

Stating the Obvious

by Paige Cromley

Like most things about myself, I only realize the obvious when someone points it out.

“You talk like a kid,” my friend says. It’s finally warm, and he’s in a t-shirt, shorts. We’re sitting on a stretch of grass, idly wish-hunting from a blanket of clovers.

I’m immediately offended. I was a late bloomer in high school, always a little wide-eyed for my year, always a bit behind. At college, I’m sensitive to such things. I want people to think I’m serious, or at least that I have serious things to say. I ask Jonah what he means.

“You just say silly things sometimes.”

I glance down at my hands. They’re deep in clovers, gently parsing through leaves. I press back. When’s the last time I said something silly?

“Just now. You were like, ‘There goes a cloud.’”

I had said that. But only because a cloud had, in fact, passed over us.

“That’s just me pointing things out,” I say. My voice is defensive and a bit whiny. I sound young, even to myself. “You pointed out the dog in the boots.”

But that was different. A dachshund in slippers is unusual, noteworthy. The cloud I’d mentioned was just a fluffy old thing, dragging through the sky like any other. It wasn’t even shaped like a bird, or a lopsided Florida.

“You say things sometimes that you don’t need to,” Jonah says. “It’s not a bad thing, you’re just excitable.”

I curl my fingers into a tangle of grass. Jonah is turning remarks into compliments. Usually, his whole mannerism works to smooth my self-consciousness. But when I get up, brush off my knees, I’m hyper-aware of the words I let slip.

Over the next few days, I start to notice it for myself. Phrases spill from my mouth, instinctively, all the time. Always about incredibly basic things, whatever I encounter on my strolls outside.

“Flowers,” I report, walking past a patch of buttercups with my roommates.

Later, gesturing towards an average Joe of a squirrel scampering around the base of a tree. “Look at that tail!”

And when it starts to rain, as I’m staring at a puddled sidewalk and its squirmy inhabitants. “Whoa,” I murmur, solemnly. “Forgot about worms.”

It’s especially true in the morning, when I first step out of my dormitory building. My mouth works faster than I can rein it in.

On Tuesday, it’s raining. I open the door. “Mm, wet!” My umbrella was already in hand; I’d looked out the window right before.

Wednesday, drier. “Sky is blue,” I announce. As if it were news. But this, too, I’d known.

Thursday. Not much to say on the weather. I look to the leaves on my right. “Oh, a bush!” I say this with an element of surprise, although it was there the day before.

It’s like I’ve been cursed to forever commentate on my surroundings.

Sudden awareness of this habit puts me in a tough spot. I’m hyper-focused on how uninteresting I sound, how simple my shared thoughts are. But I’m unable to stop myself.

On Friday, my friend and I are walking down the same road we do every day, twice a day, heading to lunch after class. We’re in the middle of a conversation- nothing important, just a normal enough back-and-forth. And then my brain interrupts.

“What a tall tree.”

She glances to the elm towering above us, the elm we pass every day, twice a day. She nods, and continues talking.

We move on, in both step and conversation. But inside, my brain is looking at itself, shaking its head. My shadow stays back, stuck under the elm, neck craned towards the serrated green leaves.

Oh my God, I think, with full force. I do talk like a kid.

It is a humbling thing, to wake up at twenty-two and realize you are no more profound than when you were five. I find myself double thinking about the value of my words.

In my head, I keep turning over all the times I've made my friends look at the moon. There is always something I feel the need to say about it—how it is bright, a crescent, full, or even just *there*.

Well, the moon has been bright, crescent, full, *there* my whole life. Can I not say something interesting, something new, instead?

I think of the last time I went to the ocean, how I stood on the shore as my friends ran into the waves. My toes dug into cold sand; I eyed the horizon, turning my head from left to right.

"Ah," I said, after a moment. "It's big."

Surely, I can find it within myself to make more novel observations than that.

I begin to ruminate frequently on the usefulness of my language. How much information do I actually convey, and how much of it is worthy to be spoken aloud? I focus my efforts on thinking before I speak.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a passage from a book stirs. I read *Winter*, by Karl Ove Knausgaard, for a course last fall. It's a collection of meditations on the mundane, poetic essays on things like otters and snowfall and trains. At the time, I thought it contained a sweet perspective on the world; I even lent it to an ex-boyfriend, Dylan, who left doodles and notes in the margins.

I pull it from my bookshelf and flip past the drawings to page 177.

"A conversation about something that has intrinsic value, where what is said is both important and interesting in itself, occurs so rarely that it clearly isn't the main objective of human intercourse."

This is good news, actually. My platitudes fall within the majority of human speech. Maybe I'm no more boring or vapid than everyone else.

