

Advance Praise

“In *Laterals*, Cesi Davidson brings together an imaginative collection of short plays and poems that traverse the landscapes of memory, identity, resilience, and belonging. Historical figures share the stage with invented characters in worlds that stretch from a sperm bank to the rural Tennessee of 1890. Moving seamlessly between realism, absurdity, and magic, Davidson reveals the surprising ways lives intersect across time and circumstance. Thoughtful, witty, and deeply humane, *Laterals* is a memorable collection that resonates long after the final page.”

—Anna Steegman, Staff Writer for the
New York City Jazz Record

“*Laterals*, a mix of jaw dropping tunes.

“Cesi Davidson orchestrates a play the way a masterful band leader refines musicians to create a brilliant ensemble composition. Her pen is her conductor’s baton. Every character in each play has opportunity to shine; a solo rocking out, chilling out, or energetic stillness. And when the characters come together with dialogue there is no question—there is one story unfolding and that story is captivating. With magical realism this author brings us in and out of historical-based possibilities, imagined worlds, and ideas seldom considered. The reader, the audience, joins in the fiction creating the music with the humanity we all share.”

—Tonya Pinkins, Actor, Producer, Director, Screenwriter

Laterals

Release Sideways

Conversation Pieces



A Small Paperback Series from Aqueduct Press
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A Novella by Holly Wade Matter
101. Pain Is a Chain. Move, and I'll Hear You
Poems by Erik Hofstatter
102. Laterals
Short Plays to Nourish the Mind & Soul
by Cesi Davidson
103. Women In Space!
Poems by Christina M. Rau

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 102

Laterals

Short Plays to Nourish
the Mind & Soul

by
Cesi Davidson





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*For Mrs. Sarah Berhanan, my first-grade teacher,
thank you for giving me a pencil.*

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In Praise of L

An interview with Dr. Lawrence Raphael, aka Larry

Cesi: Why should we care about speech sounds?

Larry: We should care about speech sounds because they help us communicate. If we didn't have them, we couldn't talk as we normally do. We think about speech as an "overlaid" function. Articulators like the tongue, lips, teeth, and hard palate (roof of the mouth) help us survive by breathing and swallowing. Over time, the articulators were "hijacked" for use in communication.

Cesi: L is considered a lateral speech sound. Will you explain?

Larry: The tip or apex of the tongue is raised to the roof of the mouth. The sides of the tongue are depressed so the air from the lungs comes over the sides of the tongue.

Cesi: Is L the only lateral speech sound in American English?

Larry: Yes. However, some speakers of English articulate a type of R in which most of the air is emitted over the sides of the tongue. In other languages the L exists but may be pronounced different from American English. For example, Welsh has voiceless Ls. I remember

being in a pub in Llangollen, Wales. The townspeople were trying to help me pronounce the name of the town. After several beers and speech practice with my bar mates I could say it.

Cesi: What is so special about L?

Larry: L is classified as a semivowel. It has a life somewhere between a consonant and a vowel. A sound spectrograph is an electronic instrument that we can use to visually represent the acoustic qualities of speech sounds. With this instrument L looks like a vowel. Ha Ha.

Cesi: I love L. Do you?

Larry: Yes, partly because it is not as messy as R!

Lawrence J. Raphael is Professor Emeritus of the City University of New York and Adelphi University. He is a world-renowned scholar in the fields of speech science and acoustics. I met him shortly after I completed high school pursuing college studies. Little did I know, his lectures would direct the course of my professional life achieving a doctorate in speech language hearing sciences.

Introduction

In this collection, I weave magical realism into every play. Keeping with the tradition of *Articulation*, *Fricatives*, *Bilabials*, and *Stop Plosive*, my prior books in this series, each play is independent. Peruse them as nurtures your whim and fancy. Although dear reader, you may sense themes uniting some stories, I admit only to one. I believe within my mission as a storyteller is the task of bringing the past forward. I use imagination exploring answers to questions for which available historical facts are missing. “The Queen on the Sidewalk,” “Miss Grier Rises,” “Madame Aboma: For One Night Only,” and “The Limitations of Sin” contain such explorations.

