EXCISIONS

Clare Best
Hove, UK: Waterloo Press, 2011

REVIEWED BY EVA C. KARPINSKI

Clare Best's poetry dazzles with the clarity of its chiseled phrases and its measured form. Perhaps the confessional narrative it tells, of encounters with mortality through the loss of her parents and her own preventive double mastectomy, warrants a desire for such poetic control. Her couplets, tercets, and quatrains often suggest reaching out after shape in an attempt to stave off a sense of transience, mutability, and shapelessness. These life writing poems that function as both thanatography and scriptotherapy present themselves as hard polished objects carved from words. A few of them are stitched together from other people's voices, statistics, or quotes. In this sense, they remain faithful to the collection's title. After all, *excisions* are what surgeons and poets share in their craft although the latter salvage and keep what is cut out.

The volume consists of three groups of poems. Part One, dedicated to the dead—parents and grandparents—takes its title from the poem "Matryoshka," which refers to a set of nested dolls, Best's image for the concentric structure of memory, cyclical repetition, and embededness in the family. Linked to recurrence, it also evokes associations with generations, generating, and genes, especially in the matrilineal transmission of a hereditary disposition to cancer. Metaphors of cutting saturate these lines: from the opening words of the entire collection—"I cut"—collapsing cutting (flowers) and writing, to the Elizabethan-esque vision of time as a surgeon/poet complicit in cutting human life (in "August"), to the excisions, stitches, and scars inflicted on bodies and memories:

> My grandmother knew about seams, knew things made from good material
> may be cut and made again.
> […]
> My grandmother knew about seams—
> her abdomen ruched from pubis to sternum,
>
> the stitch-marks silver and blue.
> ("Stitch")

Several poems ponder the father-daughter relationship. "My father's thesaurus" is a contemplation of a daily object that mediates the aporia of absence/presence and establishes a tenuous relationality that occasionally, as in a later invocation of the mythical allegory of Perses and Hecate ("The death of Perses"), hinges on guilt and emotional entanglement. The distance between "I" and "he" sometimes shrinks into the anaphoric "you," yet the fragility of the other's presence can be felt metonymically in the elegy called "Six rendezvous with a dead man." In an unexpected twist, the poem "Uncoupled" the speaker's wedding as separation or uncoupling of the father-daughter dyad that foreshadows the ultimate parting through death.

Best is concerned with memory, recycling symbols and images, playing on their doubleness, and mixing up the mythic and the ordinary. The eschatological seeps into the daily when her widowed father turns into Orpheus; the coin put in the mouth of the dead is the coin baked in the Christmas pudding; and the banality of a plastic bag intrudes into the solemn occasion of scattering the ashes. Memories pivot around earlier memories in concentric circles, each loss bringing back the pain of previous losses.

Part Two, entitled "Self-portrait without Breasts," traces a narrative trajectory leading up to and following her surgery. Here the speaker gestures toward the possibility of community with other women, Amazons, to whom this section is dedicated. This community extends to mythical and historical figures such as Fanny Burney, whose 1811 mastectomy, done without anaesthetic, she describes in "Account." "Intercession" invokes Saint Agatha, the patron of breast disease, "whose breasts were excised with pincers" by her torturers. A sense of continuity with other women patients is partly established through recurrent metaphors of the body as landscape, whether as a vast expanse of wasteland where others have been before, or geological formations that hide the fear of the unknown. The topography of the excised body—"manscaped, hills removed"—needs to be validated for its new beauty. However, the body, a territory to be reclaimed, is also controlled by biopower and medical technology, whose invasive vocabulary infiltrates the verses through medical terms and talk of pre-op planning and reconstruction.

With fearless candour, Best is drawing an intimate geography of the body, mapping out memories of loss, pain, and pleasure. Looking at the cast of her breasts made before her operation, she remembers and mourns lost sensations, but also describes an act of love making, where the lovers tenderly caress their scars. She subtly challenges conventional gender politics and redefines femininity on her own terms, becoming her "own woman-warrior".

