THE WRITING EYE

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ABSTRACT

In poetry and other literary texts, the writer's ability to look and see -- embodied in the term *insight* -- is deemed of prime importance. However, seeing is not as simple as it seems. It involves a negotiation between what we see and what we know of what we see. Moreover, seeing also requires a negotiation between how we see things and how others see things. It is in these negotiations, therefore, that we are able to investigate the other's way of seeing *and,* in the process, explore still more ways of apprehending the world and arrive at an insight

WE WOULD FIGHT who among us would get to sit where we could lean over and, puny arms parallel to our father's, hold on tightly to the handlebars and imagine one's self driving the motorbike. As kids, my siblings and I always thought of these rides a rare privilege. Yes, even if it was just to the public market a few blocks away to buy groceries or whatnot. There was no greater thrill for us than to feel the wind blowing across our faces as our father expertly drove his bike through the streets.

But what was more fascinating for me was not just the ride but also the view of the streets we passed by reflected in the bike's side mirrors. The familiar scenes of our town somehow became strange as these were reflected back. To look from the mirror then to the real thing, and back to the mirror again—there was some magic at work there. So even when the bike was parked and we were allowed to clamber over it, I would sometimes tire of imagining driving across faraway lands. I would instead just sit and stare at the length of our street cast in those mirrors. And even if it was a lazy hot afternoon and nothing was going on on our street, I would wait until even just a dog would make its way

across the frame. My waiting somehow became, in my young mind, my being able to will something to happen. And when something did happen within the frame, it seemed that I had something to do with it.

And my enchantment with the world reflected in "mirrors" did not end there. My siblings and I would borrow children's books from the public library. It seemed we would never tire of reading those books, sometimes going back twice in the day to borrow more of the same. (Our father had to explain to the librarian that we did read, and not just flipped through the pages for pictures, every book we signed out.) Among the books we would borrow were some that schoolchildren in the US most probably used to learn about their communities. It had stories about the different people who lived in these neighborhoods, what they did for a living, and how they all contributed to making their community into such an ideal place. Some even had maps or bird's-eye-view pictures that would show where the firehouse is, or the church, or the mayor's office, etc. At that impressionable age, we found ourselves calling the *sari-sari* store at the corner as "the grocer's". And because of the books we read, it was no surprise that we did not just play "house" but "town"—one of us would play a grocer, another would own the bank, still another would have a gas station where our make-believe bikes or cars would fill up for gas, and so on until we had our own make-believe town.

When television came to our part of the world, all of us—even the eldest who was in the higher grades—got hooked on *Sesame Street*. By then we were a lot older than the show's target audience, and our command of English made us aware of more than the program's ABCs and arithmetic. Yet, every time we came home from school we would all rush to sit so quietly before this magical box. What I found so entrancing about the show was the whole fictional community of people and puppets living in what seemed to be a New York neighborhood. There was the black couple and the Hispanic sweethearts and, yes, even the grocer himself. Of course there was Oscar the Grouch, the affable Big

Bird, the reclusive Mr. Snafflelapagus, the Count, and the roommates Ernie and Bert. There was also the voracious Cookie Monster, the gangly Grover who sometimes thought he was a superhero, there was Kermit the Frog, and so many other colorful characters.

Here was a "world" that seemed, if only it was not so perfect to my young eyes, so much like the one I lived in. Except mine did not have puppets for neighbors or brownstone apartments and stoops, and had a *sari-sari* store instead of a grocer's. But it was basically the same world to me. It was the same length of street in the mirror. It was those books all over again (though by this time I had graduated to juvenile and not-so-juvenile novels). There was something in that TV show that made me look at our neighborhood in a different and more comprehending light.

