

When my older brother, Kim, and I were children, our father used to tell us stories about a bookworm named Wally. Wally, a squiggly little vermicule with a red baseball cap, didn't merely like books. He ate them. The monosyllables he found in most children's books failed to satisfy his voracious appetite, so he turned instead to the dictionary, which offered a richer bill of fare. In *Wally the Wordworm*, a chronicle of some of our hero's lexicographic adventures that my father wrote when I was eleven, Wally savored such high-calorie morsels as *syzygy*, *ptarmigan*—which tasted pterrible at first, until he threw away the *p*—and *sesquipedalian*, which looks as if it means “long word” and, in fact, does. Inspired by Wally, Kim and I spent years vying to see who could find the best sesquipedalian. Kim won with *paradimethylaminobenzaldehyde*, a smelly chemical that we used to sing to the tune of “The Irish Washerwoman.”

One of my greatest disappointments about growing up

is that it has become harder and harder to achieve a Wally-like degree of sesquipedalian repletion. There just aren't enough new words. Or so I thought until last summer, when I happened to read a book called *The Tiger in the House*, written in 1920 by Carl Van Vechten, a novelist and jazz critic whose prose style, if not actually purple, can certainly be described as mauve. Its subject was cats—cats in literature, history, music, art, and so on. I was writing an article about cats myself, and I'd read several recent compendia of cat lore that covered much the same territory. The authors of these books made only one assumption about their readers: that they were interested in cats. Van Vechten, by contrast, assumed that his readers were on intimate terms with classical mythology and the Bible; that they could read music (he included part of the score from Domenico Scarlatti's "Cat's Fugue"); and that they were familiar with hundreds of writers, artists, and composers to whom he referred by last name only, as if Sacchini and Teniers needed as little introduction as Bach and Rembrandt.

What simultaneously most thrilled me and made me feel most like a dunce was Van Vechten's vocabulary. I couldn't remember the last time I'd met so many words I didn't know. By the end of the book I'd jotted down twenty-two. Not only did I have no idea what they meant, I couldn't remember even *seeing* them before. They might as well have been Old Norse. Here is the list: *monophysite, mephitic, calineries, diapason, grimoire, adapertile, retromin-*

*gent, perllan, cupellation, adytum, sepoy, subadar, paludal, apozemical, camorra, ithyphallic, alcalde, aspergill, agathodemon, kakodemon, goetic, and opopanax.* These words didn't require a wordworm. They required a word anaconda.

Carl Van Vechten, who is better remembered as a patron of the Harlem Renaissance than as a cat apologist, wrote letters to his literary co-saloniers on stationery that bore the motto "A little too much is just enough for me." His weakness for over-the-top vocabulary (along with over-the-top everything else) was notorious. However, I doubt his book would have gone through four printings if his original readers had found these words as inscrutable as I did. My guess is that in 1920, educated general readers would have considered my list difficult but not impossible. Many of them would have known Greek and Latin, which would have provided etymological clues to about half the list; and seventy-five years ago, several words that now sound creakily archaic had not yet acquired a layer of dust. Sepoys and subadars, for instance—two ranks of Indian soldiers—still served the British administration. The camorra, a Mafia-like secret society, still kidnapped tourists in Naples. Aspergills, brushes used to sprinkle holy water, were still routinely used in Catholic masses. People still washed themselves with soap made with oil of opopanax, a fragrant plant.

Feeling elegiac about the lost world conjured up by Van Vechten's words, I tried them out on my family, to see if Wally's other former acolytes found them any more fa-

miliar than I did. (If any readers wish to grill themselves, the meanings of the words not defined during the course of this essay can be found on page 19.) Warming to the task, I was about to subject my friends to the killer quiz when my editor, who had no desire to become a victim himself, said gently, "Hold your horses, Anne. Not everyone loves tests as much as you do."

He had a point. When I was growing up, not only did my family walk around spouting sesquipedalians, but we viewed all forms of intellectual competition as a sacrament, a kind of holy water, as it were, to be slathered on at every opportunity with the largest possible aspergill. When I saw the movie *Quiz Show*, I squirmed in my seat because the literary-hothouse atmosphere of the Van Doren ménage was all too familiar. Like the young Van Dorens, the Fadiman children were ritually asked to identify literary quotations. While my mother negotiated a honking traffic jam on a Los Angeles freeway en route to a restaurant, my father would mutter, "'We are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight.' Source?" And Kim and I would squeal in chorus, "'Dover Beach!'"

Our competitive fervor reached its apogee every Sunday afternoon, when we gathered around the television set for our weekly round of *G.E. College Bowl*. As you may remember if you are of a certain age and disposition, this was a quiz show—an honest, unrigged one—in which two teams of four students, each representing a different college, competed for scholarship money. Our family also con-

stituted a team of four, which—I am admitting this in public for the very first time—we called Fadiman U. It was an article of faith in our home that Fadiman U. could beat any other U., and indeed, in five or six years of competition, we lost only to Brandeis and Colorado College. My father knew the answers to all the history and literature questions. My mother knew politics and sports. My brother knew science. I rarely knew anything that another member of Fadiman U. didn't know as well, but I had quicker reflexes than my parents, so sometimes I managed to bang the arm of my chair (our home-team version of pressing the College Bowl buzzer) first. Fadiman U. always yelled out the answer before Robert Earle, the M.C., could even finish asking the question. "Wing Biddlebaum is an unfortunate ex-schoolteacher. Dr. Percival is—" WHOMP! "*Winesburg, Ohio!*" "After being poisoned and shot several times—" WHOMP! "Rasputin!"

