

Reduction

I. Eyes Fell Down Her Face

The woman hated her own breasts, a hatred directed not merely toward their size, but to *the very fact* of them, the fact that she *had* these breasts, the responsibility and mandate of having to deal and cope with having breasts of this size, deal and cope with all the objective and subjective responses a society, culture, patriarchy might have toward a person with this-sized breasts, the kind of breasts that drew eyes like divining rods to earth-covered wells: the eyes of men—and women—on the subway, on Fifth Avenue, in the park on her way to class, in the stacks at Bobst, at Washington Mews, in the Ireland House, at faculty meetings, academic conferences, student advising appointments, committee meetings, curriculum-planning meetings, co-op board meetings, political rallies, protest marches, in waiting rooms, restaurants, laundromats, coffee shops, in the city, in the suburbs, on the beaches of Marblehead, in Salem’s Peabody Essex Museum doing research on the Witch Trials, at the movies, at the ballet, even *The Nutcracker*, at home or abroad, here, there, everywhere, a globalism of gaze. For wherever she went, since the age of sixteen, eyes fell down her face. Even the eyes of her female students in her House(frau)keeping: Representations of Post-Feminist Identities in U.S. Suburbs class. Even in her Cult of (the) Madonna course last fall, as well as her Crone’s Disease: Witches, Midwives, and America’s Contempt for Female Non-Normative Behavior course.

Sometimes she’d look up after reading aloud from the Butler or the Halberstam and encounter her female students’ eyes rapt, cast up from their desks at her torso, pens poised before parted lips. And the men she slept with—always most interested in the moment the bra came off,

helpful as could be with the unfastening, the lowering of straps, the swift pulling-off of that tight harness, anything to get them out for viewing. That rapturous moment when the bra would finally be off—you could see it in their faces: revelation, wonder, awe. But everything post-bra: quotidian. (The man in her life was a bit of an exception. She'd seen that look in his eyes early on, but he soon figured it out, remembered the woman attached. He was a man, after all, a good man—chair of her anthro department, a specialist in global masculinities, his book, *Finding Our Fathers: A Man's Journey Home*, resting at number three on the *Times* best-seller list for thirteen weeks, a half-hour slot on *Fresh Air*—but still only a man.) She had an irrational fear (which she knew to be just that, due in large part to her weekly sessions with Barbara on Central Park West) of what a surgeon or an OR assistant might think or say, or how he might wince or make momentary eye contact with the other attending male surgeons if one or both of her breasts ever had to be removed. She imagined the light blue torso twist of the surgical-masked assistant as the heavy, now womanless breast was handed off to be placed in a hazmat bag, the men with their hairy forearms in the OR repressing the urge to say something or flinch (as a totally natural response to the indescribable stress that occurs in the OR, which stress she understood from regular viewing of the medical drama, *Grey's Anatomy*), just some barely noticeable but utterly present OR tension-relieving reaction to the hefty breast, avec tumor, sans woman.

There had been another detached breast dream last spring in San Francisco while attending an American Studies conference. The night before she was to present her paper, she watched the aforementioned medical drama on her hotel room's big TV, her laptop and Blackberry and yellow legal pads and pink and purple Post-its and gender theory texts strewn like stuffed animals all over the bed; the two sweaters and one turtleneck and blouse and vest and blazer and silk scarf and two sports bras she had planned to wear for tomorrow's talk hanging in the closet. In her nightmare, a handsome surgeon pulled down his mask and lifted with both hands her freshly mastectomied breast's nipple to his mouth and sucked three times like a baby, lifting his eyes and eyebrows simultaneously on each of the three sucks to meet the eyes of the three attending male surgeons, all huddled blue-ly over her anesthetized and gaze-deserted and breastless body.

That raw tearing-out from the OR back to her hotel room when something loud in the hallway woke her was unbearable to endure alone. She called the man, but his cell phone must have been turned off.

Lying in the dark, naked, she could still see the mastectomied breast, the dark, serrated dripping oval of its severing, its wet wires and circuits of clipped veins and mucussy tissue; and, when, after taking three Xanaxes with a small bottle of wine from her hotel room's minibar, she fell back to sleep, the dream reanimated and there again was the severed breast in the man's hands, and with each of the man's sucks, she could see the tumor itself begin to push its way through the mucus, extruding itself from the morass of gore as though it were alive, like the head of some creature crowning, struggling to be born. That morning in the shower, after coffee and two more Xanaxes, she felt for lumps.

But there were no lumps. There were never any lumps—despite the aggressive self-exams she regularly administered—not even a family history.

