



Under the Sun

"An essay is a short piece of prose in which the author reveals himself in relation to any subject under the sun."
J.B. Morton

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Things Lost, Things Found

by JENNIFER LANG on Sep 11, 2016 • 12:01 am

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Photo by Chris Schmidt

Things Lost, Things Found

by Jennifer Lang

Lost: An easy answer to basic questions: "Where are you from?" or "What's home?"

America, my country of birth?
France, whose baguette, Cabernet Sauvignon, silky scarves, leather handbags, compulsory *bises* on each cheek, and all-around decorum still entice and enchant me? Israel,

where I reside because my foreign spouse refused to spend one more year in my homeland? Where my neighbors and friends come from all over the globe, making the world seem big and small at the same time? Where the sun shines more than the rain falls, and where, within its limited 8,000 square miles, lie the Mount Hermon ski resort, the luminous Mediterranean Sea, and the partly desolate, partly developed Negev desert? Where the national anthem, called *HaTikva* meaning The Hope, always makes my skin shiver and eyes well, a full-body sensation? Where I, a mixed-heritage American-born, French by marriage, and Israeli by choice, seem to belong?

Found: Maturation

When I visit, I see the beauty of the Bay Area as well as the reality: the homeless sleeping in doorways, with stolen grocery carts full of meager belongings at their feet, up and down Market Street in downtown San Francisco; an exorbitant cost of living creating a gap between the over- and under-privileged; an insufferable drought; and a failing public school system. Where I live, I see the beauty of a desert that blooms, as well as the reality: barriers, checkpoints, random acts of violence by extremist Jews and Muslims, racial profiling, and no solution.

Lost: Dorothy's ruby red slippers

- Cindy Bradley on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Armen Bacon on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Cindy on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Cindy on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Peggy on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Josie Earl on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Linda MacKillop on Finding Livelihood
- Cindy on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Maddie Lock on For Remembering How To Live Without You
- Jennifer Lang on Going Home Again
- Jennifer Lang on Things Lost, Things Found
- Melissa on Marge
- Melissa on Marge
- Melissa on Marge
- Stephen Gutierrez on Marge
- Stephen Gutierrez on Things Lost, Things Found
- Davis Birks on Vinescape
- Renee E. D'Aoust on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
- Kirie Pedersen on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Kirie on Marge
- K.C. Pedersen on A Mennonite Soldier
- Melpub on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
- Melpub on Meta-Hamster
- Melpub on Marge
- marian kilcoyne on Going Home Again
- Melissa on Marge
- Renee E. D'Aoust on For Remembering How To Live Without You
- Renee E. D'Aoust on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
- Jennifer Lang on Things Lost, Things Found
- Bobbie Wayne on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
- Bobbie Wayne on Marge
- Miriam on For Remembering How To Live Without You
- Cindy on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Renee E. D'Aoust on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
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- Renee E. D'Aoust on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
- Renee E. D'Aoust on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
- Renee E. D'Aoust on Things Lost, Things Found
- Sophia Kouidou on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
- Mel Livatino on Death, Driveways, and Dreams
- Melissa on Marge
- Mel Livatino on Going Home Again
- Mel Livatino on Going Home Again

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Mel Livatino on Going Home Again
Mel Livatino on I Love You, Please
Christine on Marge
Shiv Dutta on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
Shiv Dutta on Aloha
Danna Ephland on The Dance Studio as Writer's Studio
Renee E. D'Aoust on Aloha

Lost: My American metaphor

My California driver's license when I moved to New York in 2001. My New York driver's license when it expired in 2012, the year after our move to Israel, when we no longer had proof of residence.

Found: New metaphor

An Israeli compulsory identity card called *Teudat Zehut*: a laminated card with a unique nine-digit number, first and last names, date of birth (both civil and Hebrew date), date of issue and expiration (civil and Hebrew), father's and mother's first names, ethnicity (if issued before 2005), place of birth, gender and portrait photo. A card with a separate appendix that lists the current address, previous name(s), marital status, citizenship, name, birth date, gender, and identity number of spouse and children. A card every resident receives at the age of sixteen in the spring of junior year when high schools organize a moving ceremony for parents to witness their children becoming full-fledged citizens. A card that my daughters each held up proudly for pictures with their friends. A card on which the deceased child's information will no longer appear, no matter how the child dies, whether in a war, through an act of terror, or an illness. A card that reminds me of where we live.

