
Skincentric Ecology

ANDREAS WEBER

After rain I run my hand through juniper or birches for the joy of the wet drops trickling over the palm.

—Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*

THE MINERALS' SKIN

Every time I looked up from my writing, I saw the lichens. They covered the opposite roof. It was a low roof, not steep at all, wedged in between walls of grey stones, covered by reddish clay tiles.

At first, when I found my writing place here, at the small window looking over the other building, I had not noticed the lichens, mistaking them for weathered patches. These beings—composed of algae and fungi in a single organism—formed rounded spots and spherical halos on the mineral surface. There were black spots, and dots made of soft grey, and circles that in their reddish hue seemed like transformations of the clay itself. I let my eyes wander over the roof made of mineral. Before my gaze, the lichens' patches transmuted the surface. The mineral bloomed, and its blossoms were slowly spreading, touching one another, growing into each other, meandering around the spaces in between, bleeding into one.

Where the lichens dwelt, the texture of the surface softened and seemed almost creamy. My eyes softened, too. My gaze

grazed the lichens, and I felt as though I could ingest the stone, which had become palpable, touchable, edible. My vision worked in two directions: by watching the lichens softening the stone, I was touched by them, and mollified by their touch. They gave back my gaze, and receiving theirs made me soft. The lichens were a dreaming of the rock. And I was a dreaming of the lichens.

I had a lot of time to watch the roof. I was alone in a silent house, spending some weeks between rows of olive trees in the hills of Tuscany, high above Siena, to take care of the cats of a friend's friend. After my arrival, the succession of moments gradually slowed down and left me with two companions to reflect upon: stone and being. It was January, and in the night the temperature outside dropped below freezing. On some mornings, the high ridges to the southeast of Siena transparently shone through the mist.

The discovery of the lichens' presence instilled not only pleasure in me, but also a sense of urgency. It was a sort of yearning, as though I should not waste a minute and pay due attention to what they gave to me. They watched me with the gaze of living stone. They sat there, on that roof, as part of that roof, as stone that, if you wait long enough, softens and becomes palpable as a living skin.

ADMIRATION AND GRIEF

Whenever I raised my eyes to the lichens and their spherical patterns on the tiles, I experienced a profound bafflement. I had strong feelings but no words to express them. A clear, sharp beauty slipped through my fingers. The lichens were there—plainly there, just there—present, unmoved, soft and dimly shining, like stone undone—and, at the same time, distant, closed into themselves—making me feel that I could not reach them. I could feel the pull of their presence, but it left a void.

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I thought of Thomas Mann's characterization of love as a mixture of "admiration and grief," a sentiment I had never liked, since it seemed to be a narcissistic misunderstanding of connection. But I felt something similar here—and feeling it made me more uneasy. I was held in deep attraction—and in endless distance. After all, those were just tiles with epiphytes on them. Why did I experience their presence as meaningful? I gazed upon them and felt watched. How?

My uneasiness was not just about my personal state of mind. It had to do with something more general: with how most humans relate with other beings, and how we share our world with them. I felt bad because of the rule that we humans ultimately are strangers to other beings—to lichen-beings, tile-beings, algae, minerals, water, the stones of the blue Sieneese hills. Aren't these just things? When they suddenly speak, we are startled. We don't know how to respond. We don't know how to welcome back. We are unhappily in love.

Sitting at my window overlooking the lichen blooms on the roof, I was too overwhelmed by what I felt on my skin to give in to this resignation. Although I was only watching them, the velvet spheres out on the roof made my body tingle. They made me joyful, nervous, and restless. It was a view of other beings' skin. The voice inside that whispered to love back did not originate in my head; it was my skin murmuring. It was the soft and touchable aspect in my own flesh that answered. My flesh could not remain indifferent to being touched.

What let me open up to the lichens was that which was lichen inside of myself, slowly softening the surface of a stone and

making it blossom with a velvet epidermis. What responded within me was me-the-lichen, me-the-algae, me-the-mycelia, me-the-rock. Its whispering came not as a pertinent voice, but as a gentle touch from the inside, a sweetness that appeared and disappeared and came back again, in waves of making and unmaking, like a tender breath.

I realized that the slight taint in the beauty I experienced came from not giving in to my own desire.

BREATHING TOGETHER

After lunch, I used to walk up the slope behind the house. My companion, a black poodle, raced ahead, happy to move—although she seemed equally happy indoors, lying on the window ledge looking out, keeping company with lichens and hills. The sun was high. We strode past oak trees stretching their barren branches into a transparent sky. We trod over crisp brown leaves, along the withered manes of last summer's grasses. High in a tree, hunters had set up a shooting platform constructed out of crinkled boards and camouflage tarp, which silently awaited the arrival of the songbirds in spring.

