

When Home,
No Need to Cry

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
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When Home, No Need to Cry

by
Erin K. Wagner





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“Blow Flies” in *Bourbon Penn*

“Fallow” in *Syntax & Salt*

“When Home, No Need to Cry” in *Clarquesworld*

“Planet Like Earth” in *Perihelion*

To my sister, Lara, and our Appalachian childhood

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Blow Flies

The flies were dying. They fell from the ceiling and the light fixtures in loose, drunken flight. They were large flies, bloated from the summer, but they made no noise as they circled toward the floor. Hallie watched them, the afternoon sun bouncing off their transparent wings. She sat in the kitchen, a cup of coffee at hand, the formica table warm in the light. She thought of going to the pantry and digging out the vacuum cleaner, but the carpet seemed to swallow up the flies, and she could not muster the energy. The coffee was cold. She had brewed it hours ago, to be ready for Dwight when he stumbled out of bed, johns hiked up to the knee. He worked early hours, checking the trap-lines, occasionally running a plow or truck for the county. He expected his coffee to be scalding hot, to be ready the moment he asked for it. It was cold by the time Hallie had the appetite for it.

*Hallelujah, her momma had said when Hallie was born.
Hallelujah, and passed out. Her daddy had filled in the
birth certificate with the only name that came to him.*

The flies were drawn to their property by the furs and skins tacked up on the shed and on the side of the house that faced away from the road. Dwight had promised her, the first time he had picked her up and driven her by

his house, that the skins didn't stink for long. She remembered still the sound of the truck's engine idling, Dwight's impatient hand on the gearshift, as she took in the sight of his house. The house was crowded in by scraggy shrubs and rough hillocks of churned-up dirt. It was nestled down from the road, at the lowest point of the holler. There was trash scattered across the overgrown lawn, though Dwight pointed out to her the system of it—dented car doors and rusted hubcaps together, burlap bags of mulch and hay together, broken mower and weed-eater leaning against each other. A car rested on cinder-blocks, and she could see right through it; there were no windows or seats in it.

It was a steal, Dwight told her. He leaned close, and she could smell rub on his breath. I bought it for next to nothing.

The benefit to Hallie had been the distance from her parents. Seventy miles and an hour to drive on a good clear day. When the mist and fog were low on the hills, it took longer. Dwight had been, was, good to her. He had taken her out to eat, and the mom and pops of the mom-and-pop restaurants had nodded their heads over the two of them, snuggled into one side of the booth. It had felt like a benediction of sorts to Hallie. Fried liver and gravy, warm, dense biscuits, and the salad bar.

Any refills, folks? They're free, said Johanna, the waitress with the bruise under her left ear. You'll need all you can get with this one, she added and winked conspiratorially at Hallie.

Dwight had been the first boy Hallie had slept with. She'd played around with others, but she'd never felt so serious with anyone else. Because he'd promised her things—a house of her own, time alone for her hobbies, control over the checkbook and the credit card (something of disproportionate importance to her after a childhood of watching her father swear over the bills at the end of the month). Dwight hadn't asked much in return. He'd asked to see her naked, he'd asked her to keep quiet in the mornings when he was just waking up, and he'd asked her to make a real dinner once in a while. He had grown up on TV meals and reruns of '70s shows at supper-time. And he'd asked for one more thing, on their wedding night, when his friends had dropped them off, drunk and sitting on the porch.

We'll never visit my parents. And don't ask me nothing about them. There was something strange about his voice, a catch at the back of the throat.

Hallie had never been interested in Dwight's family. She'd never been tempted to ask after them, and she wasn't even sure of their address. They hadn't come to the wedding. They hadn't called in the five months that Hallie had lived here. But in the same morning that the flies started dying, there was a card in the mail. A generic card, one that charity organizations mailed out in the hope of donations, with a watercolor of a bird on the front. A yellowed return address sticker indicated a house only two roads over, a mile as the crow flies. The

handwriting inside was shaky and unsure. Hallie read what was written there, and slipped the card back into the envelope. She cut her finger on the sharp edge of the flap.

