

From Voyages Unreturning

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 88

From Voyages Unreturning

by
Deborah L. Davitt





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

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ISBN: 978-1-61976-242-8

Prior publication acknowledgment:
“Microcosms,” *Star*Line* 45.2 Spring 2022 April 1, 2022.

Cover illustration: Betelgeuse <https://hubblesite.org/contents/media/images/2020/44/4724-Image>
NASA, ESA, and E. Wheatley (STScI)
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Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

*For my husband, Jason,
who always gives me the freedom to fly.*

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Finding Yourself

They say that in order to find yourself
you have to start looking;
you thought that meant to voyage within
like the ancient Greeks:
know thyself

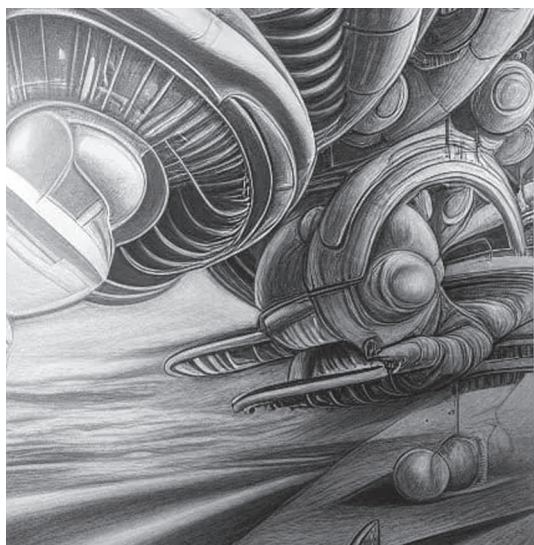
but it didn't work;

introspection
only takes you where you
have already been;
the internal black hole
where all your past experiences
achieve the critical mass
of self-hood
but from which
light so rarely escapes.

Light travels, both wave and particle
through every possible path
between its source
and the perceiving eye
photons are quantum ghosts
or maybe gods
everywhere at once
until they aren't;

so seeing yourself in a mirror
only shows the collapse
of reality.

You needed another point of view
so you set off on a journey
that might show you
who you really are.



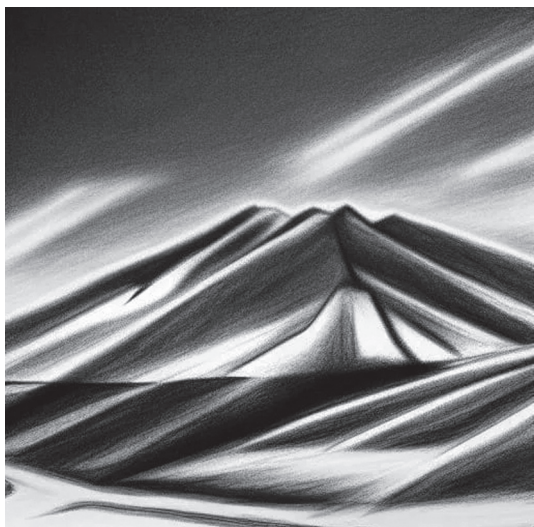
The Joy of the Journey

For some, the joy of a journey
is about keeping score. Not low-key;
they abhor, adore—an alloy!—
what they foreswore...and then play coy.

Boredom annoys, ennui's a disease;
they soar out the door for the seas.
Pour a drink or join a convoy;
implore god for wonder, shout ahoy!

More that's strange to enjoy, carefree;
from civil war to shop debris,
lore unhinged or Helen of Troy;
eat a polypore, snap a wolf boy.

Just don't snore; employ no latchkey.
Cry for awe—ploy its apogee.



In Cryosleep

Even traveling at superluminal speeds
staying young while everyone you ever knew
(all those you left behind)
grows old and turns to dust
space travel still takes time.

Of course, every journey, even life itself
proceeds in space as well as time,
but for you, you've decided,
that it's better to spend the long durations
between tourist hotspots
in suspended animation—
even the most questing mind
wearies of crosswords and sudoku,
runs out of interesting articles to read.

