Sights Unseen: Blindness and Sensory Detail in Lillien Blanche Fearing's *The Sleeping World*

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> "If we wish to be literal, we can doubtless find flaws in this figure or series of figures, but what words are fit to express its imaginative splendor and sweep of harmonious sound?"
> - William Morton Payne on *The Sleeping World*

Among the many time-forgotten books of nineteenth-century poetry sits an unassuming volume titled *The Sleeping World* by Lillien Blanche Fearing. The simplicity of its exterior gives way to lively text that captures the reader with its complicated rhythms and imagery. This book, published in Chicago in 1887, was distributed initially to wide acclaim, not just from Fearing's peers, but also from the likes of John Greenleaf Whittier and Oliver Wendell Holmes (Argus). Fearing, who was blind from birth, also achieved success in her educational pursuits and established impressive careers in both law and literature. Though she never saw the world around her, in *The Sleeping World,* Fearing imaginatively captures the beauty, sorrow, and loneliness of human existence using physicalized language, meter, and subtly interwoven moments of sightlessness.

The Sleeping World is, upon first glance, a simple book. It is slim and about 4 inches by 8.5 inches, containing 116 numbered pages, with two blank pages each preceding and following the printed ones. There are no images or page decorations. The blue cloth cover bears no decoration, and the only lettering, which contains the title of the book and the author's last name, appears on the spine, reading horizontally. The stamp of the publisher, A.C. McClurg & Co., is an acorn and a ribbon, also in gold and sits at the bottom of the spine. This stamp is the most decorative thing about the book - the acorn and ribbon are delicately etched and show details of shading and texture. As *The Sleeping World* is Fearing's first published book, it is unsurprising that the stamp of the publishing house should hold more visual clout than any other part of the book. The book was clearly designed cost-effectively, because out of the three edges of the pages, only the top edge is gilded. This edge, along with the spine, would be the only parts of the

book visible to a potential reader as it sits on a shelf with other texts. Those two parts are also the only ones bearing any gold, so the placement of the gold coloring suggests that it is a strategic advertisement intended to draw the eye.

Interestingly, *The Sleeping World* has no frontispiece, which is significant because the only pictures and sketches that exist of Fearing show her wearing dark glasses, which would be a clear indication that she was blind. Frontispieces could often be a kind of advertisement for the book or for its author, so the decision not to include a frontispiece implies that Fearing was not meant to function as an advertisement for her writing. In this way, her blindness would not have been used as a marketing tool. There are as many articles that do not reference Fearing's blindness as there are articles or reviews that do, so it is entirely possible that some of Fearing's readers would not have even known that she was blind. For this reason, her work is allowed to stand for itself, and judgment of its quality cannot in any way be excused by or attributed to her blindness. However, it would be remiss to ignore the effect that visual impairment would have had on the way Fearing experienced the world, and by natural extension, the fascinating effect it would have on the development of her craft. Sightlessness does make an appearance in Fearing's writing, but it is only noticeable through careful examination of her word choice and style.

The inside of the book bears a relatively simple type, consistent throughout, except for one alteration. The inscription reads, "This little book is lovingly inscribed / To my Mother" (iv). "To my Mother" is printed in the exact center of the page, and is emphasized not only by its appearance on a new line, but also by its Gothic typeface. Those three words are much bolder than any other text in the book, which gives them a distinct weight, significance, and formality. Fearing's mother was an important figure in her life because Fearing relied on her over the course of her education. The two women were constant companions. Fearing would have had no

access to Braille, as it had not yet been widely adopted, so her mother read all of the texts and assignments to her so that she could complete her law degree (Notes 6). Fearing would have needed her mother for any assignment requiring written text, possibly even to help her write her papers and poetry. There is no record of Fearing's writing practice, so it may be that she dictated her poetry to her mother. It is no surprise, then, that Fearing should have dedicated this first book to her.

