Cul de Sac Stories

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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Cul de Sac Stories

by
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I dedicate this book to all the people who've ever spoken out against marginalization by the patriarchy. I hear you and raise my voice to join yours however I am able.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Elizabeth Thorpe for her editorial feedback early into the gathering of these stories. A special nod to Valor and Jason for beta reads. The encouragement and support of Glenda Bailey-Mershon, Kathleen Alcala, Waverly Fitzgerald, and Nisi Shawl have kept me going through the years.

I also deeply treasure my folks at both the Port Townsend Writers Conference and the North Seattle Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers group for their years of feedback, camaraderie, and belief in my voice and vision.

There has never been a more important time for truthtelling; I offer this book—my little loop inside that conversation—inspired by the trails blazed and maintained by the early and everlasting influences of Margaret Atwood, Louise Erdrich, Ursula K. Le Guin, Franz Kafka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Ray Bradbury.

Contents

Introduction
by Cat Rambo

I'm honored that Aqueduct Press invited me to write the introduction to a set of stories that are so enjoyable and well-wrought. There are those of us in this world who love short stories, both to write as well as to read. We love them deeply, passionately, and intensely, knowing that a well-wrought short story can hold entire worlds in it, implying so much beyond the page, that a short story can slay your heart with its tragic perfection or change your viewpoint about humanity at large. Some writers excel at the short form and put it through its paces in ways unexpected, ingenious, and wonderful.

Tamara Kaye Sellman is a short-story lover; you can see it in what she writes—stories where the marvelous stands elbow to elbow with the commonplace, where the voice at your elbow may be a witch's mumbling or an oracle's hint. Her stories carry the flavor of the Pacific Northwest, with its Oyster Coast and blackberry brambles, the Pacific County Fair, and Pacific Northwest Indigenous people. But at the same moment, there's a timelessness to them, celebrating the wit and wisdom of women as well, as the women of these stories move through the extraordinary while trying to navigate the ordinary demands of their lives, demands posed by sleepless children, indifferent spouses, and the vagaries of life in the modern world.

Those women take on myriad forms. In the opening story of the collection, "April 9," the women are witnessing a war, as senseless as any real war, being waged by the king on the trees, with the victims dragged:

> …mercilessly, by a wagon's rope, through the muddy streets of the village. A child—heady with victory—rode the tree's spine as if it were merely a runaway ass until his mother, fearing the venom in the needles affixed to thin withies not yet stripped from the trunk, pulled the boy down. She scolded the men for allowing him to endanger himself in the first place even as he snarled, fought her grip on his wrist.

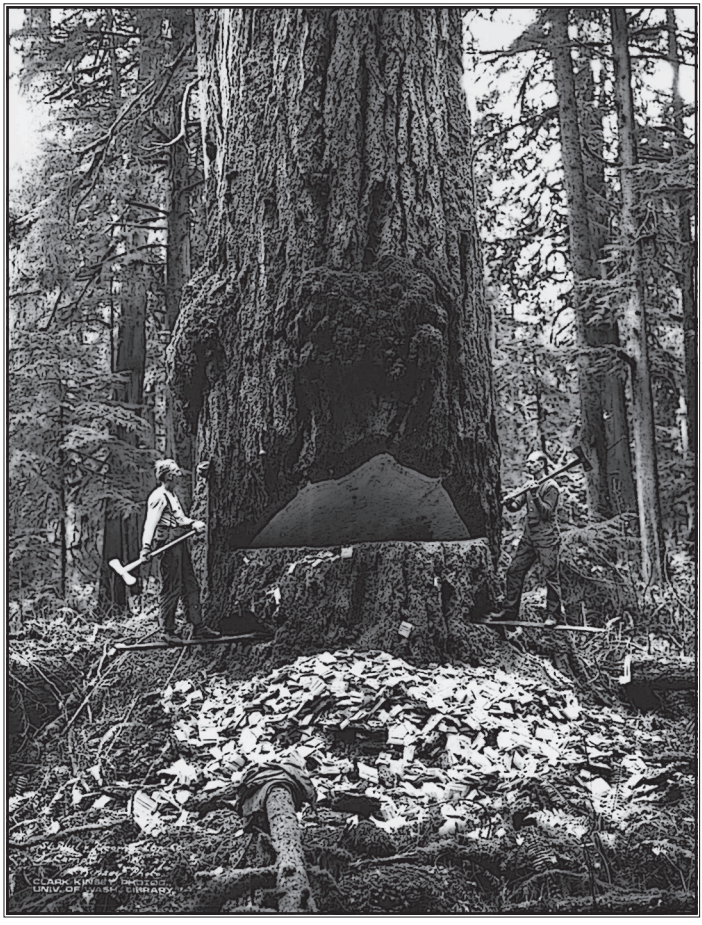
The women wait for the madness to play itself out, hoping, perhaps futilely, for a return to a calmer time. The epigraph at the beginning of the story, however, referring to the fall of Saddam Hussein, suggests that the violence is eternal.

