

## From *The Writing Life*

ANNIE DILLARD

In 1975, when she was twenty-nine, Annie Dillard won the Pulitzer Prize for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). Written in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (the subject of Dillard's MA thesis), *Pilgrim* established her as a contemporary nature writer and philosopher. She is known for her metaphysical leaps, beginning with meticulous description of natural phenomena and expanding into spiritual musings. Dillard, formerly a professor of English and writer-in-residence at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, is also the author of many books, including *An American Childhood* (1987), an autobiography; *The Writing Life* (1989); and *For the Time Being* (1999). This chapter from *The Writing Life*, often called "The Stunt Pilot," explores what it means when work becomes art.

Dave Rahm lived in Bellingham, Washington, north of Seattle. Bellingham, a harbor town, lies between the San Juan Islands in Haro Strait and the alpine North Cascade Mountains. I lived there between stints on the island. Dave Rahm was a stunt pilot, the air's own genius.

In 1975, with a newcomer's willingness to try anything once, I attended the Bellingham Air Show. The Bellingham airport was a wide clearing in a forest of tall Douglas firs; its runways suited small planes. It was June. People wearing blue or tan zipped jackets stood loosely on the concrete walkways and runways outside the coffee shop. At that latitude in June, you stayed outside because you could, even most of the night, if you could think up something to do. The sky did not darken until ten o'clock or so, and it never got very dark. Your life parted and opened in the sunlight. You tossed your dark winter routines, thought up mad projects, and improvised everything from hour to hour. Being a stunt pilot seemed the most reasonable thing in the world; you could wave your arms in the air all day and all night, and sleep next winter.

I saw from the ground a dozen stunt pilots; the air show scheduled them one after the other, for an hour of aerobatics. Each pilot took up his or her plane and performed a batch of tricks. They were precise and impressive. They flew upside down, and straightened out; they did barrel rolls, and straightened out; they drilled through dives and spins, and landed gently on a far runway.

For the end of the day, separated from all other performances of every sort, the air show director had scheduled a program titled "Dave Rahm." The leaflet said that Rahm was a geologist who taught at Western Washington University. He had flown for King Hussein in Jordan. A tall man in the crowd told me Hussein had seen Rahm fly on a visit the king made to the United States; he had invited him to Jordan to perform at ceremonies. Hussein was a pilot, too. "Hussein thought he was the greatest thing in the world."

