

Goddess Bandit
of the Thousand Arms

Conversation Pieces



A Small Paperback Series from Aqueduct Press
Subscriptions available: www.aqueductpress.com

1. The Grand Conversation
Essays by L. Timmel Duchamp
2. With Her Body
Short Fiction by Nicola Griffith
3. Changeling
A Novella by Nancy Jane Moore
4. Counting on Wildflowers
An Entanglement by Kim Antieau
5. The Traveling Tide
Short Fiction by Rosaleen Love
6. The Adventures of the Faithful Counselor
A Narrative Poem by Anne Sheldon
7. Ordinary People
A Collection by Eleanor Arnason
8. Writing the Other
A Practical Approach
by Nisi Shawl & Cynthia Ward
9. Alien Bootlegger
A Novella by Rebecca Ore
10. The Red Rose Rages (Bleeding)
A Short Novel by L. Timmel Duchamp
11. Talking Back: Epistolary Fantasies
edited by L. Timmel Duchamp
12. Absolute Uncertainty
Short Fiction by Lucy Sussex
13. Candle in a Bottle
A Novella by Carolyn Ives Gilman
14. Knots
Short Fiction by Wendy Walker

15. Naomi Mitchison: A Profile of Her Life and Work
A Monograph by Lesley A. Hall
16. We, Robots
A Novella by Sue Lange
17. Making Love in Madrid
A Novella by Kimberly Todd Wade
18. Of Love and Other Monsters
A Novella by Vandana Singh
19. Aliens of the Heart
Short Fiction by Carolyn Ives Gilman
20. Voices From Fairyland:
The Fantastical Poems of Mary Coleridge, Charlotte
Mew, and Sylvia Townsend Warner
Edited and With Poems by Theodora Goss
21. My Death
A Novella by Lisa Tuttle
22. De Secretis Mulierum
A Novella by L. Timmel Duchamp
23. Distances
A Novella by Vandana Singh
24. Three Observations and a Dialogue:
Round and About SF
Essays by Sylvia Kelso and a correspondence
with Lois McMaster Bujold
25. The Buonarotti Quartet
Short Fiction by Gwyneth Jones
26. Slightly Behind and to the Left
Four Stories & Three Drabbles by Claire Light
27. Through the Drowsy Dark
Short Fiction and Poetry
by Rachel Swirsky
28. Shotgun Lullabies
Stories and Poems by Sheree Renée Thomas
29. A Brood of Foxes
A Novella by Kristin Livdahl
30. The Bone Spindle
Poems and Short Fiction by Anne Sheldon
31. The Last Letter
A Novella by Fiona Lehn

32. We Wuz Pushed
On Joanna Russ and Radical Truth-Telling
by Brit Mandelo
33. The Receptionist and Other Tales
Poems by Lesley Wheeler
34. Birds and Birthdays
Stories by Christopher Barzak
35. The Queen, the Cambion, and Seven Others
Stories by Richard Bowes
36. Spring in Geneva
A Novella by Sylvia Kelso
37. The XY Conspiracy
A Novella by Lori Selke
38. Numa
An Epic Poem
by Katrinka Moore
39. Myths, Metaphors, and Science Fiction:
Ancient Roots of the Literature of the Future
Essays by Sheila Finch
40. NoFood
Short Fiction by Sarah Tolmie
41. The Haunted Girl
Poems and Short Stories by Lisa M. Bradley
42. Three Songs for Roxy
A Novella by Caren Gussoff
43. Ghost Signs
Poems and a Short Story by Sonya Taaffe
44. The Prince of the Aquamarines & The Invisible
Prince: Two Fairy Tales
by Louise Cavelier Levesque
45. Back, Belly, and Side: True Lies and False Tales
Short Fiction by Celeste Rita Baker
46. A Day in Deep Freeze
A Novella by Lisa Shapter
47. A Field Guide to the Spirits
Poems by Jean LeBlanc
48. Marginalia to Stone Bird
Poems by R.B. Lemberg

