

THE SILENCES OF ANNIE DILLARD

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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Kimberly Engber, Committee Chair

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, who taught me to look to the clouds, to the stars

“You were made and set here to give voice to this,  
your own astonishment.” — Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

“Silence makes us pilgrims.” — Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*

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## ABSTRACT

This research began as an investigation into Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood* with the intention of discovering if her memoir could be considered nature writing. Though I had intended to limit myself to her memoir, my research in nature writing and in ecocriticism continued to expand the breadth of Dillard's work that I included. The underlying theme that became a focal point for my research was that of the spiritual language in Dillard's writing, which I examined through Max Picard's definition of silence. After merging varied ways of seeing nature writing and spiritual writing in Dillard's work, it became apparent, even before reading the "Afterword" in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, that Dillard's writing was pointing toward silence and darkness. The *via negativa*, a Christian aesthetic path toward unknowing, is what I traced through three of her books: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Holy the Firm*, and *An American Childhood*. Not only does Dillard join a tradition of nature writing along with Henry David Thoreau and the Romantics, but her contributions remain shrouded because her words leave space for possibility: enchantment, bewilderment, or both, paradoxically.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE MAP

The work of Annie Dillard is often divided into two categories, nature writing and spiritual writing. These are not mutually exclusive; one informs the other. In exploring the vein of eco-criticism, I discovered that Dillard carves her own path: on her website, next to an article on eco-theology, Dillard quips, “forget eco-anything.” (So I did, at least for a while.) Her writing comes from an ancient and disciplined way of living, comes from a way of seeing. Dillard maneuvers nature through spirituality, but her writing cannot be reduced to either/or. With precision and grace, Dillard offers her readers something rare: religious writing without doctrine, nature writing without dogma. What Dillard sets out to do is to see what she can see; then to write what she can write. The result reveals a deep reliance on the power of a word and the absence of the word. This power comes sometimes from choosing a precise word and sometimes from not naming; Dillard's reliance on silence leaves space for an awakening to a divine darkness.<sup>1</sup>

The divine darkness is not where to begin, usually, though it seems to be where Dillard returns (and what I return to). After attempting to craft an argument for Dillard as an eco-autobiographical writer in combination with her romps through nature, I came to an impasse: Dillard exemplifies the writer who shifts deftly between memory and narrative in *An American Childhood*, but the elements of nature writing were too strong to ignore, yet too varied to fit into the eco-autobiographical perspective only. The way that Dillard constructed her “mental map” and the way that she became awake to her consciousness signaled deeper ecological workings as well (*An American Childhood* 42). Dillard hints at a religious narrative woven back through Henry David Thoreau, the Romantics, all the way back through early Christian mystics to the beginnings of the biblical narrative: “darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (*New International Version Bible*, Gen. 1.2). The darkness reveals itself more fully in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and becomes the hinge—the divine darkness—in *Holy the Firm*. Dillard's work is crucial to both the spiritual writing and the nature writing camps because her work presses the rim of the boundary between these two genres; silence is the way she navigates the middle ground.

In attempting to find a model for a critical lens for Dillard's work, I absorbed too completely my major source. While Peter F. Perreten's “Autobiography: Portrait of Place/Self-Portrait” (2003) offers much of the frame

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1 Annie Dillard refers to the “divine dark” in the “Afterword” (1999) of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

for my original ideas, and the more closely I read Dillard, the more my argument mimicked Perreten's, failing to encompass what my close readings were revealing. Perreten examines how Lisa Dale Norton, Annie Dillard and N. Scott Momaday demonstrate a "symbiotic relationship between the natural setting and the self" (2). With insight toward Dillard's *An American Childhood*, Perreten became a beginning toward a more ecocritical approach (though I had initially resisted it). Perreten's work seems to hint at ecocriticism without actually using the term.

The critical waters were stirred by nature writing in the 1970s, but the term *ecocriticism* was not fully given a definition until the 1990s. Lawrence Buell defines *ecocriticism* "as study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis" (430). Ecocriticism has its roots in literary ecology, according to Buell in his expansive *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) (430). Buell is primarily using Thoreau as a framework, and he relegates one possible critical foundation for his reading to a footnote. Buell traces the beginning of the ecocritical movement to Joseph Meeker's *Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* (originally published in 1974), which was "neglected" by critics (430). Meeker explores the intersection of "human behavior and the natural environment" in literature (4). Following Meeker, Stanley Cavell gave a series of lectures on Henry David Thoreau in 1971-72 that became *The Senses of Walden*, a densely constructed exegesis of Thoreau's major work, *Walden* (vii). Cavell often delves into philosophy and theology to give framework for his study (xiii). Buell's work is also based in Thoreau's, and Buell is interested primarily in literary non-fiction and how the "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination" (2). He argues that there must be a revision (a re-visioning) of how literature is read (2). In the extensive footnote that contains his definition of ecocriticism, Buell explains that his book fits under the definition of ecocritical writing "in the broader sense of the term" (430). Ecocriticism seemed a possible lens to explore Dillard's weaving of nature writing with her spiritual language, as I follow Buell's call for a re-visioning of literature.

Buell's work is pioneering in its breadth and remains a standard text for environmental literary exploration. Though Buell maintains that works like Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) have "ancient roots," and those roots are born from a pastoral tradition, he also believes the way nature is approached in contemporary critical circles must change because "putting literature under the sign of the natural environment requires some major readjustments in the way serious late twentieth-century readers of literature are taught to read" (144). Though Buell

offers more than a comprehensive discussion on environmental writing and includes extensive passages on Dillard, the labeling of “environmental writer” still seemed to me too reductive for Dillard.

I returned to Thoreau because that is the tradition Dillard follows; I had hoped a framework would reveal itself. Buell and Cavell both explore Thoreau extensively, but the connections with Dillard's autobiographical work still had not surfaced. After a summer of idleness, the framework became clear through the writings of the Swiss German Catholic theologian Max Picard. In his seminal work, *The World of Silence*, Picard ritualistically and systematically examines silence in philosophical and theological ways: in speech, in language, in nature, in love, and other realms. Rather than attempt to define Dillard in a term and then argue to fit her work to that definition, I used Picard's ideas about theologically-rooted silence to approach her work through my close readings.

Using three of Dillard's works, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), *Holy the Firm* (1977), and *An American Childhood* (1989), with forays into a few of her other books, I set out to re-inspire the soul of nature writing by putting it back in conversation with its spiritual side, by re-enchanting the scientific with the sacred; silence is my lens. I chose a passage from each of these texts for a close reading, using nature writing layered with the perspectives of spiritual and cultural critics for further illumination.

Dillard alludes to biblical phrases like “eyes to see,” that are signs, and, for the tuned reader, like stations of the cross, leading not toward any theology, but toward a *theos absentia*: a space without names, without words, a field of silence.<sup>2</sup> I want to give voice to my own enchantment<sup>3</sup> when I read a phrase that contains religious language—even a single word—I recognize as having a sacred resonance for me: I know that “eyes to see” is a phrase from the Prophet Isaiah and I know that Jesus quotes Isaiah when he tells his disciples why he speaks to the people in parables; he uses the negative: “They may be seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven” (qtd. in *New International Version Bible*, Mark 4.12; Is. 6.9-10). Dillard's work is prophetic: she exhorts her readers—and herself—to have eyes to see the miraculous in the ordinary. Through this re-visioning, Dillard emphasizes those shifts in perspective that Thoreau encouraged, shifts that nurture self-knowledge, which pushed toward revelation. To change the world, for this kind of writer, is the begin with the self, the interior life.

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2 In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Dillard has a chapter called “Field of Silence,” which is an intimate and unsettling account of her engagement with an almost embodied and living Silence (130-36).

3 I am using “enchantment” as Matthew Del Nevo defines it in *The Work of Enchantment*: “the desire of the soul” (3).

Dillard knows the tradition she calls on: “The secret of seeing is, then, the pearl of great price. If I thought he could teach me to find it and keep it forever I would stagger barefoot across a hundred deserts after any lunatic at all” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 35). Those lunatics for her are Thoreau, Emerson, through to the Romantics, back to the mystic desert fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries and even back to the time of the original witnesses, the apostles. Dillard directly references the gospel of Matthew: “[T]he kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (*New International Version Bible*, Matt. 13.45-46). These are similar words to what St. Anthony, a desert father, heard when he was told to sell all he had. Maybe the “pearl” is what Dillard gleans from Abba Moses: your cell will teach you everything (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 262). And in that cell is the darkness where memory and imagination meet.<sup>4</sup> These words—the ones about the pearl of great price—ring the bell in my chest.<sup>5</sup> These words recall a wilderness knowing, the way John the Baptist, invoking the Prophet Isaiah, wanders in from the desert wearing animal skins and eating wild honey, witnessing to all who would hear and be baptized with water: after him will come “one [who will] baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gather his wheat to the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (*New International Version Bible*, Matt. 3.11-12). Dillard has roses of blood on her chest at the beginning of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* from the tomcat that kneads on her in the night. She asks, “What blood was this, and what roses?” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 3). Baptism or passover are possibilities. The fire and Dillard's roses merge in the process of exploring the origins of her ideas. Dillard's experiences, however disparate and far-flung, find their center, their underpinnings in sacred language, reclaimed, and reborn into silence.<sup>6</sup> Dillard baptizes her reader in fire and silence.

It is not surprising that Dillard turns to the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who took a vow of silence and wrote extensively on the contemplative life. Merton was well educated and reveled in literature; in fact, literature was in part the catalyst for his choice to go to the Trappist monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky (*Encounters* 23). Dillard quotes Merton near the end of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, as well as Abba Moses, the first desert father. Dillard writes, “I have been reading the apophthegmata, of fourth- and fifth- century Egyptian desert hermits. Abba Moses

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4 In *The Writing Life*, Dillard explains that a writer must have a room with four walls so that memory and imagination can meet in the dark (26). This seems to hint at Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

5 Near the end of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard writes of a “bell” that says, “Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet” (276).

6 T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* layer religious imagery, particularly at the end of “Little Giddings,” how “the rose and the fire will be one” (2488).

said to a disciple, 'Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything'" (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 262). A few pages later, near the end of the last chapter "The Waters of Separation," Dillard references the Trappist: "Thomas Merton wrote, 'There is always a temptation to diddle around in the contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues'" (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 274). Dillard seems to have subsumed these bits of wisdom because her reflections on the contemplative life, through the lens of her cell (both the word and the place), offer more than "itsy-bitsy statues." Though her references are brief, the use of these two luminaries—one ancient, one contemporary—exemplifies the breadth of Dillard's spiritual journey on the *via negativa*, an ancient Christian idea that the path toward God is into a holy darkness, toward an embrace of the unknown.

Henry Nouwen, another Catholic theologian, has work on the desert fathers that is in conversation with Merton and silence. *The Way of the Heart* began as lectures at Yale Divinity School on the spirituality of the desert (vii). Published in 1981, this book traces what the desert fathers say about prayer, silence, and solitude. In the third century after Christ's death, Nouwen explains that St. Anthony, "father of the monks," was given a directive to go sell everything and go to the desert for solitude (*The Way of the Heart* 9). This spiritual practice of going to the desert, of retreating to solitude and silence, is the part of Dillard's writing that I could not ignore: her writing seems to be born out of silence as she writes in her cell, be it in a cabin, or a library, or a fire tower. Though her work is eco-autobiographical as well as clearly nature writing flavored with spiritual motifs, consistently her work denies any single critical lens; silence seemed the most reverential path toward preserving my love of Dillard as well as critically examining how her non-fiction reflects her vision.

Along the way, I encountered Thomas Moore's *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life* and Matthew Del Nevo's *The Work of Enchantment*. Both Moore and Del Nevo, joining Merton and Nouwen, come from the Catholic tradition. Published in 1996, Moore's work emphasizes the beauty of the ordinary, the particular, which is something Dillard does, as well. Del Nevo's work is more recent (2011), and seeks to exhort his readers to re-capture how we are enchanted, particularly through art by reading, listening, and gazing (9). Moore and Del Nevo could be considered cultural critics in terms of how Dillard fits within a larger context outside of nature writing or spiritual writing, and their religious leanings and language inform this work, as well.

A way toward re-enchantment and then transcendence is through what in Christian mysticism is called the *via negativa*. Both the *via negativa*—that God is ineffable and known only by what he is not, and the *via positiva*—

that God's attributes can be known, provide spiritual framework, but the *via negativa* more closely aligns with the absence, the “nothingness,” the silence in Dillard's work (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 279). Indeed, the *via negativa* is the way she prefers. In the “Afterword,” Dillard remarks that she finds the *via negativa* “more congenial” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 279). Dillard explains in *The Writing Life* that “perfect prose” creates a form, and that form “unrolls into nothingness” (15). The *via negativa* not only connects to Dillard's spiritual direction, it informs her writing process. Signaling her influences, Dillard references directly and briefly—the Prophets, Thomas Merton, and Abba Moses. Though not mentioned in these three main texts, Dillard is aware of Picard's *The World of Silence*; she quotes him in *For the Time Being* (2000), her collection of reflections on babies, Hebrew mysticism, Teilhard de Chardin, clouds, China, sand (19).

Lawrence Buell<sup>7</sup> and Stanley Cavell provide narrative roots for Dillard in their discussions of Thoreau's work. The transcendentalists, Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, are both grounding and liminal influences because their spiritual views of nature are intricately woven into Dillard's work; we see Dillard working out her faith with fear and trembling. In “An Invitation from Silence: Annie Dillard's Use of the Mystical Concepts of *Via [P]ositiva* and *Via Negativa*,” B. Jill Carroll asserts rightly that Dillard “has gone to nature to derive her theology” (26). Nature is her sacred text, her ritual altar.

