



## *Small Talk*

**Marjorie Kanter**

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I have just finished a new book, *Small Talk*, a collection of short literary or poem-like pieces largely based on real experience observed and/or participated in and some questions and reflections. My writing is meant for dialogue, dialogue with self and dialogue with other. I invite my readers to dialogue with me, and each other, through my Facebook page, by email and/or in person.

“*Small Talk* plays like jazz with improvisations, melody and different tempos. Marjorie Kanter fills the texts with irony, humor and sensitivity. To read her pieces is an expanded experience that changes every time you read them. *Small Talk* is a compilation of her work imagined, experienced, written and rewritten over the past ten years.” Delgado Guitart

Words matter. Actions matter. The same word, the same action can sometimes mean something quite similar to author and reader, yet at other times something very different from writer to reader and reader to reader, and yet still carry meaningful meaning. At the outset, I write for myself, to help let go of, enjoy, work through, understand, save a thought, an experience, a gesture, an encounter... When I decide to share my writing formally, it is because I feel I have reached a corpus that will be meaningful to others, that it can stand alone without me. Most of my writing is a reflection of real experience, either a short interact between several people or a reflection on life in feelings or thoughts.

Coming out of Bilingual Speech and Language Therapy, having failed French and Latin in high school, but always having had a real interest in languages and cultures and a desire to connect cross-culturally, Spain gave me my first real positive experience in the learning of a second

language, and at the same time, opened the doors to my creativity; this living in a new culture that was/is sometimes so interesting, so marveling, and at other times, left/leaves me so terribly confused...even in a heavy state of frustration.

My writing began with scribbles in notebooks, or in fact anywhere, including on toilet paper, and in anyplace including in the middle of the street. It served (and still does) as a way to communicate with someone and that someone was/is myself. I wrote/write for myself. To communicate with myself. To get inside my experiences. To set things aside. To take distance. And mostly, just because I had/have to do it. I could/can not, not, do it.

For years, I kept those journals, having no thought/inkling that I would do more than that, just scribble down these thoughts and feelings and put them aside...except that I didn't throw them away. But eight years after I'd begun the journals, I moved from small town Tarifa, Spain to Madrid (1994) and I began re-reading my words. Pieces of text popped-out, calling for something to be done with them. That's when I began manipulating, playing with, doing something with my experiences and texts...though still thinking I was doing it just for myself...and time to time, to share informally with my family and friends. Part of my development came when I joined several successive writer's groups that started and stopped as people came and went from Madrid...some I joined, some I began.

I thrive on the dialogue that sharing my working pieces provokes and engages both myself, and my readers, in. We talk about writing, but also about life. Why people do what they do? How we interpret things? How we judge each other? How to consider that there might be more than one possibility as to why someone has done what they have done, and not necessarily one right way to do things, what experiences we share in common and those that seem so unique.

Still, I was working for myself. Not imagining that I would publish and give workshops and do all kinds of things with the word in public. In 2000, I read about the *Barcelona Review* and sent them my piece, "The Skirt." To my surprise, they took it. That was like a stamp of acceptance, that I was a writer officially, that I was doing more than just doing something for myself. Slowly, I built a corpus of what seemed to be finished texts and then began to put together my first collection:

*I displace the air as I walk*, 2004. From there, things moved more quickly. I began giving workshops in writing and creativity, interactive process oriented sessions focused on facilitating the opening of doors for the participants in finding their own creativity. And, to use all of that for dialogue to build self and interactive understanding. Another milestone was my inclusion in *Supraficciones*, an exhibit with La Caixa in Lleida, Spain.

I use paper sharing in the form of off-prints and books; public space sharing in the form of installations such as a collection of bagged stories where I exhibit zip locked baggies that contain a text of mine printed on a card (postcard size) along with a found object that I have searched for to go with the text, all to be hung on a wall or placed individually in a box or handed out as a business card. I have installed vinyl texts in a museum using the bathroom mirrors, the elevator, the stairs, underneath an auditorium seat, an empty bench at the entrance, etc. for the location of these words/stories. Digitally, I have used Facebook, a web ([www.elasunto.com/mkd.htm](http://www.elasunto.com/mkd.htm)), and Twitter. Workshops or special events might include performances by participants where they are given a prompt such as my piece *Hola/Adios*. The participants are divided into pairs who each prepare and present a representation of the silence that fills most of this text. In another project, I interact with a public waiting in long lines to enter somewhere. Here I read some of my texts (about waiting) to them to provoke dialogue and turn the waiting time into a time of exchange, into an artistic and communicative experience in and of itself. They tell their stories about waiting too. I also take people on a walking tour of my area of Madrid (*el Barrio de las Letras* - the literary neighborhood) where I read some of my texts in situ... where they first occurred.