I had become the hapless prisoner taken out of Plato's cave (120). Suddenly, I could see not just the shadows cast by the light on the cave wall. I could see and comprehend what was real and what was illusion. But I also never forgot the flickering shadows and its magic play on the cave wall. This was what I wanted to do. To be able to create something magical out of what appears mundane. To show how the real world works by framing, to use the metaphor of the bike's side mirrors again, what I perceive essential to a particular truth. To see and show others what I see. Much later I read the multi-awarded scriptwriter Ricky Lee say of the writer's work:

> The writer's task is to see, and to show others what s/he sees. When we watch a magic show, we just don't enjoy it with jaws hanging in amazement. We go backstage because we need to see how the magic is done. And if we aren't allowed backstage, we imagine what is there. We writers like going backstage. [My translation.] (3)

BUT SEEING is not as simple as it seems. I read the neurologist Oliver Sacks's intriguing account of blindness and sight. He writes about the case of Virgil (not his real name) who lost his sight in early childhood but regained his vision at fifty years old. Before his "miracle," Virgil learned how to cope with his blindness. He became self-supporting—working as a massage therapist in the local YMCA—and grew contented with his independent life. At fifty, however, he meets an old friend, Amy, who herself had eye problems because of diabetes. Their renewed acquaintance develops into a romance and the two soon plan to marry. However, Amy entertains the idea of restoring Virgil's sight—for he could perceive light and dark, not being totally blind. Her ophthalmologist, after examining Virgil, gives her fresh hopes when he declares the possibility of Virgil being able to see again. With the news, Amy nurses some romantic illusions: "wouldn't it be fantastic if he could see? If, after nearly a lifetime of blindness, his first vision could be his bride, the wedding, the minister, the church!" (Sacks 59).

With the advances in medical science, Virgil indeed regains his sight. However, this gift of vision soon becomes a curse for him and his new wife. Accustomed to "seeing" with his hands, Virgil is unable to make sense out of this new world of light and colors and shapes. Amy writes her observations about Virgil's difficulties the day after the miracle: "'Trying to adjust to being sighted, tough to go from blindness to sighted. Has to think faster, not able to trust vision yet.... Like baby just learning to see, everything new, exciting, scary, unsure of what seeing means'" (Sacks 59).

Virgil's excitement and wonder at his new vision gradually erode his confidence when he feels "disabled" by it: he has problems putting things together—while he can identify individual letters, he finds it hard to read words. In a trip to the zoo, he feels disheartened when he thinks the gorilla looks like nothing more than a large man. Only when he is able to examine with his hands a life-size bronze statue of the

gorilla does he murmur: "'It's not like a man at all'" (Sacks 60). A few years later, Virgil experiences recurrences of momentary blindness—due to sensory overload and emotional stress—that eventually lead to total blindness which he accepts and embraces.

Sacks says that Virgil's difficulty is understandable considering that seeing is a learned activity. People see what they have been conditioned to see. A sighted person may not fathom the depth of Virgil's problem. However, Sacks points out that the ability to see does not necessarily come with the sense of sight. He says that "[w]hen we open our eyes each morning, it is upon a world we have spent a lifetime *learning* [emphasis provided] to see. We are not given the world: we make our world through incessant experience, categorization, memory, reconnection" (Sacks 61). He contrasts the sighted person's seemingly effortless ability to see with that of the artist:

> Most of us have no sense of the immensity of the [visual] construction for we perform it seamlessly, unconsciously, thousands of times every day, at a glance. But this is not so for a baby, it was not so for Virgil, and it is not so for, say, an artist who wants *to experience his*[/her] *perceptions individually and anew* [emphasis added]. Cézanne wrote to his son, 'The same subject seen from a different angle gives a subject for study of the highest interest and so varied that I think I could be occupied for months without changing my place, simply bending more to the right or left.' (Sacks 65-6)

What is meant by sight here, then, is not just the physical act involving the retina and the brain. It is not merely "a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli" (Berger *et al.* 7). Sacks says a person's ability to visually construct things also involves some psychological and social conditioning. John Berger describes it this way:

> It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world.... [But the] relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.... ¶ The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. ¶ [Moreover, we] see only what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach—though not necessarily within arm's reach.... [But we] never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving.... (7-9)

SEEING apparently allows us to conceptualize our relation to a thing. But this conception is always conditioned by our perception of other things and by what we know of these other things. So our understanding of the world is always a negotiation of what we see and what we know of what we see. It is looking at the actual world and then to the image in the mirror and back again.

