

Apollo Weeps



# 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 86

# Apollo Weeps

by  
Xian Mao

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Content warning: this book contains depictions of self-harm. Please read with care.

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Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:  
[www.writersmugs.com](http://www.writersmugs.com)

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

*For Ha, who shares my love of musicals,  
and Luchang, who let me borrow the Iowan sky.*



# Contents

The Cassandra Theater .....	1
The Grey Family Tree .....	9
The Grey House .....	16
Rite of Autumn .....	20
The Medium's Son.....	29
Obit Too Late.....	39
Ghost Town, Iowa .....	44
A Stranger in Her Own Home .....	58
Dramaturgy.....	62
The Director's Tale.....	69
The Electrician's Tale .....	73
The Security Guard's Tale .....	78
The Mask .....	83
Opening Night.....	89
Deep Roots .....	93
Down Once More .....	99
The Ballad of Miranda Grey .....	104
Dodo Drowns the Parakeet .....	109
Perestroika.....	118
Mason & Miranda .....	123
Sosie's Legacy .....	127
Hollow Tears .....	137
Confrontation .....	144
The Writer's Tale.....	148
Epilogue: Cassandra Smiles .....	154





## The Cassandra Theater

IN a small plaque at its entrance, the Cassandra Theater reminds its guests of its age and its fathers: Built in 1912 by local entrepreneur Robert Shulling and Polish architect Waclaw Grilkow, the Cassandra Theater is a small Midwestern town's love letter to la Belle Époque, or its last hurrah for the Gilded Age. The theater is named for the late Cassandra Shulling, who died just two days before her wedding day. It is only further down on the plaque that the theater admits to its greatest shame, a secret hidden in plain sight: the Cassandra Theater is built on paupers' graves.

The *Garner District Daily* has published more than a hundred articles about the historic Cassandra Theater. Aside from reviews of the five plays produced each season beginning in the fall, the newspaper publishes a feature story on some aspect of the building's history at least two times a year. What else is there to marvel at in a small town like Leroux, Iowa?

Unlike most of its residents, Cara Vincini, features editor of the *Garner District Daily*, is not a native to the town. She moved here ten years ago following a mass layoff at her paper in Chicago, and in her time the *Garner* has received multiple county awards and recognition from larger publications. Quite the accomplishment, she often thinks to herself, uplifting the newspaper from this little Podunk town to something that sees circulation in both of Iowa's airports.

Cara has been in the business long enough to know that features on local history always sell well. The Leroux locals may roll their eyes at another deep dive into the Cassandra and her catacombs, but the world at large gobbles up the

small-town Americana. It's always the pieces about local treasures and hidden gems that wind up on NPR or in the *Times* of some distant city.

Personally, though, Cara would rather interview every corn and pig farmer within a hundred miles of the town than read another article about its beloved theater.

Which is why she dislikes Alouette Chagney, a writer of enough clout to have been published in the aforementioned distant *Times* and to have featured in a segment on an NPR show, before she even met her. Cara expects a pompous youngster overfed on hometown pride; instead, the writer she invites into her office is a mousy individual who slouches with her neck at ninety degrees, sporting glasses with the thickest lenses Cara has ever seen, perpetually sliding down her flat nose.

Alouette Chagney does not look like her name. The name Alouette inspires a sort of romanticism, making Cara think of a wan waif with long, blonde hair leaning out of the window of some Victorian mansion. The actual Alouette Chagney looks like she still gets carded at bars, her face almost ovular because of the way her short hair frames it.

Cara also expected someone named Alouette Chagney to be white, but the dyke in front her is some flavor of Asian, possibly anything from Korean to Vietnamese. She remembers trying to read an article by Chagney about adoption, but the writing was so sentimental she had to stop reading after the second paragraph. She hates writers like Chagney, sops who write woe-is-me articles that publications are forced to accept lest they be accused of the latest -ism mentioned in the *Huffington Post*.

