

A Network Beneath the Soil

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Abstract

A Network Beneath the Soil is a short fiction story that follows a young person who is struggling with their existence in a heteropatriarchal, colonial, racial capitalist society. They transform into part of the *Amanita muscaria*'s mycelium, a network of fungal threads that form a symbiotic relationship with the roots of plant organisms in the forest. The character is presented with a choice: to abandon their humanity and become fungi, or continue to exist as a human. *A Network Beneath the Soil* looks toward mycorrhizal fungi to express what we, as humans, might learn from the symbiotic relationships that occur below the surface of the Earth.

Keywords

fungi, mycorrhizal, transformation, human, escapism

I let my hand trail behind me as I walked, fingers gliding over the rust-crusting wires of the chain link fence. The silver ring on my index finger skipped against each bump of metal, producing a rhythmic sound that I found unpleasant yet oddly soothing. Looking down at my beat up converse sneakers, I navigated my feet along the ground to avoid irregular shaped rocks of concrete and the occasional discarded needle.

My pace quickened, eager to reach the familiar gap in the fence that would allow me to cross this metal barrier. I had been visiting this spot for the past few months after discovering it on one of my solo adventures. Well, the word "adventure" is probably not the most accurate term. These trips could more accurately be described as anxiety-induced

escapes, in which I look towards nature to try and find some form of solace from my transphobic boss and overwhelming feelings of existential dread.

After what seemed like forever, I finally found the gap in the fence where it bends just enough for me to step over and go through onto the other side. Despite having only discovered the wooded area a few months ago, it makes me feel safe. It feels as though I have known this place forever. I have yet to encounter anyone here, likely thanks to that old, ugly fence. It seems out of place in a spot this beautiful.

I haven't always felt the need to escape. I once had impermeable dreams of being a writer. I was enthralled by the possibility of creating works that might shape the lives of other people. These dreams were quickly shut down when it came to receiving support from my parents to enroll in a creative writing program. Apparently, being a writer is not an acceptable career path for my family. At least, not in this economy. Under the pressure of my parents, I began working as a paid intern in an office, putting my data analysis degree to use.

I found myself losing the passion I once had for life, falling into a deep well of hopelessness and apathy. I lived the same old story: stuck at a low-wage job I despised, struggling to pay rent, experiencing migraines and neck spasms from looking at a screen all day, and having to choose between instant noodles and hard boiled eggs for dinner. Except it never gets old enough to become accustomed to, does it? Alas, the cycle continued. Week after week, I found myself struggling to stay afloat with no time or energy to do the things I love. I can't remember the last time I volunteered at the community garden, went out to see my friends, or sat down to write poetry. This constant treading water is exhausting.

Don't even get me started on the news, which plays constant reminders of all the violence, death, and horror that we are expected to accept as reality. As hatred rises along with the sea levels, how are we expected to "keep calm and carry on" with our daily lives? My doctor suggested that I see a therapist to talk through all of my pent up anger, sadness, and stress. She also prescribed me antidepressants to help with my anxiety and depression. Not to be bleak, but I don't think pills will fix the illnesses caused by a society that forces me to *survive* instead of *live*.

I did, however, follow my doctor's advice. My therapist and I have talked about loads of things that stress me out. I resent him in some ways, knowing that he only talks to me because I pay him to. But I know it's not his fault. We all have to do what's necessary to survive in this capitalist hellscape, even if it means participating in the privatization of important health services. One day, he suggested that I should spend quality time in nature to help combat some of my stress. I joked, suggesting that he was pawning his job off to Mother Nature. He didn't like that. Nonetheless, I wouldn't have found this special place if he hadn't suggested taking up nature walks so for that, I'm grateful.

By now, the path to my favourite spot is familiar to me. I made my way through the bushes, moving thin branches to the side to prevent them from snapping at my legs. Finally, I reached the clearing. I paused, taking a moment to admire the serenity of this place.

The area is surrounded by slightly dense brush and several types of trees. The tall oaks and red maples are a comforting presence that remind me of my late grandfather's garden. The open area is nothing too special, with a few rotting logs and emerald-coloured ferns. There isn't an overpriced condo in sight, only life. A towering oak tree stands in the clearing, just slightly off to the side. The base of her trunk forms a slight curvature. It is a spot I have leaned up against many times, the rough trunk molding almost perfectly around my back like a hug. Just past the clearing is a sloped river bank that leads down to a small but mighty stream. The soft sounds of steady running water and wind rustling through the leaves contrast the constant droning of motors I am accustomed to hearing from my downtown apartment.

Most people would not give this spot a second glance, but to me, it's special. Here, in my little safe space, I am shut off from all of that racial capitalist, colonial, heteropatriarchal, transphobic bullshit. In this clearing, I don't need to be worried about being forever stuck in a job I have no passion for, isolated from my friends while struggling to afford my twelve-hundred dollar rent. I can't hear the shrill voice of my supervisor instructing me on why I *must* follow the gendered dress-code. The trees don't care if I am single or married, if I look "presentable," speak a certain way, or even speak at all. I'm able to push these stresses away to the back of my mind, if only for a few hours. I don't even think about the way I carry myself in this space, I'm able to be myself without the fear of being judged by others. The clearing provides momentary relief from the burden of endless expectations in my life.

