

Preface

Language is one of the few common experiences humanity has. Not all of us can walk; not all of us can sing; not all of us like pickles. But we all have an inborn desire to communicate why we can't walk or sing or stomach pickles. To do that, we use our language, a vast index of words and their meanings we've acquired, like linguistic hoarders, throughout our lives. We eventually come to a place where we can look another person in the eye and say, or write, or sign, "I don't do pickles."

The problem comes when the other person responds, "What do you mean by 'do,' exactly?"

What *do* you mean? It's probable that humanity has been defining in one way or another since we first showed up on the scene. We see it in children today as they acquire their native language: it begins with someone's explaining the universe around them to a rubbery blob of drooling baby, then progresses to that blob understanding the connection between the sound coming out of Mama's or Papa's mouth—"cup"—and the thing Mama or Papa is pointing to. Watching the connection happen is like watching nuclear fission in miniature: there is a flash behind the eyes, a bunch of synapses all firing at once, and then a lot of frantic pointing and data collection. The baby points; an obliging adult responds with the word that represents that object. And so we begin to define.

As we grow, we grind words into finer grist. We learn to pair the word "cat" with "meow"; we learn that lions and leopards are also called "cats," though they have as much in common with your long-haired Persian house cat as a teddy bear has with a grizzly bear. We set up a little mental index card that lists all the things that come to mind when someone says the word "cat," and then when we learn that in parts of Ireland bad weather is called "cat," our eyes widen and we start stapling little slips of addenda to that card.

At heart, we are always looking for that one statement that captures the ineffable, universal catness represented by the word "cat," the thing that encompasses the lion "cat" and the domestic-lazybones "cat" and the bad weather in Ireland, too. And so we turn to the one place where that statement is most likely to be found: the dictionary.

We read the definitions given there with little thought about how they actually make it onto the page. Yet every part of a dictionary definition is

crafted by a person sitting in an office, their^{*1} eyes squeezed shut as they consider how best to describe, concisely and accurately, that weather meaning of the word “cat.” These people expend enormous amounts of mental energy, day in and day out, to find just the right words to describe “ineffable,” wringing every word out of their sodden brains in the hopes that the perfect words will drip to the desk. They must ignore the puddle of useless words accumulating around their feet and seeping into their shoes.

In the process of learning how to write a dictionary, lexicographers must face the Escher-esque logic of English and its speakers. What appears to be a straightforward word ends up being a linguistic fun house of doors that open into air and staircases that lead to nowhere. People’s deeply held convictions about language catch at your ankles; your own prejudices are the millstone around your neck. You toil onward with steady plodding, losing yourself to everything but the goal of capturing and documenting this language. Up is down,^{*2} bad is good,^{*3} and the smallest words will be your downfall. You’d rather do nothing else.

We approach this raucous language the same way we approach our dictionary: word by word.

*1 Throughout this book, I will be using the singular “their” in place of the gender-neutral “his” or the awkward “his or her” when the gender of the referent isn’t known. I know some people think this is controversial, but this usage goes back to the fourteenth century. Better writers than I have used the singular “their” or “they,” and the language has not yet fallen all to hell.

*2 **up** *adv.*...**7 b** (1) : to a state of completeness or finality (*MWU*; see the bibliography for more details)

down *adv.*...**3 d** : to completion (*MWU*)

*3 **bad** *adj.*...**10 slang a** : GOOD, GREAT (*MWC11*)

Hrafnkell

On Falling in Love

We are in an uncomfortably small conference room. It is a cool June day, and though I am sitting stock-still on a corporate chair in heavy air-conditioning, I am sweating heavily through my dress. This is what I do in job interviews.

A month earlier, I had applied for a position at Merriam-Webster, America's oldest dictionary company. The posting was for an editorial assistant, a bottom-of-the-barrel position, but I lit up like a penny arcade when I saw that the primary duty would be to write and edit English dictionaries. I cobbled together a résumé; I was invited to interview. I found the best interview outfit I could and applied extra antiperspirant (to no avail).

Steve Perrault, the man who sat opposite me, was (and still is) the director of defining at Merriam-Webster and the person I hoped would be my boss. He was very tall and very quiet, a sloucher like me, and seemed almost as shyly awkward as I was, even while he gave me a tour of the modest, nearly silent editorial floor. Apparently, neither of us enjoyed job interviews. I, however, was the only one perspiring lavishly.

“So tell me,” he ventured, “why you are interested in lexicography.”

I took a deep breath and clamped my jaw shut so I did not start blabbing. This was a complicated answer.

