from *An American Childhood* by Annie Dillard

“When everything else has gone from my brain...” writes Annie Dillard in the prologue to *An American Childhood*, “what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.” Dillard’s highly-praised memoir of her privileged 1950s childhood in Point Breeze recounts small, shining moments of joy and discovery and traces her growing awareness of the world around her—as in this chapter about activities along Penn Avenue.

A tornado hit our neighborhood one morning. Our neighborhood was not only leafy Richland Lane and its hushed side streets, but also Penn Avenue, from which Richland Lane loftily arose. Old Penn Avenue was a messy, major thoroughfare still cobbledstoned in the middle lanes, and full of stoplights and jammed traffic. There were drugstores there, old apartment buildings, and some old mansions. Penn Avenue was the city--tangled and muscular, a broad and snarled fist. The tornado broke all the windows in the envelope factory on Penn Avenue and ripped down mature oaks and maples on Richland Lane and its side streets--trees about which everyone would make, in my view, an unconscionable fuss, not least perhaps because they would lie across the streets for a week.

After the tornado passed I roamed around and found a broken power line. It banged violently by the Penn Avenue curb; it was shooting sparks into the street. I couldn't bring myself to leave the spot.

The power line was loosing a fireball of sparks that melted the asphalt. It was a thick twisted steel cable usually strung overhead along Penn Avenue; it carried power--4,500 kilovolts of it--from Wilkinsburg ("City of Churches") to major sections of Pittsburgh, to Homewood and Brushton, Shadyside, and Squirrel Hill.

It was melting 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 sparks were cooking the asphalt gummy; they were burning a hole. I watched the cable relax and sink into its own pit; I watched the yellow sparks pool and crackle around the cable's torn end and splash out of the pit and over the asphalt in a stream toward the curb and my shoes. My bare shins could feel the heat. I smelled tarry melted asphalt and steel so hot it smoked.

"If you touch that," my father said, needlessly, "you're a goner."

I had gone back to the house to get him so he could see this violent sight, this cable all but thrashing like a cobra and shooting a torrent of sparks.

While the tornado itself was on--while the buckeye trees in our yard were coming apart--Mother had gathered Amy and Molly and held them with her sensibly away from the windows; she urged my father and me to join them. Father had recently returned from his river trip and was ensconced tamed in the household again. And here was a pleasant, once-in-a-lifetime tornado, the funnel of which touched down, in an almost delicate point, like a bolt of lightning, on our very street. He and I raced from window to window and watched; we saw the backyard sycamore smash the back-porch roof; we saw the air roaring and blowing full of sideways-flying
objects, and saw the leafy buckeye branches out front blow white and upward like skirts.

"With your taste for natural disaster," Mother said to me later, "you should try to arrange a marriage with the head of the International Red Cross."

Now the torn cable lay near the curb, away from traffic. Its loose power dissipated in the air, a random destructiveness. If you touched it, you would turn into Reddy Kilowatt. Your skin would wiggle up in waves like an electrified cat's in a cartoon; your hair would rise stiff from your head; anyone who touched you by mistake would stick to you wavy-skinned and paralyzed. You would be dead but still standing, the power surging through your body in electrical imitation of life. Passersby would have to knock you away from the current with planks.

Father placed a ring of empty Coke bottles around the hissing power line and went back home to call Duquesne Light. I stayed transfixed. Other neighborhood children showed up, looked at the cable shooting sparks, and wandered away to see the great killed trees. I stood and watched the thick billion bolts swarm in the street. The cable was as full as a waterfall, never depleted; it dug itself a pit in which the yellow sparks spilled like water. I stayed at the busy Penn Avenue curb all day staring, until, late in the afternoon, someone somewhere turned off the juice.

Streetcars ran on Penn Avenue. Streetcars were orange, clangy, beloved things—loud, jerky, and old. They were powerless beasts compelled to travel stupidly with their wheels stuck in the tracks below them. Each streetcar had one central headlight, which looked fixedly down its tracks and nowhere else. The single light advertised to drivers at night that something was coming that couldn't move over. When a streetcar's tracks and wires rounded a corner, the witless streetcar had to follow. Its heavy orange body bulged out and blocked two lanes; any car trapped beside it had to cringe stopped against the curb until it passed.

Sometimes a car parked at the curb blocked a streetcar's route. Then the great beast sounded its mournful bell: it emitted a long-suffering, monotonous bong ... bong ... bong ... and men and women on the sidewalk shook their heads sympathetically at the motorman inside, the motorman more inferred than seen through the windshield’s bright reflections.

Penn Avenue smelled of gasoline, exhaust fumes, trees' sweetness in the spring, and, year round, burnt grit. On the blocks from Lang to Richland Lane were buildings in wild assortment: two drugstores, Henry Clay Frick's mansion with his old daughter somewhere inside, a dark working-class bar called the Evergreen Café, a corner grocery store, the envelope factory, a Westinghouse plant, some old apartment buildings, and a parklike Presbyterian seminary.