But no matter how slowed your metabolism
in cryosleep, you still dream—
(the doctors say it's not possible,
that the ultradian sleep cycle
never oscillates into the shimmering patterns
of REM)

and yet you do,
seeing again all the places you have been,
and the places you will never stand.

The diamond mountains of 55 Cancri E,
edged in wonder, knife-sharp
against its leaden sky
as the blaze of its too-close star
edges the horizon;
you stand at the terminus between sunrise
and sunset on this never-turning world,
a screaming wind from the planet's dark side
blasting you towards its star-scorched day.

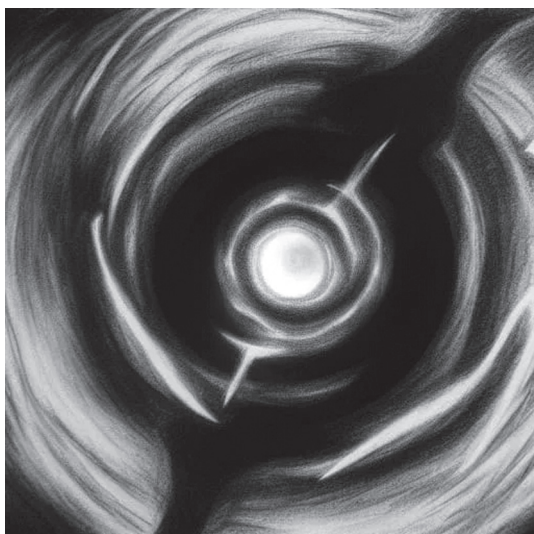
Though in these dreams
you're on the surface
crushed by its gravity without an exoskeleton,
as unable to move as jelly on a plate,
you're also somehow untouched
by heat that should melt iron into slag.

You cannot flee the horror,
as your heart beats wild in terror,
or escape the wonder
of the star's searing rays
as they blind you through
those prismatic peaks
rainbows piercing you,
the ant under their condensing glare;

until the dream shifts,
showing you that you're not alone—
that those you've left behind
are there to share both dread and awe.

You meet their eyes
—*father, mother, sister, brother, son*
all dead and gone to dust—
and awake, tears burning like acid
in the arid ducts
left desert-dry by cryosleep.

They were here; they were *there*,
as close as dreams
and as distant
as all eternity.



Black Hole World

This planet orbits on the edge of time:
a million-year circuit of the abyss
and blueshifted light that sears in UV—
and in its heavens, dark infinity.

A million-year circuit of the abyss
where gravity slows time's relative dance.
And in these heavens, dark infinity
means that your dreams take an eternity.

Where gravity slows time's relative dance,
it's easier to slow life's frantic pace;
when your dreams take almost eternity,
you face the future with sanguinity.

It's easier to slow life's frantic pace
on this world that orbits the edge of time;
you face the future with sanguinity
despite blueshifted light that sears in UV.



No Going Back

With time-dilation being what it is
you're not sure how many years
you spent on that black hole world
staring up into a sky
in which streams of fiery gas
plunged into nothingness—

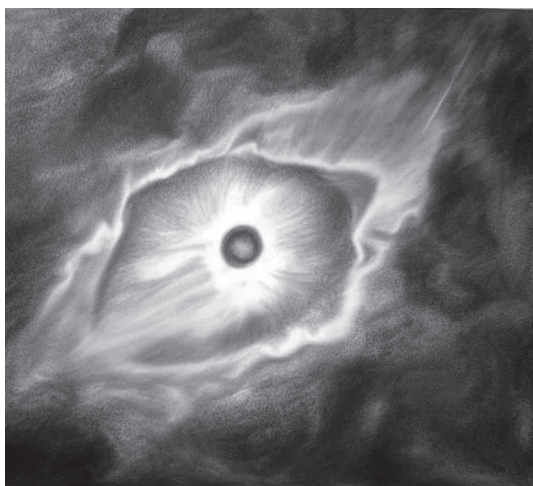
a year there might have been
a century outside of the black hole's grasp;
and when you emerge
from the cocoon of time
bent and spindled
by gravity,

the galaxy's changed,
and now, more than ever,
you've traveled in time
as well as space.