The Sleeping World also contains an entire poem titled "Mother," which explores the effect mothers have on their children's lives, and exalts the mother as a saintly and heroic figure. This piece provides a good starting place for the study of Fearing's work, despite its placement well into *The Sleeping World*. Spanning pages 49-52, "Mother" sits in nearly the exact middle of *The Sleeping World*, just as the dedication to Fearing's mother appears in the center of the inscription page. If there is any place to situate a poem as significant as the first piece in a book (in this text, that space is occupied by the poem bearing the same title as the book, "The Sleeping World"), it must be either the very middle or the end. If this is so, then "Mother" sits in one of the three most significant places in *The Sleeping World*, which provides an extra emphasis on the importance of that particular role to Fearing.

The poem begins by arguing for the power of words, a section which holds topical implications for the rest of the book as well. The speaker marvels,

> 'Tis marvelous, the power of a word,
> How it can drive the blood in scorching waves
> Along the veins until the pulses flame,
> Or roll it back until the drowning heart
> Beats 'gainst the bosom like an iron fist. (49)

Fearing's choice to feature a heartbeat over such an extended metaphor immediately calls attention to the iambic pentameter of the blank verse she uses. Iambic feet uniquely reflect the

rhythm of a heartbeat, which creates a pattern that, as it flows throughout the piece, directly connects to the text itself and to the affection behind it. The mention of the word "heart" throughout the poem stirs up the idea of love, but by drawing on the rhythm of its beating in the sequence of words, this poem builds its emotional emphasis with particular strength. The idea of this piece's pulsing heartbeat contributes to the physicality Fearing develops in "Mother" as well. The verbs and adjectives she selects – heat, pressure, a pounding heart, and a quickened pulse – are all reminiscent of feeling a bodily response to some stimulus. For example, the use of the word "heat" instead of describing a blush reminds the reader of feeling a blush in her own body, rather than seeing one on someone else's face. These descriptions, combined with the pulse of Fearing's meter, establish a connection between sound, the text, and the physical body, creating a physical experience in the mind of the reader.

In these same lines, there is a valuable ambiguity that allows them to be extended to the rest of Fearing's poetry. In her discussion of the power of a word, she does not specify whether the word in question is spoken or heard, or written or read. None of these actions is chosen over the others, which leaves open the possibility that any one of these methods of communicating a word is just as effective as another in stirring up a feeling. Though the poem clearly refers to the word "mother," the ambiguous "word" allows for the speaker's sweeping statement to apply to Fearing's writing as a whole. Her words, whether read aloud or silently, generate the memory of a physical response from the reader. Later in the piece, the speaker describes that "at [a mother's] sound, / Or at its echo," troubles of the mind and body are released (50). While she seems to emphasize the spoken word here, referring to a voice, Fearing's choice to call attention to "its echo" keeps other possibilities open. An echo is the repetition and distortion of a sound, and it leaves behind the suggestion of what that original sound once was. Importantly, though, words

are often the suggestions of sound, as in "hissing tears" (50). Thus, referring to the power of a sound and the power of its echo includes both sound and suggestion: the written word and the spoken. By using language and structure in this way, Fearing increases the breadth of what it means to experience written text. Instead of relying solely on visual descriptions to represent the world of her poetry, Fearing layers in sensory details that incorporate sound and feeling into her writing, elements which would have, in theory, been more familiar to her than any visual cue.

Fearing continues to toy with sensory imagery in an almost synesthetic way throughout *The Sleeping World*. "Claude and Eloise," one of the longer pieces in the book, follows the disintegration of young love because of a misunderstanding and a man's jealousy. The speaker of the poem tells the story from a distance, offering insights and questions of her own as the story progresses. The introduction of "Claude and Eloise" shows the speaker as

> to-night, all self-forgetting, low above the page I bend,
> And I read the tender story of thy early youth, my friend.
>
> Every word is like a heart-beat as it echoes in my ears,
> And I list the thrilling measures swelling through the resonant years. (40)

