

“BLOODIED AND MAULED”:
NATURE’S VIOLENT GOD IN *PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK* AND *HOLY THE FIRM*

Joanna Sierks Smith

A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Religious Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Chapel Hill
2016

Approved by:

Yaakov Ariel

Brandon Bayne

Randall Styers

© 2016
Joanna Sierks Smith
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

Joanna Sierks Smith: "Bloodied and Mauled": Nature's Violent God in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*
(Under the direction of Yaakov Ariel)

This thesis traces Annie Dillard's violent visions of nature through *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*. Within the two books, Dillard iconoclastically shatters the capital-N image of Nature as peaceful, balanced, and patterned. In its place, she offers a portrait of nature as bloody and brutal, relentlessly burgeoning with ever-new forms of predation, parasitism, and death. The first half of this thesis explores Dillard's depiction of the violence underpinning the natural world. The second half goes on to examine her insistence that God exists *within* this violence rather than in spite of it. Staring at nature's violence head-on and urging her readers to do the same, Dillard brings a radically new set of theological questions into the broad tradition of American nature writing. Ultimately, she allows herself to linger and dwell in the dissonant space between the violent realities of nature and any notions of a scrutable God.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: ANNIE DILLARD'S NATURAL WORLD.....	1
PART 1: NATURE'S VIOLENCE UNVEILED.....	6
I. The World as God's Mason Jar.....	6
II. Tumult Within the Jar.....	9
III. Fecundity, Excess, and Omnivorousness.....	13
IV. Cacophonies of Death.....	20
PART 2: DIVINE VIOLENCE INCARNATE.....	28
I. Divine Forces of Nature.....	28
II. The World Possessed.....	36
III. Nature's Sacrificial Heave.....	39
IV. Suicidal Pursuit of the Divine.....	44
CONCLUSION: NATURE'S VIOLENT INTIMACY WITH THE DIVINE.....	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	53

INTRODUCTION: ANNIE DILLARD'S NATURAL WORLD

In paragraph one of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*¹, Annie Dillard slaps her reader across the face with a powerful image: she describes the way a cat she once had would jump through the window and onto her bed in the middle of the night, wild and clawed. There is an extraordinary violence to her rendering of the scene: “Some mornings I’d wake in daylight to find my body covered with paw prints in blood; I looked as though I’d been painted with roses.” The very next paragraph demands that the reader directly confront whatever animating spirit is behind the encounter. Together, reader and author gaze into the mirror at Dillard’s bloody body. Dillard forces the reader to ask, along with her, “What blood was this, and what roses?”²

This astonishing opening salvo ends with a line quoted, it seems, in virtually every critical analysis of Dillard’s work: “We wake, if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence...”³ Literary criticism has dealt very thoroughly with Dillard’s approach to death and beauty. However, even as critics quote the line above, they cull the third word from her trinity, too often leaving the holy ghost of violence gestured towards, but never named.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974.

² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 3.

³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 4.

Dillard is sparing in her explicit use of the word “violence.” At the start of *Holy the Firm*⁴, she blithely informs readers, “Nothing is going to happen in this book. There is only a little violence here and there in the language, at the corner where eternity clips time.”⁵ However, attentive readers of Dillard’s work will realize that this violence remains “at the corner” because of the distortions of human sight, not because it is actually marginal to the cosmos. In this essay, I seek to bring into sharp relief the central role that violence plays in constituting the worlds, both natural and theological, of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) and the subsequent *Holy the Firm* (1977).

Throughout a career spanning back to the 1960’s, Dillard has come to be best known as a writer of narrative nonfiction. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, her first major prose work, won the Pulitzer in 1975. Written in Virginia, where Dillard attended undergraduate and graduate school, it reads as a response of sorts to David Henry Thoreau’s *Walden*. Like *Walden*, on which Dillard wrote her Masters Thesis, it follows an approximately seasonal cycle, and like *Walden*, it centers on the author’s meditations on nature. Dillard walks her readers not only through Roanoke Valley’s suburban side streets and along the titular creek behind her house, but also through the stacks of the Hollins College library. An omnivorous reader, she uses the nearly 300 pages of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to pull theologians, philosophers, mystics, scientists, and poets into conversation with the natural world.

Holy the Firm, published four years after *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, also focuses largely on nature. In its sharp-whittled 76 pages, Dillard reflects on a few days sliced at random

⁴ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

⁵ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 24.

from her years spent living on an island in Washington's Puget Sound. If *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is the tea, *Holy the Firm* is the tincture, offering a potent distillation of Dillard's previous visions of nature. Within the intensely dense prose of *Holy the Firm*, she pares out simile in favor of metaphor and sheds minutiae to reveal shining, singular moments of ecstasy and grief in the natural world.

Though Dillard is often classed as a modern heir of the transcendent tradition, a contemporary writer picking up where Thoreau left off, such a characterization overlooks her unique determination to pursue theological questions into the hard corners of nature. Unlike writers whose theologies seek to look through or around the brutality of the natural world, Dillard's radical insistence on an immanent God forces her to stare down a divinity who somehow manifests *within* violence rather than in spite of it. At one point in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, trying to make sense of the unpredictability and instability of the world around us, she turns to Master Eckhart, quoting: "God is at home. We are in the far country."⁶ If God is indeed at home on Earth, then, as B. Jill Carroll writes, "nothing that happens in the natural world is outside of God's purview or sanction."⁷

The scenes Dillard watches unfurl around her in both the suburbs of Roanoke and the forests of Puget Sound spin out from centers of suffering, violence, and seemingly limitless death. This leads Dillard to a troubling set of questions, questions that have continued to haunt her writing throughout her career. Theodicy festers in the open wounds of her natural world. "We are moral creatures in an amoral world," she writes,

⁶ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 62.

⁷ B. Jill Carroll, *The Savage Side: Reclaiming Violent Models of God*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 36.

unflinchingly.⁸ “We have not yet encountered any god who is as merciful as a man who flicks a beetle over on its feet.”⁹ A benevolent model of God, Dillard argues, can only exist in dissonance with or ignorance of nature unveiled. She urges readers to open their eyes to the brutality that swirls around them, carrying them forward in its crushing momentum from birth to death, and to locate the sacred somewhere within that cruel wave.

In the first half of this thesis, I will analyze Dillard’s depiction of violence. Playing with the notion of the natural world as a closed system, a cosmic Mason jar in which we the earthbound live out our days, Dillard seeks to pull back the curtain on the murderous theatre contained within the jar. She describes in vivid detail the gruesomeness underside of nature. Animal devouring animal, parasites decimating hosts. Rapacious larvae and suicidal moths, poison and tooth and claw. These are the images on which she chooses to unblinkingly dwell. But what kind of God would create a world of such magnificent, and careening violence? By staring long and hard at the bloody knot of violence, fecundity, and death that drive the daily tide of time, Dillard raises a compelling and radically new set of questions about the presence of God in nature.

In the second half of this thesis, I will explore how she herself begins to answer those questions, unpacking the implications that the violent world holds for Dillard’s God. Throughout these two books, Dillard, resolutely Christian yet also spiritually omnivorous, argues that God is present in and deeply complicit with nature’s violence. Janus-like, he dodges in and out of the material world wearing many masks: wind, light, time, death. Refusing to tie him to one aspect of nature, Dillard instead ties him to the whole. He

⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 181.

⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 179.

emerges as a dangerous force, a wild and volatile power that possesses the world and our human selves along with it. Dillard remains profoundly ambivalent about this sharp-edged, even murderous God who operates outside of the bounds of human morality; she relishes the tensions between fury and joy, horror and exhilaration while refusing to accept a dialectical division between the two. Ultimately, Dillard leverages the motif of sacrifice to make sense of the violent world. Nature's violence, rather than leading Dillard to nihilism, is reframed as a perpetual sacrifice, a form of intimate participation with a God of death. The Earth and all of its creatures continually heave themselves, bloodied and scarred, in simultaneous protest and celebration of their inescapable annihilation within the divine.

PART I: NATURE'S VIOLENCE UNVEILED

I. The World as God's Mason Jar

For readers groping towards a handle on the chaotic, violent world, Dillard offers a deceitfully domestic motif: the Mason jar. Images of jars, subtly woven throughout these books, offer readers a zoomed-out view of the world. Using these images, Dillard is able to play with the notion of a Gods-eye view while raising critical questions about whether the world in which we see so much violence unfold is a closed or open system. Telling several stories of insects trapped in collecting containers, she offers variant narratives that all end with the same gruesome twist: the enclosed space deforms the creatures, pushing them towards horrible deaths.

In one of the most vividly violent anecdotes of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard describes how a childhood teacher of hers once kept a mantis' egg case inside a jar until it hatched. The newborn mantises, driven from birth to kill and devour instinctively, methodically, began to tear one another to pieces; with nothing else to attack, they had to attack each other. Dillard describes how she and her classmates watched in horror as one by one they devoured one another until there were only two mantises left. Glutted with their own siblings, they tore at one another until they both lay down on the floor of the jar, heaving, and died.¹⁰ This kind of detached, almost mechanical cannibalism, for which she

¹⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 57.

turns to the mantises as her prime example, takes on an entirely different valence within the closed system of the jar.

The jar is not only a space of cannibalism but of horrific transformations. Offering a somewhat gruesome take on the traditional butterfly-in-jar class project that sustains elementary school classes around the country, she recalls her elementary school teacher keeping a cocoon in a jar so that the children could watch the moth emerge. When the moth emerged, no one, neither children nor teachers, had the sense to remove the jar's lid. The moth's wings, rather than unfurling, were melded together by the gluey fluids of the cocoon, fused into misshapen weights it carried along its sides. "They made a single nightmare clump still wracked with useless, frantic convulsions." Dillard vividly recalls the horror of watching the moth – unable to fly – dragging itself across the asphalt after it was finally released.¹¹ In a parallel moment, she notes how grasshoppers, when stored in large numbers together in large glass jars, will morph into locusts within jars – the transformation "from Jekyll to Hyde" happening just behind the glass.¹² They will become "restless, excitable, voracious," she informs readers. "You now have jars of plague."¹³

These examples ominously underpin Dillard's depiction of the Earth itself as a closed jar, and we, its inhabitants, as the horrific experiment contained within. The fixedness of this system is incomprehensible to her, and she sees this bafflement as a common human experience: "It is the fixed that horrifies us, the fixed that assails us with the tremendous force of its mindlessness. The fixed is a Mason jar, and we can't beat it

¹¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 62.

¹² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 210

¹³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 211.

open."¹⁴ We are in God's Mason jar, but we cannot understand the lid clamped down over us – cannot, perhaps, even believe that it is there. At one point, Dillard describes opening one of her own collecting boxes to see a beetle she had thought long dead still trying to crawl away, futilely churning its legs through the air from where it stood pinned to the cardboard.¹⁵ We are all beetles stuck here, pinned by gravity and an apparently unfeeling God into the pain of a violent world.

Taking the motif of the jarred Earth a step further, Dillard periodically writes of the sky itself as a covering. Thus it is that birds within her world can "pock the air, rip great curved seams in the settled air."¹⁶ Dillard herself wants to break through this cover to whatever is beyond: "I want to climb up the blank blue dome as a man would storm the inside of a circus tent, wildly, dangling, and with a steel knife claw a rent in the top, peep, and, if I must, fall."¹⁷ Both as an artist and as a spiritual seeker, she is drawn to slash at the top of the jar until she finds an opening. This image takes on a richer poignancy, a sense of joyful desperation, the more we read of the cannibalism, deformations, and horrific transformations that take place within the jar that is this world. In these images, readers glimpse flashes of Dillard's frustration at the seemingly inexplicable violence, mortality, and grief of this planet. Sporadically, she responds to ethical dilemmas with a futile call to action: why not turn the blade against the jar itself?

¹⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 69.

¹⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 54.

¹⁶ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 25.

¹⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 65.

The jar motif suggests that the drama of the world may be unfolding within a closed system. It allows Dillard, when rarely but sharply overwhelmed with fury at the violence of the world, to turn the accusing finger away from nature itself and towards the creator, asking: "In the jar, what are we going to eat but each other?"¹⁸ The motif also demands a second theological question. If Dillard is inscribing a closed ecological system, one in which both predator and prey are contained within the glass, is it also a closed system of spiritual energy? Perhaps whatever divine energy lives within the jar lives by the same natural rules, functioning within a closed loop. Perhaps God, like humankind, simply dashes from side to side. This possibility of the self-sacrificing God is one to which Dillard returns again and again without resolution.

II. Tumult Within the Jar

Within the universe of these two books, then, Dillard asks her readers to entertain the notion that the material world is a closed system, some kind of cosmic Mason jar. Surely God, like a schoolchild, has stuffed the jar full of leaves and grass for his insects to build their lives upon. What kind of a planet do we find within the glass? The nature Dillard describes in both *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm* is lopsided, unpredictable, and volatile. The very Earth's surface is "random" and "frayed"; "the planet is characterized by its very jaggedness."¹⁹ In fact, the world is so asymmetrical that Dillard is at times forced to openly question the potentially damning provincialism of her own project. Is the creek itself, along with everything she encounters on its banks, simply "one of the accidents of

¹⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 170.

¹⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 140.

freedom,” an anomaly in a world of anomalies, or does it truly does reflect a broader pattern? By presenting a cross-section of Tinker Creek to her readers as though it contains universally relevant clues to the divine, Dillard confesses, she may simply be demonstrating the limits of her own perspective as she attempts to peer through the glass of the Mason jar to a larger, divine cosmos outside.

Though the jaggedness of the world is profoundly playful (after all, “the creator loves pizzazz”²⁰), it also makes the world sharp-edged, dangerous. The planet is violent to its very core, shaken by tectonic movements, eruptions, and collapses. “The world is a wild wrestle under the grass: earth shall be moved,” Dillard writes.²¹ In this shuddering of the planet she sees divine movement, startling shifts of God’s volcanic presence. Setting up a motif of gaps that continues throughout her work, Dillard hones in on ravines, canyons, valleys, and rivers as space rent apart to be potentially filled by the divine. She writes that “somewhere, everywhere, there is a gap, like the shuddering chasm of Shadow Creek which gapes open at my feet... into which things slip, or are blown, out of sight, vanished in a rush, blasted, gone, and can no more be found.”²² Ours is a pocked and unriveted world.

The Earth is not dead matter on which life superficially dwells; it is alive itself, an organism at play in the divine drama. The planet “absorbs heat and releases it slowly, like a leviathan breathing.”²³ At another moment, Dillard watches as “gold lights veer and retract, shatter and glide in a series of dazzling splashes, shrinking, leaking, exploding... the bare

²⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 139.

²¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 98.

²² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 270.

²³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 76.

forest folds and pleats itself like living protoplasm before my eyes.”²⁴ This is more than a metaphor. To Dillard, the world is a nervous system and the mountains are “raw nerves, sensible and exultant.”²⁵ She characterizes the planetary organism’s system as one ruled by flutters and surges, prey to electrical storms. As will be discussed in greater depth shortly, she often casts the divine as electricity, a shock or charge that travels rather than dwells. In this unstable world, fault lines and fissures can both be expressions of and responses to God’s violent, unpredictable movement through the world. Planetary turmoil – heaving, rolling, quaking - is by no means confined to the Earth. “The galaxy is careening,” Dillard writes. “The sun’s surface is now exploding.”²⁶ The whole universe is simply staggering along.

Though *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm* are both stubbornly materialist, time for Dillard remains a critical alchemic stratum that flows through and transforms the functioning of the material world. In a zoom-out moment, she reflects, “When I added the dimension of time to the landscape of the world, I saw how freedom grew the beauties and horrors from the same live branch.”²⁷ Dillard rejects the linear trajectory of a traditional Christian narrative of the fall from Eden. As she writes it, creation itself constitutes the fall, “a burst into the thorny beauty of the real.”²⁸ Yet she also refuses to frame time as a stable, renewing cycle. Certainly, as Lawrence Buell writes, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* follows a

²⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 79.

²⁵ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 65.

²⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 98.

²⁷ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 182.

²⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 218.

seasonal flow and emphasizes at moments the miraculous continuity of the seasons.²⁹

Dillard's time often seems to flow along an electrical circuit. Like the looped snakeskin she finds in the forest, it has no end that can be unknotted, and "there are no edges to grab."³⁰

However, though the looped thread of time ties the seasons together into an intelligible pattern, that pattern is tenuous. The miracle of repeating seasons is ultimately a mutation of eternity, just as life within Dillard's harsh natural world is a mutant form of death. Time appears cyclical within our limited vision, but from a broader view Dillard reveals it to be a violent and disruptive force, an eruptive power rather than a clean and predictable loop.³¹

Time, then, adds an ambiguous and unstable valence to the natural world. It wildly throws us all towards death. "Time," Dillard writes, "is the warp and matter the weft of the woven texture of beauty in space, and death is the hurtling shuttle."³² Like the lid of the sky, time is a caul that holds the Earth within certain bounds of the contingently real. It can be – and inevitably *is* - ruptured, shredded, shattered: as Dillard writes, "the past inserts a finger into a slit in the skin of the present, and pulls."³³ The passage of time is the joke of the world, Dillard writes, the surprise that smacks us all like a rake in tall grass. "We're tossed broadcast into time," Dillard muses, "like so much grass, some ravening god's sweet hay."³⁴

²⁹ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 239.

³⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 75.

³¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 144.

³² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 141.

³³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 89.

³⁴ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 42.

Eternity houses the electrical storm of the divine; eternity clips the temporal and sends it into a wild tailspin. As will be discussed at greater length, the fluid fourth dimension of time links the mysterious presence of God to the material world. The living, breathing, heaving planet, wrapped in a thin blanket of time, serves as an aptly lopsided stage for the staggering theatre of blood and decay that Dillard goes on to unveil.

III. Fecundity, Excess, and Omnivorousness

Our world bears a strange mark of Cain: we inhabit, Dillard argues, the only planet in the solar system that bears the “blot of death.” “We the living are survivors huddled on flotsam, living on jetsam. We are escapees. We wake in terror, eat in hunger, sleep with a mouthful of blood.”³⁵ Nature has signed a “contract,” a “pact,” a “covenant,” to which “even every hydrogen atom” is bound, she asserts: “The terms are clear: if you want to live, you have to die.”³⁶ Looking at insect, animal, and human life, Dillard conjures a vivid and unblinking portrait of life on Earth as a volatile and often gruesome dance towards the gallows.

The actors that populate nature’s stage are wildly diverse, spectacular in their horrendousness. Dillard calls this nature’s “extravagance.” “Nature will try anything once,” she writes. “No form is too gruesome, no behavior too grotesque.”³⁷ Embracing a Thoreauvian delight in the disgusting, Dillard insists on lifting up rocks to see what squirming horrors she will find beneath. She argues that if we are to praise nature’s

³⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 174

³⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 183.

³⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 66.

generative energy, we must also turn our gaze to that which we find most repellant. We cannot simply rhapsodize over the pristine wings of a dragonfly; we must also look confront the prehensile, barbed lips of its larvae as they reach out to drag prey back to be masticated in the waiting jaws.³⁸ It is in the latter that we can see the feral beauty of nature's ravenousness unrestrained.

Especially when describing insects, Dillard focuses on the unabashedly repulsive, relishing the "unholy revulsion" that even etymologists feel for what they witness among insects.³⁹ Dillard writes of parasitism with disgusted fascination, digging the fingers of her language into the creek's slime where this "hellish hagiography" can be found.⁴⁰ For pages on end, she works her way through variations on a gruesome theme: a fungus creeping like pale mold across an eyeball, a drooping leech, "a bloody jar squirming with yard after yard of some unthinkable parasite" found in a rabbit's stomach.⁴¹ She writes of eyeballs, stomachs, and nostrils - of brains and blood devoured. "Engorged ticks and seething ham," she writes in one exuberant list, "pus-eyed hogs and the wormy nostrils of sheep."⁴² This multiplicity of the natural world is "unwarranted," rising from "an abandoned energy sprung from an unfathomable font"⁴³; the sheer excess of the natural world sets the

³⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 138.

³⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 65.

⁴⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 231.

⁴¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 231.

⁴² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 332.

⁴³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 139.

groundwork for an excess of violence. Marveling at the proliferation of aphids, Dillard writes that it is “more than extravagance; it is holocaust, parody, glut.”⁴⁴

By emphasizing not only the repugnancy of nature’s overproduction but also the sheer flood of excess, Dillard forces readers to attend to their own responses. “Lemmings blacken the earth and locusts the air. Grunion run thick in the ocean, corals pile on pile, and protozoans explode in a red tide stain. Ants take to the skies in swarms, mayflies hatch by the millions, and molting cicadas coat the trunks of trees. Have you seen the rivers run red and lumpy with salmon?”⁴⁵ Why, she asks, do we insist on closing our eyes to this ugly proliferation? There is “no veil cast over these horrors” of the world save for those that we ourselves cast - veils that Dillard strips off before her readers’ eyes in a macabre Dance of the Seven Veils, revealing that the grotesquerie of the unhidden world.⁴⁶ Stripped naked, nature is revealed to be comprised of the “black burgeoning of disease, the dank baptismal lagoon into which we are dipped by blind chance many times over against our wishes, until one way or another we die.”⁴⁷

Dillard herself is baffled and haunted by the proliferation of parasites, larvae, fungus, and mold, and openly reflects on her own nauseated desire to simply *not know*. She recounts, midway through *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a nightmare in which her bed fills with fish eggs. Dillard wakes from the dream, shuddering, to a Tiresian self-recrimination: if only she had looked away from the insects mating at the creek the day before, she would

⁴⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 170.

⁴⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 168.

⁴⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 65.

⁴⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 237.

have been spared this foul visitation.⁴⁸ Yet now that she has opened her eyes and gazed long and hard, without blinking, at the grotesqueness that drives the world around her, she cannot choose to shut her eyes again. What she has witnessed cannot be unseen; the knowledge that haunts her is cannot be un-learned. Offering a telling allegory, she later recounts the legend of a young Native American man who watches the face of his young wife slough off to reveal, underneath, the blood-streaked face of the old murderess who had been wearing the skin of his bride as a mask.⁴⁹ The only mask covering the leering face of nature is the mask that we ourselves have thrown over it.

Honing in on insects and parasites, Dillard gestures towards a sweeping pattern that animates the natural world: the twinning of birth and death, consumption and annihilation. "Every glistening egg is a memento mori," she writes.⁵⁰ Though we typically celebrate human birth and work to induce the virility of the plant world, Dillard points to a taboo, a profound discomfort on the part of human civilization surrounding fertility that is outside of human control. "Fecundity is anathema only in animal."⁵¹ Pulling on the examples of flies and gnats, Dillard writes of pupae eviscerated before they even hatch, their own microscopic eggs swelling and rupturing within them. Vividly, she tugs the human body into her metaphorical language, imagining such larvae as eggs lain in the body of a mummified Egyptian queen. "The eggs burst, shatter her body, and emerge alive, awake,

⁴⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 161.

⁴⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 271.

⁵⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 162.

⁵¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 167.

and hungry from a mummy case which they crawl over like worms and feed on till it's gone. And then they turn to the world."⁵²

Dillard cannot pinpoint what it is about such a form of reproduction "that so appalls" but includes herself among the repulsed, writing "fecundity is an ugly word for an ugly subject."⁵³ Fertility and death trip over one another, somersaulting forward through generations: "The pressure of birth and growth...hungers and lists and drives the creature relentlessly towards its own death."⁵⁴ The instable pair come in the wave of time, like the sharks Dillard once witnessed silhouetted in a cresting wave. In this momentum towards death repeated in endless variations, we watch as "grace tangles in a rapture with violence."⁵⁵ Death, insatiable and omnivorous, is the driving current of the natural world. It carries us inescapably on the crest of its forward motion.

This can be seen more than anywhere in the cannibalistic impulses of the living. Apart from a brief mention of a lioness eating her own cubs,⁵⁶ Dillard does not venture into the well-documented world of mammalian cannibalism. Instead, she continues to focus on insects. On the female mantis, for example, who devours her mate, gnawing his head off during copulation.⁵⁷ Or on the dragonfly nymphs who devour newly hatched dragonflies,

⁵² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 172.

⁵³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 163.

⁵⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 163.

⁵⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 10.

⁵⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 171.

⁵⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 59.

their own future selves.⁵⁸ Or on the lacewing, who, hungered by the work of laying eggs, devours her own offspring: “She pauses in her laying, turns around, and eats her eggs one by one, then lays some more, and eats them, too.”⁵⁹ Drawing on a seemingly bottomless well of variations, Dillard then inverts the loop, writing of the cases wherein pupae devour their parents, or are laid as eggs in a different living host, any host, and eat their way out. “In the death of the parent in the jaws of its offspring I recognize a universal drama that chance occurrence has merely telescoped, so that I can see all the players at once.”⁶⁰

Hunger and death are conjoined twins, both springing from this same insatiable drive. Take the wasp that sucks the honey from a living bee, and then continues, even as she herself is attacked and devoured by a mantis, to feast on the honey; in the words of one scientist Dillard quotes, she is “unable to relinquish the delicious food even amid the terrors of death.”⁶¹ Hunger fuels birth, which in turn fuels hunger again, and thus the world eats its own tail.

Shredding, gnawing, consuming, demolishing, bleeding, decay: these are the incomprehensible yet routine processes of the world. To Dillard, wholeness is the accident.⁶² Walking through trees, she observes the leaves: they are “half-eaten, rusted, blighted, blistered, mined, snapped, smutted, pitted, puffed, sawed, bored, and rucked” –

⁵⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 170.

⁵⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 170.

⁶⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 171.

⁶¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 65.

⁶² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 242.

and these are just leaves.⁶³ How much more is this true for the living, blooded, membraned animals of the Earth. “Life seems to catch you by the tail,” Dillard writes of butterflies whose wings bear the holes and tears of predators.⁶⁴ It is the butterfly who lives a full year with both its wings intact that is the freak, not the one-winged creature flapping helplessly against the ground. We the living are always “nibbling and nibbled,” always “pitted and scarred and broken.”⁶⁵ The wild creativity of the kind of deaths to be died – and the kind of lives that may lead up to them – all serve simply as “frantic variations on our one free fall” towards the grave.⁶⁶

Dillard’s choice to focus largely on insects over mammals is a powerful one. It draws readers’ attention to an invisible yet ruthless violence that animates the ground beneath our feet. By unveiling the ever-present yet often ignored drama that takes place every day, showing readers what they have been consciously or unconsciously averting their eyes from, she gestures towards a violence that is ever-present, literally underfoot, but often unseen. We are all inescapably contaminated by this death. Musing over an ancient Israelite ritual purification, demanded for those who had touched “a bone, or one slain, or one dead,” Dillard exclaims, “But I never signed up for this role. The bone touched me.”⁶⁷ The bone, the blood, the entrails – we are always touched by and touching the dead.

⁶³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 230.

⁶⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 240.

⁶⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 230.

⁶⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 69.

⁶⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 272.

There is nowhere we, trapped in the jar of earthly life, can flee. Our globe is an ossuary without an escape hatch.

IV: Cacophonies of Death

On a miniscule and individuated scale, the narrative of a single life in Dillard's world often reads as tragic theatre. As she writes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Aeschylus, looking for inspiration for Greek theatre, needed to look no further than the life cycle of a wasp to understand "the stuff of real tragedy."⁶⁸ Dillard lies in the grass by Tinker Creek one night. Observing shifts in the light, she watches silently as water striders stalk the moonlit surface of the water, slaughtering the other insects they encounter. What she sees, hauntingly, both appalls and attracts her. "I was lucky to have seen it once. Next time I will know what is happening, and if they want to play the last bloody act offstage, I will just part the curtain of grasses and hope I sleep through the night."⁶⁹

Dillard takes this one snapshot of death and multiplies it to a seemingly infinite degree, forcing readers to confront the wave of death on which nature is carried forward. Death on our planet is spectacular in its creativity and its cruelty. Take the example, given in the first pages of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, of the venomous bug whose bite turns the organs of a toad to liquid. "His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent... it was a monstrous and terrifying thing."⁷⁰ By placing such an unsettling example in the first pages of her book, Dillard suggests that jarringly unique

⁶⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 173.

⁶⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 192.

⁷⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 8.

forms of death are the norm, not the exception, in nature. When we name old age the only *natural* cause of death, we are shutting our eyes to the realities of the natural world.

In nature's cacophony of death, the line between predator and prey blurs. One night, Dillard watches a skunk lumber by. An owl calls from the sky. The two then "[meet] on the bloodied earth."⁷¹ Here, Dillard's very language sidesteps the language of blame: the killer and the killed, meeting, have become interchangeable parts in a horrific pas de deux.

Dillard even goes so far as to describe worms that, having been torn in two, later devour their own regenerated selves. The blurred line between predator and prey extends beyond the individual encounters Dillard witnesses, casting the very dialectics of the universe into unstable disarray. Does Death hold the scythe, or is life the ultimate predator and death simply its sharpest tool?

In either case, this is no benign circle of life. Matter is not simply preserved and recycled, killing is not simply for the sake of survival, and blood spilled is rarely blood frugally spent. On the contrary, Dillard presents nature's violence as a symphony of excess. "People have seen frogs," she reports, "with their wide jaws so full of live dragonflies they couldn't close them. Ants don't even have to catch their prey: in the spring they swarm over newly hatched, featherless birds in the nest and eat them tiny bite by bite."⁷² Recalling a nighttime walk through the woods, Dillard she mildly takes note of this excess all around her, writing, "over my head black hunting beetles crawled up into the high limbs of trees, killing more caterpillars and pupae than they would eat."⁷³ Expanding on what Catherine

⁷¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 221.

⁷² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 8.

⁷³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 221.

Albanese calls the “omnivorousness that is nature’s unkept secret... the unmitigated feeding of species on species,” Dillard takes it as a granted fact that humankind is included as one miniscule subject in this regime of expansive violence.⁷⁴ She writes, “Nature is as careless as it is bountiful, and... with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include our own cheap lives.”⁷⁵

Images of suicide, the *ultimate* excess, populate Dillard’s universe on both on both universal and microcosmic levels. Shooting stars and meteors “commit hari-kari,” flinging themselves across the sky by day and by night.⁷⁶ Caterpillars, we read, will follow the same trail of pheromones in circles until they perish of starvation or of thirst.⁷⁷ Plants expending all of their energy are “literally killing themselves” to make seeds, and the animals doing the same to reproduce.⁷⁸ Insects, as always, provide her with the most colorful examples of exuberant, active drive of the living towards death’s embrace. A suicidal impulse drives the male mantis to mate with the female. He is hopelessly driven to her in spite of his brain’s foreknowledge of his impending end. Even as his head tells him to turn away, Dillard writes, “a chemical in his abdomen says, ‘Yes, by all means, now and forever yes.’”⁷⁹ Yes, by

⁷⁴ Catherine Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. 167.

⁷⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 162.

⁷⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 25.

⁷⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 67.

⁷⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 182.

⁷⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 59.

all means, now and forever yes: this is an impulse, Dillard implies, that will sweep every living thing down the path to annihilation.

While Dillard typically describes the emotional or spiritual dimensions of death with flat language, she relishes the material details of death. Similarly, in writing of the physical detritus of the dead, Dillard does not respond with horror or shock, but rather with mild discomfort. Smelling the wet humus in the springtime, she is surprised that “all that death – all those rotten leaves that one layer down are black sops roped in white webs of mold, all those millions of dead summer insects – [don’t] smell worse.”⁸⁰ When a wind picks up and intensifies the smell, she simply finds it “disquieting.” Dillard drifts slowly towards a reckoning with death. At one moment, itemizing individual animals she has known or encountered, she begins to wonder at the decay of their bodies but pulls herself sharply up out of that lyricism with a more clinical summation of death: “But this is no time to count my dead. That is night work. The dead are staring, underground, their sleeping heels in the air.”⁸¹

Yet she cannot help but count them at times. The Earth, Dillard reminds readers in multiple passages, is full up of the dead. We don’t like to be reminded of it. Hurricane Agnes, she writes, coffins dredged up out of cemeteries, leaving so many corpses stranded in the trees and rooftops that helicopters had to be brought in to help deal with the problem. “The pilots, sickened, had to be relieved every few hours. The one I talked to...preferred Vietnam.”⁸² Most of the death around us is diluted, made an invisible

⁸⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 248.

⁸¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 100.

⁸² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 159.

foundation of time and space. At one point, holding the fragment of a shell “almost as flexible as a straight razor” in her hand, Dillard muses, “the animal is long since dissolved, and its blood spread and thinned in the general sea.”⁸³ In our bloody oceans we see Revelation already underway; every day, the apocalypse unfurls.

There seems to be no question to Dillard of a human animal divide. Though she at times catches herself instinctively falling into patterns of tribalistic thinking, she consistently denies that anything sets humans apart from the rest of the living world. Pondering the million million barnacle larvae released into every half-mile of coastal seawater, Dillard writes simply, “Can I fancy that a million million human infants are more real?... I have hatched too, with millions of my kind.”⁸⁴ Discussing a bout with pneumonia, she muses dispassionately that had the bacteria thrived she would have died, and credits happenstance, not divine justice, with having allowed her to win this toss of the predatory coin.⁸⁵ The bacteria has the same urge to live, to reproduce to excess, to dominate that her own lungs do, and God has thrown them both into the fighting pit. “*Vive la chance,*” she writes, simply, of her illness.⁸⁶ Including humans within the endlessly violent onslaught of animal and insect proliferation, Dillard insists that there is no divine blessing setting humans apart from nature’s movement towards death. “There are no more chilling,

⁸³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 255.

⁸⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 168.

⁸⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 242.

⁸⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 238.

invigorating words,” she writes wryly, “than these of Christ’s, “Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead.”⁸⁷

When she writes with brutal directness about the cruelty of life, it is therefore sweeping, a condemnation of earthly affairs for the sake of the mantis as much as the sake of the human: “There is death in the pot for the living’s food...if you can get it. How many people have prayed for their daily bread and famished? They die their daily death as utterly as did the frog...when God knows they loved their life.”⁸⁸ As many times as she returns to death’s impartiality, it continues to surprise Dillard. At one point, zooming-out to take a broad angle look at the world, she reacts with startled recognition: “This is familiar ground. I merely failed to mention that it is death that is spinning the globe.”⁸⁹ Her responses to these flashes of clear-sightedness vary broadly, and she flits between outrage and acceptance. At one moment, in a bold declaration of materialism, she writes, “the death of the self is no violent act.”⁹⁰ Yet at other moments, death’s omnipresence spurs to her anger, as when she demands, “Do we need victims to remind us that we’re victims? Is this some sort of a parade for which a conquering army shines up its terrible guns and rolls them up and down the street for the people to see?”⁹¹

God remains all-powerful, and “there is no such thing as a freak accident.”⁹² Dillard

⁸⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 242.

⁸⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 270.

⁸⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 182.

⁹⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 262.

⁹¹ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 60.

⁹² Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 62.

refuses to place humans at the center of the natural world in any way. Implicitly, she argues that when environmentalists cast humankind as the hijackers of the natural world, the cause of violence in what would otherwise be a peaceful, stable natural realm, the same religiously driven egomania is at play. How can we possibly look at the layers and countless forms of disruption in the natural world and somehow think we, one animal among millions, are responsible for it? As Albanese observes, to Dillard, “nature is not simple – in need only of a cleansing from the pollution humans have wrought.”⁹³

No. Whatever causes exist for the violence that drive the world are located in the wings of universe, out of our sight. Actors are sent across the stage and scenes set in motion by directions given from offstage by a voice inaudible to human ears and incomprehensible to human minds.⁹⁴ Dillard argues that divine violence is not malevolent but is rather functioning on a plane in which beauty and horror are utterly fused.⁹⁵ Undeniably, Dillard crafts what James I. McClintock labels “a grim, amoral world.”⁹⁶ Yet Dillard refuses to frame the violent, unruly world as fallen.

Because Dillard’s work “explodes notions of the ‘amiability of the natural world’⁹⁷” it forces her readers to look at the patternless churning of death head-on. When she looks at it directly, the common trope within nature writing of a human harmony with nature

⁹³ Albanese, *Nature Religion*, 170.

⁹⁴ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 62.

⁹⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 9.

⁹⁶ James I. McClintock, *Nature's Kindred Spirits: Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. 102.

⁹⁷ Carroll, *The Savage Side*, 12.

becomes laughable. Nature is in constant conflict with itself, a screeching and dissonant symphony of death. Though Dillard might varyingly protest and accept this, she ultimately accepts that it carries a momentum beyond our reckoning. Of death, she writes, “This is the monster evolution loves...evolution loves death more than it loves you or me.”⁹⁸ There is no escaping its strangling hands. “The one infinite power deals so extravagantly and unfathomably in death – death morning, noon, and night, all manner of death.”⁹⁹ Even the rare bloodless deaths shown within these pages are freighted with an “extravagance” that astounds her. In one striking and solitary example, she describes a bird dying in mid-flight: “It jerked, died, dropped, and smashed on the ground.”¹⁰⁰ Even this death remains violently rendered, an explosive and spontaneous rupture of time. At one point, Dillard quotes an unnamed source reflecting on life and death: “The last act is bloody, however brave be all the rest of the play.”¹⁰¹ Within *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*, this bloody finale is played over and over again in an endless series of run-throughs, demanded by a director whose face we never quite see.

⁹⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 177-8.

⁹⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 91.

¹⁰⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 20.

¹⁰¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 270.

PART II: DIVINE VIOLENCE INCARNATE

I. Divine Forces of Nature

What kind of a faceless God is it, then, who directs this theatre of blood?

A God who is himself the greatest of all its masked actors, a God complicit in the “toothed conditions of time and the mysterious, coiled spring of death.”¹⁰² If Dillard’s God is a father, he is negligent at best. At moments, Dillard gestures towards God’s periodic absence as evidence of his cruelty. “This god is a brute and a traitor,” she writes in *Holy the Firm*, “abandoning us to time, to necessity, and to the engines of matter unhinged.”¹⁰³ But it is not merely God’s absence that is brutish. He himself is dangerous, wild and armed. Even when invisible, an unseen force compelling through the world, his presence is something to be feared; he is awful in the ancient sense.

At moments, of course, we see flashes of a playful God. He can manifest as miniscule. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, we glimpse God as a grasshopper;¹⁰⁴ in *Holy the Firm*, he is at one moment a wren.¹⁰⁵ Though this partially reflects lightheartedness on Dillard’s part, a characteristic break in her often serious tone, it is also rooted in earnest theology; Dillard’s God, like the God of Moses, can dwell in a whisper as well as in a storm. Yet while God can

¹⁰² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 237.

¹⁰³ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 46.

¹⁰⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 223.

¹⁰⁵ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 26.

be playful, he is never domesticable. Walking through the valley at Tinker Creek, chasing the sunlight through ravines, Dillard writes that it feels as though she is playing a game against an "unseen adversary." As her generally explosive language suggests, even that momentarily playful light can quickly morph into a "blast of light" that is as apt to kill as to delight.¹⁰⁶ The unseen adversary can be revealed to be a monster, and games can quickly turn ominous when they are played with invisible forces. One night, listening to the creek run, Dillard describes a horror rising within her. Like a child realizing with dawning dismay that a puppet is moved by a human hand, it suddenly occurs to her that a monstrous power lurks behind the water's constant flow. There is something "sinister" to it, Dillard writes, "senseless and horrifying...the damned thing was flowing because it was *pushed*."¹⁰⁷

What kind of creature is this ambivalent, invisible pusher who deals in "blasts" of light? One whose very self is a weapon, toothed and clawed. In one of her most striking depictions of the divine, Dillard pushes this depiction of God's innate dangerousness to an extreme, writing that Julie Norwich, a mutilated child, has been "baptized into the bladelike arms of God."¹⁰⁸ Arguably, this image of God as a monstrous parent encapsulates one of the fundamental tensions in Dillard's theology. God is neither gentle and attentive nor dangerous but absent: instead he remains violently engaged with and present in the world, and in doing so, destroys what he touches. God has a Midas touch of blood; he embraces a child and in doing so "slaughters" her face.¹⁰⁹ Dillard's depiction of a divine who functions

¹⁰⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 14.

¹⁰⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 70.

¹⁰⁸ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 41.

outside of human moral codes echoes and intensifies Thoreau's. "Here is a force," Thoreau wrote upon summiting Mount Ktaadn, "not bound to be kind to man."¹¹⁰

Dillard's God ducks in and out of the natural world. He can be stalked but never caught. Like the God of Sinai, he emerges brilliantly and without warning. Dillard's ecstatic encounters with God strike powerfully and suddenly. "The vision comes and goes," she writes, "mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam."¹¹¹ Watching a flurry of birds fill the sky, Dillard seizes the hem of the divine and nearly collapses beneath its power. "I stood with difficulty, bashed by the unexpectedness of this beauty, and my spread lungs roared."¹¹² Beauty is sharp-edged, potentially fatal. "Morning beats the trees senseless with beauty," Dillard notes one day.¹¹³ Simply put, beauty and violence – the beating, the pummeling, the bashing of the natural world – are inseparable.

God, both beautiful and violent, dwells in nature's most extravagant and most ambiguous spaces. As Carroll writes, Dillard's God is "*almost synonymous with nature*";¹¹⁴ certainly, the divine inhabits and animates both the landscape and the creatures that populate it at various times throughout Dillard's work. Yet he is also somehow more than the physical. Colleen Warren frames this "partially material presence" by honing in on

¹¹⁰ Henry Thoreau, "Ktaadn" in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden, Or, Life in the Woods; The Maine Woods; Cape Cod*. New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1985. 645.

¹¹¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 36.

¹¹² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 42.

¹¹³ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 75.

¹¹⁴ Carroll, *The Savage Side*, 13.

Dillard's suggestion that God may dwell *behind* rather than *within* nature: "We, because of our own human limitation or tolerance, may only be able to see the spiritual presence in glimpses, through 'gaps.' Yet these glimpses, Dillard insists, are entirely real, material moments, seen through fissures in the physical world."¹¹⁵ This ambiguity is intense and meaningful. Dillard resists resolution, insisting instead that her readers linger with her, perpetually, in dissonance and ambiguity. Her emphasis on ambiguity is not merely a poetic device or a philosophical free pass, but rather a reflection of what she reads as a profoundly ambiguous God. Dillard's God is not one interested in making himself scrutable to humankind.

The exhilarating presence of the divine is a strange bedfellow to the seemingly limitless violence of the natural world, yet we cannot grapple with one without confronting the other; as Dillard insists, "if we describe a world... that is a long, brute game, then we bump against another mystery: the inrush of power and light."¹¹⁶ In this inrush, her God moves through air, light, electricity, and time - all forces that flow through the material world yet are not part of it. Dillard thus links the divine to the most unsettling natural forces, those that uncomfortably skirt the line between the material and the spiritual worlds.

Repeatedly, Dillard turns to air and wind as vehicles of the divine. Her God typically arrives not in human form but in clouds and as the God of the Pentateuch. It is a classic religious trope - that of the potent yet invisible and sourceless divine power - but one that

¹¹⁵ Colleen Warren, *Annie Dillard and the Word Made Flesh: An Incarnational Theory of Language*. Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2010. 69.

¹¹⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 9.

allows Dillard considerable room to speak about the divine without mentioning God by name. “The air churns out forces and lashes the marveling land,” she writes.¹¹⁷ Wind both creates and inhabits the gaps where, in Dillard’s world, God dwells: the wind pauses in “underwater gaps” and “lances through” rocks “where you cower to see the back parts of God.”¹¹⁸ The wind, here, is a spiritually virile force. Citing Pliny’s report that certain mares conceived the fastest offspring by turning their tails to the wind, Dillard writes that the wind somehow “engenders something quick and kicking in [her] lungs.”¹¹⁹ However, the wind is equally able to kill, and is cast as an instrument of cosmic sacrifice. “The wind’s knife has done its work,” she writes at one point, musing on the sacrificial gesture found in a clean November wind.¹²⁰ The wind’s mysterious origins, though, are what leave Dillard reeling and amazed. In one of the final chapters of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she takes the mystery in simply: “A wind from no place rises.”¹²¹ Coming from some otherworldly source, the wind has a disruptive power both to beget and to tear asunder. As with other forces that she connects with the divine, the eruptive force of the wind suggests a divine opening in the closed ecosystem of the world.

In another vivid echo of the Pentateuch, Dillard’s divine is commonly revealed in light. Using wrenching language, she portrays light – God - as instantaneously transformative, capable of renting holes in the fabric of the landscape. Her God manifests

¹¹⁷ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 72.

¹¹⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 188; 274.

¹¹⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 54.

¹²⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 264.

¹²¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 246.

brightly and suddenly, an enlivening spark. “The world without light is wasteland and chaos,” Dillard writes. She echoes the creation story of Genesis 1, where God’s “Let there be light” brings order to primordial chaos; to her, the divine presence is the critical animating force in nature.¹²² Yet there is a dangerous edge to that force. God can also be an incinerating light. Writing of the sun, Dillard points towards the impossibility of ever glimpsing God head-on. “Nobody here on the planet seems aware of this strange, powerful taboo, that we all walk about carefully averting our faces, this way and that, lest our eyes be blasted forever.”¹²³ Like the God of Sinai, Dillard’s divine cannot be directly confronted. Light reveals human sightedness to be somewhat of a farce. After discussing at length the tricks played by human eyes, Dillard concludes, “darkness appalls and light dazzles...[they] confuse me, bowl me over.”¹²⁴ Both extremes of God’s presence and absence leave her stunned.

Complicating Dillard’s visions of God as light is her notion of God as an electrical current pulsing through nature. This image further separates her notion of the light of God from benign Sunday school tropes, instead suggesting that this divine light is the kind of electrical current that kills. And indeed, she connects this divine electrical loop both to life and to death. “Our bodies are shot with mortality. Our legs are fear and our arms are time.”¹²⁵ If God is the electrical impulse, then we are tiny wires straining to connect to the divine current, one that could connect us to a cosmos outside the jar of mortality. “You reel

¹²² Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 72.

¹²³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 25.

¹²⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 39.

¹²⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 91.

out love's long line alone, stripped like a live wire loosing its sparks to a cloud, like a live wire loosed in space to longing and grief everlasting";¹²⁶ with no larger circuit, this flow of desire, sorrow, and power is being sent out into empty space, missives sent out to no receiver. The metaphor of electricity complicates Dillard's situating of a God who is rooted in space. The divine spark runs on a circuit around the world, but it also "sockets into everything that is," both inside and outside of the Mason jar of the world.¹²⁷

The image of a divine electrical wire running its circuit around the world – sometimes looped, sometimes with a "live wire loosed" – allows Dillard to begin fleshing out the complex and ambiguous relationship between God and time. Dillard ties notions of time's passing to the electrical imagery she uses elsewhere to describe the erratic currents of the divine. "Eternity sockets itself twice into time," she writes.¹²⁸ Though the two are tied to one another within Dillard's works, the precise relationship evades definition. Time is and is not real, it is and is not the divine. It is a mysterious substrate, a channel, a wire through which God rolls and unrolls his currents, and it ties the material world, bound in space and time, to the transformations of the eternal. Although some scholars, such as Buell, have read *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as ultimately affirming the "fundamental promise" of a meaningful seasonal cycle,¹²⁹ Dillard also frames time as disruptive and unpredictable.

In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard makes a loose distinction the demiurgical gods of the day and the unpredictable, omnipotent God of Time, yet frames both as capriciously cruel. She

¹²⁶ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 44.

¹²⁷ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 30.

¹²⁸ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 71.

¹²⁹ Buell, *Nature's Kindred Spirits*, 239.

writes, "The one great god abandoned us to days, to time's tumult of occasions, abandoned us to the gods of days each brute and amok in his hugeness and idiocy."¹³⁰ We are playing the temporary games of the gods of the moment, but when we are even briefly "socketed in" to the electrical current of the larger God of Time, the slow regularity of earthly time falls away as an illusion. In frustrated, halting language, after an ecstatic experience Dillard struggles to explain: "You must rest now. I cannot rest you. For me there is, I am trying to tell you, no time."¹³¹

Of all of these liminal, semi-material forces with which Dillard identifies God, the most haunting mask she has him wear is that of death. She writes only glancingly of death in anthropomorphic terms: he "shuffles in... all the halls I dare not call to mind or visit for fear I'll glimpse the hem of his shabby, dazzling gown disappearing around a turn."¹³² Like the wings of the butterflies Dillard collects, even Death's own robe is tattered. In this pale, inverted echo of the healing hems of Christ's robes, readers glimpse, alongside Dillard, the edges of a God who does not spare himself from the ravages of the machine that he has set in motion. Here, in yet another echo of the Mosaic God, death's face cannot be glimpsed; we humans can only glimpse his backside.

Even God-as-death cannot be pinned to the image of a robed and ghostly man. Instead he flickers in and out of Dillard's text in various forms, emerging as the "monster evolution loves" or as the "great dog" that trails its master, Time.¹³³ However Dillard casts

¹³⁰ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 43.

¹³¹ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 68.

¹³² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 177.

¹³³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 177, 183.

death, though, she sees it always propelled by a divine energy. Within her world, there is a grim exuberance to be found not only in the in the myriad ways that life lusts after death, but in the creator who would unleash his offspring upon one another within a machine designed simply to hurl them towards the grave.

II. The World Possessed

In the same way that Dillard's God seizes hold of the physical world, fleetingly inhabiting, electrifying, and decimating animal bodies, landscapes, and forces of nature, he seizes hold of the human body. We are all hooked fish waiting for the line to tug. Dillard writes from a baseline assumption that her attraction to the divine is universal, if not universally felt. She herself points to a careening sense of loss as central to the mystical quest for the divine. Thinking of the creek and of the vision of the divine cosmos she sees between its banks, she writes, "I come to it as an oracle; I return to it as a man who years later will seek out the battlefield where he lost a leg or an arm."¹³⁴

While explicitly rejecting the notion that God is a "mass hypnotist," Dillard continues to regard human autonomy with some suspicion.¹³⁵ Clearly the divine manifesting through the physical world holds an undeniable magnetism that affects the compasses of our bodies, drawing us viscerally towards the sacred. Writing of the rarely witnessed migration of eels across dry land, Dillard wonders, "If I saw that sight, would I live?... Or would I be seized to join that compelling rush, would I cease eating, and pale, and abandon all to start

¹³⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 7.

¹³⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 9.

walking?.”¹³⁶ She frames human yearning for the divine as a parallel to the migratory impulse that pulses through the blood and bones of the animal world, and herself appears to both fears and desire this gravitational tug towards the mystical, towards some unknown but utterly consuming center.

Dillard plays with the image of God as a ventriloquist as well, musing, "Power broods and lights. We're played on like a pipe; our breath is not our own."¹³⁷ Here, Dillard writes in reference to an anthropologists' report of Eskimo children singing into one another's throats to pass the time. This ventriloquism, then, is not sinister, but may be rather read as a cosmic game, another instance in which we see God display a child's playful cruelty. At times, Dillard goes so far as to use the language of possession to describe how God seizes us, hearkening back to the medieval dance of the possessed: "Someone is piping, and we are dancing a tarantella."¹³⁸ Her natural world, Albanese writes, "demand[s] complicity in its violent beauty"; as these moments of seizure show, we could not opt out even if we tried.¹³⁹

These depictions of God's overwhelming and possessing presence chip away at notions of human control. If Dillard's ritual approach to the divine is stalking, it always ends either in empty hands or in a reversal of roles. It is the divine that reveals or hides himself, and it is the stalker who is seen. Our vision is faulty, and we glimpse God only at his whim. These moments of being seen result in a loss of control, a bleeding out of autonomy.

¹³⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 223.

¹³⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 33.

¹³⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 24.

¹³⁹ Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 166.

We, the hunters, turn out to be the hunted. Dillard's herself embraces a ritual stalking of God as the only meager step that we can take towards seeing. "I cannot cause light," she writes. "The most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam."¹⁴⁰ Though Dillard is, as McClintock argues, a ritualist, her rituals offer only a way of playing the odds. Moments of connection with the divine can never be guaranteed. They grab us, not us them. To Dillard, there is no such thing as efficacious ritual.

If this is the God that inhabits Dillard's world – one who manifests and disappears at will, who possesses our bodies in an inrush of feeling, who violently flows in and around the world without concern for human values – how are we to communicate with the divine? God, wearing the masks of these various forces, cannot be encountered as one would encounter a human. Within these two books, Dillard does not write at length about prayer; though she references the act broadly, at no point does she detail conversations with God, nor does the God she presents in these two texts appear to be one who'd be particularly interested in conversation. The most we can hope for is to be struck by his lightning, by what she calls "the smash of the holy."¹⁴¹ It is this very danger, this "smash" that we are drawn to like Dillard's moth is drawn to the candle flame.¹⁴² It's an old trope powerfully conjured: we seek our own destruction in stalking the divine.

If Dillard (resolutely Christian, periodically Catholic, and overwhelmingly private about institutional connections) is fairly quiet within these two books on the subject of prayer, she is practically mute on the subject of church. She does, however, mention that

¹⁴⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 35.

¹⁴¹ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 75.

¹⁴² Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 75.

she prefers low churches – unschooled, poorly housed, slapped together. At high churches, she writes, there is more reliance on euphemistically mild language of moderate religion and the myth of a truce, a contract, an *understanding* with God. The simple love of God preached at such churches simply doesn't compute within the cosmos Dillard has constructed. Love may not be the most fitting word for what Dillard feels towards God, nor, it seems, does she feel it is necessarily an appropriate response to such a being. Baffled, she writes, "We reel out love's long line toward a God less lovable than a grass head, who treats us less well than we treat our lawns."¹⁴³

At low churches, though, she sees at least some of this stripped away to expose more complicated responses that resonate with her observations of the natural world: fear, anger, mistrust. These churches, Dillard writes, reasonably expect God "to blast the service to bits."¹⁴⁴ It is at these same churches that she sees open protest against God: she describes a pastor's outburst, mid-prayer, against God's mute indifference to the congregation's prayers, as endearing him to her.¹⁴⁵ This combination of humility and fury with which the congregation approaches God accords with Dillard's own vision of God, a God not bound by human norms of conduct. Ultimately, this attitude drives her to turn to sacrifice, not prayer, as the most primal way to flag down the divine.

III. Nature's Sacrificial Heave

Seeking some meaningful within all of this violence, both on the part of nature and

¹⁴³ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 46.

¹⁴⁴ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 59.

¹⁴⁵ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 58.

from the hand of the God who lurks behind nature, Dillard returns again and again to the theme of sacrifice. Sacrifice, and sacrifice alone, is violence rendered intelligible. God demands sacrifice – not as a guilt offering, and not as a vindication, but rather as a medium of communication. In the magnificent crescendo at the end of *Holy the Firm*, wherein she, the author, is utterly transformed into now sacredly faceless prophet, Dillard declares, oracle-like, “The world without light is wasteland and chaos, and a life without sacrifice is abomination.”¹⁴⁶ Blood and slaughter, fire and immolation: this is the language that God speaks, and thus it is only through these mediums that we can call down his attention.

Dillard describes the world as the altar stone of millennia. “The sea is a cup of death” she writes simply at one point, “and the land is a stained altar stone.”¹⁴⁷ The seeker, along with the rest of the living world, inevitably must become the bloodied sacrifice. Something as insignificant as a sandstone ledge stained with berry juice, which she glimpses after watching a dog scurry by with a deer’s bloody leg clutched in its jaws, to her resembles “an altar bloodied.”¹⁴⁸ Near the end of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she realizes that just as she cannot avoid the seemingly patternless violence of the natural world, she cannot avoid participation in whatever mysterious and sacrificial rite is at play within that violence. Standing by the creek, splashed with water, she writes, “I am spattered with a sop of ashes, burnt bone knobs, and blood.”¹⁴⁹ As Stan Goldman points out, reading *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* alongside Leviticus, in ancient Israel it was the smearing of blood on an altar that

¹⁴⁶ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 72. Emphasis mine.

¹⁴⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 177.

