

THE
WRITING
LIFE

ANNIE
DILLARD

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND

Chapter Three

*Another day, another dollar;
fourteen hours on snowshoes and wish I had pie.*
—FROM A MAINE TRAPPER'S DIARY

ONCE, in order to finish a book I was writing and yet not live in the same room with it, I begged a cabin to use as a study. I finished the book there, wrote some other things, and learned to split wood. All this was on a remote and sparsely populated island on Haro Strait, where I moved when I left Virginia. The island was in northern Puget Sound, Washington State, across the water from Canadian islands.

The cabin was a single small room near the water. Its walls were shrunken planks, not insulated; in January, February, and March, it was cold. There were two small metal beds in the room, two cupboards, some shelves over a little counter, a wood stove, and a table under a window, where I wrote. The window looked out on a bit of sandflat over-

grown with thick, varicolored mosses; there were a few small firs where the sandflat met the cobble beach; and there was the water: Puget Sound, and all the sky over it and all the other wild islands in the distance under the sky. It was very grand. But you get used to it. I don't much care where I work. I don't notice things. The door used to blow open and startle me witless. I did, however, notice the cold.

I tried to heat the cabin with the wood stove and a kerosene heater, but I never was warm. I used to work wearing a wool cap, long wool tights, sweaters, a down jacket, and a scarf. I was too lazy to stick a damper in the wood stove chimney; I kept putting off the task for a warm day. Thoreau said that his firewood warmed him twice—because he labored to cut his own. Mine froze me twice, for the same reason. After I learned to split wood, in a manner I am shortly to relate—after I learned to split wood, I stepped out into the brute northeaster and split just enough alder to last me through working hours, which was not enough splitting to warm me. Then I came in and kindled a fire in the stove, all the heat of which vanished up the chimney.

At first, in the good old days, I did not know how to split wood. I set a chunk of alder on the chopping block and harassed it, at enormous exertion, into tiny wedges that flew all over the sandflat and lost themselves. What I did was less like splitting wood than chipping flints. After a few whacks my alder chunk still stood serene and unmoved, its base untouched, its tip a thorn. And then I actually tried to turn the sorry thing over and balance it on its wee

head while I tried to chop its feet off before it fell over. God save us.

All this was a very warm process. I removed my down jacket, my wool hat and scarf. Alas, those early wood-splitting days, when I truly warmed myself, didn't last long. I lost the knack.

I did not know it at the time, but during those first weeks when I attacked my wood every morning, I was collecting a crowd—or what passed on the island for a crowd. At the sound of my ax, Doe and Bob—real islanders, proper, wood-splitting islanders—paused in their activities and mustered, unseen, across the sandflat, under the firs. They were watching me (oh, the idleness) try to split wood. It must have been a largely silent comedy. Later, when they confessed, and I railed at them, Bob said innocently that the single remark he had ever permitted himself had been, "I love to watch Annie split wood."

One night, while all this had been going on, I had a dream in which I was given to understand, by the powers that be, how to split wood. You aim, said the dream—of course!—at the chopping block. It is true. You aim at the chopping block, not at the wood; then you split the wood, instead of chipping it. You cannot do the job cleanly unless you treat the wood as the transparent means to an end, by aiming past it. But then, alas, you easily split your day's wood in a few minutes, in the freezing cold, without working up any heat; then you utterly forfeit your only chance of getting warm.

The knack of splitting wood was the only useful

metaphor for writing

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thing I had ever learned from any dream, and my attitude toward the powers that be was not entirely grateful. The island comedy was over; everybody had to go back to work; and I never did get warm.

Much has been written about the life of the mind. I find the phrase itself markedly dreamy. The mind of the writer does indeed do something before it dies, and so does its owner, but I would be hard put to call it living.

It should surprise no one that the life of the writer—such as it is—is colorless to the point of sensory deprivation. Many writers do little else but sit in small rooms recalling the real world. This explains why so many books describe the author's childhood. A writer's childhood may well have been the occasion of his only firsthand experience. Writers read literary biography, and surround themselves with other writers, deliberately to enforce in themselves the ludicrous notion that a reasonable option for occupying yourself on the planet until your life span plays itself out is sitting in a small room for the duration, in the company of pieces of paper.

Inside the small room, the writer is deeply preoccupied with things hitherto undreamed of. He finds himself inventing wholly new techniques in the service of his art.

