

# Liminal Spaces

# Conversation Pieces



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## About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, *Conversation Pieces*, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The *Conversation Pieces* series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually-created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what *Conversation Pieces* is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 59

# Liminal Spaces

by  
Beth Plutchak





Published by Aqueduct Press  
PO Box 95787  
Seattle, WA 98145-2787  
[www.aqueductpress.com](http://www.aqueductpress.com)

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
ISBN: 978-1-61976-136-0

“Game Theory” was first published in *Boundaries, Border Crossings, and Reinventing the Future*, February 2017.

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Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:  
[www.writersmugs.com](http://www.writersmugs.com)

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging



*For my children and grandchildren  
who make everything possible.*

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# The Swan Sister

i

She drags her wing sparking across the cement floor of the ammo plant. The plant is dead. There is nothing there for the sparks to ignite. Her wings are fashioned of scissors and knives, the detritus of other industrial plants in other times and places. They are rusted. The sculptor didn't clean them as he meticulously took them apart and refashioned them. If she cares to, she can remember each and every one of them as they were fastened into her flesh. She does not care to.

The buildings lie in ruins now. Most days she wanders aimlessly on the grounds. Normally, very few people are around. She stays away from the eastern edge, where the dairy forage center is. Most days there are people there among the cows. She no longer trusts people, but she is lonely.

She wanders up and down the aisles between the compressors. The sculptor has been there all day with his sculptor followers, moving junk. It is unusual for him to spend so much time here, shouting directions. "This goes here. This there," pointing. She absorbs the excitement, and she is curious. She is drawn to these people whose concerns are not her own, who are

focused on their own purpose. But she knows how to remain invisible.

Her human hand lies at the end of a hollow bone that connects her wing span to her shoulder blade. She places the hand on the nearest compressor. It is humming. She hears voices lost in time.

## September

Susan re-read the page in front of her, missing it's meaning yet again. Midge wasn't even pretending to study. The Rathskeller was especially stuffy tonight. The tobacco haze and low lighting did little to disguise the faint sweet smell of pot. Out of the corner of her eye, Susan'd been watching Craig and the others, the Midnight Gang. They'd been sitting there for a while, drinking beer and passing a joint under the table.

Craig glanced through lowered lashes at Susan's table. He took a breath and raised his voice. It had been drowned in background noise before, but now she could hear him clearly.

“Obviously, marching isn't getting anything done.”

Craig's little brother nodded. Craig sat up straighter.

Susan thought those boys unredeemably romantic, just like the revolutionaries in Dr. Zhivago.

“We've been lied to, and the war goes on.”

“Gets worse,” Gary chimed in.

Craig frowned at the interruption, not taking his eyes off Susan's table.

“We need to make a statement. We need to do something bold, for once. If violence is the only language The Man understands, that is the language we need to use.”

He slammed his fist on the table for emphasis. “We can’t risk being cowards.”

Susan blushed and looked down at her book. She whispered to Midge, “Who are those guys?”

“Oh, just ignore them. They think they’re some kind of revolutionaries.”

Craig ran one hand through his tousled hair, standing the yellow curls on end. He winked at her and then looked back at his followers.

Susan flushed.

“Look at this,” Midge said. She’d put her purse on the center of the table and pulled out a round case. “Susie, look. It’s the pill.”

Midge pulled Susan’s attention back to the two of them.

Susan felt an overwhelming urge to giggle. “Birth control? You can’t get those unless you’re twenty-one.”

Midge opened the round pink case, and there they sat, all twenty-one of them surrounding a numbered wheel.

“How?” she whispered. “I mean, where did you get them?”

Midge nodded wisely and slipped the case back into her purse. Susan thought she looked remarkably grown-up, with her smooth dark hair and sorority style twin-set and pearls.

“One of the professors got them for me. He told the doctor he was my father.”

Susan was shocked for sure, but she found her attention wandering back to the self-styled revolutionaries anyway.

“Not so loud,” Craig said, pretending to look anxiously around the room, looking at last directly at Susan.

“We can’t be cowards. We need to do something that makes an impact, something that makes people sit up and take notice.”

Susan’d heard rumors about these boys. They weren’t the better known leaders of Madison’s anti-war movement. They were on the fringe. More than a little bit wild.