¹⁴⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 253.

¹⁴⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 272.

marked a death as sacrifice rather than simple slaughter.¹⁵⁰ With the Earth itself as the altar stone constantly blood-streaked, every death becomes a sacrifice.

Early on in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, struggling to find a way to make sense of the seeming cruelty of a God who creates a world of violent chaos, Dillard seizes on the image of ancient Israelite sacrifice. In particular, she hones in on the ritual of the heaved offering, in which a priest would throw the breastbone of a slaughtered animal towards the altar. Dillard seizes the heaved offering as a form of protest against God, an expression of mute bafflement and rage that could only be given voice through bloodied flesh. This furious gesture, she insists, is “not inappropriate.” How, knowing what we do about the grief, the destruction, the seemingly utterly unnecessary pain written into the natural world, can we not lodge complaint on behalf of the world?

“This heave is a violent, desperate way of catching God’s eye,” Dillard writes, going on to describe the scene in visceral terms. Musing on the priest having already “slayed and chunked” the sacrificial animal, she asks, “Does he hurl it across the tabernacle, between the bloodied horns of the altar, at God? Now look what you made me do. And then he eats it.”¹⁵¹ Ending the heaving sacrifice with a ritual devouring, Dillard’s priest simultaneously participates in and decries the carnage that constitutes earthly life.

Now look what you made me do: readers should hear in these words the unvoiced outrage of Dillard’s complex set of characters: The earthworm eating its own tail and the lioness devouring her cub. The mutant moth in its jar. The wasp devouring a bee. The male

¹⁵⁰ Stan Goldman, "Sacrifices to the Hidden God: Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Leviticus." *Soundings* 74, no. 1 (1991). 205.

¹⁵¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 269.

mantis writhing in pain and sexual ecstasy. The lacewing, dying, “whose mandibles are wet with the juice secreted by her own ovipositor.”¹⁵² Dillard’s teeming parade of the “nibbled and nibbling” are all participants in the consumptive act of sacrifice, lodging, with each bite, an impotent protest against an amoral world.

Through careful ongoing references to nature’s “heaving,” Dillard depicts nature itself as continually sacrificing, continually seeking to wave down the divine. It is not only human priests lobbing bloody chunks up towards the heavens, but nature itself that itself is continually flinging a sacrifice towards some faceless deity. Just as humans are blind to the constitutive violence of the natural world, Dillard argues, we are blind to the expansive sacrificial gestures by which nature cries out in the violence language that is God’s mother tongue.

Each plant and animal is a living sacrifice, driven by a perpetual Icarus impulse to fling itself towards God. Plants use the power within their veins to “heave the rock earth” at extraordinary rates.¹⁵³ They “heave silently.”¹⁵⁴ Each one “secretly... seethes; it splits, sucks, and stretches; it heaves up tons and hurls them out in a green, fringed fling.”¹⁵⁵ Sharks “roil and heave” in a feeding frenzy.¹⁵⁶ Trout heave up from the water.¹⁵⁷ More

¹⁵² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 171.

¹⁵³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 166.

¹⁵⁴ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 212.

¹⁵⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 113.

¹⁵⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 10.

¹⁵⁷ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 188.

grimly, parasitic grubs heave their way out of decimated and emptied cocoons.¹⁵⁸ The mangled moth from one of Dillard's childhood jars, unable to fly heavenward, stubbornly "heave[s] himself down the driveway" out towards an unknown arbiter of justice.¹⁵⁹

Human bodies, tugged along with the rest of nature's unstoppable impulses, are compelled to heave upward. Like nausea, or hunger, or labor pains, the impulse to gesture expansively towards the divine takes over our bodies. When Dillard stands after a long time looking at the creek, her blood "heaves to [her] head."¹⁶⁰ When our pulses quicken, Dillard writes, it is a "heave in the wrist," a fluttering gesture of our bodies towards the ecstasy of closeness to the divine. It is as though the blood flowing through our veins *wants* to be sacrificed, *wants* to be used as a voice to speak to the unspeaking God. As an embodied impulse, the heave re-anchors our spirits to a God that fully inhabits the material world and animates dead matter with the movement of time. "I stir," Dillard writes after another long spell of watching. "The heave of my shoulders returns me to the present."¹⁶¹

Through this sacrificial language, Dillard brings new shades of ambiguity to her own Mason jar motif. At moments, she uses the heaved sacrifice to affirm that the natural world is a closed system, framing the gesture as one in which energy is conserved, given from nature unto nature. In *Holy the Firm* she asserts, "This is the one world, *bound to itself* and exultant. It fizzes up in trees, trees heaving up streams of salt to their leaves."¹⁶² But more

¹⁵⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 234.

¹⁵⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 62.

¹⁶⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 100.

¹⁶¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 101.

¹⁶² Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 30.

frequently, Dillard describes the heave as random, expansive, spewed boundlessly outward. The sun's energy, she writes, "heaves in every direction, like slaves building pyramids."¹⁶³ Here, energy is being spilled out, like Bataillean sacrificial excess, towards a divine that can never be located, pinned down, or held within a closed loop.

The closest that Dillard comes to suggesting that sacrifice is a part of a cycle is in regard to Christ. Is his suicide a "descent or an ascent," she asks.¹⁶⁴ Is this a roll of film we watch forward or backward, or is sacrifice, like so much in her world, another cosmically looping snakeskin with no end that we can grab? In keeping with her recasting of the creation story as the fall, Dillard recasts Jesus's bloody self-annihilation as itself the moment of resurrection, upsetting any notions that there is a directional push to the eternal narrative. Though she typically describes the heaved sacrifice as directed heavenward, in one dizzying moment she questions whether it matters at all which way the dismembered pieces of our earthly life is thrown. "Had this place always been so, and had I not known it? There were blowings and flights, tossings and heaves up in the air and down to grass."¹⁶⁵ If the world, whole, is an altar, and God shooting it through with time and space, then perhaps all this death is a looped and directionless sacrifice.

IV. Suicidal Pursuit of the Divine

Amidst all of this expansive, wasteful heaving, we see Dillard's insistence on pursuing God to dangerous places as a self-sacrificial impulse, a kamikaze lunge towards

¹⁶³ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 119.

¹⁶⁴ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 47.

¹⁶⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 223.

the divine. Dillard frequently evokes an Old Testament terror of the divine presence. "It often feels best to lay low, inconspicuous," she writes, "instead of waving your spirit around from high places like a lightening rod."¹⁶⁶ To Dillard, to attract divine attention is always to attract danger. It is bear-baiting on a cosmic scale, what Carroll dubs a "daredevil spirituality."¹⁶⁷ Always, it requires a suicidal impulse to approach the divine, and, as previously discussed, Dillard's natural world is rife with suicides. The cosmos itself is continually self-annihilating while under our feet, plants and insects throw themselves towards death. Through images of blood and fire, Dillard insists that God's deadliness is not metaphorical or amorphously spiritual, but is actually embodied in the bloody cost of life on Earth.

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek opens with Dillard's musing on what to make of the blood that she finds, dazed, printed across her body at the break of day. "What blood was this," she asks herself. "It could have been the blood of murder...or the blood of some unspeakable sacrifice or birth."¹⁶⁸ As readers come to see, the burgeoning pattern of birth, the fecundity of the world, is one and the same with the "unspeakable sacrifice" Dillard fears. The blood of birth cannot be separated from that of death. She goes on: "I never knew as I washed, and the blood streaked, and faded, and disappeared, whether I'd purified myself or ruined the blood sign of the Passover." Over the course of the book, both of those suggestions fade. There is no purification from the bloodied world, nor will the angel of death pass over the planet without entering every house and hole and nest and den.

¹⁶⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 90.

¹⁶⁷ Carroll, *The Savage Side*, 46.

¹⁶⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 4.

At one point, conjuring shadows of Old Testament plague by vividly imagining that she is standing in a cloud of ravenous locusts, Dillard writes, "My spirit flaps near my heart like an eagle; blood on the wrists and throat is a good price to pay for this exhilaration."¹⁶⁹ This cannot be the blood of Passover; Dillard is not imploring the angel of the Lord to pass her by. On the contrary, the blood on Dillard's wrists – a stigmatic imitation, as Carroll points out, of the eternally wounded Christ¹⁷⁰ - becomes a challenge to God, a demand that he manifest in even a fragment of his destructive glory and his beautiful monstrousness.

The author is not only the bloodied sacrifice, suicidally dragging herself closer to the sharp-edged blade of God, but the instrument of sacrifice as well. Dillard is another weapon in the hand of the divine. "I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood."¹⁷¹ What has she struck? Whose blood drips along the book's pages? It is not only her own blood, but also the blood of nature, the blood of the divine. It is no surprise that in the climactic scene of *Holy the Firm*, where Dillard suddenly vaults to ecstatic heights, takes place as she trudges home from a corner store with communion wine, the blood of Christ, in her backpack. As Warren sums it up, "the wine – the blood of Christ – floods the landscape, pools deeply within Dillard, and pours over the world."¹⁷² Dillard's God is himself bloodied and battered, participating in the same sacrificial heaving upward and out that the rest of the world must enact.

¹⁶⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 224.

¹⁷⁰ Carroll, *The Savage Side*, 33.

¹⁷¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 15.

¹⁷² Warren, *The Word Made Flesh*, 119.

If blood is a trailing, staining sign of nature's sacrificial impulse, fire offers another more incandescent allegory for the deadly power of the divine presence and the impulse towards mystical suicide that animates all life. Writing of seraphs, Dillard notes that, "according to some rabbinic writings, they can sing only the first 'Holy' before the intensity of their love ignites them again and dissolves them again, perpetually, into flames."¹⁷³ She sees this suicidal adoration of God mirrored in the physical world.

