

# For Sure the Kittiwake Naming, Nature, and P. K. Page

Who am I, then, that language can so change me? . . . Where could wordlessness lead?

—PAGE, “Questions and Images”

. . . the whole business of naming is curious.

—PAGE, *Brazilian Journal*

## 1

Can poets take too much pleasure in words? How much should our language frustrate and shame us? How much excite, tickle, and teach? Is taxonomy the hand of death, murdering to dissect? Do you feel that your own name—Patricia, Arthur, Eve, Adam—pigeonholes you? “Why should three phrases alter the colour of the sky. . . ?” (Page, “After Reading *Albino Pheasants*”). Is a name a cage, a crown, a straitjacket, a coat, a shell, a nail, a halo, a brand, a bridge, a prison cell, a pointer, a window, a cross?

## 2

In P. K. Page’s early poetry, children and adolescents are often rambunctious creatures. Look at those in “Young Girls”—porpoise-like, giggling, lolling, very prone to smiling and crying. In contrast, the title figure of “Only Child” seems quiet, solitary, overshadowed by his mother, torn between his need for her and his hunger for escape. This poem—one of Page’s most full-fledged, suggestive narratives—begins:

The early conflict made him pale  
and when he woke from those long weeping slumbers she  
was there  
and the air about him—hers and his—  
sometimes a comfort to him, like a quilt, but more  
often than not a fear.

There were times he went away—he knew not where—  
 over the fields or scuffling to the shore;  
 suffering her eagerness on his return  
 for news of him—where had he been, what done?  
 He hardly knew, nor did he wish to know  
 or think about it vocally or share  
 his private world with her.

Then they would plan another walk, a long  
 adventure in the country, for her sake—  
 in search of birds. Perhaps they'd find the blue  
 heron today, for sure the kittiwake . . . .

In other poems Page sees girls thrilling to “a phrase / that leaps like a smaller fish from a sea of words” or talking “as if each word had just been born— / a butterfly, and soft from its cocoon” (“Young Girls,” “Sisters”). The boy in “Only Child,” rejecting his mother’s example, has little taste for words and language, as becomes still clearer later in the poem. He seems to resent questions and discussions; he even prefers not to “think . . . vocally.” Many of us can sympathize with his reluctance to speak, recalling childhood times when our backs stiffened to parental questioning, even of a kind-hearted, undemanding sort. We can sense false pretences behind the supposed family bonding of the walk (surely “they would plan” is ironic, the mother laying down the plan, and “for her sake” hinting who gained the most from the jaunts). Yet in the poem’s second stanza the boy can frustrate us just as he frustrates his mother. For the moment, we might get a grasp on her position, as the boy’s evasiveness deprives *us* of a clear idea of his walks alone. Not only is he evasive with her; he seems oddly out of touch with his own experience (“he knew not where,” “He hardly knew, nor did he wish to know”). It’s as if he wants a world too “private” for words, or for self-knowledge of any sort.

### 3

For weeks, “Only Child” has been running river-like—sometimes subterranean, sometimes bursting into the surface—through my other reading. To chart that river, I’m also surveying the surrounding landscape, which is crisscrossed with various writings by Page and by many others. A personal history of reading a poem can include reading reminiscences prompted by the poem, unexpected detours and digressions, through a region of thickly interconnected moments like the jungle lines in one of P. K. Irwin’s more intricate paintings.

#### 4

In a Writer and Nature course I just finished teaching for the first time, I was struck again by how often our species in its Western variants has been suspicious of its urges to name and categorise. While in European cultures and their descendent cultures in North America there have been innumerable “nature as book” metaphors, nature has also been defined as beyond or outside language. Take a look at Dickinson’s poem 811. In other poems Dickinson is perfectly adept at finding riddles, scriptures, and languages in the woods and fields, but in 811 “we” systematize what nature does spontaneously and unwittingly: “We conjugate [Nature’s] skill / While she creates and federates / Without a syllable.”

Taxonomy is a special villain of the conjugation. Some writers have agonized over its cramping, shrinking effects. In *The Tree*, John Fowles—once a natural-history curator in Dorset as well as a novelist—tells of visiting the eighteenth-century garden of Linnaeus, who did more than anyone else to solidify botanical taxonomy. While Fowles doesn’t deny that Linnaeus shaped an extremely useful tool for science, he admits he finds “nothing less strange, and more poetically just, than that he should have gone mad at the end of his life.” For Fowles, taxonomy aggravates our tendency to being “a sharply isolating creature,” overemphasizes “clearly defined boundaries, unique identities,” and “acts mentally as the equivalent of the camera viewfinder. Already it destroys or curtails certain possibilities of seeing, apprehending and experiencing.”

For all its perceptive moments, there’s lots to argue about here and elsewhere in Fowles’s book. For instance, didn’t Linnaeus help create cultural features through which visceral, emotional, and poetic responses to nature—not just rigorously scientific ones—could arise? Can’t the use of a camera encourage and enhance certain ways of seeing? Would Fowles complain that reading one poem keeps us for the meantime from reading another, or that taking one walk keeps us from taking another? From one angle, can’t Linnaeus be seen as a *non*-isolationist, one who wanted not to focus on a few select species but to see and appreciate flora in all its mind-bewildering-and-charming variety?

