

Katy Lederer

On Working with Lyn Hejinian

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And so, as I sat in my dark little room, I decided to write her an email and ask her advice. I told her I was terrified. That I hadn't known what I was getting into, but that now I'd signed this contract, and what was there to do? My family, I told her, was furious with me. The writing, I told her, was not very good. Of course, these were all just excuses. What I really wanted, plain and simple, was to get out if it—to get out of the writing, to get out of the personal *risk*. As one might expect to feel about any full-length work based on one's life, my feelings about my memoir were ambivalent. After two years of working on the thing, I had lost all perspective. Lyn had always been for me an aesthetic and ethical ballast. Not trusting my own artistic judgment, I looked to her to tell me what was right and wrong, something I knew even then no artist can ever be fairly expected to do for another.

"There is nothing wrong with writing down a life," she replied. "As I think you're aware, I have all my personal letters at the library down in San Diego, and I know how you feel, the idea of people being able to paw through your experience, to know your private life. It can feel awful, but it's truly a generous thing. We need to know of others' lives. If you think, of course, that this will follow you, then don't publish it."

She was equivocal, trying to find the right level with her student who desperately wanted an out.

I'm embarrassed now to admit to the loss of nerve I had then, but the conversation that resulted was one of the most important I have ever had—Lyn on the phone talking all about not just her life, but also the ways in which she'd written about it, written *through* it, and the importance of that. I think of this as the first time—no matter how much I may have adored her, no matter how much I'd looked up to her in all my years of school—that I realized she wasn't by nature a pedagogue. No, she too had a life, had equivocal, hard-earned desires: to write a few really good books. To be happy in her life and in her work. To make, as they say, a contribution to her art. She was, I could see, just a person, a human.