

Tales from Mnemosyne

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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Tales from Mnemosyne

by
Dennis Danvers





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To my students and teachers

That is the miracle of Greek mythology—a
humanized world, men freed from the
paralyzing fear of an omnipotent Unknown.

—Edith Hamilton, *Mythology*

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The House of Mnemosyne and the Muses

My name's Mnemosyne, and I don't recollect seeing you gents and ladies here before, so I'll tell y'all the story of how me and the girls got started. Leastways the way *I* tell it. Other folks may tell it different, and I wouldn't deny them the pleasure—though my *name's* Memory—as in goddess of—so I ask you, who you gonna believe?

As you can see, if you look around this tiny-ass mountain town, there ain't a whole lot for a single girl to do but whoring. It's a fact—there's way more men up here than ladies. All the respectable work's what they call *men's* work—or being wives.

I say no thank you to that. I got enough to keep up with in my own head without attending to some spouse's nonsense. I can't forget my *own* nonsense, and from what I've seen, no offense, fellows in these parts have that extra *god-sized* nonsense. Because gods, as you know, will do any crazy fucking thing just because they can.

When I was still new here, this sweet-looking fellow come in, looking like he just stepped down off a tractor. All tanned, with golden hair, nice muscles, and a shy smile. He took off his cap as we did business and cradled it in his hands like it was a mourning dove. Couldn't

take my eyes off those hands, so powerful, so gentle. I thought, this boy's too much.

Too weird is what he was, because he said, "I want nine consecutive nights at midnight, one right after another."

"I know what consecutive means. I graduated high school and remember every damn bit of it," I said to put him in his place, then told him, "Sure. We can do that. You wanna pay for all nine in advance?" figuring he'd say no way, and who could blame him since he hadn't yet partaken of the pleasure.

But he doesn't hesitate a lick and hands me a bag of *gold* and says, "I'll see *you* at midnight!" and he's gone in a heartbeat.

We don't generally see bags of much in these parts except weed and coal. If there was gold in any of that coal they scraped off the mountaintops and hauled away to burn up the planet, I never heard tell of it. Don't even mention burning no coal around my mama Gaia, or she'll tear you a new asshole.

But back to my story, what puzzled me even more than a bag of gold was how some farmer boy come to pay in *advance*. Them boys were *born* in debt.

It was a mystery.

I went into the bar to have my supper, and there's Mercury hanging out. He's a regular. *Loves* to gossip. The girls all love him. He knows everything about everybody and loves to tell it.

He leaned on the bar where I'm eating and said, "You know who that was, don't you?"

"Farmer Boy?"

Mercury laughed. He loves it when we nickname the johns and tell him their stories. The god's got a mind like

a file drawer and like as not there's a file in there on you. He also loves it when he knows something you don't know, so he can tell it and tell it well, far and wide. Nowadays, everybody's Mercury, blabbing shit from around the world into the tiniest little holler.

"That's none other than Jove," he said. "I know that peckerwood anywhere, and he's up to no good. You can count on it."

"Get out!" I said. Even though Mercury can't keep a secret to save his life, the god don't lie. I had to believe him. Oh my, Mnemosyne, I said to myself, what have I done?

Then he proceeds to tell me the whole sick plan, how after Jove bangs me nine consecutive midnights out pop nine baby *Muses*—who inspire folks to tell stories and dance and make music and whatnot. Then he plans to steal them babies away and tell them what to do under his strict control. He'd be like another Disney, and the world's not half big enough for another one of those.

"What can I do?" I asked.

"You'll have to get control of them babies yourself," Mercury said.

Now, I shoulda been scared, I suppose. This was Jove we're talking about. You don't cross him, or he'll just fry your ass and call it Justice, make no mistake. He'd picked me out for this job—nine nights, nine babies. I suppose I shoulda been flattered, but that didn't mean I couldn't be replaced if I gave him any trouble.

Muses, Mercury explained—they would know what to do with all the memories building up in my head—like any day they was going to bust loose, like a dam giving

way and swamping the whole valley with pointless recollections, drowning in aimless sorrows.

These Muse girls would turn them into poems and songs and dances and movies and podcasts and a bunch of other stuff that hadn't even been thought of yet, art being timeless, don't you know—just so long as those little babies could count on *me*, their mother, instead of that thunderheaded bully, Jove, who had one skill only, far as anybody knew—blowing shit up for no good reason. You may have seen one or two of his movies at the Cineplex.

