



# Peripheral Vision

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(Intended for July 2020 MFA community *only*. Thank you.)



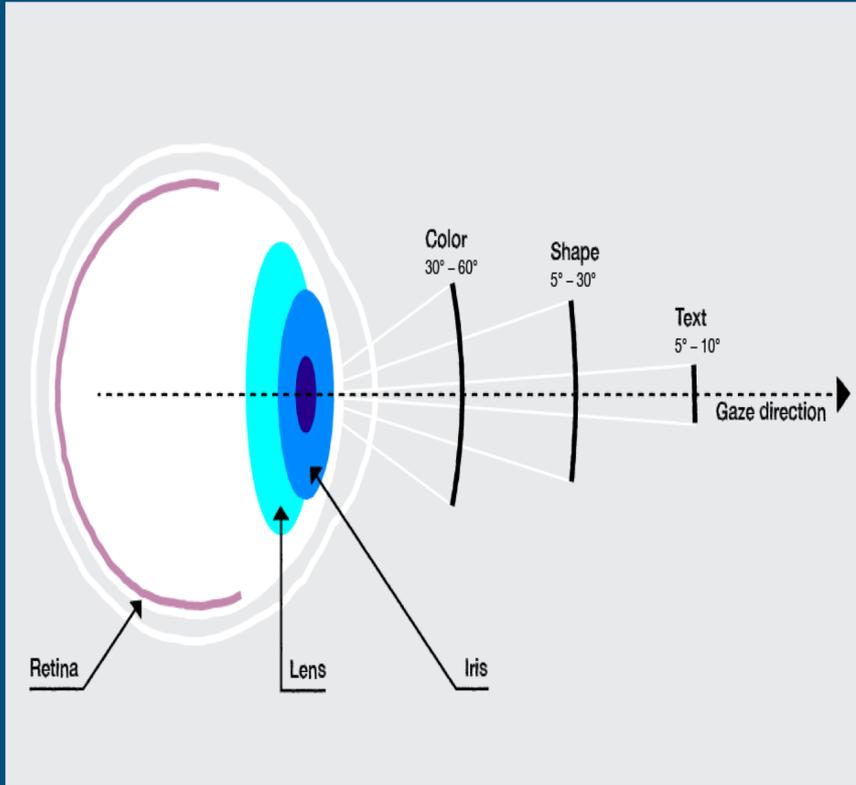
# Seeing around the narrator

What is seen, what is not seen, and what is glimpsed out of the corner of the story's eye?

How does narrative gesture to the world that exists at the edges of the narrator's gaze?

How can peripheral vision interrogate knowledge in the story, map relationships to systems of power, create tension and friction?

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Peripheral vision is the ability to see things where you are not directly looking—“out of the corner of your eye.”

**Most vision is peripheral.**

We have high-resolution vision only in a small area in the very center of each eye’s visual field.

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# Peripheral vision is poor, and it is a fiction.

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In the periphery of your visual field, you are legally blind.

The resolution in your peripheral vision is roughly equivalent to looking through a frosted shower door, and yet you enjoy the illusion of seeing the periphery clearly. --David Eagleman.

Wherever you cast your eyes appears to be in sharp focus, and therefore you assume the whole visual world is in focus.

**Peripheral vision is geared to motion:** quick at detecting something entering our field of sight, but weak at distinguishing color, shape or detail.

Absence or loss of peripheral vision is **tunnel vision**.

# Peripheral Vision in Fiction

## Might Include:

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Something that *indirectly* occupies a vast amount of space in the story

Is only glimpsed in part

Exists in conjecture, inference, or supposition

## What catches the gaze?

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Sudden movement

A shift in focus

Trajectory from the general (motion) to the specific (color, shape, detail)

## FROM OTTESSA MOSHFEGH, “SLUMMING”

[this is the ending]

I stood around watching her clean for a while, helping her here and there, moving furniture so she could mop. She seemed perfectly fine to me. “I love The Matrix,” she said, straightening my shelves of VHS tapes. “I love old movies.” She beat the sofa’s cushions with her fist. She stacked the magazines on the end table. She straightened my framed posters of Monet’s Water Lilies. Her eyes were clear and blue as ever under their thick, gleaming lids. I went upstairs to get the broom, then I retreated to the kitchen, put away the clean dishes, and did the dirty ones. I put the dinner half of my sub in the fridge and sponged off the counter. I took out the trash. Outside my neighbors were filling a kiddie pool with water from their garden hose. I waved.

