

# Floaters

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When I stare at the sky or a blank page, I see things that no one else can see. I'm not talking about imagination or what have you.

I'm talking about my floaters.

What it comes down to is there's a bunch of junk in my eyes. It's been there for as long as I can remember.

I remember when I was younger the eye doctor saying the floaters would go away when I got older.

I wonder if I am older yet.

My floaters remind me of the lazy river at Noah's Ark, "America's Largest Waterpark," according to the tagline. When I was a kid, my family went every summer. The intense and tall water slides were fun, banking left and right in snakely tubes, but my mom and I always had a special place for the lazy river. It wound slowly around the whole park, and you could get in or out at many places, or you could just stay put for hours and let the current take you round and round. Letting the afternoon float by in the lazy river, sitting atop a one-person tube, staring at the sky.

*Floaters* is a good name for them.

Whenever I stare at something plain and bright, I can see them tracking across my visual field. Shadowy forms, some sharper than others. There are tiny dots and there are short threads. The threads look like eyelashes, as if I somehow got one stuck inside my eyeball. Then, my favorite, there are the blobby tails that look like chromosomes.

There they are now, always, drifting quietly. Slow-motion asteroids falling toward the earth. If I move my eyes quickly, they zoom in parallax past whatever I looked at, and then they descend on a slowing arc. They are shy: When you try to look at them directly, they dart away.

When I was in kindergarten, everyone had to take a vision test. Of the class of fourteen or so, I think I was the only one whose life this changed: I came to school a few weeks later with glasses half the size of my face, in my father's image.

I was nearsighted—or "near-sided," as I thought—which gave rise to the floaters. They're common in people who are near-sided.

The eye is full of clear jelly called vitreous, vitreous, vitreous.

Vitreous helps the eye keep its shape, but a problem of this arrangement is that sometimes the vitreous

can't manage to keep its own shape. The vitreous maybe ought to read the Gospel of Matthew.

In some cases—mine, apparently—the vitreous shrinks, and when this happens, it gets knotted up. It's like when you're making custard, if you let the pan get too hot, the eggs cook before they're incorporated, and so clumps of egg mar the consistency of the otherwise smooth custard. But also sometimes, when the shrinking, knotting vitreous pulls away from the retina, little scraps of retina get stuck in the goo, suspended like astronauts.

All this junk in your eye casts shadows on your retina, and that's how you can see them: shadows on the wall. Eventually, according to the NEI, the floaters will settle at the bottom of your eye, and they'll never be seen again. I think of a snowglobe. I wonder if hanging upside down or jumping would reanimate the floaters. The Mayo Clinic webpage on floaters uses almost all the same words as the NEI, and I wonder who copied who.

Have you ever thought about the inside of your eye? The funny thing about our bodies is how they're invisible to us. We don't think about them until something stops working. You don't notice your hand until it gets sore, or your toe until you stub it, or your hair until it's unconscionably greasy. We don't think about our blood or bile or synovial fluid. We definitely don't think about the jelly inside our eyes. Vitreous, vitreous, vitreous—the word means “like glass.” The idea is we don't see glass until it's dirty.

We're like fish, ignorant of water.

Or like humans, ignorant of air, at least until we live in Beijing.

My floaters are how I know I'm in Beijing.

If you don't have any floaters but you want to go to Beijing, all you have to do is push on the side of your eye a few times and watch how your vision warps. Or you can do the thing with an empty paper towel roll where you cut a hole in your hand.

Things we do as children, but not once we're grown up, and so I think Beijing must be a kind of Neverland.

Growing up, the eye doctor told me, means no longer being able to see inside your eye.

My floaters mean that when I use my eyes I'm not just looking at things out in the world, but also at things inside my eyes. The eyes are instruments that can observe themselves. Can you imagine looking into a microscope and seeing not a teeming cell but rather glass discs and metal?

It's curious being able to see inside your own body. With the naked eye, so to speak. Inside your own eye.

Every eye doctor I've ever seen has said to come in immediately if I ever notice more floaters than usual. If this happens, what it probably means is that my retina has detached from the rest of my eye and is crumpling up like a McChicken wrapper, soon to be followed by blindness. The process may be accompanied by bright flashes and a loss of peripheral vision. All this sounds rather extreme to me and I wonder what good “coming in immediately” could do anyway. When the world inside your eye is collapsing, where does it go?

The NEI's website seems to imply that there is some way to treat retinal detachment if you spot it early enough. You'd think it would be impossible not to spot, seeing as it's inside your eye.

But then again, would you ever notice if there was a new star?

This whirling nebula inside my eye, these floaters, these comets.

Maybe I was talking about my imagination after all.