Contempo 9 Nov 2010

Thank you so much, all of you at Contempo, but especially John and Jess, for inviting me to come and talk about my work, and read my poems. Contempo is an exciting initiative, and it’s terrific to be part of the inaugural Brighton event.

I would like to emphasise that I am here as a working writer, a pilgrim-practitioner of the craft. This talk is from that corner.

Today’s session will run more or less like this:
1. I am going to talk briefly about what I mean by writing process and suggest features of my own process that seem to have characterised my writing recently. (about 10 mins)
2. I am then going to say something about the genesis of my two recent poem sequences: Treasure Ground and Self-portrait without Breasts. (about 5 mins)
3. Next, and this will be the main part of the talk, at around 30-40 minutes, I will read several poems from each sequence, enough to give you a sense of how the sequences move. I will stop between poems to look at some aspects of my writing process that they illustrate. (And I’d like to say here that writing process is so individual and obviously I can only talk with authority about my own, but I hope that some of what I say might resonate with others, in various ways, or might stimulate some useful thought and discussion) (40 mins)
4. Throughout the time I am talking, I’ll be showing images which relate to the two sequences. These photographic images act as backdrops for my words.
5. My talk will last just under an hour. After that, there will be plenty of time for questions, discussion etc (up to 30 mins)

So, writing process. How long is a piece of string? Or rather, how long is the piece of string you’ve got?

For me, the writing is the process and the process is the writing.

Process theory has institutionalised notions of a linear or at least cyclical set of stages in the writing process, typically Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Editing, Consulting, Publishing. The model is embedded in our education system and in our publishing trades, and it is useful. But it is not always helpful to the (creative) writer.

In my view, the model tends to encourage a too-soon focus on editorial stages, at the expense of fluidity in the initial creative phase, which I like to think of as the biblical creation phase, Day One – And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

This formlessness is hard to talk about, so the tendency is to go on to talk about Days Two to Six – drafting, revising, editing, consulting, publishing. These are the stages or constructs we can more readily define, and handle. Much of what Days Two to Six are about is the technique, the craft of writing, which can be and is successfully taught or facilitated.

But technique has to be applied to material, and discovering or gathering the material is the origin and first stage of the process – the prewriting.

Creative writers, poets especially, should probably dwell as long as possible in the without form and void, the prewriting phase (arguably sometimes never moving beyond it, or at least moving back into it more often). The stuff of prewriting is what makes a writer individual – it is their unique stuff. It is also what makes the piece of writing individual. This is why the prewriting part of process cannot really be taught. For each unique artist-craftsman it comes from their underlying substance, and is different in each situation: it is their own way of working on that particular text. Or, I prefer to say, towards that particular text.
So the prewriting, the pen poised, the void, is what I think of as the heartland and hinterland of process, and of writing itself. An ability to come and go from the rich and complex but uncertain and uncomfortable place of prewriting is often, I think, what makes a good writer. It is what distinguishes a writer who is able to take risks, re-examine his or her own process and material, keep questioning and developing.

It may be helpful to think of Day One of process not as the start of a linear or cyclical progression, but as a store of rather messy stuff that lies below, behind, beyond the presented surfaces of our work. Unseen, but shaping the surface, just as geology shapes and causes a landscape. Sometimes it is liquid magma, forcing its way to the surface here and there. Other times it is the slow shift of tectonic plates and the heave of rock.

By playing around in the messy stuff, working with it, we can learn to accept the mess and observe what is in it… lumps and mud and blocks and silt and flakes of gold. We should never regard the mess as hindrance but always as potential. We should write the blocks as well as the flakes of gold. This mess is the heartland and hinterland, and when we play around in it we change how the writing (the surface) looks, and change it with integrity. The change comes through the individual writer's process, and any product along the way is of course part of the process too.

One way we can help one another, as writers, as teachers and facilitators of writing, is by supporting each other in the exploration of process, in the exploration of these heartlands and hinterlands each of us has. And that is one good reason to continue thinking about and opening up this slightly mysterious area.

Let me say something about my own process, current and recent. Something about my prewriting.

