

She Unnames Them

Ursula Le Guin

About the Author

Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018) was an American novelist, essayist, and short story writer best known for her works of speculative fiction. Her writing often explores themes of language, identity, gender, power, and social structures. Le Guin frequently reimagined mythic, biblical, and cultural narratives in order to question accepted assumptions about authority and naming. “She Unnames Them” reflects her interest in language as a tool that shapes human relationships and systems of control. “She Unnames Them” was first published in The New Yorker in 1985.

Most of them accepted namelessness with the perfect indifference with which they had so long accepted and ignored their names. Whales and dolphins, seals and sea otters consented with particular grace and alacrity, sliding into anonymity as into their element.

A faction of yaks, however, protested. They said that “yak” sounded right, and that almost everyone who knew they existed called them that. Unlike the ubiquitous creatures such as rats and fleas, who had been called by hundreds or thousands of different names since Babel, the yaks could truly say, they said, that they had a name. They discussed the matter all summer. The councils of the elderly females finally agreed that though the name might be useful to others it was so redundant from the yak point of view that they never spoke it themselves and hence might as well dispense with it. After they presented the argument in this light to their
10 bulls, a full consensus was delayed only by the onset of severe early blizzards. Soon after the beginning of the thaw, their agreement was reached and the designation “yak” was returned to the donor.

Among the domestic animals, few horses had cared what anybody called them since the failure of Dean Swift’s attempt to name them from their own vocabulary. Cattle, sheep, swine, asses, mules, and goats, along with chickens, geese, and turkeys, all agreed enthusiastically to give their names back to the people to whom—as they put it—they belonged.

A couple of problems did come up with pets. The cats, of course, steadfastly denied ever having had any name other than those self-given, unspoken, ineffably personal names which, as the
20 poet named Eliot said, they spend long hours daily contemplating.

It was with the dogs, and with some parrots, lovebirds, ravens, and mynahs, that the trouble arose. These verbally talented individuals insisted that their names were important to them, and flatly refused to part with them.

The insects parted with their names in vast clouds and swarms of ephemeral syllables buzzing and stinging and humming and flitting and crawling and tunneling away.

As for the fish of the sea, their names dispersed from them in silence throughout the oceans like faint, dark blurs of cuttlefish ink, and drifted off on the currents without a trace.

30 None were left now to unname, and yet how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day.

This was more or less the effect I had been after. It was somewhat more powerful than I had anticipated, but I could not now, in all conscience, make an exception for myself.

“I’m going now,” I said. “With them, you know,” and went on out.

Suggested Vocabulary for Study

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| 1. Namelessness | 17. Attraction |
| 2. Indifference | 18. Donor |
| 3. Alacrity | 19. Taxonomy |
| 4. Redundant | 20. Patriarchy |
| 5. Designation | 21. Allusion |
| 6. Appellation | 22. Deconstruction |
| 7. Ineffably | 23. Hierarchy |
| 8. Platonic | 24. Autonomy |
| 9. Qualifiers | 25. Anonymity |
| 10. Linnaean | |
| 11. Ephemeral | |
| 12. Consensus | |
| 13. Conscience | |
| 14. Resolutely | |
| 15. Tentative | |
| 16. Barrier | |