

MY MOTHER'S NIPPLES

—after Robert Haas

I remember them: freakishly large, pink nubbins and the way she would swathe a towel around her head and step naked from the shower—

Concave stomach, lower abdominal slope, the wiry black grove of pubic growth. I remember my mother's nipples—not when it mattered, not when I bit the breast that fed me—but years later.

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An ancient Greek myth my mother read to me as a child: Hercules was being breastfed by Hera, but unbeknownst to her, he was the product of one

of her philandering husband's many affairs—she'd have been wild had she known—but nonetheless, decided to breastfeed baby Hercules; not recognizing him

as the same child who crushed two white vipers she'd sent out to kill him upon his birth. And the way my mother looked up at this point in the story,

"Now don't get the idea that Hera likes baby Hercules," she said. "She doesn't. She's just breastfeeding him." Back to the story: Hercules bit down

on Hera's nipple, sending her spray exploding across the sky, where it stayed. This was how the Milky Way came to be.

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Those years we lived in Greece, the house was marble encased by a white balcony, and it was white, all white, in fact, with gargantuan columns, and the yard was dirt with a single palm in the middle, and kumquat trees and figs bursting with mealy fecundity; the same bruised, purple inside as a nipple. And the yard smelled of a hundred, bleating, breeding tomcats. My mother was wild with loathing for the cats. She would stand outside, at the top of the marble stairs that glinted in the sun, and would hiss and stomp until the cats would scatter like terrified krill under rocks. Refused to drive or walk outside of the house, because she claimed she once saw a naked man in the bushes on the way to the kiosk to buy cigarettes. She was always calling her aging mother in Illinois and crying that she wanted to leave this place. Nights, she and my father would go to wild Carnival parties: I saw the photos of my aunt dressed as a hula dancer with bare shoulders and a pair of plastic breasts, topped with hard nipples. She was sitting with my mother, who told me that at the last minute she put on a white puffy wig she'd brought along, and at the party borrowed my aunt's mascara to paint large, black spots on her face right before a woman at the party got on a glass table to dance and fell over. "They were beauty marks," she explained.

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The first woman's nipples I ever felt, except my own: Sherry Niles's. Eight years ago in Southern Illinois, where we moved after my mother's mother fell ill. I asked Sherry what she'd like me to do. She refused to answer. I recall the way she felt, the way they felt: like two hard little knots, two stubborn buds that refused to break through to the surface, that withheld their secret and kept you guessing at the beauty they might contain.

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In 1967, my mother left the University of Chicago. Whether she dropped out or was kicked out is unknown. All I have managed to discover of my mother's early adulthood comes from the beautifully slurred words of drunk relatives at family parties. "She went to Greenwich Village with three blacks," said my grandmother. "Three Black Panthers, I remember. She was calling me every hour to check in. God knows what would have happened, had I found out then! She was in love with one of them, one of the blacks."