

Conversation Pieces
Volume 2

With Her Body

Short Fiction

by

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with an Afterword by

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Contents

Touching Fire ←	1
Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese ←	39
Yaguara ←	63
Afterword: A Word for Human Is Woman by L. Timmel Duchamp	131

Touching Fire

That summer I was working nights at Talulah's to pay the rent until school opened again in the fall. It was Wednesday night, getting on time to close, and there was one woman left, nursing a beer over in the corner under the bass speaker. She was small, asian-dark, her dusty black hair cut in spikes, and not an ounce of fat on her, but not frail, definitely not frail.

I had to ask her to move her feet so I could get the mop under the table.

"My name's Nadia," she said, "and I'm a National Treasure."

"Right," I said, because the customer always is.

She moved her legs, anyhow. And finished off her beer. Then she looked around like she hadn't seen the place before. It was hard to tell what she thought of it. Talulah's is better than some places, worse than others. I've seen plenty of women's bars, though, and I like this one. On nights when I'm here as a paying customer and the women are high-stepping, flashing lean muscle and white teeth, and the floor almost moves with the weight of the music, it's a fine place, a place of possibility and excitement. But now, with the music down low, and the people paired off and gone, the harsh overhead light showed puddles of spilled beer on the floor and stains on the wall.

“Thursdays are the best,” I offered, leaning on my mop. “And of course, I’ll be here then.” I gave her my best smile.

That’s when she pushed back her chair and looked at me. Her eyes were very dark brown. Black maybe. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Trust a stranger. You shouldn’t.”

“It’s never done me any harm.”

Her smile was strange, twisty and self-mocking. “I do believe you mean that. You trust me.” She said it slowly, like she was tasting the words. Then she nodded once, sharply. “Trust for trust then. But when the time comes, just make sure my guards don’t see you talking to me.”

Drugs, I thought, but she didn’t look like she used. Too healthy. “Guards?”

“Privacy isn’t one of the privileges of a National Treasure.”

Then she slid out of her chair like she was made of oiled snake, not woman, and left.

That night I lay awake in my efficiency, thinking of the way she moved, of her black eyes, of her voice skating through several layers at once, like ocean currents.



Thursday, she was back. She was wearing black, the same dusty charcoal black as her hair. It made her skin look warm and rich, like cello wood. I slipped out from behind the bar and took a couple of beers to her table.

“You didn’t get my name last time,” I said, and put a beer in front of her. “I’m Kate.” I held out my hand. She turned away, pretending she hadn’t seen it.

“Go,” she said, not looking at me. “My guards are here.”

“Oh?” I glanced around, casually. “Where?” Sometimes if you humor people, they quit.

Not Nadia.

“Over by the pool table. Two of them. Earrings, short hair. One has beer, the other a shot glass.” She’d just described the entire clientele. But she wasn’t finished. “They’re both wearing loose jackets. They have guns.”

If she didn’t want me at her table she just had to say so. But the thing was, I think she did want me there. I stayed.

She watched the dance floor for a minute. “Meet me in the bathroom in five minutes,” then she got up to play the pinball machine.

I served a couple of people and kept watch on the two women by the pool table. Their faces were in shadow, but one had an outwardly bent little finger, like it had been broken and badly set. They didn’t even glance at Nadia.

In the bathroom, Nadia was by the mirror, standing with feet wide and balanced, hands relaxed, but I could tell she was humming with tension. Even in the harsh neon, she was beautiful.

“I don’t know why I’m doing this,” she said.

I didn’t, either.

She spread lean hands, as though offering something. “My name is Nadia Amin. I’m a National Treasure because I’m a LAOM dancer. The only one. I’m

here in Atlanta because I'm helping Kyoto-TEC with their latest ad campaign. And when I'm not filming the commercials I'm working with a research team to figure out why I'm the only one who can do it."

"Do what?"

"The dance." She was impatient, but I didn't understand a word.

"Look," I said, "I'm a communication systems major. I don't know anything about larm dancing. Is that like ballet?"

