



the Woman, the Mirror, the Eye
A Reflection in Three Parts Maureen Thorson

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*If a woman chances during her menstrual period to look
into a highly polished mirror, the surface of it will grow
cloudy with a blood-colored haze.*

—Aristotle, *On Dreams*

THE WOMAN

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Our senses are imperfect: our ears deceive us, our eyes play tricks. So we need other means by which to triangulate reality.

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Mirrors might be one. They show us things that our eyes can't see. Principally ourselves.

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But mirrors are imperfect, too. As I've read so often, the objects in them may be closer than they appear.

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Dreams are another possible source of insight. But the world is what we agree on. And how can we agree on a dream?

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“All men whilst they are awake are in one common world; but each of them, when he is asleep, is in a world of his own,” wrote Plutarch. And so, to quote the Scottish physician Robert MacNish, “there is a strong analogy between dreaming and insanity.”

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After a sudden onset of fuzzy, doubled vision, I was told that I was losing my sight. It could take years for the process to complete itself. Or perhaps it would not. Already, though, the doctor informed me, large blind spots had taken root in my right eye.

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In *Through the Looking Glass*, Tweedledum and Tweedledee inform Alice that they are all part of a dream that the sleeping Red King is having, and that when he wakes, they’ll “go out–bang!–just like a candle!”

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Shortly after my diagnosis, I read an article about mirrors in folklore. It described a Chinese legend that says our reflections are separate

beings, condemned for past transgressions to sleepwalk through life, dumbly mimicking our actions.

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Several years before the blind spots, I experienced bright blue flashes occluding my vision. I was referred to a neurologist. But when I went to see him, the neurologist was angry. He thought I was wasting his time. In his opinion, I was “seeing things.”

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Yes, of course. That was why I was there. But he meant that I was crazy. That I was failing to live in our common reality.

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Whose reality?

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In her essay “Finding Poetry in Illness,” Jennifer Nix writes: “Those who haven’t suffered serious illness rarely understand how isolating it can be.”

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In describing menstruating women's effect on mirrors, Aristotle posits a scene that is part of no common reality I've experienced. A scene that could only happen in a dream.

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Still, does that make it insane to believe that a woman's cycle will color a mirror? Aristotle was wrong, but was he crazy?

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Back to the Chinese legend. It says that our reflections will someday throw off their torpor and attack us. The flickering movements we catch in mirrors, out of the corners of our eyes, are their first stirrings.

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Between the blue flashes and the blind spots, I have been tested, to my growing annoyance, four times for colorblindness. As if I would not notice.

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Would I notice? If I lost my sight, what else would be lost?

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In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger describes the Western tradition of painting nude women so as to gratify the viewer's desire, while hypocritically shaming the woman for her nudity. There is also a feeling of unasked-for shame in being seen as sick, although one feels like a locus of repulsion or pity, rather than desire. But in both cases, the person beheld is not really seen as a person, but as an object, a lesson. In both cases, the beheld represents a moral error.

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Even so, I could look into a mirror for hours.

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The Chinese legend interests me enough to conduct further research. But I find that there is no such legend at all. Instead, the whole idea seems to trace—of course—to Borges.

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For hours—were it not that I have bad dreams.

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In the wake of my diagnosis, I felt cut off from others. Did being labeled as sick create the distance, or did it make me conscious of a gap that was always there?

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Writing is a vain, heartbreaking, and lonely act, like waving at oneself in a mirror.

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To be ill. To be crazy, wrong, ashamed. In a world of one's own.

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Here I am, with my half-sighted eyes. Do I flicker or stir? Am I closer than I appear?

THE MIRROR

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Brunelleschi is said to have discovered linear perspective with the aid of a mirror.

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Linear perspective makes paintings seem more “real”—that is to say, less like the flat rectangles that they actually are.

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On a day when I could no longer stand the radically different images produced by my afflicted eyes, I taped the worst of them shut, and went around one-eyed for a day. Without depth perception, it was as though I were walking (and sometimes tripping) through a painting.

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All hail the vanishing point.

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In Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *The Ambassadors*, there is a curious, elongated object at the foot of the table on which the portrait's subjects lean. Only when the painting is viewed from an angle does the object take on its correct proportions, revealing itself as a human skull.

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Biologists determine the mental acuity of animals by testing whether they can recognize themselves in mirrors. Very few animals pass the mirror test: the great apes, elephants, dolphins and killer whales, magpies.

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Humans pass the test only from the age of eighteen months onward.

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There is only one surviving nude by Diego Velázquez, the court painter to Philip IV. It depicts Venus in the style pioneered by Titian: stretched out on a couch, her reflection visible in a mirror that Cupid holds before her.

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The mirror test strikes me as flawed in that it presupposes that vanity is a sign of intelligence.

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After all, certain relatively intelligent animals, such as pigs, can determine that there is food behind them by seeing it reflected in a mirror, but do not appear to take interest in their own reflections.

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It is usually said that Velázquez's Venus is admiring herself. But the viewer can see Venus's reflection in the mirror that Cupid holds in front of her. This would seem to mean that Venus is not using the mirror to look at herself: she is using it to look at you.

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Velázquez's most famous painting also employs a mirror. *Las Meninas* depicts a princess of Spain with her ladies-in-waiting, two dwarfs, a dog, Velázquez himself before a canvas, a distant courtier upon a stair and, small, dark, but directly in the center of the painting, the

reflections of the king and queen of Spain, ostensibly the subjects of their painted painter's work, posed just where the viewer stands, looking in and over the scene.