And so because she could not have her breasts removed (she wasn't insane, after all, just depressed and weary and gaze-sickened, especially after reading in the *Post* about a woman in Australia who'd experienced such a crippling phobia of her own E-cupped breasts that she tried to trick a doctor into removing them both; the Australian woman was arrested for insurance fraud and later committed suicide), did not, in fact, even want them removed, but, rather, wanted them never to have existed at all, she opted instead, with Barbara's support, to push through her irrational fear of surgery and have her breasts reduced, diminishing the load she could no longer bear, and thus diminishing, she hoped, her complicated, secret loathing—not a despising of the feminine or any gender-betrayal or some terribly difficult gender-identity confusion, but rather a hatred directed toward the unthinkable: The woman hated the shape of her breasts, not merely their size and the fact of their being attached to her, but *their very shape*, the sense that the shape was hegemonic within its bodily borders, tyrannical over her own self-image and her appearance to others and her way in the world, their very shape oppressing her. For they were to her mind not breasts at all, but gigantic blob-sacks—humongous, blunt, long, doughy, fat, flabby, blue-lightning-veined slabs—large in the wrong way, floppy in a sickening way, the very *way* of them reminding her of those stitched-leather speed-bags that boxers wallop back and forth. Cumbrous and mastodonic and lubberly and horrible and hanging and floppy and whopping and utterly slab-like. More like someone's huge fat thigh than a breast. Her chiropractor, Dr. Richard Stiglioni of Union Square East, and her psychotherapist, Dr. Barbara Stein of Central Park West, both,

in their effort to validate her feelings, acknowledged that her breasts were indeed large and indeed heavy, and that their stress on her lower back and the accompanying frustration and weariness of having to heft that weight every day was, no doubt, a tremendous strain on the woman's spine and spirit.

And so the woman hated her breasts (although, not always: Once, in Cancun in the 1980s, on spring break, she was demolishedly drunk and was talked into entering a wet T-shirt contest, indisputably winning the minute the water was thrown on her, the other contestants, no doubt bitter, remarking that the woman's breasts could be used as flotation devices and/or beach balls; but her victory had to do with more than her breasts, she knew: for she was thin-waisted and curvy-hipped and long-limbed and bosomy and tall and attractive, holding up her long auburn hair with one hand while on stage and shaking her chest, unashamed, playful even—what happened to that young woman? she often wondered), her hatred further complicated by the fact that hating her breasts for being merely large and heavy and misshapen implied her ratification of an ideal of the perfect breast, a beauty myth that was no doubt instilled in her at a pre-critical, pre-conscious age by a patriarchal, culturally constructed norm of the perfect platonic breast—platonically large, but not Homerically mammoth—that the world had decided was the perfect breast. A breast that advertisers and American consumers preferred. Like girls in *Shape* magazine had. Like her classmates at Barnard had. Like women at the gym had.

Yet what the woman secretly feared, when she came right down to it, what she hated most viciously, resented most bitterly, was the fact that unlike runway models with their prepubescent-boy-body's flat A-cupped chests, or sporty young women with their firm B-cupped apples, pert nipples like little stems, what the woman feared and loathed about her resentment and loathing most was that her breasts were ugly, their ugliness magnified by their monstrous size. And, in her darkest moments, there was the flickering thought that her breasts made her look—*no, no, no*, she couldn't admit it even to herself, the truth was too hideously perverse—the woman hated herself for hating her breasts because sometimes, if she happened to be feeling particularly sensitive to the culture's criticism and sexist mind-control, or found herself vulnerable on certain anxious, low-self-esteem-ridden, drinking-deep-of-the-culture's-Kool-Aid days, the woman feared that her breasts made her *look fat*. And then it seemed she was nothing more than a fat pair of monstrous breasts walking through the world. How her

female colleagues at the university would despise her, she well knew, if they were ever to discover her traitorous breast-loathing.