#### 5

It’s no secret that acts of naming and categorizing have been considered more male than female, hooked in with male desires to exploit and domi-

nate. That may be a cliché with all too much historical truth behind it. But in “Only Child” Page reverses the stereotypical difference. The boy is the one who hates labels, the one apparently attracted to sympathetic experience and identification, while the mother is the pointing taxonomist, the person keen with words. The gap between mother and son grows increasingly clear in the poem’s middle stanzas:

Birds were familiar to him now, he knew  
them by their feathers and a shyness like his own  
soft in the silence.  
Of the ducks she said, “Observe,  
the canvas-back’s a diver,” and her words  
stuccoed the slaty water of the lake.

He had no wish to separate them in groups  
or learn the latin,  
or, waking early to their song remark, “The thrush,”  
or say at evening when the air is streaked  
with certain swerving flying,  
“Ah, the swifts.”

Birds were his element like air and not  
her words for them—making them statues  
setting them apart,  
nor were they facts and details like a book.  
When she said, “Look!”  
he let his eyeballs harden  
and when the two came and nested in his garden  
he felt their softness, gentle, never his heart.

She gave him pictures which he avoided, showed  
strange species flat against a foreign land.  
Rather would he lie in the grass, the deep grass of the island  
close to the gulls’ nests knowing  
these things he loved and needed near his hand,  
untouched and hardly seen but deeply understood.  
Or sailed among them through a wet wind feeling  
their wings within his blood . . . .

On a first, too-hasty reading, I figured Page was creating an easily disliked cardboard figure of a mother to help us empathize with the lonely, sensitive boy. Soon I started to wonder if a more complex mother hid behind the son’s caricature, and to see that Page hardly presents the boy’s bond with nature as a perfectly healthy contrast to his mother’s. What the mother is, beyond her protectiveness, curiosity, and memory for bird names, we can’t

say; by and large the poem is much closer to the boy's point of view. Yet the poem sees him critically as well as sympathetically. Of what is his relationship to nature made? Not much. He returns from his solitary walks as if blank-minded. Just as he has no interest in names, books or pictures, he apparently doesn't have much in observing behaviour either. He's so absorbed in his personal experience that images of distant species mean nothing to him. Would the "strange" and the "foreign" leave a more curious, imaginative boy so cold? It's as if this boy won't imagine nature beyond his own small sphere, as if to him "nature" doesn't exist beyond what he can see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears.

For the young character in Page's poem seeing and hearing don't seem nearly as important as feeling. What does he feel? Mostly, a strong sense of self-identification with the birds—"a shyness like his own / soft in their silence," "his element like the air," "their softness, gentle, near his heart." I'll leave to others the psychological implications of nature as mother substitute, surrogate nest or womb, haven from harsher realities. Rather than exploring, the boy seems content just lying passively in deep grass. His view of nature is a narrowed one indeed, even sentimental—little like that of Heaney's boy figure in "Death of a Naturalist." Even the gulls seem uncharacteristically silent, especially for gulls around their nests. (One morning a few years ago I stepped cautiously among dozens of egg-pillowing gull nests and had my ears filled with outraged cries, with the warning, feathery shudder of swooping bodies.) Where are brambles cutting arms, flies biting legs, rain chilling feet, owls swallowing mice?

Halfway through the poem, it seems clear that the boy is interested less in the birds per se than in arousing certain sensations within himself, a feeling of "their wings within his blood." Self-identification reaches its peak, and some kind of "setting them apart" might not be such a bad idea after all. Among the trickiest lines in the poem are: "these things he loved and needed near his hand, / untouched and hardly seen but deeply understood." What is it to deeply understand what's hardly seen? Does the boy love the birds he would not name, or is he more in love with his own feelings of being blissfully one with it all?

## 6

The boy's fondness for the gentle, the soft, and the passive connects to a kind of dreaminess questioned by other Page poems. Sometimes in her

work, peacefulness, rest, and inactivity are needed before a release into a dream world of truth and revelation. Other times, they're signs of lethargy, directionlessness, or timidity. The lost, wandering anti-hero of "Cullen" becomes "content to rest within his personal shade" and—in lines very reminiscent of "Only Child"—"felt the gulls / trace the tributaries of his heart. . . ." Before his uncommitted and desperate volunteering when war breaks out in 1939, Cullen's weakness of character is laid bare: "Nor could his hammock bear him for it hung / limp from a single nail. . . ." The dangers of "gentleness" take an extreme form in "Stories of Snow": "gentle" snow tempts lost woodsmen to "dream their way to death."

It would be going too far to say that the boy of "Only Child" is drawn to a death-like state. But compared to, say, the title figure of "Blowing Boy"—who is very active, kite-like, and associated with language ("In the liquid dark / all his words are released and new words find him")—this boy seems withdrawn, almost listless. Did he ever grow tired of lying dreamily in the deep grass, ever leap into the water to swim and feel surges of energy far from his misty identification with gentle birds and his suspicion of naming?

