

E-Love

Harriet Malinowitz



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The world is much more enthusiastic about art than it is about artists. A tortured painting can be revered, but a tortured painter is nervously avoided. A wildly exuberant symphony receives a standing ovation while its wildly exuberant composer gets treated for bipolar disorder. A fine piece of critical

writing is lauded, but the obsessively observant person who produced it is more likely to be called a critical bitch.

The urge to write always struck me with the bludgeoning insistence of a biological drive, but this didn't make me a "writer"; it just made me a vaguely strange child. I spent many hours alone in my attic bedroom writing unfinished prose pieces that I stuffed into a drawer, believing that this was one of those things that everyone secretly did but nobody talked about. At home in Queens, I was regarded as voluble and judgmental (presumably without an inner life); at school, I was spaced out and barely noticed (with nothing, presumably, *but* an inner life). In both cases, the actual act of writing, as well as its product, were so absent from my public existence—the only realm in which personalities were noted and codified—that they didn't factor into what one might call my "identity." Nobody—myself included—ever romantically branded my unsolicited analyses of people and events at home and the eternal daydream within which I moved at school as the rumblings of an inventive mind; they were simply signs of room for improvement. *

Upon graduating from junior high school—the ninth grade—everyone traded bulk-printed cards, each of which bore an individual graduation photograph. It was the custom to write a little something on the back of the card you gave someone. Three years earlier, graduating sixth grade, we'd gone round to teachers and classmates, asking them to sign our autograph albums. But in an autograph album you were only expected to write, before signing your name, one of the jingles that everybody else wrote—something like, "Don't ever kiss by the garden gate, 'cause love is blind, but the neighbors ain't." On the back of the photograph cards, the nugget of advice at least pretended to be personal and sincere, despite its almost universal dissemination. (The most common message, for example, was: "You're a great kid—don't ever change.")

I couldn't understand why people deliberately wrote such crude messages that had nothing to do with the recipients, but I never doubted that there was a good reason. In general, I assumed that the people who surrounded me in everyday life were more perceptive than they seemed to be—and just pretended to be dumb because vacuity, delivered with gusto, was the social glue that held people

together in nodding agreement. To fit in, then, I, too, would sometimes mouth vapid pieties in a cheerfully insentient way, and these were accepted as the passport to inclusion in common humanity.

Still, each time someone asked me to write an inscription on the back of my photo card, I couldn't help writing something specific that I had actually noticed about the person. The result was that each time someone handed me a card with her photo on the front and "You're quiet but a great kid, don't ever change" on the back (and I felt freshly slapped with disappointment, each time, that this was all someone had to say after all those years of going to school with me), the card I handed her invariably described something I found intriguingly quirky about her character. Though I rarely said much, I observed my classmates with the close attention of that other, more famous Harriet—the Spy—with whom I always felt identified.

But unlike the other Harriet, I only noted complimentary findings on those graduation cards and kept my copious critical reflections locked in my head. (Harriet the Spy had her diary stolen and everyone ostracized her when they read the unflattering things she had written about them.) So even though I had transgressed junior high school mores with my unique greetings, I was agreeably stunned to find that people *really read* their cards, with serious, rapt looks on their faces. Then they looked up at me with a combination of pleasure, surprise, bewilderment, and—most striking of all—curiosity. I, the unlikely custodian of such visions, was rewarded for the first time with the heady experience of *being seen back*. The part of me that I usually kept quarantined as unfit for mass consumption was, however fleetingly, publicized. Not only that, but appreciated.

However, despite the favorable reception of my cards, there turned out to be no resulting new friendships or stratum of social life for me.

Over the years that followed, I made the discovery that there were in fact a number of people on the Earth who did not converse in the whiny, obtuse cadences of Long Island. During those years, I started to publish my writing: short stories, theatre and book reviews, feminist and left-wing journalism. (Out in the world, I had developed a Consciousness—something of great use for any writer.) I also started to want to be famous.

