

# **Aerial 10 / Lyn Hejinian**

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# The Beginning of the Making of “The Cell”

Kit Robinson

In the fall of 1986 Lyn Hejinian told me she was having trouble writing. The problem had to do with the relationship between thinking and writing; for Lyn, thinking seemed to be inhibiting writing. I suggested we start a correspondence, writing short poems that we would exchange in the mail. The idea was to write quickly and without revision, and to use one another’s poems as referent material for generating new ones.

On October 11, 1986, I received this letter from Lyn:

“Dear Kit, Here are my first three, written before I read the two poems you sent, so that it is purely coincidental that questions of vision and grass appear in both. Coincidental but timely .... I still can’t stop thinking, and think more than I should, which slows me down .... Nonetheless, these were written relatively quickly .... I just reread them—I hardly recognize them.”

Our correspondence continued for two years. According to my records, I sent Lyn 88 poems, ending in February 1988. Lyn’s poem number 102 was dated May 1988, but she continued on her own through January 1989, and went on to revise the entire sequence, which was published by Sun & Moon Press in 1992 as *The Cell*. Lyn’s first three poems became the first three poems in *The Cell*. An edition of 12 poems by each of us from the first three months of the correspondence was also published as *Individuals* by Chax Press in 1988. An additional set of mine appears as “Up Early” in *Ice Cubes* (Roof Books, 1987). The title “Up Early” refers to the life context in which my poems were written: between 7:30 and 8:00 a.m. each morning before my commute.

Repetition is a form of friction  
I get mortally warmed up when I write  
the cold of poetry  
against the rock in the ground

LH 11/27/86

The coincidence of referents and themes Lyn referred to in her letter was striking, especially in the early days of our correspondence. On one hand, each of us freely borrowed terms from the other, so that we began to weave a common vocabulary, moving shared elements into differing contexts and perspectives. At the same time, poems with identical or related contents often crossed in the mail. It felt at times as if we were generating a psychic continuum with a life of its own, a landscape with unpredictable rises and dips, intersections, curves, and cul de sacs.

We started writing 12-line poems, but Lyn soon began to diverge from this form. In February she wrote, “Here is one too long and one too short. Not legs, love, Lyn.”

The ghost is only the  
    poor attempt of nature to  
    present herself as me in  
    the language of inquiry

*The Cell*, January 16, 1987

Elements of unconscious play occur in both our poems. In Lyn’s they’re often dreams subjected to a process of evaluation by an inquiring mind. In mine, they’re more often whole lines, verbal products of the unconscious, as in Breton’s automatic writing, or dreams in the forms of words. These are typically used to touch off other more consciously framed lines, by way of association, sound, or inference. There is less effort in the tone of address to come to terms with the elements of the unconscious in an interpretive manner. They are rather left to just sit there leaning up against one another like idiots in a post-modern frieze.

Like Stein, a Harvard-educated Californian, Lyn combines Jamesian Yankee pragmatism and pioneering spirit. A speculative naturalist, her method is to observe, record, and compare. The object of inquiry is the psyche moving around in the world. Said another way, it is the daily making of the world, its composition. Thus, a phenomenology of mind expressed in lines—lines whose contours are inimitable as a day.

Here is a typical exchange:

Extraordinary popular ferocity, nature  
as hypotenuse—I feel  
as if I've told a dream  
The penitent form of leaves  
in their description  
Proper—  
But centrifugal in modern cities  
under accidental foot of the tree  
Even if I got it right  
I couldn't keep it right  
the old codicil of the walk  
I, who can't keep a joke

LH 10/23/86

unable to keep a joke  
because I can't do the accent  
even if I got it right  
the accidental tree of modern cities  
I keep safe from  
would cut the parrot's tongue  
coming off in the hand  
I, who is trying to understand  
spy thing itself through shade of  
blinds, leaves  
eludes my grasp

KR 11/1/86

Lyn's poem of 10/23/86 was later revised to appear in *The Cell* as follows:

With extraordinary populist ferocity (with  
nature as hypotenuse) I've told  
a dream  
Both doors are flimsy  
Two women from the hotel  
staff are trying to devise  
a way of jamming the

door by leaning a pyrex  
baking pan against the door  
I suggest a different baking  
pan—it is obvious that  
none of this will work  
The penitent front of leaves  
spin in description  
It's proper  
Silver  
Poplar  
Tiny golden nails come in  
the package with picture hooks  
But the situation is centripetal  
in these modern cities so  
I'm worried that the police  
will figure out that I  
helped the prisoners escape in  
time over the accidental foot  
of the tree  
Even if I got it  
right I couldn't keep it  
right  
I'm carrying a white curtain  
(a door substitute) on a  
rod—I who can't keep  
a joke  
Everyone knows I'm in love  
The din is incredible (because  
of my present concern for  
feminist issues) "like leaves"

*The Cell*, October 23, 1986

I never did agree with Lyn's decision in *The Cell* to break the lines into five-word units, and I still don't. It gives the look of writing in a small notebook and disguises the true expansive generosity and exuberance of the great long lines, which are Whitmanian in their spontaneous daring.

