The Third Bird

The painting is two, as in a split-screen.

On the left, we have the view from the railroad tracks of a train that is about to trample us, the split-second before we die. The face of the locomotive takes up more than half the left painting; its front two windows look like the giant eyes of an insect, right before it eats you. Headlights like ears, or little sensors, whatever protrudes from insects. Shark teeth for pilot bars. Otherwise, it's a beautiful day. Big fat sun rays coming from the top right, off page. Grass and green weeds protruding upwards from between the five to ten feet of tracks that lie between us and our death. Flimsy tree branches that hang over the tracks react to the train rushing by.

And witnesses — two birds present, perched to the left of the train about to kill us. A fence lines the tracks, and there are trees beyond the fence, and on those trees, there are branches, birds… They could be two crows. They could be two sparrows, or a sparrow and a pigeon, or an eagle and a condor — ultimately, it's up to the artist to decide. But there are two of them. One of them is looking at us, watching what is about to happen. And the other one, perched right beside the first, is looking away. Looking away… as if looking to see if anyone else is seeing this, a third witness, a third bird. Or maybe, it's not looking for anybody. Maybe it just knows what's going to happen, it knows it's going to be ugly, and it can't bear to look.

That's the image on the left.

The image painted on the right is an overhead shot of a train passing, presumably the same train. The train passes horizontally and covers the length of the entire second image, effectively splitting this second image into two more. Top and bottom. Trees on both sides. Almost symmetrical,

as if the crosscutting train were a mirror — or rather, the astute viewer recognizes, a Mira (the red plastic reflection tool you used in geometry class, remember? Your life flashes before your eyes, before the perched birds' eyes, and yes you do remember).

The most glaring consequence of this — of the train filling the tracks from end to end — is of course that we don't see whatever it was on the tracks in the first image on the left, whatever was about to be hit. Was it a bird? Was it us? Was it anything? The bird in the image on the left — it's looking at us, or it's looking at whatever it is that is about to be hit. So something had to be hit. That's what the first painting suggests is about to happen. But now that it's been hit, we can't see what it is. We can't see what had been teased. It's a major disappointment. And yet, at the same time, isn't it a relief? We've been spared the horror of witnessing our violent death. We feel deprived, but really, we've been spared.

And so we blindly go. Like scavengers, never satisfied, we hungrily scavenge on. For truth. For evidence. For changes. A split second has elapsed between the two images, it seems to us, but what evidence of this slight passage of time is here for us to see? What evidence, even, that the trains in each image are the same? Verify our death. Verify the timeline. Scavenge the woods in the "After" painting for our witnesses. There: the two birds in the first image also appear in the image on the right. We feel something like relief. They are perched in presumably the same position on the tree as before. Only now, from this vantage point, this bird's eye view, they are depicted more like little dots in the tree. And (we feel a piercing jolt in our gut, a final reminder that the scavenger's relief is always temporary) there are three of them. Three little dots.