“Closing down buildings, interrupting classes, police confrontations, none of that’s made a difference. The press spins everything into something else.”

“I’m going to talk to him,” Susan whispered to Midge.

Midge frowned. “I told you, they’re trouble makers.”

Susan pulled her long brown hair back and ran it through her fists, straightening it behind her neck. She smoothed her tee-shirt and rubbed her damp hands down across the lap of her jeans. Then she got up and walked over to Craig’s table. She didn’t say a word. He handed her the joint. She’d never smoked pot before, but she took a slow pull and managed not to cough. She sat down.

ii

The sculptor means no harm. It’s the way he sees the world. What other people discard means something to him. When he holds a piece of scrap metal in his hands, he sees its history and its future. It’s like standing in the middle of the time stream, with all the threads of the multiverse open and swirling before him. He holds them all. Art is his tool.

He never caused the Swan Sister’s wounds. They are her own. She earned them traveling through life. When the sculptor attaches her metal feathers, he is trying to help her. He is trying to fix her in space and time.

## October

Pulled out from under the matching shelves, the dorm beds almost touched in the middle of the floor. These were the smallest dorm rooms on campus, the cheapest way to get the most students housed.

Susan sat naked from the waist down and cross-legged on her bed with the battered and used copy of *Our Body Our Selves* open in front of her. Midge leaned over and gave her the hand mirror.

“If you like him, go for it,” Midge said. “Personally, I don’t know what you see in the boy. He’s a little too rough around the edges for my taste.”

Susan took the mirror. “Does it hurt? You know, the first time?”

“Oh, Susie, you are such a baby.”

Last week Midge had laughed at her when she asked if inserting a tampon meant she would lose her virginity. “Of course not, you baby,” Midge had said. But, how was she supposed to know this stuff, anyway? The nuns at school had talked about her monthly friend and then skipped straight to pregnancy. No one she knew had ever talked about what happened in between.

Susan held the mirror between her legs and looked at it, squinting with one eye closed. She still didn’t know what she was supposed to be looking at. It all seemed just, you know, gross, to her.

“What you need to worry about is whether he holds on long enough for you to have an orgasm. Boys come so fast, it’s hardly worth the trouble.”

Midge had been dating her married professor for three weeks now. This, Susan thought, made her an authority on boys versus men.

Susan put the mirror down, closed her legs, stood up, and pulled on her pants. “I’m not sure I even want to, you know. I just like him. I want to talk to him.”

Midge snorted.

“He told me he likes my intensity. He’s interested in what I’m thinking. No one ever says they are interested in what I think. He told me it makes him work harder to be smarter.”

“Boy just wants to get laid,” Midge said.

“Sometimes you sound just like my mother.” Susan frowned. “He’s thought a lot about the war, too, you know, and why the protests aren’t working. He told me that this is our time to make a difference in the world, to make the world a really different place,” Susan lowered her voice, “a different place for everybody.”

“Are you going to see him tonight?”

“I can’t tonight, you know. It’s Friday. I have to take the bus back home for the weekend. I’ve got to work.”

“Yeah, at the Ammo Plant, right? How does that square with your revolutionary boyfriend?”

“Midge, you wouldn’t tell him would you? It’s not like if I quit my job they would quit making ammunition, and I can’t afford school without a job. They pay really well.”

Midge snorted, again. “So, your principles go out the window where money is concerned. You’re a sellout. Just like everyone else.” Midge laughed.

Susan knew it didn’t matter to Midge one way or the other. Midge was just trying to get to her. Whatever opinions or thoughts Susan might have, Midge would always express the opposite. Susan ground her teeth. Midge would never understand how much Susan really needed that money. And Susan wasn’t about to argue



the value of a dollar with someone who seemed to get everything she wanted with a phone call to her parents.

On the bus ride west from Madison, Susan continued to mull over her latest argument with Midge, if that's what it even was. Midge was always so sure she was right.

They were friends she supposed, through the accident of being assigned the same dorm room, but weren't all relationships accidental in some way? She'd never have met Craig if they hadn't happened to be studying at the Rathskeller when he was there with his pals. You fell into the things that happened to you.

