

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?