—

I grew up the eldest, book-loving child of a blue-collar family that was not particularly literary. According to the hagiography, I started reading at three, rattling off the names of road signs on car trips and pulling salad-dressing bottles out of the fridge to roll their tangy names around on my tongue: *Blue Chee-see*, *Eye-tal-eye-un*, *Thouse-and Eyes-land*. My parents cooed over my precociousness but thought little of it.

I chawed my way through board books, hoarded catalogs, decimated the two monthly magazines we subscribed to (*National Geographic* and *Reader's Digest*) by reading them over and over until they fell into tatters. One day my father came home from his job at the local power plant, exhausted, and dropped down onto the couch next to me. He stretched, groaning, and plopped his hard hat on my head. "Whatcha reading, kiddo?" I held the book up for him to see: *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, a book from my mother's nursing days of yore. "I'm reading about scleroderma," I told him. "It's a disease that affects skin." I was about nine years old.

When I turned sixteen, I discovered more adult delights: Austen, Dickens, Malory, Stoker, a handful of Brontës. I'd sneak them into my room and read until I couldn't see straight.

It wasn't story (good or bad) that pulled me in; it was English itself, the way it felt in my braces-caged mouth and rattled around my adolescent head. As I grew older, words became choice weapons: What else does a dopey, short, socially awkward teenage girl have? I was a capital-*n* Nerd and treated accordingly. "Never give them the dignity of a response" was the advice of my grandmother, echoed by my mother's terser "Just ignore them." But why play dumb when I could outsmart them, if only for my own satisfaction? I snuck our old bargain-bin *Roget's Thesaurus* from the bookshelf and tucked it under my shirt, next to my heart, before scurrying off to my room with it. "Troglodyte," I'd mutter when one of the obnoxious guys in the hall would make a rude comment about another girl's body. "Cacafuego," I seethed when a classmate would brag about the raging kegger the previous weekend. Other teens settled for "brown noser"; I put my heart into it with "pathetic, lickspitling ass."

But lexophile that I was, I never considered spending a career on words. I was a practical blue-collar girl. Words were a hobby: they were not going to make me a comfortable living. Or rather, I wasn't going to squander a college education—something no one else in my family had—just to lock myself in a different room a few thousand miles away and read for fourteen hours a day (though I felt wobbly with infatuation at the very idea). I went off to college with every intention of becoming a doctor. Medicine was a safe profession, and I would certainly have plenty of time to read when I had made it as a neurosurgeon.^{*1}

Fortunately for my future patients, I didn't survive organic chemistry—a course that exists solely to weed slobs like me out of the doctoring pool. I wandered into my sophomore year of college rudderless, a handful of humanities classes on my schedule. One of the women in my dorm quizzed me

about my classes over Raisin Bran. “Latin,” I droned, “philosophy of religion, a colloq on medieval Icelandic family sagas—”

“Hold up,” she said. “Medieval Icelandic family sagas. *Medieval Icelandic family sagas.*” She put her spoon down. “I’m going to repeat this to you one more time so you can hear how insane that sounds: *medieval Icelandic family sagas.*”

It did sound insane, but it sounded far more interesting than organic chemistry. If my sojourn into premed taught me anything, it was that numbers and I didn’t get along. “Okay, fine,” she said, resuming breakfast, “it’s your college debt.”

—

The medieval Icelandic family sagas are a collection of stories about the earliest Norse settlers of Iceland, and while a good number of them are based in historically verifiable events, they nonetheless sound like daytime soaps as written by Ingmar Bergman. Families hold grudges for centuries, men murder for political advantage, women connive to use their husbands or fathers to bring glory to the family name, people marry and divorce and remarry, and their spouses all die under mysterious circumstances. There are also zombies and characters named “Thorgrim Cod-Biter” and “Ketil Flat-Nose.” If there was any cure for my failed premed year, this course was it.

But the thing that hooked me was the class during which my professor (who, with his neatly trimmed red beard and Oxbridge manner, would no doubt have been called Craig the Tweedy in one of the sagas) took us through the pronunciation of the Old Norse names.

