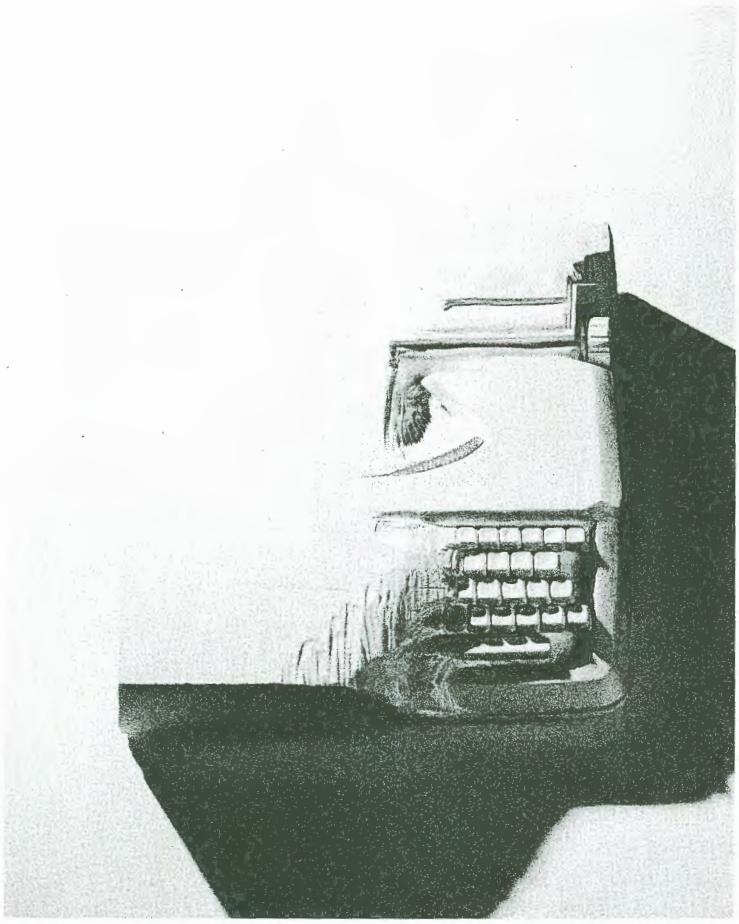
THE WRITING LIFE

DRAFT NO. 4

Replacing the words in boxes.

BY JOHN McPHEE



Block. It puts some writers down for months. It puts some writers down for life. A not always brief or minor form of it mutes all writers from the outset of every day. "Dear Joel . . ." This is just a random sample from letters written to former students in response to their howling cries as they suffer the masochistic self-inflicted paralysis of a writer's normal routine. "Dear Joel . . ." This Joel will win huge awards and write countless books and a nationally syndicated column, but at the time of this letter he has just been finding out that to cross the electric fence from the actual world to the writing world requires at least as much invention as the writing itself. "Dear Joel: You are writing, say, about a grizzly bear. No words are forthcoming. For six, seven, ten hours no words have been forthcoming. You are blocked, frustrated, in despair. You are nowhere, and that's where you've been getting. What do you do? You write, 'Dear Mother.' And then you tell your mother about the block, the frustration, the ineptitude, the despair. You insist that you are not cut out to do this kind of work. You whine. You whimper. You outline your problem, and you mention that the bear has a fifty-five-inch waist and a neck more than thirty inches around but could run nose-to-nose with Secretariat. You say the bear prefers to lie down and rest. The bear rests fourteen hours a day. And you go on like that as long as you can. And then you go back and delete the 'Dear Mother' and all the whimpering and whining, and just keep the bear."

You could be Joel, even if your name is Jenny. Or Julie, Jillian, Jim, Jane, Joe. You are working on a first draft and small wonder you're unhappy. If you lack confidence in setting one word after another and sense that you are stuck in a place from which you will never be set free, if you feel sure that you will never make it and were not cut out to do this, if your prose seems stillborn and you completely lack confidence, you must be a writer. If you say you see things differently and describe your efforts positively, if you tell people that you "just love to write," you may be delusional. How could anyone ever know that something is good before it exists? And unless you can identify what is not succeeding—unless you can see those dark clunky spots that are giving you such a low opinion of your prose as it develops—how are you going to be able to tone it up and make it work?