If I sense a poem coming, I often try not to write it for a while. I really try NOT to write it. I turn the other way. I have learned to trust this dwelling in the prewriting. It can be painful and strange. But something builds up during this time, and for me at least, if a poem is going to form, it seems to need to come out of this gestation void. This period of formlessness, of Day One, can be long or short, but it is always the origin of my process of writing.

Sometimes I get it totally wrong and leave it too long to try and write the poem, and it has evaporated. Maybe it wasn’t going to work anyway. Sometimes I write a few words and then come back to them (up to months or even years later) having let the images settle, and I find they are ready for development. More often I write a very loose draft or freewrite (always noted as draft 0/zero in my files) to try and capture the whole ghost of the poem, however crudely. And then I keep redrafting, but using the zero draft as a ‘portal’ to the prewriting state of mind. I keep every draft.

Back to the prewriting. With me, seeing comes first. The visual is my dominant sense by far, my dominant mode of searching, finding, interpreting, learning. In all my work, vision is very important and the imagery in my poems tends to be strongly visual. This is why I have brought photographic images with me today as the backdrop for this talk.

Put plainly then, I often ‘see’ the poem at an early stage of the prewriting. I mean see in the sense of literally get a picture of the subject/s of the poem in my head. No words at this point, but colours, shapes, light, movement. This sometimes locks me into the desire to simply present what I see, to describe it. I have to guard against doing that. I must inhabit the poem I see, which is different from standing apart and describing it.

Then, as soon as words begin to come, I listen for the poem, I hear the poem – the sound patterning of the words, the rhythm of the lines. Starting to hear the poem is like letting the dogs into an empty house. Hearing then becomes for me the partner sense of seeing. In the later stages of drafting, it becomes obsessive. It can even threaten to mug the more delicate visual aspects of the poem. Another danger I must be alert to.

* * *
Both the sequences I am presenting today address, in their subject matters, the dynamic surface-shapes of things – they address how to read these surface-shapes, and how to relate to them. Both were written, in different ways, from very physical experiences, one of landscape, the other of body.

Both are lyric sequences, with narrative tendencies.

There is another feature the sequences have in common, and that is they both focus on physical flatness. This was a strange coincidence. It brings me to say a little about the origins of each sequence and to highlight where the two differ.

**Treasure Ground**
The poems in this sequence were written as part of a project backed by Arts Council England. The project was a writing residency at Woodlands Organic Farm on the Lincolnshire fens, where I spent many periods of a few days at a time from 2005-2007. This is a flat landscape of wide spaces and colossal skies. It is some of the most fertile and most vulnerable agricultural land in Britain.

The residency was a very public project, publicly funded, with a clear and well-planned agenda to use writing to help the community reconnect with the rural/farming landscape and with sources of food. My top priority was running community writing projects… farm visits with poetry workshops for children, themed walks with writing workshops for adults. I also organised poetry competitions, and we produced a recipe book and there were all sorts of other activities.

My own poems, written in response to the working landscapes of the farm and the fens, and celebrating Woodlands Farm, the place, had to elbow their way into my time. The prewriting for these poems was often particularly physical, mud in my hair and rain in my face. I loved it. The poems were often begun and drafted in soggy notebooks in the field (literally), or on the train home to Sussex.

I came up with the bright idea (!) of putting the poems out in the 2,000 veg and fruit boxes distributed weekly to farm customers, little knowing that this would prove to be the most demanding aspect of the job. Each month I had to have a poem ‘ready enough’ to go out in the boxes. This pushed my process into new gears. The coming and going between the landscape of the fens and my Sussex home, proved to be the perfect way to facilitate my own writing. The messy physical stuff, the literal dwelling in the Day One prewriting happened in Lincolnshire. The drafting and later stages almost always happened back home, with the benefits of distance, and from a contrasting landscape.

I wrote more than forty poems during the residency. In the end thirty of these, book-ended with two prose passages, were published as a collection by HappenStance in December 2009, entitled *Treasure Ground*.

