

An Interview with Elizabeth Goldring

author of *Eye: Poems and Retina Prints*

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Interviewed by Karen I. Johnson

Q. Your new book, Eye, is more than a collection of poetry. It also includes retina prints. In fact, the title of the book is actually that of one of your retina prints. Could you begin by describing the significance of the collection's title and the way it is printed? Also, could you explain the process involved in making retina prints?

A. The hyphen that substitutes for the final e in the title of the book and in the retina print stands metaphorically for the fact that my eyes don't see equally. My sight now is limited to light and shadow perception in one eye. The retina prints represent my way of seeing the imagery. The prints capture the eye's retina looking at an image using a machine called the Scanning Laser Ophthalmoscope (SLO). Both the retina with its optic nerve tendrils and what the retina is seeing are pictured in the prints. The book contains an explanatory note about the retina prints that discusses my introduction to the SLO, which is a diagnostic tool, and the process of using the SLO to create the prints.

Q. Previously, you have described some of your poems as "eye poems." Could you explain what you mean and do you consider "Bittersweet" an eye poem? Are there other examples in this collection?

A. Now, my eye poems either deal directly with the visual phenomenon going on inside my eyes or they deal with my indirect or convoluted way of seeing. Yes, I would call "Bittersweet" an eye poem. The poem talks about my view of a very familiar environment where I lived. In the last stanza, "Against my panes first circles form lengthening daggers", I'm inside looking out but beyond my eyes. I am also into an area of eye phenomenon where there is a lot going on inside my eyes. An earlier poem, "Lobster", from my first book deals entirely with visual phenomenon because at that time I could not see. Most of the poems in this new collection are in some way what I call eye poems.

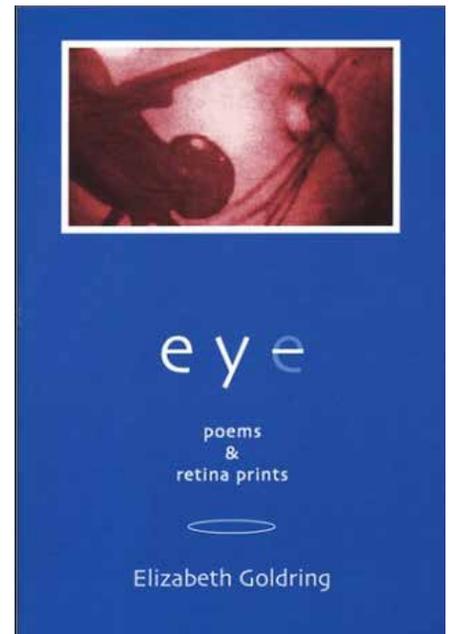
Q. Currently, your art exhibit, entitled "Eye: Retinal Prints and Poetry," is being shown at the Compton Gallery of the MIT Museum. There, the emphasis is on the visual art of the retina prints. How would you describe the relationship of the prints to this collection of poems?

A. I consider retina prints to be visual poems. They represent the way I see. Another parallel between the poems and the prints is that they both rely on an economy of strokes. There is a very good reason for that economy. I can't see more than four letters in a word at any time so it is important for me to be economical with my words.

Q. In a blurb to this book, two doctors from the Beetham Eye Institute at Harvard University say that this new work shows that you have adjusted to your loss of vision. Could you describe the process of that adjustment and how it has affected your poetry?

A. I'm not sure I have adjusted. I think it is difficult for me to analyze my poetry for changes. Many earlier eye poems dealt with visual phenomenon. Now, I tend to talk about me and my eyes in the environment--both familiar and new environments. Now I am looking out instead of looking inside my eyes. This represents the changes in my vision. In the poem, "Beijing" I am talking about what my eyes see, but in the environment. For example, the poem begins, "Down a wide street metal blur assails me, sun glinting white on spokes, white shirts."

Q. This collection of poems is divided into four sections: "Going Away," "Going Home," "Eros Ambulance," and "Portraits and Dialogues." Tell me a little bit about the structure of these sections and how they are connected.



A. In “Going Away,” the landscapes are not familiar. Going new places is terrifying for people who don’t see. You never know where there might be steps or objects in your path. Yet I travel a lot. These poems describe not just what I see when I am in unfamiliar places but what I hear and smell in experiencing the new environment.

The poems in “Going Home” are the ways I see familiar environments. I can look at an object like a coffee mug and sometimes I see a coffee mug. At other times I might see a cigar or something else. For people who don’t see well, objects change a lot. The poem, “Cigar Tree (Things aren’t what they seem)” illustrates those changes in what I see when I am looking.

The poems in “Eros Ambulance” are about human relationships. The poems in “Portraits and Dialogues” are my recordings of conversations. I don’t recognize faces so I recognize people from what is being said. The way I have to communicate, by hearing dialogue, is difficult for me because I can’t see shifting facial expressions. I miss that eye-to-eye communication. Not having that is somewhat isolating.