“Honestly, I expected more from your pitch, Chagney,” she says. Not knowing how to pronounce the last name, she has settled on a hard G. “This being your hometown and all, I thought you’d have come up with a more creative angle. We publish an article on the Cassandra almost every quarter.

What's there that's not been said?" *What's there that requires your illustrious touch?* she adds ruefully in her head.

Chagney bristles. "Most of the features on the Cassandra are historical in the sense that they look at old playbills or find records in the archives. I'm going for a more personal angle."

Cara glances at her printed copy of the pitch and then looks back at Alouette. Is she expecting special treatment just because she grew up in this small godforsaken town? "Yes, this Madeleine Grey. I've met her before—interviewed her, actually. Sure, she's been managing the theater for about ten years now, since the ripe young age of 25. It's impressive but not remarkable. Same goes for her acting. What story will you pull out of her that someone couldn't get from reading the archives of our Arts section?"

"I went to school with Maddie," Chagney says, emphasizing the nickname. Perhaps Cara isn't wrong about the pompousness after all. "She was, well, we were in a lot of the same classes together. Her great-grandfather built the Cassandra, and her family's been involved with it for four generations."

"And why hasn't somebody already written a story about this family?"

"Maddie's a pretty private person—the whole family is. And the story is mostly matrilineal, so it isn't obvious unless you know where to look."

Just let her write the goddamn piece, an evil part of Cara's brain whispers. Let her crash and burn if it doesn't sell. And if it does, well, we're the one who will publish it.

"All right, Ms. Chagney, but I'm going to warn you, I've read more articles than I care to about that damn theater. Make this one different."

To her credit, Chagney does not cower. They discuss further the timeline and resources needed, until the meeting ends blissfully early. Cara walks Chagney to the door and sends her off with a firm handshake.

She has already moved on to the next item on her busy schedule when a voice she already hates pipes up from the doorway.

“It’s pronounced SHA-nee, by the way. The G is silent.”

Cara turns and glares at her door. That damned Chagney is standing there, face crimson, looking halfway to spontaneous human combustion.

“I beg your pardon?”

“And it’s not ‘Ms. Chagney’ either. Just call me Alouette or Chagney, I don’t care, but I’m not a Miss. I use ‘they’ and ‘them’ pronouns.”

Having said their part, Alouette Chagney turns and runs out of the office, leaving the features editor of the *Garner District Daily* alone to roll her eyes. It’s good to know the animosity is mutual.



An underappreciated facet of the Midwest is the abundance of parking spaces. There is always an open lot nearby, and Owl doesn’t mind the walk.

The meeting with Cara Vincini aggravated them more than they expected, so Owl takes an extra lap around the block to clear their head. They had prepared themselves for what it would be like returning to Leroux; they just didn’t expect the town to snatch their voice from their throat so quickly. Once more the Chagney child, once more hyper-visible—*exotic*, the word everyone uses (when they aren’t calling them tragic).

The word Owl prefers is *lonely*.

They already miss it dearly, the invisibility a metropolitan area provides. How easy it is to be just a figure in a crowd, a shadow on the wall, with no one commenting on the rarity of their name, no assumptions made about their family, their parents just vague hints of a distant childhood. Despite the larger population contained within the geo-

graphical area, no one in a city cares about ghosts. They simply disappear in the crowd.

Owl turns a corner and stares ahead of them at the endless rows of houses with lawns in varying states of overgrowth. Nothing has changed since they left, not a construction crane in sight. It's too quiet, just crickets and the rustle of corn—the sound of life going on, the same as ever.

They have dug crescents into their palms from tightly clenching their fists in the editor's office. Their mouth feels raw from how often they bite their cheeks.

Owl wonders again if they should have grown their hair out to better fit in. The thought makes them shudder with a deep hatred for every aspect of their body. Then the dysphoria passes, as it always does, and once more they are left alone with just the sound of cicadas and songbirds in the mild, summer day.