In this passage, the speaker becomes reader, listener, and storyteller all at once. She bends over the page to read a story, but hears every word, too. This distances the speaker from the poem slightly, as it is clear that the story is not about her, but it remains unclear whether the speaker is the original storyteller or not. Again, sight and sound meld together so that both feature in the telling of this story – there are multiple ways to experience the tale, whether it is heard or read off the page. There is a brief tie-in to "Mother" here in the "echoes" of the spoken words and in the heartbeat. The meter of "Claude and Eloise," however, is distinctly different. "Claude and Eloise" is one of the longest poems in *The Sleeping World*, and the only one in which Fearing uses 15-syllable modified trochaic octameter, which could be attributed to her study of Tennyson

(Payne 5). Fearing's use of trochees offsets the heartbeat-like rhythm found in iambs, which shifts the tone away from that of "Mother." In fact, up until this point in the book, all of Fearing's poetry features iambic rhythms, which are occasionally broken by a key word or idea. By changing the syllabic emphasis of the meter, this shift to trochees for an entire poem unbalances the established expectation created by the earlier pieces. "Claude and Eloise" is the story of a love gone sour, so the use of trochaic feet and couplets, which is atypical for Fearing, subtly reminds the reader, visually and sonically, of the ill-fated pair. The meter and structure work together to carry that information, so that regardless of whether the poem is read from the page or heard aloud, the structure of the poem contributes to the understanding of its content.

Fearing's use of meter to suggest a heartbeat in her pieces also calls attention to the frequency with which she uses the motif of a pulse or heartbeat in her poetry. The first few lines of "What Have I Done?" (a poem that reflects on a life with concern over its productiveness or importance) are representative of this use. The speaker places her "finger on Time's wrist to score / The forward-surging moments as they roll; / Each pulse seems quicker than the one before" (32). The beginning of "Mother" describes a heartbeat in a general sense, whereas this metaphor involves personal engagement between the speaker and the personification of time. The act of physically touching another person is an intimate gesture, and the way this moment reads suggests that the touch lasts long enough for the speaker to know the pulse she feels has quickened. This sign of familiarity and intimacy shows the speaker's easy connection with the supernatural, in this case, the personification of time.

Just as she uses a pulse to show love and affection, Fearing uses it to demonstrate her characters' loneliness. In "The Heart's Bitterness," specifically, the lack of human connection is emphasized through descriptions of touch. In the piece, the speaker explains the falseness of her

earthly friendships. The speaker's and her friend's "palms touched, but our souls stood far…he never meant the thing he said; / it had no pulse of sympathy" (22-3). The pulse, which should be an indication of either person's bodily response or excitement, is absent in the moment described, though the touch itself takes place. There is noticeably no visual description attached to this moment, but there is no need for one – through touch, the body knows what the eyes might not. The speaker later questions, "O brother men! why stand apart, / With never touch of heart to heart?" (24). The juxtaposition of these two mentions of touch, along with a reminder that the pulse and the heart are connected, supports the idea that the inability to feel another person's pulse or heartbeat represents a fundamental disconnect between those two people. It marks the disconnect between Fearing's speakers and the other people featured in her poetry, but using pulse represents an interesting reliance on the physical to communicate instead of the visual. In the text, the speaker's companion is disingenuous, though she does not see that until she stands close. When they touch, however, her body is able to discern the lack of feeling that she couldn't see on the surface. Though there is no objective sightlessness in this moment, the interpretations available through touch alone make the visual imagery a secondary part of this poem.

Beyond the physical, earthly level of immediate connection or identification, Fearing's poetry tends to have a celestial or supernatural element. In "Mother," the speaker says that her mother "seemest clothed with half divinity, / With more than earthly power" and is "priestess mid the images of saints" (50-1). "Mother" is actually one of the few poems in *The Sleeping World* that does not contain the word "angel" or "seraph," but the speaker still chooses divine language to explain the relationship of mother to child. The idea that a mother possesses "more than earthly power" connects her directly with heaven, and painting her as a "priestess" makes

her caretaker and worshipper of her children. The speaker explains that her mother teaches her children

> To stand on the dark world and touch the clouds,
> As lofty mountain planted on the earth
> Can feel the throes of her great heart, yet bathe
> Its forehead in the rosy light of heaven. (52)

