

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 21

*My Death*

A Novella

by

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with an afterword

by L. Timmel Duchamp





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why must I write?  
you would not care for this,  
but She draws the veil aside,  
  
unbinds my eyes,  
commands,  
write, write or die.

—H.D., *Hermetic Definition*

...a typical death island where the familiar  
Death-goddess sings as she spins.

—Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*



As I traveled, I watched the landscape—lochs and hillsides, the trees still winter-bare, etched against a soft, grey sky—and all the time my empty hand moved on my lap, tracing the pattern the branches made, smoothing the lines of the hills.

That drawing could be a way of not thinking and a barrier against feeling I didn't need a psychotherapist to tell me. Once upon a time I would have whiled away the journey by making up stories, but since Allan's death, this escape had failed me.

I had been a writer all my life—professionally, thirty years—but the urge to make up stories went back even further. Whether they were for my own private entertainment or printed out and hand-bound as presents for family, whether they appeared in fanzines or between hardcovers, one thousand words long or one hundred thousand, sold barely two hundred copies or hovered at the bottom of (one) best-seller list, whether they won glowing reviews or were uniformly ignored, my stories were me, they were what I did. Publishers might fail me, readers lose interest, but that story itself let me down was something that had never occurred before.

Strange that I could still take pleasure in sketching, because that was so completely associated with my life with Allan that the reminder ought to have been too painful. He had been a keen amateur artist, a weekend

Lisa Tuttle

watercolorist, and, following his relaxed example, I'd tried my hand on our first holiday together and liked the results. It became something we could do together, another shared interest. I had not painted or sketched since childhood, having decided very early in life that I must devote myself to the one thing I was good at in order to succeed. Anything else seemed like a waste of time.



Allan had never seen life in those terms; he came from a different world. He was English, middle-class, ten years older than me. My parents were self-made, first-generation Americans who knew and thought little about what their parents had left behind, whereas his could trace their ancestry back to the Middle Ages, and while they were nothing so vulgar as rich, they had never had to worry about money. Allan had gone to a “progressive” school where the importance of being well-rounded was emphasized and little attention given to the practicalities of earning a living. And so he was athletic—he could play cricket and football, swim, shoot, and sail—and musical, and artistic, and handy—a good plain cook, he could put up a garden shed or any large item of flat-packed furniture by himself—and prodigiously well-read. But, as he sometimes said with a sigh, his skills were many, useful, and entertaining, but not the sort to attract financial reward.

We'd been living modestly but comfortably, mainly on his investments, augmented by my erratic writing income, until the collapse of the stock-market. Before we'd

done more than consider ways we might live even more modestly, Allan had died from a massive heart attack.

I had no debts—even the mortgage was paid off—but my writing income had dried to the merest trickle, and the past year and a half had eaten away at my savings. Something had to change—which was why I was on my way to Edinburgh to meet my agent.

I hadn't seen Selwyn in several years. At least, not on business—he had come up to Scotland for Allan's funeral. When he'd sent me an email to say he would be in Edinburgh on business, and was it possible I'd be free for lunch, I'd known it was an opportunity I had to take. I'd written nothing to speak of since Allan's death, one year and five months ago. I still didn't know if I would ever want to write again, but I had to make some money, and I wasn't trained or qualified to do anything else. The prospect of embarking, in my fifties, on a new, low-paid career as a cleaner or carer was too grim to contemplate.

I'd hoped having a deadline would focus my mind, but by the time I arrived at Waverley Station the only thing I felt sure of was that, as stories had failed me, my next book would have to be nonfiction.

I arrived with time to spare and, as it wasn't raining and was, for February, remarkably mild, I took a stroll up to the National Gallery. Access to art was one thing I really missed in my remote country home. I had lots of books, but reproductions just weren't the same as being able to wander around a spacious gallery staring at the original paintings.

It was hard to relax and concentrate on the pictures that day; my mind was jittering around, desperate for an idea. And then all of a sudden, there *she* was.

I knew her, standing there, an imposing female figure in a dark purple robe, crowned with a gold filigreed tiara in her reddish-gold hair, one slim white arm held up commandingly, her pale face stern and angular, not entirely beautiful, but unique, arresting, and as intimately familiar to me as were the fleshy, naked-looking pink and grey swine who scattered and bolted in terror before her. I also knew the pile of stones behind her, and the grove of trees, and, in the middle distance, the sly, crouching figure of her nemesis hiding behind a rock as he watched and waited.

*Circe*, 1928, by W.E. Logan.