My critical lens is a kind of ecocriticism, but I am re-centering it in mystic roots, attempting to infuse the spiritual back into something that has become secular, a dividing of nature from enthusiasm.<sup>8</sup> Nature separated from its “workman whose work we are” (*Walden* 94). This workman could be the Workman, but it can also be the writer crafting the story, and nature is a referent for this working out of words and identity. James I. McClintock's *Nature's Kindred Spirits: Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder* puts conservationists, poets, and writers in conversation with their craft, each other, and their spiritual leanings. While I will reference McClintock's work, my focus is Dillard's progression on a spiritual path as she joins a mainly secular

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7 Lawrence Buell quotes Dillard from a 1981 interview about the purposeful structure of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: the first and the last chapter are a frame for her exploration of the *via positiva* that winds its way toward the *via negativa* (240).

8 Enthusiasm is Dillard's approach to literature: “I approach fiction, and the world, and these absurdly large questions as a reader, and a writer, and a lover. Although my critical training and competence, such as it is, is as a careful textual critic, I have here flung this sensible approach aside in favor of enthusiasm, free speculation, blind assertion, dumb joking, and diatribe. The book as a whole sees the mind and the world as inextricably fitted twin puzzles. The mind fits the banks of the world and shapes it as a river fits and shapes its own banks” (*Living by Fiction* 14-15).

and masculine tradition; her use of Christian language is a connecting thread to Thoreau and Emerson, but puts her in a borderland, a desert, in terms of criticism. William Harmon indicates in *A Handbook to Literature* that the mystic often travels three successive paths to God: the purgative way, the illuminative way, and the unifying way (with a time of uncertainty, symbolized by darkness) (358). By using three examples from Dillard, I will show how she travels these paths while concurrently reflecting enchantment, re-enchantment, and transcendence. In a way of purifying her vision, Dillard leaves the forest in silence in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard follows the way of a spider's web toward illumination. A centering and unifying scene of a transfigured skater on a dark street holds the mean in *An American Childhood*. These are examples of nature writing on the surface and spiritual writing underneath with a vein of silence flowing in between. These scenes offer nature as the object of the observer's gaze; nature has no voice, it is simply the referent of Dillard's experiences. And the cell in which all of this takes place—the cell that Dillard both examines and resides in—is *silence*. (Nature, too, is silent.)

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF SILENCE

A kind of holy silence permeates Annie Dillard's work. As a spiritual writer, Dillard offers options—different ways of seeing. One option is that tension remains without resolve, the hidden remains unseen, the unknown, unknown. Merton writes about how every moment and event plants something in us, but more often than not, we “are not prepared to receive” (14). Those moments and events are the most pressing unknown. Dillard poses bold and complex questions, questions that reflect that her perspective could be a response to Merton:

Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mysteries probed? Can the writer isolate and vivify all in experience that most deeply engages our intellects and our hearts? . . . What do we ever know that is higher than that power which, from time to time, seizes our lives, and reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered? Why does death so catch us by surprise, and why love? We still always want waking. We should amass half dressed in long lines like tribesmen and shake gourds at each other, to wake up; instead we watch television and miss the show. (*The Writing Life* 72-73)

Yes, startled and bewildered. Dillard is able to startle and wake us (unless television has blinded us all together).

With the vision of the primitive, could she wake the tribesmen in us? These are the questions that both center us and unhinge us; these are the questions of being and becoming. These are the questions that should prompt an awakening; wait, I'll go get my headdress.<sup>9</sup> Dillard exposes a truth within her question about power, when that power “seizes our lives, and reveals us startlingly to ourselves.” To be made awake to our own bewilderment, is this not also the pearl of great price?

Late in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, after cataloguing insect pests and parasites that curl sensitives inward, after these questions, “Have I walked too much, aged beyond my years?” and “What happened to manna?” (that bread of heaven), Dillard grabs her readers by the shoulders and faces us: “The only way I can reasonably talk about all this is to address you directly and frankly as a fellow survivor” (232-242). Survivors awake and bewildered. If we are reading her words, we have survived this world so far with all its violence. If we have survived, then we have the common language of breath, the common possibility of inspiration. Then she hits us with the truth: “Here we incontrovertibly are” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 242). Here, yes. What does it mean to be *here*, to have a sense of place? If there is a sense of the “here,” waking is not far behind: “We wake, if ever we wake at all, to mystery,

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<sup>9</sup> This statement is becoming real as I read more of Clarissa Pinkola Estés's *Women Who Run With Wolves*. I will not be able to address the elements of myth in Dillard's work, but exploring a conversation between Dillard and Estés seems like a worthy topic for future research.



rumors of death, beauty, violence. . . . 'Seem like we're just set down here,' a woman said to [Dillard] . . . 'and don't nobody know why'" (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 4). Here, *here*. What do you do when you know you are here and suddenly awake? To map *here*, to answer our bewilderment with a sense of place are ways of gaining perspective. Dillard's response is to see, to walk, to wait, to write her way toward mapping her place, her wilderness.

Parasites and grubs roil just under the surface in the forest near Tinker Creek. Even as Dillard has fully marked her space at Tinker Creek with paths through the forest and along the water's edge, she sojourns to the Lucas cottage for a night, in "the heart of the city" that is the Lucas land (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 216). Earlier Dillard writes that the city is no place for a poet, so she constructs her own city, a kind of refuge on a hill (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 82). To be on a hill harkens to the Puritans who desired religious freedom and set out to build the city on a hill, their interpretation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount when he says, "You are the light of the world. A town on a hill cannot be hidden" (qtd. in *New International Version Bible*, Matt. 5:14). Dillard's "town" is in the middle of a wilderness and is a kind of center for revelation.

The theologian Max Picard uses harsh language for the "mechanism of the city" in that it has been "destroyed by the explosion of silence," and that it struggles in the "ruins of silence" where "everything is disorder and confusion" (132). Dillard has urban connections, but she chooses to go away to the more wild places to do the work of seeing. The contradiction of using "city" for the name of a space that is meadow and mountain and valley is conscious: though she is in the wildness in the text, she is writing this in an urban place; she is surrounded by four walls, a kind of cell in a way that monks have their cells. The four walls she finds on the Lucas property were another kind of cellular space where her imagination meets reality in the dark, sleepless night (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 219; *The Writing Life* 26). Alone, silent, and awake, Dillard is witness, the mystic in her own monastery of sky, stars, trees, water. Her words are born out of rituals—solitude, waking, seeing—giving voice to what had been hidden.

What if being aware and awake is not enough? *Holy the Firm* (1977) resonates with what is not said, the absence that generates questions and a disquieting sense that something other than grubs is roiling under the surface. In this place, there is certainly a sense of bewilderment—answered with silence. Jim Cheney articulates this tension as he sees it in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: it is "on the one hand, thoroughly naturalized and contextualized inquiry into the sacred and, on the other hand, the Western theological vocabulary at work in the text" (44). Dillard lays out

the coordinates for this tension of what seems a waking to darkness, to the *via negativa*:

We are most deeply asleep at the switch when we fancy we control any switches at all. We sleep to time's hurdy-gurdy; we wake, if we ever wake, to the silence of God. And then, when we wake to the deep shores of light uncreated, then when the dazzling dark breaks over the far slopes of time, then it's time to toss things, like our reason, and our will; then it's time to break our necks for home. (*Holy the Firm* 62)

Just before that, not in a claim she makes herself, but one she borrows from Meister Eckhart, Dillard unveils our bitter location: "God is at home, [w]e are in the far country" (62). Dillard challenges our ideas of home: does she believe God is in the place we want to be, or is she giving us options? If we are indeed in the far country, how do we get home? Silence can be a way home even if God is not there when we arrive. But first we must awake to "the darkness hovering over the deep" in the creation narrative, "to the deep shores of light uncreated," and wake to the "dazzling dark." Dillard seems to not only say this darkness is the way home, but that this darkness is home for the bewildered; the difficulty is waking at all.

To know a place can begin the waking. Markers in Dillard's memoir, *An American Childhood* (1987), demonstrate how she creates sacred space, though the tension remains because she has the task of remembering rightly to explain her inspiration, to explain those "sudden" happenings; then she breaks her neck for home, often in a rapture:

I pitched in a blind fever of concentration. I pitched, as I did most things, in order to concentrate. Why do elephants drink? To forget. I loved living at my own edge, as an explorer on a ship presses to the ocean's rim; mind and skin were one joined force curved out and alert, prow and telescope. I pitched, as I did most things, in a rapture. (*An American Childhood* 97)

Here, Dillard's body is a boundary, her "own edge," a narrow distinction between her and the world. Even pitching is an action done in silence, and here made to be like a ritual, with ecstasy as the result. Carroll indicates this rapture would be obvious because "Dillard is a mystic" (26). Even if Dillard is more (or less) a mystic, and there is resistance to the critical need to label her and her work, this term *mystic* is useful for understanding how she rhetorically swings bewildered from subject to subject. The use of religious language combined with a childhood activity like baseball provides an example of Dillard's ability to navigate the spheres of the common and the spiritual with ease. She makes the common spiritual; she makes the spiritual commonplace. This directly draws from the Romantics and their connections with their natural environment. Dillard's ordinary is revealed through her mystical visions: a tulip tree bud, a spider's web, and a young skater in the dark.

Much of the aura of Dillard's work seems rooted in the ritual of awareness—an awareness boundaried by silence, boundaried by four walls of her choosing. In *The Writing Life* (1989), Dillard explains that writers need a space. She maps out the situation: you need only four walls: “One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark” (*The Writing Life* 26). This darkness is Dillard's “dazzling darkness,” the divine dark, the way toward the *via negativa*. With religious and spiritual language threaded through her work, this contained darkness is as holy an altar as anything else. *An American Childhood* provides signs—the big snow that held everyone in, the “luminous oblong” shadow sliding across her bedroom walls, her conscience awakening in the bathtub—of how the divine darkness is where her imagination met her childhood memory in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm* (*An American Childhood* 30, 21, 12). Those early ecstatic experiences are her beginning toward the *via negativa*, her chosen way of seeing a God who is ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, and incomprehensible, a recognition of “the hiddenness and mystery of God” (Carroll 28).<sup>10</sup> These are the cells, the “[rooms] with no view,” where her words were given shape and space to become what they are.

One of the primary goals of spiritual practice is awareness; Dillard practices seeing and walking as her ways toward awareness. One of her companions on the road toward awakening is Thoreau. In “Walking,” published in *The Atlantic* a month after he died, Thoreau states:

I walk out into nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in. You may name it America, but it is not America; neither Americus Vespucius, nor Columbus, nor the rest were the discoverers of it. There is a truer amount of it in mythology than in any history of America, so called, that I have seen. (“Walking”)

Dillard, too, walks in the way of prophets and poets, engaging her world with reverence for myth and mystery. Once there is an awakening to these old stories, then there is more freedom to write the world, not as a critic, but as a lover.<sup>11</sup> In *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*, Thomas Moore explains that one of the reasons that those in power “bind the power of stories” is “[p]erhaps because stories can reveal the soul in all its paradoxical splendor” (245). Moore continues to situate story: “We disenchant stories, for example, when we explain them away” (245). This explaining away happens when “[a] preacher [silences] the song in a good Christian parable by reducing the story to a moral. A psychoanalyst [disenchants] one's precious life story by explaining it according to theory” (245). Possibly

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<sup>10</sup> These words of absence (of *negativa*) come from the Eastern Orthodox Prayer Book, the text of a tradition heavily informed by the lives of the desert fathers and mothers in those centuries following Christ (*The Pocket Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians* 86).

<sup>11</sup> In *Living By Fiction*, Dillard indicates that she is critically trained, but she prefers to approach literature “as a lover” (14).

Dillard's work has succumbed to this disenchantment when critics or teachers seek to fit her into the boundaries of a particular theory. Dillard writes that “inexplicably” *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which she calls “a difficult book,” has been taught in high schools and colleges. As a result, “a generation of youth has grown up cursing [her] name” (282). Possibly this is because explication and answers to Dillard's many questions were more important than a reverence for Dillard's work. Moore chides those who “disenchant a movie or a poem” when they choose to consult a critic “to find out what the story means, if it is good or bad, and where it fits in the current vogue of criticism” rather than rely on their own intuition, and sense of enchantment (245). (This was my initial trouble; I went to Perreten's argument first instead of consulting my intuition.) Dillard roots her words in enchantment, in an awe to awakening, rather than a systematic hermeneutic approach.

After the awakenings that happened at Tinker Creek, Dillard seems to engage the darkness by taking her experiences to her “four walls” and giving them words. If these words do not come out of silence, Picard writes in *The World of Silence*, then they are only noise; words are only clanging gongs and resounding cymbals, according to St. Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, if they are without love (*New International Version Bible*, I Cor. 13.1). In Dillard's silent cell, she can allow her imagination to meet memory the way lovers do: with awe and passion. The stories of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* are born on those dazzling dark shores of waking to mystery, to the silence of God.

What greets us on those dark shores? Max Picard says that words come from silence, and in a mystical sense, silence was before language (31). Discovery through the senses are nothing new, but our modern sensitives need to be infused with the primitive once again (Dillard's exhortation to become tribesmen and Buell's re-visioning). The Psalmist gives us a pastoral view:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside still waters,  
he restores my soul. . . . Even though I walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me. (*New International Version Bible*, Ps. 23.1-4)

Dillard silently walks this valley with the psalmist, the desert fathers, the Romantics, with Thoreau and Emerson. What if, in literature classes, students practiced silence: a passage would be read, maybe from Dillard or Thoreau or William Wordsworth, and instead of responding with words, they responded with contemplative silence (for a time,

at least)? (Maybe there would be less cursing of names.) What if this kind of practice was called a criticism of silence, where students begin with silence first and then venture into what language would best reflect their ideas of a certain passage, poem, play, or novel? This practice may make space for conversations about the way we love certain poems or passages, but this love would be explained within a context grounded in a literary tradition. Silence is necessary in order to see what the writer alone is doing with words.

