

Letter to the Earth,

Well, Earth, you've done it again. I fell in love with you again. This time, it was the miniscule, mysterious, majestic and magical lichens. Lichens? Yes, lichens. Somehow, in all my years, I've been blind to this ancient and ubiquitous life form. Maybe I was seduced by the grandeur of mountains or the magnificence of a massive white oak or the effervescent song of the wood thrush.

Now, the lichens arrest me. I'm enthralled by their story, for they've been part of you for 400 million years. They are the first life form on rocks, penetrating even granite, beginning the timeless progression of stone to soil. A few lichens might grow as fast as three-quarters of an inch in one year. The Yellow map lichen would take 200 years to grow three-quarters of an inch; but specimens of this lichen have been dated at more than 4,500 years old.

Lichens are connected. They provide food to birds and beasts, from deer to squirrels to snails. They shelter insects. The ruby-throated hummingbirds gather lichen for their nests. They are camouflage for tree frogs. Somehow, they get nutrients from the air, serving also as an indicator of air quality.

Still, I don't understand what this life form is. It's not a plant; it's not an animal. It's different than a fungus. Maybe it's a partnership between fungus and algae or possibly a lichen is an ecosystem. Also, I can't identify most lichens I find in the field. It takes chemistry and a microscope. Thus, I understand little about these life forms and my desire to name and categorize is crushed.

However, I am awed by lichens. I see and love their mystery and magic. Though they may be hard to understand, their subtlety and beauty is not. What artist could sculpt the form or capture the elusive hues. So, once again, I have fallen in love.

Janet Chandler

In celebration of Earth Day, 2020