In the mix of what I do, I have a major focus or interest in the field of the pragmatics of communication, human development and human interaction – what is it we think, intend, do, intend, and what is the outcome of all of this. Most of the time, I attempt to capture life as it is, leaving quite a bit out of the text, leaving a lot up to the reader. I am interested in what is in my mind, what ends up on the page and what the reader adds to the page. I care about what we think our intentions are, how we play them out and what their function is. Above all, perhaps, many of my texts serve a point of jumping off into reflection and dialogue. What I put into a text and what I leave out is primordial. I may work on five lines or even one sentence for 20 years, to get it just right, to find its essence, yet another piece may just pop out finished, just like that. This

process includes repeated expansions, making grow, writing about the same memory or story or piece without looking back at the other versions and later reductions, going through cycles of setting aside and revisiting, plus share-ings of the texts with others in dialogue and later finding all the versions and putting them together to work toward a final text. Sometimes I put printed-out pages under my pillow to keep my mind working quietly while I sleep.

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With this unconventional and somewhat reluctant question, ‘Can I tell you what I really think?’, Marjorie Kanter invites her readers to enter... Marjorie Kanter invites her readers to enter her collection of ‘Smalltalk’, beckoning for interest in her seemingly private worldview. She collects little moments of being, anecdote-like, sometimes adding comments, but mostly leaving the interpretation of the ‘photographic takes’ to the reader. Her approach to this unusual genre quickly turns into ‘Bigtalk’, when we realize the richness of communication of fringe themes, which a hectic world neglects to appreciate, although everybody knows that wishing someone a ‘good morning’ can change the day. Kanter has decided to take the term ‘smalltalk’ literally.

She has a keen ear for language and loves to play on words, experimenting with transgressions of all sorts of conventions. Kanter has diligently “stored” her world as she has experienced it like an innocent child collecting experiences in a poetic diary, often approaching the tenderness of a Japanese haiku, in order to pass them on, reminding us of what the world should be. She starts out with the ‘concrete’ graphic block, playing on ‘WAS’ and ‘EMPTY’, ending after 217 pages with the graphic counterpart stating ‘IS’ and ‘FULL’, as if she has made her way into a meaningful self, written down. And this “biography” turns into wise guidelines, never pedantic, but entertaining in a lovely, rare way.

The reader has ample occasion to compare him/herself with what Kanter presents, obviously not only offering ‘a book of learning’, but also an enjoyable companion to the beauty and richness of life we need to reanimate again and again, come hell or high water... Heinrich Waegner

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(Below I share some images from *The Bagged Stories Project* and texts from *Small Talk*.)

SELECTION FROM *THE BAGGED STORIES PROJECT*









Inside out

I called her on the phone.  
She asked me if I was crying.  
I said, "No."  
She said, "Yes you are."  
I said, "I am not."  
(I wasn't.)  
I was trying not to...cry.  
(That's different.)









## tugs, pulls and a kiss

The mother gave a hard and heavy yank  
 as she fixed her child's <ponytail>  
 and then asked, "¿Te he hecho daño?"  
 The child said, "Sí." (That means yes.)  
 The mother, "¡Dame un beso!"

tugs, pulls and a kiss

The mother gave  
 a hard and heavy yank  
 as she fixed her  
 child's <ponytail>  
 and then asked,  
 "Did I hurt you?"  
 The child said, "Sí."  
 (That means yes.)  
 The mother,  
 "Give me a kiss!"

*tirones y un beso*

*Arreglando la coleta de  
 su hija, la madre le dió un  
 tirón, fuerte y pesado,  
 y preguntó  
 "¿Te he hecho daño?"  
 La niña contestó que sí.  
 La madre, "¡Dame un beso!"*

## school yard

The sun is

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It is getting dark.

I walk by (and hear a little voice say), “*No veeeeeeeeee...*”

He sounds worried. I feel worried too.

A tough lady says (in no uncertain terms),

“¡*YA VENDRA!* ¡*NO TE PREOCUPES!* DON’T WORRY!”

We aren’t reassured.

## The little architect and the big dig: 1

Little toddler,  
dressed in clean white diaper,  
realizing three acts in  
a/one coordinated/simultaneous effort.

1. Digging in mommy's favorite plant.
2. Shaking his head right to left and left to right.
3. Saying: No Jordan! No Jordan! No Jordan!

## The little architect and the big dig: 2

I was staying at their house.

It was the three of them:  
mom, dad and toddler.

It was (when) I was turning the corner from  
the kitchen to enter the dining room (that) I heard  
a little voice pronouncing,  
"No Jordan! No Jordan! No Jordan!"  
And then, I saw him.  
There he was  
shaking his head  
<side to side>  
left-to-right, right-to-left,  
left-to-right...(and)  
at the same time  
(digging away)  
in mommy's  
favorite  
plant.

