

Says the Eye

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i.

The year I turned fifty I got a hole in my eye. I hadn't known such a thing was possible. Facing the big five-o had made me fearful and cranky. Fifty sounded so old. On Senior Day at the food co-op a young cashier asked me if I got the discount.

"No," I said. "And don't tell me what the cut-off is."

"Sixty," she replied. I scowled. "You don't look sixty," she quickly added. I continued to scowl.

My hair had begun to turn white, and the skin around my eyes was creased, but I was fifty for eleven months without any other signs that I was getting older. Then one evening, while looking up, cleaning a closet shelf, I felt something poke my right eye. I went into the bathroom, stuck my head under the tap, and rinsed the eye. Pain woke me in the night. By morning the eye was aflame.

My husband was away on business, so I tried calling friends and family. No one picked up. The upper right quadrant of my head felt as though it had swollen to twice its normal size. My eye was red, puffy, and tearing nonstop. I panicked, I couldn't think straight. The eye had become acutely light sensitive, so I closed it and drove to an Urgent Care clinic a mile from home. It hadn't occurred to me to call a cab. I could have been, but was not, blindsided.

The admitting clerk took one look at me and exclaimed, "Holy moly!" The middle-aged doctor on duty looked tired. "What is going on with your eye?" he asked. One of my husband's goofy expressions came to mind. "You're the doctor," I said. He did not laugh.

He applied a numbing drop – pain gone – and

looked at my eye through a magnifying scope. I had a corneal abrasion, a scratch, he said. There may have been something in my eye, but if so it had gotten flushed out. The cornea heals quickly. I should see my eye doctor if any discomfort remained after a day or so. Cheerful, I headed home not realizing that when the numbing drop wore off, the searing pain would return.

ii.

When I was young my mother taught me to call what was between my legs a "peeper," which did not seem strange to me at the time. I figured every girl growing up in northern Minnesota used the word – I knew my sisters did – but I never heard it anywhere outside my childhood home. According to Internet sites, peeper more commonly refers to a young boy's genitals. My mother may have used the word with my brothers too. I can't recall, and I don't know how to ask. We are not close.

The word peeper is also a slang term for eyes, as in the song, "Jeepers Creepers, where'd ya get those peepers." The root word, "peep," a verb, means either to make a sound, or to look. A peeper is a type of frog that makes a peeping sound, and a peeper is a person who peers in a sneaky, invasive way, in the manner of a Peeping Tom.

Peeping Toms are looking for sexual thrills. The peeper (a person) is using his peepers (eyes) to try to see peepers (genitals). I wonder how this word came to refer to the person doing the looking, to the structure that enables him to look, and to the object of his gaze.

iii.

The day after my Urgent Care visit, still suffering, I went to see my eye doctor. She was late coming in, and giggly when she arrived. She'd had a flat tire, and had called her husband to come rescue her. The cornea is suffused with nerves, which scream when they are compromised. I had sat stock still in the waiting room, holding myself upright, leaning on every moment, humming with the deep ache in my eye.

I was shown into an examining room. The technician flipped through my chart.

"So, you have diabetes," she said, as if she knew this, and simply wanted me to confirm it.

"No," I said.

She looked at my chart again. "Oh, you have high blood pressure," she said.

"No," I said.

She was in her twenties, and had lovely long blonde hair, like I had when I was younger. She herself appeared not to have health problems. Perhaps she had never had a health problem.

"Well," she said, "certainly you have some (serious? chronic? fatal? I can't remember) disease, don't you?"

"NO!" I said, but I was no longer sure.

My doctor came in and applied a numbing drop. The eye quieted. Though the pain felt deep, the problem was in fact superficial. She peered through the scope. "You have a corneal erosion," she said. This scrambled my brains. The word "erosion," of course, usually refers not to a medical problem but to a process in the natural world involving a force – water, wind, or waves – that wears away the earth's surface. If my right eye were the earth, and my iris the United States, my erosion lay along the Atlantic coast, an eroding beach in South Carolina.

