After undergoing Roux-en-Y gastric bypass surgery to reduce the size of her stomach, poet Sally Stewart went from a size 24 to a size 8. Working with photographer Charlee Brodsky, she documented her journey in the project “Reconfigured.” She’s shown here six months after surgery.
Sally Stewart has a family and friends who love her no matter how large her dress size. So after years of dangerous fad dieting, she happily surrendered to the constant, aching hunger that had chased her since puberty. She indulged in entire bags of potato chips and mixing-bowls full of noodles that could feed a family of four. She hid the scale and avoided mirrors.

But then she started getting tired—and breathless too—from just one trip up a staircase on her swollen ankles. She got tired of dizziness and headaches, the constant backwash of stomach acid in her esophagus, the rudeness of salespeople, and the complete stranger who walked right up to her on the street and yelled, “My God, you’re huge!” When the scale at her doctor’s office reached nearly 300, the reality stunned her. Soon after, she talked with a doctor about gastric bypass surgery. When the doctor told her that four out of every 100 people who undergo the procedure die from complications, she went home and cried.
Below: Sally Stewart’s daughter, Joanna Mongelli, supports her mother’s arm, too heavy to be raised for more than a moment.

➤ Top Right: Stewart’s husband, Scott Stewart, is now on the South Beach Diet. ➤ When her wedding band and engagement ring no longer fit on her finger, Stewart wore them on a necklace, as she does today.

➤ Bottom Right: Before surgery.
But she signed up for the surgery anyway. She was a 40-year-old woman who could barely walk. No matter how scary the statistics sounded, she thought, “I have to do something, or die.”

Robert Quinlin, a University of Pittsburgh clinical professor of surgery and bariatric specialist at Pittsburgh Bariatrics, would perform Roux-en-Y minimally invasive gastric bypass on her. (As it turns out, the statistics Stewart had heard were high: The mortality rate is more like 1–2 percent for gastric bypass.)

A common misconception is that gastric bypass is the “easy” way to lose weight; it’s cheating. But it requires intense self-discipline and a commitment to changing your habits—your life—forever. In the months prior to her surgery, Stewart researched the procedure doggedly and met with anyone she could find who’d had it. She then contacted photographer Charlee Brodsky, whose documentation of one woman’s experience with breast cancer has been widely acclaimed. Stewart wanted to document her procedure so that others might understand its radically transformative effects, both physical and emotional. And after years of hiding from cameras, she was used to seeing only fragments of her body—mostly from the neck up. No matter how painful it might be, she wanted, once and for all, to take a good, long look.
FROM LEFT: Reconfigured and in a little black dress.

➤ Writing poetry helps Stewart work through the psychological implications of the surgery. “Some poems surprised me with their anger,” she says. Others focus on the energy of her new body and her fear of regaining the weight.
Stewart emerged from surgery with a stomach the size of her thumb. Within 10 days she dropped 17 pounds. For the first time in decades, she could see the curves of bones in her ankles. After six months, she’d dropped another 83. She could cross her legs. After a year and a half of tiny portions of healthy food, protein shakes, vitamin supplements, and rigorous daily exercise, she’d lost 150 pounds. Her own sister didn’t recognize her in the airport.

But the rapid weight loss left behind uncomfortable flaps of skin. Under the care of J. Peter Rubin, Pitt assistant professor of surgery who’d founded a unique UPMC clinical program dedicated to excess skin removal, Stewart endured a painful lower-body reconstruction—including several feet of incisions and seven weeks of recovery. She’s still saving up to do her arms and breasts. Until then, her newly toned arms are masked by useless flesh, the ghost of her former body. “I lost half of me,” she says. “But it takes the brain a while to catch up. I’m always pulling things off the rack that are much too large for me.” Her poetry expresses fears of sliding into old habits, or worse, waking to discover it has all been a dream.

What if this is all just beautiful vapor,
A slight drift of success precious enough
To make failing that much more painful?

Yet this is real, and some days Stewart has to stop herself from approaching people on the street and saying, I have been reborn, and I want to share my joy with you!