

DESCANT

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EXCAVATIONS

with 2008 Gillies / Descant Beauty Prize Winners




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Christie Pearson

Russian and Turkish Baths, New York City

Once I get into the basement, I go from one end to the other, the corridor alongside a series of rooms containing saunas and pools. The last door looks like a door to a service room, but I see someone else go in. I open the door into a large room of steam. It's incredibly hot. It seems to be carved out of Manhattan's very strata. Tiers of benches. I find a place in the room.

All of New York is here. There are fit young men in Speedos, older men with big bellies and chains burning hot into hairy chests, women in gaily printed one-pieces and Japanese tourists giggling behind their hands. Businessmen talk business, then sports. A tattooed man talks about Vietnam. *It's a no-think situation. I'm telling you, if you hadda been there, you would've done the exact same thing.*

I'm getting hotter — find a way to recline so I can more easily float between conversations. I learn where the best place to buy bagels is, who is most likely to win the game tonight, why vitamin C is overrated, how many years this ex-soldier has been coming to this place, what kids today really need more than anything. I learn that you can scrub your neighbour's back and they'll scrub yours and that when it gets way too hot, you fill that bucket from the tap, stand over the drain and douse yourself with icy water.

After the lean golden woman in a golden string bikini does this, she starts her routine. Arms up, her fingers pointing toward the distant heavens, then down toward nearby hell. Circling, twisting and stretching in a steam dance. Sparkle of sweat and turquoise on muscles. She is a steam goddess.

The ex-soldier doesn't break his story. Perhaps she does this every day, while he talks. Her rhythmic breathing. Someone sighs. The door squeaks open and closed.)))