My doctor asked if I had ever had an eye injury. Twelve years previous, out in the garden in the morning, half awake, as I bent over, my eyes focused on the ground, my eye bumped against the top of a tomato stake. There was no wound, no blood, but she said the incident could have weakened the corneal tissue, thereby laying the groundwork for problems down the road.

The erosion would probably heal in a couple of days, she said. But I had a second condition, something called dry eye, which might complicate the healing. Dry eye is common, it is especially common in older women, but I had not heard of it until that moment. It may have been complicit in causing the erosion, further weakening my corneal tissue. I would have to use drops (once an hour, all day long, every day, forever) called artificial tears.

My doctor gave me a primer on tears. They are made of a balance of mucus, oil, and water. They keep the eye

healthy. Drops mimic them. The chemicals in emotional tears wear on the eye. This last tidbit gave me pause. For much of my life I had been a crier. I had shed more tears than were called for, many more. I feared that by crying so much I'd worn that hole in my eye.

There are many brands of tears on the market. I settled on Bion Tears. Great. I had the first ingredient for becoming the Bionic Woman, and, now, like her, I was reliant on manufactured parts.

iv.

Years ago people used to tell children that if they masturbated they would go blind. Because vision is so precious, and they thought children wouldn't want to risk losing it? Or is there a connection between sex and eyes?

v.

Three days later I saw my doctor again. She pronounced me healed. But be careful, she said. Keep your eye hydrated. After an erosion opens, the thin epithelium on top (she said: think tissue paper) patches itself, but it takes months for the cells to create a weave strong enough to adhere to the layers beneath them (she said: think Velcro). In the meantime, the surface cells are easily knocked off. Even the low-level friction of the eyelid running over the eye can do it.

Eager to leave her office, and to forget about eye problems, all I heard was the word "healed."

vi.

I'd worked with a therapist when I was a young woman and had told my parents I had been hurt sexually when I was a child. Those words spoken out loud had set off a huge fight between us, and after that we had little contact for over a decade. During our estrangement I had begun writing a memoir. In recent years we had reconciled, but tentatively. I was terrified that when my book came out I would lose my parents once again.

I had worked on this book for many years. I couldn't see my way clear to finish it. I didn't know if a force in me, or one in the material, kept me from bringing it to a close. The night my erosion opened I had a dream. "It is important that I write my story," I told my parents firmly. "And to do that, I have to write about you as well." They were not pleased. Thus began my eye odyssey, and for months it was difficult, if not impossible, to write.

vii.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (O.E.D.)*, the figurative meaning of the word “peep” is: “to emerge or protrude a very short distance into view (as from concealment); to begin to appear or show itself: chiefly said of natural objects as daylight, flowers, distant eminences, etc.” Why the word peeper for vagina? Because the vagina has blinders, you might say, and one small head, or eye, that peeps out?

viii.

Two weeks after my eye doctor pronounced me healed, I went to hear Joan Didion read from her book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Didion, a woman in her seventies, appeared fragile and determined, steely and tender. Her husband had died suddenly of a heart attack while their only child, a grown daughter, was hospitalized with a flu-like illness. Shortly after Didion finished writing the book, which describes her grief at losing her husband, her daughter died as well. She had lost everyone.

After the confrontation with my parents, they fell away, and they took my four sisters and two brothers with them. It was as if they had all been in an airplane and it had dropped out of the sky. Partway through the Didion program I felt a pain in my right eye. When I closed the eye, the pain went away. In the night the erosion opened full bore. My husband told me I awoke screaming. I don't remember screaming.

ix.

I went back to my eye clinic. I saw a doctor who said that I had signs of a third condition, Anterior Basement Membrane Dystrophy (A.B.M.D.). The only word of that string I heard was “basement,” because it was a real, familiar thing, and it wasn't medical. I did not want to hear about any more problems with my eyes.

