chapter 5

Here's Looking at You

Of all the normal visual experiences that sighted people take for granted, the one I find most confusing is eye contact. I could live with this confusion except that sometimes eye contact seems a matter of life and death. For instance, one day I was listening to tabloid TV and heard a woman talking about shooting the man who molested her child. She said that before she pulled the trigger she wanted to look him "dead in the eye." She wanted to see for herself whether he regretted what he'd done. To do this she had to step right up to him, an arm's length away, endangering herself. But, she said, she had to do this, had to take those few extra seconds to look him in the eye. She explained that if she'd seen any sign of remorse, she wouldn't have fired it. But there was nothing in his eyes. No remorse. Only fear. So she killed him.

I try to picture this. What does remorse look like, I wonder. Like a Method actress I summon memories of actions I regret. I touch my face to feel my expression. My brows knit, lifting the outer corners of my eyes, while my mouth droops, deflating my cheeks. What this may be doing to my eyeballs I cannot tell. Fear, I know, stretches the skin around the eyes, revealing a lot of white. If the child molester had only managed to alter his expression in some way, make his eyelids quiver, perhaps squeeze out a tear, could he have saved himself? Would the mother have been taken in? More likely she would have seen the insincerity in his look and shot him anyway. And she didn't give him that much time. The whole incident could have lasted only a few seconds. He saw her, or at least saw someone step out of the shadows into his path. It's possible that he didn't even recognize her. He probably wasn't expecting to see her there, and so drew a blank. And when he saw the gun in her hand it didn't make much difference who she was. Then she shot him. No time for him to lift his gaze and look her "dead in the eye" and see what she wanted. And what exactly would he have seen? Question, accusation, hatred, rage.

And there's more. In that final split second of eye contact the mother wanted something else to occur. She was not merely reading his look, deciphering the thoughts going on behind the precise configuration of his features. She was also attempting to inscribe something there, an image of her face, and in her face, a reflection of her child's face. Apt, from her point of view at least, that the final image should encompass the reason for death, and (as she saw it) its justice—the mother of his victim and his executioner all in one. She said something about sending him to his maker. She wanted him to carry her image along with him. It would stand between him and his God, to obscure their view of each other and prevent the possibility of eye contact between them. It could also serve as

a label identifying his crime, just in case his maker was looking the wrong way when he committed it. Mother, executioner, maker, destroyer. All there in a blink of an eye.

The interviewer did not question the mother about her need to make eye contact before she shot the child molester. Had it been me, I might have asked: "Didn't you see what you wanted to see? Isn't this detail in your story meant to arouse sympathy by implying that you were provoked into shooting him by the way he looked at you?" The interviewer assumed that a majority of viewers would find the mother's explanation of those few seconds plausible. A look can be a provocation. A look can speak volumes. Apparently it can say, "I hurt your child and got away with it," in a way that cannot be mistaken for, "I regret what I did. Please don't shoot me." Apparently most viewers would take this for granted. They might debate whether her act was justified, but they would not doubt that some meaningful and unambiguous eye-to-eye communication took place.

Eye contact is a mystery to me. My macular degeneration makes it impossible for me to see such detail as features on a face. When I try to look someone in the eyes, he disappears. If the person is close, in intimate space, the upper third of his face hazes over. I may see his lips move, but I cannot see his eyes. If he is across a table from me, my impaired central vision decapitates him. A haze hangs above his shoulders. To see him, to make his head solidify into a discernible form, I shift my eyes slightly to one side. I aim for his ear. The haze resolves into a head shape. But the sidelong glance lacks detail. I see a shadowy T of eyes, nose, and mouth. I cannot tell whether the eyes are open or closed. I can't tell whether he's looking at me. Besides, this off-center gaze can make me seem shy, distracted, suspicious, bored, or untrustworthy. I shift my gaze back, centering my eyes on his, or where I know them to be. I hit

my mark—bull's eye—but I see and feel nothing. Still, nine out of ten people sitting across the table from me would call this eye contact. At the precise instant I see them the least, they believe me to be engaged in the most significant visual exchange.