The idea of writing "Dear Mother" and later snipping off the salutation popped into my head forty-one years ago while I was participating in a panel of writers at the Y in Princeton. Jenny was the only member of my family there. She was ten. The bear got a big laugh, but cheerlessly I also served up the masochism and the self-inflicted paralysis, causing Jenny to tell me afterward that I was not sketching a complete picture.

"You know it isn't all like that," she said. "You should tell about the good part."

She had a point. It isn't all like that—only the first draft. First drafts are slow and develop clumsily, because every sentence affects not only those before it but also those that follow. The first draft of a long piece on California geology took two gloomy years; the second, third, and fourth drafts took about six months altogether. That four-to-one ratio in writing time—first draft versus the other drafts combined—has for me been consistent in projects of any length, even if the first draft takes only a few days or weeks. There are psychological differences from phase to phase, and the first is the phase of the pit and the pendulum. After that, it seems as if a different person is taking over. Dread

PHOTOGRAPH BY GRANT CORNETT

CONSTRUCTION BY STEPHEN DOYLE

largely disappears. Problems become less threatening, more interesting. Experience is more helpful, as if an amateur is being replaced by a professional. Days go by quickly, and not a few could be called pleasant, I'll admit.

When Jenny was a senior at Princeton High School and much put out by the time it was taking her to start an assigned piece of writing, let alone complete it, she told me one day as I was driving her to school that she felt incompetent and was worried about the difficulty she was having getting things right the first time, worried by her need to revise. I went on to my office and wrote her a note. "Dear Jenny: The way to do a piece of writing is three or four times over, never once. For me, the hardest part comes first, getting something—anything—out in front of me. Sometimes in a nervous frenzy I just fling words as if I were flinging mud at a wall. Blurt out, heave out, babble out something—anything—as a first draft. With that, you have achieved a sort of nucleus. Then, as you work it over and alter it, you begin to shape sentences that score higher with the ear and eye. Edit it again—top to bottom. The chances are that about now you'll be seeing something that you are sort of eager for others to see. And all that takes time. What I have left out is the interstitial time. You finish that first awful blurting, and then you put the thing aside. You get in your car and drive home. On the way, your mind is still knitting at the words. You think of a better way to say something, a good phrase to correct a certain problem. Without the drafted version—if it did not exist—you obviously would not be thinking of things that would improve it. In short, you may be actually writing only two or three hours a day, but your mind, in one way or another, is working on it twenty-four hours a day—yes, while you sleep—but only if some sort of draft or earlier version already exists. Until it exists, writing has not really begun."

The difference between a common writer and an improviser on a stage (or any performing artist) is that writing can be revised. Actually, the essence of the process is revision. The adulating portrait of the perfect writer who never blots a line comes express mail from fairyland.

Jenny grew up to write novels, and at this point has published three. She keeps everything close-hauled, says nothing and reveals nothing as she goes along. I once asked her if she had been thinking about starting another book, and she said, "I finished it last week." Her sister Martha, two years younger, has written four novels. Martha calls me up nine times a day to tell me that writing is impossible, that she's not cut out to do it, that she'll never finish what she is working on, and so forth and so on, et cetera, et cetera, and I, who am probably disintegrating a third of the way through an impossible first draft, am supposed to turn into the Rock of Gibraltar. The talking rock: "Just stay at it; perseverance will change things." "You're so unhappy you sound authentic to me." "You can't make a fix unless you know what is broken."

When Jenny was ten months out of college, she was beginning to develop some retrospective empathy for me on that day at the Y when she was ten. Now she was in Edinburgh, writing on a fellowship, and she told me in a letter of her continuing doubt and discouragement. Those were the days of paper airmail, and by paper airmail I replied.

With respect to her wish to become a writer, she said she was asking herself day after day, "Who am I kidding?"