The tendrils on corneal epithelial cells (“Think fingers,” the doctor said, wiggling his) normally interlock. When dry and weakened, they pull apart and the cells slough off. I had excess moisture in the layer of corneal cells beneath the surface. When you have an erosion and A.B.M.D., the surface cells attempt to reweave themselves on top of sloppy cells, to poor results. He said I needed to use a product designed to dry the underneath layer.

“Dry?” I asked. “I've been told to keep my eye hydrated.”

He chuckled. The drying product I was to use, Muro 128, was designed to pass through the surface

without impacting it, and to dry what was underneath, he said. I went to the drug store, bought Muro 128 ointment, and put some in my eye before going to bed. That night, the erosion opened again.

What had first been diagnosed a corneal abrasion (which would have healed quickly and stayed healed), and then diagnosed a corneal erosion, had morphed in a few weeks time to what doctors were calling a large, ragged, recurrent corneal erosion. When I used that phrase while talking on the telephone with an on-call eye doctor in the middle of that night, she sucked in her breath.

I had been told it would take approximately six months to thoroughly heal my erosion. During this period, it was likely to reopen. The A.B.M.D. made recurrence more likely. Each time the erosion opened, I had to start over counting down the months. I didn't have to bring hopelessness to this condition. It came built right in.

I began to suspect there was more going on here than met the eye. My body was using my eye to tell me something about my book. Never before had it gone to such extremes to get my attention, though I might have asked it, “What took you so long?” The therapist I saw years ago – once it became clear that we would be working with childhood sexual trauma – startled me by saying, “I hope you have a good doctor.”

Water is associated with feeling. I had too little water on the surface of my eyes, and too much underneath. Was my body trying to tell me that I needed to look at submerged feelings? Indeed, when my erosion opened a stream of tears poured out.

My memoir is in part about the Prairie River in northern Minnesota. I write that the river has womanly traits, and that there are things about me that are river-like. There is something called a lachrymal river in the eye, which carries tears along the lid. While trying to finish a book about a river, and while imagining myself to be like a river, I develop a problem in the one part of my body that has its own river.

I was writing about the Prairie because I have family connections to it, and because there was a large oil spill on it back in 1991. I wanted to bring the effects of the spill to light even as I explored the shadow side of my family. Before applying my Muro 128 eye ointment one day (I put a dab on my finger, pull out my lower eye lid, and scrape my finger along the edge), I read the label. The word “petrolatum” caught my eye. Amazing. I was writing about an oil spill on a river, I had a river in my eye, and I had been directed to put oil in the river in my eye.

I wanted to get away from eyes, and from that one wide disembodied woman's eye that is used in ads for things like false eyelashes or laser surgery. Don't people know how ominous that image is?

x.

When I told people I had a corneal erosion, they asked, "Does it hurt?" It did, but only when the erosion was open, and then in varying degrees. If a small patch of tissue sloughed off, I might feel just a tickle or a tremble. Other times, it would feel only as though I had an eyelash, or grit, in my eye. At these times I would shut the eye and it would heal itself.

The intense pain when the erosion opened wide, though, had made me exquisitely aware of sensations in my right eye, and, curiously, extra sensitive to words. I couldn't stand it when someone said, "That is an eyesore," or "I will keep my eyes peeled," or "That is eye-popping." There is a lot of eye peeling and popping going on, as it turns out, in everyday speech. Or I would hear, "That doesn't even begin to scratch the surface," and I would blink. The hair on my neck would bristle.

I picked up a magazine and began to read an article about a French Impressionist painter. Within a couple paragraphs I learned he had suffered a lesion on one eye. I put down the magazine and put on a compact disc. The liner notes said the composer had been blind since birth. I turned off the CD player. A friend invited me to her reading. She had had a novel published about Harley bikers. She introduced me to one of her biker friends. "Meet Deadeye," she said. Had I ever before in fifty years met someone named Deadeye? Why now? I shook his hand, but could not look him in the eye.

I wanted to get away from eyes, and from that one wide disembodied woman's eye that is used in ads for things like false eyelashes or laser surgery. Don't people know how ominous that image is? The one eye by itself? I went out to buy a poetry book for my writing group. Its cover illustration, a drawing of a house with one large eye looming over it, was called, "Buzzload of Paranoia."

xi.