II. Mimesis & Masculinity & Metaphor & Metonymy & on & on & on &, &, &, &

The man in her life wanted to be a man for her. He wanted to fix her broken situation because of his feelings for the woman, which were to his mind *loving*. But, as a cultural anthropologist (Why be modest? He was the head of the largest and most well-funded anthropology department in lower Manhattan), he was also acutely and painfully aware that his wanting to help the woman made him guilty of reinforcing the very system that had led to her confusion and low self-esteem and breast-loathing in the first place. He agreed with Kaminer (1992) in her critique of our society's self-help culture. He believed that the woman's psychotherapy sessions were only the playing out of a bourgeois solipsism, which enacted a consumer's complicit participation in a commercialized system that reinforced the very attitudes and norms it claimed so nobly it sought to "cure." And yet, despite his vehemence on this point, the man also acknowledged that, though he averred that one needn't "have therapy" (that *horrid* idiom) for someone to tell you how screwed up you were about not feeling "beautiful," it was nonetheless true that all humans were victim to culturally indoctrinated and reinforced notions of self-loathing; he knew, in other words, that the woman was hurting. And, regardless of his hard-line position on the self-help culture's creation of victims and whiners, it hurt him to understand this about the woman.

But she had made him understand.

She had sat him down just last night, after the anthro department's Third Friday of the Month Dinner and Public Lecture Series, where the woman had given a lecture entitled "Madonna War Complex: Lindy Englund and America's Attitude toward Female Warriors." When the man and the woman returned to their co-op, she'd invited him to sit next to her on the sofa, and then, turning to face him, said she was considering surgery to reduce the size of her breasts, and that she'd had a consultation with a doctor weeks earlier, and that, after waiting for the results of her tests, the doctor had just, that very afternoon, left a message on her Blackberry saying he could have a bed ready for her on Monday morning.

The man's first reaction was interior: amazement and disbelief—why, he thought, would the woman want to have anyone cut and remove parts of her body? Especially her breasts. Which the man adored and regarded as a significant source of sexual stimulation. And if he could get really honest with himself, there was also some part of him that resented the woman for deciding—without consulting him on his feelings—to reduce the very things that provided him some little bit of pleasure in this pleasure-shaming, puritanical, body-despising culture. But it was abundantly clear to the man in the same instant that he was being selfish and piggish and masculine and grotesque.

Thus his first exterior reaction was simply to take and hold the woman's left, wedding-ringless hand and listen to her, fully aware from the Tannen (1990) that men's first reaction to a woman sharing difficult feelings was to immediately rush in with advice and problem-solving rhetoric. He held her hand, and that contact made him forget himself for the minute and forget the Tannen and the fact that he was right in not wanting her to do this and she was wrong. But even before the woman's honest and difficult and emotionally vulnerablizing disclosure, the man had, for a long while, plainly seen that the woman loathed her breasts. The way she kept them covered, layers of sweaters and jackets and blouses upon blouses and that horrid vest; the bra she wore that could flatten a medicine ball; the way she slept naked but always held blankets under her chin. The way she covered her naked self when she rose from bed to go to the bathroom or to get a glass of water or even to get another blanket to cover her doubly. The man had tried many subtle strategies to take this shame from the woman: e.g., doing his absolute damnedest last spring not to let her catch him looking at her breasts, which avoidance strategy failed horribly within a week, as the man became obsessed with stealing furtive glances at them, waiting for the moment mid-conversation when her eyes would look away for just a "split second" as she tried to refocus or gather her thoughts, and the man would look down quickly and then back to her eyes, over and over again in one conversation, not hearing what she was saying, and he became convinced that his need to look furtively at her breasts came as a result of trying his absolute damnedest not to. So he tried the opposite, to look at them frankly and forthrightly, without objectifying lust, gazing at them as though he were looking at the university provost's target enrollment and student retention memo. Nor did this failed attempt to appear erotically uninterested in her

breasts help the woman: e.g., the week last summer when they were vacationing on the Cape, and had sex several times, the man never once touching or putting his mouth to her breasts, but rubbing or kissing her shoulders instead. Until finally she asked him if he disliked her breasts, which led to his spending the rest of their vacation dutifully attentive to her breasts, which attention neither of them, he knew, quite accepted as genuine. Nothing seemed to convince the woman that she needn't feel ashamed or morbidly self-conscious of her body. And nothing the man did seemed to help.

Truth be told, the man was all too aware that it was precisely his need to “fix” her broken situation, to “save” her because he “loved” her, that was the problem. A problem further compounded by the fact that he knew he was not so much guilty of actually feeling this way, but was, rather, *culturally conditioned* to react this way. To want to save her and be a man for her. And that knowledge terrified and disturbed the man because it made him question the one thing he felt was true and good in his life: his love feelings for the woman.

