

FIVE

Framing My Pictures

I HAVE PICTURES IN MY BASEMENT that I am framing from trips that Hannah, Teela, and I have taken. As I work to align the first and then the second photos in their mats, putting my head down close to each, straining to see the edges of each large glossy print, I think about myself: Why am I doing this? Shouldn't I just give up? What am I, a blind woman, doing matting and framing photographs, even taking these pictures to begin with and trying to appreciate them? It is so hard to see them, to keep the edges straight. I should not be doing such vision-intensive work. It isn't right. I am ready to cry.

I so often want to give up when I feel frustrated by my lack of eyesight—when I feel that I am useless, or disabled, that I have nothing of value to offer, or that I am not doing what I should—what a blind woman or a person my age should be doing, or what someone else might be engaged in. My lack of sight complicates all my self-doubts and is an impediment. But against any negatives emerging from it, overwhelming them for me is a sense that I have been given a gift—a new lens through which I now see. My vision, though imperfect and full of blind spots, is revealing, opening new worlds for me, creating a distinct blind point of view. My challenge is to use my new perspective to see what otherwise I might not, to use it to contribute to the insights of others and to help me value myself rather than fueling my self-doubts.

Because I think often about my eyesight—what I do see, what I don't see, and how I should act taking my blindness into account—fundamental issues repeatedly arise for me concerning not only blindness but vision, the known and the unknown, the nature of disability, and the value of alternative ways of seeing. Because my vision is blurry when I look at objects from a distance and leaves things out, distorts, and darkens the world, I often must search closely for what, at first, does not seem to be there—for the invisible in any picture or in my life. Finding the invisible element becomes a reward in itself, like figuring out a puzzle or composing a pleasing portrait. As I try to identify what is not there, I am aware that I am creating pictures in my mind, grasping temporary moments of clarity before an image fades or a scene fragments again into pieces. I appreciate my surroundings more now than when I could take my vision for granted. I experience more joy in what I see. Sometimes I will take pictures with a camera to capture an image I want to cherish, or to see details later that I may miss at the time. Then I will frame some of these pictures.

One that I am currently framing, and that I especially like, is a photo of a general store in Portal, Arizona, where Hannah, Teela, and I went on a recent trip to the Southwest. Portal is a tiny town located near the borders of Mexico and New Mexico in the foothills of the Chiricahua Mountains. My photo of the Canyon Creek Store in Portal is a brown-toned picture, and I like the way it conveys the shadowy sense of the place. I took it one early morning just after sunrise when the light was gentle and golden. A glassed-in phone booth sits in front of the store on the right-hand side in my picture, next to a white ice machine. The storefront, made of dark wood, is somewhat junky looking, with signs for Budweiser beer, Coca-Cola, and local notices tacked up beside a front door that may be welcoming but is now closed. I am drawn to this photo of the Canyon Creek Store, but my fondness for it is odd because I had a terrible

time when we stayed there—in a funky motel located just behind the store. Towering above the dark storefront in my picture is a large sign announcing, “Canyon Creek Store, Cafe and Lodge” in flowing, hippie-style lettering. Dangling below the sign, hanging from the building’s eaves, are strings of white Christmas lights—pearly drops of glowing light sparkling against the dark wood background—a signature of Southwest desert places in winter.

On our trip this past winter, Hannah and I had planned to stay at the Canyon Creek Lodge for two nights, but we left after the first because wild, piglike javelinas wandering around threatened Teela, and the motel room was too rundown—the blankets thin, the rug a mangy gray, the dim lights flickering eerily while a rickety heater blew stiff gusts of hot dust through the room. I had planned for a more serene experience in this remote place—reached after driving up from a bare, desolate desert floor toward the towering granite peaks of the Chiricahua Mountains. Nestled in a wooded streamside canyon in the Chiricahua foothills, the Canyon Creek Store and adjacent motel felt seemingly nowhere. It was not a place I’d go back to, though I like removed places. But it was the idea of it more than the experience—of a retreat and of taking a refreshing shower, and of a store in which you could find anything you might need for a stay in the mountains, a stay away from the usual. I keep wishing to return as I look at my photo, despite my distressing experiences there. Odd, too, is the fact that as I stare at the picture, I can’t make out the detail on the wooden storefront. I see only the square brown shape of the building with the hippie lettering of the large sign on top, the empty phone booth and ice machine to the right, and a stop sign on the left side—these features framing the store like weathered antique bookends. I took my photo from across the road, looking over at the store, wishing to capture the quietness of early morning, to register that I’d been there, to come away with something.

