

Sacred Summer

Conversation Pieces



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Poems by Cassandra Rose Clarke

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 75

Sacred Summer

by
Cassandra Rose Clarke





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To Aaron, heavy metal love of mine

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*“I haven’t understood a bar of music in my life,
but I have felt it.”*

—Igor Stravinsky

Part I

midwinter 1998

when we left the warmth
of our parents' houses and
loosed ourselves
in the snowy woods
crowding against
the boundaries of the city

armed with a cheap
camcorder, red light
blinking *record* from its
uneven tripod as we played
the one song we'd written
in two months
a guttural whine chainsawing
out of the old amplifiers
3/4 time, minor key
bare fingers pink and stiff
from the wind
from the force of our song

a song that twenty years later
still sounds
the way blood looks
on old snow

TWENTY YEARS LATER

1: In Repose

The Dancer In Repose

The summer haze arrived early, that miasma of gasoline and barbecue smoke, weed eater whine, chlorine evaporating from cerulean ponds tucked away behind curtains of hibiscus and canna lilies, the only flowers that bloom in the toxic swelter. In the hot mornings, M.'s neighbor L. runs in a soaked sweatshirt around the cul-de-sac, golden ponytail swishing as it captures the sunlight, a glint in the window where M. has pulled opened the curtain for the pot of lavender she planted two years ago, when this house did not exist, when her marriage did. M. smokes a cigarette at the breakfast table, hot coffee poured over ice, phone glowing with more bad news to ignore. A glint in the window, like a flash of metal in the desert: a reminder of civilization that blinks out after a heartbeat of existence.

When she turns toward that sliver of the outside world, she sees through the smear of her smoke a sudden palate of vivid green, a mirage of the forest that grew wild for centuries before the developers came.

M. waits for the blazing afternoon, when the street will settle into stillness, when even the slightest sway of tree branches will feel like a tornado. She will drop the record needle and wait for motion to find her again.

The Wives in Repose

The wives gather like dandelions
pushing through cracks in the driveway,
dusty flowers clumped in the shade of
someone's three-car garage, vices held
at arm's length: a stale cigarette for S.,
a bottle of sweet white wine for T.,
a bag of cheese-powdered chips for L.

Sometimes M. crosses the street and joins
them among the gas stains, smokes
her own cigarette, exchanges sheepish
looks with S., who admits she has
smoked from the same pack for the
last seven months. Hubby doesn't approve,
she gets her smokes in when she can.
The others laugh, nod, share their own
secret maps to shameful treasures.

M., the only divorcee, is only welcome when
the others want to remember what freedom
looks like: a pack of cigarettes lying brazen
on a kitchen counter, an empty refrigerator,
yoga pants, and unwashed hair. Some days
the air shifts around her, their gazes
turning sharp like clear-cut diamonds as
they strip her bare, flay her skin into curling
ribbons. This place is not for the free.

But M. knows her freedom is an illusion,
a heat shimmer above the asphalt. So she
always returns, breathes her fire into the
mix. Smoke, wine, junk food crumbs: all
are ingredients, a magic spell, a ward
against husbands, children, the world.

The Architect in Repose

He built for her a home to win awards,
with windows that face
the remains of the forest,
left like trophies after the trees
were razed for the designer houses
to grow from the mulchy soil
like mushrooms. Houses like hers:
first a wedding gift,
then a divorce settlement.
They all hold such contradictions
within walls of glass and stone,
fragility and strength
beauty and imprisonment.

He built for her, too, a hall of mirrors.
She goes inside for the first time
that summer, four months after
she moved in. The air is stale
and dusty but the scent is familiar:
girl-sweat, hairspray, worn spandex,
as if her old self haunts this place
in her stead. She walks barefoot
onto the vinyl floor, her reflection
a mocking shadow. She wonders
if that reflection shattered its knee.
She wonders if that reflection
can still dance.

He built for her a home to win awards.
He built for her, too, a hall of mirrors.
He built them both for his muse.
But when she broke herself,
leaping wide in grand jeté,
landing hard and wrong,
the violent crack of her bone
a drumbeat in the music,
she became too human
for houses and halls.
She became too human
for him.

