*Anne Lamott is a well-known writing teacher and author of novels and best-selling nonfiction, including*Bird by Bird (1994), Traveling Mercies (1999), All New People (1999), and Blue Shoe (2002). *She has taught at the University of California, Davis, and at writing workshops across the country. Lamott’s biweekly diary in the online magazine*Salon, “*Word by Word,” which ran from 1996 to 1999, was voted“The Best of the Web*” by Time *magazine*. Bird by Bird with Annie (1999) *documents a year of Lamott’s life, which Amazon.com characterizes as that of “your-run-of-the mill recovering alcoholic and drug addict, born again Christian, left wing liberal, and single mother who just so happens to write New York Times*—*best-selling books.” Lamott lives in northern California with her son.*

**The Crummy First Draft**

*Lamott’s*Bird by Bird *is an inspiring and often very funny guide to Writing. In this excerpt from the book, Lamott advises others how to begin writing by silencing their noisy inner critics.*

For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really crummy first drafts. The first draft is the child’s draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and vision come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, “Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?” you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory you let him. Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you know what you’re supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages.

I used to write reviews for *California*magazine before it folded. (My writing food reviews had nothing to do with the magazine, although every single review did cause a couple of canceled subscriptions. Some readers took umbrage at my comparing a mound of vegetable puree with various ex-presidents’ brains.) These reviews always took two days to write. First I’d go to a restaurant several times with a few opinionated, articulate friends in tow. I’d sit there writing down everything anyone said that was as tall interesting or funny. The on the following Monday I’d sit down at my desk with my notes, and try to write the review. Even after I’d been doing this for year, panic would set in. I’d try to write a lead, but instead I’d write a couple of dreadful sentences, XX them out, try again, XX everything out, and then think, calmly: I’m not going to be able to get the magic to work this time. I’m ruined. I’m through. I’m toast. Maybe, I’d think, I can get my old job back as a clerk-typist. But probably not. I’d get up and study my teeth in the mirror for a while. Then I’d stop, remember to breathe, make a few phone calls, hit the kitchen and chow down. Eventually I’d go back and sit down at my desk, and sigh for the next ten minutes. Finally I would pick up my one-inch picture frame, stare into it as if for the answer, and every time the answer would come: all I had to do was to write a really crummy first draft of, say, the opening paragraph. And no one was going to see it.

So I’d start writing without reining myself in. It was almost just typing, just making my fingers move. And the writing would be *terrible.*I’d write a lead paragraph that was a whole page, even

though the entire review could be three pages long, and then I’d start writing up descriptions of the food, one dish at a time, bird by bird, and the critics would be sitting on my shoulders, commenting like cartoon characters. They’d be pretending to snore, or rolling their eyes at my overwrought descriptions, no matter how hard I tried to tone those descriptions down, no matter how conscious I was of what a friend said to me gently in my early days of restaurant reviewing. “Annie,” she said, “it is just a piece of *chicken.*It is just a bit of *cake.”*

But because by then I had been writing for so long, I would eventually let myself trust the process—sort of, more or less. I’d write a first draft that was maybe twice as long as it should be, with a self-indulgent and boring beginning, stupefying description of the meal, lots of quotes from my black-humored friends that made them sound more like the Manson girls\* than food lovers, and no ending to speak of. The whole thing would be so long and incoherent and hideous that for the rest of the day I’d obsess about getting creamed by a car before I could write a decent second draft. I’d worry that people would read what I’d written and believe that the accident had really been suicide, that I had panicked because my talent was waning and my mind was shot.

The next day, though, I’d sit down, go through it all with a colored pen, take out everything I possibly could, find a new lead somewhere on the second page, figure out a kicky place to end it, and then write a second draft. It always turned out fine, sometimes even funny and weird and helpful. I’d go over it one more time and mail it in.

Then, a month later, when it was time for another review, the whole process would start again, complete with the fears that people would find my first draft before I could rewrite it.

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it’s loose or cramped or decayed, or even God help us healthy.

What I’ve learned to do when I sit down to work on a crummy first draft is to quiet the voices in my head. First there’s the vinegar-lipped Reader Lady, who says primly, “Well, *that’s*not very interesting is it?” And there’s the emaciated German male who writes these Orwellian\* memos detailing your thought crimes. And there are your parents over your lack of loyalty and discretion; and there’s William Burroughs\*, dozing off or shooting up because he finds you as bold and articulate as a houseplant; and so on. And there are also the dogs: let’s not forget the dogs, the dogs in their pen who will surely hurtle and snarl their way out if you ever *stop*writing, because writing is, for some of us, the latch that keeps the door of the pen closed, keep those crazy, ravenous dogs contained…

Close your eyes and get quiet for a minute, until the chatter starts up. Then isolate one of the voices and imagine the person speaking is a mouse. Pick it up by the tail and drop it in a mason jar. Then isolate another voice, pick it up by the tail, drop it in the jar. And so on. Drop in any high maintenance parental units, drop in any contractors, lawyers, colleagues, children, anyone who is whining in your head. Then put a lid on, and watch all these mouse people clawing at the glass, jabbering away, trying to make you feel crummy because you won’t do what they want—won’t give them more money, won’t be more successful, won’t see them more often. Then imagine that there is a volume-control button on the bottle. Turn it all the way up for a minute, and listen to the stream of angry, neglected, guilt-mongering voices. Then turn it all the way down and watch the frantic mice lunge at the glass, trying to get to you. Leave it down, and get back to your crummy first draft.

A writer friend of mine suggests opening the jar and shooting them all in the head. But I think he’s a little angry, and I’m sure nothing like this would ever occur to you.

\*1The Manson girls were young troubled members of the cult led by Charles Manson (born

1934). In 1969 Manson and some of his followers were convicted of murder in California. [Editor’s note.]

\*2In his novel *1984,*the British writer George Orwell (1903-50) depicts a futuristic world in which a totalitarian government controls citizens’ behavior and thoughts [Editor’s note.]

\*3The American novelist William Burroughs (1914-94) wrote experimental and often surreal works on drug addiction and other aspects of contemporary life. [Editor’s note.]