

Sample translation from

*Breasts*

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## Prologue

‘It means we’ll have to amputate your left breast, but we can perform a reconstruction straight away during the operation.’

Judging by the way the oncology surgeon said these words, she had uttered this sentence before. There was habitual empathy in her tone which was business-like mainly. She knew she shouldn’t beat around the bush, that she needed to get to the point right away, and to articulate it as clearly and concisely as possible. Swiftly, she checked her screen, then looked back at me.

I was supposed to say something back. But what?

The word ‘reconstruction’ still hung in the air, above the desk and my opened file. It was tempting to comment on this. Maybe I was expected to. It would lead to a manageable conversation about the medical possibilities and impossibilities of a fake breast. How artfully they could make it, whether they would use an implant or my own tissue, and what all the consequences were of that. Enough conversation material.

But was this the conversation I wanted to have?

I was confused. Apparently, the message ‘your breast needs to be amputated’ wasn’t even worth its own independent sentence. A sentence with a full stop and the option to follow it up with silence. Or with something to say. To ask. Or scream, if needs be.

Now there had only been that fleeting comma after the bad news, and the relatively good news – the possibility of reconstructing the breast – right afterwards. It sounded like: you will lose your breast, but you won’t really, because we can craft you a new one straight away.

I looked out the window and tried to think clearly. It was time for a reply.

Then I remembered that I had thought about the artificial breast option before. I wasn’t a stranger to cancer-land. It was my second encounter with breast cancer. And a breast-sparing operation had been sufficient four years ago, I had asked for information about breast reconstruction.

Fortunately, I could fall back on the thoughts I had had then.

‘I’m not sure I want a reconstruction,’ I said.

My voice squeaked a bit and my attempt at a smile failed. But my words were perfectly intelligible.

The surgeon nodded. Maybe I was imagining it, but it seemed like she was taken aback. I hadn't stuck to the protocol. I hadn't gone along with her plan. I was going to take extra time.

Again, I tried a smile. I did better, but the surgeon didn't notice.

She said: 'The vast majority of women in your situation opts for immediate reconstruction. There is research that proves that women find the loss of a breast easier to deal with if the breast is reconstructed right away. But of course, you are free to think differently.'

In the days after the consultation one thought prevailed: a breast that had developed cancer twice had to go. It was obvious. I didn't need time to think it over. And if it needed to happen anyway, better to get it over with as soon as possible.

The question of whether I wanted an immediate breast reconstruction was a completely different matter. It didn't really have anything to do with the cancer, but with how I would look afterwards. I read that direct reconstruction had a series of benefits: 'You will avoid the experience of waking up with only one breast,' the flyer of the Maxima Medical Centre read. The plastic surgeons of the University Hospital Ghent wrote: 'A breast reconstruction can strongly enhance the image of oneself and the patient may feel more feminine afterwards.' And on the Dutch Society for Plastic Surgery website, I read: 'Studies show that breast reconstruction is important to most women's happiness.' But it also said: 'Whatever you choose is extremely personal.'

Although I read all there was to read, I didn't make any progress. I couldn't manage to think straight, let alone to make a decision. The cancer – that had returned furtively – took up all the space in my mind. In comparison, everything else seemed unimportant. So, I postponed the decision about breast reconstruction and focused on the only thing relevant to me: the first step, the most important, the medically necessary one. I prepared for *the unkindest cut of all*, as historian James Olson calls breast amputation in his study of the history of breast cancer.

I counted the days until the operation. My left breast was hidden beneath my clothes, as always. Sometimes I touched it lightly.

It was the breast that I had impatiently looked forward to when I was twelve, that gave me joy, as well as being a source of embarrassment, that I covered and hid away, compared and scrutinized, touched and taunted. The

breast I wrapped in satin and lace or stretchy fabric from Hema. The same breast that – when for the first time in my life it had been full and round – had fed both of my daughters. It had done its work well and then shrunk, become soft and less firm. Not a tea bag, as it apparently sometimes happens, but just my left breast.

The breast that I now had to get rid of.

How was I supposed to prepare to lose a body part? How could I say goodbye to a breast?

I had fantasies, half-dreams. I imagined organising a farewell dinner for my breast, the same way you would arrange a party for a friend who was about to move to another, far-away country. Everyone sitting around a table and taking turns telling it what he had meant to them all these years and how they would miss it.

What sort of speech would I give for my left breast?

My breasts have always been an obvious and natural part of my body. A loved, soft part, sure, but other than that only an area of my body that had to be washed and dried every day, just like the rest of it. They needed special packaging, and shouldn't be too clearly visible through your clothing, but they didn't need to be hidden either. Those kinds of considerations were made in passing. There was nothing special about them.

If I referred to my left breast, it was only as one of a pair: my breasts. The left didn't differ in status from the right. I didn't discriminate. Except perhaps when I was breast feeding, when I had to remember which one was next: left or right. But even then they had been interchangeable, one or the other. The subtle differences between the two breasts – a freckle more or less, a slightly different shape – I wouldn't have been able to describe.

