

Writing's Writing

Conversation Pieces



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Essays and Poems by Rebecca Ore

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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Writing's Writing

by
Rebecca Ore





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For Maureen Owen and Rebecca Wright



Photo courtesy Rebecca Ore

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WRITING'S WRITING

My first memory was yelling when some older children used their mother's bracelets to chain me to a tree. The two mothers looked on placidly from their plastic loungers, cold drinks in their hands. After I was loose, the other mother showed my mother how the other kids had looped the bracelets together. I was about two or so. We were living in a brick house in a Louisville, Kentucky, post-war development in the early 1950s.

I've been all sorts of writer: toddler, unwed mother, poet, science fiction writer, newspaper writer, and haunter of libraries. My first continuous memories are of Seneca, South Carolina. My parents and baby sister had moved there while I lived with my grandparents and an uncle in Critz, Virginia, a rural place my father drove me to and left before I woke up the next day. Apparently, my grandmother told me that my Dad had gone out to get gas. My grandmother told me when I was an adult that I waited a few days before asking again. It kept me quiet enough for those six weeks. I remember none of that. I remember sleeping with children's books that my mother had read to me earlier, such as the expurgated Mother Goose with happy endings.

I was bored in first grade, as I'd learned the alphabet earlier to write my name in a private class with one other student, a state senator's daughter, at about age four. The woman teaching us lived next door to a parrot who

called for her owner, Mrs. Keller, every time strangers came near its cage.

Other neighbors near our house had monkeys, one of whom got out and strangled baby blue jays. Another neighbor with a daughter my age, Karen Moore, had a bitch, vaguely small and somewhat snub-nosed, who whelped and bit me on the nose when I bent over her babies. Sometime later, a woman living alone, described to me as a hillbilly, shot the bitch but didn't kill her, but did kill some others.

When my dad was a student on the GI Bill at the Harvard Business School, my mother worked for a man who had won the Nobel Prize in Medicine, probably Fritz A. Lipmann who won in 1953. I have a vague recollection of my father being cynical about him and my mother remembering all the chicken eyes the lab techs had to process. Somehow I got the idea that being famous was dangerous. Karen Moore, my neighbor friend, once asked me what I was thinking. I can't remember precisely what I said, something about being afraid of being famous. Years later, someone who'd studied at Harvard explained to me that the man my mother worked for was difficult, not a usual thing among scientists.

We moved to Clemson, South Carolina. My best friend, Margaret Hershfield, was Jewish and didn't believe in Santa Claus; neither did I. Teachers scolded us for disillusioning other students. Earlier, I'd thought that Santa sent bills since, obviously, I couldn't get everything I wanted.

I still have vivid memories of Margaret Hershfield's mother, in slacks, leaning against a radiator while she told my mother and me how she escaped a Nazi death march with friends when they heard shooting behind them. They ran and found peasants who didn't turn them in but fed

them potatoes. She told my mother and me the story up to the peasants, and the rest of the story didn't get told in the South Carolina sun. I don't remember Mrs. Hershfield's face, just her body in slacks and a blouse, leaning against a radiator under a window, her tattooed arm folded over her other arm, telling us her story.

I never directly used Mrs. Hershfield's story, but a Leica and a concentration camp made it into a linked short story collection called *Time and Robbery*. Leitz saved as many of their Jewish employees as they could. In a past monster time, some people managed to do good. In this monster time of 2025, empathy is, if not quite a crime, considered a blight on acquisition and control.

In the second grade, Margaret and I and others made imitation newspapers and illustrations. Margaret's mother put books on the teacher's desk to give her daughter more than what South Carolina furnished children's minds with. I read them. The teacher almost stopped me, but the books were on her desk. I don't remember anything about them, though. The Kipling *Jungle Book*, I do remember bright moments from: the Cat who walked by itself, the Limpopo River, how the Elephant got its trunk, and flashes of other images from my mind's eye.

Margaret and her family left, and I missed her. I put on a play with the neighborhood kids. I remember it now vaguely as a western. One of the actors stuttered until I made him mad enough not to stutter.

The Hershfield family left years before I encountered the possible reason they left: the Nazi professor and his wife who taught Latin. The Hershfields went North where they wouldn't be the only "Jewish" Jewish family. I realized later that the family who owned the local drugstore were probably

converted Jews. From their store's book rack, I bought some years later *We Too Won't Last*, a book about lesbian relationship woes, Damon Knight's *100 Years of Science Fiction*, and a thriller about attempts to kill Castro by a CIA guy caught in Watergate.