We had just begun reading a saga whose main character is named Hrafnkell. I, like the rest of my classmates, assumed this unfortunate jumble of letters was pronounced \huh-RAW-funk-ul\ or \RAW-funk-ell. No, no, the professor said. Old Norse has a different pronunciation convention. “Hrafnkell” should be pronounced—and the sounds that came out of his mouth are not able to be rendered in the twenty-six letters available to me here. The “Hraf” is a guttural, rolled \HRAHP\, as if you stopped a sprinter who was out of breath and clearing their throat and asked them to say “crap.” The *-n-* is a swallowed hum, a little break so your vocal cords are ready for the glorious flourish that is “-kell.” Imagine saying “blech”—the sound kids in commercials make when presented with a plate of steamed broccoli instead of Strawberry Choco-Bomb Crunch cereal. Now replace the /bl/ with a /k/ as in “kitten.” That is the pronunciation of “Hrafnkell.”

No one could get that last sound right; the whole class sounded like cats disgorging hair balls. “*Ch, ch,*” our professor said, and we dutifully mimicked: *uch, uch*. “I’m spitting all over myself,” one student complained, whereupon the professor brightened. “Yeah,” he chirped, “yeah, you’ve got it!”

That final double-*l* in Old Norse, he said, was called the voiceless alveolar lateral fricative. “What?” I blurted, and he repeated: “voiceless alveolar lateral fricative.” He went on to say it was used in Welsh, too, but I was lost to his explanation, instead tumbling in and over that label. *Voiceless alveolar lateral fricative*. A sound that you make, that you *give voice* to, that is nonetheless called “voiceless” and that, when issued, can be aimed like a stream of chewing tobacco, *laterally*. And “fricative”—that sounded hopelessly, gorgeously obscene.

I approached the professor after class. I wanted, I told him, to major in *this*—Icelandic family sagas and weird pronunciations and whatever else there was.

“You could do medieval studies,” he suggested. “Old English is the best place to start.”

The following semester, twenty other students and I sat around a large conference table of the kind you only see in liberal arts colleges or movies with war rooms in them, while the same professor introduced us to Old English. Old English is the great-granddaddy of Modern English, an ancestor language that was spoken in England between roughly A.D. 500 and 1100. It looks like drunk, sideways German with some extra letters thrown in for good measure:

Hē is his brōðor.
Ʒæt wæs mīn wīf.
Ʒis lif is sceort.
Hwī singeð ðes monn?

But speak it aloud, and the family resemblance is clear:

He is his brother.
That was my wife.
This life is short.
Why is that man singing?

We stuttered our way through the translations. My professor went on to explain the pronunciation conventions of Old English; there is a handy and completely abstruse pronunciation section in our *Bright’s Old English Grammar*,^{*2} and the class delved right in.

But that first translation exercise left me with an itch at the back of my brain that wouldn't go away: "Hwī singeð ðes monn?" I stared at the sentence for a while, wondering why the other sentences seemed to match their translations so well, but this one didn't.

This was not the first of these itches: I had had them in high-school German class, when I realized how *Vater* and *Mutter* and *Schwester* looked like Amish cousins of "father" and "mother" and "sister." I had had the same mental scratch in Latin, when I mumbled through my *amo, amas, amat* and realized that "amour"—an English word that refers to love or the beloved—looked a lot like the Latin verb *amare*, "to love." I waited until after class and asked my professor about his translation of "hwī singeð ðes monn?" and he confessed that it wasn't a literal, word-for-word translation; that would be "why singeth this man?" The itching intensified. I was vaguely aware that Shakespeare used certain words that we didn't anymore—"singeth" being one of them—but I had never wondered why those earlier forms were different from the current ones. English is English, right? But English, I was fast learning, was fluid. "Singeth" wasn't just a highfalutin flourish deployed to lend a sense of elevation and elegance to Shakespeare's writings; "singeth" was a normal, boring way to say "sing" in the late sixteenth century. And it happened to be a holdover from Anglo-Saxon. We used "singeth" as the third-person form longer than we used "sings."

I had spent years hoovering up words as quickly and indiscriminately as I could, the linguistic equivalent of a dog snarfing up spilled popcorn; I gobbled up "sing" and "singeth" without much thought about why the forms were so different. My only thought was *stupid English*. But those illogical lunacies of English that we all suffer through and rage against aren't illogical at all. It's all spelled out here, in the baby pictures of English.

From that point on, I was a woman obsessed: I traced words across the rough sword and buckler of Old English, over the sibilant seesaw of Middle English, through the bawdy wink-wink-nudge-nudge of Shakespeare; I picked and chipped at words like "supercilious" until I found the cool, slow-voweled Latin and Greek under them. I discovered that "nice" used to mean "lewd" and "stew" used to mean "whorehouse." I hadn't just fallen down this rabbit hole: I saw that hole in the distance and ran full tilt at it, throwing myself headlong into it. The more I learned, the more I fell in love with this wild, vibrant whore of a language.