Along the path, granite boulders pierced the earth, softly rounded mounds of grey and white, orange and black. They consisted of stone and flesh, as did the roof tiles. They were covered with dense crusts of lichens. The sun was warm. It had chased away the hoarfrost, and now caressed the stone with careful rays. At the ridge of the hill, where we paused before turning back, a massive boulder rose up from the earth like a colorful cupule, overgrown with vegetation. On top of the boulder, a whitish circle rippled outward in waves, like a radiating sun.

While I sat on that massive stone, careful not to scar the lichen, I found it difficult to tell where the lichen started and where the stone ended. Both had become one being. And indeed: As the lichens grow on the mineral surface, they feed from it. They extract minerals and incorporate them into their bodies. A rock that is colonized by lichens weathers a thousand times faster than it does if it is not embraced by life. Lichens eat rock—just as they eat sunlight. They transform rock into flesh. The being of their flesh and mineral being have merged.

I sat on top of the hill and watched the minutes sink slowly into the blue of the distant valleys. I caressed the coarse rocky skin with my fingers, allowing our skins to merge. I lingered in the presence of the lichens, touched by the lichens, as skin among skin, as breath from the rock's breath.

Metabolism is a way through which one being becomes incorporated into another, not metaphorically. Metabolism is a

way stone becomes me. What in my heart felt like an exchange with plant beings and fungus beings and rock truly *was* this exchange: Plants transform rock, and, by this pathway, my body—as I subsist on plants, like all life does—transforms from rock into flesh. The same sort of transformation happens as I breathe. I breathe in the exhalations of plants, and they breathe in my body, whose building blocks of carbon are continuously broken down and shed through my lungs as CO₂.

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A similar transformation happens when I eat: I convert the bodies of other beings into my own. It happens when a root digs into the soil, dissolving its grains and taking up its elements. All those are the in- and out-breathing movements of how the stuff of this world is transformed through beings who meet, touch, intermingle their skins, become one, and separate again to become others. It is all breath. It is all touch. Every incorporation is a meeting of two sensitive surfaces, an exchange of skin through skin.

In every moment, life is the birth of one being into another. I am given to myself through others, and I can go on breathing only by allowing myself to pass away into others. The lichens on that roof were a direct part of this exchange. Some of the CO₂ I exhaled yesterday found its way into their bodies. I looked at my own flesh and blood. We were a physical continuity. We were family. Skin is kin.

PERSONS OF MATTER

When we experience beauty, something in us knows this. Our sensible skin knows. Our breathing chest knows. Our eyes, taking in light, and radiating light outwards with every gaze, know. We know that we are part and parcel of this grand exchange. We know that we are family.

I have not revisited the silent stone house looking out over the Sieneese hills. But the experience has remained with me. So, still today, lichens exert their magic everywhere I look. In the forest close to my place in Berlin, they cover the trunks of the winterly barren oaks with hues of whitish green. The lichens

grow on a portion of the trunk's circumference where they are exposed to a certain amount of rain and sun. On other parts of the trunk, green algae cover the bark with sulfuric yellow. The lichens have needs, and they act according to them. Often I stop at a tree and let my hands glide over the soft coarseness. The lichens are cool, and slightly moist, and they always have a tender grain, like exquisite velvet. I stay and breathe, and at some point I start to see the lichens as the selves that they are, with needs and preferences. I don't always achieve this, but when I do, then the world suddenly shifts. Every physical detail, every loop and bend of their thalli becomes a gesture of their ways of being.

We are all family because we all share the feeling of being alive. We all share ways of realizing this feeling. And we all share the atoms and molecules that embody this feeling. We breathe one another. And we perceive others striving for the same goals that we strive for: Continued existence, connection with others, exchange of flesh through flesh. In the other beings' matter we can see ourselves before us, and at the same time we *are* this being we see there.

Our ways of being alive come about through bodies that are mutually breathing one another. At the same time, each individual's way of living according to his or her feelings is unique. And each species' tradition of fulfilling those needs is equally unique. While stroking the lichens, this insight comes to my skin literally as first-hand knowledge. Their uniqueness compels me—the sheer fact of this soft, coarse texture in its pale white, here and now. The uniqueness of a self.

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Biology has shown that each being is fundamentally “autopoietic”: Living beings create themselves. Every breath is an act of mixing, but also an act of auto-construction. Organisms are those parts of the living flesh that show an insistence on remaining an active center, an agent, someone to whom its own being is of concern. From this biological perspective, a cell is a subject with needs. A cell is a self. A self is a person.

This is not limited to biological organisms. Organisms express a desire to be-in-connection, but everything takes part in

desire's yearning to become-through-mutual transformation. Stones do. Their openness to new encounters manifests in the slow withering of their crusts. Everything temporal partakes in realizing desire. Everything that happens pushes it further. The arrow of time is the arrow of desire. Time is there because things happen, because atoms meet, because stones breathe one another. Matter is social. Time arises because this cosmos cannot sit still. It needs to share and connect.

