

The Best
AMERICAN
ESSAYS
1998

Edited and with an Introduction

by CYNTHIA OZICK

ROBERT ATWAN

Series Editor



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

BOSTON • NEW YORK 1998

Copyright © 1998 by Houghton Mifflin Company
Introduction copyright © 1998 by Cynthia Ozick
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PS
688
B47
1998

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of the copyright owner unless such copying is expressly permitted by federal copyright law. With the exception of nonprofit transcription in Braille, Houghton Mifflin is not authorized to grant permission for further uses of copyrighted selections reprinted in this book without the permission of their owners. Permission must be obtained from the individual copyright owners as identified herein. Address requests for permission to make copies of Houghton Mifflin material to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company, 215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

ISSN 0888-3742
ISBN 0-395-86051-2
ISBN 0-395-86052-0 (pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

"Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body." First published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Copyright © 1998 by Cynthia Ozick.

"The Telephone" by Anwar F. Accawi. First published in *The Sun*. Copyright © 1997 by Anwar F. Accawi. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Shadow Cities" by André Aciman. First published in *The New York Review of Books*. Copyright © 1997 by André Aciman. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"How I Learned to Speak Italian" by Helen Barolini. First published in *The Southwest Review*. Copyright © 1997 by Helen Barolini. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Graven Images" by Saul Bellow. First published in *News from the Republic of Letters*. Copyright © 1997 by *News from the Republic of Letters*. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"The Merely Very Good" by Jeremy Bernstein. First published in *The American Scholar*. Copyright © 1997 by Jeremy Bernstein. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"States of Reading" by Sven Birkerts. First published in *The Gettysburg Review*. Copyright © 1997 by Sven Birkerts. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"What Is Realism?" by J. M. Coetzee. First published in *Salmagundi*. Copyright © 1997 by J. M. Coetzee. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Altar Boy" by Brian Doyle. First published in *The American Scholar*. Copyright © 1997 by Brian Doyle. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Witness" by Andre Dubus. From *Meditations from a Movable Chair* by Andre Dubus. Copyright © 1998 by Andre Dubus. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

"Will You Still Feed Me?" by Joseph Epstein. First published in *The American Scholar*. Copyright © 1997 by Joseph Epstein. Reprinted by permission of the author.

✓ O'NEILL LIBRARY
BOSTON COLLEGE

"Someplace in Queens" by Ian Frazier. First published in *DoubleTake*. Copyright © 1997 by Ian Frazier. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"The Test of Time" by William H. Gass. First published in *The Alaska Quarterly Review*. Copyright © 1997 by William H. Gass. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Two Baths" by Elizabeth Graver. First published in *Shenandoah*. Copyright © 1997 by Elizabeth Graver. Reprinted by permission of The Richard Parks Agency.

"A Peaceable Kingdom" by Edward Hoagland. First published in *Preservation*. Copyright © 1997 by Edward Hoagland. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"In History" by Jamaica Kincaid. First published in *Callaloo*. Copyright © 1997 by Jamaica Kincaid. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.

"Nearing Ninety" by William Maxwell. First published in *The New York Times Magazine*. Copyright © 1997 by William Maxwell. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.

"Silk Parachute" by John McPhee. Reprinted by permission; © 1997 (John McPhee). Originally in *The New Yorker*.

"Building the House" by Mary Oliver. First published in *Shenandoah*. Copyright © 1997 by Mary Oliver. Reprinted by permission of Molly Malone Cook Literary Agency.

"Orion the Hunter" by Tim Robinson. First published in *The Recorder*. Copyright © 1997 by Tim Robinson. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Water Babies" by Oliver Sacks. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.; © 1997 (Oliver Sacks). Originally in *The New Yorker*.

"The Page Turner" by Lynne Sharon Schwartz. First published in *The Threepenny Review*. Copyright © 1997 by *The Threepenny Review*. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Soldier's Heart" by Louis Simpson. First published in *The Hudson Review*. Copyright © 1997 by Louis Simpson. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"A Visit to Camelot" by Diana Trilling. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.; © 1997 (Diana Trilling). Originally in *The New Yorker*.

"Lost Art" by John Updike. Reprinted by permission; © 1997 (John Updike). Originally in *The New Yorker*.

