



Janet Wong  
*Poet*

# Whispering secrets: An essay on art and poetry

*Painting is poetry which is seen and not heard,  
and poetry is a painting which is heard and not seen.*

Leonardo da Vinci

**A**rt is provocative only if the viewer is willing to be provoked, willing to react, to respond. A scary thing happens to most of us, in museums: if we look at a piece of art, especially contemporary art, and some meaning doesn't come within ten seconds, we tend to turn away. Worse yet, many of us are afraid to respond; what if we get it wrong? Poetry shares the same curse. A scary thing happens to most of us when we read poems-especially a serious poem. Midway through, we lose our breath. Our eyes glaze over. We start to sweat if we can't find the meaning. Many of us remember an uncomfortable class where we were taught to look for meaning in a poem, often more meaning than might have been there. Art and poetry are like two friends whispering secrets behind the high school wall.

But children love secrets. *Tell me.* They want to know. If you won't tell, fine; they'll make it up. A painter may paint a strawberry black, and a child might think of rotten fruit, or licorice, or the time she rode her bicycle at the beach, or a black strawberry. A poet may say that a cloud is a dog, and a child might agree, or call it a cloud, or remember a day at the movies, or want some milk. Children spill over with response.

Recently I was asked to prepare a gallery activity for the Bellevue Art Museum. Searching for a way to make children look at art more deeply, I remembered an exercise which my teacher, the late

great poet Myra Cohn Livingston, liked to have us do. This exercise involved close observation of an object and two columns of word lists. We were instructed to look carefully at the thing, just one thing; Myra felt the best poems focused in on one moment, or experience, or object. We looked, we saw - and then, in the left column, we wrote down what we saw: objectively, what anyone with good vision might see. In the right column, we wrote words to describe our thoughts and feelings about the object, our subjective associations and questions.



Leslie Clague  
Safety Vest with Airbag Deflated, 2000  
felt, rubberized vinyl, polyfil  
18x14 inches, Photo by Shellzen  
Courtesy of the artist and Fuzzy Engine

Here are two lists that I wrote in response to "Safety Vest with Airbags," by artist Leslie Clague, a sculptural piece shown in the Bellevue Art Museum's 2001 Pacific Northwest Annual Exhibition:

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Subjective</b>
<u>What I See</u>	<u>What I think or feel</u>
open, hollow circular shape	open mouth of a sea creature eating? singing?
smaller propeller-like tail	are you an anemone/ jellyfish?
mainly gray,	do you live deep in the sea

some yellow	where there isn't much light?
hanging from a hook	did someone catch you
puffy	puffy lips what do you eat? spiny things?

These are the first words that popped into my head that day, in response to the sculpture, sometime during the last week in August 2001. I left out some obvious choices, such as *soft*, and *stuffed* and *fabric*; and I could have had a number of other associations, such as my husband's *pillow flower*. These are the first words that I thought of and, chances are, I thought of ocean creatures because my son had just returned from a week of fishing with Grandpa. With fishing fun on my mind, this artwork inspired me to write two whimsical poems:

### Questions for a Sea Creature

by Janet Wong

Are you the ocean version of a thundercloud?  
Do your lips turn pink when you are happy?  
Are you angry at the fisherman?  
Did the hook really look alive?  
Is your mouth open to scream for help  
or just to sing a song?

### The Sea Creature's Garden

by Janet Wong

Every once in a while  
a sailor will eat a bag of sunflower seeds, the raw kind,  
and toss his shells over the side of the boat.  
The shells float, unless by accident  
the sailor has tossed a whole fresh seed over, shell and all.  
That kind will sink.  
Sink down-down to the bland gray sand  
in the darkest stink of the black-gray sea,  
where some poor blind bottom feeder will step on it, squish-  
squish it deep in sea mud with his tail.

Did you know that raw pumpkin seeds sprout whales?

This third poem might have been inspired by fishing, but more likely I was influenced by that week's high-profile television appearance of a floundering politician; I'm not sure.

### The Sea Creature

by Janet Wong

Once upon a time—  
three minutes ago—  
you lived a perfect life:  
now you have been caught.  
Hooked.

In your old life you devoured  
several dozen creatures a day  
down in the secret cave  
where you stayed, hidden,  
homely, pale and gray.  
A kiss from your swollen lips  
and your prey was ready  
to swallow.

Listen:

I will let you go,  
if you sing me a song.

Today, I have not thought of fishing, or the affairs of a politician. It is September 13, 2001. My mind returns to horror and disbelief, over and over, and worries about safety. My subjective responses to the same objective list of words reflect this:

### Objective

What I See

open,  
hollow circular shape

smaller propeller-like tail

mainly gray, some yellow

hanging from a hook

puffy

### Subjective

What I think or feel

a gaping hole,  
an emptiness

nowhere to go

the gray ash everywhere  
smothers

our safety hangs by a hook  
hangs by a thin line

puffy eyes

puffy padding; in the  
future, will we need to wear  
personal parachutes and  
airbags along with our  
bulletproof vests and fire  
suits?

Using some words from the new subjective list, I

have written a very different poem just now:

**Safety Vest with Airbags**

by Janet Wong

Safety hangs by a twisted hook  
in the future here now soon enough:

a safety vest with airbags, a parachute:  
yellow is the color of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Wriggle fast, away, scramble how you can.  
No hole will tear you through.

Art and poetry are like two friends whispering secrets in the shadows behind the high school wall, giggly secrets, secrets that break your heart—thoughts and feelings that need sharing, no matter how frivolous or bitter or sad. Come on, and join the club.

**BOOKS OF POETRY ON ART**

**GREENFIELD, ELOISE.** (1988). **Under the Sunday Tree.** Paintings by Amos Ferguson. Harper. In this collection, Greenfield wrote 20 poems inspired by Ferguson's paintings of life in the Bahamas.

**RYLANT, CYNTHIA.** (1994). **Something Permanent.** Photographs by Walker Evans. Harcourt. Evans' images of southern life during the depression are paired here with Rylant's poems, written to fit them.

**GREENBERG, JAN** (Ed.). (2001). **Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art.** Abrams. In this anthology, Greenberg invited poets to choose a 20<sup>th</sup> century piece of art, and to write about it. Selections include art by Alexander Calder, Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock and Christo, and poems by X.J. Kennedy, Deborah Chandra, Constance Levy, Naomi Shihab Nye and myself.

**HOLLANDER, JOHN.** (1995). **The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art.** University of Chicago. A sophisticated discussion of ecphrasis, with excellent comments on a number of paintings and accompanying poems, including work by Leonardo da Vinci, Henri Matisse, Edvard Munch and Sandro Botticelli, and Edith Wharton, W.D. Snodgrass, Donald Hall and Rachel Hadas.