The Musician in Repose

some nights, i wake up
to feedback buzzing
through the amplifiers

shadows crawling into vines
across the bare walls
of my apartment, slices of

moonlight marching across
the dirty carpet, illuminating
patches of moss and flares

of fern fronds, a scatter
of wildflowers, & on bad nights
tree branches stretch out

skeletal hands from inside
my closet, the door hanging
crooked on its hinges, &

on the worst nights,
the feedback becomes music
the music becomes screams

i squeeze my eyes shut
measure my breaths like notes
try not to wonder why

i was left alive

The Monster in Repose

you lie spindly
tattered remains
in your strangled
hair, your rotting
clothes, a dress
that had once
been the white of
weddings, now
gray with grime,
brown with blood

you birth yourself
from between
mossy roots, dirt
dark crescents
under your broken
nails, jagged from
digging through
the mulch, the
rot, the carcasses
of the sacrifices
you call in notes
of starlit clarity

drawing them to
your cathedral
of oak and birch
mud and snow
a slurry on the

Cassandra Rose Clarke

ground where
their feet sink
as their bones
snap their muscles
tear their bodies
collapse

into bloody fragments

the only offering you
will accept

2: Augurs of Summer

Abacomancy

The cassette is black,
photocopied label peeling
in thin wet strips that
disintegrate
against her fingertips.

She hasn't stopped listening,

not since she found it lying
inside a kitchen drawer
still smelling of sawdust
and fresh paint and assumed
it was left behind
by the builders,
those tools of her ex-husband's
alleged genius. Perhaps

one of them had found the cassette
tucked inside the seat of
an ancient car
or resting dusty on a shelf
in an aging parent's home,
a relic of his youth
he'd brought to work
for a laugh. Maybe

one of those smudgy-faced
boys on the paper
folded over inside the case
grew into a man
who hammered nails
so that her ex-husband
could see his art
fully realized. But

all her assumptions
her maybes, her perhapses
were wrong.

She always circumvented
the truth:
that the cassette marked
the land like a gravestone,

that the cassette
like the forest
had been here first.

Solaromancy

She stretches out in the plastic lounge
beside the swimming pool made radioactive
by the sunlight. Sunglasses, bare belly,
earphones snaking to the Walkman
sitting anachronistically on the parched tiles,
beside her gleaming iPhone. Strange music
uncurls from the tape ribbons, an ethereal
static she could never dance to, which is why
she can't stop listening, the tape wheels
spinning like her empty summer.

Light spangles off the surface of the neon water.
Beyond the pool the grass slopes toward
the forest, the trees' branches heavy with foliage,
their heads bowed with the promise of cool shadows.

But she stays in the sun, listening to her wintry
music, guitars howling like a snow storm, drums
banging like a broken shutter. Her hand
drops, grazing the hot tiles until she finds the
cassette case and holds it up to the light. From
the slip of paper inside three teenage boys glare
back, faces blurred into toner splotches, and
she wonders who those boys are now,
twenty year later,

if they still shriek like ghosts lost in a blizzard.

Somatomancy

She opens the curtains on the studio windows
to a deluge of stale afternoon sunlight.

Dust follows her footsteps across the vinyl,
glinting,
swirling,
a ghost
of herself
and of

the cassette.

She pulls it from her pocket,
weighs the black plastic,
rubs the thin label.

At first she thought
the music was
an undanceable
static snowstorm,
too fast for human feet.

But now when she listens
(and she's always listening)
the old synesthesia kicks in:
music translated into motion.
Bourrée to a frantic drumbeat
fouetté to a spinning riff
one two three four
five six seven eight
barely layering above the chaos

as the dance shivers inside her,
electric currents pushing
her muscles
her tendons
the graceful tips
of her fingers.

She connects the Walkman
to the speakers built into the walls—
dancing to a cassette
like in her first ballet class.

When she presses play
the music drowns out the sunlight,
flooding the studio with its darkness.
turning the dust motes into snowflakes.

And the dance
is already there,
a choreographer
watching behind the curtain,
whispering the steps
as she glides, spins,
leaps
back into herself.

Necromancy

You know people died here, L. tells her,
voice breezy, as if swapping the usual gossip
about alcoholism, divorce, bad children.
Diamonds of sweat shine on her skin.
She's been running again.

We would have been teenagers, L. says, and
she explains the rest in newspaper headlines,
fragments tiled together like a Byzantine mosaic.

Winter. January.

*Two dead boys
found with snapped necks.*

*One living boy
bleeding broken blacked out
in the snow, resurrected with a kiss
from the EMT. Three months
in the hospital. Crazy, they said,
whispering of his guilt.*

*Innocent, he said, and the courts
believed him, even if the talk didn't.*

It happened here, L. says with water bottle swig,
then points,
her finger an arrow flying toward
the frame of M.'s house.

When this was all still woods, she adds.
They were in a band. Probably Satanists.

M. laughs at the vintage absurdity
of such a statement and imagines
Satanists praying beneath
the lurid crepe myrtle blossoms,
carving pentagrams into the hoods
of luxury cars. But then L. says

the name of the band

two words plucked
from the darkest part of the dictionary,
two words M. has only seen, never heard,
distorted across the photocopied line notes
of the cassette she has not stopped playing.