

Linea Nigra

by Margarita Meklina

I

First calculation, then calcium. Fetus and figures.

I figured out the day of my ovulation, measured temperature—and then strengthened my spine, spirit and stature with folic acid and calcium tablets in preparation, and calculated your due date.

Several days of elevated hopes and temperature had passed (you were already conceived) when I learned that your great grandfather had a grave form of cancer.

At ninety five, in a hospital bed, he was calling his *Yiddishe mommele* who had a wise look, a light complexion and the last name of Lightman, the one who luckily perished from illness in Byelorussia before the Nazis came to their place.

He lived through it all: waking up to hymns and hypocrisy on the radio, watching carefully prepared, crafty parades on TV, walking with fake and folksy factory workers waving Soviet flags.

Your great grandfather lived through all that and then, following his adventurous, adulterous kids, each with two wives (a live-in, right-in-your-face and a secret one "on-the-side," the one for whom business trips were invented), came to the U.S.

In California his skeptical self embraced Capitalism and capitulated to cancer.

That's what we assumed.

Stubborn and strong as he was, he could not be eradicated by extraneous forces (such as famine or fascists during World War II, or a freak accident later, when at ninety, on a cold rainy night, with a backpack on his shoulders, he was hit by a bus): with his outward strength toward the world, he could only be destroyed by himself, by his home-made cancerous cells.

And as soon as I knew that you'd live, I foresaw his impending imminent death.

Fetal movement or quickening, a manifestation of a quickly growing organism—and the fatal moment, the agony, disintegration.

That's—I foolishly thought—how life is.

2

And those butterflies... Your Italian father learned a new expression from me: butterflies in the stomach, a fragile feeling we both felt when we first met.

He strolled around an abandoned gas station with me, very serious in his suit (which, as I discovered later, he wore only a few times, favoring T-shirts of his beloved rock bands), and carried in his hand a cup with steamy espresso from a coffee house where we planted our blind date (the editor suggests "planned" but I'm talking about planting a seed of the date that in one month sprouted marriage). The cup was his protection: something to cling to, to clutch in his hand. To get a hold of what was awaiting to happen. If we were in the nineteenth century which he, a history buff, dug, quoting the luminaries of that time with the same ease and elation as modern mammoths of history monographs, he probably would be tightening his grip on a rapier.

He was a large thirty-nine-year-old man, strikingly athletic and sturdy, with a Wild West streak sending him successively to all six continents, but weak in his heart, which started accelerating, legs walking slow and giving way, when he saw me. With his full yet not flabby calves and a pronounced, disproportionately large head, he reminded me of a gigantic infant.

Yes, he looked like a baby. And when a would-be baby in a womb moves, the sensation its mother experiences is sometimes referred to as "butterflies in the stomach." It's those tender taps of a thin yet stiff butterfly's wing against a womb's soft walls.

No wonder this story begins with a calculation—there is an arithmetic to life: at eleven gestational weeks, you were around three inches, at seventeen—six, but the quickening was supposed to start, according to a pregnancy book, when you scored eighteen-nineteen. Orchestrated by two skipped heartbeats (I came to a standstill sensing something unusual), it happened before: I felt you move when Yitzhak Perlman went on stage.

We did not surmise that somebody who played such empowering music could be so handicapped. Still, there was no contrast between his musical prowess and physical powerlessness (affected by polio, Perlman laboriously entered the stage relying on crutches). On the contrary, shiny steel "legs" seemed to give him more weight.

You did not move when he, purposely oblivious of the awestruck audience, casually walked to his chair. But right when the violin replied to his touch, I felt the butterflies.

The butterflies...they were there the day I first met your Italian father, and they reappeared, five years into our marriage, when you wanted to remind us of the beauty of love.

3

Linea nigra is a black line, a pigmented path, which runs from an expectant mother's navel to her pubic bone. When the line is undetected (and it is always undetected unless a woman is pregnant), they call it *linea alba*, a white line.

When an embryo is only a few days old, his future is outlined with invisible ink. When he grows, this concealed line—a conceived person's protruding presence—darkens and widens. A wavy green vine on a hospital monitor signifies a heartbeat; *linea nigra*, a black line—a blunt, blasphemous mother's triumph.

Look at somebody's grave: crisscrossed planks (or lines) are like a person's check-out from a hotel: he was here, and then a check mark was put in his place as though he left, deserted, escaped. Lines and arrows, bloody-red, on war maps show soldiers advancing; many will be shot dead.

Your great grandfather stored treacherous tracer bullets in his right shoulder: this triggered the interest of his grandkids. At our dacha in a subtle suburb of St. Petersburg (where a village would turn into a city without announcement), Granddad watered red puffed-up strawberries and green gaunt cucumbers, and we imagined him in his army fatigues and a green field cap with a red Soviet star. The hose in his muscular hands was like a machine

gun.

Flesh flattens even before you succumb to the earth. Eyes become even, pale, teary lakes; cheeks are sunken. The body burrows into the sand, body tissue gives way and disappears, and what is left is a Zen line guarded by dusty digits on bare-boned granite: 1913–2007. And occasionally, you are an unknown hero soldier, and there is no trace at all.

We anticipated your great grandfather dying before you were born (one in and one out, as in an overcrowded warehouse), so we prematurely and erroneously erased him from our senses. He still engaged in conversations on conventional themes like his Medi-Cal or a medal given to him sixty years after the Nazis were crushed; he still cared about us and his contorted-by-illness-yet-continuing life, but his younger son said once, when a polyglot nurse, politely greeting us in Russian, English, and Spanish, turned on the TV for him: "He is already watching some other TV." As though there were some far away fantasies on phantom TVs available only to those who already had crossed a mysterious line.

What color is it when crossed? Is this transition to the other world indeed permanent, like a line drawn by a permanent marker?

For you, whose life is just starting, the line is still black.

...Not so long after your birth you were chaperoned around in your toy-sized infant car seat, and an old man ogling you on his way out of the supermarket and on the way to his demise asked, "How old is she?"

"She is only one month," replied your father, proudly beaming.

"She has a long way to go!" he exclaimed without evident envy.

Linea nigra, a black line.

4

It is almost impossible to believe that something, once non-existent and silent, is finally revealing itself. Sitting late at night in front of a blue crystal screen, I place my right hand on the crown of the world's head (on the plastic back of my warm, amenable mouse) switching languages and shuffling events, playing with a necklace of Internet links, jumping from recovered paintings looted by the Nazis to Nabokov's Berlin in the twenties, and from a Sumatra disaster to South America's currency gains. My left hand is on top of my belly, detecting movements which just weeks ago were absent. But you had already lived in my womb for several full months.

For those months nobody heard you as you held your umbilical breath.

You were like a planet that, as everybody knows, exists, but no one has ever been there.

How, out of nothing, did something come?

Or, as your Italian father's ikebana teacher would say in her brazenly broken English, "How out of nothingness came this mind-blowing somethingness?"

The world looks distant and disengaged. Its sultry surface facing me seems to be uneventful. News reports invariably have to do with somebody else. In my life, everything's neutral; even a big dog of danger is neutered; nothing is new.

But now I'm made aware that something seemingly absent for more than four months (no quickening, no quirky karate kicks) had actually hidden itself and, before the time struck, did not indicate its portentous presence. Could it be that what we consider the lack of miraculousness just hesitates to make itself evident?

In California, in the evenings after my comfy computer petrification at a 9-to-5 high-tech firm, I wasn't used to lifting my head up. Those few basic aluminum-colored stars hiding behind our domestic negligent smog failed to capture my interest—but in Hawaii, happily pregnant and unemployed, I ascended Mauna Kea and, deposited into the freezing darkness with a cup of free tea from the Gemini observatory, wrapped in a warm cocoon of fleece clothes under a sclerotic sky covered with a silver web of capillaries—multitudes and multitudes of unreachable planets—realized that there are many invisible things.

It is never "nothing"—because something hides itself all the time.

5

Is there any connection between a child and a fruit?

Or have I myself become a fruitful tree?

In a magazine for future mothers I read: "Your uterus is now the size of a grapefruit; your embryo is the size of a grape."

6

A graying nurse in scholarly glasses smeared purple-colored jelly on my hemispherical stomach and attached to it, with a cord's help, a metal device she held in her hand.

I was all eyes.

She moved the sophisticated rectangular box away from my blithe belly, as though protecting its unconcerned contents.

Then I was all ears.

I heard a dispersed, shapeless, shy noise and waited for more. Finally, a limping rhythm, unsure of its delicate self, got on track, and I heard precise, clear heart beats.

I had two hearts.

7

Your great grandmother was restless and crazy, but she had lived in a time of unrest.

When the war with Finland came, she was settled right on the border with Finland; when the Leningrad blockade started, she was expecting a baby right in the middle of it—in the mad medley of it—living on the Staronevsky.¹

As the Nazis tightened their grip, the Soviets tightened their belts. And then they boiled those old cowhide belts and ate them, together with starch glue on the walls beneath the wallpaper.

In Leningrad, life dried up, diminished to the size of a shrunken dry fruit discovered on a dusty and desolate shelf by a "kozha da kosti" ("skin and bones"—that's how Russians call a person starving to death). That apricot and a tuft of spring grass that he'll eat is his lucky strike of the day.

Food was scarce and the streets scary; a ghost—an anemic, pale boy wrapped in a white bed sheet so as not to be recognized—could jump on you, bring you down into a snowdrift and take away your bread coupons. Without your hundred grams—several bread crumbs—you would die.