The reason I wanted to be famous was not to garner the adoration of millions (though I would not have objected to that), but to catch the attention of specific literary individuals and intellectuals I wanted to know. I felt, for instance, that I would have a lot to say to Doris Lessing if only I had the opportunity. But unless I were famous, Doris Lessing would not know that I existed, would not know what sort of conversation we could have, and thus we would not have it. Unless I were famous, I would always look at people like Doris Lessing through a one-way mirror, yearning hopelessly to be looked back at—to be mutually recognized.

The person I wanted to have a conversation with more than anyone in the world was the poet and essayist Adrienne Rich. If I had had anyone in my actual life who thought and spoke with the complexity, the seriousness, the moral intensity, the meticulous language of Rich, I would not have longed so desperately for this conversation. But I had no such person.

Unable to have the real interchange with Rich that I wanted, I internalized her. In my head, even in nighttime dreams, she approved of things about me that nobody in reality did: my need for solitude; my tendency to prioritize reading and writing over social relations; my inability to go with the flow about matters that seemed highly significant to me, even if they did to no one else; my inability to distinguish between describing life and living it; my moral agonizing about virtually everything; my eccentric interpretations of people and events; my drive to use language precisely, not carelessly; my being a lesbian. In short: my struggle to take myself seriously.

But after I published my first few stories and articles in feminist periodicals—and after, conveniently and unbelievably, Adrienne Rich just happened to move into the house across the street from mine in a small, rural, New England village (I'm not kidding—this really happened)—she knew me. She initiated conversations with me in the tiny village post office. She came into my house to get an article she needed. She sat in on a course that I was sitting in on at a local college. Once, she prefaced a remark she made there with, "As Harriet was saying. . . ." Some years later, when we'd both moved away, I saw her at a benefit literary reading in New York. She was sitting with another feminist writer and asked if we knew each other. The two of

us sheepishly shook our heads, and she introduced us, saying, "Anyway, I'm sure you know each other's work!"

Adrienne Rich is so generous and encouraging to other writers that it's hard to know whether she actually finds your work worthwhile or is just boosting your self-confidence. She had said nothing, in fact, to indicate she thought my work was any good, only that it was, as they say, "out there." In any event, her magnificent introduction had its effect. I felt welcomed by her into the circle of people who are mutually known because they have each injected into the world some imaginative artifact that has been sopped up by others. In that magic circle, irrespective of my usual human failings, I glowingly felt that I existed.

It is against the backdrop of this lifelong quest to be *seen* and *take* back to as a writer, by the writers I most obsessively *saw* and *needed to know*, that I now introduce the adventure that took me all the way through the looking glass.

In 1989, by pure chance, I came across a small, intriguing volume in the fiction section of my local independent bookstore and impulsively bought it. Published in Australia in 1975, it was a now out-of-print lesbian coming-of-age novel called *All That False Instruction*, written by Elizabeth Riley, a writer I had never heard of. While the narrative had a strong autobiographical flavor, there was no author's bio. The novel was smart, funny, heartbreaking, and disarmingly literate; I fell completely in love with it. Years later, this is how I described my initial encounter with *ATFI* in an article for the *Women's Review of Books*:

Reading, I'm immediately charmed by a particular fusion of humor and pathos I haven't encountered in other lesbian novels I've read. Riley's narrator-protagonist Maureen Craig couches her confessions in wry self-deprecation, exposing herself as a Woody Allenish, Charlie Chaplinesque schlemiel whose intelligence and hypersensitivity saturate her with an excruciating consciousness of her failed attempts to garner love. . . . [T]he narrative traces her development through, and just beyond, her college years in stiflingly conformist mid-1960s Australia.

