

City of a Thousand Feelings

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
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City of a Thousand Feelings

by
Anya Johanna DeNiro





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For my trans sisters

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1. The Wilderness

When I first meet you, your eyes are gray and hazel,
and your name is Melody.



We hope the city will remain in place as we approach it, but no sooner after discovering it on the plain of salt, where nothing grows, it begins to recede from us. The city is in flight from us, because those who control the city believe we don't deserve it. They don't see us as who we are—as women—but rather as aberrations.

There are thousands of us—some banished from the city, some having never lived there in the first place, but rather forced to survive or starve on the plain, which is known by all of us as The Gather. Other groups that have lived and died on the plain have other names for it. There is no single geography when you live outside the city. We have vowed to care for each other and die together if necessary.

We could, if a passing traveler squinted from a fair distance, be called an army.

I'm terrified as we pursue our long-desired quarry, and yet I'm fiercely determined to see this through. Also, like most of us, I have nowhere else to go. We march hard for three days, pikes slung across our backs and gleaming schiavones at our scabbards, trying to gain ground. Our mounted scouts on the oracle

horses know that the city will not be able to travel far, but still, everyone is nervous.

The flight is not pleasant on the city's inhabitants, either. For some who live within its walls, more or less placidly, their neighborhoods of steady feelings become jostled out of place, and they go into excessive mourning when there's supposed to be joy, or vice-versa. You wonder aloud to me, as we march side by side, why the city would make its own inhabitants suffer rather than allow us entry, when we want nothing more than to be left in peace in a little neighborhood of our own.

I say: "They would rather themselves all die than let us live the way we want to."

"But that is no way to live," you say, turning your head away from me. I say nothing, though my heart aches. You are still young, though like all of us, you bear many scars. The circumstances of our meeting were entirely mundane—we had been marching beside each other and fell into the same cadence. For a long time we didn't say much to each other. I think we were trying to suss out each other's silences. Our silences are so different—I hunch over slightly, and if I didn't happen to be holding a pike longer than the length of my body, I'm certain I would have my arms crossed. You, on the other hand, have plenty of feelings battling inside your interior, but nevertheless your movements are almost carefree, and you don't try to deflect anything or anyone. You always carry a

slight smile, even if it's not directed towards the person standing in front of you.

And after our steps began to match, neither of us would ever be the same.



The city, for non-inhabitants, is nearly impenetrable, and for its citizens, travel outside its walls is strongly discouraged or—in time of panic, which is nearly always—forbidden outright. The stone walls, a resinous mortar of unknown provenance, ring the entire city, so it appears like an egg with its top sliced off. The single gate into the city appears and disappears at various times on a calendar that no one in our camp can ascertain. The walls themselves stretch high enough to block out most of the structures within. The only architecture that can be seen are the crowns of the ecstasy towers, built like giant birdcages from steel wire and soldered to the tops of towers. People take three days to climb the spindly ladders to the cages. We watch them through our telescopes and try to interpret their facial expressions as they live inside the cages for weeks before descending again.

You think that they're crying, but I remind you that crying, while in an ecstatic state, can be a sign of extreme happiness.



We march double-time through the night. The city tosses out ballast in its effort to reach the mountains

faster, and we carefully pick our way through the wreckage, which they no doubt consider suspect and worth discarding. Most of these are monuments to women in love with each other, which might have been found “safe” and unremarkable in a more serene time. Love that is pure and unassuming and forced to die by exposure. We navigate around the broken statues and twisted garden gates slowly.

The city trashes even its own.



At last our scouts range back on their eyeless golden horses and tell us that the city has ground to a halt. They had thrown all of their fury and spite and desperation into the retreat of the city away from us; and even, at the end, their despair. But after a few days they’ve depleted themselves. Not even the city has inexhaustible anger. They’ve been trying to make it to the outskirts of the Godghast Mountains—the purple peaks ahead of us hazy with the miasmas of the corpse-mongers who live there.

Even I would have found it remarkable a few months ago that the city would make common cause with the corpse-mongers, but here we are.



I know so little about what’s inside the city.

I tell you that I lived there for a short while as a child, long before I realized I was not who everybody

told me I was. I can only reconstruct stories for you about the feelings on display there, not having experienced them first-hand. For most of my life in the Gather, I was too sad to even tell stories, and so for you I make up the feelings that I might have known.

“When I was a child, I went to the Six Fountains of Seven Hopes,” I tell you by the campfire one evening. The stars above us, arrayed by the Silent Ones long ago, are inhuman puzzles. The embers from the fire flicker around us. We lay on our backs. “It might have been my first memory. I threw six-sided coins into the trickling water. The water turned seven shades of blue.” I trail off.

