

GIVING VOICE TO THE SILENCE

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On a windblown cliffside, cedar shacks cling to the rock and bear the temperamental Pacific weather. Only a few lonely locals keep watch over the seascape outside of tourist season. Behind the greying door of one shack is Larry, attempting to teach a stone to talk. He practices his ritual of training the stone, though it has not yet proven fruitful. It is difficult to take him seriously, yet it is equally difficult not to. Annie Dillard, with her infinite patience and keen eye for truth in the mundane, perhaps sees something in Larry's desperate attempt. His fixation reflects something in us all: we are afraid of the indifference and unreasonableness of nature, we are horrified by the thought that we really may be completely alone, and we are—above all—afraid of emptiness. Here, I do not mean the quiet of a Sunday morning or the stillness of a beachfront on a cool day, but a deeper, more antagonistic-seeming silence that we associate with death and loneliness and the phenomenon of nothingness which cannot be experienced.

In defense against this oppressive absence, we are desperate to communicate with other intelligent life anywhere. Dillard suggests that this quest to shatter the silence is manifest in diverse human traditions of science and faith alike, questioning at one point: “[w]hat is the difference between a cathedral and a physics lab? Are not they both saying: Hello? We spy on whales and on interstellar radio objects; we starve ourselves and pray till we’re blue” (“Teaching” 89). To date, however, we have heard nothing from other planets, evoked no sound from stones, and we remain in fiery debate about the existence of a higher power. What if the silence is all there really is?

Throughout her essay collection *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Dillard utilizes juxtaposed lenses to reveal what is literally happening before switching perspectives to more metaphoric ideas about what the simple motions of nature and humanity may mean. In “Total Eclipse,” for example, Dillard brings us with her to observe a total solar eclipse. In the hours leading up to the moment, she describes in detail the humans who have so casually set up camp

to witness a historic moment. "Rugged individualists" clamber out of cars, "[set] up shop," and organize themselves, seemingly oblivious and neglectful of the humanity around them in the face of the looming cosmic event (13). Dillard quickly changes lenses; in her view, those "rugged individual[s]" who gather to watch the eclipse become people who have "gathered on hilltops to pray for the world on its last day" or "crawled out of spaceships and were preparing to assault the valley below" or "scattered on hilltops at dawn to sacrifice virgins, make rain, set stone stelae in a ring" (14).

Likewise, in "Living Like Weasels," Dillard illustrates her stunning encounter with a weasel. On the one hand, the "brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, [and] alert" weasel is "mute and uncomprehending" (67, 69). Yet again Dillard quickly moves deeper, or loftier, seeing the weasel not as a base rodent, but as the highest ideal of the human heart: relinquishing the gaudy and trivial, yielding to the "perfect freedom of single necessity" and not letting it go "till [its] eyes burn out and drop" (70). In both cases, Dillard's juxtaposition of realism and romanticism represents a movement into the transcendental, an expression of an ideal. In the same way, perhaps Dillard is suggesting that the "rugged individualists" who turn into communities that would pray, attack, or build together in "Total Eclipse" demonstrate the possibility that facing atrocity is the best way to find unity. When we recognize the clues in the natural world—including the mundane dens of rodents—we may realize a vision of integrity that we have hitherto hidden from ourselves. It may be worth attending to the fact that nothing in the scene itself has changed though Dillard's perspective has shifted. Both her perspectives exist simultaneously. The weasel is indeed just a weasel, but it is also an exposition of Dillard's highest ideal. We are always given a choice as to what we see. Dillard is inviting us to become aware of this choice and choose however we want.

Unfortunately, we often confuse our myopic visions of reality for truth and choose intentional ignorance over a higher ideal. In "The Deer at Providencia," Dillard illustrates human apathy toward a deer tied to a rope and presents the people who observe its suffering as examples of such myopia. Traveling through the Ecuadorian jungle on the banks of the Napo River, in a village called Providencia, Dillard witnesses a deer, "delicate of bone" and "thin-skinned," dying a slow, painful death, soon to be eaten by the villagers

and the travelers (79). In the narrative, Dillard expresses a general apathy when confronted by a fellow traveler who finds the deer's slow death disturbing, inquiring, "what surprises you? That there is suffering here, or that I know it?" (82).

However, it would seem as though Dillard's persona is in contrast to her true point: that the deer, in its suffering, matters. She describes the animal in detail, noting that the deer "thrashed, kick[ed]" for its life on the rope; "its spine shook. Its eyes rolled; its tongue, thick with spittle, pushed in and out" for "fifteen minutes" (80). If she were truly apathetic, it is hard to imagine her paying such close attention or relaying such details. Which is it? Is the deer a meaningless beast for the slaughter, or does it deserve dignity? And what of us? Do we have dignity? Is there—she seems to ask through the deer—meaning in all of this? In averting our eyes from the deer's pain, are we avoiding a truth of our own?