Faking eye contact is not terribly hard. As I've noted before, sighted people are not always that observant. Also, when your eyes are lined up with the eyes of the person across the table, your ears are conveniently aligned for optimum stereophonic listening. So you can hear eye contact even if you can't see it. Some sighted people can tell the difference, however. When I was a dance student at the Martha Graham School, one of the elements of the choreographic repertoire that gave me a lot of trouble involved the gaze. Sometimes a dancer was required to meet the gaze of a dancer across the stage or to fixate on an object. This had to be done with enough intensity and precision so that the whole audience could tell what each dancer was looking at. My teachers there were trained to spot the minutest detail of a dancer's movement or physiognomy and so were never fooled by my charade. They commented on the way my gaze wavered or seemed to fall short of the target. I perceived this as yet another feat of muscular control to master and would practice in front of my friends. "Now you've got it," they'd tell me, and I would will my muscles to memorize the sensation so I could re-create it on command.

The eye seems irresistibly drawn to other eyes. There's evidence that certain cortical cells in our brains respond specifically to eyes and eye-shaped patterns. Eye contact produces measurable physiological arousal: increases in brain stem activity, galvanic skin response, even heart rate. Infants learn to make eye contact with their mothers long before they can see much else. When adults play peek-a-boo with babies, they help both develop the skill and show that eye contact is an important and pleasurable activity. As

babies grow up they learn to detect subtle changes in the eyes they look at. Toddlers can detect, with amazing accuracy, the precise object of another's gaze. Sometimes when I'm talking to someone, shamming eye contact, my eyes may involuntarily shift to one side. Though this shift may be only momentary, the person almost always feels compelled to look where I seemed to have glanced. I sense a survival mechanism taking over. This abrupt but minuscule movement that shifts my iris off center and exposes more of the white part seems to send a subliminal message: "When you see the whites of my eyes, be afraid."

Obviously there was an evolutionary imperative for our species to develop a mechanism to detect when another creature is looking at us, and to ascertain whether that creature wants to fight us, eat us, mate with us, or flee from us. But is the system really sensitive enough to detect, from the eyes alone, all the fine gradations of emotion between hostility, hunger, lust, and fear?

Because I can perform tricks with my eyes, people tell me that I don't "look blind." To look blind is to stare blankly straight ahead through immobile, unblinking eyes. In fact, this expression is more the exception than the rule. Like most blind people, I blink and move my eyes. Blinking is a reflex. The eyelids close and open, spreading a saline solution over the eyes to cleanse and lubricate them. This can happen whether the eye functions or not. Also, like most blind people, I lost my sight after I had already developed the habits of seeing, such as coordinating the movement of the two eyes and aiming them at the source of sound.

It has been more than a quarter of a century since I could make eye contact, and I have no memory of what it feels like. And while I have no direct experience of it, I understand its significance from the way people speak and write about it. A great deal of contemporary literary and film theory explores the power dynamics of the

gaze, and who controls it. Any novel I pick up will make some mention of fleeting glances, longing looks, sullen stares. In my own fiction, I write about it too. Frequently some reference to eye contact provides a convenient shorthand for a range of complex emotional interplay. To write "they exchanged a look" or "he caught her eye" conveys a lot in a minimum of words. At times, however, I find these phrases annoyingly hackneyed and imprecise. I start detailing the whole facial expression, calibrating the lift of brows and lids, the twitch of lip muscles, the curve of cheek. My goal is to make my reader involuntarily re-create the character's expression and thus catch some tremor of the emotion that produces it. But too much of this can encumber action or distract the reader. More often than not I put, "When he glanced at her she looked sad," and let it go at that.

I question sighted people about the phenomenon, but what they tell me is often confusing. A friend tells me a story about a class he's teaching. He asked a difficult question, and no one wanted to answer. "All of a sudden they won't look at me—forty pairs of eyes aimed in forty different directions." Of course, I know what this feels like, or rather, sounds like. In my class such questions are greeted by a vibrating silence. Unfortunately, reluctance to answer sounds like shock and also like rapt attention. Boredom and irritation are noisier. I try to picture my friend in his class, his question hanging in the air. My picture is rather crude. Since I cannot imagine forty pairs of eyes, much less forty faces distinctly discernible from one another, I play myself an interior movie, a panning shot of face after face after face. Each face is aimed in a different direction and wears a different expression. One is uplifted, the eyes pointing to the ceiling, the lips pressed together, the brow creased —thoughtful contemplation. The next face is lowered, the lids at half-mast, eyebrows bearing down—perplexity. The third face is behind a book, fingers riffling pages—the search. Then there's the

face of bored stupefaction, slack-jawed, droopy-lidded. I know this is not what my friend saw. In fact, all his students may have had their faces aimed at him, and the faces may have been without expression. Only the eyes swiveled to aim at different spots: ceiling, floor, wall, window. And though the eyes were staring, they were probably blank, reflecting the blankness of the brain behind them, glazed, dazed, unblinking, and unseeing—the way blind eyes are supposed to look. I marvel at my friend's ability to see this, take it in at a glance. His eyes scan the class for eyes with an answer. "You there, in the third row. You look like you know." What does that look like? Again, my imagination draws something broad, stagey—an expression meant to be read from the back of the house. I picture the student leaning forward in his seat. His hand lies across his open book. Tension in his arm suggests he's about to raise it. His face is thrust forward, his lips slightly ajar, his eyebrows hoisting his lids high.

