



Georgia O'Keeffe
and the Project of Seeing:

A Craft Talk and Workshop
for Writers

SEEING

1. A discipline: seeing, *really*
1. A technique: view-finding







“Nobody sees a flower really; it is so small. We haven’t time, and to see takes time—like to have a friend takes time.”

-Georgia O’Keeffe

“A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many *associations* with a flower -- the *idea* of flowers. You put out your hand to touch the flower — lean forward to smell it — maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking — or give it to someone to please them. Still — in a way — nobody sees a flower — really — it is so small — we haven't time — and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.”

-Georgia O'Keeffe (italics mine)

“We don’t see things as they are, we see them as *we* are.”

-Anaïs Nin

“Wash the gum from your eyes!”

-Walt Whitman

“Cleanse the doors of perception.”

-William Blake

And the Zen masters counsel their students to “wipe the lens” through which they experience the world.

Young children see the world in a manner relatively unencumbered by association and interpretation.

For the rest of us, this kind of seeing is a discipline.

It requires practice, and the practice doesn't feel good—at least not at first. It feels clunky, awkward, confining. After all, we know how to use words, we're good at it, and this is a practice that ties our hands.

THE DISCIPLINE:

For a few minutes every day, write about what is front of you—about what you see and experience with your other senses.

Not what you think about it, what it reminds you of, etc.

No simile, no metaphor.

This is essentially a re-training in seeing

Some payoffs

See Hand-out:

1. **“Summer Kitchen”**
by Donald Hall

A poem composed almost entirely of observed details, with almost no figurative language or interpretation.

2. & 3. Surprising language (figures of speech) as in the excerpts from W. S. Merwin and Wislawa Szymborska.

We can open ourselves to this level of freshness through the practice of separating our observations from our accustomed associations and responses.

4. & 5. Two poems (Tony Hoagland, Carolyn Forché) that employ, to powerful effect, restraint in the use of figurative language and interpretation / commentary.

A Technique:

View-finding

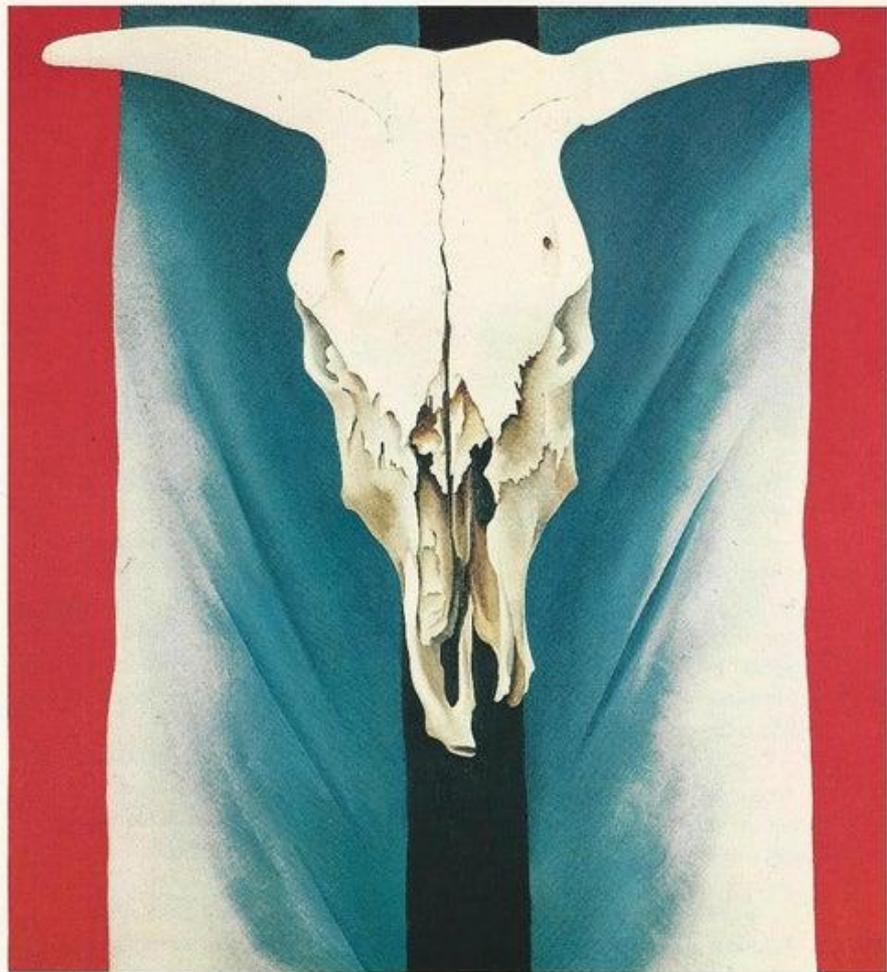




“I began picking up bones the first year because we didn’t have any flowers.”

-Georgia O’Keeffe







“When I started painting the pelvis bones I was most interested in the holes in the bones—what I saw through them”

--Georgia O'Keeffe



View-finders, lenses, framing devices:

What are analogous moves (techniques) for us as writers?

Move #1:

See through someone or something
else's eyes

--in poetry, persona poems

--in fiction, character as lens

In poetry:

the persona poem

In fiction:

seeing through the eyes
of a character
(character as lens)

Move #2:

Train the lens on a different era
in your life

Exercise, Part 1

Write for ____ minutes in first person about yourself as a writer (or painter, music-maker, sculptor . . .) at an early age—that is, an early creative experience.



Exercise, Part 2

Continue from where you left off,

OR

shift the lens, and write from the perspective of someone else (parent, teacher, friend or nemesis . . .) observing you doing what you've just written about.



The Project of Seeing



