Goddess Bandit
of the Thousand Arms
Conversation Pieces

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    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

Goddess Bandit of the Thousand Arms

by

Hal Y. Zhang
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Dawn, a Genesis

To the Astronomer Aspiring

new mass

Ruby, Ruby, Black Sand

Afterword
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?
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 wooly camellia buds.
Wind-torn rice paper doors
unveil the white tiger, on your
dulcet tones the astronautical
lanterns sway half-blind-drunk

you must continue the family craft.
Goddess Bandit of the Thousand Arms

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. Chittering 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
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.

\textit{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
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 sssiiillllrippppp
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 adamantine 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.
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.