

Invocabulary

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)

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Invocabulary

by
Gemma Files





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To Sonya, who said why not start
writing poetry again; what's the worst
that can happen?
(This, I suppose.)

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INVOCABULARY

*The small shall become great, the crooked become
straight, and though blind, I shall see.*

—Desumiis Luge.

At this very moment, what I'm avoiding most of all
is laying a curse on you.
I've thought about it, a lot, and really,
it's far too much trouble
for far too little reward. So I sit here
smiling pleasantly,
avoiding carving your name with my fingernail
into a sheet of soft lead, then melting it
over a fire. On no account
will I drip wax into water and see
which of the resultant
lumps looks most like your face, then
drive pins into the places
where your eyes should be. Neither will I bury
your cat alive in a cemetery at midnight,
or weave your hair into a nest for birds
to fuck and shit in. None of that.
The worst part of my own forbearance is how you
frankly don't even seem to notice how much effort
it takes for me to avoid making
my thoughts real, killing you long-distance,
sending black words down into your blood to bloom

like microbes. Nevertheless, I refuse
to spit into your food, to lick your spoons,
to show my vagina in your shaving mirror, in hopes
that its reflection will strike you blind. To take
photos of you while you sleep, then burn them.
You can't make me, no matter what you do,
or don't.

at the moment I am living in a haunted house—
 haunted by what it has yet to tell me.
 but yes, the curtains here hang like tongues,
 rough and silent; yes, the drains murmur;
 yes, a telephone whose bills I don't pay for rings
 most often in the middle-night, its tone
 the rattle of black lacquer beetles in a box.

(if you pick it up it will whisper
 bilious secrets in dead relatives' voices
 so I usually let it ring and ring)

and yes, a wind blows from nowhere
 through the bathroom at odd hours; yes,
 faces peer from upper cupboards
 too high to store anything in anyways,
 grinning like rotten pumpkins; yes,
 half-melted waxen hands reach to catch at
 passing ankles from underneath the bedskirts.
 a temporal lag between steps five and six
 going down to the front landing sometimes holds
 me captive for minutes—or days—at a time,
 but since I can't avoid it (unless I want
 to stay upstairs forever), I simply have to learn
 to let go, let God. accept the annoying fact that
 there is no secret narrative attached to my home.
 thus far, I have discovered no evidence of
 play, foul or otherwise. the floorboards sit soundly,

each to each. doors open smooth. no wall rings hollow
when knocked on—not even from the inside.

so yes. it would be nice to know
who is to blame for all this—
what recompense to expect. but as it is
I can only assume this house found me
the same way I found it: by accident, fate,
prophecy, by doom. some forgotten sin
that predetermined our meeting,
our partnership. the many unspoken ways
in which we must obviously have come
(at last) to deserve (nothing but)
each other.

LIE-FATHER

I that am I alone,
 cruelest and most clever;
 light-hearted, heartless.

I that am flame
 without true form, a thousand things in one,
 and every one of them a lie:

A fly when I stole the Brisingamen
 A seal when I fought Hjeimdall for it
 A red-headed man with my lips sewn shut
 A red-headed bridesmaid for a thunderous bride
 who sows slaughter between the sheaves
 Fenris' father
 Sleipnir's mother
 A leaping fish caught in the net of tears
 An old woman who will not weep, ever,
 not even for the light of the world.

This is what you let in
 as a guest, and more, Odin One-eye—
 this is what you mixed your blood with,
 who you let marry into your All-family
 and live proudly childless
 while he bred monsters elsewhere

Do you not feel foolish?

Even now, pinned beneath mountains,
 writhing in my poisoned bonds,

I cannot be contained.
My song goes on and on,
spawning many lines of liars—
Kveldulfr, Skalla-grimr, Egil in his turn:
*hamrammr*s, poets and killers,
who bend to fit the world around them
only in order to trick it
into breaking to fit them.

Thor Odinson, mighty one,
when we lay together in the Jotun's mitt;
poor sad Hodi, when I handed you the arrow
of mistletoe, kiss-attractor, to send
your brother's bright face down
into my daughter's clutches—

You felt my sparks dance
across your blind knuckles,
and laughed—admit it!
All of you, in pain or otherwise—
I could always make you laugh.

Look to me, therefore, on that day,
that dreadful time of reckoning,
when my ship made from dead men's nails docks
at the very foot of the rainbow.
I promise you, cousins:
when all my brothers take up stones against you,
when one son takes the sun in his jaws
and the other coils 'round the world's root,
squeezing, 'til your rotten tree cracks—

There will be much laughter then.

THE DROWNED TOWN

(for Sonya Taaffe)

What Dabut knows (now):

How the sea makes a bad husband
but the Devil a worse lover.
The perfidy of fathers
and the mercilessness of saints.
Just how far down a fall
from a horse's back may take you.

