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News that Inspires

The Lost Words: Reclaiming the Language of Nature
by Maria Popova

"Words belong to each other," Virginia Woolf's melodious voice unspools in the only surviving recording of her speech — a 1937 love letter to language. "In each word, all words," the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot writes a generation later as he considers the dual power of language to conceal and to reveal. But because language is our primary sieve of perception, our mightiest means of describing what we apprehend and thus comprehending it, words also belong to that which they describe — or, rather, they are the conduit of belonging between us and the world we perceive. As the bryologist and Native American storyteller Robin Wall Kimmerer observed in her poetic meditation on moss, "finding the words is another step in learning to see." Losing the words, then, is ceasing to see — a peculiar and pervasive form of blindness that dulls the shimmer of the world, a disability particularly dangerous to the young imagination just learning to apprehend the world through language.

In early 2015, when the 10,000-entry Oxford children's dictionary dropped around fifty words related to nature — words like fern, willow, and starling — in favor of terms like broadband and cut and paste, some of the world's most prominent authors composed an open letter of protest and alarm at this impoverishment of children's vocabulary and its consequent diminishment of children's belonging to and with the natural world. Among them was one of the great nature writers of our time: Robert MacFarlane — a rare descendent from the lyrical tradition of Rachel Carson and Henry Beston, and the visionary who rediscovered and brought to life the stunning forgotten writings of the Scottish mountaineer and poet Nan Shepherd.

Troubled by this loss of vital and vitalizing language, MacFarlane teamed up with illustrator and children's book author Jackie Morris, who had reached out to him to write an introduction for a sort of "wild dictionary" she wanted to create as a counterpoint to Oxford's erasure. Instead, MacFarlane envisioned something greater. The Lost Words: A Spell Book (public library) was born — an uncommonly wondrous and beguiling act of resistance to the severance of our relationship with the rest of nature, a rerooting into this living world in which, in the words of the great naturalist John Muir, "when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe," just as each word is hitched to all words and to the entire web of being.

While children's experience is at the heart of this quiet masterpiece, MacFarlane and Morris intended the large, lavishly illustrated book for "children aged 3 to 100" — a book

“to conjure back the common words and species that are steadily disappearing from everyday life — and especially from children’s stories and dreams,” a book “to catch at the beauty and wonder — but also the eeriness and otherness — of the natural world.” What emerges is a lyrical encyclopedia of enchantments, radiating the sensibility of classical natural history illustration but illustrating a more natural future for the generations ahead.

Each word occupies three lavishly illustrated spreads: a poetic “summoning spell” in the form of an acrostic to conjure back the lost word in a rhythmic incantation composed to be read aloud, a wordless visual eulogy for its vanishment, and a typographic botany of letters spelling it “back into language, hearts, minds and landscape.”

Half a century after Rachel Carson painted in the opening of her epoch-making book Silent Spring a dystopian future bereft of birdsong, MacFarlane opens with an image of a world — this world — bereft of the words for birds (and plants, and other beings), and thus bereft of the regard for and concern with them:

Once upon a time, words began to vanish from the language of children. They disappeared so quietly that at first almost no one noticed — fading away like water on stone. The words were those that children used to name the natural world around them: acorn, adder, bluebell, bramble, conker — gone! Fern, heather, kingfisher, otter, raven, willow, wren… all of them gone! The words were becoming lost: no longer vivid in children’s voices, no longer alive in their stories.

You hold in your hands a spellbook for conjuring back these lost words. To read it you will need to seek, find and speak. It deals in things that are missing and things that are hidden, in absences and in appearances. It is told in gold — the gold of the goldfinches that flit through its pages in charms — and it holds not poems but spells of many kinds that might just, by the old, strong magic of being spoken aloud, unfold dreams and songs, and summon lost words back into the mouth and the mind’s eye.

Complement The Lost Words, the splendor and enchantment of which no digital screen can convey, with Susan Sontag on the conscience of words and Walt Whitman on the wisdom of trees, then revisit the lovely Lost in Translation — an illustrated dictionary of beautifully untranslatable words from around the world.