

Vida Yovanovich's prison of dreams/ Elena Poniatowska

All of us grow old, all of us are going to die. Few of us, however, face up to old age before it arrives. Far from it: the fountain of eternal youth is one of humanity's greatest obsessions, and whole industries are sustained by the yearning to be forever young. There is no more tenacious, desperate battle that waged by countless men and women to remain middle-aged. Thus, the case of Vida Yovanovich is a surprising one: she wanted to be old before her time. She wanted to see herself in the mirror by becoming an inmate in a god-forsaken old age home. She wanted to portray herself in the portrayal of others.

With merciless anticipation, Vida examined herself slowly over the course of endless days and nights among our forgotten elders, and came to a kind of exorcism. Now she is so old that she can no longer age. She is so old that she has become a child. She is so old that she gives birth to herself over again, amends her past, restructures it, gives orders to herself, and obeys her future countenance, the terrible gaze of her sad solemn eyes. If there is one woman who has looked death in the face, it is Vida – a name which means “life”. Through the long hours of day and night she has felt the poison of loneliness seep from her pores, from her wrinkling skin, from the creases that furrow its surface, from her thinning hair and failing muscles, from her dimming eyes and shriveled, once-fecund womb, from the withered limbs that can no longer resist what they could.

I feel an immense admiration for Vida's experiment and for her absolute, desolate commitment. I picture her day after day in that home, waiting for the pigeon to alight on the windowsill while a white-haired old woman, hunched over the table, absorbs her food from an enamel spoon. I imagine her among the rickety cots and the vanquished, unresponsive bodies. Around her I see the hair fall, and the saliva trickle unstoppably from the corner of the old woman's mouth, and the yellow liquid no longer controlled by her nerveless sphincter, and the scarf unravel from the shaky knitting needles. We too drop our stitches, and our tissues are no longer wrapped tautly around our organs, we too ooze spittle and excrement, and even the space we move in is slack from so much fatigue. The air can no longer contain us. On the contrary, it shrinks away from those who smell of death. No one has summed up the putrefaction of death more concisely than the poet Jaime Sabines, through the eyes of his son Julito:

“(…) It happened with a baby rabbit which died a couple of days after we got it. Julito came in holding it by the paws, staff as board.

-It won't move, Daddy, it's ugly.

-Shall we throw it away then?

-Yes, throw it out, it's ugly.

And I do not think anyone can say anything more precise about death. Or life.”

Vida's mouth thins. She does not smile. She shrouds herself as though she were her own Veronica, and her face is imprinted on the translucent gauze. Or is it sackcloth? In any case, the affinity with the shroud on which Christ's features appeared when Veronica mopped his bleeding face is painfully obvious. What will be left of us when we die? so much as a crown of thorns? As Vida Yovanovich covers her face, the old woman beside her obeys listlessly and covers her own head as though it ached.

Vida has strong, curly, wonderful hair like a bird's nest that could ensnare the clouds, since she is so tall. She photographs herself with or without hair, crucified, her countenance/ mask deeply slashed, parted into two wounds of anguish. Her bathrobe is her shroud. She stands upright but thinks she is stretched out in the blackness of the darkest night, the night of her own death. She is unconscious of the vigor radiated by her sword-body, of the fleur-de-lis traced by her soul on the face she has obstinately cut into pieces.

Vida howls, she is her own mother, her cry is the cry of her birth and of the horror before living death, and the terror of her name: Vida-muerte, Life-death, Death-life-Death,- now there's a name nobody gives their child, but which Vida's Yugoslav parents gave her when they called her Life and bore her in Cuba, a thousand years ago.

Vida Yovanovich, gripped by the years, lives out the imprisonment of her dreams and the paralyzation of the future. “These ruins you see are your likeness”, she repeats to herself, and throws it in our faces so that we realize that old age is not poetic, but heartrending. It is nothing but the violence that time inflicts upon us, just our bones breaking through the human packaging to confirm that we bear death inside us and that the day is not far distant when we, too, shall become those grotesque and dislocated skeletons drawn by Posada –not the dancing, carousing ones with gaily clacking jawbones, but rather the bitter, grudging ones, huddled tearfully in a dark corner.

“It was like ripping myself open”, says Vida Yovanovich. “At first, whenever I left the home, I’d wash my hands with a terrible sense of contagion. I could not photograph, I could only feel. I think is difficult to put what one feels into photographs, the things one goes through as one takes them, and at the same time it is impossible to forget, or become detached of the experience.

“(…) I think something happens to us with certain photographs. I try to understand life, my own life.”

Susan Sontag wrote of something similar in *On photography*:

“For me it was photographs of Bergen Belsen and of Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen-in photographs or in real life cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they where about. What good was served by seeing them? They where only photographs –of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.”

Vida confirms the impact a photograph can have:

“My first self-portrait was the product of a self-imposed task. One morning I set my camera on the tripod, stood in front of it, and clicked. Well, this is pretty simple, I thought. Later, when I looked closely at the contact sheet, I closed my eyes and cried. I could not believe it. How could a self-portrait give away everything inside like that, everything that’s hidden and protected?”

“The image was perfectly framed, with a hardness that even today, hurts me when I look at it. The photograph remained in my drawer for years. I did not mention it, I did not show it, I did not recognize it within myself. I hid it.”