And we name what we see to "freeze" (or frame) for a moment our understanding of a thing. However, our use of words puts us in a double bind for language itself has its built-in way of seeing. The poet Gémino Abad explains:

> language makes us its subject or, to say the same thing, a subject of/to our community. How this happens, without our knowledge or consent, tells us just how subtle language's hold is on us. ¶ For language, which the community continually invents, establishes all that the community perceives as "reality" and calls "our world." Its language secretes the community's way of looking and feeling about its "world." So, from birth we are *in-formed* [emphasis provided] (formed within) by our speech; and self-identity or consciousness—what the individual

> imagines himself to be—arises only from those words he can speak of himself. ("Lightness of Being" 31)

So even our choice of looking at something may not be a choice after all. We only see what we look at, but it may also be true that we only look at what we have been conditioned to see.

But Berger says that "[s]oon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world. ¶ ... The reciprocal nature of vision...explain[s] how...'you see things,' and...discover how '[the other] sees things" (9). We adjust our understanding of the world by negotiating between how we see things and how others see things. It is in these negotiations that we learn to look at things "individually and anew." For in seeing how another sees things, we investigate the other's way of seeing *and,* in the process, explore still more ways of apprehending the world. That is why Cézanne would spend months, bending more to the right or the left, contemplating an object. That is why Lee is fascinated with what happens backstage. That is why poets, according to Abad, are basically "curious [about] how [they] could look with words and see things clearly again" ("Why I Write" 14). There is in them that "urge to change [the] form [of writing/language] and make a special clearing within language for [themselves]" ("Why I Write" 13). And poets are able to devise new ways of seeing in the

> spaces between words, and between languages, where other meanings may take root—that is, other ways of looking, other modes of feeling. These are possible other "worlds" that the community's speech does not allow [individuals] to see lest [they] subvert its ideology or way of looking. (Abad, "Lightness of Being" 31)

SO IN POETRY and other literary texts, one's ability to look and see—embodied in the term *insight*—is deemed of prime importance. Abad defines poetic insight as the "illumination of a thought that no idea expresses, or illumination of a feeling that no thought catches.... ¶ That insight is what is sometimes called theme, provided we do not think of 'theme' as an abstraction that can be formulated.... It cannot be formulated; it is lived. It lives in the poem" ("What Does One..." 61-62). Edith Tiempo, National Artist for Literature, says that insight in poetry is usually "dredged up only in the *depth explorations* [emphasis added] of the poetic imagination. It is no accident that such concepts have been labeled as insights: *sighted in (the depths)* [emphasis provided]" ("Introduction" viii). For Tiempo, insight is something you look for under the surface of words, ideas, and feelings.

This lesson on insight was seared into my mind when I attended the 26th Silliman University National Writers Workshop, which Tiempo directs. What in essence she and the panel of writers suggested, after training their critical eyes on my poems and those of the other writing fellows, and after some kind words about the work at hand, was the re-visioning of our poems. They pointed out that poems fail because they are not well conceived. This simple advice was enough to deflate my greenhorn's enthusiasm for the art. Poetic conceptualization was not just about coming up with the right arrangement of words in a "frame." For the panelists' diagnosis not only pointed to problems in craftsmanship but, and more importantly, also to the failure to develop the incipient depth of vision the poems exhibit. The panelists were unanimous in saying that while young poets (like myself) may easily enough master the craft through practice and time, what was more difficult to achieve is poetic insight. And if that was not enough, they also cautioned that a poem's subject must be "reimagined and made fresh"; otherwise, "[w]ithout change, art stagnates" (Wallace and Boisseau xix).

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But while insight is valued as being "the center of making good poems" (Wallace and Boisseau 128), its treatment in poetry textbooks remains scant. While vision is said to be the measure of a poem being good or bad, discussions on insight (compared to, say, rhythm or imagery) are scarce. Such discussions on insight are usually given a cursory treatment in these books, with the implication that it is something that can never be taught. One exemption is Robert Wallace and Michelle Boisseau's textbook *Writing Poetry* that talks about how insight can be achieved by *peeling one's eyes open*. (Then again, that discussion is more or less two pages in length and is merely a part of a longer treatise on "subject matter" or "content.") Wallace and Boisseau say that:

