

Illusion of Harmony

JENNIFER LANG

When I meet my American friend for coffee, she tells me she can't sleep. Since last summer's Israel-Gaza Conflict and the recent slew of stabbings, she's riddled with gloom-and-doom feelings about the country's future. Her 18-year-old son keeps a baseball bat in his car for his three-hour drive alongside scores of Arab villages en route to his army preparatory program in the northern tip of Israel. That same day, my Ultra-Orthodox Jewish brother calls from Jerusalem to say everyone is on edge; he's carrying a knife. I try to avoid being sucked into the vortex of live news threads with appalling headlines—"Israeli police officer stabbed to death in Old City" and "Young Palestinian woman shot by Israeli forces dies... after she reportedly attempted to stab Israeli soldier"—or I, too, will stop sleeping.

It—life here—isn't always like this.

In my newly adopted home in Raanana, a quiet city a tad north of Tel Aviv, I wonder if my day-to-day is so different from that of my friends in the suburbs of San Francisco, where I'm from, or the center of Paris, where I once lived. I work, exercise, feed my kids, fill my fridge, do laundry, run errands, pay bills and occasionally go out to dinner or movies. But the nonstop cycle of terror makes me question if life can be lived in the shadow of violence.

In the house: first story facade

From the front door, I scan the open space where the kitchen flows into the dining room flows into the living room. Guests often ooh and ahh as they enter, amazed by the minimal furnishings and the absence of clutter, at the illusion of harmony.

The stone walls are painted matte white and the tile floor is grey. Every sound echoes and bounces from corner to corner, pinging from point to point. Whether I'm upstairs in my bedroom or downstairs in the yoga studio, I hear spoons clang against pots, characters scream on the television, my family blasting Adele's "Rolling in the Deep." My bare feet slap against the floor, cold and soothing to my sweaty soles in summer when heat and humidity soar.

When I gaze at the garden, sunlight pours in from the wide floor-to-ceiling windows. The wall of glass and the tile floor that extends into the garden create an inside-out impression. A cast-iron table and chairs

furnish the patio. Inches beyond, an infinity-edge pool shimmers against its multi-colored teal green, turquoise blue tiles.

At the far edge of the pool, skinny cypress trees and purple flowers catch my eye. To the left of the pool fledgling trees—one lemon and one clementine—ache to grow. To the right are pomelo and lychee trees, both exotic and enticing, even if they produce little to no edible fruit.

Beyond the shrubs a low stone wall and slated fence create a barrier between my abode and an empty lot. In the vast lot, piles of dirt amass. A desert still struggling to survive, still in the midst of transformation; an immigrant family still trying to settle, still in the muddiness of acclimation.

In the house: below ground

Whether I enter the yoga studio from an inner stairwell or from an outer one near the front gate the effect is the same: peaceful. Step barefooted into the small, intimate space with sand-colored bamboo flooring, white painted walls and narrow, high windows. Sigh.

I adore the Christmas contrast with my pomegranate red mat below what my students call the forest: a long wallpapered wall of enlarged photos of leaves in dizzying shades of green. A brass OM in Sanskrit hangs next to the bathroom door and a cork bulletin board with my class schedule hangs near the door. Built-in shelves hold meditation and

anatomy books and a colorful array of candles. In the closet, a wide wicker basket contains an assortment of eco-friendly mats and heavy-duty wire shelves store other yoga-related props: Styrofoam blocks, cotton straps, eye pillows and blankets.

“It even smells like yoga in here,” a new student says when she whiffs the faint odor of lavender incense burning. “I love all the sounds,” says another when hearing meditative music emanate from the iPod and the steady sound of trickling water enter from the windows where a stone water fountain perches in the garden.

My students hail from America, Canada, Brazil, England, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Russia, South Africa, Australia, even Israel, and we form a mini United Nations of yogis. A dozen bodies squeeze mat to mat. When a siren wails they follow me behind a heavy, metal door into the room of many names—storage, shelter, safe, sealed—a room with which we are each familiar; a room built in post-First Gulf War structures, when Home Front Command determined every citizen needed fast access to a space that could protect against chemical and biological warfare; a room where, together, we inhale and exhale.

At the seashore: spellbound

All year long I drive four miles west to the shores of Herzliya, one endless stretch of beach with mesmerizing views of the

Mediterranean Sea. In the winter, I walk along the water's edge, but during warmer months, I place my towel directly on the sand—soft, white, sinking—in the shade, the sun too fierce for my fair skin. Sometimes I read until the sweat in every crevasse of my body becomes unbearable, urging me to plunge into the waves. Other times, I watch Buddha-bellied toddlers frolic in shallow water and school-aged children dig tunnels and recall when my children used to resemble Buddhas with their round, full bellies. I hear the continuous back-and-forth banging of paddle balls as men and women of all ages play matkot, the hottest sport on Israeli beaches. Sometimes I simply give into the spell and listen to the waves as they whoosh against the sand and retreat into the sea. But since last summer, I feel different. Despite the overwhelming beauty, I feel vulnerable and exposed; if a siren sounded, where would I take shelter? If someone wielded a knife, where would I run? I cannot fathom how it is possible for war to rage less than 50 miles south when peace and splendor surround me. The bold-faced dissonance leaves me wordless.