Your great grandmother was evacuated through the Road of Life (also known as the Road of Death, since wagons with provisions and people were relentlessly bombed), but when the war ended, she—who played romances on the guitar and read playing cards like a gypsy, and a traveling gypsy she was, with her Roman nose, romantic ties with the criminal world, restlessness, deep eyes and dark past—placed her daughter in an orphanage with rough-housing kids.

In the orphanage, my mother experienced hunger.

My one-year-old father was evacuated in the beginning of the war from Byelorussia. His relatives who remained there, who had neither the

¹ Staronevsky Prospect, in the center of the city.

guts nor grave premonitions to leave, were led to the edge of a trench. My father's great grandfather, named Naftola, a ninety-four year old Jewish gravedigger by training, was among them and, protectively flanked on both sides by daughters and grandsons, probably did not care why those graves were not properly made. In seconds, all of them were dead and covered up by the earth.

When my father grew up, all he talked about during family reunions



was hunger and food.

How in exile in Novosibirsk, during those cold, bare years of war, they had a hen named Katya and a pig named Borya, and how poor Katya and Borya had to be eaten.

When I visit my parents' apartment, which looks like a resourcefully stocked grocery store, I stumble upon cans and canisters on the floor. I flounder counting dollar-store food containers.

Carrots and nuts, goat's milk, garlic, meticulously washed blueberries in plastic jars, that I have to bring back after consuming this deliriously desperate feast—for them to replenish.

And they are replenished themselves by knowing that they can play a part.

8

My Italian mother-in-law, in every way distant, sits somewhere in her sterile flat in Turin, ecstatic that her grandson caught chicken pox. "I'm so excited he's sick, she explains into a phone receiver. He has to stay home, and I will babysit. Finally, I will be useful."

My father stands in front of me in his subsidized studio in San Francisco and tests a baby sling. It smells like cheap soap, like a thrift store. He stands in front of me and demonstrates, while my mother scolds him for putting the sling on the wrong way.

Then he hands me a dreadful, old-fashioned potty made from bruised, weathered wood. Surely, it served generations of kids. My arthritic mother artistically sits and pretends to defecate.

"It cost five bucks at a garage sale, but a seller 'long-changed' us so that we

'earned' five dollars instead,"² my mother says and continues: "For that money we could purchase one more for our future granddaughter to use here during her visits. But your sister spoiled everything."

And she tells me about my sis, who, being so serious after a miscarriage about everything having to do with children, cried out upon realizing the mishap: "It is for a baby! It is a bad omen!" and ran back to return the folded bills.

During the times of physical changes (in my pregnant body, in my sister's malfunctioning body, in the aging bodies of my agile mother and father), vulnerability looms like never before. I can't fit myself behind the steering wheel, I weep tying my shoes, I slip in the bathtub, I slowly lower myself to the edge of the bed, I bend, trying not to hurt my enormous belly. I'm overwhelmed by an inability to do simple things when the complex job of creating a person takes place inside.

Enveloping the baby, I feel and look very fragile, and my parents become more paternal but also pathetic.

As though the new life turning within me gives their life a different turn.

9

After a visit with my observant obstetrician, I stare at tantalizingly temperamental teenagers outside a bike shop and ponder if I can relate to any of them.

Margalit, will you look like these giddy girls when grown up? Or like those broody or brawling boys? In the future there might be a similarity between you and them, but what bothers me in the present is that you already seem distant.

But how can I feel related to you? There is nothing yet to place on or under a pillow (perhaps, your hospital wrist band or the first diaper shirt) or hug for the night. Surprisingly, I do not even have to follow rules on how to expand a placenta; how to divide growing cells; how to direct them toward your eyes, kidneys, or foot. Everything had already been set by somebody else—and I felt left out of business.

Therefore, to discover how to relate to you in the future, to that you who is now inside (in the womb), I turn outside (to the world).

I'm peeping at proverbial pimples, boys' low pants and girls' posh

² They gave him ten dollars; he thought it was twenty, and gave them fifteen in change.

pumps, and I feel no connection to them.

On realizing it, I get very frustrated, imagining that there will be, at your birth, no connection to you.

IO

A girl from New York, a thriving transplant who had learned an extinct language in Russia (in college, she studied Yiddish, and I—the more viable, virulent Hebrew), casually cautioned me that once my daughter was born, my life would be never the same.

Meaning that piles of poop-stained diapers would shield me from creating fastidious fiction, and baby babbles or cries—from the *New Yorker's* cartoons I flip through before falling asleep: this activity lets me skim characters and situations while staying firmly anchored to a bed

That your breast-sucking will be like a sanction, a sanction to stop being myself, because my life will never be the same either...because now everything would change!