Silence has its beginning in solitude. Without the practice of solitude, being quiet can simply parade as silence. Henry Nouwen's *The Way of the Heart* confronts us about a shadowed valley:

In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding: no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract, just me—naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken—nothing. It is in this nothingness that I have to face my solitude, a nothingness so dreadful that I want to run. (17-18)

Something that Dillard does consistently, according to her own accounts, is to remain in solitude; she remains in the nothingness however dreadful, though at times she does turn away.<sup>12</sup> In her memoir, Dillard spends hours alone exploring, a childhood preparation for the solitude we find in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*. In both of these works, Dillard expands on the stillness of solitude as she continues to prepare herself to be amazed, to be ready for wonder.

At the end of her slim volume on craft, *The Writing Life*, Dillard quotes a well-known paleontologist and Catholic priest: “The world is filled, and filled with the Absolute,” Teilhard de Chardin wrote. “To see this is to be made free” (qtd. in *The Writing Life* 111). What is this Absolute? In a religious sense, God, but Dillard leaves this open. She neither agrees nor denies that the Absolute is God. Is the Absolute a being or a place or silence or something else altogether? Without defining Absolute, the word comes from silence and returns to it the way Picard explains the beginnings of language, leaving the reader with the task of engaging with the Absolute as she sees it (31). Without defining or interpreting the Absolute, Dillard allows the word to remain a whole story in itself, to remain enchanted as Moore hopes. Chardin's “to see” points back to Dillard's “pearl of great price,” of the secret of seeing, which seems more important to Dillard than defining the Absolute.

Dillard's craft is both Christian and Other: Thomas Merton articulates that the “other” of his Eastern contemplative practice “teaches nothing; it merely enables us to wake up and become aware. It does not teach, it

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<sup>12</sup> “The Field of Silence” in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* is an example of how Dillard turns away; I will address later how she turns away from a budding tulip tree leaf, but that seems a different kind of turning away. The turning away from the field of silence hints at a loneliness that is too layered to unpack here (130-36).

points” (qtd. in *Encounters* 132). The Absolute does seem to hint at a metaphor for God, as Carroll indicates in her explication of the essay “An Expedition to the Pole” found in Dillard’s *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. In that chapter, we learn that “[t]he Absolute, the Pole of Relative Inaccessibility, is what the polar explorers tried so desperately to reach” (qtd. in Carroll 30). Dillard gives the pole another name, a Pole of the Most Trouble, which Carroll says is “an obvious metaphor” for God (30). The Latin for *absolute* means “freed, unrestricted” (OED). Again, the power is not in defining the absolute, but in seeing it, which is a paradox. Yet having eyes to see is the way to give voice to your own astonishment, Dillard and the prophets say. Merton speaks to this contradiction when he writes that “[t]he Absolute is in the world of opposites and not apart from it” (qtd. in *Encounters* 131). If this is the Absolute that Dillard writes about, then her freedom is in the “world of opposites.” Dillard’s consistent and seemingly reckless abandon toward nature, toward common experiences, toward the spiritual, is an example of her freedom to not name, to re-name, to remain silent:

I didn't know, I never have known, what spirit is it that descends into my lungs and flaps near my heart like an eagle rising. I name it full-of-wonder, highest good, voices. I shut my eyes and saw a tree stump hurled by the wind, an enormous tree stump sailing sideways across my vision, with a wide circular brim of roots like a tossed top hat. (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 224)

A tree’s roots as its branches seems a fitting image for Dillard’s way of seeing because if her roots are in Christianity, the way she uses religious language frees it from its doctrinal bonds. Dillard is willing to engage the dazzling darkness through crafting words for what she sees, even if paradox is the result. If she agrees with Chardin (and silence can be an agreement), Dillard’s God is Possibility; she is constantly looking to re-define the unknown in her own way.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE TULIP BUD: THE SILENCE OF PURIFICATION

In line with William Harmon's assessment of the mystic life, the purgative way is the first path toward God. Annie Dillard exhibits this purging through a brief encounter with a tree bud; she purifies herself through leaving, which results in a kind of enchantment. Thomas Merton wrote about the *via negativa* indirectly: "We cannot capture God in titles, names, and facts, but many things hint at and point to God" (qtd. in *Encounters* 61). Merton continues, "And therefore it is only the one who prays to God, quite possibly the one who searches for silence, who can recognize God in the many little ideas, meetings, and happenings along the way" (qtd. in *Encounters* 61). Though Dillard does not say she does not pray, she embodies Merton's second assertion that the "one who searches for silence" is the one who "recognizes God in the many little ideas, meetings, and happenings." In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, the movement toward the *via negativa* "moves downward into realms of greater and greater emptiness," according to Dillard in a rare interview in 1981 (qtd. in Buell 240). This recognition for Dillard is not to name God as he is beyond "titles, names, and facts," according to Merton. Dillard explores the unfolding of herself in the search. The search for silence is Dillard's way to prayer. The destination often of prayer, communion with God, is seemingly not as important as having ways of seeing the possibilities of where God may be revealed, in these cases, through nature. One of the ways Dillard engages nature is through her experiments in the particular, in the ordinary and commonplace. In this section, I will examine how Dillard's observation of a tulip bud exemplifies the connections between her craft and her journey on the *via negativa*.

Silence provides a foundation for a way of seeing the world whether on the *via positiva* or the *via negativa*. In his discussion on mysticism, Harmon explains another way of viewing these two paths: "There are two broad types of mysticism: in one, God is seen as transcendent, outside the human soul, and union with Him is achieved through a series of steps or stages; in the other, God is immanent, dwelling within the soul and to be discovered by penetrating deeper into the inner self" (358). Dillard is less interested in a systematic way to God, but in a deeper, more internal and inexplicable way to God even though she uses these two paths as frame for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (279). The spiritual life is layered and full of complexity and contradiction; a necessary part of mysticism is finding space to be alone. If silence is avoided and sound constantly fills spaces, both external and internal, the

cacophony pushes out any kind of reflection or revelation. Noise is a great destroyer; Picard spends a whole chapter on its vices (172-97). Dillard seems fully aware of what she is up against, ready to fight. This fight takes her to a cabin at Tinker Creek, a fire tower near Puget Sound, a room at a library; she is fighting to build each sentence cell by cell.<sup>13</sup>

Dillard exhorts us to be aware of silence; it teaches. Silence is the name of the thing that undulates under the surface of her writing; it is the space between her sentences, between her words. Dillard's craft seems centered on this idea: "The world of language is built over and above the world of silence. . . . Silence is for language what a net stretched out taut below him is for the tightrope walker" (Picard 37). There is reverence as well as violence in Dillard's careful balancing of language and silence. If silence creates the possibility for waking, it is worth shedding blood for as in the opening scene of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: the tomcat that leaves bloody footprints on her chest like roses, and when she washed the blood away (a hint toward baptism), she was not sure if she had "purified [herself] or ruined the blood sign of passover. We wake if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence" (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 4). Dillard creates layers of interpretation because not only is this the blood of baptism, it is the blood of ritual. This seeming contradiction of purification or passover show the passive nature of this idea: the ritual happened while Dillard was sleeping; she missed it. She wakes to the sign without the message, without the prophecy. During the last plague before Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt, the Egyptians did not put blood on their doors; their firstborns were killed. Dillard would have been aware of this violence even as she is writing about her own sign of blood (*New International Version Bible*, Exodus 12). Dillard must interpret the sign for herself, so she gives different interpretations, but, ultimately, if we wake, we wake to the unknown. Language arises from silence, as Picard writes, and that is where it returns (37). Dillard's work seems to acknowledge this beginning. She offers her writing to the reader the way she finds herself carrying the communion wine, carrying "Christ with a cork" in her backpack: a carefully crafted experience loaded with subconscious connections that leaves a wake long after the words are gone (*Holy the Firm* 64). Silence is the way to let the story remain without the disenchantment of too much explication.

Silence is a vital element in Dillard's writing that provides a foundation for revelation because it is an important part of self-discovery and awareness. Dillard is silent about her work, mostly; a black and white photo of

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<sup>13</sup> Dillard describes the construction of "perfect prose" through a structure that is built "cell by cell" (*The Writing Life* 26).



her on her website's "Contact, or not" section with an "X" across her mouth furthers the contradiction that Walt Whitman names and the mythology that Thoreau encourages: to be an American writer is to contain multitudes, to embrace contradictions.<sup>14</sup> Silence is a place of awareness even as we contain multitudes, even as we wrestle with the disparate.

Much of American mythology is rooted in ancient practices, in the biblical narrative. The early Christian ascetics went to the desert to preserve their way of communing with God; Dillard goes to Tinker Creek. Then at Puget Sound in her fire tower she is a kind of stylite, an ancient desert pilgrim whose contemplative life was spent at the top of a pillar. Sitting at the top of her tower, closer to God and farther from the world, Dillard has space to reflect on Julie Norwich, a child who was burned badly.<sup>15</sup> This child is the embodiment of innocence and becomes a symbol for Dillard for the ways in which we cannot explain—God's silence—suffering (*Holy the Firm* 73-76). The innocence of *Holy the Firm*—though she ends the book with a blessing and a promise to be a nun—is a contradiction of the innocence in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (*Holy the Firm* 76).<sup>16</sup> At the creek, innocence is still waiting, still wondering. Innocence is not the same as childishness; innocence is a serious wide-eye approach to the world. Innocence sees everything; judges not. Dillard's perchance for child-like wonder provides an example of what James McClintock sees as a deeply imbedded part of her work: "Innocence is a state [Dillard] values as did romantics and Christians before her. . . . The prerequisite of innocence may explain why Dillard often identifies stalking and seeing rituals with childhood and childhood games." 'Only children keep their eyes open,' she writes" (qtd. in McClintock 99). Dillard approaches God like a child: she preserves her wide-eye innocence by refusing to give God a fixed nature<sup>17</sup>—he is ineffable, say the mystics; she is innocent in her observations and in her seeing, which are absent of proscription. This innocence revels in the questions, presses the rim of the unknown.

Lawrence Buell indicates that Dillard's use of the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* are mostly structural, which seems reductive considering the mystical nature of her work, as though structure and ecstatic experiences cannot co-exist. He calls this framing "biblicism" (240). Buell defines Dillard as a "choric figure" for whom the

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14 At the end of "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman writes, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then, I contradict myself, / I am large—I contain multitudes" (94).

15 Stylites were ascetics who lived on top of pillars. The word *stylite* comes from the Greek word *stulitēs* meaning "pillar" (OED).

16 Dillard writes that "there are two kinds of nun, out of the cloister or in" (*Holy the Firm* 74).

17 The idea of a fixed nature comes from the *via positiva* way of knowing God. If he can be known, then his nature will be "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (*New International Version Bible*, Heb. 13.8). This reference is toward Jesus Christ, but I believe it applies to the nature of God here, as well.

reader has a model “of praiseful witness to the miraculous, scary confusion of a phenomenal flow utterly baffling in its particulars but reassuringly predictable in its basic sequence of events” (241). In spite of reducing Dillard's *Tinker Creek* to a formula where the frame appears more important than what is spoken (or unspoken), Buell hints at how Dillard can be accessed: the seasons are “predictable,” the particulars are “baffling” (240). Stay in the bafflement, Dillard might say, the miraculous is possible. Buell's formula rests on the seasonal shifts, and Dillard uses the seasons as a frame to build cell by cell her progression toward her own winter, her journey on the *via negativa*, toward a holy confusion.<sup>18</sup>

The seasons are the boundary where Dillard's spiritual self presses the rim. Nearly halfway through Annie Dillard's seminal *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), she is still on the *via positiva* (qtd. in Buell 240). “Spring” holds Dillard's attention, and she finds herself innocently rapt by a tulip tree leaf emerging. The chapter title references her seasonal framing, the obvious architecture and what Buell indicates is the higher way of seeing her work; there is another structure not explicitly stated in the text. Not saying, not naming leaves room for the reader and for Dillard's progress (or digression) toward God. While the content bends toward the way of knowing, it also contains Merton's “world of opposites.” It was not until almost 20 years after an interview where Dillard mapped out the structure of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that she added this crucial key to her code: she borrowed mysticism from Christianity. She explains in her “Afterword” (1999) the tradition that shaped her work:

Neoplatonic Christianity describes two routes to God: the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. Philosophers on the *via positiva* assert that God is omnipotent, omniscient, etc; that God possesses all positive attributes. I found the *via negativa* more congenial. Its seasoned travelers (Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century and Pseudo-Dionysius in the sixth) stressed God's unknowability. Anything we may say of God is untrue, as we can know only creaturely attributes, which do not apply to God. Thinkers on the *via negativa* jettisoned everything that was not God; they hoped that what was left would only be the divine dark. (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 279)

Dillard is intimately aware of the divine dark. An awareness of the limits of language allows Dillard to move freely between realms of nature and of spirit. Picard emphasizes that “[l]anguage can only enjoy security as it moves about freely in words and ideas in so far as the broad world of silence is stretched out below” (37). Picard and Dillard refer to the darkness that was in the beginning that hovers over the deep. The way Dillard maneuvers around the tulip bud indicates that she considers this space prime for a possible miracle; her words create the surface of the experience and they hover there, waiting. Phrases like “trying to determine” as she examines the “progress” of the bud even as

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<sup>18</sup> In the “Afterword,” Dillard indicates that she could not get away from the seasonal framework because other “structures . . . injured, usually fatally, the already frail narrative” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 279).

she “looked away” indicate that Dillard knows how to make her words wait for the proper time (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). Dillard's miracles, these objects of wonder, are more about the possible than about the actual.

