The woman, behind her glass window with her violet water and eau de
Cyprus, her hair creams, the faded prices on her wash mitts and cupping
glasses, her discolored plastic roses, stares at the visitor a long time, and asks
him in a businesslike tone if this is his first visit. She is reading a photo-novel.
The Hammam V is a very undistinguished sort of establishment, located in-
side a courtyard, its entrance marked by a sign on the street, its mosaic facade
symmetrically aligned with two lanterns, the glass of one of which is broken
and wrapped in a plastic bag. A notice at the entrance indicates the business
hours, the days reserved exclusively for men or for women, as the hammam is
ritually a place where men go to relieve their bodies of fat, and their souls
of vice. The establishment—for baths, massage, and relaxation, as the sign
indicates—is composed of cubicles innocuously spaced on either side of a cor-
ridor. These cubicles remain empty. Directly opposite the cashier is a frosted
glass door with the words Steam Bath written on it, beyond which a long steep
staircase descends. A triangular-shaped mirror, dotted with specks of silver
and lightly veiled in steam, suddenly reflects one’s hunched image, for the
vault is low. The combined odor, slightly sour and salty, of the steam, perspiration,
soap, and the long-awaited softening of plantar arches irritates the nostrils
at first. At the bottom of the stairs, the visitor drifts between several
possibilities: doors of frosted glass with hot water seeping beneath them, the
sound of showers, a screen that reveals white shapes sleeping on mats in a
dark room, a Moorish-style bar in red and yellow, and, just to the right, a
dressing room decorated in the same colors. The man at the bar takes the little
ticket with the word Hammam stamped on it in blue ink and repeats the
cashier’s question, like a password, to the unfamiliar face: “Is this your first
visit?” He hands him a white robe and a warm towel, and demands a tip. His
skin is brown; one of his eyes dead. The visitor undresses before a locker of his
own choosing, among the lacquered red and yellow wall panels studded with
mirrors. Men lurking in the shadows are eyeing him already. An almost black
hand with a shiny gold ring clutches the door to the toilets, the rest of the
body hidden but for its spread bare feet.
The arch of the foot passes indifferently from slightly sticky black linoleum
to cracked white tiles, laid on a slope to allow the water to drain; the contact is rather unpleasant, and can even prompt a shudder if one considers how readily fungi and greenish mosses cling to such surfaces. The showers, level with the floor, are spread out in a row, parallel, along the full length of the main room, which is bounded by a pool of green water, embellished with rock work onto which falls the soft light of a glass roof. A tall, spiral metal staircase rises above the surface of the water, which is empty but surrounded by seated men who wink at the visitor while openly squeezing their genitals and smile to show him their gold teeth. The men shower naked in a line, using one hand to pull an iron chain that releases the water, lathering their heads, soaping their long brown genitals at great length. In the far right corner of this main room, whose walls pierced with sheets of clear glass enable the visitor to see inside the relaxation rooms and the neighboring rooms for scalding oneself, is another door of frosted glass opening onto a dark space entirely filled with thick white steam, which is pierced only by the vacillating yellow glare of a lamp. At the center of this room is a pyramid of stairs, whose graduated sides are lined with an iron ramp. At the very top of this pyramid, one can make out the silhouettes of two men standing face to face, one of whom is shaving with a little hand razor. The walls are entirely scaled and thoroughly brushed with the excrement one wished to make disappear. But the cylindrical mouth that dispenses the steam and burns the tips of one’s fingers as they near it is decorated with a delicate painting of a heron catching a fish with the tip of its beak.

The effeminate white man standing behind the bar, amid old aperitif bottles and a tap handle, whispers stories of lechery in Hammamet, while smoothing the lacquered waves of his hair with the hollow of his palm. A small numbered board, whose slots house the drink checks, is surrounded by plastic roses. The tiles are black and white, diamond-shaped, and the archways are decorated with Christmas garlands; someone has painted a moon and the yellow hills of a desert on the walls and, more delicately, palm trees on the mirrors to hide the cracks. High up, above an angel in white plaster, the twin to the one at the entrance which no longer spouts a stream of water, is a television set broadcasting the marriage of Queen Elizabeth, followed by fleets of military jets. Men girded in white loincloths read magazines, limply stretched out on the red, imitation-leather benches, drinking orangeade. Between the bar and the shower room, a shelf edged with mirrors, embedded in the wall, holds large hair dryers in the shape of snails and small red plastic brushes. One of the men, sometimes already dressed, smooths and waves his thick black hair.

The various rooms, pierced as we said with sheets of glass, hide nothing; they merely muffle the sounds. From the dry steam room, where the light of a glass roof falls on the slats of wood worn almost gray, and on a fat body lying curled up on a curved mat hollowed out like a hammock, one can make out through the glass, just above a verminous sink, the man from the bar leaning on his counter, but one cannot hear that he is talking about the crudeness of Arab customs; and on the other side, in the half-light of the relaxation room,
dozing white shapes are again visible. The white linen spread across the wood seems to wrinkle instantly, crumpled by the sour and salty steam.

The metal staircase above the pool's pale-green trickling climbs until it reaches a long corridor, also red and yellow, lit by daylight, and bordered on each side by half-open doors, behind which men, reclining or seated alone in their own little rooms, wink at the passing visitor, their grins invariably revealing one of their gold teeth, and squeeze their genitals. Other men, who have kept their long robes on, lean against the partitions, and wait indefinitely in the silence. Some wear their towels around their necks like scarves, or like turbans on their heads. They don't talk to each other. Each tiny room has a wooden plank covered with a red, imitation-leather mattress, and a little marble ledge with an ashtray attached to the wall. Each room is closed and sealed by a frosted-glass window. Through the doors one catches sight of an eagle tattooed on an arm, or a gold chain bracelet circling a fat hand (gold flashes too, repeatedly, amid smiles and silent invitations). Certain doors are shut. A white man with thick flesh opens one of them and collapses against the door frame, sweating, disheveled, holding his robe closed like a woman hiding her breasts, limp wrists encircled in brightly colored bracelets. The circumcised members of dark-skinned men are often notched with little goosebumps of whiter flesh.

The visitor returns to the bar to pay his tab and asks the barman with the dead eye to open the door to his dressing room. On the way out, he examines the row of little bottles of eau de cologne, Cyprus and Pompeii water behind the cashier's glass cage; they cost only four francs and must not be high in quality. He decides to buy the most discreet one, from Pompeii, which the cashier hands him, and once home he injures himself, as if deliberately, while opening the little steel cap that seals the bottle, gashing the skin of his hand in several places, the steel sliding under his nail.