

Juliet FitzPatrick believes you can still be happy as a woman without breasts and actually it's not scary to look at.



SUE LACEY

When faced with a cancer diagnosis and radical surgery, the option to refuse reconstruction is not often discussed. **Penny Rutterford** gets it off her chest

# PERFECTLY UNRECONSTRUCTED WOMEN

**A**ccording to legend, in 19th century Kerala, Nangeli cut off her own breasts to protest a caste-based "breast tax". She didn't survive. This is one of the stories writer and visual artist Claire Collison might share if you join her Birmingham-based *Intimate Tour of Breasts*. I first met Claire on her London tour. Amongst other breast-inspired sights, she took us to see possibly the most lactating painting in the National Gallery; a Tintoretto, of course. She reminds us that whilst a painting of such provenance would be exhibited with pride on the walls of any stately home, in recent times one of our more "stately" hotels took exception to a real-life lactating woman breastfeeding her baby where she could be seen by other guests. You couldn't make it up.

Topless models were for many years

proudly featured on Page Three of one of Britain's tabloid newspapers but I never expected that in my 50s I would find my own breasts discussed on its pages. However, one divorce and a mastectomy led me to share my personal one-breasted dating fears in a blog and *The Sun* reported it with "I fear men will recoil in horror at my body": Cancer survivor lifts the lid on what it's like to date after a mastectomy.

