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Slow Feeling

KATE FAGAN ON LYN HEJINIAN'S CALL TO THE EVERYDAY

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Lyn Hejinian, one of the leading Language poets, passed away in February 2024. On the one-year anniversary of the publication of *Allegorical Moments*, Kate Fagan sounds an elegy to a lifetime's work of resisting closure and cultivating community.

Time is filled with beginners. (The Fatalist)

A dream is any place to begin.

Lyn Hejinian has been visiting my dreams with adverbial force – steadily, absurdly, warmly – since late February, when I first received news of her death. I almost write ‘her passing’. But that word risks over-signification, as Hejinian might describe it. *Death / and the finite world are perpetually disrupted – they disrupt / themselves – with creativity.* Like so many of her avid readers, students, and friends, I have been cycling in these past months through the planetary

energies that animate Hejinian's work, hearing in everyday things her elastic sentences and their inimitable music. I have recalled scraps of talk, treasured letters, shared readings, and mountain walks, navigating by the compass of a long camaraderie across continents.

I am beginning with a dream because it's free from singular interpretation. I mean this in the sense that I understand Hejinian's late fascination with interpretation as an intellectual and ethical condition – a critical calling, analogous to an obligation to live among the mess of life's materials, open to things that are happening, as they arrive.

This call is embodied in a book Hejinian was writing at her time of dying, *Lola the Interpreter*. It also casts a binding spell around the discrete essays in *Allegorical Moments: Call to the Everyday*, an extensive collection published in November 2023 by Wesleyan University Press that from the outset reiterates Hejinian's devotion to criticism as a vital mode of 'aesthetic activism', and as a digressive and improvised response to living, anchored in 'interpretation as a dynamic force propelling both aesthetic and everyday flow'. During one of her visits to Sydney, I interviewed Hejinian in a public conversation that appeared afterwards in *Cordite Poetry Review* as 'A Fable for Now'. As we spoke, she remarked: 'One of the things I keep thinking about is how to be an interpretative thinker who isn't a terminal thinker.'

But I'm getting ahead of myself, or pedalling furiously to catch up.

I'm rummaging about in dreams in part to honour *The Book of A Thousand Eyes*, a joyfully encyclopaedic poem composed by Hejinian over twenty years and published in 2012 by Rusty Morrison and Ken Keegan at Omnidawn. *A Thousand Eyes* takes as its opening gambit an idea that sleeping might enable access to curious and improvisatory worlds that remain radically obscure, or in alterity, within waking thought. Across the poem's prodigious span, sleeping states become a laboratory of sorts, in which Hejinian unbuilds narrative modes that insist upon facile logics of consequence, closure, and completion. If poetry is a

way of fathoming ‘the consciousness of being conscious’ (‘Some Notes’) – one of the aesthetic and epistemological touchstones for Hejinian’s poetics of inquiry – what might be possible when introspecting within fields of *un*-consciousness?

Speaking of her method in composing *A Thousand Eyes*, which counts Scheherazade among its guiding spectres, Hejinian observed in ‘A Fable for Now’:

There are arguments that say one of the roles of art is to make the world experience-able again, to make the familiar unfamiliar, so you experience it freshly as a child would. So, having gone on and on about this, I thought well, what about the *unconscious* world? What does it know that I don’t? And how would one approach it without sentimentality?

Night thinking, or the discontinuous space of dreaming that ‘soaks from experience’, becomes in *A Thousand Eyes* a longed-for ramble to which we might return over and over – not in order to generalise or reveal phoney ‘truths’, but to observe ourselves ‘experiencing experience’ via language. This practice of writing ‘after’ dreaming – a kind of hunt, conceptual chase, or aesthetic pursuit – resonates with the questing for knowledge that repeatedly exercised Hejinian’s thinking after the mid-1980s, especially following her cultural and translational work in Russia. *Let’s speak of the unconscious and do so consciously.*

Improvised responses to fragments recalled from memory are a mainstay of Hejinian’s poetry of conscious minding, or even mindfulness; they are figured at one point in *A Thousand Eyes* as ‘a broken sequence of second recognitions / which slipping by become themselves’. Such poetical regard might engender a state that Hejinian describes as ‘mineral freedom – the freedom to be willing to be here, creatively, among the facts’. This is from an essay in *Allegorical Moments* in which Hejinian unspools her intellectual indebtedness to George Oppen and Jean-Paul Sartre. The essay’s title, ‘Mineral Freedom’, distils Hejinian’s understanding of Oppen’s ‘pure joy / of the mineral fact’, a luminous detail from his serial poem ‘Of Being Numerous’ that Hejinian positions at the heart of Oppen’s poetics of conviction, more often troped as sincerity, and cited regularly

as a synecdoche for Objectivist aesthetics.