I asked a young doctor who was on call if he had gotten any training in medical school on metaphor and the eye. After all, we say the eye is the window to the

soul. He looked at me a moment. He was gorgeous, straight out of central casting. His last name had a synonym for "dear one" in it.

"If we can't measure it or put a drop in it..." he said.

"Then you don't go there?" I asked.

"We are simple," he said. He smiled. I smiled back. We were in cahoots. Two decades his senior, and I was flirting with him. To regain his authority, he said, sternly, "Remember to use your artificial tears."

xii.

My book was, in part, about my low-grade depression, and how I had come to understand it. By mid-life, after plenty of therapy, and a marriage that had brought up old hurts as well as helped resolve them, I had no longer cried so much. But after I'd stopped crying I'd acquired eye problems. I had to actually go to the drug store and buy tears, put them in, and daub my eyes with a Kleenex. In other words, my erosion and dry eye condition forced me to go through the motions of a person crying. I wondered: Did my eyes have an agenda? Had a part of me that had expressed itself through tears now feel silenced? Did it miss the attention it had gotten, or the chance to unburden itself?

xiii.

In several photographs of me as a child, I have my legs crossed, or I have one protective hand pressed to my crotch. In junior high and high school, whenever I wore pants, I carried my books in my arms, and let my purse hang from my wrist front and center, placed strategically to block the view of my crotch.

xiv.

Because the erosion had opened to the point of intense pain three times in just a few weeks, I was advised to upgrade to a cornea specialist. The guy's name

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sounded like a slang term for an erect penis. For a while I resisted seeing him on that basis alone. Many of the patients in his office were women, and most of them were in their sixties, or older. My mother, I learned, had been diagnosed with dry eye when she was in her mid-sixties. Why was I dealing with a health problem especially common to women at least ten years older than me? I wondered.

My mother was so squeamish about touching her eyes that she had my father put her drops in. Her paternal grandfather had been equally unable to touch his own eyes. Though I don't mind putting in drops or ointment, I was descended from people whose eyes creeped them out. Eye ailments make a lot of people queasy. I'm not sure why. Is it that eyeballs are inside the body, and when the eyelid opens, the body opens?

xv.

When my erosion was open, my inner eye was exposed, just as my inner life would be exposed when my book came out. I would stand naked to the world. Was my body trying to warn me that it would be painful to show what was usually personal and private, to lay it out for all to see?

xvi.

I bought myself a book called *Yoga Over Fifty*. The people demonstrating postures in it are all middle-aged or older. Their hair is grey or white, but none of them has rounded shoulders or a soft belly. I found mastering simple Yoga postures a good antidote to my fear that my eye problems meant I was aging prematurely. But I had to laugh when I saw what my Yoga book instructed me to do at the end of each session. To relax, I was urged to assume the Corpse pose.

xvii.

One of the peculiar things about an eye ailment is that doctors use their eyes to diagnose your eyes. The better their vision, the more accurate their diagnosis. My regular eye doctor once said of my specialist, "He has such

an eagle eye!" Another peculiar thing: when chatting with me, doctors would look not into my eyes, but *at* my eyes. I can't say how I could tell the difference, just that I could.

This look of theirs bugged me. I pay close attention to such things. I remember one evening when I was dating my husband. We sat on the couch, talking. My eyes are a lively blue. Something I said, I can't remember what, made him sit up straighter. He tipped his head forward just a little to look into my eyes from the appropriate level of his trifocals (we were in our forties). His long look conveyed curiosity and tenderness. I find this open look of his quietly thrilling.

On one of our first dinner dates we walked across the Stone Arch Bridge. It spans the Mississippi in downtown Minneapolis. Pausing on the far side, I said: "Sex hasn't worked out all that well for me." To which he replied, with a little smile, just the right amount of impetuosity, and without missing a beat: "I hope it works better for you this time."

xviii.

