



Jane Silcott

## Essaying Vanity

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*The shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not . . . simply a blow from an enemy bidden behind the cotton-wool of daily life; it is . . . a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words.*  
— Virginia Woolf

“Look! A geriatric!” The voice sang out from somewhere behind me in the woods. I was standing hip deep in an icy mountain lake, two thousand feet up from the road where my husband and I had begun two hours earlier. My legs were growing numb. It was late summer. It was hot. I’d been promising myself that swim all morning. My husband had gone back along the trail to see if there were better entry points, but I’d forged on, avoiding what looked to be a rusted piece of metal, several tree branches. I looked to see who belonged to the voice and to check in case there was someone on the trail behind me, someone frail, leaning on hiking poles, wearing a Tilly hat. There was no one. The voice was clear as a bell in the mountain air.

Should I call out? “I can hear you?” Or, “I’m not that old!” I remained silent, a gray haired woman in a teal blue swimsuit, curious to hear what I might hear about myself next.

A second voice said, “How did she get here?”

“Maybe there’s a flat road in here somewhere.”

It was hard to stay silent at this, but again I said nothing. There had been some points where I would happily have followed a road if one had appeared (or better still, some secret tunnel with an escalator marked “geriatrics only”), but I wasn’t about to admit that.

“Well, good for her. That’s how I want to be when I’m old,” the first voice pronounced, then continued with a final jab after a pause: “Except I wouldn’t be wearing a bathing suit.”

My husband returned. I told him. He said, “I would have said, I may be geriatric, but I’m not deaf yet.”

After our swim we sat on the rocks and absorbed the intermittent sun. We became geriatrics enjoying the peace. Geriatrics with our body-camouflaging bathing suits hanging on a log on the dead bole of tree extending over a bit of rocky beach, eating chicken leftovers and carrots and celery. And then geriatrics napping because we’re good at that; we can do it on stones and we can do it sitting up. We close our eyes and let our minds drift, feeling the world and all of our years holding us.

We went home. I told the story to friends and to our kids. Everyone took umbrage on my behalf. And I told them it was fine. “It’s funny,” I said. And it was. It was just a word, misapplied (if only by twenty-eight months — a geriatric, in medical terms is anyone over sixty-five) by someone from a distance. It was because of my gray hair, I reminded myself. I had stopped dying it years earlier in a kind of protest against conformity. The truth behind that is I’m bad at it. I don’t keep it up, and then I become one of those people who walk around with skunk stripes and light gray penumbras like crop circles on the back of their heads where the roots are growing through.

*“Vanity working on a weak head produces every sort of mischief.”*  
– Jane Austen

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You don’t need to tell a person you’re telling a story when you’re telling one. They already know. Their bodies lean in. When you write an essay, you’re asking them to come along as you puzzle through a conundrum, sometimes entirely of your own making. And they do so or not, depending on the sound of

your voice, on the subject you're addressing or just on the cadence of your speech and ideas. This arrangement rests on the thinnest of foundations. A skein of light. A shadow. A whisper in an ear.

We can name a mineral, a chemical, a cup or saucer, and it remains itself in whatever language we address it. But how can we name our shifting selves, how convey (and re-frame, re-make, re-live) a stab to the psyche, let alone a shimmer or ripple or glow?

Weeks after the hike, I met a friend in Mexico, ostensibly for a writing retreat—I had this essay to write and a deadline—but mostly to spend time together. It had been years since we'd had a proper conversation. The night we arrived, a neighbor greeted my friend outside the house she had rented. She introduced me. I had been studying Spanish, not diligently, but there was no need for any study to understand when the man said “tu madre” with a question mark right after it then came over and kissed me warmly on the cheek. I turned and air kissed his other cheek. I overcompensate when I'm upset. I'm two years older than my friend. I could feel every second of my slightly greater years weighing on me. The roll around my waist, the double chin, the gray hair. In my mind I saw my mother and her cousins as they used to be. Plump, some of them, with thinning hair, their bags of knitting beside them. Had I already reached that stage?

“He was drunk,” my friend said. “Don't think about it.”

I went to bed in the rented room thinking about the ways that the right word can sometimes make us feel safe. Name a feeling and you feel free of it. What was my feeling? I curled in on myself, reading and trying to get away from it, whatever it was. Shame, probably.

Phillip Lopate said the duty of the personal essayist is to “bring back news about the wider world.” I like this, not only because anytime I can quote people I feel better, but also because it takes me off the subject of my appearance. It wasn't just that surface shock, it was the realization of how much I've relied on my so-called looks through my life, and how sad and useless that is. Michel de Montaigne wrote a

whole essay about vanity. His vanity was over writing, not his looks. Still, there's something extraordinarily reassuring to read an essay over four-hundred years old and recognize a part of yourself there—

*‘If other men would consider themselves at the rate I do, they would, as I do, discover themselves to be full of inanity and foppery; to rid myself of it, I cannot, without making myself away. We are all steeped in it, as well one as another . . .*  
— “Of Vanity”

