

KEEPING IT SIMPLE SAMANTHA WYNNE-RHYDDERCH



photo © Keith Morris

Camera Lucida

i.m. William Henry Fox Talbot (1800 -1877)

Trust him to bring his portable light room on honeymoon. Not content to remember the hot cobbles, the oranges and lemons dangling like lanterns outside our window in Livorno, he'd take his camera lucida wherever we went and people would stare at us like is he bored with her already? His obsession with capturing exactly what he sees means he's always seeking to cause images to print themselves more durably than he'd imprint himself on me in the camera obscura of our hotel room. I remember the day I was staring at him staring at what was right in front of him which he preferred to view through a tube as if he didn't trust himself to transcribe the emotion of a stone. By projecting the subject onto a surface he sees scene and paper simultaneously, enabling him to sketch the outlines of objects, a form of seeing double I guess, so he sees two of me, which must mean I am forever upside down, an optical illusion, confined to a box of light.

My writing process is very simple and it's one I've shared with all my students. Not surprisingly (being a poet) I tend to think small-scale, at least to start with. I am drawn to manageable, contained spaces and the blank page is for me such a space. I'm also fascinated by sketching, although my only artwork is the drawing of lines across blank pages. Before I start writing, I draw a horizontal line across the page and then divide the upper half of the page into two columns. In the first column I write out the story of the poem, whether in prose or in note form or sometimes using stick figures and arrows to denote action. In the second column I list any images, colours, given lines and research (or notes as to where I can find the relevant research). Once I have filled these two columns, I am ready to transfer my observations to the lower half of the page. I rarely use all my notes – it's more a case of riffling in a treasure chest, taking what I need for this particular subject and leaving the rest for another day.

This is the process I used as the basis for writing *Camera Lucida*. I had too much research to fit into my right-hand column which meant I had a raft of notes to consult; my left-hand column flowed over the page resulting in the first three or four drafts of the poem being very long. At one stage it seemed this might be turning into a sequence. But in the end I felt I got the best out of my story through compression.