No time to think about this now, Owl tells herself. Look forward instead. Just hold on to the end of the week. By the end of the week, they will step into the Cassandra for the first time in a decade and see *her* again.



Like all anticipated things, the week passes slowly. Owl stays in their old bedroom, answering emails and constructing the bare bones of an outline, a script for Madeleine Grey to fill in the answers. They barely work, spending most of the day waiting for it to be over, for Friday to step over Wednesday and Thursday and appear *now*. They want to hop into their old Subaru and drive toward tomorrow and the day after, faster and faster until they are in the parking lot of the historic Cassandra Theater.

Which makes it surreal when they finally pass the row of maples and pull into the parking lot. Finally, what they have been looking forward to is in the here and now.

The Cassandra Theater has one of the oldest facades still standing in town, but even it has changed since Owl left. The west wing has been remodeled to accommodate a small café, a whole wall of glass giving it a chic exterior even if it only faces the decrepit parking lot.

As Owl locks the car, they hear knocking coming from the theater. They turn to see Madeleine Grey waving at them through the theater's newly installed Venetian windows. Owl smiles and waves back. Madeleine's eyes follow them as they cross the parking lot to the side door near the alleyway.

The door is unlocked, just as Madeleine said it would be. Idly Owl wonders if teenagers still sneak in through this door to get a peek at the catacombs, or if the security guards under Mr. Lefevre's new command have quashed that rite of passage.

The theater is in a lull; the summer festival has passed through just two weeks prior, and the regular season will not start for another two months.

Caught between one curtain falling and another curtain yet to rise, the theater sits pretty and purposeless on this cloudy day in August. There is no sun, just its albedo reflecting off motes of dust that dance like will-o-wisps, the remnants of candles still haunting after the wick has burned.

The theater café is small with only five round tables, a menu printed on the wall, and tchotchkes for sale on the counter. Even on its day off it smells invitingly of coffee brewing and baked goods, as Madeleine Grey—Maddie, their high school classmate and friend—busies herself behind the counter operating the espresso machine.

Owl slows down as they approach. Only the laws of physics and decorum prevent them from running through the tin tables and aluminum chairs to sweep Maddie off her feet and hold her close. Or, given their height difference, allow themselves to be swept off their feet.

How long has it been since they last saw her? The last clear memory they have of her is of high school graduation, where she wore a garland of white roses around her neck. By then Owl had already stepped on and off the stage and was watching from the wings as parents and family friends clapped for children who weren't their own. For Maddie, however, the entire audience erupted in raucous applause, and Maddie, surprised, bowed deeply with her hand on her heart.

Given the chance, Owl would have watched Maddie forever, but as someone used to watching the people around her, they tore their gaze away in fear that others would notice. As they scanned the audience, one audience member caught their eye, one with a stern, stony expression, hands resting in his lap and eyes vaguely forward. As they stared at him, the man turned to stare back, even though Owl was nearly invisible in the crowd of caps and gowns. Still, they were caught in momentary strangeness, wondering why Maddie's father did not applaud for his own daughter.

Was that the last time they saw Maddie? There has to have been another time in that lazy summer before they went away for college. Or a chance meeting during the holidays. Owl can't seem to remember any other occasions. The woman before them is at once so different from and so similar to the girl they remember. Maddie still has the solid build she had as a teenager, a boyish, almost androgynous figure Owl always envied. Fine lines map the contours of her face. Her hair is still short, but with strands of gray mixed in with oaken brown. Someone who makes no secret of her age is more attractive than one who hides it.

She extends her arms out to Owl as they make their way to the counter, smiling so wide her wrinkles deepen. "Owl!" she exclaims. "It's been too long, I'm so glad to see you."

Owl leans in for a hug. Maddie has put some weight on her arms and her torso, but the overall effect is an air of easy strength. Not a model's body, but one that can belt and

dance with formidable grace. She is fully capable of crushing them against her chest, and they would thank her. But her hug is gentle, and she quickly releases them to attend to the cup of espresso she is making.

