

## SANDRA IVANY

*time standing still, yosemite, 2004*  
photographic print, 16 x 22 in



courtesy: the artist

## JOHN MOIR

# Nature's Blinded Visionaries: John Muir, E. O. Wilson, and the Sixth Extinction

**A**s twilight is settling over Indianapolis on March 6, 1867, an industrial engineer at Osgood, Smith & Company, a manufacturer of wooden wagon wheel parts, notices that a circular-saw drive belt has come loose. He is a twenty-eight-year-old Scottish immigrant, a brilliant mechanic who has won awards for his ingenious inventions and whose work at this factory has earned him rapid promotions from his employers. His name is John Muir.

To repair the saw, Muir decides to cut a small section from the drive belt. With the sharp end of a file, he begins to loosen the tightly bound laces that hold it in place. It's a simple task, but as he pries at the stubborn laces, the file slips. The metal point shoots upward and punctures Muir's right eye.

Stunned, Muir covers the wound with his hand while fluid trickles through his fingers. It is the aqueous humor, the liquid that fills the area between the cornea and lens. To his horror, when Muir opens the injured eye he sees nothing but blackness.

"My right eye is gone," he says, "closed forever on all God's beauty."

A shaken Muir makes his way along the icy streets back to his room at a nearby boardinghouse. He has no doctor to call, no family nearby. He lies alone on his bed, his body trembling with shock and excruciating pain. His thoughts turn to the oak, ash, and walnut forests outside the city where he delights in spending his spare time. Despite Muir's talent with machines, his true passion has always been the natural world. Now, with the loss of an eye, he despairs that he may never again be able to fully enjoy the wild places he loves.

Within hours, Muir suffers another setback. The shock of the injury produces a sympathetic reaction, and the vision in his left eye also vanishes. John Muir is blind.

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The first time I heard the name John Muir, I was a young boy sitting by a campfire in Yosemite watching sparks pirouette into the night. My dad, always a storyteller, filled our evenings by spinning yarns about the bearded conservationist who saved this valley I loved. Night after night, he recounted Muir's ongoing adventures: climbing cliffs,