

Re-Cosmetico

By Scott Tinley

"This face is all I have, worn and lived in; the lines around my eyes my old friends." Willie Nelson

I asked the nurse if she ever got used to the smell of burning flesh. She looked away from me and spoke through the white surgical mask, the same kind I had used to paint the bathroom the weekend before.

"Sure, you just don't notice it after awhile."

Notice *what* I thought, the smell, or the act of burning someone's flesh itself?

She must have sensed my confusion because she forced an awkward laugh, covering some deeper thought by making light of a serious situation. I'm sure she knew I was hiding behind a thin layer of macho veneer; this stable woman who cauterized each small blood vessel as the surgeon sliced away another layer of my face. She knew, they always do. It's their job.

My job was to be "okay" with the operation the docs were about to perform. Regardless of the outcome, whether a tiny snaking scar or Elephant Man, I needed to be ready.

I wasn't.

Cynicism is a bad thing. And I was cynical about plastic surgery, a term that isn't as apparent or descriptive as its semantic partners "reconstructive and cosmetic." Vain men and women standing in line, I thought, paying huge sums of money for what is known as elective surgery (you choose to have it—there is no real medical need). Flip through the pages in the office, order off the menu; you want pouty lips, smooth cheeks, a thinner waist, thicker calves, high-beam boobs? The before/after pictures are always convincing.

But I'm a guy. Men can get away with crows feet around the eyes and a few jagged lines left over from a motorcycle crash or an old football injury. Women *need* to look half their age. It says so right there on the cover of *Redbook*, *Cosmo* and *Women's Day*. Forty year old guys who model under wear are considered rugged and must've been a famous jock at one time or another. Forty year old women do ads for estrogen supplementation.

Yeah, I was a real righteous cat. I may have appreciated the outline, if not the sculpture of augmented breasts (you really can't say "fake tits" anymore), but when I felt them, I was taken back to my days on the beach, shoveling jelly fish into plastic bags to clear the volleyball court. (I can hear the collective sneer of men everywhere.)

It's funny, I thought, lying there under the beady lights, waiting for some lab technician with thick glasses and bad teeth to come back and tell the doc if

things were cool. It's the sins of my youth that had placed me in this predicament, the endless summer days out in the water, surfing, swimming, just plain hanging with my buds on the hot sand. The messenger lab rat had pasty white skin, no wrinkles. Probably served a volley ball under hand. I bet he hadn't been laid in months.

Punk couldn't *earn* the bitch named cancer. And I was jealous. This wasn't elective surgery; I didn't elect to have it, my choice was to play outside in the sun, all my life, mostly without a hat. This was my price for that life. It wouldn't kill me but I could end up looking, well...cut and pasted, bio-photoshopped.

Somewhere in the take-the-patient's-mind-off-the-procedure conversation, sunscreen entered the dialogue. Oh you mean that white stuff that the lifeguards put on their nose, like a seagull shit on their beak? Naw. Sunglasses are fine. We were kids, immortal. We were surfers.

Technically, it wasn't my face under deconstruction, but my nose, which sits on top of the face. I knew that it was commonly thought a nose is much more difficult to rebuild when sliced and diced away, more difficult than, say, a shoulder or a thigh. With a bad hair style, you can always hide an ear. Noses are tough.

Right down the hall, in the lobby of my next stop after the dermatologist had finished with this "office visit," were half a dozen women thumbing through the pictorials that would shape their future by shaping their flesh. Most of them would be waiting to have the plastic surgeon alter their physical appearance in some way; almost always in an effort to look younger. Nobody goes to a plastic surgeon wanting a more mature look.

I was running from what'd happened in my youth. They were struggling to hold onto theirs.

And as the dermatologist came back in to take "just one more small section" from my left temple ("Let's just snag this little beauty as long as we have you here"), another basal cell carcinoma, ("Oh, nobody dies from these"), the nurse with the soldering gun in tow stood ready, like a gunnery sergeant feeding a string of 50 caliber bullets into a machine gun. She was ready to stop the bleeding by welding the ends of those little bleeders shut.

Why would anyone *choose* to have their body cut into, onto, moving flesh around like clay on a potter's wheel? Why would you make a conscious decision to have someone cut you open? Why not run a few more miles, pad your bra, and put that white crap on your nose? But we know why, I think, the reasons lying inside our subconscious, sandwiched between repressed pain and thrilling anticipation.

