

worthy: light, air, water, earth; plants and animals; human families and communities; the traditions of decent life, good work, and responsible thought; the religious traditions; the essential stories and songs.

It is presumptuous, personally and historically, to assume that one is a part of a "saving remnant."¹⁷ One had better doubt that one deserves such a distinction, and had better understand that there may, after all, be nothing left to save. Even so, if one wishes to save anything not protected by the present economy – topsoil, groves of old trees, the possibility of the goodness or health of anything, even the economic relevance of the biblical tradition – one is a part of a remnant, and a dwindling remnant too, though not without hope, and not without the necessary instructions, the most pertinent of which, perhaps, is this, also from Revelation:¹⁸ "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die."

"saving remnant" -
see Romans 9:27

"Be watchful... die" -
Revelation 3:2

Dillard, Annie. "from An American Childhood." *Shadow and Light: Literature and the Life of Faith*. Ed. Darryl Tippens, Stephen Weathers, and Jeanne Murray Walker. Abilene: ACUP, 2005. 121-28.

Annie Dillard

{ 1945 - }

Dillard was born in Pittsburgh and educated at Hollins College, Virginia. Her collection of meditative essays on nature, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, earned her the Pulitzer Prize in 1974. One of America's leading prose stylists, Dillard composes essays noted for their vivid metaphors and singular lyricism. She characteristically explores the inherent mystery of the natural world, her vision imbued with the intuition that what she sees there is a hieroglyph of sorts. Extending and enlarging the naturalist tradition of Emerson and Thoreau, Dillard resensitizes readers to the numinous quality of their embodied existence. If the natural world cloaks horror, as every diligent observer must concede, it also veils an intense glory – overwhelming evidence, in other words, that mystery is at the heart of the cosmos. Dillard has written a book on her craft, The Writing Life (1989), and an autobiography of her early years, An American Childhood (1987), from which the following selection is taken. She currently serves as writer-in-residence at Wesleyan University (Connecticut).

from AN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD

THAT MORNING IN CHURCH after our first subscription dance,¹ we reconvened on the balcony of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church. I sat in the first balcony row, and resisted the impulse to stretch my Charleston-stiff legs on the balcony's carved walnut rail. The blond boy I'd met at the dance was on my mind, and I intended to spend the church hour recalling his every word and gesture, but I couldn't concentrate. Beside me sat my friend Linda. Last night at the dance she had been a laughing, dimpled girl with an advanced sense of the absurd. Now in church she was grave, and didn't acknowledge my remarks.

subscription dance -
a dance held to raise
money, often for a
chantable organization

Near us in the balcony's first row, and behind us, were the boys – the same boys with whom we had traveled on a bus to and from the Sewickley Country Club dance. Below us spread the main pews, filling with adults. Almost everyone in the church was long familiar to me. But this particular Sunday in church bore home to me with force a new notion: that I did not really know any of these people at all. I thought I did – but, being now a teenager, I thought I knew almost everything. Only the strongest evidence could penetrate this illusion, which distorted everything I saw. I knew I approved almost nothing. That is, I liked, I adored, I longed for, everyone on earth, especially India and Africa, and particularly everyone on the streets of Pittsburgh – all those friendly, democratic, openhearted, sensible people – and at Forbes Field,* and in all the office buildings, parks, streetcars, churches, and stores, excepting only the people I knew, none of whom was up to snuff.

The church building, where the old Scotch-Irish families assembled weekly, was a Romanesque* chunk of rough, carved stone and panes of dark slate. Covered in creeper, long since encrusted into its quietly splendid site, it looked like a Scottish rock in the rain.

Everywhere outside and inside the church and parish hall, sharp carved things rose from the many dim tons of stone. There were grainy crossed keys, pelicans, anchors, a phoenix, ivy vines, sheaves of wheat, queer and leering mammal heads like gargoyles, thistles for Scotland, lizards, scrolls, lions, and shells. It looked as if someone had once in Pittsburgh enjoyed a flight or two of fancy. If your bare hand or arm brushed against one of the stone walls carelessly, the stone would draw blood.

My wool coat sat empty behind me; its satin lining felt cool on the backs of my arms. I hated being here. It looked as if the boys did, too. Their mouths were all open, and their eyelids half down. We were all trapped. At home before church, I had been too rushed to fight about it.

I imagined the holy war each boy had fought with his family this morning, and lost, resulting in his sullen and suited presence in church. I thought of Dan there, ruddy* cheeked, and of wild, sweet Jamie beside him, each flinging his silk tie at his hypocrite father after breakfast, and making a desperate stand in some dark dining room lighted upward by snowlight from the lawns

Forbes Field - home stadium of the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team from 1909 until 1970

Romanesque - an artistic and architectural style that flourished in medieval Europe

ruddy - red

outside – struggling foredoomed to raise the stone and walnut weight of this dead society's dead institutions, battling for liberty, freedom of conscience, and so forth.

