

Speak to Strangers

Gemma Seltzer is a London-based writer and literary blogger. She is interested in charting her creative responses to people and places through interactive web-based projects. Her fiction has been published in *Cent* magazine and as part of an exhibition catalogue commissioned by The Photographers' Gallery and ArtSway. She spoke at the 2009 Venice Biennale about the relationship between contemporary art and text. Gemma is the author of *Look up at the Sky*, an online activity exploring the peace and the pauses in the city.

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Penned in the Margins

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I've freely borrowed from writers and artists I admire and people I know. As David Shields advocates, reality cannot be copyrighted, but I thank them all here for their words and ideas.

For MH; and yet, and yet.

Speak to Strangers

Day 1

My mind was elsewhere when you asked me about my default printer. I don't have the right one. I have the wrong one. I wanted to know why, but you couldn't explain. Heads turned, also needing an answer. How can something change overnight? We need routine here. A solution would come, you promised us. I saw how you described my needs on your clipboard, both names spelt incorrectly and a dash leading to a series of numbers. This is how you represent my needs. I want to throw off my cardigan and the cold air to fall on my skin.

Day 2

Too much noise and a sadness that followed you room to room. You liked the balcony, but wouldn't go outside. You wanted a series of rails along the walls. Body in slumped heaps; your eyes darted about, asking questions that sounded like pleas. Like me, want me, take me. A certain type of direct enquiry repels, makes me recoil, but you wouldn't know. You aimed, drew back and shot. As it hit, venom rose. It was like tasting something not consumed since childhood. It brought anxiety with it, as much as anger. I closed the door behind as you left.

Day 3

I like a man waiting for me. I like to be late, just a little, to add a bit more suspense to the encounter. Your glasses were angled, your teeth aligned. And that emphatic way you spoke with both hands as you explained what it was you wanted from me then. I filled in my details, careful not to smudge, whilst you read your papers, fiddled with your collar. Around us, glasses clinked, a large television screen showed heavy-set rugby players grappling with each other's bodies and the jukebox played songs by Kylie Minogue. You didn't check your watch once.

Day 4

Where were you looking? Not at me, or at them, but into the distance, beyond the street where we all stood. Your height, that might have been it, or perhaps your recent good fortune, made you distant. You spoke of shopping, holidays and your partner's recent success. There was gossip. I think we all laughed; you smiled. You wore a gold chain around your neck and that's all I could see. I pointed towards the heath; you only stared at my hairline. Carrying two bags in each hand, your arm muscles and teeth swallowed the strain. Your conversational skills suffered.

Day 5

From a distance, your hands look perfect. Tapered fingers that lead to cuticles of white moons, nails of pearls. A silver ring looping over your middle finger. I listen as you tell me I'm a Reflector with Activist instincts. There's nodding; apparently it's true. I'm a known entity and I admire your insights. There's no clock in the room. We tell the time through conversations ending. Later I observe that it's fake; the nails are stuck on. I see the glue, the orange streak along your forearm. Your smile is permanent. I wonder what it is that makes you happy.

Day 6

Your hair falls in the same way mine does, over one shoulder, uneven ends trailing to your chest. You're roughly a head taller than me but that might be your shoes. A name like yours is unnatural shortened but still, you have chosen this label that trips me up. It's too immediately familiar. You speak about a new opportunity, not with wistfulness but restlessness. It will tie you down and you want absolute freedom. In you, there is a bright glowing place. I'd like to see you stand upright, holding a cigarette between angled fingers, hair piled on your head.