Hands clasped tightly together, I tried to give Steve Perrault a heavily abridged and eloquent version of this history. He sat impassive across from me as I blithered, awash in flop sweat and aware—perhaps for the first time since I answered the want ad—that I really, really wanted this job, and I was really, really rambling.

I stopped and leaned in, breathless. “I just,” I began, fanning my hands in front of me as if to waft intelligence my way. But it didn’t come: all I had was the naked, heartfelt truth. “I just love English,” I burst. “I love it. I really, really love it.”

Steve took a deep breath. “Well,” he deadpanned, “there are few who share your enthusiasm for it.”

I started as an editorial assistant at Merriam-Webster three weeks later.

—

Merriam-Webster is the oldest dictionary maker in America, dating unofficially back to 1806 with the publication of Noah Webster’s first dictionary, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, and officially back to 1844, when the Merriam brothers bought the rights to Webster’s dictionary after his death. The company has been around longer than Ford Motors, Betty Crocker, NASCAR, and thirty-three of the fifty American states. It’s more American than football (a British invention) and apple pie (ditto). According to the lore, the flagship product of the company, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, is one of the best-selling books in American history and may be second in sales only to the Bible.*³

You might expect such an august American institution to be housed in lofty Georgian or neoclassical digs, something in marble with a goodly number of columns, and a pristine lawn. Think of the architectural equivalent of the word “dictionary,” and what springs to mind is stained glass, vaulted ceilings, dark wood paneling, majestic draperies.

The reality is quite different. Merriam-Webster is housed in a modest two-story brick building located in what is euphemistically known as a “transitional neighborhood” in Springfield, Massachusetts. Drug deals occasionally happen in the parking lot, and there are bullet holes in the safety glass at the back of the building. The front door, framed with some moderately interesting brickwork and a lovely oriel window, is always locked; ring the bell and no one will answer it. Employees enter through the back of the building, hunched and hurried, like they’re sneaking into one of the strip clubs around the corner. The interior is

full of odd juxtapositions, with historic ephemera sprinkled throughout a building whose aesthetic is best described as Office Bland. One side of the basement is a nonfunctioning cafeteria from the 1950s, which was converted to a lunchroom with stout wooden tables and vast echoic linoleum surfaces, with a small office tucked in the corner at “garden level.” The other side of the basement is wire-caged, dimly lit clutter that houses oddities like old grade-school dioramas of important moments in American history that have been donated to the company, crates of Urdu-language printings of our dictionaries, and the fusty glut of old papers bunged hastily into metal bookshelves. Wandering through the tight aisles, you can feel the heebie-jeebies brushing the back of your neck; it is the storage room of David Lynch’s dreams.

It’s not all Lovecraftian unease: two stately conference rooms bookend the building, done up with painted wood paneling and long drapes, dominated by massive, dark conference tables that are always polished to a mirror shine and upon which *no one* is allowed to place anything except special felt-backed desk pads. But those are the only rooms of grandeur in the place. The rest of the building is a rabbit warren of cubicles in varying shades of that noncolor, taupe. Even the coffee seems anachronistic: it’s anonymous stuff that comes in oversized orange foil packets—packets whose vintage seems to match the industrial coffeemaker we use that dates back to the Johnson administration. The grit in the foil packets produces coffee that tastes like wet cardboard, but it is our coffee and we will not change it. Recently, the editorial floor finally acquired one of those new one-cup jobbies that hiss like an angry lizard. People nonetheless make and drink the vile orange-foil stuff.

There’s an odd juxtaposition of people, too. Downstairs you’ll find the employees who enjoy talking: customer service, marketing, IT. It’s not a loud office, but there’s conversation, laughter, the electronic burble of phone calls, the whump of boxes being hefted and dumped. People prairie-dog over the tops of their cubicles and call to their co-workers: “Hey, you going for a walk at lunch today?” It is perfectly, blandly normal. Head up the echoey stairwell to the second floor, and the happy din damps into silence. You come to a landing with two heavy fire doors facing each other, closed. Listen; it sounds empty, abandoned, perhaps a little haunted. It doesn’t help that it’s also much darker in the stairwell than you anticipated. The tableau gets you wondering what weirdnesses they’ve squirreled away up here—more unsettling dioramas, perhaps, or Miss Havisham languishing in a dusty chaise longue—when one of the doors suddenly swings open. The person on the other side starts, eyes like dinner plates, then ducks their head, whispers, “Sorry,” and scurries around you. The door is open: beyond are more cubicles, lots of books, and the *feel* of

people, though not the *sound* of people. Welcome to the editorial floor.