The boys, at any rate, slumped. Possibly they were hung over.

While the nave* filled we examined, or glared at, the one thing before our eyes: the apse's* enormous gold mosaic of Christ. It loomed over the chancel;† every pew in the nave and on the balcony looked up at it. It was hard to imagine what long-ago board of trustees had voted for this Romish* looking mosaic, so glittering, with which we had been familiarizing ourselves in a lonely way since infancy, when our eyes could first focus on distance.

Christ stood barefoot, alone and helpless-looking, his palms outcurved at his sides. He was wearing his robes. He wasn't standing on anything, but instead floated loose and upright inside a curved, tiled dome. The balcony's perspective foreshortened the dome's curve, so Christ appeared to drift flattened and clumsy, shriveled but glorious. Barefoot as he was, and with the suggestion of sandstone scarps* behind him, he looked rural. Below me along the carpeted marble aisles crept the church's families; the women wore mink and sable stoles. Hushed, they sat and tilted their hatted heads and looked at the rural man. His skies of shattered gold widened over the sanctuary and almost met the square lantern tower, gold-decorated, over the nave.

The mosaic caught the few church lights – lights like tapers* in a castle – and spread them dimly, a dusting of gold like pollen, throughout the vast and solemn space. There was nothing you could see well in this rich, Rembrandt* darkness – nothing save the minister's shining face and Christ's gold vault – and yet there was no corner, no scratchy lily work, you couldn't see at all.

It was a velvet cord, maroon, with brass fittings, that reserved our ninth-grade balcony section for us. We sat on velvet cushions. Below us, filling the yellow pews with dark furs, were the rest of the families of the church, who seemed to have been planted here in dignity – by a God who could see how hard they worked and how few pleasures they took for themselves – just after the Flood* went down. There were Linda's parents and grandparents and one of her great-grandparents. Always, the same old Pittsburgh families ran this church. The men, for whose forefathers streets all over town were named, served as deacons,

nave - the chief part of a Christian church, extending from the entrance (the narthex) to the area just before the altar

apse - the area behind the altar

chancel - also known as the choir, the chancel is the area just before the altar

Romish - Roman Catholic

scarps - cliffs

tapers - long, slender candles

Rembrandt - Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Dutch painter

the Flood - see Genesis 6:13-9:17

trustees, and elders. The women served in many ways, and ran the Christmas bazaar. 11

I knew these men; they were friends and neighbors. I knew what they lived for, I thought. The men wanted to do the right thing, at work and in the community. They wore narrow, tight neckties. Close-mouthed, they met, in volunteer boardrooms and in club locker rooms, the same few comfortable others they had known since kindergarten. Their wives and children, in those days, lived around them on their visits home. Some men found their families bewildering, probably; a man might wonder, wakened by reports of the outstanding misdeeds of this son or that son, how everyone had so failed to understand what he expected. Some of these men held their shoulders and knuckles tight; their laughter was high and embarrassed; they seemed to be looking around for the entrance to some other life. Only some of the doctors, it seemed to me, were conspicuously interested and glad. During conversations, they looked at people calmly, even at their friends' little daughters; their laughter was deep, long, and joyful; they asked questions; and they knew lots of words.

I knew the women better. The women were wise and strong. Even among themselves, they prized gaiety and irony, gaiety and irony come what may. They coped. They sighed, they permitted themselves a remark or two, they lived essentially alone. They reared their children with their own two hands, and did all their own cooking and driving. They had no taste for waste or idleness. They volunteered their considerable energies, wisdom, and ideas at the church or the hospital or the service organization or charity.

Life among these families partook of all the genuine seriousness of life in time. A child's birth was his sole entrée, just as it is to life itself. His birthright was a regiment of families and a phalanx of institutions which would accompany him, solidly but at a distance, through this vale of tears.

Families whose members have been acquainted with each other for as long as anyone remembers grow not close, but respectful. They accumulate dignity by being seen at church every Sunday for the duration of life, despite their troubles and sorrows. They accumulate dignity at club luncheons, dinners, and dances, by gracefully and persistently, with tidy hair and fitted clothes, occupying their slots. 14

phalanx - a tightly packed mass

this vale of tears - the world as a place of sorrow and loss

15 In this world, some grown women went carefully wild from time to time. They appeared at parties in outlandish clothes, hair sticking out, faces painted in freckles. They shrieked, sang, danced, and parodied anything - that is, anything at all outside the tribe - so that nothing, almost, was sacred. These clowns were the best-loved women, and rightly so, for their own sufferings had taught them what dignity was worth, and every few years they reminded the others, and made them laugh till they cried.

