

You Can't Get There From Here (The Essay)

by Liss Platt



Film still from *You Can't Get There From Here*.
Photo by Liss Platt

Growing up with a terminally ill sibling, my experience with my own health has always been framed in relation to my sister's illness, disability, and death. Abby was diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis in 1969 when she was six years old, and I was four years old. By this time the degenerative disease had already taken a toll on her respiratory system and she ended up having half of her lungs removed when she was eight. Her diminished lung capacity meant she couldn't run around as much as most kids. Since CF also affects the digestive system, she was skinny and had to eat high calorie foods all the time just to maintain a normal weight. Driven by both sibling rivalry and a desire to distance myself from her debilitated body, I tried to outpace Abby on the field and at the dinner table. For my efforts I became sporty and chubby.

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Being sporty was a way to disavow the fragility of the body that I observed, on a daily basis, in my sister. When I was a child, Abby slept in a vaporized tent and was constantly being hospitalized or stuck with needles by home health care workers. Her physical vulnerability was palpable. My running, climbing, biking, kicking, and throwing WERE the means by which I insisted I was strong, healthy, forceful, and alive—that I was not my sister. My overeating was also a response to Abby’s body. Her thinness was equated with sickness, and her constant eating became synonymous with survival. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t in danger of wasting away, I still responded to the perceived threat. I experienced her body both as an extension of my own and as an “other” against whom my sense of strength and vitality was constituted.

These enmeshed bodies provide a backdrop for *You Can’t Get There From Here (Redux)*, a performance wherein I pedal a bicycle to power the projection of a short experimental film. It is both a story on celluloid and an active body struggling to get that story told. While ostensibly an autobiographical work



Platt pedals to keep the film rolling in *You Can’t Get There From Here (Redux)*.
Photo by K.J. Bedford

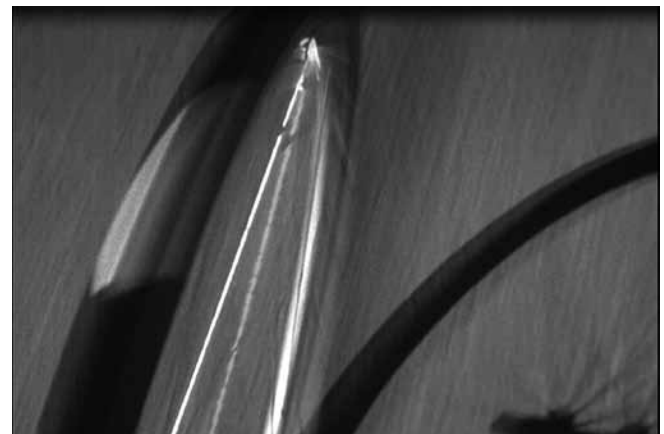
that explores my experience of being sixteen, the structure of the film, as well as the interdependence of the film and the performative activity (both conceptually and materially) pushes it more towards the gestural, experiential, and visceral realm. Central to the story is Abby’s physical debilitation and her death (she died when I was sixteen). *You Can’t Get There From Here (Redux)* attempts to locate that story—and crisis—in my physical body, and in so doing complicate notions of good vs. ill health.

The film component presents a kinetic scrapbook of being sixteen; a coming-of-age story that forefronts the sensations and textures of that time of my life. Snippets of the everyday—bikes and open road, weed and Band-Aid boxes, construction paper and candy bars, love letters and photos, medications and hospital gowns—are collaged together in an intentionally jarring fashion, evoking how everything from the

mundane to the catastrophic registered at the same intensity. The fact that my sister was very sick and dying held my attention no more than my high school life, burgeoning queer desire, TV viewing, or partying. A strong feature of the film is its movement from coherence to incoherence and back again. I want the viewer to get caught up in the anxiety of not being sure what to make of it all—the repetition of the ordinary and naive juxtaposed with inklings of impending crisis. By giving all facets of my life relatively equal screen time, and purposely avoiding narrative devices that foreshadow any particular outcome, it generally comes as a shock to the audience when Abby dies. Throughout the piece I am trying to position the audience to experience what I experienced: how the traumatic event of a sibling’s death pierces through the noise of the everyday and reframes the lives of those left behind. An important aspect of this is how living with someone who is chronically ill can produce a new “normal” within a family structure, where the sick person’s vulnerability and precariousness becomes just another facet of the everyday.

This produces a sort of limbo; you live in constant fear of their death, but you don’t ever really expect them to die.

The bike figures prominently in my story and is a recurring motif in the film (through POV shots of me riding on roads where I grew up, abstract close-ups of the tire and pedals in motion, and the sound of my breathing and the bike tires/gears/chain). It was literally how I got around as a teen, but it also serves as a metaphor for my quest. Like most sixteen year olds, I was trying to get a life, but in the face of my sister’s disease, this pursuit was far more loaded and became linked to survival. I was on the move, and also on the run. The bike gave me freedom, mobility, and increased my territory. It was how I pursued the girl I desired who was at college fifty miles up the road, and it was how I got away from my family and my circumstances. My bike was the place where I could imagine I had



Film still from *You Can’t Get There From Here*.
Photo by Liss Platt

control over my body and my destiny. On it I was a mythic solitary figure—a traveller, an explorer. I believed if I pedaled hard enough and long enough, I could go anywhere.



