



*As writers and artists
throughout the ages have
discovered, blindness is “vision’s
unacknowledged cousin.”*



Rosamond Purcell, West Indian Monk Seal, 1999, by permission of Rosamond Purcell
(from Rosamond Purcell, *Swift as a Shadow*, Houghton Mifflin, 1999)

EYES WIDE SHUT

*From Shakespeare to Thoreau to Emily Dickinson, writers and artists have
always wrestled with the mystery of eyesight.*

It seems impossible to imagine the more than one billion mammals, reptiles, birds, and insects said to have perished in the recent Australian bushfires: an animal holocaust of unprecedented dimensions, a field of charred remains many times bigger than the biggest city on the planet, and that in a region that already held the world record in animal extinctions. We prefer to imagine animals, if we don't happen to be eating them, as alive and as individuals, whether in the wild or at home, whether it's the barred owl in *Walden* that fixates, through half-shut eyes, its "peninsular" stare on Henry David Thoreau or the cat that interrupts French philosopher Jacques Derrida's morning *toilette* simply by looking at him. But such individual encounters may not offer us very much comfort and hope of companionship either.

In one of my favorite poems, "A Bird Came Down the Walk," by the reclusive New England poet Emily Dickinson, the wilderness and household or, rather, the semi-wild and the semi-domestic briefly meet when the poet spies a solitary bird, of an undetermined species, ambling down a walkway in her garden. ("In the Garden" was, indeed, the unauthorized title the poet's first editor clumsily attached to the poem). Unaware of the poet's presence, the bird proceeds to catch an equally unaware worm, eats it, and then flies off. But that is not quite the story we get from Dickinson. Here's the beginning of the poem as it first appeared in 1891:

A bird came down the walk:
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.

And then, he drank a dew
From a convenient grass,
And then hopped sidewise to the wall
To let a beetle pass.

The poet's attempt to humanize what she has seen—a male bird taking a constitutional, munching breakfast, taking a sip (it's hard not to hear "glass" in that "grass" from which he drinks), stepping aside, ever so politely, for another creature—runs up against reality, highlighting the absurdity of that effort. An "angle-worm" is not a species recognized by science; no bird would whip out a frying pan to cook its breakfast meat; and if that careless beetle gets another lease on life, that probably just means that the bird's stomach is still, well, full of worm.

But then the flippant tone of the poem, which chummily makes a "fellow" out of the doomed invertebrate, changes. Suddenly aware of the observer's presence, the bird panics. But now the poet's mind transforms it: the bird's eyes, darting around wildly at first, solidify into beads; his plumage turns to velvet. In the poet's mind at least, the bird is turning into an artifact, a blind thing, with beads for eyes:

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all abroad,—
They looked like frightened beads, I thought;
He stirred his velvet head

Perhaps the "frightened beads" echo Shakespeare's lines from *The Tempest* ("those are pearls that were his eyes"), recycled later in Eliot's "The Waste Land." Yet Dickinson's beads aren't Shakespeare's pearls; rather, they suggest the kind of cheap substitutes taxidermists use when they stuff a

*Viewing the natural world
through strained eyes,
Emily Dickinson might
have discovered, with
declining physical vision,
new ways of seeing.*


bird. Except that this bird—like Ferdinand’s father in *The Tempest*—is still alive: the blinded eyes show fear, the head moves. As the poem goes on, it is no longer clear who is “in danger” here: as if wishing to undo what she has done to him, in an absurd attempt at making friends, the poet offers the bird a “crumb,” a grim parody of the Eucharist, perhaps also an allusion to the “crumbs from the rich man’s table” in Luke 16:21. But the bird comes to life again and, unimpressed, departs, leaving the poet struggling for an adequate way to describe what has happened, her imagery becoming so difficult and contorted that she is left with only contradictions and only one conclusion—that one cannot so easily “see” a bird in flight.

Like one in danger; cautious,
I offered him a crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home
Than oars divide the ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or butterflies, off banks of noon,
Leap, plashless, as they swim.

