

Conversation Pieces
Volume 33

The Receptionist and Other Tales

poems by
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I

The Receptionist

1. THE FIRST TRANSMISSION

“He knocked three times on the castle door,”
Edna read, closing the gold and purple cover,
soothing their howls, leaving one with a score

of plastic knights, the other hunched over
a drawing-pad, sketching ghosts. Her husband
was on evening shifts again—happy shiver,

airy quiet before her, hours on end,
stacked like blocks or sandwiches. Just pack
lunches first, scrub down the counters, attend

to cooling laundry, set the alarm, lock
what’s ajar, then glorious pajama-clad nothing.
It was after she drew curtains against the black

windows, after the kettle had begun to sing,
while she served cat-food to a yowling beast
on a pretty saucer, that the telephone rang

three times. Edna held her breath—please,
no talking. The shrilling stopped. Then she heard a voice.
It wasn’t a remembered sound, or the chill breeze

of conscience saying *one more chore*, or boys
fussing upstairs. *Okay*, it told her from her right
shoulder, or maybe the side of her skull. *Good choice:*

*mutinous. Let's say your stepmother's light
blew out just then, and she tsked and cut the line.
By the time she changes the bulb her favorite*

*show will be on, so she'll leave you alone
to consider your duties.* It wasn't a whisper she knew.
It wasn't a child or a woman or a man.

She turned off the burner, poured water through
a leafy teabag, and paused, listening for more.
The first revolution: simply to refuse.

2. DAWN RITES

The trees, next morning, flared like yellow torches
against the frowning battlements of the College
where Edna worked. She stepped over two flat roaches,

brown as tea leaves—these old buildings itched
with them—and unlocked the narrow door. Her office
was also the department's closet, kitchen,

and inner chamber, where professors hissed
hexes and plotted coups as if Edna could
not hear them. At this hour, with lids of mist

still clapped over low roads, most of them would
hunker over notebooks, practicing spells.
She powered up the computer, hooked her hood

behind the door, mounded up fragrant hills
of coffee in the filter, sat down at her desk
to simmer and wait at the lip of her screen's well.

White characters shimmered there, were whisked
away by shifting light. It winked and then,
like a pool in some enchanted place, it asked

her for a password before it granted visions.
She shook her head to clear it—too many fantasy
read-alouds lately, all dark lords and minions.

Her messages rose up, ordinary
questions: would you please, what's the plan.
Bold and steaming. She scanned them, feeling slightly

disappointed. It was well after ten,
after the clatter of mugs and boots, copies hot
for class, when Edna thought to check her spam.

There it was, from “Gnomic Utterance.” Subject
line: *Solve for X*. My destiny approaches,
she thought, and chuckled like a cracked crock-pot.

3. INTERPRETING RUNES

The message: *You will find companions at the inn.*

No signature. Then, with her green heels drumming
applause, the drama professor billowed in,

followed close by the work-song-humming
medievalist. Edna dimmed her crystal
ball discreetly with a click. Her pulse was thrumming.

“The Dean,” Galina declared, “is a scoundrel.”
Her role: Head of Women’s Studies. Her métier:
to hex his sly designs. Galina filled

the temporary gig with vigor, too straight
for his crooked script. “Edna, good morning,”
Galina said, and spun her tale of foul play.

The medievalist made sympathetic crooning
sounds in his beard. Edna wondered why
he was clutching a hammer. Some drooping

diploma? The Victorianist sidled
in, shied out, during the scene. Elfin and fair,
he would have been almost unbearably fine

if his mouth had not been shadowed by a sneer.
Edna listened covertly to the list
of grievances and pretended to stare

at the course-scheduling spreadsheet. She missed
working with Monique, the oracle
of campus combat—medic, too. Her best

friend, though, was managing claims at the hospital.
Then she understood. Jackson's Tavern. Edna's
father wouldn't mind keeping his beautiful

grandkids for one more hour. She could buzz
Monique who, yes, would love a glass of wine
at five, no special occasion, just because.