As she shifts her perspectives of God to gain a better view, Dillard shifts around the seen and the unknown of the (potential) tulip leaf. The problem: Dillard and I are trying to access something that is rhetorical and we need signs to awaken our imagination, to call this image into being.<sup>19</sup> Thoreau was well acquainted with signaling the internal: “No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly” (*Walden* 204). Thoreau moves from attributing the labors of the earth to an Artist to examining the sounds of words beginning with “lobe” (204). This looking deeply at the minute internal works of leaves and words is something Dillard does with skill gleaned from the nature writing tradition. In her version of an experiment—Thoreau has his experiment in the woods, as well—she “looked away from the tulip leaf at the tip of the sapling” and back again (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). Her goal seemed simple: could she actually “see the bent leaf tip rise and shove against the enclosing flaps,” could she see the unseeable? Dillard layers her experiences with the force of her words doing what she describes: even as she is trying to “see,” this word “rises and shoves” against the folds of meaning (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). *See* comes to English through the Latin *sequi*, meaning “follow” (OED). Dillard follows the leaf; she looks back and forth; she is trying see if something will happen.

Even as Dillard is working out what she literally sees, she senses something else is happening: enchantment. Matthew Del Nevo gives words for Dillard's experiences: “Enchantment, essentially, is the possibility of being captivated by the beautiful. But this is because enchantment is the desire of the soul,” writes Del Nevo in *The Work of Enchantment* (3). The connection between Dillard's awakenings and Del Nevo's enchantings come down to possibility and seems to hint at Moore's paradox of the soul, as well. It is the possibility for beauty that they both endorse. All this following and seeing, seeking out trees and leaves, Dillard comes to a resolution earlier in the chapter directly related to Del Nevo's, but distinct: “Beauty is the language to which we have no key; it is the mute cipher, the cryptogram, the uncracked, unbroken code” (108).<sup>20</sup> Both Dillard and Del Nevo recognize the human

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19 I heard this idea from the poet Scott Cairns during a lecture about St. Isaak's presence in *The Brothers Karamazov*. He discussed how in the Hebrew language the word is the thing; the word calls the thing into being.

20 At the end of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard encounters a maple key spinning toward her from the sky. I cannot help but tie these two passages; suddenly, beauty has a “key.” Dillard is not explicit in her delight in the maple key that it is Beauty, but there is something about the way she threads words together that will not let me not try to make this connection, however limited. A few pages before she “sees” the key, she writes, “Beauty is real” (271). After “the bell under [her] ribs rang a true note” the maple key becomes a kind of key for her future experiences (273). She writes, “And now when I sway to a fitful wind, alone and listing, I will think, maple key.

need for beauty; Dillard pressed the boundary of how we can know beauty because she writes that it is beyond words, “mute,” and a code we cannot possibly decipher. Dillard offers Beauty to us in negative terms, full of the unknown. Both Del Nevo and Dillard refer to what is possible—and describe a way to be captivated. Dillard is not so concerned with what beauty is as much as she wants to be present wherever it may be (we’ll know it when we see it). For now, beauty is the tulip bud; it is the possibility of what is hidden, as well. She stays in the moment: “I was trying to determine if I could actually see the bent leaf tip rise and shove against the enclosing flaps” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). Though she sees nothing happening, her readers begin to see (if we use our imaginations and allow for enchantment, relying on the self rather than a critic, as Moore encourages). She describes the leaf tip and we see it; even more so, we believe it is happening.

In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard writes that “nothing happens” in the book, though paradoxically so much is happening—often under the surface of her words—as she catalogues her observations and unexpected visions. Again, this concept that “nothing” is happening, reinforces Picard’s premise that the nothingness is silence, where language is born (31).<sup>21</sup> Picard calls silence a “holy uselessness,” as well as “Holy Wilderness” (19). These ideas of “uselessness” and “wilderness” are the spaces from which Dillard’s words rise. Nothing is happening, but the possibility and inevitability haunts Dillard: is she willing to wait?

Her craft is one of continually returning to the moment of awakening. Dillard circles the dialectic between seeing and not seeing, of being tuned to the “progress” in an experience about a tulip tree bud (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). When she looks away and back again, she is creating a line of sight—an empirical moment: can this unfurling be visually verified? What if beauty is as much about what we do not see as it is about what we do see? There is beauty in her language: the “enclosing flaps” hold more than a new leaf; they hold an essential dialogue, and, as the Old Testament prophets say, what is hidden will be revealed; what is unknown will be made known, in the proper time. In the Book of Jeremiah, God tells the prophet to “[c]all unto me, and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know” (*New International Version Bible*, Jeremiah 33.3). These things will be made known when the prophet “calls upon” God. The sacred writings reveal, but the silence of God is often what

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When I see a photograph of earth from space, the planet so startlingly painterly and hung, I will think, maple key. When I shake your hand or meet your eyes I will think, two maple keys. If I am a maple key falling, at least I can twirl” (273).

21 There are echoes of T. S. Eliot here: the “nothing” seems to be Eliot’s “stillness / Between two waves of the sea” from “Little Giddings” (2488).

is heard. Until we are tuned to listen to the prophetic, we are partners with Dillard in her unknowing-seeing-knowing: “I couldn't tell whether I was seeing or merely imagining progress, but I knew the leaf would be fully erect within the hour” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). Dillard makes the distinction between seeing and imagining; both are important to enchantment and spiritual awareness; seeing requires action and imagining requires memory.

A force propels Dillard toward the unknown. Rather than wait to see what she already knows, that “the leaf would be fully erect within the hour,” Dillard leaves (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). In the beginning of the tulip tree scene, Dillard invokes Emerson's transparent eyeball as she maneuvers around the bud to observe every angle, every slight movement. Though in her “More Years After” (1999) she describes this idea as “ever-ludicrous,” Dillard “tried to be” fully present and awake to everything around her; her assessment of this attempt was that “fools rush in” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 283). Directly following the being-here for a tulip leaf, Dillard writes about leaving that scene; she channels Thoreau. When Dillard writes, “I left the woods,” she alludes to the later pages of Thoreau's *Walden*: “I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there” (214). Thoreau leaves because he has worn the paths of the woods and wishes to leave the conformity that he has made. When she leaves, spread before her is “silence . . . in a wave” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). She continues with parallel structure repeating “I left the wood silent” leaving off the plural of “woods” and adding “silent” as the adjective (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). There is ambiguity: Dillard is silent when she leaves, or the woods are silent, or both; not contradictions but possibilities are present here. Dillard is opening this space between possibility and reality; what rises and shoves to the surface is silence. Thoreau is concerned with conformity; Dillard is concerned with the unknown of her own experience.

“Woods” is the American version of “wood,” the British form, which follows a tap root all the way back to Dante's “dark wood,” the place of confusion and disorientation, a place of loss (OED). This is what Dillard does with a word: she strikes the bell of our imagination and the reverberation wafts its way through our memory, landing lightly on each way we know the word; her craft is to get us to the word and then beyond it to the unknown. Even the colloquial maxim “to lose the wood for the trees,” the obscuring of the larger perspective within the study of the microcosm, correlates to Dillard's most immediate paradox: in the opening of the leaf is also the wave of silence, not as energetic but still powerful. The sapling and its one leaf carry the same weight for her as the entire forest: the miraculous in the particular. There is even an ancient proverb of Erasmus that claims that wood is the “material” out

of which man is “made” (OED). Dillard’s interest in the woods, in the leaves and trees, through the lens of the proverb, shows the intimate connection between the consciousness of trees and our awareness of what is intertwined under the surface.<sup>22</sup> This tulip leaf tip is rising and shoving against Dillard’s very core; she turns away from this fecundity in a skillful way. This experience with the tulip leaf is not only a spiritual experience, it is an exercise in practicing her craft:

The reason to perfect a piece of prose as it progresses—to secure each sentence before building on it—is that original writing fashions a form. It unrolls out into nothingness. It grows cell by cell, bole to bough to twig to leaf; any careful word may suggest a route, may begin a strand of a metaphor or even tout of which much, or all, will develop. (*The Writing Life* 15)

Each word in this passage—in all of her writing—is carefully chosen, knowing that she is weaving her metaphors, knowing each word is growing “cell by cell, bole to bough to twig to leaf,” in the same way she is examining the yet-unfurled tulip leaf. The passage from *The Writing Life* does exactly what it says: it picks up the threads of the passage about the tulip leaf, one is a metaphor and one is the meaning. Both passages encompass Dillard’s commitment to the fidelity of each cell of her work, each word. And yet, she says, “It unrolls out into nothingness,” which seems to hint at Picard’s Holy Wilderness. Her experience and her writing are progressing toward “nothingness.”

This nothingness is the destination beyond language, the place language cannot enter, as Picard says. Soon the silence will unroll before her in a similar way that the “dazzling dark breaks over the far slopes of time. . . . [T]hen it’s time to break our necks for home” (*Holy the Firm* 62). Dillard turns away from the tulip leaf almost as if she needs to break her neck for home: “I left the woods, spreading silence before me in a wave, as though I’d stepped not through the forest, but on it” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). The silence spreads before Dillard “in a wave,” a loaded metaphor that signals toward a gospel story (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). She furthers the image with the idea of walking “on” the forest. Though a stretch, the implications are a sort of walking on water, like Jesus when Peter attempts to walk to him and Jesus lifts him to the boat and calms the storm (*New International Version Bible*, Matt. 14.29). Dillard is emerging, and like Thoreau, she is leaving the woods, but not unchanged. With her attention to each sentence and each “cell” of a word, it is not unlikely that the tension within her work, sometimes

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22 In “Teaching a Stone to Talk,” she writes of a visit to the Galapagos Islands. Though her memories of the sea lions and other creatures fade, she remembers the *palo santo* trees, “thin, pale, wispy” (93). Not only does she remember, she decides, “I would like to come back as a *palo santo* tree on the weather side of an island, so that I could be, myself, a perfect witness, and look, mute, and wave my arms” (*Teaching a Stone to Talk* 94).

within a sentence even, is crafted and intentional:

There is a tension in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* between, on the one hand, a thoroughly naturalized and contextualized inquiry into the sacred and, on the other hand, the Western theological tradition of a transcendent creator-god which provides much of the explicitly theological vocabulary at work in the text. (Cheney 44)

Yes, the tension. Rather than trying to assuage the reader (or herself) with attempts at explanations and doctrine, Dillard remains in the tension, creates space for her readers (if they are willing). At times even the critical voices are left in wonder; Jim Cheney, who writes about the tension above, admits: “One of the joys of reading [*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*] is savoring the interplay of these two aspects of the text” (44). When given the chance, enchantment is possible even in seeming contradiction.

Enchantment is close to what Dillard was feeling when she left the woods, a feeling mixed with uncertainty. Feeling “stirred and quickened,” Dillard alludes to spiritual undercurrents in her experience and in her words (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). Dillard draws on all the layers of *stir*; from the Oxford English Dictionary’s literal to the archaic: Not only does she seem to be “caused to move along or away,” but she is “roused,” and she is “stimulated.” A rare use of the word is “showing signs of growth; to bud” (OED). If Del Nevo is correct, and enchantment truly is the desire of the soul, then Dillard is working at the “careful word” to construct images that engender in her readers the same feelings she had in those moments of unexpected beauty (for the reader, the enchantment can be with Dillard’s form) (*The Writing Life* 15). Dillard is becoming what she saw; her own awakening happens in the wake of the leaf’s slow progress toward unfurling, but unlike the leaf, sometimes the waking does not happen until we leave the scene. Further, “to stir” is to “rouse from sleep or rest, to wake up” (OED). She has been startled awake once again by a simple process in nature, one that borders the miraculous. And finally, *stir* means “to ‘raise up,’ to call into being,” which is the foundation of all that has happened to Dillard in those few moments with the tulip leaf (OED). She faces the challenge to see beyond the leaf; what is it that Dillard stirs?

Dillard stirs the nothingness, the sacred wilderness of silence within. She does not wait for the leaf because she is already “quickened,” simulated, moved, restored to life; this moment plants itself in her as a seed, as fire (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). Her word choice, at the cellular level recalls the epigraph of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which is an illumination from Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher: “It ever was, and is, and shall be, ever-living Fire, in

measures being kindled and in measures going out.” McClintock asserts that this epigraph in *Tinker Creek* “and the pervasive fire imagery in *Holy the Firm* signify that the intellectual aspects of her meditations prepare her for a sense of wonder no less than for horrific vision” (103). To be on fire, to be awake is inspiration that should be noticed; Dillard is creating a witness to these experiences; she is the flaming Moth, all consumed by what she sees (and does not see). In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard writes of a moth (or Moth) that she witnesses set herself in a candle and then burn as a wick (16-17). The imagination can be the place where the spark of an experience, the “sense of wonder,” is still creating the ever-living Fire that is burning but not consuming—her own burning bush where she removes the shoes of criticism to fully experience the miracle as a lover of nature; John the Baptist’s promise of “an unquenchable fire,” not in the form of a savior, but here, for Dillard, in the form of imagination (*New International Version Bible*, Exodus 3.1-5; Matt. 3.11-12). Though she cannot wait for the leaf to be more than what it was right then, the miracle is that it was there; the miracle of being. By telling this story, Dillard again calls the leaf—and the silence—into being present still in the imaginations of her readers as well as present in words on the page.

Even as her form indicates that the tulip leaf bud is worth the wait, Dillard “couldn’t wait” for “progress” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). This is pointing at craft: why will she not wait? Later in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* she waits for the muskrat to the point of ridiculousness, maneuvering herself across the ground on her elbows, sitting completely still on a bridge all contorted with a cigarette precariously between her fingers (197). Near the end of her year at Tinker Creek, she writes the contradiction of her earlier experience: “Waiting is the thing” (263). If the tulip leaf is a metaphor for the writing process, then Dillard uses “progress” to hint at her process of “securing one sentence before moving to the next” even if later in her text what has been “secured” contradicts an earlier idea (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114; *The Writing Life* 15). After leaving the forest, to step away into the silence, into the nothingness, seems exactly the “progress” she intends. She is curious, but impatient. The progress that happens is that Dillard progresses right out of the forest; the movement forward here is not the leaf, but Dillard. She knows what will happen if she waits, but she decides not to stay. By not waiting and leaving the woods, she misses what readers might assume is the miracle—the leaf finally rises and shoves through to reveal itself (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). What happens when we know the miracle will come and we choose to *not* see it or *not* wait for it?