In "Madam's Curse," an epistolary story told in the form of interview transcripts, a sham psychic reveals her true vision: "I saw Madam Walks-On-Needles find the Great Green Pearl, and I divined the coming of Tornado Fever," she says, taking us into a story full of dreamlike moments detailing the loss of a pearl snatched from a pearl-less oyster, and the disease that its loss leaves in its wake. The visionary of "The Spinster" is the writer Ludmila Popravak, waiting for her agent to arrive, frantically cleaning strange debris from her house in order to seem normal when he arrives. The protagonist of "Shrapnel over Chicago: August 1989," a former Seattleite, transplanted, confronts unfamiliar skies and the tornadoes they contain.

Many of these stories involve maternity and children. In "Blood Tunnel," mother Gianna Lombardi tries to get her child Maria successfully through a hellish post-apocalyptic landscape, using a strange tunnel that promises hope of escape. Another mother deals with the world of nightmares in "Since that First Night of Lit Halls," vanquishing the shadowy figure threatening her children. In "The Rosaries of Raggedy Ann" an iconic female doll gives her owner inexplicable powers that go beyond death. In "The Third Way," skillfully crafted to unfold backwards in time, a mother tries to rescue her children from the forces of the Brotherhood, a conservative movement that has swallowed her neighbors.

The majority of these stories are fantasies in which the magical is rarely—if ever—explained, but Sellman uses it to deal with the core emotions of the human experience. "Blood Tunnel" and "The Third Way" are science fiction, however, dealing with the sort of landscape that sometimes seems all too close in these days of reactionary conservatism and the whittling away of women's rights.

One of the things a collection does is give the perspicacious reader some sense of the writer as a whole: the themes that haunt and obsess them, the tropes that return in different forms, the particular dreamscapes that they walk in their sleep. The stories in *Cul de Sac* give the reader a chance to linger in Sellman's vicinity for a while, to have more than one chance at conversation, speaking of different things, although some motifs will repeat, as always happens with such conversations. I've enjoyed the time I've spent with Tamara's stories, and I hope that you will too.



University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Clark Kinsey, photographer, C.Kinsey3617

April 9

> "For years, you could see the metal toe of Saddam's foot still attached to the base of his former statue, but now you'd never even know anything was there."
>
> —Jane Arraf, Firdos Square, Baghdad
> [From "Iraqi Who Toppled Saddam Hussein Statue 15 Years Ago Regrets His Action," *NPR News*, April 9, 2018]

I

The knights laid claim to the aggressive forest today. Or at least the head tree, the part that might give the villagers peace of mind. Remove the head tree, the rest of the forest would fall without a struggle.

This is what the men believe.

I was there, among only a handful of women.

We watched as they hacked away at the base of a large cedar—the most persistent and tallest among the grove—with their sharpest axes.

The tree groaned in a way that we all felt more than heard—deep rumbling that could have been confused with the sounds of temblors, maybe, or a stampede of wildebeests as described in horrific detail by our neighbors to the south.

At the sound of the tree's keening, the hair on my neck and arms raised like it does during a rare course of dry lightning in midsummer. The earth shuddered, as if the wicked tree were pulling up its roots from deep within the dark peat of the forest in a move to run. But of course, that couldn't happen, I thought, even as I watched the swaying bole and saw the terrible eyes—millions of them—glimmer through the dark seams of the tree's thick and unforgiving hide of bark.

Still, I wanted it to be so. I wanted it to run.

Eventually, the giant stopped swaying and groaning, and the tiny, glittering eyes, bloody as the underbark of the tree, blinked themselves into blackness, and a stillness, made sharp by the scent of perturbed cedar oil, pervaded the forest.