I will be attached by my nipple to you and won't be able to move, when you, in your turn, will be like a puppy who does not want to let go of a glove or a lopsided ball, taking a firm stand on all fours, snarling while the owner tries to retrieve the slobbered-on thing (the slobbered-on thing in this case is my chewed-up breast)

Keeping an eye on you, I will not be able to keep an eye on myself or the world

A sudden tunnel tired vision that I will develop—

A soccer mom's visor will be firmly positioned over my unmade-up eyes

It will be like SIDS, the sudden infant death syndrome that will overcome me, meaning that after delivering an infant, I myself will die and never have my own life, apart from a newly minted newborn

No bold, borderline books that I want to relive

No faraway countries rising like ghosts from those bold books, whose grass is being trampled, like book pages, under my feet, when I finally reach a different continent

No open-air blues concerts with summer drunks lining up in front of port-o-potty green cabins, draining the last water drips from plastic faucets while listening to sad, rhythmic songs chock-full of choked back tears and color

No instant success from my literary stunts, from my bipolar, border-

line books, which would bring me the means to go to different continents—
which, in turn, would bring me more ideas for books

No blues but baby blues—that's what the NY girl says

That's what she warned me about while permanently glued to her
white carton house in a cartoonishly tame neighborhood of exclusively
white, bleachy pale whitish neighbors having no sun and no blues

Did HER life ever change?

II

It's as if a fishing bob suddenly dives, and something inside me—the
bait, perhaps—is instantly swallowed by a persistent, strong fish...

It's as if a frog tries to surface, pounding water with its limp, little
legs while gurgling and reaching the top of the pond to gasp some fresh air...

It's as if one takes a polished chestnut speckled with sunlight, one
of those that are infinitely being carried in a pocket in hopes for finite luck,
and shakes it, hearing how something inside it knocks and rolls shyly and
gently...

Everything goes into a boisterous, boiling pan of word witchery:
simmering waters trembling under the sun; crawling crickets touching things
with their cautious moustache; a round, firm bee's nest pulsing under an
open palm...

One can evoke the whole animal world with its cryptic nature and
creatures to describe what is going on.

But it is only a new baby busily moving inside me.

I2

At night, I cannot sleep.

In those popular preparatory books they say that when a mother is
awake, her fetus is usually dozing; when a mother is sound asleep, the unsu-
pervised fetus starts to hiccup and kick.

Not true with us. We are in sync.

You are restlessly swimming and almost knocking me over, water
splashing in the womb.

I am reckless, letting myself rock on the nightly insomnia waves.

Prior to your conception, I segregated my dark self from the world;
days passed in prostration, procrastination, contemplation or writing. Single-
handedly, I faced the dreaded duality of the day, when routine would over-

come depth.

Have you ever watched how a mother and daughter, arms around
each other's shoulders or waists, go to another room to confide secret tales?
They need that seclusion; they unite to discuss.

Only several months pregnant, I am alone, but inside me there is
one more me, and it adds a different quality to my solitude.

I3

...Waking up worried: where are those wiggly movements and wob-
bly karate kicks?

...Living as a schizophrenic, as it is perfectly normal to sense in your
wholesome body somebody else, to paranoiacally listen to "voices," to panic
when not hearing gurgling or tapping...

It's all in reverse: a mental patient is considered healed when they
finally convince him that he is alone, when he is not guided by illegitimate
ghosts; when he becomes so incensed and thick-skinned that he ceases pay-
ing attention to voices or stops believing in little people inside his stomach
or head...

On the contrary, many lend a sympathetic ear to a woman who
claimed that she had heard her child's "voice"; who, still pregnant, imagined
him grown up, coloring her mildly grey, monotonous middle-age.

A man hearing voices suspects that he is becoming insane. Sensing a
separate life inside her, a woman is jubilant.

And in this case, it's not a phantom—it's a fetus.

I4

A fur- and sugar-coated man from Putinesque Russia, an avid reader
and an avian traveler, surely knows the mystery of a woman from very afar...
he is not the first male to inform me that an expectant woman is extremely
autistic: she is oblivious of everything while transfixed on her own transfig-
uring shape.

Men offer thoughts about the miracle of motherhood. About lips
whispering to the whale of a belly. About an inspired gait and a peculiar gai-
ety, about the brightening of a future mom's face—"as though a Madonna's."

I belch, bellow at my Italian husband and move slowly, heavily, as
though carrying a yoke, no lightness in view.

For me the lightening is when a baby is supposed to "drop": this

happens when his head starts its customary descent into the pelvis.

Today my stern, steel-nerved obstetrician (the best surgeon in the department, they tell me) jokes that I'm carrying a basketball player—she is so elongated, he says, that he could even touch the tip of her head with his fingers (fingering me).

That probably means, he speculates, that she dropped and is ready for a new world, a new womb.

How big is the opening? I ask him.

He answers: two fingers.