Having spent my childhood struggling to one-up my family, I found it quite liberating to present the rest of the Fadiman camorra with a vocabulary test that I myself had resoundingly flunked—*pre*-flunked, before their hands could even get close to their chair arms. My mother knew one word, *sepoy*. My brother, in a humbling sibling shut-out, knew nine: *mephitic*, *monophysite*, *diapason*, *sepoy*, *subadar*, *alcalde*, *aspergill*, *agathodemon*, and *kakodemon*. My father knew twelve: all the ones Kim knew (with the exception of *aspergill*), plus *retromingent*, *paludal*, *camorra*, and *opopanax*. WHOMP!

My husband, even though he views the Fadiman U.



ethos as a dangerous psychosis, cheerfully submitted to my catechism as well. He knew *diapason*. I think he was quite pleased to beat me. Ignoring my editor's warning, I then proceeded to poll a random sampling of my friends: a movie critic, a freelance writer, three editors, a playwright, an English professor, a classics professor, a lawyer, a law student, a stand-up comic, and the director of operations for the New York City bus system. Some of them tried to wriggle out of the competition by treating the quiz as a game of Dictionary, with trumped-up definitions (*paludal*: "a German pastry made from a lapdog"; *subadar*: "a Turkish spittoon"; *grimoire*: "where Bluebeard stored his bathrobe"). The final results: five zeros, three 1s, one 2, three 7s, and one 9.

Although I cannot claim that my poll was statistically significant, it did strike me that, glossologically speaking, my respondents were either on the bus or off the bus: they knew hardly any words, or they knew a lot. What set the Wallys apart? My father, of course—the champion to date—is Wally, and therefore occupies a class by himself, though I would also venture that he was aided by being ninety years old, and thus an intellectual product of the same era that shaped Carl Van Vechten. My lawyer friend, who knew seven words, restricts his reading almost entirely to works published before World War I. He is forty-one, but he might as well be ninety. The classics professor (9) and one of the editors (7) know Greek and Latin. My brother has the unparalleled advantage of owning no tele-

vision set. Every one of the high scorers considered these twenty-two words—especially the ones they *didn't* know—not a prickly obstacle but a precious trove. "When you found them, you must have felt like stout Cortez!" exclaimed the English professor (7). ("Source?" I thought automatically. "'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer.'")

All the Wallys could remember exactly where they had encountered the words they knew. The English professor said, "*Mephitic!* That must mean foul-smelling. I've seen it in *Paradise Lost*, describing the smell of hell." My brother, a mountain guide and natural history teacher who lives in Wyoming, said, "*Mephitic*, hmm, yes. The scientific name for the striped skunk is *Mephitis mephitis*, which means *Stinky stinky*." The lawyer, who, incredibly, had bumped into *mephitic* just the previous week in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, possessed particularly vigorous powers of memory. When I asked him to define *monophysite*, he said, "That's a heretic, of course, who believes there is a single nature in the person of Christ. I first encountered it in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, of which I read an abridged version in a green Dell Laurel edition with a picture of Roman ruins on the cover that I bought with my allowance for seventy-five cents when I was in grade school, at the bookstore at the corner of Mill Road and Peninsula Boulevard in Valley Stream, New York. I read it while walking home. It was springtime, and all the trees on Mill Road were in bud." No man ever remembered the

face, dress, and perfume of an old lover with fonder precision than Jon remembered that glorious day when he and *monophysite* first met.

I asked my pollees whether they thought we know more words or fewer than we would have in 1920. They split right down the middle. "I bet we know at least as many," said the comic (0). "The new vocabulary of the Internet alone has easily made up for everything we've lost from nineteenth-century literature." I found this idea positively mephitic. The playwright (1) said sadly, "We know fewer words, and the ones we know are less beautiful. Just listen to the words on your list! The words we've lost tend to be connotative, and the ones we've gained tend to be denotative. I've never seen *modem* used in a poem." I share the playwright's views. I can bid farewell to *cupellation* (the act of assaying gold or silver from lead in a small, flat vessel called a cupel) without tears, but I regret that I have spent my life until now without knowing that a grimoire is a book of magic spells, or that an adytum is the inner sanctum of a temple. Wally's dictionary and Carl Van Vechten's cat book are grimoires. I feel their spells working on me at this very moment.

These twenty-two words, which two months ago were utter strangers, have now penetrated deeply into my own psychological adytum. Shortly after my daughter's fifth birthday party, I dreamed that instead of playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, Susannah (who is now an aficionada of *Wally the Wordworm* herself) and her friends had played

with my words, which had assumed shimmering three-dimensional shapes. Their favorite was *opopanax*. The children batted their new playthings delightedly back and forth, for the words were bright and pretty. But like balloons, they were excessively buoyant, and if you weren't careful, they floated away.

*Calaveras* (n.), cajoleries; *dampson* (n.), full range of a voice or intaining to witchcraft.  
*demon* (n.), good spirit; *kakodemon* (n.), evil spirit; *goetic* (adj.), per-  
 erect penis; *alcalde* (n.), Spanish or Portuguese magistrate; *agatho-*  
 or maternal; *apozemical* (adj.), infused; *thyphallic* (adj.), having an  
 nating backward; *perllan* (n.), Welsh orchard; *paludal* (adj.), marshy  
 struments; *adaptible* (adj.), easily openable; *retromingent* (adj.), uri-