The problem with my picture is that I focus too much on peripheral details—the posture of the body, the arrangement of the limbs, the twitching and stretching of facial muscles—and too little on the eyes themselves. When the sighted describe facial expressions, the eyes are more central and more active. Eyes glow, twinkle, sparkle, shimmer, smoulder, and flicker, projecting emotions the viewer readily understands. But what I know about the visual system tells me that the eyes cannot do all this. They receive and respond to light but cannot emit it. The "flash of recognition" or "spark of understanding" the teacher sees in his student's eyes is merely a trick of lighting. The lids rise, in wonder and surprise, exposing more of the slick surface of the eyeball to reflect light back to the beholder. Illumination. The downcast eye beneath half-lowered lids cannot catch and throw back the light and so seems dull and unenlightened. The eyes themselves are passive. Without

the context of the mobile face around them, and the play of light upon them, they remain unchanging and vacant. But in the language of the sighted, where seeing is believing, the eyes must be the focal point of every expression. All the wrinkles and crinkles of emotion occur only to funnel meaning into the eyes.

But I miss the point. In my friend's story the students are withholding their gaze. It's as if they suspect the teacher possesses some mesmeric power: "Look into my eyes. Speak!" Or else they fear, if eye contact is made, he will be able to see inside their heads to discover that they have not done the reading. As in the exchange between the mother and the child molester, eye contact seems more than a process of seeing and being seen. The students avert their gaze, attempting to cut off communication, while the teacher tries to coax the gaze out of them. Can he also, when contact is made, perhaps transmit something to them, inscribe the answer through the eyes into the brain? Or could they read the answer he's looking for in his eyes?

I try a new picture. I imagine that each eye emits a silvery beam of light, like the flickering beam of a film projector. The classroom becomes a network of intercepting shafts of light. The teacher sends his own twin beams into the web. If he is lucky, he makes contact, attaching his beams to those of a student. Combined in this way, the light becomes more opaque, more palpable. Contact. A circuit is created between them, and through it impulses are transmitted, messages sent and received.

But that's science fiction. Real life doesn't look like that.

On the radio, Liane Hansen interviews the photographer Howard Schatz about his book *Homeless: Portraits of Americans in Hard Times*. He photographed the people on the streets where he met them but used a black drape to blot out any details of their surroundings. He explains that he did this to oblige viewers to look at

the people, to see them eye-to-eye and thus, to understand them. He knows how it is. People are afraid to look too closely at the homeless. They avert their eyes and walk by. They fear that making eye contact with such people might have unpleasant consequences. Disturbing messages could pass through the eyes of the homeless person into the eyes of the passerby: "Brother, can you spare a dime?" Schatz hopes that his photographs can force the encounter people try to avoid. He wants viewers to confront the homeless, contemplate their plight, and perhaps even do something about it. He not only acts as an agent for this confrontation but also sets an example by donating the proceeds of his project to a relief organization.

Schatz interviewed his subjects and tells their stories. A printed text accompanies most of the photographs. A few pictures, however, have no text. Apparently some pictures tell their own stories. Of one, Hansen says, "It's in his eyes."

I wonder about this. What exactly is visible in the eyes that makes words unnecessary? If a picture is worth a thousand words, why include any text at all? Isn't the book itself context enough to compel the viewer to understand each photo in a particular way? Is it possible that you could take anyone—a factory worker, a banker, a movie star—dress him in rags, photograph him before a black backdrop, supply a printed tale of woe, and achieve the same effect? Conversely, could you take a homeless man, dress him in pinstripes, attach a story of privilege and Ivy League degrees, and make that convincing too? True, malnutrition, stress, fatigue, and illness can leave visible traces in skin, teeth, and hair. Hard times can dull the luster of the eyes and contribute to a variety of eye diseases. But in a different context, with a different text, couldn't these visible characteristics be understood differently?

