

and more the qualities of the huntress and fittingly reverts to the original form of her given name — has, like her Aunt Rhea before her, fallen out of the world of everyday selves into the inner world which is a “kind of madness.” She is the new woman who will cast aside or redefine the roles that have contained her race. In stark contrast to Selena, who believes “we carry all our possibilities... in our wombs,” Diana sees motherhood as the death of possibility:

Motherhood kills the life of a woman. It kills the woman's separate life, and I cannot, I will not believe that that is right. That any woman who becomes a mother has to die herself.

Unlike Diana, Rhea did not consciously choose to respond to the demands of her inner voice. In the desperate loneliness of her life as a pioneer woman, her interior life forced itself upon her irresistibly.

They're afraid of it, afraid it's nothing but a black hole into which their everyday selves will fall. People are afraid they will fall into that other world, into madness, and never be able to climb out again.

And they're right. It is a kind of madness into which I fell. I fell inside myself. Alone, day after day, with the wind and the sky, the grass and the wild things.

The Rhea we meet on the first page of the novel lives largely in a seemingly timeless mode, sitting for hours in her darkened living room, musing upon her life. Butala's use of the continuous present when we are with Rhea effectively places her beyond the world of measured time. Rhea's oracular function culminates in her retelling of the creation myth, a poetic *tour de force* which challenges her listeners to transform their world.

But it is Selena whom Butala knows most intimately. There is something very poignant in this portrait of the untransformed woman who persists in a life little different from that of her mother, stirred by feelings of discontent, yet quite unwilling and unable to break out of the familiar mould. Her part of the novel is the ground for the flights of Diana and Rhea; that bedrock realistic account of the entrapment of Selena's everyday life is what gives such potent meaning to Rhea's epiphanies and Diana's quest.

Selena is trapped in the past. In rendering her reveries, Butala seldom uses

that special power of the present tense that she bestows on Rhea and Diana. Selena cannot lay claim to the heroic stature of the pioneer that distinguishes Rhea; this is the unglamorous generation that will lose the farm or the ranch not to the elements, but to the banks. She has not been able to mythologize work, to say, as Rhea does, “Work was only the raw material out of which I fashioned my life, out of which I fashioned my soul.” Selena has not yet found a vision beyond her endless toil; she hasn't made that dangerous journey into herself that the novel suggests must at some point be embarked upon. The birth of Phoebe's daughter causes her to recall the horror connected with Phoebe's birth, feet in stirrups, hands strapped to the table. Is this situation a paradigm of Selena's whole life? Her last words are ominous: “I got panicky when I realized what they had done to me... I thought if I don't struggle, I won't know... I'm a prisoner.”

Diana has broken out of her prison. And yet her path into the future is by no means clear. The novel gives her the last word, in a letter she sends to Selena from Central America. Journeying into a foreign culture, Diana sees her own in a new light. She begins to value and understand her own women folk when she reflects upon the stunning embroidery that decorates the everyday costume of the Indian women she meets:

The first time I saw it, I couldn't believe it, couldn't imagine the spirit that would make them produce some beauty that they could live with every day, even in that hard, unbeautiful killing life that they lead. It told me something about women. In fact it made me think about that argument we had about the community college — about all those classes in embroidery and sewing and different kinds of crafts... I see now what they were for, what they mean. And my respect for the women I grew up with has grown. I may not have been entirely wrong, but I wasn't entirely right, either.

The novel's conclusion highlights the seeding which Diana has barely begun as she travels “further and further into the jungle.”

What does this novel offer? A prairie reader will especially recognize Butala's power to convey the life of that daunting and beautiful landscape. For the urban reader with any rural roots it will evoke memories of a way of life now changing

radically, and perhaps a renewed appreciation of the strength of spirit those women have had to summon up in order to survive at all. For the student of literature, there is the pleasure of developing a reading that gives full play to the mythopoeic strands of *Luna*, starting with all those moon-goddess names! Or one could explore Butala's deployment of the central argument through the two sisters and their aunt, or the interesting connection between Selena and the narrative point of view, or Butala's report on female culture and the relations between women and men in this particular setting. The most challenging question is how this novel will strike the reader who recognizes in herself the predicament of Selena.

In the end, I liked *Luna* for the most old-fashioned of reasons — I cared about the characters. And I treasure it for something else that I'm not going to try to define here — the Canadian-ness of its voice. Novels like *Luna* remind me that our literary culture is distinct and distinctive. Now, more than ever, it must be defended.

AN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD

Annie Dillard. New York: Harper and Row, 1987

Deborah Jurdjevic

Autobiography is centred in, is anchored in the self; the autobiographer's challenge always is to use the self as metaphor, the way a musician uses an instrument. The unspoken hypothesis is a faith that the melody is already out there, as God's voice was for Augustine, as Nature's was for Emerson and Thoreau; the self is a hollow reed the wind blows through.

Dillard has given us a biography of a girl-child, an American, in the mid-twentieth century, in the eastern-most of middle-western cities — Pittsburgh. For readers who know *Holy the Firm*, or *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, this seems a most unlikely local habitation. Annie Dillard and the fiery smoke-belching furnaces that fouled the Ohio river? Annie Dillard, her feet blackened by the carcinogenic morning dew that coated the grasses along the Ohio, the Monongahela, the Allegh-

eny? Surely the place is wrong.