The bus pulled into the Badger Army Ammunition Plant parking lot. Shift change. This was always a long stop. Young women climbed aboard, pulling the tight scarves off their heads and shaking off the dust and grime. They were already laughing and planning for the weekend, where they would go, who they would see, maybe down to Sauk City to the Riverview Ballroom to hear the band and dance with their guys.

Susan had gone to high school with some of these girls, but she had already fallen into a different path. Her high school guidance counselor'd declared her college material. Lois had been delighted, and nobody questioned what delighted Lois Fontaine. Lois had had a full college scholarship, before she'd turned it down to marry the handsome sailor she'd met in a bar and had Susan. She'd never regretted it, Lois insisted with a sigh. But, still, Susan was going to have her chance.

And Susan was actually happy about it. She turned her face to the window. She had nothing in common with these girls anymore, anyway, and she didn't want to get pulled into a conversation.



Home, Susan paused in the doorway and listened. She could hear Lois in the living room. She sniffed the air. No smell of dinner cooking. That was never good.

“Ma, I’m home.”

Susan dropped the knapsack she’d carried from the bus stop in the entryway and walked into the living room. Campus life was far, far away now that she was back here.

Lois sat on their worn, green couch carefully applying bright red nail polish.

“Where have you been? I’ve been waiting.” She looked at Susan accusingly.

Christ, all she’d done was walk in the door. “I got here when the bus got here, Ma. Same time as usual,” Susan dragged out the nasal sound of Ma, deep in the back of her throat, the way Lois hated.

“Don’t call me Ma, Susan. It doesn’t sound educated, and you’re a college girl, now.” Lois blew lightly on her nails and examined her handiwork. “Something I never got to be.”

When Susan was a sophomore in high school, bored in study hall, the girls had made a game of counting back the birthdays of the oldest kid in the family, counting back to the date of the Catholic weddings. When Susan asked Lois about it later, Lois’d said, “Well, you know what they say, ‘most babies take nine months—but the first can come any time,’” and laughed and shook her head.

“Now, listen I’m going out. You’ll pull something together for your father’s supper, won’t you? There’s a good girl.”

“What will I tell Dad?”

“Oh, as if he cares where I go. I’ve been stuck home alone all day cleaning his house, doing his laundry. I’ve a right to go out and have some fun with my friends.”

Lois stood up and smoothed down the front of her full black skirt. She wore a slim white blouse carefully tucked in, neat stockings, and black pumps. Her thick brown hair was loosely curled and pulled softly away from her face. Why couldn’t Lois just look like a Mom?

Headlights shone through the living room window as a car pulled up in the gravel drive. Lois grabbed her sweater and ran out. Susan watched her get in the car, and in the overhead light from the open car door, she saw a strange man lean over and kiss her lightly on the cheek.

Susan peeled potatoes for dinner. “Never has the country been more divided,” David Brinkley intoned from the living room TV.

Dad, always predictable, arrived home at six fifteen. He stood in the living room looking around absently as he ran his long fingers through his tousled hair. “Mom’s not home?”

Of course not, Susan thought. “I guess she went out, Daddy, but I’ve made us some dinner.”

Vernon smiled at her absently and took his plate into the living room, setting it on the TV tray Susan had put there for him. She ate alone in the kitchen, and then she took her books up to her room.

The sculptor finds the Swan Sister on the bank of the Wisconsin River. He bends down and brushes the hair

off her face. She is broken. He touches her neck, searching for a pulse. It is there, barely there, but there. He picks up her limp body, and then he sees all up and down the timelines, all in and out of the multiverse, her life and his, the way it is, the way it was, the way it could be, the way it could have been. Possibilities and certainties. He recognizes that sight in her. She, too, sees the multiverse. And everywhere they look, her life is sadness and despair. It would be a mercy to turn her into a work of art, fixing her in space and time. He is convinced he is not being selfish.

He chooses to make her—the sad, bruised, broken, Swan Sister—a means (he won't say tool) to harness the multiverse for art. And when he learns what he needs to learn to create his masterpiece, he sets her aside, forgotten, yet self-aware.

## Halloween

“C'mon, Midge” Susan urged.

They stood on the sidewalk outside a rundown two-flat on Mifflin Street. There was already a boisterous crowd outside on the narrow wooden porch.