49. Unpronounceable
A Novella by Susan diRende
50. Sleeping Under the Tree of Life
Poetry and Short Fiction by Sheree Renée Thomas
51. Other Places
Short Fiction by Karen Heuler
52. Monteverde: Memoirs of an Interstellar Linguist
A Novella by Lola Robles,
translated by Lawrence Schimel
53. The Adventure of the Incognita Countess
A Novella by Cynthia Ward
54. Boundaries, Border Crossings,
and Reinventing the Future
Essays and Short Fiction by Beth Plutchak
55. Liberating the Astronauts
Poems by Christina Rau
56. In Search of Lost Time
A Novella by Karen Heuler
57. Cosmovore
Poems by Kristi Carter
58. Helen's Story
A Novella by Rosanne Rabinowitz
59. Liminal Spaces
Short Fiction by Beth Plutchak
60. Feed Me the Bones of Our Saints
Short Fiction by Alex Dally MacFarlane
61. If Not Skin: Collected Transformations
Poems and Short Fiction by Toby MacNutt
62. The Adventure of the Dux Bellorum
A Novella by Cynthia Ward
63. People Change
Short Fiction and Poems by Gwynne Garfinkle
64. Invocabulary
Poems by Gemma Files
65. The Green and Growing
A Novella by Erin K. Wagner

66. Everything is Made of Letters
Short Fiction by Sofía Rhei
67. Midnight at the Organporium
Short Fiction by Tara Campbell
68. Algorithmic Shapeshifting
Poems by Bogi Takács
69. The Rampant
A Novella by Julie C. Day
70. Mary Shelley Makes a Monster
Poems by Octavia Cade
71. Articulation
Plays by Cesi Davidson
72. City of a Thousand Feelings
A Novella by Anya Johanna DeNiro
73. Ancient Songs of Us
Poems by Jean LeBlanc
74. The Adventure of the Naked Guide
A Novella by Cynthia Ward
75. Sacred Summer
Poems by Cassandra Clarke
76. Disease
Short Fiction by Sarah Tolmie
77. Goddess Bandit of the Thousand Arms
Poems by Hal Y. Zhang

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 77

Goddess Bandit of the Thousand Arms

by
Hal Y. Zhang





Published by Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

Copyright © 2020 by Hal Y. Zhang
All rights reserved. First Edition, September 2020

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the author.

ISBN: 978-1-61976-189-6

Cover illustration courtesy Hal Y. Zhang

Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:
www.writersmugs.com

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

Contents

Majorana, back again	1
How to leave the planet	3
what we gain in translation	4
Steeped in Stars	6
Victor St.....	9
sea-child, sea-mother	11
the mind remembers flight	12
Swallow	13
sundown	14
no casualties	16
Recollecting soil.....	17
Only Found in Dreams	18
The Empire of Sugar, Its Rise and Fall.....	19
to my ghost by the sound	22
Summer, scalloped dredges of (colorized).....	24
Sunday Cleansing.....	25
Outfield.....	26
clay, January	29
Pomegranate—Persephone	30
fear cat.....	31

the celestial in thrall	32
sound science.....	33
sorrow for the featherweight.....	34
Anatomicon	36
cardioid	37
denaturing.....	38
sky king toast	40
oubliette	41
Sievelike	43
Only Treading.....	44
Seraphima.....	46
[themalign]ed	48
hypnogogia.....	50
seven heads	51
Shelly Scully.....	54
Napa Pork Glass Sea	55
My last tooth.....	56
Pearling	57
Exeunt, or from the weary adventurers to their creator	59
runes, ruins.....	60
the great filters.....	61
Étude for Warblers.....	62
Things I'm Not.....	63
sun caves.....	65

litotes.....	67
Dawn, a Genesis.....	68
To the Astronomer Aspiring.....	69
new mass	71
Ruby, Ruby, Black Sand	73
Afterword	85

*Be careful, whispers the ruby.
I have seen the light,
and you will be struck into night.*

Majorana, back again

9. The explosion cradles her gently,
weightless, so loud all is silent,
the swaddle of electric pepper
compressing like a mother's heartbeat.

8. Is this when—

7. No, a path already woven cannot
be altered. The past has occurred,
and so has the future. She must
just *be*, in the here and now, every
coordinate a golden fiber in her being.

6. She traces the mistakes inscribed on
the infinite wax cylinder of the world,
ending in an ouroboric blaze of regret.

5. Here is a fantasy:

If she can truly start over, again,
she'd go back before the first hydrogen.
Before the first pings of light.
As an all-seeing god she can sheathe
the sword. Untie the knot by sending
the sheep back to pasture.

4. Knowing what happens only makes
it harder. How does Cassandra bear it,
fire pouring from her eyes nightly?

Hal Y. Zhang

3. She realizes it now, because she has always known, in her very name and nature.

2. Antimatter is matter traveling back in time. Our lines in spacetime are snarled yarn. Headless. Tailless. Death and birth the two infinite walls we bounce between.

1. The world bares its entire self to her from the inside out, stars upon stars in the celestial womb.

0. "What do you mean, backwards?"

How to leave the planet

Airborne birds: easiest, still impossible. fly up and out, pump your wings hard until the air thins into blazing light in the darkness. panoramic view of the junkyard below is not to be missed.