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Few have analysed that poetical and political bearing better than Hejinian. She finds in 'mineral freedom' a caption or blazon for poetry as a lifelong vocation that enables and requires attending to *others* – a word I'm using here as shorthand for complex networks of relations and encounters, without intending to centre a single, human, listening subject – and that, in its capacity to acknowledge the contexts of things, can restore history and sociality to what otherwise might teem, as her essay puts it, with 'the mere numerousness of singularities, separateness'.

The Book of a Thousand Eyes delivered Hejinian a method for collaborating with some continually re-arriving 'other' version of her writing 'self' and its inscriptions. The work leans into its mineral freedom, which I want to recast here as a sincere obligation to encounter the anti-hierarchical and anarchic mess of profusely different realities, and to understand living as a circumstance of being in common, always. Reality, refracted through a dream prism, unravels singularity. Can sleep even *be* experienced, except in a waking state? Might the conscious revisiting of dream apparitions provoke a poetry that defies organisation around the controlling limits of a writer's ego? Can dreams write themselves back into the poems they inspire? *Dreams don't provide the thrill of sleep / Waking does [...] / People fly after their metaphors.*

True to improvisational methods, my desire to begin with a dream keeps deviating. My mind is like an old-school slide carousel, pulling out frame after frame, jumping from year to year while a central spindle revolves. In a moving tribute to Hejinian by an ensemble of her closest contemporaries, published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Carla Harryman reflects on Hejinian's matchless sense of poetry's circular temporalities by recalling Henri Bergson's sense of *duration* as a spatial, qualitative measure of time – which Harryman counterpoints to 'clock time', as explored within her own experimental works for theatre: 'Rather than pressuring the performer to concentrate on ending or goal,

this rather causes one to be present to time and timing in the moment.' Being present to timing in the moment necessitates a crowd of arrivals – of people, things, dialogues, passing referents. *There are things / We live among 'and to see them / is to know ourselves'*.

'Writing as shared invents a world,' notes Jennifer Scappettone in her contribution to 'Positions of the sun: Lyn Hejinian and her students'. Compiled for *Jacket2* by sixteen of Hejinian's former university pupils, this collection is remarkable for its collaged portrait of Hejinian as a tireless instigator of pedagogical communities where the borders between public and private, collective and individual, are never quite stable. The shared world of writing 'is not a private one, as is often presumed,' observes Scappettone, 'but a vagrant fellowship'.

Two months after Hejinian died, I found myself drawn back to her book-length poem *The Fatalist* (2003), yearning for the vagrant fellowship of its wickedly funny wisdom. On a rattling intercity train from Leura to Parramatta, with autumn leaves dropping as flames, I marvelled at the poem's grasp of sprawling temporality. I felt I was listening to Hejinian speaking in a classroom or gently holding court at Beta Lounge; or, as was regularly the case, talking with a circle of guests around her dining room table. Such was Hejinian's knack in affirming everyday contexts that her writing 'self' often became a ventriloquist or conductor, producing an aggregation of details, sonic variations, characters, and correspondences – always hers, but always collectively embodied – always referring to others, and sometimes made by and for them.

The logic is archival and repertory, poly rather than mono. *The obvious analogy is with music (My Life)*.

'Voice' and, to an extent, 'style' upend 'self' in Hejinian's writings, where poetical voice reflects a compositional attitude and approach towards observing and being in the world, rather than a projection of individualism or personhood. Hejinian cites Charles Altieri in *Allegorical Moments* – 'voice is made up of other

voices' – to remind us of the collaborative and mediated nature of selfhood as 'a relationship rather than an essence'. This latter maxim is from 'The Person and Description', which was written for a forum on 'The Poetics of Everyday Life' curated by Harryman in 1988. Throughout her writing life, Hejinian repeatedly sought and devised experiences that affirmed her sense of subjectivity as 'always under alteration, becoming other than what it was' (*Allegorical Moments*).

Once, in a letter to me about *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, one of her best studies in self-estrangement and collective voicing, Hejinian described revisiting that book as akin to flicking through a photo album. Such experiences can transport us to an appreciation of everyday forgetting and the forgotten everyday. Art becomes an aid to memory, and a trace of site-specific instances of subjectivity as a mobile, social formation.

Re-reading *The Fatalist* earlier this year, I stumbled over a fragment I recognised from another of Hejinian's letters to me, in which she huge-heartedly supplied a cover note for one of my books (*will this work?*). Time and intense vertigo unfolded from her pages – my dizzy recall of a lost pearl – and into the train carriage, jouncing through morning sun.