"Real Life" by James Wood. First published in *News from the Republic of Letters*. Copyright © 1997 by James Wood. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.

ELIZABETH GRAVER

Two Baths

FROM SHENANDOAH

Sometimes first impressions gather up some of the residue of centuries.

—John Berger

1

I WAS, at this first bath, twenty, spending the year studying in France, but traveling for a week with an American friend in Germany. Why Germany? Because it was cheap, because my eye landed on it as I sat in Chartres in the Bibliothèque André-Malraux and stared at an enormous atlas; because I liked the name Baden-Baden — the way it repeated on the tongue and meant Bath-Bath.

For a few days we had been walking in the outer fringes of the Black Forest, a landscape that reminded me of the New England mountains where I grew up — the same gentle shapes and deep pine colors, only here you could eat rich, dark cake in cafés, pour tea from iron kettles with acorns on their lids, climb wooden lookouts on the trails and sleep in clean youth hostels where Canadians planted flags on their night tables, lest someone mistake them for Americans.

We were Americans though we bore no flags, privileged young women traveling on our parents' money. We were dark and funny, a comedy team, eager to talk to strangers, quick to hitch a ride from a man in a black turtleneck, black jeans, and black Mercedes. A count, I remember imagining as I sat in the back seat. He might take us home to his castle. He might wine and dine us. Or rape us. The thoughts slid calmly across my mind and disappeared.

We were also Jewish, a fact that kept lighting my head in flashes I tried to ignore — in the train, for instance, as we rode so precisely from one town to the next; in the way something in me curdled when I heard the German language, my ears unable to find music there, though I knew all words held music if you listened right. I hadn't come to Germany for history, but it kept prodding me. I found that in this country I, always a bit outside myself, was even more outside, looking, looking at myself — my black hair, fair skin, long nose, long face: can they tell, is it obvious? And how weak and skinny I felt there, next to the strapping couple who ran the café we sat in for hours — a man and a woman as tall, blond, and leggy as giraffes.

We went to the baths to relax after days of walking in the Black Forest. Like two girls in a tale, we climbed the marble steps, clutching money whose worth we didn't know how to tally, walking into a palace where we didn't quite belong. Our clothes were sweaty and dirty from days of traveling. My hair was pulled back with a purple shoelace; my friend's hair was cropped close to her head like a boy's. I felt far from home and wanted a bath the way a child does — for its cradling water, the lathering of my skin, the tipping of my head into capable hands. I wanted heat, too, for it was late November and we'd been cold in the mountains. We paid our marks and went inside.

Where I saw, at first, nothing but beauty: tiles covered with green peacocks, beaded with water; damp white floors and high windows; rooms leading, maze-like, one into another, each room with its own clean purpose — salty or steamy, hot, cold, or in-between. There were signs on the walls but we couldn't read them; we moved by our senses, from here to there. In the first room, stripping off our clothes, I remember stretching and feeling small and puny, and (somehow, at the same time) firm and lucky. Next to me, my friend unhooked her bra, stepped out of her underpants, taller than I was, a bit rounder, and on her hip (unseen, as of yet, by her parents) the blurry tattoo of a blue rose.

Looking back, I know I must have had the body of a girl — the flat stomach and smooth thighs of a twenty-year-old who'd had an easy life and never given birth. All around us old European women bent over their long breasts, soaped at their wrinkled skin, sat on benches and rubbed pumice stones along the tired soles of their

feet. So much skin, I remember thinking, so much loose flesh, and I wanted and did not want to look, feeling my own flesh as so firm, so new, and yet knowing at the same time that I might be witnessing a vision of my future. Time, in this bath, came to me as a folded, pleated thing, and I recognized that, before I knew it, I'd be thirty looking back (as indeed, now, I am), and then forty looking back, and then it came to me (standing there so far from home, my pores yawning open) that even if I were lucky enough to live a long life, one day I would die.

It came to me, perhaps, because the steam blurred things so that the edges of bodies almost disappeared and matter came apart along its seams. There I was, surrounded by strangers, each one naked, touching her own skin. I wanted a towel or a skirt, but the women around me seemed utterly unselfconscious, even as they were covered with the nicks and marks of age. Everywhere I looked I saw bareness — the sharp angle of an elbow, the dip of a breast, the dark line between buttocks — women with bodies, concentrating on themselves. Naked the way animals are, I thought, and I watched a squat woman bend over and scrub between her legs like a monkey cleaning itself.

