

On knowing the names of things

Jason Allen-Paisant

Here's an anecdote. Something I've heard in one of those numerous Zoom events I've taken part in recently. Someone was saying how not being able to name things keeps certain people out of culture. Or another way of putting it might be, that the ability to name things in the landscape is a form of cultural power, a credential and a way of maintaining privilege. This is something I'd taken for granted because I had never had the language to express or question it. So I'd never given myself the right to notice it. The person talked about a young working-class writer of colour who said they'd sometimes wanted to write nature poems, but felt intimidated because their vocabulary for flora, their scientific knowledge of plants – of their names and of their parts – were not developed enough. How could they write nature poems when a nature writer needed such knowledge?

This young poet was, of course, conveying what they'd felt and observed. If years ago I had been confident enough, I might have made the same remark. I have felt these same inadequacies. Before I ever embraced the notion that I, too, could write poetry or prose about natural landscapes, about flora and fauna, it had seemed to me that those who did write such things were people who had had the privilege of spending time thinking about plants, trees, woods, etc. The kind of privilege that had afforded them an education, an erudition about such things, a culture. These writings were

the result of time spent observing things. They could describe the ossified buds of the polyp-carbuncled mussels left exposed at low tide. Theirs was the delight of finicky pursuits, of tiny, cute things – found things – like the archiving of mushrooms.

But perhaps not having the right names for things is also a gift. It's the absence of the right name that opens a pathway for us to encounter the world. Prior to the name, we take a feel for the forms of things from our own bodies, we hold things up to our feelings.

Naming is something we have long held to be necessary, the privilege accorded to Adam of naming the animals; but naming is also death, something that fixes, hides, falsifies and in the end destroys, as the poet Rilke thought. Poets are on a mission to rescue things from death, through their own being and listening.

Perhaps, at its heart, poetry is a different way of naming; or it pushes us towards a different idea of naming, one that's less sure, more open, more in flux. Perhaps when we say 'poetic' we really are talking about a language that's less 'useful', less apt for mastering, for control. Less useful for the City and the Guardians. Perhaps poetry is a necessary component that balances life. Perhaps Plato was right for the wrong reasons – right that poetry *is* truly dangerous – and, perhaps, we cannot totally dwell in poetry, or cannot *all* dwell in poetry, if we are to have an *efficient* world. But perhaps poetry is, in the end, the language that brings us closest to things.

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What name does a thing have when it becomes present to your body, becomes something quietly acting on you, shaping you, one night at a time,

one instant at a time? What names do the brightest and biggest stars have when you see them at night in the hills, in the dark, in villages that have no electric light, and you can almost reach up and hold them? They are in you – you have no names for them.

Jason Allen-Paisant

Jason Allen-Paisant is a poet whose work explores embodied experience in the context of Afro-diasporic history. His critically acclaimed collection, *Thinking with Trees* was named an Irish Times Poetry Book of the Year in 2021. His work has appeared in *Granta*, *The Guardian*, *The Poetry Review*, *Callaloo*, *New Poetries VIII* and on the BBC, and is forthcoming in *More Fiya: A New Collection of Black British Poetry*. Jason has been the recipient of a prestigious Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship. He holds a Doctorate in Medieval and Modern Languages from the University of Oxford and is on faculty in the School of English at the University of Leeds.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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