## 7

Contrast the boy's indifference to phrases like "The thrush," "Ah, the swifts," "Observe, the canvas-back" with Page's own naming of birds in other poems:

- red-eyed vireos ("Short Spring Poem for the Short-Sighted")
- a hoopoe "weightless upon my wrist, / trembling brilliant there" ("At Sea")
- mallards "unmoving as wood"; and a ruby-throated hummingbird, "a glowing coal / with the noise of a jet" ("Domestic Poem for a Summer Afternoon")
- finches that "stir such feelings up— / such yearnings for weightlessness, for hollowing bones, / rapider heartbeat, east/west eyes" ("Finches Feeding")

And contrast the boy's apparent lack of close observation with all the uses of binoculars in Page's poems (and in *Brazilian Journal*). Page's satirical poem on travel, "Round Trip," mentions binoculars in a traveller's luggage, but the man in the poem is too caught up in fantasies, fears, and foolish dreams to ever use them. In "Visitants," pigeons' brashness and beauties are appreciated through binoculars. In other poems, magnifying devices even become compatible with inner worlds: a scene is examined by "the valvular heart's / field glasses" ("Personal Landscape"), "My telephoto lens makes

visible / time future and time past” (the glosa “Inebriate”), and there is a “dream through binoculars / seen sharp and clear” (“Cry Ararat!”). The last poem says “the bird / has vanished so often / before the sharp lens / could deliver it,” which expresses skepticism about the device in the face of elusiveness. However, imperfect as they are, binoculars appear too often in Page’s work to be merely invasive tools of the devil; they can be useful without being clinical, they can inspire attentiveness without aggression.

## 8

It seemed under a smile of good fortune and good timing that last week just after finishing Page’s *Brazilian Journal* I saw Canadian jazz flautist and soprano-sax player Jane Bunnett perform with her friends from Brazil and Cuba. For three hours, with untrammelled energy and layered sound-textures, the six musicians evoked Brazilian colours and rhythms as Page did in her prose of 1957-59. When Bunnett first heard Celso Machado imitate bird and animal sounds with his assorted whistles and tiny percussion instruments, maybe she felt something like Page did when she was first surrounded by the calls of Brazilian birds.

The *Journal* rings and echoes with inquisitive, witty, sometimes almost ecstatic, observations of natural scenes. At times Page doesn’t know the names of things but describes them with voluptuous, vivid detail. A “finch-like bird of a clear cerulean blue with a black eye-mask and throat” was “so neatly feathered he looked carved and polished from some mysterious blue stone, his wife dull green and blue.” A bird “like a ballerina—tiny, black, dressed in a white tutu—flew out onto mid-stage, did a fabulous *tour en l’air*, and disappeared before I could further observe it.” Of course, not knowing the name of something can prompt an observer to describe it more precisely than otherwise. But it wouldn’t be fair to say that Page’s ignorance of the names determines her precise descriptions. Knowing names for animals hardly keeps her from describing them with close attention. A toucan is seen “with an electric blue eye, a bill like an idealized banana, a body of sculpted soot set off by a white onyx collar and gorgeous red drawers,” and shrimps are unforgettably seen “with their wide-ranging antennae, looking half like a caricature of a guardsman, half like a nervous pianist, their anxious white front legs like fingers uncertainly playing the same music over and over.” (And what of this description of *homo sapiens*? The curator of a natural-history museum has “dog’s eyes—pale eyes, honey-coloured—and I

thought, ‘Nonsense, look at his nose,’ and his nose too was a dog’s. And so I switched to his teeth—pointed, white, dog’s teeth. Uncanny. But such a polite dog. Wouldn’t cock his leg just anywhere.”)

One day after visiting a museum Page admits a dislike of stuffed birds, and another day she feels sad at the sight of thirty-some bird-whistles used by hunters to attract birds (“Are there really so many birds worth shooting?”). Yet nowhere in the *Journal* does she suggest that names themselves are traps, cages, luring-to-death whistles, or that—in the terminology of “Only Child”—they turn birds into statues. Early on she even complains about having only “inadequate bird books,” and a year later she’s still saying “I’d give a great deal for a good bird book.” At times her delight in names is obvious. She discovers that birds she’d known in Australia as bellbirds are called *ferreiros* (blacksmiths) in Brazil, “with good reason. Their song is exactly like the ring of metal.” She learns that a variant of the mangrove cuckoo is known in Portuguese as *alma de gato*, “soul of a cat.”

Contrast the boy of “Only Child” and his attraction to birds possessing “a shyness like his own / soft in the silence” with Page of the *Brazilian Journal* and her fascination with another kind of bird:

we saw a small, blue-back bird apparently jumping for joy. He was sitting on a fence-post and on the count of five up he went, about a foot in the air, singing. He was not catching anything, as far as we could tell, nor was he showing off for a mate. He was just jumping for joy on a fence-post in the middle of Brazil—for longer than we had the patience to watch . . . In all my amateur birding, I have never seen anything like it.

No instant reference to her heart or self, no preference for the gentle and the comforting. Just astonishment at a bird’s buoyant energy, at its apparent pleasure and humour. When Page came to write her series of prose meditations “Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman,” she described her own sense of art in terms that echo the Brazilian bird’s hopping: “Play, perhaps . . . spontaneous involvement which is its own reward: done for the sheer joy of doing it; for the discovery, invention, sensuous pleasure. ‘Taking a line for a walk’, manipulating sounds, rhythms.”

## 9

“Only Child” is here in the background, like the theme forever present in an improviser’s mind. It’s song and message and object, but also catalyst, spur, hub, home plate, mind seed.