**Self-portrait without Breasts**
Towards the end of my residency at Woodlands, when many of the poems for *Treasure Ground* were already written, I underwent preventive double mastectomy, a decision I took because of a strong family history of breast cancer. My second decision – after that of opting for surgery – was not to have reconstruction of any kind, or to use prosthetics, but to adopt a new flat shape and to wear it openly. (Here is the flatness again.)

The writing project that came out of this experience ambushed me about nine months after the surgery, when I came home from a writing retreat with drafts of eight poems about breasts, instead of the 10,000 word story I had intended to draft!

So this sequence, in contrast to *Treasure Ground*, was unplanned, and arose unexpectedly out of very personal decisions and private events.

The prewriting for these poems was obviously rooted in the physical, mental and emotional experiences I myself had been through, as well as the background of breast cancer in the family. When they began to arrive, the poems came thick and fast. There were no imposed deadlines, only my own urgent pace.
Quite quickly the poems took on a public mantle. Now, although they have yet to be published together in their entirety as a sequence, many of the 30 plus poems are in print individually or in small groups, in a range of publications including *Magma, Smiths Knoll, Poetry News* and various anthologies. A group of them is soon to be published in an academic journal for *Womens’ Studies* at York University in Toronto (Volume 28, Nos 2 & 3 of *Canadian Woman Studies/l’ues cahiers de la femme (cws/cf)*) along with some of the images you will see here today. I have read and performed the poems to many different audiences including conferences, Breast Cancer support groups, mainstream and cabaret poetry readings, fundraising events and so on. They already have a well-developed public life of their own.

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I’m going to read from *Treasure Ground* first.

And I will begin with the opening prose piece, as it sets up the landscape, gives a sense of journey, and introduces visual elements of perspective, light and colour, and scale which reappear in the poems. And there is the sense of interrogating surface.

**To the fens**

The Peterborough-Spalding rail link over the fens. March, frozen feet, I stand by an open window while the train rattles east over black sea-ground, heading away from the sun-setting west into blue and purple, towards the windy edge of the Wash.

This time of day distorts perception. Lines of trees are whiskered onto a bowl of sky like rare mould growth. Jet trails over the horizon are fragmenting, silver as silverfish. The evening’s violet cloud banks are phantom hills to me: I come from the south where to look down from above is to see half my county from a chalk ridge. But here a railway embankment gives enough perspective to look out across fields swimming shade and last light. Here is almost underwater, almost tidal.

Criss-crossing dykes and cutting over plough, we’re just above sea level, above soil level, and it’s as though we’re trying to take off on a long runway into night. Red-brick villages with dark slate roofs huddle either side of the railway line. These settlements seem to be inhabited only by yellow lights and satellite dishes.

This is bulb country with polytunnels striped over vast prairies, and as the train shudders onwards the stripes flicker away into serial vanishing points. By May, when I’ll next make this journey, potato plants will show on the ridges between trenches, alternating black and green, black and green, soil and leaf.

*God’s dripping pan*, they call this place. Put anything on or in the ground here and it tends to grow, and fast. It reaches down, takes root, makes the most of the mysterious dark earth and the picked-clean skies. Everything grows. Crops. Hedgerows. Weeds—willow weed, persicaria, dog daisy, camomile, creeping thistle, bindweed, fat hen, and the rest.

I can almost believe the houses here began as sheds that grew and grew, putting roots down, digging in.

Next I’m going to read *Ingredients*, which appears as the first poem in *Treasure Ground*. This poem would seem to be the exception that proves the rules of my writing process. Often my poems go through 15 or more drafts. The first draft of *Ingredients* is dated 16 May 2007, the fourth and final draft is dated one month later. Soon after that it went out in the veg boxes, and two years later it was published in *The Rialto*, unchanged. It was picked by Michael Mackmin as the Editor’s Choice for that issue. Seems too easy doesn’t it!
BUT, here is the prewriting story: I first had the idea for this poem in 2005 and one or two of the pictures or snapshots came into my head then, during the early weeks of the residency. I pushed the poem away, I was not ready. I wrote nothing down. The pictures only re-emerged in the final months of the residency, when I was running a workshop at Woodlands and asked the participants to write a list poem. While they were writing, I returned to the dormant pictures in my memory, and the poem came in half an hour, almost fully formed.

