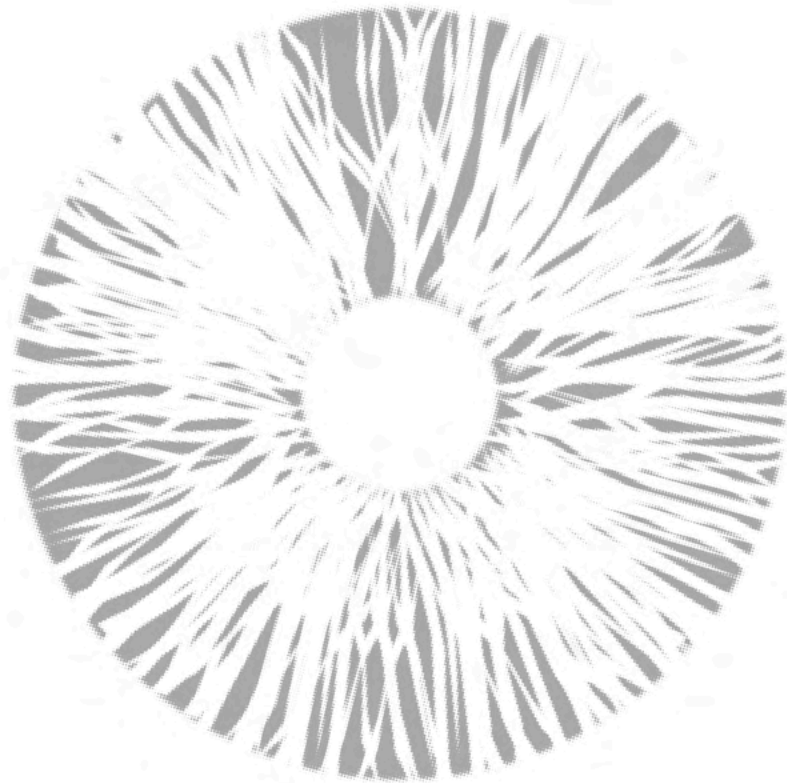




CEPHALOMORPHIC





# CEPHALOMORPHIC

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They started cropping up in the corners of the bathroom, at the intersections of moldy tiles, in the darkest reaches of the shower. Household cleaning products did not easily remove them. In all my months of showering there in the dimly-lit, windowless bathroom, I had never come across such an unusual species, nor one which grew so quickly. From a distance, they resembled round little balls, like the heads of wild mushrooms or like a small smooth button variety. But, inching closer, I could tell they were no ordinary fungi. They had the look of something more sinister, something frightening to behold, although I couldn't say why. I began wearing sandals in the shower to keep anything from sticking to the soles of my feet and purchased an arsenal of disinfectants, degreasers, and mold-fighting bathroom cleaners, which I used every Saturday without fail, down on my hands and knees, in a pair of shorts and rubber gloves. I scoured the shower corners with a toothbrush, mustering all my strength to scrape away the slimy substrate growing along the tile's grout, its branches extending outwards, revealing a circulatory pattern of veins or roots. It was a difficult fungus: I had to use a small spatula to remove it completely and fling the yellow remnants into the trash.

One weekend, I couldn't scrub out the shower. I had a ton of work waiting for me, and I was glued to the computer as soon as I'd fixed myself breakfast. They asked me to cover an extra shift on the customer service chat line since another representative had a family emergency. And I didn't find time during the rest of the week either. But every day while showering, I stared down, disgusted, at that disturbing shower corner, reminding myself I had to make time to get rid of that yellow stain, which I could barely make out with what little light reached the shower floor. Finally, on the following Saturday, I changed into my shorts, got out the spatula and the cleaning products, and crouched down to begin spraying disinfectant. But, seeing the fungus up close, I was surprised at its yellowish, spherical polyps, sprouting in a beehive formation, displaying an unusual geometry. They resembled bunches of sickly grapes, with vaguely familiar patterns across their surfaces. I decided I'd examine them with the flashlight on my phone and found the sacs to be nothing other than tiny human heads made of a somewhat spongy material, growing with their eyelids closed, with cheeks, with little noses and little eyes the size of peanuts. Their fat and freckled little faces had been swelling up this entire time, motionless.

forming at the end of minuscule white stalks. I gently nudged one of the faces with my spatula, I parted its lips, discovering it had teeth as well. It disgusted me. And I got that feeling in my anus I get whenever I experience something horrifying: deformed bodies, open wounds, high-up places.