> Discovering a good subject may be partly luck, but luck comes to poets who are alert, who keep their antennae out, who make new combinations, who truly *see* [emphasis provided].... Try to see everything with a cleansed eye. Look at things. Study a slice of bread, for instance; really see it and then write about what you notice. Free yourself of assumptions about the stuff of life and shimmering fields of golden grain. Look at the bread. Like the purloined letter in Poe's story, the secret is hidden in the open. Look. Notice.... ¶ Accurate perception is not just an aesthetic choice; we have a moral obligation to see what is truly there, not just what we would like to see. (127-8)

So I stayed on beyond the summer workshop, doing serious study on poetry, and "apprenticing" with Edith Tiempo. What I learned from these sessions can hardly be found in any book on poetry, literature, or criticism. Edith Tiempo would go over a poem I would submit, second-guessing what I meant in this line or that and then suggesting how I could improve the work. It felt invasive then, and made me feel ill-

prepared and inadequate for the vocation I had chosen. It seemed as if I lacked the words to fully limn the idea I wanted to explore in my work. And when Edith Tiempo would suggest a poem for me to read, because it might help me flesh out what I wanted to say in a work, I thought she was telling me I had nothing original to say about the subject.

It was only later that I realized the benefits of this apprenticeship. As I worked closely with my poet-teacher, I began to see how she conceptualized her poems and how she "re-imagined and made fresh" an emotion, a fleeting moment, or an idea in her works. It was as if I could go inside her head as she was giving shape to a poem. Through these sessions I had the chance to see how she saw what I saw in my work, and also to see what she saw as she worked out her poems.

I would like to believe that, through my apprenticeship, I gradually learned how to be "alert" and to see with "a cleansed eye." I would also like to believe that this alertness goes hand in hand with some degree of mastery of the poetic craft. For as Ricardo de Ungria argues, "mastery of technique also involves *one's perceptions of and relations* to [emphasis added] life itself and its own patterns, rhythms, and images" (xxiii). He quotes Seamus Heaney:

> Technique entails the watermarking of your *essential patterns of perception, voice, and thought into the touch and texture of your lines* [emphasis added]; it is that whole creative effort of the mind's and body's resource to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form. (xxiii)

What de Ungria would like to understand of "form" here includes a

> meaning greater than that of simple poetic form to include the "form" of a poet's perceptions and even

> the "form" his life has taken so far and the "form" he has witnessed at work in life and in the universe—an expression of which he arrives at, consciously or unconsciously, in the poems he writes. (xxiii)

Ultimately this "form of a poet's perception," or simply a "way of seeing," determines how poets are able to discern that insight into an idea. While language forms poets' ways of seeing, their play in the spaces between words or language reveals other ways of looking and feeling. To quote Abad again:

> I also find that some words or phrases are routes to the poem-in-the-making, but some, blind alleys; and in the space between those offerings, a hum and drum of the void to which one listens without hope. I find, above all, that writing the poem isn't simply writing or dealing in words (their meanings and images); it would otherwise be quite rational. For the poet, writing the poem is *present* [emphasis provided] and living. I looked up the word "experience"; it is associated with faring and attempting, with peril and fear. Exactly: one's experience is the only point of contact with reality; one goes forth, tries and is tried, meets with chance and sudden danger, and nothing is sure. *But one lives and could make oneself aware, present. It is that experience, it is at that point of contact, where one feels and sees and knows. That insight is what exacts the poem* [emphasis added]. If one had been aware, the poem would be given. ("Way to a Poem" 21-22)

This awareness is difficult to come by, however. This state of being present or aware is "the very point of contact with reality where an insight flashes" (Abad, "What Does One..." 61). As Tiempo suggests, a meditative state helps: "I think it's because I allowed myself to be quiet, not to run

after thoughts. Meditating really imposes a complete quietus, in the mind, in the heart, in the body.... And I think that's why the images come more clearly, more lucidly" (Manlapaz 66).

When the images do come in this aware state, Tiempo continues, the next joyous task is to recognize what is given. "The only right that we have to the images is what they give to us and that is recognition. We become aware of what it is in the objects that is also in us. We do not impose, we do not take away. We recognize" (Manlapaz 66). That recognition leads to insight. When there is no awareness or recognition, then what is in the image remains untapped. "It's in the object, but it is locked and it is the poet who unlocks it by allowing the object to speak" (Manlapaz 68).