I said, "I think I first started saying that to myself almost exactly forty years ago. Before that, when I was twelve, I had no such question. It just seemed dead easy—a rip, a scam—to tickle some machine and cause it to print money. I still ask myself, 'Who am I kidding?' Not long ago, that question seemed so pertinent to me that I would bury my head in my office pillow. I was undertaking to write about geology and the question was proper. Who was I to take on that subject? It was terrifying. One falls into such projects like slipping into caves, and then wonders how to get out. To feel such doubt is a part of the picture—important and inescapable. When I hear some young writer express that sort of doubt, it serves as a checkpoint; if they don't say something like it they are quite possibly, well, kidding themselves."

She said, "My style is always that of what I am reading at the time—or overwhelmingly self-conscious and strained."

I said, "How unfortunate that would

be if you were fifty-four. At twenty-three, it is not only natural; it is important. The developing writer reacts to excellence as it is discovered—wherever and whenever—and of course does some imitating (unavoidably) in the process of drawing from the admired fabric things to make one's own. Rapidly, the components of imitation fade. What remains is a new element in your own voice, which is not in any way an imitation. Your manner as a writer takes form in this way, a fragment at a time. A style that lacks strain and self-consciousness is what you seem to aspire to, or you wouldn't be bringing the matter up. Therefore, your goal is in the right place. So practice taking shots at it. A relaxed, unself-conscious style is not something that one person is born with and another not. Writers do not spring full-blown from the ear of Zeus."

Jenny said, "I can't seem to finish anything."

I said, "Neither can I."

Then I went back to my own writing, my own inability to get going until five in the afternoon, my animal sense of being hunted, my resemblance to the sand of Gibraltar.

It is toward the end of the second draft, if I'm lucky, when the feeling comes over me that I have something I want to show to other people, something that seems to be working and is not going to go away. The feeling is more than welcome, yes, but it is hardly euphoria. It's just a new lease on life, a sense that I'm going to survive until the middle of next month. After reading the second draft aloud, and going through the piece for the third time (removing the tin horns and radio static that I heard while reading), I enclose things in boxes for Draft No. 4. If I enjoy anything in this process it is Draft No. 4. I go searching for replacements for the words in the boxes. The final adjustments may be small-scale, but they are large to me, and I love addressing them. You could call this the copy-editing phase if real copy editors were not out there in the future prepared to examine the piece. The basic thing I do with college students is pretend that I'm their editor and their copy editor. In preparation for conferences with them, I draw boxes around words or phrases in the pieces they write. I suggest to them that they might do this for themselves.

You draw a box not only around any word that does not seem quite right but also around words that fulfill their assignment but seem to present an opportunity. While the word inside the box may be perfectly O.K., there is likely to be an even better word for this situation, a word right smack on the button, and why don't you try to find such a word? If none occurs, don't linger; keep reading and drawing boxes, and later revisit them one by one. If there's a box around "sensitive," because it seems pretentious in the context, try "susceptible." Why "susceptible"? Because you looked up "sensitive" in the dictionary and it said "highly susceptible." With dictionaries, I spend a great deal more time looking up words I know than words I have never heard of—at least ninety-nine to one. The dictionary definitions of words you are trying to replace are far more likely to help you out than a scattershot wad from a thesaurus. If you use the dictionary after the thesaurus, the thesaurus will not hurt you. So draw a box around "wad." Webster: "The cotton or silk obtained from the Syrian swallowwort, formerly cultivated in Egypt and imported to Europe." Oh. But read on: "A little mass, tuft, or bundle . . . a small, compact heap." Stet that one. I call this "the search for the mot juste," because when I was in the eighth grade Miss Bartholomew told us that Gustave Flaubert walked around in his garden for days on end searching in his head for *le mot juste*. Who could forget that? Flaubert seemed heroic. Certain kids considered him weird.

This, for example, came up while I was writing about the Atchafalaya, the huge river swamp in southern Louisiana, and how it looked from a small plane in the air. Land is growing there as silt arrives from the north. Parts of the swamp are filling in. From the airplane, you could discern where these places were, because, seen through the trees, there would be an interruption of the reflection of sunlight on water. What word or phrase was I going to use for that reflection? I looked up "sparkle" in my old Webster's Collegiate. It said: "See 'flash.'" I looked up "flash." The definitions were followed by a presentation of synonyms: "flash, gleam, glance, glint, sparkle, glitter, scintillate, coruscate, glimmer, shimmer mean to shoot forth light." I liked that last part, so I changed the manuscript to say, "The reflection of the sun races through the trees and shoots forth light from the water."