Please come, the card read. There isn't much time.

Hallie washed her finger, wrapped a band-aid around it, and sat back down to the kitchen table. She pushed the cup of coffee to the side, and she brushed a fly off the envelope of the card. Its legs flicked feebly. It righted itself, hobbled to the edge of the table, and fell off. There was no name on the address label, no signature in the card. Hallie had no way of knowing for sure that it came from Dwight's parents. But she was sure nonetheless. There was a weight to the feeble scrawl, a responsibility in the hills and valleys of those letters.

Her daddy had told her the story many times, about how carefully he had traced her name out on the certificate. I nearly forget the j, he said. Nearly forgot it. Never thought much of letters that kept so silent.

Dwight had a route he followed so as not to miss any of the traps, so she knew exactly when to expect him back, as the autumn sun was sinking low. He took her with him once, in the first weeks after they were married. He'd given her waders to wear, already splattered with mud. They were a size too big for Hallie and they squeaked when she walked, but they kept her feet dry. There were puddles that never seemed to dry up in

patches of sunken ground under broken trees. The traps were camouflaged, hard to see until Dwight pointed them out. He worked with his bare hands, twisting the wires, unhinging the doors, resetting the bait. One of the traps had snapped a rabbit's back, and there was red around the animal's nose and mouth as if it had tried to chew itself free, death not instantaneous. She had told Dwight then that it seemed cruel to her, but he hadn't answered, prying the animal loose, putting it in the bag he strapped over his shoulder. And, if she were fair to him, he hadn't made her skin the animal, or chop it up. He'd wrapped it in butcher paper and tied it up himself, stuck the package in the chest freezer on the porch. The hide he'd tacked up to the shed wall.

My dad taught me how, Dwight said to her the second time they had hung out, just the two of them, the only time he'd mentioned his parents. Said you'd never starve for winter, if you laid the lines.

Hallie had only gone to the grocery store three or four times since she had moved. Dwight didn't eat much, and he was fond of making his own jerky. She made bread herself, since there was little enough to do, and a neighbor over the hill always sent her spare eggs over to Hallie. But there were things—bottles of ketchup, canned peaches with syrup, hamburger, orange juice—that she went to the store for. The carts were old, the plastic worn off the handles, the front wheels wobbly. The fluorescent lights were unsteady and flickering. Sometimes she bought small treats for herself, a candy

bar, a sleeve of Oreos, or a carton of chocolate milk. Dwight never seemed to notice, and he never added anything to her list. He was a lean man, with strong forearms and callused fingers.

Might as well treat yourself, said the grocery clerk with the needle-tracks on her arms. Never know when you'll next have a chance.

Hallie had first noticed him on the day of her high-school graduation. Her class was made up of sixty students, give or take a few who had flunked out or mysteriously returned weeks before the end of spring. She stood up when the principal called her name, struggling to balance in the heels her momma had insisted she wear. The robe, cheap polyester, brushed her calves, and she looked out over the crowd, reaching for the diploma at the same time. And she saw him, standing at the back of the crowd of parents. He looked a year or two older than her, and already had the hunch in his shoulders that said he had been working full time for a while. He smiled when he caught her eye, and it was a beautiful smile. It almost made her uncomfortable to look at it.

I've heard about you. You're Wylor's girl, he said when he came up to her after. I've been wanting to meet you.

Hallie hadn't asked how Dwight had heard of her. The county was a small one. It was strange not to have heard of someone at all. So she had invented for herself a network of rumors, small gossip, casual mentions to

link herself with him. Hadn't her daddy mentioned some kid by the name of Dwight—maybe he had worked on cars at the scrapyard? Or maybe it was his parents that she had heard of? She took a sip of the coffee, and the taste of the grounds clung to the back of her throat, cold and slimy. She stared at the card, mulled over what had been written inside. She got up and went to the kitchen counter. She picked up the phone, the landline, and put her ear to the receiver. It was working, the dial tone shrill and insistent. Yet Dwight's parents had put this card in the mail, gripping the pen with arthritic fingers perhaps—she had read into those two short lines a whole history for them, for the mother or father who had written those words.