I can see you smiling on the other side of the campfire. In other parts of our ragtag camp I hear cooks chopping vegetable stalks, midnight librarians shuffling through books that got out of order in the pursuit, the sparking of swords against each other in play and practice, and floating in whispers—words of love, words of hope.

“What was your favorite shade?” you say.

I have never been in this position before, with another. “Aquamarine was my favorite. That subtle shade of blue is the color that comes upon you when you wake up in the middle of the night from a nightmare but aren’t terrified. Rather you’re elated, because you’ve escaped.”

“That’s amazing,” you say, as you fall asleep. For some reason you’ve taken to me.



I have decided not to get close to any of the others in the army. Only you. I have done this very consciously, and I wonder all the time if I will regret this. Of course, we would not all be together if we didn't share this exclusion from the city—and this has made us all pretend that we are not tender-hearted. We are not always approachable, though, even to each other. There is a fletcher in our army, a woman with white hair in long braids and an easy laugh. She tries to speak to me several times around one of the campfires about her own pain, but I deflect her. I don't look her in the eye, even though I have no reason to be so cruel.

A few days later she gives up and falls in with a trio of quiet-eyed women who came from an island at the far end of a lost ocean; so lost that they no longer believed they had come from there.

I know we will come into harm's way. It is better to be together, and yet alone, and these two states are in uneasy balance with you. You tell me almost nothing about yourself, and I'm too afraid to prod.



While the city waits on the edge of the foothills, and we bring our forces together for a strike, the city begins to dismantle the crowns of the ecstasy towers, using fire orbs to melt through the platforms and tumble the pieces down.

I think at first that the city acts, once again, out of spite—that they don't want to give us even a sliver of their emotional lives to view.

And that might be true as well. But as it turns out, they need the steel.



They strike us before dawn. No charging horses, only sorcery. A wind sweeps over our camp, carrying the scents of an angel's corpse burning in a steel censer, deeply sweet and sickly.

It's from the corpse-mongers. I can almost hear them laughing.

The winds bring nightmares, and the nightmares overpower us, even those who are awake. In my sleep I see everyone that I have ever lost, lined up like poorly painted lead figurines about to be knocked down by a child: my parents, my brothers, my few friends—

I wake in shock. You scream. "My eyes," you say. "They took the color from my eyes."

In the dawn, I see that your eyes are gray and only gray.



The corpse-mongers trawl the highest peaks, and the roofs of the ancient ice towers there, where the angel-nets still hang. There they disassemble the corpses of angels that still occasionally fall from the celestial realms, which the Silent Ones built at the beginning

of linear time. The corpse-mongers are all men. They raid villages in the mountains to capture boys on the throes of manhood, or—and I do not quite believe this myself—impregnate the angel-corpses through unspeakable rituals I do not wish to dwell on.

In one way they are like us—they have no leader, no single person to point to and say, *all right, this person must die, then everything will be all right again*. They made their decisions together, whether by whim or collective need I could not say.

They are masters of pestilence and, if anything, hate us even more than the city-dwellers. Because they see everything around them as pestilence, except themselves—imagining themselves pure victims of a fallen world, of which we were the harbingers.



I don't want to attack the city. I'm terrified. Even before the city weakened us with their surprise assault, I was terrified. I reason that *not* living in the city doesn't mean we *lack* feelings. Of course we feel things! If anything, we feel everything more sweetly and painfully as exiles. The city provides an architecture and a way to talk about those feelings—to make them visible without shame—but maybe we don't need architecture. Maybe we can live with just the stars above us.

After our supper I look over at you, whistling a shapeless tune and sharpening the steel of your pike by the campfire. I realize I want to protect you from

the fallout of an assault. And I reason to myself: I don't even know you really.

When women like us start out, it's easy to fall for someone who's further ahead on the (more or less) same journey. It's often mistaken for romantic love, but that is rarely the case. And even still, I find it inconceivable that you see me in *that* rarified, platonic way, as someone who's "made it." After all, I nitpick every self-perceived flaw in my appearance and disposition, and use it as evidence that I'm hard to love, much less admire.

This doesn't seem to bother you, and that makes me marvel, and want you to stick around.



So, we begin a long siege we don't want. I realize I'm not the only reluctant one. Our army has a potluck of our few remaining supplies and, in the center of camp, we try to decide what to do next as a group. The leaders of our camp start arguing about tactics, then strategy, then everything. The older leaders—older than me—want to parlay and negotiate, and the younger leaders—younger than me—want to strike as soon as possible, even if the time isn't aligned perfectly for us, because any negotiations will only lead to dead-naming, mockery, and misery. The older women insist that they refuse to see the entire troupe slaughtered over a hopeless siege-breaking—and yet, the younger

women decry: their lives do not deserve half-measures and *accommodation*—

I take your hand in mine as we stand next to each other on the edges of the potluck. You squeeze it and I squeeze back. They argue deep into the night.



