On Eclipses
When Language and Photography Fail

On August 21, the earth, moon, and sun’s celestial postures aligned in performance of the perfect spectral mirage: the moon appeared to slip from its orbit, and like an unknown body blotting out the light at the end of a narrow tunnel, briefly obscured the violent, ultraviolet orb of the sun.

In Los Angeles, outside the slender path of totality that threaded across the contiguous United States, the sun remained as a sliver, a toenail, or a fractured oval; the drop in air temperature was only marginally perceptible. A naked glance upwards would be rewarded with a crescent-shaped scar seared into the retina.

Elsewhere, those situated within the path of totality would be seized by a lunar tempest: a disc of shadow would defiantly cloak the sun and assail the terrestrial plane below, moving at an upward speed of nearly 3,000 miles per hour. At the moment of total eclipse, twilight would emerge, the sun’s corona would careen into view, and the visible color spectrum would appear to lilt and shift. While this rapturous solar void has been lyrically imparted as “a forsaking” (Anne Carson), a fatal “defeat” (Virginia Woolf), and “a slug of anaesthetic up your arm” (Annie Dillard), by all accounts, the corporeal experience of this phenomenon is truly invulnerable to being shaped by language. Existing in what Sarah Charlesworth describes as a liminal state of “All Light & No Light,” an eclipse also magnificently defies photographic representation. Capturing an eclipse’s image or recounting it through language is akin to fleshing out an imperishable portrait of a fleeting ghost.

While a total solar eclipse predictably occurs somewhere on the planet approximately once every 18 months, the August 21, 2017 eclipse was the first to align above the United States in 38 years, with the last occurring on February 26, 1979.

Recognizing the uncanny qualities of this celestial affair, both Sarah Charlesworth and Annie Dillard employed the 1979 eclipse as subject matter for two distinct works that mined its respective photographic and poetic properties.

In Dillard’s classic essay, “Total Eclipse,” the author intimately recounts her personal experience of the eclipse, narrating the ways in which language becomes unmoored from the actual somatic experience of being consumed by the moon’s shadow (“Language can give no sense of this sort of speed”). Pondering the limits of language, Dillard frequently turns to the language of photography, excavating the points at which image and prose meet: “The sky snapped over the sun like a lens cover. The hatch in the brain slammed.”

As she continues to navigate an array of complex visual metaphors, she ultimately asserts that, as language crumples in the aftermath of totality, so does its photographic brethren. “You have seen photographs of the sun taken during a total eclipse. The corona fills the print... The lenses of telescopes and cameras can no more cover the breadth and scale of the visual array than language can

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possibly illuminate light’s own jarring retreat? Both become the modes through which our internal experience of external phenomena are mediated. Like an object in a viewfinder slipping from focus, like our eclipse-battered senses “receding the way galaxies recede to the rim of space,” the moon methodically recedes from the earth each year at a glacial pace. In 600 million years, as the moon’s synchronous orbit finally surrenders its ability to veil the sun, the last total solar eclipse will align above the terrestrial horizon. In a fitting end to this metaphor, like an unfixed image that dissipates in the sun, or a momentary mincing of words, an eclipse is a fleeting, mercurial anomaly—it evades all forms of permanence, just as it evades all modes of representation.

In an inadvertent rendition of Charlesworth’s Arc, most networks aired live video footage of the moment of totality as it rhythmically unfolded above the various communities along its geographic path. As the sun and moon appeared to collide, a moment of rapt silence was punctuated by a chorus of screams—a spectacle of primal rapture performed for the mediated vantage points of news cameras and social media. This peculiar primitive phenomenon, also recounted by Dillard, marks the precise moment that language begins to disintegrate. “From all the hills came screams.” Then suddenly, “[t] here was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs hushed. There was no world.” This void—of light, darkness, language, sound, and reason—represents the experiential dialectic of the eclipse: How can language possibly annotate its own evacuation? How can photography, through the mechanics of light, possibly illuminate light’s own jarring retreat? Both become the modes through which our internal experience of external phenomena are mediated.

13. In reference to the proliferation of DIY instructions for wearable / mask-like eclipse viewers, modeled after the mechanics of the pinhole camera or camera obscura.
15. Dillard, 11.
16. Ibid., 10.
17. Zubritsky.