The vast majority of people give no thought to the dictionary they use: it merely *is*, like the universe. To one group of people, the dictionary was handed to humanity *ex coeli*, a hallowed leather-clad tome of truth and wisdom as infallible as God. To another group of people, the dictionary is a thing you picked up in the bargain bin, paperback and on sale for a dollar, because you felt that an adult should own a dictionary. Neither group realizes that their dictionary is a human document, constantly being compiled, proofread, and updated by actual, living, awkward people. In that unassuming brick building in Springfield, there are a couple dozen people who spend their workweek doing nothing but making dictionaries—sifting the language, categorizing it, describing it, alphabetizing it. They are word nerds who spend the better parts of their lives writing and editing dictionary definitions, thinking deeply about adverbs, and slowly, inexorably going blind. They are lexicographers.

To be fair, most lexicographers didn't think much about the people behind dictionaries before they applied for their jobs. For all of my love of English, I gave scant thought to the dictionary and never even realized that there was more than one dictionary; there is no "*the* dictionary" but rather "*a* dictionary" or "*one of several* dictionaries." The red Webster's dictionary that we all used is just one of many "Webster's" dictionaries, published by different publishers; "Webster's" is not a proprietary name, and so any publisher can slap it on any reference they like. And they do: nearly every American reference publisher since the nineteenth century has put out a reference and called it a "Webster's."⁴ But I knew none of this until I started working at Merriam-Webster. If I gave dictionaries so little thought, then I gave lexicography itself bugger all.

This is the song of my people. Most lexicographers had no clue that such a career path existed until they were smack in the middle of it.

Neil Serven, an editor at Merriam-Webster, is an outlier. He sums up his brief childhood musings on how dictionaries came to be thusly: "I imagined dark halls and angry people."

There are not many of us plying our trade these days; language may be a growth industry, but dictionaries are not. (When's the last time *you* bought a new dictionary? I thought so.) And yet whenever I tell people what I do—and after they make me repeat it, because the statement "I write dictionaries" is so unexpected—one of the first things they ask is if we're hiring. Sit in a room all

day, read, ponder the meanings of words—to anyone who even remotely likes words, it sounds like the ideal job.

At Merriam-Webster, there are only two formal requirements to be a lexicographer: you must have a degree in any field from an accredited four-year college or university, and you must be a native speaker of English.

People are surprised (and perhaps slightly appalled) to hear that we don't require lexicographers to be linguists or English majors. The reality is that a diverse group of drudges will yield better definitions. Most lexicographers are “general definers”; that is, they define all sorts of words from all subject areas, from knitting to military history to queer theory to hot-rodding. And while you don't need expertise in every field conceivable in order to define the vocabulary used in that field, there are some fields whose lexicon is a little more opaque than others:

When P^* is less than P , the Fed can ease its credit policies, allowing bank credit and the money supply to grow at a faster rate. The P^* formula is:

$$P^* = M2 \times V^*/Q^*$$

where $M2$ is an official measure of the money supply (checks plus checkable deposits, savings, and time deposit accounts), V^* is the velocity of $M2$, or the number of times that money turns over, and Q^* is the estimated value of Gross National Product at a nominal growth rate of 2.5% a year.

To someone like me who has an antagonistic relationship with math, this is a nightmare. What's P ? Checkable deposits are different from checks? Money has *velocity* (and not just away from me)? If there's someone on staff, however, who has taken economics courses, they are likely equipped to navigate this sea of jargon. Consequently, we have a minyan of English and linguistics majors on staff, but we also have economists, scientists of every stripe, historians, philosophers, poets, artists, mathematicians, international business majors, and enough medievalists to staff a Renaissance Faire.

We also require that our lexicographers be native speakers of English, for a very practical reason: that's the language we focus on, and you need mastery over all its idioms and expressions. It is a sad reality that in your daily work as a lexicographer, you will read some good writing and a lot of mediocre and terrible writing. You need to be able to know, without being told, that “the cat are yowling” is not grammatically correct whereas “the crowd are loving it” is just very British.