Of course, Schatz and Hansen are engaged in the difficult task

of describing a visual phenomenon to an audience that cannot see it, an audience temporarily blind. It is understandable, if discouraging, that they fall back on certain figures of sighted speech which point to the eyes as not only the focal point of every face but as the site of all significant experience. The eyes at once interpret and inscribe, emote and receive, project and absorb. The blind, excluded from this constant, kinetic interchange, must take the sighted's word for this.

Schatz uses language more precisely when he describes the encounter that inspired the project. He saw a woman sitting on a sidewalk in San Francisco. It was in the early 1980s, before most Americans developed the habit of walking by the homeless every day without seeing them. The woman had a sign which read "Hard Times" and a cup for donations. Schatz recalls that she was "made up poorly—either she did it without a mirror, or she did the best she could." He was struck by the irony. She went to the trouble to apply makeup, presumably to make herself more attractive to passersby, but ended up looking worse. Except that it was precisely this poor paint job that attracted the photographer's eye. He also noticed that she "looked straight ahead, as if she weren't there. As if she weren't to be seen." She was staring into space, looking at nothing, failing to see what was before her eyes. Her face mirrored the faces of the people passing, pretending not to see her. The blank stare. The blind gaze. It occurs to me that maybe the woman was blind. Maybe that's why her makeup was so bad. It is estimated that a significant number of America's homeless population has some form of untreated or undiagnosed eye trouble. Impaired sight may make it difficult to fill out forms or get a driver's license or follow directions or make eye contact during a job interview. Employers, landlords, social workers, and cops may read these difficulties as signs of mental incapacity or laziness. Thus, people who might be

eligible for services for the blind, or aided by a pair of glasses, may end up on the street. But there is no way of knowing if the woman Schatz saw was one of these. He goes on: "I couldn't keep my eyes off her and of course I felt terrible doing this." Although he had a camera with him, he could not take this woman's picture because it "would have been too exploiting." She would not meet his eye, make the contact that would permit him to preserve the moment and give dignity to her suffering by forcing others to see it. His desire to make people "look, eye-to-eye, and understand" was thwarted because she withheld her gaze.

That's the picture I'd like to see, but I doubt I could see all that in a picture. My experience of photography, especially black and white, is sketchy at best. I need the context of a label or title to make the shades of gray resolve into something meaningful; color pictures give me an extra clue to go on. Photographs offer me an opportunity to simulate eye contact. I hold a fashion magazine cover close to my face, move my gaze around, piece together the arrangement and shape of the features of the model pictured there. Even if I could meet her eyes with mine, I know that this is not what people really look like. The photo has probably been retouched, flaws airbrushed away. And the photograph is static. The slippery, liquid sheen off the eyeballs is arrested. There's no blinking. I sense something between us, the shiny transparent surface of the magazine cover itself. But it's the best I can do. To get this close to a live person I would have to know her intimately. I try to line up the photo's eyes with my own. She has a direct gaze. The whole eye is visible, the pupil and iris lined up in the center of the eye. Professional models and movie actors learn to create the illusion of the direct, eye-catching gaze. They aim their eyes precisely at the lens of the camera. They may even learn what many portrait painters know, that most people have a dominant, or lead, eye. The dominant eye points directly at the viewer while the other eye appears slightly off center. Eye dominance is usually related to handedness, so right-handed people generally have a dominant right eye. It's easy to determine which of your eyes is dominant. Make a circle with your thumb and index finger. With both eyes open, line up this circle with an object across the room. Now close first one eye, then the other. When your dominant eye is open, the object will appear in the center of the circle. When the other eye is open, the object will jump out of alignment.

I study the model's eyes. I cannot tell which eye is dominant because I cannot see both eyes simultaneously. To see one eye, I aim my gaze a little to the right. Now her eye seems to be aimed at something over my left shoulder.