**Ingredients**

1. A rush of growth – Cherry Holt, Leeks Land, Gull Field, all have green to astonish.
2. An arrival: parachute in or walk across the Wash. Try to arrive on time.
3. Gates, five-bar, grey-weathered, the perfect height to lean on and look.
4. A good pair of eyes.
5. A Bramley orchard and under the trees, a scatter of turkeys in Bourbon Red, Lavender Blue.
6. Enough sun then rain to heal any breaks in the mud.
7. Barn owl, skylark, sedgegrass, earthworm, some of each.
9. An unclouded sky for storms to invade.

*Conversion* was the first poem I wrote for the project, early in 2005, and it soon became for me a talisman for the entire residency, since it focuses on the reawakening of land and mind – renewal and reacquaintance. The making of this poem was entirely in my physical experience of walking behind the plough and seeing the birds, and the main image of the poem, the sail of birds like a parachute steadying the plough was in my head from the afternoon of the walk. I can recall the exact occasion and all the sensations of the poem’s arrival. The piece is about my conversion to the work in hand, ie accepting the role of writer in residence, as well as about the conversion of the farmland to organic cultivation. A turning point.

**Conversion**

In these few clover years
Hemplands has come back to life.

Earthworms as fat as your finger,
black loam over the golt. You know

as you tread the dyke
beneath wheelings of steel-grey
and white, the tell-tale cry –
hundreds and thousands

of common gulls, oyster catchers,
black-backed gulls,

a vast billowing sail of birds
like a parachute steadying the plough.

NOTE:
Hemplands is a field at Woodlands Farm.
Golt, a Lincolnshire word, describes the subfertile undersoil.

There is a more complicated story to Walk New Year. I recall the moment of seeing the poem, after a field walk in early January 2005. In the first freewrite, dated mid-January, all the elements of the poem appear, and there is an initial burst of drafting later that month. Then nothing for nearly a year. I got stuck, needed more exposure to the winter fen landscape to move into the poem. When the season came around and I revisited the fen country in similar conditions, the poem took off again, arriving at its near-final draft almost exactly a year after the prewriting walk that set it off.

**Walk, New Year**

Winter sun uncovers everything,
seeks you out on the fen,
surprises you in a field
or by a creek

and when light’s found you,
rain pins you down,
salt wind tangles your hair,
polishes your skin.

No mid-distance.
The flat ground underfoot
is all that’s near.
Far is way over there.

Between
can’t be seen
till you’re up close
or leave it miles behind.

*Planting Apples* came from a similarly weathering experience but went through many more drafts, because of the complexity of the notion of time in the poem. The main part of the poem is written in the present continuous, and the action of planting is about to happen, but the speaker anticipates a time of looking back on the planting that has not yet happened! This poem is one of several in which I attempt to inhabit the cyclical nature of time on the worked land of the farm.
Planting apples

First March days, snow-striped furrows,
the solitary heron flapping slow as a flag
from his morning ditch. Time to plant apples.

*Laxton’s Superb, Egremont Russet,*
an avenue for the cottage. Close rain’s good
for dewing the roots—saplings lined up, waiting
to be sunk. Already you taste them six years on,
sugar-skins rough, the sour-sweet pulp.
Spitting pips in long grass, you will remember
cold booted feet heeling in apple sticks,
thin rain, then sleet stiffening your coat.

Woodlands is a mixed organic farm and I knew I was going to have to write about the animals, but I found this extraordinarily difficult, mostly because I was doubtful about the idea of applying human language to creatures. It seemed arrogant. But I had to get over my squeamishness and think of ways to write about them, and eventually some came.

I hope the poems about the Lincoln Red cattle, the turkeys, the chickens, show these noble beasts the respect they deserve.