Your status as a native speaker of English also becomes a place of comfort you can return to throughout your career. There will come a point when you are deep in the weeds of a word, hunched over your desk in bone-crushing, head-

in-hands concentration. You will have been staring at this entry for days, unsure of how to proceed, and that filament of sanity inside you will suddenly fizzle and snap. It will become clear to you, in the space between heartbeats, why you are having a hard time with this entry: it is because you realize now that you do not, in fact, actually speak English—that the words you are reading are in some Low German dialect and you are no longer certain that they mean anything. It will be 3:00 p.m. on a Wednesday in April; you will glimpse preternaturally sunny weather through the sliver of window near your desk; the shouts of children walking home from school will sound both alien and familiar; cool, metallic panic will slide down your gullet and wave up at you from your stomach. Don't be alarmed: this is normal when you spend all day alone with nothing but the English language. Simply stand, walk briskly downstairs, and ask the first marketing or customer service person you see, "Am I speaking English?" They will assure you that you are. They might remind you that we hire only people who speak it natively.

There are some additional unmeasurable and unstated requirements to be a lexicographer. First and foremost, you must be possessed of something called "sprachgefühl," a German word we've stolen into English that means "a feeling for language." Sprachgefühl is a slippery eel, the odd buzzing in your brain that tells you that "planting the lettuce" and "planting misinformation" are different uses of "plant," the eye twitch that tells you that "plans to demo the store" refers not to a friendly instructional stroll on how to shop but to a little exuberance with a sledgehammer. Not everyone has sprachgefühl, and you don't know if you are possessed of it until you are knee-deep in the English language, trying your best to navigate the mucky swamp of it. I use "possessed of" advisedly: *You will never have sprachgefühl, but rather sprachgefühl will have you, like a Teutonic imp that settles itself at the base of your skull and hammers at your head every time you read something like "crispy-fried rice" on a menu. The imp will dig its nails into your brain, and instead of ordering take-out Chinese, you will be frozen at the take-out counter, wondering if "crispy-fried rice" refers to plain rice that has been flash fried or to the dish known as "fried rice" but perhaps prepared in a new and exciting way. That hyphen, you think, could just be slapdash misuse, or...* And your Teutonic imp giggles and squeezes its claws a little harder.

If you don't have sprachgefühl, it will become very apparent about six months into your tenure as a lexicographer. Don't be disappointed. This just means you can leave for a more lucrative job, like take-out delivery driver.

You must also be temperamentally suited to sitting in near silence for eight hours a day and working entirely alone. There will be other people in the office—you will hear them shuffling papers and muttering to themselves—but you will have almost no contact with them. In fact, you are warned of this over and over again. The first part of my interview at Merriam-Webster was a tour of the sepulchrally quiet editorial floor. Steve pointed out that there were no phones at most desks; if you needed to make or take a phone call, for whatever horrible reason, there are two phone booths on the editorial floor available for your use. The phone booths are still there. They are rarely used, tiny, unventilated, and not soundproofed; they are not rarely used *because* they are tiny, unventilated, and not soundproofed, however. They are rarely used because editors don't talk on the phone if they can help it. I marveled aloud at the phone booths, and Steve looked askance. Was I expecting to have a phone at my desk? he wondered. I assured him I was not. My previous job as an assistant in a busy office left me drained and bone shaken, and I nearly wept for joy at hearing I wouldn't have a phone at my desk.

The second part of my interview was conducted with Fred Mish, Merriam-Webster's then editor in chief, who sat in one of the small conference rooms like a spider in his lair, waiting for the fly in her nice interview clothes to come twitching in. He cast an eye over my résumé and asked with some incredulity if I *enjoyed* interacting with people, because if I did, then I should understand this job promised nothing of the sort. "Office chitchat of the sort you're likely used to," he grumped, "is not conducive to good lexicography and doesn't happen." He wasn't lying: I began work at Merriam-Webster in July; it took me about a month to exchange hellos (and in some cases just hellos) with the other forty editors on the floor. One of my co-workers told me that there had been a formal Rule of Silence—and you could hear the capitalization as he said it—on the editorial floor until the early 1990s. I was recently told that was a fiction, but one of the editors who was hired in the '50s to work on *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* claims it was true. "The silence of the lambs was a fact," says E. Ward Gilman, one of the greats of lexicography and an editor emeritus at Merriam-Webster, "although I don't remember who would have kept telling newbies about it."

Emily Brewster, who has been an editor at Merriam-Webster for over fifteen years, sums up the secret longing of every lexicographer: "Yes, this is what I want to do. I want to sit alone in a cubicle all day and think about words and not really talk to anybody else. That sounds great!"