It was like coming across an old friend in an unfamiliar place. As a college student, I'd had a poster-print of this same painting hanging on the wall of my dormitory room. Later, it had accompanied me to adorn various apartments in New York, Seattle, New Orleans, and Austin, but, despite my affection for it, I'd never bothered to have it framed, and by the time I left for London it was too frayed and torn and stained to move again.

For ten eventful, formative years this picture had been part of my life. I had gazed up at her, and Circe had looked down on me through times of heart-break and exultation, in boredom and in ecstasy. I much preferred the powerful enchantress who would turn men into pigs to the dreamier, more passive maidens beloved of my contemporaries. The walls of my friends' rooms featured reproductions of PreRaphaelite beauties:

poor, drowned Ophelia, Mariana waiting patiently at her window, Isabella moping over her pot of basil. I preferred Circe's more angular and determined features, her lively, impatient stare: *Cast out that swine! she advised. All men are pigs. You don't need them. Live alone, like me, and make magic.*

I gazed with wonder at the original painting. It was so much more vivid and alive than the rather dull tones of the reproduction. Although I'd visited the National Gallery of Scotland many times, I could not remember having seen it here before. Now I noticed details in it that I didn't recall from the reproduction: the distinct shape of oak-leaf, and a scattering of acorns on the ground; a line of alders in the distance—alders, the tree of resurrection and concealment—and above, in a patch of blue sky, hovered a tiny bird, Circe's namesake, the female falcon.

My fascination with this painting when I was younger was mostly to do with the subject matter: I liked pictures that told a story, and the stories I liked best were from ancient mythology. I had been sadly disappointed by all the other paintings by W.E. Logan that I had managed to track down: they were either landscapes (mostly of the South of France) or dull portraits of middle-class Glaswegians.

*Circe*, which marked a total departure in style and approach, had also been W.E. Logan's last completed painting. His model was a young art student called Helen Elizabeth Ralston—an American who had gone to Glasgow to study art. Shortly after Logan completed his study of her as the enchantress, she had fallen—or leaped—from the high window of a flat in the West

End of Glasgow. Although badly injured, she survived. Logan had left his wife and children to devote himself to Helen. He paid for her operations and the medical care she needed, and during the long hours he spent sitting at her bedside, he'd made up a story about a little girl who had walked out of a high window and discovered a world of adventure in the clouds high above the city. As he talked, he sketched, creating a sharp-nosed determined little girl menaced and befriended by weird, amorphous cloud-shapes, and then he put the pictures in order, and wrote up the text to create *Hermine in Cloud-Land*, his first book and a popular seller in Britain throughout the 1930s.

The real Helen Ralston was not only Logan's muse and inspiration, but went on to become a successful writer herself. She'd written the cult classic *In Troy*, that amazing, poetic cry of a book, which throughout my twenties had been practically my Bible.

And yet I'd had no idea, when I'd huddled on my bed and lost myself in the mythic story and compelling, almost ritualistic phrases of *In Troy*, that its author was staring down at me from the wall. I'd only discovered that in the early 1980s, when I was living in London and *In Troy* was reprinted as one of those green-backed Virago Classics, with a detail from W.E. Logan's *Circe* on the cover. Angela Carter had written the appreciative introduction to the reprint, and it was there that I had learned of Helen Elizabeth Ralston's relationship with W.E. (Willy) Logan.

Feeling suddenly much livelier, I left the gallery and went down Princes Street to the big bookshop there. I couldn't find *In Troy* or anything else by Helen Ralston

in the fiction section. Browsing through the essays and criticism I eventually found a book called *A Late Flowering* by some American academic, which devoted a chapter to the books of Helen Ralston. Willy Logan was better represented. Under “L” in the fiction section was a whole row of his novels, the uniform edition from Canongate. The only book I’d read of his was one based on Celtic mythology, which had been published, with an amazing George Barr cover, in the Ballantine Adult Fantasy line around about 1968. I remembered nothing at all about it now, not even the title.

After a little hesitation I decided to try *In Circe’s Snare* for its suggestive title, and I also bought *Second Chance at Life* by Brian Ross, a big fat biography of Logan, recently published. And then I noticed the time and knew I had to run.



Selwyn was waiting for me at the restaurant. He stood up, beaming, and came over to give me a close, warm hug.

“My dear. You’re looking very well.”

