

## like two pears



There is the outside of a person and the inside, almost that.<sup>i</sup>  
— Bernadette Mayer

### (I) Lyn & Bernadette

On August 21st this year, i receive an e-mail from UC San Diego Library with some old correspondence between poets Lyn Hejinian and Bernadette Mayer. i'd come across mention of the letters a few months prior while searching for *Mutual Aid* as a 40th birthday gift for T—a stapled book Bernadette had published when she too was 40 y/o. It was the first book released in 1985, on January 1 at 12:01am(!) and had a print run of thirty-three. i was feeling sorry i didn't have the \$\$ to spend US1250 on an auction-house copy at Barnebys, also sad wondering where those \$\$ would have gone anyway, though the search did bring me to San Diego scrolling lists of Bernadette's papers her manuscripts drafts poems the archives of her past world. And me not thinking much of it but here i was typing my contact in an empty e-box signing up for a library account where the ease of it left me skeptical of any means of access but i'm writing still asking if possible please, could i order some scans? Scans, a knock-knock on the library's door at high covid o'clock.

And no word for a slow three months, then suddenly there is word, there's words and words and waits for blab la bla, a few surprising back & forths and some choosings in the lists boxes folders numbers, receding back because 50 cents a scan !too many! and i receive twelve letters from Lyn to Bernadette spanning the course of eight years. It's here i learnt about their mutual admiration for the other's sentences.

In her second letter to Bernadette in the file, Lyn thanks her for the review in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E where she writes about *My Life*, Lyn's then most recent book. This is February 2, 1981. I go ahead and find the review on [eclipsearchive.org](http://eclipsearchive.org) in Number 13 from December, 1980. Bernadette praises Lyn's sentences, or rather, her lines. She says:

*My Life* has so many good lines in it, it's like a trot, it makes you want to steal from it or perhaps annotate it & make the compliment (or complement) of imitating it.<sup>ii</sup>

And voila, talking to T on the phone about pistachio pesto we both check our shelves for *My Life* and *My Life in the Nineties*, the 2013 re-print, and it's there—on the book—in The Blurbs. Her quote! Thirty-three years after the fact, pertinent still.

In Lyn's headnote to "Happily", the final piece in her collection of essays and talks, *The Language of Inquiry*—she also praises Bernadette's lines, or rather her sentences. Lyn says:

I should, I think, acknowledge some creative indebtedness... the sentences of three writers in particular have been central to my attempts to develop and amplify sentences of my own: Bernadette Mayer's radiating and run-on sentence, with its seemingly infinite capacity for digression...<sup>iii</sup>

From a to z, from L to B. From 1981 to 1989. It's the sentences that move, in each other's influences folding in. Reading these sentences letters numbers fills me with a joy from witnessing relations unfold in what seems to be real time. A date is a date, and what an anchor for the passing years.

Markers.

Anchors.

Ankles.

What is an anchor? An anchor is that which keeps one from drifting from the subject.<sup>iv</sup>

The final correspondence in the file is from November 7, 1989, and I suddenly realise there're no responses from Bernadette. Will have to take a look at Lyn's archive.

## (II) Pear Poems

First of August, the day after the last day of July this year reading Bernadette's *Memory* and they've settled, the days, but today feels like i've been on a big km swim splashy cute we wore the same socks and ate cherry cake or was it pie(?) the one with fake cherries they call it the sour ones but they're sugared actually covered in glacé. Bernadette ate it too @the village restaurant with vanilla ice cream, and it went like this the celebration of a last day to *Memory*.

Second of July, Bernadette lists her meals, w/ pear:

(naive) cheese pear beer burnt bread (luna: bread water wine priests of nyu having a discussion & crazy people horrible sarcasm of veal...<sup>v</sup>

Third of June, and i was crying not because you said no but because you said no like that, and all the other nos. Handwash, Moisturiser. Shampoo, Conditioner. 2-in-1. 2-in-1. Like rooms and space, the land of it. Not sure what i mean. Why was i finding it so hard to say that we're children? We're just children now all of us here falling over the most recent one being no practice for it. i don't know, i just was. And the extent of it.

In May, T gave *Memory* to me for my birthday. The text was compiled in 1971, where on each day in July Bernadette journaled and exposed a roll of film to her 24hrs. The first edition of the book only included the writing and is long out of print, but it was re-published this year with the month's corresponding images. This is the book i had read from every day in July.