According to old wives' tales and moth-balled myths, a pregnancy is something hidden, unknown—but this is a passer-by's view. From my point of view, it's mundane manufacturing (counting movements, measuring the uterus, taking a certain number of vitamins and, after thirty five, a certain number of risks); it is motherhood math.

15

Kneeling, your future father looks, from underneath, at my bare belly and says that this marble globe, this moving miniature mountain reminds him of our instincts and of the Stone Age.

He says that when we need to perform primitive calculations, we purchase a powerful Pentium.

When we feel a deep need to connect to somebody, we don't hold hands—we hook up shallow cables.

When we desire healing, we don't pray, because we preach pills.

But this bloated belly reminds us that we are from flesh.

That we have something primordial—it's not orderly circuits or irksome iPods flicked off by remote control; it is something that develops with diligence, despite our bad grades in Chemistry, Genetics, or Genesis.

"Listen, he says to me, isn't it wondrous? Those cells divide regardless of our trust in divinity, and the body of a fetus matures whether or not we are mature enough to raise a new human being."

And when he climbs the steps of these high-flown words, I nervously click my way through Websites and sink down a dark well of diagnoses:

- 1) prolapsed cord
- 2) low amniotic fluid
- 3) fetal distress
- 4) torn sac, slow heartbeat
- 5) mermaid legs

6) spina bifida

7) two-headed monsters

We are both talking about the same thing: the intricate forces of nature.

16

It emerged so effortlessly; it was never important.

On its own something was going on, unannounced in the first few days or maybe few weeks.

Still, despite this ease, my body revolted: two nights in a row I was rolling on a cool Peruvian rug as on burning coals, with a pain burrowing into my lower back—an embryo, as a mole, was burrowing down the uterus lining.

There was almost no will there—it was a passive submission to chance, a zygote roulette.

But when a clump of cells grew bigger, pity grew together with it.

Bellowing to protect a protruding belly from my spouse's elbows; pushing him away when he trespassed on my side of the bed. There was a pity toward what was within, the pity toward a pit placed there by an invisible, yet inquisitive, force.

Pity and hate.

When I hated myself, I hated it together with me because it shared my dull days and daily depression—but I loathed it only when I considered it to be a part of me. When I thought it to be separate—a unique human being with its own bent—I had high expectations.

And shivered reading a horror story about a loony who wanted a baby of her own so much that she slaughtered a woman and cut out of her a full-grown fetus...Like it was an organ not needed, like an appendix.

I was going slowly on freeways; I pushed the steering wheel with an airbag far away from myself; I sit on a pillow—to keep the baby invincible in case of a car crash.

Something that appeared there by chance (that zany zygote roulette, a twenty-five percent probability every month that a healthy woman from eighteen to thirty five years of age faces by flipping a coitus coin) now was becoming my choice.

Now I wanted it badly.

17

An expectant mother limits the activities she undertakes during the day: no casual sex, no casual wining and raw food dining, nor sightseeing from an unpressurized cabin of a helicopter or scuba diving, no lifting of weights.

No lifting of a world's wanton burden on swayed back shoulders; no accessory sadness tipping off her center of gravity (she already has trouble performing her belly-balancing act).

Taking a fetus' future in her own hands, she consumes great amounts of organic health foods, strongly believing that this will give him a high IQ and an ability to endure high altitude soccer. To make him succeed, for the three-fourths of the year everything should be tranquil.

Thus, sacrificial sacramental parents assume they must limit their horizons to widen those of the newborn.

18

A would-be baby reminds me of danger.

From high school I brought home doggy bags of biology knowledge: meiosis, mitosis, splitting hairs over a double helix, division of cells. Dangers awaiting my daughter inside me (now she is busily duplicating her DNA strands) differ from those that catch me on the outside.

I see myself with a stroller walking blightly lit streets. What if a shabby white man dressed in bleak black (or a brightly-dressed black man with the whites of his eyes blazing) approaches me with a knife. I would be scared to death.

This summer in China, somewhere near the remote remnants of the Great Chinese Wall, we let our dutiful chauffeur take a well-deserved rest (confused by our desire to be left alone, he continued to slowly dribble after us in his dusty "Datsun") and walked empty-handed on an empty road. Only a beat-up car loaded with scary large stones (one fell, jumped high as a ball several times and landed at our feet) or a horse carriage with people of unknown intentions and destinations would pass by, and, giving them way, we stepped onto the dirt.

The buildings around us seemed to be aged military barracks, which, after their retirement, applied for another position—just to be useful. As we could see from afar, children's clothes hung on invisible strings, men swaggered in sweatpants; at that moment, far away from my land of origin, I felt omnipotent, happy.

A strange, non-linear force of fate brought me first to Kazakhstan and then to China—it was impersonated by a wheel-chaired or, better, wheel-chained woman who could not walk herself, but who gave me a gift of being airborne. Olga, whose petite, pitifully fragile, fleshless body was overcompensated by overly large glasses and an acute intellect, arranged a generous grant for me, and I landed first in Almaty, and then Beijing.