Where unity is needed, there is separation. Where compassion is warranted, it is neglected. Where comfort is sought, there is, it would seem, only suffering. But perhaps it need not be this way. In each of her essays, Dillard's objective appears to be to reveal an ideal that is quite the opposite of what is at first presented. "Rugged individual[s]" are used to express the necessity of human connection, a base rodent is used to underscore our most transcendent ideal, and abject apathy is examined in order to underscore the necessity of compassion for all things sentient.

After all, Dillard's work is not really an exposé. She isn't so much trying to get us to hang our heads in dejection because of our piteous state; rather, she appears to be trying to wake us to the possibility of, well, waking up. In her recounting of the solar eclipse, where each person or couple or family arrived individually with their own picnic baskets and blankets, the encounter with the sublime strips them of their individuality and leaves them—just for the moment—in a state of monochromatic unity. The individual problems that Dillard was ruminating over are obliterated in that instant as she, with her fellow onlookers, becomes cognizant of only one thing. This moment resembles a sort of mass meditative ritual—a trance state in which humans forget to keep up the masquerade and are exposed by the silvery darkness as what they have always been. Dillard, in reflecting on the deer, becomes

acutely aware of its pain and thus shares empathy—the deepest form of compassion—with it.

But these moments don't last. The deer, of course, is eaten. And when the sun peeks back out, the momentous unity is lost. Without missing a beat, those who an instant ago were suspended in awe—readers included—return to animation and seek the security of their familiar cars, the sounds and smells of normalcy. The sublime, in Dillard's essays, is presented in transcendent moments which cannot be grasped completely or maintained. It slips through her fingers even as she writes. But in so doing, she implies that the ordinari-ness we cling to is not all there is, not all there can be. And in some real way, we don't belong to the world of our making, nor does the world belong to us.

Dillard approaches our folly in believing otherwise in her work "An Expedition to the Pole," in which she juxtaposes polar exploration with a small community of a Catholic parish. The polar explorers are heroic yet excessively optimistic, ignorant of the hazards of the Arctics they will soon encounter. The crew of the 1845 Franklin Expedition, for example, carry merely a "twelve-day supply of coal for the entire projected two or three years' voyage" and instead of more coal, they carry a hand organ, china, wine goblets, and silverwares (36). Over the next 20 years, their skeletons will be recovered from the silent wasteland. Parallel stories to this senselessness are woven throughout the telling as worshippers of Dillard's church are frivolously unprepared for the encounter they ultimately seek. Without the "foggiest idea what sort of power [they] so blithely invoke," the worshippers chant away like "brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute" (52). The singers, whom Dillard condescendingly deems incompetent, perform absurd rituals in the hope of catching a glimpse of God, attempts to internalize the delusion of awe. In this and her other work, Dillard is constantly reminding us that whatever we may think, we are not the kings of the world, and what we try to master will—without fail—ultimately overcome us.

There is a pendulum that traces human history. From the mysterious world of the Middle Ages to the logical empiricism of the Enlightenment to the decentralization of Postmodernism: we move from mysticism to fundamentalism and back again. On a more local scale, this sort of swing is overt in U.S. politics. Election winners swing from Democrat to Republican to Democrat, with each modern president doing his best to undo the work of his

predecessor. So, with Dillard's observations: we crave superiority and dominion and then, when at last we crest the hill, we become acutely aware that we are kings of a lonely kingdom and seek again the company of anything not us. It seems appropriate that Dillard was writing in the height of the technological boom at the end of the twentieth century when the world was becoming connected at the speed of light and humans were, at heart, lonelier than ever. And this loneliness, Dillard insists, is gnawing.

Ironically, even as we adults so often repress our consciousness at the bottom of a whisky glass or behind the soft glow of our screens, it is away from these repressive forces that parents often try to steer their children. It is in our parenting, perhaps the most sacred of all human endeavors, that we most clearly see Dillard's vision. We see it when we teach our children to wake up each day and "look alive there, to join by words and activities the life of human culture on the planet's crust" ("Total Eclipse" 22). What could this ritual be if not an innate attempt, at a primitive level, to reconnect the human race to the world around us, to plug in our individual consciousness to the larger Consciousness within which we must try to live? Yet, as adults, "we have so mastered the transition [of sleeping to waking] we have forgotten we ever learned it" (22). It becomes all too easy to remain asleep even while awake. Akin to "will-less dolphins . . . [that] plunge and surface," we burrow ourselves, even in waking moments, "in some private, useless, and insensible waters we never mention or recall" (22, 23).