The shape of a person's body, especially the face, is the windsock for the rest of their being. We are subtly taught this through our means of socialization, from the school principal's disciplinary scowl, to watching our mothers apply their make up before leaving the house, to the deodorant commercials that feature former *Baywatch* types. A chiseled jaw, man or woman is external evidence of

internal strength and resilience. A furled brow means intensity; worry, sometimes anger. And the eyes, the so-called windows to the soul, they speak volumes that we are unable to hear. If a skilled surgeon can give us what was not a standard feature at birth, tighten up what age, gravity, kids, stress and sun have lowered; then why not, the entitled will ask?

"Raises the self-esteem," we are told, "puts back what should be there." The anecdotes are fast, furious and compelling. Most women who opt for elective surgery state that they need to feel more beautiful for themselves, not those who look at them. More out of compassion for the concept than true understanding, I can believe these claims.

"I love my kids," a woman will say, "but they ruined my boobs."

If I was a woman, listening for 20 years to every other man turn to his friends and say, "Bro, check out that rack," I'd could probably convince myself that a great rack would open a few doors.

Men, face it—it's our own damn fault.

It must be hard to fight that particular stereotype, all that white noise telling women how important mammary glands are. Our society says they should be firm, shapely, and if possible, large. That is *our* society though, an important footnote.

Usually, when a small skin cancer, lesion or mole is removed, the kindly nurses pull down their masks to let you see their sincerity and say its all fine, the doc will just put a few stitches in the area to keep it shut tight and clean while it heals up and disappears into a small inconvenience of the past.

When the last biopsy report finally came back with "clear margins," I heard none of these benign pleasantries, only, "Well, the plastic surgeon doing the closing is very good." Nurses are healers; they have access to the drift of things to come, whether appealing or appalling.

Dog eat dog, I thought, sun eat skin, skin eat flesh, cut or be killed. No love at all in looking good early, then flaming out.

I tried to comfort myself with the snippet of knowledge that Robert Redford refuses to have a face lift against the constant request of movie studio heads.

I knew this was more than a "closing." The removal of the epidermis and dermis layers off my nose had crossed this inconvenience over into the realm of reconstructive surgery, the same type used when someone puts their head through a windshield. Again, my research had told me that noses were the trickiest to get right, whatever that means. You just don't slice off a little piece from your ass or behind your ear and stick in on like play dough. There are things to consider--like blood supply and airways. Aesthetics are nice, but first you have to make sure the flesh and skin you relocate will take to its new location. Ever move a beautiful healthy rose bush to another part of the yard and come back from vacation to find the sucker dead?

In certain indigenous cultures, an elder is given great respect for having earned the deep crevices running down his or her face like vertical rain gutters. Old black and white photos of the great Native American Chiefs show unforgettable features that command respect and knowledge with a knowing sense of grace and compassion. Other tribes around the world will alter their appearance, mostly by piercing and tattoos, to make themselves more desirable to the opposite sex or to display physical prowess.

Walking around college campuses these days, I can't say that the piercing/tattoo thing is much different from Zulu culture or New Hebridian fashion of the 1800's.

The great Apache warrior Geronimo said, "I will fight no more forever." I promised myself that I would use more sunscreen. Forever.

Interestingly, in the upcoming years disease may finally affect fashion. What some experts are saying is that due to the rapid advancement of skin cancers, within a generation, two at the most, tan skin will no longer be equated with the outdoor leisure class--the athletic types who ski, golf and ride mountain bikes instead of working real jobs. One has to wonder if at some point our society would return to the pugmarks of a century ago, when pale white skin meant that the individual didn't have to work. They could sit on the veranda all day and sip ice tea. Watching my fifteen year old daughter refuse anything higher than sunscreen number seven, I have my reservations.

The cultural ideology of youth-centrism is pervasive, a billion dollar industry. The myth of immortality has become its own political economy. Kids who've never heard of The Who don't necessarily want to die before they get old. But they might consider death before *looking* older.

But what is age anyway? A numerical designation of one human's existence. The tennis icon, Andre Agassi makes the finals of the 2005 U.S. Open at 34 years old. The NY Times labels him, "the geezer of the finals." And arguably, the greatest baseball pitcher of all time, Satchel Paige, who played his last professional game in 1965 at fifty-nine years old, once asked, "How old would you be if you didn't know how old you were?"

I thought I was too young for anything resembling a medical "operation." Too much association with bad stuff. With things that old people need.

Preparing for surgery is an interesting ordeal, sort of a micro version of being inducted into the army. They make sure that you are, in fact, who you say you are, take away your clothes and hand you a generic gown--no different than army fatigues or prison blues. You remove all of your jewelry, even the little cross that you had worn around your neck since 6th grade. It's all very humiliating, this deconstruction of one's pride.

