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Rewriting Identity at the Intersection of Femininity and Disability

In her memoir, Lucy Grealy chronicles her experience with childhood cancer that left her face disfigured. Her intense loneliness and isolation and her struggle to find herself echo the experiences of many coming-of-age stories. But Lucy's efforts to construct a whole identity that encompasses both mind and body are complicated by the intersections of her gender, and the disability others see in her. Her memoir is an attempt both to reclaim her place as actor in her own story and to hold on to the "inherently unretainable" truths about identity that she's fought hard to learn.

Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* is not so much a story of medical triumph over illness as a quest to understand everything that came after. Early on, Lucy asks, "How do we go about turning into the people we are meant to be?" (Grealy 13) and this question sets the stage for every move she makes. Even before her diagnosis, Lucy takes pleasure in assuming different personas. Her immediate reaction to being sent to the hospital is joy at "personally living out" her two favorite medical television dramas (20). Later, she returns to the idea of herself as an actress on a stage as a way to endure pain, loneliness, and rejection (3). When she runs pony parties, she describes herself as a nervous actor, one who would have preferred to stay hidden behind the curtain. But paradoxically, she says her audience's "approval or disapproval defined everything for me, and I believed with every cell in my body that approval wasn't written into my particular script" (4).

At other times, Lucy uses fantasy to cope with her illness, slipping into other identities of her imagination. "I was myself only in the briefest of moments," she recounts of the years of radiation and chemotherapy. Not surprisingly, one of her make-believe identities is an alien capable of self-transformation (89).

As she begins spending more time in hospital rooms than on playgrounds, Lucy reforms her identity around her illness and role as patient, a strategy with inherent problems. Patients are largely objects acted upon by others rather than agents of their own story. This passivity leaves little room for the growth of self-esteem at a formative time in Lucy's life. Her poor treatment at the hands of Dr. Woolf (73) is just one example in a string of medical experiences that leave her feeling unheard, objectified, and disappointed in herself. In her article *Poor Historians*, Suzanne Koven points out a common theme of lost identity in the medical memoir. Koven believes that worse than losing one's voice, the patient experience is "to have one's words replaced, to be issued, along with a hospital gown and an IV, a new vocabulary...some self-incriminating" (Koven 178).

Lucy proves to be no exception to this new self-incriminating vocabulary. She tries to conform to a list of self-prescribed list of maxims like "above all, one must never, ever cry." These rules originated in her first emergency room visit when her parents praised for being brave. Though her family and personal life are in chaos, Lucy believes acting a certain way will give her power, and remarks, "...I had been supplied with a formula of behavior for gaining acceptance and, I believed, love. All I had to do was perform heroically and I could personally save my entire family" (30).

But as Grealy admits, at that point in her illness "heroism was still fairly easy." It's not until chemotherapy that the flawed foundation of her new identity is exposed. The combined

effects of her disfigurement, hair loss, and the weekly agony of chemotherapy treatments chips away at the heroic image she has formed of herself and she spirals into depression. "Unable to locate my unhappiness within the difficult and complex family relationships we all shared, I thought that it all originated with me, that I was somehow at fault...and how unfair of me to inflict it upon everyone else, upon my mother especially" (93). In spite of her mother's repeated exhortations, Lucy cannot help but cry before each chemotherapy treatment. In time, she sees this personal failing as the seed of all her family's problems and a reflection on her character.

Soon after she starts doubting her moral worth, others begin judging her physical value. At first, she doesn't internalize the insults, recognizing them as meant to impress one another rather than to hurt her. "I looked at myself in the mirror with a preoccupied preadolescent view, which is to say that I looked at myself but didn't judge myself" (104). Because her identity doesn't yet include a sense or awareness of sexuality, physical beauty (and its implications) are not yet something she uses to measure herself.

But this suspension of judgment isn't to last. Eventually, Lucy recognizes the mirror society offers to her and picks it up. As Sylvia Brown explains in her essay, *Scripting Wholeness in Lucy Grealy's Autobiography of a Face*, the disconnect between how others see Lucy and how she sees herself, as well as her own body's betrayal, gives rise to a fissure in her self-image. "This chasm destabilizes her identity," Brown says, "Depriving her of an intimate connection with a consistent or satisfying sense of who she is" (Brown 3).

After her first childish attempts to try on other identities, such as her Eskimo Halloween costume (119) Lucy becomes a more sophisticated mimic. Through her teens and adult years, she adopts the mannerisms and dress of several different personalities in attempts to either insulate herself from the pain of other's reactions or to mold herself into an identity she believes might be

better accepted. In high school, she's the aloof academic (177), in college, an androgynous poet (194) and in graduate school, a highly sexualized vamp who dresses provocatively to detract from her face (207).

But none of the assumed identities is an authentic marriage of her physical and emotional uniqueness. Each seeks to hide, ignore, or compensate for her physical self, so each fails to bring her a feeling of wholeness. In a letter to her graduate school roommate, Grealy later wrote, "Sometimes I feel real calm and wise and accepting and other times I'm totally on the edge. When I wear the guise of alienated poet I do okay, everything seems if not actually good, then at least placable. When I try and wear the guise of a woman, it's a disaster" (Patchett).

