

# 120} A TREE GROWS IN THE BRONX: ON KNOWING THE NAMES OF THINGS

*"The limits of my language are the limits of my mind."*

—WITTGENSTEIN

Two tree surgeons are at work on a tree, one high on a limb, the other down in the street, holding the safety rope. Both wear hard hats and leather harnesses. As a writer passes by on the opposite side, the worker on the street yells to him, in a thick Eastern European accent, "Know what kind of a tree is this?"

The writer looks up at the tree—at least four stories high, with thin, pointy leaves. Not maple, that's all he knows. He takes a wild guess, "Elm?"

The tree surgeon shakes his head ruefully. "This is strongest of all tree, like iron. In old time they make axe handle from such tree."

"Chestnut?" the writer guesses again.

"Hickory," says the tree surgeon. "Ten year I live in this country. Ten year I'm asking peoples, 'What kind of tree is this?' Ten year and no one say right tree. One of ten peoples, maybe. Look—" He points to a tree on the other side of the road. "What is? I give clue. You breaks branch, comes strong sweet perfume. From this tree Indian make tea."

"Black birch," says the writer.

"No, not black birch. Sassafras."

"Oh, right. Sassafras."

All this time the tree surgeon has been holding the swinging rope, oblivious of his partner, still sawing at an overhead branch.

"And this?" the tree surgeon points to another tree, perfectly vertical.

"No idea," the writer tells him.

"Poplar. Is straight like arrow. Was used to make mast of ship, is so straight. When I'm come from, if you ask someone about tree,

nine time out of ten they know. In America . . .” He purses his lips, squeezes his eyes shut, shakes his head again. Then his eyes pop open and he asks, “What you do?”

“I teach,” says the writer, bashfully. “And I write.”

“If writer, you should know all about tree,” pronounced the tree surgeon.

The totemic power of words: We grasp things by their *names*. In Genesis, Adam is given the power to name all creatures on earth, symbolizing his dominion over them.

- Ferrule: the metal band on a pencil that holds the eraser.
- Philtrum: the midline groove running from top of upper lip to nose.
- Those little knobs forming the hull of a raspberry? Drupelets.
- Tittle: the dot over an i or j.
- Q: What do you call the plastic tip that binds the end of a shoelace? An: aglet.<sup>61</sup>

One can do worse than peruse dictionaries as a hobby, including Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*, where he describes a “blister” as “a pustule formed by raising the cuticle from the cutis, and filled with serous blood” and “network” as signifying “anything reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections.”



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## *Nuts & Bolts 2: Dialogue*

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61 One source for such exacting terms is a *picture dictionary*. Many writers refer to them.