All That False Instruction is, in many ways, an archetypal outsider's *bildungsroman*, in which feeling and desire, transgressive and suppressed, are ultimately resurrected as moral imperatives of their own. (WRB, 34)

For years and years, I tried to find out—from any Australian feminists, lesbians, and literary folks I met—who this Elizabeth Riley was. Many knew of the novel and that its author had produced nothing else. But that was all. Then, in early 2000, promotional emails from a feminist publisher in Melbourne began appearing in my inbox; it occurred to me to hit "reply" and pose my old question. This time I got an answer. Elizabeth Riley was a pseudonym, the publisher told me; the author was really Kerry Higgs, now living in New South Wales. This publisher had in fact approached her several times about bringing the book back into print, but some logistical problem had stood in the way. She offered to pass on a letter from me if I wished to send one.

After hastily securing a green light from my editor at *The Women's Review of Books*, I wrote to Kerry telling her (a) how much I had loved her book for eleven years, and (b) that I would like to write an article on the book, what had become of it, and what had become of her. "Only if there's a good story there," had been my editor's caveat when tentatively agreeing to run something about a long out-of-print book that nobody in the United States had ever heard of.

There was a good story; as an email correspondence instantly sprang up between Kerry and myself, I began to piece it together. The book had been awarded a major literary prize in its development stage in the early 1970s. Media and family members had trumpeted the news of the incipient novel before becoming apprised of its lesbian content. When the novel's subject matter was revealed and Kerry's mother threatened a libel suit, Kerry and her publishers heeded legal advice to release the book under a pseudonym and moved the narrative's locale from Melbourne to Sydney. Kerry retreated to the shelter of anonymity with (as she confessed in one email to me) some relief while her publishers grimly tried to market a novel severed from both its prizewinning glory and a live author to promote it. Capitalizing on its notoriety as Australia's first overtly

lesbian novel, they inserted the subtitle "A Novel of Lesbian Love" in lurid hot pink lettering on the dust jacket—a move that did not make the author happy.

As I swiftly gathered that Kerryn was not one to toot her own horn, I used what I now knew and newly available research methods to uncover the more illustrious facets of the book's history. "I have always been disappointed that *ATFI* sank like a stone," she wrote in her first email, leading me to believe that no one beside myself had recognized its importance. But in fact, despite the overwhelming setbacks the novel faced coming into the world, it had become an underground lesbian classic. It eventually appeared in paperback and in a German edition and drew much critical interest in both the popular and intellectual press of Australia and Great Britain. Its frank language and sexuality offended the occasional male critic—"That the lady can write well is abundantly apparent," one grudgingly wrote, but added that "a deliberate predilection for gutter language" made it "repugnant." But most who wrote about it found those same qualities—along with the book's many other attributes—to be breathtakingly welcome. It probably would have achieved wider recognition had it been reissued in 1989, when the publisher wanted to include it in a new paperback series of Australian fiction, but Kerryn once again balked at the use of her real name while her parents were still alive, and the plan was abandoned.

I was amazed and very deeply moved that I was not only getting the information about *ATFI* and its author that I'd sought for so long but getting it straight from the horse's mouth. No matter how much she told me about the book and about herself, I always asked for more. This was partly because I was ragingly curious, and partly because I didn't want our business to be finished and the correspondence to end. I am not the kind of person who ever says things like, "I don't want to pry," because I like to pry. So I bombarded her with questions, and they went further and further afield of what I needed to know for my article.

In between bombardments, I had the good grace to apologize for taking up so much of her time and energy. But as it turned out, the timing was right. She was just beginning to emerge from a six-month depression triggered by her father's death and seized upon

our correspondence as a way to further pull out of it. "I have been in a miserable state really since dad died, apathetic and very unlike myself—or what I have always taken for myself," she wrote. "You happen to catch me at a loose end where cryptic crosswords and cricket matches have been the most entertaining part of many days." I instantly wrote back asking her who she "took herself" to be, and she obligingly supplied a description. "Feels like I'm having a conversation with you that goes well beyond your project—there being no clear demarcation!" she wrote in an email she titled "no clear demarcation." But she sounded pleased and also asked me about myself. ("Must say, one little question CAN set you off on a Tolstoyan response!" she remarked when confronted with my prolific replies.) I wrote: "I'm 45, a little bit of a New York Jewish stereotype (neurotic, high-strung, talk fast and a lot, gesture a lot—I don't know if you HAVE such a stereotype out there in the Australian bush), left and feminist politics—these days, most riveted on the 'left' part."

