

Phillip Lopate (b. 1943) writes poems and nonfiction: this essay comes from *Against Joie de Vivre* (1989). He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and his work has appeared in *Best American Essays*. He teaches at the University of Houston and Columbia University. In 1994 he edited *The Art of the Personal Essay*.

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PHILLIP LOPATE

On Shaving a Beard

1 I have just made a change that feels as dramatic, for the moment, as switching from Democrat to Republican. I have shaved off my beard. Actually I clipped it away with scissors first, the I went in for the kill with a safety razor. The first snip is the most tentative: you can still allow yourself the fantasy that you are only shaping and trimming, perhaps a raffish Vandyke will emerge. Then comes the moment when you make a serious gash in the carpet. You rub the neighboring whiskers over the patch to see if it can still be covered, but the die is cast, and with a certain glee the energy turns demolitionary.

2 As I cut away the clumps of darkness, a moon rises out of my face. It lights up the old canyon line of the jawbone. I am getting my face back. I lather up again and again and shave away the bristles until the skin is smooth as a newborn's—the red irritation spots where the skin has reacted to the unaccustomed blade seem a sort of diaper rash. When I am done, I look in the glass and my face itself is like a mirror, so polished and empty are the cheeks. I feel a little sorry for the tender boy-man reflected before me, his helpless features open to assault. The unguarded vacancy of that face! Now I will have to come to terms again with the weak chin, the domineering nose, the thin, sarcastic-pleading lips.

3 I look down at the reddish-gray curls in the sink. The men in my family have always been proud that our beards grew in red, though the

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tops of our heads were black. It seems an absurd triviality for Nature to waste a gene on, but it is one of the most tangible ways that my father has felt united to his sons and we to him. A momentary regret passes through me.

4 Never mind: I have taken an action. I grew the beard originally because I had been restless and dissatisfied with myself; I shaved it for the same reason. How few cut-rate stratagems there are to better our mood; you can take a trip, go shopping, change your hair, see every movie in town—and the list is exhausted. Now I will have to be contented for a while. It is summer, the wrong time to start growing a beard again.

5 Because of the hot weather, I also have a ready-made excuse for anyone who might ask why I gave up my beard. I know that the real reasons are more murky—they go to the heart of my insecurities as a man and my envy of others of my sex. When I meet a man I admire and he is wearing a beard, I immediately think about emulating him. The tribe of bearded men have a patriarchal firmness, a rabbinical kindly wisdom in their faces. They strike me as good providers. They resemble trees (their beards are nests) or tree cutters. In any case, mentally I place them in the forest, with flannel shirt and axe.

6 So I join this fraternity, and start to collect the equivalent of approving winks from other beardies, fellow conspirators in the League of Hirsutes. It feels good to be taken for an ancestor or pioneer. Then the novelty begins to wear off, the beard starts to itch, and I realize that inside I am no more rooted or masculinely capable than before. I start to envy clean-shaven men—their frank, open, attractively “vulnerable” faces. Some women will trust you more if you are clean-shaven; they profess to see beards as Mephistophelian masks, hiding the emotions. Early in the relationship, this may be a good reason to keep a beard. At a later point shaving it off becomes tantamount to a giddy declaration of love.

7 Other women, on the other hand, will tell you that a kiss without facial hair is like a roast beef sandwich without mustard. They consider beards a mark of virility, trustworthiness, and bohemian sensitivity. Obviously, the image systems break down in the face of individual tastes. Nevertheless, it is still possible to say that beards connote freedom, telling the boss off, an attitude of “gone fishing”; men often grow them on vacations, or after being booted from the White House staff, like Ehrlichman. (Even Admiral Poindexter grew a mustache.) Clean-shavenness, on the other hand, implies a subscription to the rules of society.

8 A major division in the bearded kingdom exists between those who revel in no longer having to bother with maintenance, letting Nature have its luxuriant bushy way, and those who continue to keep a razor nearby, prudently pruning or shaving the cheeks every few days.

A well-clipped beard on a kindly man looks as proper as a well-kept lawn on Sunday. On the other hand, there are beards with a glint of cruelty—beards trimmed to Caligulaesque exactitude. I had thought to be one of the pruners, but went too far, lacking the razor-sharp finesse.

9 Having shaved the beard off, I take my first cautious steps into society. I am dreading those who will ask why I did it, then settle back for a long soul-bearing explanation. What will I reply to those who are quick to say, "I liked you better the other way"? My impulse is to step on their toes, but we must not punish honesty. Once, when I was teaching in P.S. 90, I shaved off my beard, and the children, who were familiar with me as a hairy man, were so outraged that all through the first day of the new regime, they ran alongside and punched me. Children are good at expressing a sense of betrayal at change.

10 Those who are bearded for the long haul either tend to view the new me with something like a Mennonite's disapproval at backsliding, or are relieved that one who had appeared a member of the brotherhood was exposed in the nick of time as turncoat. A few friends, who pride themselves on their observational powers, make helpful comments like: You look fatter. You look thinner. You look younger. You look older. The majority say nothing. At first I think they are being polite, not meaning to broach a subject that might make me self-conscious. Then, out of frustration at their not having noticed, I finally call my naked face to their attention. They say: "I *thought* there was something different about you but I couldn't put my finger on it. Besides, you keep going back and forth, Lopate, who can keep up?"

CONSIDERATIONS

1. In his first sentence, Lopate had to make a choice between "from Democrat to Republican," and "from Republican to Democrat." Did he make the right choice? Explain.

2. Why is Lopate unable to state decisively how a man's beard affects the opposite sex?

3. Lopate's smoothly written essay seems effortless, but a careful reader will find many unusually apt word choices, evidence that the writer did not toss off the piece casually. Note some of those choices and explain why they are real contributions to the essay.

4. In what sense, if any, does Lopate's essay explore deeper territory than the whiskers on his face?

5. There are a few capitalized words and phrases in the essay that you may not recognize: Vandyke, League of Hirsutes, Mephistophelian, Caligulaesque, P.S. 90, and so on. What do you lose if you do not bother to look them up?

Thomas Lynch (b. 1948) was born in Detroit and now lives in the town of Milford, Michigan, where he has been a funeral director since 1974. His first book of poems, Skating with Heather Grace, was published by Knopf in 1988. "Burying" appeared in the Quarterly.

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THOMAS LYNCH Burying

Every year I bury one hundred and fifty of my townspeople. Another dozen or two I take to the crematory to be burned. I sell caskets, burial vaults, and urns for the ashes. I have a sideline in headstones and monuments. I do flowers on commission. 1

Apart from the tangibles, I sell the use of my building eleven thousand square feet, furnished and fixtured with an abundance of pastel and chair rail and crown moldings. The whole lash-up is mortgaged and remortgaged well into the next century. My rolling stock includes a hearse, a limo, two Fleetwoods, and a mini-van with darkened windows our price list calls a service vehicle and everyone in town calls the Dead Wagon. 2

I used to use the "unit pricing method"—the old package deal. It meant you had only one number to look at. It was a large number. Now everything is itemized. It's the law. So now there is a long list of items and numbers and italicized disclaimers, something like a menu or the Sears, Roebuck wish book, and sometimes the federally mandated options begin to look like cruise control or rear-window defrost. I wear black most of the time, to keep folks in mind of the fact we're not talking Buicks here. At the bottom of the list is still a large number. 3

In a good year the gross is close to half a million, 5 percent of which we hope to call profit. I am the only undertaker in this town. I have a corner on the market. 4

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