Lampreys: feed on diseased blood, food and scientific fodder for the stars, until you explode. your pieces will cycle carbon nitrogen water rock eternity.

Fire salamanders: the fire isn't real until you find one. your plume of ashes is visible from the space station.

Shrews: dig down until the pressure caves tunnels. curl your venom into a ball to be distilled into diamond. wait.

Humans: others first, then us. blast cliffs for diamonds until no fingerholds remain unharvested. fall.

what we gain in translation

when I walked out of the plane I did
not know what I left in the bins:

skin cells gut bacteria tongue tips
and consonants for broken birds to nurse.

there is no return because the world
changes color while you linger

elsewhere, molts light remembered
noise lick of flames, sweet as

fermented beans tasting different
from the same jar. everything is

different. half of me too. melted and
recast in a background role, brittle

and hollow, disappointment of chocolate
rabbits reheated cheese dough. I

don't know why the eggs don't steam
well here, mother said. the proteins

unspool wrongly when they look in
the mirror world. I dream. the gargantuan

moon shatters into curds soundless,
yellow unlike my vague skin stuck in

my teeth and folds golden money
boats to float to the hereafter.

Steeped in Stars

Jasmine,
night blossom,
vetiver to my barren heart,
let me caress you.

don't go.

Your sweet song perched on
my ear rings steps into round
gates between bamboo groves,
a gaggle of cousins underfoot.
Grandparents chorus greetings
inside while layering symphonic
poems of perfume and tannin
in handwoven baskets. In the
fingerless swelter I fold my
knees beside you. The cicadas
creak a lazy rhythm as you
quietly unfurl on the shoulder
crooks of woolly camellia buds.
Wind-torn rice paper doors
unveil the white tiger, on your
dulcet tones the astronomical
lanterns sway half-blind-drunk

you must continue the family craft.

through sterile viewports,
refolded by the smithy of
the spacetime celestial.
As the telescope unfolds to
slow waltzes of gyroscopes
I'll aim it at the seemingly
dark between scaly tails
of the mermaid-née-tiger.
Five generations and roof
are long gone, but the ghost
of the old stone wall still
streams your meteor shower,
little photons brave enough
to kiss your nectar then drift
over countless light years to
ping my tongue. I'll taste
your growing secrets until
the sun rises over a perfect

roots, not wings.

cup of tea, bright gold as the
horizon moon, sonorous as the
mountain's echo, heady heat
waking listless bones, endless
ripples of fragrance bobbing
lumps in throat. Chattering
children pouring over bouncy
baos and swirling tofu flowers,
steam curling hair and toes. An
impossible conversation over
an impossible dream, to roam
infinite skies one day with a

Hal Y. Zhang

we'll miss you so much down here.

novel craft. Pods upon data
pods of histories, neither hair
nor mote. Sole living things
two ivory blossoms emerging
from vacuum and anesthetic.
No tea here—not yet—though
machines hum like night bugs.
Ancient memories not mine.
Just the ache, lingeringly warm.

Victor St.

I remember my first death
under dim lights. A smear of fur
and utter dark on the asphalt,
life stretched and flattened onto the killing plane
described by a singular yellow lamp of
suburban wrongness. I snapped
my neck away, blood-phantom-shard-pain
of seeing something terrible in the sublime.
oof, roadkill, my father said, as if we
should be described by how our murderers
twist the knife. All night I dreamt
of vengeance and the black serrated blade
until I was tugged in the extended arm of my mother
who did not know the new changeling
in her daughter's body shirking the
garish daylight, helpless to alter our
sun and moon elliptical orbit. Then round the corner
with not-yet-myopic eyes I could see precisely
nothing below new buds of the imprisoned
city pear, midday wheels heaving over
a lacuna blown on the negative reel
of my mind as if maliciously
imagined. I lingered. Here was a
vanished crime scene cleared
of all wrongdoing, not even a televised

Hal Y. Zhang

sham trial. As my head lightened into her embrace
I could hear my mother's sinewy panic above
all else, a pietà for the unborn
and undeserving.

sea-child, sea-mother

foam belly oh
sandchurn feet my darling
the salt ache how the wind billows skirts
in the hidden space how to rip apart with bare hands
adjoining ears and head thumbprinted stone fruit *ssiiiiiiiiiripppp*
crown of sargassum how to not redrown in the god-high
stonemarked soles tides of our lineage
fistfuls of sand are the things i want to show you but
dollars to make tumbling my water only sloshes through
out of the waves you and my voice
a bearable first frightens you
memory so

the mind remembers flight

how the world is made homogenous
in motion wind-flattened stippling
of branches and arrows flower explosions
blurring hyperopic inkwell how you grasp
for escape with a phantom tail
when threatened dangling feeling vs. plastic
upholstery and when the porcelain slips
from your forefinger it is the prehensile past
that does not catch it

Swallow

I am thankful to not be a fish
again in this life.