There's a good reason for the quiet. Lexicography is an intermingling of

science and art, and both require a commitment to silent concentration. Your job as a definer is to find the exact right words to describe a word's meaning, and that takes some serious brain wringing. "Measly," for example, is often used to mean "small," and you could get away with simply defining it as such and moving on. But there's a particular kind of smallness to "measly" that isn't the same sort of smallness associated with the word "teeny"—"measly" implies a sort of grudging, grubbing smallness, a miserly meagerness, and so as a definer you begin wandering the highways and byways of English looking for the right word to describe the peculiar smallness of "measly." There is nothing worse than being just a syllable's length away from the perfect, Platonic ideal of the definition for "measly," being able to see it crouching in the shadows of your mind, only to have it skitter away when your co-worker begins a long and loud conversation that touches on the new coffee filters, his colonoscopy, and the chances that the Sox will go all the way this year.*⁵

Of course, we do need to occasionally communicate with each other in order to function. We now use e-mail, but until computers were common on the floor, there was a system of interoffice communication called "the pink."

At Merriam-Webster, every editor has the same set of tools at their desk: a personalized date stamp, with your last name and the date, which is how you sign and date any physical thing that crosses your desk; a fistful of pens and pencils (including a few stubby old Stabilo pencils, formerly used to mark insertions and deletions on shiny-papered galleys and now hoarded against the coming Pencil Apocalypse); and a box of three-by-five index cards in pink, yellow, white, and blue. The colors are not to make your tan-gray cubicle festive; they have a purpose. White cards are for citations, any little slip of English usage that you want to make note of. Blue cards are for production reference. Yellow cards, or buffs, as we call them, are for drafted definitions only. Pink cards, or pinks, are for any miscellaneous notes for the file: typo reports, questions about how to handle an entry, comments on existing definitions.*⁶ Pinks also ended up being used for personal communications.

It worked like this. Say you have a group of editors who typically go out to lunch together on Friday. You don't want to bother each editor by sauntering over to their cubicle to blab about whether it's Indian or Thai this week, so you write a pink. The initials of each editor go in the upper-right corner of the card; the question goes in the middle. You sign the note and throw it in your out-box for the first morning interoffice mail pickup. The note goes to the first editor on the list; they answer, then cross their initials off and drop the note in the next editor's in-box.

Circuitous and less efficient than a conversation? Absolutely. But risk walking to a colleague's desk only to see them startle and freeze like a rabbit as the hawk swoops in? No, thank you.

Because gabbing around the watercooler isn't encouraged, lexicographers are perhaps a little awkward when it comes to the niceties of casual human interaction. When I was being given my tour of the building after joining the staff, we came up to one editor's desk to find it was chock-full of historical Merriam-Webster ephemera: old advertising posters and giant prints of historical illustrations and, above them all, a black-and-white portrait of a man. The editor happily explained what all the pictures and posters were, then pointed at the portrait. "And that," he said, "is an editor who used to work here, and one day he went home and shot himself." My eyes widened; he merely crossed his arms and asked us where we had all gone to college.

Nowhere else is our institutional introversion borne out than at the Merriam-Webster holiday parties. The parties are usually held in the afternoon, and in the basement of the building, which in some years is literally spruced up for the occasion. Traditionally, the editors ring the cafeteria in groups of twos and threes, clutching our wine and murmuring quietly among ourselves while the marketing and customer service folks whoop it up in the center of the room near the shrimp cocktail, having quantifiable, voluble amounts of loud fun. It's not that editors don't like fun; it's that we like our fun to be a little less whoopy.*⁷ "We're not antisocial," says Emily Vezina, a cross-reference editor. "We're just social in our own way."

—

Lexicographers spend a lifetime swimming through the English language in a way that no one else does; the very nature of lexicography demands it. English is a beautiful, bewildering language, and the deeper you dive into it, the more effort it takes to come up to the surface for air. To be a lexicographer, you must be able to sit with a word and all its many, complex uses and whittle those down into a two-line definition that is both broad enough to encompass the vast majority of the word's written use and narrow enough that it actually communicates something specific about this word—that "teeny" and "measly," for instance, don't refer to the same kind of smallness. You must set aside your own linguistic and lexical prejudices about what makes a word worthy, beautiful, or right, to tell the truth about language. Each word must be given equal treatment, even when you think the word that has come under your consideration is a foul turd that should be flushed from English. Lexicographers set themselves apart from the world in a weird sort of monastic way and devote

themselves wholly to the language.