Under the sway of his love feelings, he wanted the woman to keep her extremely large breasts exactly as they were, not for his own pleasure, but for her sanity and sense of self; he wanted to eradicate her culturally conditioned hatred of her body. But it was precisely his wanting to make the woman secure with her body and feel that she was “good enough just the way she was” that made him worry he was guilty of being just another example of a patriarchally, culturally privileged man wanting to “fix” the pedestalized woman's problem, content in his privileged luxury to actually feel that it was his entitled right to “rescue” her, and thus, by not only attempting to rescue her, but also feeling that it was in his privileged masculine power indeed *to* rescue her, he would be enacting and reinforcing the very cultural conditioning that was responsible for her hatred of herself in the first place.

The man felt despair at ever being a man for the woman in such a smoldering circular ruin as was this culture.

Now—lying naked in bed with the woman less than twenty-four hours since her revelation that she was considering breast reduction surgery this very Monday, two days hence—the man felt anxiety about some very confusing feelings he was having for the woman's breasts, anxiety compounded by the fact that he was experiencing these feelings the very day after she had openly shared with him her own confusion about and loathing for her breasts. It sickened and depressed him to have such feel-

ings. But these feelings—the man had to reassure himself—were to be expected. He was experiencing helplessness, and as the current research clearly demonstrated, that is one of the most emotionally vulnerable places a man in this society can be (Sullivan, Perth, Silverstein, 1981, 1985, 1999). He was desperate and panicky and losing his erection.

She had taken him, after dinner tonight, by the hand from the living room couch on which she had only yesterday broken the news about her breasts, and from that site of honesty and self-disclosure and handholding and shared tears had led him into the bedroom and pushed him onto their bed and said that she wanted to drip hot candle wax on his chest. The effect on the man's phallus was so swift that it drew blood from his head. She carefully unbuttoned his shirt, slid it down his arms and off his body as the man sat on the bed blinking and trying to stay upright. And then, sensitive to his self-disclosed obsessive-compulsive sartorial tendencies, she walked the shirt to the closet and hung it up. Turning from the closet to face him, as though this were some bourgeois softcore porn fantasy, she told the man to get undressed, and then excused herself to the bathroom. When the woman returned, she strolled naked across the room, without shame or bathrobe or blanket or afghan or one of his shirts, shoulders back, breasts present and accounted for, to retrieve the long red candle from the top of the tall chest of drawers. She stood naked to light the match and touch it to the wick and then placed the taper for a moment on the trunk at the foot of the bed.

When the man looked up from where he lay, hard as a bar of pig iron, in order to gaze at the woman bending to set down the lighted candle, he saw in the candlelight the woman's breasts sway forward and flatten out and flop, while also hanging conically and somewhat slablike, swaying back and forth like twin pendulum weights inside a grandfather clock. And what came unbidden to the man's mind was the word "teat." And all at once he envisioned a cow's milk-dripping teats—the bloated and veiny pink udder, the dugs—and he became horribly aware of his raw nakedness on the bed. His thin, nearly hairless shins; his soft belly; the baby toe on his left foot missing, something the doctor attributed to his mother's heavy drinking. The man knew then that he was not a good man for the woman. He never would be. He wanted to fix her and build her up and then reduce her to a barnyard creature. And then an immediate follow-up thought brought with it a flash of anger and outrage, that his momentary comparison of her breasts with a cow's teats had to be culturally conditioned in him, something having to do with the word "tits." And this awareness of his motherfucking cultural

conditioning—along with the attendant guilt and confusion and frustration and, frankly, momentary revulsion for the word “teats” after gazing at the woman’s actual “tits”—this onslaught of awareness, he now feared, hating himself for thinking it, was seriously affecting the blood flow to his erection.

III. Eyes Had Taken Her In

The woman who sought a breast reduction had indeed hated her own breasts, it’s true; but tonight she was feeling complicated and ambivalent feelings regarding them. For in a few days’ time, she would have them surgically reduced, the base of each breast slit open and cut perpendicularly up toward the nipple, her nipple then scalped circularly and placed on ice, her breasts split and spread open, the fat tissue sucked out, parts of the mammary cut away, the nipple then taken off ice and replaced higher on the gland to account for the reshaping and remapping of her entire chest. When the doctor explained what would happen in surgery, the woman felt faint, a feeling she instantly chastised herself for, aware as she was of the clichéd tendency attributed to women to faint in doctors’ offices. But she didn’t think she could go through with it.

Her nipples felt hot and tingly as she consulted with the doctor. When she told him that, no, she wasn’t married and did not plan on having children, he said good, because she’d never be able to breastfeed once the procedure was done. He took blood and urine and her pulse, asking about family history of cardiovascular disease, told her to put her shirt back on and then he and the female nurse who’d observed the whole consultation stood to leave the room. But not before the nurse took one last surreptitious glance at her breasts. It could have been something related to her job or to the possible surgery, but the woman saw the look, recognized the gaze. The nurse looked up from her chest and their eyes met. They both knew.