After a few references intended, it seemed, to assure me that some of her best friends were Jewish, she wrote back:

Your world and concerns feel very accessible and even similar to mine: eg globalisation/corporatisation you speak of re Unis, in full swing here too with the decline of humanities in the vocational/economic-rationalist trend (despite our more socialist heritage in Aus—fast decaying however). We both belong to a left-feminist culture perhaps, common across western countries, a more benign aspect of globalisation.

But politics were only one of our serendipitous commonalities. We wrote—every day, I might add—about writing, language, parental loss, Jane Campion films, Prozac, class, reconciliation, rain forest ecology, Australian shiraz. I have to admit that it took me a number of emails before I casually mentioned, as if it were a peripheral detail, that I lived with someone in a relationship of fourteen years' duration. In truth, the relationship was in its death throes, and I let it be known that there was trouble in paradise. She, for her part, mentioned casually that she was a long-term loner and a smoker.

The Kerryn that emerged through her emails struck me as very different from Maureen Craig, her fictional alter ego in *ATFI*. She sounded, in fact, bafflingly serene and well-adjusted. She now used a great many exclamation points in her writing, which gave the impression of lightheartedness, and a kind of shorthand—part Aussie slang (as in “uni” for “university”), part like someone who didn’t want to be bothered with needless articles and pronouns when a point could be gotten across just as well without them—that gave her an air of cheerful briskness. (Later on, she would tell me that she had labored hard at editing each of these emails before sending them.) At one point she even commented to me that she was in fact rather ordinary, and that Maureen Craig had simply been a portrait of herself as a youngster, thirty years in the past. *Ordinary*? I responded, with a disappointment I didn’t bother to conceal, desperately wanting her to take it back. “Sorry, really sorry to be crushing re ordinairiness,” she wrote back hastily. “Didn’t mean anything like ‘normal,’ more that I feel I’m still bogged down in my bullshit, rather than transcending it as heroes must. Feel the ‘ordinary’ state of humans is to be bogged down.” What a relief! I could still relate to her.

I had written to her, with false ingenuousness, everything that I thought was endearing about Maureen Craig—as if I were speaking of some third party. Kerryn was amazed and delighted that someone would warm to such a warts-and-all presentation—and that the partiality came not *in spite of* the traits that always got her into trouble, and which, she said, she usually tried to hide from people until she knew them better, but *because* of them. Every word I wrote was the absolute truth; yet because I knew that the character Maureen Craig greatly valued warm people, I was particularly uninhibited in exhibiting my warmth. I also knew that she was a country girl who had grown up amidst, and still loved, the great outdoors; she still seemed to camp a lot. I made it clear that I, too, venerated nature, though I couldn’t get to it often enough from Brooklyn. “Hardly anybody wants to camp with me anymore—certainly not Sara,” I wrote plaintively and completely misleadingly, since I had no more desire to sleep in a tent than Sara, my long-term partner, did. But I fantasized that maybe Kerryn would feel sorry for me, so bush-deprived, and invite me for a completely implausible camping trip in the outback.

We went on like this for about five weeks, our allusions to a deeper intimacy we both increasingly felt couched in ostensibly ambiguous but actually quite puerile terms and email subject lines, language that said things in such a way that we could claim we hadn't said them. "Happy Anniversary" was how I titled my email announcing that this "mad" correspondence had been taking place for precisely one month. "Unreasonably hot" was her title for an email partly about how climate change had brought uncharacteristically sizzling autumn temperatures to New South Wales. It was, however, her complete misinterpretation of an innocent use of the term "slippery slope" on my part (she didn't know that it referred to a logical fallacy) that made her feel the day of reckoning was at hand. Finally, we experienced a phenomenon we called Escalation: that is, we directly confronted our feelings for each other, feelings that we were both quite sure we had despite the fact that we'd never met, spoken, or seen pictures of each other, and lived, both in terms of north and south and east and west, on opposite ends of the world.