I’d been feeling flushed and sweaty, but his appreciative gaze made me feel better. He’d always had the knack of that. Selwyn was an attractive man, even if these days he had to rely on expensive, well-cut clothes to disguise his expanding middle. His hair, no longer long and shaggy, nevertheless was still thick and only slightly sprinkled with grey. When young, he’d worn little round Lennon-type glasses; now, contact lenses made his brown eyes even more liquid, and his eyelashes were as enviably thick and black as I remembered.

“Let’s order quickly, and then we can talk,” he said after I was settled. “I’ve already ordered wine, if white’s all right with you; if not—”

“It’s fine. What do you recommend?”

“Everything is good here; the crab cakes are sensational.”

“That sounds good.” I was relieved not to have to bother with the menu, being a little out of practice with restaurants. “Crab cakes with a green salad.”

Smoothly he summoned the waiter and swiftly sent him away again, and then those brown eyes, gentle yet disconcertingly sharp, were focused on me again. “So. How *are* you? Really.”

“Fine. I’m fine. I mean—I’m not, not really, but, you know, life goes on. I’m O.K.”

“Writing again?”

I took a deep breath and shook my head.

His eyebrows went up. “But—your novel. You were writing a novel.”

He meant a year and a half ago.

“It wasn’t any good.”

“Please. You’re much too close to it. You need another perspective. Send it to me, whatever you’ve got, and I’ll give you my thoughts on it. I’ll be honest, I promise.”

I trusted Selwyn’s opinion more than most, but I’d never liked anyone reading my rough drafts—sometimes I could scarcely bear to read them through myself. This one was permeated by Allan, and the happy, hopeful person who had written it was gone.

“There’s no point,” I said. “I’m not going to finish it. Even if you liked it, even if there’s something good in it—too much has changed. I can’t get back into that frame of mind; I don’t even want to try. I need to get on and write the *next* book.”

“All right. That sounds good to me. So what might the next book be?”

To my relief, the waiter arrived with our drinks. When the wine had been poured, I raised my glass to his and said, “To the next book!”

“To the next book,” he agreed. We clinked glasses and sipped, and then he waited for me to explain.

Finally I said, “It’s going to be nonfiction.”

My last nonfiction book had been published nearly fifteen years ago and had been neither a howling

success nor a disaster. There had been good reviews, and the first printing had sold out. Unfortunately for me, there was never a second printing, nor the expected paperback sale. The publisher was taken over in mid-process, and my editor was among the many staff members to be “rationalized” and let go. My book got lost in the shuffle, and by the time I’d come up with an idea for another, the fashion had changed, no one was really interested, and my brave new career as an author of popular non-fiction had fizzled out. All that was a very long time ago: I didn’t see why I shouldn’t be allowed to start again.

Selwyn nodded. When he spoke, I could tell that his thoughts had been following the same track as mine. “It was the publisher’s fault that you didn’t do a lot better last time. That was a good book, and it always had the potential to be a steady seller on the back-list. I don’t know why they didn’t stick with it, but it was nothing to do with you—you did a great job with it, and it could have, *should* have, launched a whole new career for you.” He paused to take a drink of wine and then looked at me inquiringly. “What sort of nonfiction?”

“Biography?”

“Perfect. With your understanding of characters, your ability to bring them to life in fiction—yes, you’d do very well, writing a life.”

Even though I knew it was his job to build me up and promote me, I couldn’t help feeling pleased. I responded to his praise like a parched plant to water.

“Really?”

“Absolutely.” He beamed. “There’s always a demand for good biographies, so selling it shouldn’t be tough.

I don't know how much I could get you up-front, that would depend—they can be expensive projects, you know, take a long time to write, and there's travel, re-search...of course, there are grants, too—" he broke off suddenly and cocked his head at me. "Now, tell me, do you have a particular subject in mind? Because *who* it is could make a big difference."

"Helen Ralston." Until I spoke, I hadn't really known.

Plenty of well-read people would have responded, quite reasonably, with a blank stare or a puzzled shake of the head. Helen Ralston was hardly a household name, now or ever. Her fame, such as it was, rested entirely on one book. *In Troy* had been published by a small press in the 1930s and developed a kind of underground reputation, read by few but admired by those discerning readers who made the effort. In the 1960s it was published again—in America for the first time—and there was even a mass-market paperback, which is what I'd read in college. It was revived from obscurity once again by Virago in the 1980s, but, from the results of my bookstore visit before lunch, I was pretty sure it was out of print again.

Selwyn knew all this as well as I did. Not only was he a voracious reader, but before becoming an agent he'd been a book-dealer, twentieth-century first editions his specialty.