Last night, after she’d presented her paper at the Third Friday lecture, her Blackberry vibrated in her blazer pocket, and she knew it was the doctor. She would overcome her irrational fear of surgery and surgeons and go ahead and get it done. (Well, truth be told, she could not have made this decision without extra sessions with Barbara on Tuesday and Thursday.) And sharing all this with the man had made her even more secure in her decision. For the man had reached out and taken her hand and held it and listened intently and kept his eyes focused on her and

even teared up at one moment, the exact moment she'd teared up. There was no judgment in his eyes. And this intimacy, which she alone initiated and controlled, empowered the woman and made her feel closer to the man and more trusting and playful and, surprisingly, somewhat aroused, and for the first time in several months, refreshingly horny.

And yet, despite her self-awareness and feelings of empowerment and control over her life and body, and full acceptance that her decision was based on her own feelings and not the man's, there was, nonetheless, also a competing and coexistent gnawing awareness that she was falling victim to the misogynistic standards of beauty hegemonically programmed and reinforced in her by a cultural beauty myth and patriarchal notion of what the perfect breast should be. And this made the woman depressed and sick inside and throat-constricted and confused as to what she should do regarding the cutting and slitting and nipple remapping and reduction.

The feelings of sexual arousal aroused by her open sharing and disclosure were nonetheless, despite her soul sickness at her decision, still present today, waning when she graded papers in her study while the man read the first Saturday supplements of the *Sunday Times*, but refreshed when she focused on the thought she'd had when she woke up—that tonight she wanted to play with pain. Wanted to do this thing she'd seen in a movie, this thing that Madonna had done to Willem Dafoe. For the woman had often let her fingers play with hot wet wax, whether at dinner or around the small table in their dining alcove; she would act as though she were listening to her dining partner, and let her fingers distractedly venture toward the candle, closing her eyes ever so imperceptibly as she felt the burn. As a little girl, her father had taught her and her sister to make candles in the beach sand at night, their small house behind them as dark and indiscernible as the dunes obscuring it from sight, taught her and her sister to dig little holes with their pruned fingers, and then he would pour hot wax into the little holes, as many as they made and as many as the supply of wax would allow, and lower into that puddle a wick, and with his Zippo ignite each wick and cover it with a Mason jar, until all over their small patch of beach little flowers of fire flickered and waved, bits of stars in the dark sand, lambent and strange, the lights of Nahant and Revere and Winthrop glittering off shore, and farther south the Back Bay glowing on the horizon way out across the dark water. The smell of the sea; her father's cigarette smoke; the fish stench from gull-picked shells, day-old suntan lotion still sweet on their salty

shoulders. And later when the woman returned from college and she and her sister and mother went to that patch of beach to let go his ashes into the vast Atlantic, and after they made his sand candles and sat on the driftwood log and drank red wine and dug their toes into the moist cold sand, the woman put her fingertip into the puddle of wax next to her foot and raised it up in the dark and her face felt tingly and her hair charged and she said softly *phew, phew, phew* as she blew dry the wax, the delicious pain driving her crazy, but taking all else from her mind. It was bracing in a way she'd never experienced before. Her eyes had never felt so wide.

The woman was fully aware that wanting to do the thing she'd seen Madonna do in the film was the most problematic and obvious platonic remove, life imitating art and all that. And when she was grading her students' papers and thought about enacting that filmic cliché, the woman lost her feeling of arousal, but each time she concentrated on the feeling of the fire, she regained a certain excitation, the anticipation of that pain.

She would do it to the man, and then have the man do it to her. It would be the last time she would make love to the man with these breasts, she knew. The doctor said there was a good chance that much of the sensation would be lost. Tonight, she wanted to control the pain, before the pain was out of her control; she wanted to control how she felt. She wanted to feel what these breasts really felt like, for the last time, without any self-consciousness. Which self-consciousness, the woman knew, would kill the mood like a motherfucker.