Now, I don't pretend to know what all bad blood there is between Mercury and Jove. Some folks say Jove's his daddy, which would explain a lot. Jove's got no end of pissed off offspring, but truth is Jove didn't have a whole lot of friends or a whole lot of sense either, if you can believe the stories, so I had to allow them babies would be better off with me, though nine daughters sounded like a whole lot of grief I'd never forget.

But Mercury, he laid it on thick: "They'll be good girls, every one. You'll see. They'll be so busy inspiring folks to make stuff out of your long memory, they won't have time to bring you heartache, only *masterpieces* the world will owe to *you!* I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't get a temple or two and a few cults out of the deal!"

Well, as you can see, he was pretty persuasive, though I knew not to take everything he said at face value. For every masterpiece there's a bunch of pieces of something else, but if it makes folks happy, what's the worry? As for the temples and whatnot, this place is temple enough for me, and as for cults, you can have 'em, just don't come around here preaching or handing out tracts.

So that's how I spent the afternoon and evening, waiting, anticipating—all of that *Muse* hoodly-doodly already chasing around my brain—even before I'd laid down to work and taken Jove into my bed—the baddest-ass god on the mountain.

The nine nights were pretty much the same. I remember every detail, not that there were many. You know how long a lightning bolt lasts? Like that. With a *whole* lot of noise to go with it, except from me, not that he noticed.

The last night as he was climbing into his overalls a couple minutes past midnight, I took a chance and told him, “I know who you are and what you're up to.”

He eyed me for a moment like even though he'd fucked me nine nights running, he'd just now noticed I was there.

“Who gave me away?” he asked.

“You were such a lousy fuck I figured only a god would be so awful and not care at all. Man would have his pride. Gods could give a shit, am I right?”

He ignored my question because clearly I was right. “Mercury told you,” he said.

“Pretty much. But you ain't taking away my babies.”

“We'll just see about that!” he bellowed and hit the door. “See you in nine months!” he hollered back, laughing up a storm that damn near drowned half the towns down in the valley.



Now, nine months pass, and I'm about as big as two mares and an old sow, when finally, out they come one right after the other: Calliope, Clio, Euterpe, Erato, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Thalia, Urania, and Polyhymnia—

I worked *hard* on them names!—my nine little babies, who lucky for me, grew up real quick before they sucked their poor mama dry.

And Mercury was right. They were good girls, every last one. They got along with each other, entertained themselves, each other, and even their mama. I didn't know true joy 'til they come into my life.

Calliope, Melpomene, and Thalia told wonderful stories—adventure, heartbreak, laughter. Somehow it was better dealing with one damn thing after another once those three had their way with it. What had all been a meaningless mess before, somehow made sense, had a certain beauty to it.

Euterpe and Terpsichore sang and danced every day like the world was new, and damn if it wasn't. They got your heart beating and your foot tapping. Erato and Polyhymnia were lost in a cloud of perpetual love for some god or mortal, never saw that it mattered much one way or the other which one, love being love regardless. But those two made you love the whole world and all the lovers in it.

Clio and Urania were my little scholars, mapping the earth and sky, keeping track of things, writing them down or having some human do it. Humans *love* to write things down.

So we was all about as happy as we could be, but you'll notice who hadn't showed his sorry face.

That's right. Jove.

Like he had nine kids to pick up at daycare and picked up a pint on the way instead and plum forgot them babies altogether. Cause that's what gods do. They forget about folks. Goddesses too, to be fair.

Not me.

I'm Mnemosyne.

I remember *everything*.

I'll remember *you*.

So what to do about that big knucklehead, Jove? There was no telling when he might sober up and show, ruining everybody's good time, because everything's always got to be about *him*.

The prospect gave me and the girls no end of worry, and all the arts turned pretty gloomy there for a while, when finally the girls come up with the idea of inviting their daddy up to the house for a little revue, like a show in his honor, you might say, a sample of his girls' talents on display.

All the gods and the wealthier humans they palled around with were invited to witness what Jove's little Muses could do. Everybody who was anybody was there, though I'll allow there weren't so many folks as now, though like now, there were a few at the top who ran everything just the way they liked it.

