade out. After ten seconds of silence, we hear the barn owl call.

Voice One

The Barn owl is calling us to the next realm.

We are now entering a realm at another liminal threshold. It exists Between light and dark. Between plant and animal. It is a conduit for nutrients and communication... And between life and death. It is both everywhere at once and nowhere in particular.

But most importantly, in spite of its high strangeness, it is absolutely vital to life on Earth.

We have entered the fungal realm.

Voice Two

Another sounds fades in: rustling, tapping and rhythmic knocking

Voice One

What you are hearing is fungus communicating.

Although our main direct experience of fungi is through its fruit, the mushroom or toadstool, which appears mysteriously overnight, fungus threads its way through our lives and the world in many different ways. In his book *Entangled Life*, Merlin Sheldrake describes it as “ecological connective tissue, the living seam by which much of the world is stitched into relation.”

Fungi are Inside and around us, nourishing and killing plants. Eating rock, breaking down soil. Producing medicine and cleaning up oil. Largely out of sight, but hugely transformative.

All plant life is, in fact, dependent upon fungi. Wherever plants are growing, they are connected by mycelial networks. Through these mycelial networks, fungus connects to many plants in different ways, controlling the flow of nutrients and information, and mediating the toxins and pathogens, simultaneously with each plant.

The world’s largest organism is a fungus in East Oregon. This giant *Armillaria Ostoyae* occupies nearly 10 square kilometres. It is also one of the world’s oldest beings, being somewhere between 2,400 and 8,650 years old.

Fungi show up in our lives in so many essential ways.

Voice Two

Food samples are brought out to taste and smell; there’s mushrooms, bread, beer, cheese, marmite and chocolate.

Voice One

Apart from the mushrooms on our plate, fungi are present in many other ways. Fungus makes bread rise and beer and wine ferment; it makes blue cheese ripen, and gives Marmite its distinctive taste. Even chocolate relies on fungi for its very special flavour.

Then there’s medicine. Some of our most game-changing medicines are made from fungi. Penicillin. Cyclosporine which enables organ transplantation. Lovastatin, which lowers cholesterol.

Fungi even play a vital role within our own bodies. They are present on our skin and within our mouths and stomachs, playing a vital role in our health and digestion.

Fungi have also played a role in thoughts about human consciousness. It wouldn’t have been legal to share any magic mushrooms with you, but some researchers believe that the consumption of magic mushrooms and other psychedelic fungi had a part to play in the evolution of the human brain.

Voice Two

The Barn Owl’s call returns.

Voice One

The barn owl is summoning us to the next realm.

As we pass through the curtain we are transported to a dark and mysterious place.

Voice Two

A new sound fades in, a squelching and a popping.

Voice One

Please close your eyes.

We are in a long low-roofed shed. It is very warm. There is very little light, but as your eyes adjust you can see pinpoints of light dotted around you.

You slowly see that these are, in fact, candles. In their soft light you begin to notice the shadowy outlines of hundreds of plants.

They are about 60cm tall, with broad fan-shaped leaves supported by a thick, straight stalk.

Voice Two

Stalks of rhubarb are passed around.

Voice One

Can anyone guess where we are?

We are in a part of the north of England which has become known as 'The Rhubarb Triangle'. And what you can hear is the sound of rapidly growing rhubarb. The popping sound is the buds bursting open. The squelching is the sound of the skin of the stalk splitting as it rapidly increases in size.

The Rhubarb Triangle is a 23km squared area of Yorkshire, between the towns of Wakefield, Morley and Rothwell. At one time, this area was responsible for 90% of the world's rhubarb supply.

The rhubarb is grown naturally in a field without harvesting for two years. During this time, plants are storing energy from the sun in their roots in the form of carbohydrates. After this period, usually in the winter months, the rhubarb is moved into a heated shed which is kept in complete darkness. The heat means they no longer need to use any of their stored energy to make leaves, which turn a sickly yellow-green colour. All of the energy then goes into making the stalk larger, and sweeter.

Rhubarb grown in this way, which is called forced rhubarb, is said to have the best flavour: a combination of sweet and sour. And now we are going to experience that flavour for ourselves.

Voice Two

Rhubarb candy sticks and rhubarb kombucha are passed around.
Andy guides us through a mindful rhubarb moment.

The sounds of rhubarb growing slowly fade out.
After ten seconds of silence, we hear the barn owl call again.

Voice One

The barn owl is calling us into the next and final realm.

Close your eyes.

It is nearly midnight. The full moon is high above you. The air is warm around you. You notice that you are sitting in a wooded grove. You become aware of birds singing.

Voice Two

The song of a nightingale fades in. It is soon joined by the sounds of a clarinet and banjo, which seem to enter into a dialogue with the birdsong.

Voice One

Does anyone know what you are hearing?

Yes, this is the nightingale. Between April and the end of June, he sings this enchantingly beautiful song to attract a passing female. The musician is Sam Lee.

Let's just spend the last few minutes of our time together bathing in this beautiful music.

Voice Two

After three minutes of music, the sound fades out.

Voice One

Open your eyes.

That brings us to the end of our excursion into liminal life.

Stay sensational.