In the search for words, thesauruses are useful things, but they don't talk about the words they list. They are also dangerous. They can lead you to choose a polysyllabic and fuzzy word when a simple and clear one is better. The value of a thesaurus is not to make a writer seem to have a vast vocabulary of recondite words. The value of a thesaurus is in the assistance it can give you in finding the best possible word for the mission that the word is supposed to fulfill. Writing teachers and journalism courses have been known to compare them to crutches and to imply that no writer of any character or competence would use them. At best, thesauruses are mere rest stops in the search for the mot juste. Your destination is the dictionary. Suppose you sense an opportunity beyond the word "intention." You read the dictionary's thesaurian list of synonyms: "intention, intent, purpose, design, aim, end, object, objective, goal." But the dictionary doesn't let it go at that. It goes on to tell you the differences all the way down the line—how each listed word differs from all the others. Some dictionaries keep themselves trim by just listing synonyms and not going on to make distinctions. You want the first kind, in which you are not just getting a list of words; you are being told the differences in their hues, as if you were looking at the stripes in an awning, each of a subtly different green. Look up "vertical." It tells you—believe it or not—that "vertical," "perpendicular," and "plumb" differ each from the two others. Ditto "plastic, pliable, pliant, ductile, malleable, adaptable." Ditto "fidelity, allegiance, fealty, loyalty, devotion, piety."

I grew up in canoes on northern lakes

and forest rivers. Thirty years later, I was trying to choose a word or words that would explain why anyone in a modern nation would choose to go a long distance by canoe. I was damned if I was going to call it a sport, but nothing else occurred. I looked up "sport." There were seventeen lines of definition: "1. That which diverts, and makes mirth; pastime; diversion. 2. A diversion of the field." I stopped there.

His professed criteria were to take it easy, see some wildlife, and travel light with his bark canoes—nothing more—and one could not help but lean his way. I had known of people who took collapsible cots, down pillows, chainsaws, outboard motors, cases of beer, and battery-powered portable refrigerators on canoe trips—even into deep wilderness. You set your own standards. Travel by canoe is not a necessity, and will nevermore be the most efficient way to get from one region to another, or even from one lake to another—anywhere. A canoe trip has become simply a rite of oneness with certain terrain, a diversion of the field, an act performed not because it is necessary but because there is value in the act itself.

If your journey is long enough in wild country, you change, albeit temporarily, while you are there. Writing about a river valley in Arctic Alaska, I was trying to describe that mental change, and I was searching for a word that would represent the idea, catalyze the theme. "Assimilate" came along pretty quickly. But "assimilate," in the context, was worse than "sport." So I looked up "assimilate": "1. To make similar or alike. 2. To liken; to compare. 3. To . . . incorporate into the substance of the appropriating body."

We sat around the campfire for at least another hour. We talked of rain and kestrels, oil and antlers, the height and the headwaters of the river. Neither Hession nor Fedeler once mentioned the bear. When I got into my sleeping bag, though, and closed my eyes, there he was, in color, on the side of the hill. The vision was indelible, but fear was not what put it there. More, it was a sense of souvenir, a sense of sheer luck at having chosen in the first place to follow Fedeler and Hession up the river and into the hills, a memento not so much of one moment as of the entire circuit of the long afternoon. It was a vision of a whole land, with an animal in it. This was his country, clearly enough. To be there was to be incorporated, in however small a measure, into its substance—his country, and if you wanted to visit it you had better knock.

I was left, in time that followed, with one huge regret. In three years of Alaska travel, research, and writing, it never occurred to me to wonder why the Arctic was called Arctic. I never thought about it until a few years after the book was published. If only I had looked in the dictionary, I would have incorporated the word's origin into the substance of the writing. This is how "Arctic" is defined: "Pertaining to, or situated under, the northern constellation called the *Bear*."