For all of our flaws, we humans still have a few things going for us. Though we may act unreasonably, I don't believe we are unreasonable by nature. If we are hiding, it would seem that there must be reasons to do so. In "A Field of Silence," Dillard describes living by herself in a farmhouse, where there are glimpses of unfiltered silence. She describes this place as consistently saturated with a gentle rhythm: things slowly growing, being grown on, rusting, chewing, and swaying. Here "the animals always [break] loose" and it is calming to herd them (131). Against this backdrop, she describes her encounter with silence as if it were a physical force, a presence that "gathered and struck [her]" (133). She writes: "[i]t bashed me broadside from the heavens above me like yard goods; ten acres of fallen, invisible sky choked the fields" (133). In those moments of silence, she describes herself, the roosters, the fields and fencing and road and parked orange truck all as "stricken and

self conscious" (133). Ultimately, the silence is broken. A neighbor whistles and pushes a wheelbarrow. The world starts spinning. Dillard comes to reflect on her experience as a state in which she felt, beyond a doubt, that she was in the presence of holiness. Never—she claims—had she felt so lonely before. God, she implies, must be lonely.

Dillard writes about the distressing forces of separation, suffering, and unconsciousness, which she believes we experience in our darkest moments. But the forces of silence, longing, and holiness, which she speaks of as parts of our most ephemeral, transcendent moments, are perhaps even more horrifying. Well, which is it? Do we desire the comfort of isolation or the vicariousness of feeling and witnessing the Truth? Although the faint traces of instinct we still have make us pursue a connection with the world around us—however brutal it may be—we still do not dare submit to nature, or each other, or God (if God exists). Dillard implies that humans, with generations to learn from, are only deepening the problem. Instead of submitting to the sublime, we attempt to glorify ourselves by seizing it. We dam rivers, split atoms, renounce spirituality to promote ourselves, or—conversely—harness God as our own personal ally. Such pursuits can be intoxicating: "[a] taste for the sublime is a greed like any other, after all" ("An Expedition" 30).

This is why it would seem that it is often in moments of crisis that we become aware. What is a crisis, after all, if not a sharpened awareness to the world around us and, perhaps, our own powerlessness therein? Dillard's testimony of the total eclipse has already revealed to us that state of wonderment: when the sun is hidden, from "all the hills came screams" ("Total Eclipse" 17). The "black body" screeched the heart and "the meaning of the sight overwhelmed its fascination. It obliterated meaning itself" (19). In the face of this critical loss of meaning, humanity seems laughable. In this moment, for just an instant, the witnesses are able to see their own foolishness illuminated by the darkness.

Likewise, in "An Expedition to the Pole," Dillard further spotlights the foolishness of human endeavor when contrasted with gloriousness. The explorers, who doubtlessly engaged in a voyage for their own fame and glory, came to experience in their final days the "[s]implicity and purity" of the Arctic, a land whose "austerity held them" (40). It seems out of place for the materialistic adventurers who insisted on bringing monogrammed silver to

have used language that suggests the barren land held spiritual wonders, yet their diaries resound with poetic musings describing the “icy halls of cold sublimity,’ ‘lofty peaks perfectly covered with eternal snow,” which they believed to be “perfection” itself (40, 41). The explorers “man-hauled their humanity to the Poles” only to discover in the face of that beautifully fatal place what it truly meant to be human (41).

In this, Dillard hints at an answer. She seems to be implying in a voice at once existential and spiritual that the secret to finding our humanity is to lose it. The sublime is not something to conquer, but something to be conquered by. As with death, the sublime is neither entirely foreign nor entirely familiar. We know it, but fear getting too close. In the words of the ritual prayer for the dead: from dust we are born and to dust we must return. As ominous as this often sounds, Dillard seems to imply a beauty in such submission. If we “empty [ourselves] and wait,” we’ll hear it: there is nothing (“Teaching” 90). What remains is no more than “those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread” (90). When we let everything go and listen attentively, we can hear nature’s attempts to reach back to us. And so it hums: “[t]his is it: this hum is the silence” (90). This intolerable silence is not a power to be feared. Rather, when we stand witness, it becomes all there is. It is the “alpha and the omega,” a power that broods over the world (94). We cannot prevail over the noises of the holy mountains, but we can lend our voice to join in the silence. The tranquil scenery transforms into something sacred beyond words; after all, “[s]ilence is not our heritage, but our destiny” (87).

WORKS CITED

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- “A Field of Silence.” 130-136.
- “Living Like Weasels.” 65-70.
- “Teaching a Stone to Talk.” 85-94.
- “Total Eclipse.” 9-28.