Blind Imagination: Pictures into Words

by Georgina Kleege

I ask, "What are we looking at here?"

Inevitably there is a pause, and then the description begins: "It's a black-and-white photograph of a man. A full-face portrait. He's a youngish man, maybe around thirty..."

"How can you tell?"

"His face looks...fully formed. A younger face would look softer around the chin and...there's not much in the way of wrinkles. His hairline seems to be receding slightly, or maybe he just has a naturally high forehead. Or else it's the way his hair is combed straight back. There's not a lot of hair, or else it's a light color, probably light brown or dark blond."

"What else? Give me a gut reaction."

"He looks very intelligent."

"Why?"

"He's wearing glasses, smallish, roundish, metal frames."

"Glasses make people look intelligent?"

"It's not just that. His gaze is very direct. He is gazing directly at the camera."

"You can see that through his glasses. There's no distortion?"

"No. His eyes are clearly visible. And it looks as if he's looking directly at me."

"And this makes him look intelligent?

responses from different viewers, so I often question multiple informants. In fact, this can make a good parlor game, though for my purposes there's a risk that people's descriptions will influence each other, so I do better to question them in isolation. When an adjective recurs in every description, I feel I may be close to something like universal truth, or at least a truth universal to the people I know, which may not be the same thing.

I do not suppose that I gain access to objective reality in this way. Generally, I learn more about the people speaking than about the image before their eyes. Different people notice different things. Some are quick to form snap judgments while others are more tentative. Knowing the traits and tendencies of my informants allows me to weigh their words. When I want a verbal description of something, I tend to choose people who are good talkers. It helps if they are accustomed to describing things to a blind person, practiced at translating their visual perceptions into language that will be meaningful to me. Their habit of translation and the questions I ask while they're doing it make them examine what they see with extra care, challenge their own assumptions and impressions, then revise the words they speak.

Other people, who consider themselves highly visual, may be as observant but may have a harder time expressing what they see. I was discussing Audio Description with a filmmaker acquaintance. We were referring to the new and still rather experimental technology where blind audience members at the theater or cinema use special radio receivers to hear a verbal description of the action, costumes and settings. The filmmaker said, "The problem is that every image would take so many words to describe adequately, that there would be no way that the Audio Description could keep up with the action."

I have to take her word for this, and to some extent I do, but I become resentful when the presumed impossibility of translating visual experience into language becomes an excuse for exclusion. If a picture is worth a thousand words, I'd settle for a hundred, even ten or twelve. Like many other blind viewers, my problem with Audio Description is not that

kind of information less necessary or meaningful. The best descriptions for blind people come from those who can step back from the immediacy of their own experience and imagine the world perceived by other means. A friend described something that happened in her orientation and mobility class where she and other blind students were learning to navigate using white canes. A group of students stood at an intersection while their instructor told them how to interpret the traffic flow from the sounds they heard. He used the phrase "a T-intersection," then paused and asked, "Do you all know what that means?"

One student did not. He had been blind since birth and a Braille reader since an early age. A T in Braille does not resemble the Roman letter, and reading Braille is not a matter of tracing individual characters but of feeling the pattern of raised dots in sequence as the finger sweeps across the line. Like many totally blind people he may have learned to write the Roman alphabet, at least enough of it to sign his name. But perhaps he had no T in his name, so the metaphor was lost on him, as were others such as U-turn, V-neck and S-curve. The instructor was also blind and had spent enough time explaining things to other blind people to know how to handle the situation. He drew a T on the student's back, and instantly he understood. In inscribing the two lines on the student's body, the instructor was not attempting to form a mental picture in the student's mind's eye. Rather he was inviting him to re-orient his mind's body in space, to transform his body into a map of the terrain that surrounded him, where his spine corresponded to one street and the perpendicular of his shoulders represented the other. "We're here," the instructor said, touching the student's right shoulder blade, "and we want to get over here" drawing a diagonal to the top of his left shoulder.

One way for the blind to understand how something looks is to grasp how it feels. Once a friend was showing me some photo portraits in an art magazine. While she described them, she took my hand, and using my finger like a pencil drew over the page saying: "Here's his arm. Here's his back. His head is pointing this way, and this elbow is pointing this way." Having traced the general outline of the person's body she went on to sketch in details: "The light is coming from this side. So this side of his face, his shoulder, his arm, and his torso are lit while all this is in shadow."

memory, the texture of paint under a brush or palate knife, or the satisfying splat of flung paint hitting canvas, mingled with the scent of oil paint and turpentine, as if I had been the one doing the painting. It is no accident that the two paintings I'm thinking of—one by Morris Kanter, the other by Jackson Pollack—are abstract. My parents, their teachers and friends were all abstract expressionists, so this was the first style of painting I was exposed to as a child. Since these works strive neither to tell a story nor to represent objects found in nature but rather to explore ideas about light, color, energy, rhythm and texture, my response, which is triggered by words and much more tactile than visual, is perhaps not so far-fetched. Certainly it is as apt as the response of a sighted museum visitor who complains that any five-year-old could do a better job.

scent that spurts up from its broken skin directly into the nostrils. She also associated the word with good health and bright, morning cheerfulness—qualities touted by the orange juice industry. For these reasons, any mention of the color always made her happy.

"What about safety orange?" my friend asked, returning us to the original subject. She was referring to the shade of orange used on road cones and barrels to indicate construction, and elsewhere to indicate hazardous substances or conditions.

"It would probably be better to call it danger orange," I told her. We went on to discuss shades of color. She said that she understood this through an analogy to sounds—louder and softer volumes, higher and lower pitches—which seemed as good a way as any to me.

I could have told her that Helen Keller claimed that pink was her favorite color because it made her think of the tender softness of a baby's cheek and the warm summer breezes of her childhood home in Alabama. Keller had no color perception either, but perceptively drew on cultural conventions that associate pink with infants, especially female infants, and then linked those general associations to the place and climate of her own infancy.

Instead, I told my friend a story about my mother, how when I was a teenager I went with her to visit the studio of a friend of hers who had recently died. She spent a long time staring at his palette that had been left untouched, at a particular shade of green he'd mixed for the painting he was working on before his final illness. She didn't say it, but I sensed that the color spoke to her as eloquently as if she'd heard his last words.

"What shade of green?" my friend wanted to know. “Bottle green, grass green, acid green?"

"I don't think it was a green found in nature,” I said. "I think that's why it was interesting."

I doubt that this conversation gave my friend a clearer understanding of orange, or green or any other color for that matter. We were talking around the topic, amassing and comparing anecdotes related to it, without ever quite putting a finger on the thing itself. Still, I think the discussion was mutually satisfying. Our tone alternated between

words, but I can experience words without images. When the words are well chosen they make something happen in my brain that is not entirely visual but is nevertheless vivid to me. And it happens without extraordinary effort, every time a friend phones to describe her new sofa, her desert vacation, or the birds on the branch outside her window. And it happens every time I sit down to read, as I imagine and hope it does for all readers, sighted and blind alike.

Georgina Kleege

Georgina Kleege was born in New York City in 1956. At age eleven, she was diagnosed as legally blind due to a rare form of Macular Degeneration. She attended regular schools and received a B.A. in English literature from Yale University in 1979. She is the author of a novel, *Home for the Summer* (Post-Apollo Press 1989) a collection of personal essays about blindness, *Sight Unseen* (Yale University Press 1999) and *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller*, (Gallaudet University Press 2006) an epistolary exploration of Keller's life. Her interest in the visual arts stems