At the port: downside-up

Every Thursday at noon, I marvel at the constant buzz of activity at the Tel Aviv port. I revel in how hundreds of people, including myself, practice yoga at Ella, while hundreds of people peer in the windows to watch yogis, like me, stand on their heads or balance on their hands. When I hang upside down and peer out the window, I see only the upper half

of bodies—heads bobbing, torsos swaying, arms swinging—and think about Pablo Picasso’s cubist perspective in “The Accordionist.” With my head below my hips and my heart to reverse blood flow and improve circulation, I see the legs of bikers and rollerbladers and skateboarders and Segwayers dodge pedestrians along the promenade. Shoppers carry Steve Madden and Carolina Lemke and Castro bags. People yap on their cellphones or with friends, often with a cup of coffee or cone of gelato or frozen yogurt in hand. Beach lovers take a break from sun worshipping, especially women in string bikinis, sometimes with a smattering of tattoos or piercings. Black-hat Haredim stroll alongside their wives, who cover every strand of hair for modesty’s sake, with a handful of offspring in tow. New parents push fancy, post-modern strollers. Fishermen wait for their prey to jostle their rods over the railing. Inversion magic kicks in, and a feet-to-head feeling of calm floods my body. On the mat, I summon my breath and push away thoughts of sirens and stabbings. I see the water and the mainsail of boats and the clouds and the horizon inverted and muster a smile at the topsy-turvy, higgledy-piggledy, pell-mell of this corner of the world.

At the shuk: hustle and bustle

My favorite day at Shuk HaCarmel is Friday, when shoppers crush together, elbow to elbow, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip between two rows of stalls buying food for Shabbat. Crooked, stooped men lean on canes. Brassy-haired women heave paisley-

patterned shopping carts. Tourists stop to gawk at and photograph unusual fruits or vegetables like the large, green orb of a pomelo, Thai green papaya or fleshy, fresh dates. Middle Eastern music booms from several stalls.

“Pita tari, 10 pitot rak 12 shkalim,” a man pushing a wooden cart selling steaming hot pitas screams as he zigzags his way through the maze of shoppers. I gulp the scent of fresh yeast.

The main artery of the market funnels out to smaller alleys and narrow lanes. The nut, seed, spice and grain sellers occupy one area; the Yemenite restaurants with their meat-based soups and zhug spicy sauce and hilbe (semi-spicy jam-like spread made of the Fenugreek plant) another; the butchers and fishmongers yet another. Huddled between two nondescript stalls stands Hummus HaCarmel, where people form a line to buy the least expensive, most nutritious meal: a plate of freshly made chickpea paste dripping with tahini and smothered in olive oil accompanied by pickles, chopped salad, a hardboiled egg and soft, fluffy pocket bread.

Of all the odors in the shuk—raw meat, overripe passion fruit, scorching hot and deep-fried falafel—the smell of tobacco assaults me. Every vendor dangles a cigarette off his lip so the smoke seeps into the rind of an orange or the peel of a banana or the flesh of an onion.

A stall holder tosses me a pink plastic bag to select figs. He weighs my goods and signals: “Shesh esrei shkalim.” I wonder if my produce really weighs 16 shekels or if he’s just making up some random amount. Drops of sweat slide down my face and neck and settle in my underarms. The midday sun is oppressive, and my hat, sun block and sunglasses barely shield me from the intensity of its rays.

On prior visits, before I moved here, the shuk’s craziness unnerved me. Now, it no longer strikes me as anything other than what it is: exotic.

What does faze me is when I look south toward the ancient port of Jaffa. The sea glistens calmly, making it difficult to comprehend that only 40 miles beyond lies Gaza Strip, headquarters of Hamas and its missile launching pads. How can it be so close and yet so far away? So many antonyms—cruelty-kindness, courage-fear, creation-destruction—and somehow they all coexist.

Back in the house: at my desk

Many days, I stay home, take refuge in my office. At first glance, the two matching birch veneer corner desks appear identical each with a computer screen and laptop. But at a closer look, one is void of clutter and chaos, while the other—mine—resembles a paper battlefield. Bills and receipts and writing books and notebooks and old photos and address books and bar/bat mitzvah invitations and hand cream and drugstore

glasses and random files with contact phone numbers for the kids' schools and family medical records cover almost every surface. If the appearance of order and control is crucial in my living space downstairs, then the messiness of everyday life inevitably moves upstairs, invading my work area.

But the disarray of my desk doesn't bother me. When my husband asks what time the party starts or where the wedding is, I know exactly where to find the answer.

When he asks how I can work in such a balagon—Hebrew for mess—I explain that I can write despite the disorderliness. I can sense grace despite the pervasive bedlam. Despite the dirt and disquiet and destruction, I can thrive. Because it isn't always like this—or is it?

Header photograph © S. Schirl Smith.

About the Author

Jennifer Lang

A San Francisco Bay Area native, Jennifer Lang lives and writes in Raanana, Israel. Her essays have appeared in Under the Sun, Ascent, The New Haven Review, and on Brevity's One-Minute Memoir and NPR's Hanukkah Lights podcasts, among others. A Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays nominee, she earned an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and serves as Assistant Editor for Brevity.

See author's posts
[<https://barrenmagazine.com/author/jennifer-lang/>]



Share This: