

# The Names of Things

*by* Cami Park

She's having trouble remembering the names of things. She remembers a quotation she'd read somewhere a long time ago, about how knowing the true name of a thing gives you power over it, but recalling the actual names of things is becoming more and more of a struggle.

Lists are a problem. She'll be sitting at the table, pen in hand, spelling out the family's needs—flour, oatmeal, brown sugar, eggs, shortening—and suddenly stop short, her mind a blank, thinking, what is it, what is it that we drink each morning, my husband and I, while the little one looks on, envious, contenting herself with her milk—chocolate, to appease her—what is it, that dark and bitter, necessary thing? She'll remember the word, coffee, but then forget what she has in front of her, clasped steaming in her other hand, her mind blank except for the word—coffee.

As her days fill with forgetting, her nights devote themselves to memory. She lies next to her husband listening to him fall asleep, listening as his breaths become more and more shallow before descending into a deep-throated rattle punctuated by gasps as the brain forces an opening in a clogged soft palate. She counts the intervals between the rattle and the gasp and divides them by the ticking of the clock and the steady lowing of the crickets, until, wakeful as ever, she rolls him onto his side, gets out of bed and pads barefoot down the hallway, stopping for a moment outside her small daughter's room to assure herself of the lush measured breaths within.

Then across the cold kitchen tile through the back door to the patio where she stands in her thin slip letting the night fold in on itself, on her, on the girl and the man and the house and all she has in this world except for some thing she cannot name. Something lost,

subsumed by time and misplaced hope and mundane tasks, something, she doesn't know what, something like being eight years old riding a bike on an open road suspended between home and school and friends and not friends knowing only herself and her power.

"Isn't it funny," she says to her husband this morning as he stands next to the sink drinking his coffee, "that I can remember what people say about the names of things, but I can't remember the names?"

He looks at her over the rim of his mug as he gulps the last of his coffee, sets his mug down on the counter, brushes her cheek with his lips, and leaves for the day.

She picks up after him, pausing to wonder at what she remembers is a spoon. What power does she have over it now, that she didn't have seconds before? What certainty of purpose is contained within its letters that is not contained within itself?

She rinses her husband's coffee things and sits down at the table with her own. The phone rings. And rings and keeps on ringing as she sits staring at the filled spoon she holds transfixed between the sugar bowl and the cup.

"Mommy, answer the phone."

She looks down. Her only child stands next to her, her little girl, four years old, with tangled hair the color of sunrise and a peaches and cream complexion puffy with leftover sleep.

The ringing stops.

"Mommy, what's wrong? Can I have some sugar?"

She sets the spoon down, spilling just a little, and brings her daughter to her lap, inhaling her warm sleepy scent, light strawberries tinged with vinegar. And she remembers.

"Sophie."

