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Look and Listen

by Ma. Elena L. Paulma

“Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.” My students in my writing classes love to memorize these words by Anton Chekhov. It is one of my favorite examples for a writer’s “surrender to a world of images.” The use of imagery is any creative writer’s first secret. If you ask me, it would be the first element of craft that I would like to master. With the use of imagery through language, a character, setting, story, and voice can be created.

Perhaps you are one of those who cringe at the thought of writing an essay, or a short story, or God forbid, poetry. Perhaps you are very much afraid that words will fail you. Well, let us rest on

the fact that words will always fail us. No matter what we say or how we say it, the reality before us is already gone even as we begin to think of the words with which to describe it. So allow your fear to make itself felt at the first words on the page, but do not give up because you have within you a unique combination of words that must be allowed expression.

You will recall that we spoke of writing as a way of looking at the world. All you have to do is take the time to look. When I say “time,” I mean waiting for what’s before you to speak to you. So why don’t you just pause and take a look at the world around you.

Upon waking up, look at the red, yellow, and orange hues of the clouds as the sun rises. Notice the soft blue of the sky as darkness gives way to light. Pay attention to the rooster announcing the arrival of a new day. Savor the way the soft morning light brings into play the dance of transparent leaves on the tree in your backyard. Now run, because you are already late. But on the way to work you may marvel at the man in red sweeping the street, and you would like to write about him, maybe something like this:

The Man with the Broom

There he sits,
a one-act play
framed by the bus window,
a little island
against a great wall,
a face gone blank from waiting,
dust slowly settling
on bright colored candies and cigarettes
lining a tray before him.

They walk past, hurriedly,
those who have somewhere to go -
moving curtains opening and closing
on this sidewalk tableau -
now you see him,
now you don’t.

Open curtain –
he holds a broom,
sweeps his little part of the sidewalk –
close curtain.

The bus moves on -
I am on my way to somewhere.

I leave the man, his wall,
his broom, his sidewalk.

I will go far,
but he has done more.

In creative writing, you will not be required to write big words. In fact, you will be asked to use the simplest words possible, words that appeal to the five senses. Write about what you see, hear, taste, smell, or touch. Art is not overly concerned with the product, but rather with the process or the slow movement towards what we want to say. It is not even concerned with being fully and logically understood. We read literature not because we want to know. We read because we want to experience the inner *inexpressible* meanings and feelings beneath the surface of things and people.

There is, therefore, one other thing that you must do as a writer. This is to listen to how you feel. A writer does not only look. A writer listens to that which is beyond and beneath what s/he sees, and responds to it through words. To write is, quite simply, to look and listen.