In reflecting on what it meant to live a monastic life in the 1960s while engaging with the “illusions of the world,” Thomas Merton writes, “[T]he better part of action is waiting, not knowing what next and not having a glib



answer” (qtd. in *Encounters* 109). Dillard is reading Merton when she is at Tinker Creek and the thread that links them is Merton's contemplative practice formed by nature (*Encounters* 46). Dillard writes that Merton cautions his readers because “[t]here is always a temptation to diddle around in the contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 274). On the surface, it may appear as if Dillard is “diddling” around in the contemplative life, but her awareness to each word she writes indicates otherwise. In walking away, in abandoning the object of observation, Dillard is “stirred and quickened” by her experience; that is the miracle this time, not so much in what she sees, but in what happens to her when she chooses to leave. Dillard is the miracle.

And what of enchantment? Del Nevo writes that it is the “possibility of being captivated by the beautiful.” Dillard enacts this possibility for her readers in this way: we are attentive to whatever she does next; she is unpredictable, which is both beautiful and unnerving. Peter F. Perreten speaks to this miracle as well in that what Dillard and others are trying to do is to “make a new self in nature,” which he exemplifies by pairing a place portrait with a literary self-portrait (1). Dillard moves between nature and her descriptions of nature while pairing self-reflections and revelations on what she is reading or studying. This amalgam of thoughts, facts, and ideas continue to map her way of seeing the world and her place in that world.

Dillard seeks to capture and curate and catalogue: the names of the things she is seeing, what these things are doing, how they are doing it, and why. In *Tinker Creek's* “Afterword,” (1999) Dillard writes about how her “willingness to say 'I' and 'me' embarrasses—but at least it used the first person as a point of view only, a hand-held camera directed outward” (282). In 2007, “More Years Afterward” was added to the end of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Dillard writes: “I was twenty-seven in 1972 when I began writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. It is a young writer's book in its excited eloquence and its metaphysical boldness. (Fools rush in.) Using the first person, I tried to be—in Emerson's ever ludicrous phrase—a transparent eyeball” (283). Dillard is not only giving an account of place, she is accounting for her own transformation even if that “self-portrait” is that of a fool (Perreten 1). Dillard joins the tradition of looking inward, using herself as a compass for revelation and transformation.

The “why” of her method is tricky because anything we say may be untrue; an explanation of a tulip leaf bud may not leave room for other perspectives (often science tries to perfect the naming of things with objective language); Dillard seems to prefer “unofficial science” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114; McClintock 7). This is writer and activist Edward Abbey's idea that we should look at nature with an “intelligence informed by sympathy,

knowledge in the arms of love” (qtd. in McClintock 7). Dillard is on this path with Abbey; her way is one of silence and the unknown, though likely love is still present. The “nothing” and the silence seem to lead her to the *via negativa*, that God is unknown and is in the cloud of holy darkness. She begins her exploration in this short experiment by focusing on a single tulip leaf while in the next few sentences she moves out to the whole forest then to the Northwest Territories and beyond. This scene comes from her chapter “Spring.” Thoreau also has a chapter titled “Spring.” She focuses in on the minutest detail as the camera lens or transparent eyeball sees only the thing it is focused on; then she pulls back in waves to the woods and away, to Finland. Thoreau writes, “The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels” (214). Thoreau is cautioning against conformity here; Dillard is seeing where her thought will take her; both are conscious of the dangers of traveling the same path too often because of how familiarity narrows the view. We can hear the imperative. In “Walking,” Thoreau feels “that with regard to Nature I live a sort of border life” (“Walking”). The same could be said for Dillard; she lives on the edge of things, wild and nibbled.<sup>23</sup> Dillard’s paragraphs are short, seemingly nibbled at the edges, the excess removed; only the essence remains. The implication is that Dillard is crafting a message: I’ve done all that words can do here; let be what is. What she leaves out is important; silence fills that space in waves. This example seems contradictory to her exhortation earlier in the book about how “beauty and grace are performed whether or not we sense them—the least we can do is be there” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 10). She does not wait this time for the tulip leaf.

Silence is the response to the tulip leaf, but it contains both the positive and negative connotations for *silence*. Is the progress of the tulip leaf the miracle here or is the miracle simply the chance to see the tulip leaf? The miracle is another kind of blooming, not so much that the moment with the tulip leaf passed, but that Dillard allows silence to bloom before her, to “spread in a wave” before her (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). *Silence*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, has not changed in spelling since it entered the English language in the 1200s. That this word remained fixed in an ever-changing linguistic world, speaks to its resonance and power. With only a slight variance in “cilence,” *silence* is “the fact of abstaining or forbearing from speech or utterance; muteness, reticence, taciturnity” (OED). The rule of silence, commonly practiced by monks like the Trappists (like Thomas Merton),

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<sup>23</sup> “It must be, I think tonight, that in a certain sense only the newborn in this world are whole, that as adults we are expected to be, and necessarily, somewhat nibbled” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 241).

means the “renunciation of speech chosen or vowed” (OED). Here is the contradiction: Dillard writes about silence, which gives the word a voice, and a place, a cell and space for expounding on her experiences.

For Dillard, the religious silence, the silence that is “used allusively to denote the state beyond this life” seems most likely what was happening in the forest with the tulip bud (OED). And the darkness is beginning, the *via negativa's* shadow is present; the last half of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is Dillard's journey into the *via negativa*: “The first half of the book represents the *via positiva*; the second half, the *via negativa*. The book has bilateral symmetry; opposite chapters are paired” (qtd. in Buell 240). When she writes that she “left the wood silent,” she either means she was silent when she left, or the wood is silent now that she is gone. Likely both are correct. In a way, she is passing over this passage in silence as well because of its spare language. Leaving the tulip leaf is the beginning of her move toward the *via negativa*. (An exodus is going to take place.)

Though Dillard is enchanted by the leaf, more is going on; she is trying to break the code. One option: wait for the leaf to open to see what is inside. Dillard balks against this option and leaves the scene, willing to let the words do the work of enchantment this time. Not only are the words rising, Dillard herself is embodying these words; she “follows” the “progress” of this bud, even though she chooses not to wait for it to unfold and unfolds herself for us instead (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). This blooming for Dillard is a “rising and shoving” in forward “progress” in the silence that is essential to her own process and craft (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 114). *She* blooms in the process: she has been bending to see the leaf, moving back and forth; then she leaves the woods like the unfolding of the leaf; both are done in silence. This progress is also a move toward the *via negativa* because this passage is about the darkness of waiting; a kind of emptiness moves in.

This silence provides space for the sublime. The concept of the sublime came to us through “Longinus, who wrote his foundational work *On the Sublime* nearly two centuries ago, regards sublimity above all as a thing of the spirit, a spark that leaps from the soul of the writer to the soul of the reader, and only secondarily as a matter of technique and expression” (qtd. in Preminger 819). Though Dillard does not use the term *sublime* (that I can remember), the idea of “the spark that leaps from the soul of the writer to the soul of the reader” seems very present in her work, even as she is silent on sublimity. The spark represents the space where the imagination of the writer and the reader meet in Dillard's dazzling dark on the *via negativa*. Silence makes space for the sublime, that ever-living Fire of Heraclitus. Dillard's connection to Emerson is a reverence for the sublime: Dillard's sublime is in the

silence, Emerson's in the stars (Emerson 180). Each of these writers channels the sublime spark, which is unseen, hidden beneath the layers of language and experience but ready “in measures being kindled and in measures going out” to the reader (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* epigraph). There is a way of seeing that makes each space within our view a possible place for miracle; Dillard crafts the telling (and the reality of) her experiences this way. She intricately moves her “transparent eyeball” from the sapling to the forest, from the minute to the massive, never losing sight of what each word is doing as it rises and shoves, stirs and quickens within this passage and throughout the entire narrative. Dillard's words are born out of silence and signal movement toward the *via negativa*.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE SPIDER'S WEB: THE SILENCE OF ILLUMINATION

When Annie Dillard strides out into the woods or spends weeks alone in a fire-tower apartment, place is the crucial frame: As Lawrence Buell reminds us, environmental writing approaches what he calls the “antinomy” of “acquiescence to and partly in resistance to or evasion of official boundaries” (Buell 269). It does this “by pitting map knowledge against empirical knowledge” (Buell 269). The map is fixed and an attempt to be objective, though maps are always subjectively constructed through the eyes of the mapmaker; those following the *via positiva* attempt to, in a way, claim empirical knowledge of God—God can be mapped. For Dillard, empirical knowledge leads to drawing new lines on maps—her resistance to official boundaries leads her more toward the edge of her own rim (*An American Childhood* 97). As she explores the natural world around her and presses the boundaries of what is known, Dillard encounters the space between what is known: the map, and the unknown: what is beyond the world's rim; what she cannot see from her fire tower is darkness to her and moves toward the *via negativa* and the silence that makes space for the sublime. By describing what she sees in the corners of her life, those places with “scant traffic,” Dillard unassumingly does what she was set here to do, what she works to do: give voice to her own astonishment (*Holy the Firm* 13). A spider's web at the beginning of *Holy the Firm* is a metaphor for how she does what she does, instinctually; this is the illuminated way Harmon asserts on the mystic way to God because Dillard is aware of her craft and can access the supernatural in the particular (*Holy the Firm* 13). Dillard is concerned with “the particular,” so this spider is a spark for her imagination; she sets out to observe (McClintock 8). Merton writes, “It was because the saints were absorbed in God that they were truly capable of seeing and appreciating created things” (23). Dillard, in contradictory ways, is accessing her theology through nature because her rituals are directed, not so much at God, but at seeing the significance in each created thing, her “unofficial science,” as McClintock calls it (7).

Dillard challenges God in *Holy the Firm*, and questions traditional ways of envisioning the Creator. As she attempts to reconcile disparate religious concepts such as suffering and rituals like communion, her astonishment settles on a spider who has made her web in the corner of the bathroom (*Holy the Firm* 13). Dillard describes the setting as her bathroom; then she quickly indicates the significance of the spider: it reminds her of a moth she once

killed. Then she describes the spider: “uncertain lineage, bulbous at the abdomen and drab” (*Holy the Firm* 13). Dillard stays in the scene, waits for clarity: though the web is a “mess,” it “works.” This working of the web is the crux of this anecdote and of Dillard’s own work. This web works “miraculously,” keeping the spider alive and Dillard “amazed” (*Holy the Firm* 13). This amazement is not only at the spider’s web; Dillard’s own work weaves threads in the same way an artist can be driven and meticulous, but the beauty he creates can still amaze (sometimes even bewilder).<sup>24</sup> This is the miracle: Dillard sees the spider again and again, continuing to give this miracle (and others) a voice; at times she enters the space of amazement and embodies the miracle, as well. Silence is her path in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; silence is her cell in *Holy the Firm* and *An American Childhood*.

Dillard emphasizes the duality of being both the observer and the observed; she sees these miracles, but she is also re-shaped by them (*An American Childhood* 12). This is a ritual Dillard began in childhood. Peter F. Perreten expounds on Dillard’s shift: “At the age of ten, the I-subject narrator is fully aware of her environment: ‘I am awake now forever, I thought suddenly. . . I felt time in full stream, and I felt consciousness in full stream, joining it, like the rivers.’ Dillard is ready to fully engage with the environment to fill in details of the picture of place, to add to her mental map” (qtd. in Perreten 13). Often she describes in detail small facets of her life; these facets are the essence of her craft, of her map making, which is her way of “resisting official boundaries” in her work (Buell 269). The mental map can never be “official” because it is held in a space no cartographer can enter. Even more crucial are the ways Dillard crafts scenes as mirrors on her work; again an example of how she is perfecting her prose by building one sentence on another, cell by cell, and in this case, thread by thread. In the opening of *Holy the Firm*, Dillard gives a quick cast of characters in her small, fire-tower apartment: the gold cat and a spider (later a dead bird, a little god). Short of naming the spider and speaking directly to her (she does not say she does *not* speak to the spider), and using simple language, Dillard regards her spider with respect, and awe—her most common response, though with God there is more uncertainty, with the spider, more wonder (*Holy the Firm* 13). In many of Dillard’s close observations of nature, she uses present tense to evoke the “still-ness” of these events, and in particular, how this spider is a companion. Her skill is in describing the ordinary, yet conjuring mysteries, for her readers in the most unremarkable of things, a spider’s web. Even in this small creature’s simplicity, the shadow of the *via negativa* is

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24 Dillard writes of an artist: “What can any artist do but set his world on fire?” (*Holy the Firm* 72). Thoreau has his Artist, as well, his Artist “who made the world and [him]” (*Walden* 203). If I conflate the two, God is the Artist who sets the world on “fire,” give us the spark of inspiration and leaves us with the “ever-living Fire” of Heraclitus. *Bewilder* comes from *amaze*, which I discuss more in depth later.

present because Dillard's awareness here is the awareness of mystery; she contemplates how the web works, but no true access is afforded her; the spider's ways are like Picard's Holy Wilderness.