My plane could fall in Almaty, in Astana, in Beijing, in Xian.

Back in the U.S., peering into a Kazakhstan life reflected in ripples of Internet news, I read that a flight engineer in Almaty came too close to a plane engine and was sucked in by a freak force. In the city of Beijing there was bird flu and in some villages—leeches poisoning the waters (in China, we were afraid not of criminals, but of creatures: if any native touched a tourist, he could end up in the hands of a firing squad).

Walking through the Forbidden City with a large yellow umbrella with a tattoo on its leg ("this protection from the Sun is donated to plain folk by the president"), I ran risks (which were implied rather than implemented): to be burned by sun rays, to be bitten by an insect, to be hit by a stone before it found solace at our feet destroying the car bumper of our guide.

And what about you, Margalit? The same way I miscarried many promising projects, I could have miscarried you, too. If a spermatozoon rushed to the left instead of the right, when an egg was waiting for it on another sidewalk, like on a blind date which went geographically wrong even before being consummated—you would not be born. What if chromosomes, cosmoses in themselves, did not pair as needed...what if I paired with a different man?

If my cervix were somewhat "incompetent"; if I had a mioma or tumor; if my placenta would be too thin or too old...How many times in a bathroom stall I was afraid that with too much straining you would end up squeezed out; how in the shower I stared into murky, mad waters trying to see if you had fallen...

At any moment an embryo can meet a sudden, sad death; it is preyed upon by the same misfortunes that plague adults: bad nutrition, wrong timing, unforeseen circumstances, not enough faith.

19

Margalit overcomes all the rules of geometry: from a round shape ("you look like you engulfed a cannonball," a passerby informs me), from a

hardened coconut of my belly she constructs a square, showing at once all her extremities.

What is this one: a hand, a foot, a hard head or a soft butt?

My belly extends every possible way—at a visit to the obstetrician, when I strive to align my hard-to-operate body (it's like a complex mechanism with its buttons not working) in the middle of a tissue-covered chair, she jerks to the right, crumpled under the right dome of the uterus, visible as a fish under a thick layer of water.

I feel as though she unabashedly puts herself on display. As though, under inquisitive obstetrical eyes, it's not a fetus, but my internal organ—a kidney or a colon—extending to show its brazenly angular and firm forms through my stretched skin...

I am ashamed.

When she was only four gestational months, she ran away from a rude, rowdy African-American doctor who scared her while attaching a device to listen to her heartbeat. He tried placing it on different spots (I gasped upon hearing silence—is she still there?)—and each time she ran away. She moved inside me eluding his roughness, and I, finally relieved and relaxed after sensing her activities and her acting up, watched with pleasure his impatient and startled face.

When I turn to my left, the left side of my uterus gets heavier as though a cannon ball were slowly rolling into a niche; the left side of the belly grows a bump.

She is not comfortable.

When I turn to my right, I feel funny on the left side: at the moment when she finally finds a new position, when she does not expect any more changes, her cozy capsule betrays her and shifts again.

She is again bothered with no evident reason. And again she has to move.

She can achieve convenient coziness if she follows me: if I turn onto my left, she needs to take a seat on the left; if I turn to my right, she has to shift right; otherwise, she just hangs for her dear life onto uterus walls, like a cat balancing on all fours on an inclined table.

Thus, before her "outer" life even starts, she already has to adjust to her mom...Should I simply outweigh her?

Rather, we have to listen to each other's desires. When I turn without giving her a timely warning, I feel painful discomfort: she tries to keep herself in her former position, her hands and feet, as cat's claws, scratch my innards.

I must proceed slowly, with caution and intuition, repositioning myself inch by inch, inkling by inkling, as though instructing her on what's going to happen next...

This tactic should continue when she is born.

20

A fresh sensation of newness—such clean air—when leaving home, as though a traveler, with a bulky, big-bellied "hospital" bag.

Gates automatically open. No metal noise. It is still quiet. It's seven a.m.

The world has been already informed.

I always had this very same feeling when leaving the obnoxious, boxy apartment complex for Patagonia or Tahiti: something is ready to happen, but you don't know what to expect.

Planes from the nearby airport fly over the Bay, flounder in the mirroring water and add to my feeling of transit. Or transition, perhaps. Black gates and blue bay right in front are the same, yet they are transformed. As in my childhood, at the end of summer when we fled to a city flat from a cold dacha...even the linoleum seemed strange, compared in my mind to the chinky floors at the countryside.

The orderly flat, left on its own for three summer months, had had to learn how to embrace people again. Now, after a long separation, it looked unrecognizable (water pipes crossly grumble when turned on for the first time after a break), and the unused, vacant air was not yet mixed with our breath...Nothing is changed, but our minds have the ability to experience things as though new.