“Marvin died,” one of the women said glumly.

“Who’s Marvin?” I asked.

She turned to her sister, or mother—I couldn't tell—and rolled her eyes. Clark had chained the lids of my trash cans to the plastic handles on the barrels. For some reason, the people of Alna liked to steal the lids and throw them in the Omec. That was one of their summer recreations, he'd told me. As I stuffed the garbage down, the pregnant girl threw open the screen door and walked stiffly down the front steps. She held one hand down under her belly and the palm of her other hand up in front of her face. When she saw me and the neighbors, she turned her palm around. It was covered in blood.

“Oh, honey!” cried one of the women, dropping the hose.

“Something's wrong,” the girl stammered, stunned.

“Well, honey, what happened? Did you fall? Did you hurt yourself?” the women were asking.

The girl caught my eye as they surrounded her. I put the lid on the trash and watched as the women guided the girl across the muddy grass. They made her sit down in a lawn chair in the shade. One of them went inside to call for help. I went back into the house and got the girl's flyers and twenty dollars from my wallet. When I got back outside, she was panting. I handed her the money, and she grabbed my forearm, smeared her blood all over it, squeezed it, shrieking, contracting her face in pain.

“Hang on, honey,” the neighbor said, frowning at me, her fat hands stroking the girl’s smooth, sweaty brow. “Help is on the way.”

When the ambulance left that afternoon, I took a walk down to the Omece. Squatting by the edge of the river, I washed the blood off my arm. I took the crystals out and let them plunk down into the rushing water, threw the crumpled foil at the wind, and watched it hit the surface and float away. I looked up at the pale, overcast sky, the crows circling then gliding down to a nest of rotting garbage on the opposite bank. I sat on a hot rock and let the sun warm my bones. My thighs splayed out; my white skin tightened and burned. It was nice there with the cool breeze, the sound of the traffic through the trees, the earthy stench of mud. An empty Coke can tinkled a rhythm against the rock, shaken by the current. A toad hopped across my foot. Later that evening I dragged the sunlamp out onto the curb, thinking maybe the zombies would find it. The next morning it was still there, so I dragged it back inside. I walked up Riverside Road. I got what I wanted. I walked back home.

[end of story]