It was William Shawn, the editor of *The New Yorker* for several decades, who first mentioned to me "the irregular restrictive which." Mr. Shawn explained that under certain unusual and special circumstances the word "which" could be employed at the head of a restrictive clause. Ordinarily, the conjunction "that" would introduce a restrictive clause. Nonrestrictive: This is a baseball, which is spherical and white. Restrictive: This is the baseball that Babe Ruth hit out of the park after pointing at the fence in Chicago. The first ball is unspecific, and the sentence requires a comma if the writer wishes to digress into its shape and color. The second ball is very specific, and the sentence repels commas. There can be situations, though, wherein words or phrases lie between the specific object and the clause that proves its specificity, and would call for the irregular restrictive which.

Confronting this memory, I cannot say that it kicks old Buddha's gong. Yet it has sent me through the entirety of two of my books on a computer search for the irregular restrictive which. In well over a hundred thousand words, I found three:

In 1822, the Belgian stratigrapher J. J. d'Omalius d'Halloy, working for the French government, put a name on the chalk of Europe which would come to represent an ungainly share of geologic time.

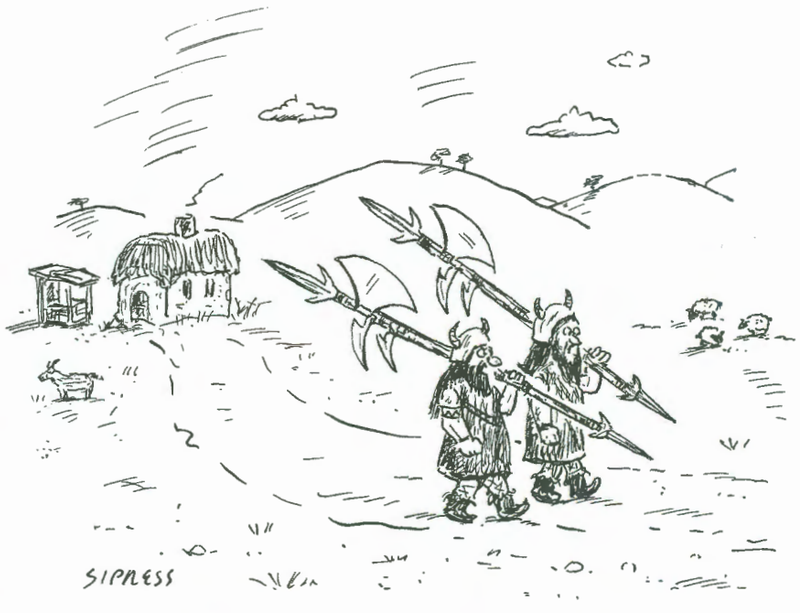
Oakmont uses a *Poa annua* of its own creation which bears few seeds and therefore results in what golfers describe as a "less pebbly" surface.

Dominy had risen to become U.S. Commissioner of Reclamation, the agency in the Department of the Interior which impounds water for as much as two hundred miles behind such constructions as Glen Canyon Dam, Grand Coulee Dam, Flaming Gorge Dam, Hoover Dam.

As it happens, those excerpts are not from the Shawn era but are all from pieces published in the twenty-first century. *The New Yorker,* in other words, has by no means forgotten the irregular restrictive which, or the regular earth from which it springs.

In the same books, incidentally, I also quoted Thoreau and Leviticus, and may have winced in Shawn's honor.

Four hundred yards above the interstate bridge we came to Carthagina Island, standing in a flatwater pool. Thoreau doesn't call it by name, but he describes it as "a large and



"People not from here don't understand. It's not a weapon—it's a way of life."

densely wooded island . . . the fairest which we had met with, with a handsome grove of elms at its head."

Nothing irregular there, H.D.T. It was the fairest island that you met with.

Leviticus:

> And the Lord spake unto Moses and to Aaron, saying unto them, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, These are the beasts which ye shall eat among all the beasts that are on the earth.

Actually, Mr. Shawn was just another spear-carrier in the hall of usage and grammar. The dais was occupied for more than half a century by Eleanor Gould, "Miss Gould," who was Mrs. Packard, and whose wide reputation seeped down even into the awareness of apprentice writers everywhere. I was scarcely eighteen, and already collecting rejection slips, when I heard or read about a twenty-two-year-old Vassar graduate named Eleanor Gould, who, in 1925, bought a copy of the brand-new *New Yorker*, read it, and then reread it with a blue pencil in her hand. When she finished, the magazine was a mottled blue on every page—a circled embarrassment of dangling modifiers, conflicting pronouns, absent commas, and over-all grammatical hash. She mailed the marked-up copy to Harold Ross, the founding editor, and Ross was said to have bellowed. What he bellowed was "Find this bitch and hire her!"