Seven years after Bernadette's first *Memory*, another New York poet, Ted Greenwald writes that the pears are the pears:

the pears are the pears  
the table is the table  
the house is the house  
the windows are the windows...  
... the eyes are the eyes  
the mouth is the mouth<sup>vi</sup>

The mouth, i read 42 years later about a pear growing inside a pear-shaped bottle, one that holds pear brandy. The William pear, or the Bartlett pear, or the other names for this special variety of pear, is used for poire eau-de-vie. It's made in Alsace "the garden of France" entirely from fruit—thirteen kilos of pears used to make one bottle of Poire Williams.<sup>vii</sup> The pear-in-glass-growing begins in May, when an empty pear-shaped bottle is tied around a

young pear bud, straight onto the tree. Such pear in pear is also known as Poire Prisonnière.

i buy the Prisonnière, this bottle of eau-de-vie, G.E. Massenez, Liqueur Poire Williams—a treat to drink—with the coins i’d been saving from my teenage years. i had just refound them, they’d been sitting in an old metal cylinder previously used for an electric shaver, a container that used to be my dad’s. It was all stored for a decade in my family’s garage, i had used the cylinder to grow coins.

There was no pear in this bottle that i’d bought with the change. But as i sip i think  
Woah, we’re like these lil pears growing inside our houses rn. We’re the so-called Poire in our Rooms-de-Vie.

In one of Bernadette’s uncollected poems that i ordered during my online library visit, she typewrites on the back of a “PEARS’ transparent SOAP” packet, writing through the meaning of pears and its sounds. She writes:

We are like two pears  
We are like a pear or two  
We like two pears  
We are two like pears  
Like pears we are two  
Like pears we are too  
A pear and a pear  
A pear and a pear are too  
Like pears to swim in the sea  
...<sup>viii</sup>

There’s an interruption to meaning when reading pears with the suggestion of pairs, five and a half pairs to her pairs of pears. This interruption opens up space for meaning to shift, where these wordplays situate her thinking on the slippery plane of the bathroom sink, or the kitchen sink, or the swimming sink, showing how words can slide, how meanings can move, how we appear too and two. Bernadette prods the sounds in

pears	pear	pair
		two
		too

being transparent  
with how she moves from word to word, from line to line, meaning arriving from proximity in pears. With a soapy pair of hands we witness the metamorphosis of her slippy thinking in real time. She’s guiding our reading time with her writing time, sharing with us her pears unfold. We’re on the associative journey with her fruits.

There's a letter titled "Pear Pie" in Bernadette's book *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, a collection of letters written during a nine-month period when Bernadette was pregnant with her third child, Max. Her writing began in the Summer of 1979 and finished in February 1980—nine years after *Memory*. These letters were addressed to individuals she had known, to "a constellation of friends," though they were never sent.<sup>ix</sup> Her correspondence stayed with her.

In "Pear Pie" Bernadette speaks about a pear tree, a lucky one that's "striking", been struck by lightning whoosh cut in. Sorry to interrupt. Though the tree's regrowth is budding from the split, sprouting pears, multiple loins. It's an opening of space. Bernadette and her daughter, Marie, collect the pears from this cleft, a little under ripe so that they can eventually make a pear pie. Bernadette exclaimed her interest in the pears, saying she "wanted to get excited about something, even just these green pears... if and when they do ripen..."<sup>x</sup>

Bernadette also mentions of the "something" in this zapped pear pie story, that there's "no way of saying anything without implying something." She sees thoughts in pairs, where there's "something" behind this "anything". There's movement of thinking beyond what is said, where the meaning of one thing shifts by thought's proximity. Or, by its distance—the space opened up by difference. One two, one, two. A pair of pears, like us, is two, too.

Lyn shares a similar thought. She says:

But the emphasis... is on the moving rather than on the places—poetry follows pathways of thinking and it is that that creates patterns of coherence. It is at points of linkage... that one discovers the reality of being in time, *of taking one's chance, of becoming another.*<sup>xi</sup>

We're living in pairs within us. Moving within in multiples. Is this seeing double?

Abodes within abodes.

Frames.

Brackets.

Numbers.

\*clink clink\*

### (III) Poetic Feet

Magic was the roses they're there, there's all of them! bushes cut together house by house and they're all re-growth now. Re-growth re-quote a second-hand book in hand, it arrives to me *The*

*Descent*

*Of*

*ALEtTE* where

Alice Notley writes an Author's Note about the use of her "quotation marks". It's at the start of the 1996 Penguin edition and this book her book a feminist epic follows Alette, the narrator, through a journey of "continual transformation" where the quotation marks frame rhythmic units throughout. They're at the edges of our words that is, the edges of our mouths.

Alice explains that at times readers ask about the quotation marks when beginning the book. Ask who? Though the reader then becomes accustomed to them, she says, no longer wondering why the floatation marks are used. Alice still flags three reasons for them.