I turned back to the book's flyleaf. Its tidy inscription was a prescient gift:

for Kate & for Peter

'reality provides the materials'

with love

from Lyn

After our first meeting in Berkeley in 1998, Hejinian steadfastly posted to me, and later to my partner Peter Minter and me, every book of hers as it was published, and plenty more by writers championed under the Atelos imprint that she created with Travis Ortiz as a dynamic successor to Tuumba Press. Countless readers around the world will have experienced the buzz of receiving a parcel from Hejinian, addressed in her impeccable handwriting. In the early 2000s, when I was completing a doctoral thesis on Hejinian's writings, I kept these ordinarily discarded satchels as talismans, so I could experience on repeat the

thrilling aura of her neat calligraphy.

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Reality provides the materials. With love from Lyn.

I'm finding it hard in this dilatory essay to write 'Hejinian', a formality that conjures a kind of critical propriety. Such was Lyn's superlative generosity that working in common, especially in and for poetry, often became an invitation towards friendship. From the early 1970s, when Tuumba began to publish an assemblage of innovative poets whose aesthetic innovations shaped the avant-garde cluster known as Language poetry, *friendship* sustained as a serious, dialectical method in Lyn's thinking.

Such was Lyn's generosity.

Such *is* Lyn's generosity.

Switching to present tense feels happily inevitable. And I'm still unravelling middles to reach a beginning.

In one of her more outlandish appearances in my recent dreams, Lyn materialises on my kitchen table as an outsized, stripy peony bloom. Its base colour is apricot. The peony is an amplifier, or maybe a radio. In Lyn's precise and unforgettable voice, the talking flower begins to broadcast the text of friends' messages and letters to me about Lyn's dying. I wake up delighted and devastated.

I later wonder why the flower is apricot. It's not a colour I associate with Lyn's forensic, expansive aesthetic. But my dream has anticipated the pitfalls of my waking ignorance.

*The pair of ancient, stunted apricot trees yield ancient,
stunted apricots. (My Life)*

*My, the bright cheek that I touch
in sight. The sky was a pale blue
and the seduction a longing*

of faces. This morning

Sydney Review of Books *by seaside roses and oaks in the dry hills*

I am impatient to begin

the roses painted on the dish.

The Queen of Spring would be Queen of an early

Time; incipient

the soft cleft of the apricot.

Something is woven with the green. (A Mask of Motion)

Something is woven with the green. This sentence was written by Lyn almost fifty years ago, and it resonates with an elegant regard for happenstance that persevered as a major poetic theme across her lifetime's work. (*Her lifetime's work!* I can imagine Lyn laughing at that idiom and its shortfalls. *Her lifetime's listening, her lifetime's relatives, her lifetime's baking, her lifetime's shoes.*)

Something is woven with the green. The phrasing here is recognisably Hejinianesque – as is its comprehension of knowing as incomplete, already and always. Lyn's second book *The Mask of Motion* (1977) is dedicated to Larry Ochs, her partner of over fifty years, and to her children, Paull and Anna. This early poem 'Song' traces the autonomy of things ('seaside roses and oaks in the dry hills') quivering with an aliveness that never depends upon human regard or authorship, but that begins again in poetry's acknowledgement of its mattering. It also sings of the loving communities of others Lyn gathered around herself ('Queen of an early / Time', 'the bright cheek that I touch / in sight', 'the seduction a longing / of faces'), and to whom she remained fiercely loyal.

Time is filled with beginners. *I am impatient to begin.*

Apricots, cleaving and incipient.

In my first remembered dream after Lyn dies, I seem to be giving a talk about her work in a darkened auditorium. Night-like, although I sense it's daytime outside. Curtains cover all the walls. A person in a stripy knit walks by (more stripes!). There are plants, a table, several lamps throwing light in dim coins. Then I notice Lyn is the sole audience member. She is dressed in black, patient and straight-backed. I reach to my left and accept a microphone from a woman who offers it while saying, *test the mics*. A young bearded man to my

right interjects: *we can't start yet, nobody's here*. Lyn is here. I get defensive. *Look up*, I say. Suddenly there are circular stages embedded at different levels in the auditorium walls. Noisy parties are happening on every stage, visible behind transparent and sumptuous tea-house screens. Things are in full swing. Everyone has flocked here for Lyn. *Ghosts are the shadows of knowledge we crave* (*The Unfollowing*). On the table, my paper begins scrolling across a screen shaped like a giant, two-dimensional teacup. I see that my talk is called 'Slow Feeling'.