It was (to be)  
a big hole.

## The Lady and the Poodle

She speaks to him  
as though he understands.

It's a lot of words  
spoken in a monotone  
and then (because he hasn't paid a bit of  
attention to what she's said)  
she drags him

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a-l-o-n-g the sidewalk.

He gets a pedicure  
as they go.

## Eyes

She  
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her  
eyes  
in  
tears.

## Nostalgia

It's not  
what it  
used to  
be.

*un instant*(*e*)

He was  
pleased with her  
and she was pleased that he was pleased.  
(At that moment) they were two  
pleased people standing  
together.

## Where does the sky begin?

He's a tall thin man.

He almost touches

the

ceiling

of

the train.

When he's outside, he almost

touches the sky.

## Sweet tooth

A family is out for breakfast.  
They order coffees and milk, juice and crêpes.  
They are served.  
The little girl takes one bite, one taste, of her  
<sugar and butter> crêpe and proclaims, "It's sour."  
She is ignored.  
She stands up in her strawberry splotched pinafore,  
stamps her feet  
and again proclaims, "It's sourrrrrr."  
She adds, "I KNOW IT."  
She is still ignored.  
There is a full bowl of (uncovered) sugar on the table.  
She dips her fingers in and helps herself...once...twice...thrice...  
There is a smile of satisfaction on her face.  
It is (then) that she is noticed.

## All reported stolen:

1. *Dos orfidales*
2. *Unas zapatillas*
3. *Un cuchillo*

Some hours later,  
they all showed up.  
It appeared they had  
been mislaid.

The objects:

1. Two sleeping pills
2. One slipper
3. A knife

## Ladies:

1.

### Favorite Hat

I was at a ladies' gathering.  
Obviously, one of them wasn't a lady.  
She stole my hat.

2.

### Sighting

I was early for a ladies' gathering.  
I didn't want to arrive ahead of time.  
*Para hacer tiempo*, I entered a cafe for a while  
(and then) made the rounds of a bunch of shops,  
all around the neighborhood,  
<every single one>.  
It was a lot of stores.  
--In, a timely fashion--  
I rang my friend's doorbell,  
went up the stairs,  
and once she'd let me in,  
put my belongings on a chair  
on top of someone else's coat and things.  
Others entered and put their stuff on top of ours.  
When I went to leave, I couldn't find my hat.  
I thought: I must have lost it along the way  
before coming up.  
I frantically made the rounds  
asking everyone (in every place I'd been to),  
"Have you seen my special deep pink *boina*?"  
"I was here earlier today," I reminded them.  
"Maybe I left it here. Maybe you found it."  
But no one knew anything about my hat.  
No one had found it.  
No one had seen it.  
I even looked in the gutters.

But, no luck there either.

Next, I called my friend and asked her if I had left it at her house.

She searched and searched and then called me back.

It was no where to be found(so)

I gave my hat up for lost.

(Several days later),

I was standing on my balcony,

(looking at the crowd walking down below)

when I saw my hat bobbing <up and down>.

I remembered that on the day (when) I'd lost it,

one woman had left before the rest of us.

She'd been the first to arrive and the first to leave.

She was also the one who had had her belongings under mine (and)

there she was walking

down below

with my hat on

her head...

bouncing-bouncing up & d

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n.

## Opportunities

I went for  
a walk and  
came to a fork.  
I was hungry  
so I picked it up  
but ...  
then I realized I had  
nothing to eat  
...and now,  
I had  
only  
one path  
to follow  
and not  
two.

## Difficult task

Just before he  
exited (in a rush),  
the professor instructed  
<each and everyone of us>  
to turn to the person  
on our right and talk  
to them.

We were sitting in  
a circle (and it was he who  
had seated us that  
way.)

## The Canned Box

One day  
this five year old  
(at the moment when it  
was full of cowboys and indians  
shooting at each other)  
asked me to please open up the TV (to go  
and get the can opener) so we  
could play with the people locked up  
inside there.

He was more  
than disappointed when they <shot us>  
dead.

## Cookies

On the subway.  
I felt so hungry (that)  
I took out the bag of cookies I'd bought  
and opened it.  
It kind of exploded and half the cookies  
spewed all

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the train floor.  
A little girl looked at me and said,  
"You made a mess."  
I offered her a cookie.  
(She) didn't accept.  
When my stop was approaching, I  
moved toward the door.  
Behind me,  
crumbs were everywhere.  
As the subway stopped and the doors opened,  
I heard the little girl (say) once more,  
"YOU MADE A MESS, a big mess."  
(I had.)