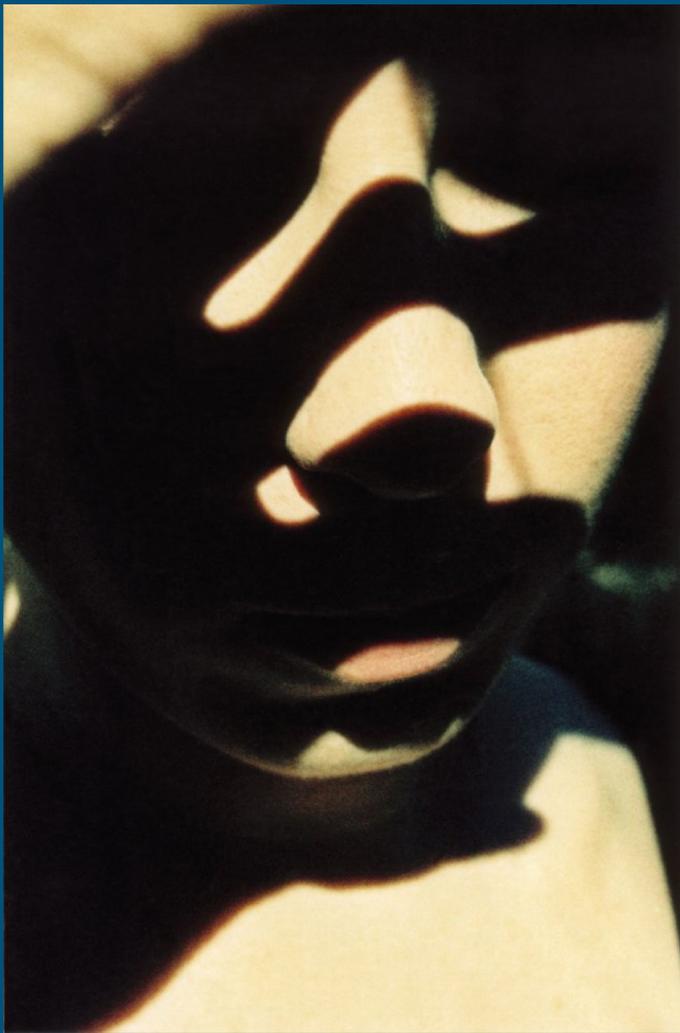
# QUESTIONS

What is centered in the narrator's gaze, and what is not?

Where do you see movement on the periphery, a shift from general motion to concrete detail?

How does your reaction align or disalign with the narrator's?

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I love Giacometti for his distortion of his figures. I'm really interested in the way the figures kind of reduce to being really scant and 'half-present'. It's similar to ideas that appeal to me when photographing portraits that are obscured – as though you're looking at something that's on the periphery of what you're looking at...I was interested in exploring what could be garnered from a presence if it were only looked at in an abstracted way, and felt in other ways. How the initial impression of a person on the periphery could be intuitively kind of absorbed.

--Charles Dennington, photographer

## FROM JENNY ZHANG, “WHY WERE THEY THROWING BRICKS?”

[the opening]

“I lost hearing in this ear when a horse jumped over a fence and collided against the side of my face,” my grandmother told me when she arrived at JFK. I was nine and hadn’t seen her in four years. “In Shanghai you slept with me every single night. Every week we took you to your other grandmother’s house. She called incessantly, asking for you. ‘Can’t I see my own granddaughter?’ I said, ‘Sure you can.’ But—let’s not spare any feelings—you didn’t want to see her. Whenever you were at your waipo’s house you cried and called my name and woke up the neighbors. You hated her face because it was round like the moon, and you thought mine was perfectly oval like an egg. You loved our house. It was your real home—and still is. Your waipo would frantically call a few minutes after I dropped you off asking me to come back, and I would sprint all the way there. Yes, my precious heart, your sixty-eight-year-old grandmother ran through the streets for you. How could I let you suffer for even a second? You wouldn’t stop crying until I arrived, and the minute I pulled you into my arms, you slept the deep happy sleep of a child who has come home to her true family.”

“I sleep by myself now. I have my own bed with stickers on it,” I told her in Chinese, without knowing the word for stickers. [...]

“You remember how uncanny it was,” my grandmother continued, tweaking her hearing aid until it made a small shrill sound and then a shriller sound and then another even shriller sound. “They called me a miracle worker and I said, ‘No, no, I’m just her nainai,’ but everyone said, ‘You’re a miracle worker. You’re the only one who can make that child stop crying.’ They said there was no need for me to be modest. ‘This child prefers her grandmother to even her own mother and father! Why sugarcoat the truth?’ I had to stop myself from stopping other people from saying it after a while. Was I supposed to keep insulting everyone’s intelligence? Protesting endlessly? Your nainai isn’t that type of person. And the truth is, people don’t make things up out of nothing. There’s truth in every widely believed saying, and that’s just true.”

“What?” I said. “I don’t understand Chinese that good.”

“I knew you wouldn’t forget a moment of your real life, your real home—the place you come from. Have you learned English yet?”

“That’s all I speak. It’s America.”

