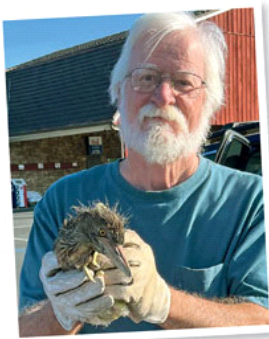


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A Literal, Literary Loss

John Friel



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Like millions of others, I was saddened to learn of the recent passing of Annie Dillard, personal literary heroine. This Space has quoted her on several occasions and her words outshone everything else on the page every time.

In 2017, I traveled to Oregon for the Farwest Show a day early to witness my first total solar eclipse. It was everything I was led to believe it would be and more. I could describe in detail how the temperature plunged, how the afternoon light decayed to an eerie jaundiced sepia, how the sun convincingly impersonated a fingernail moon as totality approached and so on.

But I won't because it's already been rendered better than I could possibly sketch it on my best day ever, by—you guessed it—Annie Dillard, who described in electric, ecstatic prose the solar/lunar shadow that swept across Washington in 1979.

Let's get the obvious pun out of the way: Her description eclipsed mine, totally. To write about anything—a place, a creature, a celestial phenomenon—after Dillard has had her way with it is a race for silver, a distant second. Sometimes, no matter how good you are, you're just somebody's cover band.

I've also seen a partial eclipse, which was remarkable. But as Dillard wrote, "Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him ... Although the one experience precedes the other, it in no way prepares you for it."

Similarly, reading about this remarkable writer's remarkable writing in no way approximates actually reading her. If you haven't done so, ever or lately, you owe it to yourself to acquaint or reacquaint yourself with the real thing.

It's late September as I type, early November as you read. Here in PA it's time for those home chores you New Englanders have already crossed off and you Southerners are still putting off: Swapping screens for glass, storing the window AC, stockpiling firewood, sweeping chimneys and stoves. Scaled up to greenhouse size, that translates to checking fan covers, unrolling jet tubes, caulking gaps ignored all summer, testing boilers and generators, and so on.

My winter prep To Do list includes cleaning my flue with a brush borrowed from old friend and green polymath Dale

Hendricks. That brush is stored in a tote bag so old it's emblazoned "Ohio Florists' Association, Sponsor of The Short Course." For younger readers, that organization is now called AmericanHort and that event is dubbed Cultivate.

Sometimes, winter prep involves splitting firewood by hand, a violent form of fun with quick, satisfying results when done properly. I was bad at it when I started heating with wood; a simple split that should have taken one blow took several, each errant swing accompanied with sweating and swearing. It's a rare event anymore, thanks to the miracle of hydraulics, which God gave us specifically so codgers can keep heating with wood.

But occasionally you find yourself with some odd rounds, too good and large to ignore, too few to justify hauling to the splitter. Out comes the maul. Which brings us back full circle to Annie Dillard: That extraordinary woman even taught me how to split firewood, via a hilarious, self-effacing essay in "The Writing Life."

Splitting fuel for her winter writing retreat, a drafty cabin in remote Washington, she—like me—would end up with a scattering of splintery shards and a still-too-big remnant that wouldn't even stand upright. But an epiphany came to her in a dream and solved the problem for both of us. It's a matter of focus.

The solution: Pretend the wood you wish to split isn't there. Simply aim for the point where you want the axe to arrive, which is the chopping block directly below the wood. It sounds like a mind trick, until it works. It's like driving on ice: Don't look at where you fear you'll end up (fence, ditch), focus on where you want to be.

Where I want to be in October is Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, for the yearly Perennial Plant Conference. If you can't make it, you can read the recap here in December. Meanwhile, happy autumn. And RIP, Annie. **GP**

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