Midge wrinkled her nose and hesitated. “Well, I hope your boyfriend knows how to throw a party.”

“He's not my boyfriend really, Midge.”

“Well, you want him to be, don't you? Isn't that why we're here?”

They made their way slowly up the crowded stairs, turning this way and that to slide between the bodies. A girl passed Midge a joint on the way up, the sweet smell mingling with the odor of stale beer.

It was actually quieter in the apartment than it had been outside. There was a small television in the corner; the news was on with pictures of body bags coming home from Viet Nam. The sound was off, the Moody Blues playing on the adjacent stereo.

“Here, watch this part,” said one of Craig’s roommates, his brother Gary, Susan thought. “It makes more sense with the sound off and the music on.”

Susan went to sit on the rumpled couch next to Craig.

Midge was stopped in the doorway by the other roommate. “Well, here’s someone new,” he said appraisingly.

Midge sniffed.

“I’m all for women’s lib, you know. Women’s lib and the sexual revolution. Do you believe in revolution?”

“I don’t think so.”

Midge looked as stiff in her jeans and tee-shirt as she did in the slacks and sweater she normally wore.

“What do you believe in, baby?”

Midge raised an eyebrow, “I’m pretty sure I’m not your baby,” but she offered him the joint.

“All for women’s lib and the sexual revolution, but I can’t stand a chick who doesn’t shave her legs.”

“Oh dear, and you’ll just have to wonder about mine.”

Midge pushed past him and made her way through the room and out to the back porch, where the keg was.

“Oh, don’t be so stuck up, baby,” he said, but he’d already lost interest in her as he pulled on the joint.

Susan felt uncomfortable in the dimly lit room. She didn’t think she liked Craig’s friends. She’d imagined a room dusky with smoke and whispered conversations planning the revolution. Were these the people she’d thought would change the world?

Home alone at night she'd listened to the radio for stories of the Freedom Riders risking their lives, registering Negro voters down south. She'd imagined what it must be like to care about something so much you would risk your life for it. She'd thought Viet Nam War activism was another step in the same revolution. Hadn't Martin Luther King, Jr. said so, before he'd been murdered?

Craig slipped his arm around her. That felt nice. She closed her eyes and laid her head on his shoulder. The music washed over her. She wondered if she was falling in love. She supposed she was.

After a while Craig stood up and took her hand. "It's too crowded in here, let's go to my room."

Craig took her to a room with two beds, both beds already occupied. They sat on the thick throw rug, smoking the joint that had made its way into the room with them. Susan felt warm and tingly, a little disoriented, expectant.

Craig reached over and tapped the foot of one of the boys in the room, who reached down and took the joint. He eased Susan onto her back on the rug.

She liked kissing. She liked the feeling of blood rushing to parts of her body she didn't usually think about. She could have just kissed for a long time, getting slowly more excited. When Craig started fumbling with her clothes, it made her nervous, and then embarrassed that she didn't know how to respond properly.

His hand cupped her breast, and that was alright, but then he reached his hand down into her pants.

"I've never done this before," she whispered.

"It's OK, baby, I know what I'm doing."

Susan closed her eyes and tried to think about the feeling of his lips on her neck and his hand on her breast. The other poking and prodding didn't really excite her, and then it was over almost faster than it had begun. Craig rolled over onto his back with a sigh. Susan was disappointed. What was all the fuss about?

Craig stood up and pulled his pants back on and left the room without a word. Susan rearranged her clothes feeling suddenly exposed. She wandered out to the porch to look for Midge. Midge was locked in a kiss with a boy Susan'd never seen before, so Susan grabbed a plastic cup and filled it at the beer keg and wandered back into the kitchen. Craig was sitting at the table expounding. Susan tried to judge if he looked different, somehow. She supposed she was no longer a virgin, and she knew she should feel changed forever, connected to Craig in some inalterable way. She didn't quite feel it. Something was missing, but she didn't know what.

"Here, let me explain it to you, again," Craig said to the group in the kitchen. "It's an illegal war. We shouldn't be there in the first place. It was all a political trick, and now we need to make enough noise that Washington and the redneck voters listen to us and get us out."