In reality, Eleanor Gould was nine years old when Ross invented *The New Yorker*. She grew up in Ohio, went to Oberlin College, and graduated in 1938. Seven years later, she sought a job at *The New Yorker*, and in her application she mentioned one or two examples of the sort of help she felt she could provide. For example, something is not different *than* something else; it is different *from* something else. It was Shawn, the managing editor, who hired her. There is no compact or simple title for what she did across the following fifty-four years. She was not an editor—not, at any rate, on the higher levels of holding writers' hands. She was not a fact checker, although she would surely mention any fact she looked upon as suspect. What she did was read the magazine in galley proofs and mark up the proofs. Each galley had a *New Yorker* column running down the middle and enough margin on either side to park a car. She filled the margins with remarks about usage, diction, indirection, word choice, punctuation, ambiguities, and so forth. Her completed product was sent on to the writer's editor, who read the marginalia and later brought up selected items with the writer, or just handed the writer the Gould proof, as it was known, and let the writer soak it up. Robert Bingham, who was my principal editor for sixteen years (until brain cancer ended his relatively young life and with it his exceptional capability), always passed the Gould proof along to me, almost always saying, "When she says 'Grammar,' sit up!"

On a highly competitive list, her foremost peeve in factual writing was indirection—sliding facts in sideways, expecting a reader to gather rather than receive information. You don't start off like an atmospheric fictionist: "The house on Lovers' Lane was where the lovers loved loving." A Gould proof would have asked, "What house?" "What lovers?" "Where is Lovers' Lane?" In short, if you are introducing something, introduce it. Don't get artistic with the definite article. If you say "a house," you are introducing it. If you say "the house," the reader knows about it because you mentioned it earlier. Mr. Shawn was influenced by Miss Gould far more than vice versa. He was a bear on indirection.

Her suggested fixes did not always rise into comparison with invisible mending. Some writers developed reactions in the tantrum range. Nothing, though, was being forced upon the prose. If the writer wished to ignore a salient comment from Miss Gould instead of slapping the forehead and feeling grateful, that was up to the writer. It was the writer's signed piece. If the writer preferred warts, warts prevailed. A Gould proof rarely endeavored to influence in any manner the structure or thesis of a piece, and was not meant to. Its purpose, according to Miss Gould, was to help a writer achieve an intent in the clearest possible way. She sat you up, let me tell you. And not only did you not

BEACH WEDDING

Being just a stone's throw from the pretty church
they often tumble out onto the beach,
unworldly creatures, the bride herself
an apparition of satins or silks
among stripy towels and inflatable sharks,
the groom in a morning suit, walking the sand
in bare feet, wearing his shoes on his hands.

She'll hitch her dress as far as her garter,
he'll carry her some way into the water.
Setting out for Atlantis they pause here
on the point of departure; her long train
floats on the surface and drifts and darkens.

Each empty evening a figure arrives
in a shooting jacket and combat trousers,
combing the shore with a metal detector,
grubbing for coins or keys, sweeping for mines.
The shovel hooked to the back of his belt
drags behind him like a devil's tail,
plowing a furrow, marking a lone trail.

Before first light a spring tide does its work,
panning for gold, resetting the sand,
while under a thin sheet husband and wife
lie badly wounded after the first fight.

—*Simon Armitage*

have to accept her suggested fixes but also—of course—you were free to fix the fixes according to the sound of things in your own head.

