

DÉSINCARNÉ DISEMBODIED

MEERA ATKINSON

... *the lover's discourse has been replaced by its simulation* ...

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

We met in 'Books and Literature.' It was a quiet room; just us and a smart-arse from Delaware. I said I was new to chat rooms. He said, get out now. I typed lol (laugh out loud). He said he was serious. I asked if he'd been chatting long. He said longer than he cared to remember. We identified locations (him Manhattan, me Milton Island) and talked books (*Finnigans Wake*, *White Noise*, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*) and poets (Anne Sexton, Gregory Corso, Octavio Paz). We exchanged some pointless repartee. After a while he asked my age. I said I was 33. He told me he was 52; an editor in The Big Apple, born and raised in The Bronx. He said he hated journalism, that he envied me being a poet. I paused and asked him why. Journalism is the opposite of writing, he wrote. Yes, I said, the opposite, the facts without the truth. But—I reminded him—poets don't get salaries. That's right, he said, except in Communist Russia. He told me he was writing a novel. He was quick and his words were good and I liked him straight away. I drew a bold breath and sent him a private message.

We talked for two hours that night.

He asked what my cyber name meant. It's the meaning of my real first name, I said. I asked what his cyber name meant. He said ghost of a long dead French anarchist. He asked me what my real first name was. I told him it was Emalia and he told me his was Alex.

I can't remember how it came up, but at a certain point he said something about national boundaries being stupid. I asked if he thought

such things would change as a result of global economics. He said that frankly, he didn't really care. I started, said I was only making conversation. He said it was just that, as he got older, he cared less and less about politics. I said, well, it's a free country. We both wondered about that. There was an awkward silence. He wrote that he did believe certain things. I asked what things he believed in. I wasn't prepared for what came next. I didn't see it coming. The word love flashed up on the screen. Good answer (smiles), I wrote.

That might have been the start. A sharp, invisible hook pierced my corporal flesh. I could feel it.

Out of the blue he asked, did I want to read his novel. I panicked, said something like, what's it about? Suddenly he turned New Yorker and said, hey I only offer once. Don't back off, I said, it's just that I get nervous. We swapped email addresses. He said he'd send the first chapter and if I liked it he'd send some more. I said I'd send him a couple of recent poems. He said he had to go, that it was four in the morning his time, and that by the way I had a lovely name. We said goodbye a couple of times using words like 'later' and 'ciao'.

Later I mailed him two poems.

Date: Sun, 26 Mar 2004 07:53:24-0800 (PST)

From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>

To: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com <proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com>

Subject: swap

alex,

hi there. i really enjoyed talking—it's refreshing to connect with someone among the fractured thought of chat. poems following, as promised. can't help feeling they're a little weighty for this sort of swap, but i don't do light poems and don't do stories so ...

as i said before, i get nervous showing my poems to, or reading the work of, people who are neither trusted friends nor total strangers

(it's that pesky middle ground that bothers me), so bear with me if I seem a little guarded.

i do appreciate your suggesting it though and a riskless life is not a life worth living, or even really an option, so i'll leave them with you and say bye for now.

emalia alias flirtinlatin

That night I couldn't sleep. Watched the curtains billow above my head. Worried about his chapter. Maybe I wouldn't like it. Maybe I'd get trapped in that tight crack between the discomfort of lying and concern for another's feelings. In the morning I logged on.

Date: Sun, 26 Mar 2004 14:00:06-0800 (PST)
From: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com <proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com>
To: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
Subject: Re: swap

Dear Emalia—I liked your poems very much. I enjoyed talking to you too, though I'm afraid I was half unconscious due to the hour, and far from at my best. Here is the first chapter to repay you.

A.

The chapter was good. I was relieved I liked it.

Date: Mon, 27 Mar 2004 04:02:10-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com
Subject: story

dear alex,

loved the chapter, really, an excellent beginning. feel like sending some more of your novel through?

i'm in an interesting situation here on the island, lifestyle-wise, which means i'm mostly home and work or not when i want so i'm flexible about meeting times, let me know if and when you feel like chatting again.

hope you've caught up on the sleep, emalia

Date: Mon, 27 Mar 2004 11:37:53-0800 (PST)
From: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com <proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com>
To: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
Subject: Re: story

Dear Emalia—thanks for your kind words about the chapter. I'm attaching the second chapter. What is this island you live on? I'm not entirely clear where in Australia you are.