And so many forms to sign. Yes, / would be the responsible party and pay the bill if my insurance company, whom / responsibly paid every month, failed to do so. Yes, / would hold harmless all the doctors and nurses who would be working on me. Hey, it's not their fault I was raised a beach rat.

You lie there on the stainless steel table, lights so bright they seem as if they could worsen your skin cancer just from lying under them. And all sorts of things run through your mind. You are giving up control to a man or a woman who is just like you, but went to school a few more years, men and women who you can't see behind the masks. I would have liked to see a powerfully cut jaw under the sterile garb, not a furled brow behind the glasses. This masked person will decide how you look. The surgeons play God with your flesh. And you breathe the gas that gives them the permission.

In the waiting room I had flipped through the generic pamphlets from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. The one touting forehead lift read, "You'll be very pleased with your refreshed and rejuvenated appearance." Another one on liposuction stated that, "you may notice that clothes fit more comfortably and you'll feel more confident about your appearance." I wondered if teenagers got much of their confidence from the current trend of baggy clothes. Old men walk my neighborhood and their pants sag in the rear just the same. A cultural bridge, I thought, and wondered if I would mention that to my teenage son.

Oddly, I was becoming okay with all this. I kept hearing the quote from Dr. Beck Wethers, a member of the ill-fated Everest expedition where more than a half dozen people died. He had been given up for dead, lost in a blinding snow storm at 28,000 feet but somehow managed to survive a night outside of the protection of the tents. In the morning he stumbled, mummy like, into the morbid camp, most of his extremities already decomposing with frostbite.

Months later, not enough fingers and toes left to count "this-little-piggy" on, he very calmly looked at his interviewer who was wondering, then asking, "What does it feel like?"

It's only body parts, Wethers told him, only body parts.

I knew what had to be done. The plastic surgeon, a likeable craftsman with a top-shelf reputation, had shown me a digital picture of my face, sans nose and a good chunk of the left temple; just walked right into the room, opened the file, looked at the photo, showed it to me and said, yep, we have some work to do. That honesty was comforting. I like no-bullshit people, especially no-bullshit docs. I could see hanging out with this guy, loaning him tools, trusting his golf score. He seemed the right age: old enough to have some experience but not burnt out on his job.

I signed forms, thought about women getting fake boobs for Christmas, put on my backless gown and flashed on kids born with cleft pallets. Climbing up onto the operating room table, I suddenly realized how body parts have become action verbs.

"Get a leg up on that project", "Don't try to strong arm him", "Face the music pal; you just have to stomach it", "have the heart to finger your way through the problem." Beck Wether's body parts had become part of the vernacular of success, some type of urban legend lexicon.

Suddenly, I was connected to every human being who had been operated on, who had gone under general anesthesia, who had slept the sleep of the chemically-induced necessity.

I was egoless because I had no choice. Forced Zen was better than none at all.

And that moment I realized that wounds resonate in some shared experience. That violation of external integrity creates an internal bond for all those who are affected. But they must accept it. If I was to look like the elephant man, I would need some training.

I was reminded of a friend who died twice so that he could live once: the first time when hit by a bus resulting in the loss of a leg, and again when he was struck by a truck causing paralysis from the chest down.

"Oedipus," he would always say, "was haunted by a wound for which he had no basis of fear. And a denial of one's wound is like a denial of one's life." Where does strength like this come from? The body is only a carrier he would tell me in moments of quiet reflection. What was I carrying around inside me that needing anything but a hole in my face that let air in and air out? The importance of shape began to lose its import.

A precise moment finds a precise feeling. But the whole paradigm was still a bit cloudy. In my internal struggle I was hoping for a precision job, while losing my disdain for elective surgery, remembering all the while that the surgeon had told me, "the cosmetic funds the reconstructive."

Hey, people are lucky to have choices. They want liposuction? Fine. Go for it. If I opt to run 60 miles a week, eat less and look at silicone boobs in a whole new light, well, that's not hard either.

Yes sir, choices are good.

Something heroic was colliding with a real life reality TV show. Against all odds, maybe I was growing up. The far-reaching fun, the sun, the sins, the unparalleled joy tailored in behind me, in sync. Just so long as I didn't make any sudden moves under the knife.

This augmentation of my own had given me this unique relationship to every woman with after-market breasts (though not in the way most men would have liked). It would connect me to every cosmetic surgery ever performed, no matter the reason or rationale behind it. Our complimentary wounds did not come at the hand of fate behind the bumper of a truck; they were lifestyle-catalyzed, one backward, one forward.