The general term for all this—from "house style" to a Gould-like proof—is copy editing. Miss Gould accepted the title "grammarian" for several decades, but grammar was only the base of things she reacted to as she monitored the magazine. House style was actually dealt with by others before she saw anything. House style is not a reference to the canard that an entire magazine can be made to sound as if it were written by one writer. House style is a mechanical application of things like spelling and italics. In *The New Yorker*, "travelling" is spelled with two "l"s. Book titles are framed in quotation marks. The names of magazines are italicized, and if the names are in the possessive—*TV Guide's, National Geographic's*—the "s" is italicized, too. The names of ships are not italicized. It is house style to put the two dots over a second consecutive identical vowel, because the house does not coöperate in deëmphasizing diaereses. In articles in the New York *Times* the name of everybody mentioned is preceded by Mr., Ms., or Mrs. (if not by a lofty title like President, General, Senator, or Cardinal), and, traditionally, if a *Times* reporter got into a skin boat with an Eskimo in the Chukchi Sea no personal pronoun was ever going to get into that boat. "A visitor" got into that boat. The Chicago Manual of Style is a quixotic attempt at one-style-fits-all for every house in America—newspapers, magazines, book publishers, blogishers.

Copy editors attend the flow of the prose and watch for leaks. Whatever else she was called, Eleanor Gould was a copy editor. She was one of several in a developing tradition that became a legacy. For a single closing issue, today's copy editors read *New Yorker* proofs so many times and in so many ways that they variously subtitle their own efforts. The five incumbents call themselves copy editors, page O.K.'ers, query proofreaders, and second readers. They all do all of it, and that's four job descriptions each for five people—twenty functionaries at five desks. They also do what Eleanor Gould did, and to this day when they finish working on a galley proof they say that it has been "Goulded." If they live in her shadow, they lengthen it.

They can be rarefied. Reading a sentence like "She didn't know what happened to the other five people travelling with her," they will see that what the writer could mean is that the traveller was one of eleven people on the trip. This is high-alloy nitpicking, yes. But why not? There is elegance in the less ambiguous way. She didn't know what happened to the five other people travelling with her.

To linger in the same thin air, what is the difference between "further" and "farther"? In the dictionary, look up "further." It says "farther." Look up "farther." It says "further." So you're safe and can roll over and sleep. But the distinction has a difference and O.K.'ers know what's O.K. "Farther" refers to measurable distance. "Further" is a matter of degree. Will you stop pelting me with derision? That's enough out of you. You'll go no further.

Getting into an authentic standoff with this multitalented, multifaceted, proofreading, query-proofing, copy-editing, grammar-wielding corps is difficult to do, and in fifty years I have done so twice. One standoff, which shall not be elaborated here, had to do with my flippant use of scholarly parenthetical in-text citations (Mourt, 1622) in a piece in which the works cited did not appear on what scholars call the Works Cited List. There was no Works Cited List. The other standoff—related to the issue of February 23, 1987—had to do with the possessive of the word Corps. It was the piece about southern Louisiana, the Atchafalaya River, the vast swamp, and the levees, spillways, and navigation locks of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It approached twenty thousand words in length, and, as you can imagine, the word Corps was all over the text like an eruption of measles. Often, the word occurred in the possessive. When I was in the eighth grade, Miss Bartholomew told us that a noun ending in "s" could be rendered possessive by an apostrophe alone or by an apostrophe followed by an additional "s," tie goes to the writer. Now, in the Louisiana piece, I had written Corps' for each and every possessive Corps, and the copy editors said that the possessive of Corps should be printed as Corps's. I thought I was in a morgue. I said so. The copy editors phalanxed—me versus the

whole department. They said that *The New Yorker* did not use the naked "s" apostrophe except with classical names like Jesus, Aeschylus, and Socrates; and even French names ending in a silent "s" were given the apostrophe "s," as in "François's," "*les jeunesses's*," "Epesses's"—also as in "Amiens's hidden cache" and "*le français's* frank mustache." With regard to Corps's, the copy editors were uncharacteristically unbending. I said that if Corps's had to be the form printed, I would have to stop all forward motion and rewrite every sentence in which that possessive occurred—in ways that would avoid using it, in ways that would get rid of "all those corpses." I'm sure I spluttered about "slabsful of recumbents" and said it would be "as if every one of those Corps's was wired to a cold toe." This threat was not considered persuasive, but eventually it led to someone's remarkable suggestion. Why not call the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and ask what they do when they need to express themselves in the possessive? I hadn't known that the Army Corps of Engineers was steeped in Fowler's Modern English Usage or Merriam-Webster's unparalleled English Usage or the flexibilities of grammar. How would the Corps write it? Corps', said the Corps. Never Corps's. Never the geminal "s"s.