Would love to chat more. How about the weekend? Send more poems.

Love, A.

The 'Love. A' didn't escape my attention. It was an unavoidably significant moment in our relationship. I stared at the text like a fortune-teller staring into a crystal ball, trying to determine it's precise resonance. After a while I decided that it was a friendly 'Love', rather than a frightening or lecherous 'Love.' Merely the healthy expression of a sense of mutually developing warmth. Still, I cowered. I could reciprocate the messages but not yet the 'Love.' I hoped this wouldn't hurt his feelings.

I hoped any sting felt by the absence of a 'Love' would be soothed by a gentle sense of humour.

Date: Mon, 27 Mar 2004 14:55:55-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com
Subject: situation

dear alex,

weekend is good. re the island—it's a long story but basically i was living in melbourne, lecturing in english lit at monash university, when i left my partner of 5 years. my father, who lives alone on the island (northeast of brisbane, in queensland), took ill at the same time, so i took sabbatical and moved in temporarily to care for him. i'm taking the opportunity to work on a new collection of poems.

so here i am. the island is like a tame, miniature, australian version of florida. aside from tending to my father, i spend my time reading and writing, with little else to do besides, apart from taking long walks. i hope to be back in melbourne in two months if my father's recovery runs on time, but this surrealistically suburban interlude with goldorangepink sunsets and dolphins in the bay has turned out to be quite lovely.

emalia

I read the next chapter and liked it. I liked it a lot. As I read, I felt myself drawn to him, drawn into his pulsating textual body.

It's hard to describe the way the intoxicating to and fro of messages caused me to start falling in love, the way their rhythm beat like a pair of clever feet that swept me into a dance. It's hard to explain the strength of feeling that gestated in a womb of words and words alone.

It was an embryonic admiration, tender, young, buoyant in the medium like so many miraculous cells bubbling in a body.

Date: Mon, 27 Mar 2004 17:37:33-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com
Subject: chapter

this correspondence is running thick and fast isn't it? i just logged on again to tell you that I really liked the chapter. really.

on another note—i don't quite know how to put this ... be assured i'm not sizing you up with any particular agenda in mind but ... now that we're becoming friends i'm curious to know certain things: what you look like, your style as a person, if you're jewish—an obvious question arising from reading your novel and i hope not an offensive one. please don't feel pressured to respond.

i imagine you're wondering the same about me so i'll oblige a little first: I have straight shoulder-length honey-brown hair, fair skin, am five-six and a half, don't know my weight but i'm curvy. don't do dior suits or round the clock make-up. hate sporty casual. i wear vintage clothes. I love the cut and fabric of old dresses. i'll leave it there for now as i have a tendency to run on in email and you have enough of my words to be getting on with.

send more novel please.

emalia

Date: Tues, 28 Mar 2004 17:10:25-0800 (PST)
From: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com <proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com>
To: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
Subject: Re: chapter

>what you look like

Six-one, 170 pounds (on a good day), still have hair (gone grey), wire-rimmed glasses.

>your style as a person

19th century anarchist.

>if you're jewish

Son of Russian Jews.

>send more novel please.

Am back at work after a week's leave and swamped. Chapters attached.

A.

I noted that he had deleted his 'Love' and felt bad about it for a moment. Had I been mean in withholding it? I now had plenty to ponder. 19th century anarchist was interesting. Six-one was good. Glasses could be cute. Still has hair.

As to the gone gray, well, I was partial to older men. I convinced myself I would find Alex attractive. I had reached a time of life where I could see beauty in an older face. How could a map of wrinkles erase the lure of lingua? How could I not love the nakedness of a body when I longed to strip that body of its words and reach the nakedness of its mind?

