



The old tree in the
Karnak - bright yellow
leaves & doves in its branches

THE

NAMES

OF

THINGS

*A Passage in the
Egyptian Desert*

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You could keep some remnant of it, a talisman that would become rare and fine, worn over time into something familiar. It would naturally become more thin and precious the more the air wore it out, like the bones of a saint. After all, it was only an object in the physical world, not something more potent, like something in the mind: memory.

But the original, the thing itself, would never come back. It had passed away from the world. You could conjure it, though, the emotion that kept it alive inside you, with a trigger: an image, a smell, a combination of sounds that formed it into a picture that stayed in your mind. That was the life of the thing after it died. The only thing that could bring it back.

This is what a word is worth.

YOU COULD BEGIN with the crab that scratches in the sand. The name of the animal is the action or sound it makes, or its color. The name parents other like meanings belonging to other things, leaving the animal behind: grapho (Greek—to scratch, and so, to write), gramma (the scratches), graph, grammar, grab.

As I walk along the shore of the Red Sea at dawn a hundred pale pink crabs scuttle carefully back across and into the white sand. Behind a sharp crust of coral a rock crab, seaweed-green edged with red, pries the back off a sand crab and feeds. It is not so easily frightened and merely watches me. There are tiny porcelain-blue crabs in the mangroves a few miles south, popping out of the dense muddy quicksand like living jewels.

In this harsh environment life itself is a gorgeous miracle,

coming out of the barren desert, out of the bitter sea: hals, the sea of salt.

Above the tide line the sand is crusted over with glass, hard-surfaced and brittle like frosting sugar. It snaps into square panes of rock. Rocks flecked electric blue-green with what became copper here wash down in the mountain floods. Walking in these hills I am looking at visual puns. I can see how readily the creatures translate, were translated long ago, into thought and use and language. What is lost is a sense of their intense beauty: that they are alive.

Words begin as description. They are prismatic, vehicles of hidden, deeper shades of thought. You can hold them up at different angles until the light bursts through in an unexpected color. The word carries the living thing concealed across millennia.

"The lynx is speckled like the starry sky," the nomads here say. "The crane belongs to the rain, and the stork belongs to the sea."

Animals belong to their environments, are inseparable from the processes that draw them. As Saad told me, pointing down to our feet where qatta, desert grouse, were moving over the stony ground. I could not see them for some minutes, so much did they resemble the brown-black scatter of stones. "You see," he said, "as you are white like snow and ice where you

come from, and I am brown like rock and sand. Don't write that down."

He tells me of the mystery of domesticated goats, why they are white and black, unlike their cousins, their ancestors, the ibex, who are invisible against the rock cliffs they climb. An animal taken from its environment may lose its natural color. Color is a defining principle of place.

The flamingo is the hieroglyph for red. All red things: anger, blood, the desert are spelled with the flamingo. The Red Sea Hills are mostly red. The red rock is vibrant in the changing light.

Near here are lavender mountains with cranberry cliffs. Silver and blue and green wadis wind around them. But the true red of the Eastern Desert, the red of Wadi Baramia, of Nugrus, is an intense color, harboring little plant life except the sweet-smelling selim that grows straight up in branches from the ground making the best walking sticks. It is a painful color, harsh to the eyes.

Flamingo, flaming. In Greek its name is phoenicopteros, phoenix, with feathers of fire. The riddle extends: the delicate, breakable flamingos breed on ash cones in the evaporate bed of Lake Natron in Central Africa. The new birds arise from the ashes. Fee waqt el mattar, in the time of rain, they arrive in the thou-

sands. Last February there were twenty thousand flamingos on Lake Bardawil in North Sinai.

Red and green define the environmental extremes of Egypt. The desert is red. The sea is the great green. The sweet sea, the Nile, was once clotted with papyrus, thriving, gigantic, mobile, filled with animal and bird life, as it is today only in the Sudd, the great marsh in South Sudan. In Egypt the plant no longer exists. It survives only in the hieroglyph for green.