That what I have come away with is only partially visible to me now should not surprise me, but it does. I am always surprised when I cannot see something I think I should. When I first viewed my Canyon Creek photo after coming home, I was distressed that I could see none of the detail I knew was on the dark wooden storefront: the signs for Budweiser beer, soda, the local notices. I knew the small details were there, but I could not make them out beyond a blur. I am not sure if I even saw them initially when I took my picture. I was probably focusing on getting an image into the camera's frame, not losing parts of it, centering it. Last week when I began working with my pictures, I asked Hannah if she could see the details on the storefront in my photo. She said, of course, she could see them clearly. I carried the photo over to a window with bright afternoon light streaming through it, held it up, and there I finally saw the signs on the wall and the confusion of Americana that gave the place character. Then I carried my photo back to normal light and all the details disappeared, as they would on any wall where I might hang the picture. Hannah does not want to see it in the main part of our house because the photo reminds her of our very uncomfortable night, and of the javelinas charging at Teela. She says I can hang it in my study if I want to, which I know; anything we don't agree upon for the house can go in my room. But there are only so many walls. My study seems to me often a repository for all my memories, for all things that are simply mine, as well as a place ready for new work. Each picture I have surrounding me has its own history and emotional import. I think about their meanings even though I can no longer see the pictures well. They look to me like squares of color and light, a few bold shapes, the details blurred, lost to my eyesight but persisting in my mind as faint memories of important times.

My photo of the Canyon Creek Store clearly contains contradictions—between my fondness for the remote store in the Chiricahuas and my actual experiences there, between what I can and

cannot see, between what I forget and what I remember. A second photo I am framing, related to that of the store, is of a javelina. Like my picture of the dark storefront, this photo, too, is hard for me to see. The javelina is gray and fades into a background of bushes that are green but look gray to me. Hannah took this photo for me because she could see the javelina better than I could and she wanted me to have a picture of it to take home.

Javelinas are small, gray, boarlike animals with compact bodies on short, thin legs. They roam the far Southwest deserts in groups, and the mothers can be aggressive when they feel their young are threatened. On our trip, I had wanted to see javelinas but I had so far only glimpsed a few of them briefly. When we arrived in Portal, as I got out of the car with Teela, stepping into the parking lot behind the motel, a string of eight to ten baby javelinas came picking their way toward us, surprising me. The mother followed quickly, eyeing Teela, circling the car to get near us. I was later told by the store owner that although usually skittish and likely to run off, these particular javelinas had been given handouts and were not afraid of people but were not happy with dogs. Like a coyote, they feared, a dog might eat them.

Teela had begun to pee and was squatting a few feet from me at the end of her leash when she first noticed the baby javelinas. She froze, then rose ever so slightly—keeping her bottom low to the ground, her back raised at an angle upward—a large Golden Retriever-yellow Labrador poised as if ready for takeoff. She had seen the baby javelinas, although I was not aware of it until Hannah called to me, “The javelinas are coming!” I glanced over quickly enough to see the backs of the tiny babies as they trotted away down a dirt path behind the motel. They were pink, I imagined, though they had to be gray. I was confusing them with pigs, which they are not; they are “peccaries”—wild grazers. But the combination of my inability to see well enough to locate where they were, combined with the deftness

of their retreat, made me imagine what I could not see. When the mother javelina stepped toward Teela and me moments later, I was glad to have her close in my view. I did not take her seriously at first. I assumed that Teela was curious, too, and that, if she could, she would get close behind the scruffy mother and smell her rear. She would be unprepared if the javelina did not think her friendly.