Convicted musicians in the evening between

the movie and the street  
Zukofsky says, “Emphasize detail  
130 times over—or there will be no poetic...”  
(gives, droops, drags with the elasticity of place)  
Crickets  
They govern by ear  
the nation of sound  
Invisible physically frequent retreating unarranged lush and  
unnearving  
— flossy corymbose crouch  
But by then gradually decisive

LH 26 & 28  
October  
1986

how strange to hear crickets in November  
tell innocent musicians to repeat certain notes  
until an entire nation is unnerved  
a movie  
a physical withdrawal from place  
a street but a street in a song stuck in the head  
then back to the frequency of  
change our city  
government affects  
as mustard has  
or cherry  
making the year a round

KR 11/3/86

Government is dizzy without capitals  
to name  
More and more, connection takes space  
and correction  
Every place the imagination  
occurs replace it with the word “language”  
which works

It doesn't drone with anarchy  
To change the city we must dictate predictions  
Entire nerves  
What do you suspect  
The imagination congests the sex

LH 7/November/86

Quickly though, our vocabularies began to diverge. On November 11, Lyn wrote:

"If you weren't noting the relationship of your poems to mine in letters, I am not sure if I would have been certain of the connection. And I have been writing from yours as they have arrived, although you say you don't notice the correspondence."

"I always liked (aesthetically) and appreciated Eigner's habit of indicating background information along the margin of his poems. But for me—I hope it is the same for you—this project is getting so intense that I am not sure I would know how to annotate it."

#### PACIFIC INCINERATOR

all things being equal  
rusted door on cracked concrete pagoda oven  
I may already have taken everything inside  
California back yard  
the whole person a casing of outside  
sun through leaves' yellow  
regular, normal, daily, particular metabolism  
flexes like a sweat  
Cartesian screen door  
and my whole calendar is filled with them  
there is no such thing as a day

KR 11/9/86

Elegy

After Kit's of 11/9

Charles Olson had an articulate organ  
which he called a lung  
The blunt November summer  
Red and yellow language coming with the tongue  
the whole rusted calendar  
with spunky redundancy  
makes the year so long  
it's blown  
There's no such thing as yesterday  
which rolls remote  
and holds its information forward  
for too long

LH 13  
November  
1989

I meet myself rarely to  
    experience the coincidence of my  
    objectivity with my subjectivity  
This incongruence is independent of  
    the possibility that a person  
    had an articulate organ which  
    he called a lung  
The blunt November summer—I  
    could have only said so  
Red and yellow language coming  
    with the tongue  
A big one  
The year is thick and  
    long and thrust  
The label sticks up from  
    the collar but the hair  
    hides it  
The place warm  
The space bar worn  
There's no such thing as

yesterday which rolls under and  
holds its information up and  
forward for long  
The information is like a balmy palpitation  
I like everything at a level below its name

*The Cell*, November 13, 1986

Here Hejinian uses the initial draft as if it were a set of chord changes, and lays a stunning, intricate solo over them.

Lyn's letters contain keys to some of the references in her poems. These include the music of Giacinto Scelsi, roofers replacing the roof of her house, a street person who has moved into her backyard, her translation of the poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, pornography, drawings by Jacob Lawrence based on poems by Langston Hughes, dream journals, Zukofsky, Ma Rainey, the dictionary, radio advertising, William James, Ovid, Ornette Coleman on Spike Jones, Coleridge, Ernest Shackleton's expeditions to Antarctica, a glider trip over Mt. St. Helena, chaos theory, Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Pasternak's *Safe Conduct*, Beckett's *The Unnameable*, Schreber's *History of Mental Illness*, Gogol's story "Vivv," Eikhenbaum's *Russian Prose*, Bataille, Kafka, conversations with friends, and her persistent investigation into poetic activity.

"...I feel as if my poems are somewhat clumsy and at points inept or blurred by superfluties, but that I am finally doing in poetry what I have thought I should do—it's all exploration and inquisition at this point for me. The product-orientation has diminished and I have thought for a long time that it was becoming a problem."