I went running to the kitchen for a knife – planning to cut open one of the little heads and examine it more closely – then returned to the shower. I handled them carefully, surprised at their rubbery yet soft and terribly delicate texture: a single footstep would have turned them all to mush. I moved them this way and that with my knife, examining just how perfectly the mycotic material had sculpted the eyelids and the ears. I was very cautious; I feared they might hurt me, bursting in my face, releasing poison or spores. I tried taking pictures with my phone, but they all turned out blurry or underexposed. I was dying to tell someone. But I had fallen out with everybody in my home country, and the only people I knew in this city were my coworkers, whom I didn't consider friends. I had designed a life for myself in which I spent the maximum amount of time shut up at home, avoiding the stresses of human interaction; I even

thought there was something romantic about it after reading a history of paleo-Christian monks in the Byzantine Empire, isolated in deserts, in mountain monasteries, searching for some strict form of confinement in order to discover, in the silence, the traces of God.

While it's true the horrible fungus heads were disgusting, they were at the same time a little endearing, pitiful even: each one resembled a real person, a chubby little baby of mycotic matter. Some had fused together, conjoined at the face with half-parted lips, enjoying a peaceful nap. They seemed to have souls, to be breathing gently. Although I'd planned on decapitating one and bringing the head out of the bathroom to inspect it in the light, I was suddenly struck by the feeling that it would be the same as committing murder and that I could possibly end up in jail. How easy is it to kill something simply for being bulbous and small? But no, I thought, shaking it off, these are still just fungi springing up from my bathroom tile. I gripped the knife hard and severed one of the tiny bald heads as easily as slicing through butter or scooping out a spoonful of avocado. I set the baby head on a small plate and brought it up to the window.



Seeing it there in the daylight, I had the sudden impulse to dig both thumbs into its angelic cheeks and see what would come out its mouth – like popping a zit quickly and cleanly so there isn't much pain. I opted, instead, to split the head down the center with my knife, like a grape divvied up between two starving people. I slid the blade down through the forehead, halving the nose, lips, and chin. Its interior was full of some kind of black goo loaded with slimy seeds, still green, spilling out across the plate. It made me so sick I had to step away and pace around the living room, trying not to vomit.



I left the tiny head in sun to dry. At least I'd confirmed it lacked a skeleton: inside was only that fleshy black pulp with its miniature seeds, smelling like sweat or fermented food. At any rate, I did feel like I'd just killed someone, that I had to give it all up now and turn myself in. But no. No! They're just fungi growing along the poorly-sealed tiles of my shower, I thought.

That same night, I tried to learn more about fungi. I read up on molds and lichens and algae, but found nothing mentioning organisms with human heads. I went to sleep at 2 a.m. after having studied the fungal kingdom's major phylogenetic divisions, and I dreamt I was standing before the small head I'd split in two. In my dream it remained whole, now the size of a melon. It sat on the cutting board watching me calmly, examining me, rolling its eyes around, exploring my world. I caressed it and ran my fingers through its thin baby hair: it was someone quite dear to me. Then it began babbling, and I leaned in close to hear what it was trying to say. A whisper, it softly uttered my name.



I didn't clean at all that weekend, and when I got in the shower on Monday, my eyes fixed on the hundreds of tiny papules swelling in the hot-water spray. I could barely scrub myself down. I was afraid to get too close again, afraid to see the foul faces of misshapen cherubs with their flabby cheeks. I spent the rest of

