

hippocampus magazine

memorable creative nonfiction

[Submissions](#) [Past Issues](#) ▾ [About & Info](#) ▾ [Masthead](#) [Books](#) [Conference](#)

[Support](#) ▾ [Contest](#) [Contact](#)

MEMOIR • ESSAYS • FLASH • INTERVIEWS • REVIEWS • CRAFT • WRITING LIFE •
NEWS & UPDATES

Gas Masks and Wedding Vows by Jennifer Lang

July 1, 2016



HIPPO
CAMPU
S
MAGAZ
INE

We're an
online
publication
set out to
entertain,
educate and

The shrill woke me out of my sleep. An *azaka*, one of the newest words in my growing Hebrew vocabulary, a continuous alarm with an ascending and descending tone, an eerie up-then-down sound, echoed into the onyx sky.

I eyed the clock: 3 a.m. precisely, a new day, January 18, of a new year, 1991.

For the past few months, tension between Iraq, Kuwait, the U.S. and Israel had been escalating. War, everyone—from the sociology professor I worked with to my great aunt and uncle to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir—agreed, seemed inevitable.

Anxious, I elbowed my husband. “It’s started. Come on.”

We threw off the duvet cover and grabbed our fleece bathrobes. The frigid cold outside, trapped by the stone walls and tiled floors inside, made me quiver.

With the apartment’s only roam-phone in hand, Philippe and I scurried down the hall to our guest room, closed the door and taped the doorframe, shutting ourselves in, shielding us from possible chemical or biological warheads. We plunked ourselves down on the blue tweed sofa-bed and unwrapped the world’s most reprehensible wedding presents from their boxes. A gift from the Israeli government, the gas masks were non-returnable and non-exchangeable. A cross between an elephant’s and a pig’s face, they were huge and hulking, a mass of black heavy rubber with a tight strap that traversed behind the head,

engage
writers and
readers of
creative
nonfiction.
We also have
a books
division and
bring our
mission to
life with an
annual
writing
conference.



two enormous holes covered with thick plastic for eyes and a large grey canister in front of the nose. Philippe helped me fit and tighten my mask, making sure I could see, move and speak, and then I helped him. We removed a protective guard inside in order to take the first breath.

My body shuddered involuntarily. Philippe clasped my hand. I inhaled the pungent smell of fresh, raw rubber. I willed myself not to gag. The phone rang.

“Hi, it’s us. We’re watching the news. Are you okay?” my mother asked from my hometown, some 7,500 miles and seven time zones away.

“We’re fine,” I said, faking it. “Just tired.”

My voice must have sounded muffled and distant, perhaps like a Martian from outer space, as it traveled across the spotty phone line.

I knew it was worse for them than for me. Both my brother and I had settled in Israel, and the live TV coverage brought the ugly Mideast reality to the warmth and comfort of their California home.

Born and raised in the San Francisco Bay area, I had grown up with earthquake drills when we scrambled under desks, crouched face down and cupped hands behind heads. But fifteen-second quakes and tremors seemed like child’s play compared to a country-wide siren that awakened six million people from sleep and signaled an incoming SCUD missile, potentially carrying deadly

chemicals, destination unknown. A new immigrant, I had never lived through war.

“CNN’s showing everything as it happens. We saw them launch the missile toward you.” she said. “They said it landed in Haifa.”

Although I had left my parents’ house years earlier, first for college in Chicago, then for a job in France and eventually for Israel, where I unexpectedly met and married a Jewish Frenchman and stayed, I craved to kick my slippers and be swept far, far away to a city or state, country or continent that didn’t have to fight to defend itself from surrounding enemies. Philippe stroked my arms while I spoke to my parents. If I cried, I might hyperventilate in the mask.

“I know. We heard. We’re listening to the news on the radio and on T.V.,” I said.

Since the official start of Operation Desert Storm the day before, CNN had been filming live from the front line in Baghdad. Our television station flashed occasional images from the 24-hour news network: fighters taking off from aircraft carriers from the actual perspective of the machinery and missiles hitting their targets, Iraqi SCUDs shooting through the sky toward us, into Israel. It was as if we were sitting in some 3-D futuristic war movie, thanks to the use of night vision equipment, only we starred in the show.

