

Last week when I was reading [Barbara Kingsolver's essay](#) "What good is a Story?" she mentioned a book by Annie Dillard referring to it as a "great book", so this week I had to see if I could find an essay by Dillard to get a taste of her work. She is yet another author I probably should have read by now, but haven't. Actually I'm not at all familiar with Dillard, so did a little bit of investigating. She trained as a poet and according to Philip Lopate her prose has the markings of a poet. She was born and raised in Pittsburgh and developed a love of the natural world through her reading. After her college years she became an intensely spiritual person, which shows in her writing. Like Barbara Kingsolver I get the feeling she is a formidable woman and writer.

I seem to be reading an inordinate number of essays dealing in some way with nature, which I find that I sort of like, so I can add Annie Dillard's "Seeing" to my list. Lopate writes "Dillard is a self-described seeker, a pilgrim on a mission to retrieve a sense of ecstatic wonder before the natural world." I like that.

"When I was six or seven years old, growing up in Pittsburgh, I used to take a precious penny of my own and hide it for someone else to find. It was a curious compulsion; sadly, I've never been seized by it since. For some reason I always 'hid' the penny along the same stretch of sidewalk up the street. I would cradle it at the roots of a sycamore, say, or in a hole left by a chipped-off piece of sidewalk. Then I would take a piece of chalk, and, starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write I labeled the arrows: SURPRISE AHEAD or MONEY THIS WAY. I was greatly excited, during all this arrow-drawing, at the thought of the first lucky passer-by who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe. But I never lurked about. I would go straight home and not give the matter another thought, until, some months later, I would be gripped again by the impulse to hide another penny."

Thus begins Dillard's essay on seeing. The world is filled with these tiny, insignificant pennies, and if you can appreciate these small, simple gifts all the rest of what you find will in their own way be riches. The first part of the essay she talks lots about seeing and nature, how nature is a "now-you-see-it, now-you-don't affair". Nature not only reveals but conceals and it is only by chance you may stumble upon something--like a flock of birds in a tree that simply materialize and then fly away not to be seen again. Like the surprise hidden penny, you have to keep your eyes open for them.

"These disappearances stun me into stillness and concentration; they say of nature that it conceals with a grand nonchalance, and they say of vision that it is a deliberate gift, the revelation of a dancer who for my eyes only flings away her seven veils."

Later Dillard uses the example of blind people who have undergone a cataract surgery to enable them to see for the first time since birth or a very young age. A blind person has no idea of space or depth or height or distance and must rely on touch. Often when sight is restored they still rely on the sense of touch, and they find the tremendous size of the world overwhelming. "For the newly sighted, vision is pure sensation unencumbered by meaning." She writes about light and darkness and shadows and how we see them and how necessary they are and how a newly-

sighted person experiences them and how it can be oppressive to them. This new vision for them "is pure sensation unencumbered by meaning."

She didn't really expand on this, but I thought the following paragraph was interesting, and perhaps it is the difference between the two kinds of seeing she writes about in her essay--first she writes about those visible images she sees in nature and then the sensations of what someone who was blind sees. I'm not sure and have been thinking about this.

"But there is another kind of seeing that involves letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied. The difference between the two ways of seeing is the difference between walking with and without a camera. When I walk with a camera, I walk from shot to shot, reading the light on a calibrated meter. When I walk without a camera, my own shutter opens, and the moment's light prints on my own silver gut. When I see this second way I am above all an unscrupulous observer."

I think Annie Dillard is someone you have to read slowly and let roll around in your head for a while and then maybe even read again. She mixes keen observation with gorgeous and lively prose, and her reverence for the natural world verges on an almost religious meditation. Okay, another hole in my reading history, but I've never read Thoreau's [Walden](#) in its entirety and I can tell there are some obvious nods in his direction in Dillard's writing (her thesis was on Walden by the way--she has a MA in English). I'd like to read her Pulitzer winning [Pilgrim at Tinker Creek](#), where this essay appeared, at some point. There's an essay in [The Art of the Personal Essay](#) called "Blindness" by Jorge Luis Borges, which might make for an interesting contrast. It's not a terribly long essay but by another author who I find a little intimidating, but perhaps an essay is the best way to approach his work. I think I've found next week's essay.

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