Hannah called to me to get Teela away from the approaching mother and to put her quickly in the car so the javelina would not injure her. Javelinas have tusks, although I could not see them. Hannah could tell that the mother javelina was not happy and that she was set on discouraging Teela. I opened the back door of the car, told Teela to jump in, then got in the front seat quickly and sat there waiting, sad to have lost sight of the javelina up close, and feeling somewhat silly. Here I was, a big person with a large dog, sitting in a car—a huge piece of metal and engine—while a little tanklike animal with short, spindly legs simply looked at me and slowly approached. I was shocked that I had been so scared and wondered if I was as scared of the javelina as I was of ignoring a possible danger and of failing to protect my dog.

After the mother javelina sauntered off down the path behind the motel, I got out of the car and went with Teela into the motel office, located at the cash register inside the Canyon Creek Store. I wanted to check us in for the night and to ask the owner about the javelinas and what to do if one approached me again.

Behind the counter, a rough-shaven man wearing a flannel shirt and suspenders looked up at me sideways. “They don’t see well,” he said. “Try stepping aside. By the time the javelina sees you, you may be gone. The javelina will charge by right next to you. Then again, she might not.”

I stood thinking—that scruffy gray mass could not see me well.

He continued, “It’s not you. It’s the dog. You have to watch out. They don’t like dogs. They’re like rats. People shouldn’t feed them around here.”

Then he told me that someone had recently killed a bear in the canyon. The implication, I felt, was that the area was dangerous and I was now forewarned.

That night when I took Teela out to relieve herself before we went to bed, Hannah came with me to watch for javelinas. The next morning when I took Teela out by myself in the dark before sunrise, I had her relieve herself right next to the car, with the back door open so she could jump in if a javelina charged. I had my cane ready—my long, white, blind person's cane—in case I needed to use it to ward off javelinas. But none appeared. When I went to throw away Teela's stool in a garbage can near some picnic tables beside the store, I bumped into several wooden statues of javelinas placed low to the ground near the tables. Fortunately, Hannah had warned me they were there the night before, but even so, when I got close to them in the dark of early morning, I wasn't sure and had a moment of panic in case there might be real javelinas mixed in among the statues.

I left Teela in the motel room after that, when I went out to take my photos. I did not want to be peering through my camera lens at a distant object and overlook a javelina coming toward us. Later in the morning, Hannah, Teela, and I took a walk together deeper into the canyon. When Hannah left me for a while to climb up a steeper trail toward the granite peaks, where I was afraid I might lose my footing, I walked with Teela down the main road, which wound through bushes and trees beside a deeply sunken creek. With my left hand, I grasped Teela's harness handle as I followed behind her, while in my right, I held my white cane in front of me, ready to swing it at any javelina heading for my dog. I was watching for javelinas, who were probably watching me, and listening for their sounds in the bushes. Secretly, I wished some javelinas would approach so I could get a better look at them. I did not want to miss them entirely simply because I was afraid for my dog.

I took out my camera occasionally as I walked, juggling it awkwardly in my hands along with my cane and Teela's leash. I kept listening for cars as well as javelinas, hoping Teela would stick close enough to the edge of the road to keep us out of danger, and feeling I must be a peculiar sight. I was carrying a cane *and* following a dog. Other people might not know that a blind person does not need both a dog and a cane to be guided, but I knew, so I felt I looked strange. Periodically, I sensed javelinas in the bushes, but I neither saw nor heard them. We saw a few deer. The sun was becoming higher, illuminating the bare white branches of the creekside Sycamore trees, lending a glowing light to our path.

When I checked us out of the motel a day early, I told the owner of my concerns about the javelinas—that I had not anticipated I would be constrained in my movements in exploring the canyon because I could not rely on my dog, for fear she would be charged by an angry mother javelina. The owner seemed content to have us go, as if his warnings from the night before had been heeded.

Had I better eyesight, I would still have wanted to leave the Canyon Creek Lodge after one night, for the shabbiness of the room unsettled me. But then I would not have had this particular adventure, nor been caught between my curiosity and protecting my guide dog, which, I was learning, ultimately leads to protecting myself. As we drove down out of the Chiricahua foothills, leaving behind a strikingly picturesque place with large granite peaks and majestic rock formations against a blue sky, I wished I had been able to stay longer—to see more javelinas, to have one come right up and eat out of my hand, to have Teela smell the behind of the scruffy little javelina mother, to add that to her repertoire of experiences. It was a fantasy, but it pulled at me, and I felt as if I had seen it.