

It's like ...

Readers of poetry often wonder why poets don't just say what they mean, why they feel compelled to wrap their points in symbols and analogies, similes and metaphors. Let me answer with an analogy. I once lived in a house that had a stone lattice facing outside from the living room. It produced a particular optical illusion: In the right light you could see an imaginary black dot at each of the intersection points of the lattice -- except the intersection point at which you were looking directly. The impulse was to turn and look directly at a dot, but as soon as you tried, that dot disappeared. You could only see the dots out of the corner of your eye. That's what poetry and similes and metaphors do: they allow you to see things you can't see by looking directly at them.

I remember the poem that first made me think I understood what poets do. I was in high school -- the poem was Robert Frost's "Birches." Frost is walking along and sees a row of birch trees bending low, and his imagination takes off to explain why they are bent in that fashion. Reading where his imagination had taken him, I learned that a part of the job of the poet is to see -- from the corner of his eye -- the meaning behind the ordinary and to report the significance of the mundane.

I once criticized a poet friend for the obscurity of his work. I challenged him with, "Why don't you just say what you mean?" He replied, perhaps somewhat disingenuously, "I do." What I took for willful obfuscation, was merely a manifestation of the fact that he sees the truth, but with only the limited vision available from corners of his eyes.

This peripheral vision is unsuited to science where you are expected to hold your peace until you have sufficient evidence and clarity to say what you mean directly and precisely. Poets are valuable because they see things before most of us do; they pick up hints of change in the wind and report what they have seen out of the corners of their eyes.