She says, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you drink coffee, so I don’t know what you want to have. I assumed espresso since you’re coming from the big city and all—I enjoy it too, I feel like I’m in Paris when I drink it. Or I can drip a pot of coffee if you want some.” She manically bustles around the counter as if she works there—which she probably does occasionally, when the regular barista is out sick.

“I’m actually off coffee for now,” Owl replies sheepishly. “It makes me shaky and anxious.”

“Oh,” Maddie’s smile wavers for a moment. “Then can I get you a steamer? Or some tea?”

“Tea would be lovely. Earl Grey, if you have it.”

“Of course we have it! My Ariel, what do you take us for?” Owl’s heart flutters at the sound of the old nickname, a nod to their shared high school English-class reading of *The Tempest*. That had been their last English class together, taught by Maddie’s own father.

Maddie bends down and opens a cabinet to grab a tin of tea, loose leaf, which she spoons into a steeper. “Want something with it? We still have a bit of milk, or some lemon slices.”

Owl asks for both, though they normally drink their tea black. In the presence of their friend, who they have not seen for almost twenty years, they would gladly drink curdled milk if she served it.

Maddie must have put on a CD, because Owl swears they hear Andrew Lloyd Weber’s swelling strings and Patti Lupone begin to croon in the background. Like the song says, it’s as if they never said goodbye.



## The Grey Family Tree

“So.” Maddie smiles coquettishly. “How should I begin?”

Owl sets the tape recorder down on the table and straightens their notes. “Start from the beginning. What’s your name?”

“Madeleine Garden Grey,” she laughs. “You already know that, Owl.”

“It’s for the recording.”

“Don’t you recognize my voice?”

“Anywhere,” Owl stresses. “But it’s a formality. Tell me about yourself.”

“You’re not here to write about *me*, Owl—”

“I’m here to write about your family, and that includes you. Tell me about yourself and work backwards from there.”

“How about I start at the beginning instead,” Maddie counters.

Owl smiles despite herself. “You’re being intentionally difficult, aren’t you?”

Maddie bats her eyelashes. “Why, my dear Ariel, I don’t know what you mean.” After a couple of more false starts, she clears her throat and begins the story from the beginning, back when the Cassandra was simply a drawing on a drafting table:

“Once upon a time, a corn baron dreamt of a theater in a small Midwest town. He was rich but not *that* rich, so the only land he could buy was the local cemetery—you know this story, Owl, you were the one who found it.”

“Keep going. Where does your great-grandfather come in?”

“Well, no one wants to disturb the dead if they don’t have to, but you can’t build a foundation without digging into the ground. I guess Great-grandpa was the only one

willing to take the job. It was really lucky for him, too. He was an immigrant from Poland, you know. I think Grillkow is actually pronounced ‘Gril-kov.’ Sorted all the bones into the catacombs we both know and love.

“His one other condition, other than getting paid in pennies as an immigrant, was to have his daughter be a part of every production the theater held. She was just a baby then, so they would fill her up with brandy and use her like a prop. Then she had bit roles, you know, whenever a play needed a child in the background. She was never a Shirley Temple, but by the time she was sixteen, she was actually *good*, and acting full time. Changed her last name to Garden to seem more American.”

“What happened to your great-grandfather?”

Maddie shrugs. “At this point Grandma leaves him out of the story. You know how it is.”

“Tell me about your grandfather then.”

“Don’t know him. At one point Grandma was pregnant, I guess, but my mom might as well have sprung from Sarah Garden’s head. She had to drop out of *A Doll’s House* because of the baby. Remember that one? We read it junior year, didn’t we? I read for Nora, and you read for Krogstad. You were a good reader, you know? I felt like I was really acting with you.”

“Some people say I’m just in love with my own voice.” Owl fails to hide their smile.

“No,” Maddie shakes her head. “It’s more than that. When you read as Krogstad you made the words more than words. You let them shape a new reality around you.” She reaches over the table and squeezes Owl’s shoulder. “I’m always acting when I read with you.”