You walked on sidewalks whose topography was as intricate as Pittsburgh's, and as hilly. Frost-heaved peaks of cement arose, broke, and, over years, subsided again like Appalachians beside deep pits in which clean grass grew from what looked like black grease. Every long once in a while, someone repaired the sidewalk, to the tune of four or five squares' worth. The sidewalks were like greater Pittsburgh in this, too—cut into so many parts, so many legal divisions, that no one was responsible for all of it, and it all crumbled.
It was your whole body that knew those sidewalks and streets. Your bones ached with them; you tasted their hot dust in your bleeding lip; their gravel worked into your palm and knees and stayed, blue under the new skin that grew over it.

You rode your bike across Penn Avenue with the light: a lane of asphalt, a sunken streetcar track just the width of a thin bike wheel, a few feet of brown cobblestones, another streetcar track, more cobblestones or some cement, more tracks, and another strip of asphalt. The old cobblestones were pale humpy ovals like loaves. When you rode your bike over them, you vibrated all over. A particularly long humpy cobblestone could knock you down in a twinkling if it caught your bike's front wheel. So could the streetcar's tracks, and they often did; your handlebars twisted in your hands and threw you like a wrestler. So you had to pay attention, alas, and could not simply coast along over cobblestones, blissfully vibrating all over. Now the city was replacing all the cobblestones, block by block. The cobblestones had come from Pittsburgh's riverbeds. In the nineteenth century, children had earned pennies by dragging them up from the water and selling them to paving contractors. They had been a great and late improvement on mud.

The streetcars' overhead network of wires made of Penn Avenue a loose-roofed tunnel. The wires cut the sky into rectangles inside which you could compose various views as you walked. Here were a yellow brick apartment top and some flattened fair-weather clouds; here were green sycamore leaves in the foreground, and a faded orange rooftop advertising sign, and a yellow streetlight, and a slab of neutral sky.

Streetcars traveled with their lone trolley sticks pushed up by springs into these overhead wires. A trolley stick carried a trolley wheel; the trolley wheel rolled along the track of hot electric wire overhead as the four wheels rolled along the cold grooved track below. At night, and whenever it rained, the streetcars' trolleys sparked. They shot a radiant fistful of sparks at every crossing of wires. Sometimes a streetcar accidentally "threw the trolley." Bumping over a switch or rounding a bend, the trolley lost the wire and the spring-loaded stick flew up and banged its bare side crazily against the hot wire. Big yellow sparks came crackling into the sky and fell glowing toward the roofs of cars. The motorman had to brake the streetcar, go around to its rear, and haul the wayward, sparking trolley stick down with a rope. This happened so often that there was a coil of rope for that purpose at the streetcar's stern, neat and cleated like a halyard on a mast.

So the big orange streetcars clanged and spat along; they stopped and started, tethered to their wires overhead and trapped in their grooves below. Every day at a hundred intersections they locked horns with cars that blocked their paths--cars driven by insensible, semiconscious people, people who had just moved to town, teenagers learning to drive, the dread Ohio drivers, people sunk in rapturous conversation.

"Bong bong," bleated the stricken streetcar, "bong," and its passengers tried to lean around to see what was holding it up, and its berserk motorman gestured helplessly, furiously, at the dumb dreaming car--a shrug, a wave, a fist:

I'm a streetcar!
What can I do?
but wait for you jerks
to figure out that I'm a streetcar!

I tried to kill a streetcar by overturning it.

Pin Ford and I were hiding under a purple beech tree on the lawn of the Presbyterian seminary on Penn Avenue.

Through the beech's low dense branches she and I could make out Penn Avenue's streetcar lanes. It was midafternoon. Now a streetcar was coming toward us. We had been waiting. We had just stuck a stone in the streetcar track. This one seemed like a stone big enough to throw it over. Would the streetcar go over? Did we hope it would go over? We spotted its jiggling trolley stick first, high above the roofs of cars. Then we saw its round orange shoulder, humped like a cobblestone, and its lone simple eye. I pressed a thumb and finger between ribs on both sides of my breastbone, to try to calm myself.

It had started with pennies. A streetcar's wheel could slick a penny and enlarge it to a stripe. What would it do to a stone? It would crunch and crumble a stone. How big a stone? We ran between moving cars and placed ever bigger stones in the streetcar track; we ran back under the beech tree to watch.

This last stone was a coarse gray conglomerate, five inches by two by two. Was it reinforced concrete? Through the low-slung beech boughs we saw the streetcar draw nigh; we covered our lower faces with our hands.

The streetcar hit the stone audibly and rose like a beached whale. Its big orange body faltered in the air, heaved toward the lane of cars beside it, trembled, and finally fell down on its track and broke the stone. And went on, bumping again only slightly when the rear wheel went over it. Pin Ford and I lay low.

In that instant while the streetcar stopped upraised over its track like an animal bewildered, while it swayed over the cars' lane and hung on its side and its trolley stick dangled askew, I saw it continue its roll; I saw precisely which cars it would fall on, and which dim people silhouetted inside the cars and the streetcar would be the most surprised. I saw, too, in that clear instant, that if the streetcar did derail, I would have to come forward and give myself up to the police, and do time, and all that, for the alternative was living all the rest of life on the lam.