Overnight, I imagined various shapes of glasses on an amorphous identikit face. Formlessness and fear. Language and love. If the body could not be touched and seen it would be imagined into being. I had a sudden impulse to sign my next message with a 'Love'. In the end, I held back on the 'Love' but, filled with compassion for a fellow artist strapped to the wheel of material life like some tortured literary butterfly, I took a risk in making physical, if bodiless, contact.

Date: Tues, 28 Mar 2004 18:17:13-0800 (PST)

From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>

To: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com

Subject: p.s.

dear alex,

i'm moving through the chapters quick so you can keep sending them through. sorry to hear about the back-to-work demands. sending you a comforting shoulder rub.

emalia

Date: Wed, 29 Mar 2004 04:25:39-0800 (PST)

From: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com <proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com>

To: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>

Subject: Re: p.s.

>please send more through.

More chapter attached. You are very sweet.

Love, A.

The 'Love' was back. The rub had called it back.

It tormented me. I wanted a clear vision of Alex. My cat prowled into the room complaining in long meows. I closed my eyes and she licked the salt off the back of my hand with her raspy red tongue as I tried yet again to pin down a picture of him. I wanted to be patient, to not ask too much too soon. But I couldn't wait. I had to know more.

Date: Wed, 29 Mar 2004 14:00:50-0800 (PST)

From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>

To: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com

Subject: my still burning curiosity

dear alex,

height, weight, hair is too vague. say something more about your physical presence. are you homely? menacing? wildly attractive to women? do you, in the spirit of a 19th century anarchist, wear any form of frockcoat?

for my part (i'm assuming you're curious too), i'll put it this way. i'm not a raving beauty but i have a certain, delicate, appeal. to a stranger i probably look like a cross between an intellectual and ... something not intellectual for which i can't think of a word. does that give you a better picture?

love, emalia

There it was in black and white. I had written 'love'. It was done. It felt like a weight had been lifted.

Date: Wed, 29 Mar 2004 18:42:33-0800 (PST)

From: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com <proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com>

To: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>

Subject: Re: my still burning curiosity

>are you homely? menacing? wildly attractive to women?

Homely? Certainly not. Menacing? Only to people who confuse being ill-barbered with lunacy. As for actual looks, when I was younger I was very attractive to women, though—owing to modesty or hopeless stupidity—I never wrung from this the advantage I could

have. I suppose I'm still reasonably attractive now, if your taste runs to the geriatric. I don't seem to myself to look as old as most people my age, but no doubt I'm deluding myself. In the spirit of truthfulness I should also add that I'm thrice and currently married and the father of three children ranging in age between 16 and 25.

>do you, in the spirit of a 19th century anarchist, wear any form of frockcoat?

No frockcoats in my closet.

You on the other hand sound quite delightful and I'm sure you would turn my head if I saw you.

You are—in case you didn't know it—quite a fascinating individual.

Love, A.

So he was married. Of course he was. I was seized by a sudden urge to cry. I had not been looking for a lover or husband and yet ...

Married. For how long? 20 years? Longer?

We had established a certain frankness, and I was in no mood to play pretend.

Date: Wed, 29 Mar 2004 21:52:50-0800 (PST)

From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>

To: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com

Subject: curiosity killed the cat

sigh. just as well you told me you were married. i was beginning to fall for you. i know, it's ridiculous, under the circumstances, having known you in cyberspace all of four or five days. you probably think i'm desperate for love but i'm not. perhaps you just enjoy a spot of

cyber flirting. if so, no hard feelings. but i haven't even thought of this as flirting, just as two people getting along obscenely well.

sigh again.

wistfully yours, emalia

Not long afterward I grew embarrassed about my confession, concerned that he would think I had, all along, been courting him. I went back to my computer and logged on again.