And then a flash again, a vision on the outer fringes of my mind: here we were, my friend and I, in a bath where we couldn't read the signs. And at any moment the gas would come in, invisible as air, and we would crumble, draw our last breaths, and who was to say what the woman in the white dress like a nurse's costume wanted with us? Who could decipher the language, rough and throaty as a dog's bark, that sprang from her throat as we passed by?

Cover yourself, I thought. And yet here I was, a tourist, having willingly paid my money, shed my clothes. Don't be paranoid, I told myself. Don't make these people pay for their ancestors' crimes. But for an airless moment I couldn't look at the clean white ceiling, the hard white walls, without seeing the texture of bleached bone.

Then we were in the next room, lying, each of us, face down on benches built into the edges of a large stone structure like a pyramid with steps. And before I could protest or question, another woman in a nurse's uniform was leaning over me with a loofah sponge.

I want to leave, I thought. Please let me go.

The sponge was hurting me, and I hadn't signed up for this, but here she was touching me, leaning over me like a surgeon, taking off my skin. I lay on my stomach, my teeth gritted, my muscles clenched, feeling the stone hard beneath my hipbones, breasts, and cheek. When she was done, she tapped me on my back and showed me the loofah mitt and my own arm — both covered with limp, gray threads of skin.

"*Ja?*" she said, and I nodded, smiled weakly, and looked for my friend, who was under the mitt of another woman, only she was laughing, calling out *Nein nein*, and the mitt woman was laughing too and roughly batting at my friend.

I'm not sure how long we spent in the bath in Baden-Baden; time grew heavy as a towel soaked in water. I know we stayed longer than we should have, determined to get our money's worth. We lingered long enough so that we suddenly found ourselves walking, dazed, into a room filled with both men and women, the men looking up at us, perhaps forty pairs of eyes, twenty penises, most of them old and shriveled in the water. Laughter struck me, then; something like mirth or discomfort or both cramped my stomach. Only later did someone tell us that at four o'clock the bath became mixed. Mixed, I remember thinking: men and women, Jews and Christians, Germans and foreigners, our skin and theirs, everyone only half pretending not to look.

"Are you twins?" an old woman asked us in English as we sank into the water.

We giggled and shook our heads. Twins? Why would we be twins? My friend was a good four inches taller than I was, my eyes hazel, hers brown, our bodies not at all the same shape.

What she means, I thought, is: Are you Jews? Then I kicked myself for my assumptions. You're paranoid, I told myself again, and I remembered how the mother of a childhood friend posted a picture of children in a concentration camp on her family's gleaming fridge, to remind her daughters of how lucky they were and how unlucky their history was — a strange mixed message that left her family reeling. Her girls could not eat, starved themselves, binged and purged inside the mansion where they lived with a mother who read books about the Holocaust each night before bed.

"It's all right," my grandmother said to my mother when, as a girl, she shattered an eggshell-blue teacup made in Japan. "There goes another Jap!"

At the end of our hours in the bath, a woman with strong arms came up and cocooned us in white sheets until, hemmed in, we couldn't move our arms and could walk only by taking baby steps along the polished floor. She gestured, then, at a huge circular room with cots arranged around its edge, and we minced along until we reached two metal cots. To lie down we had to flop ourselves backward all in one motion, and then there we were, blanketed and snug as infants, trapped and held as prisoners, flat on our backs in an elegant white room where the light slanted down through a high dome and steam wafted through the door and all around us strangers slept. There we were, limbs tied, hungry now and dizzy and slipping toward something like mirth.

When the laughter came, it was sharp and hard and brought us close to gagging, for we couldn't sit up, quite, or get out from our wrappings. Inside our laughter lived too many things to describe: our own lightheadedness, certainly (the heat, the water, hours without food), but also a thick, teary sense of how hard it was to fix on anything in this place so far from home — a place where women who cleaned us like mothers reminded us of gas chambers; where we stepped outside ourselves and saw our bodies in their youth and in their death; where we were not quite sure if we were being coddled or choked.

