

Cabinet of Wrath
A Doll Collection

Advance Praise for Cabinet of Wrath

“A delectably gruesome, tantalizingly bitey cabinet of wonders awaits you in this jewel box of a collection from Tara Campbell.”

~Tina Connolly, Hugo-nominated author of
The Last Banquet of Temporal Confections

“Tara Campbell’s *Cabinet of Wrath* is an outrageously fun, inventive collection. Any writer who can show you the longing and quiet desperation of our own lives through the (frequently detached) eyes of a (frequently headless) Malibu Barbie is doing some kind of magic trick, which makes Tara Campbell a magician and *Cabinet of Wrath* pure magic.”

~Dave Housley, author of *Massive Cleansing Fire* and
This Darkness Got to Give

“I thought I’d seen it all with the “creepy doll” story line, but Tara Campbell takes it to the next level with her twisted and delightful imagination. Kidnappers. Lovers. Killers. Seekers. I will be thinking about these stories in my nightmares.”

~Tara Laskowski, author of *One Night Gone* and
Modern Manners For Your Inner Demons

“Tara Campbell’s latest collection is a deliciously creepy dive into the relationship between humans and their dolls. At times beheaded, at times idolized, at times fed jeweled cakes from the mouths of the masses, these childhood objects become the nightmares of our own humanity in fresh and disturbing ways.”

~Kelly Ann Jacobson, author of *Tink and Wendy* and
An Inventory of Abandoned Things

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 80

Cabinet of Wrath A Doll Collection

by
Tara Campbell





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

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ISBN: 978-1-61976-210-7

Cover design, Kathryn Wilham
Cover illustrations: © Can Stock Photo / davinci; © Can Stock Photo / frenta; © Can Stock Photo / Aarstudio; © Can Stock Photo / weges; © Can Stock Photo / dariolopresti; © Can Stock Photo / photography33

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

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

Acknowledgments

Much love and thanks to Barrelhouse and Writer Camp, where many of these stories originated. Find out more at www.barrelhousemag.com.

Thank you to Timmi and Kath at Aqueduct for their enthusiasm and attention to all the details—and for geeking out with me over creepy doll pics.

Without the support and keen eyes of all the talented writers in my writing groups, I wouldn't have come half as far: Matthew Bukowski, Myna Chang, Yohanca Delgado, Marcy Dilworth, Cristi Donoso, Mary Filicetti, Derrick Jefferson, Karen Keating, Raima Larter, Raegan O'Lone, Jessie Seigel, Bron Treanor, and Beth Ann Wenger

And a million thanks to my husband Craig Hegemann for providing me the time and space to listen to all those little voices in the Cabinet.

Prior Publications:

Midge appeared in *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, March 2020

Spencer appeared in *Speculative City*, March 2020

Becky appeared in *Twisted Love*, Bronzeville Books, February 2020 (out of print)

Petite Marie appeared in Askance Publishing, March 2020

Malibu Lacey appeared in *Ghost Parachute*, October 2019

Plot Baby appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, July 2019

Fairbanks appeared in *Bourbon Penn* (forthcoming)

*For my mother, Dolores R. Campbell, who held on
to all of her children's old toys long after we left home.
She knew we weren't done playing.*



Photo by Aimee Vogelsang on Unsplash

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Photo by Daniel Gregoire on Unsplash

The Box

MOTHER HOLLY TELLS us right from the start that no one has ever escaped from the Box. She says it's impossible, that the Makers designed it that way for our own protection.

She says we may hear rumors of escape, but they're not to be believed. She says only toys with broken minds make such absurd claims, and if we hear them, we should tell her before one of these broken toys snaps and harms us.

But if the Makers are so concerned for our safety, we ask, why did they take us away from our playrooms, away from our children and fellow toys, and bring us here to the Box?

Mother Holly folds her hands over her patchwork dress and shakes her head. "You wouldn't be safe there anymore. Not in your condition." Her voice is soft and inscrutable. The brim of her puffy blue bonnet sits low over her eyes, making her difficult to read.