Then, in this transformed or, better, transfixed, world, she appears, snub-nosed and silky. Tightly holding new limbs, snuggling up to platelets and lymph, I'm suddenly enveloped by sympathy toward withered women who once were newborns.

After Margalit's birth I read in a newspaper, almost turned into a police blog to attract receding spores of readers, about a high society lady who had lost her husband in the war in Korea. She was sweet and demented. Young girls in their twenties, gangly gang members in blue baseball uniforms (their rivals favored maroon jerseys), befriended her and moved to her flat. From there they sold crack and routinely turned away social workers who came to check on the old lady and do her household chores.

The sweet lady emanated a bad smell; her potty had never been

emptied; her sheets were not changed; her mattress sported bedsores. She attempted to call the police but hadn't enough memory to continue a comprehensible conversation. She would phone, say "hi" and then hesitate, clinging to her own words and forgetting what she wanted to say.

Months passed before the gang fooling this frail, ailing woman was caught. During the court hearings, it was revealed that girly gang members ate the meager meals brought to the poor widow and even scolded the social workers that it was not tasty. The widow had lost so much weight that she could hardly walk.

Peering into her parchment-like face in the newspaper, I felt pity for her, since now I knew that once she was as innocent, helpless and silky as a baby fresh from the womb, exactly like Margalit.

21

Making good use of vegetation, the book states: "It takes a lot of pushing and stretching to move a baby the size of a melon through a cervical opening that starts out the size of a kidney bean."

22

Lying feverishly in a hospital bed a few hours after delivery, I visualize, again and again, the bewildered look on her frantic face... on her face with unfocused blue eyes and a mouth in the shape of a triangle (even mute, it moves, sending me signals)...

Seeing in my mind's eye her first appearance in this world, I meekly smile, knowing that right at this moment she sleeps in her see-through glass menagerie nearby.

This is the person, who is already drastically different (and several hours older) from the one who emerged from my womb.

This one, looking in her protective container like a shiny museum exhibit on a display, has a fuller face and less puffy eyes than the one placed on my breast by nurses excited by her perfection ("Oh that hair, oh those eyelashes, her beauty is so unreal that she looks like a doll!"). This one already learned how to root straight for my breast, whereas the first one was disoriented in her new world and cried when they tried to orchestrate the moment of closeness.

This growth of life is perceived by my quirky mind as two parallel life events: one minutes, or moments, before (already stored in memory) and

another that takes place just this second (in front of my eyes).

The one before (how she emerged after almost tearing my legs apart, how I exclaimed, disoriented, to laughing nurses, "She has such a big tongue!", how I looked at her, but she was looking away, occupied because her skin color was inspected and her hair was washed) is a rich source of memories.

The one that is now (how she snores in her cuvette, how I adjust to my flat stomach) is full of unpredictability, it is full of the future.

23

She was born a strong girl: she could almost hold her head upright from the first moments of life; she kicked an old, ladylike nurse who tried to wrap her in a used hospital blanket.

She played with her tongue; she already had all the reflexes: grasping the needle an RN poked her with, flinching when touched, annoyed when hungry, crying when wet. She immediately started crawling on my breast on all fours like a kitten, meanwhile entangling herself in my gold chain.

She jumped into life not wasting time, ready to act.

But a gap in perception, a delay between two points in space, the hole between two generations showed herself in her Grandma.

For Margalit, it did not take long to get adjusted to a different life, coming from a dark, confined hollow into a lighted world hallway: she immediately started sucking colostrum and wetting a colossal number of diapers. But it took a much longer time for her Grandma before her motherly milk flowed.

In the beginning, grandmother fussed, refusing to show compassion and motherly camaraderie toward her daughter who was a couple of months short of becoming a mother herself. She said that if there was no morning sickness, the pregnancy was a piece of cake. She said that nobody visited her in a maternity ward—why should she then? Then she proclaimed that perhaps it wasn't worthwhile for her to travel so far to see something that she remembers so closely: her own motherhood.

But as soon as she received the midnight call, she jumped on the last train and appeared in the hospital ward, despite all her earlier warnings that grandmothers and long commutes don't go together.

In no time she was sitting on her daughter's bed, peering intently into her granddaughter's cuvette with words that *her* afterbirth stitches healed right away with no residue and that *her* children did not cry at night.

Her children's diapers were cleaner, their hair much longer, their skin smoother; their stumps fell in three days.

She remembered very well that her milk flowed like a river, her blood after delivery went away like a tide, her baby stopped making sad faces as soon as she would wave her right hand.

Overall, it was a sharp contrast: her granddaughter's instincts kicked in right away, but her own motherly—or grandmotherly—instincts took time to surface, saddened, hardened, restrained by her hard and long life.

24

They all ask: after it passed, what can you say about your motherly feelings, your instincts? How were those nine months?