Found: Fear

January 18, 1991: Philippe and I, newlyweds, sitting with gas masks over our faces, my entire body shuddering involuntarily, in our Haifa apartment's sealed room on the first night of the Gulf War.

April 15, 2003: My friend Cathleen, removing my wedding rings and wristwatch and kissing my forehead, in Philippe's absence, as doctors wheeled me into emergency surgery at White Plains Hospital to receive a blood transfusion, remove a fallopian tube that had ruptured from an undetected ectopic pregnancy, and tie the remaining one.

July 8, 2014: Philippe, our teenage daughters and I, huddling in our basement shelter in Raanana, Israel during Operation Protective Edge, our second war, the girls' first, and nobody's last.

*

Lost: The way around

Gone, when we relocated from Oakland, California, where I knew every shortcut and backroad, to White Plains, New York. Gone, when the kids, then two, four, and seven, each in a booster seat of the Toyota Sienna minivan, witnessed me breakdown as I crisscrossed Westchester Avenue, east and west, until I eyed a policeman, pulled over, and sobbed, "Can you please point me in the direction of Cobb Avenue?" Gone again, six years later, when we relocated to Raanana, Israel, a city I had never heard of until my husband's software company set up its headquarters there, to expose our children, then eight, ten, and fourteen, to their extended family and to life outside of Westchester for what I called The Year of Living Differently.

Lost: My bearings every time I walk up subway stairs in Manhattan, unable to decipher uptown from downtown, Hudson River from East River, despite a keen sense of direction.

Found: www.waze.com: "Get the best route, every day, with real-time help from other drivers."

An Israeli invention that Google bought on July 25, 2013 for \$966 million.

An app that I cannot drive without to navigate the narrow streets of Tel Aviv.

Lost: Default—English

After I mastered French, which I first began learning at age six, and then could peruse *Marie Claire* magazine for pleasure and understand *Le Grand Bleu* without subtitles. After I immersed myself in Hebrew for five hours a day, five days a week for almost five years in my early twenties, and pursued a Master's in International Relations at the University of Haifa. After we raised our children speaking our own language, a mishmash of Hebrish and Franglais, depending on mood, energy level, and circumstances.

Found: Humility that borders on humiliation

When I open emails from my daughters' schools and cannot read the weekly newsletters and sometimes ask them to translate. When I stammer in front of the check-out clerk asking me if I am interested in special deals at Superpharm or Supersol while I am trying to bag my purchases and pay. When I cannot contribute to a conversation about the Iran deal or American presidential candidates because I cannot tolerate the first and feel disconnected from the second. When I need fifteen minutes to peruse a menu in Hebrew. When I turn off the hourly news on the car radio because I don't understand the turning of phrases and passive tense. When anyone—a waiter, a bureaucrat, a stranger on the other end of the phone—asks if I prefer to speak in English.

Found: Nimble-minded-ness

To attend yoga classes in Turkey and Thailand, Berlin and Lausanne, and let the foreign words flow over and through me. To teach yoga in Hebrew or French or English to my students from Israel, Switzerland, and South Africa. To speak slowly, use simple words, gesticulate, and never assume everyone speaks and understands my native tongue.

*

Lost: My childhood home

Where my older brother sometimes jumped out from under the stairs and scared me in the dark. Where, with a black polyester cape tied around his neck, he performed a magic show for my eighth birthday party in our backyard. Where I pleaded with him to let me enter his room or climb up the tree house ladder and play. Where I used to sit on my parents' bed and rifle through my mother's art-deco jewelry box while they primped themselves to meet friends for dinner or dancing in the city. Where, with my best friends Judy and Marcia, we lay down on my green shag carpet and read Judy Blume's *Forever*, giggling every time we stumbled upon words like sex or

semen. Where, the week before middle school started, my first boyfriend Mike and I locked ourselves in the basement closet and pretended to make-out during 7-Minutes-in-Heaven. Where I crammed all my friends into our newly built cedar hot tub to celebrate my sixteenth birthday. Where my parents realized, after my brother and I had left for college, they needed change and told all of their friends, “We’re going through mid-life crisis, but instead of changing spouses, we’re changing houses.”

