

WRITING MY WAY THROUGH DOUBLE VISION

(with a little help from my dream)



Ellen B. Ryan

“Did we get hit?” My seat is almost horizontal, and a strange silence fills the sunny day. I have lost track of time, but I remember that we were driving on a side road towards Sunday lunch at my brother-in-law’s farm in southern Ontario’s Glenelg Township.

“Rear-ended,” my husband Patrick says. “That lady’s airbag released. She didn’t even slow down for the stop sign here. We were pushed into the intersection – the boys and I are OK. Are you?”

“Not sure. My neck hurts – hurts a lot.”

Six years after this lightning strike, I was still in rehab for double vision and vertigo – both conditions made walking and reading difficult.

Like a tree struck by lightning
I am dizzy as I bend and sway
with snarled messages for how to see
and stand. My branches tingle
severed from my roots

My double vision overlapped letters vertically, so reading lines on a page was often difficult. At the time of the dream that will change my future, I could read a page or three at good times in the day before the lines blurred into each other. My coping strategies included read-alouds with friends, scanning and text-to-speech software, large Arial font and audio books to supplement my reading from printed books. I was able to work, but only part-time with a competent assistant.

One night before dawn, I half awoken from a lucid dream:

I am walking in a cornfield, tasselled stalks shoulder high. Ankle weights keep track of where my feet are, as they did after the accident. Even with my walking stick, it is all I can do to walk upright. I scan the scene for landmarks, spot only an occasional towering sunflower. Nothing unusual about dizzy walking in my dreams. But in this dream, I can see how my confused walking



I See Me In Reflection 1

relates to my vision: the cornfields are the lines of text confusing me, the far-off sunflowers are hard-to-grasp words, the ones I am supposed to say or write.

“Write poems,” a resonant voice demands. “The white space around short lines will make it easier for you to read and write words. You will be able to write poems.”

In my dream I watch my hands tremble as I shove cornstalks aside, “How can this be?” I ask. “I haven’t studied poems since high school. Where does such an idea come from?” The voice guides my scramble through the field.

Continuing in the dream, I see myself at the podium closing a recent talk on dementia by reading three poems. First time I have ever included poems in an academic presentation. These poems drew loving attention to the rich emotional life of people losing their short-term memory and ability to communicate. Afterwards I told our adult daughter about the audience being so moved that I omitted my summary comments. Lori went on to tell our family at supper, “Mom recited poetry in her speech today.”

“But I did not recite poetry; I only read poems. Who am I to recite or write poetry?” I wonder, my eyebrows lifting with surprise and curiosity while I walk in the cornfield. It is only in the dream that I notice that the chosen poems are in first person, each creating an I-Thou moment.

Next, my cornfield dream journey takes me to an image from the previous Christmas Day when our son Kevin was kneeling on the floor scribbling on the piano bench. At age 24, he was playing guitar much of the time during our family holiday. I saw how words to a new song are flowing from his pencil like water from a hose. I felt a pang of envy for Kevin’s gift of song, recognizing that composing songs was beyond my tuneless voice. Now, in the dream, I imagine that perhaps I too can compose the words – though the melody will have to wait until I live among the angels. I trudge farther into the cornfield, shoving my way through the path narrowed by hefty mature cobs.

In the cornfield, I see my journals, upright soldiers. Since the accident, I have not been able to read anything written with my mechanical pencil or even a ballpoint pen. I needed large, bold print to cope with double vision. It took a long time to find suitable markers. Some have blunt tips, some give off a stink that turns my stomach, others dry up while I pause to think. Once I discovered children’s Crayola markers, I was able to journalize again. Tossing the invisible yellow marker, I wrote every other line with brown, then blue, then green. Now the parade of ten journals seems to press the question, *Where is all this journalizing headed?*

Coming out of my reverie of pages written when I got to the red and purple markers, I notice my path is opening out and taking me closer to clusters of sunflowers. I see those hard-to-grasp word-flowers facing towards the light. Pushing my face into a giant sunflower, I am tickled by its balm as I breathe in hope.