Once, for instance, I had an office in the halls of a university English department, which was of course deserted nights and weekends. There I began

writing a terrifically abstract book of literary and aesthetic theory. The kindly secretaries gave me a key to the faculty lounge so I could boil water for coffee at odd hours. The faculty lounge was around the corner and out of my earshot; it had a sink, a single stove burner, and a teakettle. The first night I used this arrangement I forgot all about the water I was boiling and scorched the kettle. It smelled terrible, and I confessed the next day. The secretaries said they would give me another chance.

It was an interesting kettle. Life is so interesting. It was a whistling kettle, but the secretaries did not want it to whistle, so they jammed the circular, perforated lid of an old percolator in its mouth. This aluminum lid became a hot item in the teeth of all that steam, so someone had devised a method of removing it with a springy wooden clothespin. Perhaps that same someone had carried the clothespin to the office for that purpose. Pretty soon people simply left the clothespin clamped on the aluminum percolator lid, which in turn jutted from the kettle's mouth. That is how things were when I got there.

After I burned the kettle, I had to discover a method to remind myself that I had water boiling on the stove in the faculty lounge, so I stuck the clothespin on my finger. It was, as it happened, a strong clothespin, and I had to move it every twenty seconds. This action, and the pain, kept me in the real world until the water actually boiled. This was the theory, and it worked. So that is how I wrote those nights, wrote a book about high holy art: moving a clothespin up and down my increasingly reddened

little finger. Why people want to be writers I will never know, unless it is that their lives lack a material footing.

The materiality of the writer's life cannot be exaggerated. If you like metaphysics, throw pots. How fondly I recall thinking, in the old days, that to write you needed paper, pen, and a lap. How appalled I was to discover that, in order to write so much as a sonnet, you need a warehouse. You can easily get so confused writing a thirty-page chapter that in order to make an outline for the second draft, you have to rent a hall. I have often "written" with the mechanical aid of a twenty-foot conference table. You lay your pages along the table's edge and pace out the work. You walk along the rows; you weed bits, move bits, and dig out bits, bent over the rows with full hands like a gardener. After a couple of hours, you have taken an exceedingly dull nine-mile hike. You go home and soak your feet.

Remarkably material also is the writer's attempt to control his own energies so he can work. He must be sufficiently excited to rouse himself to the task at hand, and not so excited he cannot sit down to it. He must have faith sufficient to impel and renew the work, yet not so much faith he fancies he is writing well when he is not.

For writing a first draft requires from the writer a peculiar internal state which ordinary life does not

induce. If you were a Zulu warrior banging on your shield with your spear for a couple of hours along with a hundred other Zulu warriors, you might be able to prepare yourself to write. If you were an Aztec maiden who knew months in advance that on a certain morning the priests were going to throw you into a hot volcano, and if you spent those months undergoing a series of purification rituals and drinking dubious liquids, you might, when the time came, be ready to write. But how, if you are neither Zulu warrior nor Aztec maiden, do you prepare yourself, all alone, to enter an extraordinary state on an ordinary morning?

How set yourself spinning? Where is an edge—a dangerous edge—and where is the trail to the edge and the strength to climb it?

Once I wrote a favorite, difficult book, a true account of three consecutive days on an island on the northwest coast. I began the book on one island and wrote most of it on another island; it took a long time. Much of it I wrote as poetry. Its two subjects were the relation of eternity to time and the problem of suffering innocents. The prose—once I decided to print it as prose—was so intense and accented, and the world it described was so charged with meaning, that the very thought of writing a word or two further made me tired. How could I add a sentence, or a paragraph, every day to this work I myself could barely understand? Its tone was fierce and exhilarated. Every time I looked at its part

of the room, I got sleepy. I could not just pick up my shovel and walk to the mine. I could not add a word until I was ready, or that word would enfeeble or puncture the work.

On a ship near a coast, I had once seen a heavy-bodied moth panting. The moth stood on the ship's rail beside me and faced the water. It was a sphinx moth, a thick diurnal moth with tiny wings; people often mistake sphinx moths for hummingbirds. In order for them to fly at all, they must supercharge their flight muscles with oxygen. A resting state will not suffice. Beside me on the rail, the sphinx moth raced its engines for takeoff like a jet on a runway. I could see its brown body vibrate and its red-and-black wings tremble. I left its side to fetch drawing paper from my cabin. When I returned, it was still revving up.