Go farther afield for contrasts: Thomas, the adolescent hero of Czeslaw Milosz's novel *The Issa Valley*:

. . . the Latin names appealing to him because of their sonority: *Emberiza citrinella* for yellow-hammer, *Turdus pilaris* for fieldfare, *Garrulus glandarius* for jay, and so on. Some of the names were conspicuous for their proliferation of letters, forcing the eyes to jump continuously from his notebook to the antiquated ornithology at his elbow. Even the longer names, if repeated often enough, acquired a pleasant lift, one of them, that of the common nutcracker, being absolutely magical: *Nucifraga caryocatactes*.

This expresses a love of language itself as nourishing, sensuous like the tang of cooked rhubarb, blackberries bursting in the mouth. I think of Page's lines "the word / quick with the sap and the bud and the moving bird" ("Virgin"). Nevertheless, Milosz shows that a fondness for names isn't a simple matter. Young Thomas cares so intensely about his knowledge of nature that when his Aunt Helen uses his bird book as a substitute for a missing bedpost foot he's exasperated by her ignorance. In that scene, Milosz has enough ironic distance to suggest a streak of pride in Thomas's hugging of his knowledge.

Despite qualms and questions about hunting, Thomas values guns and shoots at birds. We hardly have to read the several passages about the thrill of hunting to realize that his approach to nature isn't simply reverential. Naming itself, for all it's celebrated, is also suspect:

The notebook proved that Thomas had the gift of concentrating on things that excited him. To name a bird, to cage it in letters, was tantamount to owning it forever. . . . Turning the pages, he had them all before him, at his command, affecting and ordering the plentitude of things that were. In reality, everything about birds gave rise to unease. Was it enough, he wondered, to verify their existence? The way the light modulated their feathers in flight, the warm, yellow flesh lining the bills of the young feeding in deeply sequestered nests, suffused him with a feeling of communion. Yet, for many, they were little more than a mobile decoration, scarcely worthy of scrutiny. . . .

Like the boy in Page's poem, Thomas is "suffused . . . with a feeling of communion" near bird nests, but otherwise his responses to nature are far more jumbled, and complicated by self-consciousness. It's hard to imagine the boy of "Only Child" even knowing how to hold a gun, let alone using gulls and herons for target practice. Are his unnamings, harmless detachment and his deep-in-the-grass reveries, then, more praiseworthy than what Thomas

does? Why do they still seem to me sadly half-hearted alternatives to the pleasure Thomas finds in power?

### 11

Naming, or what naming symbolizes, *can* hurt. Think of Page's finely woven tapestry-of-words "Portrait of Marina," in which a domineering father names his "pale spinster daughter" Marina in hopes that the name will "make her a water woman, rich with bells." Instead, for her "the name Marina meant / he held his furious needle for her thin / fingers to thread again with more blue wool / to sew the ocean of his memory." The father discourages the daughter from having an independent life, and her name itself becomes like a straitjacket, confining her to the roles he chooses for her.

### 12

In her glosa "A Bagatelle," Page enumerates species in a garden, including "Camellia: curiously, named for George J. Kamel, / Moravian, a Jesuit missionary." If Page is amused by such naming, A.S. Byatt is too, but more satirically. In her novella *Morpho Eugenia*, an English naturalist of lower-class background returns to his native country after a decade exploring the Amazon. While one character is thankful to names for freeing her imagination to write a book of fantasy—she finds herself "dragged along willy-nilly—by the *language*, you know—through Sphinx and Morpheus . . . —I suppose my *Hermes* was Linnaeus"—Byatt also pokes fun at a particularly proud sort of naming. The aging patriarch Harald Alabaster hopes in vain that "some monstrous toad or savage-seeming beetle in the jungle floor might immortalize me—*Bufo amazoniensis haraldii*—*Cheops nigrissimum alabastri*—" Before leaving for the Amazon, the lower-class Adamson had a dream of rising in the world: "There would be a new species of ants, to be named perhaps *adamsonii*, there would be space for a butcher's son to achieve greatness." But once he starts to live in that distant foreign land, Adamson finds himself overwhelmed in "this green world of vast waste, murderous growth, and lazily aimless mere existence," and he records "his determination to survive, whilst comparing himself to a dancing midge in a collecting bottle."

Touché. The naturalist has become a bit of nature, the explorer an object, the bottler a bottled specimen.

### 13

Sometimes in Page's poems the radically transforming and transfigured are supreme, and the inner worlds we create are set higher than the sensuous worlds we're given.

"Chinese Boxes" imagines a set of boxes diminishing in size until one reaches "an all-ways turning eye," an "inner eye / which sees the absolute / in emptiness." In her remarkable sestina "After Reading *Albino Pheasants*," Page is tugged between the beauties of the given physical world and the powers of a super-transforming eye. She wonders "Why would I wish to escape this world?" and acknowledges the shaping effects of heritage and environment, but near the end she speaks of "my truth" and "its own world / which is one part matter, nine parts imagination." She goes on: "I fear flesh which blocks imagination." In "Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman" she writes: "At times I seem to be attempting to copy exactly something which exists in a dimension where worldly senses are inadequate. . . . Without magic the world is not to be borne."