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Velázquez's *Venus* has long been in the collection of the British Museum. In 1913, it was severely damaged when the canvas was slashed through by a knife-wielding suffragette.

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The narrative that subsequently developed in the press was more suited to attempted murder than vandalism, treating the painted image as though it were flesh and blood, and the woman who had "injured" it as two-dimensional, a slaving maniac.

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The perspective we see in paintings is, of course, false. There is no depth within the canvas. All representative painting may be said, in this way, to "trompe l'oeil," that is, to fool the eye.

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Neurologists have discovered a system of “mirror neurons” in the human brain, which fire when a person performs an action and also when a person sees another perform it.

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Some neurologists argue that mirror neurons explain the human ability to learn through mimicry and to anticipate other people’s motivations. Others think these neurologists are seeing what they want to see, and extrapolating wildly from what is only partly understood.

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“We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth,” wrote Mark Rothko. Or Magritte, more playfully, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe.”

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There is an ancient Greek story about two painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasius. They compete to see who can make the most realistic

painting. Zeuxis paints grapes so lusciously that birds fly down to eat them. Parrhasius, in turn, invites Zeuxis to pull back the curtains drawn over his painting. But the curtains themselves are the painting—and Parrhasius wins.

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In one of his 1964 seminars on psychoanalysis, Lacan makes use of this story to describe an aspect of the human mind that separates us from animals. It is our love of *trompe l'oeil* in the sense of Parrhasius's painted curtain: an urge toward what is hidden.

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In an essay on Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, Catherine Belsey glosses Lacan's concept of *trompe l'oeil* as "the promise of a presence that it fails to deliver."

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Writing, like painting, attempts to make a clear picture cohere from the mess of experience. It promises to deliver—and fails.

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“The truth is more important than the facts,” wrote Frank Lloyd Wright.

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Shakespeare thought that the point of art is to hold the mirror up to life. Oscar Wilde said it was to conceal anything but beauty. All of this mirroring and concealing reveals what? A simulacrum? Lacan’s irresistibly ersatz semblant?

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Ceci n’est pas un poème.

THE EYE

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The condition I was diagnosed with is called acute zonal occult outer retinopathy (AZOOR). Its most salient characteristic is that it can't be seen.

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At least, not directly. An AZOOR sufferer's retina appears perfectly healthy—no dead spots or occlusions. AZOOR can only be inferred by testing the patient's field of vision, one eye at a time, mapping the large blind spots that characterize the condition like someone sounding a bay.

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You look at the eye—AZOOR's not there. You look at what the eye sees—ah, there it is.

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After receiving my diagnosis, I went back to my job as a lawyer, where I pored over long, tiny-fonted legal documents for hours, growing angrier and angrier, wondering if they might be the last thing I see.

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How do you tell the truth about an illness so rare there's virtually nothing written about it? A diagnosis that is itself uncertain, because the disease's primary symptom is that nothing appears physically wrong?

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How do you tell the truth when you are upset, emotional? After being told I might be going blind, I became angry. Soon, I was angry all the time. But no one seemed to notice. I began to feel as if I were going crazy, as if the only way anyone would *get it* were if I had some kind of sordid breakdown.

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Instead, I wrote poems.

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In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot wrote that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.”

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Yes, and mirrors turn red when menstruating women look at them.

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Still, I’d like to be free from emotion, though I suspect that a person who expresses none is far more insane than one who expresses too much.

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The psychiatrist Anna Fels speculates that artists are better proofed against tragedy than other people. Whether crossed by a perfidious lover or a frail body, the artist can wrest back the narrative, retell and shape it, and, finally, call it her own.

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Hello, book. Hello, little mirror of my suffering.

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“The ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,” as Anne Bradstreet said.
More Caliban than Ariel?

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The blind poet is a romantic notion—we ascribe a clairvoyance, literally a kind of “clear seeing”—to Homer and Milton. But the only insight I’ve received from my eye problems is into how unclearly we see everything, even ourselves, and how fitful are our illusions of control.

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And even as I write this, I question my right to do so. Doesn’t it sound too whiny? Really, I haven’t suffered very greatly. Do I deserve to speak at all?

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Of course, as Zora Neale Hurston warned, “if you are silent about your

pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”

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Silence can't protect you from emotion, from personality.

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So here I am, telling you all this, exposing my vulnerability, my rawness and doubt, and feeling ashamed of myself for telling. Even now, per John Berger, I connive in treating myself as a sight.

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Of course, I *am* a sight. A writer writes to be read.

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If silence can't save you from emotion, writing can't save you from going blind. But writing offers the reductive simplicity of narrative, with its seductive endings, tidy resolutions.

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Its offers a simulacrum of control, an opportunity to appear acceptably

placed within the confines of our common reality.

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No one asked T. S. Eliot whether he *deserved* to escape. It was enough that he could.

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And I can try, at least for a while. The unreality of words, hiding in plain sight their lack of three dimensions, is no worse than any other.

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Now you see me—

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What a strange dream!, thought the Red King, waking with a start.

Maureen Thorson lives in Washington, D.C. She is the author of *My Resignation*, published by Shearsman Books in 2014, *Applies to Oranges*, published in 2011 by Ugly Duckling Presse, and a number of chapbooks, including *Mayport*, which won the Poetry Society of America's National Chapbook Fellowship for 2006. She is the poetry editor of *Open Letters Monthly* and the founder of NaPoWriMo, an annual project in which poets attempt to write a poem a day for the month of April.

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