I discovered real fairy tales in *Compton Pictured Encyclopedia for Children* and in various libraries. Mrs. Grayson Lane helped me with my writing when I was in the sixth grade. She was a published writer and got me to see what helped readers follow the words.

When I was in the seventh grade, a teacher suggested that I should go to a private school. My mother went to the male principal, who had never talked to me, to get absolutely uninformed male advice. "She'll leave home soon enough," he said. Girl children's ambitions other than marriage to men who could support them were considered mental problems. The whole mill-hand class in the south, black or white, was not able to live up to this Dick and Jane standard and so must also be lacking. We were a bit scared of the mill-hand children, and even more of blacks.

Women should be supported by a man, a husband who displayed his worth through the wife's shopping and birth-ing and caring for children before they were in school. The psychology books for teachers said so. Freud said so. The Young Adult books said so.

The school library had Heinlein books and Walter Farley horse books, including the Flame series that went into sci-ence fiction, and the local drug store had *Mad Magazine* and various comics, including *Classic Comics* and *Superman*, *Super Boy*, and *Super Girl*.

Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* came from a real bookstore sometime later.

My mother took me to the college library, where we took out books on horse psychology and William Beebe's book about traveling in Central America, where I live now, and though the howler monkeys still boom, unlike Beebe, I've never had malaria alone in the rain forest. Those are the surviving memory fragments of that book; the horses who learned their names, the various English ponies—and some of the illustrations—are more firmly in my memory, maybe because I read and re-read that book in the early stages of a passion for horses. I remember various aquarium fish books and owning a ten-gallon tank in the mid-to-late '50s. I still have fish, now Nicaraguan native cichlids, in a 130-gallon tank on a rosewood stand. Other fish show up in my fiction, ones I've kept in North Carolina, Virginia, and New York.

I don't remember writing in that time, just reading and more reading, even Reader's Digest Condensed Books, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Christopher Marlowe's *Tamerlane*, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, some Walter Scott, all sorts of stuff about spies.

We had maids since that's what white middle-class southern families did, maids who did much of the child-tending, cleaning, cooking; having maids proved the (white) husband could really provide. My mother took long naps in the afternoons. The last maid my mother had in Clemson was Elizabeth, whose last name I never was told, who brought me James Baldwin collections, *Story Magazine*, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, and heaps of Howard Fast novels. One day I was listening to Radio Moscow on my short wave radio, and Elizabeth said, "It's good to hear the other side."

I said, "Radio Moscow is all propaganda." She propitiated this uppity white girl with subtly feigned agreement, and the books kept coming in, though she was more guarded.

Some time later, I realized what I'd done and what it said about Southern culture that she backed off, what those Howard Fast novels and James Baldwin had said to me that I should have listened to sooner. Elizabeth was smarter than my mother but had no local outlet for that intelligence. Racism was bad.

In town sometime later, I didn't look at black people as though they were scary, and I think black women looked back at me more human to human, like this white girl finally got it. It took Elizabeth having the guts and trust to bring the books to me.

My mother wanted me to read Young Adult romance novels so I could find patterns for being a normal girl. I read a few and hated the obvious manipulations. Mom did like *Jane Eyre*, which I read later and made me realize perhaps why she had married a country boy.

Poets, my mother said, led miserable lives. But my mother took me to various Greenville museums and art galleries. One of them had a traveling exhibit of Andrew Wyeth. I loved the paintings, hated the titles of the paintings.



I was going to be a writer, even if I failed Latin, after two years of South Carolina high school, where the Latin teacher praised the SS men she'd seen when she was a classics student in 1930s Germany and decided I was a Slav.

I'm not, but had some possibly German but more likely French Huguenot ancestors, and some from the British Isles, including people whose family name is the old Norse word for "arrow," Ore, which became my writing name. The Nazi classicist refused to hear my denial. High cheekbones

proved I was a Slav. She meant it as an insult and that my real ancestry didn't matter.

Later, her husband taught a Sunday School class where he told me 6 million Jews hadn't died in the Nazi-controlled parts of Germany. I asked if it was more.

So, "We decide who's a Jew, a Slav, a Latin gang member, who's crazy and who's sane."

"Yeah, and that was a Nazi salute"

"Yeah, and we decide who's dead or never leaving a prison."