She tells us to just settle in for now, that soon they will share with us everything we need to know. For now, she says, we should thank the Makers for finding us.

"And you should also thank the Fairies," she says. "You don't remember it, but they were the ones who safely delivered you here."

And as soon as she says this, we realize it's true, even though none of us remember the night—we assume it was night—when the Fairies came in and plucked us up from the foot of the bed or out of the toybox, or wriggled us out of our child's very arms.

Mother Holly tells us that for now, we must trust that they had a very good reason for bringing us here. “We don't wait until things get bad,” she says. “We prefer to act before it's too late.”



In the Box there is neither day nor night, only an abiding golden glow. It is the comforting hue of the playroom after bathtime, before bed. Most of us relax and settle in with storybooks, but some say we shouldn't, because that's exactly what the Makers want.

“Look at these oversized chairs, the nightlights, the warm milk.” They point at the Winnie the Pooh cups next to a platter of cookies. “We don't even drink milk, so who is this for?”

“It's cozy,” we reply. “Children like it.”

“That's the point,” they say, putting fingers and claws to the tips of their noses and snouts. “It's not really for us—it's just manipulation.”

Most of us turn back to our storybooks, but the others stay on their feet and paws, vigilant, stalking the Box, refusing to be tamed.



The Box isn't really a box. It's a clinic with a benevolent-sounding name, but everyone calls it the Box, even Mother Holly.

As time stretches on, we exchange theories on why we might be in a clinic. We tell each other our stories.

“I did something,” says the doll with shining yellow hair. “With another doll.”

We nod. We’ve all done something, mostly with dolls or with puppets. The stories with collectible figurines are more difficult to believe, but then, who are we to question the designs of the Makers?

Some of us say they already knew something was amiss, even before the Fairies came for them—their seams felt a little tight, or their children had more difficulties changing their dresses, or they weren’t able to swing from branch to make-believe-jungle branch with quite as much grace as before. Some of us nod along with these stories; others shake their heads against them, denying a looming truth.

After all the stories are told, the stuffed lion still isn’t sure why he’s here. It has to be a mistake, we say. We’ll ask Mother Holly.

Or, someone whispers, could this be Maker error, a mane sewn onto a lioness?

The lion growls, claws popping out of its paws.



None of us had ever heard of the Box until now. Outside of the Box, there is no Box. Inside, there is nothing else.

Mother Holly assembles us for an orientation. Today she’s wearing an off-white apron over her patchwork dress, and her goldenrod hair hangs down in yarn braids from beneath a frilly white bonnet.

“Companions,” she says. “For you are each other’s companions now—I promised to tell you why you are here.” She sighs and clasps her mitten hands together over her apron. This delay makes us nervous, because if she doesn’t like saying what she’s about to say, we’re certain we won’t like hearing it.

“Some of you may already suspect what your time here pertains to. You’re here because of certain—transformations you may already be feeling inside. You are here not because of the transgressions that have occurred, but because we wish to protect you and the other toys outside of the Box from the consequences of those transgressions.”

“But love is no transgression,” we say. She nods before the sentence is even finished, as though she’s heard this objection many times.

“Be that as it may,” she says. “It is not what the children who played with you intended.”

A Bratz doll interrupts. “What if it wasn’t even my fault? What if my human’s brother smashed me and Ken together when she wasn’t looking?”

Miss Holly raises empty palms. “At this point motives are immaterial. All we can manage now are the consequences.”

We stand quietly and wait for her to tell us what those consequences are.

“I will be direct. Toys, you are pregnant. That is why you are here.”

Hearing out loud what we already knew makes us feel weak.

“Over the next several weeks, or months, depending, you will feel your bodies growing. Your bellies will swell as your babies begin to develop.”

We place our hands and paws over our midsections, imagining precious miniature versions of ourselves forming inside us.