In the final section called "Airborne," after recording moments of sadness and joy, she relearns to live her relationships in life, not in death; she is ready "to feast, give thanks." The volume concludes with poems reaching out toward her young son,

Freddie. Best's muted, unostentatious, common-sense feminism can be detected in her choices to shun the reconstruction aggressively peddled by her doctors and to expose the medical establishment's collusion with the dominant ideal of femininity, while also unabashedly naming the sites of pleasure, erotic and maternal, on her body. In a culture obsessed with breasts, she manages to find and redefine beauty in her experience of living in the post-mastectomy body.

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PAPER WINGS

Rosemary Clewes
Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2014

REVIEWED BY JORDANA GREENBLATT

The work of a consummate outdoorsperson, Rosemary Clewes' writing focuses on wilderness travel, and *Paper Wings* is no exception. However, Clewes' newest collection ranges farther, both in familial time and in space, juxtaposing her wilderness and northern experiences with a poetic reconstruction of her father's time as a WWI fighter pilot (based on his pilot log) and meditations on her own experiences of love and loss, her travels more broadly, and her participation in an 8-day silent retreat. While consistent with the contemporary Canadian lyric tradition (it comes as no surprise that Clewes thanks Don McKay), *Paper Wings* is also informed by Clewes' work as a photographer and artist, resulting in poetry that straddles lyric inner space and evocative description of the visual landscape. Inevitably, *Paper Wings* both draws from and participates in the literary tradition of the Canadian North, in some ways reproducing its virtues and failures and exceeding them in others. The end result is a collection that is beautiful—sometimes insightfully critical—but also largely lacking introspection into what entitles Clewes to, as she puts it in "Untitled," her "self-imposed summer exile,/ a yearly pretense of simplicity, solitude."

Some of strongest moments of *Paper Wings* combine ekphrasis with attention to constructions of nature and/or gender. In "Raphael's Galatea," Clewes contrasts her immersion in nature with Raphael's use of "sky and sea-sward … as backdrop/ for the dramatis personae" in a fresco in which "*Nature*, it seems,/ wandered off into its own dark wood." Questioning "Such heady celebration/ of artifice and brawn," Clewes mediates on Raphael's iteration of a Galatae stripped of agential sexual narrative: "No hint in this freeze-framed/ fresco that our lady is hastening to a rendezvous with a lover." Raphael's banishment of nature to the background and his "docile" Galatea contrast strikingly with Clewes' embodied description of kayaking in "Grow Me Gills," a few poems earlier: "It's all in the hips they say./ Kayak-skin, hip and knee."

The movement from Clewes' solo summers in the Bruce Peninsula to her father's stint as a fighter pilot during WWI is eased by the use of birds to figure both kayaking and flight. Undermining the conventional opposition between "masculine" wartime experience and feminized "nature," Clewes' take on her father's pilot logs balance the fear and human loss of war with the exhilaration of exploring the open space of the sky. In "Clouds," Clewes writes to her father "If you were alive, I'd beg you to talk, not of war/ but of the sky's white desert and the birth of clouds," consistently refusing stark divisions between war as a human construction and nature as a space of introspection.

Nevertheless, in *Paper Wings*, human history and culture are distinctly Western and colonial. The North, and the wilderness, are sites of natural history, interrupted only by Clewes, other visitors, and, in "Let the River Speak," a single "Inuk who knows/ the old ways but won't tell where muskox graze/ and who knows how the earth shakes out its water." Referring to her kayak, in "Grow Me Gills," as a "sea gypsy" and the imagined experience of riding a cargo train as "fleeing like an African god" in "Letting in the Light," Clewes' poetry instrumentalizes non-Western and pre-colonial culture and spaces even as Clewes questions Western culture's instrumentalization of nature. Thus, in a sense, Clewes engages in her own processes of relegation to the backdrop, a process that largely evades her often otherwise critical and introspective eye. If, as the book jacket contends, each section of *Paper Wings* asks "'Where is home?' The conclusion: Home is found within ourselves and without, anywhere, anytime," Clewes' poems retain a colonial lack of perturbation about who gets to be at home anywhere—and why.

Paper Wings deftly moves between seemingly divergent episodes in her own and her family's histories, and I would recommend it to anyone looking for an elegant take on the Canadian lyric tradition and idea of the North, one that navigates less obvious connections often very successfully. However, readers hoping that Clewes' collection will fulfill the promise of her observation, in