

“Biogeochemical. It’s a word, I promise!” There are shrieks and shouts in protest and support. Unacceptable insults are thrown, degrees and qualifications are questioned, I think even a piece of my grandmother’s famously flakey parantha whizzes past my ear. Everyone is too lazy to take out a dictionary (or even their phones) to look it up, so we just hash it out. And then, I am crowned the victor, a true success in the Merchant household. But it is fleeting, as the small, glossy, plastic tiles, perfectly connected to form my winning word, are snatched out from under me and thrown in a pile with all the disgraced, “unwinning” tiles as we mix for our next game of Bananagrams. It’s a similar donnybrook, this time ending with my father arguing that it is okay to use “Rambo” as a word (it totally is not).

Words and communicating have always been of tremendous importance in my life: from silly games like Bananagrams and our road-trip favorite “word game,” to stunted communication between opposing grandparents, each speaking a different Indian language; from trying to understand the cheesemonger behind the counter with a deep southern drawl (I just want some Camembert!), to shaping a script to make people laugh.

Words are moving and changing; they have influence and substance. Words, as I like them, create powerful flavor combinations in a recipe or (hopefully) powerful guffaws from a stand-up joke. They make people laugh with unexpected storylines at an improv show and make people cry with mouthwatering descriptions of crisp green beans lathered with potently salty and delightfully creamy fish sauce vinaigrette at Girl and the Goat. Words create everything I love (except maybe my dog and my mom, but you know, the ideas). The thought that something this small, a word, can combine to create a huge concept, just like each small reaction that makes up different biogeochemical cycles (it’s a stretch, I know), is truly amazing.

After those aggressive games, my family is quickly able to, in the words of a fellow Nashvillian, “shake it off.” We gather around bowls of my grandmother’s steaming rice and cumin-spiced chicken (food is always, always at the center of it), and enjoy. By the end of the meal, our words have changed, changed from the belligerent razzle dazzle of moments before to fart jokes and grandparental concern over the state of our bowels.