IV. Masculinity & Male Dominance & Mirror Stage & Meta-Cerebration &, &, &

Which it did a little—affect the blood flow to his penis—but not so much to be noticeable, and yet the woman must have noticed because she climbed back onto the bed, the candle left behind on the trunk, its flame wavering, casting now what appeared to the man in his heightened state of nearly unendurable anxiety to be ghastly and lurid shadows around the room, and the woman laid herself between his legs (a position he felt sure was—on some level, conscious or not—a shame-based reaction to his horribly frustrated and desperate and culturally conditioned male gaze that he had just cast upon her, in which gaze she no doubt could perceive the *entirety* of *civilization's* misogynistic, judgmental, damning and hating gaze, the same gaze—he was sure she

was sure, given all her research—the same and *final* gaze that Rebecca Nurse must have witnessed before the gallows' floor flew up past and forever above eye-level; the gaze that Joan of Arc saw through flames, the burning eyes of a crowd that wanted to kill the thing they hated: a woman, he was sure she was sure) and took his penis into her mouth and her mouth felt warm and wet and slow and deep and then, cultural notions of constructed gender identity be damned, his erection began to regain its girth, and the man felt a kind of slow ease of thought that allowed him to think past civilization's long list of misogynistic crimes and to gently focus on his love feelings for this woman, and in this way he began to consider that her breasts were womanly breasts and that they were natural, and in that way, yes, they were in some way like a cow's, but only in a way that was natural and universally intended and life-sustaining and earth-motherish.

He loved the woman because she was a woman. Whatever that meant, the man now understood. She was elemental and erotic and natural and sexy and nurturing and hot. Her wide, natural ass was sexy too, and then the man discovered that there was something intensely arousing about all this thought, thinking about loving a woman in all her earthy, fecund womanhood, and though he was relaxed and contemplative, he could feel his penis straightening and hardening as she worked it in her mouth, aware of his arousal as a response to her natural bodily nature, and all at once the man felt like he was going to climax from thinking of the woman and her natural way—and, dear lord, for what he was about to do next, the man truly hated himself, but nonetheless there was nothing else for it. In order to forestall his sexual climax, he had to concentrate on the erectile-blood-flow-inhibiting list of civilization's misogynistic crimes—systematic rape in wartime: little girls and teenage girls and young woman and middle-aged woman and old woman pulled out into village squares to be held down, blurry under a dark huddle of soldiers; female genital mutilation: clitorectomies done on women *by* women in Africa and the Middle East (Walker, Steinem, 1989, 1983) as well as Type I FGM taking place *domestically*, in the United States, right here in New York (Farnes and Hubbard, 1980); the stoning of a Yezidi Kurdish girl for falling in love with a Muslim boy, tricked by her own family into coming out of hiding, and once home, dragged out into the village square, while a thousand men (according to a Jebar news source) stripped her, kicked her, taunted her, publically inspected her hymen, and then smashed stones onto her head, some of

the participants filming the event on cell phones so that web viewers all over the world could see the girl with the smashed face now obscured by blood and brain matter still breathing while she died and the crowd cheering, etc., etc., etc.

But there were complicated implications to this psychic trickery, namely that he now felt complicit in the global patriarchal system of misogyny and sexual objectification that he had so often, publically and privately, railed against. And he felt stomach-cinching guilt and anger for feeling that he should have to hold back his naturally-occurring-in-the-act-of-love-making orgasm due to the cultural dictate that said that, as a man, he was supposed to be able to hold off and continue to sexually gratify his partner's vagina with his "rock-hard cock," pulverizing her quivering "pussy" until she came with the bed-quaking ferocity of a seizure victim, then, and only then, allowing his own naturally occurring orgasm to issue forth grandly while holding lovingly and yet masculinely his freshly spent partner as she panted and whimpered and wept and tried to regain her sense of time, space, and dimension.

And thus, in order to achieve the culturally expected—nay, *mandated*—masculine status of "fuck machine" that he had been conditioned to believe he should aspire to, he was guilty of participating in the same cultural conditioning he had abjured for its bringing to his mind the word "teats," the same conditioning he'd moments ago congratulated himself for rejecting, such rejection allowing him to discover his true and natural love feeling for the woman's natural and life-sustaining breasts. And so the man grew ever more depressed as he tried to think quickly and get himself out of this corner and readjust his mind's focus back to the woman who owned these natural breasts. But then words like "voluptuous" and "bodacious" came to him and again he felt his sphincter tighten and testicles make ready to discharge their load, and the man knew it was culturally expected of him to hold back the on-coming orgasm, and all at once he felt exhausted with sex, depleted with the demands of being a man for this woman even during sex, and he felt even more exhausted when he considered that the very good thing he had wanted to be for the woman was itself culturally conditioned. For what did he mean when he thought that he wanted to be a man for her? What was a man? Nothing at all, he knew, let's face it, but a culturally conditioned set of gender expectations and constructions that at once made him feel good and honest, but also despicable and deceiving and deceived.