An especially clear example: "After Donne" expresses frustration at the attractions and temptations of worldly senses. "For the least moving speck / I neglect God and all his angels," the poet complains. She is "subject to every tic and toc." Like a fervently otherworldly monk intent on the inner life and cautious of nature's superficialities, the poet there seems uneasy with the distractions of nature outside the life of the imagination.

In contrast to the flesh-and-blood birds of "Finches Feeding" or *Brazilian Journals* are the spiritual birds, horses, and indefinable beings of "Invisible Presences Fill the Air." And yet—a winning twist—for all their mysteriousness, these invisible presences too need names: "O who can name me their secret names? / Anael, opener of gates. / Phorlakh, Nisroc, Heiglot, / Zlar."

### 14

Why can't I rest easy with the line "one part matter, nine parts imagination"? Is it because I'd make the balance much more equal, or even tip it in favour of "matter," the raw material without which nothing would exist, our cradle and our continuing lifeblood and ground? Though Wordsworth's *The Prelude* sometimes seems to fill my consciousness with light as few other poems do, I have special qualms about these lines from its ending: "the mind of man becomes / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells." The debate over the primacy of "Imagination or

Nature” in Wordsworth remains dizzying and torturous. But, at least in isolation, lines like the above make me feel incomplete and in shock, as if I were abruptly cut adrift from much that I love. *A thousand times more beautiful?*

Our arrogant, short-sighted habits of desecrating the earth also make it hard for me to respond to the metaphors in Page’s glosa “Planet Earth.” While the poem seems written out of a desire to treat the earth carefully and reverently, Page doesn’t question the metaphors from the four key lines of Neruda—the earth as something to be “spread out” and lovingly “ironed”—and her own lines compare the earth to a laundress’s linens, a mother’s child, a tapestry, gold leaf, a brass object in need of polishing. In the 1991 NFB documentary about her, Page spoke of the environmental crisis as “bigger than any war we’ve ever thought about.” “Planet Earth” is more a poem of praise than a poem of polemics. Still, is making metaphors of the earth as our laundry and our child the way to change our thinking *or* the way to praise (or would it make more sense to see *ourselves* as laundry and children?).

Page’s “Leather Jacket,” on the other hand, protests with a purity that is bound to overwhelm any commentary on it. Its epigram comes from a medieval writer, Suhrawardi: “One day the King laid hold of one of the peacocks and gave orders that he should be sewn up in a leather jacket.” Four stanzas into the poem, hard-to-bear sorrow and lament intensify:

Cry, cry for the peacock  
hidden in heavy leather

....

The peacock sees nothing  
smells nothing  
hears nothing at all  
remembers nothing  
but a terrible yearning  
a hurt beyond bearing  
an almost memory  
of a fan of feathers  
a growing garden

and sunshine falling  
as light as pollen.

This peacock can be interpreted more as a symbol of self and beauty than as a species of bird; one critic (Constance Rooke), noting the role of the peacock in Sufism, has read its fate in Page’s poem as “a metaphor for human

entrapment,” and Page herself has spoken of it as “a creative force blocked, arrested in some way.” Thinking of the later poem “Planet Earth,” I can also experience “Leather Jacket” as a sharply focussed yet multi-faceted poem partly about our vicious uses of other species, a poem that goes on haunting like an appalling and guilt-exposing dream risen from the unconscious.

## 15

No, Page doesn't stay with conjured creatures, magical supra-senses, invisible presences, or secret names. Within her work, *Brazilian Journal* is the most overflowing and detailed contrast to her poems of inner vision. If her Brazilian experiences presented Page with phantasmagoric possibilities, the phantasmagoria was usually that of intensified everyday reality. In her poetry, too, the earthly often appears alongside the “visionary”; and sometimes the borders between the two seem to dissolve, and the distinction is very imperfect. In *The Glass Air: Selected Poems* next to the invisible presences poem, Page placed “Visitants,” a poem about that most familiar bird, the pigeon. The poem doesn't change the pigeons into doves of peace or spirits; in the oaks they “stamp about like policemen,” they are “voracious, gang-despoilers of the tree-tops.” In the last line, after the birds vanish, the human witnesses are “left hungry in this wingless hush,” and in retrospect the appearance of the pigeons seems more magical than banal. Still, “Visitants” remains a poem obviously different from “Invisible Presences,” and a dialogue between the two creates a denser field of meanings than either could create on its own.

Imagine another dialogue, between “After Reading *Albino Pheasants*” and the much simpler, shorter poem following it in *The Glass Air*. “Star-Gazer” sees the “galaxy / italicized,” and says “I have proof-read / and proof-read / the beautiful script.” The final conclusion is: “There are no / errors.” After the uncertainty, questioning, and efforts to defend imagination in “After Reading,” this short poem may appear to be little but a declaration of the inherent rightness of nature, its unimprovable integrity as 100% matter. But Page's poem doesn't follow Dickinson's “811” in insisting that nature lies beyond language; it uses the convention of a “script” out there, and calls the poet a proof-reader. Complexities around the poem arise from questions like *Who is the poet to “proof-read” nature? How is she to declare it's error-free? Is the “script” perfect gibberish, or a perfect message, or something in between?*

## 16

“The Names of the Hare” is an anonymous Middle English poem modernized by Seamus Heaney. It includes what must be one of the most explosively adventurous lists in all poetry, a list composed of names for only one creature. If the author of the poem is anonymous, the hare is hardly that: Heaney’s translation gives seventy-three names, including

The stubble-stag, the long lugs,  
 the stook-deer, the frisky legs,  
 the wild one, the skipper,  
 the hug-the-ground, the lurker,  
 the race-the-wind, the skiver,  
 the shag-the-hare, the hedge-squatter,  
 the dew-hammer, the dew-hopper,  
 the sit-tight, the grass-bounder,  
 the jig-foot, the earth-sitter. . . .