The speaker again recalls the heartbeat of the poem in highlighting the connection between the heartbeat of mother earth and the speaker's mother herself. For the speaker, her mother becomes the bridge between heaven and earth, using metaphor to conjure up the image of a body physically occupying space in both places. The phrase "dark world" is also significant, particularly coming from a blind poet. The world could be "dark" in any number of ways, but the possibility is open that the speaker's world, specifically, is dark, which would imply that she cannot see. Her mother brings heavenly light, allowing her to rise above the dark world she exists in. Though the speaker of this poem is not necessarily Fearing herself, there is an interesting parallel relationship at play here. The speaker's mother shows her how to rise above the "dark world," just as Fearing's mother guided her through her education and was by her side constantly. Touch and feeling are still essential components of this image. Unlike the beginning of "Mother," the heartbeat felt in this section is not the speaker's or the reader's own – rather, it is the experience of feeling another heartbeat that becomes significant. This personal gesture of touching both the earth and the clouds roots the mother in both places as a means of connecting the speaker and other earthly bodies to heaven.

Fearing's interest in celestial connection threads throughout *The Sleeping World.* There are three sonnets dedicated to elements of nature, "The Snow," "The Sun," and "The Stars." The snow represents an "angel's thoughts" and is "touched with the form and splendor of the spheres" (89). This snow is not just naturally occurring – to the speaker, it is heaven-sent to "fold

/ Dark spaces of the earth with grace untold" (89). These thoughts, packed so closely into just fourteen lines, affirm the significance of heavenly grace to the speaker as she experiences the snow. In "The Sun," the speaker connects her soul to the sun: "Aye, mine own soul with mightier wondering / Doth fill my being, more light doth contain, / More fearful, wonderful, than thee I sing" (90). By thinking of the celestial implications of the sun, the speaker imagines that her soul is filled with more light from heaven than the sun can cast. This search for a connection further develops the way Fearing bridges the gap between realms. Each element brightens dark parts of the human world. Snow embraces the darkness physically with the word "fold," the sun brings light to humans internally by making them think, like a "thought of God flashed into Night's dark brain," and the stars sit in God's palm as "some great human heart that heaves and glows" (89-91). The three elements Fearing has chosen link to the other physical connections she makes to the world throughout the book – physical touch, the heart, and the mind. As in "Mother," all three sonnets also describe each element filling a dark world with light, this time through physical connections to the heavens. Importantly, though, not one of these three mentions of darkness is repaired by a visually discernable light. Each instance of light is internally discovered and communicated through touch, the heart, and the mind. Though these nature sonnets do contain sighted language, the darkness present in each of these moments stands out as a kind of sightlessness, which is resolved not by the restoration of eyesight or a visual metaphor, but by thought, feeling, and touch.

These same elements, touch, the mind, and the heart, are also what ends up being part of the way Fearing's speakers seek connection with heavenly bodies. It seems they do this because they are unsatisfied with the connections they make on earth. In "The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness," the speaker theorizes that

> Each heart has its full-measured woe
> No other heart can fully know;
> And yet methinks it would be less
> If more true souls would but declare:
> 'I grieve for you; oh let me share
> A part of your heart's bitterness!' (22)

To the speaker, the cause for suffering and sorrow in life is that there is some barrier that prevents humans from sharing their miseries with one another. The "true souls" she references here indicate that some other souls are false, or falsely share themselves, hoping to achieve some other connection or gain from interactions with other humans. Fearing's careful word choice outlines this disconnect. The speaker, finding only disingenuous connection with other humans on earth, looks to the sky for sympathy and companionship. Earlier in the same poem, the speaker cries, "I feel a nearer kin with thee, / Though dumbly thou beholdest me, / O moon, than with my kind!" (21). She looks for the relationships she cannot find on earth in the heavens. The use of heavenly imagery, namely angels or planets, is not unusual for the time period, but what sets Fearing's work apart is the underlying yearning behind that skyward focus.