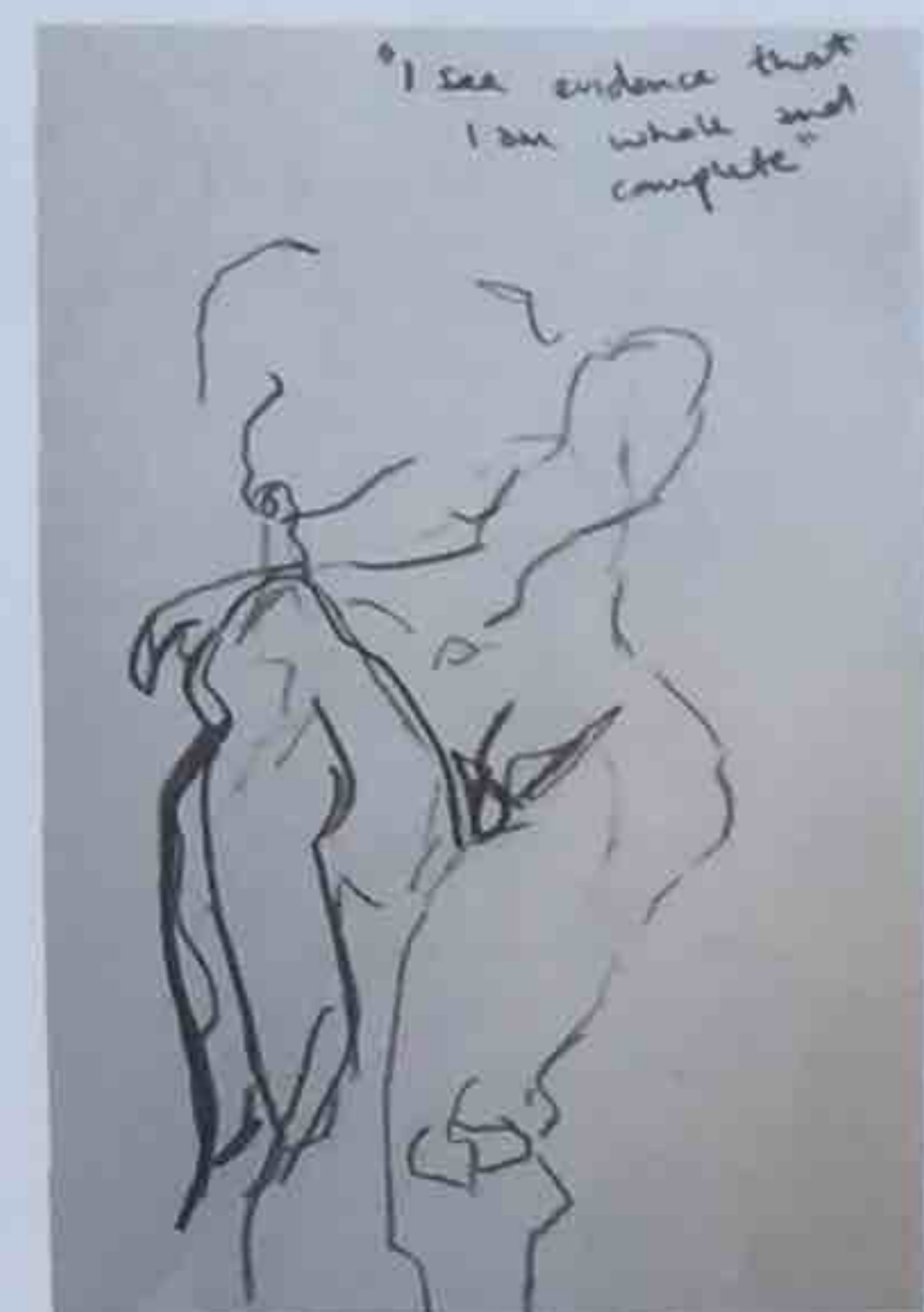
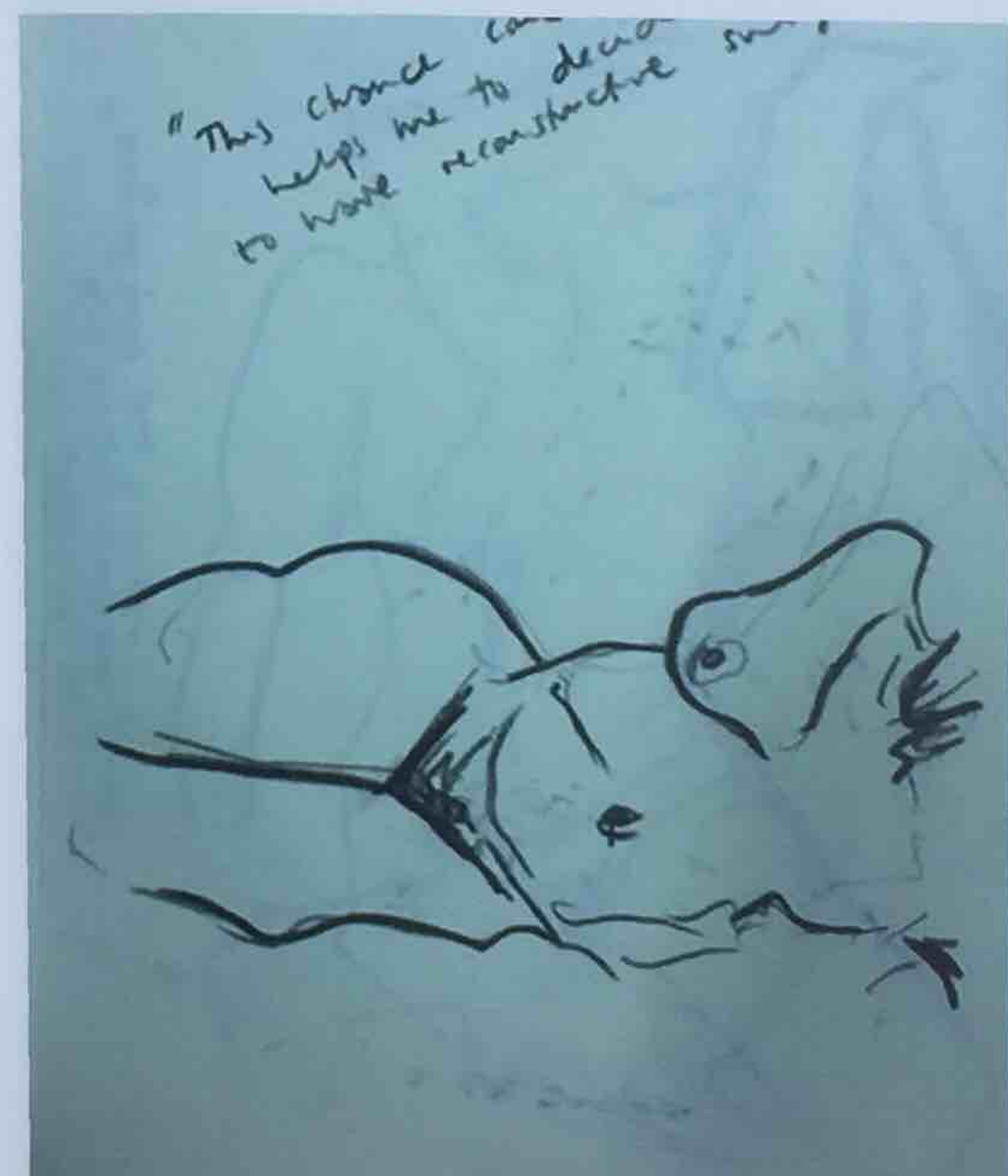
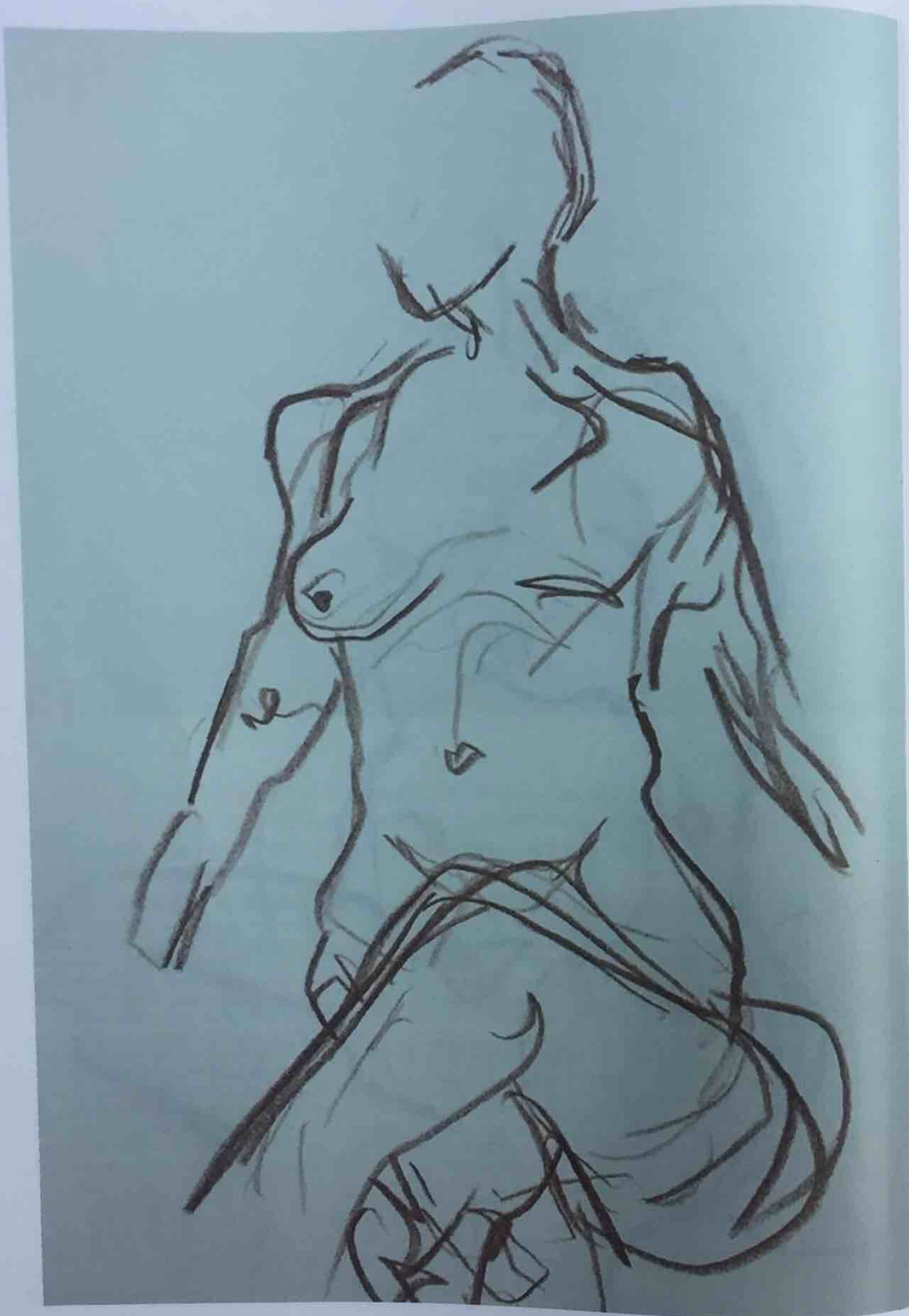
Claire and I are both "uni-boobers". Stand still in any busy street, on a packed railway carriage or in the queue at the checkout and women like us are all around you. In the UK alone, one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer during their lifetime. But you wouldn't know. We are hiding in plain sight. Most common breast cancer narratives have us swanning around in pink tutus kicking cancer's butt or getting a "boob job and a tummy tuck on the NHS."