That's what fate is: whatever's happened – time regained.

One's fate is

what has happened to one, not what is going to happen. (The Fatalist)

Grieving the death of Lyn Hejinian has been a collaborative and communitarian experience, even from the close distance of the Blue Mountains in Australia. Constantly surprising, to me, are the ways in which Lyn's poetry, letters, and essays continue to *participate* in this grieving – offering signals and care and ballast – and slowly schooling readers in what Alan Golding describes as 'Hejiniana' towards feeling, sense, and haphazard narrative, or towards 'restless and incomplete' interpretation. Citing André Breton, Barrett Watten reflects concisely upon Lyn's legacies:

In relentless pursuit of an experience that acknowledges the partial and emergent as the only experience possible, Lyn Hejinian comes as close to 'the gold of time' as anyone who 'is or was or will be living', following her great predecessor, Gertrude Stein. That knowledge, the allegorical moment of 'beginning, middle, and

ending' in the unfolding of her capacious works, is her undeniable achievement.

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Detailing her compositional method in *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*, Lyn observed: 'There's a wonderful syllogistic illogic if you just have a beginning and then a middle. There's nothing to say *that* middle wouldn't evolve from *that* beginning.' A similar stance guides Lyn's elegiacal work *The Unfollowing*, a collection of seventy-seven almost-sonnets in which no line relates logically to the line following. Everything is perpetually in the middle.

It would be bogus to resolve the trajectory of Lyn's oeuvre by marking *Allegorical Moments: Call to the Everyday* as an 'ending', a final 'complete' work published before her death – a hollow classification of which the book itself would be deeply suspicious.¹ If *The Fatalist* teaches us that fate is not an announcement of futurity, but an affirmation of what has happened and *is happening* – of being 'present to time and timing in the moment', in Harryman's words – then *Allegorical Moments* suggests that poetry's renewed acknowledgements of fate always imply differing experiences of the same reality, and always invite interpretations that diverge.

Each elegy continues

The tree is exactly itself in its accidents

Night on our faces (for we have many) hides from us (there are many of us) our

fates (we have many of those too) (The Unfollowing)

In this sense, one's capacity to 'meet one's fate' is ever-incomplete, or 'partial and emergent', as Watten writes. Another morph is always likely and incipient, 'exactly itself in its accidents'.

Just when we think Lola has arrived at the circus, we realise there are multiple rings in play. Lyn knew this in choosing an accretive form for her iconic almanac *My Life*, which obliged her over fifty years to proliferate its lines into new, kaleidoscopic, canon-bending versions. Whoever can tell the story of their

‘whole’ life? Continuous natality resists such closure, just as perpetual emergence makes room for otherness – an idea in which Lyn located sustaining hope.

The seeds of Lyn’s late attraction to allegory, as a device or mode that actively undermines or outrightly rejects closure, were planted in the ever-replenishing form of *My Life*. Lyn was interested in allegory as a commonplace, discursive mode that can turn continually away from ‘endings’ in an interpretive dynamic that *produces* otherness, as much as admitting its possibilities. Lyn moves outward in *Allegorical Moments* from Fredric Jameson’s studies of allegory to argue for an anti-commodifying allegorical method that embodies ‘an insatiable curiosity for the other’, and that forecasts its own inability to arrive. ‘Allegory,’ she writes, ‘is a device that points to the possibility of other meanings, other presences, and other contexts for meaning and presence.’ Lyn understood an allegorical poetics not as a cipher for authoritative moralising, but as an anti-hegemonic form, always dependent upon accidents and context, and resistant to settlement into ‘a particular master code’.

Within *A Thousand Eyes*, we can trace Lyn’s pull towards allegory in a scattering of poems in which multiple, absurdist ‘morals’ fail overtly to reach conclusions. The book’s teeming linkages between incompleteness and the commons generate an aesthetic that I would describe as counter-capital. One poem puts it this way: ‘The incommensurable can’t be incorporated into the realm of exchange value, of the commodity, it resists the submergence of everything into that system of equivalence.’ Allegory was for Lyn an asymptote, curving to meet the ‘gold’ of collective experience.

Over and again in Lyn’s work, traces of this plural experience are located within the poetics of everyday life. Quotidian spaces and times nourish the work of all artists enlisted in *Allegorical Moments* as being fundamental to Lyn’s own practice: Stein, Woolf, Sartre, and Oppen among them, as well as her immediate contemporaries Leslie Scalapino, Watten, and her brother Douglas Hall. The

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collection's final essay, 'Wild Captioning', glosses the everyday as a sphere of repetition and routine that nonetheless is 'replete with unpredictable elements and chance encounters'. Everyday events and their settings, including political and social contexts, are identified by Lyn as being 'at stake in art [...] the world to which we are bound in common'. Everyday things arrive continuously and proliferate new contexts, whether we perceive them or not; and we are committed, aesthetically and ethically, to what we *do* perceive. Writing returns context to life, even as living is the context for writing.