Blindness also has a significant presence in this poem. The speaker says her companion "knows me not, nor yet know I one feature of his spirit face," though the pair is having a face-to-face conversation. The speaker's companion not knowing her can mean not knowing any number of things about her, but the speaker specifically says that she does not know his face. While this could be a metaphor, it is clear that at the very least, what the speaker does not know about her companion begins with his face. The speaker also says that humans "are angels bound in chains / of bone and muscle, blood and brains" (27). This line refers to being held back or trapped by the limitations of the physical body. Humans, the speaker included, are kept from connection with the heavens by their bodies. At the end of the poem, as mentioned earlier, the speaker supposes that "soon, looking earthward from thy marge, / I shall behold with vision large," indeed, that she

will be able to see things she previously could not. This idea, connected with the idea that she is meant to be like an angel but is constricted by her body, seems to indicate that she will be able to see in heaven what she could not see on earth. These lines, while never directly referring to a blind speaker, seem to walk a line between sightedness and blindness, though the poem itself is full of visual descriptions as well.

The poems that bookend *The Sleeping World* support the same yearning for connection with heaven. In "The Sleeping World," the first piece in the book, the speaker imagines an angel looking down on the world for the first time. This member of a "heavenly vanguard" who "camps beside the world" traverses the distance between heaven and earth by nature of his observation. At the same time, that distance is highlighted by his lack of experience with humans. The speaker reaches heavenward in what appears to be a one-sided relationship – this angel's attempts to connect with humanity makes that relationship dual-sided. In "My Angel and I," the final poem in the book, the speaker fights to keep her faith alive in the face of the world's scorn. Instead of imagining an angel watching over the sleeping world from heaven, as in "The Sleeping World," the speaker discovers that "An angel was born in the soul of my soul" (113). While the angel from the first poem was at an extreme distance from the speaker, this angel is so close to the speaker that he is literally part of her. She "[clings] to his white robe with a grip / Too strong with the strength of despair to slip" (115). The world tries to separate her from this angel, reestablishing the distance between the heavenly and the earthly, but the speaker refuses and holds tightly to her companion. While *The Sleeping World* begins with an angel watching over earth from afar, it ends with an angel as close to a human as physically possible. The way the book is framed by these angelic relationships suggests that the text is set up as a kind of

journey towards divine connection. The resolution of Fearing's speakers' yearnings to connect with the heavens or a heavenly body is granted by the last poem in the book.

Fearing's writing contains a number of motifs and patterns, namely her use of angels and pulses, as well as her experimentation with meter throughout *The Sleeping World.* The connecting thread between these examples seems to be an interest in extremes of distance. The way Fearing uses language to convey the feeling of a physical excitement in heart rate and temperature asks the reader to recall her own experiences with these bodily responses and participate in the grip of the imagery. This attitude continues in Fearing's use of meter to draw attention to elements of the text, like a heartbeat, so that when read aloud, Fearing's language mimics the theme or feeling that she wishes to convey, reinforcing her images sonically and rhythmically in addition to the visual imagery she employs. The identification that the reader feels with these visceral experiences of physically-focused text creates an intense closeness between the speaker of the poem and the reader. At the same time, Fearing keeps her readers at a distance, never allowing her speakers to drop into the second person or acknowledge the presence of the reader. Any "thou" or "you" she uses is directed to an element of nature or another character within the world of the poem. In this way, Fearing both pulls her readers close and keeps them at arm's length from participating in her poetry.