The sheep were another matter. I have always thought sheep badly misunderstood and maligned, and I wanted to do something about this. The idea for *How to be Considerate to Sheep* came not so much from the sheep themselves as from a website about how to handle them. This is a found poem, a wry, ironic look at how humans are too often inclined to regard animals with a patronising gaze. It is my own way of standing up for the sheep. As a ‘found poem’ the text was largely there on the sheep-handling website for me to manipulate, and my process was quite a different one. The main work of the poem involved getting the instructions to sit in an effective order, and cutting to achieve the tone I wanted.

**How to be considerate to sheep**

When you’re known to the sheep you meet,
put them at ease. Don’t grimace or frown.

Provided they can see, sheep read expressions
just like you and me. Regular shearing

keeps fleece away from eyes. Horns
should not be allowed to grow too long.

Sheep perceive negative and positive emotion
so hang pictures of cheery faces
on the walls of the shearing shed or barn, reassuring images for them to focus on.

These social animals will be less stressed if the slaughterman’s a stranger

than if it’s someone they know. Please encourage the unknown slaughterman to smile.

Then there were the people who worked the land at Woodlands, and how to write them, their relationship with the place, with their work. Alan had worked the land for fifty years when I met him, and had cultivated this particular market garden for many years, and was soon to retire. I wrote In the Market Garden for him. It presented all the challenges of a condensed narrative and gave me a lot of trouble in the early stages. I worked drafts 1-10 throughout June 2005 and then set the poem aside for a month or two. When I came back to it, I knew I had to take out a reference to something Alan himself had said to me – it was a mention of how he wanted to leave his spade to his grandson in his will. This added detail from his own voice, which I had thought would add to the poem’s authenticity, was overloading it with some kind of morbidity, or sense of imminent mortality. This did not work in the context of the vigorous growth presented in the poem. When I removed the reference, the poem settled.

In the market garden

for Alan

June, and your vision’s cramped by cow parsley, buttercup, hawthorn— each plot of turned earth green again in hours.

Today you tie canes into wigwams for five thousand runner beans, strim poppies around currant bushes, pull weeds from artichokes. Tonight you’ll cut asparagus; tomorrow rhubarb, lettuce, chard.

You pause to clean the spade you bought for sixteen pounds twelve and six. Week after week you sharpen its blade with an angle-grinder, file the burr, test the edge on your tender thumb.

You’ll see further in October when leaves spin and scatter from hedges, when growth stays underground.

Writing Airman presented another kind of challenge. Here was a tragic human story literally embedded in the landscape. I felt it needed telling beyond the rather dour memorial plaque on a barn. The story
was that of a young Canadian airman whose plane had inexplicably crashed in 1953. It was a kind of Icarus tale. And telling it might give me the elevation to hover above the flat landscape, to see it as a bird or an airman might. But how to fit together the narrative and the descriptive/lyrical aspects without diminishing either? I puzzled for several drafts and nearly abandoned the poem. Then I hit on the idea of having an extended epigraph which sat outside the poem, but gave the bare bones of the story (rather as the on-site memorial plaque does). The epigraph and the poem are almost exactly the same number of words, and this seemed correct. Writing the story this way freed me to imagine the landscape as though from above, in the poem itself.

**Airman**

_Flying Officer Ray Bédard, aged 25, of 439 Squadron RCAF, was flying from RAF North Luffenham in a Canadair Sabre MK2 on 23 June, 1953. He broke from formation and was killed after bailing out while his aircraft was in a steep dive. The plane crashed in a field by Whitehouse Farm near Woodlands._

There’s still the geometry
of lanes and dykes and hedges,
a spirit-level horizon. East, the North Sea
sheet-metal smooth to the sun.
West, a thousand fields beyond Long Tankins

hundreds of nameless shades of green.
Now, as then, the invisible skylark
rehearses, rehearses. The marsh harrier
glides low over wheat, drops on a vole.
Hares lie in hollows, unblinking.

**Edgeland**

Between marsh and fen, creatures don’t respect time and space. They cross and re-cross boundaries. Walk here and you’ll surprise more and more of them, putting up pheasant from the fields, heron from the ditches. Meadow pipits dive and swither over stubble. Hare and rabbit scatter to the hedges. An owl might burst from the upper window of a small red-brick barn and ghost over new plough, looking for daytime kill.

