

A Rose by Every Other Name
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I was, I am told, an early speaker. First words quickly gave rise to first phrases and then complete sentences. Once that happened, there was no shutting me up. My father called me motor-mouth, a nickname not intended to torment me, but to tease me into giggles. His gentle jokes only encouraged me to speak more. And he asked questions, encouraged stories, and contributed many of his own. Our relationship was one of words. Words bound us together.

At 26, I was fortunate enough to speak with him the night of his death, a brief telephone conversation about a family reunion coming up: How he didn't want to go and would do almost anything to get out of going. (Irony is a sick bastard). Had I known that was to be our last conversation, I would have chosen my words more carefully. I would have listened more closely. I would never have hung up the phone. My motor-mouth would have kept chugging along.

In elementary school, I began to speak faster and faster. I spoke so quickly that teachers could not understand me, kids teased me. When asked to answer questions in class, I machine-gunned my responses, hoping to get it over with as quickly as possible. Hoping I could go back to being invisible. But they found me. There was no quick-talking my way out of that distinct misery that only children know how to create with their dagger words.

By junior high, I had developed a thick skin. Okay, that's a lie. (I should be more careful with my words). My skin was paper thin, a shadow offering no real protection. I felt vulnerable, as though I could be torn apart at any moment. It was my wit that had thickened. I began to protect myself from words by using my own words. I was no longer a motor-mouth; I had an acid tongue. I now understood the power of words.

With the beginning of high school, in a new place with new people, I withdrew into myself and took my words with me. I tried once again to be invisible. But words found me nonetheless.

Bitch.

Whore.

Loser.

I sought comfort in words of my choosing, those printed in books. And as I read, my experience with words evolved. I realized that words are a playground for thinking. If I change one word, I change an entire thought. Or the intention behind the thought. Or the subtext. Words can reveal or conceal. Words can be precise or vague. We can be careful or careless with our words. Some words sound just like they look. Others trick the eye and ear. I realized that words could be everything, or they could be nothing. I understood that a rose by any other name is not as sweet.

So my armour became one of words. Not an armour made of wit where I deflected the hurt or redirected it to others, but one where I could use words to detach from people to me or to create a void. Words could empower me by distancing me from others.

Now, at 39, I see the great void that I have created. I disappear behind diction, conceal with connotation, and turn myself invisible with idiom. If a man is his word, then who am I? Whose words have I been using?