

From Forest To Fabric

2019: Greetings

The sunset warming the redwood canopy always felt especially conclusive after the Sustainability Engineering class. The fading hues & oncoming chill of the evening had the same feeling, a nostalgia of the present moment: the end of a season, the end of a long day, the end of a book. It said in a strange voice, "hold this moment precious, there will be a next chapter...and there will be things you could not imagine after the darkness of night." I made the downhill walk step by step, descending from Classroom Unit to Rachel Carson, my home for the last couple of years. I'd made a recent habit of looking for mushrooms along every walk, it was the season for those mysterious fruiting bodies after all.

Even little brown and white mushrooms would stop me in my path, call me to bend down to their eye level and say hello with a quick tap on their caps. So when I saw a fantastic gathering of puffball mushrooms I nearly squealed with delight. I tapped their fragile globes and watched as they diffused their spores in a slow-motion cloud of brown. I turned to see just how many there were in this patch of grass between the outdoor stage and the road. But what caught my eye and brought me down to kneel on the grass was not a puffball. At the base of a pine taller than most buildings, was an uprooted dark brown mushroom with overlapping fans and wavy corners. It was the Dyer's Polypore I had excitedly heard about in my Natural History of Fungi class.

A warm brown mushroom without the traditional cap & stipe, *Phaeolus schweinitzii* is one of the best mushrooms to dye fabric or yarn with. It has a reputation carried in its name for being a strong dye. And here it was at my feet! As dusk settled in, I whispered hello and a message of gratitude for the mushroom. The chapters on the Honorable Harvest I read in Braiding Sweetgrass flashed in my mind as my hand hovered above the mushrooms, tempted to pick it up without another thought. "Only gather what you need and will use." I knew with a sad heart that I could not ethically take the mushroom home with me because I had no idea how to process it for dyeing! I did not have kitchen supplies or fabric and thought it would be a waste to remove it without an actual plan. So I placed the mushroom back into the dent next to it where it had originally sprouted and walked home under the stars.



2021: Gathering

Among rain-battered junk, I found an old enamel pot, a colander, and some wooden spoons. The previous tenants of this baby-blue victorian home had practically assembled a modern art sculpture of discarded items. Picking carefully through, I fished out what I needed to start on my first dying experiments. From turmeric, avocado pits, to cochineal I approached the new medium with little knowledge on the process and timid hope that my colors wouldn't disappear under the faucet and after hours on my feet. As we explored the possibilities of natural dyes in *Color of Materiality*, I was visited by a memory of seeing a mushroom meant for fabric coloring. *Maybe there would be more of its genus in the forest...or maybe that mushroom was still there? It's possible...* I thought to myself as a flash of imagery recalled the exact spot I had met and last seen them.

After handling some business on campus, I knew I had an hour to spare before moving on with the schedule of zoom meetings ahead of my day. Gates of redwood branches welcomed me home, they had grown twice the size as when I had passed them everyday. They reminded me in a song like a hug, that everything stays and everything changes. I am grounded in their unending love and the way they so openly move, change, grow and live.

Along the way I searched at the base of Oak trees for Candy Caps, hoping to find more of the orange fungi with a maple syrup aroma. Leaf litter and lichen wands lined the ground surrounding the trees but no mushroom caps were to be seen. *Well*, I thought to myself slightly disappointed but not devastated, *It is pretty late in the season*. I kept along the route I was making, welcoming memories of deer and rain in the valley behind the art department, of protests at Kerr Hall, of finding bird bones and creatively constructed forts in this same forest. As I neared the media theater road, I leveled my expectations about what I would find {or not find} at the base of that tall pine. I tried to sense whether it was still there... A large grassy clump sprouted from the ground surrounding the tree. Curbing my disappointment, I spent a moment remembering the time between this moment and then. So much had unfolded. The strikes for a livable wage at the base of campus. The return home from a Mushroom Foraging camping trip to news about a pandemic. Living alone in the ghost town of a university for three months and feeling time melt around me. Chronic pain. Surgery. New home. Even when I have been away for a while the forest offers me medicine through breath and being, grounded and still.

Bending my knees to crouch I drew nearer to the Earth. The thick blades of grass ripped with a satisfying tear from the ground, emitting their fresh scent as I placed them to the side. After a handful I felt the texture change against my fingertips. I laughed aloud and alone on the path. There they were, the same mushroom I had walked away from had not disappeared.

I smiled warmly as I pulled it from the ground and held the medium sized mushroom in my two hands. I inspected it for beauty...and for spiders. Taking the former in with admiration and awe and asking the latter kindly to vacate the shroom via a leaf I hovered near their long spindly legs. Usually I would leave behind a plant or mushroom being if I see that someone has made a house of it, however other energies moved me to encourage the spiders and other little crawling creatures to explore and find another home. Because this one had been waiting for me.

Dyer's Polypore sat on the mantle for a few weeks wrapped in a ripped brown bag and dried in the morning light of the windows. A bit of guilt would wash up to me when I passed it, thinking that I still hadn't dedicated time to that project. Artists can have a lot of visions calling their name at the same time.

Giving Color

Finally, I held the dry mushroom in one hand and steadily chopped it with a large knife. It was tough and I had to use my hands at some points to break off the edges and expose the layers of auburn hidden within. I held the bulk of the mushroom in my two hands, closed my eyes and connected. A warmth grew in my stomach like a shot of bourbon without the sting. Like strings attached from my center to the mushroom. Auric mycelium grew around my fingertips and up my arms, all the way up to pull my lips into a smile. I said thank you through my energy, grateful for what fungi have taught me about health, love, interconnection, lifetimes, and so much more. Grateful for their beauty and their willingness to share themselves with humanity. I received the Polypore's permission to keep chopping and adhere its color to the cotton and linen I had prepped the previous day.

The chunks of brown mushroom rehydrated in the warm water of the pot and released an earthy smell into the kitchen. My stomach grumbled a bit, the smell had just a hint of sweetness to it. It reminded me of the enjoying buttery Golden Chanterelles in the fall. The Dyer's Polypore is not edible but was still nourishing me through this connection to color from forest to fabric.