And the time? 1963: when Dillard leaves Pittsburgh to go to college, students demonstrate in Berkeley, in Madison, in New York, against the American military presence in Viet Nam. In the mid-west and on the east coast, buses, parked at campus curb sides, fill with Freedom Riders going south to support blacks who intend to vote. Dillard's autobiography apparently comes from another place and time. How do we reconcile the world and the book?

Theoretically, one might ignore the gap between the world and the book by ignoring the world. Sidonie Smith argues that "the autobiographical text becomes a narrative artifice, privileging a presence, or identity, that does not exist outside language."¹ And for readers of *Living by Fiction* it certainly seems possible that Dillard, knowing full-well what she does, constructs an artifice out of linguistic possibilities of the middle-west and the late 1950s. And yet, it seems to me, such an angle of vision cuts out much of the light.

The gap between world and book is bridged in *An American Childhood* by metaphor. The pleasure of connections is the consummate pleasure of the book, for Dillard writes a good deal more like the nineteenth-century romantic, who uses the self as a vehicle through which to declaim the inter-connectedness of the world, than she does as a "contemporary modernist" (her term). This works in small and in large.

Because she writes of a coming-of-age, the metaphor is self-referential: "I saw, I heard, I smelt" or "I remember" is balanced by the image — the image of, say, woman (white, middle-class, urban or suburban) as object: "Every woman stayed alone in her house in those days, like a coin in a safe." There is the abstract image couched in the child's perception of the difference between male and female: "I imagined *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams* by Ann Haven Morgan was written by a man because of the authority and freedom." There is the child's less innocent perception and more concrete image of a "polite" racism and hierarchy: the

grandmother's chauffeur keeps his drinking glass on the kitchen side-board. The child who sees, the adult who remembers and values, the artist who orders and orchestrates, these selves posit, develop, make resonant the same metaphors.

Dillard divides her autobiography into three parts, marking a world articulated by these three facets of self. In a central section, for example, she retells the effect of a tornado in her neighbourhood: a powerline has been broken; it melts a pit for itself in the street. "The live wire's hundred twisted ends spat a thick sheaf of useless yellow sparks that hissed." The image of the live wire occurs again as the self, the adolescent, whose enormous energy is unfocused and dangerous; "I was what they called a live wire. I was shooting out sparks that were digging a pit around me, and I was sinking into that pit." The image recurs in the epilogue as one of the book's sustaining metaphors. "What is important," Dillard writes, "is anyone's coming awake and discovering a place. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch — with an electric hiss and cry — this speckled mineral sphere, our present world."

She is, as any biographer perhaps, concerned with the limits of the self. The metaphors she thinks with are perfect, passing, as they do, for bits of realism. The adult voice remembers, for example, the child, aged five, whose project it was to ride her swing all around, over the top. How wide a net does she cast with that one small detail inserted mid-paragraph? How many of her readers remember themselves the linked swing-chain go slack in sweaty hands and the rump slap down on the wooden seat as the swing failed to spin out and up and over?

The real gems in her narrative show not failure but realization. Still in the early chapter of her story she remembers being chased by a driver whose car she and the neighborhood children have pelted with snowballs. When he, at length, catches them, she writes: "if in that snowy backyard the driver of the black Buick had cut off our heads, Mikey's and mine, I would have died happy, for nothing has required so much of me since as being chased all

over Pittsburgh in the middle of winter — running terrified, exhausted — by this sainted, skinny, furious red-headed man who wished to have a word with us."

The limits are most real at the point at which physical and emotional worlds collide. Still out to defy gravity, the half-grown child runs, flapping her arms to catch the sensation of flying, and catches instead, the eye of an older woman who looks as though she "herself took a few loose aerial turns around her apartment every night for the hell of it, and by day played along with the rest of the world and took the streetcar." In spite of the image which connects the natural and the human, the child and the adult, the problem of gravity remains.

There is a grave and muted note in her otherwise exuberant narrative. The self, to test its limits, returns to the past, and the past is a haunted place. The author remembers her mother, whose father died at the age of forty-one, when the mother was a child — leaving her, in the eyes of the daughter, "forever full of longing." This central image of loss recurs as the author, in late adolescence, accommodates such knowledge. I knew, she writes, "life pulled you in two; you never healed. Mother's emotions ran high, and she suffered sometimes from a web of terrors, because, she said, her father died when she was seven; she still missed him."

From the image comes the motive for the book. The authorial voice, now that of child and adult mixed, determines to remember and to set memory against the undertow of loss. One of the last and loveliest images in the book is that of the mother, "the morning light on her skin," coming across the grass to reclaim the author and the childhood world.

Dillard has written a book of surfaces, appearances, images which inevitably give way to a deeper and organizing idea. She has written a book which considers the states of time, permanent and fleeting; which considers states of consciousness: that of the child, the adult, the artist. She has written a remarkable book and the best I've read in many years.

¹ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 5.