They all know the known, but whatever is known by them is simply not true. "Nine months is nothing except a physiological marathon," I address those who bought a familiar story of mother's glow and gnawing love. "The body does everything by itself; you have no control. It struggles, it stretches, it stringently aches. The days are measured by weight gain, heavy breasts, high blood pressure, the heavy burden of a womb, by a baby's heartbeat."

It is society—I say—that paints a rosy motherhood with blushing cheeks. It is simply not like that. A mother cannot love what she has yet to inspect. You have to know somebody to love them.

For me, there were no dreams—who will this baby be? There were no dreams of family vacations, of Chanukah gifts, of a son "who will be a mother's protector." Or of a grown girl playing the violin. My body was simply full with a baby; my mind was mulling over this white monitor, those black lines...

Then I stop short: if it is only a physiological marathon, why, instead of catching my breath when crossing a bumpy, rambunctious field, am I trying to catch every thought that crosses my mind?

25

On New Year's Eve you turned nine months, and your great grandfather turned ninety six—or, if we would clock him, we'd say "four until a hundred."

In your age, you count birthdays by months: on the first of each month, your grandparents visit and bring you a cake with several candles,

something that you, still satisfied by mother's milk and baby purees, had no use for.

In your great grandfather's condition, his children celebrated every day of his life: his cancer, for a while in a remission, returned in full force.

On New Year's Eve, gathered around a big table with kosher wine and smoked fish somewhat gentrified by mixed marriages and Russian pierozhki, your great grandfather's family marked the new year: if nothing happened during it, that would be good news.

This extended family was together in Russia, always gathering and gossiping about each other's salaries or salad recipes, and they brought this tradition to the U.S. In the new country, they were still holding grudges against each other, but going strong.

They gathered around your great grandfather, their placid, pale, weak patriarch. Always in an elegant suit, with a wide-brimmed hat and a tie, this time he was dressed in a brand-new coordinated sweatpants and sweat-shirt. This was the sign that this year for him would surely be different. His doctor informed the immediate family that in his condition people may live only days or months.

We did not know what gift to bring him for his birthday: his needs at the last stage of his life were simple and bare. Why clutter his apartment with rubbish? So we gave him a beautifully framed picture of his great granddaughter, who, in a sense, was his last big achievement.

He took it in his tired hands covered by pigmentation and said: "Good, very good." Till very recently he, who came to the U.S. in his late seventies, tried to take classes in English. And he said the word "good" in English—always staying in perfect mental, though no longer, physical, shape.

Then he started eating his birthday cake, carefully dissecting it with a teaspoon, but could not finish. He was too weak and had to go rest in a bedroom. He left the holiday table right at the moment we produced our cameras to take his picture holding his great granddaughter.

Then we decided to wait till he woke up—to take this last picture of the youngest and the oldest of the family clan.

But when he woke up, his nine-month-old great granddaughter, overwhelmed by a big number of relatives previously not seen by her, crumpled in my arms, with hair wet from heat and exhaustion, sound asleep.

Now you both were falling asleep frequently, in the most unusual places and times.

You—in your playpen, on top of a plush toy; your great grandfather—in an armchair, holding your picture and asking the pronunciation of

your Italian middle name.

When you were old enough to pronounce his name, he was dead.

26

The night we brought you home from an impersonal hospital room, where we counted the hours and how many times you wet diapers, I was awakened, not by your cries (you slept soundly in your bassinet), but by your father's exalted and wheezing whispers.

He was saying, "She walks, she walks, she walks!"

I placed a hand on his wet, as though sprayed from a pulverizer, hot forehead, and he woke up. He told me that he saw you in a dream, the real you with your lithe, little, languid, lanuged body—and that you walked, just several days old! He was foreseeing skills you would acquire as you grew, and he was already scared to death of these rapid changes, even in dreams.

The next morning, he touched a dark pigmented path running from my belly button...Once the dear dweller left its coconut-shaped uterus shell, the womb shrank, and the *linea nigra*, not stretched anymore, widened and paled.

He said, "I can't wait to see what ending you added to your fictitious story...after all these perturbations of labor...after she is finally born!"

What "ending" did he expect? It is true that the sueded pigmented line soon will be no more; it will disappear without a trace; scars will heal; previously tight tissues will soften, and with the introduction of solid food (crackers or carrots) the infant will stop looking like an undernourished invertebrate (perhaps a frog)—and will look plentiful, promising, plump.

According to my pregnancy book, after running its course, the *linea nigra* will turn into *linea alba*, a white line. It will be indistinguishable from the white plains of a warm and wide belly.

And this whiteness—a witness to fear of the unknown—teaches me: anything can happen; nothing or nobody is set in stone; nothing is written yet, because for both mother and a daughter the page starts anew:

Like a mother, a daughter also has a white line.