"Peep" also means, according to the *O.E.D.*, "to look through a narrow aperture, as through the half-shut eyelids or through a crevice, chink or small opening into a larger space." In order to sleep, I must be in a room with a shut door. I need that container. Even then I am on the alert. My eye doctor suspects – given where my erosion was – that I sleep with my eyes slightly open, which exacerbated the problem with dry eye, and with my erosion.

xix.

Another peculiarity of eye doctors is how myopic they are. They have a hard time thinking outside the eye. When I asked what activities I should avoid, they were noncommittal. "Keep the eye moist," was the only advice they could offer. Winter-indoors-Minnesota equals furnaces blasting, rooms dry as kilns. I avoided restaurants, theaters, museums, and stores, and chose instead to spend my days at home. I had a humidifier in my bedroom, and water in my bathtub and in pans on the floor throughout my house, left to evaporate.

I taught my writing classes a couple of times a week, but I drove there in a frigid car and then turned the thermostat down, forcing the students to wear their coats. Leaving town was out of the question. If my erosion opened, I needed immediate help. I had to stay within a short drive of my eye doctors and their numbing drops. On the rare occasion that I had to run an errand just out to the suburbs, I was snappish and wary.

My doctors' concerns were scarring, infection, and vision loss. I made note of theirs, and added my own. Did I have some as yet undiagnosed disease that was the underlying cause of the erosion? Would I lose my job? Would I become dependent on others? What if a natural disaster or a terrorist attack disrupted commerce? If Bion Tears were not available, my eye would dry out and the erosion might open and stay open. If we had to flee our home, I wondered, would I be left behind, too slowed by pain, too infirm to be brought along?

xx.

I had learned in therapy to refer to the young, troubled aspect of myself as the hurt kid. Did this kid hate my book, where she is featured? Did she fear being annihilated by being transferred to the page? Did she think I was soft-soaping her pain in the book? Was she still so angry she couldn't see straight? Was she afraid that by writing the book I would get beyond her pain, beyond her?

xxi.

My paper file at the eye doctor's office grew to the size of a phone book for a medium-sized city. I asked my cornea specialist about metaphor and the eye.

"I am writing a memoir about a wounded I, and I develop an eye wound. How could these not be related?" I said.

He had his back turned to me as he wrote in my chart. He glanced over his shoulder. "There can be many layers of meaning in a physical problem," he said, and then he turned back to the chart. "The body is a complex thing" Nervously, he looked over his shoulder at me again. "Well, not a *thing*," he said.

xxii.

Because doctors were so limited in what they could do to help me heal my erosion, I turned to others. I talked to my therapist, I got massages, I sought out chiropractic care. When it appeared these approaches were not going to help me either, I went to a

homeopathic doctor. I told her about the sexual trauma I suffered as a young child. Sanguine, she said she'd had the same experience, but would never do anything hurtful in response to it, she would never write a book about it.

She told me to put a patch on the eye and to let my erosion heal underneath it, naturally. Her advice, both as a person and as a doctor, in other words, was to put a lid on it. I tried to follow her advice, but I didn't get the patch taped on right. In the middle of the night it bumped against my eye, knocking loose a large patch of corneal tissue.

Up to that point, when I had had a full-blown erosion in the night, it had closed again within an hour. But this time it stayed open for fifteen hours. The pain pinned me to the bed. Doctors use a mild term for what I was feeling: "a foreign body sensation." The eye wound feels hot and raspy, as if it is being poked and torn. Even though you know there is nothing in your eye, you are desperate for relief. You want someone to pull that thing that isn't there out of your eye.

With the erosion open and my pain a hundred times worse than any I had ever felt before, my eye looked angry. And I grew angry. My husband, who was trying to help, could do nothing right. I yelled at him, I turned my back, I sobbed. I wondered: is this what it feels like to die?