[much later in the story]

All of her was laid bare now—I saw her. She was just an old woman, raised in the country without education, who'd been told as a girl that women had been put on this earth to give birth and rear children and not be a burden in any way but to live as servants lived, productively, without fatigue or requirements of their own, yet had been resourceful and clever enough to come up through the feminist movement that Mao had devised to get women out of the house and into fields and factories, who had been given more power than any of the women in her lineage, who alluded to all the people she “saved” but never the people she turned in during the Cultural Revolution, whose hearing loss fed her fears of becoming useless, and who to counter those fears adopted a confidence that was embarrassing to witness, an opinion of herself so excessively high that it bordered on delusional. She tried to make her children believe they would perish without her, and when they learned better she tried the same with her grandchildren. But we were learning better, too, and it would be years before we had our own children, and by then she would be dead.

# QUESTIONS

How much of the grandmother do we see directly, and how much do we glimpse peripherally or partially, based on inference or supposition?

How does the portrait of the grandmother shift from the excerpt at the beginning to the excerpt at the end?

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Kiki Smith, *My Blue Lake*, 1995

In *My Blue Lake*, Kiki Smith combines the world and her body by using a camera designed for capturing geological features. Smith photographs herself as if she were terrain. She used the printmaking technique of drypoint along with red and blue coloring to make her hair and body hint at topographical markings.

The camera used with permission from the Royal Academy provides a full peripheral view of the subject so that her whole body is viewable in a two-dimensional image. The camera distorts her skin, but less so her face, the same way a map distorts elements in the periphery but less so in the center.

(description quoted from *Beyond Likeness*)



## FROM MARY GAITSKILL, “TINY, SMILING DADDY”

[excerpts from throughout the story]

He did not remember precisely when it had happened, but Kitty, his beautiful, happy little girl, turned into a glum, weird teenager that other kids picked on. She got skinny and ugly. Her blue eyes, which had been so sensitive and bright, turned filmy, as if the real Kitty had retreated so far from the surface that her eyes existed to shield rather than reflect her. It was as if she deliberately held her beauty away from them, only showing glimpses of it during unavoidable lapses, like the time she sat before the TV, daydreaming and lazily brushing her hair.

...

Kitty could be vicious. He hadn't seen her vicious side in years, but he knew it was there. He remembered the time he'd stood behind the half-open front door when fifteen-year-old Kitty sat hunched on the front steps with one of her few friends, a homely blonde who wore white lipstick and a white leather jacket. He had come to the door to view the weather and say something to the girls, but they were muttering so intently that curiosity got the better of him, and he hung back a moment to listen. “Well, at least your mom's smart,” said Kitty. “My mom's not only a bitch, she's stupid.”

Then one year she came home for Christmas. She came into the house with her luggage and a shopping bag of gifts for them, and he saw that she was beautiful again. It was a beauty that both offended and titillated his senses. Her short, spiky hair was streaked with purple, her dainty mouth was lipsticked, her nose and ears were pierced with amethyst and dangling silver. Her face had opened in thousands of petals. Her eyes shone with quick perception as she put down her bag, and he knew that she had seen him see her beauty. She moved toward him with fluid hips; she embraced him for the first time in years. He felt her live, lithe body against his, and his heart pulsed a message of blood and love. “Merry Christmas, Daddy,” she said. [...]

· It was hard for him to rationally ingest the beginning paragraphs, which seemed, incredibly, to be about a phone conversation they’d had some time ago about the emptiness and selfishness of people who have sex but don’t get married and have children. A few phrases stood out clearly: “. . . my father may love me but he doesn’t love the way I live.” “. . . even more complicated because I’m gay.” “. . . because it still hurts me.” [...]

· “If the worst occurred and my father was unable to respond to me in kind, I still would have done a good thing. I would have acknowledged my own needs and created the possibility to connect with what therapists call ‘the good parent’ in myself.” Well, if that was the kind of thing she was going to say to him, he was relieved she hadn’t said it. But if she hadn’t said it to him, why was she saying it to the rest of the country?

# QUESTIONS

Which character is at the center, and which is at the periphery?

How does each one stake out that territory?

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# EXPERIMENTS

1. Take a scene you've already written and insert a flicker of movement at the periphery. What changes at the center?
2. Write a portrait of one character using only partial and distant glimpses by another.
3. Write a scene in which evidence (whether in dialogue, written artifact, or scene) contradicts the narrator's own judgment of the world, or which opens a gap of altering interpretations