When I see a restaurant tank
my jaws swell in remembrance
gulp ice water like air

It could be worse, my dear
my mother's port-wine birthmark
ripples around her neck
as she waves her fork
She does not eat beef.

My daughter is inside me,
the size of a peach.
At night we dream of falling.

It is not to be feared
because her wings
beat us aloft, one-two
as we step down from the sky.

Was I delicious,
she asks as we pluck
cloves from her hair and skin.

Very.

sundown

the clock chimes six and
you transform into a different person.
a cruel stepmother, twisting thorns of
words you will not remember
in the morning.

your shoes, you've left them on the
veranda: a careless jumble. that's
how I first knew you were not well,
for how can you forget your slippers?
the eighth square that took you
from pawn to queen. but
the game is at an end,
and the pieces must return
to the earthen box.

your dress, when you rent
your swan tulle asunder in an
imagined skirmish with sorcerers
I cried too. remember when I stood
in the white circle, aged six,
sticky handprints on the mirror
you pirouetted me round and round
and promised I would be your
prima ballerina ever after.

and your carriage. once the envy of every
girl, their faces pumpkin-red with jealousy
at your grand jeté développé, dove-light,
arm aloft grazing clouds. now your
shoulders slumber, wings
snared in a cursed circlet
and there is no enchantress
on our side. only shattered glass,
bare bones. nettle and
long shadow.

dusk velvet falls over your
raked stage; I take my curtain
call, no exit. ribbon lights
unravel. we have only time now.
at midnight I will bury your weary
heart brain feet
under your mother's hazel tree,
cinders to cinders to cinders.

no casualties

reported.

no casualties but everyone
gets four years off their life
phantom pains nightmares
carsick splattered in our people rings
even the children can read.
sca-red, they're pointing
at the phonics through our
clear mesentery as we
gulp water, possibly
leaden.

four years
times all of us is a million lifetimes
unpaid, unsubsidized fear striking
true, arrow head in
arrow tail. in the
scant warmth of embraces
we bury our past dead and
think of the draught that
maims with clinical
precision. why does the
monk in the koan swallow,
why can we
not.

Recollecting soil

The leaves of childhood
loom larger than thought.
Fragrant, impossible to crush,
the kind of thing you build
by hand, two of, perpetually sticky,
magic in the cool breath mist.
Now you remember the reason your
chest aches: your mother's
long black jacket, her arm too high overhead
as you race into the new mulch,
frankincense, dead insects, unhurried
sweet smoke rising, dew congealing
to lung sap until she shouts your
real name lost in the wooden box, you may
be falling now because there are only
brown dry veins and the paralysis
of too-fast movement. You hear the
impact before your bones tell you
they have bent, your fluids to
gravy, whiplash of bygones to
cymbal crash. Please, please, your
brain shouts, I want to leave
the box. I want to be
whole.

Only Found in Dreams

We return to the swamp quietly thus
to find our bug-eyed child-selves in thrall:

impossible fruiting tigers,
eidolon deaths and adamantite apocalypse.

We were all this young once, nodding along to
every miracle, every horror,

until we walked too far
down the graveled road, feet stripped and raw. And

there is a comfort in crawling back in the cage
and swallowing the invisible key,

for the phantasmagoria here
cannot hurt us like our waking days.

The Empire of Sugar, Its Rise and Fall

I open the time capsule
ten years too late. Metal
technology and sand still
intact, vanilla cream
cookies now a stratified world
onto itself,
entire history
splayed for viewing.

Bacteria and fungi, all
exponential sweet teeth
swarmed the foreign city in
early days, neighborhoods
gentrifying with icing pumps
every corner.

All-out war later—
assassins, betrayers, poisoners
wringing you dry of every
last drop of nectar.

Now only lacy skeletons
of fruiting bodies
remain for archaeologists,
historians alike, imprints of spun sugar
hyphae whispering echoes of
ancient aqueducts and
honey temples,
sites of wealth and
plunder.

Hal Y. Zhang

The idea of lamentation,
what-could-have-beens,
never came up; I am too
far removed, after
all, though I was once
the oblivious minor deity
with a grade school project.
I'm sorry—was it all worth it?
I would ask them if I knew
the passcodes of their micro
networks, plunge my
fingers into the rot and
thrum transmissions back in
time.