the day thinking about them – intrusive thoughts interrupting my work. Every time I went to answer a chat-line question, I fell into a fugue state, sitting completely still, pondering the mycelium's geometric form. On Wednesday, I noticed the shower growth had crept out along the damp tile grout, splitting off, their white veins twining around spherical buds as they scaled the toilet. Meanwhile, another colony stained the sides of the ceramic bowl like a smear of yellow caviar. It grossed me out to pee there, but I did it anyway, aiming my stream directly at their tiny little faces, noting the way their lips moved, even glimpsing their teeth and little tongues. The rest of the week, I had more dreams about the heads: they showed up in the middle of wholly unrelated scenes, looking blurry at first, then sharpening in my mind, floating, sniffing around inside of me, overwhelming me. The next Saturday, I crouched down again and opened the flashlight on my phone. The little shower orbs were growing vertically now, their stalks getting thicker and thicker. That day I decided not to wash them away or hire cleaners but just to observe them. With fascination. I wanted to see how they grew. I wanted to see what would happen if I let them develop and show me whatever they wanted to show. Something

might blossom or hatch. I thought about how depressing it was not being able to tell anyone of my discovery and how strange it seemed that no fungus of this type existed among the classifications on Wikipedia. It could be a new species, appearing only recently – after the nuclear-plant malfunctions in Zipaquirá. At any rate, there it was, growing impetuously in my windowless bathroom, practically bubbling up in a highly fertile soup. The tiny head I'd extracted the week before had dried out completely, transforming into an empty husk of black skin and vague gray features. Its seeds – or spores – were hardly more than a fine gray dust.



It took only a couple of weeks for the growth to spread to every other tile and to stain the stucco with vivid reds and aquamarines, throwing off glimmers of fuchsia and bedstraw yellow, like a wild painting by Jacanamijoy. The whole floor turned iridescent with life, and their dendritic extensions had claimed the walls right up to ceiling, forming a skin of thick,

tangled branches, weaved together with other bulbs into tryphobic, geometric patterns: flowering sprouts that were now my babies. The eldest were already the size of melons and kept on growing. It could have all been so repulsive, but something was at work inside me, and I no longer felt disgust. I showered without sandals, caressing the pupas with my feet. And I got the feeling, slowly but surely, that the fungi could read my mind as I slept, strolling through my memories as if they were their own. The image of a giant head floating high above the city became familiar to me – even seeming to possess the face of an old friend. And, when it looked straight at me, its shining eyes dug hooks into my psyche's deepest truths. The crustaceans and centipedes of my trauma trembled in its presence, and I could distinguish something enormous, something entirely too big lying underneath its skin. The head was, in reality, a structure jutting out into the void, a network of stars and thoughts, a whole galaxy of random ideas lacking all purpose and meaning.

Once within me, the fungus took firm root: I'd scarcely close my eyes when already its form seemed to grow and multiply beneath my eyelids, faces laughing sarcastically in my dreams, forging

spinning stars, yellow-sided polyhedrons and parallelepipeds. Sitting on the toilet, resting my eyes from the screen, blinking ... the fungi would always reappear, an afterimage teeming with frenzied pupa.

The once-generic baby features now began to morph into the faces of people I'd known as a child. The first time I saw it, I spent almost half an hour completely absorbed in a cluster from which my old classmates bloomed: the faces had adopted their features, and I spotted among them balded versions of Gina Tatiana Segura and Santiago Villamarín - carcinogenic imitations of my first-grade friends. Another head was turning into my grandmother, and another, my aunt Estela. Several collapsed in on themselves just a few days after reaching maturity. One adopted my father's face, but then, at the same speed with which his features had solidified, began to split and melt and break apart, shedding interior flesh, black and slimy through a paranasal wound and a rotted-out eye.

I searched like crazy for a scientific explanation. I had to know where the fungus came from, how it was able to accurately

copy the faces of those who populated my memories: the same noses, wrinkles, eyebrows, and uneasy smiles – only now with their eyes closed and slightly deformed, heavy with spores, sacs of a foamy material, extremely soft to the touch. My attempts at finding anything on the internet failed, and the only theory I could come up with was that the fungi had developed some type of nerve cell. Its mind had spent this entire time systematically exploring my psyche, perhaps as a phase of its reproductive cycle. It had settled into the cavernous depths of my brain and was now building a nest in my temporal lobe (which processes facial recognition), copying faces without knowing what they were and without any awareness of doing it.



At last, I could escape the loneliness at the end of my shifts. I had the relief of seeing and talking to faces I'd met in a distant country, faces held up by stipes as thick as erect penises, teeming with blue veins, swollen and grainy. I told them, for example, about a woman who was furious over the new

phone she'd bought that now wasn't working, when, in reality, she didn't even know how to turn it on. I laughed while telling the story. It'd been a long time since I'd had so much fun.

