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From A to Z: The Span That Connects a World of Ideas

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don't know if, as a young child, I owned wooden blocks with the letters of the alphabet raised in colorful relief on their surfaces. If I did, they were gone by the time I was old enough to remember. When I reached the age of 4, I had no letters to use.

But I wanted to write -- not insightful essays, not soulful poetry, just the letters of my name. I asked my sister for help. Three years older than I, and she knew everything. *Everything*. She went to school; I stayed at home with my mother. She talked at the dinner table; I listened in awe. She belonged to a secret club that you had to be 7 to join, and when I said I'd like to be a member when I turned 7, she said they'd change the age of entry to 8 by then.

Still she agreed to work with me as I grappled with a large red pencil, trying to tame it enough to mark a lined yellow sheet of paper. We worked a long time, and finally I got it. My sister went off to a clandestine play session. I went to show my handiwork to my mother. The spring sunlight streamed into my eyes, making them tear as my mother said, with the hard consonants of her German accent, "Dis is not your name. Dis is your sister's name. Glor-ria."

My sister still laughs when she recalls this bit of trickery; I feel a pang beneath my breastbone. But in retrospect I should have thanked her for giving me a six-letter alphabet. With "D-I-A-N-E," I would have had one less letter to form the words that delight me even now. With "G-L-O-R-I-A" to draw upon, I could "lag" -- so fitting to my sister's endless procrastination. I could keep a "log" to track her deviousness, or be "agog" at her actions.

The next year, as a gift from Mrs. Cole, my lovely first-grade teacher, I received 20 more letters, completing the English alphabet. We'd stand in lines before the school bell rang in the morning and sing the alphabet song. It starts out cheerfully enough, but to my young ears the "elemenopee" sounded like one monstrous letter, perhaps with an incontinence issue, and the "w," "x," "y" and "z" were along only for the ride.

Still I found the letters fascinating, especially their shapes. The "D" looked rather imperious, the "s" indecisive, the "E" more relaxed kicking up its feet in an eye test. I found the "f," "i," "j" and "t" vexing, with their need for a dot or dash to complete them. But I spent hours drawing the letters, thinking about climbing a ladder and hiding in the loft formed by the "A" or curling up with a good book in the corner of the "L."

The letters seemed important, so important that I wrote them big, then bigger and bigger. By doing so, what I wrote became more and more important. By the time I was 8, I'd reported on lions and tigers in a paper that I'm sure remains one of the seminal pieces about the great cats.

But my days of writing such imposing literature ended when I was 9: My teacher declared that my letters

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were too big. Upon pain of earning a "C" in handwriting, I would write small ever after.

As a teenager, I flirted with numbers -- all the while playing word games in my head -- but today I call myself a writer. Some days I start when the sun comes up and I write until the moon traces a path across the sky. My dog checks on me, sighs, goes off to sleep. I squint at my computer screen and eventually all I see are thousands of dots, pixels told to turn on or off by whims my fingers obey. My brain no longer functions, and the letters start to decompose, turning into dust that gets into my eyes, until they're red and I'm sleepy.

I go to bed and dream, fitfully, that I'm moving letters, trying to make words and line them up in sentences. The alphabet is wooden and even the lowercase letters are half my size. I can wheel the "o" into place, but the "N" threatens to tip over and flatten me, and the "Z" won't budge at all. I am frantic, running back and forth among the letters.

From Harold I learned that letters can be like that. We struggled together over one rain-washed Oregon winter as Harold learned to read. He knew that reading held the key to a better job at the fishing tackle plant where he worked.

If not for him, I would never have realized how irksome English spelling truly is. I grew so disgusted that I suggested he learn Spanish instead. He would ask me how to spell words, and I would help him sound them out. One evening he asked how to spell "alive." When we got to the "v," he wanted to know what it looked like. I realized that although he could read a "v" as part of a word, he couldn't picture the letter itself. So I told him: A "v" looks like a bird on the wing, like a valley cut by a plunging river, like the sign for "victory" or "peace."

"Alive" -- that's how I think of the letters. When I write what I want to say, I am a woman of letters -- willowy twists of silvery metal that come to life and dance across the pages of my mind, bending and swaying, playful with me. I tug at either end of the "S," poke the "B" in the belly and dive through the "O" to see what's on the other side.

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