"How were we tricked?" asked Gary. Gary, Craig's political wingman, asking the right question at the right time, setting Craig up to give the perfect, impressive response.

This Craig, Susan thought, the revolutionary who wanted to change the world, this was the Craig she was in love with.

"We entered the war because of Tonkin Gulf, but that was just a setup so we could go in and back up the

French. The war's never been about protecting the Free World from Communism. It's always been about access to the oil in the gulf, for the West.

"Then, look what happens. As soon as we get in, the French get out. They knew it was a lost cause. You can't fight those people in the hills, in their own villages. Nobody knows which side the villagers are on. Then we take to committing atrocities to rout out the Cong. Where does that get us?" Craig asked.

"But, don't you think the demonstrations are working? The tide is turning. Peace, love, freedom, and all that, you know," said Gary.

"We need to escalate. We need to show The Man we mean business. As long as we continue nonviolent resistance, we'll continue to get our heads bashed in. The press will continue to rewrite what's happened on the ground, making us look irrelevant or incompetent or worse.

We need to do something that grabs everybody's attention, like they did in Chicago. Something explosive." Craig slammed his palm on the small wooden table and looked around the room expectantly.

His gaze slid right past Susan as though she wasn't even in the room.

"Why don't you bomb Badger?" she said softly.

No one seemed to hear her.

She cleared her throat, and Craig looked over with a frown.

"I mean, they make ammunition there. Ammunition for the M-16s they use in Viet Nam. What would happen if they couldn't get any bullets? If they knew we were so mad about the war that we'd go that far?"

"What are you talking about?"



She forced herself to raise her voice, even though everybody was looking at her.

“Why don’t we bomb Badger?”

“What?”

“You know, the ammunition plant outside of Baraboo.”  
Here it was. All in.

“I work there. I could tell you whatever you need to know about the way the plant and the grounds are laid out.”

“You work there?” asked Craig. “You make bullets that kill babies?”

Susan gritted her teeth. “Maybe I was working there all along, just waiting for this chance.”

“We can’t bomb something, you know,” said Gary. “It’s not that it’s dangerous. We’re not exactly afraid of danger, but we’ve got to think it through, somehow, you know.”

But Craig was already nodding. “That’s a message,” he said. “That’s a message nobody can misunderstand. That’s a message the press can’t refuse to report. Does anybody know anybody who has a small plane?”

Susan was shaking from the excitement of it all.

## November

Susan stood shivering in the parking lot waiting for the bus to take her home from the plant. It was late, as usual. It had been a frustrating day in any case. Since she’d come up with the brilliant idea of bombing the plant, it’d become her job to give the Midnight Gang all of the information they needed to make it happen. And it was a lot harder to get that than you would think.

Schedules were the easiest, because everyone needed to know their own schedule, so those were posted in the break room. The plant would be closed on New Year's Eve for the holiday, so that would be the best time, obviously. They didn't want anyone to get hurt. The plant needed to be empty.

But where to drop the bomb was another story. What would be a good landmark to site by in the middle of the winter, at night? She couldn't get her hands on a map anywhere. The plant layout was a military secret, so Susan had been trying to sketch it out by herself. She only knew for sure what was made in one building. That was the building where she worked. She didn't know which of the others contained what materials, highly explosive or not. When Gary flew the rental plane over the plant, he needed to know he wasn't going to drop a bomb on something that would explode back up at him, knocking him out of the sky.

This had all seemed so exciting a month ago. Now Susan wasn't sure what she'd gotten herself into, for love of Craig, or for love of the notion of revolution. What had she been thinking? She started to wander in the parking lot. It was too dark to sketch here except under the one street light, and she didn't want to stand there with the rest of the girls waiting for the bus.

She walked the fence line, her mittened hand sweeping along the fence. The shadows played tricks with her eyes. She saw something that looked like a small quivering bird, made all out of metal. She reached out to put her hand on its back. It was warm to the touch.

iv

The Swan Sister stands on the floor in her brother's room, years ago.

"You'll have to tell Mom," he says.

"I can't, Davey, you know I can't. It was only that one time. I swear."

"You can't get pregnant from just one time."

"But I did. I swear, I'm not that kind of a girl."

"It's OK. If you say so I believe you."