"'It sure is raining outside' is a fairly common statement, and clearly perfectly meaningless since everyone who hears it can see the rain for themselves."

But that doesn't matter, the essay continues. Because the statement isn't about the rain. It's about the people it is passed between. Are they strangers, hoping to convey

their good nature on a train? Had they made eye contact before? Had they flirted? Were they good friends who'd just had a fight? Really, such a statement about the weather outside isn't about weather at all.

My ex has scrawled two words at the bottom of the essay. "Phatic language."
Thanks, Dylan. Hope you're doing well. Still, I Google it.

Phatic language: Language meant primarily to establish a social connection.

Fancy terminology. Most people would call that small talk. They claim to hate it, but squirm in discomfort without it. They eye suspiciously those who refuse to stoop to participate.

No wonder I speak so much about nature, I think. I'm just making small talk. Sorry...phatic language.

Honestly, the moon is a great thing to connect over. Unlike sports teams, we all share it. I mention passing scenery like last night's baseball game.

How good to know that I'm not too silly, not too easily excitable for my age. I'm just participating in the expectations and customs of polite society. I tuck the book away, and drift to sleep.

The next week, I drive to Vermont with two friends. It's a long trip from New Jersey, inadvisable in a single day, but whatever. We want to see the total eclipse along with millions of other Americans.

Seven hours, though. That's far. It means three bathroom stops, strategically overlapped with two gas refills. An extra pull-over into an empty lot to switch drivers, watch the view. A drive thru.

It's a day full of passing encounters with strangers. Each time, spirits are high. They know where we're heading.

"Have you seen one before?"

"I saw the 2017 one in Charleston."

"How's the traffic been?"

We make friendly at the McDonald's on I-87. We smile and laugh easily in line at the gas station. We're all on the same team, the family of four, the eager old couple, and the stoned teenage cashier.

Ah, I think. Knausgaard was on to something. We ease up when we speak. An eclipse offers a convenient excuse.

In Vermont, at the park we've chosen to watch from, everyone is equally friendly. Strangers pass around glasses. They talk about how the moon and Sun overlap so perfectly. They mention the article they read about what the birds will think during the eclipse.

As we wait, we become companions, people with a spoken bond as the moon inches across the Sun.

And then the chatting stops. The two circles above us align perfectly. Sunlight hides behind the moon, and our words fall with the night. In the dark, we watch quietly.

The birds swoop over the lake, off to their nests, someone had said. The horizon flickers the orange of a sunset.

The moon inches forward once more, and the moment passes. The Sun shines again. We break the silence, stand around chatting, and eventually head home.

On the drive back, it's the same thing. Conversation with everyone, everywhere. What we thought, where we went.

How nice to have something to talk about, I think, in a chatty line at Subway. *Look how nature brings us together.*

Then again, it's only the extremes that do. Eclipses and earthquakes, bear sightings and double rainbows. I wish we could just talk about the Sun. I wish we didn't have to wait for the moon to pass in front of it.

Back on campus, in the library. I Google phatic language again, click a link out of boredom or maybe curiosity.

The term, technically "phatic communion," comes from a 1923 essay by anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski. I click a little further. My library has the essay, as an addendum to another book, called "Meaning to Mean," or the "Meaning of Meaning," or something equally obscure. Linguistics always eluded me. It's shelved on the third floor, not too far from where I'm sitting. I walk over, stand on tiptoes to pry it from its place. The burgundy cover is plain, empty and serious the way old books are.

The pages, tinged yellow with age, fold over nicely. I come across a chapter on the meaning of beauty. I've forgotten what I'm looking for exactly, but that feels related. My platitudes always revolve around nature somehow. Trees and stars and flowers. Beautiful things, even if common.

I flip to the chapter and skim the pages. The essay meanders, just like it says the exact meaning of beauty does. But then it hits on something.

"The emotive use of words is a more simple matter," I read, than language that conveys information.

"If we say 'hurrah!' Or 'Poetry is a spirit' or 'Man is a worm,' we may not be making statements, not even false statements." Instead, we're accomplishing a number of other things, like establishing a personal connection or setting a mood.

That's it! I think. Just like Knausgaard wrote. More confirmation that I don't talk like a kid, I just generate a friendly atmosphere.

Satisfied, I check out the book, and tuck it into my tote bag. Later that night, I walk home alone, feeling good. Above, the moon is a crescent, a wood shaving littering a black workshop floor. I pause to admire it. "Ah," I say. "Man is a worm."

The next morning, after I've woken and checked the weather out the window and greeted the bush outside, I start reading the 1923 essay I'd meant to last night, the addendum at the back of the book. To my disappointment but not my surprise, considering the little I know about twentieth century linguistic studies, the text is laced with racist undertones. I flip ahead, skipping over Malinowski's fake hierarchy of languages. I'm losing confidence in his coinage of terms.