Date: Thurs, 30 Mar 2004 00:46:27-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com
Subject: qualifying statement

dear alex,

i realized after that last message that it must seem to you that i was doing exactly what i said i wasn't doing—sizing you up with an agenda. not so. i guess i just don't hit it off with many people. just wanted to qualify my last message.

emalia

Date: Thurs, 30 Mar 2004 01:59:30-0800 (PST)
From: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com<proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com>
To: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
Subject: Re: qualifying statement

Dear Emalia—I'm not at all offended by your curiosity. But didn't you say you're rather new at chatting? You'll find as you continue—and it's the reason why I warned you against it—that it's a very seductive medium and that almost everyone you meet is looking to fall in love

in one way or another. Why not? It's so easy to fall in love this way, with no inconvenient bodies attached to complicate matters. I'll tell you frankly I've had my share of these cyber romances, and if you like I'll cheerfully fall in love with you, too.

Love, A.

I reeled. So he'd known others? How many? Four? Fourteen? Forty? Was I being taken advantage of? Was I being toyed with by some ruthless internet Lothario who preyed on cyber virgins like me? My father knocked on the door, opened it, asked a question. I snapped a reply and turned my back on him. I was concentrating, scanning my memory for proof of deception, of less than honourable intent.

I was held in the mercurial field of his utterances, the invisible glow that bounced off them, that was uniquely his in all the world. Had it all been a performance of language trancing me into the void? Was I, after a few short days, addicted to his words?

His having cyber lovers bore more jealousy than the existence of a wife. The wife was fleshed in some unthinkable space, some alien domestic world. But cyberspace was *our* space, our human, non-human orb. It was as if he'd had others in our bed.

The labyrinth of ego takes unthinkable routes and leads to impossible destinations.

I had guessed it, certainly, but this admission rebounded in my mind. It was the exact sentence I hated most, that 'share of these cyber romances.' *Share of these cyber romances.* Did he mean to include me? Was it possible that another's words had seized him more than mine? I stared indignantly at the screen then looked out of the window at the night and a swaying branch.

Deranged as it was there was no escaping it: I wanted to be placed above all others. I wanted my words to burn so bright in his mind and to slice so deep into his heart that another's would pale and disintegrate before his eyes.

Date: Thurs, 30 Mar 2004 15:20:44-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com
Subject: metaphors

dear alex,

yes, i did imagine that, you being a long time chatter, i could hardly have been the first to notice your charms ... and, yes, it is a strangely safe medium—intimacy without the discomfort of intimacy—the perfect plan for our human disease of fearing intimacy and desiring it in equal violent measure.

however the issue remains that, oddly, through our disembodied touch, i can't help but get a palpable sense of you. i could be dreaming it up, i know, but regardless it *feels* real and it's alluring. if you like i'll try to be un-allured, to turn the attraction off, like a tap. all the same i can't promise that, to stretch the metaphor further than it wants to go, it won't continue to drip.

you should know that i'm sulking about you having other lovers. i'm not good at feeling not special and by nature i am not suited to life in a cyber harem (the medium might not admit 'inconvenient bodies' but the inconvenience of bodies—feelings, jealousy, sensitivities—slip through sure enough).

in the meantime, while we ponder this development, please send more chapters.

love, emalia

Date: Fri, 31 Mar 2004 08:57:40-0800 (PST)
From: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com <proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com>
To: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
Subject: Re: metaphors

Dearest Emalia,

Yes, the foil of intimacy. No other creature on earth is like us in this respect. Other animals mate or they don't mate. They eat each other or they don't. Some species have great intelligence and demonstrate love, but they don't engage in this elaborate life-long psychodrama that we call relationships.

And once you reach my age you begin to truly understand the 'inconvenience of bodies'.

Please don't sulk. There is no harem.

Love, A.

But I would not be placated. It was not enough.

Date: Fri, 31 Mar 2004 10:21:12-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneyghost@yeeha.com
Subject: others

no harem you say. there is still the matter of your wife. tell me about her. what does she look like? do you still love her? if so, why are you in chat rooms seducing young women?

p.s. do you still want to meet this weekend?

emalia

Date: Fri, 31 Mar 2004 21:16:58-0800 (PST)
From: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com <proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com>
To: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
Subject: Re: others

You are a hard woman to ask such questions of a vulnerable old man. What would you like me to say about my wife? She is a middle-aged woman, once beautiful, ageing not so well. She has black hair (which she dyes to keep that way) and blue eyes. She is an alcoholic. Do I still love her? Marriage is a complex union. After a time the answer to that question no longer comes in a simple yes or no. In regards to seduction, one could argue about who is seducing whom.

