

BODIES OF WORK

Clare Best on the major creative project inspired by her risk-reducing breast surgery

In 2006 I chose to have risk-reducing double mastectomy because of a strong family history of breast cancer. I also chose neither to have reconstruction, nor to use prosthetics, but to adopt a flat shape.

I wrote the poem cycle *Self-portrait without Breasts* (thirty-one poems) over the three years following surgery. The cycle was published in my first full collection *Excisions* (Waterloo Press, 2011). Eleven of the poems were also published alongside Laura Stevens' photographs of me, in a pamphlet *Breastless* (Pighog Press, 2011).

It is interesting now to look back on the long process of bringing the *Self-portrait* project into the public domain, from its very personal origins.

Ever since I was a fine bookbinder, years ago, I have thought of the book-object as a cradle holding the contents of the book, its words and images. Binding a book involves cutting, clamping, sewing, stretching, pressing and polishing the structures to make the book strong enough to be handled and read. If the book is well made, it opens easily, the underlying work is more or less invisible, the contents appear in their best light.

The work of making *Excisions* and *Breastless* took me through the stages I was familiar with from my bookbinding days. Seeing these two publications come into being was a way of cradling not only my work but my old and new bodies, my old and new selves.

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.



Although I wrote a journal throughout the months before and after surgery, I did not expect to write poems on the subject. The project that became *Self-portrait without Breasts* ambushed me about nine months after the operation. I returned from a writing retreat with eight poems about breasts, instead of the story I had intended to draft.

The prewriting for these poems was rooted in my own physical, mental and emotional experiences, as well as in my family background of cancer. In that sense, I had been writing them for years. When they arrived in my head and on the page, the poems came urgently. Writing them was tough. I had to revisit each point of my journey, and focus on memories of my mother, aunt and cousin.

In 2008 I began sending the poems out to editors. Small groups were published in journals and anthologies. I read them to audiences. The effect on me of presenting the poems publicly was extraordinarily powerful, energising me and spurring me on to continue writing the cycle.

In summer 2010, I presented at a life writing conference at the University of Sussex, and was invited to submit poems for publication in a journal for Women's Studies at York University, Toronto (Volume 28, nos 2 & 3 of *Canadian Woman Studies / les cahiers de la femme*). I mentioned to the editor that there were images too – photographs taken by Laura Stevens before and after surgery. I had the 'before' photos made as a private gift to myself and my family, a memento. The 'after' photos were made at Laura's suggestion, eighteen months following my surgery. It felt odd sending the images across the ether. The editor in Toronto liked them very much. The pages combining poems and images looked striking. Another surge of excitement. Another healing. One more shift from personal to public.

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.



By the following year, the *Self-portrait* cycle clearly formed the core of my first collection. Other poems gathered in two sections around that core. Jackie Wills wrote: 'Best places the sequence, *Self-portrait without Breasts*, between two others, starting with grief and ending with love, so that it becomes both a pivot and a measure.'

Having already presented the poems in various settings (conferences, Breast Cancer support groups, poetry readings, fundraising events) I knew I wanted to perform them in clinical settings, as the basis for discussion. I decided to show the photographs too. When the Medical Ethics faculty at Brighton University suggested a pilot event there in October 2011, the project took a leap. I needed a different publication, to include material for other readers. *Breastless* was devised as a way of setting some of the poems with some of Laura's images, in a layout that allowed both to speak. One of my problems making decisions in 2006 was not being able to see images of simple scars following double mastectomy. *Breastless* provides such images for others.

John Davies of Pighog suggested adding short essays to the pamphlet too, so this publication became another kind of cradle, holding the poems, the photographs, and an article by a cancer expert, as well as short pieces by Laura and by me about the process of the work.

In the end, *Excisions* and *Breastless* were published within weeks of one another, in the autumn of 2011. The story goes on. I have recently presented the poems and images at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, and at Ryerson University in Toronto. On November 27th I will present them at Exeter University as part of the launch of their new Medical Humanities strategy.

I hope these publications, these two cradles, may have continuing lives as structures that uphold not only the poems and images, and the versions of human experience they portray, but also discussions about bringing personal matters into public arenas.

I think of love

and suddenly as though I've heard some new word
in a half-known tongue, comes
this sense of you, and in the opiate fog a growth of light
and you there just beyond my reach

to make me stretch, fill my lungs
and feel the cuts,
a tightening band of steel around my ribs –
and all the years and days we've been together count

as much as every stitch that binds me skin to skin,
and in the places nipples were
I feel a charge of blood
and ghosts of kisses visit me as pain.

Excisions (Waterloo Press 2011) ISBN 978-1-9067423-6-2 £10

Breastless (Pighog Press 2011) ISBN 978-1-9063092-1-3 £5

Short films of *Self-portrait without Breasts*: Main sequence: <http://vimeo.com/35217072>

Discussion: <http://vimeo.com/35313771>; Laura Stevens: <http://vimeo.com/35242920>

Individual poems: *Intercession* <http://vimeo.com/35308638>; *I think of love* <http://vimeo.com/35348490>

No adhesive necessary <http://vimeo.com/35345805>; *Seduction* <http://vimeo.com/35347218>

Consolations <http://vimeo.com/35339202>

Clare Best: www.clarebest.co.uk

Laura Stevens: www.laurastevens.co.uk