And so, despairing of knowing himself, he wanted to know the woman. He reached down and touched her face, letting his hand send a message that he wanted her to come up from between his thin, hairless legs to be face-to-face with him on their bed.

V. Now and You Know You Must

Another thing that can kill a mood and increase one's self-consciousness (not that anyone but the woman could have the final say in how she felt about how the culture made her feel, Barbara had helped her recognize and work to accept that fact) and make one hate even more deeply one's own body is any break from the complete confidence you have that your partner has anything but totally aroused sexual thoughts and feelings about you when you two are having sex, even if you're not exactly yet having sex, but are in fact making ready a candle that will initiate the both of you to a whole new experience of sex together; trying to believe all that when a man is doing a Brando-esque performance is difficult enough, but when you look up from bending naked and see your partner looking at you as though he were trying to decide if he should still eat that piece of pizza that fell on the floor, then you have a mighty battle ahead of you indeed. And the woman knew this.

Standing before his eyes, under his gaze, the woman knew it all. Knew the way the long line of days and years would un-spool with this man, with all men, truth be told. The breasts were, if she were being now very, very honest with herself, not the whole problem. She'd have the surgery, she knew it now, but that would change nothing. The bed would still be here when she returned from the hospital, the sofa, the bookcase, the trunk, the candle, and the man. The only way she'd make it through the next day was to say goodbye to her body the way she had planned. But now she knew, and in knowing she would never again ever...

And so, under his gaze, his terrified eyes seeing her eyes noticing him gazing at her, she needed to reduce this moment to something less conscious, he being aware of her awareness of his awareness, and all that. For if she stayed standing, leaving him alone on the bed, registering her hurt and outrage at what they both knew had just happened, they'd have to talk; and she knew the man would try to explain himself, would try to "assuage her feelings," which sincere albeit somewhat selfish effort would, in fact, be mood *murdering*. And so because this was not about him anymore, not about *them* even—but rather about what she needed

to do now for herself, in this last time with her body, her body as it was now and never would be again—because she needed to do this for herself, she smiled to reassure the man that she was still ready for him, smiled as she crawled up between his legs, smiled—though, had he spoken one word, she knew she would have had to ask him to please be quiet, to please shut up, to please, please, please, please, please, please, please...

VI. &, &, &, &, &, &...

And as she was coming up, she did not reach for the candle but instead smiled at him from down there, the smile he had fallen deeply in love with once, which he remembered had occurred at a paper-covered table at a restaurant on their third date. And the smile was, like his love for her, not one that most people would call perfect. It wasn't winning or seductive or tempting or sweet. It was shy. It involved the shy muscles in and around the mouth. A semi-smile. A smile too conscious of itself. One side of her face pulled back just a bit more than the other in a way that reminded him of a stroke victim, but her crooked smile now was precisely the smile he had noticed at the restaurant and he could not believe he had not noticed it before their third date. And when the woman put herself on top of him, and slid onto what was now his thoroughly erect penis, something inside him that was not his lungs exhaled, and he shuddered and simultaneously sighed and was overcome with the need to push as much of himself inside her as could reach. What a fellow on his college crew team used to call being "balls deep." A term he had despised, but now felt a strange new understanding of and identification with. Which, of course, caused the man to worry he was guilty of enacting an even more complicated set of gender constructions and alliances. But his deep sigh was occupying his thoughts now and crowded out, for the moment, his gender guilt and attendant anxiety and depression. He thought it was an emotional response he was having, one connected to his love feelings for the woman. The feeling was comforting and sleeplike, but not unconscious. In fact, he felt utterly conscious, aware of many things at once. But for the first time in a long time, these awarenesses did not ignite his guilt and anxiety and attendant depression. Nor did they affect his erection.

When she had gotten comfortable on him, she lowered her face to his and did not affect a fake kind of passionate kiss but simply touched her tongue to his lips, the man overwhelmed by a fullness in his soul,

his eyes burning, and he thought about how just moments earlier there had been a flash of culturally conditioned judgment that made him question his “true” feelings for this woman and that the feelings of judgment were about her breasts, the very things he wanted her not to loathe due to what he considered to be their shared curse of cultural conditioning, and which breasts he could now feel brushing against his own breasts or pectoral muscles.