Throughout this conversation about human interaction, physical response, and heavenly connection, the threads of sightlessness and the unseen are undeniably present. While she never directly writes about blindness or seems to have a blind speaker, the absence of sight is present all the same. In "Human Love's Weakness," "darkness blinds the sun" (16). The use of the word "blinds" in this line is one of the few moments that blindness is directly mentioned, though other moments of sightlessness or the removal of sight are present throughout the book. Later in the

same poem, night remains, “though never moon strikes through the gray / of triple-fabled vapors flung / across the glory of her eyes” (16). This reference to clouds covering the moon is loaded – the idea of the moon as an eye or having eyes makes the metaphor about having clouded vision, or being unable to see properly, as with blindness. Fearing’s brilliance shows in her ability to craft both imagery and engage the other senses of the reader in the experience of her poetry. She was blind from birth, which implies that she never saw the world as it exists, yet the power of her imagination to fill her world is evident in the vivid and stirring images she paints with her writing (Chicago Tribune). While it is impossible to decide, one way or another, whether Fearing intended for any of her speakers to be blind, it is not a stretch to imagine her blindness to have had an effect on her style of writing. If it did, that could explain Fearing’s preference for communicating with metaphors relating to responses of the body, or for writing about sound as much as sight, but it also does not mean that the moments in which her speakers see or the moments when she writes in visual descriptions have any less of an effect on her poetry or craft as a whole. Nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore the care and subtlety with which she incorporates the language of blindness into her poetry.

At the time of its publication, *The Sleeping World* brought Fearing recognition and the seeming promise of a great career. In his review of the book, William Morton Payne writes, “By its publication, Miss Fearing steps at once into a high place among American poets. It is perhaps safe to say that no American woman before her has sounded so strong and sustained a note…her verse will some day be treasured among the choice possessions of our literature” (Payne 6). Unfortunately for Fearing, and for the literary world, she has been somehow forgotten by time. After this first volume of poetry was published, Fearing went on to graduate at the top of her class at the Union College of Law in Chicago, Illinois, now a part of Northwestern University.

She was, notably, the only woman in her graduating class and the first woman to receive a scholarship award from the college for academic achievement. As previously mentioned, Fearing was able to finish her course of study because her mother read all important texts to her. Frances Willard, a celebrated Northwestern University alumna, chose to include Fearing in her "Fourteen Hundred-Seventy Biographical Sketches" of notable American women (Willard). Fearing published three more works under her own name in her lifetime, including another book of poems titled *In the City By the Lake*, a novel called *Roberta,* and "The Isle of Shoals," an idyll (Tribune).

The Sleeping World is a carefully-handled artistic beginning, impressive because of Fearing's keen attention to emotional and physical detail and the high quality of her imaginative storytelling. The scope of her success in the fields of literature and of law are not hindered in any way by her blindness – in fact, her achievements in both are made all the more impressive considering the extra effort involved in being one of only a few women present at her law school, and in the idea of revising or writing poetry without ever seeing it herself, only hearing it read aloud. Why, then, has her work been forgotten for so long?

Perhaps she disappeared from literary memory because of the strength of the criticism against her writing – one reviewer wrote that Fearing's writing presents "some skill in versification, and a gentle melancholy not unpleasant in small doses…offset by a general immaturity of thought and lack of anything specially new or forcible to say" (Christian Union). Another suggested that "perhaps a short service in a training-school for nurses would make her sympathies a little more definite. At any rate she ought to study etymology and natural history before she writes any more poetry" (Recent Poetry). Fearing's critics, however, were in the minority in the proportion of surviving reviews of *The Sleeping World*, so that is not an entirely

satisfactory answer. Or, maybe, Fearing's poetry was never distributed widely enough to earn her enough recognition, though there is a record of her poetry being published in a newspaper in Oregon: "Totally blind, Miss Fearing appeared before her Oregon audience long enough to implant the lines which continue to live, and then disappeared no one knows where" (Oregon 3).

Fearing "disappeared," apparently, back to Chicago to run her own law practice before passing away at the age of thirty-six. Fearing's early death, then, might have prevented her career from continuing further, as she was still writing and working up until she passed away. Her mother was with her when she passed away, which is poetic in its own right. A poet, who explores the lack of connection between human beings yet was assisted throughout her entire life by her mother, passes on to join the angels she wrote about in the company of the woman to whom she dedicated that writing. Despite her speakers' solitude on earth, by including her mother in the finished product of *The Sleeping World,* Fearing, and her poetry, leave her readers with a lasting reminder of love and dedication.

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