Then one day, my sister, who'd died twelve years earlier, appeared among the fungi, half-smiling, resurrected as a freckly pupa, blooming with joy. I nearly burst into tears, and couldn't help but reach out to touch her mushroom skin and quietly speak her name. "Sandra?" Her mouth and eyes didn't budge. The fungiform pupas had no brains. They were nothing but hairy, freckled, spore-filled sacs - spongy like mushrooms - lacking both mind and muscle, with intricate rows of little gray membranes beneath the chin - like the thin gills of the hymenium under the caps of many other fungi. My sister's face was spectacularly sculpted and roughly the size of a mature squash. It seemed alive.

I held her head in my hands and remembered how she'd died. I had run away from everything because of her, always ending up in remote places, in countries where I didn't speak the language and couldn't make friends. When we were little, she'd always



called me ugly and dumb. It could've been just what kids do, but I never got over it. She would hit me in the head for no reason, say I was the ugliest person in the world, and, when I became a teenager, laughed at my body hair, my armpits, my mustache, and the size of my nose. She'd do it in front of the whole family, my friends, our parents. She'd also call me retarded, an ape, an orangutan, and a freak. Other times, she forgot all about me, never giving me a single thought. Even then, at thirty-years-old, I still hadn't moved past it: I couldn't take my clothes off in front of other people, I still stuttered, and I didn't want anyone to see me. A few days before her death, we had a really bad argument. She was lying in bed in a hospital room following a heart attack, but the argument was about me. I knew it wasn't the right time, but I told her that she had ruined my life, that because of her I was afraid of everyone; I hurled at her every insult I knew. That same night, she had another heart attack. I was sure I'd killed her, at least indirectly. I really did love her, and I think she loved me, but just never showed it in a way I could understand.

By the time they reached maturity, the heads had grown much

larger than human scale. Some, I'd say, were bigger than Pilates balls – their stalks bowing under so much weight – and they now jutted out past the bathroom door. With their cheeks pressed up against the floor of the hallway, one on top of another, piling up for lack of space, they began to form a wall blocking passage to the bathroom. The fungus with my sister's head turned purple, and the one with Juanita's, who had once been my best friend, had a gnarled stem and was now a dark brown. Other fungi lost teeth as they matured, and most of the heads had now fattened, their eyes open, with large pupils and wide smiles. I tended to them, watered them, cleaned them, feared losing them. I felt like a gardener: I pruned them, picked off the dead skin that peeled back each week as they grew, and told them about what happened to me at work. I could say anything; they wouldn't judge. "I don't know why I'm so scared to admit I'm lonely." My sister looked up at me from the floor with one eye half-open. "At home I was taught that it was good to be alone, that I didn't need anyone else, which is why I didn't want... I don't have the words to describe this loneliness." My sister remained in the same position, swollen up like a balloon. "I want to tell you that I miss you. I miss you a whole lot. I didn't know how to

say it to you before, but now that you're here, everything makes sense. The last time we talked, I treated you terribly ... I want to apologize. Do you forgive me?"

It was after several venting sessions that the fungus with my sister's head appeared to me, clear and bright, in a series of dreams. I supposed it was the hive mind's telepathic presence. I no longer left the house. I no longer showered or shaved. I'd lost my job - I assume - since I stopped answering the customer-service chat line. I also stopped charging my cell phone. I spent hours on end embracing my loved ones' purplish faces. I had my groceries delivered and lived off instant noodles and canned food - I'm not sure for how long. I only turned my computer on to look for more references to telepathic fungi. And that's how I discovered that within the past week several new articles had been published: growths like the one in my apartment were popping up sporadically across the city. A biologist affected by one such occurrence found that the fungi were related to the common puffball and that their spread had begun the previous month. In another article, published just days prior, a group of scientists demonstrated how all the growths in the city were

connected via the water lines. Collecting samples from several different locations, they determined that the fungi shared the same DNA. At first, they thought this meant they were clones, but later discovered they were a single organism – one immense mycelium that, as of the article's date of publication, already measured over 300 square kilometers in size, making it one of the largest living organisms in the world. A common experience of life with the fungi was that everyone affected began feeling intimately tied to the colony. One woman, posting on a forum, said that among her head-shaped fungi had appeared the likeness of Jesus Christ; others commented that they'd seen the faces of dead parents or star football players. Each of them had started going insane in their houses, more and more obsessed with their clusters of swollen heads. Many had already lost their jobs, drowning like true catatonics in neglect and psychosis.

