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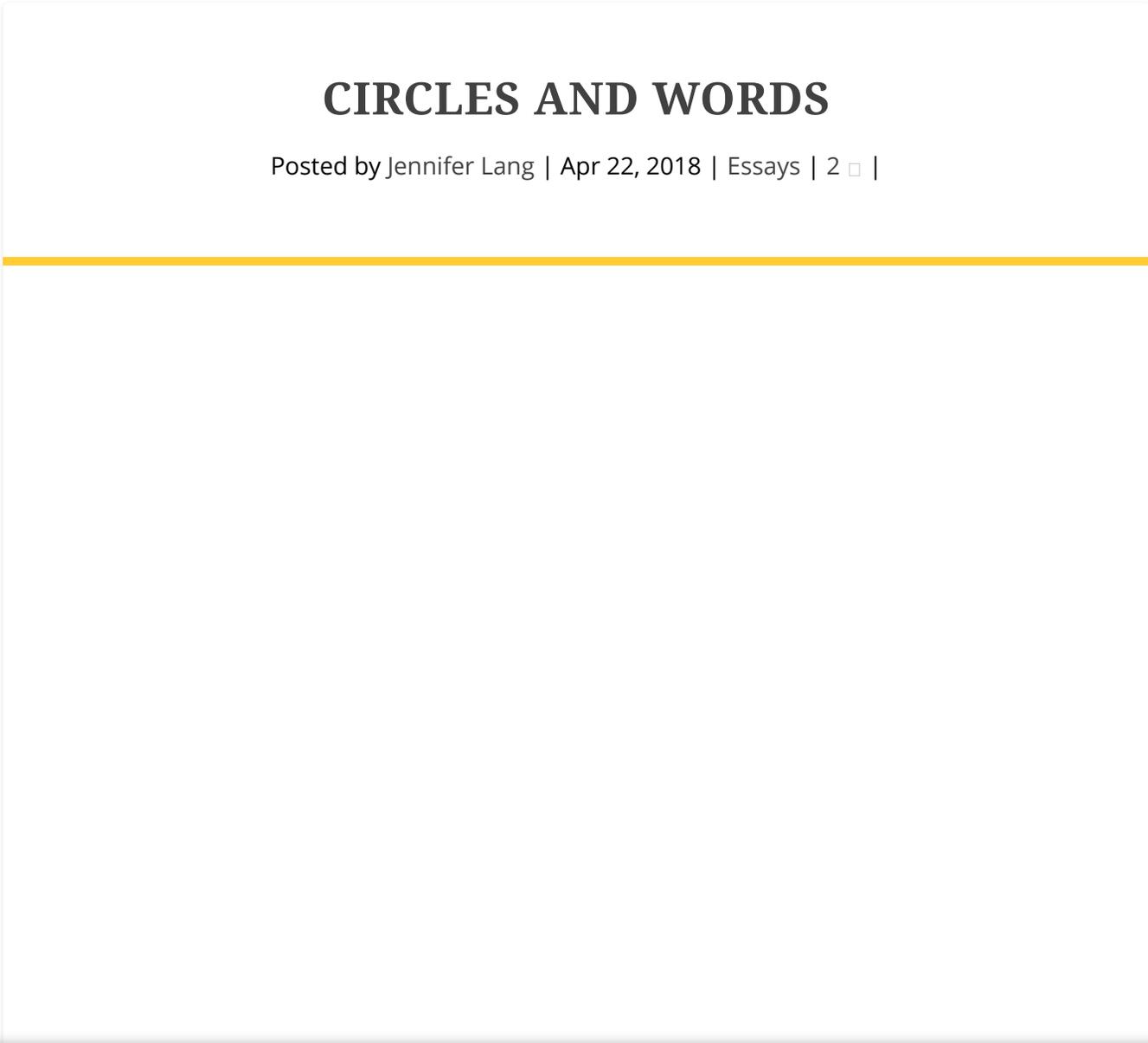
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CIRCLES AND WORDS

Posted by Jennifer Lang | Apr 22, 2018 | Essays | 2  |



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Photo by Jennifer Lang

by Jennifer Lang

"Excusez moi, Madame," I say, puckering my lips as if sucking on a Jolly Rancher sour apple candy.

A woman I assume to be the artist looks up and acknowledges me. Her shoulder-length hair blows wildly in the August wind. All weekend, we—husband, kids, I—gorged on rainbow-colored macaroons, navigated narrow alleys, and strolled the banks of the Saône and the Rhône Rivers in Lyon while dodging rainclouds. I peer at the large poster-size oeuvres d'art stacked, unframed, in a pile held down with rock paper weights.

"Comment avez-vous fait ceux-ci?" I ask how she made the prints in my most grammatically correct French, a language I studied extensively and speak fluently despite my glaring American accent.