It’s just twenty minutes walk, past giant manure heaps and a water-pumping station, to the new sea wall. Climb up through a gap in the tangled hedge of black and red berried thorn. Walk along the top: it’s as though you’re patrolling the divide—marsh with muddy creeks and low tide on one side; on the other side, fen, reclaimed land. This man-made ridge is the watershed between wilderness and cultivation.

November. There’s still a warm wind. If you drop down from the wall you’ll see how it combs the hummocks of near-horizontal grass, rippling the brackish water in the creeks. A few weeks and winter will be here, viscous salt water all but freezing as it laps at the silky mud.
Curlew skim the marsh, their wings catching sea light. They drive in fours and fives, blades carving air. Their cries banish all others. Their long, curved beaks will penetrate eight inches into mud for lugworms, and if they run out of lugworms they come inland for earthworms.

Things aren’t fixed in this edgeland. No-one and nothing will be here long. The fen lies at least ten feet lower than the marsh and one day the sea will return. Soon, perhaps. Brazen on a spring morning, high waves breaking over the wall. Or at night, seeping in under cover of darkness. One way or another she will be back to reclaim what’s hers.

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And now for something completely different, as the saying goes: Self-portrait without Breasts.

If the poems for Treasure Ground were written as ways of revisualising and reinterpreting the worked farming landscape of the Lincolnshire fens, ways of explaining the place to the reader, the poems which became Self-portrait without Breasts were written first to myself, probably as part of the work of revisualising and reinterpreting the changed landscape of my own body and identity. Their other, more public purpose, developed later as the sequence gathered momentum.

I have said that this sequence of poems ambushed me, demanding to be written. The poems that came first were those whose subject matter was the surgery itself, and its immediate aftermath — a group of eight or nine poems that form the core of the sequence of thirty or so. It has been interesting for me to realise that these core poems, coming to me as they did on a writing retreat in Norfolk, away from my usual place, my home by the Sussex downs, were facilitated by the same phenomenon of distance that had helped me write the Treasure Ground poems between Lincolnshire and Sussex.

I’m going to read some of these core poems but also some which came later in the writing process and which fit before and after those core poems in the narrative order of the sequence.

Self-examination is the first poem in the order of the sequence for the reader, but it was written some two years after the core poems. I had wanted throughout that time to write a poem that every woman could relate to, about the anxiety, the fear, but also about the humdrumness of living with the risk of breast cancer. In the end the poem was inspired by an American breast cancer charity website. I was very struck by the language of landscape used in the guidance for women on the website, and I worked with this.

Self-examination

Get to know your breasts. Near the armpit you may find pebbles, bladderwrack, pearls.
This is normal. Don’t be alarmed.

The lower part of your breast could be gravel. There might be silt, quicksand, shifting dunes under the nipple.

Check for flotsam at low tide. Search for a rock in shingle, a limpet on the sandy beach.
Seek help if you discover these.
Two weeks before surgery came soon after the core poems, and it went through twelve drafts in three days in December 2007, exactly a year after the surgery. It is a poem about anticipating and remembering at the same time. Like Planting Apples, handling time in the poem was the most challenging aspect of the writing.

**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 was the first poem I wrote for the sequence, and it arrived more or less all there in September 2007. In the freewrite, all the key phrases are in place, and by the fifth draft, five days later, the poem has arrived at its final, and now often published, state. This is a record for me, and no doubt speaks of the prewriting process of nine months of not writing the poem.

**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 has been. 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.

The next two poems, I think of love and Breast care nurse are two more of the core poems written in September 2007. But both arrived in my ear, not seen but straightaway heard, as though in some synaesthetic and blurred recollection of post-operative consciousness. Again, both changed little from their first to their final drafts.

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.