I had become extremely light sensitive, so I shut both eyes. As we prepared to go see my doctor, my husband led me across our living room by the arm. I stepped over something I saw in my mind's eye: a toy horse, the kind a child holds between her legs as she trots around. I noted that my husband and I owned no such toy. Had I stepped into my childhood? Was this unfamiliar object in some way related to my sexual trauma?

In the car on the way to the doctor's office I found myself saying, "This is how much it hurt, this is how much it hurt," through my tears. I realized that the pain had caused me to bypass a circuit, and I was referring to sexual trauma whose details I couldn't fully access.

xxiii.

Sometimes when I am lying down I feel a fizzing at the top of my head, and my upper body seems to elongate and lift away. I am like a cartoon character whose form is elastic. The top of me soars upward as the bottom of me stays put. I have been told this is not an uncommon sensation. Maybe my body is remembering being born. Or maybe this developed so I could escape my lower body when I was young. The "I" in me got to float up and away.

Sexual trauma breaks a metaphorical seal on the body. The membrane that held you in has been breached. Over the years, by doing therapy, by writing, and by loving my husband, I had been consolidating an adult self and knitting together what had been torn. Did the young part of me resist these changes? If I finished the book and became whole, would she feel trapped? The tear in my fabric had also allowed for my release. If I closed this tear, would I be trapped? Had a part of me punched the hole in my eye to create an escape route, so, when in a tight spot again, I could flee?

xxiv.

After she led me by the arm into her examining room, my doctor put in numbing drops, gave me pain pills, and said: go home, go to bed, go to sleep. She thought I'd be okay, but the pain returned, in spite of the medication. I went back to her office to have a bandage contact lens put in. After a few weeks the erosion opened even with the lens in.

My doctors had been trying to convince me to have laser surgery. When they had first mentioned it, I had been relieved to hear that this fix was available. But then I learned more. They wouldn't just repair the affected area, they would remove the whole epithelium, the entire outer layer of the eye. When I told my family doctor about the procedure, he asked, "How do people live through that?"

My specialist said that in ten percent of the cases they had to go back and do a second surgery. The erosion, even after the surgery, could recur. My specialist told me he'd had to do the surgery on one man five times. I wondered, but did not ask, if the man had been healed by that last procedure, or if he'd thrown himself off a cliff. If the surgery itself was not daunting enough, the list of complications was long. But what made me bear down and say, "No damn way," was not that it could cause blindness or death. It was that it could result in recurrent corneal erosions.

After the contact lens failed, though, I had run out of alternatives. Faced with more months of living in fear that the erosion would open, and with the pain when it did, I signed up for surgery. My specialist is not a spring chicken, but on the day of my procedure he looked fresh and cute. He apparently likes doing eye surgery. I lay on my back. A technician strapped my head down, and placed a round structure on my eye to hold the lid back. Before the doctor began, he told me to stare at a bright light and lie still. I did as I was told. The doctor first scraped the weakened corneal cells off my numbed eye with a sharp blade. I told him it was hard to allow this after vigilantly protecting my eye for so long. In a thoughtful, preoccupied way, he murmured, "I suppose." After that, there were a couple of pulses with the laser, and we were all done.

An erosion opened in a new place a few days later (which, thank God, healed quickly and stayed healed). I told the technician tending to me that just before this erosion opened I had felt a tremor in the place where the old erosion had been, and speaking slowly, as if to an idiot, she explained how this was impossible. The tissue that had been eroding there was gone. But I know what I felt. Some part of me, whatever had been behind the problem all along, was not going to let my doctors have the last word.

Happily, in the years since the surgery, though I've had a couple of close calls, I've had no more full-blown erosions. I do put eye drops in once an hour, but I am no longer setting up every day around protecting my eye. By listening to and reassuring the hurt part of me, it seems I have settled it down. What my therapist had described as an intense struggle with my unconscious eased.

One day it was as if I'd ridden out a storm. I had an insight: the book could be transformative rather than threatening. It could act as my new protective outer layer. A book has covers. The hurt kid would be inside it. The way to heal was to *finish* the book. Really? I thought. Okay. I will see it through.