If we need to share, then it becomes crucial to what degree our sharing allows us to flourish. If we—granite-beings, lichen-beings, dog-beings, and human beings—need to share with others, then the transmutations of flesh into other flesh are not just silent mechanical processes, but always colored by yearning. If all of us beings need to share, this world is not a neutral place but filled to the brim with feeling. All skin we encounter is sensible skin, like our own, which through its sensibility transmits the urgency of the other's desire to change form with ourselves.

Our skin knows. Our skin even knows when it does not touch other skin directly, but when we graze the surface of another being with our eyes. Our skin knows, as it is led by the probing fingers of the lichens slowly converting the stone's longing into sentient flesh. We are matter, and we feel through it. Living through a sensitive skin is how matter feels itself.

Aliveness means to partake in the desire to be, and in the desire to connect. It means to let our skin be touched, to suffuse it with otherness, and feel through it. Membership in the desire to share makes a person. Aliveness is personal. It is addressing us personally through our skins, through which we feel the other. We exist as threads of an endlessly extended mycelium in which everything is of our own flesh and blood. At the same time, all the bliss and all the suffering are experienced by selves, by *persons of matter*, who yearn to become fuller through mutual transformation.

BEAUTY IS FAMILY

To realize ourselves as alive means to realize ourselves as family. Totally englobed and absolutely unique. Free to act yet bound by dreadful family ties that require reciprocity, if only to continue breathing, in, toward myself, and out, toward the other. Beauty entails its own ethics. Although the experience of joy and emotional ascent associated with beauty elevates the self, at the same time it points in the opposite direction. Ascent comes through connection, and connection warrants a certain attitude. We can only exist if we don't put our ego in the center, because the skin is always shared. Where mine opens up, yours

starts. Where my epidermis blossoms, it meets the breath of the world, which is the faint presence of every beings' skin. Feeling the lichen's skin against mine means realizing that I am myself an act of relating, not a separate individual, distinct from other objects. Feeling this skin requests that I do my part to make relating possible.

In the experience of beauty, we feel that we are family. We realize that we are child and parent to what radiates outward, to what calls us and mysteriously already knows us. It is flesh from our flesh, be it as seemingly distant as the colored spheres on a weathered roof, or seemingly as close as the microscopic ridges on a tender finger that touches our palm. Experiencing beauty means to recognize family and to feel welcomed into connection. Only if we forsake it by putting a wall between humans and the rest of living matter does the realization of these ties result in "admiration and grief."

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One of the most profound effects of encountering beauty is the impulse to radiate back—the pull to strive to express in words, music, or shape what has excited us by letting us know what we are part of. The experience of beauty incites us to give back by giving away something of ourselves, what Lewis Hyde calls the "labor of gratitude."¹

Undergoing beauty is, therefore, a profoundly social process. If we are blessed with beauty, we feel that we owe something. We are in debt to the forces that are continuously creating this cosmos. What is beautiful can only be realized if we reciprocate with our own acts of beauty. Giving back beauty by creating beauty is what drives many artists. Giving back aliveness for having been enlivened is at the center of animist rituals. Both are social gestures in which a person—human or non-human—who has been kind to us is treated with kindness.

We can now understand beauty better: It is not the experience of an abstract principle, nor the glimpse of an ideal world. It is the encounter of another person that shares the desire of the cosmos to be-in-connection with us. Beauty is a meeting that has gone well, and we wish to give thanks for it by enabling

more fecund encounters. Undergoing beauty is a social emotion because the cosmos we are embodying in our flesh is a process of intersubjectivity, of mutual breathing.

Being welcomed by family invites us to respond and to reciprocate. What is required—for our own sense of balance, for the well-being of the person we just met, for the fecundity of our shared cosmic body—might be as simple as saying thanks for a blessing received. We can say thanks in many ways. One way is to politely ask, and, if allowed, give a caress with the fingertips. Feel the other's skin and how it feels ours. Let the lichens feel how vulnerable and open your flesh is, and sense how patient and enduring the lichen's is. Feel, and let feel, how in meeting both become one, and many.

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Andreas Weber is a biologist, philosopher, and nature writer. His latest books are *Enlivenment. Toward a Poetics for the Anthropocene* (MIT Press, 2019) and *Sharing Life: The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity* (Boell Foundation, 2020). Free download at <https://in.boell.org/en/2020/09/10/sharing-life-ecopolitics-reciprocity>. He teaches at the University of the Arts, Berlin and lives in Berlin and Italy. For more information visit biologyofwonder.org.

NOTES

1. L. Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 249.