These prolific encounters (an expression of Stein's *continuous present*) bring about situated moments of meeting – within which Lyn located both political solidarity, and a conceptual abundance tempered always by responsibility: without the contexts in which they arrive, things become non-differentiated and empty of history. *The Fatalist* travels on this same wheel: 'One is bound to whatever comes / to one's consciousness.'

I've followed Lyn's preoccupation with this idea since the late 1990s, when she first penned the phrase *along comes something – launched in context*. (When the Lyn Hejinian tea-towels are made, this will be their slogan.) 'I wrote that phrase one evening,' she remarked during a conversation we recorded at her home on 3 August, 1998. 'I don't know what prompted it, and it just has obsessed me ever since.' These six words and their hyphen became the opening line of 'Reason', an essay written for the first issue of *Shark* journal, edited by Emilie Clark and Lytle Shaw. They reappear in the long poem *Happily* and drift through many of Lyn's works of the 2000s, sometimes as a soft echo. Enduring as the epigraph to *Allegorical Moments*, Lyn's disarmingly modest catchphrase carries her philosophy of collectivism, her respect for history, her commitment to everyday conditions and labours, and her phenomenological allegiance to 'the other on which my eyes are fixed' (*A Thousand Eyes*); or rather, a matrix of 'others' that might include ideas, things, environments, creatures, occurrences, and people.

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Lyn's skill as an interpreter was possibly the leading influence upon the ways she went about revising her most cited work *My Life*, allowing its allegorical potential to open new spaces of thinking. One of the most compelling essays in *Allegorical Moments* is 'What's Missing from *My Life*', in which Lyn revisits her classic of 'national literature' to interrogate its early exclusions. She specifically invokes the early 1950s to emphasise the racialised and political marginalisation of countless 'others' whose incarceration and control, she argues, has underwritten a founding myth of America. The white, bourgeois family endures as a symbolic engine for this story, which Lyn traces forward to 'white nationalism [...] as an *authorized* presence in US political, cultural and personal life' in the early twenty-first century:

The nation can't conceptualize itself clearly because, even while it is fixated on the otherness of the *other*, that otherness is hidden away inside itself – it either gets 'naturalized' or it gets imprisoned.

It's a searing critique, deployed to reinvest *My Life* with resonant, historical absences. In her twenty-first century redrafts of *My Life*, Lyn undertook the task of 'speaking back' to the poem's early iterations of the 1970s and 1980s, informed by an ever deepening self-positioning around global political crises that she viewed as 'emergencies' – especially around ongoing colonial damage, ecological catastrophe, and class and labour inequalities.

'What's Missing from *My Life*' also reiterates Lyn's commitment to avant-garde poetics as a dialectical mode, grounded in recursive self-awareness, through which it critically acknowledges and resists 'the unconscious internalization of xenophobia and racism'. That is, she argues against assimilationism, and for *xenia*: a conscious meeting of re-arriving otherness, or 'the occurrence of co-existence which is also an occurrence of strangeness'. 'Avant-gardism (not to mention all dialectical thinking) insists on unease,' she declares.

Lyn often returned to her experiences in Russia as a traveller and translator when reflecting upon colonial histories and cross-cultural encounters,

and the responsibilities they produce. The superb books *Description* and *Xenia* by her close friend Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, translated by Lyn with the assistance of Elena Balashova, sit alongside *Oxota* and the co-authored prose work *Leningrad* as a significant corpus dealing directly with subjective defamiliarisation and its webs of consequence, and with the ethics involved in the meetings between others for which translation is both metonym and metaphor. Lyn's embrace of *xenia* kept her restlessly opposed to bigoted monoculturalism, as a way of combating what she describes in *Allegorical Moments* as 'an obfuscating autophobia that impedes clear understanding at a cultural level of either *other* or *self*'. Collaboration, one of Lyn's defining poetical undertakings, takes *xenia* as its ethical and conceptual leitmotif. And it's possible to interpret collaboration itself as an essentially allegorical mode – an idea perhaps explored most fully within *The Wide Road*, Lyn's 'picaresque' collaboration with Harryman.

Something of this collaborative, dialectical impetus is apparent in the many friendships and crossings Lyn nurtured in Australia, and her kindness in staying true to those links over thirty years. For Lyn, the act of reading and listening to other people's work – seeking community in language as a translator, publisher, collaborator, teacher, or friend – created a continuous array of moments in which otherness might be addressed as a fundamental, political requirement.