He thought about the new feeling of *not* caring about the shape of her breasts, and the erotic understanding of how they were beautiful in a way that was new to his understanding—natural and yes, maybe cowlike in their biological function—and how humans and animals weren’t different after all, and how that was not something he needed to be scared of, but erotically aroused by, erotic like eros, the life force, and which realization could send a megacharge of erotic electrical current through his penis, which penis was now being rubbed by the insides of her vagina, and her wetness made him want to hold her head and kiss her more like a man would kiss a woman he loved, which thought had a double effect of making him, now in his comfortable erotically charged state, laugh at the when-you-came-right-down-to-it flimsy culturally implanted picture of how a man should romantically kiss a woman, and how he wanted her to feel kissed in the way a woman in a romantic movie would feel, and yet he also felt that regardless of filmic representations of kisses, he actually really *did* want to kiss her just like that and while thinking these thoughts, he acted on instinct (not questioning for the moment that problematic term) and went ahead and did it, moved her head gently and kissed her, all the while feeling that his breast did not even give milk and that one day, if genetics could be predicted from memories at the beach with his father and grandfather, that one day his breasts would look not only not as nice as they did now due to regular visits to the gym, but that his breasts would look like hers, like a woman’s breasts, as did his father’s and grandfather’s, doughy flat sacks that would hang conically when he bent to hammer into the sand the female end of the cone that would receive the male end of the beach umbrella, and that his male breasts would dangle and conically hang while he hammered and jiggled the beach umbrella in plaid shorts with black stockings in sandals.

He would be on that future beach with this woman whose breasts he years before had had a weirdness about, but who now—in his female-breast stage—would love him as he loved her ultimately, a generous love,

and pushing within her he felt the deep sigh and comfort feeling again, and he released hard inside the woman, arching his feet and curling his nine toes at the same time and almost could not stand the sensation along with the attendant idea that his sperm might make a baby inside her this very night and how natural and animal-like that would be, foals and all that. And the man hoped the woman did become pregnant because, though he hadn't yet told her, she was the one woman in his life whom he now would seriously consider marrying. In the future, of course, after they had talked through all the implications of participating in and thus validating socially constructed bourgeois notions of marriage. Yes, she was the woman he could seriously consider one day marrying. He knew this now.

VII. Reductio ad Recessus

And after the sex, as they lay in each other's arms, he tried to tell her what he thought about her breasts, tried to "share" his thoughts and feelings with the woman. But first he needed to qualify his comments and explain that he was in no way trying to "save" her or "rescue" her from her broken situation, but that Gramsci be damned, he and she, he now understood clearly, were both of animal stock. No better than rutting barnyard animals. He told her that her breasts were like a cow's teats. He tried to communicate some of the beauty and awe of this realization, especially as it had bearing on his love feelings for her, while also trying to communicate some of the complications of what he felt regarding the similarities between her breasts and a cow's teats. He tried to explain the shared cultural conditioning and possibly soon-to-be-shared mamaric conicality. And he held her, and she did not react the way he thought she would, did not seem to be filled with the same cathartic emotion he had just experienced. She didn't seem to grasp the enormous significance of how he had felt and now did feel, how he had "worked through" his confusion, how he had "broken through" certain barriers, if only for the present moment, of the culture's soul-crippling conditioning.

The woman felt stiff in his arms. And it was her stiffness that convinced him he should hold in abeyance the whole marriage-realization thing. For now. But he was still euphoric lying with her, and he wanted to communicate some of that euphoria to her, wanted to communicate clearly (as clearly as possible given the built-in limitations of language) how he felt about her, which feelings were to his mind loving feelings.

There was so much he wanted to bring to her in that moment. Their shared struggle. The curse of the culture. The possibility of marriage. Of children. The man wanted the woman to understand that though she would perhaps always be broken, he would be broken with her. Possibly for the rest of their lives, if, of course, they talked and shared and understood all of the ramifications of what “the rest of their lives” actually meant.

The woman responded by repeating her belief that it was important that she be honest with the man, telling him that she, yet again, had not had an orgasm, but that she had still felt incredibly close to him, closer than she had ever felt to him—or anyone—before, and that she felt, despite what the culture would have one believe, that, sometimes, at least, it really is different for a woman, and that, despite not reaching orgasm, she was glad that he had. And the man restated how he felt about her breasts, the complicated admiration and love feelings, and he added that he wanted her to know something: that her breasts were beautiful and exactly as nature intended, and that she should not change them or alter them to suit anybody but herself. He swallowed hard, as he knew all clichéd culturally conditioned men in his position would, and tried to tell the woman, tried to tell the woman, tried to tell the woman, tried to tell... His eye twitched. Hers were closed. And the man held the woman and the woman held the man and the bed was to both of them a place to rest for the moment.