16 My parents didn't go to church. I practically admired them for it. Father would drive by at noon and scoop up Amy and me, saying, "Hop in quick!" so no one would see his weekend khaki pants and loafers.

17 Now, in unison with the adults in the dimness below, we read responsively, answering the minister. Our voices blended low, so their joined sound rose muffled and roaring, rhythmic, like distant seas, and soaked into the rough stone vaults and plush fittings, and vanished, and rose again:

The heavens declare the glory of God:
and the firmament showeth his handywork.

Day unto day uttereth speech,
and night unto night showeth knowledge.

There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.

The heavens . . . not heard - see Psalm 19:1-3

18 The minister was a florid, dramatic man who commanded a batch of British vowels, for which I blamed him absolutely, not knowing he came from a Canadian farm. His famous radio ministry attracted letters and even contributions from Alaskan lumberjacks and fishermen. The poor saps. What if one of them, a lumberjack, showed up in Pittsburgh wearing a lumberjack shirt and actually tried to enter the church building? Maybe the ushers were really bouncers.

19 I had got religion at summer camp, and had prayed nightly there and in my bed at home, to God, asking for a grateful heart, and receiving one insofar as I requested it. Inasmuch as I despised everything and everyone about me, of course, it was taken away, and I was left with the blackened heart I had chosen instead. As the years wore on, the intervals between Julys at camp stretched, and filled with country-club evenings, filled with the slang of us girls, our

litany • a repetitive
chant or prayer

gossip, and our intricately shifting friendships, filled with the sight of the boys whose names themselves were a litany,' and with the absorbing study of their nonchalance and gruff ease. All of which I professed, from time to time, when things went poorly, to disdain.

Nothing so inevitably blackened my heart as an obligatory Sunday at the Shadyside Presbyterian Church: the sight of orphan-girl Liz's "Jesus" tricked out in gilt; the minister's Britishy accent; the putative hypocrisy of my parents, who forced me to go, though they did not; the putative hypocrisy of the expensive men and women who did go. I knew enough of the Bible to damn these people to hell, citing chapter and verse. My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.' Every week I had been getting madder; now I was going to plain quit. One of these days, when I figured out how.

My house ... thieves -
see Matthew 21:13, Mark
11:17, Luke 19:46

After the responsive reading there was a pause, an expectant hush. It was the first Sunday of the month, I remembered, shocked. Today was Communion. I would have to sit through Communion, with its two species,' embarrassment and tedium - and I would be late getting out and Father would have to drive around the block a hundred times. I had successfully avoided Communion for years.

two species • the two
eucharistic elements,
bread and wine, are
sometimes termed
"species"

From their pews below rose the ushers and elders - everybody's father and grandfather, from Mellon Bank & Trust *et cetera* - in tailcoats. They worked the crowd smoothly, as always. When they collected money, I noted, they were especially serene. Collecting money was, after all, what they did during the week; they were used to it. Down each pew an usher thrust a long-handled velvet butterfly net, into the invisible interior of which we each inserted a bare hand to release a crushed, warm dollar bill we'd stored in a white glove's palm.

Now with dignity the ushers and elders hoisted the round sterling silver trays which bore Communion. A loaded juice tray must have weighed ten pounds. From a cunning array of holes in its top layer hung wee, tapered, lead-crystal glasses. Each held one-half ounce of Welch's grape juice.

salvers • large serving
trays

The seated people would pass the grape-juice trays down the pews. After the grape juice came bread: flat silver salvers' bore heaps of soft bread cubes, as if for stuffing a turkey. The elders and ushers spread swiftly and silently over the marble aisles in discreet pairs, some for bread cubes, some for grape juice, communicating by eyebrow only.

An unseen organist, behind stone screens, played a muted series of single notes, a restless, breathy strain in a minor key, to kill time.

Soon the ushers reached the balcony where we sat. There our prayers had reached their intensest pitch, so fervent were we in our hopes not to drop the grape-juice tray.

I passed up the Welch's grape juice, I passed up the cubed bread, and sat back against my coat. Was all this not absurd? I glanced at Linda beside me. Apparently it was not. Her hands lay folded in her lap. Both her father and her uncle were elders.

It was not surprising, really, that I alone in this church knew what the barefoot Christ, if there had been such a person, would think about things - grape juice, tailcoats, British vowels, sable stoles. It was not surprising because it was becoming quite usual. After all, I was the intelligentsia around these parts, single-handedly. The intelligentsium. I knew why these people were in church: to display to each other their clothes. These were sophisticated men and women, such as we children were becoming. In church they made business connections; they saw and were seen. The boys, who, like me, were starting to come out for freedom and truth, must be having fits, now that the charade of Communion was in full swing.