Her hands curled, like claws. "L-A-O-M," she said, "Light Activated Orchestral Machines. I dance them." She must have seen my bewilderment. "They work by laser. I arrange them on a stage, dance through the beams of light, activating them to make music."

That sounded interesting. "Like those musician robot computers from Taiwan?"

"No. These are actual musical instruments. They're not pre-programmed."

I'd worked with light before, semester before last. It's tricky stuff. Every flicker of movement alters the parameters. "That's impossible."

Her smile was a slow slide of lips back from teeth. "Not for me. But as I said, I'm the only one."

That smile made me nervous. "You said you were a National Treasure. I didn't know they could apply that to people."

"They couldn't. Until now. I was a, ah, guest of the state, but Kyoto-TEC got wind of what I could do and hired some very good lawyers. They argued I was unique, and valuable, a national resource to whom normal rules should not apply." Again, that slow slide of

lips. “Maybe they bribed the judge. Anyway, she agreed to bind me over to Kyoto-TEC. So here I am.”

“Yes,” I said, not knowing where that was, exactly.

“They’ve got a lot of money invested in me. And I’m unique. They do everything for me, give me anything I ask for.”

She had no responsibilities. Like a child. I couldn’t really imagine how it might be to live like that. “Is that what the guards are for, then? To make sure you stay safe?”

Her laugh clattered around the cold shiny spaces of the bathroom like a thrown knife, and I remembered she was a dancer, and dancers are very strong. She took hold of my arm. “You really shouldn’t trust me,” she said softly, then walked out into the dark and slam of the bar.

I stayed to wash my face and try to understand what the hell was going on.

When I got back out, she was gone. So were the two women by the pool table.



My apartment is five flights up. At night, when I’m tired, they’re hell to climb, and I swear I’ll look for a first floor apartment in the morning. But in the mornings I always relent: I’d taken the room because of the view. There’s nothing like watching dawn come up over Piedmont Park, turning the trees to peach and orange and gold. Not that I’m often awake at that time.

Monday morning I was: Nadia was sitting at the end of my bed. She held out a DVD, between two fingers.

“I thought you might like to watch me dance.”

“Christ...” I levered myself onto my elbow. She was still there; it was still dawn.

She smiled. “You look very soft when you’re asleep. Very vulnerable.”

She was wearing midnight blue, and her lips looked like plums. I waited, fascinated by those lips, too confused to ask questions. She leaned forward, slowly. I couldn’t take my eyes off her mouth. She laid the disk on my chest. I clutched it to me, still stupid with sleep. “I don’t have a player.”

Nadia turned, looked around the bare white walls. She’d probably spent more money getting her hair cut than I had furnishing the whole efficiency. “No TV either.”

“Where are your bodyguards, anyway?”

“Everywhere.” She stood up, sleepy lidded, like a cat, rocking my bed, sending my hormone count sky-high. She leaned over me again and tapped the disk I was still clutching to my chest. “I’ll leave that for you.”

She slung me a smile over her shoulder as she opened the door and stepped through. The locks clicked shut behind her.

It was only then that I wondered how she’d known where to find me, and how the hell she’d gotten in. *You really shouldn’t trust me...*



Two and a half hours later the super banged on my door. “Package for you downstairs.”

“I’ll get it later.”

“Came by special delivery. You gotta sign for it. Guys are waiting.”

He sounded like one of those phone sex ads: Call Now, Guys Are Waiting. How could I resist? “I’m coming.”



It was an HDTV flat panel, with DVD player and surround-sound home theatre system.

“I can’t pay for this!” I said to the three men in overalls.

“Shipping bill says ‘pre-paid,’ lady. You want it or not?”

It was a Kyoto-TEC shipping bill. Nadia. But how had she done it so fast? And why? I thought about her crazy laugh, and bodyguards with guns.

“Lady...” They were getting impatient.

I nodded. “Follow me.”