The second path toward God, according to William Harmon's description, is the way of illumination. Dillard finds illumination through a spider's web. After Dillard wakes “to a god” on this particular day (“each day is a god”), hears the click of the cat's sutures, she rises and turns her attention to the spider occupying a corner in her bathroom (*Holy the Firm* 11). By “keeping a sort of company” with her spider, Dillard immediately indicates the bond she has formed, which is one of understanding, of camaraderie. Both “company” and the next word she uses, “outfit,” have military uses, of banding together, of a tightly woven group (*Holy the Firm* 13). Dillard has a habitual, daily ritual of observing the spider because she uses “always” to say how often she is reminded of “a certain moth” she helped to kill. In this passage she translates her observation into a visceral connection with this little creature in her bathroom (*Holy the Firm* 13). The spider triggers reverie for her, and a few pages later, Dillard offers the whole sordid scene of how she assisted in that moth's demise, but on the previous pages, she gives her readers only the rawness of how she relates directly to her spider: they both kill (*Holy the Firm* 13). Not only is she giving “voice to [her] own astonishment,” her exhortation to her readers in *The Writing Life* (1989), she is reflecting on what “works” for the writer, but she offers this caution: “It is the beginning of the work that a writer throws away” (68, 5).<sup>25</sup> Possibly the reader is bewildered at this point. Stay in the web, she says. If this is where we stay, this is the imperative as well: be wild in the sense that you allow yourself to abandon reason and wrestle with the contradiction of observing the spider but not knowing how the web “works” (*Holy the Firm* 13). Dillard echoes John Keats' Negative Capability: “[W]hen a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. . . .” he is the objective poet (qtd. in Harmon 366). Though objectivity is not necessarily Dillard's goal, her desire to get out of the way to let the words speak is evident: Dillard creates images with her phrases or with a single word. The way she circles around her experiences, the way she states simply what happened—the spider reminds her of a certain moth she helped to kill—gives the reader a chance to explore multiple ways of seeing. Dillard unrolls the story sentence by sentence, cell by cell.

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25 I experienced this; I had a draft of this thesis that I wrote in November. Much of what I wrote I discarded, but the practice was what I needed to begin the process of writing this.

If the better action is waiting, as Thomas Merton observes, then Dillard's use of the passive voice forces readers to wait for the literal action in her sentences, particularly in describing her spider's work. Dillard is a master at keeping her tone personal and objective; in other realms these are competing perspectives. She makes the contradictory layers of *her* work seem ordinary and natural. But in list that follows the passive be verb *is* she provides the particular: the setting is her bathroom; the spider “herself is of uncertain lineage, bulbous at the abdomen and drab”; the web “itself is in a corner”; sixteen or so dead bug bodies underneath (*Holy the Firm* 13). Buell indicates that proximity is important for constructing a sense of place: “‘The externality of the world,’ observes Stanley Cavell, ‘is articulated by Thoreau as its nextness to me.’ Nature remains other but connected, meaningful albeit not fully known: not terrain, but place. In the process of perceiving this place-sense for himself, the speaker creates it for the reader also” (qtd. in Buell 268). The spider is the “other” for Dillard and has a “nextness” to her. Dillard is working with a metaphor that both connects her readers to her experience and creates the sense of the “other” because she can only describe the spider by what she sees; she cannot know fully this spider's identity; all she really knows is that the spider is *here*. Her knowledge is based on observation, on empirical knowledge. Dillard repeats a phrase using “works” three times consecutively, mimicking the repetitious way the web keeps feeding the spider. *Works* connotes labor, repetition, ritual, monotony, and, in this case, death, which is the precise way the web works. Again, the darkness descends here because death is the undercurrent of this experiment. Dillard moves closer to the mystery and shadow of death.

Dillard mimics the actions of the spider's weaving by working the threads of her story back and forth in a concerted effort to provide the framework where imagination can do its work. The web creates a kind of map, and Dillard's imagination keeps the paths worn where her words will realize its shape. Dillard describes the web map as a “mess” (*Holy the Firm* 13). This mess is what the spider creates, instinctually. Each thread of the web woven with precision, which is what Dillard does with her words. In the beginning “[e]ach day is a god” in *Holy the Firm*, which again delays with the passive structure but astonishes with the metaphor: the word *god* is a layered word, greeting the reader with range of possibility for meaning (*Holy the Firm* 11). With a mess there is often confusion; the situation is full of contradictions; sometimes food is involved. The root of the word is Old French *mes*, meaning “a portion of food,” which is an apt description for what the web does for the spider (OED). Later in the word's lineage it came to mean a small group of people who regularly ate together, a company, which Dillard uses to frame her



familiarity with the spider, “with whom [she] keeps a sort of company” (*Holy the Firm* 13). Though *mess* indicates a disorderliness about the web, the triangulation of wall-to-wall-to-floor precision that Dillard describes tells the reader otherwise. Again, the contradiction. When examined closely, the *mess* becomes a map and a miracle; the *mess* becomes a way of seeing the world. Dillard’s “mental map” from *An American Childhood* is at play here: the web is the map and the ritual of seeing provides the mental framework to create the memory Dillard weaves into a story (44).

On the surface, Dillard’s writing can appear “messy.” Buell describes her prose in a Tinker Creek passage as “a rushy kaleidoscope of perceptual and intertextual fragments, precariously contained by a basketry of motifs” (237). In many of her anecdotes—like this one from her memoir, *An American Childhood*—Dillard moves rapidly from topic to topic in a seemingly disconnected bewilderment because she pitched “in a blind fever of concentration,” then “as I did most things, in order to concentrate” (97). Then a question: “Why do elephants drink? To forget” (*An American Childhood* 97). Then the confession: “I loved living at my own edge, as an explorer on a ship presses to the ocean’s rim; mind and skin were one joined force curved out and alert, prow and telescope,” and once again she is “in a rapture” (*An American Childhood* 97). Baseball, to elephants, to exploration, back to baseball. Upon further examination, Dillard triangulates her thoughts here, flinging the thread way out, striking one wall—elephants, another wall—being an explorer, and back to the grounding element—baseball. This way of weaving her ideas together alludes to a mystical connection—a triangulation between writer, reader, and image—with language and with silence. (This is the mystical and unknown side of story telling: how do we know how our words will move a reader’s imagination?) Buell addresses this crucial idea: “[I]n order to participate in a most important endeavor” of rescuing the environment, “analytical processes of ‘trained’ readers of literature must be reimagined; environmental crisis involved a crisis of the imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it” (2). Dillard’s prophetic role is not so much environmental as it is to wake us up to silence through the power of the word, which will inform how we see our ecology. (She is prophet to herself, as well, which is her praxis more than activism like some of her contemporaries.)

Dillard’s words work with an undercurrent of religious language. By describing the web as working “miraculously,” Dillard acknowledges the wonder and terror of the sublime, of the inherited romantic aesthetic, and of being faced with the horizon, which is the sublime, of the unknown, which appears consistently in her writing.

Dillard's religion is transcendental and the pastoral voice is Emerson (and Thoreau). To Emerson, the sublime was the space where humans and heaven mingle:

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though no body is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look to the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. (Emerson 180)

Interestingly, Henri Nouwen exhorts his readers to look inward in their solitude; Emerson encourages men to “look to the stars.” In solitude, Dillard finds that her “heavenly bodies” are on earth and bodily: the spider with her bulbous and drab body (the tulip bud is a kind of body, and in the next section, I'll discuss Dillard's experience with a skater, a seeming no body skating on the street at night). Even as she uses a kind of empirical method—also consistent in her observations—she continues to make space for the indescribable, the ineffable. In *Tinker Creek*, her method is enacted in nature and re-enacted in her study as she writes. *Holy the Firm* is a three-day journal-type entry bordering on poetry in its raw exploration of suffering. Both texts contain and were conceived through Dillard's enchantment: the space where “memory meets imagination in the dark” (*The Writing Life* 26). To wait for the sublime as well as to enact it—these are the circumstances for the miraculous. *Miracle* comes from the Latin *miraculum*, meaning “object of wonder” (OED). More than anything, Dillard ritualistically directs her readers to wonder after wonder after wonder, beseeching us to do what she has done, which is to “try to be there” for “grace and beauty” because they are constantly present, though maybe in the Emersonian sense, transparent (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 11; Emerson 180). Dillard is present to see the spider; she observes and extracts meaning as her solitude meets the spider's solitude. The spider certainly challenges our sensitivities to beauty and grace, but that is what Dillard does best: contradict our sacred beliefs and destroy our stereotypes; she triggers reaction in us the way these everyday things, like the spider, trigger for her, in this case, a flaming moth she “helped to kill” (*Holy the Firm* 13). Here the spider is the spark in the Holy Wilderness; the moth mimics the ever-living Fire “being kindled and in measures going out” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* epigraph).

This incident begs a question from us: what have we helped to kill? We are confronted with a spiritual question, one that would not be raised unless Dillard came back to her experience with the spider ready to be taught. Though not necessarily prayer, her work of observations, in this case, with the spider, is meditative, ritualistic.

Thomas Merton, in reflecting on his own path toward becoming more nature-aware, writes,

'It is impressive to see how prayer opens one's eyes to nature. Prayer makes people contemplative and attentive. In place of manipulating, people who pray stand receptive before the world. They no longer grab, but caress, they no longer bite, but kiss, they no longer examine, but admire. To prayerful people, nature can show itself completely renewed. Instead of an obstacle, it becomes a way; instead of an invulnerable shield, it becomes a veil that gives a preview of unknown horizons.' (qtd. in *Encounters* 46)

In contrast, Dillard seems to reverse these ideas: nature moves her toward prayer, instead of prayer toward nature, which is her movement toward contemplation, even if the contemplation is secular concerning sacred spaces.<sup>26</sup>

Dillard indicates that the culmination of the *via negativa* in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, “suggests prayer, the soul's emptiness and receptivity” (qtd. in Buell 240). Again, the tension Jim Cheney illuminates between Dillard's “inquiry into the sacred,” and “the Western theological tradition” (44). This progression and tension is reflected in her writing process, which reflects the emptiness and receptivity that leaves space for possibility.

The spider is a small, but significant, reflection of Dillard's process. She often occupies a small corner of the world—here, Puget Sound, a few years earlier, Tinker Creek, in *The Writing Life*, a cabin and a cubicle—with “scant traffic.” Yet, she has so much to observe, so much to write. This interpretation of such a small anecdote is not too much to attribute to Dillard's spider because the self-reflection is overtly evident, especially since the spider reminds her of something she killed (sometimes what we kill is the beginning).<sup>27</sup> Dillard's spider is a kindled metaphor for her work, her microcosm, her mystery. To take the metaphor even further out, the silence and wonder of nature—and of God—are deeply woven into almost every sentence of Dillard's work in *Holy the Firm* as well as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and more veiled but still present in *An American Childhood*. Dillard waves her words intricately, deliberately, as she explores the micro- as a study of the macro-. The web as a symbol of death is a signaling toward the mystery of the unknown, toward the *via negativa*, and the way to Holy Wilderness.

Amazement threads its way through Dillard's work. This web keeps the spider alive and Dillard “amazed” (*Holy the Firm* 13). How is that she is still amazed even though she sees this web continually? How does this web not become routine, a mess and a nuisance behind her toilet? Even though many would find a spider inside threatening (or at least annoying), Dillard studies this spider, makes it a ritual to see beyond the “mess” to what the spider is really doing: intricately making and re-making her home, her trap for prey, re-making herself. In the next

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26 In “Field of Silence,” Dillard exhorts us to “pray without ceasing,” which is a biblical reference (*Teaching a Stone to Talk* 94; *New International Version Bible*, I Thess. 5.17).

27 From *The Writing Life*: “It is the beginning of the work that a writer throws away” (Dillard 5).

paragraph we learn that Dillard drops to her knees “to see” three old spider skins and an assortment of moth parts (*Holy the Firm* 14). This religious posture toward nature, this kneeling down before the altar of the web, indicates Dillard's humility to simply honor what she sees; to get a closer look at what she is revering makes the web sacred. Dillard seems to work toward always being ready to be bewildered, either by herself or by nature. The Old English *āmasian* means “bewilder,” which seems to be a method of Dillard's: using conflicting or confusing situations to disorient or confuse (OED). But this bewilderment is a holy bewilderment. Here, Dillard merges the common and the spiritual: the spider is a marker on her *via negativa*; the spider marks the unknown way of why things are the way they are. Those metaphysical questions are begged: Why are we here? Why does this spider exist? Stay in the bewilderment, she says, as she does: dropping to her knees to see, knowing that this spider is an emblem for her, a reminder, the way we use rosaries and crosses to direct our attention to the Unknown beyond ourselves. This is Merton's “waiting.” Dillard waits for the spider in a way she did not wait for the tulip bud. This time she stays. This time she keeps returning. To stay in the bewilderment is to wait for the possible: the possible could be an answer to a larger question, but more than likely what meets us in the place of possibility is silence.

Just as the web is helping the spider survive, writing about the web is helping Dillard survive, make sense of the world. Certainly Dillard writes of death (an unknown, for sure), but here, the “corpses” are the remains of what keeps the spider alive; she anthropomorphizes these remains—they are “corpses,” not insects, bringing death a little closer to her readers (*Holy the Firm* 13). Dillard does not judge the spider for killing; the killing is for survival. Joseph Meeker, in *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic*, explains that for humans, as the only literary creatures, literature needs to be examined in terms of how it helps us survive (4). (Buell said Meeker's ideas were not popular; Meeker quips that a critic said all the copies of his books should be burned.) Dillard does not condemn nature for its cruelty and its ritual violence; she seeks to be a curator of these small everyday events, like the tulip bud and the spider, offering them to her readers as sacred spaces where we can work out our own meaning. Max Picard writes about this liminal space: “The silence of nature is the primary reality. The things of nature serve only to make the silence clearly visible. The things of nature are images of the silence, exhibiting not themselves so much as the silence, like signs pointing to the place where silence is” (137). The spider points the way toward silence; Dillard writes so that the spider is the way, not her words. One result of her use of common language is that her work, like the spider's, does not get in the way of the reader's experience: subtle are her cues that allow breathing

room for the reader to catch her breath with Dillard.<sup>28</sup> We are borne into those experiences and become ready participants because her ways of using language draw us in and hold us; we fully believe in the miraculous, that the miraculous is happening to us right now. This belief makes Dillard's work viable art, something we continue to return to as if for the first time: we join her and become "a sort of company," weaving a tighter camaraderie: the spider becomes our spider, spinning and spinning, still spinning her web, miraculously. Though the spider seems a sign of illumination, a signal for the way Dillard sees the writing process, the religious connotations are of something darker. This is a Thoreauvian awakening: "The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star" (*Walden* 221). The spider is but a pin prick in the tapestry of darkness in which a little light of Dillard's process is let through. We can trace the root of Dillard's reverence for the holy darkness in a specific example from her memoir *An American Childhood*.