One reason is that the quotation marks reiterate that it is a "voice" that is speaking, the first poet writing through air. The mouHHHth. The softest place to represent prose. Alice says:

...they remind the reader that each phrase is a thing said by a voice: this is not a thought, or a record of thought-process, this is a story, told.<sup>xii</sup>

The second reason she lists as a clarification, almost, is to indicate that the narrator is no Alice:

They also distance the narrative from myself, the author: I am not Alette.<sup>xiii</sup>

A formal decision for the assumption of connecting author to narrator. The auto-fiction, the tiresome question of—would you say the character is based on experiences from within the life of You, that is to say, is the character ~more or less~ "You"? Though who wouldn't be You, as if there is one of Us. Only one of Us, one of You. And one of You too.

A third reason mentioned for the use of quotation marks in this epic speaks of pace. The pacing of the body in space, the way that pace is articulated on the page. Alice says:

But they're there, mostly, to measure the poem. The phrases they enclose are poetic feet.<sup>xiv</sup>

Feet as in ft as in '. Pair of feet. Portable units of measurement, between things.  
Units. Like a phrased walk. Alice continues that the quotation marks help  
the reader notice the phrasing, not pass over it mindlessly. They help the  
reader "slow" "down", and:

... silently articulate—not slur over mentally—the phrases at the pace, and with  
the stresses, I intend.<sup>xv</sup>

The reader becomes accustomed to each phrase's context. Able to step into  
Allete's shoes. And become one with Allete's feet. The marks exist within the  
phrase. What's before what's after quotation? What's the outside the inside,  
almost that.

*ON ONE OF YOUR  
STEPS*

after zooming with your friends washing the dishes hearing the rain  
on the windows and floors hearing it all above us  
after hearing the nasturtiums catch the drips and  
after i became a puddle, slowly, "with" "your" "finger"  
moving around it just, and just  
after the heat of it, your  
three blankets

i went downstairs to pee i was thirsty needed to pee first, to drink  
so i walked down your outdoor steps  
and then i stepped on a snail

i first heard it through my teeth tasted the crunch of it under your  
shoe i was wearing the snail who was heading upstairs to give its  
company to your hellebore, to the little goblin you call it it likes the  
wetness under the bridge, but i stepped on it on one of your steps i  
stopped it on its tracks, its one foot on the base of your shoe

snail, on my foot.

#### (IV) Pause

BCE, pre- before, pre- all this happening, pre- the e-mails 40th years and years poems, i'd been thinking there's something in the idea of interruption & rooms i'd like to follow, understand the space opened up by pause & doors. So i'm strict-one-hour-walking listening to a podcast on interruption i'd eyed a while ago—a lecture by Lyn at the University of Chicago from May 2006, titled “A Return of Interruption”. This lecture is 51'30” long and Lyn begins by saying she intends not only to speak of interruption but to make something of it. Which happens precisely at 12'58” where mid-line, as i'm hearing the word “formation”, the audiofile of her lecture stops. Seemingly accidentally, and aptly so. At the end of the podcast description, a note encourages contact through the digicomm ether to report any listening difficulties. Dear uchicago tech-help team, is there an original file? The recording is fifteen yrs old, Eric replies, unfortunately the file cannot be sourced.

Online searching elsewhere for the interrupted interruption, it's nowhere until its original(?) is possibly(?) somewhere—an essay title in the tenth issue of *Aerial* (never heard of!) *Magazine*, “The Orders of Interruption”.<sup>xvi</sup> Could it be? Rod Smith, one of its editors, receives my order for the issue. Apparently no postage atm no answers but then months later an e-mail with a pdf arrives.

*Aerial 10: Lyn Hejinian*, published in 2016 and edited by Rod, and Jen Hofer, is an issue dedicated to Lyn's work. Lyn and 24 contributors wrote around and through her practice, in any-which-way they chose. Rod Smith, Jen Hofer, Rae Armantrout, Carla Billitteri, Peter Nicholls, Laura Moriarty, Carla Harryman, Ron Silliman, Gerhard Schultz, Kit Robinson, Patrick Durgin, Kate Fagan, Barrett Watten, Jalal Toufic, Kevin Killian, Pamela Lu, Rosmarie Waldrop, Katy Lederer, Lisa Robertson, Jean Day, Anne Tardos and Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Lyn Hejinian and Jack Collom, Tim Wood, as well as ten letters from Lyn Hejinian to: Carolyn Andrews, Clark Coolidge, Rae Armantrout, Clark and Susan Coolidge, Alice Notley, Kit Robinson, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, Fanny Howe, and Jack Collom. It includes correspondence, interviews, poems, essays, as well as excerpts of previously published & unpublished works by Lyn. It all speaks to her works' “truly various, modes of thought” over the forty years she has been writing.<sup>xvii</sup>