Once the knights and the woodsmen determined it was safe, they let the townsmen throw a few blows at the girdled tree themselves: first, a brawny man in his sleeveless undershirt, then a spindly man who could barely hoist the handle of the axe. It didn't matter whether their blows were effective; the townsmen, the boys, the knights cheered them both on until the collective of voices grew raw and hoarse.

The sound of the tree falling inspired victorious cries from all the men in the village.

Yet the feat was incomplete. The head tree would not be felled in one glorious move, as the knights and the king presiding over this grotesquerie had originally intended.

Instead, there was an uncertain cracking and the sounds of shots, as if from small cannons. While the trunk landed with a satisfying boom, the upper tip of the giant snapped, limbs shattering, broadcasting random jagged pieces of redwood that smudged the air with

motes of sliver, leaf mold, cone pollen, and needles. The unintended billow sent the men nearest the tree into fits of coughing and sneezing.

I looked about me in the ruckus, saw that none of the other wives, not even the maidens, were preparing to offer handkerchiefs.

The awkward reality of that moment sent the woodsmen muttering in great displeasure, for it was their kinsmen who had suffered most at the hands of the giant, and they wanted its felling, however symbolic, to be—if nothing else—surgical in its precision.

Then, a team of workhorses advanced, led by the lumberman Brudligh. To the team's yoked harnesses, the men rigged a several-thonged pulley, attaching its straps at strategic angles around the severed bole of the ignoble tree.

With the sheer force of the team—pulling until the horses were lathered, eyes rolling wildly behind blinders—the monolith of venom-tipped needles was yanked from its jagged stump and carried into the clearing under the dead midday eye of the sun. Limbs were stripped by axe heads, bark peeled back by flat chisels, knives gouging and penetrating the spaces where the tender pith could be touched, cones raked away into a pile for burning.

No one stopped the townsmen from shinnying up the sides of the once-malevolent trunk after it was mostly denuded.

They reached with lean, muscular bodies to strip its tenacious green scions, clawing at the heartwood with bare hands, gathering inside the skin of their palms and forearms dozens of tiny blades of wood that left them bleeding in a kind of unearned badge of valiance.

At one point, the villagers laid claim to its jagged top. They dragged it mercilessly, by a wagon's rope,

through the muddy streets of the village. A child—heady with victory—rode the tree's spine as if it were merely a runaway ass until his mother, fearing the venom in the needles affixed to thin withies not yet stripped from the trunk, pulled the boy down. She scolded the men for allowing him to endanger himself in the first place, even as he snarled, fought her grip on his wrist.

Only later did I realize what a crude and lunatic feat the tree felling had been.

"What's the matter, Mama?" my youngest asked me at suppertime. All of us—me, my husband, and our five children—huddled around the hearth, blowing on our porridge to cool it. She had caught me in a frown.

I could only shrug. To say more would be far too dangerous for us all.

II

During the aftermath of the felling, I went to the well outside the royal quarters to collect bath water for the baby. It was there that I overheard a conversation between the king and his councilor in the royal gardens.

"Yes, today's feat was indeed a success," the king said. "But this war we're having with the trees is not yet over." He attested that his knights had been advised not to burn the entire forest proper, but merely the farthest seam of it, based on reports from beyond the borders of the land.

"I have heard it said that the portions now afire are a controlled burn on the forest's side opposite the village," his counsel replied. "Your people and animals—indeed, the entire village—are safe."

"For now," muttered the king, his voice grave. "For now."

There was still considerable resistance further north, he said, along the kingdom's borders, where woodsmen continued to die, ambushed by the conspiring roots and limbs of copses and the dark and bottomless ravines that gave way beneath the men's thick boots. Every tree's life lost to our king's army meant the hewing of men's lives elsewhere.

"It is a war of blood for sap," the king said of the transaction.

"Be not worried for the villagers, let them rejoice in this symbolic triumph today," the king's counsel advised before taking his leave to see about the progress made along the controlled burn.

Indeed, the townsmen clung to the king's earlier words of a magnificent triumph, of reveling in the streets on this, a working day, forgetting their chores and drinking down the afternoon hours in pints of ale.

True to expectation, we women were left to tidy up after their merrymaking while keeping the careful order of the hearth. Among us, I witnessed more than one reddened cheek behind a wet sheet hung to dry in the smoky air, more than one angry harrumph from a neighbor digging turnips from her potagerie late in the day while our husbands and sons snored away their post-razing excesses.