I navigated through the clearing with familiarity, my sights set on a small spot of red near the base of my favourite oak. I crouched to examine the mushroom further.

Rare to the human eye, it stands glorious. A temptation and a teacher from beneath the forest floor, waiting to be found.

Could it be? The mushroom looked as though it had been plucked out of a fairy tale. Its cap was a beautiful strawberry red, speckled with white spots. I reached out my hand, fingertips grazing the soft, bumpy skin of the mushroom cap. Without a second thought, I tore the mushroom cap off of its white stem. While I examined the red mushroom cap between my fingers, I felt guilty and unsure of what came over me. Something about it was just so alluring. I gently tore a section of the cap off, popping the piece into my mouth. "Why did I do that?" I contemplated, eyes widening in confusion. I chewed the mushroom slowly, a slight grimace settling on my face. The flesh was chewy, almost rubbery in texture. It tasted earthy and bitter, reminding me of soil. Finally gulping it down, I cleared my throat and swiped my tongue across my front teeth to rid them of the mushroom's residue. "People eat wild mushrooms all the time," I thought to myself reassuringly. "What's the worst that could happen?"

I sat there at the base of the tree, listening to the faint sound of rushing water in the distance. Tilting my head back to let it rest on the trunk, my gaze was drawn to the rustling oak leaves above. The bright white sky peeked through the vibrant green leaves which somehow appeared much more vivid in colour. They twinkled in the kisses of warm yellow light. I became lost in the beauty and magic of the scene above me. My eyes hypnotically followed the fluid movements of the leaves, which transformed the sky into a kaleidoscopic blur of moving colour.

Another being to teach. Another being to guide.

A small wave of panic struck me as I startled back into reality. “How long have I been sitting here?” I thought. In my dreamlike state, I seemed to have lost track of time. I could feel a bubbling of nausea begin to emerge in the pit of my stomach. My head became clouded with dizziness. Suddenly, a sharp pain in my stomach forced me onto my side. Maybe eating that mushroom wasn’t the best idea after all.

I don’t know how long I lay there, curled up on the ground in a helpless fetal position. My arms had clutched themselves onto my knees, pushing them into my chest. My feelings of delirium settled, along with the debilitating pain in my stomach. As I opened my eyes again from their scrunched position, I noticed that the sunlight around me had dissipated. The forest floor had become much colder without the sun’s warming rays. I felt a slight, brief pressure from the ground beneath me, nudging my arm. Sitting up, I trailed my hand across the small patch of soil.

Another being to gift the importance of life giving and sharing.

I know I should have been scared, but any apprehension melted away when I felt a strong warmth emanating from the ground. I shivered from the cold air, desperately brushing away leaves and twigs to get my hands closer to the source of warmth. My hands settled atop the bare soil. The heat felt similar to that of a fire, steady, but just slightly out of reach. Without a second thought, I began to dig beneath the soil. There was nothing but desperation in my actions. I felt a need to reach the source of this elusive warmth.

To touch, shape, change, mold.

With the earth finally covering my hands, the liquid heat entered through my palms. It burned and tingled like a drug coursing through my veins. The warmth soothed my body, which had become stiff from the cold air. The years of tension that had permanently tangled itself throughout my body began to dissipate. My shoulders unclenched, and the knots lying between my shoulder blades loosened. The dull throbbing beneath my eyebrows began to fade, my eyes relaxing into their natural state as though the ache had never been there at all.

To show how life should be.

The relief was almost too much. It was overwhelming to feel so present and grounded in both mind and body, finally free from the aches and pains I had grown accustomed to. I felt overcome, almost invaded with this warm being that felt so purely alive. Hands still buried in the soft soil, I felt the presence pulsing beneath my fingertips. “What are you,” I whispered in wonder. Suddenly, my surroundings quickly faded to black.

The body, no longer a body. Disassembled. Reshaped. Transformed.

The merging of two beings, conjoined in an entanglement of the air above, and the earth below. The human is given a choice. One world or the other.

I understand it. I don’t know how it happened, but I know that it happened nonetheless: *I have become one with the network beneath the soil.*

We span across the vastness of the forest. Each minuscule branch has a purpose in supporting life from beneath the ground's surface. Each part of me, the mycelium, *belongs*. The network forms a partnership with the plants of the forest. Our fungal threads reach out, connecting to the roots of the plants and trees. The network focuses towards the large oak, her root system strong and supportive. We communicate, there is an understanding between us. Filaments to roots, roots to filaments. An exchange occurs. The supplying of water and nutrients, and the reception of sugars. Strength is provided to the entire mycelium. The oak thrives. *Mutualism*. Ah, a concept long forgotten by many. There is no fear here. No shame. No violence. No hierarchies. No hate. How refreshing.

The human finally feels as though they have a purpose, part of something bigger than themselves.

A choice is made.

The human is no longer human. Part of them forever entangled in the vast, complex, life-giving network beneath the soil. Their other half awakens from a deep slumber under a large oak tree.

The human curiously touches the small pile of soil in front of them, wondering whether their breathtaking transformation was just a hallucination after all.

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Conflicts of Interest

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About the Author

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