"Shhh," I said to my friend, which only made her laugh harder. From other cots, people turned their heads and glared at us. And then a nurse-woman stomped in, frowned, unwrapped us, and sent us out to where our clothes lay waiting.

Later that afternoon, we met an old woman on a bus and she took us home for tea and showed us pictures of her family — men in SS uniforms with swastikas embroidered on their hats.

"*Sehr* handsome, *ja?*" she said, pointing at the men, and we nodded and prodded each other under the table.

Her house was small and made of stone, her food simple. Her legs were stocky and her laughter nervous. I knew she wanted something from us, but I could not tell what. For hours we sat there as she showed us her embroidery and photographs and

spoke to us in streams of German we couldn't understand, mixed in with bits of English.

"Address telephone," she said at one point. "You *und* you."

Dutifully, we wrote them down.

"*Und* America," she said when she saw I'd written my address in Paris, so I wrote down my parents' address as well.

"Stay," she commanded when it grew dark and we got up to leave. "Stay stay stay!" She stood and flapped her arms up and down like a plump, anxious bird or a child winding up for a tantrum.

"No," we said nervously, "no, but thank you, *danke*."

She flew into a panic then, ran around the house collecting things in a basket to send off with us: a red glass cup, a piece of lace, sausages, bread, a spool of thread.

"No," we said, "don't give us all that, really."

But she pressed the basket into our hands.

That night at the youth hostel, I peered into the mirror in the bathroom and wondered what she'd seen. Who was this woman who charged over to us in the bus and took us home as if she'd been waiting for months for our arrival? Why was she giving us things? Why had she shown us her relatives but ignored the swastikas on their hats?

Uncomfortably, I saw pieces of myself in her — in her longing and frenzy, her desire to take strangers home, collect objects in a basket, comb over photographs pointing out only what she wanted to see. In her effort, especially, to find, in the world of daily things, small footholds of meaning, a place to rest. And then I saw her relatives again in their uniforms, and my own face which may or may not have announced me as Jewish, my skin taut and open from the bath. Perhaps what she was saying was quite simple: Look — my people, the faces I love. Handsome, *ja*? Or maybe she was saying, Yes, here are my relatives who were Nazis, but years have passed and I'd like to feed you now. Whatever she wanted me to see, I know I could see only one thing: men made faceless by the overbearing symbols on their hats.

After we left (I later found out), she picked up her phone and placed a call to my parents overseas. When they answered, she said, "Daughter, *wunderbar*," and my parents panicked, knowing only

that I was traveling, thinking I might be hurt or dead. For months after I got back to Paris, I received postcards from her, written in German, signed with hearts and smiles. I never answered, too unsure of what she wanted. War guilt, said my French friends. After a while, the postcards stopped.

Did the woman from Baden-Baden ever ride the bus to the baths, untie her brown shoes, take off her thick wool skirt, unpeel her stockings, and sit on a bench, hosed in her own body, her own flesh, still with herself for a moment? Did she always scan the bus for strangers to take home — girls to mother, Jews or Americans to look at her photographs, mouths to feed, ears that could hear her sounds but not begin to understand? War guilt, perhaps (could she tell we were Jewish?), but I think that's only one part of the picture. Really I have no idea who I was to that woman, and I cannot describe in any simple way who she was to me. I know I felt scrubbed and naked that afternoon, missing a layer of skin. She tried to give me gifts; I said no. Later she wrote to me; I didn't answer. Daughter *wunderbar*. A call from across the ocean. This is not a story I can make clearer. That night I slept clean, tired and slightly less sure of my place in the world.

2

And then I was thirty, and my mother was fifty-eight. For three weeks we had been traveling together in Turkey, the country where my mother's parents were born and grew up. On this, our last day, we had come to a *hamam*, a Turkish bath, down an alley in a gray, ordinary section of the city of Ankara. This building, unlike the bathhouse in Baden-Baden, was plain on the outside — beige stucco with a nicked brown door. Inside, we left our clothes in a small room with a key, put on plastic clogs, and walked into a huge marble chamber dense with steam. My mother was naked and, without her glasses, nearly blind. On this trip she had seemed both old and young to me — young as we met children and scrambled after them down hills, through tunnels, into abandoned churches; old in the deepening fan of lines around her eyes, the frailty of her shoulders, the way she told me she felt invisible when we walked down the street and the men called out to me: Pretty girl, come have tea, hello American girl!