This is wisdom,
cold and deep—
the longest embrace,
crushing air from lungs,
light from air.
Narcotic rapture, hard truth,
pulls her into darkness
where night's vast trench engulfs her.
And at the very bottom

Her mother's smokeless flame
lights up the drowned town's windows
while her coils fill up its floors;
its scaly towers, coral-grown,
like thorns,
provide her only crown.
She receives no visitors—
sends out the occasional

chandelier of memory,
brief gelid visions of
her topside self, set like lures
to drift between currents.

How Dabut looks (now):

Nothing like them, anymore;
nothing like you.
All pearl skin
and flat shark's eyes—
hair like kelp, trailing miles long,
pod-studded.
Her fin-feet flutter
as she hovers above the murk,
singing.

The tide steals her voice,
translates it to
wrack and loss, white noise, rock-riven.
An ell on every side,
whales and skates cringe from it—
rays flee, flapping like sails.
Eels and sea-snakes knot so tight
they strangle each other.

But her song is not meant for them, anyhow.

Where Dabut lives (now):

Deep, and deeper.
Neck-high in the silt
of centuries.
She can still be sought

by those who brave the gulfs,
but only at a cost.

Above, a bathysphere descends
over the shelf-lip,
an iron moon setting.

Below, she waits.

In Dahut's sunken city,
the drowned town, Ys,
the slimy streets are paved
with shell and longing.
The sea her husband
makes a jealous (if a careless)
spouse—

and a red-armored
skeleton horse roams
the caverns nearby,
its rider carrying
a prehistoric fish
perched on one wrist
like a hooded hawk,
with his helmet rusted shut.

ED GEIN AT NIGHT

(with apologies to *Proverbs*)

*The lips of a strange woman drop honey
And her mouth is smoother than oil:
But her latter end is as bitter as wormwood,
Sharp as a two-edged sword.*

From the great dead heart she comes,
mincing out the summer kitchen door
into the front yard. Her tanned vest cannot feel
the wind, stiff breasts lopsided. Skin puttees
contract with cold 'round hairy thighs,
the toybox hung aflap
at her crotch's crease salted-stiff
with silver paint, fringed in red ribbon:
A valentine sent straight from Babylon.

All up around Friendship, Wild Rose, Plainfield,
is sand country, near Sand Lake.
The sky presses hard in daytime, cataract-pale.
Nights the moon shines down, illimitable and pure,
just as it once did on
the blue faces of Civil War dead, while
Whitman stood weeping; just as it once did
on the steps of Tenochtitlan.

Under her bare and horny feet, the soil
is wax-pink, like old wedding-cake:

Cut yourself a slice, and watch
it crumble.

*Now therefore, my sons, hearken unto me,
And depart not from the words of my mouth.
Remove thy way far from her,
And come not nigh the door of her house.*

Rust on the seeder, dust on the pin-neat bed,
the clothes neatly folded, stacked away in drawers.
On the dining-room wall, Jesus casts up his eyes
and suffers, in silence.

But the strange woman
does not come from either of these directions:
She steps heavy over a rug of trash,
black-rotten slug-trail, a decade's tangle
of mulch and debris saved at random:
Dentures set out like castanets, dime-shelf pulp,
twine and smashed crockery. One coffee-can
holds lumps of old gum, the other a belt
made from nipples, assorted noses.

Yet further still inside
this witch-kennel lurk many
other strange delights: Faces kept soft
in bags by the door, lipstick left on;
baked beans served in a skull-cap.
The windows, tar-papered shut, let in
no interfering light—

A dirty womb breeds dreams
made haphazard flesh, irregular as anything
born beyond God's provenance.

*For why shouldst thou, my son, be ravished
with a strange woman,
And embrace the bosom of a stranger?*

Not even if she, underneath it all,
is me
(or you, either)

*What, my son? and what, o son of my womb?
And what, o son of my vows?
Give not thy strength unto women
Nor thy ways to that which destroyeth kings.*

REDCAP

Wandering girl, wayfarer,
 stranger
 consumed with hunger, you—
 family-less, land-less.
 We know your works, have heard
 the tales; they prove
 nothing useful.

You say you have kin here,
 or had. Your mother, grandmother—
 long dead. They lie pinned deep under ash,
 without blessing (or curse),
 at the cross-roads.

You with your Judas hair,
 your sumptuary laws-breaking finery:
 We do not want your kind,
 your help.
 Without true names, those known
 only by their clothing
 cannot be trusted.

In this village, we breed
 our own hunters.

Here is how it will be, therefore:
 The forest path lies just
 beyond our fences, bracken-clean
 and deep-cut, cauterized with salt, and fire—

Go by the river, where
your grandmother's hut once stood.
Pick a stone from her cairn,
smooth-washed. Slip it in
your shoe, and walk.

Dip your woolen cap
in the slaughterhouse trough—
drink deep, for your journey.
Re-dye your hood in wolf's-blood,
blood from the wolf's-head's throat, and then

move on
move on
move on.