Rock drawings are scratched onto the flat, wind-scraped surfaces of red sandstone. They illustrate how the landscape has changed. The oldest are of giraffe, elephant, rhinoceros, from when this bare rock was grassland.

These African animals are among the first hieroglyphs. The giraffe is in the verb to foresee. The saddlebill stork, now rarely seen north of Khartoum, is the picture that defines the word for soul.

These early written words emerged as the land here rapidly became desert in the Neolithic and pushed what they represented away, as though the growing desert isolated and so emphasized each living thing.

In ancient Egypt hieroglyphs were called medew netcher, sacred words. Netcher is the picture of a flag on a pole, like the flags that mark sacred places throughout the desert even now:

tombs and rocks and trees. It eventually became the Coptic, hence early Christian, word for God.

Five thousand years away there is an incidental pun: netcher equals nature.

I come from a dislocated people, the Scots who came to Canada in the nineteenth century. I have never been to Scotland, but I have made the journey to Canada many times, the three-hour drive from my parents' house to Kingston, where my mother grew up. At least once a year we cross the slender green bridge over the St. Lawrence, through the rose-pink cliffs of Wellesley Island and into fields where lichen-spattered whalebacks of grey granite make the land poor.

David Hutchison, my father's grandfather, arrived here on the northern edge of Lake Ontario by steamboat at the age of five. His father had purchased two hundred acres north of Toronto, where the boy would learn to shoot and ride.

"They wanted to live like Scottish lairds!" My great-aunt Dorothy laughs as she describes them, coming to the wilderness with all their grand designs. Her own father, David Murray, my mother's grandfather, sailed from Scotland to Ontario around the same time. He saw his family lose almost everything to the infertile soil of the Canadian Shield, the oldest exposed rock in the world.

But these were Scots. They were tough, they got by.

seen. Such a fine, unusual shade of green that I could taste it in my mouth, feel its delicate tissue on the tips of my fingers. How could I draw such a rare color into myself? I could only do this, taste and feel the color, as I looked at the moth.

My mother would never have let me touch it. She knocked it gently with the edge of something, a piece of paper, into her killing jar. It is on the wall of my childhood room in Geneva to this day, yellowish and crumbling in its frame of packed cotton.

I had a job as an intern in the Brooklyn Museum. I used to spend the afternoon in the vault. Its door was hidden behind a case of late dynastic sculpture in the Egyptian gallery. I sat sorting through glass frames of mounted papyri that had been lying around in dusty drawers for years. I sorted them into piles: Demotic, Coptic, Hieratic, all the written languages to come out of Egypt. Once in a while there would be a shred of something that I was unused to, like Aramaic, in the mix.

I liked looking at these frames of brown material that was more like fabric than paper. I had to be careful. If I held one the wrong way, a word could crumble and disappear. I did not understand the words. That was up to people who had worked intensively on these writing fragments for years, like the German papyrologist the museum would ultimately send the photographs of the sorted fragments. I knew what a difficult thing translation was.

Erit W.O. Papyrus Chamber
P. 100. 1. P. 100. Papyrus

High sun. The great goddess who stands across the sky.

See green stones.
Turquoise, malachite stones.
and green green. That very green green

Green as a living tree

The etymology of hieroglyphs is visual or not is central

Ḥ. so, The papyrus is green. The snake is green. There are multiple levels of meaning. The papyrus is green because it is alive. Papyrus. The snake because it sheds its skin - sheds it is renewed in life, symbol and renewal. In the magic spell. in the conjuration "Open green!" The papyrus is the word green has symbolized life (source).

That snake also made of light. also clear, also female are snake (expensive) are plants and green

See - light, plant, soul

(Bedouin) See Papyrus in the Hebrew word 'to blossom'

Erit W.O. Papyrus Chamber