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28 On breathing: "The fact is, said Van Gogh, 'the fact is that we are painters in real life, and the important thing is to breathe as hard as ever we can breathe'" (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 244). In *The Writing Life*, at the end of chapter one, when the words have become symbols on our computer screen: "Right now you are flying. Right now your job is to hold your breath" (21).

## CHAPTER 5

### THE SACRED SKATER: THE SILENCE OF TRANSFIGURATION

In the final stage of the mystic journey, the pilgrim closes in on a bond with God, but first a time of darkness ensues; this may be an interminable darkness if you believe that God is found in the divine darkness and not in the union (Harmon 358). Much of Christian practice comes to us through the monastic tradition, which has much practice in the way of the *via negativa*. Many of Annie Dillard's literary influences are masculine and spiritually leaning: Thomas Merton was a monk; the Prophets were all men. She works in the vein of Emerson and Thoreau, and her religious language reflects a masculine tone as she writes in the tradition of Ezekiel, Thoreau, Merton, Chardin and others. Simply the title of James McClintock's book indicates the company Dillard keeps: Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey, and Gary Snyder. In the introduction to *Living by Fiction*, Dillard names the writers she has been reading: Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel García Márquez, as well as Samuel Beckett and Italo Calvino (13). She asks herself “how their work's goals differ from those of the Modernists before them—Faulkner, Joyce, Mann, Kafka, say—or from the goals of Hardy or Eliot, or of Saul Bellow or Salinger or Mailer” (*Living by Fiction* 13). Dillard acknowledges that these questions are “old hat” to critics, but her goals are different: “I approach fiction, and the world, and these absurdly large questions [What is (gasp) the relationship between the world and the mind? Is knowledge possible? Do we ever discover meaning, or do we always make it up?], as a reader, and a writer, and a lover” (*Living by Fiction* 14). If Dillard is indeed joining a kind of patriarchal tradition, she is infusing it with her brand of spirituality.

Dillard's writing is “masculine” in the ways that it establishes its boundaries; feminine in the way “silence” undergirds every word. Her silence is not that of the nineteenth century “angel of the hearth” silence, the silence that made quiet women the “wine of life,” but is instead the silence of defiance, paradox, and contradiction (Johnson 221). To be a quiet woman is to be submissive on the surface and likely suffocated underneath with no outlet for self-expression except what was acceptable: silence, not as a holy reverence where language could be cultivated, but a silence that suppressed any search for meaning. Dillard re-imagines silence for us, not as a sign of weakness, or even as simply a ritual, but as a space for the common to be redeemed, transformed, made sublime. Silence is the

space of equality and the space where Dillard is at play. As Meeker maintains, “Play is one of the rare human languages that can cross all lines of culture, race, gender, status, or species” (18). Dillard uses association more often than direct argument, creating a kind of silence. Her symbolism and intertextuality, in particular, seem designed to play with the reader's immediate assumptions, to create new associations and thus to cross the lines that divide humans from each other as well as from their natural world.

After the purgative and illuminative ways, the bonding with God is the final path, which Dillard experiences as a child by seeing a transfiguration, and has not so much a union with God, but an encounter with Beauty framed in silence. Silence as amazement is crucial, if not essential, in Dillard's story-telling. The way she crafts one particular scene from *An American Childhood* (1987) in which her family suddenly sees a young woman ice-skating on the street during “the big snow” of 1950 creates a sense of anticipation as the scope of her narrative moves from the interior of the house outward (30). The passage is building toward something miraculous, something life-changing, something she later calls “the center of the maze” of her childhood (*An American Childhood* 31). This “maze” seems to hint at the way the spider in *Holy the Firm* “amazed” Dillard (13). The skater is at the center of this amazement, this enchantment, the same way the spider was at the center of Dillard's memory of the moth; both became triggers for process. Dillard leaves the city of her childhood, but “she had to reconnect to the childhood landscape in order to empower her adult narrative voice” (Perreten 14). This is the tension: Dillard writes in the adult narrative voice in such a way that a big snow, a dead dog, a dangerous cold counterintuitively prepares the way for a miracle through a child-like experience. There is darkness here; the adult voice does not try to alleviate the tension in the mood.

Each word in this passage lends to the tension that is, as Jim Cheney indicates, between the “naturalized and contextualized inquiry into the sacred and, on the other hand, the Western theological tradition of a transcendent creator-god” (44). From the first word, “now,” Dillard puts us in the scene. With a single word we are present with Dillard's family in that quiet, deathly quiet, dining room. The room is “hushed,” not only by the “big snow” that “held the houses down and the people in,” but by an almost religious reverence (*An American Childhood* 30). That “big snow” serves as the shroud blanketing the city in silence, *silence*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, meaning “completely without sound, the avoidance or mentioning of something, the state of standing still and not speaking as a sign of respect. . . or in an opportunity for prayer” (OED). Though there is darkness with this silence

and the cries of the dead puppy still echoing, Dillard weaves the threads of death and life, of the ordinary and the supernatural, giving us a glimpse of the *via negativa* once again; they cannot know—or even have words for—what will happen next.

The narrative arc of this passage begins local, at the dining room table, and moves out into the street and beyond. By the end, the young Dillard lets her breath out and looks up: “Distant over the street, the night sky was moonless and foreign, a frail, bottomless black, and the cold stars speckled it without moving” (*An American Childhood* 31). Her look to the stars hints at Emerson's belief about the sublime: simply look up to the heavenly bodies, they are icons of “the city of God,” and “envoys of beauty” (181). Dillard is more grounded about the cold and the darkness. For the six sentences that are at the center of this short chapter, Dillard sets the scene: They are quietly eating in their dining room in mostly silence and darkness. The cause of this silence and darkness is “the big snow,” a significant event for the young Dillard, so significant that the moments became full with anticipation: what will happen next? She refers to the recent past—the puppy that died of distemper—and moves to the present moment told in past tense. She continues to describe the setting. Dillard stays in the language of place, which Buell indicates is a difficult task,<sup>29</sup> except for the rising action of Dillard's mother then the climactic moment: seeing the girl she had been taught to avoid, Jo Ann Sheehy, skating on the street (*An American Childhood* 30). The window frames the action, and, more than a frame, the window separates Dillard's family from danger, not Jo Ann this time, but the cold. This scene pans out as if filmed: quiet dinner; mother sees something; the family moves to the window; suddenly they are mesmerized by seeing a young girl ice skating in the street (*An American Childhood* 30). Dillard begins in the center, the house as a place of safety, and narratively pushes the official boundaries of the four walls of the house.

The cast of characters caught in “the big snow” are Dillard, her mother, her father, (sister Amy is present, but not mentioned here), a dog (dead), the big snow (seems like a character), and Jo Ann Sheehy, who is the icon, the *eikōn* (image). The action for these characters begins in the dining room, a sacred space, a place for meditation and prayer, a place for waiting for the miraculous. The window is like the space of unknowing, the place where the holy will be revealed, where the holy resides (there is a kind of veil over the window), until the holy is revealed. The

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<sup>29</sup> At the beginning of the chapter called “Place,” Buell indicates that most writers, even ones like Eudora Welty, pass over place in favor of character development: “[T]he function of place is to define character by confining it” (255).



cold is described as “dangerously,” but the word is used for the Sheehy family, as well. From what Dillard writes about her other encounter with the Sheehys, they are obviously dangerous, likely to cause harm and cause problems. Jo Ann is an unknown, though the implication is that her name makes her capable of harm. Coming from the Middle English arrogant, fastidious, difficulty to please, *danger* rooted in the Old French *dangereus* from *dangier*, the cold and Jo Ann merge, the two dangers twirling in and out of darkness, streetlight illuminating both. Though unlike, the word “danger” describes and merges these two dissimilar entities (OED). Dillard repeats the phrase “the big snow” three times. The first two times the phrase is paired with prepositions, “the big snow outside, the big snow on the roof,” with the delayed verb, “silenced” (*An American Childhood* 30). The “big” adjective means “of considerable size, extent, or intensity; scale.” Interestingly, an archaic phrase, “big with,” meaning “advanced in pregnancy” and that the scene is large with anticipation and possibility, the possibility for beauty.

In Dillard's scene, we see the miraculous signal the beyond. Jo Ann, the young skater, is revealed in the way Jesus is revealed at the transfiguration, when he is illuminated from heaven, a signal of the possible for the miraculous (if what followed the crucifixion could be considered the miracle of redemption) (*New International Version Bible*, Matt. 17.1-13). In re-awakening to daily miracles, Emerson, writes, “The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire for beauty. . . . [Beauty in nature] is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good ” (Emerson 189-90). Del Nevo emphasized this Emersonian idea (and it is in Thoreau, as well) that the soul desires beauty, but we must work toward enchantment, be prepared; Dillard's answer is to “try to be there.” The transfiguration of something is to make the beautiful elevated (OED). Dillard transfigures Jo Ann with her words; both Jo Ann and Jesus are illuminated and pointing to something higher through language and text: Jesus was revealing his Father, and Jo Ann is signaling the sublime. The elevation happens at the revelation of beauty: we see the beauty in the scene and then Dillard as writer, not as child observing, transforms Jo Ann and makes her available for some other kind of work, the work of Dillard's words. Dillard weaves, like the spider, a delicate web of connections between her memory and the narrative. Perreten emphasizes that the narrative “re-creates the map of her memory of childhood” (15). Just as this scene is the center of her maze, the word “transfigured” becomes the “X” on the map of this scene, the destination and the center.

In this scene, the trinity of mother, father, and child stands before the window in awe (reverence and fear). By layering the setting of this scene, Dillard creates a tension that yields a religious vision, initiated by her mother,

where their family—enveloped in silent awe—see the young neighbor girl, like a messianic vision, skating on the street, illuminated by the streetlight (*An American Childhood* 30). For something to transfigure it has to be revealed, turned into something more beautiful or elevated. There must be darkness and light; in this case, the darkness is inside, the light, outside. The presence of the *via negativa* in the interior darkness reflects back to the adult narrative writer as the child becomes aware: “her external world expands beyond house and family” (Perreten 13). Dillard preserves the center of the scene by not making it overtly religious; the word “transfigure” is a signal of the sacred, but it does not claim a theology. *Transfigure* comes to our language from Middle English: from *trans-* meaning “across,” and *figura*, turning to “figure” (OED). Jo Ann is the figure skating across the ice on the street; she skates, crossing the frame of the window, being refigured by silence, becoming both beautiful and strange (*An American Childhood* 30). This fleeting image is central to Dillard's craft: she circles back around to the skater, but the adult narrative voice transforms the childhood experience and saves the word “transfigured” from direct interpretation, allowing for multiple readings of this scene.

This passage is divided into two short, parallel paragraphs, with the second paragraph ending with an additional sentence announcing the climactic miraculous happening. Dillard uses structure to create the delay, allowing her readers to sit in the silence with her family. By way of verbs and action, the scene begins with “we sat” and ends with “we saw” (*An American Childhood* 30). Combining simple and complex sentences, Dillard delays her action verbs like sending her readers through a maze. For instance, the second sentence in the first paragraph reads: “The big snow outside, the big snow on the roof, silenced our words and the scrape of our forks and our chairs” (*An American Childhood* 29). She uses commas and the transition “and” frequently to increase the distance between the setting, the frame, and the climactic moment. She uses one compound sentence with a semi-colon: “A motion must have caught my mother's eye; she rose and moved to the windows, and Father and I followed” (*An American Childhood* 29). The semi-colon is crucial here because it does not break the action, it leaves room for the delay in response; we do not know what her mother is thinking about what she is seeing; she is simply observing. Later, when Dillard calls this “the center” of her childhood, the implication is that the big snow impacted Dillard deeply and became a crucial location on her mental map (*An American Childhood* 31). This snow produced the miraculous even in the double danger of the street. The young Dillard imagines a car will come from no where and hit Jo Ann; the bitter cold was partially responsible for the dog's death (*An American Childhood* 30-31). The miracle is located,

not only in the street, but at the center of where her adult imagination met her childhood memory in the dark; this is the way “her childhood mental map leads the adult autobiographer home” (Perreten 15). In this case, home is a spiritual and transcendent experience that ushers Dillard into silence.

Out of silence Dillard works not only with the thread of words, but the thread within the thread of words—the sounds of words. Dillard is interested in the sound of words, in the way words work, in much the same way Thoreau is. He explicates “hope” and “love” (*Walden* 115, 204). This working is the sort of “cellular” level of writing Dillard exhorts her readers to participate in (*The Writing Life* 26). The skater passage from *An American Childhood* includes versions of the “o” sound, which draw out the sounds of the words, make the passage sound heavy and layered: “now,” “room,” “snow” (repeated three times), “outside,” “on the roof,” “our words,” “our forks,” “dog was gone,” “world outside dangerously cold,” “houses down,” “windows,” “out onto the narrow front,” “motion,” “mother’s,” “rose,” “moved,” “to the windows,” “followed,” “young,” “Jo Ann,” “alone” (*An American Childhood* 29). Along with the “o,” the passage includes “a” sounds that give the passage an ominous tone: “sat,” “dark,” “and,” “chairs,” “was,” “dangerously,” “gave,” “narrow,” “yard,” “have,” “caught,” “Father,” “saw,” “transfigured,” “skating alone” (*An American Childhood* 29). Her word choice and verbs lend to the tone, as well, with “dark,” “hushed,” “silenced,” “scraped,” “gone,” “dangerously,” “held,” “chilled,” “narrow,” “caught,” and “alone” (*An American Childhood* 29). Each of these categories end with the word *alone*. Though it describes the skater, the word signals that the writer will take a path alone toward her own realizations about life and religion; and simply, that the writer is alone when she writes, alone with her words in darkness. Even then, the silence hints at the *via negativa*. (The words create a path, a history.)