When I undertook to write a doctoral thesis on Lyn's writings, after hearing her read poetry one humid afternoon on Glebe Point Road in the mid-1990s, these themes became a structuring principle for my wildly incomplete study, which I called "Constantly I Write This Happily" / Encountering Lyn Hejinian'.

Let's go to Australia as a duo

without paragraph breaks – I'm not sure why [...]

There's no original point, only infinite change. (The Fatalist)

No original point, no endings. Only infinite change.

When I last saw Lyn, she was kerbside under spring leaves in Berkeley, waving Pete and me into a taxi and chatting happily about the Jell-O Museum in

New York.

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That's what fate is: whatever's happened – time regained.

It might, in part, have been 'insatiable curiosity for the other' that first brought Lyn to Perth in 1995, and then to Sydney. Across the next three decades, Lyn befriended, worked alongside, and corresponded with over fifty Australian poets. I want to share here a few more stories from Lyn's 'Australian fate', hoping to honour her time in Australia as a cherished guest among a company of hosts, while also celebrating one local chapter of her unswervingly internationalist poetic. Some of these histories begin in the memories of others. Sometimes, I can't recall if Lyn said something directly to me, or if I've absorbed it from the symphonic vernacular of her poetry. *One is bound to whatever comes / to one's consciousness.*

The windows are open.

We live in a temporal series that consists entirely of beginnings.

The windows are open.

My cat is pacing slowly over the sunny grass after something invisible. It might be a moth or a shadow.

Window, lesson to be learned from cat watching at the open.

I find myself veering and listing in my efforts to acknowledge fate as it flies tenderly in and out of frame. I am chasing moths, diverted by beginnings.

I've just been leafing through *The Beginner* in its exquisite handmade version, designed by Emilie Clark for Spectacular Books. Emilie's cover birds feel like an exaltation. In places they are life-giving outlines, as though their fullness were independent of the artist, even while her sketches give them transitory form.

A side of a tree cut into squares at a shout from a man
Sydney Review of Books *under an umbrella.*

A furtive marked moth fluttering into a beam of light.

A woman at a door falling.

The beginner is diverted.

I don't think Lyn would care *what* was written about her work in response to her death – but she'd care immensely *that* people were writing, something, anything, improvising in different publics through generative fields of attention. The *why* is assumed. The *how* always excites curiosity. She might care even more that people were *reading*: reading her works, reading her letters, reading for solace and connection, reading anything they associate with her sprawling life-library.

I emailed poet-scholars Ann Vickery, Kate Lilley, and John Kinsella to gather their memories of Lyn's Australian visits, knowing how dear Lyn was to each of them, and how much Lyn admired their work – but also, because Lyn's reception by Australian readers was inseparable from clusters of community that were building in the 1990s within Australian innovative poetry.

Lyn's first visit to this extensive neighbourhood began with an invitation to West Australia initiated by Anne Brewster, who, in her teaching at Curtin University of Technology, had been an early local champion of Language writing, and by scholars at Murdoch University in Perth, where feminist scholar Anna Gibbs had worked before relocating to Sydney. Lyn wrote the essay 'Barbarism' for her Curtin talk to historicise elements of the early years of Language poetry. Reflecting upon contrasts in the Anglo-European colonial occupations of America and Australia, she also mapped some of the 'middle' or 'border' thinking that was driving her studies of Oppen and Adorno, and that later underscored *A Border Comedy* (2001), which is rooted in a poetics of impasse and encounter.

Networks of appreciative readers of Lyn's poetry – and work by Language-linked associates, including Scalapino and Charles Bernstein – were also

flowering on Australia's east coast. By late 1993, scholar and poet Philip Mead, whom Kinsella described in an email to me as a 'pathfinder' for contemporary Australian poetry criticism, was supervising Vickery's dissertation on feminist genealogies of Language poetry. Published in 2000 as *Leaving Lines of Gender*, Vickery's work is a lively intervention into geographically exclusionary versions of Language aesthetics, and scrutinises narratives of avant-garde community for their gendered omissions. Vickery travelled to Berkeley in 1994, meeting Lyn over coffee to discuss collaboration and community as imperatives for Lyn's writing practice. Over and over, Lyn made room for visiting scholars and students, inhabiting what seemed like a limitless capacity to be radically present for others.

