Annie Dillard on the Winter Solstice
by Maria Popova

Rilke considered the cold season the time for tending one’s inner garden. “In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer,” Albert Camus wrote a generation later. “If we didn’t remember winter in spring, it wouldn’t be as lovely,” Adam Gopnik observed after many more revolutions of the Earth around the Sun in his lyrical love letter to winter. But if we are to reap winter’s quiet and invisible spiritual rewards, it seems that special regard must be paid to day of the season’s onset as the time to set such interior intentions.

That’s what Annie Dillard (b. April 30, 1945) invites in a splendid meditation on the winter solstice, originally published in her 1974 masterpiece Pilgrim at Tinker Creek — which I revisit frequently as a sort of secular scripture — and later included in The Abundance: Narrative Essays Old and New (public library), one of the 16 finest books of 2016.

Dillard writes:

Today is the winter solstice. The planet tilts just so to its star, lists and holds circling in a fixed tension between veering and longing, spins helpless, exalted, in and out of that fleet blazing touch. Last night Orion vaulted and spread all over the sky, pagan and lunatic, his shoulder and knee on fire, his sword three suns at the ready — for what?

[…]

I stood at the window, the bay window on which in summer a waxy-looking grasshopper had breathed puff puff, and thought, I won’t see this year again, not again so innocent, and longing wrapped round my throat like a scarf... Is this mystery or coyness? A cast-iron bell hung from the arch of my rib cage; when I stirred it rang, or it tolled, a long syllable pulsing ripples up my lungs and down the gritty sap inside my bones, and I couldn’t make it out; I felt the voiced vowel like a sigh or a note, but couldn’t catch the consonant that might shape it into sense. I wrenched myself from the window and stepped outside.

She considers how winter highlights one of the central perplexities of existence — the mystery of beauty. In a sentiment that calls to mind Baudelaire’s assertion that “beauty always has an element of strangeness,” Dillard contemplates winter’s strange and
Is beauty itself an intricately fashioned lure, the cruelest hoax of all?

[...]

A wind rose, quickening; it invaded my nostrils, vibrated my gut. I stirred and lifted my head. No, I’ve gone through this a million times, beauty is not a hoax... Beauty is real. I would never deny it; the appalling thing is that I forget it.

Art by Carson Ellis from Du Iz Tak?, a lyrical illustrated story about the cycle of life and the eternal cycle of growth and decay

Watching a maple leaf twirl to the ground in its final flight, Dillard considers something else we easily forget, as essential as beauty — the irrepressible cycle of growth and decay, life and death, each rendering the other both necessary and inevitable:

Another year has twined away, unrolled and dropped across nowhere like a flung banner painted in gibberish. “The last act is bloody,” said Pascal, “however brave be all the rest of the play; at the end they throw a little earth upon your head, and it’s all over forever.” Somewhere, everywhere, there is a gap...

[...]

The gaps are the spirit’s one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps ... are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fjords splitting the cliffs of mystery.

Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the solid, turn, and unlock — more than a maple — a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. Spend the afternoon. You can’t take it with you.

Art by Alessandro Sanna from The River, a watercolor ode to the seasonality of being human.

In a passage that calls to mind Simone Weil’s beautiful notion of “the needs of the soul,” Dillard arrives at the ultimate existential gift that winter gives us when we make ourselves willing to receive it:

There is not a guarantee in the world. Oh your needs are guaranteed; your needs are absolutely guaranteed by the most stringent of warranties, in the plainest, truest words: knock; seek; ask. But you must read the fine print. “Not as the world giveth, give I unto
you.” That’s the catch. If you can catch it it will catch you up, aloft, up to any gap at all, and you'll come back, for you always come back, transformed in a way you may not have bargained for... Did you think, before you were caught, that you needed, say, life? Did you think you would keep your life, or anything else you love? ... You see the needs of your own spirit met whenever you have asked, and you have learned that the outrageous guarantee holds. You see creatures die, and you know you will die. And one day it occurs to you that you must not need life. Obviously. And then you’re gone...

I think that the dying pray at the last not “please,” but “thank you,” as a guest thanks his host at the door... The universe was not made in jest but in solemn, incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see. And then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men, and who carries his vision of vastness and might around in his tunic like a live coal which neither burns nor warms him, but with which he will not part.

The Abundance is a bountifully rewarding read in its totality. Devour more of its richness with Dillard on what it takes to be a writer, then revisit Henry Beston on solstice, seasonality, and the human spirit and Dillard’s abiding wisdom on the two ways of seeing, choosing presence over productivity, and how to reclaim our capacity for joy and wonder.