A bird’s flight is like rowing, the poet proposes, its wings moving up and down as oars do, too. And yet it most certainly is not, since boats, as they cut through it, leave traces in the water and a bird’s wings, gliding through the air, do not. Or maybe a bird’s flight is like butterflies frolicking, in the middle of a warm day, leaping soundlessly, from imaginary cliffs (my tentative attempt to visualize the “banks of noon”!), into some imaginary river. But that comparison cancels itself out, too—as everyone knows, butterflies can’t swim. It is richly ironic that the final line of the poem, in trying to describe something that is happening silently, should be making a loud noise—the popping “p” in “leap, plashless.”

Significantly, Dickinson’s own eyes were giving her trouble at just around the time that she wrote “A Bird Came Down the Walk,” so much so that she left her beloved Amherst to consult a doctor in Boston, with mixed results: her eyes were, she reported after a second visit, “sometimes easy, sometimes sad.” In her poem, the bird, refusing to be remade into a beady-eyed exhibit in the natural history museum of the poet’s mind, survives its temporary blinding. It leaves behind a poet whose own sight or, rather, insight remains compromised. Blindness is, as art historian James Elkins has said, vision’s unacknowledged cousin.

Dickinson’s beady-eyed bird reminds me of another animal, one that didn’t get away. Ever since I first came across it, in her 1999 collection *Swift as a Shadow*, Rosamond Purcell’s portrait of the eye of a West Indian monk seal has haunted me. In her decades-long career as a photographer, Purcell has acquired a reputation for unsettling photographs often produced in natural history museums, those morgues of animal life that both repel and attract her. Death rules the natural history display, which closes out, in Purcell’s own words, “the cosmos from which each creature came.” In death, the animal becomes a specimen, as Dickinson’s animal almost did. While “the museum has its methods,” as Purcell



acknowledges, it preserves little more than a dim memory of “how the philosopher, the villager, the forest dweller, or the poet saw the animal walk, crawl, zigzag, or soar.” Instead, it privileges our expertise at confirming the animal’s deadness, recording when and where it was collected and by whom, when it was last seen, and where it fits, or used to fit, into the system of nature.

Caribbean or West Indian monk seals (*Neomonachus tropicalis*) share a separate, unique branch of the seal family tree with their surviving, yet critically endangered cousins, the Mediterranean and Hawaiian monk seals. They were an ancient species, going back 3 to 4 million years, with populations numbering in the hundreds of thousands. In 1494, on their second voyage, Columbus’s men killed eight of these gentle animals for their meat (they called them “sea wolves”), making *Neomonachus tropicalis* the first New World mammal to be thus slaughtered by the explorer, the prologue to a sad chronicle of violence that wiped them off the face of the earth, their blubber having provided oil for countless lamps or the grease that kept the machinery on plantations running,

The last *Neomonachus tropicalis* was sighted in 1952, long before it was officially declared extinct in 1967.

Purcell’s photograph, like Dickinson’s poem, stages an intimate encounter with an animal, but it’s an encounter of a different kind, and not with a generic bird but a very specific animal. Dead for many decades, her Caribbean monk seal looks at us directly, his one obsidian eye wide open as it would be in dark and murky water, steadily meeting the camera’s lens. The texture of the seal’s fur, a dense carpet of fine, brownish, yellow-tinged bristles, is captured here in such lavish detail that one can almost feel it: a little rough, if not unpleasant, to the touch, moist with tangy ocean water, warm from sunlight. Not Dickinson’s frightened bead but rather a polished, glassy globe, the seal’s eye reflects no emotion, reminding us of nothing so much as this animal’s deadness. It appears that, for the occasion of this portrait, the seal was temporarily moved into an outdoor space, a courtyard perhaps, a strange reminder that his habitat, in his pre-museum days, would have been outside, too. And projected onto the glassy surface of the dead animal’s fake eye appear the blurry outlines of a fragment of the world around him, distorted as in a funhouse mirror, a world to which that seal never belonged.

This eye is not a window unto the soul (provided that, unlike Aristotle, we’re even willing to grant souls to animals). All it shows are reflections of exterior things, human things—the walls, windows, facades of the museum we have built, arranged around a reminder of a life the seal has long left behind, though not voluntarily so, a raggedy remnant of the cosmos from which that animal is permanently shut out: a patch of blue sky. Turning his blind eye to us, the unsteady, endangered survivors of a world we have diminished, Purcell’s silent seal—if we would only learn how to look, where to look—does have something to tell us after all, although this comes way too late and might be way too little: about how his loss is, finally, our loss, too.



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