The screen went from black to white letterbox: an unmoving shot of a white-walled room with bare boards polished by age and countless generations of dancing feet. What looked like seven unfinished metal barrels, each a different girth and height, squatted on the floor in a huge irregular circle. Thick cables ran back from each and disappeared off screen. Nadia was tinkering with the insides of the leftmost barrel; she straightened abruptly, flicked a switch. A red eye glowed on the closed panel. She moved to the next one. The camera remained fixed on the center of the circle. The red light glowed on the second barrel. She went to the third.

A neat line of print appeared in the lower right corner of the screen: *Day two: initial assessment performance with Kyoto-TEC prototype LAOMs.*

I could tell by the way she walked that her muscles would feel tight under her skin, coiled, ready. Pre-performance nerves.

By now, red glowed on six of the seven barrels. Nadia leaned, flicked the switch on the last one and stepped to the middle of the circle. Her feet were bare. She wore the same dusty black as the second time she'd come to Talulah's, and no jewelry. Her hair was longer than I was used to seeing it, and she looked tired and tense: maybe it was she who was being assessed, not the machines.

She raised her arms. The light in the studio dimmed, and each of the seven barrels suddenly splayed dozens, hundreds of ribbons of light up and out, like straight-line fountain water. At first it looked like white light, but it wasn't, not quite. One barrel poured with ivory, another with sepia; a third shimmered like a heat haze over sand.

Nadia stayed immobile, in the exact center of the ring, black clothes untouched by light. She was smiling faintly, her skin sheened with sweat, her breathing even; not nervous now, just ready.

I'd never seen anyone move like Nadia did. One moment she was standing like she'd been carved from wood a hundred years dead, the next she leapt away in a twirling half-turn, slashing her arms down through several beams of different colored light, flick flick flick, faster than I could follow, making music. Every time her hair, or a fingertip or a crease of her clothes, the heel of her left foot or the thrust of a hip went through light, there was a sound. Nadia kept moving, and the music poured from the barrels: tubular bells and violas,

french horns and African drums: sampled music, like a light-operated Fairlight Series IV. Only instead of taking sampled and digitally stored music that had already been programmed into coherent sequences and then manipulating the waveform using a light pen, she was doing it all simultaneously, with her body, using dance to make music. It was like watching a shuttle liftoff: impossible, but happening right before your eyes.

It was fast music, sun-on-dragonfly music; music like the thousand and one flowers nodding in a field and the flyers and burrowers that played above and below. Light-hearted music, but complex, with the rhythms of life and death: computer-aided Grieg, or Camel with violins; marvellous music, intoxicating. And creating it, spinning in it, sweat flying from her skin and making its own, little music, was Nadia: charcoal tunic and trousers stained black in patches, hair slicked down to her scalp and half-smile gone, replaced by utter concentration. I could see and hear the work: muscles bunched and stretched, bare feet thumped on boards, breath whistled. For a few seconds—half a minute—she hit her groove, and the dancing and music came together in a perfect, pattern. Her sheened arms slid and swam through the light like fish, faster, faster, and the bass and treble, the horns and strings and woodwinds all fit together in an intricate jigsaw making me laugh out loud at the wonder of it. But then she put a foot too far forward and the cello faltered, and the synergy of movement and sound was lost. Once again, it was just a woman dancing beautifully, making marvellous music.

The screen blanked, cutting picture and sound mid-bar.

I blinked, took a shaky breath. So that was LAOM dancing. I picked up the remote, wanting to watch it all again, in slow motion, but the screen flicked back to white. More?

This time the lettering came up first: *Day 163, Performance, Mark III Kyoto-TEC LAOMs*. Five or six months later, then. And this time they had a real camera operator on the job: a pan shot of the LAOMs first, eight of them now, seven arranged in a squashed-looking circle, the eighth off-center. They weren't the crude things of *Day 2*, either: these were beautifully finished machines, wooden cases gleaming, plates made of burnished high-tensile alloys.

Nadia stood, ready: not the tired, tense woman-under-trial of *Day 2*, but a different Nadia.

