

Dillard's Metamorphoses

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Annie Dillard doesn't have the answer. She doesn't know why she exists in a state of motionless separation from the world spinning around her, why she can't seem to jump into reality. In her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she doesn't specifically go looking for the answer, either, but in the bugs and creatures of the creek, she finds one. Whether observing a metamorphosing caterpillar, a homicidal praying mantis, a deflating frog, or a field of grasshoppers, Dillard draws lines between the critters' lives and her own as she walks through the woods, and in doing so alleviates her feelings of numbness and ennui. Every day she steps out of her isolated home in the forest and into a world of writhing communication. Reminiscing about what she sees at the creek, she brings her observations home and lets her mind weave them colorfully into her reality. Reflecting on what she finds in the woods, she says, "If I seek the senses and skill of children, the information of a thousand books, the innocence of puppies, even the insight of my own city past, I do so only, solely, and entirely that I might look well at the creek. You don't run down the present, you wait for it, empty-handed, and you are filled" ("Present" 103). These reflections on nature's wisdom, born from passive observation and leaps of association, form the basis of *Tinker Creek's* essays.

Dillard bombards her readers with surrealist imagery and hallucinogenic metaphors, expressing the power of the natural world to cut to the core of her imagination. The details she communicates about the woods betray her idolatry of Mother Nature as a sibylline resolution, an answer. That answer lies in the tiny bugs Dillard's curious mind observes. They are forever metamorphosing, changing, ebbing, but they are stable in this cycle of deterioration—if in nothing else. They function with the profound recognition that the rhythm of nature will continue to pulse forever, that the cocoon is a set stage with a beginning and an end, that nature's providence is being whispered around every corner to those in tune enough to hear it, those attuned to the natural world.

Escaping into the woods to find meaning in her passing days, assembling her thoughts and bouncing theories off her forest observations, Dillard comes to believe in both nature and herself as oracles. “Today I sit on dry grass at the end of the island by the slower side of the creek,” she says in “Heaven and Earth in Jest.” “I’m drawn to this spot. I come to it as an oracle; I return to it as a man years later will seek out the battlefield where he lost a leg or an arm” (13). She conceptualizes nature as many things—a “carnival,” a performance, a “breathing leviathan”—but in every representation, nature is some sort of sibyl (“Heaven” 18, “Untying” 77). So, too, is the author herself: Dillard’s thoughts flow instantly from the forest around her to large existential contemplations; she never separates the forest creatures’ minutiae from Thoreau’s ideas about civilization or di Chirico’s “Nostalgia of the Infinite,” switching abruptly between registers from sentence to sentence (“Seeing” 22, “Fixed” 65). The recurring transitional pattern—which is, as it turns out, a lack of transition—demonstrates Dillard’s amazing ability to see allegory, representational truth, in every small piece of the world around her. “The creeks are the world with all its stimulus and beauty,” she says. “The creeks are everything” (“Heaven” 11). She treats philosophical ideas and natural phenomena as two different manifestations of the same thing, both awaiting her dialogue. In “Spring,” she addresses both in one sentence: “‘Never lose a holy curiosity,’ Einstein said; and so I lift my microscope down from the shelf, spread a drop of duck pond on a glass slide, and try to look spring in the eye” (121). Dillard consistently presents nature as a mysterious force that doesn’t quite speak our language, but can reveal the same truths all the more vividly if we just stop to look.

Nature’s language, Dillard professes, is the rhythm of the bugs’ lives. Unlike the writer herself, they seem to have their existences perfectly figured out as they move through predictable stages with set beginnings and ends. They offer no apologies for their small existences; they perform their mysteries right before her eyes, unveiled and unashamed, their urges genuine and guided. The bugs manifest themselves to Dillard as unselfconscious “comrades-at-life” that provide “a glimmer of companionship” (“Fixed” 67). Dillard turns to nature as a remedy for her intellectual and natural introversion, itself born of the evident lack of sensibility she sees in civilization. She charges nature’s rawness with recovering this sensibility, asking that it give her access to truths society has not equipped her to find. In return, she allows it to lord over her, speaking of its power as if it breathes and counts, deceives and wastes, as if it is a fanatic despot unafraid of taking even the most

grotesque measure of control. “The season changed two hours ago,” she says, and asks, “Will my life change as well?” (“Flood” 145).

This unique way in which Dillard conceptualizes her relationship to nature—she is the asker, the walking question, both answer and answerer—manifests itself throughout her writing as a tone of absolute reverence. She responds in wonderment to nature’s smallest movements, stopping even to find transformative beauty in a muddy creek bed (“Seeing” 27-28). She seems transfixed by absolutely everything she sees in the forest: “I looked at it for a long time,” Dillard says of a moth that landed on her windowsill; “like all large insects, it gave me pause, plenty pause” (“Fixed” 69). In another essay, she tells the reader, “I had stepped into the meadow to feel the heat and catch a glimpse of the sky, but these grasshoppers demanded my attention, and became an event in themselves” (“Nightwatch” 200). Although throughout her essays she weighs nature’s wisdom against its peril and expresses her doubts about its overall sanity to us, her consistent enchantment betrays an almost evangelical commitment to its righteousness. Every piece of natural creation, no matter how capricious, gets her applause—applause she thinks is long overdue.

Dillard speaks in a hallucinogenic stream of observations, as if her synapses are plugs in the hands of an overly excited telephone operator constantly connecting and rearranging the cords. Stirred by various associations, she describes her thoughts as she watched a frog being eaten from the inside out: “His very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water” (“Heaven” 13). She connects what she sees around her to every experience lodged in the Western mind’s collective unconscious, to every image she believes she can invoke to imbue us with some sort of fellow-feeling. When she describes the cloudless February day as a beautiful woman with an empty face, her goal is to get us to feel as if we, too, were face-to-face with it (“Fixed” 59). These metaphorical connections also demonstrate the unique way Dillard re-conceptualizes her reality—the way the meaning of what she sees goes far beyond what is physically right in front of her.