“I must tell you,” continues Mother Holly, “this will not end the way you expect. Those of you from homes with human mommies may be thinking about talks they’ve had with the children you belong to, about little sisters or brothers growing inside them who will join their families soon. You may have seen human babies—you may even have been with your own human children since they were plump little babies themselves.”

And now we smile at each other, remembering the first time our humans’ tiny hands grabbed hold of us.

“This,” says Mother Holly, “is not that.” She waits until the murmur dies down. “New toys are supposed to be made by people. This is not what is happening to you. Right now, inside you, thousands of tiny doll egg cells are splitting, growing. They will continue to grow, by the thousands, until...”

Mother Holly seems genuinely reluctant to deliver the news.

“...until they will grow too big for you to contain.”

“And that’s when we give birth,” we say, looking down between our legs, silently wondering how.

“No, Companions,” Mother Holly says quietly. “That’s when you split apart.”

Mother Holly has to explain the process multiple times before we grasp it: left unchecked, the eggs would continue to grow inside of us, gradually straining our

seams with their mass. If they hatched, they'd consume whatever stuffing they found, or pull a doll's hair back inside through the holes, eat every bit of us up from the inside. Still growing and ravenous, they'd worm through our seams or pop off our limbs, or chew their way out of our skins—even plastic—and if that happened, no one in the playroom would be safe.

She could keep all of that from happening, Mother Holly says. A simple procedure, and then they would take us back home, where we could be “found” and reunited with our human children.

For a moment the room is silent. Then comes the whisper of cloth as we all clutch our bellies. The next instant: bedlam. Gasps and moans, hooves and hands shooting into the air, toys shouting that it's all a lie, howling to be told another version of the truth, pleading to do whatever it takes to make it stop. A shrieking plush deer knocks over a clown to get to Mother Holly. GI Joes move out of the shadows to guard her, holding seam rippers like rifles, pushing us back in a desperate, scrabbling ring. Sobs and exhaustion set in sooner than we'd like to admit.

Mother Holly tells us to take our time and think. They will force no one, but they cannot let us leave until we have the procedure. Our only other option, she says, is to stay and let them contain the aftermath.

She gives us another evening alone to digest our new reality. Some of us think about nothing else but being first on the list to get fixed and go home. A few try to think back, try to dredge up a memory, a story they could have sworn they heard about a toy actually giving birth to another toy. Wasn't there a doll one time, they

ask. Didn't it happen somewhere up north? Or out west? Wasn't it sometime, a long time ago?

How could this even have happened, we wonder. Why didn't anyone warn us off dolls, or mention the Box? Why didn't anyone stop us?

We ask questions and questions and questions until the only question left is how long each of us will wait before letting the Box do what it set out to do. We slump to the floor and fall asleep, sniffing, holding on to each other instead of our children.

In an instant we're jolted awake by alarms, by doors clanging open and GI Joes running in with cigarette lighters bristling with tiny bayonets. They turn over tables and use their blades to stab behind curtains and rip open the overstuffed chairs. Mother Holly tells us they're looking for a monkey and a lamb. She tells us we should be good toys and cooperate.

The GI Joes question all of us, leaning into our faces one by one, until they finally haul a crying milkmaid away. Mother Holly follows them, closing the door behind her, shutting us up in our ransacked chamber. We hear a lock *click* into place. We stare at each other, moon-eyed, unable to sleep.

We sit back down on the floor, holding on to each other's hands and flippers and paws.

"They'll die out there," someone whispers. We all picture the lamb and the monkey swelling up, writhing on the ground in agony until they burst open in a spillage of—what? What do doll babies look like? What kind of mouths can hold all those razor-sharp teeth?

What more did Mother Holly not tell us?

Hours go by. The milkmaid doesn't return.

Someone whispers, “Should we have run, too?”

Another one whispers, “There’s a reason we’ve never heard of the Box.”