LH 11/1/86

Do you patrol? outside the  
self? around a body and  
the follicle in which it  
stands  
Or cell?  
Request?  
Have you reverted?  
All memory of having looked

is loose  
It is so cold parallels  
wobble in the chamber shoes  
grain drifts  
A sign on the fire  
door says silence  
A sign on the floor  
says come in  
Patrol (but there are no  
opposites) is narrowing  
But I was not moving  
anywhere on my feet  
Within such fear of death  
if it is a thrill  
to cease  
But in the succeeding request  
I ask decess to be  
stable, not diffused or decreased  
The cell of description of  
anything (and virtually interrupted)  
Her death in a beginning  
It is in a prolonged,  
ruthless, unguarded kinesis  
The cell in shifts  
Cells in drifts  
So we're feeling a loss  
but not a conclusion  
The smallest unite of imagination  
in time, a retrospection  
A unit of space so  
small it seems to be  
going backwards

*The Cell*, January 14, 1987

what is early, what late  
if I start now, will I finish before the beginning?  
have we been here all along?

can we say what's happened? is there time?  
the children are gone, but they write  
from the perfect playground of coincidence  
we're like survivors, thinking of starting a business  
you saw what happened last time  
and the air quenches our thirst for answers  
with a mental finding  
either you're going to get up and go  
or I don't know what  
KR 8/6/87

The phrase "a mental finding" came from current events. During the Iran-Contra hearings, Oliver North's attorney's claimed that while President Reagan had not officially ordered the secret war in Nicaragua, he had issued a "mental finding," approving certain operations.

67. (after Kit's 6/8)

One thing that I think about melody is the ordinary  
coincidence  
Anything that repeats must be a childhood to affect you  
The squall is resting on the polar, quenching  
Perhaps there's not enough change in civilization  
or proportion  
It gives you the feeling that the thing you love is not as  
important to you as it is to someone else  
The coincidence (lots of sound sounds very much like water)  
A water involutes  
It unwound the last time  
Life after sleep—there too we have genitals and mental  
findings  
The sound in a childhood until it coruscates  
The air is stalled in the emotion  
The proportion

August 15, 1987

"I've been making small idiotic diagrams to depict to myself the relationships of your #72 to my #76. But the poems are exceeding the bounding sides of the

figures I draw. They (the figures) are bulging triangles with oscillating sides, built shakily on the three points *language* (words, grammar, syntax), *things* (objects, events, systems [like “government”], etc.), and *mind* (thought, perception, consciousness—person).

“I think I am predisposed to triangles because of the rhyme with ‘triangulation’—implicating an explorer and his or her measuring apparatus.”

LH 10/1/87

Space is the place, as Sun Ra has pointed out, in which we can make discovery. But other seeming imperatives tended to remove space from our consideration.

“The other day Larry defined ‘reality’ as ‘the world that won’t go away.’”

LH 5/20/88

I don’t have copies of my letters to Lyn. The computer disks are somewhere, the software obsolete. She thinks the print copies may be in her archive at UCSD. As I remember, they began as energetic, discursive commentary on the content of the exchange and over the course of the two-plus-year correspondence trailed off into a series of brief and increasingly grumpy notes. I was exhausted, my job left me little time or energy to write, I envied Lyn’s ability to read, think, write, travel, with these and other complaints I went from suave liberator to crabby fussbudget. I had given Lyn permission to write freely and spontaneously and now she was burying me—I couldn’t keep up. Recently we laughed about this. “I’ve created a monster! Stop!”

Writing this article has given me occasion to look back at the poems I wrote with Lyn, most of them unpublished, with new eyes. I am struck by their seeming autonomy, even from their author. They flaunt the possession of deep meaning, but refuse to give it up. By contrast Lyn’s read as increasingly open, with the amendments of *The Cell* and interceding time adding new levels of access.

I think the opacity of my “Up Early” and subsequent efforts (“Later That Day”) are partly accountable to the intimacy of my poetic dialog with Lyn, where everything was permitted. Haste and a sense of urgency—it was always almost time for work—were other contributing factors. I wrote carelessly in

respect to thought, falling over consistently on the side of language.

Lyn and I had become professionals, she as a teacher and I as a writer and manager in the information technology industry. Our more frequent contact through social and poetry scenes had given way to other practicalities. Living in the same town and exchanging letters and poems in the mail felt oddly 19th century, but under the circumstances, necessary.