My grandmother washes 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

1991
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 milk-tipped 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

1998