My family moved from Clemson, South Carolina, to Charlotte, North Carolina, before my third year of high school. I could take a theater class with a few students who had been extras in movies or acted in local theater groups, one who'd even acted in a traveling Yale student repertory group. I learned that growing up in Clemson and being Cootie Brown hadn't helped my social skills with people I really wanted to know. So, I spent a year of catch-up in one of Charlotte's better public high schools. Peers were valuable.

T.S. Eliot died, and his obituaries quoted enough lines that I had to read more and so bought *The Waste Land and Other Poems* and started writing poetry and fiction and a post-apocalyptic play where survival made my poet character the best poet in what was left of the world.

In the main branch of the public library I discovered Franz Kafka and read "The Metamorphosis" straight through in one sitting without even checking the book out, and walked around the streets stunned. I now have a copy of it in Spanish, bought from a vendor selling pamphlets

of novellas and poetry in a buffet restaurant in Jinotega, Nicaragua.

Another book I discovered in Charlotte at a news stand was an anthology called *Writers in Revolt*, which introduced me to William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, de Sade, Selby, Herman Hesse, Baudelaire, Malaparte, and others. Copies are still available through the online book sellers, but a copy is no longer in my book case. So much doesn't survive moving countries or a mother who threw away all poetry and photos I didn't keep taking with me.

Somehow, I found out about a local annual literary anthology, Charleen Swansea's *Red Clay Reader*, and sent her poetry and fiction (none of my high school fiction survived Mom, either). Since I didn't drive, Mother drove me to meet with Charleen at her house designed by her first husband, an architect. Charleen liked my poetry, thought it was much better than my fiction, and suggested that I should teach myself by copying writers I was passionate about, like Kafka. I'd read enough about his life to know I couldn't really do that because I wasn't a European Jew who saw the Holocaust coming when almost nobody else did. I went home and wrote more poetry, and then a year later we moved to Southern Pines, North Carolina, which terrified me because of my experiences in that other small town, Clemson. But it was a better small town. I took an after-school class in creative writing and read John Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, tried to write a review of it for the local weekly, but nah. I was driving by then, and from time to time drove up to Chapel Hill, which was a better college town than Clemson, with a real bookstore of two stories with a poetry section.

My father bought me a copy of *Best Loved Poems of the American People*, which showed that any form that drew on all the resources of language could be used to produce sentimental drivel. But Dad was trying.



Our creative writing teacher had a sister who was going to make it. (I wonder if she did.) The teacher had us do imitations of various writers. My imitation of Hemingway told of a time a friend and I ran away from home, getting maybe eight miles away and deciding to go back the next morning. The woman who gave us the ride tipped off our parents, and our dads found us.

The creative writing teacher thought it would have been more realistic with boy characters.

Some time later, I placed a poem in an Arkansas newspaper that had a poetry section.

The summer between high school and college, I went to work for a dog-handler in New Jersey, bringing my little Border Terrier bitch with me to a kennel that had some famous Border terriers resident in it. I had one day a week off and went to NYC to the Village to listen and walk around. I saw a sign at St. Mark's Church for what I think was the poet Frank O'Hara's memorial. He died July 25, 1966, so it was possible since I'd just turned 18 in May. I met an old Beat writer named Jack Micheline and bought a chapbook of his, probably *River of Red Wine* for the date to be right along with my memory of showing it to my father when he came to pick me up from the gig with the dog-handler.

I enrolled in East Carolina College for the Fall semester, packing my 35mm Asahi Pentax, some special books, and clothes. My dorm was Cotton Hall. Our wing of Cotton

Hall had some women who loved listening to Bob Dylan and Frank Zappa, and one girl who had a copy of a Fugs' album, where the piece I liked best was Lee Crabtree's "Norwegian Wood" (or at least that's the title I remember.)

I passed around the *Writers in Revolt* with the section from *Last Exit to Brooklyn* that described the death of a dockyard hooker. All the horrified girls who returned it had a roommate who was next to borrow it. Hubert Selby Jr. had fans who like being horrified.

I volunteered to do tutoring but didn't get into war protesting at that time. I took photos of people in the dorm with my camera and charged 50 cents for prints of photos. I joined a poetry workshop. The teacher leading the group, mentioned as an also-ran in *A Controversy of Poets*, wrote poetry and had worked in advertising in New York.