Such varied naming hardly belongs only to Middle English poetry. Outside of poetry, just as species have regional variants, so do their names. In some cases, different names are used even in one area. For as long as I can remember I’ve heard the same bird referred to as Canada jay, grey jay, whiskey jack, and moose-bird. Such choices are healthy reminders that a name may be tentative, local, or random, and remains a far cry from identity.

My grandmother was a birdwatcher who encouraged my first birdwatching, but I don’t recall ever feeling a need to pit her identification of species against an emotional appreciation of avian beauties and energies. She owned a copy of the 1917 magnum opus *Birds of America*, general editor T. Gilbert Pearson and consulting editor John Burroughs. One of the most engrossing, entertaining aspects of that book is its listing of “Other names,” which reaches a comic plentitude that might’ve pleased the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*. The surf scoter, for instance, has been known as spectacle coot, blossom-billed coot, horse-head, patch-head, skunk-head, plaster-bill, morocco-jaw, goggle-nose, and snuff-taker; the woodcock, as blind snipe, big-eyes, night partridge, night peck, timber doodle, hookum pake, labrador twister, and bogsucker. And Pearson lists an astonishing *sixty-one* alternative names for the ruddy duck, including dumpling duck, deaf duck, fool duck, sleepy duck, tough-head, hickory-head, stiff-tail, stick-tail, sprig-tail, leather-back, lightwood-knot, paddy-whack, shot-pouch, stub-and-twist, and blatherskite.

“ . . . for sure the kittiwake.”

kittiwake=tarrock, pick-me-up, caddy-moddy.

### 17

The names in “The Names of the Hare” conclude with “the creature no one dares to name”—this, after seventy-two alternative names! The poem appeals partly to a hunter’s perspective. It begins by stating that a man “will never be the better” of the hare unless he first lay down his staff or bow and “with this litany / with devotion and sincerity / . . . sing the praises of the hare.” At the end, the hare itself is addressed with the wish that it “come to me dead / in either onion broth or bread,” so it may seem that all the naming has only served as a hunter’s ploy, even if the overall effect of the naming has been to celebrate the animal. There’s no denying the facts of death and carnivorous hunger in the poem’s final lines, and thus the poem keeps from being *simply* a song of praise. Anon. has brought together into one rich broth the glory and harmfulness of naming, its potential for description and blessing and its involvement in destruction and death.

### 18

“Birds were his element like air and not / her words for them—making them statues / setting them apart. . . .” Do words lose some of their Gorgon nature, have less ability to turn things into statues, when they vie with many other names to refer to the same thing? Is a label less a label when it’s only one of many labels for the same thing? In one sense, yes, because the variety reminds us how ephemeral and local a name can be. But in another sense, no.

The mention of *Finnegans Wake* was a dead giveaway. I revel in the names listed in the Pearson book like a kid rolling in a pile of leaves or a Canadian tourist partying in the streets of Rio at Carnival time. Then I shouldn’t forget that, admiring and amused by a human facility, I’ve experienced intoxication by names much more than appreciation of whatever avian details helped inspire the linguistic carnival. The names are then like gigantic signposts next to a nesting sparrow.

### 19

After the carnival, time for a more skeptical period . . .

A deep distrust of naming, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, has often been linked to idolatry. God gets defined as beyond definition and naming,

his name sometimes forbidden on human tongues or written out deliberately incomplete, as “G-d” or some such form. In our country, nobody has offered a more intelligent and generous-spirited amplification of this attitude than Tim Lilburn. In his essays and in his poetry collection *Moosewood Sandhills*, ex-Jesuit Lilburn dramatizes the need to swing constantly between adopting names and cancelling them. In his eyes, claims of knowing another species, of having the deer live “under its name,” are forever false. In a TV documentary about him, Lilburn has said that the quality of “infinite” traditionally applied to God actually belongs to all natural phenomena, each blade of grass, things complex far beyond our possible comprehension. As Lilburn writes in one of his essays: “behind these names, this veneer of intelligibility . . . that’s where things live.” In that light, we have to admit that a name—though sometimes it’s all we have to start with—is a paltry thing compared to the unfathomable, never-half-perceived richness of what it points to.

## 20

Another danger of distinguishing and naming is that when they’re pursued excessively the forest is lost for the trees, the ocean for the fish, the bird for its feathers. Page says in “This Frieze of Birds”:

. . . Rigidity supplies  
 a just delineation  
 of separates, divides  
 crest, pinions, claws and eyes.  
 No whole divides such rout.