Breast care nurse

She whistles in – flat shoes, primary colours, wide smile:

Remember to take some softies when you leave, 
use them as soon as your wounds are closed, 
wear them with a comfy bra, baggy top, 
nobody’ll guess. Then call and make a date 
for silicone ones, any size you fancy, they’ll look good under a T-shirt or vest. Try different brands 
till you find what suits – so many kinds, 
even stick-ons for nights.

I want to tell her 
I am my own woman-warrior, 
heart just under the surface. I let go of pretence
weeks before the surgeon drew
his blue arrows on my chest.

*The new geometry* was a quite different process. I began work on this poem a year after the core group of poems and worked on it off and on for over a year before arriving at a draft I liked. The essence of the poem – the sense of the speaker’s own vulnerability in her new post-operative shape – was probably still so acute that time had to pass before the piece itself could be shaped.

**The new geometry**

I’m laid out, my head padded
in the angle of the back seat,

the belt above ruling its hypotenuse
across my space, placing me

in the sudden angularity of the world.
This line of sight’s ideal

to study the oval heads of cyclists,
oblong posters pasted on oblong buses –

faces squared in fogged-up windows.
Now we accelerate, switch lanes –

I see plane trees in parallel rows,
parabolas of lights. A trapezium of sky.

Over the South Circular, a helicopter
poised like a rotating star.

In the last few poems I am going to read today from the sequence, body is very directly presented in terms of landscape imagery.

**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, reshapess. Impossible to think
tomorrow’s clear and blue.

You don’t really need to know much about the next poem except that the voice that comes into the poem in the second stanza is my son’s voice. He was eleven at the time.

**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.

This next poem, Flat lands, was always going to be one that gave me a lot of trouble. I had a notion of it in my consciousness from the time when I was writing the first core poems, but it was elusive, indistinct. So I kept turning away from it, hoping and waiting. Here, once more, the answer eventually seemed to lie in writing the piece whilst away from base. Frustrated and fed-up with a prewriting that was more null than void, I eventually tackled it, head-on, over a weekend away in the Midlands in autumn 2009. Because the subject of the poem is lack of feeling, numbness, all my usual methods to help myself write seemed to fail. Twenty-two drafts later I am reasonably content with it.

**Flat lands**

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

1:1, 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.

All this is a kind of counterpoint to Flat lands.

All this

All this will go on changing,
you’ll recover some feeling
and the scars
will flatten and fade.

When will the first crocus
show; which day
will the bud split its calyx?
Will damselflies hover
like summer coming and
before summer will there be spring?

There are signs already –
roots stirring
and that chrysalis at your shoulder
unfolding spangled wings.

Lastly, I want to leave you with a poem that is, in its way, a summary of the journey of Self-portrait without Breasts. As the sequence is shaped at the moment, this poem, entitled The bookbinder, will conclude the sequence.

In a former life, I trained and worked as a fine bookbinder. I loved the work. There are many parallels between the crafts of bookbinding and writing. The care and precision, the absolute attention to detail. The frustrations and pleasures. The preoccupation with surfaces and what lies beneath them. And of course there is always the fascination of the creative process.

There are one or two terms in the poem that I should explain. ‘Finishing’, in the context of the craft, is the work of gold tooling the leather, and other aspects of the decoration of the binding. ‘Glair’ is mature (raw) egg white painted onto the leather surface, in the blind impression. It is the filler and adhesive which ensures that the gold leaf ‘takes’ on the leather when the hot tool is applied to it.
The bookbinder

Pare the leather, thin the skin
where it must crease and stretch.
Then paste: the tanned flesh darkens,

wet and chill, fingers working
over spine and cords, into joints,
mitreing corners neat and flat.

Bandage the book in paper, let it
settle under weights, day after day
until the leather’s dry and taut.

When the time is right for finishing,
black the room, clamp the book
spine up in the beech-wood press,

anglepoise pointing where to begin.
Hot brass letters and a vigilant hand —
an accurate blind impression.

Paint in glair with a fine brush,
lay on the gold leaf, with level breath.
Tilt the lamp, shadows will reveal

the place to press the tool again.
Now, strike the gold—feel the title
word by word, bright in the grain.

Clare Best
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