Please come. There isn't much time.

Hallie shoved her arms into her jacket, and she zipped it up tight to her chin. There were kleenexes balled up in the pockets. Her boots were by the front door, clodded with mud from the yard. It had been raining for the past two days, which made the current sunshine welcome. When she left the house, she locked the door behind her and slipped the key under a rock by the front mat. She contemplated leaving a note pinned in the frame of the screen door for Dwight, but thought better of it. She hoped to be back soon anyways, just as he was coming into the yard, bag full from the lines. Maybe she would pry open a can of stew and set it to warm for him then. Maybe she would come to the front door and wrap her arms around him, the secret of her visit sitting

heavy in the back of her mind. Perhaps, with her arms tight over his jacket, the smell of tobacco in his hair, she might not feel that slight unease.

At first I didn't like it. Thought to beat your father upside the head. But Hallelujah you are, child, Hallelujah you are. Her mama speaks real soft when it's late at night.

She wasn't entirely sure of the way. At first, she thought to cut through the backyard and up the hill there to the road on the other side. Then it was just one road further. The graveled county route intersected with a dirt road. On that dirt road, there were only a few houses and then a mess of dark, vine-tangled trees clambering up the foothills beyond. She thought that dirt road was the one on the address label. With the path she took, across private property and bisecting roads, it was two miles at most. There was sweat on her neck where the collar of the jacket rubbed her skin. She remembered as she walked, faint and dim, her father walking with men from the utility company, dowsing rod in his hand, tracking a meandering course across the yard. There was a part of her that felt transported back to her fascinated five-year-old self, her feet making turns her brain couldn't follow.

It's not far off the beaten path, Dwight said, watching her stare at the house. You've got a ten-minute drive to town.

Her daddy used a forked branch for a dowsing rod. He'd find them himself, walking the very edges of the yard where the debris blew down from the trees in a

storm. He always said that you had to take from where you hope to find, so when there was a need, he would rummage, bare-handed, among the leaves and find the best branch—one that would balance just right on his palm and fingers. Without fail, the rod led to water, be it cisterns, underground creeks, or septic pump. It wobbled precariously in his grip, always teetering, never falling, pulling suddenly and sharply toward what it sought. Hallie had been a little frightened of her daddy's intensity in those wandering moments, his brows furrowed down low. What if he turned the dowsing rod to other things, to searching out secrets, to finding the cigarettes Hallie had stashed under the bed?

You can't trust 'em, her great-aunt said, as if she weren't even in the room. Kids'll steal the blanket off your bed, the coat off your back. There was an angry scratch on her cheek.

The sign only indicated the name of the graveled county road. There was no name or sign for the intersecting dirt road. Hallie paused at the intersection. From here, she could have heard a car coming from a mile off, but it was quiet. It was a wet quiet, the leaves on the road and under the trees still soggy from yesterday's rain. The light was low in the sky, leached away by the darkness of the hills. She glanced back the way she had come. Dwight would be home soon, if he weren't already. She stuffed her hands further into her pockets and turned back to the dirt road. She could see the first house, a double-wide with red-rust siding. It couldn't be much beyond that. She shuffled quickly across the intersection,

her footsteps deadened by the dirt of the road on the other side.

I need the quiet now, Dwight said when she'd woken him up by running water in the bathroom. Otherwise, I'm no good for the rest of the day.

There was a dog chained up in the yard of the double-wide. He lay still, eyes shifting to follow her, in the shelter of the porch. He looked like a mutt of some sort, with drooping ears. It made her uncomfortable to have a witness, but no one came out of the trailer or asked her who she was, a woman walking alone on a road that wasn't hers. People didn't take walks in these parts, and Hallie found that she couldn't formulate a good excuse. It seemed to her that it ought to be natural to say that she was visiting her folks, her in-laws, but the hypothetical answer stuck in her throat. She dipped her head, tucking her chin into her jacket, and let the words in the card serve as her dowsing-rod. Each step felt inevitable, as if she had woken up this morning and planned for this visit. A ways up the road, there was another clearing and another yard. Thick vines had choked out the link fence, but the gate was wedged open by a cinder block. A mailbox leaned out toward the road, stickered numbers reflective in the early dark.

