

The Circus, the Garden
(and Mario Lanza)

Conversation Pieces



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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, Conversation Pieces, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The Conversation Pieces series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what Conversation Pieces is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces

Volume 100

The Circus, the Garden
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by
Holly Wade Matter





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*To the memory of George King,
Florence Russell, and Dolly Dumbo*

In the Beginning

It all began with an apple, and with the dirt under her fingernails.

At least, that's how it *ought* to have begun. When Mollie thought about that long day and night, she preferred to believe that it *had* begun with the apple and the dirt under her fingernails, followed by Uncle Taylor bringing Dolly the circus elephant to Mother and Father's house, and following *that*, the circus itself—Fargo Fogg's Jewel-Box Circus, "Every act a diamond!" And after that, Aunt Florence, who confessed her secrets, who read Mollie's tea leaves.

Abracadabra! The horrible parts disappeared in a puff of rum-and-tea-scented smoke.

But before her dirty fingernails came the garden that got them dirty. And before the garden came Mario Lanza.

Mario Lanza

At 16 and rapidly approaching 17, Mollie fell madly in love with Mario Lanza. It happened suddenly, in a used record store where she was searching for Scottish folk tunes. The owner, who ignored her completely when she came into the store, put on the 45 of “The Bayou Lullaby” from “The Toast of New Orleans.” Even before the song ended, she was lost. She bought the 45 on the spot and took it home to her own little record player in her bedroom. She listened to it three times before Mother told her to stop with that nonsense. “At least turn it down so I don’t have to hear it.” As if his beautiful voice were noise!

She was lost by chance; she stayed lost by choice. The feeling was delicious and new. Her heart belonged to his voice, his coal-black hair, his sensitive face, his smile, his dimples. She had watched one of his movies—*The Toast of New Orleans*, as luck would have it—on the *Late, Late Show* and bought all his records that Mel, the owner of the used record store, could scrounge up for her.

She kept a signed, glossy, black-and-white photo of him, which her Aunt Helena had found in a second-hand shop, in her bedroom, above a large Chinese porcelain vase that had belonged to her great-grandmother. Mollie had filled the jar with dried rosebuds from Mother’s rose hedge and a number of small tabs she’d cut out from index cards. Written on each tab was the name of a song Mario Lanza had recorded during his too-brief career.

When she was feeling anxious or uncertain or just wanted an emotional forecast for the day, she swirled her hand through the rosebuds and tabs and chose a tab. That song, just one, would guide her through a particular difficulty, suggest a solution to a problem, or simply give her a lens through which she could view the day. She played the song on her little record player as she got dressed. She called this ritual divination “Mariomancy.”

Mother was annoyed by Mollie’s obsession with Mario Lanza. She didn’t like his music, which she considered out of date. She thought he looked disreputable...a womanizer, a degenerate.

“But Mother,” Mollie once said, “He was the greatest operatic tenor of this century.”

“This century isn’t over yet. And if he really *were* the greatest operatic tenor of the century, he ought to have sung with the Metropolitan Opera and left those awful pop tunes alone, don’t you think?”

Mollie *didn’t* think so, but she had learned early that there was no winning an argument with Mother. Arguments frequently ended with Mother’s chastisement: “Remember—you’re a McBride. We’re better than everybody else, and so we have to *do* better than everybody else.”

Mother didn’t know, but Mollie did, that in the small town where she’d grown up, Mother was referred to as “Mrs. God.” Father didn’t have a nickname. He was—so she always heard, but never personally witnessed—entirely too suave for that.

Needless to say, she didn’t tell Mother about Mariomancy.

That particular morning, Mollie felt especially in need of her oracle. Her sorority’s Spring Formal was that

night at the Gold's Hotel ballroom in the city—very fancy. She would rather do just about anything than go, but, as with her joining the sorority in the first place, Mother insisted.

She had asked Denny Walters to be her date. Denny liked boys. He told her so early on in their acquaintance. He said he'd never told anyone else before.

Even when she was a little kid, other kids came to Mollie to confess their secrets. She didn't know why. Sometimes she hated it and wished they wouldn't. Other times, it was almost as if they were giving her a beautiful gift. Denny's secret was neither hateful nor beautiful. It simply *was*.

He and Mollie dated fairly frequently, especially when a fraternity or sorority occasion called for it. Denny liked to dance, and Denny liked to talk, and Mollie had no objection to dancing with him or listening to him, but their friendship was not a deep one by any means. Mollie had had deep friendships in her hometown. She wrote to her friends there, and they to her, and one of her great ambitions, if not her greatest, was to go back to Sky, the only place she had ever really called home. But to Denny, she well knew, she was temporary and could be easily replaced and forgotten when somebody more congenial came along.

For days, Mother had nagged at Mollie to go into the city and buy a new gown. There was a formalwear shop in town, but none of her sorority sisters used it because it limited their choices; nobody wanted to wear the same gown as two or three other girls. Mother had given

Mollie money for the new gown, but Mollie had put it into her savings account instead, as she did with all gifts of money, with the nebulous plan of saving it for her eventual getaway. She told Mother, in one of her rare, outspokenly stubborn moods, that the gown she'd worn to her senior prom was perfectly adequate to the task. It was a white tulle fantasy spangled with rhinestones and worn over a narrow hoop skirt. She'd bought it on a visit to her Aunt Helena. It was the most beautiful article of clothing she'd ever owned. It was practically a personal talisman because of its association with Aunt Helena and with her happiness wearing it, dancing in it, in the high school auditorium.

She was the youngest student ever to graduate from her high school. For most of Mollie's education, her teachers could scarcely keep up with her academic progress. They helped her to apply for colleges when she was just fifteen. But Mother and Father were adamant that she attend Teachers College, far away in a distant southern state. It was the college *they* had attended in their youth, where they had met each other. This had meant a wrenching move from both her hometown and Aunt Helena, dropped into a culture she didn't understand, a culture with its own idioms and customs, its own weather, its own odd-tasting water, its own peculiar society.

But it had given her Mel's record store. It had given her Mario Lanza. It wasn't a complete disaster.

Mollie swirled her fingers through the tabs and rosebuds and pulled out a tab. Mario's cover version of "The Loveliest Night of the Year."

She looked up at the photo. "You're clearly in a sarcastic mood," she said. Still, she found the song and

Holly Wade Matter

played it and quietly sang along (so Mother wouldn't hear her) as she dressed for the day.