In *The Tree*, Fowles warns of excessive hairsplitting that distracts us “from the total experience and total meaning of nature.” He mentions a Victorian naturalist who studied twenty specimens of Dorset ferns that experts since have decided belong to only three species. The Victorian gent gave “each specimen some new sub-specific or varietal rank, as if they were unbaptized children and might all go to hell if they were not given individual names.” (And yet, comically dogged and misled as the fern man may have been, I suspect there could be something oddly touching in him *if* his naming grew from an alertness to uniqueness, a desire to recognize what was individual about each specimen, not just each species.)

This road leads to the final stanza of Page’s “After Rain”:

And choir me too to keep my heart a size



larger than seeing, unsexed by each  
bright glimpse of beauty striking like a bell,  
so that the whole may toll,  
its meaning shine  
clear of the myriad images that still—  
do what I will—encumber its pure line.

While these lines speak mostly in defence of the whole, they see the glimpses as bright, beautiful, seductive, not dull, cold, unattractive. At the end of the poem, for all the celebration of the “whole,” I can’t forget the many attractions described in the poem’s earlier stanzas, including “glorious chlorophyll” and after-rain snails making “broderie anglaise from the cabbages, / chantilly from the choux-fleurs, tiny veils.” The poet herself admits that, whatever she does to keep the whole pure, the reckless impurities of “myriad images” remain in her mind.

## 21

In *Brazilian Journal*, Page writes one day in February 1959:

I am working on a very large canvas which will probably be called *Woman’s Room*. Funny how some works demand titles—in fact, the whole business of naming is curious. A person you don’t know—one you see on the street, for instance—is quite complete without a name. Looking at him I may register his beauty or lack of it, his manner of dressing, his possible employment. . . . But once you know a person, he has to have a name. He is incomplete without it.

Here Page suggests a commonsensically *practical* aspect to naming, our need for it if we want to go beyond fleeting encounters and passing glances.

When parents name their child, are they only trying to “own” it, or also trying to find an easy way of referring to it beyond “our child”? I could accept Fowles’s statement that “Naming things is always implicitly categorizing them and therefore collecting them, attempting to own them” only with one large qualification: that a name can also be a sign of interest, a form of recognition, an element of respect. In my experience, people who don’t know names for things in nature or care to learn them often simply don’t see, hear, or otherwise notice the thing. When I hear a dark throaty rough-edged call in the woods and think “raven,” the experience of hearing is vivified by having the name with which to picture the bird, from times when I *have* seen it. Sometimes I’ve found myself involuntarily saying “song sparrow,” “nuthatch,” or “raven” and surprised friends who then say they’ve heard nothing. If recalling a name can be a sort of possessive act, or a

flaunting of knowledge—some birders savour lists and statistics as much as some baseball fans—it can be much more than that. When a bird is heard but not seen, knowing the name helps bring an image of the bird to mind and lets you feel piercingly the proximity of another being, or even silently send off a kind of mental greeting to it, a feeling of gratitude simply that it is there.

When I hear a faint blurry nasal honk and think “nuthatch,” I find it hard to agree with Hegel that by naming the animals in the Garden of Eden Adam “annihilated them in their existence as beings.” A Robert Hass poem speaks of this notion that “a word is elegy to what it signifies.” If words can be bombs, erasers, or subtractors, can’t they also be pencils, pointers, gestures? Here’s an alternative Eden myth: Adam named the beasts only when he began to see them, hear them, feel curious about them, and recognize them as fellow species. While exploitation would follow, that initial naming was a way of bringing images of animals into human consciousness, while recognizing the animals’ existence beyond it.

## 22

But sometimes isn’t “pointer” or “gesture” too neutral and innocuous to be accurate? We read of the explorer James Cook without thinking of kitchens, stoves, and cooking, but Page’s poem “Cook’s Mountains” is one of the clearest poems anywhere to show how a name for a thing can get inextricably balled up in our ways of perceiving it. Cook named a range in Australia “the Glass House Mountains.” The poet relates how when a driver told her the name her view of the mountains was forever changed:

And instantly they altered to become  
 the sum of shape and name.  
 Two strangenesses united into one  
 more strange than either.  
 Neither of us now  
 remembers how they looked before they broke  
 the light to fragments as the driver spoke.

In these lines Page doesn’t seem to bemoan the effects of naming upon perception; Cook’s naming isn’t obviously seen as destructive or regrettable. She accepts the “Two strangenesses united into one,” or even admires them.

But earlier and later in the poem, there’s a subtly unsettling emphasis on the human vision of the landscape. The poem begins:

By naming them he made them.  
They were there  
before he came  
but they were not the same.  
It was his gaze  
that glazed each one.  
He saw  
the Glass House Mountains in his glass.  
They shone.

The very first line can be read as startlingly abrupt, suggesting a violent overthrow of what the mountains were in themselves before Cook arrived. Then right away the poem undercuts too strict a belief in its first line by admitting that the mountains were there before their English observer, even if his naming would change later English viewers' experience of them (Aboriginal names for the mountains lie outside the scope of the poem; if the poem or one like it were written today, it might implicitly acknowledge the politics of disparate naming, the question of which and whose names prevail.) Page herself later continues the act of seeking out metaphors for the landscape—"Like mounds of mica, / hive-shaped hothouses, / mountains of mirrors glimmering"—and ends not with further views of the mountains but with an image of Cook "upon a deck / his tongue / silvered with paradox and metaphor." The mention of "Queensland" reminds us of the title; both it and "Cook's Mountains" are terms of ownership, like flags stuck in a landscape. Page's poem is hardly a poem of condemnation or protest, but with illuminating delicacy it encompasses both our marvelling over a union of place and name, and our questioning about what's lost in the process of naming.

