

G L O S S O L O G Y

Luke Bradford

GLOSSOLOGY

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FIRST EDITION

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PDF VERSION

For Courtney.

CULTURE

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I remember the first time I ever read the dictionary,
I thought it was a poem about everything.

— Steven Wright

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C O N S T E L L A T I O N

an ancient, insensate satellite—

ten celestial coins lost in a canine, a lion, an assassin,
a saint, a castle, a lance, a snail, a cetacean, an insect:

alien, aeonian isles lit alone in a silent sea,

a collision
a collection
a collocation

an intense, lactescent scintillation,

a clean neon tessellation,

an ecstatic stasis

N E B U L A

a Luna-blue bubble

N E U T R O N S T A R

a sun
stress
turns

to
stone

UNIVERSE: UNSEEN RIVER

GALAXIES: AGELESS AXIAL SEAS

SOLAR SYSTEM: ROOMY ASTRAL MOTOR

E A R T H

a hearth, a heart, a here, a her

GLACIER

a gracile calcic acreage, regal, unreal, elegiac, clear—

eerie icicle cellarage,
glare carrier,
lilac relic:

all ice,
all age

all lag

ICICLES

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LIGHTNING

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MICROBES

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C A N O E S

O C E A N S

sea cocoons

a seance, a nascence, an essence, a oneness, an eon, a season, a sense

S P E R M W H A L E

a harsh sea empress,
ephemeral, peerless, lawless, raw—
war pleases her.

a reaper, a hell-mammal,
her ample mass a lash,
her maw a seawall.

G I A N T S Q U I D

an aging, august aquanaut,

gaunt, sad, distant

unsquinting

ANGLERFISH

a gangling assassin selling a fragile, alien fire:

an ageless, infernal siren,
her fangs as fine as nails,
her fins as sheer as glass;

an elfin, seafaring hell-faerie, half insane—

a garish, anserine hag,
shining,
again reeling in, again ensnaring fingerlings in an airless saline arena

JAPANESE SPIDER CRAB

an incarnadine deep-sea breeder; a jaded dancer dressed in red

J E L L Y F I S H

for Jess

shy, fleshy lily;
eyeless isle, lifeless life

P L A N K T O N

a natant opal platoon

S E A T U R T L E

austere, stellate ruler,

astral treasurer:
as surreal as a teal star

WEST INDIAN MANATEE

a tame, immense saint,

wise, wide-waisted,
it swims in an idea:

an eminent seaweed statesman,

sentient, tan, and sedate

BUTTERFLYFISH

lithe little surfer, shy little belle

FLOUNDER: odd round feller found under dune under flood; doleful floor feeder

GIANT OCTOPUS: a gigantic, cunning tactician; a sinuous suction-cup pianist

MANTIS SHRIMP: a snappish assassin, a phantasm, an amaranth spirit

BASKING SHARK: a harsh, brash barbarian king as big as a barn

GIANT DEVIL RAY: an elven airliner; an elegant gray glider

PUFFERFISH: huffish, sheepish reef surfer; surprise sphere

BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN: lithe-bodied, spotless, noble pilot

FEATHER STAR: a rare seafarer; a sheer, serrate aesthete

TIGER SHARK: eager, sagittate greaser; a hake's hearse

OCEAN SUNFISH: aeonian, innocuous sofa cushion

SEA ANEMONE: a neon mass, a mane, a moss

SCORPIONFISH: iconic poison-pin horror

CORAL REEF: a floral, rococo collar

MONK SEAL: sleek, solemn lama

LEOPARD SEAL: polar sea lord

SEA SNAIL: a senile alien

DUGONG: odd dun god

SEA COW: a ewe/scow

OYSTER: sooty rose

LEAFY SEADRAGON

a grand, slender, ageless sage;
a serene eddy of orange, saffron, green and gold—

floral faery,
grassy god,
algal angel,

aloof,
alone;

an elder legend, dressed as a sargasso frond

GREAT ALBATROSS: alabaster eagle, lost at sea

C O A S T L I N E

a sectional concatenation,
it ensconces
inlets, insets,
islets, atolls;
seals, sea ice, stones:

a continent's cancellation,
a lineation Atlantis lost

H O R S E S H O E C R A B

sober ocher scarab,
seashore sorcerer

H E R M I T C R A B

a maritime chimaera;
a barterer, beach bather, armchair architect,
each chamber a rebirth

WILDERNESS: dense, endless needle-ridden riddle: deer dwell inside...

W H I T E - T A I L E D D E E R

a lithe wild athlete, alert, ethereal;

earth treader
herd dweller
trail rewriter

T I M B E R W O L F

fleet rebel, limber terror,
fellow tribe member
or terrible foe

G R I Z Z L Y B E A R

regal, lazy berry grazer

S N A P P I N G T U R T L E

a petulant, rust-green angler;
a strange, sullen septuagenarian sleeping in stagnant algae, sitting in silt;
a guerrilla in eelgrass, glaring—

a sinister sentinel,
its alert reptilian stare arresting, unsettling, alien...

a silent spirit trailing ripples;

an astute, relentless strategist,
it engineers, plans, prearranges its assaults:
a gangster, an eager assailant;

a pitiless, aging tsar ruling a pristine riparian estate

P A I N T E D T U R T L E

a radiant, itinerant reptile in a den in a dell in a delta;

a patient, plated lieutenant,
detailed, patterned in red—

little rural naiad:
puddle treader,
dappled paddler

D R A G O N F L Y

a royal gold dryad on a gnarly log,
a ray of glory—

a gyral orgy of fall organdy, daylong landlord of a foggy lagoon:

aloof on an oar,
or off, allargando, on a noon foray

B U T T E R F L Y

ruby-blue flutterer,
fey elf

fretful
but utterly free

S A L A M A N D E R

a slender, emerald-red damsel,
a serene eel-deer seen near dells:

a rare maenad,
a mad dreamer

G R E A T H O R N E D O W L

a hardhearted general on her gnarled throne
at a woodland Golgotha along a lowland glade,
an otherworld death-god to a rodent or a toad—

a lethal, ethereal warden,

grand, eternal, long-eared, wroth,

held to a law all her own:

lone warlord,
old one

her low hoot a threat, and not a hollow one...