I stole a glance at the boys, then looked at them outright, for I had been wrong. The boys, if mine eyes did not deceive me, were praying. Why? The intelligentsia, of course, described itself these days as "agnostic" - a most useful word. Around me, in seeming earnest, the boys prayed their unthinkable private prayers. To whom? It was wrong to watch, but I watched.

On the balcony's first row, to my right, big Dan had pressed his ruddy cheeks into his palms. Beside him, Jamie bent over his knees. Over one eye he had jammed a fist; his other eye was crinkled shut. Another boy, blond Robert, lay stretched over his arms, which clasped the balcony rail. His shoulders were tight; the back of his jacket rose and fell heavily with his breathing. It had been a long time since I'd been to Communion. When had this praying developed?

Dan lowered his hands and leaned back slowly. He opened his eyes, unfocused to the high, empty air before him. Wild Jamie moved his arm; he picked up a fistful of hair from his forehead and hid it. His eyes fretted tightly shut; his jaws worked. Robert's head lay low on his outstretched sleeves; it moved once from side to side and back again. So they struggled on. I finally looked away.

Below the balcony, in the crowded nave, men and women were also concentrating; it seemed. Were they perhaps pretending to pray? All heads were bent; no one moved. I began to doubt my own omniscience. If I bowed my head, too, and shut my eyes, would this be apostasy? No, I'd keep watching the people, in case I'd missed some clue that they were actually doing something else – bidding bride hands.

apostasy - the abandonment of Christian faith

For I knew these people, didn't I? I knew their world, which was, in some sense, my world, too, since I could not, outside of books, name another. I knew what they loved: their families, their houses, their country clubs, hard work, the people they knew best, and summer parties with old friends full of laughter. I knew what they hated: labor unions, laziness, spending, wildness, loudness. They didn't buy God. They didn't buy anything if they could help it. And they didn't work on spec.

on spec - on speculation, without a contract or formal agreement

Nevertheless, a young father below me propped his bowed head on two fists stacked on a raised knee. The ushers and their trays had vanished. The people had taken Communion. No one moved. The organist hushed. All the men's heads were bent – black, white, red, yellow, and brown. The men sat absolutely still. Almost all the women's heads were bent down, too, and some few tilted back. Some hats wagged faintly from side to side. All the people seemed scarcely to breathe.

I was alert enough now to feel, despite myself, some faint, thin stream of spirit braiding forward from the pews. Its flawed and fragile rivulets pooled far beyond me at the altar. I felt, or saw, its frail strands rise to the wide tower ceiling, and mass in the gold mosaic's dome.

tesserae - the fragments composing a mosaic

The gold tesserae scattered some spirit like light back over the cavernous room, and held some of it, like light, in its deep curve. Christ drifted among floating sandstone ledges and deep, absorberent skies. There was no speech nor language. The people had been praying, praying to God, just as they seemed to be praying. That was the fact. I didn't know what to make of it.

Who is my neighbor? - see Luke 10:25-37

I left Pittsburgh before I had a grain of sense. Who is my neighbor? I never learned what the strangers around me had known and felt in their lives – those lithe, sarcastic boys in the balcony, those expensive men and women in the pews below – but it was more than I knew, after all.

Robert A. Fink

{ 1946 - }

A native Texan, Robert Fink is an award-winning poet and veteran of the Vietnam War. His experience as a first lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps often figures in his poetry and essays. Fink's three books of poetry, *Azimuth Points* (1981), *The Ghostly Hitchhiker* (1989), and *The Tongues of Men and of Angels* (1995), often describe passionate wrestlings with moral and spiritual questions. His works cover a wide range of topics – family, marriage, baseball, war, religion – and often reveal a happy blend of humor and spiritual insight. Fink is the Bond Professor of English and director of the Creative Writing Workshops at Hardin-Simmons University.

HOW I FOUND RELIGION AT A BASEBALL GAME

I ALWAYS SIT FOUR ROWS UP, directly behind home plate. It's important to be in position to see the whole picture. I discovered this spot several years ago when I recognized the invisible line connecting home plate to the pitching rubber, to second base, to the middle of the twenty-foot green monster wall in dead center. This is the line dividing the playing field into halves resembling angels' wings. The line originates at my fourth-row position.

The poet Theodore Roethke is supposed to have said he never realized he could think until he turned forty. There's something to this. The view from forty is similar to my fourth-row vantage point. It's more of an introspective look at what's happening around me, and I'm not as important to the picture as I used to think, and this doesn't bother me as much as I expected. My past begins to look like design, not mine. It's more like religion. Not a bad place to be on a sunny, March afternoon in West Texas, the temperature in the high 70s, the flags at ease above the center

Theodore Roethke - American poet (1908-1963)