Meanwhile, the sky filled with the sweet-sharp haze of burnt wood, a low layer of clouds yielding a light fall of ashen flakes: snow in summer.

We could not know then that, in the days to come, this passing of the ash cloud would eventually mark, in the stories told in village squares, all around the kingdom and beyond, the moment we felled the monstrous tree.

III

There are charlatans hiding in the countryside who have demanded pacific resolutions to this conflict.

Why not give them space? they asked. Why not pen an accord to agree upon harvests? Why not live beyond their circles of shade, which have never, in fact, been designed for us to use? Can't we all live on this same land together? Animals, vegetables, stones?

Rumors describe how the charlatans had met around circlets of fire across the plains, far from the royal grounds, to discuss strategies of uprising, but were forced to move from place to place, else they were made to disappear, as orders from the king had decreed. They still exist, these charlatans, but even my youngest child believes them to be figments of fairy tales and fables, where I expect all defeated heroes eventually discover themselves.

Many farmers, too, protested the king's declarations of war. His noblemen quickly advanced new plans, to use the lumber of the fallen trees to build lavish halls across the land, to redirect their sire's attention away from the commoners' moral arguments and toward potential expansionist gains that granted him more favorable optics.

How might the whole of the kingdom benefit in that manner? the farmers protested. They had struggled through a spring of damping off and now faced a summer's drought; they thought the trade in lumber might supply them a second source of revenue to mitigate what they predicted would be a cursed growing season.

It's a farmer's concern to most efficiently square his resources, is it not? responded the king. He would not hear of such buffeting and threatened a heightened land tax to inspire their silence.

Some in the village agree with no one. Women who sit quietly at Sabbath feasts and evening cries mutter nothing of the trees themselves, or of the lack of shade, the lack of raw materials, the lack of food in the larder with all the birds and beasts gone to safer havens. They wish only for life to return to the quiet simplicity of before.

As if life in the village ever was quiet or simple. Or maybe because it could be.

IV

Such divisions remain tonight, unvoiced, in the village square, as the chimes from the town crier ring out. The cry comes late, having been delayed by the roaring of the conflagration of the head tree's roots, still embedded in the soil. For hours, the fire is too hot to bear, and the noise of it is deafening.

The fires we cannot see at the edge of the land bring stinging tears to our eyes in a heady blanket of invisible fumes. When we ask the knights about the security of the village, they tell us everything is under control.

The sun falls behind the doomed forest, the sky beyond seared the color of hearth coals kept too hot, rufous under a high mackerel sky of ashen clouds.

The scents of porridge, cook-fire smoke, horse manure, and spilled ale aren't nearly as comforting this night as they are on any other night, not with the sharp edge of cedar sawdust and burnt greenwood cloying our nostrils.

The village gathers in the square, unnaturally hushed, with no expectation for what will happen next. No children argue or frolic. No pots clang from inside

the sculleries. No faint singing winds itself out from the shutters of the tavern at the village edge.

It is as if we all know that today's felling was not an ending, but a beginning. A terrible, interminable, mistake.

What have we done?

I dare not ask out loud, lest I be banished like a witch from these parts.

The crier, bedecked in rich robes and flamboyant hat, waltzes into the square with his pointless lantern illuminating dozens of pairs of weary and uncertain eyes peering out from the gutters, the gardens, and the windows of hand-cobbled homes.

He pauses, notices how we are not complete, with so many farmers falling back to their acres, soberly tending to the demands of their crops.

The rootfire crackles as the crier sings his chorale of clear and dulcet tones, rendered so much like the prayers of the Muse himself. His song-voice invites the world, for a moment, to pause and reflect on this proclamation:

"We have won the war over the trees."

Who will tell him that a more insidious message—a question… *Why?*—unfurls itself within all of us like a fresh green twig in that moment, in a silence he cannot hear, a silence that nearly drowns out his words, renders them powerless?

His words are precisely what the king has demanded, words that the woodsmen, and the knights, and the many townsmen who participated in the devilry of felling a tree—*a tree!*—crave more than gold itself.

Only they, and the boys, cheer tonight.

In that moment, the embers of the head tree's roots flicker in their buried ash pit, flaring up, snapping and laughing, hungry and well supplied, while under-

ground, we all imagine just how its inextinguishable fury must fester.