S T A R - N O S E D M O L E

an ornate, ramose mammal,
master den remodeler:

landless lord,
roadless nomad;
astral meanderer,
loam loosener—

a salamander eater,
or a solemn elder senator

GIANT SEQUOIA

an august, antique titan,
unique, quiet, unostentatious:

a sunset queen,

it touts its status as an institution,

its stout tonnage
negotiating seasons, ages, eons;

a saga,

a statue,

an engine,
an antenna

RED - T A I L E D H A W K

hardhearted aerial killer

B A R N O W L

lorn brown arbor baron

F L Y I N G S Q U I R R E L

sunrise unfurler, fluffy lunger

G R A Y S Q U I R R E L

agile aerial guerrilla

W I L D B O A R

odd old bard; lowbrow warlord

P O R C U P I N E

porcine pinecone prince

E A R T H W O R M

terete mother; wet root aerator

RAINFOREST

an anteater's fortress, a sea of trees,
an intense fantasia of soft terrain—

a riot, an inferno, a nation of fire ants, antennae astir;

rotten fifteen-foot roots (serifs, footnotes);

an oasis of ferns, a nest of fairies.

afternoon torrents rinse its rafters: aeries for tarsiers.

a tense arena of ferine terror;
a faint aftersensation of fear...

TARSIER: eerie tree seer

MONKEY: meek, moony monk

ORANGUTAN: gargantuan, roan guru

MANDRILL: a mad admiral in an animal drama

TAMARIN: a trim airman

MARMOSET: a terse maestro

MOUNTAIN GORILLA: a murmuring giant ruminating in moonlit rain

S L E N D E R L O R I S

eerie, noiseless eidolon,
leonine sensei

R I N G - T A I L E D L E M U R

an alert eternal guardian;
a demure dreamer, an undead alien

H I P P O P O T A M U S

a smooth, moist mist-mammoth,
its mouth a pit

R H I N O C E R O S

oneiric iron horse

B A C T R I A N C A M E L

an eccentric, reticent all-terrain rambler,
a reliable railcar in an ancient mail train:

a mercantile mammal,
recalcitrant, lanate, tan

BENGAL TIGER

an elite general in tangerine regalia, terrible, brilliant, elegant;
a lean, intelligent titan

SIBERIAN TIGER

an arresting eastern sage, a sinister, terse assassin;
satin strategist, strange sensei

CROCODILE

oiled, corroded elder lord;
idle drooler

ALLIGATOR

log-tail algal troll

KOMODO DRAGON

a grand dragoon; a mad nomad on a dark moor

BOA CONSTRICTOR

satin assassin, contortionist cobra

S P O T T E D H Y E N A

death's shy attendant:

an ashen, dead-eyed heathen,
sooty, steep-nosed, spade-toothed,
hotheaded, tense, and deadpan.

A B O U T

Glossology is a set of lipograms: texts that avoid certain letters of the alphabet. Lipograms have a rich but sporadic history reaching back more than 2500 years, to the Greek hymns of Lasus of Hermione that left out sigma for sonic reasons. The most famous modern lipograms, Ernest Vincent Wright's *Gadsby* (1939) and Georges Perec's *La Disparition* (1969) also avoid the use of a single letter, E. The French literary group Oulipo — the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, “workroom of potential literature” — of which Perec is a member, champions lipograms as artistic tools, along with forms under a variety of other constraints.

Among more severely constrained lipograms, the best known are univocalics, which permit the use of only a single vowel. Perec's novella *Les Revenentes* (1970) has no vowel but E, and Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (2001) has one chapter per vowel, each of which omits the other four (and Y) and aims to exhaust all usable words. *Eunoia* also contains the poem “Vowels,” which allows only the letters in its title.

More restrictive examples do exist. Like many forms of constrained writing, lipograms blur into visual art and conceptual writing when hunted back to their most distant boundaries. Monica Aasprong's *Soldatmarkedet* (2003–) includes, among other works, a complete volume containing only the lowercase letter T, its pages an inundation of wordless text broken by narrow islands of whitespace.

Each poem in *Glossology* is a definition of a term that uses only the letters in the term itself. These are extreme cases: they admit between three and 11 letters, depending on the term they define, and therefore omit between 15 and 23 letters. My major sources of inspiration, as usual, are Bök's *Eunoia* and his earlier collection *Crystallography* (1994), masterpieces for which I'm eternally grateful. The true seed for *Glossology* is the first poem in *Crystallography*, titled “Crystals”: it defines ‘crystals’ using only the letters C, R, Y, S, T, A, and L, arranged visually in the same pattern as some of the poems here, such as “Lightning” and “Icicles.”