He puts his arms around her and she sobs uncontrollably on his shoulder. She raises her tear-streaked, stricken face.

"Will you help me get rid of it? You have to Davey, no one else will help me."

"Whatever you need. I'll always be here for you."

The Swan Sister's brother loves her unconditionally, in a world and a time that is always conditional.

That boy will never marry her, and her parents will disown her. Throw her out. On top of that she is ashamed. She knows she is a bad girl. Why, oh why, did she go that far? But that's the proof, isn't it? That she's just another bad girl who deserves what she gets.

Davey looks at her, and she is again just herself.

He stands by her through the illegal abortion. He locks himself in her room with her and tends her that night through bleeding that they both fear will never stop. But it does stop. And she lives, in spite of everything. He cleans her room. She sleeps. He tells their parents she has the flu but is getting better.

When the flu does come through in 1918 it is Davey who dies of it, and The Swan Sister is punished absolutely,

irredeemably for what she did. There is no bringing him back for her. There is no fairy tale in her life where she knits nettles, silently, silently for nineteen years, into a coat that will bring him back to her. He is gone. She is punished.

Later, when she sees all up and down and in and out of the timelines, it is always the same, in all the worlds connected to her. There are some consequences that can't be undone.

Is it any wonder that she talks to herself after that? Is it any wonder that she makes up stories to comfort herself, stories where her brother comes back to her? Is it any wonder that she eventually ceases to talk at all? That she hopes that her silence will be enough? Is it any wonder that when she imagines she sees Davey calling to her from the sand bar in the middle of the Wisconsin River she goes out to him?

## December

Midge was sitting in the middle of her bed, crying uncontrollably. Susan didn't know what to do. Should she try to back out quietly and pretend she hadn't seen?

“Oh, Susan, I'm so glad you're here. My life is over.”

Susan walked in to sit beside her. She reached out and tentatively patted her back.

“I'm sure it can't be as bad as all that.”

Midge looked up at her with wide, round eyes. “He promised me, you know, he promised me it would be alright. I love him.”

“Did he break up with you?” asked Susan.

“Oh, I don’t know, probably.” Midge wiped her face with her crumpled damp handkerchief.

“Oh my god, what did he say to you?”

“He said I have to have an abortion.”

Susan jumped up. “What, but you’re on the pill. How could you be pregnant? Are you sure?”

Now she really didn’t know what to say. They were together in their dorm room for Chrissakes, surrounded by the stuffed animals they’d brought from home. Neither one of them was ready for something like this.

“Oh, I’m sure, I’ve been to the doctor,” Midge sniffed.

“But, you’re on the pill,” Susan said again. “How could you be pregnant? Did you forget to take it?”

Susan rested her hand on her own stomach. She and Craig hadn’t even used birth control, but luckily her period had come on time.

“I didn’t forget. I thought I was protected, didn’t I? It shouldn’t be able to fail. It’s 99% effective. The most effective birth control there is. I can’t be pregnant.”

“I thought it was 100% effective,” Susan suddenly remembered her math. “Will he leave his wife, and marry you?”

Midge gave her that look again, that poor unworldly Susan look.

“His wife just had a baby last year. He doesn’t want mine.”

“What will you do?”

“He wants me to have an abortion. He’ll get someone to drive me out of state, somewhere it’s legal, and that’s what I’ll have to do.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

“My life is over if I don’t, isn’t it? My parents would never get over it. He promised me it would be alright.”

What was the point of a sexual revolution anyway, Susan thought, if Midge couldn’t even think about what she might want to do? If it was all about what other people wanted her to do?

She thought of Lois and Dad, married because of her and hating each other. That wasn’t what either of them had wanted either, was it? When did what you want even matter?

Susan sat back on the bed and put her arm around Midge. “What do you want, Midge?” She asked it again.

Midge stopped crying and straightened her shoulders, shrugging off Susan’s arm. “It’ll be alright. I know what I have to do. It’s just getting used to it that’s a little hard. It was the shock and all.” She wiped the back of her hand over her nose, pulling it away covered in snot. “I’ll do what I have to do.”

Susan reached over to her dresser and got a hanky and cleaned Midge’s face.

“He’ll love me again when I get back, won’t he Susie?”