VERSE FOUND SCRATCHED INSIDE THE LID OF
A SARCOPHAGUS (DYNASTY UNKNOWN)

Never think to hide yourself in death from me.
 Before you are even half-digested
 my body's adze will pry open your flesh-eating box—
 I will bake myself into a clay doll for your tomb
 and slip thus beneath the portico, with its net of spells.
 I will pursue you through every division of the night
 even unto the realm of the fourth and fifth hour,
 that howling wasteland where serpents coil
 and crocodiles sharpen their teeth on bones.
 Knowing well Lord Seker has no care for his own
 worshippers,
 I will pass both him and his eight gods by, move unnoticed
 through fields of chopping blocks, pits of vomited fire;
 I will fear neither the black rustle of his wings (knit from
 resinous wrappings), his two heads on two necks,
 that his tail terminates in a human skull.
 As the oils of your press turn rancid, curing you in cedar,
 I will burn kyphri 'til the air itself hangs heavy
 with myrrh, broom and saxifrage,
 'til ba and ka alike fall slumbrous as smoked bees.
 I will work an Execration Text on you
 and sever each part of your soul in turn—
 your heart, your name, black shadow of your vital spark—
 shape you in wax, in mud, bound and dismembered.
 I will crush you flat and scribe my will upon you,
 threaten you with the Second Death,

murder your name, erase you, make it so that none
now living remember you ever lived (but me).

As Hathor's blood-drunkenness overcomes me, I too
will collect the dribbled bile of Re, our senile God-king—
like Isis, I will reduce you to torn-up parts, then string
(all I can find of them) back together with my father's spit.
Like Nut, unending sky, I will stretch myself upon you
at last, open your mouth with mine and murmur:
There, it is done, you are Beautified. Rise up now,
and join me. Rise up. Wake to my word, to me.
Rise up, wake, to me, and now. Or never.

I will not be denied.

HYMN TO MUT

Fear of Mut is in every land
 I will fashion a porch of drunkenness to her glory
 I will travel through the marshes
 I will offer her beer mixed with ochre
 instead of human blood
 Fear of Mut is in every land.

Fear of Mut is in every land
 I will wear the mask of intoxication
 I will pleasure her with my revelry
 I will beg her to turn her raging face
 away from the slaughter
 Fear of Mut is in every land.

Fear of Mut is in every land
 Mut, our mother
 Mut, our destroyer
 Mut, architect of our celebration
 Fear of Mut is in every land.

Fear of Mut is in every land
 And indeed, she should be feared
 Drink deep, Mut
 Drink deep, and slumber
 Let your father Ra's red eye lull you
 Awaken refreshed
 No longer eager for the taste
 of our meat and marrow
 Fear of Mut is in every land.

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Let us fear you as we love you.

Let us love you as we fear you.

Drink, and sleep.

SHE WHO STOPS

How can we know she is young, her face still veiled?
 She lifts her blank head beside the gates, the downward
 way.

Her body a bending reed, heavy with juice;
 a pliant stalk, half-split, ripe for blooming.
 Beneath the black fall of cloth, her mouth hangs open,
 questioning, blind. No breath stirs that damp oval
 marking where her sharp teeth wait.

Older at once than those already dead, or not yet born,
 keeper of every key, She Who Stops,
 whose name means gloom, a thing laid flat,
 inert, unreconcilable: Leinth of the Shadows,
 usheress of all suplicants, all refugees.
 It is she who fixes her seal upon your papers,
 migrates you from one state to the next. It is she
 whose signature renders you a citizen
 of that bleak place to which all things return.

Bow down, therefore; scrape low. Salute the one
 who cannot be recognized, save by reputation.
 And watch her bow in turn, tallest of sombre pines,
 to sweep the ground. Sweet Leinth, who makes
 her veil a curtain we must yet pass through
 into the dark, our faces likewise lost
 forever.

TANTALUS, REACHING UPWARDS

towards the tree's lowest branches,
chin-deep in wine and water,
forever feels his son Pelops' thighbone crunch
between his teeth and grind, dust in an empty mouth—
a million marrow-shards splitting to further crack
his parched and bleeding tongue.

(He cannot even remember, now,
what it tasted like.)

Nearby, on the shore, he sees
Clytemnestra with axe in hand, flanked by
three laughing woman-shapes
whose whips drip venom, eyes drip blood.
She peers down, whispers: *I know your works.*
While his house (but hers, hers too!), juts just as high,
unreachable as the tree itself—
limbs slick with pale fruit hung
like suicides, stillborn children choked on cords,
heavy in this airless wind.

Blood at the leaf, the root, the cornerstone;
blood an unchecked tide down every wall,
dewing every roof. Blood like a curtain drawn
cross every door; no entrance here. No exit.

And so it goes on and on, predestined:
we Atreae slip in red muck, arena sand,
grab onto the nearest warm body and

rip tear cling, whatever it takes. Steal and kill
and breed new children on our own; serve up
those children, perfection-cooked, to the same gods
who curse us. Offer them our best,
our sweetest meat, only to have it spit
back in our faces.

Boasting and bribery. Niobe's wet stone,
marking fourteen graves. Iphigenia's marriage.
Though Leto's son and Zeus's thought-crime
may argue all they want, no settlement is sufficient.

Let it never be forgot that we eat ourselves.
Let it never be
forgiven.