“Because toys can keep secrets,” says a third.

“No, they can’t,” says a fourth.

“They wipe our memories,” says a fifth. “Isn’t that what Mother Holly said?”

Mother Holly never said that.

On and on, we whisper until we don’t know whether it’s morning or night, if the milkmaid’s still crying, when—if—Mother Holly will come to us again. We ask one another if our children back home still miss us, or if they’re already unwrapping our replacements.

We wonder if Monkey and Lamb will find their way home, or lose their way home, or swell up and explode from all the doll babies inside them.

We wonder if we should have followed them.

We ask and we ask, and we wait for Mother Holly, and we wonder: is this how we lose our children forever?



Midge

“I REMEMBER SAILING in a ship.”

Skipper’s voice fills the musty darkness of the drawer. “I mean, it was a small ship, more like a boat, I guess, and we were just floating, really, which maybe some people wouldn’t call sailing, but anyhow I liked it.”

Her tone brightens with the details. “It was a warm day, but cool down by the water. The girl had taken us down there—”

“What was the girl’s name?” I ask.

I hear Skipper’s intake of breath, the way the memory catches in her throat, even though she technically doesn’t have one anymore, meaning a throat, seeing as how she’s now just a head in a junk drawer, like all of us, lying on top of lost buttons, rusty screws, used twist ties, expired coupons, and a broken pair of scissors. Waiting for someone to come save us.

“I don’t remember,” she says. “You’re so mean, Midge! I never remember, why do you keep badgering me?”

“Shh, shh, it’s okay,” says Francie. “She was just asking.”

But Skipper’s right, I am mean, always have been. I think. I don’t remember going on any sailing trips. What I do remember is that the girl who played with us always reached for me last, and then had me argue with everyone else. I don’t know why she picked me to be the mean one. Maybe it was my name: Midge—that sounds

like someone who starts arguments. I just can't remember what we argued about. And the longer I'm in this drawer, the less I remember from before.

Christie interjects: "Skipper, sweetie."

I roll as everyone shifts around me, and I assume it's Skipper trying to face her, a habit we haven't completely unlearned since being in the drawer.

"Sweetie, Midge is only trying to help."

"Whatever," I mutter. "If you want to just lie around here the rest of your life..."

"What does that mean?" asks Skipper, voice trembling. "The rest of m—"

"Ignore her," says Francie. "She's just trying to scare you."

Francie's right. I *am* trying to scare her, just like I did with Tutti and Todd before her, and Kelly before them, firing questions at them until they cried. To hell with comforting new arrivals; they might still have enough information to save us, if I can just jar it out of them.

"Don't ignore me," I say. "I'm the only one—"

The drawer lurches below me. A crack of light appears like a raised horizon, then widens to encompass the whole sky. The brightness hurts even through closed eyelids, and without arms I can't shield my face.

Something hard and heavy grazes my cheek as it falls into our drawer. Then, as quickly as the light blinded me, I'm jostled and plunged into darkness again.

"That bitch!" says the new arrival. The voice is deep. Masculine.

"Holy shit," someone blurts out. "It's Ken!"

"Ladies?" says Christie. "A little help?"

As my eyes adjust, I notice that a sliver of light still shines through a crack, with a blot of darkness against it. A few of us roll over bent nails and loose batteries to get closer to the blot. It's Christie, and her hair has gotten stuck in the top of the drawer.

"Hang on," says Skipper. "We'll pull you out."

Christie shifts. "No, don't pull me back into the drawer. This is our *way out of it!*"

"You bet your sweet ass it is." Ken rolls from side to side, as though testing his new range of movement, then tells us to watch out. He tumbles toward the front of the drawer, banging himself below the crack of light again and again, until he finally gives up and rolls, panting, into a back corner.

The drawer hasn't moved at all. The horizon hasn't gotten any brighter.

"You done?" asks Christie.

Her tone is uncharacteristically rude, but no one tells her to be nicer, which I find gratifying. But then, I'm Mean Midge.