## The speaker

The auditorium filled up early.  
 There was an air of excited expectation.  
 We were invited to hear  
 this/a famous British author known for  
 captivating his audiences.

At **11:00 a.m.**, the auditorium was full.  
 The invited guest speaker was seated and waiting.  
 At **11:10**, the local professor walked in and sat down.  
 At **11:15**, (fifteen minutes after the announced start-up  
 time) the local professor of English literature stood up  
 and took possession of the microphone.

"Testing one-two-three."

It was working.

We confirmed.

We were ready and waiting.

The professor began his introduction.

The guest was sitting next to him.

**Five** minutes went by. Bla bla bla.

We waited.

**Ten.** Bla bla bla.

We shifted in our seats.

**Fifteen.** Bla bla bla bla bla...We wondered when our  
 professor would get to what we'd come for.

**Twenty.** Bla bla bla BLA BLA BLA...We were becoming uneasy. Would he  
 ever sit down?

**Twenty-five.** Bla bla bla BLA BLA BLA BLA.....When would he close his  
 mouth, get beyond his jabber and clatter?

**Thirty.** BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA.....We  
 were becoming anxious now. Some were thinking of  
 leaving, walking out.

**Thirty-five.** BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA.....  
 The seats and our bodies rustled and creaked.

Someone could be heard snoring --

--in the back and to the right.

**Forty.** BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA BLA.....Still waiting. Some started getting up to leave.

**Forty-five.** Finally, the local professor moved into his  
 closure and, *por fin*, handed over the microphone. The speaker, this very  
 interesting writer who we'd all come to hear, began his presentation.  
 He opened his mouth.

He uttered a few words.

We were thrilled and pleased with ourselves for having waited-out the long-drawn-out introduction.

Alert and interested, we were settling in, relaxing and beginning to enjoy ourselves.

Some of us could even be seen sitting on the edges of our seats (so as) to capture every word.

That's when

(maybe ten minutes had gone by)

the professor (the local one) interrupted,

grabbed the microphone, and said,

"I think we've heard enough. It's time for lunch."

## (Back) drop(s)

It was pouring rain when I overheard him announce to his friend that he was heading outdoors to make a phone call. I happened to look at my watch and noticed it was exactly 14:30.

The waiter called to him (and said),  
 “You don’t have to go outside, we have coverage.”

He went out anyway.

A few minutes later,  
 he came back in

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wet. I overheard him tell his colleague, “I had an appointment at 14:00. I told them I was caught in a traffic jam.”

## Unspoken

What  
do you want  
to say  
would you like  
to say  
that you've never  
said  
(before)?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of short literary and poem-like pieces, Marjorie Kanter holds degrees from Ohio University and the University of Cincinnati. She first visited Spain in 1965 and has lived between Madrid and Tarifa for the past 27 years. Author of *"I displace the air as I walk"*, *"Small Talk"*, *"The Saddle Stitch Notebooks"*, *"The Bagged Stories"* and *"Im/politeness: One Hundred Im/polite Days"* amongst other texts, she has participated in Public Word Art Installations and Interactive Projects at La Caixa, Lleida (In-Comunicación); La Noche en Blanco, Madrid (Historias para la Espera) and for Madrid Abierto. She is a researcher of Paul Bowles and his mixing of codes in particular. She gives workshops and seminars in creativity and writing. She has presented her writing and offered training in events with The University of Alicante, the Contemporary Writer's Forum of the University of Siegen, The University of New Orleans Masters Program in Creative Writing, La Caixa, Lleida, The University of Minnesota, and others. Her conference presentations include mixing creativity and research in various areas of linguistics at conferences such as Creating Characters, Inventing Lives: The Art of the Self at the 2nd International Symposium, Barcelona, Spain, Performing Tangier (Morocco), The International Short Story Conference (Alcala de Henares and Vienna), College English Association (St. Petersburg, Florida), Contrastive Linguistics (Santiago de Compostela), Discourse Analysis (Valencia), MESEA (Pamplona), Pragmatics of Human Communication (Madrid), Popular Culture (Boston), etc. Her workshops focus on the process of opening doors to creativity and writing and an exploring of social, psychological and cultural issues for living and for writing. She considers herself a creative ethnographer, mixing her training and professional experience as a speech therapist (1965–1985) and her interests and studies in the areas of communication, linguistics, language development, psychology, sociology and interculturality with her found creativity. In her writing, she strives to mesh (all) her different selves, experiences and interests. "Writing found me. A need to communicate with self, take distance, get inside my feelings and experiences, all provoked me to keep journals that slowly turned into finished poem-like pieces often in narrative form."

Originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, Marjorie Kanter has lived in Spain for the past thirty years with sojourns to Morocco and a year in the Dominican Republic.

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