Recognition, then, becomes a paramount requisite to achieving poetic insight. The poet may be able to look at something but not see. Such was the case of Virgil. To truly "see," he had to navigate between two ways of seeing—his restored sight and his sense of touch. It is the poet's negotiation, this intelligence and instinct to recognize insight that I refer to as the Writing Eye.

I CAN ONLY PRESENT my own process as demonstration of how one comes to such a recognition. While this venture may seem immodest, I recall what Stephen Spender says on writing about one's work: "One poet's example is only his adaptation of his personality to the demands of poetry, but if it is clearly stated it may help us to understand other poets, and even something of poetry" (qtd. in de Ungria xii). I hesitate to make such claims even while acknowledging that an understanding of my own process may indeed add to the knowledge of poetry and how poets write. I cannot assume that whatever I come up with can be used by other poets in their own writing. However, I would like to think that such an investigation may help teachers and students understand the creative process involved in the production of literary works.

Traditionally, the sources of poetry are attributed to mysterious and metaphysical powers: gods or God, the Muses, the chi, the White Goddess, the unconscious, genius, energy, emotions, memory, etc. Poets are supposedly "inspired" or "possessed" by these forces and are thus able to write their works. However, as the French poet Paul Valery says:

> Graciously the gods give us the first line for nothing, but it is up to us to furnish a second that will harmonize with it and not be unworthy of its supernatural elder brother. All the resources of experience, and of intelligence are hardly enough to make it comparable to the verse which came to us as a gift. (qtd. in de Ungria xv)

This unconscious or unknown element in poetry is tempered by the poet's will in what is, according to Paul Engle, "intelligence playing over against intuition, each bracing the other, the mind giving form and sense, the intuition giving immediately of impression, the stored-up memory, the deeply instinctive phrase" (qtd. in de Ungria xxi). Abad echoes this view in his description of the poet as passive and active: "[a] passive instrument, since the inspiration, whatever it is, triggers the rage of the thinking and the desiring of the poem-of-it.... But also, he is active, because of the thinking and the desiring for the poetic disclosure..." ("To the Reader" 6).

This play between intellect and intuition requires a unique kind of "management," according to Brewster Ghiselin:

> The mind in creation and in preparation for it nearly always requires some management.... The larger objects of management are two: discovering the clue that suggests the development to be sought, that intimates the creative end to be reached, and assuring a certain and economical movement toward that end. The indispensable condition of success in either stage of production is...freedom from the established

> schemes of consciousness.... It is essential to remember that the creative end is never in full sight at the beginning and that it is brought wholly into view only when the process of creation is completed.... What is necessary is to be able to look into the wings where the action is not yet organized, and to feel the importance of what is happening off stage.... The young artist is likely to feel that it is nothing, to go on imitating. Yet it is only there, behind the scenes that are so largely given over to the impressive play of traditional activity, that the new can be prepared. No matter how meager, dull, disorderly, and fragmentary the off-stage action, it must be attended to. For only on the fringes of consciousness and in the deeper backgrounds into which they fade away is freedom attainable. (qtd. in de Ungria xix-xx)

With this "curb and spurs" kind of management (akin to Longinus) are poets able to conceptualize their works. They do so by involving themselves in this

> play of forces whereby a particular poetic end (out of many possible ends) is arrived at through a set of rules which it has itself engendered and which assume an increasing prominence such that certain thoughts, images, and rhythms gravitate towards it to effect a whole (which is the particular poem), whereas other thoughts, images, and rhythms are allowed to slip back into their unknowns, perhaps never to return. (de Ungria xi-xii)

This "play of forces" follows what is also traditionally considered the recursive four stages of the creative process: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (de Ungria xvi). The recursive nature of these four phases is best demonstrated with my own experience in writing "Garden Jungle" (the final version below):

Garden Jungle
(for Marj)

we plant next season's blooms
we trim the hedges, mow the lawn
we hang the wind chimes
from the bamboo grove
we have clipped and pruned
and trained to plot
the rising full moon's arc
across our sky
and then we sit under its arch
listening to the bells filling
spaces we have made our own
while beneath us weeds
break through the ground

The preparation stage for this poem began way back in 1988. On a visit to the metropolis, I stayed at Marj Evasco's home. She lives in a townhouse in Mandaluyong City that has become a haven for several kindred probinsiyano/ probinsiyana caught in the city's grind. I was witness to how several of her friends who come from the Visayas would often gather in her tiny front garden. Sitting or lying on a mat in that garden with its bamboo grove, they would be transported back to the idyllic province in their minds. On one such night, I realized that what I was seeing could be a poem. Even as I listened to the conversation and sipped wine with that night's company, my mind was looking at this idea from several angles.