Despite the roaring air conditioning, her touch burns.

Owl has the sudden urge to take Maddie’s hand into their own and kiss it, a knight’s pledge to their lady love. Instead, Owl remains stiff and frozen until Maddie slowly

slides her hand away to flick a few stray strands of hair out of her eyes.

“Your other grandfather also acted at the Cassandra.” Owl’s gaze focuses on the scribbled genealogy of the Greys.

Maddie nods. “I’ve never met him, but he was almost as prolific as Grandma. There are photos everywhere of Daniel Grey.”

“How did he end up in Leroux?”

“He was traveling with a company. The Never Moors, I think they were called.”

“How did your grandma convince him to stay?” The full context of the question is unspoken. How did Sarah Garden convince a Black man to move to Leroux, which even today is majority white? Growing up as an Asian child with white parents was hard enough; Owl couldn’t imagine what it would have been like for a Black man living there in the shadow of the Second World War.

“She offered him the chance to be the Cassandra’s leading man. Indefinitely, no questions asked.”

“And they let her?” Owl does not need to specify who *they* were. They partially mean the theater’s first board of directors, composed entirely of old white men, but more than that, they are gesturing toward the abstract concept of Leroux. The town *is* an old white man in their mind, a jolly gentleman whose Midwestern smile does not reach his eyes. Leroux the man would speak sweetly to their face but call them slurs behind their back.

Maddie shrugs. “She was already pregnant at the time. What’s the best way of getting past a scandal? Make an even bigger one to take its place.”

“The pregnancy didn’t halt her career?”

“No, it didn’t. If anything, it made her a better actress. As if being a mother opened something within her heart. She didn’t take care of my mother herself, of course. As luck

would have it, Daniel Grey had a pregnant wife that he sent for. Nursed both my mother and father on her breasts.”

“Your other grandmother, what was her name?”

“Shoshanna.”

“What was she like?”

“I can’t say.” Maddie is suddenly distant as she stares out to the sky, dark clouds bringing an early darkness to the town. “She left the town when my parents were small.”

“Why?”

“Well, when Daniel died in an stage accident, Grandma was able to convince the judge that Shoshanna was not fit to parent her son.” Maddie says this so casually that it takes Owl a second to comprehend.

“Wait, how?”

“She did under-the-table work as a spirit medium, so Grandma hired a lawyer who used that to prove she wasn’t mentally fit to care for a child by herself.”

Owl lets out a breath. “Sarah Garden doesn’t sound... pleasant.”

“Maybe not,” Maddie says, contemplating the dregs of her espresso cup. “She was terrifying and mystical and sometimes kind. Growing up, I thought of her as a big tree, so large and unreachable, casting a shadow as long and dark as the night. My parents didn’t really want me to talk to her much, but as she aged, they softened up a little. Especially after the cancer.”

“You used to perform with her.”

She nods. “A couple of times, yeah. When I was six, I played Gretl when she played Maria. I remember throwing a tantrum during one of the rehearsals and shouting ‘You’re too old to be my mom!’ at her.”

“That caused you to throw a tantrum? I can’t imagine.”

“Well, that’s what children do when the world seems wrong. And to me, at six, seeing my grandmother pretend to be a young nun seemed ridiculous. Farcical.”

“You thought that at six?”

“Obviously I didn’t know what a farce even was, but yes. Even at six I couldn’t accept that my grandma was playing the woman who would become my mother. It seemed wrong. Of course the audience loved her, gave her standing ovations every night.”

“Did you like it? Performing with her?”

Maddie leans in close enough that Owl can smell the coffee on her breath. “Sometimes I’d forget who I was when I was with her. It’d feel like the performance was happening in the audience, and the stage was the real world.”

“All the world’s a stage,” Owl offers, and Maddie beams.

The interview continues, with Maddie recounting memories of her imperious grandmother. Even though Maddie was only thirteen at the time, Sarah Garden had already left an indelible mark on her life. A few years more, Owl muses, and it would have been called a legacy.