Copy editors seldom stray into the realms of others, but when they do, their suggestions and comments are not unwelcome. Mary Norris, who joined *The New Yorker* in 1978 and has worked on untold numbers of my pieces, is a verbal diagnostician I would turn to for a first, second, or third opinion on just about anything. She doesn't mind when friends call her the Pencil Lady. In 2003, we were closing the piece that retraced the journey made in 1839 by Henry David Thoreau and his brother, John, down the Concord River to the Merrimack and up the Merrimack through and beyond Manchester, New Hampshire. In manuscript and in the initial galley proofs, there was a sentence (odd out of context) that said:

> In bed at night for three or four months I'd been listening to Manchester laughing—a chorus of Manchesterians sitting on those steps convulsed by us on the way uphill with our canoe.

Mary Norris wrote on the proof, "Would you like 'Mancunians'?"

It was as if she had handed me a rare gold coin. Five years later, when I happened to be writing about lacrosse in Manchester, England, I worked in the word "Mancunian" three times in one short paragraph. It was the second-best demonym I'd ever heard, almost matching Vallisoletano (a citizen of Valladolid). The planet, of course, is covered with demonyms, and after scouring the world in conversations on this topic with Mary Norris I began a severely selective, highly subjective A-list, extending Mancunian and Vallisoletano through thirty-five others at this writing, including Wulfrunian (Wolverhampton), Novocastrian (Newcastle), Trifluvian (Trois-Rivières), Leodensian (Leeds), Minneapolitan (Minneapolis), Hartlepudlian (Hartlepool), Liverpudlian (you knew it), Haligonian (Halifax), Varsovian (Warsaw), Providentian (Providence), and Tridentine (Trent).

One can do worse than pretend to be a copy editor. In my role as my students' editor, I go through their papers with them privately a comma at a time. Much of what I tell them I have learned by osmosis from those O.K. O.K.'ers at *The New Yorker*, not to mention a range of others, from Miss Bartholomew, of Princeton Junior High School, to Carmen Gomezplata, of Farrar, Straus & Giroux. The students, picking up the parlance, sometimes go off and copy-edit their roommates. This has led to disputes, and I have been

asked to settle the disputes. My name isn't Strunk. I'm just another editee. But I do what I can, as, for example, after two such people recently got into a squabble over—imagine this—the possessive plural of "attorney general." The question came to me in an e-mail: "If more than one attorney general possess a number of cars, how would you fill in the blanks (if at all) in the following sentence: 'the attorney[ ] general[ ] car[ ] were all parked next to one another'?"

Both Web. II and Random House say flatly that the plural of "attorney general" is both "attorneys general" and "attorney generals." That being so, I put on my robe, rapped the gavel, and said from the bench, "If you accept that the two forms are equal, I think you would write attorney generals' cars and not attorneys general's cars—for obvious reasons (a sense of the sight and sound of words has to kick in somewhere or the writer is missing one or two marbles)." What would I personally do? None of the above. I would refer to "the cars of the attorneys general." But that's just a matter of choice.

I work in a fake medieval turret on the roof of a campus building. When I come out and walk around, bumping into friends, they tend to ask me, "What are you working on?" Which is one reason I don't often come out and walk around. I always feel like a parrot answering that question, and a nervous ill-humored parrot if I am writing a first draft. A few years ago, I had the luxury of a one-word reply.

"What are you working on?"

"Chalk."

"Chalk?"

"Chalk."

That did it. That seemed to be one more syllable than anyone wished to pursue.

But when the question comes in a note from one of your own daughters it is wise not to wax monosyllabic. Jenny, for example, was an assistant editor at Alfred A. Knopf when she innocently asked what I was working on, and got this reply:

"Dear Jenny: What am I working on? How is it going? Since you asked, at this point I have no confidence in this piece of writing. It tries a number of things I probably shouldn't be trying. It tries to use the present tense for the immediacy that the present tense develops, but without allowing any verb tense to become befouled in a double orientation of time. It tells its story inside out. Like the ship I'm writing about, it may have a crack in its hull. And I've barely started. After four months and nine days of staring into this monitor for what has probably amounted in aggregate to something closely approaching a thousand hours, that's enough. I'm going fishing." ♦