Lost: Connection to the Golden State

Where Vietnam vets and hippies and Hare Krishna hang out on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley; where my father always bought us hotdogs at Cal Berkeley football games; and where Lombard Street and Coit Tower and Ghirardelli Square precede me. Where I had always assumed I would reside after college, like the Vietnam vets and the hippies and the Hares, like my parents, and their parents before them.

Lost: Close friends, intentionally and unintentionally

When illness intervened: Kim, who lost her fight against Childhood Hodgkin Lymphoma, supposedly the most curable kind of cancer, a year after a casual, see-you-later hug and kiss goodbye at high school graduation; and Nomi, whose imperfect heartbeat required a pacemaker, which, a few years later, malfunctioned at the age of thirty and caused her to keel over at Gymboree while watching her toddler play. When jealousy interfered: Fabienne, a Parisian art student who invited me to her family’s apartment for Jewish holidays and New Year’s Eve and birthday dinners and then, eighteen months later, wrote me a hateful airmail letter, dumping me like a backbiting lover, after I moved to Israel and met my future French husband. When email wasn’t yet invented and I moved abroad: my best friend Joey, who, after confessing he was a homosexual in high school, slept with every available man in the Bay Area, just as the AIDS epidemic erupted.

Lost: Fierce attachments

First funeral: a week after Thanksgiving weekend in 1981 when my maternal grandpa slipped in the shower and, a few days later, died in a local Los Angeles hospital of complications from heart disease. I still hear him swirling his Scotch and Bourbon after work and chuckling over his latest punny—a cross between funny and pun. Second funeral: in March 1991, six months before my wedding in Jerusalem, when my paternal *zeida* died only days after checking into some San Francisco hospital with benign heart complaints. I longed for him to stroke my cheek and call me his *shana madela* one last time. Missed funeral: a few months after my wedding when my fifty-nine-year-old uncle Sid, my mother’s only sibling, succumbed to a massive heart attack in his sleep, alone, in his Venice Beach apartment. One minute he had stood under our *chuppah* alongside my husband and our parents, reciting one of the seven blessings for the bride and groom, in bumpy, unfamiliar transliterated Hebrew, and the next, he was gone. Another miss: early the next year, my demented grandma who surrendered to an onslaught of strokes and a badly broken heart after the loss of her son Sid. How I used to love petting her cheeks, as soft as a baby chick. Third

funeral: eight years later, my Rumanian-born *boba*, the least likable and most bitter of my grandparents, after she took her last breath. I cried, not for the loss of her as much as for the passing generation, the buffer between my parents and their own mortality and, therefore, mine.

Found: Gratitude twined with regret

For the Craftsmen bungalows and the Victorian and the wood-shingled houses; for the bodies of water visible from my parents' street—the Pacific Ocean to the west, the Golden Gate Sound to the north, and the San Francisco Bay to the east; for the bridges—Bay, Richmond, San Mateo-Hayward, and Carquinez—connecting my county to the others and for the world-famous orange vermillion bridge that, when not covered in fog, twinkles above sailboats and tugboats and cargo ships passing under its span; and for the steep streets and the century-old cable cars that ride them; above all, for the mindset—the free-to-be-you-and-me, nobody judges if your shoes match your purse, whether or not your toenails are painted, or if you shave your underarms; if you're hetero- or homosexual, married or single, a parent or childless; if you work from home or in an office or perhaps not at all. For time: I had to grow up, leave, move far away and come back to understand I was born and raised in a place that is *sui generis*, of his, her, its, or their own kind, in a class by itself.

*

Lost: Affinity for my brother

When, a few years after college graduation, he snubbed our American Reform Jewish roots to embrace an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish lifestyle in Jerusalem. When he refused to eat from our parents' non-kosher plates. When he rebuffed physical contact with any woman other than his wife, my mother, or me.