“She wasn’t all strict business, you know. Grandma taught me how to get to the rooftop. She would let me up there so I could play with the Apollo statue.” Maddie looks up with a glint in her eyes. “We can go there now.”



Owl follows her into the lobby, where the two of them take the main staircase to the second level, and then backstage to where the props and scenery are stored.

“It’s always a hassle getting to the roof,” Maddie says as they wade through mountains of plywood. “But that’s half the fun.” She throws aside a few planks to uncover what in theory is a door, but in reality is just a metal slab.

“This theater’s a maze.”

“Oh definitely. All secret doors and hidden tunnels. I can make my way from the prop room to the pit without anyone seeing me.”

“A real Phantom you are,” Owl jokes as they follow Maddie into a space meant for pipes and not people.

These aren't the catacombs, but the mass of wires, pipes, and bare insulation are formidable obstacles nonetheless, especially to Owl's middle-aged knees.

"Here we are," Maddie exclaims with a flourish as the two of them crawl out of a small opening and onto the roof. Owl stumbles their way onto the roof and gasps, entirely from the view and not because they are out of shape.

The boxlike Cassandra Theater is impressive in the front, but without its façade the architecture is humbly perpendicular. Bits of molding peek from the edge of the roof, and near the front of the theater the *pièce de resistance* stands proud and radiant. Upon his pedestal Apollo gazes out past Leroux with something like a smile, one hand raised with a lyre and the other hand at his side with two arrows between his fingers.

The god of music and medicine looks fearsome in bronze, terrifying and mystical all at once. Unlike Owl's impression of him from the myths, however, this Apollo does not appear kind. The statue is a stark reminder of the god's crueller side, that even a healer can harm.

"Isn't it problematic to have an Apollo statue on top of a theater named Cassandra?" they ask idly.

"It was built in the turn of the century. They didn't know better back then. And when the statue needed to be restored, there were plans to add a Cassandra statue too."

Owl asks her what happened to the other statue, but Maddie gestures toward a part of the statue and changes the subject.

"You can see my hidden hand that Mom put in for me."

Owl squints at the cascade of robes falling from Apollo's figure and sees within the folds a small indentation. From far away it blends into the folds of fabric around it, but up close it is unmistakable in its handedness. Five fingers spread out like a compass. Owl surreptitiously glances over at Maddie's hand and wonders how much it has changed. From the distance they can see the same long palm as the

one embedded in the bronze, a long ring finger hidden behind the charismatic index finger of equal length.

“Mom rarely got to work in metal. Mostly wood for the stage sets. So she was really excited to help refurbish the statue. She had a workshop in our old house, and I would try and find the best hiding place possible. When she needed to remake Apollo, she took the original statue apart; that’s when I found out that bronze statues are empty inside. I used to climb into all the molds and models that she had finished making, but this time I begged and begged for her to let me inside the real thing. Eventually she gave in and made this hatch at the bottom of the statue.”

Maddie reaches into her pocket and brings out a small key, which she uses to unlock the hatch at the back of the pedestal. Owl helps her raise the panel, and together they peer into the statue. It is as exciting as looking inside an empty box.

“Mom called it my orgone box,” Maddie whispers, the interior of the statue turning her voice into a legion. “When I was little it felt so magical in there.” Maddie ducks her head into the opening, and Owl follows suit, placing them cheek to cheek, sharing the same stale breath of rusty air. There is enough space for a small child to squeeze up through the opening into the body of the statue itself, if the child is nimble.

Though the statue is only about ten feet tall, to Owl it still seems like a cavern, a small infinity contained within a single space. For a second they feel the darkness approaching them, bringing with it a world that only contained them and Maddie.

Thunder peels overhead, and the statue moans like the toll of an old bell. Rain suddenly pours down, a true summer storm that can only be found in the flat empty space of the Midwest. Laughing like schoolchildren, Owl and Maddie run back to the shelter of the Cassandra Theater.