In the totally stupid but, for me at the time, absolutely engrossing movie *You've Got Mail*, Meg Ryan falls in love with a stranger on email, having no idea that he's actually Tom Hanks, a man she knows and detests. In one scene Hanks, goading her about the illusory nature of her email romance, asks her how she would feel if, upon meeting the man in person, she were to discover that he was fat. "I don't care about that," she says with total conviction, and I know exactly how she feels. "You don't care that he's so fat, he's one of these guys that has to be removed from his house by a crane?" he asks. "That is very unlikely," she replies realistically.

The uncanny thing about falling in love on email is that you have all the symptoms of love but without the usual hard data to go on. Is it *more* real—because you've genuinely peered into someone's mind and soul, regardless of what they look like and talk like? Or is it *less* real—because words on paper or a screen are incapable of capturing the fullness of human individuality? When you meet someone at a party and feel "that chemistry," it's not like you really have much more to go on. Most people do, in fact, "create" themselves in order to attract someone in person—through clothes, grooming, conversation—in a way that is simply an alternative to "creating" themselves

online with words—with the help of spell-check, thesaurus, and time to ponder the wisdom of what they've written (even run it by a friend) before hitting "Send." Furthermore, most people do "fall in love" while still in the state of heightened illusion, and tend to feel, in retrospect, that they only discovered the "reality" of their lover once they were well into it. Isn't it possible that the illusion of the textual lover is only a different part of the elephant that the blind man feels, one port of entry among others to the same animal?

When you fall in love on email, if you are going to pursue the relationship, you have to ease into it gradually. I realize that most people who experience this phenomenon meet in chat rooms or online dating services, and that many of them follow protocols particular to those communities. But I think Kerryn and I must have been fairly typical in finally deciding, at the point of Escalation, that the next thing we wanted to do was to exchange pictures and have a phone conversation. Kerryn's techno-savvy sister put a few photos of her up on the family Web site. I, at a loss for better alternatives, referred Kerryn to an old Web page from an academic conference to which I'd hastily submitted a picture that had been taken in Alaska; the six layers of clothing I was wearing gave me the bulk of a polar bear. So there was our first, but relatively mild shock: *that's what you look like!* I mean, I knew intellectually that she had red hair, but there it was, red!

And then our first real-voice contact: the biggest shock yet. Don't ask me why, but it was jolting to hear that she had an Australian accent. (I read everything she wrote in an American accent though my brain had also somehow translated much of her writing into a clipped, upper-class British accent. Of course, that was ridiculous; she had, just as I should have expected, the sort of broad, working-class, rural Aussie accent that turns mundane vowels into astonishing diphthongs.) We stayed on the phone for two hours, trying hard to make our connection work, but through it all I fought a wave of sadness and loss. Who was this imposter, speaking to me so insinuatingly, as if she knew me? How had she learned all these things about me? When I said her name, it felt like I was taking it in vain, violating the exalted being to whom it really belonged.

We just didn't have the access to each other that we always had on email.

After we hung up, pretending that all had been fine (because of course, this Voice and I were polite strangers), I didn't know what to do or whom to talk to in my desolation. And then I thought of the one person who could make me feel better: the Kerryn that I knew on email. Because she still had to exist. If I could just crawl back onto email and pour it all out to her, it would surely be a good thing. So I did. She wrote back:

Your thoughts rang true. I know I found your accent much softer than I expected, and like you, it wasn't the voice I've been writing to—though of course it IS. This happens, one chap I'd listened to for years on RN [Radio National], finally saw him on TV not long ago and absolutely couldn't match the person with the voice. Still can't, I have a double take and picture him as I always did. Anyway, for us, this morning was the first of anything concrete (not that the writing isn't in its own way), so could be something that time will change. It is a pretty mad way to meet. But certainly 21st century and vanguard.

