

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 73

Ancient Songs of Us

by
Jean LeBlanc





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*This collection is dedicated to my students from
Literary Masterpieces of the Western World I.
Your insights make the ancient songs new.*

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which tell

This story tells

about a []
who []
and then []

and of course
a journey
goes off course

a memory (or two)
proves
to be false

farewell
(every story
has at least one)

and water
(we are forever
crossing water)

just
an ordinary day
someone singing

Language

just try it, translate the puns
the anthimeria the phrases

for which all meaning has col
lapsed

incandesced sailed away
to some rock-ringed no man's land

of women's whispered stories
to daughters they never had

(watch out for the one who says
et cetera et cetera

he means the opposite
and as for irony

that's much too great a compliment
to his abilities)

whatever rolls sweetly off the tongue
will be trashed in no time

in no time in no time
have we never said these things

that now a sour breath somewhere
repeats and calls his own

Penelope

Cured myself of that sickness, memory. A different song each evening. A man strong and kind, the man I would happily have married had war not taken him away. Or, perhaps we do wed; a few brief months together. A loom on which to weave a day, unweave it, start anew. When I say he isn't dead, I mean he never did exist. Unplait every strand. Knit a yard of fiction. Fabricate my story. Unpiece desire. I married no man.

the shroud in which i shall bury him

lots of white space i realized when it was a few feet in length. i unwove it and tried again. still blankness. i'm making something that is really nothing. i unwove it, unwove nothing into nothing. then wove nothing again. i don't know how many years passed before someone asked me what i thought i was doing. the loom answered, but it was a long sentence that is still going

In some versions of this story

the hero returns home. In some versions of this story, the hero learns a valuable lesson. In other versions, the hero is a colossal bore. In others, a murderous fiend. Why so many versions? One for each of our many selves. It takes countless versions to be at last resigned to fate. Dredge it up again, memory after the wreck (and there's always a wreck); impossible to not embellish with a little aside, a little what-i-wish-i'd-done-i-did. How many years passed. How many ears. In some versions, the hero is still out there. There's probably one version where we still care.

The Treacherous Way

—based on a twelfth-century tanka by Princess Shikishi

In those days
a traveler would send word
to his beloved:

*It has all become
what it should be.*

Meaning:

I survived
the perilous journey
saved
by my thoughts
of you

Or:

Nothing but danger
on our roads these days
how fortunate one's old life
is so easy
to forget

O Has Been Gone a Long Time

if the boy stutters
you must exchange words for tears

if the boy stumbles
help him remember it is all air

if the boy cannot string a bow
decide which part of your life
are you willing to lose

if your house is full of grumbling men
his father was a coward
what good's a dead king
who wasn't really king
to begin with

the boy will pretend
to give up listening

but will grow into
his own quiver
full of sharp secrets

Poem for a Newborn Son

—for Anne and Russell

We are all hoping for a world at peace
not just now but in nineteen years, when war
would have your name, when it would, if it comes,
have your eyes, your father's eyes, his father's
before him, and we will all look back
and remember this day, your tiny fists,
the way the clouds swept in off the Pacific,
the television weather maps looking
much like the ultrasounds had looked, needing
an expert to point out head, hands, *and yes—*
cold front meeting mountain range, swooping
up and over, dropping rain —*it's a boy!*
We are hoping yours is the name for peace:
Aloysius, the ocean winds will sing.

The trouble with immortality

What does one do for eternity? One grows bored with ambrosia, power, getting everything and everyone one wants. All desires fulfilled means no desire can be fulfilled. So every immortal adopts a petty project. Turning sailors to swine. Helping one single traveler find his way home. Tormenting that traveler. And tens, hundreds, thousands of mortals die as a consequence, but that's the way it is with mortals, always needing to prove to themselves that they are mortal. Each other's image: petty, swinish, noble, lost, searching for that desire true enough to be truly worth all one's time.

reassembled always into what we are

becoming chimera
woman with snakes for hair
witch who'll set you

on fire from afar
and not the good kind of fire
the real kind

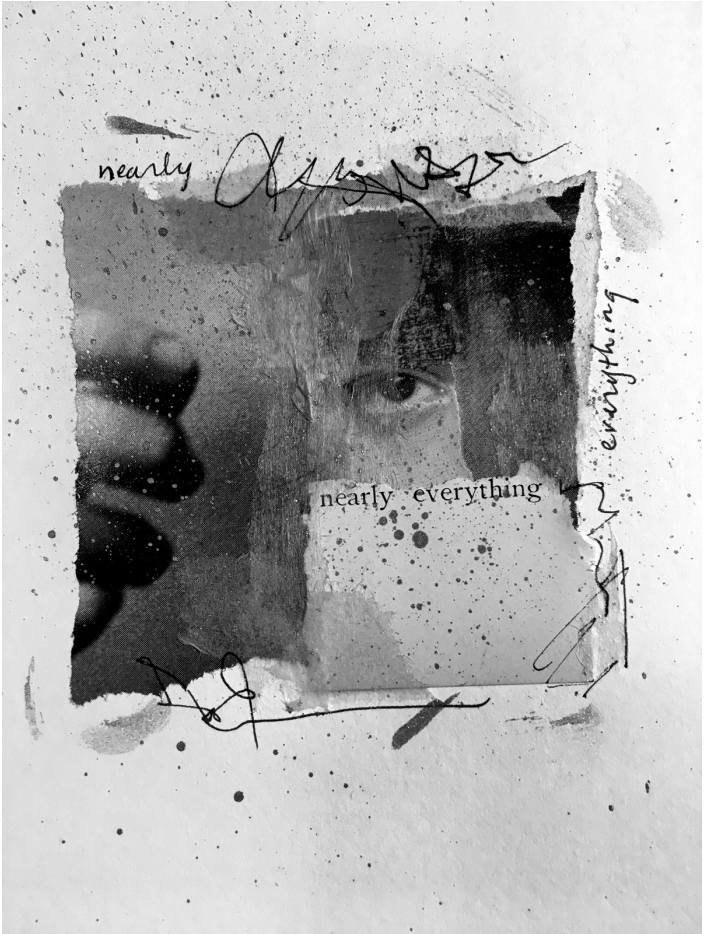
you burn me
she wrote
three thousand years ago

you burn me
she sang yesterday
the snakes in no mood

and you think you
have turned to stone
spin spider spin

and hey that swan trick
was good
so here's a daughter

who'll destroy legions
come from that union
of feather and flesh



nearly everything

About the Author

Jean LeBlanc, a New Englander transplanted to New Jersey, is the author of several poetry collections. She teaches English at a two-year college and facilitates writing workshops, always hoping to show the power of poetry to transport and transform. More of her work can be seen at: www.jeanleblancpoetry.blogspot.com.