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Two Poems from a Lichen Alphabet

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Cetrelia chicitae

*fringed with white soledia, looking very much like a frilly petticoat
or frothy waves at sea.*

—"Keys to Species," *Lichens of North America* (Brodo, Sharnoff & Sharnoff)

Before the scopes confirmed not one—but two!—solid fungal arms enclosing
wet delicious algae, a kind of protection-for-food racket—before debates of predator or
parasite or partners, it was the most Reverend James
Crombie's sideburned, arch, 19th-century contempt
that spat on symbiosis, ridiculed *that Romance of Lichenology: unnatural union* (every
metaphor indentured servant then, handmaid to Reason) *between captive algal damsel
and tyrant fungal master.*

It never was.

Him, Cetralia on his knees on cotton pads wrapping cartilage and bone, scrubbing
his varnished deck, mornings a pot of tar to caulk ripped seams, the whole ship
always almost watertight. In moonlight, his threaded needle flashes chitin-white,
weft and warp across thin air to mend the heavy porous nets—clumsy,
hungry, waiting for his one true like a reverse Penelope ripping his work by day,
at night again the mending, the extending, there must
be a better way. Pale light through fog, bland noon sunbleached,
empty. Only salt, dead cod, longing
for his luck to change.

It's she, unwed Trebouxia, who treads, whistling, the listing boards
of her own galley, cast-iron stove to icebox to potato bin, muscled arms hauling ropes
of root vegetables from half-frozen ground to the cellar. She steps out to test the wind,
run up the staff vast sheets loose and billowing and white
as sails, pulling them down at dusk to fold. After the labour, singing,
arms linked with the girls up the hill Saturday night
her gray-green silk flounces, *lifting at the edges* sheened emerald, *undulating*
and ruffled, showing its lacy underskirt—hardly
the Folies Bergère, this kicked-up homemade poodle skirt in a fast-turned
stepdance in a wooden hall in the woods above a cove that's half a day
by water or a seven-hour drive to St. John's. She could be anyone's.

(—Where's he at tonight?

—The Banks.)

Not him. He holds the rail and looks to shore with his thread and needles, brushes and tar,
hammer and interleaving boards and bucket of saved nails, building this one boat
to catch her eye, ready to fling the gangplank
for her to step up, take his name,
alight.

Stictis urceolatum / can-of-worms

the Western philosophical tradition has, for two millennia, defined meaning, reason, and truth so as to exclude metaphor.

—*More Than Cool Reason* (Lakoff & Turner)

Scientific names are harder to remember. In this book we have included [common] vernacular names. Often we have had to invent our own. We have tried to be straightforward, rather than overly metaphoric.

—*Lichens of North America* (Brodo, Sharnoff & Sharnoff)

Try it. To be straightforward is harder
than you think as it's not how you think: 'Ticker tape'
'spray paint', 'ladder lichen', 'chocolate chip'
—for two hundred pages scientists fail
to un-see *Lasallia papulosa* as toadskin, an ugly duet
of cyanobacteria and fungi: blistered jelly—or bloodstain,
rock pimples, soot.

In 1660 Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*

"Chapter V: Of Reason & Science" declares metaphors
sedition, senseless and ambiguous words peppermint drop
pink smarties button rosette *and reasoning upon them is wandering*
amongst innumerable absurdities goblin lights goldust
moonglow *They are certainly, nods Locke one century later, in all discourses*
that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided

jester-cap eggolk

and not to be used in the seeking of truth

lace

pillow

bone

Lift a wet, rotted two-by-four propping the fish-shed to find
the grotesque, spreading conspiracy of *Bulbothrix confoederata*
or stumble, almost bashful, on the one that wants
space, lone boat on its ocean of bark, delicate round o
of *Absconditella celata*: a tiny hidden secret
(even its desperate wall of Latin
helpless). The problem is all in your mind: soft wet lobes
like purple stormclouds lit by lightning, each flash of thought a neural leap
connecting new to known, that's how it works

(stepping-stone, socket lichen, can-of-worms, fishscale,
needle, chalice, blood)

Off Sambro Head chugging past the barrens to set traps in lifting fog
you can see from a quarter mile *Xanthoria's* massive yellow splash
on granite, electrified (sunburst). Or drive the nineteen miles
to town where oak legs pin down a patterned carpet in the History
of Science office: windows and neo-classic columns
frame Dr. Evelyn Fox Keller's open palms *Scientists still*
weed out metaphors in each other's texts (toy soldiers hoop-and-ball)

We're like children burst loose

in a fenced playground, wild with games as if free as if
thoughts aren't storms bound in the bone wall of our own
skull, each swinging leap from known to new, monkey-barring
our way across, we can't help ourselves: eyelash, lipstick, pin-cushion, *Cladonia's*
bulbuous red burlesque—everyone fails. Open *Lichens*
of North America to page 258 and try not to think *goblet* or *bullseye*
or *bloody heart*. Go on. I dare you.

CLARE GOULET is a Québécois-British hybrid living in Kijipuktuk/Halifax, Nova Scotia on the unceded territories of Mi'kma'ki; she has published creative nonfiction, poetry, fiction, and reviews for journals in Canada and abroad, as well as essays and research on metaphor and polyphony. She has edited for *The Fiddlehead*, Brick Books, Nimbus, and Gaspereau Press, co-edited with Mark Dickinson *Lyric Ecology* on the work of Jan Zwicky, and teaches at Mount Saint Vincent University.