I didn't read science fiction then, not that I can remember. If there was a science-fiction fandom, it wasn't visible in Greenville, North Carolina. A lot of us pretended to be art students to avoid living in dresses except on Saturdays.

Assistant Deans back then took student lists and checked beach hotel registers. One resident of my dorm was expelled for premarital sex at a beach hotel.

Sometime in that Freshman year, in the second semester, I met the theater people and the honor-class people. Two of them became my other set of friends. I tried out and got a bit part in *Marat/Sade*, scooting a chair across the stage and looking mad. The man leading the honors seminar was a man with a drinking problem, apparently, and fond of Freud. I wanted to get psychoanalyzed and/or accepted to NYU. Two new friends were having sex with their boyfriends and were caught up in the discipline process. Everyone lied, so they got off.

I followed their lead but got pregnant. I took a medical leave from the school with all sorts of drama. I wanted an abortion, but my mother thought having a baby would make me more feminine or something. I ended up in a place called Appalachian Hall, where I met another woman whose mother had her on the waiting-list for Menninger's Clinic. The really crazy people at Appalachian Hall were in the back ward. The front ward housed adult alcoholics and a few other people, including the man who wrote the music for *Gone with the Wind*. I was prescribed no therapy, no drugs, just that I "go talk to other people." My introduction to adult life was, once again, through alcoholics. We were told that wanting a career was a sign of mental disturbance in women, same as the psychology texts for education majors in those days. Gregory Corso once observed that it was easier for men to be counter-cultural people, that women who wanted to live as free as the male Beats tended to end up institutionalized.

I found a copy of Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf* in the library. What I remember now of it is that being a snob about popular culture is not as much proof of superiority as the people sneering at it imagine.

My friend and I had off-grounds privileges and abused them. I expected to get therapy and didn't, just was asked why I thought I was crazy. I could at least check out and go by bus to see the local Yale University repertory group putting on Sheridan and Archibald MacLeish's *Job* and some others that I forget now. Wandering around Asheville, I thought about Thomas Wolfe and all the patients in detox who seemed to have drunk personalities and sober personalities. Some of the drunk personalities were more honest.

The alcoholic wife of an alcoholic husband said that masturbation would spoil me for men.

I never got an abortion. If I had, I'd have missed the son I met when he was 50, who liked cameras and science fiction. My niece said she thought the DNA testing would catch up with me eventually, and it did because my sister wanted to find out if she was pure British and find other family members, forgetting there was that one, my son, whose wife bought him a DNA test to find his mother. My water broke in late December, and I went to the local hospital where another girl was having the first no-information baby of the year. I was set up in a room to wait until I was closer to delivery. It began to hurt. I dilated to 10 cm quicker than the nurse expected. Being put in an obstetric stirrup delivery bed was more painful than any other position but was easier for the doctors and nurses. They put the mask over my face, and I woke up to find someone whose daughter had been seduced and abandoned who volunteered to tell her daughter's story to women who'd delivered out of wedlock as soon as they were conscious.

I didn't see my child. My mother tried to, but the nursery didn't let her in. My fictional characters know what is involved in having a baby.

My mother insisted that I lose weight before coming home. Of the two male doctors who did the post-delivery exams, one told me to be honest with my husband when I married. The other one told me not to tell my future husband about my first child because he'd use it against me in an argument, would call me a slut. I didn't get married. I was a one child non-family. After my son's wife found me when he was fifty, I had a reason not to have had an abor-

tion because my son likes my novels and wrote this about *Outlaw School*:

“I keep allowing myself to be interrupted, but I’m really enjoying this one. The protagonist and the world she lives in seem real—not just dystopian metaphors. I’m glad this world isn’t real, but it’s uncomfortably close to the one we live in.”



A number of women I met in New York had had children or abortions. Some raised their children. Some didn’t. Patti Smith wrote about her experience. Diane Wakoski advised me never to try to find my son. One woman called it the era of the pregnancy wars, when the sexual revolution was ahead of easy access woman-administered birth control and abortion legalization. Very few of the women writers I know haven’t had some skirmish in the pregnancy wars. The world has Diane Wakoski’s children by LaMonte Young in it. One other of Fluxus members, Jackson MacLow, thought this was an amazing thing; she’d put her children up for adoption and moved on.

Diane Wakoski was the first of the *Four Young Lady Poets* that I met. I met at least two of the others over the next several decades.

