

AMY LEACH

God

THE HOOPOE and the bat do not say this word. Neither do the eagles or the vultures or the black vultures. The hyena and the wild goat and the night creatures refrain from using it, too. I have found stoats busy in the gutters, doing what they wish, but never uttering this word. A ferret may slip off one's lap, stalk away along the floorboard with a bend in his back, crush under the back door and leave. Outside in the dark, nobody knows for certain what escaped ferrets do, but they've never been heard saying the word, or even forming it silently with their mouths.

People say the word repeatedly, and the more they repeat it, the less I can understand it: listening to words I do not understand is like swallowing stones. With each repetition of the word it is like I am given another stone to swallow. I can't keep up, for it is hard to swallow stones. I have stones filling my mouth and stones in my lap, and stones falling out of my pockets, and the stones keep coming heavy and hard.

The word refers to someone no one has ever seen. Perhaps this is why people say it over and over, as if repetition of a word can make up for the absence of its referent. They say it pleases him, to say his name incessantly—they sing it in songs and chant it together and broadcast it loudly on the radio, on signs. Perhaps it pleases him. I do not know. It does not please me.

Some evenings as I sit there with all these stony words piling up on me, I get so overwhelmed that I become indifferent, and I spit the stones out and let the heap on my lap fall to the floor, and I walk away and go out the back door. The escaped ferrets are out there. The hoopoe and the bat are out there, and I listen to them, and I drop into the pond and swim with the black eels, and I listen to the eels. I listen to the jackrabbits and the javelinas and the sandhill cranes, for they are all out there. And so is he to whom the over-uttered word refers. He is there because his words are there.

His words do not rain down like rocks on those he speaks to, but they mount up with wings or leap through brambles or swim blackly in ponds. They sleep hanging from trees, stomachs full of hunted insects, or grow tall and imperious and leafy in the forest. Many, if not most, of his words hope never to be heard—rooting blindly through their dirt-homes or proliferat-

ing on the tops of mountains, they are dismayed when they are discovered, and rush away. His words are not repetitive: the only thing his words have in common with each other is that they are strange and they are themselves — they move on their own, through gutters and caves and swamps and the sky, and some of his words, when they get tired of hearing his name over and over, and wish to hear him speak, escape out the back door, like ferrets, like me.

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