Alliteration adds to the poetics, and the forward motion of the language: “dark dining,” “sat,” “snow,” “silenced,” “scrape,” “snow,” “street,” “saw,” “skating,” “streetlight,” “we,” “words,” “was gone,” “world,” “windows,” “we,” “hushed,” “held,” “houses,” “motion,” “must,” “my mother’s,” “moved,” “Father,” “followed,” “chairs,” “chilled” (*An American Childhood* 29). Emerson alludes to this idea: “Words are signals of natural facts. The use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history; the use of the outer creation [in this case, the word] to give us language for beings and changes of the inward creation” (190). Dillard initiates these changes of the “inward creation” through the careful word, through her vigilance. By utilizing repetitive vowel sounds, resonating language, and alliteration, Dillard crafts this scene with linguistic layers of meaning and chooses all of

her words to intentionally establish layer upon layer of wonder, fear, awe, and hope in the same way “the big snow” continued to blanket layer after layer of snow on the city. Picard enforces this idea with the sense that each word is “born out of silence,” just like each snowflake (46). The hinge word in this scene, “transfigured,” points toward the “theological tradition” that Cheney discusses, while still leaving space for the reader to interpret the word as sacred, not tied to any religious tradition (44). In this cell of a word, the reader's imagination and memory meet, just as Dillard's does, in the dark.

In this scene, nature almost suffocates those being held down. It suffocates their voices and refuses to release them. The verb “held” is used for the snow, so Dillard personifies the snow, investing it with power to act; it held everyone in except Jo Ann (*An American Childhood* 30). Dillard makes us believe that no one could survive the extreme weather. When Dillard mentions that “[t]he dog was gone,” this phrase gives the passage even more of an ominous tone; the shadow of death lingers over this scene (*An American Childhood* 30). And the use of the verb “scrape” for the chairs, adds to the pall over the scene. *Scrape* comes from the Old English *scrapian*, meaning “to cause to rub by accident against a rough or hard surface, causing damage or injury. . . making a harsh noise” (OED). The windows described as “chilled,” suggest that the big snow has killed already; it could do it again, easily. And yet what happens is that the “dangerous” Sheehy girl is comfortable, at home, in the “dangerous” cold (*An American Childhood* 30). Upon reflection, Dillard writes, “Here were beauty and mystery outside the house, and peace and safety within” (*An American Childhood* 31). The adult writer recognizes the paradox that the childhood memory creates and begins to map the maze.

Dillard seems to acknowledge (without saying it) that reflection on her childhood experiences will illuminate truth and beauty, however controversial the memory might be. The impossible happens, the miraculous happens and Dillard, her mother, and her father are aware enough to see this “beauty and grace” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 10). The least they could do is be there as Dillard exhorts in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. This practice, of “being there,” is something Dillard began long before her venture to Tinker Creek; in fact, it is a familial awareness. This is the child leading the writer back to her home, her center (Perreten 15). Dillard's mother senses this beauty outside the window; she directs the family to the miracle, anoints it silently; she simply rises and goes to the window; the others follow. The mother is the guide, pointing and directing others to see what she sees (*An American Childhood* 30). There are linguistic guides, too.

The biblical idea of vision is at play here: in the temple, Jesus reads the Scripture from Isaiah, chastising his listeners because they neither “see with their eyes,” nor “understand with their hearts” (*New International Version Bible*, Is. 6.9-10). The gospel of John continues that Isaiah wrote these things because he “saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him” (*New International Version Bible*, John 12.40-41). Not only “eyes to see,” but the sense of an actual vision as when Mary sees the Archangel Michael when he delivers his message of the child she would bear, or Ezekiel when he sees the valley of the dry bones, or Elijah on Mount Horeb when he is told to look away because the Lord was passing by (*New International Version Bible*, Luke 1.26-38; Ezekiel 37.1-14; I Kings 19.9-18). And there is the illuminated Jesus upon his transfiguration standing with Elijah and Moses; after the resurrection, the disciples watch Jesus rise to heaven, though hidden by a cloud (*New International Version Bible*, Acts 1.9). This is Dillard's re-visioning of the skater. Even though there was “beauty and mystery” before her through the window, we are left with a sense of the the emptiness when Jo Ann becomes “ordinary” the next day (*An American Childhood* 32). All those years Dillard carried the “center” with her in memory giving voice to her astonishment almost four decades later. Dillard's use of religious tone and language creates a space for those who are aware enough to engage in the divine dark because language can only hint at the beyond: “The silence out of which language comes is now transformed into the mystery surrounding truth” (Picard 31). Dillard's truth now rests in silence, rests in beauty and mystery.

Waking to mystery is woven through Dillard's work. One mystery that appears (sometimes veiled) in much of Dillard's work is that we wake to the silence of God (*Holy the Firm* 62). Picard would say that we wake to the silence of nature, as well (137). Dillard returns to the idea of “waking” over and over in her work; seeing the skater is yet another awakening, but this time it includes her parents, an event initiated by her mother, which, according to Emerson, is rare. He attests to the gap between children and adults:

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eyes of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of a child. A lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of adulthood. (Emerson 181)

This is a gap that Dillard seeks to bridge in her memoir as she recalls childhood events as an adult. One way of fleshing out in a contradictory way Emerson's idea is that Dillard's mother is the catalyst for the seeing; Dillard's mother seems to still have the “spirit of infancy,” or at least she's awake. (And a child shall lead them, the prophets

say.) Moreover, Dillard, “as a lover of nature,” in Emerson's sense, is able to navigate the distance between adulthood writing and the childhood of experiences; her “inward and outward are still truly adjusted to each other” (Emerson 181). Dillard joins Emerson's “few”: her ability to vision and re-vision her experiences in nature are rooted in her ability to see with “the eye and the heart of a child” (Emerson 181). Dillard continues to re-construct her mental map, all the while wrestling the darkness for her careful words.

Dillard navigates the space between adult and child as she describes her mother's actions. It is uncertain what Dillard's mother will do once she reaches the window. Will she condemn Jo Ann's reckless behavior? What Dillard's mother does is part of the miracle: she remains silent (*An American Childhood* 30). They silently watch Jo Ann move in and out of the darkness, effortlessly, in her short skirt as if she were an Olympic skater. The skater, like the spider, is a metaphor, not only for the writing process, but for Dillard's spiritual experiences along the *via negativa*, along the path of divine silence. Her family waited for the skater, not knowing they were waiting; Dillard's work along the path of the *via negativa* is that of waiting, of watching, of writing. In order for the miraculous to happen, there must be those present who are willing to accept the gift and give voice to it. Dillard began walking the *via negativa* long before she traveled to Tinker Creek. She discovered markers that would nudge her to accept the divine dark, to cultivate space where she would be truly awake, as the adult narrator wakes to the intricacies and layers of her mental map.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION: THE SILENCE OF ASTONISHMENT

Annie Dillard nods to Henry David Thoreau in her work, marking her place on the map of the American literary tradition. Dillard acknowledges the influence of Thoreau and Emerson on her work. She follows the American transcendentalists' conviction that change begins within. This puts Dillard in some tension with her contemporaries, particularly writers such as Edward Abbey and Rachel Carson whose dystopian *Silent Spring* galvanized a generation of environmental activists. Through her work, Dillard makes a strong case for inaction, for watching but not waiting to see what unfolds, for leaving nature to work out its own miracles without human presence. In the absence of activism, Dillard turns to the inner wilderness to find the prophetic. Indeed, she becomes prophet to herself, which is the paradox of American nature writing: by exploring the wilderness of the interior life, the wilderness of the self within nature, these writers signal to their readers a way toward transformation. This is a difficult path; Dillard shows that the *via negativa* is an apt route to a way of seeing, even if the divine darkness paradoxically signals the sacredness of nature, as well. Dillard joins the tradition of writers who have sought to continue to press the rim of wilderness, to find ways of knowing who we are in relation to nature. Once we find that identity, to alter our way of being is to enact a ritual that can be called an ecocritical approach, the praxis that Buell names. Dillard's approach is enthusiasm though she has been classically trained (these do not have to be contradictory) (*Living by Fiction* 14). She follows her own path, weaving together spirituality and science, seemingly content with the contradictions they offer to each other. Memory and imagination meeting on Dillard's map may look paradoxical, but Dillard is crafting a dialogic between herself and her child-self, between herself and the reader, between herself and silence.

Whether Dillard strides out into the woods or spends weeks alone in a fire tower, silence is the crucial frame, it is the cell she lives in and waits for. Dillard favors empirical knowledge over the map that has been given to us, passed down as tradition, the map of criticism, so she created her own map in her mind and followed it to the edge of her own rim. The contradiction is that she uses a "mental map" to remember her neighborhood, her childhood (*An American Childhood* 44). These two terms, "mental," and "map" are made to co-exist because Dillard

writes in the in-between, she writes in the space between where her memory and her imagination meet in the silent, dazzling dark.

“Walking was my project before reading,” Dillard explains in *An American Childhood* (44). Again, this joining Thoreau in his ritual of walking. In the autobiography, Dillard explains further that “the text [she] read was the town; the book [she] made was a map. . . . I pushed at my map's edges” (*An American Childhood* 44). Finally,

[o]n darkened evenings, I came home exultant, secretive, often from some leafy curb a mile beyond what I had known at lunch, where I had peered up at the street sign, hugging the cold pole, and fixed the intersection in my mind. What joy, what relief, eased me as I pushed open the heavy front door!—joy and relief because, from the very trackless waste, I had located home, family, and the dinner table once again. (*An American Childhood* 44)

The path of the child leads Dillard to the tradition of becoming the cartographer of her experiences, leading her out of the “very trackless waste” toward the configuration of her inward and outward selves.

By appearing to follow the mystical path, Dillard adheres to a tradition, though she deviates and creates her own language for the merging of her religious knowledge and the knowing of her “own edge” as well as the edge of her “map.” The *via negativa* is the “map” she follows, but as the lights dim and go out in Darkness, Dillard continues seeking the sacred, even as her readers find themselves planted (sometimes joyfully) in contradiction. Dillard enthusiastically challenges established structures and forms of criticism through her regard for the spiritual (and through her silence on criticism). Many of her references to a faith tradition are revealed and hidden through the way she uses words as compass roses. Like Thoreau, she continually turns language toward her own purposes, layering biblical reference and natural imagery to prepare the way for self-discovery. The Christian perspective exists underneath nature, in silence until revealed. Thus Dillard joins a tradition of those who “grope a little” in the Dark, giving voice to their own astonishment, even if they find themselves in the far country.<sup>30</sup>

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30 A reference to Emily Dickinson's poem with the opening line “We grow accustomed to the Dark” (Keillor 211).



## AFTERWORD

One night I stayed late at Eighth Day Books to study. I have been sojourning to Eighth Day for almost four years; mostly I walk or ride my bike from wherever I have lived, now two blocks west. I was nearing the end of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, sensing the turn toward winter, even as we are coming out of winter here, sensing that Dillard's *via negativa* was nudging me toward a place that I did not know I needed: the desert (not know until now). I asked Warren to show me where the desert fathers are kept in the store. He took me to the center wall, the supporting wall of the store. I had walked by them for years; they had quietly waited. He lifted a book on Abba Moses, "Begin here," he said. A few days later I turned a page in Dillard and was startled and quickened to read that Dillard was reading the apophthegmata, and in it Abba Moses tells one of his students to "[g]o sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything" (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 262). Dillard echoes those words in *The Writing Life* after a reader asked her, "Who will teach me to write?" (59). Dillard replied, "The page, the page, that eternal blankness . . . 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, . . . that page will teach you everything" (59). For Dillard, the cell is the word and the page.

How can I explain that I took a little book of the desert fathers with me to Europe five years ago, that I have carried around *The Way of the Heart* by Henri Nouwen, not knowing that these wanderings in Dillard would lead me back to the beginning of all my exploration and that I would be led back to silence? Then Warren took me to the Orthodox prayer book to show me a passage he has shown me before, the passage where God is described as ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, and incomprehensible. I wept in silence for the coming back around to the *via negativa*. This work with Dillard is much like the way the spider's web works: the triangulation of the paths toward purification, illumination, and transcendence.

## AFTER THE AFTERWORD

I have a friend who reads *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* every year in the spring; I will make this my ritual, as well.<sup>31</sup> And I agree with Henry David Thoreau's sentiment: "A written word is the choicest of relics" (*Walden* 23). Each time I return to Dillard, each new season, the relics of her words will shape and re-shape how I see the world. And I know what the frame of my continued academic work will be. I found it in one of Dillard's books. You would have thought I could have come to this conclusion sooner, but I have, as the poet Theodore Roethke notes, taken this waking slow by going where I have to go.

Two years ago at a workshop in Santa Fe, Warren held Max Picard's *The World of Silence* and said to me, "You will own this book one day." I purchased that book in July of the next year. That book gave me the crucial frame for my work, which has become a literary—and life—work.

I am home now, having just purchased *Teaching a Stone to Talk* from Warren at Eighth Day. I knew I would need this book; I loaned my copy to a friend, happy to call it a gift now. I stumbled across a quote online yesterday during a hurried flourish to find the place in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* when Dillard says, "Even if we do not know *who* we are, at least we can know *where* we are." (I don't even know if she wrote that, let alone if it is in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. I think this is a Wendell Berry idea in Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*. At least for the moment, I know *where* I am.) I did not find the source of the quote, but I did, astonished, find this from *Teaching a Stone to Talk*: "The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to 'World.' Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing" (94). *The silence is all there is*.

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31 Dillard fulfills a prophetic inquiry of Thoreau: "Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service; to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library—aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature" ("Walking").

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