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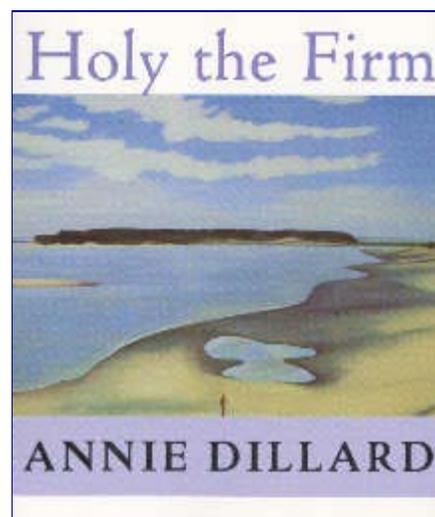


A READER'S JOURNAL

Holy the Firm

by
Annie Dillard

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for
Enjoyment
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"Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time." With the opening words of this book, Annie Dillard sets us down, Holy and Firmly, and never lets go as we read on. This is a short book, but who says Holy must be long, either in space or in time? She set me down, and I read it wholly in one day, an otherwise cloudy, rainy, and depressing day in February; she held me firmly in a holy place till I turned the last page, she held me in a place where the Sun rising is a god, the Puget Sound is a god, the Pacific is a god whose being is articulated by the surrounding scene.

[page 12] . . . his breast rises from pastures; his fingers are firs; islands slide wet down his shoulders. Island slip blue from his shoulders and glide over the water, the empty, lighted water like a stage.

Today's god rises, his long eyes flecked in clouds. He flings his arms, spreading colors; he arches, cupping sky in his belly; he vaults, vaulting and spread, holding all and spread on me like skin.

If you have read her [Pilgrim at Tinker Creek](#), [An American Childhood](#), [For the Time Being](#), or [Teaching a Stone to Talk](#), you would not be surprised, because Annie Dillard is always a surprise and a delight to read, whether it's a novel, a non-fiction story (as this one seems to be), or essays on the art of writing itself as in her [The Writing Life](#). Like she recommends that we do, she goes at her life "with a broadax."

She lives alone on Puget Sound with a cat and a spider. Doesn't sound like much company to city folk, but few have paid so much attention to a tiny spider as she did.

[page 13] There is a spider, too, in the bathroom, with whom I keep a sort of company. Her little outfit always reminds me of a certain moth I helped to kill. The spider herself is of uncertain lineage, bulbous at the abdomen and drab. Her six-inch mess of a web works, works somehow, works miraculously, to keep her alive and me amazed. The web itself is in a corner behind the toilet, connecting tile wall to tile wall and floor, in a place where there is, I would have thought, scant traffic. Yet under the web are sixteen or so corpses she has tossed to the floor.

How had she helped to kill a moth? Isn't that a wicked thing to do? In her case, it literally was wicked. Camping years earlier in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, a continent away, she had an adventure

with a moth. Ever notice yourself how few adventures, close up and personal, with Nature you have when a gang of people are around? I have. I have had adventures like the ones she writes so lyrically about. The moth! The WICKED MOTH! She was a golden female moth who flew into Annie's candle one night and burnt away, but not fully away.

[page 17] All that was left was the glowing horn shell of her abdomen and thorax — a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle's round pool.

And then this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth's body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. That candle had two wicks, two flames of identical height, side by side. The moth's head was fire. She burned for two hours, until I blew her out.

Have you ever blown out a moth? Could you have continued reading for two hours by the light of a moth-wicked candle? Annie did.

[page 17] She burned for two hours without changing, without bending or leaning — only glowing within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God, while I read by her light, kindled, while Rimbaud in Paris burnt out his brains in a thousand poems, while night pooled wetly at my feet.

Annie tells us, "Nothing is going to happen in this book," but we have already met the *wicked* moth and one room cabin with an all-glass wall opening to the lake and mountains, a voracious spider, a cat named Small, and a person named Annie, who adds, "There is only a little violence here and there in the language, at the corner where eternity clips time." (Page 24)

If you are reading your first book by Annie Dillard, you will likely feel "Newborn and Salted" which is the title of Part One. One of the rituals my wife and I perform before we move into a new house is to sprinkle salt around the outside perimeter of the building to keep unwanted spirits away. Don't recall where I learn to perform this salting, but here Annie reveals some of the tradition's origins.

[page 24] So I read. Armenians, I read, salt their newborn babies. I check somewhere else: so did the Jews at the time of the prophets. They washed a baby in water, salted him, and wrapped him in cloths. When God promised Aaron and all the Levites all the offerings Israel made to God, the firstfruits and the firstling livestock, "all the best of the oil, and all the best of the wine," he said of his promise, "It is a covenant of salt forever." In the Roman church baptism, the priest places salt in the infant's mouth.