We both felt better for having confided in each other the thoughts we couldn't possibly have shared with the alien on the phone and agreed that the best thing to do would be to try again. So the next day, we had another phone conversation, and this time it was much better. Phone talk became a part of our routine, along with email, so that we developed a real and vibrant speaking dynamic that soon lost its dependence on our written one, and we started to hear each other's true accents when we read each other's emails. Soon there was fluidity between phone calls and emails.

Then (to try to make a long story short), I managed to persuade the wonderful feminist provost of my university to fund me to go to Australia so that I could interview Kerryn in person. (Remember the article?) And don't imagine that I was a complete creep about my relationship with Sara; I came clean about everything, and we faced the fact that the end of our relationship had been dangling in front of us for a long time, though I had taken the usual weak, shallow, cowardly way out by hanging on by a thread until another relationship appeared, which is a tactic I generally despise in people. But that's another story.

With Kerry, the transition from email to phone gave us—or me, anyway, who obsessed about it continually—a sense of what to expect of the transition from phone to Reality (as I had referred to it for some time in advance, trying to foresee and thoroughly analyze all the pitfalls in store as if that would diminish their devastating effects). “This isn’t my body any more, it’s my mother’s,” I warned her, anxious about my first tryst in a decade and a half. She let me know that she was short—“I’m a midget,” she said once, and for a second I thought, “Does she mean that literally?”—and then, like Meg Ryan, I told myself, “I don’t care. I don’t care.” (She didn’t mean it literally.)

As my plane made its descent to Sydney, I looked at my pictures of her and leafed through the old copy of her book that I’d had all those years, knowing that this was the last time I’d ever perceive them the way I had. I knew it was very, very unlikely that the person I was about to meet could really be identical—not just in looks but in ineffable personhood—to the image I had inside me to which I was so attached. I knew that in just a few minutes, someone very beloved to me would cease to exist, and with a strange sort of mourning, as the plane landed, I said my good-byes. Then I went out into Reality and met her.

And yes, it was another weird transition, as such things must always be.

One thing I often fruitlessly wonder about is how it would have been if we had met each other first, somehow, in the real world. Would we have “recognized” each other as The Right One? Would there have been an attraction? Would we have become friends? Just how *would we* have perceived one another? I find it maddening that I will never know, though I have to remind myself that the way we *did* meet and “recognize” each other was as Real as anything else—as Real in its own way, as I’ve said, as meeting at a party. It was at least as normal as a wisely arranged marriage, in which the carefully considered premises of the match yield the heat that more profoundly solders the pair together over time. (Actually, I arrived in Sydney feeling bizarrely like a mail order bride.) Perhaps, for someone who has always escaped from Reality into written texts, it feels kind of funny to make the reverse passage from written texts into Reality. Where do you go from there?

In any case, we *did* make the transition to Reality, and as Jane Eyre might say if she were an online lesbian today: Reader, I married her.

Not only that, but the article came out, *All That False Instruction* was republished by the feminist publisher in Melbourne who had connected us, the new edition bore Kerry's real name and an afterword in which she explained the whole story behind the first edition, the novel's plot was relocated back from Sydney to Melbourne, where it had been set in the first place, I wrote the critical introduction, the Australian media hailed the return of a "lost Australian classic," I have a life in Australia, and Kerry has a life in New York.

Besides all that, when people ask me how we met, and I tell them the story, they usually say, "That's a great story!" And I realize how much it means to me that just as out of narrative, I got Kerry, out of Kerry, I got narrative. Kerry and narrative: I love them both dearly.

Work Cited

Harriet Malinowitz. "Out in the Outback." *The Women's Review of Books* 17, nos. 10-11 (July 2000).