Lost: My spiritual schema

West coast, watered-down, Reform Judaism—the way I was raised, the youth group I attended, the overnight camp I loved, the best friends and boyfriends of my youth, the label I clung to in college—when I married a traditional European Jew who wraps two small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah around his upper arms and his forehead every morning, and who refuses to cook, use electricity, or drive from Friday to Saturday sundown, and who derides American Jewry's need to label themselves.

Found: A different definition of Jewish

One where I say *Shabbat shalom* to the Arab produce store owner every Friday and happy holiday to the Ethiopian street sweepers on the eve of Rosh Hashana or Independence Day. One where walking barefoot along the Mediterranean seashore moves me more than sitting in synagogue. One where the words spirituality and tradition resonate more than Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Orthodox, or any other box.

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Found: Room for surprise

When all throughout my teen years, I reddened in response to my friends' gushing over my father's brown-haired Robert Redford-like physique, often asking, "Do you think your dad's ever cheated on your mom?" When all throughout my twenties, I still confided in my mother about everything from friendships to Philippe. When all throughout my thirties, as I listened to my parents fight, I questioned the strength of their marriage. When all throughout my forties, I gradually distanced myself from their constant bickering, until my father called to confess to a quarter-century affair and the man who raised me turned out to be a stranger, and I decided this was their mess, not mine.

Lost: Them as the center of my universe

When my father phoned at 4:32pm on December 13, 2007, and uttered ten unforgettable words: "S. and I have been romantically involved for twenty-five-years." When my mother, almost seventy, said, "I have nowhere else to go," and stayed.

Lost: Me as the center of my children's universe

When my fearless middle child wandered away from me in a museum, which I only realized after a stranger's voice boomed over the loudspeaker: "Will the parent of a little girl in a blue jean overall dress please come to the entrance to claim her?" When, fourteen years later, she still calls me Mommy, at first making my heart melt but then break, because, like her older brother and younger sister, she prefers time alone behind closed doors to time together. When will I ever get a hug or a kiss or even a two-way conversation without groveling again?

Found: My own narrative

With a European husband, who has never had a secretary. With three children, whose dynamics and dyads are fun and friendly and always in flux. With passports to several continents, which makes coming and going too easy. With my one heart divided between three countries and cultures.

*

Found: My own ruby red slippers

34 comments



STEPHEN GUTIERREZ says:
Jan 13, 2017

Reply

I like the jumpiness that established the writer's basically dilemma: where to be, how to be, who to be. And the Bay Area material caught my part of the world perfectly. Thank you for an excellent essay, refreshing and sobering. So much life, so much experience and emotion and love and loss. So much craftsmanship and so much heart.

JENNIFER LANG says:
Jan 18, 2017

Thank you, Stephen, for reading and responding. Your feedback is really touching.



Reply



RENEE E. D'AOUST says:
Oct 17, 2016

Reply

Jennifer,

I so admire your piece. The form particularly supports the borders you cross and engage so eloquently. And as a fellow writer who lives between continents and cultures, your piece resonates strongly. If you ever make it to Lugano, Switzerland, let me know and we'll share a cup of coffee.

I love this: "Found: Humility that borders on humiliation." Yes, indeed.

My best regards, Renee



JENNIFER LANG says:
Oct 30, 2016

Reply

Renee, I cannot tell you how much your words mean to me. Thank you. For reading, for feeling, for sharing, for connecting.



JENNIFER says:
Sep 29, 2016

Reply

Michael, thank you so much for your feedback. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate it.



MICHAEL GODDART says:
Sep 28, 2016

Reply

My first response got lost when I hit tab. Jennifer I appreciate more your piece the second time. Loved the format and the honesty it supported. Having lived eight places in Berkeley and thought I'd end up there, and having grown up and lived in Marin, S.F., and Sonoma County, there's much of your experience I relate to. The strength of the content is how you've forged your unique path while honoring what has been and what has been lost and appreciating your present reality. I felt the pangs of what life brings and takes away and what comes in its place. Mazeltov.

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