"I sold my first edition of *In Troy* to Carmen Callil," he said.

I was horrified. "Not to set from?" Reprints like the Virago Classics are photo-offset from other editions, a process that destroys the original book.

He shook his head. “No. She already had a copy of the 1964 Peter Owen edition. She wanted the first for herself. I let her have it for sixty quid. These days, I doubt you could get a first edition for under three hundred.”

It always amazed me that people could remember how much they’d paid for things in the past. Such specifics eluded me. I could only remember emotionally, comparatively: something had cost *a lot* or *not much*.

“I should talk to Carmen,” I said. “She probably met Helen Ralston when she decided to publish her.”

“Probably.” He had a thoughtful look on his face. “Didn’t we talk about *In Troy* once before? When I was selling *Isis*. *In Troy* had some influence on your book, didn’t it?”

I ducked my head in agreement, slightly embarrassed. *Isis* was either my first or my second novel, depending on whether you judged by date of composition or actual publication. Either way, I’d written it a life-time ago. I could hardly recall the young woman I had been when I’d started it, and by now my attitude toward that novel—once so important to me—was clear-eyed, critical, fond but distant. “Yes, it was my model. Almost too much influence, it had—I didn’t realize how deeply I’d absorbed *In Troy* until my second or third revision of *Isis*. Then I had to cut out great tranches of poetic prose because it was too much like hers, and wasn’t really *me* at all.”

I recalled how I’d been pierced, at the age of nineteen, by the insights and language of *In Troy*. It felt at times like I was reading my own story, only written so much better than I could ever hope to match.

It was such an amazingly personal book, I felt it had been written for me alone. If Helen of Troy was Helen Ralston's mythic equivalent for the purposes of her novel, then she was mine. Somehow, the author's affair with her teacher in Scotland was exactly the same as mine, fifty years later in upstate New York. Details of time, space, location and even personal identity were insignificant set in the balance with the eternal truths, the great rhythms of birth and death and change.

I had a genuine, Proustian rush then, the undeniable certainty that time could be conquered. All at once, sitting at a table in an Edinburgh restaurant, the taste of wine sharp and fresh on my tongue, I felt myself still curled in the basket chair in that long-ago dorm room in upstate New York, the smell of a joss-stick from my room-mate's side of the room competing with the clove, orange, and cinnamon scent of the cup of Constant Comment tea I sipped while I read, the sound of Joni Mitchell on the stereo as Helen Ralston's words blazed up at me, changing me and my world forever with the universe-destroying, universe-creating revelation that time is an illusion.

"I was *meant* to write this book," I said to my agent, with all the passion and conviction of the teenager I had been thirty-two years ago.

He didn't grin, but I caught the spark of amusement in his eyes, and it made me scowl with self-doubt. "You think I'm crazy?"

"No. No." He leaned across the table and put his hand firmly on mine. "I think you sound like your old self again."

Our food arrived and we talked about other things.

The crab cakes were, indeed, superb. They were served with a crunchy potato galette and a delicious mixture of seared red peppers and Spanish onion. My salad included rocket, watercress, baby spinach, and some other tasty and exotic leaves I couldn't identify, all tossed in a subtle, herby balsamic dressing. When I exclaimed at it, Selwyn grinned and shook his head.

"You should get out more. That's a standard restaurant salad."

My nearest restaurant was a twenty-mile drive away, and didn't suit my budget.

"I don't get out much, but I'd make this for myself, if I could get rocket in the Co-Op."

"The Co-Op?" His delivery brought to mind Dame Edith Evans uttering the immortal question—"A hand bag?"—in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

"Does the Co-Op still exist? And you *shop* there?"

"When I must."

"Oh, my dear. When *are* you moving back to civilization?"

"I don't consider that civilization resides in consumer convenience, actually."

"No." He sounded unconvinced. "But what do you *do* out in the country? I mean, what's the great appeal?" Selwyn was such a complete urbanite, he couldn't imagine any use for countryside except to provide a quiet chill-out zone at the weekend.

"I do the same things I'd do anywhere else."

"You'd shop at the Co-Op?"

I laughed. "Well, no. But I can write anywhere."

“Of course you can. And when you’re not writing, in the city, there’s art galleries, theatres, bookstores... what is it you like about the country?”

“The hills, the sea, peace and quiet, going for walks, going sailing...”

He was nodding. “I remember, I remember. I grilled you on this before, when you told me you were going to marry your former editor and leave London. I couldn’t understand it. *Not* the part about marrying Allan—who was a better man than the publishing world deserved—but why leave London?”