### 23

So what happens to the unnamed son, the boy indifferent to naming and prone to dreamy reveries and feelings of kinship with birds, when he grows up? The poem concludes:

Like every mother's boy he loved and hated  
smudging the future photograph she had,  
yet struggled within the frames of her eyes and then  
froze for her, the noted naturalist—  
her very affectionate and famous son.  
But when most surely in her grasp, his smile  
darting and enfolding her, his words:  
"Without my mother's help . . ." the dream occurred.

Dozens of flying things surrounded him  
 on a green terrace in the sun  
 and one by one  
 as if he held caresses in his palm  
 he caught them all and snapped and wrung their necks  
 brittle as little sticks.  
 Then through the bald, unfeathered air  
 and coldly as a man could walk  
 against a metal backdrop, he  
 bore down on her  
 and placed them in her wide maternal lap  
 and accurately said their names aloud:  
 woodpecker, sparrow, meadowlark, nuthatch.

In the brutal clarity of these lines, there's some sharp psychological sketching. Below its surface, the poem is ambiguous about how much active, domineering control the mother actually wielded over the boy. It's possible that he's driven less by her manipulations than by the guilt nagging inside himself; her "grasp" may be a grasp he feels more than she exerts. In one of the hardest ironies of the poem, he "froze for her," as if he suffered the same fate he imagined the birds suffering when her names threatened to turn them into statues.

The concluding nightmare brings back, in the famous adult, all the child's resentment. It would be wrong, I think, to say that in the dream the mother gets her just desserts and is shown the error of her ways, the murderous neck-wringing implicit in naming. We can hardly escape thoughts of a neurotic reliance of the son on his mother, a weakness in him that thwarts him from a deeper selfhood, his inability or unwillingness to realize something between the extremes of dry, spiritless taxonomy and a dreamy experience of nature that may show more detachment than engagement. Rather than presenting an anti-scientific view that naming merely kills, Page has written a packed-with-implication narrative that dramatizes two questionable approaches to nature, and leaves a more genuinely caring and enthusiastic approach in the wings. Such an approach emerges in other poems, and in *Brazilian Journal* with all the brilliance of a peacock's tail or a toucan's feathers.

## 24

Write a poem called "The Names of the Ruddy Duck," but with no hunter's soup at the end. Or write a glosa based on these four lines from "Cook's Mountains":

And instantly they altered to become  
the sum of shape and name.  
Two strangenesses united into one  
more strange than either.

But “united into one” trips you up, because what is named keeps its separateness, its intransigence, its uncapturable “it”-ness. The debate goes on. A name is a hand, a cage, a bridge, a brand, a window . . . .

**A Note on Sources:** Some of the impetus for this essay came from discussion at a “Poetry and Ecology” symposium organized by Don McKay and Jan Zwicky at the University of New Brunswick in February 1996.

Most of the quotations from Page’s poetry are from *The Glass Air: Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1985). Her glosas are found in *Hologram* (London, Ont.: Brick, 1994), “This Frieze of Birds” in *Cry Ararat! Poems New and Selected* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), and “Round Trip” in *As Ten, As Twenty* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1948). Her prose is quoted from *Brazilian Journal* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1987) and from the two prose pieces in *The Glass Air*. The critical comment on “Leather Jacket” is from Constance Rooke, “P. K. Page: The Chameleon and the Centre” (*The Malahat Review* 45, 1978). Page’s own comment on that poem was heard on part II of *The White Glass*, a CBC *Ideas* documentary (by Ann Pollock) first broadcast in May 1996, later transcribed as part of “The White Glass III,” *The Malahat Review* 177, 1996.

Dickinson’s “811” can be found in Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little Brown, 1960); and the lines from Wordsworth, in J.C. Maxwell’s parallel-text edition of *The Prelude* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981). “The Names of the Hare” is anthologized in Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, eds., *The Rattle Bag* (London: Faber, 1982), and the Robert Hass poem quoted is “Meditation at Lagunitas” from *Praise* (New York: Ecco, 1979). The sources of the quotations from Tim Lilburn are his poem “Learning a Deeper Courtesy of the Eye” in *Moosewood Sandhills* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994), his essay “Writing as a Ghostly Activity” (*The New Quarterly*, spring 1996), and the Vision TV documentary *How To Be Here*, first broadcast in January 1994.

For more “Other names,” see T. Gilbert Pearson, ed., *Birds of America* (Garden City: Garden City Books, 1936). The sentence from Hegel appears in Gerald L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (New York: Yale UP, 1974). Other prose was drawn from A. S. Byatt, *Angels & Insects* (London: Vintage, 1992); John Fowles, *The Tree* (St. Albans: Sumach, 1979); and Czeslaw Milosz, *The Issa Valley*, trans. Louis Iribarne (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1981).

# Flight

dissolved  
in ultramarine  
dissolved in cobalt  
thalo cerulean  
thinned  
with water or milk

my flesh  
blue watered silk  
my red blood blue  
and blue my green  
and utterly astonished  
eyes