By the time Lyn arrived in Perth in 1995, carrying copies of her books and buoyed by characteristic playfulness, keen Australian subscribers to US small presses and journals were circulating her work, or rewriting university syllabi in serious response to the theoretical and practical provocations of Language writing. Following her lecture at Curtin, Lyn journeyed briefly with Kinsella through the West Australian wheatlands. Their dialogues about settler colonialism and ecology began to filter into Kinsella's graphology series of works; later that year, Lyn wrote the introduction to Kinsella's *erratum/frame(d)*, published in 1995 by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. After visiting the WA wheatbelt, Lyn also agreed to publish, with Folio/Salt, a chapter from what later became *A Border Comedy*. The resulting book *Guide, Grammar, Watch, and the Thirty Nights* (1996) broadened Lyn's reach among Australian readers.²

Lyn's antipodean arc brought her in Autumn 1995 from the west to the east coast. Gibbs had arranged a reading at Gleebooks, and suggested Lyn stay with Kate Lilley and her partner, the literary and screen scholar Melissa Hardie. 'I remember M & I were teaching when Lyn arrived, so we arranged for her to get into our flat in [King's Cross] and went home after work knowing she was already there,' writes Lilley. I can just picture Lyn making herself at home, *a woman at a door*. Lyn shared Lilley's fascination with early modern writer Margaret Cavendish – it transpired Lyn had asked Larry to buy for her, as a birthday gift, a rare hardback edition of *The Blazing World*, not realising Lilley was its editor.³

Had Lilley not invited me to Lyn's first Sydney reading in 1995, I would not have chosen to write a doctorate on Lyn's work. I remember Lyn's temperate, steely performance as exhilarating in its density and strangeness. I can't say I followed everything I was hearing that afternoon; I was a true beginner. But I felt enthralled by the conceptual vitality of Lyn's poetry and needed to understand it. I recall musing afterwards with Trisha Pender on the affective concision of the phrase 'inappropriately blue'.

Two years later as I was moving between houses, undecided about my dissertation project, a flyer from Lyn's Glebe reading fell from a book into my hands. In the accident of that moment, I committed myself to a research path. *Fate sees things in all their relations*. Soon after, I bought *The Cell* and *Oxota* and began my doctorate under Lilley's supervision. As I am writing this essay, some thirty years after first hearing Lyn read, 'inappropriately blue' jumps up from *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* – a jewel of time regained.

My first forays into *The Cell* were made with no inkling of its dialogical relationship to poems by Kit Robinson. As is true for *Sight*, *The Wide Road*, *Wicker* and *Sunflower*, *Chartings*, and *The Traveller and the Hill and the Hill*, Lyn's work both flowered from and intensified abiding friendships. I travelled in 1998 to the Mandeville Special Collections of UC San Diego and immersed myself in Lyn's archival papers.⁴ Sitting in the Archive for New Poetry, and furiously making lists on everything from Armantrout to Day to Zukofsky, I tumbled through the epistolary contexts in which Lyn wrote *The Cell*. They began to soak everything about her art – including most of her works from the 1980s and 1990s – in technicolour clouds of community. Real people, real relationships, real aesthetic stakes. It's no exaggeration to say that I'd been reading the score but missing the music.

Several weeks later, I spent an afternoon sitting with Lyn at her dining room table, following a generous invitation to her Berkeley home. I had come fresh from the San Francisco State University Poetry Centre archives – where, sifting through an electrifying back-catalogue of videotapes arranged for me on a

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trolley by the inimitable Jewelle Gomez, I had been drawn first to a 1978 'Poets' Theatre reading of Zukofsky's *A-24*, live at the Grand Piano. Sitting opposite her, I felt uncanny joy as 'Lyn-Hejinian-the-warmly-brilliant-raconteur' began to project slowly onto a flickering 'Lyn-Hejinian-as-research-subject' that I'd encountered in the archives. I had observed my on-paper subject as an energetic epistolary correspondent, profuse and meticulous draftsman, adoring daughter writing weekly missives to her mother, humourist, indefatigable traveller and translator, and as an emblematic Bay Area poet in a long blue shift dress reading Zukofsky with her friends. This new, at-home Lyn was all of those.

We looped our way through a spacious, morphing conversation. At one point, Larry Ochs wandered into the room and picked up an emu egg I'd brought as a gift for Lyn. I loved his reflexive musicianship – he blew unhesitatingly into the egg's aperture, seeking a sound from its sea-green drum, and then held its blown end to his ear, listening to the amplification of space. Lyn sent me back to Australia with *Poetics Journal #10*, the album *Bingo* by ROVA quartet, and a half-dozen unpublished essays from what would become *The Language of Inquiry*. Her kindness stunned me. My precious cargo of papers, sounds, gestures, and handwritten notes became a chart for my next four years of study, luminous echoes from a pre-digital cusp.