But there it is: "...the breaking of silence, the communion of words is the first act to establish links of fellowship, which is consummated only by the breaking of bread and the communion of food."

These phrases, often regarding the irrelevant or the perfectly obvious, serve to fill the space, "...to get over the strange and unpleasant tension which men feel when facing each other in silence."

And then Malinowski endeavors to name the phenomenon, to label it as a social instinct. Academics were always claiming things back then; I wish I had the confidence to christen the abstract.

But how can I relate this to my own habits?

Malinowski's description sort of matches my chatter. I like sharing in nature's quirks and its routine. I like talking about beautiful things, setting a friendly mood. I like to fill the space.

Then again, I think of myself at the ocean, standing alone on the shore. Talking to myself about the size of the sea. Something there is different.

I think of opening my doorway and announcing the weather, of bending over flowers and stating their color. I'm all alone in these moments. There is no one to speak to.

Am I uncomfortable facing the ocean in silence? Am I trying to establish social connection with daisies? *Maybe I am*, I think. *Maybe I am*.

I'm walking with my friend, the one I'd told about the tall tree, heading this time towards dinner. I tell her about how silly I've been feeling, how I don't feel I add much to conversation and do nothing but state the obvious.

"Remember when I pointed out that tree? That was silly," I say. I'm trying to get ahead of my own self-consciousness, showing her that I'm aware of my habits.

But she seems surprised.

"Oh," she says. "But I hadn't noticed how tall it was before."

"We walk past it every day."

"Well, I guess I knew it was tall, but I hadn't noticed quite how tall."

At her words, something settles in my stomach. The weight of being an annoyance, a talkative burden to conversation, slides off my back. It's like I'm in line at Subway and everyone is just as eager to talk about the Sun as me.

Just like last time, my friend and I keep walking and talking as, internally, my brain balloons with the sensation of realization. I decide in that moment that my friend is very wise, that she is smarter than Malinowski and probably all the other twentieth century linguists. Because there is phatic communion, and there is emotive use, but there is also

such a key difference between ‘know’ and ‘notice.’ My chatter, my platitudes, are born in that gap.

When I was a kid, I failed my eye test. The doctor gave me a prescription, and I cried. A week later, we went back, where a shiny new pair of lenses waited for me. I had chosen a rather bizarre frame, thin wires that drew huge circles around my wide eyes.

Outside, wearing my new glasses, I pointed at the tree tops. “The leaves!” I cried. No one laughed, or looked at me like I was stupid. They knew it had been a long time since I’d been able to make out the outline of leaves in branches, a long time since a tree was more than a green blob.

Had I known, in the meantime, that a tree was made of individual leaves? Yes, of course. But had I noticed it? Not at all. The reacquaintance came with the full wonder of a first meeting.

Jonah said I talk like a kid. Maybe I do, just a little. In the way kids are always stating the obvious because it is not so obvious to them. They are meeting things for the first time, or trying to commit them to memory the second, or encountering them again after a long stretch of time without a pair of glasses.

The natural world is so wide, I can’t hold it all in my head. The crook of the constellations, the squiggle of a worm, these are things I forget between glances. And when I see them again, I am sometimes hit with the remembrance of a long-lost friend. Words spill out in these moments.

The more I think about it, I do not believe it negative at all to be in a constant state of reintroduction to the world. It may be childish, but it’s not silly. In fact, it’s quite fun.

Whenever I see the moon, it’s been a full day, sometimes even two, since I saw it last. Have I really remembered how bright it is? Not in the way I do when I’m standing underneath its glow. The moonlight moves me to speak. If I’m not stating the obvious, I’m not paying attention.

And maybe nothing is a reintroduction; maybe, in a way, I’m meeting everything for the first time. You can only step in the same river once. Maybe that requires a verbal greeting. Plunging your feet in cold water, it’s hard not to make a sound.

There’s another scrap of words I read in class. A Margaret Atwood poem, from a 1974 collection titled “There is only one of everything.”

“Not a tree but the tree / we saw.” It starts off, and the whole poem can be understood in those eight words. I read the rest anyway.

“When my / eyes close language vanishes.”

I speak to hold it there. A little longer, because my memory will fail. The words, hung like a portrait, or like the crescent moon in a lonely sky. Every time I see the ocean, I think it is the first time. And wow—it sure is big.



Paige Cromley studied astrophysics before she began freelance writing about science and nature. She’s been published in magazines like *Hakai*, *Sierra*, and the *Revelator*. She recently moved from Texas to California in a grand endeavor to start her serious adult life (which keeps somehow being delayed).