As to chatting, I can meet you tonight 11pm my time.

Love, A.

Date: Fri, 31 Mar 2004 18:46:29-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com
Subject: tonight

you're right. that was mean of me. sorry. i don't know what's come over me. must be the isolation. this island is like something out of a fellini dream sequence. the people are enormous and grotesque and sweaty. or half-dead in that mothball, tight-lipped, walking sock way. i recognise no one here and am too alone. my father is my only company and he is frail and depressed, my friends are thousands of kilometres away, and i don't like the humidity.

anyway, will see you tonight at 11. i'll be in better spirits then.

love, emalia

We talked until the sun rose in New York. I went to bed imagining our encounter in an East Side hotel. I had conjured his voice, his accent, so fully it was as if I'd been hearing it all my life. We agreed to meet again same time next night. I slept for a few hours, dreamt about the wife. In the dream she humoured me, blew smoke in my face from her long, thin cigarette. I woke in a state at 2am and logged on.

Date: Sat, 1 Apr 2004 06:36:18-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com
Subject: last night

did you mean it when you said you daydream of meeting me? what would you do if i showed up? i'm going to look into flights today. why not? my father's improved and could cope for a week or two.

btw: i have the money so don't think i won't do it.

emalia, x

I checked my mail thirteen times throughout the night but there was no reply. By 9am the silence had put me into a frenzy.

Date: Sat, 1 Apr 2004 17:00:18-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com
Subject: hello?

i wonder what your wife would think of all this.

I regretted it as soon as I hit send. I wished I could reach through the ether and retrieve it, but it was gone, shooting down the wires and sparks. Language is a virus, just like William Burroughs and Laurie Anderson said, and I was sick with it. A threat. Me, a stalker.

Date: Sat, 1 Apr 2004 17:08:18-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com
Subject: last night

alex,

please forgive me. i didn't sleep. you're under my skin. i'm not usually like this.

emalia, x

It was a painful wait. I paced the house. Checked my messages too often. Finally it came.

Date: Sat, 1 Apr 2004 17:36:18-0800 (PST)
From: flirtinlatin <flirtinlatin@yeeha.com>
To: proudhoneysghost@yeeha.com
Subject: Re: last night

Dear Emalia,

Just got in. I've been out all day with the family. I do daydream of you. Often. But I'm not sure if a visit is a good idea. Going to take a nap now so I can meet you tonight. Let's talk about it more then.

Love, Alex

At 3pm I logged on to 'Books and Literature' and waited. We had come to a punctuation of sorts. A full-stop. There was no telling what sentence would come next. I counted on my fingers and worked out the time difference. It was 11.15pm his time. I sat and listened to the cicadas as they slowly faded with the day's heat.

At 11.30 I knew he wasn't coming. I closed my eyes and crossed the sea. I flew over Californian rooftops, soared above mid-western fields of corn, flew east, east, to Manhattan's iconic streets. I found his house still and solid in the windy spring night. His youngest slept as the city hummed and tree arms flailed outside their windows, and I was drawn toward the dim light of a room. I looked in and watched as he led his wife to the waiting bed. I clenched my eyes tight but I was forced to see that desire needs the body like a baby needs the breast.

I watched as their two ghosting shapes linked in the darkening room. I would not feel his whispery pant at my ear, would not read the wordless scripture of his body as it blessed me and left me breathless.

I looked at the screen. There was yet another conversation about Ayn Rand taking place. I looked down the list of chatters: bunnyfoofoo, david_2000, rightersblock. I was just about to click out of the room when a new name flashed up: Marcus_De_Sade. I smiled and started typing.

MEERA ATKINSON has a BA in Communications from the University of Technology Sydney and an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Queensland. Her poetry, short stories and essays have appeared in many journals and magazines, including *Heat*, *Blue Dog*, and *Salon.com*. She writes regularly for *Griffith REVIEW*.