Though Grealy's narrative never explicitly mentions concepts like patriarchy or feminism, this line to Patchett touches on implicit themes running through her story. Lucy's disfigurement has particular implications in a society that prizes women for their physical beauty, especially the beauty of their faces. As Susannah Mintz points out in her essay, *Writing as Refiguration: Lucy Grealy's Autobiography of a Face*, Lucy's telling of her story shows she cannot separate her sense of self from her face because it's "subject to patriarchal attitudes toward female beauty and sexuality" (Mintz 172). Lucy doesn't fit the idealized norm society has constructed for women, so she has trouble feeling accepted as a complete woman.

It isn't accidental that only the boys in Lucy's junior high and high school do the bullying and teasing. Adolescent girls are known for their cruelty, yet only the boys feel entitled to assign a value to Lucy's humanity based solely on her appearance. She notes "for the very first time I realized they were passing judgment on my suitability, or lack of it, as a girlfriend" (125).

Lucy's ready acceptance of these attitudes is prefaced by several previous experiences. Her parents' words and actions surrounding her physical appearance lay the groundwork for her

belief in the value of beauty. Her father's joy and relief at the possibility of facial reconstruction surgery and her mother's offerings of expensive wigs and "summer turtlenecks" are what first cause her to doubt her previous, less judgmental, reactions to her facial difference (156).

More than just "homeliness" Lucy's disfiguration marks her as "disabled" long after her cancer is gone. This adds an extra layer of difficulty on top of the patriarchal attitudes she's already navigating. Her face doesn't prevent her from doing anything except eating crunchy foods. But in a social view of disability, her disfigurement *is* a handicap in the sense that it impairs her ability to interact socially (Brown 6), to experience romantic love and to be accepted as a sexual being.

This barrier is brought home for Lucy when several girls sitting around the stables one day confirm without hesitation that she's not worth considering as a date for a boy they know. Their belief that her disability rules out desirability is in line with a wider societal view that femininity and disability are mutually exclusive — a kind of "asexual objectification" (Thomson 25).

Accepting the attitudes of her peers, Lucy decides to make another shift in her identity. "Because I was never going to have love...I cast myself in the role of Hero of Love. Instead of proving my worth on the chemotherapy table, I would become a hero through my understanding of the real beauty that existed in the world" (Grealy 150).

As Lucy comes to equate beauty with lovability, she postpones all her hopes for happiness for the day she will finally acquire her "real" face. She gains many friendships in college but still isn't fulfilled and notes, "not having a lover meant I was ultimately unlovable...whatever sense of inner worth I developed was eroded by the knowledge that I could only compensate for, but never overcome, the obstacle of my face" (206).

Lucy's quests for her "real face" and to be accepted as a woman lead her into twin cycles of hope and disappointment. Just as she gets excited before each surgery, only to be disappointed with the results, she takes a series of lovers only to discard each one. Describing herself as having a kind of Groucho Marx attitude, she says, "I became convinced that anyone who wanted to have a real relationship with me was automatically someone I didn't want."

Her thwarted attempts to rewrite her script through facial reconstruction lead her into steadily more dangerous surgeries. Stepping into the passivity of the patient role puts both her physical and mental health at risk (217). It also leaves her face in a constant state of change, one that feels alien to her self-image and prevents her from moving on. "No matter how philosophical my ideals, I boiled every equation down to these simple terms: was I loveable or was I ugly?" (211).

It's only after the book's final surgery that Lucy begins to avoid, rather than court mirrors (220). Mintz believes this avoidance is Grealy's attempt to re-establish a sense of self, separate from her obsession with physical beauty (Mintz 181). It is also possible she's trying to break the cycle of hope and disappointment that has been so crushing in previous surgeries.

Grealy's memoir ends with the open-ended but hopeful image of her chatting with a male companion without the intense self-consciousness she usually cannot shake. For the first time in a year, she decides to glance at her reflection in the window behind him.

But as Grealy herself says, "I used to think truth was eternal, that once I knew, once I saw, it would be with me forever, a constant by which everything else could be measured. I know now that this isn't so, that most truths are inherently unretainable" (Grealy 222). In light of Grealy's later life, this is a prophetic and haunting close to her book.

Less than ten years after the scene in the cafe, Grealy was dead of a heroin overdose. Her overdose followed failed surgeries, prescription drug abuse and reliance on heroin (Patchett). That she surrendered herself again—even after her epiphany—to the objectification of patienthood and the cycle of surgical hope and disappointment in another attempt to “fix herself” highlights the corrosive effect society exerts on those who cannot conform to its ideals.

It may be impossible to disentangle Grealy’s memoir from her premature end, but as Thomas Couser points out in *Recovering Bodies*, “...there is much to be said of rising above adversity. But not all adversity ends in triumph, and that which does not should not arbitrarily be ruled inexpressible” (Couser 290).

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