

The Mother Without Breasts

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When I was little I thought
 women were flat-chested
 like men
 only they had long purple
 squiggles across their chests
 I thought
 this way because cancer
 filched both my mother's breasts
 when I
 was born

Later (I was three or four)
 I saw another mother
 naked
 her swelling, succulent orbs
 hanging pendulous and ripe
 so full
 I spent the rest of that day
 naked in front of a
 fissured
 mirror

pulling my cherry nipples
 trying to make those luscious
 fruits grow
 trying to escape my
 mother's chest, those plum-colored
 scars like
 sanguineous highways,
 barren roads leading nowhere
 waiting
 for me

As this poem suggests, I grew up with a mother "without breasts." At first I thought this was normal; later, I thought it was horrifying. Later still, when I began to understand the implications of those absent breasts and present scars, I was very, very afraid of what my future, and the future of my two little daughters, might hold. Even later, I began to recognize my mother's incredible bravery and incredible beauty. She never hid her body from me but rather offered it without embarrassment as a part of her journey. My mother went on to have two more children, had a career as a successful novelist, and at 87 is living a rich, creative, and fulfilled life (even now she receives annual postcards from the American Cancer Society asking her if she's still alive). This poem is about my fear as a little girl. Now I see my mother's body as traversed by paths of courage. My body too has accumulated its own scars, and I wear them proudly, following with humility and love in my mother's footsteps.