“Stay safe,” my father said. I squeezed my eyes to block the tears.

We didn't speak long. The masks made it difficult to hear, and we wanted to watch the news and know if any missiles had landed in Israel and where; if anyone was hurt; and if others were en route. We couldn't see outside since our windows were covered with thick sheets of plastic but would surely hear the deadening thud if one landed nearby.

As I huddled with my husband, I thought about how I'd made the decision to remain in Israel *with* Philippe, *for* Philippe, *because of* Philippe. Each of those prepositions held so much power when positioned before his name.

Had I lost my own power, my sense of self, by staying in a place that scared me, in a nation I'd never dreamed of calling home? I relished the feeling of witnessing history in real time, such as Mikhail Gorbachev opening the Soviet Union's borders allowing Jews to leave the republic for Israel en masse, but had I acted hastily, not thinking through all the potential scenarios in this crazy place?

Eventually I stopped shaking, but inside, my body clenched when I thought about the future—of being stuck in a region fighting endless wars, of raising future children in a land I both admired and abhorred.

I leaned into Philippe like I always did. His composure calmed my EKG-like emotional nature.

“Est-ce que ça va?” he asked, his dark brown eyes penetrating mine.

I wasn't sure if I was okay but looking at him and his sureness eased my fears. Breathe in, breathe out, I repeated like a mantra.

Sometime between sixty and ninety minutes later, another siren rang: a continuous single-pitch sound, signaling all clear. Philippe and I removed our masks, un-taped the door and trudged down the hallway to our room. We hung up our bathrobes, crawled under the duvet and burrowed into the flannel sheets. How would I be able to fall asleep? Surely, this was only the beginning with many more sirens and SCUDs ahead. The government had already instructed us to carry our gas masks everywhere—to work, out to dinner, to the movies—until further notice.

In those pre-dawn hours, I thought about our wedding three and a half months earlier outside the entrance to Jerusalem. We had gathered before sunset on the outdoor terrace of a restaurant called Mei Niftowach. Flowers and vines were sewn into the seams of the white-washed stone, making the building shimmer with pinks, reds, yellows, purples and greens.

While awaiting our guests, Philippe and I played hide-and-seek, each occupying separate parts of the restaurant. We hadn't seen each other since Friday night dinner—a full forty-eight hours—in an attempt to uphold part of the

traditional week-long separation between a bride and groom. My insides ached with desire.

I couldn't wait to behold him. To stand next to him under the fire orange embroidered *chuppah*. Our guests parted into a makeshift aisle for Philippe and his parents followed by me with mine. I circled around him three and a half times then he circled around me three and a half times, our way of tweaking a biblical tradition when a bride circles seven times to show how she figuratively builds the walls of the couple's new world together just as the world was figuratively built in seven days. He lowered my veil, a protection made by Jewish males since Jacob wed a veiled Leah in error, rather than his true love, Rachel.

On that halcyon evening, standing under the stars, the rabbi had asked us if we promised to love, cherish and protect each other, whether in good fortune or in adversity, and to seek with each other a life hallowed by the faith of Israel. At the time, the terms "adversity" and "faith of Israel" were just words. But, now, in the darkness of our room in Haifa, they resonated with unmistakable meaning.

In bed, clinging to Philippe, I closed my eyes and tried to conjure up the expansive valley beyond Mei Niftowach, to picture the quietude of the surrounding *wadis*, land belonging to both Arabs and Jews. All that openness represented the complete antithesis of our sealed room.

And, like everything in Israel, it symbolized the two extremes inherent in a country where the beauty and the bedlam constantly co-exist. And, I wondered if I would ever be able to make peace with that paradox, to accept that the walls we were trying to build together might collapse from time to time, unable to support us within the enigma called Israel.

Jennifer Lang has been published in the South Loop Review, Dumped: Stories of Women Unfriending Women, and upcoming in Under the Sun, among others.

Occasionally, she contributes to the Wall Street Journal's expat column and www.opentoisrael.com, her blog attempt to see the bright side in a place she never dreamed of calling home. This summer she receives a MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. When not at her desk fretting over every word in her upcoming memoir, Finding Home: One Woman's Transcontinental Journey through Judaism, Marriage, and Motherhood, she's probably in triangle pose on a yoga mat.