

Lichens: An Anti-apocalyptic

Lichens were never the subjects of still lifes. They might have been if we didn't love such lavish measures of the end, our earthly desires and vanities arranged by the Dutch masters as fat wheels of cheese, bright lemons peeled to their velvety pith, pheasants curing on filigreed trays, and over it all like a pearly, held breath, late sunlight through a kitchen window briefly warming eggs in a bowl, icing the stems of chalices, everything paused, posed, and gloriously sheened before the coming dark.

Lichens do nothing lavishly. They crust over stone and patches of bark. They rash the length of rocky coasts. Even at their most alive, they look, at first glance, completely done.

Look harder, into the sallow, pocked surface of a simple Greenshield or Spangled Rosette (my tear-drop shaped jeweler's loupe, eye pressed to it, lens against the rock) and there are the layers of tufted petals, hyphae clustered like organ-pipes, and underneath, the hairlike filaments holding tight to the face of the world. And though I'd need a finer scope to see the collaborations at work (the way algae gathers light and air to make sugar for the sheltering fungus), if I remember to make vast my sight, I too can know the transformations – that over time, lichen weather ancient rock, break it apart, dissolve it with acids and as they die, offer those minerals back to the ground. And if I think in trceries, I can feel, in everything I grow and eat, the slow sifting of lichens through me.

Lichens disquiet the subjects of still lifes, what lush is, how abundance comes. Their clay-greens, powder-grays, and chalky-gold specks, those soft and diffuse colors challenge me. I who have needed the high blush of a ripe pear to impassion a scene, and plums washed of their protective

bloom, so I might see my reflection therein. For so long I've courted the fiery verge. Flumes of whitewater. The drama of thresholds. Crises slow-coming, then all of a sudden.

Like the moment of our current dying.

Since lichens were never the subject of still-lives, we missed the chance to train our sight on the stretch of eons, the reach of eras. On lichen time. How to imagine a body crossing an epoch. What it looks like to reconstitute after decades of thirst, or to thrive in the heat of volcanic springs, below miles of ice, inside the very body of granite. What flowering is after irradiation. How to dwell in impossible places. We who call winter *death*, not *resting*, have no eye for forms in the making, no eye for the nibblers and leachers, who will, in their way, take in our bones, and change us again.

Our job for the moment -- I mean, ever after? -- Repair the story of transience.

Lichens are slow lives. No, that's not right, let me reassemble the language -- slow *lives*. Not a singular, but a colloquy -- biome upon biome, algae-and-fungi paired up with worms, bacteria, yeasts -- so many enthreaded ways of being, and none divisible, nothing a mere part. All of it *lichen*. You might even say: a lichen *are*. Are systems + beings + dwelling places. Sites of exchange and regeneration, some forms breaking off and rerooting, some finding each other in air and mingling. Settling on boulders, pilings, fences, speading on weathered slats of old barns.

Spangled on windfall, underfoot.

Shingled into hummingbirds' nests, overhead.

The work this moment most needs? Retraining the eye that loves the end.