Susan didn’t say anything. She was pretty sure he wouldn’t.

v

The Swan Sister drags her wing, sparking across the rough pebbles of the parking lot, far from the humming ammo plant. In this place, at this now, she listens to a new voice. “What do you want?” it whispers. The Swan Sister wonders how anyone would begin to answer a question like that.

## New Year's Eve

Susan stood on the landing outside Craig's apartment, rubbing her frozen hands together. Even thick winter mittens did little to keep them warm. Eventually, Gary came out to answer the door.

"This isn't a good time, Susan," he said. "We're really busy tonight."

Susan frowned. "I know. I'm part of it, aren't I?"

Gary shook his head, "Then you know that tonight of all nights we need secrecy."

"Oh, just let me in, will you?" Susan pushed passed him and made her way into the kitchen.

Craig was in his usual posture expounding to the small group around the table. He looked up with a frown.

"Not tonight, Susan, we have a lot going on."

"I've been part of this since the beginning, haven't I?"

Craig's expression softened to a look of concern. "We're going to move tonight, Susie. Nobody wants you connected to this. It's for your own good."

Susan had an oddly disjointed feeling that her memory of how they'd all gotten to this point in time was now very, very different from Craig's. It was no longer her idea. She was just the girlfriend.

Gary was shifting from foot to foot by the kitchen doorway. The rest of the small group continued to discuss logistics— how long it would take to get Gary to the airport at Morey Field, where they would reconnoiter, when to notify the press. There was an old ammunition plant map spread out on the table. Susan had no idea where they'd gotten it, but she could see at a glance

that it wasn't at all like her carefully hand drawn notes of the layout of the present day plant.

"I don't think that map's going to work," she said.

Craig didn't look up. Gary hunched over the table now, studying the outdated map.

"I think we need to know something about wind speeds tonight, don't we?" Gary asked.

"You'll be flying too low for that to matter," said Craig, who'd never even taken a flying lesson but was as authoritative as ever.

Gary took another swig of whiskey and nodded.

"What about the flight plan?" asked the other roommate.

Gary shook his head. "I don't need to file one. It's a small airport, unstaffed, no one will even notice I've taken the plane out until it's all over."

Susan stood in the doorway to the kitchen, wavering on the edge of anger. Something else she'd thought she'd wanted was slipping from her grasp. This was the statement that might finally bring an end to Viet Nam, she'd thought, and with it an end to everything she found dissatisfying in the world the way it was, and now she wasn't even a part of it. She felt in her pocket to make sure of Dad's spare keys and backed unnoticed out the door.

She still had time to run by Dad's work then drive up to Badger and alert someone in the time it would take for them to finish the whiskey and Gary to drive out and pick up the plane. Whatever difference it made, she would be a part of it.

The sculptor means no harm. How many others see what he sees, all the threads of the multiverse? How is



he to know that he can only see what he already believes is possible? How is the Swan Sister supposed to know that what she sees all in and out of the multiverse, all up and down the timelines, consists only of imagined possibilities, when she can no longer imagine anything through her grief and her guilt? She believes she has already made all of the choices she will ever get to make.

### New Year's Eve

Susan heard the plane before she even pulled into the Badger parking lot, already too late. She parked the car and ran to the fence, relegated once again to observer in her own life.

Whatever happens next, she promised herself, the rest of my life will be up to me. She pulled her coat close around her in the bitter wind. To hell with all of them, she thought, I'll do what I want to do.

She heard the plane engine sputter and start up again. It was very, very close. She didn't expect to see the payload drop, there in the dark, but she expected to be the one eyewitness to the resulting explosion. That had to mean something.

### vii

The Swan Sister sees Susan dying before she has a chance to live, Susan married too young to a man she hates, Susan pregnant and frightened and punished for it, Susan old and alone and permanently unhappy. But she also sees one tiny window, one tiny chance, where the choice is Susan's. Where the future isn't preordained by any past mistakes. And she sees that choice, that

new future ripple through the timelines, opening other threads, making other choices imaginable, even possible. The Swan Sister reaches Susan long before the bomb drops, protective, invulnerable.

The Swan Sister stands to her full height. She stretches her wings to their full length. She steps out, onto a newly opened path.