Of course, sometimes I was actively concerned with my breasts: when I needed a new bra, when bikini-season was upon us, when I had a new boyfriend. But in the same way, there were other body parts that needed attention, like hair, eyes, skin, lips. Yet, there was always something special about breasts, something to do with femininity and eroticism. I was aware of it, but only rarely made a point out of it.

It was only once I knew that I would be missing one of these two breasts, that I realised that breasts are extraordinary body parts, that I strangely didn't know much about. Suddenly, there arose in me a new and intense

interest in this ‘astonishing organ’, as Florence Williams calls the female breast in her book on breasts. Soon I was reading up on all the breast trivia to be found on the internet. For instance:

Breasts are the only body parts that are not there at birth. During female puberty, breasts build themselves from scratch.

Breasts distinguish us from other primates. Female monkeys have swollen nipples when they breastfeed, but they don’t possess breasts.

Breasts are intriguing. When men’s eyes see the picture of a woman, it takes less than two hundred milliseconds until their gaze moves towards the breasts.

Breasts are rarely evenly sized. For unknown reasons, the left breast is usually larger than the right.

Breasts act as sponges and readily absorb toxins. The modern breast has thus become a sort of storage space for all kinds of dangerous chemicals.

Breasts, despite their multi-faceted and intriguing nature, have no medical specialism, unlike the heart, lungs, skin, liver, and gut.

And: there is no other organ that is as likely to develop tumours as the breast. A quarter of all the world’s tumours is caused by breast cancer.

But there is more than lists of trivia and biological facts. The breast isn’t just another body part. In our time and culture, it has a special status. My consultation with the oncology surgeon had suggested this already. Apparently, we believe that breasts are so crucial to a woman, we deem it necessary to build a new one the very moment one is lost. And for good reason. Losing a breast can be traumatic. ‘It is a direct attack on femininity; there is really nothing as emotionally charged as a breast,’ journalist Lander Deweer writes in the diary he kept about his girlfriend’s breast cancer.

Breasts are not something one can just be rid of, is the thought. They are important to a woman’s identity. Philosopher Jenny Slatman calls them ‘a daily and tangible signifier of a woman’s womanliness.’ But this is also ambivalent. Breasts may have an almost mythical status – the objects of song, love, worship – at the same time they are often associated with sex and pornography. Women are expected to cover their breasts in public, while breasts are visible everywhere, either whole or partly: in movies, advertisements, video clips, magazines, and on television. In most cases the context is strongly sexual.

It is no wonder that women have contradictory feelings about breasts. They vary between pride and shame, indifference and joy, guilt, sadness, or even disgust. 'No other part of human anatomy is as provocative as the female breast,' English photographer Laura Dodsworth writes in her photobook on breasts.

And so I have lost one of my two provocative body parts.

What had been the function of that breast all those years? What meaning did it have? The question is simple, but the answer is – even discounting all the ambivalence – less evident. I realise that my breasts, contrary to my other body parts, have changed purpose a considerable number of times during my life. Compare them to legs, for example. From the beginning until the end of life, their function is to move you around: from the first steps on chubby legs to the strong, mature legs that carry you through life, and the stiff, fragile legs of old age, when walking becomes increasingly difficult. All that time the question is: how do I get from one place to another?

Breasts are different. In the first few years of life they are completely absent; they start to grow out of nothing during puberty, ushering in maturity. They are part of being a woman and are associated with beauty, pleasure, and sex. But they also evoke ambivalent feelings. Are they too large or too small, too round, or too slack? Do I show them, or do I hide them?

At the birth of a first child, breasts' role changes. They are no longer just for fun or beauty, but suddenly have a new function. They have become milk factories. Or, a little more poetically, 'givers of life'. Now new questions become important: are they producing enough, is the baby drinking well, and is breast milk the most nutritious form of feeding or not?

At some point in a woman's life – one out of seven Dutch women experience this – another change of role may take place, if one fateful day breast cancer turns out to have taken over one or both of the breasts. From that point, none of the other roles is important anymore. The 'giver of life' becomes a 'destroyer of life' in an instant.

In this biography, I tell the story of the dramatic changes of character breasts go through in life. My own left breast's history is the common theme in this. With each new change of role come new functions, emotions, thoughts, reactions, and definitions. The story of breasts is not only the story of those who possess these body parts, but also of those who look at

them, judge them, desire them, or are inspired by them. And for all those, who deal with them professionally.

The different functions of breasts are given a place in this biography. Different people have their say on breasts: psychologists, sexologists, philosophers, as well as artists, lingerie-sellers, and surgeons. I spoke to women of all ages about young and old breasts, porn breasts, milky breasts, operated breasts, fake breasts, and sick breasts.

My story isn't comprehensive in any way; that wasn't my purpose. These are the stories I might have told during my left breast's farewell dinner. This book is the speech I never gave.