I confess that, like a lot of the girls' cockamamie ideas, I didn't take to it at first, but when I saw them rehearsing, they had me with their opener: Terpsichore and Euterpe and Erato performing "Dancing on the Grave of a Son of a Bitch"—which if it wasn't about Jove, it was about his twin brother.

When the big galoot came to the dinner and took in the show, he didn't get it at first. Any attention is good attention to a big baby like him, but by the time Thalia got around to demonstrating the fine art of standup and had the whole place rolling in the aisles at jokes aimed at his sorry ass, Jove turned the color of the sky

when it's out to kill you, and I was afraid we'd all be nothing but cinders.

But even Jove didn't *really* want to live way up on Olympus all by his lonesome, and besides, these nine babies were *his*, after all, so he didn't throw the lightning bolts sizzling in his hand.

Not yet.

He thundered, "I can't be having you peckerwoods saying such things about me! Laughing at me! It ain't respectful!"

And the laughter died in a silence so deep I just knew we was all done for, but by then I felt sorry for the big fool and offered him a deal, a way to save face, you might say.

I said, "You leave my babies alone and let them inspire *humans* to do whatever the fuck they want, and me and the girls will leave the gods alone, so they'll just have to inspire themselves, at *your* pleasure, of course. How's that sound?"

Well, he went for it, which is why to this day god art ain't worth a good god damn. It's humans have the knack, for good or ill.

So come on in and enjoy. Stay an hour, stay your whole life. Me and the girls will show you a good time you'll never forget, and perhaps entertain you while you wait. What's the use of a big, long memory if you ain't got no stories to tell?

Some folks think the gods are all Greek or Roman or Norse or whatnot, but gods being gods, they might just show up anywhere—down any creek or up any hollow or mountaintop. I like to mix and match. Gods have a special fondness for mountains, and Lord knows we got a mess of them around here.

And gods being immortal, their stories ain't always stuck in the past like your great aunt Millie neither. You might think you heard them all before, but gods are as changeable as the weather, which you may've noticed gets more changeable all the time.

So sit yourself down and make yourself comfortable, and I'll tell you a few god stories from around these parts and not so long ago.

You may have heard them different, but this is how I remember them, and like I said, my *name's* memory, so who you gonna believe?



So that's my story, and you're welcome
for bringing the Muses to town
and hooking them up with regular folks
instead of some thundering clown.
So come on in and meet the girls.
It would surely make their day
if they inspired you just the tiniest bit
'cause you know what we always say:
Life is short, and Art is long,
as long as it's free to play.

Prometheus and Io

Best place to begin, I suppose, is the beginning—or before, if you can imagine it. Before anything got going, there was Chaos. Before there was before and after, up and down, in and out, or now and then, there was nothing *but* Chaos. You think we got chaos *now*? This nonsense is nothing. We're talking before there was any such thing as any sense at all. Truth hadn't been thought up yet, because, you guessed it, there was no thought and nobody to think it. No gods. No humans. Not that gods waste much time thinking, since they just *know* shit. That's what makes them gods. For thought you need humans—a thought thought up *by* humans—who you'd think might notice they omitted all other life on the planet, most of whom, on their worst days, are way smarter than humans, with the possible exception of lemmings.

But somehow, the story goes, straight out of Chaos come Erebus, who I like to call the Inky Abyss, who I met a few years back during a certain cardiac event, and Nyx, Night, who most folks *think* they know, but this was long before there were stars and moons and all the rest of it, not a single drop of the Milky Way. Hard to tell how Nyx and Erebus could even see one another or tell each other apart, but they must've worked that out because they soon started loving on one another, even

though they was were brother and sister, and had several interesting children, one of whom all y'all will meet before this earthly party's over, Charon, the ferryman, who gives us all a ride back home.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, though things did happen pretty fast. Once you had deities copulating with one another, things picked up, you might say, and before you knew it, one of the crazier gods had come up with the idea of humans and, just as quick, no surprise, started thinking it might be a good idea to kill 'em before things got out of hand (and because they'd proven to be such a disappointment, which was pretty much the way they felt about Him, though they'd be crazy to say so. Everybody *Lo-o-oved* the Big Bully).

We're talking about Jove, of course. Jupiter, Zeus, Jehovah. Don't matter. You know who I'm talking about: HIM. Bend the knee, sing a hymn, slaughter something tasty or someone, for that extra bit of groveling sacrifice, and blow smoke up His Ass. I never did understand why all these big boy gods needed so much loving like their mamas didn't give them enough, so they got to take it out on other folks. Gets tiresome. Scary too, when you think about it—a god hungry for total adoration and constant proof of it. How can a *god* be so insecure?