You hitch a ride on a new ship,
(or maybe one that's ancient)
but the vessel's a living thing,
its interior full of silken organic membranes—
you worry, now and then,
that it might well digest you
in payment for services rendered;

there's a quacksalver aboard
just temporarily between stars,
who claims that a good course
of nanite treatment will cure
what ails you, will fix
all your serotonin imbalances,
with maybe
a nice colonic to the brainstem.

You can't tell this so-called doctor,
your would-be confessor,
that what ails you isn't a physical malaise,
but the malignant effects
of time wearing on the soul,
and the knowledge
that there's no going back
to who you were before.



The Eye of God

Your living ship, with its organic circuits
and self-aware mind,
sings as it achieves
superluminal speeds.

Time for you
should now be bending backwards
relative to those you left behind,
the redshift of the entropic universe
briefly turning violet.

You emerge from the silken cocoon
that embraces you warmly
during such leaps,
and out the front ports,

you see the Eye of God,
the Helix Nebula, in true-color,
the kind perceived by the human eye,
not cameras or telescopes.

The outer edge is rimmed red
as if with tears or care;
your own itch in sympathy;

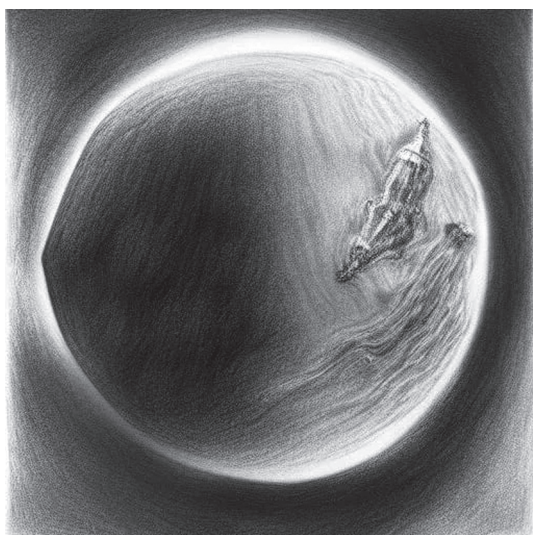
the center's limpid blue,
like a lake high in the mountains
that you once visited as a child,
as blue as the skies of Earth,
so long departed—

and yet it burns,
burns with the heat
of a dying star.

You rest your hand against the bulkhead
and ask the ship,
“Why are you showing me this?”

The great beast doesn't answer.
But it dives right in,
dipping and playing through the maelstrom,
gulping deep draughts
of hydrogen and oxygen,
and you sink with it into wonder,
watching comets as they flee their
ancient home,
streaks of white against the night.

And finally you ask,
your voice soft,
“Please, take me to where
something is being born.”



Wolf 1061c

The ship has never yet told you
its name (if it has one)
and you don't speak its strange language
so much like whale-song
double and triple harmonics
strange dissonances;
but it understands you,
or at least, you think it does.

It takes you to a young dwarf red star,
a dull-glowing ember,
and from there,
to one of the planets locked in its embrace;
a strange place,
one side tidally bound to its star,
the other, cast into perpetual night.

The sun-blasted deserts of day-side
boast mats of lichen on the undersides
of rocks;
simooms stirred by stellar fingers
rage across the whole hemisphere,
bringing dust and warmth and life
onto the night-side;

here, in darkness, great lakes shimmer under
three distant moons;
algal mats bloom with subtle phosphorescence;
here, the fungal kingdom
raises tall, bare stumps,
and mats of stringy rhizoids conduct water
from lakes and streams deeper inland;

here, the few animals are huge-eyed amphibians
adapted to the pale moonlight;
a few more mobile fungi bridge the gap
between animal and plant;
slime-mold analogues creep over the world,
taking the place of ants
in this bizarre ecology;

and all of them wait
for the storms to roll in,
bringing the taste of dust,
the feel of warmth,
throughout their endless night.

They exist; they evolve,
but if they ascend,
you cannot see it.

“This is a wonder,” you tell the ship,
“but it isn’t what I meant,
not at all.”