

The Spelling Bee

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On some days, I wake up with the jangled edges of letters from various alphabets colliding with great fury in the pit of my stomach. I don't understand the intensity of my anger. Neither do I know where it will take me. My paranoia is simple. On certain days, I just fear that in the process of arranging these spaghetti-*ti-o's* of jumbled letters into meaning, I will perform irreversible surgery on myself.

My anger, I firmly believe, emerges from getting down to the level of the alphabet, the *matrika shakti*, and doing all the scrub work, all day, every day. Don't be mistaken. It's not as if I loathe this work. On the contrary, my particular seat in the house is hard to come by. I am paid handsomely to do what I love best: to polish each syllable of a word to make it authentic, to make it be, to write with power, then write some more—this time with less bravado, and then to rewrite what I have just written, with meaning. To write as myself. To feel the nuances of my broken skin in the landscape of words. To lose myself in my creation till I feel that I have finally been nirvanized. Even if it is for a brief countdown of minutes. All day, most days, I deal with the power and delight of language, the meaning that it is capable of containing, the intelligibility that is derived from words sometimes strung seamlessly across a page.

I continue the process of becoming "chilled." Of becoming frozen in the word so there is no difference between it and me. Of becoming one with the text so that word and blood type match up perfectly. There is no dissonance.

But my deficiencies grow sharper by the day. At times they seem so large that even those with perfect myopia can sense my presence in jarring word after each word. What I seem to lack is not skill as a writer, but as a speaker of words. I lack mastery over the right pronunciation and the right accent. I give myself away in an instant. At that point, the vulnerable parts of me are forced out of the soup bowl in one heap of linguine, revealing an aspect of myself that is not particularly attractive to behold.

Every so often, this multiple-choice testing of my abilities shows up as a simple spelling bee. You would think that because my accent is different, the mainstream would want to correct my pronunciation or rectify my speaking patterns. But that is not so. Because I speak differently, others assume that my knowledge of the language is just plain deficient, less than, my comprehension is questionable, and my hearing abilities are on the wane. Many are the times when I have had an immaculately mannered white person come up to me and blast out his generosity: "Welcome to the United States of America. We hope that you like it here." All this at a pitch that I swear even the deaf can hear.

From dentist's office to hair-cutting salon, from library clerk to the serviceperson in the garage, every one seems intent on making me prove myself. "How do you spell your first name?" the serviceperson asks politely. The first initial is an "A," A for acrylic. How much more generic can I get? "What is your first name, ma'am?" he asks with an authoritative air, with the intention of making me feel stupid. "How much does it matter to you?" I think aloud, as I begin the long, tortuous road to the end of the fourth syllable that constitutes my name. Which prompts the next comment, "What a different name. Where are you from? You speak differently?" and out spews the flood of questions which conceals more than it reveals. For under the critical gaze of these half-questions, I shrink into my old, inarticulate, inexpressive self, the self that is defined by the chaos of different alphabets rather than one uniformly recognizable one.

It is the same story wherever I go. "How do you spell your child's name, your daughter's name, the child whose lashes are long enough to sweep the floor?" Are these descriptors necessary? I reply back with a question. Would they describe one of their own with such poetic abilities? Would they ask for the correct spelling of Marcia's name with a panegyric to her freckles? I begin spelling my daughter's name because I have kept the nurse's assistant waiting too long. Her name begins with a "P," a "P as in Psychology." The assistant looks at me again, half-annoyed and fully impatient at my innate stupidity, sarcasm, or erudition. She cannot make out which. "Okay," I have resolved the issue for the time being. "I give up," I say with resignation. "My daughter's name begins with a 'P,' as in Paul," and then I rattle off the three remaining syllables that run through the geography of her name. If it is vanilla-flavored homogeneity that is desired, then so be it.

I become reconciled to spelling my way through the syntax of my life as I make myself comfortable in the new grammar of America. I realize that my anger is mostly self-directed because I try so very hard to find my place. And I don't. Yet, in some, undefined corner of my self, I stand tall because of my difference. I train myself to be upbeat about these spelling bees. For all I know, it is because of the consistent efforts of these well-intentioned people that I know how to spell eleemosynary without even so much as consulting a dictionary.

San Andreas Fault

Meena Alexander

'And if I cried, who'd listen to me in those angelic orders?'

—Rilke

I: The Apparition

Too hard to recall each grass blade, burn of cloud
in the monsoon sky, each catamaran's black sail.
Nor very easily, could we make ourselves
whole through supplication,
before and after—the jagged rasp of time,
cooled by winds brushing the Pacific.
The brown heart, rocking, rocking,
ribs dashed to the edge of San Andreas Fault.

Suddenly I saw her, swathed in silk
seemingly weightless, nails prised into rock,
rubber boots dangling over the gorge:

'This morning light over water
drives everything out of mind, don't you agree?
I know the Ganga is like nothing else on earth
but now I fish here.
San Andreas suits me: salmon, seaperch, striped bass.'

Montara, Moss Beach, Pescadero, Half Moon Bay,
North American names quiver and flee, pink shrubs,

stalks of the madrone, speckled heather rooting in clumps
 and under it all the fault her voice worked free:
 'Saw him walking with you, holding hands in sunlight
 two of you against a wall: hands, face, eyes, all shining
 he had a brown paper bag you nothing. How come?'

Feet hot against madrone roots, veins beating indigo
 to the rift where her thighs hung, musically,
 unbuckling gravity, I set my face to her squarely:

'Come to America so recently
 what would you have me carry in my hands?
 In any case why bring in a man I hardly see anymore?

II: Flat Canvas

Once, waiting for him in the parking lot
 right by the tap and muddied pool
 where wild dogs congregate
 —he was often late—I let the sunlight bathe my face.
 Stared into water, saw myself doubled, split
 a stick figure, two arms bloodied with a bundle
 racing past parked cars of third world immigrants.

Then I saw him sprinting by my side:
 'Teeth, Teeth, Teeth'
 he cried his body bolted down, a dream
 by Basquiat, flat canvas, three pronged heart, broken skull
 laced with spit, skin stretched over a skeleton pierced with nails,
 Gray's Anatomy in one hand, in the other, the Bible.

In Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, French he cried out
 turning to English last, babbling as the continental coast

broke free riveting Before and After, jumpstarting reflection.
 The Angel of Dread, wings blown back
 neck twisted over mounds of rubble
 doorposts with blood of the lamb smeared on.
 And faintly visible under jarring red
 words like 'Progress' 'Peace' 'Brotherly Love'
 'One Nation under God' all that stuff.'

III: Funeral Song

I sensed his breath on my neck
 he needed to suck me into eternity
 press thumbs against my throat, set a paper bag
 against my thighs, warm with the hot dog he got on the cheap
 from the corner store by the supermarket wall.
 'A real American hot dog, sauerkraut and all' he boasted
 till tears took hold.

He pressed me tight against a tree,
 in full sight of an Indian family
 struggling with their groceries, thrusting
 harder as breath came in spurts—
 a funeral song he learnt from his mother
 the words from Aswan filling me:

'You have crossed a border, never to return.
 Stranger in this soil, who will grant you burial?
 Neck of my beloved, who will grant you burial?
 Eyes, lips, nose who will shield you from sight?'

Tighter and tighter he squashed me
 till the fruits of the fig tree broke loose
 and fit to faint I thrust my fist
 through his blue cotton shirt, cast myself free.