



Creative Wordshops

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re-story, re-create and
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(courtesy Dominic Haarhoff)

See blog for this letter, ongoing opportunities and 'what's on.'

Dear seeker of words and images

*A word is dead when it is said, some say.
I say it just begins to live that day. (Emily Dickinson)*

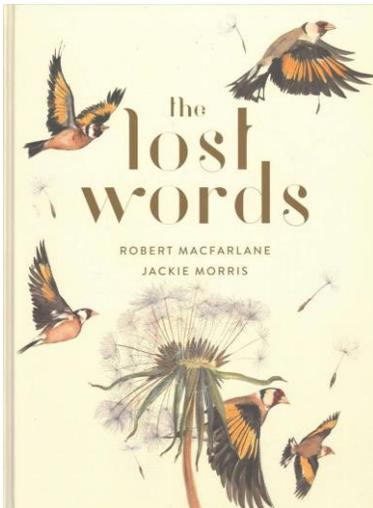
Losing and Finding Words

Words. What are all these slippery symbols? Strung together with gaps between them to create meaning and nuance? To elevate and deprecate? Inspire and insult? Soothe and disturb? Enough words have been written about words to encircle the galaxies. So as we approach another year, this letter offers a minuscule reflection on losing and finding words in one language of the many tongues - English with its vast vocab.

What happens when we begin to lose a world of words? Lose a language with its nuanced imagination? Through ageing, shifts in the culture, stripping significance as we rush into a future? "Words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still." (TS Eliot)

Thomas Moore, the therapist and writer, says somewhere that we have lost words that carry nuances around feelings. Instead, we cover the loss with a summary word such as 'depression' whereas in medieval times there were various words for its different faces. Such as melancholy, gloom, woe. In losing specific words we blunt the sharp tool that can dig out our emotions and hold them to the light.

Robert Macfarlane (incantation, poetry) and Jackie Morris (illustration) bring us words our screen-bound children are losing. Here is part of a review of a poetic manifesto of words spells to reclaim lost words from the realm of nature -wren, willow, magpie:



<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/02/the-lost-words-robert-macfarlane-jackie-morris-review>

The English philosopher, AJ Ayer "felt that unless we have a word for something, we are unable to conceive of it, and that there is a direct relationship between our imagination, our ability to have ideas about things, and our vocabulary."

. "The acrostic spell-poems are designed to be read out loud. It is a book for adults and children, for adults to read with children. The spells carry the spirit of their subject in their structure. Take the brilliant "Magpie Manifesto: / Argue Every Toss! / Gossip, Bicker, Yak and Snicker All Day Long!"

Not only are the word and the bird restored and celebrated, but the spirit and nature and the clatter of the magpie are conserved within its lines."

In Judaism the alphabet and the words they form are holy, with layered meaning from the literal to the mystical. The Rabbi who prays in the synagogue with eloquence, clarity, intonation and rhythm. That night he asks God, "was my prayer well received?" God says, "Yes." The Rabbi then asks, "was that not the best prayer that reached your ears this day?" God says, "No" The Rabbi demands to know, "No? So who prayed more eloquently than I?" God responds, "Kefie." "Kefi? He's the janitor of the synagogue. What does he know? What did he say?" God responds, "Kefi stood up and said 'You know that I am a simple man and that I love you. In order that I do not offend you, I will recite the alphabet and you arrange the words according to what pleases you.'"



John's gospel evokes different symbolic nuances of 'word'. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was GodThe Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us." In the annunciation story Mary respond to the angel Gabriel "be it unto me according to the thy word." And as the centurion said to Jesus, "Lord, say the word only, and my servant will be healed."