I See Me In Reflection 2

Now the golden flower clusters shift into whimsical sections among the scrawled lines in my journals while something stirs deep inside – these few word-flowers glow with summer possibility.

It strikes me that I can take colour-filled flower clusters – these words from my journal – and arrange them on a page – lift them out of the thicket of cornrows, nurture them and set them off in a meadow of white space.

I wake from my dream full of energy and resolve to write poetry, although I have no idea how to begin. I can well identify with mental confusion/darkness due to bouts of unsettling dizziness and lack of balance. But after the dream, I feel like a maple tree in spring, sap rising, buds about to burst. I ponder: how do trees stand strong through dark nights, winter storms? Trees console by their erect presence and with the space surrounding them. So, like the trees, with more white space and shorter lines, I will reconnect with ideas and creativity.

A few words per line, a few lines per stanza and the brevity of poetry offer a chance to read more naturally, with less brain stress. Also, use of a few words pointing to powerful images allows me to take full advantage of my newly acquired ‘*read-a-little-think-a-lot*’ skills.

Weeks after the dream, my husband spots a notice for an adult-education course on poetry, entitled *Call of the Spirit*. Patrick does not normally pass along notices from his alumni newsletter, but here I am, like the ‘Energizer Bunny,’ repeating, “I need to write poems. How do I learn to write poems?” The sound of the course title catapults me back into the dream. I accept Pat’s offer to drive me to Toronto every other Saturday morning for the course. I anticipate lectures on the nature and techniques of poetry and a selection of great poems to analyze.

I walk up the curved staircase to the classroom with legs shaking more than usual. Middle-aged women fill the room, chatting easily with each other. I soon hear from them that many take this course over and over again to keep writing poetry. “Oh, yes,” they answer to my query about the teacher. “Al Moritz is a great poet and an attentive listener. But, no, he does not do any direct teaching.”

Indeed, Al announces, “For each session, you will be prepared to distribute 20 copies of your own new poem for critique by the group. I will comment last.”

No traditional instruction, I think. *How will I be able to manage?* The class veterans did assure me of their support. Before I can bolt out the door, the campus chimes root my feet, breathe through me and bless my resolve. *How could I give up this best chance to learn poetry?* I repeat the course for three seasons.



I See Me In Reflection 3

Ellen B. Ryan is professor emeritus at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. She is a member of Tower Poetry Society, co-editor of *Celebrating Poets over 70* and *Second Journeys: The Dance of the Spirit in Later Life*, and author of the book *Ability Speaks: Talking with a Person with Disability*. She hosts the Writing, Aging and Spirit and the Hamilton Aging in Community websites. Along with talented colleagues, she fosters writing of life stories and poetry among older adults. Ellen also practises mindfulness in nature with her camera. Her specialty is selfie/unsselfie shadow images. She held her first gallery showing in 2022, "My Pilgrim Shadows." The photographs included here are reflections capturing the sense of self through double vision.

In time
I am a lightning survivor
pain-pruned
toes planted in fertile ground
I listen to wind whispers
reach for the sky

My beguiling dream has lured me into the creative life. My resilience grows as I dig deep and risk sharing my spirit via my words. Soon after my first poetry course, I am fortunate to join a writing group, which continues to inspire me twenty years later.

Rehab on Jerseyville Trail

Cadence of daily steps
balances dizzy legs

Into my reverie breaks
an ancient leafy oak

Tugged toward the sky
by upturned branches

first time
I'm standing free

Weight of earth
roots one leg

my healing
yoga tree

I pay attention to the moment and set words within white space. I still wonder about the meaning of white space. Of course, it focuses the mind on the light within a few words, but it also holds the mystery of the unattainable brightness of all colours working together.

White Space

words pared
white space invites
open to light
sound-sprouts for green
unbirthed seeds

Writing and my continuing journey with photography fill my days.