I assume that since she is on a magazine cover, her eyes are beautiful—"easy on the eyes," someone might say. They are very blue, perhaps unnaturally so. With a magnifying lens, I can make out the pattern of flecks and strands in the iris. Apparently this pattern is as unique as fingerprints. Automatic teller machines and similar devices will soon be able to use this information to verify a customer's identity. Perhaps an adept viewer really can read the model's story in this pattern, as a fortune-teller reads palms. Her pupils seem a bit dilated. The pupil opens and closes in response to light, but it also dilates when the person is excited or sexually aroused. When you look at someone with dilated pupils, your own pupils may involuntarily dilate in response. As the pupil widens, more light floods the eye. You are dazzled by the other's beauty. The word "pupil" comes from the Latin for "little doll," perhaps a reference to the miniature reflection you see when you look into someone's eyes. So when the pupil is enlarged, there is a better backdrop for your image, and you get excited. In fact, the effect of a dilated pupil has nothing to do with such narcissism and can occur

spontaneously whether or not you are "making eyes" at someone. Researchers show their subjects photographs of people. The photos have been retouched so that the pupils look enlarged. The subjects report that the people with the enlarged pupils looked more friendly, attractive, or sexy. And this is not news. For centuries European women used drops, derived from a plant in the deadly nightshade family, to dilate their pupils and make their eyes more alluring. Accordingly, the drug was called belladonna.

I'm not sure what message I'm supposed to derive from this model's dilated pupils. Since the magazine is aimed at a heterosexual female audience I guess she's supposed to look friendly, eager to share her beauty secrets with me. Her eyes are large and relatively wide-set. Apparently beauty in eyes has to do with the spacing between them as well as with the color and shape. Human beings have eyes in the front of their heads because we evolved as predators. The relative proximity of one eye to the other allows humans and other land predators to spot and track prey. The eyes of our prey—deer, rabbits, birds—are farther apart, making it easy to scan for predators. Does this mean that a wide-eyed beauty is appealing because she looks like prey, vulnerable and tasty? When someone's eyes are too close together they are said to look stupid, brutish, and even sinister, prone to violence.

Though all this is a matter of millimeters, apparently it registers subliminally whenever you look at and into someone's eyes. The way eyes look matters enough to filmmakers that they will budget tens of thousands of dollars to create special eye effects. Actors may use drops to dilate or constrict their pupils, wear contact lenses to tint the irises, or employ other devices to make their eyes appear supernatural, bestial, deranged, or blind. These effects are expensive and uncomfortable, perhaps even dangerous, for the actors. It hardly seems worth it for such a little thing. But of course

the eyes on the movie screen are magnified hundreds of times, and the eyes of the audience naturally gravitate toward them. So the character's true self must show in the eyes.

In real life, however, eye contact is not a matter of careful, prolonged scrutiny. It occurs in the twinkling of an eye. It can be done from great distances, at high rates of speed. A friend of mine was driving on an interstate. He passed a car that had been pulled over by a state policeman. As my friend went by, the cop looked at him and made a gesture, perhaps to indicate that he should pull over. But the gesture was ambiguous, my friend says. Several interpretations seemed possible at that rate of speed, and the gesture might have been directed at another motorist. My friend drove on. He got off the highway at the next exit. He drank coffee for a while. When he guessed that it was safe, he got back on the road. The same cop nabbed him for failing to pull over before.

"But officer," my friend protested, "I didn't know what you wanted. I wasn't even sure you were signaling to me."

"You knew," the cop said, handing him the ticket. "You made eye contact."

Now there's something I'd like to see. Is it really possible for a person in a car traveling sixty-five miles an hour (or more, depending on whose story you believe) to focus on and hold the eyes of someone standing still by the side of the road? Whether the cop's claim would stand up in court—in the eyes of the law—I do not know. My friend paid the fine without protest.

Though even sighted people may be skeptical about this story, it implies that some people may learn to be better at eye contact than others. A cop's life may depend on his ability to pick up minute signals from the eyes he sees. Flight attendants and bank tellers receive training in interpreting the way people make or resist eye contact. Self-defense literature for women is full of advice about

eye contact. It is risky to bestow it unthinkingly, because a casual glance can be misconstrued, interpreted as an invitation. On the other hand, it is equally dangerous to appear distracted, to have an unfocused gaze. This can be seen as vulnerability. Authors go on to advise that if a woman is attacked, she should look her assailant straight in the eye and attempt to stare him down. The fleeting gaze can seem weak and spur the urge to dominate.

When I question sighted people about eye contact in ordinary social situations, the diversity of their answers staggers me. So many factors play a role. Some claim that eye contact between strangers is more common in large cities. A friend complains that when she moved from a large east-coast city to a small southwestern town, she missed the casual eye contact she enjoyed back home. Another city-bred friend tells me he was so warned against meeting the glances of strangers that he finds it difficult to make eye contact even when it would be safe and appropriate. And though the eyes are supposed to speak a universal language, a great deal seems to get lost in translation. When a man makes eyes at you from across a crowded room, are you attracted or repelled? When a woman fails to return your gaze, is she lying or shy? How do you know? When you're speaking to a group of people, when do you try to catch someone's eye? How long do you hold it? Why? I know people who seem to have a complete set of guidelines, specific answers to all these questions. There are others who admit to being as stymied by the whole issue as I am.

