

## A Map of No Place

Before entering the room I shrug off my shadow and hang it over the back of a chair. It feels just like removing a sweater that's been soaked through. Then I clench the soles of my feet, tightly, so that my steps won't be heard, cross the threshold into the room, in to you. You are sitting on the bed, on the bedspread, back towards me. I imagine your gaze burning into the wall, how it gets warmer there, how any moment now a flame will rise inside the wall. And now all I can hear is the soft hiss that is my own breath, the only thing keeping me here and now. The thick Persian burgundy carpet swallows my every step. A very fine quality, and one for which I admire the carpet weaver. The carpet weaver is thirty-eight years old and known among the bazaars as Ali al-Shamsa, which means Ali of the Sun. He is very tanned; the skin of his face dark brown and leathery. Six days a week he offers his carpets to one and all on the markets of Damascus. He always carries with him a small cobalt mat with golden threads woven into the cloth. It is not for sale. He uses it for prayer: five times a day he turns in the Holy Direction, such as befits a good Muslim. But the rest of the time is business time, and business is good. Good enough for him to afford a small house on the outskirts of the city, a house with a garden where orange trees and hyacinths grow. Unfortunately, time has not permitted a wife and children, but Ali is content with his situation and knows that patience is a virtue. Yes, it is a virtue walking with your head bowed up to the bed where you are sitting waiting for time to tear down the walls of the house and trumpet blasts to announce Judgment Day. I

am doing it, almost floating up to you where you sit, ossified in a moment of eternal life, or death. I lay down beside you, let my arm gently touch your waist, but you do not move. And for your sake I have shed my clothes, appearing before you naked, so that we may start over again. But you are silent; perhaps you are waiting. Perhaps you want the sun to rise above the mountains first, perhaps you need to let its warmth thaw you, as I have thawed dinners for one during the last month. Next to you is a magazine. On a glossy spread two women smile at the camera. They are standing on a beach and are about to throw a shiny red frisbee towards someone. Beyond the borders of the image you can vaguely make out the shape of a man, or maybe a dog. The dog is a Golden Retriever that is blind in one eye. It is very old and should have died a long time ago, but in spite of this it keeps running around, acting like a puppy, as if time were of no concern at all to it. And fair enough, as long as he keeps eating, they see no need in putting him down. He doesn't seem to be in pain anywhere, and Karin should know, having gone to Vet School and all. But he can still catch frisbees like a baddie, even in the air, easy as pie, as if it's all he's ever done. Karin turns towards her and laughs, but she realizes it's about something else, probably the fact that she's seeing Jonas again tonight. She knows there are things one has the right to expect on the third date. Herself, she's not interested; not since Lukas made her lose faith in humanity in general and in men in particular. Even though it is hot, baking in fact, she shudders at the thought of him pressing the glowing cigarette tip against her shoulder that time in March and how he then threatened to rip her pussy out, *you fucking cunt, you wouldn't dare, come on, try me, try—* But all that is history now, the only ones here are her and Karin and Gizmo and the sun is warm and juicy

like a date between the teeth. Ali al-Shamsa chews thoughtfully on the date and watches the never-faltering stream of people moving across the square, between the booths selling spices, cloths and handiwork. There is something serene about the view, he gets calm just watching it. Sometimes he is lucky, like now: There she is again, just a glimpse between the woman selling tea and the shoemaker's, a fleeting glimpse of veils and covering cloths. He does not know who she is, where she comes from, where she is going. All he knows is that she comes along once in a while to do some shopping, or perhaps she knows someone working here. But that is not important, really. What is important are the black corkscrew curls escaping the veils, the soft clinking of the golden bracelets adorning her thin wrist, the way those bracelets catch the rays of the descending sun, creating a glittery reflection that forces him to shade his eyes. Sometimes, when she turns around rapidly, he thinks he can see a small area of skin, where the cloth is unable to cover up, when they slide apart to lay bare a tiny, yet real gap. He fantasizes about exploring that piece of skin, as if he were in the desert without a map, since the desert itself is the map. She runs her index finger along the river. The map is lying spread out on her lap and she's on the second glass of wine this evening. When she left Karin, Gizmo whined so pitifully she considered asking Karin if she would mind ... but no, it's her night tonight, she wouldn't want to waste it, and besides, hadn't she said something about Jonas being allergic? Anyhow, she's sitting here now, and Gizmo is lying on his blanket on the floor. As on so many evenings before, Bretagne is spread out on her knees, and she has marked a route, circled names of villages with the ball pen, imagined hikes, farms, cups of wine and *deuet mat oc'h* next to *s'il vous plait*. But she swallows another sip

of wine and looks at Gizmo and she knows that as long as, *as long as*. Gizmo looks up, notices her watching him and yelps. The sudden sound wakes Ali where he is sitting, and he realizes he has been sleeping. He shakes his head, looks around, tries to locate the sound, but there's no dog to be found anywhere. And when his gaze returns to the carpets on their stands he sees her also. How has she — but she is there, real and *there*, sparkling green eyes behind the veil that she is presently unhooking, which makes the gold bracelets around her thin wrist jangle and clink and gleam and reflect the sun that he should know so well by now, but how well can you actually know someone? How well do I know you, and how well do you know me? It hurts, knowing that you can get close, but never that close, never as close as I want to get, and certainly now, with my fingers lightly against your waist. You are not resisting, in any case, you don't say no, which is good and bad, but considering the circumstances good, I think. Perhaps you are waiting for the sun to power you up so that you will have enough strength to turn towards me, with love or hate or the horrible thing that lies between. When I move closer the magazine lying next to you slides off the bed and onto the floor, and finally you move, you blink, break the staring at the wall, turn towards me but slowly, so incredibly slowly, and not until now do I see myself, see myself for real, reflected in the shiny veil covering your green eyes.