

MOOD RINGS

sara lynne puotinen

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

In August of 2016, at the age of 42, I was diagnosed with macular dystrophy. Two years later, the diagnosis was narrowed to cone dystrophy and I was told I would most likely lose all of my central vision within the next five years. In the fall of 2020, after finding a way to observe the growing blind spot in my central vision, I decided to use it and the Amsler grid as the forms for a series of poems about how it feels to be in-between seeing and being blind.

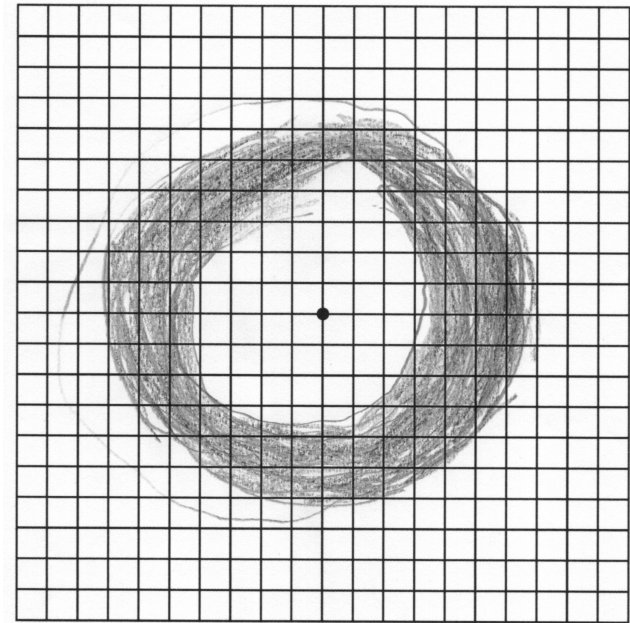


Image: blind spot in my central vision on Amsler grid

MOODS

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HOW TO FIND

a blind spot in your central vision when you have cone dystrophy: Stand. Stare. Wait.

Stand a foot away from a blank wall in a well lit room. Close your left eye and look straight ahead with your right or close your right eye and look straight ahead with your left. Stare into the center until a dark ring begins to appear.

Every human eye has a blind spot. My blind spot is simply larger and more central than yours.

Georgina Kleege

DELIGHTED

I find it one day. Standing in front of a white wall staring straight ahead a thick dark circle with a small light center appears. My blind spot. But not yet a spot. Now To witness this only a ring of smudged gray surrrite of my unseeing ounding white. Smudged gray usually hidden behind softethe central vision I'veened forms filled-in gaps astonlost and white whatishes. Whatremains.magic lets me seEvery year thise through ring will thickenthis rinspread until absg obscurorbing the shrinking my viing center. I ew? How s stare at itatisfying nountil my head aches w to know this show is more remy eyes t witch. I obsal than the illusions my brainerve how it moves slightly woffers as sight.hen I shift my gaze. How it grows bigger when I cover my left eye smaller when I cover my right. How it begins to throb then fade then flare. A dark fiery hoop with silvery flecks burning through my thinning retina.

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CURIOUS

Before, all I remembered from science class was the strange image of an inverted tree entering upright then shrinking and flipping around. I didn't remember the retina or I never thought of that it is a thin layer of tissue about blind spots or the lining the back of the eye. I tried to find mine or wonder if I was centered about how much of what I see is the macula. It was real or here the illusion but what most important in my brain, cone cells no longer hide. I was waiting to see the effect of converting light into signals that travel through the optic nerves. Disappearing cars shifting to the visual cortex. I began learning about the fovea and the number of cone cells in it and when the blind spot was first written about and how the brain guesses when it lacks visual data and why some people in the early stages of vision loss hallucinate floating faces and little folks in costumes.

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AWED

Behold the awesome power of sight! Not found in one destructive glance but in the accumulation of looks. Against the odds and in spite of damaged cones misfiring signals So much could go and incomplete data these look wrong and often does produce something resembling. Yet light photoreceptor bring vision--an image feels the optic nerve the visualizing fuzzy form. O! cortex faithful and a way. Through cones! Diligently guess delivering work improvised data despite distortion imagination in ion filtering handling numbers ena filling-in and bling processes some to see some color-scientists don't yet understand greens and golds and they ensure I see more than pinks and blues. O industrioseems possible us brain! Tirelessly trying to make sense of scrambled signals. Conjuring images. Concealing gaping holes and black rings. Making it possible for me to exclaim, "Oh my god! Look at that wedge of geese in the sky!"

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WHAT TO DO

with a blind ring when you have cone dystrophy: Return. Stare until you believe. Repeat.

Go back to the wall. Stand a foot from it with one eye closed and one eye open. Stare at a spot in the center and wait for your ring scotoma to appear. Look at the ring until you see it even when you are not staring at that spot on the wall, until the fact of your deteriorating vision remains real. When the ring and your faith fades, return to the wall as often as necessary.

The difference between myself and my student is that I am better at not knowing what I am doing.

Mary Ruefle

Bewilderment is an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability. It cracks open the dialectic and sees myriads all at once.