What can we make of the inexpressible joy of children? It is a kind of gratitude, I think—the gratitude of the ten-year-old who wakes to her own energy and the brisk challenge of the world. You thought you knew the place and all its routines, but you see you hadn't known. Whole stacks at the library held books devoted to things you knew nothing about. The boundary of knowledge receded, as you poked about in books, like Lake Erie's rim as you climbed its cliffs. And each area of knowledge disclosed another, and another. Knowledge wasn't a body, or a tree, but instead air, or space, or being—whatever pervaded, whatever never ended and fitted into the smallest cracks and the widest space between stars.
Any way you cut it, colors and shadows flickered from multiple surfaces. Just enough work had already been done on everything—moths, say, or meteorites—to get you started and interested, but not so much there was nothing left to do. Often I wondered: was it being born just now, in this century, in this country? And I thought: no, any time could have been like this, if you had the time and weren't sick; you could, especially if you were a boy, learn and do. There was joy in concentration, and the world afforded an inexhaustible wealth of projects to concentrate on. There was joy in effort, and the world resisted effort to just the right degree, and yielded to it at last. People cut Mount Rushmore into faces; they chipped here and there for years. People slowed the spread of yellow fever; they sprayed the Isthmus of Panama puddle by puddle. Effort alone I loved. Some days I would have been happy to push a pole around a threshing floor like an ox, for the pleasure of moving the heavy stone and watching my knees rise in turn.

I was running down the Penn Avenue sidewalk, revving up for an act of faith. I was conscious and self-conscious. I knew well that people could not fly—as well as anyone nows it—but I also knew the kicker: that, as the books put it, with faith all things are possible.

Just once I wanted a task that required all the joy I had. Day after day I had noticed that if I waited long enough, my strong unexpressed joy would dwindle and dissipate inside me, over many hours, like a fire subsiding, and I would at last calm down. Just this once I wanted to let it rip. Flying rather famously required the extra energy of belief, and this, too, I had in superabundance.

There were boxy yellow thirties apartment buildings on those Penn Avenue blocks, and the Evergreen Café, and Miss Frick's house set back behind a wrought-iron fence. There were some side yards of big houses, some side yards of little houses, some streetcar stops, and a drugstore from which I had once tried to heist a five-pound box of chocolates, a Whitman sampler, confusing "sampler" with "free sample." It was past all this that I ran that late fall afternoon, up old Penn Avenue on the cracking cement sidewalks—past the drugstore and bar, past the old and new apartment buildings and the long dry lawn behind Miss Frick's fence.

I ran the sidewalk full tilt. I waved my arms ever higher and faster; blood balled in my fingertips. I knew I was foolish. I knew I was too old really to believe in this as a child would, out of ignorance; instead I was experimenting as a scientist would, testing both the thing itself and the limits of my own courage in trying it miserably self-conscious in full view of the whole world. You can't test courage cautiously, so I ran hard and waved my arms hard, happy.

Up ahead I saw a business-suited pedestrian. He was coming stiffly toward me down the walk. Who could ever forget this first test, this stranger, this thin young man appalled? I banished the temptation to straighten up and walk right. He flattened himself against a brick wall as I passed flailing—although I had left him plenty of room. He had refused to meet my exultant eye. He looked away, evidently embarrassed. How surprisingly easy it was to ignore him! What I was letting rip, in fact, was my willingness to look foolish, in his eyes and in my own. Having chosen this foolishness, I was a free being. How could the world ever stop me, how could I betray myself, if I was not afraid?
I was flying. My shoulders loosened, my stride opened, my heart banged the base of my throat. I crossed Carnegie and ran up the block waving my arms. I crossed Lexington and ran up the block waving my arms.

A linen-suited woman in her fifties did meet my exultant eye. She looked exultant herself, seeing me from far up the block. Her face was thin and tanned. We converged. Her warm, intelligent glance said she knew what I was doing--not because she herself had been a child but because 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. So Teresa of Avila checked her unseemly joy and hung on to the altar rail to hold herself down. The woman's smiling, deep glance seemed to read my own awareness from my face, so we passed on the sidewalk--a beautifully upright woman walking in her tan linen suit, a kid running and flapping her arms--we passed on the sidewalk with a look of accomplices who share a humor just beyond irony. What's a heart for?

I crossed Homewood and ran up the block. The joy multiplied as I ran--I ran never actually quite leaving the ground--and multiplied still as I felt my stride begin to fumble and my knees begin to quiver and stall. The joy multiplied even as I slowed bumping to a walk. I was all but splitting, all but shooting sparks. Blood coursed free inside my lungs and bones, a light-shot stream like air. I couldn't feel the pavement at all.

I was too aware to do this, and had done it anyway. What could touch me now? For what were the people on Penn Avenue to me, or what was I to myself, really, but a witness to any boldness I could muster, or any cowardice if it came to that, any giving up on heaven for the sake of dignity on earth? I had not seen a great deal accomplished in the name of dignity, ever.

Annie Dillard is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and numerous other works of nonfiction including An American Childhood and For the Time Being. Her novels include The Living and, most recently, The Maytrees.

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