Prometheus didn't like it one bit neither and thought he'd even up the score by stealing fire and giving it to humans so they could make it through the winter and cook and work metal and build factories and sawmills and seem hellbent on burning up the whole damn planet before it was over. But it all got started with Prometheus trying to do folks a favor. Maybe if he'd stolen solar panels instead, we wouldn't all be in this current mess, which

is one reason it's sometimes hard to believe gods are as smart as they say they are. If they can tell the future, how come they keep fucking it up?

Naturally, Prometheus had to be punished for all eternity for thinking for himself and refusing to kiss Jove's ass, but he was kind of a hero for never giving in, having his liver devoured every day by Jove's eagle as punishment, sort of like the fellows down at the roadhouse who do it drop by drop, day by day. But they'll never, by god, give in to whoever or whatever! Prometheus is their man!

Folks forget he also cooked up numbers and writing and other such useful tools, so folks could figure out what else to do with that fire, in their nice warm houses, besides just burn stuff up. But some say his greatest gift was Blind Hope, which I suppose if you've got a mind to get on the wrong side of the gods, is the greatest gift of all. Makes it easier to pay them no mind.

As you can imagine, the boy doesn't have a whole lot to do chained to a mountain in a perpetual thunderstorm. Nobody stopped by to chat except Mercury making his rounds, running his mouth. Prometheus didn't mind. He welcomed any change.

Mercury told him the latest about Jove: Who he'd raped, who he'd murdered, who else he was torturing in some cruel and sadistic way. Mercury told him there was this fellow Job over in the next hollow the Big Boy had tortured within an inch of his life *because* he was so good, don't you know, and he bet another fellow he couldn't break him. Now I ask you, what kind of sick god does shit like that?

And of course Prometheus spared no words denouncing these abominations, knowing full well every word in Mercury's ear was fed up to Jove like a pig on a platter, meaning Prometheus had about as much chance of getting free as that poor black fellow in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, despite Atticus Finch's eloquent efforts.

So, when a few gadflies show up one evening, feasting on the residue of liver blood that had built up on the rock over the years, Prometheus took it as a sign. He had the Gift from his mama Themis. He knew the future, which was just another curse, if you ask me, but then, the past is my thing. There're lots of gods and seers and whatnot who know the future in these stories—I'm not sure how they keep them all straight, or if they bother.

But sure enough, bringing up the rear of her gadflies, so to speak, comes Io. Not that she looked like Io, you understand. She looked like a white heifer that'd been wandering around these hills too long, ribs sticking out, covered with fleas and ticks and burrs and whatnot that plague some poor cow on the loose. Not to mention the gadflies. It's enough to make a girl long for the slaughterhouse.

She had horns on her head—like a crescent moon lying on its back. She would rather be a woman than a cow, but she *did* rather like the horns. When the moon was full, they practically glowed. They were brilliant in the morning light, and Prometheus watched her coming from a long ways off, halfway expecting her to turn away and avoid his suffering ass, but she kept on coming.

She had long sought, in her endless wandering, someone to unburden her suffering on, and who better than a fellow who was chained up and couldn't go nowhere,

whose blood offered the first relief she'd had from those fucking gadflies Juno sicked on her since she come up on a dead stag from some other story I'll tell y'all later. They'd be back on the job quick enough, but she could enjoy it while it lasted.

She tells him: "I'm Io. I used to be so beautiful that Jove fell in love with me at first sight, or so he claimed, and had to have me! The results are as you see.

"First, he raped me, and then at the sound of his wife Juno's approach, he turned me into the cow you see before you in a vain attempt to conceal his crime. She saw through him, of course. The goddess is no fool. She said, 'For me, sweet Jove? The gift of this beautiful heifer? What a darling husband you are.' You have to ask yourself, at least I certainly have, what kind of fellow turns his love into a cow, then gives her to his wife, and all I could do was low and moo and whatnot, and not too good at that since I'd only been a cow for a few minutes, and it took some getting used to.