Which leads to the third, and possibly most slippery, personality quirk required to do lexicography: the ability to quietly do the same task on the same book until the universe collapses in on itself like a soufflé in a windstorm. It's not just that defining itself is repetitive; it's that the project timelines in lexicography are traditionally so long they could reasonably be measured in geologic epochs. A new edition of the *Collegiate Dictionary* takes anywhere from three to five years to complete, and that's assuming that most of the editors on staff are working only on the *Collegiate*. Our last printed unabridged dictionary, *Webster's Third New International*, took a staff of almost 100 editors and 202 outside consultants twelve years to write. We began work on its successor in 2010; because of attrition, there are, as of this writing, 25 editors on staff. If we hold to the schedule, the new *Unabridged* should be finished a few weeks before Christ returns in majesty to judge the quick and the dead.

Lexicography moves so slowly that scientists classify it as a solid. When you finish defining, you must copyedit; when you finish copyediting, you must proofread; when you finish proofreading, you must proofread again, because there were changes and we need to double-check. When the dictionary finally hits the market, there is no grand party or celebration. (Too loud, too social.) We're already working on the next update to that dictionary, because language has moved on. There will never be a break. A dictionary is out of date the minute that it's done.

It is this slog through the fens of English that led Samuel Johnson, the unofficial patron saint of English lexicography, to define "lexicographer" in his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* as "a writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge." It's a definition people chuckle over, but it is in earnest. In a 1747 letter to the Earl of Chesterfield, Johnson writes,

I knew that the work in which I engaged is generally considered as drudgery for the blind, as the proper toil of artless industry; a task that requires neither the light of learning, nor the activity of genius, but may be successfully performed without any higher quality than that of bearing burthens with dull patience, and beating the track of the alphabet with sluggish resolution....It appeared that the province allotted me was of all the regions of learning generally confessed to be the least delightful, that it was believed to produce neither fruits nor flowers, and that after a long and laborious cultivation, not even the barren laurel had been found upon it.

Bearing burdens with patience, beating the track of the alphabet with sluggish resolution, the least delightful, the long and fruitlessly laborious—and that was how Samuel Johnson felt about lexicography *before* he started writing his famous *Dictionary*.

He didn't lighten up any once he had finished, either. The preface to his magnum opus begins,

It is the fate of those who toil at the lower employments of life, to be rather driven by the fear of evil, than attracted by the prospect of good; to be exposed to censure, without hope of praise; to be disgraced by miscarriage, or punished for neglect, where success would have been without applause, and diligence without reward. Among these unhappy mortals is the writer of dictionaries.

And yet these unhappy mortals continue their work. An academic friend who studies old dictionaries remarked that it seemed less like a job and more like a calling, and so, in some ways, it is. Every day, lexicographers plunge into the roiling mess of English, up to the elbows, to fumble and grasp at the right words to describe ennui, love, or chairs. They rattle with them, haul them out of the muck, and slap them flopping on the page, exhausted and exhilarated by the effort, then do it again. They do this work for no fame, because all their work is published anonymously under a company rubric, and certainly not for fortune, because the profit margins in lexicography are so narrow they're measured in cents. The process of creating a dictionary is magical, frustrating, brain wrenching, mundane, transcendent. It is ultimately a show of love for a language that has been called unlovely and unlovable.

Here's how it happens.

*1 No matter how book smart, we are all idiots at seventeen.

*2 The edition of *Bright's* I used was edited by Frederic Cassidy, a lexicographer of some renown. Lexicography and medievalists go together like swords and shields.

*3 The company lore is difficult to substantiate: the methodology behind many best-seller lists is murky and opaque. It's safe to say that the *Collegiate* is probably America's best-selling desk dictionary just by dint of being one of the oldest continuously published desk dictionaries around. No list I consulted placed it at number two, however.

*4 The company now called Merriam-Webster lost exclusive rights to the name "Webster" in 1908 when the First Circuit Court of Appeals averred that the name "Webster" had passed into the public domain when the copyright on *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* expired in 1889. Easy come, easy go.

*5 "Measly" is defined in the *Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition*, as "contemptibly small." Emily Brewster thinks it might be the best definition in the whole book.

*6 Even though everything has been electronic for some time, the word "pink" has stuck. When we annotate a production spreadsheet, we still refer to it as "sending a pink to the file."

*7 The editorial floor has its own holiday potluck that is much more our speed. The long galley tables are cleared off for the food, and editors congregate around the citation files, the tall banks of drawers holding our plates while we all practice talking in a normal tone of voice. The editorial potlucks have gone on for over twenty years and will probably go on for another twenty, along with

that damned coffemaker.