The corner remains quiet.

"Ken. The girl's name is Mackenzie," Christie says. "MacKENzie!"

"Oh!" gasps a doll named Stacey. "Oh oh oh, and she has red hair just like me."

"And she likes milk and cookies after school," Skipper adds. "Even though she usually gets carrot sticks and, gag, celery—I mean, who likes celery—and crackers with that weird chickpea paste on it? I mean, have you guys smelled that stuff? And she has to sneak the cookies, which isn't hard because her parents keep all kinds of junk food in the house, but then she feels bad

about it afterward, because she looks in that stupid mirror and thinks she's fat. She's only ten for Christ's sake, and she thinks she's fat. Can you believe it? I mean, isn't that horrible?"

After a moment, I break the silence: "Christie, what's the plan?"

We all whisper, bubbling with ideas, and we decide to wait until the world outside the drawer is dark and quiet. The one thing we agree on is that we can't let our captor(s?) discover the gap and close the opportunity before we figure out how to use it.

When night falls, we try out our ideas: we push against Christie to wedge more of her hair into the opening; we stuff our own hair into the opening alongside hers; we roll ourselves around and around, twisting our hair into tight, fat bundles meant to pry the opening wider. Nothing works.

Skipper spins, unwinding her hair, and looks into the back corner of the drawer. Ken is lying somewhere over there in the darkness. He hasn't spoken or moved since he rolled back there. It hits me then that none of my nice, helpful companions have gone back to check on him.

"I'm going to try something," Skipper says. What little light is left reveals her eyes, narrowed, and her mouth set in a hard line. "Please promise, though: don't judge me."

She rolls out of the scant light toward the blackness in the corner. Something makes me cringe at the thought of being that close to him in the dark. Cornered. We wait, listen. Hear things. Things that sound like the rip of silicone. When she rolls back to us, there's a bulge in her cheek.

"Skipper?"

“What did you do?”

Skipper doesn't answer, merely rolls up the pile of our heads and goes to work on the opening, burrowing and shimmying, creating some pretty nasty tangles in our hair, but also opening the split wide enough for us to forgive her.

“Hand me the scissors,” she says to no one in particular.

Everyone gasps. I don't like being bossed, but Skipper seems to have a plan, so I untangle myself and push the broken scissors up the pile of heads, almost laughing when I think about “handing” them off with no arms.

Stacy starts to cry, but no one asks why, probably because we can all now remember the time Mackenzie tried giving her bangs. We all told Stacy she looked great, but she cried for weeks. We visited her almost every day on the top shelf of the bookcase, where Mackenzie hid her so she wouldn't have to look at her botched bangs, and we all acted as though nothing had happened.

Just like now, when we don't talk about how Mackenzie will never come save us.

And now, when we don't talk about dark corners and Ken.

Skipper tells Stacy to stop crying, she's not a little girl anymore, and the words cut through me like a blade. “I'm not a little girl anymore.” That was the last thing Mackenzie said to me before she put me in here. The same thing I heard her say to every new head that has tumbled in since.

Skipper doesn't try to give anyone bangs. Together, she and I set the scissors along one side of the drawer and wedge the tips out of the crack, then lever and wriggle until the crack opens even further. The others get the

hint and disentangle themselves to set up two teams, pushing the handles in opposite directions, widening our horizon a little more with each heave-ho.

We leave the scissors wedged where they are, then slide a ruler into place as a ramp to the outside. Wordlessly, we back away—Skipper has earned the first taste of freedom.

I watch my sisters roll out into the world after Skipper, each of them holding a nail or pin or sewing needle between her teeth, and I notice that none of them turn to look back for Ken. Not one. But I look back, and I remember everything, including why I'm so mean. It has nothing to do with my name.

I clench a nail between my teeth. Darkness swirls around me as I tumble after my sisters up the ramp into a new world, one with no room for anyone but us.