Salt your eggs in the morning and you can feel created all day long, Annie says.

[page 25] There are some created sheep in the pasture below me, sheep set down here precisely, just touching their blue shadows hoof to hoof on the grass. Created gulls pock the air, rip great curved seams in the settled air: I greet my created meal, amazed.

So it goes, as we read our created book, created by Annie Dillard, newborn and salted. But she is a reader as well as a writer.

[page 30] I read. Like a rug or wrap rolling unformed up a loom, a day discovers itself, like a poem.

Holy the Firm is like a long lyrical poem which unrolls itself before our eyes as we read, never knowing how the intricate tapestry of loneliness and created-ness will weave its warp and woof of meaning for us.

Can God lose a tooth? we ponder this as we read the title "God's Tooth" for Part Two, which begins with a shock, "Into this world falls a plane." Those firs, which she reckoned as god's fingers earlier, pulls an airplane out of the sky and it falls down like a loosened tooth, all white and bloody to the ground. Annie's little friend, Julie, all of seven years old, lost her face in the flaming gasoline which leapt on her as her father pulled her from the crumpled plane which didn't clear the firs at the end of the small clearing. Annie remembers the day of cidering when Julie dressed up Small, Annie's cat, as a nun in a long black gown with a white collar. Now Julie doesn't have a face and Annie finds that hard to face, the possibility of a friend being blotted out.

[page 44] The pain with the millstones' pitiless turning is real, vaulting, insofar as it is love, beyond the plane of the stones' sickening churn and arcing to the realm of spirit bare. And you can get caught holding one end of a love, when your father drops, and your mother; when a land is lost, or a time, and your friend blotted out, gone, your brother's body spoiled, and cold, your infant dead, and you dying: you reel 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.

What meaning can we give the title, *Holy the Firm*? We get hints in the question which this next passage builds up to, and the eponymous Part Three strives to answer.

[page 47] Faith would be, in short, that God has any willful connection with time whatsoever, and with us. For I know it as given that God is all good. And I take it also as given that whatever he touches has meaning, if only in his mysterious terms, the which I readily grant. The question is, then, whether God touches anything. Is anything firm, or is time on the loose?

Holy the Firm, she asks if that is the primary substance beneath all other substances, a holy foundation stone, which supports all the metals and minerals that fill us during our earthly existence, which underlies the salts, which as newborns we are connected with, which underlies the elements in God's tooth.

[page 70, 71] But if Holy the Firm is "underneath salts," if Holy the Firm is matter at its dullest, Aristotle's *materia prima*, absolute zero, and since Holy the Firm is in touch with the Absolute at base, then the circle is unbroken. And it is. Thought advances, and the world creates itself, by the gradual positing of, and belief in, a series of bright ideas. Time and space are in touch with the Absolute at base. Eternity sockets twice into time and space curves, bound and bound by idea. Matter and spirit are of a piece but distinguishable. God has a stake guaranteed in all the world. And the universe is real and not a dream, not a manufacture of the senses; subject may know object, knowledge may proceed, and Holy the Firm, is in short the philosopher's stone.

Closing this wonderful meditation on life, Annie shares Julie's distress, visualizing her as a nun, who is also shrouded in black with white trimmings, alone with God in her solitude and prayers.

[page 74] You might as well be a nun. You might as well be God's chaste bride, chased by plunderers to the high caves of solitude, to the hearthless rooms empty of voices, and of warm limbs hooking your heart to the world. Look how he loves you! Are you bandaged now, or loose in a sterilized room? Wait til they hand you a mirror, if you can hold one, and know what it means. That skinlessness, that black shroud of flesh in strips on your skull, is your veil. There are two kinds of nun, out of the cloister or in. You can serve or you can sing, and wreck your heart in prayer, working the world's hard work. Forget whistling: you have no lips for that, or kissing the face of a man or a child. Learn Latin, and it please my Lord, learn the foolish downward look called Custody of the Eyes.

Next, she deftly blends Julie with the wicked moth, immolated in the flame, by which light Annie read for

two hours before blowing out the moth.

[page 76] Held, held fast by love in the world like the moth in wax, your life a wick, your head on fire with prayer, held utterly, outside and in, you sleep alone, if you call that alone, you cry God.

Living like a nun in a cloister of her own design and choosing, a one room cabin, Annie prayed for Julie as she gazed to the mountains which framed her glass wall to the world, and made this request and offer, "So live. I'll be the nun for you. I am now."