I crouched in a corner on the floor, held a plastic jug under the spigots of a squat marble sink, and poured hot and cold water over myself. I watched a Turkish woman lead my mother out across the floor. My mother groped forward, extended her foot to test for level ground. The woman took her firmly by her arm and laid her down across the *gobek tasi*, or navel stone — an octagonal marble platform in the middle of the room. Above it, a dome rose like a pregnant belly, studded with round windows. From here (I, too, without my glasses, the world a little blurry) I might have been looking at a painting: two women in a bath, my mother and a stranger, their skin steamed and rosy in the light that filtered through the windows in the roof. My mother might have been a woman my own age, or this might have been not Ankara but Istanbul, where my grandmother used to visit the baths.

For Muslims, I had read, running water has mystical properties. And for Jews? For my Sephardic grandmother? Sitting in the half-light of the bath, I pictured my grandmother as a first-time bride in Istanbul. Her name before she was married the first time was Rebecca Cohen; then Rebecca Baruch, and later Rebecca Levy, like a spell with three parts. Like the Muslims, the Jews in Turkey sent the bride to the *hamam* for a ritual bath before her wedding. My grandmother would have been around nineteen the year she married Moses Baruch, a man who she told me (in the winding stories she spun the year before she died) worked in a cheese factory. I've seen a picture of her at this age, and it must be said that she was unusually beautiful, with a strong chin, a proud gaze, thick eyebrows, and luxuriant, wavy brown hair.

Two days before my grandmother's wedding, she would have had her hair, hands, and nails dyed red with henna sent by her groom, Moses, on a copper tray rimmed with candles. Her family would have rented the whole *hamam* for her ritual bath, or if they couldn't afford to rent the whole place, they would have used the Jewish corner. My grandmother's mother would have gone with her, along with her sisters, her aunts, her friends, perhaps even her close friend Suzanne Behar, who would later become the first wife of my grandfather Samuel Levy, the man my grandmother would marry after Moses Baruch and Suzanne Behar both died.

In the bath, my grandmother, her sisters, mother, friends, and aunts would strip off their clothes and chatter in Ladino — the

archaic Spanish spoken by Sephardic Jews. Or they would sing, perhaps, in Turkish, Ladino, or French. I can picture my grandmother at the center of it all, gulping down the attention, singing the loudest, arching her body down onto the navel stone in the middle of the *hamam*. Was she scared that day, smeared with henna the color of dried blood, preparing her body for sex? If she was, I doubt she showed it; my grandmother had a talent for disguise.

She would have brought a package with her, a *bogo de banyo* from her future husband. The gift would have arrived wrapped in fabric embroidered with artichokes and tulips — a cloth valued for its reversibility, perfect inside and out with nothing to hide, like a good wife. Inside, a set of towels to cover the shoulders, the head, the torso. Also a *tasa de banyo* — a brass bowl for rinsing the body; and wooden clogs inlaid with mother-of-pearl; and combs, soaps, and perfumes; and money to pay for the bath.

Before my grandmother's ritual immersion, the women throw sugar cubes in the water. For a sweet life, Rebecca. (Would her life turn out sweet? Much bitterness and loss inside it; spurts of laughter, too.) She squats, tips her head back, and they cluster around her and douse her with water from the sink. As she stands up, someone (her mother? her sister?) breaks a yeast cake over her. A blessing. To life. To children (she will bear five). And with a giggle, some knowing looks, and a slap on the behind: to love.

I remembered my grandmother with her Jean Naté bath splash, and how, in her last days, when she had one leg and spoke in a torrent of Ladino, French, English, and Turkish, she still loved a good bath, the towels plumped and fresh, her Avon products left over from her days as an Avon lady in Florida, when she charmed her customers with songs. I remembered how exacting she was when she taught me to embroider; the cloth had to look as good on its underside as on its top. At home my parents keep matchbooks in a brass dish my grandfather said was for scooping water at the bath. A disgusting place, he said, drawing out the syllables — *deee-scoost-sting*. Unclean, where bad things happened. Later I learned from my mother that my grandfather's brother was gay and frequented the baths in Istanbul, bringing shame on the family.