4. IN WHICH A CONSULTATION IS CUT SHORT BY A BRAWL

“Is the Dragon involved?” Monique inquired, sleek head bent over a mojito, tone low. “No.”

The Dragon broods over a glittering hoard

of Renaissance lyrics, but a few years ago
she had glanced up once, noticed the president
gutting the curriculum, and was so

enraged she crisped him with a single vent
from her aged jowls. “Then these complaints
don’t matter,”

Monique judged. “Galina’s a malcontent,

they think. If she says it, they won’t hear.”
Edna grunted. The bar was crowded tonight,
some finance guys back-slapping at the bar,

the paranoid untenured hiding from the light
with their chocolate martinis and local ales.
Edna longed to tell all but couldn’t quite

decide on how to pour: fast, without details,
like water for thirst? At a tilt, so the foam
doesn’t mount too high in the glass, the tale

too frothy to swallow? As Edna played for time,
pinching the stem of a chardonnay, she saw
a disturbance in the corner of the room.

A tall woman, haughty—Edna didn't know
her, though she joked with a group of professors,
including the department's new poet. A guffaw,

some iced smirks, and suddenly a cup turned over.
The mocker toppled it, aiming surely,
and then swept away, baubles agleam. The poor

bard was whisking liquor as demurely
as she could from her skimpy dress. A threat
or an insult, not a joke. Aggression, purely.

5. A REEK OF WRONGNESS

Edna snagged the bard's eye, shared a miserable smile before the damp poet hurried out. She told Monique, "Her name is Isabel,

and she's pining in exile." Edna couldn't read the verse—ragged jumbles that were meant to subvert patriarchal discourse, impede

the grammar of law, fracture and circumvent hegemony—but felt sorry for this underfed person ever revising a constantly-

rejected manuscript (Edna managed her submissions). "Well, just keep her clear of that Dean," Monique replied as she counted

out bills, her poise unstitched. It was a year since Monique had fled the College, touched too many times by the wolf in wool, while no one would hear

her protest at his bullying. "Nothing so tasty as a postmodern Latina with a weak tenure file." Monique, now scarved, exhaled scratchily

as Edna hugged her goodbye, stepped into the mild evening, began to walk to her parents' house. Monique had been dating a professor while

his hounding unraveled her life, a woman named Bess in Chemistry and in the closet. Dr. Evil had wooed Bess for Associate Dean, with success,

and she had broken with Monique. The upheaval shredded staff morale, but he survived, all who crossed him swept out with the rubble.

Even Bess looked frayed now, hunched into herself...Edna faltered. Trouble. On the hill ahead, in leather, silver-knived.

6. HILL-TOP AMBUSH

University Counsel loomed there, a pair
of lawyers, Blackberrys shining brighter than
the hide on their wings. *This is the part where*

*the Riders attack you from their avian
steeds.* The damned Voice tolled again in Edna's
ear, and she looked up in surprise. A skin

of clouds was forming over faint stars,
a crescent moon. *They want to steal your voice,*
it warned. Not my amulet? Edna was

exasperated. Not my spell-book? *Your choice.*
She didn't know what that meant, but she did
wear her mother's school ring. Feeling daft, she toyed

with it, twisted the garnet around, hid
the stone in her fist. Of course, she was already
invisible. The Dean's defenders slid

downhill, vile beaks clicking. Edna held steady.
Lucky for you—was that a mocking tone?—
the Broken Harp is here. Lights dawned ahead,

a car pulled up, the passenger window down.
“Want a ride?” Isabel asked with an absurd
grin. Edna smiled back and climbed on in.

A rush of wind, a frustrated cry, and the birds
swept past. Isabel’s face was streaked, her grief
unblotted, but in a normal voice she observed,

“Dark early these days. Where do you live?”
“Oh, I’ll pick up my kids at my father’s house,
just down the next street, and walk from there.” Disbelief.

