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My Eyes are a Map of Veins

By Jacqueline Ellis

I push my chin and forehead against strips of hard, grey plastic. Feel the cold, damp residue of an alcohol wipe. The new doctor sits behind the slit lamp, surveying the interior structures of my eyes. I stare at the side of his cheek, at a corner of his dark brown hair. Blue light advances toward my eyeball. The doctor's face disappears.

In 2017, I was diagnosed with Thyroid Eye Disease. Antibodies had attacked the muscles behind my eyes, causing them to bulge out beyond the lids. Since then, six different eye doctors have examined the dryness of my cornea, the pressure around my optic nerve, the efficacy of my tear ducts. Do I see double? Do short, black spindles drift across my vision's surface? Do objects at the periphery appear blurry, spectral?

The doctors have remarked in resigned or amazed or pitying tones: "Your eyes don't close when you blink."

I am not supposed to blink. I am meant to keep still but also relax and breathe normally, to look only at the top of the doctor's ear or the place above their ear that's covered by their waving fingers. Once, a doctor grabbed the back of my head and forced it still, annoyed that it moved when I adjusted the position of my right foot.

That doctor referred me to the first ocular-plastic surgeon. The one who grimaced when he saw my face and said, "You look terrible. Why haven't you fixed that?"

The second surgeon's hands were small and smooth. He looked down and blinked too much as he talked. I watched him adjust his expression to look more understanding, more sympathetic. He pressed the exophthalmometer against my face to measure each millimeter of the bulging. Its points were sharp and cold against my orbital bone. Stretched the corners where my eyelids meet.

"Your eyes are like ice-cream and the socket is like a cone," the surgeon said. "The cone is not big enough. The ice-cream is coming out of the sides. We need to relieve the pressure."

Pink melted sweetness trickled from the edges of my eyes, slid down my cheeks and onto my lips. I tasted sugar and warming milk.

All the doctors take photographs of my eyes. They have directed me to stand in front of a black curtain, to sit on the edge of an examination chair, to lay back with my neck extended, to focus on the space between the top of the office door and the ceiling. I have turned my head left, right, straight ahead. Looked down, tilted my chin up, angled my face toward the doctor's.

A third surgeon said, "Stop squeezing your eyes together, relax your eyelids."

He turned the camera around to show me the pictures.

"See how bad they look in this one," he said, pleased.

My face had no edges, my eyes pressed out like when Bugs Bunny sees a pinup rabbit. I saw my eyeballs extended on coils, pulsing red-heart pupils; heard the cartoon springing sound.

The doctors use the digital cameras that everyone had before they had smartphones. Silver with a lens that moves in and out. The lens advances toward my eyes. Then beep, click, an electronic whir. I think about pictures I have taken with one of those cameras—the Statue

of Liberty, the fountain in Central Park, my parents and daughter standing in front of the Houses of Parliament. My daughter holding her hand out flat so Big Ben rests on her palm.

I have deleted most of the pictures of my eyes from my phone. Except for the before-and-after ones I took between orbital decompression surgeries. I swipe through images where the lids on my right, then left eye are sewn together, where I am bruised and bandaged, where I am bruised and swollen. Where the bruises turn from red and purple to purple and yellow, then to yellow and grey, then to yellow and back to my skin again.

There are no pictures of how my face looks now. I have posed for them—with my husband on our anniversary, at my fiftieth birthday party, on a road trip with my best friend, with my daughter on Mother's Day. I have smiled and pictures were taken. I have scrolled through them, zoomed in on my face, tried to recognize myself.

My eyes protrude like Luca Brasi garroted in *The Godfather*.

I press the trash can icon. The images fold into themselves and disappear.

In 1583, a German physician, Georg Bartisch, published a medical textbook, *Ophthalmodouleia: Das ist Augendienst*, describing diseases and treatments "in service of the eye." One of the woodcut illustrations shows a man in a black coat with a wide white collar. His moustache and beard weave together in an uneven rectangle. Instead of eyes he has two white protrusions, tight and flat at the front like pin cushions, crossed lines like stars for pupils. The illustration depicts, Bartisch writes in an elaborate ink-quill script, "a disease caused by witchcraft."

Fourteen years later, in Scotland, Margaret Aitken claimed she could identify a witch by searching a woman's eyes. She could discern the Devil's mark in the patterns of red veins. A commission of men—clergy, judges, doctors—took Margaret from town to town. Lined up women for her surveillance. She peered into each face, breath cold, damp against the tops of the accused woman's cheeks. Margaret deciphered every configuration, assessed the evidence, made a diagnosis.

My eyes are a map of veins. I push my face to the bathroom mirror, close in until it disappears. My breath dampens, clouds the glass, obscures my reflected mouth. I track each red-strand tangle—a cluster in the left outside corner, a web above the gold-flecked blue of my right iris. Gauge the thickness of each thread, the urgency of the redness, its contrast against the white. Measure how it bends, refracts, behind tears. Hope for the clarity of witchcraft.

There are no clear signs, no recognizable changes, no conclusions to draw.

Before the pandemic, I gave up on my eyes and focused on my mouth. I bought hot pink lipstick, orange lipstick, bright red lipstick: mattes, glosses, satins, velvets. I smiled more and hid my eyes behind glasses. Now, all I see are eyes. Mine pushing out of my face, balancing white and red on the top of my mask. Other people's: double takes, too long stares, glances, glances away.

The new doctor—whose whole face I have never seen—prescribes infusions of steroids, of arthritis medicine, of new miracle drugs. I drive to medical facilities meant for chemo patients, sit in a reclining chair, my arm hooked to an IV: once a week, every other week, once a month.

The nurse taps my veins, tells me to clench and unclench my fist, then glances at my eyes, the only visible part of my face. My lips tense behind my mask. Hers form the imprint of a smile. Her eyes wrinkle and narrow at the corners.

She asks a question I can't answer: "Has there been any improvement?"

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