

# Prayer for Sam Johnson as he writes the dictionary

by [Jeanne Murray Walker](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

How can children read, with words  
wobbling any way they feel like?  
*Spelling* shows up as *spelng*,  
and *spelin* spills to *spleen*. *Stolen*  
*bases* slide to *stollen basis*. There's  
no Too Far, no leash to keep  
the feral hound from escape,  
no property line between ideas,  
no surveyor to fasten edges.

And if Johnson doesn't finish soon,  
words might wander further into  
wildness, soar like index cards  
in a hurricane, and scatter  
like so much litter. Or worse—  
careen like bullets into meanings,  
blowing every deal to pieces.

If he finishes, you could be stuck  
in a poem entirely on spelling,  
longing for rescue from the strait-  
jacket they tied us into  
so we can read and write this.  
How fragile the guide rope of logic  
seems between us! How tenuous  
sweet mutual understanding!

Sam Johnson, in your stained shirt,  
big as Fleet Street, rehearsing

for the thousandth time your smudgy  
slips of paper, you've never finished  
anything on time, you rarely  
finish. This is a prayer for you.  
But shall I bless or curse?