Was her photography an emotional therapy in order to learn to accept the passage of time?... Vida observed her fears, took unforgiving note of her failings. She was appalled by the horror she felt before the image of self. She tried to comprehend her life through the deterioration that was gaining ground throughout her body and began a process of self-recognition from the inside out, the way a doctor does when he palpates

a patient's guts and presses the stethoscope to a chest, filling his ears with the thumping of a heart. The ravages of time served as a measure of her maturation, and she stuffed the contact sheets into a drawer so as not to see them. She could not look at them for a long time. If Vida had been a coward she would have destroyed them, but it was written that one day she would accept herself and show herself to the world just as she was, in those terrifying photographs. Seeing her dread blown up in detail on the wall at last, she transformed the photographs into a life project, a challenge... and she calls herself easily frightened. Many of us face up to ourselves for the first time around the age of fifty. Sometimes it is depression that opens the door to self-knowledge, to separating the wheat from the chaff, sometimes it is the imminence of death.

Installed with her camera in the only institution for the elderly that would allow it, eventually Vida became like another inmate. There here day began and there nightfall found her, among centuries of accumulated existence, among human beings reduced to bundles of neglect. In spite of the contrast she made thanks to her youth, she became one more woman among the many.

“Most were women, there were only a handful of men because men die younger. Women are alone in the end, easily abandoned.

“Over the years I became transparent. I became one of them, part of the place itself. It was hard at night. The women who during the day had been my friends, at night became my enemies, and in the dark, would scream at me to go away.”

“Three years passed before I photographed a naked body. Photographing an old woman in the nude was wonderful, it was a liberation for me, because as a woman, the sight of another woman's body wracked by time was awe-inspiring. It was like a true examination of conscience. I became used to the decrepitude and lost my fear of it.”

“When I took my self-portrait in the bathroom, I guess was depicting my inability to face up to time, my passage through time, my fear of death, and the knowledge that not only the old women were dying, but many things inside me were also dying.”

The first old woman I actually touched inside the home, was one who had slipped sideways on her bed. I amazed myself by setting her straight up on her pillow instead of running away.

Art critic Graciela Kartofel has said about this work:

“In *Prison of Dreams*, there are some small details that might seem just that, details in a photograph, and yet they touch a symbolic and tragic chord. A gash or stain on the wallpaper acts like the imprint of a being whom the woman prefers to turn away from. A light bulb inside a room, an outlet and cord on the wall of an adjacent room, are two sides of a triangle completed by a human figure; the electrical appurtenances are the antithesis of the crushed being whose arm and fist evoke a hypothetical energetic connection, while she mumbles into the void as though trying to memorize something, but only manages to rehabilitate her wandering gaze.”

Vida Yovanovich stands by the oxygen dispenser in front of the luminous rectangle of a door, like death lying in wait. She holds the mirror that an old woman flees from. The Mona Lisa presides over the agony of a face whose mouth sags open in an effort to breath. Next to the pillow of the woman who has sunk back into infancy, sucking her thumb, are two photographs: one of a soldier and one of a couple, torn in a half. Pigeons flutter at the window despite that vengeful old crone, who, fortified by the bottle of sherry on her table, is shaking her stick at them.

Vida Yovanovich offers us a disenchanting vision of the last stages of life.

Premature death is widely thought to be a tragedy. Vida makes us question this, and ponder at the drama of ending up alone, weary and abandoned in an institution where death is made as ghastly as any other, unnecessary agony, such as, starvation. Here the aged die of themselves, of need, of lack of love. Alone they commit suicide, and alone they die. No longer needing themselves, they let themselves go. They have no choice but to surrender to death. Their bodies, the flabby, insipid, extinguished matter, is like a hideous disposable wrapper, ready to be thrown away.

In the home, the old people are terminally bewildered and have lost the gift for saying yes to life. They are cornered, unable to lift themselves off the bed, the chair, the stool under the shower. Death howls, it makes a noise, it is a scandal. Life too can be cruel, but less so than the camera which underlines wrinkles and magnifies pores, and dwells on the liver spots which are the inescapable sings of exhaustion. The camera's mission is neither aesthetic nor moralistic. Vida shows us the future. She crudely informs us of what lies in store.

Nevertheless, there is hope for other old people.

Every year in the month of August, at the “Una cana al aire” (Having a Fling) ball, organized by the Mexican National Institute for the Elderly, old women and men,

in freedom, pack the gigantic arena of the Sports Palace and gaily pair off for ballroom dances like mambo, danzón and cha-cha-cha; some move as sensually as though they were dancing the cumbia or the *quebradita*. This is a way of growing old that Vida declares herself incapable of capturing, for she grew up in a family where age was a difficult subject and birthdays not a celebration.

As I behold this fragile throng bopping to the sound of the Sonora Santanera as if there were no tomorrow, I know that here is the old age we all aspire to: without walls to mummify us, without a prison to confine our dreams, without a ban on watching those who come after us unfold. It is necessary and right, to claim one's occasional opportunity, not to be scoffed at, to a step tun-tun on the dancefloor of the Salón Colonia or the California Dancing Club.

In spite of everything, we can never be sure, that when we are home again, collapsed into bed, we will not be overcome by the terrible certainty of sinking – dancing shoes and all-, into our own coffins. (Translated by Lorna Scout Fox)

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