

JENNIFER LANG

The World Fell at our Feet

Filled

Hot September sun penetrates the windows. A steady hum of air conditioning becomes white noise. I doze off and on. Hard to sleep. Hard to wake up, too. In a sparse rectangular room with bed after bed after bed. Eight strange women speaking in foreign tongues of Hebrew and Arabic to men at their sides. Babies in their arms. Families on stiff chairs. Only my husband and mother, visiting from California, here with me. Threadbare curtains—some open, some closed—separate us patients. Televisions blare with images of men I admire: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, PLO leader Yasser Arafat, President Bill Clinton. Headlines flash about the Oslo Accords; their handshake still three days away in D.C. halfway across the world. Potent odors of antiseptic mixed with Turkish coffee and honey glide up my nose. Plump grandmothers pass around large plastic containers filled with sticky sweets: kanafeh, basbousa, baklava. A nurse takes my temperature, checks my blood pressure, and offers me pads. *Mazel tov!* she says.

At moochana lehanik et haben shelach? Am I ready to nurse my son? Knackered, I nod. We're not playing a game. No ready or not's here I come. Just here he comes. Ready. I extend my arms. She passes him. Shows me how to support his neck. I unwrap his bland receiving blanket. He looks like a cross between a troll—large head, small body—and a frog with scrawny, wrinkled legs, feet turned out. I nuzzle into his belly. Do innocence and perfection smell? The nurse swaddles him and teaches me a new word: *la'atof*. To wrap, like a present. A doctor approaches—not the one who monitored me throughout the past forty weeks in his clinic but the one on call this morning when I was in labor—and asks how I feel. A two-syllable Hebrew verb—*ko'ev*—indicates both it hurts and I hurt. *Haa'ya* lach episiotomy, he says. As if to explain. As if I understand. As if the 19th-century Greek term registers. A few months back, when Philippe and I toured this Haifa hospital, I learned about its non-negotiable enemas. But news of the surgical incision in my perineum to ease delivery shocked me. *Mazel tov!* he said on his way out the door.

The nurse resumes, all business, and instructs me to open my sheet-thin gown and remove my breast. I fumble. Everything aches. Between my legs. Even my arms. Whose body is this anyway? She reaches for my bosom, lifts, opens baby's mouth, and attaches one to the other like a plug. I wince at her maneuvering, at him not responding. The room fills with noise: quick, constant, animated jabber. Swarms of people descend; entire villages celebrate. More about peace talks. *Tenasi shoov paam*, the nurse tells me to try again, taking my left hand to my right nipple. I take. Try. Baby still not responsive. *Shoov paam*. Again. I try. He tries. We try.

With

She waves one hand, smooth and freckle-free, indicating to scoot toward her. On my back, knees bent, feet in stirrups, I butt crawl: an upside-down crab. She leans in. *Ani nogaat be'isad yemin be rechem*, the Israeli gynecologist says, *I'm touching the right side of the uterus. Rechem* (uterus), *ubar* (fetus) and *vesset*

(menstruation) are these odd words in my limited vocabulary, learned in my late twenties, pregnant with my first, when my doctor performed routine vaginal ultrasounds. *Ve be tsad smol*, she says, inching the speculum left. Touchdown: her cold metal contraption clamps my dry vaginal lips. Everything around my buttocks—from gluteus maximus and gluteus medius to ilium, sacrum, and coccyx—clenches. I summon yoga breath: in, out, in, out. I remember my mother advising me to relax before my first Pap Smear three decades ago, then when I hadn't yet left my native northern California to live abroad, then when I was on the cusp of turning twenty-one, then when it meant nothing beyond routine procedure, the price of being female.

Now is different. I've moved back and forth and back again to Israel. I'm older. Aware. Six months ago, my Pap results returned unclear. Doctor called, dropped words like atypical cells and undetermined significance and uttered consonants that sounded like a college abbreviation—ASC-US—before telling me I need to retest. This is that test. Lying back, I stare at her bent head, thick onyx hair, and eternally tan Mediterranean complexion. We met five years ago, but she only knows my name when scanning my healthcare card. She'd never be able to identify me in a police line-up. Other than my glaring accent—and withering reproductive system—she knows nothing about me. Every time I recline on her exam table, I think about my doctors back in the States: my midwife with whom I swapped book titles; my dermatologist who always asked about my writing; and our beloved pediatrician who lived next door. The gynecologist scrapes once, twice, thrice to collect a sample, while talking to me, walking me through, step by step, movement by movement, as if I'm a Pap Virgin. I live 7,337 miles from home and entrust the most intimate part of my body to a doctor who speaks a foreign language. I follow her lead, lean in.

Hope

I inhale deeply—belly, ribs, collarbone—then exhale, hoping three-part breath calms my quivers. The orthopedist asks if I'm okay, his American English accent overpowering his Israeli origins. I tell him cold, scared. A twenty-something nurse hovering nearby covers me with a heated sheet. Snaps a wide, heavy belt across my lower abdomen, affixes sticky pads around my heart, a pulse meter on my pointer finger and blood pressure cuff on my upper arm to monitor the oxygen-to-vital-organs relationship, cooing softly in Hebrew. I squeeze my eyes to block out the fluorescent lights dangling over the operating table.

Tel HaShomer's plastic chairs, austere walls, and abandoned cleaning supply carts conjures images of a Soviet spy movie. I picture the one-humped dromedary undergoing foot surgery in Dubai's Camel Hospital, hanging upside down with his hooves roped together and head dropping back, requiring three medical personnel to support his neck and pump medicine into his mouth. The orthopedist interrupts my monkey mind, asks my playlist wishes. I request Adele whose deep, soulful voice soothes me like Sunday morning pancakes. He places his phone near my head. *Hello* boomerangs from ear to ear. He apologizes for the pinch in my bony foot as he injects anesthesia. *I've forgotten how it felt / Before the world fell at our feet*. The lyrics make me giggle. Because of the ungulate and me. Because my body is in one place, my mind in another. Because my surroundings are so foreign. Because I feel everything. Because I feel nothing. Breathe in, breathe out. Hebrew and English, the two tongues of my everyday life, ping-pong around me. The sheet's warmth slowly fades. My body stops shaking.

Best American Essays nominee, she earned an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and serves as Assistant Editor for *Brevity*. Find her at israelwriterstudio.com and follow her @JenLangWrites.