Maybe I scared it. After trembling so violently that it seemed it must blow apart, the moth took flight. Its wings blurred, like a hummingbird's. It flew a few yards out over the water before it began losing altitude. It was going down. Its wings buzzed; it gained height and lost, gained and lost, and always lost more than it gained, until its heavy body dragged in the water, and it drowned before my eyes without a splash.

During some of the long, empty months at work on the book, I was living in a one-room log cabin on an empty beach. I had not yet borrowed the freezing cabin up the beach to use as a study; I did not yet know how foolish it was to plan days of solitary confinement, days in which my only activity was

walking four or five feet from the bed to the desk. My husband wrote his book in another cabin; he worked much longer hours than I could. When my husband left after breakfast, I looked around the one-room cabin and out at the water and strip of beach. Nothing changed but the tides. Sometimes the empty beach was wide, and sometimes it was narrow. I could see it all from the bed, even on the darkest nights. The bed faced the beach and the water, and so did the desk; so did the table, and so did the sink. The whole house was a ship's rail. I turned to the work. This book interested me more passionately than any other. The task was to change intellectual passion to physical energy and some sort of narrative mastery, from a standing start.

"Bring on the lions!" I cried.

But there were no lions. I spent every day in the company of one dog and one cat whose every gesture emphasized that this was a day throughout whose duration intelligent creatures intended to sleep. I would have to crank myself up.

To crank myself up I stood on a jack and ran myself up. I tightened myself like a bolt. I inserted myself in a vise-clamp and wound the handle till the pressure built. I drank coffee in titrated doses. It was a tricky business, requiring the finely tuned judgment of a skilled anesthesiologist. There was a tiny range within which coffee was effective, short of which it was useless, and beyond which, fatal.

I pointed myself. I walked to the water. I played

the hateful recorder, washed dishes, drank coffee, stood on a beach log, watched bird. That was the first part; it could take all morning, or all month. Only the coffee counted, and I knew it. It was boiled Colombian coffee: raw grounds brought just to boiling in cold water and stirred. Now I smoked a cigarette or two and read what I wrote yesterday. What I wrote yesterday needed to be slowed down. I inserted words in one sentence and hazarded a new sentence. At once I noticed that I was writing—which, as the novelist Frederick Buechner noted, called for a break, if not a full-scale celebration.

On break, I usually read Conrad Aiken's poetry aloud. It was pure sound unencumbered by sense. If I ever caught a poem's sense by accident, I could never use that poem again. I often read the Senlin poems, and "Sea Holly." Some days I read part of any poetry anthology's index of first lines. The parallels sounded strong and suggestive. They could set me off, perhaps.

This morning, as on so many mornings, I lacked sufficient fuel for liftoff. I looked at the legal pad pages again. A new section must be begun in the book, and a place found to put it. I wrote four or five sentences on a gamble, smoked more to stimulate the brain or stop the heart, whichever came first, and reheated a fourth mug of coffee. After the first boiling, the grounds sink to the coffeepot's bottom. When you reheat it, you call it refried coffee. I already felt like the empty kettle on a hot burner, the thin kettle whose water had boiled away. The top of my stomach felt bruised or burned—was this how

mustard gas tasted? I drank the fourth mug without looking at it, any more than you look at the needle in a doctor's hand.

Now, alas, I had cranked too far. I could no longer play the recorder; I would need a bugle. I would break a piano. What could I do around the cabin? There was no wood to split. There was something I needed to fix with a hacksaw, but I rejected the work as too fine. Why not adopt a baby, design a curriculum, go sailing?

The dog opened one eye, cocked it at me, and rolled it up before her lids closed. People should not feed moralistic animals. If they're so holy, where are their books? I was starving, but eating was out of the question. Nausea might temper this energy, but eating would kill it.

I read it again. Reading, I drew all over it. This was usual. Now my drawings tightened and darkened; I pressed them into the paper. They were digging through the paper and into the desk. Where next? I knew where next. It was within my possibilities. If only I could concentrate. I must quit. I was too young to be living at a desk. Many fine people were out there living, people whose consciences permitted them to sleep at night despite their not having written a decent sentence that day, or ever.

Let's dance. I could not draw the lamp any more; it was too little. I walked out on the beach unseeing and fell back in the door, sick, dead, dying. I heated a bowl of soup which I ate blinded by coffee and nicotine, unremembering. I returned to the papers and enclosed a paragraph in parentheses; it meant

that tomorrow I would delete the few sentences I wrote today. Too many days of this, I thought, too many days of this.

I do not so much write a book as sit up with it, as with a dying friend. During visiting hours, I enter its room with dread and sympathy for its many disorders. I hold its hand and hope it will get better.

This tender relationship can change in a twinkling. If you skip a visit or two, a work in progress will turn on you.

A work in progress quickly becomes feral. It reverts to a wild state overnight. It is barely domesticated, a mustang on which you one day fastened a halter, but which now you cannot catch. It is a lion you cage in your study. As the work grows, it gets harder to control; it is a lion growing in strength. You must visit it every day and reassert your mastery over it. If you skip a day, you are, quite rightly, afraid to open the door to its room. You enter its room with bravura, holding a chair at the thing and shouting, "Simba!"

Living thus—with your lion tamer's chair, your ax, your conference table, and your clothespin—you may excite in your fellow man not curiosity but profound indifference. It is not my experience that society hates and fears the writer, or that society adulates the writer. Instead my experience is the common one, that society places the writer so far

beyond the pale that society does not regard the writer at all.

Whenever an encounter between a writer of good will and a regular person of good will happens to touch on the subject of writing, each person discovers, dismayed, that good will is of no earthly use. The conversation cannot proceed. From such chastening encounters I have always learned far more than I intended.

Once, for example, I learned from a conversation with a neighbor that I had been living as it were in a fool's paragraph.

This neighbor, who crewed on a ferryboat, was one of the world's good, sane people. He was the local sheriff. He was an emergency medical technician, a volunteer fireman, a husband and father, and an unequalled contributor of witty remarks into the window of each car that rolled on and off the ferry. May his tribe increase.

One rainy day, this member of the real world gave me a ride home. I invited him in for a minute, and somehow all hell broke loose.

Politely, he asked me about my writing. Foolishly, not dreaming I was about to set my own world tumbling down about my ears, I said I hated to write. I said I would rather do anything else. He was amazed. He said, "That's like a guy who works in a factory all day, and hates it." Then I was amazed, for so it was. It was *just* like that. Why did I do it? I had never inquired. How had I let it creep up on me? Why wasn't I running a ferryboat, like sane people?

I hid my amazement as well as I could from both of us, and said that actually I avoided writing, and mostly what I did by way of work was fool around, and that for example that morning I had been breaking my brain trying to explain Whitehead to my journal. Why, he wanted to know, was I doing that? Again I stopped completely short; I could not imagine why on earth I was doing that. Why was I doing that?

But I rallied and mustered and said that the idea was to learn things; that you learn a thing and then as a matter of course you learn the next thing, and the next thing. . . . As I spoke he nodded precisely in the way that one nods at the utterances of the deranged. ". . . And then," I finished brightly, "you die!"

At this we exchanged a mutual and enormous smile. Still nodding and smiling in perfect agreement, we ended the visit and walked to the door.

A week later I had a visit so instructive that when it was over, and I had fully absorbed its lesson, I considered never opening my door again. This was a visit from children.

During the week after the ferryman's visit, I asked myself where my life had gone wrong. I was too far removed from the world. My work was too obscure, too symbolic, too intellectual. It was not available to people. Recently I had published a complex narrative essay about a moth's flying into a candle, which no one had understood but a Yale critic, and he had

understood it exactly. I myself was trained as a critic. I was a critic writing for critics: was this what I had in mind?

One day, full of such thoughts, I tried to work and failed. After eight hours of watching helplessly while my own inane, manneristic doodles overstepped their margins and covered the pages I was supposed to be writing, I gave up. I decided to hate myself, to make popcorn and read. I had just sunk into the couch, the bowl of popcorn beside me, when I heard footsteps outside. It was two little neighborhood boys, Brad and Brian, who were seven and six. "Smells good in here," Brian said. So we ate the bowl of popcorn on the floor and talked. They played the harmonica; they played the recorder; they played the ukulele.

Then Brian got up and stood by my desk, on which there happened to be a pen drawing of a burning candle.

Brian said, "Is that the candle the moth flew into?"

I looked at him: WHAT?

He said, and I quote exactly, "Is that the candle the moth flew into, and his abdomen got stuck, and his head caught fire?"

WHAT? I said. WHAT? These little blue-jeaned kids were in the first grade. They came up to my pockets. Brad, on the floor, piped up, "I liked that story." Why, if I was sincere in anything, did it seem to console me to repeat to myself, "Oh well, he's older"?

Later, before they left, Brian made certain I un-

derstood that whatever sphere of discourse I fancied I shared with any interlocutor, I was wrong. Brian said (admiringly, I thought), "Did you *write* that story?" I started to answer, when he continued, "Or did you type it?"

Here is a fairly sober version of what happens in the small room between the writer and the work itself. It is similar to what happens between a painter and the canvas.

First you shape the vision of what the projected work of art will be. The vision, I stress, is no marvelous thing: it is the work's intellectual structure and aesthetic surface. It is a chip of mind, a pleasing intellectual object. It is a vision of the work, not of the world. It is a glowing thing, a blurred thing of beauty. Its structure is at once luminous and translucent; you can see the world through it. After you receive the initial charge of this imaginary object, you add to it at once several aspects, and incubate it most gingerly as it grows into itself.

Many aspects of the work are still uncertain, of course; you know that. You know that if you proceed you will change things and learn things, that the form will grow under your hands and develop new and richer lights. But that change will not alter the vision or its deep structures; it will only enrich it. You know that, and you are right.

But you are wrong if you think that in the actual writing, or in the actual painting, you are filling in the vision. You cannot fill in the vision. You cannot

even bring the vision to light. You are wrong if you think that you can in any way take the vision and tame it to the page. The page is jealous and tyrannical; the page is made of time and matter; the page always wins. The vision is not so much destroyed, exactly, as it is, by the time you have finished, forgotten. It has been replaced by this changeling, this bastard, this opaque lightless chunky ruinous work.

Here is how it happens. The vision is, *sub specie aeternitatis*, a set of mental relationships, a coherent series of formal possibilities. In the actual rooms of time, however, it is a page or two of legal paper filled with words and questions; it is a terrible diagram, a few books' names in a margin, an ambiguous doodle, a corner folded down in a library book. These are memos from the thinking brain to witless hope.

Nevertheless, ignoring the provisional and pathetic nature of these scraps, and bearing the vision itself in mind—having it before your sights like the very Grail—you begin to scratch out the first faint marks on the canvas, on the page. You begin the work proper. Now you have gone and done it. Now the thing is no longer a vision: it is paper.

Words lead to other words and down the garden path. You adjust the paints' values and hues not to the world, not to the vision, but to the rest of the paint. The materials are stubborn and rigid; push is always coming to shove. [You can fly—you can fly higher than you thought possible—but you can never get off the page.] After every passage another passage follows, more sentences, more everything

on drearily down. Time and materials hound the work; the vision recedes ever farther into the dim realms.

And so you continue the work, and finish it. Probably by now you have been forced to toss the most essential part of the vision. But this is a concern for mere nostalgia now: for before your eyes, and stealing your heart, is this fighting and frail finished product, entirely opaque. You can see nothing through it. It is only itself, a series of well-known passages, some colored paint. Its relationship to the vision that impelled it is the relationship between any energy and any work, anything unchanging to anything temporal.

The work is not the vision itself, certainly. It is not the vision filled in, as if it had been a coloring book. It is not the vision reproduced in time; that were impossible. It is rather a simulacrum and a replacement. It is a golem. You try—you try every time—to reproduce the vision, to let your light so shine before men. But you can only come along with your bushel and hide it.

Who will teach me to write? a reader wanted to know.

The page, the page, that eternal blankness, the blankness of eternity which you cover slowly, affirming time's scrawl as a right and your daring as necessity; the page, which you cover woodenly, ruining it, but asserting your freedom and power to act, acknowledging that you ruin everything you

touch but touching it nevertheless, because acting is better than being here in mere opacity; the page, which you cover slowly with the crabbed thread of your gut; the page in the purity of its possibilities; the page of your death, against which you pit such flawed excellences as you can muster with all your life's strength: that page will teach you to write.

There is another way of saying this. Aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing. Aim past the wood, aim through the wood; aim for the chopping block.