I've heard tell of something called "eye sex," but the people I ask about it give me few answers. Either they giggle with adolescent prudery or give me what I assume to be a knowing look—"If you gotta ask, you'll never know." I wonder about it when I ride escalators and subways. What sort of propositions are being sent

to me as I stand there, oblivious. Worse yet, what are my eyes saying back?

Friends discuss the phenomenon called "gay-dar" and assert that they can detect a person's sexual orientation simply from a look. This look transcends such superficial features as hairstyles, clothing, posture, speech, and mannerisms.

A friend of mine who has been hard of hearing since birth tells me that her sisters used to criticize her for staring too intently at people who were talking to her. When she was in graduate school, a classmate initially interpreted her too-intense gaze as a sign that she was a lesbian when in fact she is not. Is that what her sisters were worried about?

There are cultural differences as well. In some Asian cultures, the direct gaze is considered rude, while the downcast or averted gaze is deemed respectful. For this reason, Westerners—missionaries, traders, soldiers—sometimes labeled Asians they encountered as inscrutable, deceitful, or treacherous. Do Asians wishing to do business in the West practice looking people in the eye?

And why call it contact when no actual contact takes place? But everyone I ask is adamant about that. It is not a purely visual experience. I am told that it is a unique and absolutely unmistakable feeling, as palpable as a touch, an electric charge, a jolt. Perhaps it is precisely because the exposed eyeball is the one part of the body even lovers do not touch. You gaze into your lover's eyes but do not caress them. Apparently an atavistic fear of losing the eyes makes people squeamish. They flinch reflexively if a projectile comes too near. Even watching someone else touch their own eyes, inserting contact lenses for example, can make some people look away. When the Three Stooges poke each other in the eyes, viewers may laugh. But they also eye each other nervously to make sure no one

tries the gag at home. When Christ wanted to restore the sight of various blind men he encountered, he touched them on the eyes. Perhaps he did this (or his disciples recorded it this way) to make the act all the more remarkable to onlookers, wincing at the sight. The blind men did not flinch as they would have at another's touch. Blind faith becomes sighted salvation. So, when you look someone in the eye and call it contact, do you hope to evoke that story? Do you really believe the touch of your eyes has the power to convey, convince, convert, control?

The whole subject of eye contact, with all its complex and subtle meanings, fills me with anxiety. But not for myself. I've gotten by this long without it. I worry that the sighted delude themselves and put themselves at risk. Because when most of them look into my eyes they see me as sighted. If eye contact matters so much, surely it should be harder to fake. Perhaps it is only the expectations of the sighted. When I aim my eyes in more or less the right direction, the sighted see it as close enough. But if a mere millimeter could make an inquiring look into a menacing stare, shouldn't my fraud be instantly obvious?

Be honest. Look at me when I'm talking to you. Do you really see all that you say? Or is it a convenience of language to ascribe to my eyes those qualities, emotions, messages you derive from the rest of my face, our surroundings, or the words I speak? Aren't you projecting your own expectations, interpretations, or desires onto my blank eyes? And if you're really being honest, really looking closely, my eyes are no more vacant than a sighted person's eyes. My eyes and your eyes send back only reflections. Of course this hypothesis comes full circle. If I see your eyes as blank, it is only because I am projecting what I see (or don't see) onto you. But only you can say for sure. Go ahead. Take a good look. Pull the wool off your eyes. Tell me what you see.

chapter 6

A Portrait of the Artist by His Blind Daughter

When my father read what I had to say about eye contact, he disagreed. He recounted three separate anecdotes in which he had been able to read other people's thoughts from the look in their eyes. This was unlike him, I thought. His response seemed uncharacteristically sentimental and illogical. But it reiterated the notion that visual experience is relative. There are different levels of visual skill. If Ted Williams could read the English on a baseball, I had to believe that my father was someone who could read the language of the eyes.

My father believed that he could teach anyone to draw. He said drawing was simply a matter of learning how to see, then learning how to put that on paper. It was a matter of eye-hand coordination. What the eye takes in, the hand puts on the page. He said, "You