

Self Portrait as a Mushroom in the Damp and Leafy Forest

I want to touch a mushroom.

I have developed such an affinity with the fungal kingdom and its fruiting bodies. To be chronically ill, to be one of *the sick ones* - a postscript in the wake of a global pandemic - is to live like fungus. No matter how dignified you appear, or how majestic, there is something of a stench of death about you. There's an association with breakdown and decay.

Like a mushroom, I appear strong and vibrant, but I'm very easily pulled apart. I have infirm, permeable edges and a lumpy alien shape. I too am spongy and viscous. I too bruise easily. I too spend a lot of time in the dark.

Recently I have been very tired. I fall asleep late at night and wake early and unrefreshed. I am always too hot and too thirsty. I feel yeasty, fermented. My brain is very full of thoughts.

I want to connect with the earth in a thick, damp sleep.

It's not that I want to stop thinking, but that I want my consciousness to change. It must be possible to shift away from the constant stream of internal dialogue, the worry about deadlines, about paying my bills, about whether I'm making the right decisions in life or whether I'd do better to run away and live at the seaside (and whether or not my ego would let me).

I want to connect with the earth in a thick, damp sleep.

Recently I have abandoned social media. Instead, I have taken to recording long and intense voice messages, back and forth, with other chronically ill friends, whom I cannot touch and have never seen. Like me, they lie in their own little darkened rooms, like me, unwashed, like me, in various states of undress. We have sore throats and sore hands. There are months of silence followed by unbelievable bursts of productivity, where life happens all at once. We all have extraordinary talents and strange hobbies and horrible doctors and far too many financial woes.

I want to tap into my friends' thick, damp dreams.

The conversations operate on Mushroom Time - refusing to manifest for long, unspecified periods, and then bursting in many directions all at once, and as if from nowhere, like pearlescent oysters after a bout of rain.

The messages are the most transformative thing I've ever done. We talk about protest and activism and changing the world. We talk about what we can learn from the fungal kingdom - how the 'Wood Wide Web' reminds us of mutual aid networks - groups of marginalised strangers collectively passing around the same £20 to whoever needs it most that day. We talk about whether it's possible to signal and find each other the way slime cells do - whether we would want to, whether in fact we are doing it to each other right now. We record our messages at odd hours, monologuing our sleepy fungal thoughts while the world around us dreams. It feels like we are merging and spreading, tiny spores reproducing our shapes across the airwaves.

Nobody gets to see what is really happening underneath, but these conversations are transforming me also. I am different now. I am stiller and fatter. My need to appear productive is dwindling slowly. Some of the best fungi fail to produce a fruiting body at all.

I want to carry my friends with me to the thick, damp woods.

It is rare that I am able to access a forest, but when I can, it is by mobility scooter. I can only go as far as the battery will carry me. I spend time beforehand researching accessible routes. I am an adept rider. I handle my scooter like a horse, steering gently over impossible tree roots, and around boggy, leafy depths. Even when it panics, I am calm.

However, there must always come a time when the forest is too deep: the scooter can't go any further. At this point, if I can, I will pull out a walking stick and walk half as far as my legs will allow. My innate aversion to gravity is loosened: bouncy moss springs under my feet. I want so much to become lost in the forest, in a way that doesn't require a dropped pin on Google Maps.

I want to connect with the earth in a thick, damp sleep.

In here, it is easier to feel healthy and alive. My lungs fill with nature, its heady top notes: all leafy foliage and singing birds. The body of the forest lies somewhere underneath all this, in the dampness and darkness and decomposing earth. I close my eyes and inhale as much of the wildness as possible, knowing that this moment may sustain me for months to come.

I want to connect with my friends in the thick damp earth.

As my senses recuperate, my eyes, too, become impossibly sharp. Eventually they home in on what I'm looking for: a small mushroom clumped under a bush. And then there are more of them: mushrooms, everywhere. Milky white and delicate little buttons shoot out like beansprouts around the edge of a rotting tree trunk; mushrooms resembling other things: buns, or horns, apples, and trumpets; bracket fungi fan out from tall trees, some so large a dog could sit on them.

Wherever I can, I reach out my hand. I touch gently, with a single digit. It feels so much like I'm touching my own skin. Where the mushrooms are thick and fleshy, I think of my thighs, my stomach. The delicate papery ones are more like my hands, my bony wrists. Some are tender, others springy. Others disintegrate under my thumb.

I want to merge with the mushroom, right here on the forest floor.

I wonder if the mushroom can sense my pulse, or my tenderness; whether it can sense my presence from its thick, sleepy state or whether it is wide awake and lucid, passing messages back and forth.

Touching the mushroom takes me deeper into all of it, to spaces I cannot take myself: the heart of the forest, the universe, the rooms of my friends, whom I cannot see.

I want the mushroom to touch me back.

Published in *This Book is a Plant* (Pilot Press) for Wellcome Collection, in conjunction with Rooted Beings exhibition (2022)