Invocabulary
Conversation Pieces

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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

Invocabulary

by

Gemma Files
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“Blót,” Not One of Us, #50, 2013, John Benson, ed.

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,  
cruellest 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-grímr, Egil in his turn:
hamramms, poets and killers,
who bend to fit the world around them
only in order to trick it
into breaking to fit them.

Thor Odinsson, 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 Dahut 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 Dahut 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 Dahut 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 a flap 
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,
Gemma Files

murder your name, erase you, make it so that none now living remember you ever lived (but me).
As Hathor’s blood-drunkennesness 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.
Gemma Files

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 supplicants, 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.