Her eyes widen, delighted by my interest. She cuts a potato in half she says, gesturing a karate chop, dips it in acrylic paint, and presses it onto handmade Nepalese parchment paper: an amateurish, childlike technique with a whimsical effect.

I stroke the delicate sheet of vellum—thin and unevenly textured, frayed around its edges. Beneath the imperfectly round and colorful spheres dancing on the paper are handwritten words.

My family wanders ahead without me. None of them have any patience or interest in art, especially not in the outdoor French market version. The first few booths we passed seemed touristy with colored photographs of the Notre Dame de Fourvière Basilica alit at night and attempts to paint Old Lyon a la Monet or Renoir. This woman's work is different.

I sift through the heap, reading the random titles—38 places that make you dream, 17 unknown bodies of water, 55 kinds of clouds—awed by the creativity. The artist points out that no two are the same, neither the lists nor the circles nor the colors. The one on top resonates most with seven rows and eight columns, 56 circles and expressions starting with the word *prendre*. A common, irregular verb, *prendre* means to take, but here, combined with other words, they form idioms that take eons and total immersion to learn. I understand half of them. She pantomimes for extra clarity: *prendre des vessies par des lanternes* means to pull the wool over someone's eyes, *prendre la mouche* is to go ballistic, and *prendre ses cliques et ses claques* to pack up and leave. The repetition in her voice and on the page creates a meditative quality.

Some circles are uni-colored, others a mélange, one color inside another, like a bull's-eye. Some colors are opaque, others less homogenous, as if the artist had run out of ink in the process. Drawn in freehand, the circles are painted in tar black, bloody Mary red, Dijon mustard yellow, pigeon gray, and a dreary-day-in-London shade of blue. Every few rows are empty spots, random blanks, which maybe aren't random at all.

Art with words and words with art moves me. Art is ephemeral, whereas words are concrete, lasting. Words certify the art—its existence, its authenticity, its uniqueness. I cherish the look and feel of the three-dimensional decoupage mask in

cheekbones. My favorite piece of jewelry is a black-and-white bracelet my mom gave me with old typewriter keys that spell: LOVE TO WRITE.

But words as lists makes this woman's creations even more striking. When I came across Arthur Krystal's words in his *New York Times* essay, "The Joy of Lists," my control-freak Virgo heart burst from beauty: lists are "a precision and formality that makes us think we've got a handle on things... a ceremonial flourish against amnesia and chaos."

"*Comment avez-vous pensé à tous ses mots?*" I ask the artist how she conjured up the particular phrases. A multilingual logophile, I love seeing where verbs, adjectives, and nouns intersect when taking the three-letter root of a word and manipulating it to make a handful of new ones like in Hebrew, the language of the country I call home that I have yet to master. I particularly enjoy how the meaning of one word can change when added to another like in French; *lécher* means to lick and *vitrines* means showcase or window and together *lèche-vitrines* means window-shopping.

"*Lisez cela,*" she commands me to read a piece of paper taped to the side of the table. In handwritten calligraphy, it says:

Des listes pour apprivoiser le monde

Des listes pour le plaisir des mots, l'alphabet des couleurs.

C'est une peinture de cueillette

Des listes, comme une joyeuse prière,

et se faire croire que le monde est un collier de bonbons.

After a dozen years of formal French, I still don't comprehend every word, but the gist suffices. This artist makes lists "to tame the world, for the pleasure of words, the alphabet of colors, the known and the unknown... lists are like a joyful prayer and make us believe the world is a candy necklace."

My family returns, begging me to leave. I can't. I want the first list that caught my eye and dig in my wallet for euros, while the artist rolls my purchase for safekeeping during our long journey home first to New York and years later to Israel. Now, whenever I look at it, framed, in the corner of our living room, sunlight glinting on its glass, I recall our blithe summer stroll along the river's edge in southern France, emboldened by the lyrical, romanticized expressions like *prendre*

translated as wishful thinking. Like the artist, like Krystal, I'm drawn to the definite arrangement of items, "a continuing incalculable exchange between the self and the world." We *take note* of things as we go, "as we move inexorably forward, listing toward oblivion."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jennifer Lang

American born, French by marriage, Israeli by choice, Jennifer writes mostly about her divided self. Her essays have appeared in *Under the Sun*, *Ascent*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Full Grown People* and upcoming in *The Tishman Review* and *Brevity*. Honors include Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays nominations and finalist in 2017 *Crab Orchard Review's* Literary Nonfiction Contest. Find her at israelwritersalon.com where she teaches writing. Follow her on twitter @JenLangWrites.



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Karen DeBonis on April 23, 2018 at 5:23 am

Tres beautiful, Jennifer! (That's the extent of my French.) I'm a minimal list-maker, at best, but I get it now.

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Marianne on April 23, 2018 at 6:17 pm

Tres marvelous!
Avec amour, su mere!

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