I asked my surgeon if he would rather stick to the more altruistic side of his chosen profession, just focus on the necessary things like mugs torn up in car crashes and noses lost to the Endless Summer.

"Sure," he replied, "but then I'd be driving an old car like yours."

And who was I to judge? My wife used to have great boobs. Now we have two great kids. It was a good trade. She will never go silicone; it's not in her

nature. I could probably come to like a pair of those firm, perky bolt-ons, but the novelty would wear off like a new pair of sunglasses that scratch.

There are those who say that the human body is only a vehicle for the soul. You can believe that or not. But there is no denying that it will decompose at some point. The Egyptians worked really hard to slow that process. And the Indiana Jones types had a field day peeling off the layers. Still, those people had indeed checked out a long time ago, with or without souls.

Like everybody, I don't want to live out my sunset years battling some chronic disease. I don't smoke; eat healthy, drink only in moderation and exercise more than regularly. The stress is kept in check and other than a few aches and pains from time to time, I seem to be moving through the mid way mark better than most.

Okay, the sun is turning my face into the cracked dash board of a '67 Buick Skylark left in a Phoenix back yard. But with a bag over my head or a 10k race to run, I can pass for half my age. Considering my active past, I would rather be run over by a Marlboro truck, that large picture of a rugged cowboy staring down on me from the side flashing my last view on earth, than struggling with the Big C or chronic pulmonary disease for the last five or ten years of life. It's not so much the fear of pain, but more the inconvenience of it all. I would feel like I failed, like I should have gone out the way I lived, in a fiery ball; better to, *burn out than fade away.*

I suppose this ideal led me to my goals of never having to have general anesthesia, never spend a night in the hospital as a patient and never have major surgery. Of course, these are all based on issues steeped in control of some sort, issues that I was letting go of, but not without a small fight. Physical reification is not a course taught in grad school and we cannot touch the brakes of our lives the same way we touch the dreams in our heads.

I told the doc I just wanted a local anesthesia. He laughed and said no I didn't. How about a half way thing, like they do when they pull out wisdom teeth? That would be my choice but he would be doing some intricate work around my face—ship-in-a-bottle stuff. If I became irritable, itchy, and squirmy or pissed off, I could screw up his concentration and then they'd knock me out anyway.

Shit, I thought, one goal lost. But I'm not staying over night. And when can I get back in the water? There was a good south swell due to hit.

Talk to me Beck Wethers. Hey doc, measure twice, cut once.

"Kid," he said, "You cannot be simultaneously dispassionate, dry, emotionless, imperturbable, indifferent, indurated, inexcitable, passionless, phlegmatic, placid, poker-faced, reserved, reticent, self-contained, stoic, stolid, taciturn, unconcerned, unemotional, unexcitable, unfeeling, unflappable and god damn concerned about how your frickin' face will look after I pour my heart and twenty years of skill into it." And as I looked up into the cool, steely blue eyes of the anesthesiologist, I nodded, said he was slowly melding conversation with conversion and counted backwards from 10 to 9 to 8 to...

When I woke up in post op, I felt as if I had been on a three day tequila bender in Tijuana--bent, spun, oozing from new found holes in my body; bleeding pale memories of where I was, who I had been with? Did I choose this? Earn it? Or deserve it? Trying to talk, the words slithering out of my mouth at a fresh faced nurse, no mask covering her kind words... well?

"It went great. You'll be happy." Cool. Chicks dig...oh, never mind. Where's my shorts and t-shirt? No offense, but I'd kindly like to get the fuck out of here. This place makes me nervous.

I have a nose again, and a degree of bilateral appearance between the sides of my temples. They're not pretty, but I never was. I won't be doing underwear commercials, but the nose works. Air goes in, air comes out. Even that Marlboro Man is air-brushed rugged on purpose.

And my wound makes me unique, connected.

James Hillman (Suicide and the Soul, 1965) suggests to us that the place where we are most vulnerable must be most venerated, "for they mark a sacred place in us that we would have ignored."

A broken heart over a failed love affair comes to mind. But so does that white shit that lifeguards wear on their nose.

The flesh moved deftly by my-new-best-friend the surgeon, from one side of my nose to the tip, seems to be holding up so far. The scars will improve with time, fading to a faint reminder of some false sense of youthful immortality. More skin cancers will appear and I will deal with them as I must. Sadly, hundreds of thousand are walking around in the same position.

My enlightened friend in a wheelchair says I look like an Irish alcoholic that was in a bar room knife fight---an image that is not too far from where I could've ended up. I just got there early.

And artificially.

I have made my peace with silicone.