The fungi's psychic presence developed even further, propagating to every corner of the apartment, overflowing every drawer, every cabinet like a wave of emotions, entering my pores and pinning me to the ground as I hugged my loved ones' swollen heads, doing nothing but whispering and shaking. A stench of

rotting fruit accompanied the experience. I started to view it as a kind of therapy, a painful process to forgive all the shit my sister had put me through, a day of silence for hitting bottom and for finding some way, some words, some actions to express my pain. Now, whenever I closed my eyes, I'd see Sandra's giant head, a mass several kilometers high, passing over suburbs, searching for me along alleyways with her shining eyes. And in my dreams, she'd find me, entering my mind without permission through a bolt of lightning shooting from her eyes into mine – a psychic violation, but one that allowed me to see the constellation of her mind, the vast expanse of nerve endings many kilometers around. I knew she was a giant, a cyclopic god watching me in silence. I suffered bouts of happiness and contempt pondering those constellations; I felt bursts of euphoria winding through my body, setting my muscles to writhe – and waves of pleasure that made me ejaculate in my pants and which cleared the way for sharp and painful memories of who Sandra was and what she had done. Inexplicable weeping, muscles slackening at last, fits of rage. There were times I couldn't stop screaming insults at her, pacing from side to side, grinding my teeth, covered in sweat from head to toe, half-

dressed. I'd already started losing track of days, not brushing my teeth, unable to sleep. I pissed and shit in my pants while bursting into fits of laughter. At the height of my telepathic experience, when I could no longer sustain my body's muscles, the fungus spoke directly into my mind with the voice of a terrible angel. She told me she'd also suffered greatly, that the reason she'd treated me like that was because of our mother's punishments, her mistreatment and neglect. I cried at the revelation. And I understood then how pain is passed from one person to the next like an insect laying eggs in our brains. I fought for several nights against my own stubbornness, realizing how I'd caught myself up in the belief that all my misfortunes were Sandra's fault. I'd told myself that. I'd clung to it and enjoyed it. It helped cast me as the victim, but now I could let it go. The fungi oversaw my progress with the resolve of a spiritual guide, always watching, every head piled high in the hallway, their eyes wide-open and fixed on my heart.



Recently, the faces began giving off a delicious smell. Their voices woke me as I lay atop a pile of mycotic heads. First, I thought someone else was in the apartment, but then I understood it was the same angelic voice in my head. Perhaps it was thanks to our mental interaction that they had learned to distinguish the patterns of human speech. In any case, the fungi, copying my own voice, asked me to eat them. "Eat us. Eat. Open me up and eat me."

I slit open Sandra's chubby face with a kitchen knife in silence, tracing a line with the sharpened blade from forehead to jaw, splitting her in two, letting the inner black blob spill out like a soup infected with ripened spores. I took half my sister's head and buried my entire face in its concave side, filling my mouth with black jelly, feeling the gummy texture, the flavorless meat that made me think of mushrooms dipped in drool. I savored it - like a dessert.



The more I chew and swallow, the clearer my head gets, the more the fungal mind's intense presence begins to wane. The seeds are safe within me now and will arrive elsewhere through my excrement. There they'll grow again, attracting the attention of some other human and – with the promise of free therapy – make them eat their ripe flesh and spread their spores all over again. This lovely parasite adapted to read human minds and win human hearts as its only way of surviving among us. I'm hardly more than a pupa on a web of chitinous hyphae on the macroscopic fruiting body of a mycelic god. I feel complete. Happy. I've finally made peace with my sister after her death. I can leave this apartment, find another job, meet new people. I can undress without shame, unafraid of rejection. The therapeutic fungi have let me see the complexity of their interactions with the environment in which they live – they tell me about it before shriveling up in the bathroom, and they leave behind all the cracked plaster, broken tiles, and ruins of my past.

I open the door and step outside.