Mid-summer of the year I had my son, I took a bus to New York, found a shared apartment on Riverside Drive, and rather quickly got a secretarial job working for the owner’s son at a children’s book publisher. I ended up moving downstairs in the Columbia-owned Riverside Drive building to share with two other women—one Jewish, Phyllis, in love with a Muslim, the other Ann Mills, a very Anglo

woman working in banking after having attended the London School of Economics without completing the degree. Ann had a large collection of various books, ranging from science fiction to the *Angélique* novels. She was the first person who called my typing away at poetry working.

I could walk from the apartment on Riverside Drive to the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan, and the Frick to see the originals of paintings I'd only seen in books: Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*, Picasso's *Gertrude Stein*, Picasso's Minotromachy print, Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider*, Vermeers (one that struck me as fake), Jean Dubuffet's *Cow with the Subtle Nose*. I was on the fringe of a world where people read *Tel Quel* and bought a Howard Finster before he was famous, where much of the new poetry was published in community collated mimeograph magazines with a strong editor: *The World*, *Adventures in Poetry*, *Angel Hair*. After I found the St. Mark's Poetry Project workshops, Maureen Owen began publishing *Telephone*, then Telephone Books. Mimeo magazines and books from the Saint Mark's Poetry Project had weird audiences and markets—university libraries collecting possibilities and some foreign small-press distributors, and various other poets and people attempting poetry. My first pamphlet was from Siamese Banana Books with a Martha Diamond cover.

One day I entered the workshop room and saw Diane Wakoski, who'd taken over from Sam Abrams. She was the first woman poet I'd met who had major commercial-press books out. And she was generous to young women writers.

We were so young then, and now we're old, and I don't know who the young poets are now, and most of the contributors to Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry: 1945 to 1960* have died. New York was a great place for pickup

work if you ignored the lifer secretaries who wanted you to stop writing poetry and accept coloring inside the lines. The American belief that artists and writers were either rich and famous or crazy failures, or both, had eaten any ambitions those women had. One had wanted to be a singer.

I applied to Columbia University School of General Studies and was let go from the publishing company before the semester began. My parents decided they could pay for my living expenses. I took out loans for the tuition and fees.

Out in Chicago, Vivian Maier, the Emily Dickinson of photography, was still working as a nanny and taking photographs with a Rolleiflex camera, leaving thousands of photos in a storage locker, only really getting notice the autumn after she died when some of her photos were posted to Flickr. The space in our culture for many edgy women artists was posthumous recognition, the ultimate in delayed gratification. Maier never shared her photos with any of her employers. Just taking snapshots when she went out with the kids, they probably thought.

My first year in New York, I went to a party at the Peace Eye Bookstore, owned by Ed Saunders, who was also one of the Fugs, whose music I knew thanks to one of the other rebel girls in Cotton Hall. The year before, Saunders had been raided for distributing pornography. That year, Paul Carroll was in town, promoting his anthology and looking for even younger poets for a second edition of *The Young American Poets*, which first came out in 1968, the year I moved to NYC. He'd started as the editor for the *Chicago Review* but moved into publishing the more experimental and socially critical poets in a magazine called *Big Table*. Gerard Malanga and Rebecca Wright, who I was just getting to know, were both at the party. We ended up at Max's

Kansas City. Rebecca and Gerard left, and Carroll asked me if I'd come to New York to be a poet or hang out with poets. I got nervous and abandoned him and went back to my shared apartment on Riverside Drive, by cab or bus, I don't remember.

Maureen Owen wrote the best description of me in my early years at St. Mark's:

“Rebecca Brown had drawers full of poems. She was incredibly reticent. She had been rejected already. *Telephone* published her. She just didn’t feel like she was getting anywhere. Later she went down south and started writing sci-fi.”

Maureen also said of that era:

“Women were put into some little niche, the beatnik chick, an appendage, not a real person. Feminism kind of rose. Women sensed there was a wider community. There were lots of women like themselves, ripe to get something done, had written all this work, and now they realized they didn’t have to wait for someone else. [What was] lacking in that earlier period was women didn’t have a sense of supporting each other then they got that back.”

(From an interview in JACKET:
<https://jacket1.writing.upenn.edu/11/owen-durand.html>)

The fifties and early sixties had one woman in each gang of male poets. She was the representative of all women, the queen bee, and the other women were the wives and girl friends, who often worked day jobs to support the guys.