

She Unnames Them

Ursula K. LeGuin

 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 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 poet named Eliot said, they spend long hours daily contemplating—though none of the contemplators has ever admitted that what they contemplate is their names and some onlookers have wondered if the object of that meditative gaze might not in fact be the Perfect, or Platonic, Mouse. In any case, it is a moot point now. It was with the dogs, and with some parrots, lovebirds, ravens, and mynahs, that the trouble

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arose. These verbally talented individuals insisted that their names were important to them, and flatly refused to part with them. But as soon as they understood that the issue was precisely one of individual choice, and that anybody who wanted to be called Rover, or Froufrou, or Polly, or even Birdie in the personal sense, was perfectly free to do so, not one of them had the least objection to parting with the lowercase (or, as regards German creatures, uppercase) generic appellations “poodle,” “parrot,” “dog,” or “bird,” and all the Linnacan qualifiers that had trailed along behind them for two hundred years like tin cans tied to a tail.

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

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. They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to smell one another’s smells, feel or rub or caress one another’s scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another’s blood or flesh, keep one another warm—that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food.

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 resolutely put anxiety away, went to Adam, and said, “You and your father lent me this—gave it to me, actually. It’s been really useful, but it doesn’t exactly seem to fit very well lately. But thanks very much! It’s really been very useful.”

It is hard to give back a gift without sounding peevish or ungrateful, and I did not want to leave him with that impression of me. He was not paying much attention, as it happened, and said only, “Put it down over there, O.K.?” and went on with what he was doing.

One of my reasons for doing what I did was that talk was getting us nowhere, but all the same I felt a little let down. I had been prepared to defend my decision. And I thought that perhaps when he did notice he might be upset and want to talk. I put some things away and fiddled around a little, but he continued to do what he was doing and to take no notice of anything else. At last I said, “Well, good-bye, dear. I hope the garden key turns up.”

He was fitting parts together, and said, without looking around. “O.K., fine, dear. When’s dinner?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I’m going now. With the . . .” I hesitated, and finally said, “With them, you know,” and went on out. In fact, I had only just then realized how hard it would have been to explain myself. I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted. My words now must be as slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house, between the dark-branched, tall dancers motionless against the winter shining.

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Questions

Ursula K. LeGuin, SHE UNNAMES THEM

1. Who is the “she” in the story? Why is she being defiant when she decides to take away the names?
2. Who is the “he” in the story? What authority does he have to give names? Why do the animals prefer her?

3. Is language more masculine than feminine? How do women use language? How do men use language? What differences exist in their purposes?
4. What are names used for? What identities are tied up in names? What power is there in knowing someone's name?
5. What attitudes do the cats have about names? What does that say about LeGuin's opinion of cats?
6. What does the end of the story say about the relationship between the male and female in the story? What does the ending say about language that does not have any power over anyone?
7. Write about your name. Do some research. Look up the meaning and origin of your name. What does it mean? Do you like the meaning? Would you change your name?
8. Investigate the differences in the ways that men and women speak. Take some notes on conversations that you hear. Compare essays by men and women. Write about the differences you observe, or about the lack of differences.