“The block with all the mansions?” She thinks I’m a mouse,
Edna thought, and suddenly, she couldn’t bear
it. Not smallness. Not silence. Her pride aroused.

7. LOST BIRTHRIGHT

“My family has been here for generations,” Edna said. “My great-grandfather served as President at the College’s foundation.”

Edna fingered the ring again, unnerved to be looked at, finally. “Then how did you—why on earth are you—” Isabel swerved

around a roadblock of trash bins, turned onto Yew Street, rolled to a stop. “I don’t understand.” Dry air sighed from the vents. Everyone just knew

Edna’s tale in this small town; she had no canned version to open and project. “My mother, she taught here, two poets before you,” she began,

awkwardly. “She was sick with cancer most of my girlhood, it was kind of... Well, she finally died when I was a senior

applying to college. She wanted me in school, so I packed up and left, but you know how some students hold on much better than you think they will

through a crisis, then they just collapse?”

Isabel sat attentive, still, now.

“So you came back and stayed,” she whispered. Perhaps

Isabel was thinking of her own
mother, in Queens. Her face had gone soft, those black
eyebrows wrung like a handkerchief. Her eyes won

Edna over. “Yes. But really, I like
making coffee.” Suddenly both were snorting
with laughter, choking on it, hysterical,

weeping a little, Isabel’s keys still ticking
against the steering column. Edna had found
her at the inn. Was the plot finally clicking?

8. INTERLUDE WITH RANDOM VILLAGERS

Saturday was always soccer games,
canvas chairs unfolded on the grass,
cicadas waiting for the sun to warm

their flimsy legs. Edna liked to bask
too with a book, while her spouse patrolled the verge
of the field vigilantly, quick to harass

the ump. Her husband loved to coach, to urge
on the timid kids who flee the ball,
waken the dreamers, tame the ones who surge

recklessly after every goal and stall
mid-game, blood sugar exhausted. She wanted
mainly a bit of yellow light, the fall

brilliance shining on her boy's damp head.
The younger one pounded towards her, sweaty, sent
aside for a rest; she handed him a red

water-bottle, listened to his lament
about cheaters on the other team, stroked
his skinny back until his heat was spent.

He worked harder than she ever had—soaked his jersey ten minutes in. The boy plunged back out again the second his father spoke, and Edna found her unread book slack on her lap as some gossip blew her way. “I saw them running together,” said the mom who brought snacks for the team to the mom with the crimson claws. “They were just too close, you know, no air between them?” A breeze picked up, random, raw.

Lord, another badly-concealed affair, with church-pew whisperers assigning blame. Edna didn’t know who they meant, and tried not to hear.

9. ENSORCELLMENTS

Galina was packing up her curly-haired daughter, a grass-stained sprite sucking so hard at a juice-box, she ought to pop a shin-guard.

Waiting as her spouse yakked, her boys sparred, Edna picked up the girl's fairy sweater and stepped a fateful, toadstool-spotted yard

to hand it over. Jolted, the woman met her eyes with startled politeness. “Oh, hello, Edna, thank you.” A pause. “I should get her

into a bath, but—” Galina leant in, sotto voce—“I hear that shrew from Religion threw a drink at Isabel last night.” “I know,”

Edna found herself saying, scuffing a shoe against the field as if she meant to leave a mark, for once. “I was there.” “Were you?”

Galina sparkled now; she almost gave off beams, Good Witch center-stage. “But why?” Edna asked, loitering. “I just can’t believe

that anyone could be so mad at shy
Isabel.” She watched the little goblin-faced girl devour an astonishing supply

of cheese crackers. Her mother: “Nobody can understand it. She just won a big grant for Global Studies, she has the Dean

worshipping her—why should she give a fig for Isabel? Isabel has nothing.”

Edna winced. Galina forced a shrug,

though unresigned. “The High Priestess of Bling, they call her. Bye!” She darted after a flare of elf-light—Edna ensnared, the fey girl vanishing.