In one of Dillard's most well known passages, she writes of a camping trip in which moths were continually self-immolating in her fire, her cookware, and her candles. One enormous moth lodged its body into the wax in such a way that it burned, immolating and yet unconsumed, for hours. As Dillard stayed up, unsleeping, and watched, the moth's thorax became a wick, the shell of its exoskeleton directing the flame upwards and its antennae crackling.¹⁷⁴ The moth is Dillard's burning bush, and God the miraculous fire that both consumes and renders immortal not only the moth, but also Dillard's long, attentive night. As the magnificent passage suggests, nature's suicidal impulse does not lead to transcendence above the material world. The moth's exoskeleton crackles and sputters. The immolation still takes place within a closed ecosystem, the Mason jar of the world. God's presence brings transformation, not transcendence.

Nature's suicides bring various flickering shades of significance to Dillard's discussions of artists' self-sacrifice. She argues that artists share the same suicidal impulse to fling themselves into the divine fire as do the seraphim, and in doing so, she electrifies the image of her prototypical artist with a spiritual charge. Working only with the tools of

¹⁷³ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 45.

¹⁷⁴ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 17.

the material world, the artist makes himself a candle waiting to be lit by God's fire. "What can he light," she asks, "but the short string of his gut, and when that's burnt out, any muck ready to hand? His face is flame like a seraph's, lighting the kingdom of God for the people to see."¹⁷⁵

In these two books, Dillard writes of the individual as utterly annihilated in the presence of the imminent divine. Human individualism is subsumed in the flames of God and the forces through which divine power flows through nature: time, violence, and death. Humankind is enamored of the one, but nature shows us we are the many. "We value the individual supremely," she concludes, "and nature values him not a whit."¹⁷⁶ When emptied of self, the artist can become another sacrifice heaving himself onto the altar of daily life alongside the armies of his fellow friends and enemies. By emptying the artist of individualism and instead making him a vessel for the divine, she blurs the lines between an all-consuming God and an all-consuming Genius, writing, "when the candle is burning, who looks at the wick? When the candle is out, who needs it?"¹⁷⁷

As Dillard works towards the conclusion of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she depicts herself as a sacrifice walking but marked, temporarily spared the knife that she knows will one day claim her. "I am a sacrifice bound with cords to the horns of the world's rock altar, waiting for worms." Tied to the horns of the altar, what is it that Dillard submits to? As Carroll compellingly argues, she submits to the broken, violent patterns of the world, sacrificing "preconceived notions of God or grandeur" at the feet of "the realities of

¹⁷⁵ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 72.

¹⁷⁶ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 178.

¹⁷⁷ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 72.

parasites, viruses, and bacteria, and their rival claims to life.”¹⁷⁸

Dillard continues, writing from her place on the altar: “I take a deep breath, I open my eyes... A wind from no place rises. A sense of the real exults me; the cords loose; I walk on my way.”¹⁷⁹ The passage harkens back to the paradigmatic loosing of Isaac, but in Dillard’s reframing of the Biblical narrative, there is no divine voice releasing the author from the sacrificial cords. Instead, it is the wind – one of the embodiments of the divine – that silently and enigmatically gives her a reprieve.

Dillard’s God does not deal in sacrifice as a form of divine payment or retribution. Rather, he deals in sacrifice because his native tongue is blood. The language of the divine is violence, and it is through our often unwitting participation in the turmoil of the world that we commune with the divine. As Warren points out, within Dillard’s work there is no vacuum between creation and the divine, no empty space between nature and the holy.¹⁸⁰ God does not simply “know himself blissfully as flame unconsuming” – he is not, Dillard insists, simply a “holy fire burning self-contained for power’s sake alone” – but rather emerges within these texts as a fire inevitably consuming the nature world.¹⁸¹ He is the electrical storm and the knife, the immolator and the butcher. The will of nature and the will of God are inextricably bound up with one another, entangled in loops and surges of power. While nature heaves itself towards God, God in turn possesses the world with the sacrificial urge, socketing into nature and driving its creatures into the embrace of his

¹⁷⁸ Carroll, *The Savage Side*, 30-31.

¹⁷⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 246.

¹⁸⁰ Warren, *The Word Made Flesh*, 105.

¹⁸¹ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 48.

“bladelike arms.”

In spite of the revelation within these two books of God as the divine slaughterer, Dillard’s natural world remains profoundly Christian, with God both sacrificing and sacrificed, both priest and victim. Framing her natural world as an imitation of Christ writ large, Dillard argues that the violence of nature is an embodiment of the crucifixion. “Christ hangs,” she writes, “on the cross forever, always incarnate, and always nailed.”¹⁸² The decimated natural world is God’s own broken body incarnate, forever suffering and forever driven towards death.

Participation in the violent natural world, therefore, provides humankind a sacramental intimacy with God. There is ecstasy to be found in the bloodletting that ultimately subsumes us all. To Dillard, the violence of nature is sanctified by the God who both holds the knife and lies down on the altar. Therefore it is, as Albanese writes, that “the flash of pain is the flash of life.”¹⁸³ Or as Carroll frames it, Dillard’s “spiritual life – the life lived face to face with the realities of the natural world – is a life splattered in blood and chips of bone, a life bedazzled and blinded by beauty and flame.”¹⁸⁴ If Dillard leaves her readers with any spiritual imperative, it is to rush towards the violence of nature rather than cringing back, for it is only in that violence – inscrutable though it is - that we can hope to achieve ecstatic closeness with the divine.

¹⁸² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 169.

¹⁸³ Albanese, *Nature Religion*, 168.

¹⁸⁴ Carroll, *Savage Side*, 36.

CONCLUSION: NATURE'S VIOLENT INTIMACY WITH THE DIVINE

Though best known as a nature writer, within these two volumes Dillard makes no open moves to advocate for active environmentalism. In fact, the world she depicts – one in which humans are just one among millions of species, each utterly self-absorbed and each the unknowing pawn of an indiscriminating God – actually precludes the possibility of humankind uniquely opting out of the brutal system. For humankind to preserve the natural world, we would need impossibly, to edge outside of its perpetual fugue of violence and death.

Sidestepping issues of ecological conservation, Dillard instead brings inescapable moral and theological questions to the fore in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*. By gazing long and hard at the violence in nature and by locating God imminently within that material violence, she demands a new conversation within the broad genre of nature writing. Nature writers have too often edged away from violent and destabilizing models of nature. Writers from Henry David Thoreau and John Muir to Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry have depicted the natural world as transcendent and serene, a realm set apart from the violent, turbulent human world. Dillard's work shatters the myth that we can draw a line between the chaos of human life and the chaos of nature, suggesting instead that human violence is actually just a pale example - warped by a "freakish" sense of morality¹⁸⁵ – of the violence that underpins and animates all life.

¹⁸⁵ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 180.

This radical move leaves readers, along with Dillard, to dwell in unknowing. Where will go, now, to escape ourselves? We cannot, after Dillard, turn to nature. It offers us no retreat. We cannot buttress ourselves against its violence, just as we cannot buttress it against our own. We also cannot, Dillard powerfully insists, continue to turn to simple models of a benign or even comprehensible God. That is, we cannot do so without shutting our eyes to the world around us. No. Even our theology, Dillard demands, must be encroached, overrun, and brutally transformed by a nature that cannot be bridled or veiled. Models of God must be thrown, as will we all, back into the waves of violent transformation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albanese, Catherine L. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Brogger, Fredrik Chr. "Anthropocentric Nature Lover: Annie Dillard and the Transcendentalist Tradition in American Nature Writing." *American Studies in Scandinavia* 39, no. 2 (2007).
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005.
- Carroll, B. Jill. *The Savage Side: Reclaiming Violent Models of God*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.
- Cheney, Jim. "'The Waters of Separation': Myth and Ritual in Annie Dillard's 'Pilgrim at Tinker Creek'" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6, no. 1 (April 1990): 41-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002122>.
- Dillard, Annie. *Holy the Firm*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- _____. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974.
- Goldman, Stan. "Sacrifices to the Hidden God: Annie Dillard's Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and Leviticus." *Soundings* 74, no. 1 (1991).
- Ireland, J. A. "Annie Dillard's Ecstatic Phenomenology." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17, no. 1 (2010): 23-34. doi:10.1093/isle/isp149.
- McClintock, James I. *Nature's Kindred Spirits: Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.
- McConahay, Mary Davidson. "'Into the Bladelike Arms of God:' the Quest for Meaning Through Symbolic Language in Thoreau and Annie Dillard." *Denver Quarterly*, 1985th ser., 20, no. 2, 103-16.
- Reimer, Margaret Loewen. "The Dialectical Vision of Annie Dillard's Pilgrim at Tinker Creek." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 24, no. 3 (1983): 182-91. doi:10.1080/00111619.1983.9937785.
- Ross-Bryant, Lynn. "The Silence of Nature." *Religion & Literature* 22, no. 1 (April 1990): 79-94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059436>.
- Smith, Pamela A. "The Ecotheology of Annie Dillard: A Study in Ambivalence." *Cross Currents* 45, no. 3 (September 1995): 341-59.

Thoreau, Henry David. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers ; Walden, Or, Life in the Woods ; The Maine Woods ; Cape Cod*. New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1985.

Warren, Colleen. *Annie Dillard and the Word Made Flesh: An Incarnational Theory of Language*. Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2010.