A year passed before I wrote down the first draft of the poem. Before that time, I had put away the idea that had been overtaken by more pressing concerns. It was just there, tucked away somewhere in my mind. In this incubation stage, the idea would sometimes pop up and I would play around with it in my mind. But I do not recall really thinking about it that much.

Then while writing to a friend in Manila, the idea suddenly flashed in my head. And in this stage of illumination, the idea came complete with an image. At that instant I knew how to put together the poem. I discovered what Ghiselin says is "the clue that suggests the development" of the idea into a poem. It would definitely have the bamboo grove as its central image.

I latched onto this image because on a later visit to Marj's place, I almost could not find her house because the front garden was gone. But it was not gone, really. Marj's father had recently come over from Bohol for a few weeks' visit. During his stay, he had replanted the bermuda grass and had laid out a pebbled and winding path from the street to the front door. He had also pruned the lush bamboo grove and lashed together the topmost and slender stalks so it would form an arch diagonally across the small front yard. Marj's father, who had taught her how to look for beauty in nature (see Evasco 101), had designed the arch like a bridge that would carry the moon as it made its way across the sky. So there was the poem in the making. All that was left for me to do was to write it down, which I did originally in my first language (Waray) and then translating it into English (talk about "spaces between words...between languages").

Kagurangan han Kasingkasing
(para kan Marj)

Kasayun mawara
Iton mga hardin
Nga aton tinitipigan:
~~Pangabuta iton mga tanom~~
~~Tabuga an huni han mga tamsi~~
~~Simentoha iton dalan~~
~~Ngadto han imo kasingkasing.~~

Kalimti an kawayan

Nga imo gintutdu-an
Pagtulay han kalangitan
Ngan an kagurangan
Han imo paniplat
Igwawara
An mga bituon
Ngan an hangin.

Hinumduma:
~~An huyop han hangin~~
~~Ha kadahunan han kawayan~~
~~Ug an kanta han mga tamsi.~~

Pagbasul maudlot.

English translation:

Jungle Heart
(for Marj)

How easy it is
To lose the gardens
That we keep:
~~Uproot the plants~~
~~Shoo away the birdsongs~~
~~Cement the path~~
~~Leading to your heart.~~

Forget the bamboo
You learned
To bridge the sky
And the wilderness
Of your glances
Shall mislay
The stars and the wind.

Remember:
~~The wind blowing through~~

~~The bamboo leaves,~~
~~And the songs of birds.~~

Regret buds.

But this verification stage did not end with that first draft. Somehow I did not feel right with that draft, which dealt with loss and the garden growing wild because of neglect. It was back to the preparation and incubation stages for me then. I would sometimes go over that draft in my mind, or not think about it at all. Then while on a long bus ride one time, it all came to me: with no pen or paper on me I revised the draft in my head. And when I reached home, I typed down the revised lines of the draft and fine-tuning it along the way to its final version.

That above description of the poem's genesis does not fully account for the conscious, but more often subconscious, process of deciding how to write each line. It does not also tell us how I came to the final two "apocalyptic" lines that are really just prepared for by the preceding lines. But that defining bus ride offers a clue. Sitting in such confined space over a period of time, and staring out the window without really seeing the passing scenery, provided me the luxury of meditation. Once the thought of that first draft came to mind, I was able to look at it closely and yet from an aesthetic distance. And becoming "aware of what...in the objects [or images were] also in us" (Manlapaz 66), I came to recognize the poem's insight. Loss thus becomes an active taming of the garden, and the "garden growing wild" is only suggested at in the final poem.

But more significant in this revision is something that Tiempo and the other workshop panelists always remind the writing fellows: "Show, don't tell." Here in the final version of the poem, the insight gained is shown to readers of the poem so that they too can negotiate their own ways of reading and seeing the world.

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