There's a community right there writing there around Lyn's practice. It's one i learnt about through the cause of interruption. i like to think that in attempting to listen to Lyn's lecture, with the pause that followed thirteen minutes into the recording, that this interruption opened up space in which to learn about context. It opened up space to access a network, read “a portrait...emerg[ing] from the community.”<sup>xviii</sup>

And there's something in this! In the choice of who we work alongside and with, or who we choose to steal quote requote annotate and imitate from that creates a network, this context. And it is interruptions that can bring these relations to the fore. Because, as Lyn writes in *My Life*, "certain humans are situations."<sup>xix</sup> And these situations are constantly changing. Like how she also concludes in the essay version of "The Orders of Interruption":

Interruptions bring contexts into view; they are foregroundings (and sometimes self-foregroundings) of what's being overlooked, by-passed.<sup>xx</sup>

Jen mentions in her introduction to *Aerial 10: Lyn Hejinian*, that this publication, too, is a context formed through relation, and that these relations do not hold still.<sup>xxi</sup> She quotes Lyn to explain:

Language is nothing but meanings, and meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts... They are transitions, transmutations, the endless radiating of denotation into relation.<sup>xxii</sup>

It is these relations that define our work, our writing especially. Following sentences as they move.

In Lyn's first letter sent to Bernadette, she writes that she's read some of her work and likes it "very, very much."<sup>xxiii</sup> Lyn's saying Charles Bernstein is in town and will be bringing her copies of *United Artists*, Bernadette's magazine—issues no. 2, 3, 4, 5. Though not a copy of no. 1, which is the motivation to write that day, to ask for this missing issue. Lyn says she's also wanted to send Bernadette some copies of her TUUMBA press books. Reading reading. Books for magazines, the beginning of exchange.

A pair is a context. A pair is still a context. Having two in one in multiple, like the i, like a snail—a pair of feet in one foot.

Maybe a quote is like this, too: being in two worlds at once. The context you make and the context they made. What can quotation do? It can allow thinking in pairs. Can create internal proximity with the thought of the speaker. Exist within the mouth of the speaker while hearing another's voice. It can slow down pace of either side of the quote. Like an interruption, it creates space for a new relation to form. It contains, new context. Like how Bernadette's "letters" are described by Laynie, when she says that they contain all her people and all her things, they contain a potential of introductions:

I am also thinking that her's is a text that leads to many other texts.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Meaning is at these "points of linkage" of "becoming another", as Lyn says. It's in how we hold each other, like two pears. Or, where the edges of quotation—

or interruption—have another edge, a doorhandle a window a rose by another name in another season.

Pause, like relation, can help us understand context. And interruptions can open up space for these contexts to grow—through language, and through pause

A pause, a rose, something on paper.<sup>xxv</sup>

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- <sup>i</sup> Bernadette Mayer, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (Washington, D.C.: SplitLevel Texts, 2017), 98.
- <sup>ii</sup> Bernadette Mayer, “MAYER ON HEJINIAN,” *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 13 (1980): 17.
- <sup>iii</sup> Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 385.
- <sup>iv</sup> Lyn Hejinian, *The Fatalist* (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2003), 21.
- <sup>v</sup> Bernadette Mayer, *Memory* (New York, NY: Siglio Press, 2020), 33-34.
- <sup>vi</sup> Ted Greenwald, *Common Sense* (Kensington, CA: L Publications, 1978).
- <sup>vii</sup> S. Irene Virbila, “Eau-de-Vie, the Spirit of Alsace,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 1990, 14.
- <sup>viii</sup> Bernadette Mayer, *Bernadette Mayer Papers*, MSS 420, Box 34, Folder 104, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego Library, 1975.
- <sup>ix</sup> Laynie Browne, “Introduction,” in *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (Washington, D.C.: SplitLevel Texts, 2017), 10.
- <sup>x</sup> Mayer, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, 172.
- <sup>xi</sup> Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 3.
- <sup>xii</sup> Alice Notley, *The Descent of Alette* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1996), v.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*

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xiv Ibid.

xv Ibid.

xvi Lyn Hejinian, “‘The Orders of Interruption’ (Alternative title: Rough Understanding) (First presented at the University of Michigan, March 31, 2005),” *Aerial 10: Lyn Hejinian* (2016): 63.

xvii Rod Smith, “Preface,” *Aerial 10: Lyn Hejinian* (2016): 9.

xviii Ibid, 10.

xix Lyn Hejinian, *My life and My life in the nineties* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 6.

xx Lyn Hejinian, “The Orders of Interruption,” *Aerial 10: Lyn Hejinian* (2016): 77.

xxi Hofer, “Introduction,” 15.

xxii Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 1.

xxiii Mayer, *Bernadette Mayer Papers*.

xxiv Browne, “Introduction,” 13.

xxv Hejinian, *My life and My life in the nineties*, 3.

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