

My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears

My grandmother puts her feet in the sink
of the bathroom at Sears
to wash them in the ritual washing for prayer,
wudu,
because she has to pray in the store or miss
the mandatory prayer time for Muslims
She does it with great poise, balancing
herself with one plump matronly arm
against the automated hot-air hand dryer,
after having removed her support knee-highs
and laid them aside, folded in thirds,
and given me her purse and her packages to hold
so she can accomplish this august ritual
and get back to the ritual of shopping for housewares

Respectable Sears matrons shake their heads and frown
as they notice what my grandmother is doing,
an affront to American porcelain,
a contamination of American Standards
by something foreign and unhygienic
requiring civic action and possible use of disinfectant spray
They fluster about and flutter their hands and I can see
a clash of civilizations brewing in the Sears bathroom

My grandmother, though she speaks no English,
catches their meaning and her look in the mirror says,
*I have washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul
with water from the world's ancient irrigation systems
I have washed my feet in the bathhouses of Damascus
over painted bowls imported from China*

among the best families of Aleppo

And if you Americans knew anything

about civilization and cleanliness,

you'd make wider washbasins, anyway

My grandmother knows one culture—the right one,

as do these matrons of the Middle West. For them, my grandmother might as well have been squatting in the mud over a rusty tin in vaguely tropical squalor, Mexican or Middle Eastern, it doesn't matter which, when she lifts her well-groomed foot and puts it over the edge.

"You can't do that," one of the women protests,

turning to me, "Tell her she can't do that."

"We wash our feet five times a day,"

my grandmother declares hotly in Arabic.

"My feet are cleaner than their sink.

Worried about their sink, are they? I

should worry about my feet!

My grandmother nudges me, "Go on, tell them."

Standing between the door and the mirror, I can see at multiple angles, my grandmother and the other shoppers,

all of them decent and goodhearted women, diligent in cleanliness, grooming, and decorum

Even now my grandmother, not to be rushed,

is delicately drying her pumps with tissues from her purse

For my grandmother always wears well-turned pumps

that match her purse, I think in case someone

from one of the best families of Aleppo

should run into her—here, in front of the Kenmore display

I smile at the midwestern women
as if my grandmother has just said something lovely about them
and shrug at my grandmother as if they
had just apologized through me
No one is fooled, but I

hold the door open for everyone
and we all emerge on the sales floor
and lose ourselves in the great common ground
of housewares on markdown

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My Body Is Not Your Battleground

My body is not your battleground
My breasts are neither wells nor mountains,
neither Badr nor Uhud
My breasts do not want to lead revolutions
nor to become prisoners of war
My breasts seek amnesty; release them
so I can glory in their milktipped fullness,
so I can offer them to my sweet love
without your flags and banners on them

My body is not your battleground
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,
neither the cause of your disarray
nor the path to your liberation
My hair will not bring progress and clean water
if it flies unbraided in the breeze
It will not save us from our attackers
if it is wrapped and shielded from the sun
Untangle your hands from my hair
so I can comb and delight in it,
so I can honor and anoint it,
so I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love

My body is not your battleground
My private garden is not your tillage
My thighs are not highways to your Golden City
My belly is not the store of your bushels of wheat
My womb is not the cradle of your soldiers,
not the ship of your journey to the homeland
Leave me to discover the lakes
that glisten in my green forests
and to understand the power of their waters

Leave me to fill or not fill my chalice
with the wine or honey of my sweet love
Is it your skin that will tear
when the head of the new world emerges?

My body is not your battleground
How dare you put your hand
where I have not given permission
Has God, then, given you permission
to put your hand there?
My body is not your battleground
Withdraw from the eastern fronts and the western
Withdraw these armaments and this siege
so that I may prepare the earth
for the new age of lilac and clover,
so that I may celebrate this spring
the pageant of beauty with my sweet love

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