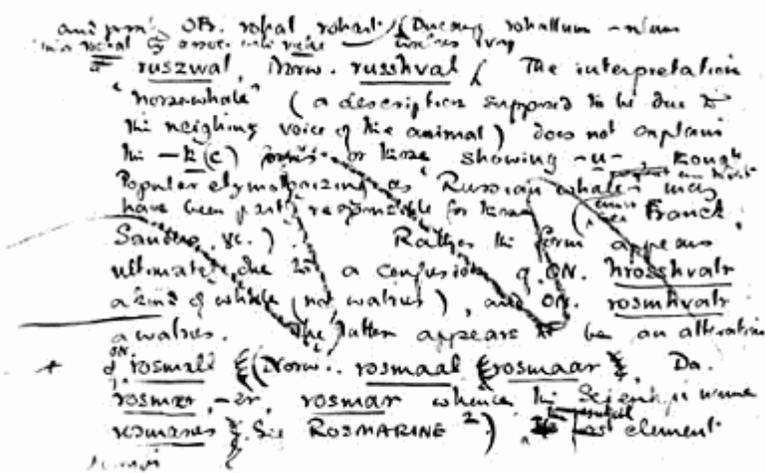
Here's the metaphysical priest-poet John Donne: "To know and feel all this and not have the words to express it makes a human a grave of his own thoughts."

So how do we resurrect words? Like Lazarus raise them up?

How can we find lost words? Call them back? One way might be to put on the robe of amateur etymologist, rediscovering roots, usage, cousins. In *Hunger for Ecstasy, Fulfilling the Soul's Need for Passion and Intimacy*, Jalaja Bonheim recalls one word:

We inherited the word 'ecstasy' from the ancient Greeks...to them ecstasy was far more than just a state of heightened pleasure... it was a sacred portal into the realm of the gods. Ordinary consciousness could not sustain itself when the majesty, beauty and sheer force of the divine struck the fragile human ego like lightning. One had to step out of one's ordinary small sense of self into a cosmic awareness. They called this process of temporary ego death *ekstasis*, literally 'to cause to stand outside'

Another way might be to follow Emily Dickinson. (her quote prefaces this letter) Try and taste a word on the tongue. We could also browse a thesaurus (Greek 'treasury, storehouse') and dictionary - two tomes that ground a writer's word-work.



In 1919 -20, at the start of his career, Tolkien worked on the *Oxford English Dictionary*; later saying he "learned more in those two years than in any other equal period of my life." Tolkien worked on words near the beginning of the letter W.

Here is his scribbled note for 'walrus'. His first entry was the

noun and verb *waggle* - 'to move (anything held or fixed at one end) to and fro with short quick motions, or with a rapid undulation; esp. to shake (any movable part of the body)'. Slips of paper of his entries in Tolkien's distinctive handwriting survive in the *OED* archives. (<https://public.oed.com/blog/jrr-tolkien-and-the-oed/tolkien1/>)

We acknowledge that words create our reality. We need to remind ourselves both of philosopher Wittgenstein's "the word is not the thing," while celebrating a definitive moment in Helen Keller's life. Anne Sullivan, her teacher took Helen to an old pump house and put Helen's hand under the stream:

As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten - a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed... I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away." (<http://www.findingdulcinea.com/news/on-this->

day/March-April-08/On-this-Day--Helen-Keller-Comprehends-the-Word--
Water-)

Here's my attempt to recover and celebrate a simple one syllable four letter word:

Word Clew

*our clew being well-nigh
wound out, let's be cheerful. (Byron)*

several strings hide
inside the packed parachute
of a word. meanings and feelings
free-fall out of an alphabet sky.
then you jerk the rip cord and
the canopy opens in a silk flutter.

take the word *claw*. noun and verb,
it's the first cousin of *clue*
in its tangled cluster.

here's the winding thread
that Ariadne handed Theseus
to lead him from the maze.

it names the cords of a
hammock that breeze-swings,
slung in summer twixt trees.

yachtsmen evoke it
in the lower aft corner
of a fore-and-aft sail.

the rare rufous necked
wood rail in evergreen forests
in Peru cries *crew crew crew*.

the word that fell
from Byron's silk sky sail
now parachutes in mine.

the chosen shape floats down,
lands, steadies and writes itself
on the grounds of a page.

Dorian