

Annie Dillard died on September 15, 2026. I was a student of hers at Wesleyan in my junior year, in the spring of 1985.

Annie was funny as hell. She liked me, I think, because I spent most of her class stifling my laughs. But god she could write. I read her before i knew she taught at wesleyan. I had bought Pilgrim at some little bookstore at harvard yard. Probably at the coop, which was the one place with public toilets back then in Harvard Square. I brought it back to my grandmother's apartment. And i thought this is it: what i, a non believing jew with an aunt in a carmelite monastery*, can call god. Not god, but the shape of the mystery that is the universe.

Heady stuff.

Then she rejected my first attempt to get into her prose writing class. Later i read the note she had written about it: sentimental stuff about camping with his father.

Undeterred, and not really upset, i applied again.

To be honest, i was always a little bit in awe.

That i can recite some poetry is due to her: she said if we were ever in an accident, and bleeding on the pavement waiting for an ambulance, we would need some poetry to keep going. To this day i can recite tennyson's "One equal temper of heroic hearts, Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Updike didn't like her. I won't retrieve his New Yorker piece, but he preferred his religion indirect, more temperate. The prim New England church.

Annie was not calm, not ready to fit inside any chapel. I don't believe anyone ever has described better the feeling of awe. At the back of her Pilgrim book was a quote from some reviewer, i believe it was from the boston globe, who said her description of a moth's death made Woolf's go stale and dim.

See for yourself:



“One night a moth flew into the candle, was caught, burnt dry, and held. I must have been staring at the candle, or maybe I looked up when a shadow crossed my page; at any rate, I saw it all. A golden female moth, a biggish one with a two-inch wingspan, flapped into the fire, dropped her abdomen into the wet wax, stuck, flamed, frazzled and fried in a second. Her moving wings ignited like tissue paper, enlarging the circle of light in the clearing and creating out of the darkness the sudden blue sleeves of my sweater, the green leaves of jewelweed by my side, the ragged red trunk of pine. At once the light contracted again and the moth's wings vanished in a fine, foul smoke. At the same time her six legs clawed, curled,

blackened, and ceased, disappearing utterly. And her head jerked in spasms, making a spattering noise; her antennae crisped and burned away and her heaving mouth parts crackled like pistol fire. When it was all over, her head was, so far as I could determine, gone, gone the long way of her wings and legs. Had she been new, or old? Had she mated and laid her egg, had she done her work? All that was left was the glowing horn shell of her abdomen and thorax – a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle's round pool

Yes: “Stuck, flamed, frazzled and fried in a second.”

Perhaps only the Canadian comedian Norm Macdonald has done as much with moths.

<https://youtu.be/jJN9mBRX3uo?si=HKhgym72boeOqMcH>

So: she is dead. The concatenation of atoms that formed her will disperse, fly off, dispel and atomize back into the mystery that is the universe.

That we now have words to approximate that mystery is thanks to Annie.

- Yes, a monastery. Nuns, of course, typically live in convents. But not the ones who pray all day. They live in monasteries.