I sighed a little. “We’d decided to down-shift. Allan hated his job; I was fed up in general...we figured out we could sell our flats and buy a boat, spend more time together and have a better quality of life on less money there.”

“It still suits you?”

I pushed a strip of red pepper around on my plate. That life had been planned for, and suited, two people. After Allan’s death I’d taken the advice of my closest friends not to rush into anything or do anything too drastic, so I hadn’t moved, or made any major changes to my life. What was the point, anyway? Nothing I could do would change the only thing that really mattered.

“I couldn’t afford to move back to London.”

“There are other places. Don’t tell the folks down south I said so, but I actually prefer Edinburgh. Or Glasgow.”

“I guess you haven’t checked out property prices since devolution.”

“But surely if you sold your farm—”

“It’s not a farm, Selwyn, it’s a farm *cottage*. A dinky toy. Somebody else owns the farm and the nice big farmhouse and all the land and lets us share the farm track.”

“Still, it must be worth something. Think about it. Once you start writing this book you won’t want to have the hassle of moving, but you will want to be near a good library.”

I thought of myself in a library, surrounded by stacks of books. The idea of having a project, things to look up, real work to do again, was incredibly seductive. “The first thing is to put together a proposal, something I can show around. Just a few basic facts, the reason Helen Ralston is of interest, the stance you’re going to take, why she’s well overdue for a biography—” he broke off. “There hasn’t already been one, has there?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Mmm. Better check the more obscure university press catalogs...you can do that online. And ask around, just in case somebody is already working on her. It would be good to know.”

My heart gave a jolt. “If there was...couldn’t I still write mine?”

“The trouble is, publishers are always ready to commission a new life of Dickens or Churchill, but nobody wants to publish two ‘first’ biographies in the same year—probably not even in the same decade.”

Until a couple of hours ago, I hadn’t given Helen Ralston more than a passing thought in years. I’d had no notion of writing her biography before lunch, and yet now it was the one thing I most wanted to do. I couldn’t bear the idea of giving it up.

“How will I find out if somebody else is already doing one?”

“Don’t look so tragic! If someone *has* got a commission, it may be some boring old academic who’s going to take ten years, and you could get yours out first. Anyway, don’t worry about it. Just have a scout around. If there’s going to be a biography coming out next year, well, much better to find out now, before you’ve invested a lot of time and energy in it.”

Forewarned wasn’t necessarily forearmed, I thought. I didn’t put much stock in the theory of minimizing pain that way. If I’d known in advance that Allan would die of a heart attack at the age of 60 it wouldn’t have hurt any less when it happened, and it wouldn’t have stopped me loving him. I did know, when I married him, that his father had died of a heart attack at sixty, and even without that genetic factor, the statistical chances were that I’d outlive him by a couple of decades. I came of sturdy peasant stock, and the women in my family were long-lived.

“How do I scout around? I mean, who do I talk to?”

“You could start with her.”

“Her? You mean Helen Ralston?”

He was surprised by my surprise. “She is still alive?”

“Is she? She’d be awfully old.”

“Ninety-six or ninety-seven. Not impossible. I don’t remember seeing an obituary of her in the last few years.”

“Me either. I’m sure I would have noticed. Well. I guess they might still have an address for her at Virago. And there’s a biography of Willy Logan, quite new, that should have something.” I patted the heavy

square shape of it in the bag slung across the side of my chair.

“Dessert? No? Coffee?” He summoned the waiter and, when he’d gone away again, turned back to me. “By the way, I know someone who owns one of Helen Ralston’s paintings.”

“By the way?”

He smiled. “Really, I just remembered. And he lives here in Edinburgh. An old friend. I should probably call in on him while I’m here—are you free for the rest of this afternoon, or do you have to rush off?”

“I’m free. Do you mean it? I’d love to see it!”

I felt a little stunned by this sudden unexpected bonus. While Selwyn got out his phone and made the call I tried to imagine what a Helen Ralston painting would look like. Although I knew she’d been an art student, I thought of her always as a writer, and I’d never seen so much as a description of one of her paintings. That it should have fallen into my lap like this, before I’d even started work, did not strike me as odd or unusual. Everyone who writes or researches knows that this sort of serendipity—the chance discovery, the perfectly timed meeting, the amazing coincidence—is far from rare. The fact that this first one had come along so soon, before I was definitely committed to the project, just confirmed my feeling: I was *meant* to write this book.