Q. One of your gifts to your readers is your ability to craft a rich visual image using a very small measure of words. For example, I can picture vividly the funeral procession of the fisherman in “The Ugly Fish” yet your description contains only 23 words. How do you accomplish this and does “A Poet’s Bath” speak to this talent?

A. First, my economy of words or strokes is in self defense. When I can read at all, I must read with a lot of magnifiers. One of the most frustrating things for me is to read something with a lot of excess verbiage. Each word that I read takes me so long. I am not very happy reading filler words so I want to get rid of those words instantly. I also don’t like words that say more than they need to so there is an emphasis on short or concrete vocabulary. It’s not that I don’t know any big words. When we’re young we’re tempted to use those words but they, too, take a long time to read. I like onomatopoeic words. I start out often with pages of writing. Then I begin to hone. Sometimes I whittle poems down until there is nothing left so there are all sorts of lost poems around. With “A Poet’s Bath,” the poem being created by the bather is an automatic poem, not one being honed over time. That is not the way it works for me. I work on my poems a long time, but their creation happens on many levels. The idea often comes in a rush--like during a bath. But the ultimate honing takes time. The reference to lost rosettas are those poems that bite the dust or that are never interpreted or are interpreted to death.

Q. You are using the Scanning Laser Ophthalmoscope (SLO) to create the retina prints at MIT. Most of us think of MIT as strictly a scientific or technological venue. What has been your experience creating art in such a setting?

A. I’ve been at MIT for a long time and I stay because each day I’m confronted with something new, something I don’t know, some way of thinking that is not part of my daily appetite. The Center for Advanced Visual Studies was founded in 1967 by Gyorgy Kepes, who was a very important artist. Otto Piene, who also happens to be my husband, was director of the center for twenty years. He had an unswerving instinct and care for the art in art appliance and technology so during that time at MIT, there were very potent, interesting artists who used MIT like a candy store for the tools of their art. They created art works that hadn’t been created before. They developed new artistic tools. For example, holography was widely developed at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies as was laser art. I think now maybe the emphasis is more on the engineering and technological aspects at the Center. Some days it feels a little more isolating being an artist and a poet there. But that may reflect the changing times in the art world as well. It may have been a more exciting time in art in the 1970s. The work that I have chosen to do I couldn’t do so well anyplace else. I have both technology and technological expertise available to me when I need it. First, I do need it partly to be able to see, and partly I need it to create the work that I create. Technically speaking, it is possible now for almost everybody who is blind or visually challenged to be able to see something. However, it is only possible in the laboratory. I don’t know when it is going to get out of the laboratory. That is what I am trying to do. I think the possibility to keep the visual sense alive even if you only use it to cross the street is really a possibility that will bear fruit at some point in time. People will be able to enjoy a visual experience even if they have only very limited vision. Qualitative rather than quantitative aspects of vision will be able to be realized.

Q. You have been described as a visual artist, a poet, an educator, and a scientist. How do you reconcile such varied roles?

A. I don't think of myself in any role. I guess that is how I reconcile all of it. I just think of what I want to do and try to figure out how to do it. I do have a mission. I do have passion. I have a lot of energy for work.

Q. Is there any one particular thing you do that you enjoy doing more than anything else?

A. Oh, yes. I enjoy making poems, whether it's using words or whether it's visual poems like the retina prints.

Q. What do poets think about people trying to interpret their work and possibly misinterpreting it? Do you have any guidance for readers who seek to interpret the work of poets, particularly your work?

A. I always think it is interesting to hear what somebody thinks about something. Many times somebody will say something that puts things in a different perspective--that just juxtaposes things differently, kind of like my eyesight does for me all the time. That's the way I regard criticism or observation. Other peoples' perspectives are interesting. For example, your question about "A Poet's Bath." You said some things that made me think or rethink words that I had said. That is what creative thinking is all about. Depending upon the poem, many poems lend themselves to different interpretations with each additional reading. Hopefully, a poem does that. I think that one reading of a poem may not be enough.

Q. What will be your next project?

A. I have been invited to a space shuttle launch and NASA wants me to create retina prints based upon my experience at the launch. I will be dealing with inner space/outer space. That coincides with a series of Sky Art Conferences out of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. There have been four which I co-directed. We are doing a fifth one in mid October in Greece where I will be talking about inner space/outer space, a concept that for me is quite exciting. On one level it is exciting metaphorically as a poet. It is also exciting literally because right now our only way to understand space is visually so people who are visually challenged or blind are left out of the loop. Also, there are no blind astronauts. Just for now, the awareness that the retina prints may inspire is a step. So I am delighted to be able to work with NASA. The launch I hope to observe is scheduled for the first part of October.



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