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The Amoebas | Matias Travieso-Diaz

Die ich rief, die Geister, / Werd' ich nun nicht los

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Der Zauberlehrling"

Early this morning, after I was done sweeping the lab, I decided to do an experiment of my own. I picked a test tube out of the rack and brought it to the fountain in the back garden.

The waters in the basin were turbid, for drainage was inadequate. That suited me fine. With a dropper, I transferred some of the basin water to the test tube. Returning to the lab, I inserted a few drops of basin water within two glass slides, as I had seen lab researchers do, and brought the slides over to a microscope. After fumbling a bit with the focus and the magnification level, I settled down to watch. I was using as per protocol a phase-contrast microscope to enhance the perception of the cellular structures without having to use a staining agent, so the images were pretty clear.

Protozoan activity displayed itself in all its splendor, showing the dramas and comedies of microscopic life. It was like a soap opera, as birth, struggle and death commingled in the chaos. Then I noticed that several amoebas swam, interlaced, in a knot that made and unmade itself periodically. (I later learned that they belonged to the *Acanthamoeba* genus, associated with several diseases in humans).

I left the microscope, went to one of the storage units along the laboratory's walls, and located a flask holding a paramecium culture. It took only a second to draw out a bit of liquid from the culture and spread it on the glass slide.

Under the microscope, a herd of paramecia was now vibrating in the liquid. The amoebas seemed at first startled by the invasion of beings that looked like hairy slippers and moved in all directions by agitating transparent eyelashes, giving rise to waves and vortices in the sea that surrounded them. But the surprise did not last long. One of the amoebas extricated itself from the knot and extended a conical protuberance towards one of the paramecia. The body of the amoeba then squeezed itself into this artificial limb, which stretched and contracted as it swam towards the paramecium, closing in on its objective. The intended target, meanwhile, kept oscillating, unaware of the maneuver.

When it reached the paramecium, the amoeba changed shape again, and became an almost perfect C, with the horns of the letter in contact with the toes and the heel of the slipper. The amoeba then expanded to completely surround its prey. There were a few erratic motions that briefly disturbed the water. When calm returned, the body of the amoeba was spread out like a fried egg, exhibiting within its semi-transparent mass a slowly dissolving slipper.

Nearby, the other amoebas started to imitate their sister. A zesty feast ensued.

I took detailed notes of the duration of the process, the temperature and the pH of the water, the specific species of paramecia and amoebas involved, and other pertinent data, so as to be able to reproduce the experiment under varying conditions. I was busy with my annotations when I thought I heard a faint murmur coming out of the slide under the microscope. Drawing quite close to the instrument, I learned – or perhaps intuitively grasped – that the Acanthamoebas were muttering something.

Of course, I did not understand the mouthless voices, but my mind seemed to capture the essence of their thoughts. They went something like this: “Thanks, O Lord, for granting us thine favor and providing the food we have just enjoyed. We pray that Thou wilt always favor us with Thine bounty, and we shall try to deserve Thine mercy and be worthy of Thine love ... For Thou art holy, Thou art eternal, Thou art the omnipotent God that reigns over the waters.”

I was shocked that these noxious creatures were directing their praises and invocations at me, an accidental outside benefactor. One last glance on the microscope revealed that the Acanthamoebas, having fed, now moved purposefully through the confines of their watery universe.

I became irritated by their prayers. “What fools! They pray to propitiate my favors; their primitive minds believe that I can be swayed by supplications from such insignificant beings. Their prayers are useless, because if I choose to give them another serving of paramecia, I will do so without their asking. Likewise, no matter how much they pray, I will not repeat the experiment if I do not choose to do so.”

“And then they are brazen enough to attempt to bargain with me: ‘We will honor you as long as you give us what we want.’ As if I needed the praises of a disease-carrying amoeba.”

After pondering these matters for a good while, my anger slowly gave way to mirth, and I became quite pleased with myself. I cast towards Heaven a silent prayer thanking the Lord for making men the kings of creation, the masters of all beasts large and small. As my exultation grew, I began intoning a litany of praise that I had learned years back in grammar school. I was only on the second verse when

the boss, an early arrival, shook me by the shoulder:

“What are you doing playing with the equipment? Finish cleaning and get out of here, now!”

“Sorry, Sir, I was just dusting around. Can I get you a cup of coffee, Sir?” I replied haltingly.

“OK, but keep your hands off the lab equipment. Black with two sugars, please.”

I went to the kitchen, fixed a cup of coffee and took it to the laboratory, where I delivered it to the boss in his office. On the way back, I sat at the stool in front of the microscope again and glanced through the eyepiece.

The knot of Acanthamoebas strutted through their watery domain, devouring everything in their path.

Matias Travieso-Diaz is a retired Cuban-American attorney who, after retirement, redirected his efforts towards creative writing. He has recently authored over three dozen stories of various lengths and genres. One of his stories was published in the *New Reader Magazine*; another in the *Dual Coast Magazine*; and others have been accepted for publication by the *Night to Dawn Magazine* and *Jitter Press*.

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