She was wearing arterial red; there were long feathers hanging from one ear, and the fingers of both hands were tipped with razorblade extensions of dull gray metal. Around her right ankle was a thick ring with a spike on the outside. The quality of her waiting was different, too: not an absence, but a presence. She brooded, like a caged animal, like a storm building on the horizon: a creature of brass and blood. I expected her to slide back her lips from red teeth and hiss.

The LAOMs suddenly spread their fingers of light—jungle colors this time, purples and golds and turquoise—like exotic pineapples sprouting spikes of virulent greenery. Nadia moved her head, letting the feather in her left ear swing out and touch a turquoise ribbon: a parrot cawed. She moved her head again; the parrot screamed over the thumping start of a deep heartbeat. The camera pulled back its focus: Nadia's

foot was tapping deliberately, the spike cutting back and forth through a low gold stream of light. Then she turned, fast as a panther stalking, and the music came pouring forth.

It was murder music, heat-and-sex music, and Nadia was leaping, whirling, sliding and tricking her way through those thousands of frozen Roman-candle lights. She never once missed the heartbeat. Wherever she was, at whatever speed, that footspike came down dead on the beat, every time, over and over.

I could hardly breathe.

She reached and sliced through hot ruby and hummingbird blue with her metal-tipped fingers, and the ribbons of light from two LAOMs began to rotate. She moved faster and faster, but, paradoxically, everything seemed to slow down, become perfectly defined. Each note, each layer of music was absolutely separate from the rest; each beat seemed to have all the time in the world to swell and crest and ebb, then swell and sound again. My heart was thumping and I wanted to shout, or scream, or die. I felt on the edge of something profound.

And the sound and the dance built, and Nadia's ankle spike never missed a beat, only now she was using her fingertips and her feathers and the flick and swirl of her diaphanous trousers to create counter-beats, and rhythm upon rhythm upon rhythm.

It was only when the screen blanked again, releasing me, that I found I was crushing the remote in my hands, bruising my palms; that I was able to cry. I sat on the couch for fifteen or twenty minutes, coughing up sobs from deep places I never even knew I had.

Nadia had ripped something away, torn aside the veil we normally wear every day to survive in the city. She made me smell life, feel it, touch it, taste it. She made me want...something. Something more, much more than I had now. She had made me see that there was more to life than just existing the best I could day by day. Life was to be lived; to be taken and shaken and sucked dry, used up. Every moment was precious. I wanted to reach out and touch her fire, bathe in it, be clothed by it.

Life. Nadia made me ache for it, fiercely, from my bones out. But inside I was scared, as well as excited: there was never adventure without risk.



Monday and Tuesday nights Talulah's stays closed, so they're my lazy days, my weekend. I spent the rest of Monday doing errands: stocking up on food, doing my laundry, the usual stuff. Every so often, vacuum cleaner going, or plate halfway to the sink, I'd pause and look over at the huge entertainment center that took up more space than my kitchenette, and wonder: Why? And that, of course, was closely followed by: How? How had Nadia found out where I lived? She didn't even know my last name—at least, I hadn't told her. And how had she managed to get everything here so fast? And that all led back to why. Why was she doing this?

You really shouldn't trust me.

And then, of course, I'd have to put the plate down or turn off the vacuum cleaner, and play the disk again, just to reassure myself that I'd seen what I'd seen.

I slept badly that night, and my sleep was full of erotic dreams of a feral and primordial Nadia, a Nadia without inhibition.

I woke up Tuesday almost as tired as when I'd gone to sleep, and with my body giving me unmistakable signals that now it knew *exactly* what it yearned after. I sighed. I had to do something about this.



My laptop was ancient, a hand-me-down from Mom, with dysfunctional battery backup and zero compatibility with any known modem. So I stuck a disk in my pocket and took the MARTA train downtown to the main Fulton County reference library.