But sometimes the line between ideas is fuzzy, leaving us with only pieces of the conversation happening inside her head. In “The Fixed,” Dillard unexpectedly divorces herself from her reverence for the master plan, digressing into a paragraph in which she calls nature’s cyclicity “profligate” (67). Despite acknowledging that the autumn leaves that cycle and die return to the soil to be reborn, she prods, “Wouldn’t it be cheaper to leave them on the

trees in the first place?” (67). She returns to her reverence for nature’s rhythms in the next paragraph, forcing the reader to reconcile two apparently incongruent conceptions of how nature functions, how it gives end to life yet rise to renewal. Here she worships not nature’s pleasantries, but its ability to stamp reality into definite structures. But then she grapples with the way the natural world, a “deranged manic-depressive with limitless capital” who will “try anything once,” destroys without hesitation the wonders of its own creations (70). This paragraph in “The Fixed” is the first place we see Dillard reckoning with nature as a monstrous and destructive force, but it isn’t the last. In “Fecundity,” she comments on how “any three-year-old can see how unsatisfactory and clumsy is this whole business of reproducing and dying by the billions. The universe that suckled us is a monster that does not care if we live or die. It is fixed and blind, a robot programmed to kill” (172). Is it a monster, a robot, or a manic-depressive? When Dillard forces herself to present nature as anything less than a force to be revered, the metaphors go haywire.

Whatever nature is, Dillard believes wholeheartedly that we are all its children. She strives to impart to us the idea that nothing is singular or non-relational, everything is connected, everything contributes to the zero-sum pool of shifting energy that nature pushes and pulls like the moon to the tides. For this reason, Dillard believes herself able to understand the caterpillar’s struggles and the interactions of everything else that seems so alien to a common observer. “When a mantis has crunched up the last shred of its victim, it cleans its smooth green face like a cat,” Dillard notices as she watches the mantis’s cannibalism, immediately recognizing it as something familiar (“Fixed” 58). In her empathy toward and personification of the insects, Dillard tries to communicate that although she and the bugs and the forest itself belong to different categories of being, they have met here in time and space to share in a similar torturedness. They are all bound up in the instability of being attached, relational, subject to everything around them. She watches the bugs’ struggles, watches the world around them keep moving, and instantly feels transformed into a caterpillar tracing her species’ track. Being able to see the proverbial forest and its trees, the big picture and its intimate details, relieves Dillard of the anxiety of her respectively inconsequential problems. She can suddenly see that although she lives a lonely life, she really couldn’t be more connected, more like everything else.

The life cycles of the bugs speak to Dillard’s deepest insecurities about being transitional, unstable, plopped into the throes of a battle between creation and death. The caterpillar, like the author, doesn’t know that he will emerge a butterfly when he battles his own cocoon, and Dillard watches him

with an acute sense of the life force emanating from his thrusting body (“Fixed” 65). He doesn’t know that he will soon gracefully flutter through the clouds, so he goes to war against his self-formed captor. Without words he passes onto Dillard a microcosmic representation of the grand design, the master plan, the ordered cyclicity of everything, and she experiences it with a quasi-divine separation but also a deeply bodily intimacy. She can see from outside the frame what she cannot see from inside it: that she too marches to a “mighty tune” (70). She sees that the rhythms by which the universe moves simultaneously provide the ultimate freedom, the ultimate stability, and the ultimate understanding—the knowledge that life simply goes on. This caterpillar, like the millions before and the millions after, will fight his valorous battle, live and die, and the world will keep on spinning. His perilous, seemingly insurmountable frustrations, witnessed by Dillard, will fade into the backdrop and dissipate without distinction into the energy of the cosmos, abruptly rendered irrelevant. “Everything will pass,” he wishes to tell her, but instead he waits in frustrated silence, bound incommunicado by the form of matter into which he has been fit. And yet, it is this silence that resonates with Dillard, that sets off echoes in her own cocoon.

Bugs are only one form of matter alive at the creek, but “the earth devotes an overwhelming proportion of its energy to these buzzings and leaps in the grass, to these brittle gnawings and crawlings about,” Dillard notes (“Fixed” 66). She finds it curious that Mother Nature, infinite in her sublime wisdom, allotted so much of the earth’s bounty to the very creatures we squish underfoot and instinctively shrink from—creatures that Dillard would argue are victims of presupposed underestimations. “What does Mother Nature know that I do not?” Dillard seems to ask as she crouches down inquisitively. With discerning eyes she places herself at the bug’s level, analyzing it with curious closeness—the same closeness she exhibited in her childhood as her nose touched the pages of the novels she devoured at night. She says in “Intricacy,” “Even on the perfectly ordinary and clearly visible level, creation carries on with an intricacy unfathomable and apparently uncalled for” (130). But instead of understandably feeling paralyzed by her lack of control over the grand scheme of things, Dillard seems electrified by nature’s determinism. Instead of fretting over the boundaries between things, she dwells on how they make reality so digestible, as if someone worked out the answer to the universe down to the last decimal. She asks the bugs the way she asked the pages of those bygone novels, the way she asks Thoreau why the universe breathes with rhythm, why it clicks along its notched tracks like a wooden roller coaster, always just on the verge of spinning out of control. And the

caterpillar answers, releasing the words of God: "See, I am in all things. See, I never lift my hands off my works, nor ever shall, without end. . . . How should anything be amiss?" ("Fecundity" 173).

WORKS CITED

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- "Nightwatch." 200-13.
- "The Present." 79-103.
- "Seeing." 21-39.
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- "Untying the Knot." 74-78.