To avoid my inanity and foppery, the tiny (disastrous, devastating) concerns of the aging woman (fading, fading towards death), I take the stone that was thrown my way, the little insult, “geriatric,” and turn outward. My plan is to throw it back, bundled up with words from the far airier and safer world of ideas. To the phenomenologists, I go. There I find discussions about language and narrative, intentionality and consciousness, perception and focus. Does a word have inherent meaning or do we bring meaning to it? Can thoughts exist without words attached? There's talk of “inner-speech theory” and “thought experiences.” This language is almost opaque to me, but it's opaque in the way that a blanket is opaque. I am comforted by it, reassured that there are people worrying these questions through, and that even as they worry at it, they never seem to come to a solid answer. My mind wanders and then is sparked by sudden bursts of beauty. Here, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

*. . . we should consider speech before it has been pronounced, against the ground of the silence which precedes it, which never ceases to accompany it, and without which it would say nothing. Moreover, we should be sensitive to the thread of silence from which the tissue of speech is woven.*  
— The Prose of the World

The ground of silence! The tissue of speech! I imagine a boundless, rich and loamy ground, out of which filaments of thought flicker or dance and a sentence can be fully born.

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The first full day in Mexico my friend and I hiked and talked the way we've always talked. My friend has a beautiful face and smile and long dark hair. When we went on the hike she wore a t-shirt and a short skirt

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made of tiers of lace, a skirt I imagine was made for teenagers, but it suits her. It is a bit of fun. My dress is loose and gray, like a sack, like something you hide in.

“So why don’t you dye your hair?” she asked, and I reacted, as I often do when faced with a direct question, with a touch of fear. I said something about my hippie youth and that I still hold to some of those principles—in other words, I don’t shave my legs in winter. “Besides,” I added, “I don’t want to strive so hard for something I can’t attain.”

“So I can’t talk you into going to my hairdresser and dyeing your hair slutty blonde?” she said, grinning.

“I hate blonde,” I said, meaning I don’t want to talk about it anymore.

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When I’m teaching, I have students do an exercise that begins with single, isolated words. They are not to write full sentences until a memory or an image comes to them. The exercise, from *Writing the Natural Way* by Gabriele Lusser Rico, was developed for PhD students who had so much to say they couldn’t write. They were frozen with ideas, frozen with those glinting pieces of thought that flicker here and there all over the brain but don’t yet have a frame to fall into. I think of it as chaos before the theory. I think of it as this essay, with its digressions and twists and turns. What am I talking about? Why this here? Why not there?

The Mexican nights were long. Roosters who hadn’t read the nursery stories about crowing at dawn, crowed all night. The resident dog barked to add her punctuation, and music blared randomly at any and all hours. My friend and I discussed surgeries. She was concerned with the skin about her eyes, I, perennially, of my neck. “But it’s a horrible procedure,” I said. What sort of monsters are we that we should consider having our skin peeled away from its moorings and then stretched tight over our flesh and bones?

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My father used to say too much about women's looks—about mine, my sisters'. "You could be a model," he said to me once. I could not, but still I got the idea that beauty was something I was meant to aspire to, always, and that if I couldn't be beautiful then I was not holding up my end of some kind of bargain, the tenets of which I was never quite clear.

On one of our last evenings in Mexico, eating dinner with our feet in the sand, margaritas in front of us, my friend said, "So what does the story about the hike and being called geriatric have to do with it? Why is it there?" I said it was the spark that set me off, and that I was writing to unpin the shame. "But why an essay?" she said. "Why not a memoir?"

"An essay allows me to move outside of my own story," I answered. "I can include tangents. Metaphors. Other stories. I can go to idea."

Then we were back to the hair thing and the age thing and I was trying to say that I didn't want to care about looks, that I believe we become more mind than matter as we age, and that's as it should be, and she just looked at me, a small smile on her face.

"You've known me too long," I said.

"You're more intellectual than I am," she said, and I laughed; though I was the one, I have to say, who turned down the third margarita, which seems to my mind not only intellectual but possibly holy.

We walked to the bus. There was a long line. "Looks like we're going to have to stand," she commented, eyeing the line.

"This is where the hair comes in," I told her.

And it did. My friend also got a seat, and I got to sit beside a very little girl, maybe all of three, who moved her legs aside for me after her mother, sitting one seat behind and across the aisle with her other children, told her to. The little girl spent the first part of the drive waving at people and stores as we passed, anything with light. And then she arranged her jacket over her legs and leaned her head against the window. It was a very old bus. There were a lot of noises from underneath, metal grinding against other

bits of metal and a lot of bumps and jerks as it made its way along the windy road. She moved her head upright. It bobbed towards me, then away, towards the window and back until eventually it settled against my arm and stayed, a very small, very hard little head belonging to a very little girl.

Not daring to move, I sat, feeling honoured and lucky, thinking about what it means to look harmless, and whether that also means that I am.