I read first about research trends in computer-assisted composition. Nothing unexpected there: lots of gabble about Fairlights and court cases pertaining to digital sampling and copyright, and one tiny article in an obscure journal about the possibilities of adapting computers so that physically challenged people could use light to compose music. There was a counter-article detailing why such light-parametered composition computers would, in practice, be impossible to use. I checked the author of the first article and found he worked at Columbia, in the music and computer labs sponsored by Kyoto-TEC. Ah hah. The article was dated two years ago. Nothing since then. Just as Nadia said: new stuff, and the prevailing opinion was that it simply couldn't be done. But Kyoto-TEC had watched the work done in their laboratory and decided differently.

Next, I looked up National Treasure provisions and precedent-setting court cases. There it was, under

Decisions: Kyoto-TEC v. US Govt., and the date was about right, seven months ago. Jackpot. I downloaded the abstract.

I ran a search for *Amin, Nadia + interview* and found two articles that were relevant. The first was nothing much, just a paragraph in the *Seattle Times* about three students graduating with double honors at the University of Washington. Nadia was one of them, majoring in dance and music theory. The second was more interesting.

It was dated eight months after the first—and ten after the piece I'd read earlier on the Kyoto-TEC lab researcher's theories. According to the paper, Nadia Amin, a promising young student enrolled at the Seattle Academy of Performing Arts, had blown the entire electrical system of the Gardner Annex while trying to perform something she called "Zeus and Semele: An Exercise in Light Composition."

I looked at the color image of the gutted annex for a long time. Now I knew that it was at least possible for Nadia to be who she said she was. I was looking forward to getting home and reading the abstract of the court case, to finding out just what it took to be declared a National Treasure as opposed to a National Menace.



When I got home there was a message on my machine from my mother, reminding me that today was my father's birthday and I was supposed to be going over for dinner with the rest of the family. I'd forgotten

of course. I dropped the disks on my couch and sprinted for the shower. The abstract would have to wait.



On Wednesday I woke up well after midday to the hot, still air of a coming storm. My skin felt tight and I had a headache; the room was stifling. I decided to risk overloading the ancient electrical circuits and turned on my window air conditioner to cool the room.

I always find it hard to concentrate before a storm.

After I'd spent an unnecessary hour puttering about with breakfast and watching local news on my HDTV, I finally got dressed and settled down with my laptop and the abstract of the court case.

I couldn't understand the first two pages, gobble-dygook, all of it: lists of obscure statutes and indictment codes, and lots of *wherases* and *hereinafters*. The air conditioner was laboring, making my head thump. I frowned and concentrated, and around page five the words began to make sense.

The judge, one Honorable Harriet Thurman, agreed to admit the testimony of expert witness Dr. Schubert Macillvaney, psychiatrist. Macillvaney assured the court that Nadia Amin was not dangerous, except in certain already described circumstances, and that in his opinion there would be no danger to the public should she be released into the custody of Kyoto-TEC, as long as stringent prec—

The AC coughed once, horribly, and the current in my apartment died. The words on my screen blipped out.

I sat in the suddenly dark room and stared at my blank screen. *Released into the custody...* What had Nadia done? Blown up another academy?

You really shouldn't trust me. I thought of her shiny laughter that night at Talulah's; her talk of bodyguards and guns; how she had found me, found my apartment, bypassed the locks, sat on my bed. But I also remembered the way she had leaned forward, so close; the way she moved, oh god the way she moved....

Finally, the level of darkness in the apartment got through to me: it wasn't just the gathering storm, it was getting late. I scribbled a note for the Super about my burned out fuses and left for work.



Talulah gave me some hard looks; I rang up the wrong money several times and twice kept customers waiting while I stared off into space, thinking of Nadia with her ankle spike and metal fingernails, the way she curved and arched, her blood red lips....

The women were restless tonight, and Jenny the DJ played strange, hard music with a driving slow beat. The air shimmered with tension and heat. We sold more shots of tequila and vodka that night than any other Wednesday since the fourth of July three years ago. I got bought a few, too, and drank them down eagerly, as though the clear liquid might give me some answers.