Although Lyn didn't fly back to Australia for two decades following her first visit in the mid-nineties, she kept her connections to its writing communities open and abundant. Books, letters, and emails shuttled back and forth across the Pacific. Poets would meet Lyn abroad, or audit her classes, and return home with greetings and news. On her second trip here in 2014, she offered a version of the essay 'The Sneeze' as a keynote talk for the 'Contemporary Women's Writing and the Environment' conference, organised by a curatorium of Melbourne scholars including Ann Vickery. Later that evening in a laneway bar, as our captions became wilder, Lyn, Ann, and I dreamed up an exchange between American and Australian writers that would take a dozen or so Australian writers to Berkeley for

some shared readings and critical conversations.

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Under Lyn's swashbuckling captaincy, this bloomed into the fantastical *Active Aesthetics* conference of 2016 – convened jointly by a lively crew including Eric Falci, Claire Marie Stancek, Daniel Benjamin, Serena Le, Ann, and me – to which Lyn ultimately invited thirty-six Australian poets, including Yankunytjatjara poet Ali Cobby Eckermann and Narungga poet Natalie Harkin as keynotes. The scale and generous range of *Active Aesthetics*, about which I have written elsewhere, made it the largest offshore gathering of Australian poets in history.

And it is this impasse – as a negativity rather than a totality (and, indeed, as a register of a collapse of totality) – that, at the moment, gives us the best hope of better things to come.

The allegorical, after all, is indexical, and it points in more than one direction.

(‘Wild Captioning’)

Each time I think this essay is ‘ending’, I reach an impasse. My desire to historicise and index details, to archive and allegorise my way through love and legacy, unwinds at every turn. Totality in writing is collapsing.

I have dotted the screen with memory's random calligraphies. I have leafed through every book of Lyn's that I own. I have counted and recounted my lucky stars in coming to call Lyn an intellectual mentor and dear friend. I have listened to dozens of writers whose collective esteem for Lyn endures, and in whose voices are carried the unequalled atmosphere of her life in poetry. From the flood of public tributes, a remarkably consistent portrait emerges of Lyn, and of the worlds she described and shared. Of catalytic community influence, devotion to family, unparalleled intellect, vocational fervour. Despite infinite positions of regard, we are circling the same sun.

Waters weaving without weight
Sydney Review of Books *of years at flash of turning*

point the sleepless limit

rush as word grief

falls

past plunging hawk through smoke (Fall Creek)

In my last dream of Lyn, she was rolling up bright green towels and organising them along a giant, curving sofa as if pragmatically setting them out for countless guests.

After Lyn's example in the closing pages of *Allegorical Moments: Call to the Everyday*, I find myself listing particulars – haphazard, ordinary, minor – that keep Lyn's spirit near.

Like her identifying instruction when arranging by email to meet me for the first time at a BART station: *I will be carrying a large book*. She was the only person at the station.

Or the conspiratorial way she leaned into conversations over drinks.

Or the concentrated élan with which she listened to every single presentation at the 'Experimental' conference organised by Lilley and Hardie at the University of Sydney, making occasional jottings in a notebook. She bought a cappuccino and later regretted the froth.

Or, on the Charles Darwin track at Wentworth Falls, Lyn tracing with her eyes the seedpods of hakeas in a hanging swamp, while imagining aloud to Pete and me that Darwin might have done the same, right there.

Or the purple basketball she gleefully procured for our daughter one afternoon on our way to preschool pickups. It was given pride of place that night on Ruby's pillow, while Lyn was offered another so she could read the bedtime story. I can still see all three, balled up under a quilt, talking about museums.

Or the unmistakable, unrushed music of her speaking voice.

Or the way she'd sometimes pause during a reading, overcome by giggles at something let loose in her poetry, almost as though she'd had no part in it.

Many of you will have your own lists, *the best hope of better things to come*.

When I learned of Lyn's death from my close friend Astrid Lorange, the first book I picked up – from within a loss that felt singularly crushing, but utterly, irreplaceably collective – was *The Book of A Thousand Eyes*.

There in your hand is a mirror.

There in your hand is a mirror reflecting a cloud. You are moving slowly and also quickly, you refuse to be bossed around and you spill the ink, word goes out to pigeons or maybe they are penguins who are carrying the message. There in your hand is a message we can't read. You are as quiet and complete as an egg and when it breaks there in your hand is a tile and on it are our names.



Lyn Hejinian and Kate Fagan at the Writing and Society Research Centre, WSU in July 2014.
Photo by Peter Minter.

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