One day last year, Juliet FitzPatrick's photo

appeared on the BBC website. Juliet was topless in the truest sense; she has no breasts. It was the BBC's most clicked-on image that day. She looks fabulous, with arms outstretched as she smiles at the camera. It's a joyful picture. Claire, Juliet and I are all women "living flat" after breast cancer.

Claire and Juliet talked to me about their own breast cancer diagnoses and how, in the same appointment hearing the news that they had cancer, they were asked to make decisions about their choices around reconstruction. It begs the question: who owns our bodies and how on earth does how our bodies are viewed by others have greater currency than how we feel in our own skin?

Describing her artistic practice, Claire says: "I use words and images in about equal measure. As a visual artist, I've used self portraiture a lot. I started off as a life model. I wanted to do stuff around women and identity. I just thought if I want to make work ▶



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▶ about women's bodies I should cut out the middle person and use my own."

"With the *Intimate Tour of Breasts*, I explore the landscape right from high art to the street, looking at the commodification and mythologising of women's bodies, and breasts in particular."

In her latest project, *Truth is Beauty*, Claire performs a monologue with her mastectomy scars exposed as she challenges attitudes towards female beauty. The poetry she incorporates into this piece was recognised in 2018 with the inaugural Women's Poets' Prize. I attended Claire's first performance at The Women's Library in London. As Claire modelled and performed her poetry the audience was invited to draw her. It allowed us to really examine her scars when usually one might look away. Isn't it rude to stare? I found it emotional. She looked great, healthy and feminine. Until I attended a hospital "show and tell" evening for patients like myself facing mastectomy and being urged down the path of reconstruction, I had never seen a post-surgery body. It frightened me. Claire said of the drawings of her body produced that day: "I looked good. I am still the same as I was as a life model before. I'm a whole, I'm interesting."

I asked Juliet about the events leading up to her topless photo on the BBC website. As a news and sports fan, Juliet is a BBC Radio 5 Live listener. She was listening to a programme discussing plastic surgery and how you get to the point of loving your body, and whether or not to have plastic surgery. Juliet texted in: "I love my body and I have no breasts. I had a double mastectomy and I don't intend to reconstruct them any time soon. Fancy having a chat about that?" And they did. She was invited to guest-edit a Tuesday lunchtime show. Faced with her own mastectomy, Juliet, like the rest of us, was led to believe that the only choice was reconstruction. Those of us diagnosed with cancer are advised not to Google our diagnosis. But reflecting on the major series of operations she might face to re-build her breast, Juliet did resort to Dr Google. This is how she found the charity and support group Flat Friends. Realising she was not alone was a game changer and helped her decide to have both breasts removed for symmetry. She is now passionate about spreading the word about the whole range of choices for those facing a mastectomy. I use the word choice in the loosest sense. We find ourselves stuck

between a tumour and a hard place – we certainly didn't choose to have cancer.

Juliet and I have both blogged about our breast cancer. I think it's true to say that we have both stepped out of our respective comfort zones since having treatment, including my own brief foray into stand-up comedy. Juliet's blog is called *Blooming Cancer* and she includes photographs of her post-surgery body taken by a photographer friend Sue Lacey.

Juliet said, "I think I got a bit fired up about the whole choice thing and being given just one treatment option. Women are not given the option of just staying flat. Once I had those photos, I thought, I'm going to tell my story and share them. You can still be happy as a woman without breasts and actually it's not scary to look at. It felt really empowering. I felt quite good about myself. I have had a few comments from people who read the blog and have said it really has helped them."

Juliet's blog also features her love of flowers: "I was meant to be going to Chelsea Flower Show with my mum and it was the same year as I was diagnosed. It was two days after chemo and by that point I knew that I would feel awful so I decided I couldn't go. My husband arranged for friends and family to send me packets of seeds so that on the day I was meant to be going there would be all these lovely seeds so I could have Chelsea at home. It was lovely. I sowed all those seeds and they grew and it was just blooming amazing. When I started writing the blog I thought, I'm going to write about cancer and being flat but also my recovery and my flowers and that became *Blooming Cancer*. I do feel like it has been a metaphor for my recovery."

Claire recalled a particular instance before her own diagnosis which had a major impact on her attitude when it came to deciding what surgery might be best for her. Working with a group of teenagers on developing their visual literacy skills, she took them to the Taylor Wessing Portrait exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. She invited them to choose their favourite portraits and give an explanation for their choices.

"This one girl chose two. One was an Amy Winehouse lookalike, a beautiful young woman. The other was a photograph of a woman who had had a mastectomy and was naked from the waist up. She was staring directly out at the viewer. I asked her about the Amy picture and she said she chose it



CLAIRE COLLISON

because she looked sexy. She had loads of makeup on and jewellery and bling and dyed hair. I asked her about the other one and she said she didn't know, she thought you were supposed to get a false one if that happened. She said she thought she looked really strong. I told her that was great, and that I believed that made her a modern feminist.

"That conversation still makes me emotional because it was such a chance thing. This kid was really susceptible to the stuff around us and how we're supposed to be and she was just at that age when you notice these things, and yet she wasn't in the least fazed."

The National Portrait Gallery is the home of a portrait of another breast cancer survivor, author Fanny Burney. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century she survived a mastectomy without anaesthetic. She continued writing and lived a further 29 years, dying at the respectable age of 87. Thanks to medical advances, women like us get the benefit of full anaesthesia and more modern treatments. During Fanny's time, their falsies were probably much less comfortable than the soft prostheses of today. My own prosthesis I have named Serena and she sticks directly to my chest. Far less itchy. And who owns our bodies? We do. ■

Claire Collison will be delivering events in 2019 at 'Women, Power, Protest' at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and in Liverpool and Peterborough. She tweets @clairecollison! Juliet Fitzpatrick blogs at: flatfriends.org.uk bloomingcancer.com Penny Rutterford's blog: greatthingsaboutcancer.com