Please come. There isn't much time.



The house was small, and the front door seemed to lead onto a closed-in porch. The windows were almost opaque, clouded by years of dust and bugs. She knocked

on the door, and it rattled in the frame. The latch of the handle clicked, apparently unlocked, jarred loose by her knocking. She called out, asking if anyone was home, but she heard nothing in reply. She framed her eyes with her hands and bent as close as she could to the window left of the door, trying to catch a glimpse of something inside. She shouted again, her voice muffled by her proximity to the glass. But she saw a shadow, something moving in the house, in the rooms beyond the porch. She opened the door and stepped in, one foot inside, one foot still grounded in the yard. There were cobwebs in the doorframe. She lifted her hand from the door, frantically brushing the webs away. The door slammed shut on her ankle. She yelped and pulled her foot inside, and the latch of the door clicked shut behind her.

You screamed and cried when you was born. It seemed like you screamed for days. I doubted, her daddy said, I doubted whether I named you right.

Someone was at the screen of the inside door, the one that led from the porch to the rooms beyond. Hallie flushed, embarrassed by her reaction to the cobwebs. She straightened, tugging her jacket straight, and smoothed her bangs back from her forehead. Her skin was clammy. She waved, trying to find the right words. It was a woman. She stared at Hallie. She was short, and her hair was very dark, almost black, bunched into a knot at the back of her head. Her face looked older, wrinkled around the mouth like a smoker's. Her eyes were watery, and she blinked.

“Who’re you?” Her voice was creaky, as if not used to talking.

“Hallie.”

The woman looked her up and down. Hallie opened her mouth to explain, realizing that the name might not be enough. The woman cut her off.

“Doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“We got your card.” Hallie stepped forward. The woman stiffened and stepped backwards. Then her mouth twitched, and she grimaced. Hallie felt an accompanying twinge of anxiety. “I’m Dwight’s wife.”

And the woman suddenly swung the door open wide.

She asked Dwight why the morning after the wedding. Her head pounded from a hangover. She couldn’t remember the answer, just the way his face clouded over.

The house was dim, and it smelled of disuse and age. The wallpaper was yellowed, a garish green and yellow pattern. The carpet was matted under foot. The woman moved, unspeaking, into a kitchen. She gestured for Hallie to sit at the table. The table was covered in a plastic tablecloth, stained from previous meals.

It was a small kitchen, with a gas stove and cabinets made from pressed wood. The woman turned on one of the burners and filled a kettle with water. She came back to the table, then, the kettle making uneasy noises as the water heated up. She placed a handful of sweetener packets on the table, and they looked out of place, clean, pink, promises of sweetness.

“Dwight said you wouldn’t come.” And she smiled. Her teeth were pitted, brown.

“I don’t know that he gave me much choice in the matter.” Hallie tried to smile back.

The woman stared at her, and she stared long enough that Hallie shifted in her seat and cleared her throat. The kettle whistled. The woman blinked, but she did not get up to remove the kettle from the heat. She pulled a packet of cigarettes from her pocket and tapped one loose onto the table. She rolled it between her fingers for a moment.

“Where is Dwight?”

Hallie was distracted by the kettle. “Checking the traps.”

“Never starve for winter if you lay the lines,” the woman muttered, and she looked up at Hallie, almost sideways.

Hallie felt a sudden sharp unease, a tickling, almost painful, on the back of her neck. She scooted back from the table and stood up. She moved to the stove and took the kettle off the burner. For a moment, the handle was searing-hot in her hand, and she slammed the kettle down on the counter. She glanced up and could see the entrance to another room across a narrow hall. She could see the arm of a chair, and perhaps the hand of someone on the arm.