The speed of Platt's pedalling determines the brightness of the film image in *You Can't Get There From Here (Redux)*.
Photo by K.J. Bedford

The use of the bicycle as the means to power the film projector integrates the performative and filmic elements, extending the themes represented by the bicycle. In the performance, my presence in the space, pedaling to power the projection, forefronts my body—its motion and effort—and locates my live and labouring body within the story framework. The dimming and brightening of the image signals the direct correlation between my efforts and the film projection. Quite simply, if I pedal faster, the image gets brighter and the film runs at a higher frame rate and looks sped up. If I pedal more slowly, the image dims and the film runs at a slower frame rate and looks like it is in slow motion. The fact that the performance bike has to be pedaled constantly at a high cadence to keep the film projecting at proper speed and brightness makes manifest the impossible nature of the journey. My inability to keep it on track and running smoothly becomes part of the piece, underscoring a sense of struggle and lack of control, as well as the limits of the toiling body.

In the performance a live microphone captures the sound of my breathing, which mixes with the sounds of breathing in the film, blurring the boundaries between the

filmic and the corporeal. While my active and live body (in the performance) stands in contrast to my sister's debilitated body (as represented in the film), the piece creates tension through slippages: it is intentionally unclear at times whom the 'struggling' body belongs to. For example, my breathing on the bike is laboured to the point of gasping. The film also contains this type of laboured breathing, which could be understood as part of Abby's diminished lung capacity or another instance of my physical exertion. The film also contains a lot of coughing. Heard over bong hits as well as over footage of or about Abby, these sounds could be associated with my weed smoking or Abby's lung condition. And finally, the images of pills and medications could relate to her disease or be understood as part of my recreational drug use.

While clearly Abby is marked as "ill" in the piece (she is pictured in the hospital looking pale and with an IV in her arm) I am not simply characterized as "healthy" in relation to her. While I am represented as robust (depicted as having an active life of bike riding, friends, school, drugs, and no indication of any physical challenges) there is a clear indication in the film that I am using the weed and drugs to self-medicate and check out. I would argue that Abby and I both, at the time,



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could be described as well and unwell (but aligned differently across physical and mental health), but because her disease was visible and terminal and her physical body was showing signs of devastation, she was most profoundly understood as "sick." The fact that I was physically strong, living a "normal" teenage life, and had a long future ahead of me, meant that I was understood as "healthy." That Abby displayed great mental fortitude and was present to her experience of her illness didn't offset her categorization. That I was constantly on the run (literally and figuratively) and mostly in a chemically altered mental state didn't offset mine either.

The contrast in our mental health is perhaps best illustrated by the voice-over in the film (taken word-for-word from a journal I wrote when I was sixteen) that accompanies an image of me sitting beside Abby's bed in the hospital.



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“Abby expressed that she needs people to be strong around her because she needs the strength. She says I’m good at this one—I don’t fall to tears when I visit her in the hospital.” What Abby perceived as my strength was more likely a manifestation of numbness and disconnectedness that stemmed from my inability to deal with the situation. I was present in body but not in spirit. I had managed to psychically remove myself, but I couldn’t eradicate our bodily connection. It is this physical interconnectedness and interdependence that is at the heart of *You Can’t Get There From Here (Redux)*.

In the performance, the physical nature of *my* struggle is forefronted. This traumatic event has lodged in my body; my somatic response puts me in perpetual motion. No matter what, I have to keep pedaling. Am I trying to produce a different outcome, or am I trying to let my body speak? My trouble breathing echoes her trouble breathing. The present (the performance) and the past (the film) are collapsed, and what materializes is the body in crisis—a shared body not bounded by time or space, self or other, real or represented.

It would be natural to consider my live body in the space as the “real” in relation to Abby’s filmic “representation”; however, I am struck by how my personal story parallels performance theorist Peggy Phelan’s, as recounted in the first chapter of *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*. Phelan describes a childhood family car trip taken after her sister has died. Her dead sibling serves as an unacknowledged passenger, and this ghost becomes the “real” because the sister’s absence was what Phelan and her siblings defined themselves in relation to. “In the clarity of her absence, we redefined ourselves. The real was the absence of her; we were representations of that loss” (12).

My frantic pedaling belies that loss. There is urgency in my action, and no matter how hard I exert myself, the bike remains in place, I literally can’t get anywhere. There is a

sense that I am failing, that she is failing, that we are both failing. My complete exhaustion and inability to keep pedaling corresponds to the crisis point in the film. Despite my best effort, I cannot prevail. I have reached my physical limit and I have to get off of the bike and let someone else pedal through Abby’s death while I slump to the ground, heart racing, and gasping for breath. Every time I have performed this piece there is a moment I think I might have a heart attack, and I am never quite sure whether or not I can get back on the bike and ride it to the end. But I do, because there isn’t really a choice. The living body keeps going, even when it seems like it’s not going anywhere.

Work Cited

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.

Liss Platt is a multimedia artist who works in video, film, photography, installation, performance, web art, and any combination thereof. The issues and ideas she investigates usually dictate which “tools” she uses and what form the works take. Her work has been screened and exhibited internationally. She is presently an Associate Professor in Multimedia at McMaster University.