"Now, I was a much prettier cow in those days, for much has befallen since, and one could almost believe that Juno was truly happy to have me, but then, knowing that Jove would steal me back first chance he got and likely continue raping me, she set Argus to watch over me—that fellow with a hundred eyes? Them eyes took turns sleeping, so you could never catch him unawares. And I just stared back at them, every eye with a heart-broken heifer wishing she'd never been born.

"Meanwhile, Jove was going nuts, pacing up and down Olympus like it was late August and there was no point trying to hear yourself think for all the rumble and crackle that rolled down into the valleys and lit up the

sky. Stealth wasn't Jove's long suit, so he summoned his boy Mercury to see to it, to use whatever means necessary to steal me back without his wife catching on.

"So Mercury made the rounds like he does, hearing all the latest and the greatest and juiciest stories, and sidles up to Argus and proceeds to tell him *every* last detail, like he was Balzac or one of those fellows. And all them eyes just wobbled and drooped one by one, and blink, blink, blink, they went down like a row of dominoes." (Realism has that effect on lots of folks, I hear, but maybe that's just the company I keep.)

"I get away and run to my family, and this was before I could talk, and I had to scratch the whole damn thing out in the yard, before they'd believe me—lucky for me I knew how to write pretty good—but even then, knowing my story, what could they do? Cross Jove and Juno, and you could find your own self in the barnyard with gadflies stinging your furry ass. But when Daddy wanted to hook me up with one of the bulls so I could make myself *useful*, I took off again.

"Course, who comes running with her gadflies but Juno, who's nobody's fool, even if she is clearly in denial about who she should be pissed at because her psycho husband is a serial rapist!"



Now as you can see, Io had her issues, but you would too if you were standing in her hooves.

And Prometheus, he listened. It wasn't every day anyone came close, and those who did couldn't help glancing over their shoulder, wary of Jove's eagle, then eyeing the poor boy's liver like it was slathered up with gravy.

Prometheus knew her. Everybody knew the story, but nobody lifted a pinkie finger to help the girl. Gods. Worthless cowards with the morals of spoiled children. They didn't care what Jove did, long as it wasn't happening to them.

Prometheus knew from prophecy that some years hence Io would bear a son named Hercules you've no doubt heard of, maybe seen one of his movies on afternoon TV, who would finally set him, Prometheus, free!

To cheer her up, he shared this prophecy, to give her a sense of purpose, though he generally kept the future to himself.

But she had one question, which him being a male god, he'd failed to anticipate:

"Who's the Daddy?"

Prometheus didn't want to say, but he'd gotten himself into this. "Jove," he said real quiet.

"No fucking way!" Io bellowed so that the mountains echoed with it and damn near scared the gadflies off their feed.

He didn't argue. When it came down to it, they had the same identical problem: Jove was a total asshole and, to be fair, Juno was too, but who could blame her? Marriage to an abusive rapist sociopath would take its toll on anyone. Poor Io. He was glad he was there to listen, at least, even if his prophecy was cold comfort. They would have to be stoic, they would endure, they would—

"Want me to get you out of here?" she asked.

He was so surprised by the question it took him a moment to answer. "I- I *can't*. I'm condemned for all eternity. It's my fate." He said this last part with a touch of pride, like it made being a victim something special.

“Says who?”

“Says Jove.”

“So what?”

That turned out to be a pretty good question, as it had Prometheus pondering the answer long and hard while Io, who'd learned a thing or two about getting around fences in her rambles, rounded up a couple of herds of cattle from the farms thereabout. Hooking their horns through the massive links of the chain, they soon yanked it loose in time to hear the beating of distant wings approaching.

Jove's eagle went hungry that day. Truth is, he was sick to death of liver and would touch nothing but fresh caught fish from then on out.

Now you may've heard that it was Hercules, the fellow with all the muscles, who freed Prometheus. They had to tell folks *something* when Prometheus turned up missing so Jove could save face.

Truth is, he and Io slipped away underground, where they continue their campaign to bring the big boy down to this day. They say Io's got her own body back and looks like a movie star. Won't touch meat to save her life. During her bovine rambles she got to know folks from all over, and made special friends with the Amazons who, no surprise, treated her like a sister. They have an army, it's said, just waiting for the day.



Prometheus and Io,
their tale's a lesson to us all:
The mightier the god whose word is law,
the likelier His heart is small,

and if you let Him decide your fate,
you'll have no fate at all.

We all come out of Chaos,
and no doubt will return.

What to do between times
but to suffer and to learn.