“It’s not your house,” the woman said, and she was still staring at Hallie.

*He’s been meaning to fix the steps, the neighbor said,
explaining her limp, the fall down her uneven front steps.*

*She handed over the recycled carton, five or six eggs inside.
But he'll get to it in his own sweet time.*

“Is your husband in here?” Hallie ignored the alarm that washed over the woman’s face. She was eager to leave the kitchen.

She noticed the flies first, crawling on the ceiling. Their buzzing was audible, and their bodies were black against the white of the light fixture. There were quiet thumps where they threw themselves against the bulb. Second, she noticed the body in the armchair, posed as if taking a nap, footrest extended. She stopped abruptly. Her heart and breathing stopped with her.

“It’s not your house,” the woman repeated angrily, coming into the room behind Hallie.

Hallie gasped, as if she had just come up from underwater. Her ears buzzed, louder than the flies. Then she noticed details. The desiccation of the skin. The yawning mouth sloughing into the chin. The nails that curled longer than the fingers.

“And what did you hope to find? To take?” the woman hissed behind her. “The card was never meant for you.”

“I’ll call the sheriff,” Hallie said, unmoving.

For better or worse, Dwight vowed at the ceremony. They’d agreed together that the traditional words were best. To love and obey, she said.

“It was natural causes,” the woman said. “And he ain’t really dead.”

Hallie turned and looked at her. She tried to work up her nerve to shove past the woman and run to the front door.

“It’s time to lay him down, though,” the woman continued and she hardly seemed to notice now Hallie’s tenseness, her eyes searching for an opening. “Sometimes he won’t even let me smoke.” And the cigarette she still held in her hand she folded in two. The tobacco broke free, drifted in brown flakes to the carpet.

The woman walked up close to Hallie, and she dug her fingers into her arm. “But he won’t let go.” She said it quietly, almost a whisper, as if she were afraid of someone overhearing. She brought her lips very close to Hallie’s right ear. Tears were welling at the back of Hallie’s eyes. The voice shifted, the breath on her cheek grew very cold. “I won’t let her go.”

Please come. There isn’t much time.

The woman held tight onto Hallie’s arm, and she shuddered after she had spoken, as if she were fighting something down inside of her. She looked sick, her skin almost pallid, almost death-like. Hallie felt like two different people watching her. One of her was scared, frightened past any point of making sense. That one wanted to run as fast as she could, to find a phone, to throw up in her own toilet in her own bathroom. That one wanted to wait in the kitchen, holding tight to the cup of coffee, listening for Dwight’s truck. That one wanted to ask Dwight to hold her.

The other one, the Hallie that stayed in the room, her legs unsteady, she had no way of understanding yet.

Dwight was on the porch. He sat forward on his chair, so that he had an angle on the rabbit he was skinning. He slid the knife with practiced ease between hide and muscle. He looked up when he heard her coming. Hallie slowed. She was cold, and her jacket did nothing to help. His face shifted through one or two different responses before he spoke. He asked her where she'd been. She didn't answer. She stepped up on the porch. She shoved her fists in her pockets, balled them up tight.

Hallelujah, you've saved us all, her friends teased her in middle-school.

He had the card on the ground beside him, the envelope ripped up, and the bird staring up at her.

You'll be free with me, Hallie, Dwight said when he proposed. He proposed in the truck as he was dropping her off home. She glanced up at the house and saw the lights on in the kitchen. Her daddy would be waiting up for her.

“We buried your father,” she told Dwight. He looked at her, the rabbit in one hand, the knife in the other.

The dirt was wet and hard to turn up.

She watched him close, wary. She clenched her fists tighter. “I figure I’ll go make dinner now.”

She walked by him, and he sat still. His jaw was clenched. The door swung to behind her, and he still said nothing. She took off her jacket, hung it over the kitchen chair. She took the cup of coffee off the table, poured it down the drain of the sink. Her legs were still unsteady.

She noticed the flies were gone.