My grandfather, as I remember him, was strict, practical, and wary of pleasure; it was hard to imagine him here. But my grandmother loved bodies, her own and other people's. As I watched

my mother being bathed, I remembered the day, as a child, that I looked under my grandmother's couch pillows for drawing paper (everything tucked away and hidden in her house) and found, instead, calendar foldouts of naked women, plump, pink, and glistening, and how she laughed and mock-slapped me when I held them up.

"Don't be ashamed," she said, "of a person's body. It's a beautiful thing. What you think you're doing looking in that couch, you? You give me those, you wise guy!" *Bee-yooo-tee-ful*, her voice prancing up and down.

I watched my mother lying on the marble, her body so much like mine except that her stomach was rounder, her nipples darker, for she'd lived twenty-eight years longer than I and had given birth twice. The water as I poured it over myself was either too cold or too hot, but the marble was gray-veined and smooth and I crouched in my corner and listened to women speak in a rising, falling melody I couldn't understand. During our three weeks in this country where almost everyone was Muslim, we'd seen mostly women beneath veils, hanging back in doorways or courtyards. Here the bathing women were naked, and the staff wore tiny bikini underwear and wet brassieres. Watching them chat and drink tea from fluted glasses, I glimpsed how little I knew of the lives of anyone here, how much went on beneath veils, behind doors and windows.

And then my mother was being led back to our sink, and I was being led out to the navel stone, and a woman with a cheerful face and beige lace bra was leaning over me, scrubbing me roughly with her loofah mitt.

With my eyes shut, I might have been twenty years old in Baden-Baden; this might have been a woman in nurse's uniform; they had the same strong hands. Or I might have been four years old, this woman my mother or grandmother, for she was scrubbing me as hard as if I were coated in playground grime and she had no shame, working over my breasts, down my belly, pushing apart my thighs so she could slide her mitt between my legs.

I did not protest, not even to myself. I had no visions, here, of water turning to gas. This was the country that had welcomed my ancestors when Spain expelled them in 1492 and had taken in thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. At twenty, I'd gone to Germany because the train fare was cheap and I was in the neigh-

borhood, but I'd come to Turkey looking for something like recognition or knowledge, home or safety; this was, after all, a place I was linked to in my blood. Was it fair to feel that history as I barely skimmed the surface of a country for three weeks? I couldn't help it; I saw my grandfather's hooded brown eyes in the eyes of a shopkeeper in the Grand Bazaar, saw my mother's and my own face in the faces of the girls we met in the streets. I heard Hebrew rhythms, even, in the wails of the mosques' calls to prayer and saw Stars of David carved on village walls.

Did it matter that Muslims also made use of the six-pointed star, so that origins were impossible to fix? Did it matter that I was cared for in Germany, taken into a stranger's home, given gifts? It would have been easier, less foggy, to experience the bath in Baden-Baden as a cold, efficient death-place, and the bath in Ankara — with its navel stone and pregnant roof — as a place of continuity and birth. But it wasn't like that. I may have imagined death as I lay swaddled like a baby in Baden-Baden, but I was thirty in Ankara and that much closer to actual death, threads of gray speeding prematurely through my hair. I was washed by a round woman who may have looked cheerful but was probably tired, doing her job. While we were in Turkey, two Dutch women were abducted by their bus driver, raped, then killed. And what of the country's history and present state — the Armenian genocide, and the fact that on our trip we didn't travel to Turkey's southeast corner because of what the tourist bureau called "trouble with the Kurds"?

When the woman finished washing me, she, like the German woman, held up the mitt to show me how pieces of myself were clinging to the loofah — a snake's skin, my own grubby debris. Then she left me alone and I lay on the navel stone distant from myself, a body shucked of its husk, a mind far from its body. I wished, then, that my mother had her glasses on so she could see me lying as she had lain a few minutes before, as her mother had lain more than seventy years ago. In the distance I could feel my mother's presence, and my grandmother's. Could this be a link, some kind of echo — vexed and inside my own head, perhaps, but an echo nonetheless? I wasn't sure. I lay there pressed against the stone of a country I could recognize only in fragments — a brass bowl, embroidery perfect on both sides, *borek* pastries like the ones my grandmother used to make, their edges frail and flaky as my own shed skin.