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For the Lichens

By Jane Hirshfield

Back then, what did I know?

The names of subway lines, buses.

How long it took to walk twenty blocks.

Uptown and downtown.

Not north, not south, not you.

When I saw you, later, seaweed reefed in the air,
you were gray-green, incomprehensible, old.

What you clung to, hung from: old.

Trees looking half dead, stones.

Marriage of fungi and algae,
chemists of air,
changers of nitrogen-unusable into nitrogen-usable.

Like those nameless ones
who kept painting, shaping, engraving
unseen, unread, unremembered.
Not caring if they were no good, if they were past it.

Rock wools, water fans, earth scale, mouse ears, dust,
ash-of-the-woods.

Transformers unvalued, uncounted.

Cell by cell, word by word, making a world they could live in.

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