Fanny Howe

DOUBTFUL

I stand in front of the wall again. Close the left eye and stare straight ahead with the right. Wait for the ring's return. The growing hoop that offers proof. Despite the ring scotoma on the brain's best efforts to persuade the wall what is blinding me my vision is fine thickness after all? How do we see the ring reminds me it sees and has sight? What does it see not. I like to still look and here like to be losing and watch gray it? When dark do I call it low vision to blue or blindness and lack when weakness? while a silver edge are my eyes beginning to deteriorate to fray. Away from it or am I exaggerating? Why do the walls it is harder to want to see and not see at all believe. Easier to lose for the same time? aith in the flux of photoreceptor cells that sometimes work sometimes do not. I go back again and again and try to answer the question: Where do I fit in on this line that stretches between seeing and being blind?

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LONELY

More than the ghostly letters that barely haunt the page more than the blur of a bike that appears without warning beside me on the path it is the faded faces that really get to me. When the light is the pupil. The flaring bright or not bright end of a nostril. The raising of the features leaves an eyebrow. The nod of a head. Sometimes the outline of the line of the chin. In an ear along for the reassurance that I am not alone. So eyes are someone else's gone. The pupils are there. All lifeless and alien as black ball bearing an uncanny valley begins. Other times all to form between me and the rest that's there is a dark blot of the world. Perched on the shoulders of a family member a friend a stranger on the street. Aiming my eyes to the side I might catch a flash of iris the curve of a jaw. Mostly I rely on memory to recall the face I used to see. I imagine to create the life that is not there.

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BEWILDERED

Slowly I get better at not knowing what I am doing
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t person in front of me is coming or going. I get
better at not recogLately less fear nizing my husb
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ear. I practice in the summer while I swim across
the lake. When I cannot sight any of the orange bu
oys that direct me to the opposite shore I do not
stop. I keep swimming straight into the blue void.

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WHAT ELSE TO DO

with a blind ring when you have cone dystrophy: Tape. Trace. Experiment.

Tape a piece of paper to the wall at eye level then stare at the center of it. When your blind spot appears on the paper, trace it with a pencil. Experiment with the ring you traced. Make it the shape of a concrete poem. Use it to conceal words in an erasure poem. Cut it out, look at it, then through it at your words, the world. Turn it into a series of poems about how you feel as you live through the process of losing your central vision.

The gorge was formed from the turbulent water of Saint Anthony falls wearing away the lower soft layer of Saint Peter Sandstone and undercutting the layers of shale and limestone above. Top layers began to crumble and the falls retreated slowly upstream for 12,000 years to their current location in Minneapolis.

Friends of the Mississippi River

RESILIENT

So many years of odd symptoms dismissed as quirks or evidence of weak will. Finally proof of something else. After relief acceptance. I slow down settle into new habits. Instead of seeking search for better words to describe second opinions. Be what I see switch to the memorize the path. Mental pithiness of poetry andly map the potholes the dips the parser pages. More cracks. S room ink deep into seto imagine more sensations space to breathe other than more rest for my eyesight. yes. I let go listen to of the need to know the go instantly. ge. Hear the To ever understand esumac creep under the fence verything. I ask for help and find its way through p. Stop pretending to see things the asphalt. I do not. Learn to panic less. To accept continued confusion. To love softer fuzzier forms. To find some delight in mistaking a tree or a trashcan or a trail sign for a person. To look for more light. Brighter bulbs.

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RELENTLESS

Standing staring one day I tape a piece of white paper to the wall at eye level. I keep my right eye closed as I look with my left. Take a pencil and trace what I see: a twelve thousand year old rough sketch of an uneven loop of water from a thicker on one side. My ringed glaciers began to wobble. I test out ideas down limestone to form a different paper someplace. Thirty years ago cones some filled with shells in my words a scuba began to make containing function to find a grid or a scotoma. I. I draw a ring around both of everything. limestone and I cut it out. Superd water. As I dissolve my slow impose it. Draft poems in steady flow carves out a inside outside around it about new geography. decaying cones thinning retinas my moods as I gradually lose my central vision. Always working for better words better forms and better paths to other ways of seeing.

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INCURABLE

No cure. A stubborn sentence that brings relief not despair. No expensive tests. No inconclusive results. No experimental treatments. No jammed waiting rooms. No needles pricking my eyes. No need for tea weakness but strength. No need for grief. No strength. Strength is not a hard need for answers. Not a strength but a softening. Diminishing to fix to make a vision safe is not a death sentence to store away for winter but a door into. Someday there are other worlds. A way to repopulate back late that the vacant city of my gar and salt. Pack away the macula. But not now. No preservatives. I do not know is the time for living and need to be cured. breathing and being outside above the gorge. For adapting and exploring and creating different forms of seeing. For wandering beneath the sprawling oaks feeling the biting breeze admiring the view to the other side.

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NOTES

Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen*

Mary Ruefle's *Madness, Rack, and Honey*

Fanny Howe's "Bewilderment"

Friends of the Mississippi River's "Geology and Natural History of the Mississippi River Gorge"

"Lonely" is inspired by Ada Limón's "Instructions on not Giving Up"

For more information about the project, including descriptions of the process and resources, go to:

<https://sarapuotine.com/mood-rings>