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My friend and I hiked almost every day. Each time, we noticed new things. Crabs that scuttled across the rocks like giant spiders, their iridescent shells flashing and then dimming as they moved; a snowy egret, that I photographed every day, always alone, always on the same beach. Tall and elegant in its white-feathered self, I thought it encapsulated something, beauty, maybe, or grace, or something beyond, something I couldn't articulate. But when it cocked a knee and leant to one side, as if pondering something interesting, it reminded me of Big Bird on Sesame Street. Two days later, I saw it close up on a river. When it took flight, the long feathers of its tail spread out like a princess's train on her wedding day, and a crest of feathers rose on its head like a helmet of spears. All that was left of its Big Bird self were its bright yellow feet.

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Doubt and questions, says essayist Charles D'Ambrosio, are the hallmarks of the personal essay. In his preface to *Loitering*, he writes: "My instinctive and entirely private ambition was to capture the conflicted mind in motion, or, to borrow a phrase from Cioran, to represent failure on the move..."

This I like. This I can put next to Montaigne's foppery and inanity. Failure on the move. I hold the phrase close to my heart and forge on.

I think of my essay, the difficulties I've hurled myself into, trying to find what goes with what. Trying to make sense of the multiple fragments I've assembled. The stops and starts, the diversions, the little stories.

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I read a quote I pulled from *Science* magazine about abstractions and creativity and am momentarily moored: “abstraction is a critical step in the efficient acquisition of knowledge; without it, the brain would be enslaved to the particular. . . . Art, too, abstracts and thus externalizes the inner workings of the brain.”

On my husband’s birthday, we go to see a showing of contemporary art by Aboriginal women from Australia called *In Her Words*. Here is wonder all its own. A painting called *Bush Plum* by Angelina Pwerle fills most of a wall. Single white dots against a red ground varying in size and intensity. The bush plum has small white flowers and grows in the Australian outback. There are places where the dots are so tiny from a distance they appear as a fog or a mist, the same way the Milky Way does in the sky at night. Other places where the dots are larger, deeper and more certain, they look like planets.

I think of abstraction, of our pattern-recognizing brains and of the boundaries we need to place around things in order to survive the steady bombardment of the particular, but here, here was everything: the artist’s mind, my mind—clouds and rivers and sky and land—the universe.

What if I could think of my words as dots? Each a tiny part of a much larger whole? What if I could sit for days pressing a stick into a pot of paint and applying it to canvas? Would the same doubts and questions assail me or is that the fault of language? If we work in words, with their sticky tendrils and slippery, unreliable surfaces, does it make it easier or harder to see the bones and ground underneath us?

This summer, we had our roof re-done. It was hot. It was loud. It was close. I sat inside trying to work, but was enveloped in noise, distracted by the presence of others, loud others, men who banged nails and stomped above me. It was hard to do anything more than mundane things. I took water out to them. I found snacks. I made tea. It was hot. The sun blazing down. I came in the house at one point, busy with something. Our kitchen has a large west facing window looking out on our neighbor’s roof and yard. Something dark flashed by in my peripheral vision.

At first I thought it was a large bird but the shapes came back. Now confused, thinking it was the edge of my glasses fooling me with their light plastic frames that create borders around everything I look



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at. I looked again and saw it was the shadow of one of the workers cast on the neighbor's roof. The man's figure was so clear, the edges of the shadow so sharp, even the rope around his waist showed, a long snaking line from the man to the chimney, and I could distinguish the knife in his hands as he ripped open a fresh packet of shingles. It was like watching a shadow play, life-sized. Man calculating angles. Man with rope. Man with tools. The concrete become abstract. The person a shade and the neighbor's roof a screen.

*"A painter should begin every canvas with a wash of black, because all things in nature are dark except where exposed by the light."*  
— Leonardo da Vinci

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Our minds need light in order to understand themselves. Our thoughts need shape. We need the light of idea or the light of other minds to help shape our own.

In her essay "On Beauty," Ursula Le Guin says: "For old people, beauty doesn't come free with the hormones, the way it does for the young. It has to do with bones. It has to do with who the person is. More and more clearly it has to do with what shines through those gnarly faces and bodies." She likens aging people to teenagers, shocked by the sight of themselves in mirrors, trying to understand or find themselves in the body and face that is changing out from under them. "I never had enough beauty to worry about," she says. But looking at a photo of her strong, elegant face and the clean shine of her straight grey hair framing it, I disagree. There's beauty there, along with peace.

Virginia Woolf said it was her capacity for shock that made her a writer, and that she used words to puzzle out what lay behind it:

Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what . . . From this I reach what I might call a philosophy . . . that behind the cotton-wool is hidden a pattern, that we — I mean all human beings — are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art.

I thought for a while about dying my hair again. Would that help? I don't know. I am home, safely, with the husband whose hair is also gray, the husband going through his own conversation with ageing. The mirror in our bathroom doesn't show our wrinkles. The light is wrong. When I look at it I see my younger self, staring back uncertainly.

In essays we pose these questions and we follow the tracks of our thoughts, looking for wisdom in others' words. The women talking about me in those clinical terms were, quite likely, medical people. As their conversation turned, I heard phrases that had that kind of bent. So they had put me in a category, and if I had slipped on one of the logs or stones in the lake and fallen on the broken metal, I would have been grateful that they had placed me, more or less correctly, in the category I belong.