Synesthesia

By William Matter

As you know, dear reader, synesthesia is a condition where stimulation of one sense triggers a response in another sense. For example, a person with grapheme-color synesthesia might see specific letters or numbers associated with the presentation of a color. My condition is even more extreme. I **hear** things that other people **see**. Take lightning for example. I hear it long before the thunder rolls. Sunrise wakes me up even if the shades are drawn because it can be alarmingly loud. It sounds something like an otter's laugh.

My special auditory synesthesia is triggered most intensely, though, by fruits and vegetables. Walking down the produce aisle in a supermarket presents a cacophony of delightful pitches, intonations, and expressions. I've had some amazing conversations there. Squash commonly have an excellent sense of humor and carrots are morose. Cantaloupes are timid and sometimes have a slight stutter. Corn is cautiously optimistic but reluctant to argue. The most perplexing vegetable of all, however, is the sweet potato. Unlike its cousin, the russet baker, sweet potatoes are never garrulous, quarrelsome, or contrary. In fact, they don't speak at all. They're much more tight-lipped than the taciturn turnip. Oh, I've tried to engage them in conversation, but it's useless. There's nothing worse than the awful silence of the yams.

Long before vegetables reach the polished floors of a supermarket, though, they are snuggled in Mother Earth. Some were even rooted in the soil of my own family garden, the one that my father and I tended daily. You will notice that I have slipped into past tense, for that garden no longer exists. To be completely honest, I was never particularly keen on its existence; my participation was more like servitude. Because of my father's advanced years, I was always the one called upon to remove weeds and deal with unwanted insects. By the way, weeds tend to scream when they are pulled from the soil, but that is a topic for another discussion.

Those of us who experience fruit and vegetable synesthesia are familiar with the personalities of many vegetables because they so often speak to us, but asparagus has always seemed especially contemptuous and detached--a mystery unto itself, both enigmatic and unpredictably confrontational. Immature on one spear, but almost worldly on another. And the three-year growth cycle, well, that adds an additional element of inscrutability to their odd behavior and questionable value.

Now, reader, I'm not concerned about the sort of fiber that asparagus apparently adds to your diet. Instead, I question the moral fiber of that phallic-shaped vegetable. Its sense of morality is notably weak. It questions nearly everything and lies freely, as easily as shoplifters cast glances. Furthermore, It's notorious for its insults and lack of tact.

But in the garden, as in life, there are checks and balances. Whenever another vegetable begins to mirror even the slightest trait of that mean-spirited spear, the string beans immediately take notice. They are the peacekeepers of the garden who inevitably seek harmony. When they sense that other veggies might aim to aid the dysfunctional repartee of the "Sparrow Grass," (their humorous nickname for asparagus) they spring into action.

I’ve mentioned previously that green beans seek harmony, but they also demonstrate harmony in the most rhythmic and musical sense. Preparing to issue a euphonous warning, they begin to sway in unison. The beans move with extraordinary artistry, like so many thin green ballerinas, and their voices, issuing caudally, are almost always on key. Then, dipping to and fro, not from the wind but from the inspiration of the moment, they provide a stern reminder by launching into song, “This is the dawning of the aids of asparagus. The aids of asparagus. Asparagus.”

Their song made my Hair stand on end. Father, of course, was clueless as usual, but the asparagus took heed and silenced its critical commentary.