That night, after you fall asleep, you float about two feet in the air. As if the ground itself is unbearable for you. I move closer to you, just in case you start to float away and I have to drag you back to the Gather.

Then you clench your chest, like you want to claw your heart out. “The Beast!” you cry out. “The Beast!”

I hold you until you shudder awake, collapsing to the ground. When your eyes finally open after minutes of murmuring, your gray eyes look into mine, and I begin to question everything that I had ever seen before. I hold you close.

“What is the Beast?” I ask you, but you’re asleep again. Though my body is still, I’m shooting away from you, like a falling star in reverse, and I don’t know why.



I’m not ready to tell you that I never lived in the city.

Many years before, when I lived as an unhappy man, I took part in a pilgrimage to the city gates, with many kinds of men and women living all over the Gather, and even beyond it. We hoped for mercy. *Pilgrimage* might have been too strong of a word. We

were more of a rabble, desperate for our emotions to be seen. I traveled there with a wife. I had a wife that I never told you about. We lived on a bridge that led nowhere in either direction. I had built a tiny cottage on the throughway. I didn't build it *well*, of course. Holes would spring up in the roof no matter how many times I patched it, and the thin walls always let in the cold as it whipped around the canyon below us. I also fancied myself as a magician, able to draw coins from behind the ear of my wife but little else, and the less said about this endeavor the better.

I mistook her patience with me, and our life together, for love—even though she never was patient with me at all.

Eventually, we both decided that we wanted more. Neither of us were happy, and yet neither of us were willing to look the other in the eye and speak plainly about it. And so rather than have a conversation filled with truth, we set off for the city. And I hated myself, because my entire life as a man and a husband was—well. I couldn't decide whether it was a joke or a lie.

As we joined the pilgrimage, I spoke plainly at last. Through tears, I told her that I wasn't the man she thought I was, that I was a woman. After the pain and betrayal and fury on her face, I promised that I would try to make it better. Through the Gather, I walked backwards, I crawled until my knees scorched. I offered to try to get counsel in the city, that surely amongst those well-ordered avenues of serenity I

would be able to get “help.” Surely there were others like me in the city, who conquered their desires in becoming happy in a way that made other people uncomfortable.

But the city knew what my wife did not, and what perhaps I did not. For that, at least, I had to credit the city. They admitted her through the gates, and several others—those who appeared, from their exteriors, to have everything in order. The city’s guard shut the gates on the remaining pilgrims. I was too shocked to realize that my wife had not even said goodbye.

There were a few others like me—even though I didn’t recognize they were like me, *they* did, and they took me under their wing as we fled away from the shadow of the city. I began to learn painfully about becoming the person I needed to be.

Like I said, I’m not ready to tell you any of this.



The next morning, a consensus (however reluctant) is reached—we will storm the city.

We begin to march closer. I walk shoulder to shoulder with you. We, all of us women, sing full-throated songs. The thumping of our drums echoes off the hard plain and back to the sun. The city is an egg about to break. With everyone’s courage stirring, I’m finding my own again.

We hoot. They will laugh at us. We don't care. With a final call from the ammonoid horns of our dragons, we charge.

And the city rumbles. We expect the deadly arc of arrows, bolts, mortars, insults. We expect them to throw everything they have at us.

Instead the plain trembles. I feel dread in my knees and bones. In a cloud of salt-dust, the city lifts up from the ground. It keeps lifting. Many of us cry out, shout and swear at the city as it rises.

High in the air. Out of reach.

We wait as the dust settles. We catch our breath. You grab my hand and look at me.

"Whatever happens," I say, "I'll never leave you."

You nod. Do you hesitate? Are you thinking, *not now, not now*—

As the dust starts to settle, I see shapes on the slopes of the mountains. A growling mass. Then my eyesight sharpens, and my heart drops.

I see towering figures of angel corpses, dozens and dozens of them, loping towards us with an ill yet coordinated grace. They are not alive. They have been animated by the corpse-mongers, driven towards us, and the corpse-mongers themselves jeer and spit behind the angels in their own army, and though they are reluctant to show their faces, they will now, because they think they can extinguish us, with their trebuchets made from the femurs of leviathans from an unspeakable age. And more—towering above all of

Anya Johanna DeNiro

them, another single form, ambling towards us, and I can tell that it's awful, it's going to be awful, and you start crying, because this is the Beast you saw, and then you let go of my hand—