Nadia came in a little after midnight. I'd been waiting for her of course. She was wearing diaphanous dark red pants and shirt through which showed her dancer's shadowed curves. I could almost feel those

strong muscles under my hands, and wondered whether if I ran my fingers down her silky calves I'd find a metal spike around her ankle. I turned away as she took a table near the dance floor and served two women who had just come in. They ordered beer. When the taller one reached out to pay, I noticed her little finger was bent. They both wore jackets, even though it was hot. I swallowed, gave them change. They nodded and took stools at the bar. Where they could watch Nadia.

"Think I'll go round up the empties, see if I can scare up some more orders," I said to Talulah. She gave me another of those hard looks, but nodded.

I hit four tables before Nadia's, trotted back and forth with more shot glasses of vodka and tequila. When I thought the bodyguards weren't looking, I cruised up behind Nadia.

"A drink, ma'am?"

She looked up with those sleepy-lidded eyes, those dangerous, gorgeous eyes. She smiled, and I knew she knew I'd watched her dance. She could probably smell it on me. "A drink, yes." Her eyes flicked to the jacketed women at the bar and back. I nodded that I'd noticed them. "Bring me a surprise," she said, and turned away.

I took her a shot glass of Prairie Fire: tequila with seven drops of tabasco sauce. She swallowed it down without looking at me. "Bring me another." I brought her another. She watched the women on the dance floor moving belly to back and drank it down as fast as the first. "Now you can watch me dance."

She stood up, still without looking at me, and walked onto the floor, moving through the heaving crowd with an easy reach-the-rhythm step that wasn't

either syncopated or bang on the beat like a march. Then she danced.

At first she seemed to be more or less standing still, but her hips were moving, slowly, and she began to run her hands up and down the air before her. Now and again she moved a leg slightly, bending out at the knee, easily, to the music. Then her hands moved, one down, one stroking the air between throat and belly level, up and down. She looked at me then, and smiled, and I blushed a hot, deep red.

Here, she was saying, this is what I'll do to you when I take you to bed.

I couldn't bear it, I wanted her so much, but I couldn't turn away: I stood there, trembling, helpless.

The music changed, and a woman with long hair started dancing at Nadia, who laughed and danced back, ignoring me. I wanted to kill that woman with long hair. I pushed my way through the crowds and out an emergency side door exit into the parking lot.

The night tasted of cars driven too fast and braked too hard, of beer and fragile laughter, of one o'clock in the morning. The sky was dark and thick with thunderclouds. There was a flash in the west, and a low rumble. Sultry, restless weather.

Music blared loud and was cut off again as someone stepped out into the night. I didn't turn, but tilted my head back to watch the stormcloud bunching and heaving like overheated muscle.

A hand touched the back of my neck. Nadia. The hand slid around to stroke my throat. "Let's go," she said in my ear, and, god help me, I went, just like that, without telling Talulah, without even *thinking* of telling

Talulah, without thinking of the court case or Nadia's admonitions not to trust her. I walked to my car, her hand still on my neck, without saying a word, without thinking at all.



The rain started on the way back to my apartment, fat ripe drops. I wanted to drive fast, but Nadia laid a hand on my thigh and I kept the speedometer exactly at thirty. No dark sedan followed us. My blood felt like molten metal.



At the apartment building, we still didn't speak. Our breathing matched, heavy and rhythmic, as we climbed the five flights of stairs. When we reached the top, Nadia stroked the back of my neck with one hand and tapped in my lock code with the other. We went in.

The power was still off, but the bed sheets shone sodium yellow in the glow of streetlights reflected from rain-wet streets. Nadia watched, unspeaking, her face in shadow, as I undressed. I felt as though I was stripping off my history, my inhibitions, my safety. This was right here, right now, like playing with fulminate of mercury. I didn't know what to expect. All I knew was that I wanted her to run a fingertip through the sweat in the small of my back, I wanted her to hold me with those strong arms and iron legs, I wanted her breath hot on my face as her lips came closer. I wanted her, wanted her, wanted her.