



Poems from *Self-portrait without Breasts*

CLARE BEST

Vital statistics

(i) The consultant put it like this

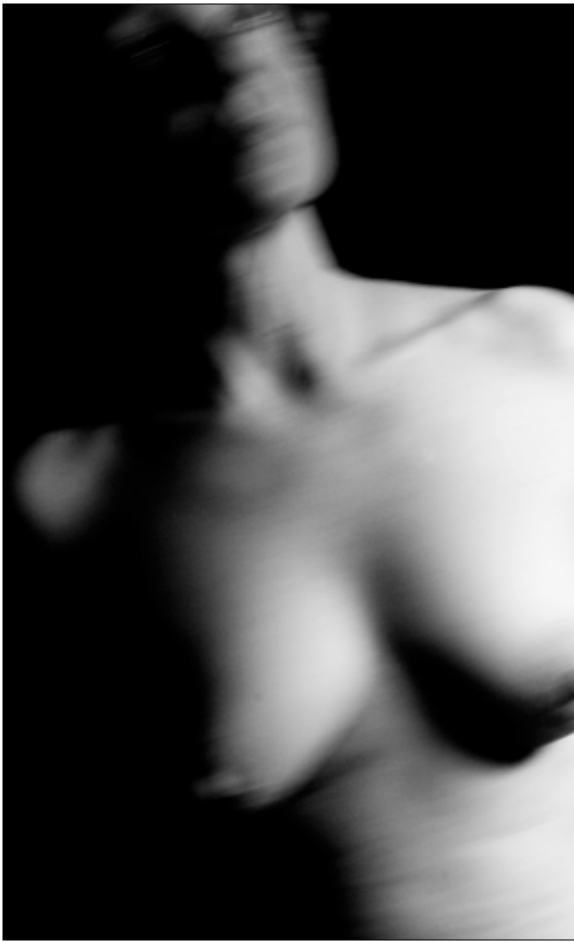
*Most breast cancers are sporadic.
Only five percent
genetic – a defective gene gives the woman
an inherited predisposition. So when*

*two or more close relatives
develop the disease, we must
be vigilant. If one parent has a bad gene
there's a fifty-fifty chance you have it:*

*if you do (we can test
for two genes – there are others
not yet found) the risk of cancer's
eighty-five percent. How does that sound?*

(ii) Eighty-five percent

*Eighty-five percent of computers in China are infected with viruses
Eighty-five percent of lost umbrellas are left on long-distance buses
Eighty-five percent of embryos transferred during IVF fail to be born
Eighty-five percent of men over sixty spend Sunday mowing the lawn
Eighty-five percent of sunscreens don't deliver their marketing claims
Eighty-five percent of people want children in another part of the plane
Eighty-five percent of western women wear the wrong bra size
Eighty-five percent of English tomorrows have weather just like today's*



The surgeon's album

He turns the pages for me:
full and partial reconstruction, implants,
muscle flaps from back and stomach. Creations
to match and balance. *But how would I look
flat? No extras. Straightforward scars.*
He frowns at a lop-sided photo.
The absence doubled? I've not done that before.

Twelve months on, he wants
my picture, conforming to house style:
no head, arms at forty-five degrees to clavicle.
I stand anonymous against a stripped pine door,
knots and fissures dark behind my skin –
a knife-thrower's object, still
until the last blade hangs from the wood.



Two weeks before surgery

'Cast me and I will become what I must be'

We've oiled my shoulders, collarbone,
breasts – olive-scented, shiny
as greased rubberwood, I'm primed for casting.
You soak chalky bandages, wrap me

in slapstick layers of white –
a sacrament to tender body and life.
Working fast before the plaster sets
we smooth wet dressings onto slippery skin –

keep my contours, take my shape;
at every fold and ruck we stop, look closer
to remember. I lie death-still, encased,
breath slow-drawn, not to crack my shell:

an end and a beginning. Beneath the carapace
I hum a lullaby – you lift the curves away,
cast off my breastplate,
air moving like shadow over sentenced flesh.

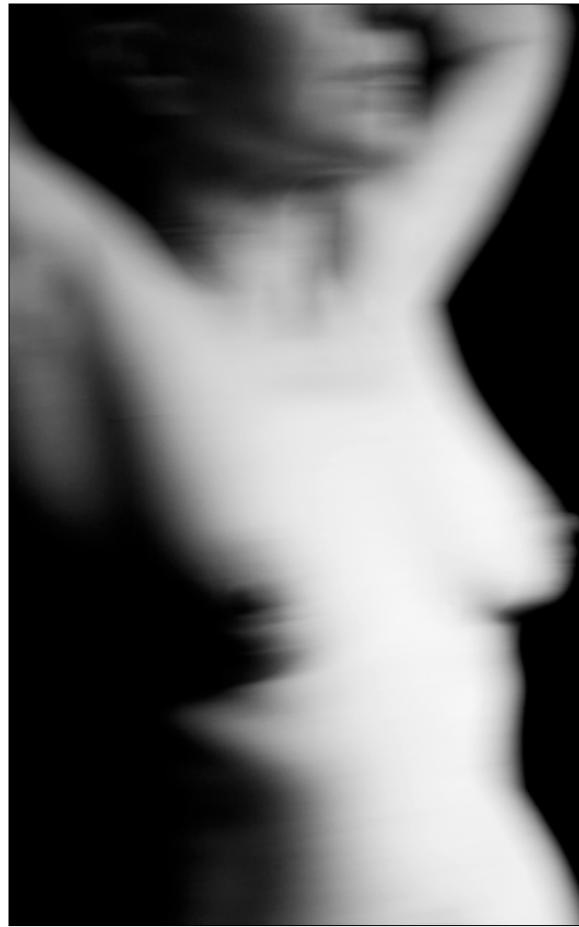


Countdown

Three turns in the corridor
to the anaesthetic room, one last walk
with breasts, the weight of them
familiar as my own name
and address. Slick of the Thames
through plate glass intoxicates.

A young man in a white coat small-talks
London, fixes a cannula into the wrist
where my watch is not. My lips
keep moving – explain we left
some years ago, not the stress,
more the desire to raise our child
on chalk hills, near the sea.

His eyes clear as a newborn's
close to my face, he holds my hand –
a moment of love, I will call it that.
I lend him this life, veins freezing
from the forearm up.



Removing sutures in the bath

Lap of water, deep
water, stitched
and rippled skin. Look

through fluid glass
to winter sky –
jet trails,

each quick cut
straight and white –
slow, the vapour

spreads, deforms,
reshapes. Impossible
to think

tomorrow's
clear
and blue.

Self-portrait without breasts

Tangled hair, charcoal-socket eyes,
mouth slack after one more long night
restless on my back. This body's fenscape –
manscaped, hills removed – the meaty joins
still livid, tight shut mouths
where distant territories were stitched

in touch. Blood seeps in deltas over ribs,
yellow and purple track to the waist.
You're even more beautiful now, you say
and I believe, for though I never was, I am
explorer, seeker – I've travelled
and I have an ear for truth.

Flat lands

Expanse of skin stretched over ribs:
this is the new terrain we'll trace on paper

I:l, a detailed plan with code and key.
Our way to measure and record

how much feeling has been lost, how much
might be retrieved.

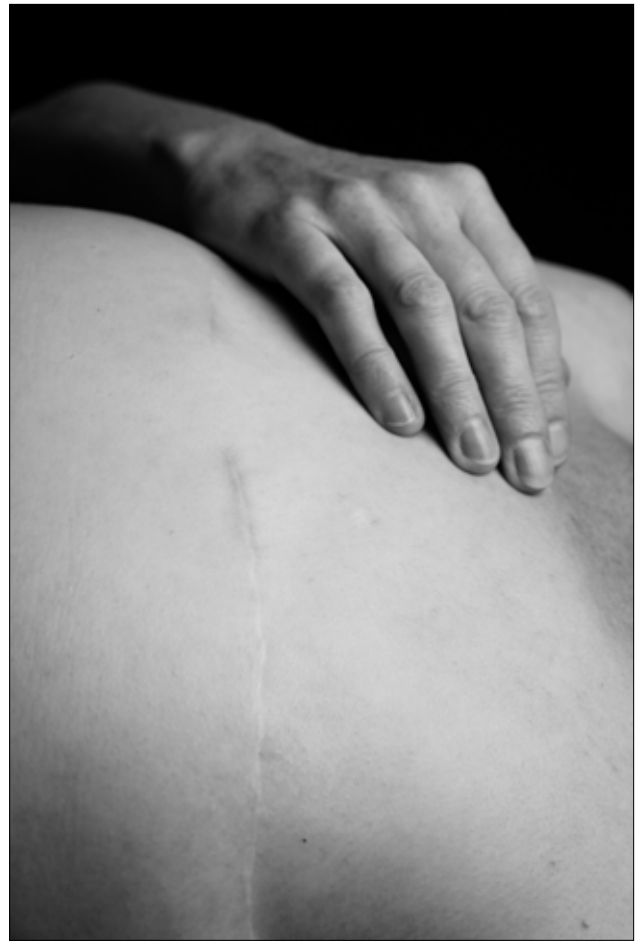
Let's cross-hatch regions of polar snow –
uninhabited, no sensation.

In places, the surface won't tell the truth:
mud on top of frozen soil and rock,

we map this permafrost with stars
held in parentheses.

Some areas are fragile: thin ice
on a lake – a leaf or feather settling

could start the crack, the thaw. We know
to plot these zones with question marks.



No adhesive necessary

Past the Hide 'n Seek lingerie range, beyond Naughty Nurse and Hail Mary sets, to a screened-off area with rows of jelly-coloured vibrators and Jiggle Balls. By the time I'm examining a five foot inflatable penis, she's close. *Need any help?* That confidential smile. Yes, *do you have nipples?* She's not sure, she'll check. *I've lost mine*, I add, for authenticity.

At home, I press the salmon-coloured discs back to back – a miniature UFO – then peel them apart, lick their flat sides, choosing where to place my one size nipples: near or far, high or low. They sit over the stripes of white scar like elastoplast. Under a T shirt they appear home-grown, virtually real. When I touch them they're always firm.

Clare Best lives in Sussex, England. She has been a bookbinder, a bookseller and an editor and she now teaches creative writing at Brighton University and the Open University. Her poems are widely published in journals and anthologies. Treasure Ground (HappenStance, 2009) brings together poems from a unique residency at Woodlands Organic Farm on the Lincolnshire fens. The extended sequence Self-portrait without Breasts will appear in her first full collection, due to be published in the United Kingdom later this year.



Consolations

Our hearts are closer
when we hug, no bra to grey

and ruin in the wash, less
bounce and wobble

running for a bus,
full horizontal contact

with the ground, I am
streamlined

in air and water, I remind myself
of me – and you

press your ear to this ribcage,
hear me live.

Photographs by Laura Stevens