You’ll find poems interspersed between some plays. My hope is that these verses will trigger healthy and thoughtful reflection.

All the book titles in this series nod to speech science terms. Yes, I embrace a view of the world that salutes the basics of communication as a core for human experience.

Peace,

Cesi

Contemplations in the Oral Cavity

I was suffering under the weight of my desire for
perfection
I was somewhere between a consonant and a vowel
Then acceptance
I'm lateral
Don't make me into your forced prescription of my place
and manner
Get a life
I have one
Side to side
Left front side
Left back side
Right front side
Right back side
The tongue makes room for prolonging
Everybody screams
So, I gathered my friends, my triangle of vowels
"Look what they're trying to do to me."
Make me breathe through the center
The middle path is overrated
The vowel is the center
The vowel is the song of the universe
We'll keep going at all costs
If there is breath, there is vowel
This is the lesson
The day the laterals made known their existence,
humanity began to heal

Consonants have purpose but they obstruct

Consonants force shapes

I'm lateral

I'm the peacemaker

The closer I can become vowel, the closer I am to divinity

The Beginning

The Misadventure of Nook & Cranny

Characters

Nell/Nelly Nook: Young woman with blindness

Anne/Annie Cranny: Young woman with sight

Setting

A living space: Real and imaginary present day (American Midwest circa 1800s).

Nell sits in front of a mirror on a comfortable chair. A western movie is playing on a nearby television. Anne stands behind Nell, looking in the mirror. She grasps Nell on the shoulders as she talks.

(Lights Rise)

ANNE: Hazel or blue...either one. They said the donor has light eyes.

NELL: That should have meaning for me?

ANNE: The way we talk...I forget sometimes that you can't...

NELL: A Black woman with light eyes. I get it.
More exotic, more attractive than most. That's the stereotype, right?

ANNE: Nell... Like an Asian woman with eye lids...
Just adds another layer to the beauty. Less is more.

Less Black women with light eyes, those few are more desired. Less Asian women with eyelids, those few are more desired. Good or bad...don't get mad at the truth. It just is.

(Walking toward the television to shut it off.)

NELL: Don't shut off the television.

ANNE: What's your interest in these Westerns.

NELL: I don't have to explain why.

ANNE: If I were you I'd be thinking of all the possibilities I'd have with my new eyes. Your whole world will be opened.

NELL: I don't miss what I've never had.

ANNE: You'll see the world Nell. You'll think in pictures. Like those Western movies. You'll enjoy them more when you can see the stories, not just hear them.

NELL: I enjoy them now.

ANNE: No point in debating. I'm sure you're anxious about the procedure. You've made a good decision. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity.

NELL: Did you bring the English muffins?

ANNE: Of course. National English Muffin Day. If there was any fitting time for our usual breakfast, it's today. I've got everything (Voice fading) homemade English muffins, butter, jelly, free range eggs, bacon, mini ham steaks...

(Music)

(Anne exits. The Imaginary Living Space.
Nell stands and transforms into Nelly Nook.

She wears a cowgirl hat, cowgirl boots,
bandana, and a circle skirt with
petticoats underneath.)

NELLY NOOK: Endless possibilities. Riding into the
open range. I was meant to live this life. Free.

(Enter Annie Cranny dressed as a cowgirl.)

ANNIE CRANNY: Nelly Nook.

NELLY NOOK: Annie Cranny.

ANNIE CRANNY: There's only room in this valley for
one filly with beautiful petticoats.

NELLY NOOK: And that would be me.

ANNIE CRANNY: And that would be me.

NELLY NOOK: Annie Cranny, you've got no class.
A woman born and raised on a pig farm can wear
any store-bought frock but she's still gonna look like
swine.

ANNIE CRANNY: Nelly Nook, you're as blind as a bat,
and as hardheaded as a tack.

NELLY NOOK: We need to handle this woman-folk
business with a petticoat tussle.

ANNIE CRANNY: Sounds about right. Let's shake for it.

NELLY NOOK: Missouri style or Frontier style?

ANNIE CRANNY: We're traveling west. I say, California
style.

NELLY NOOK: I can win by any gosh darn rules.

ANNIE CRANNY: Turn your back. Strut your stuff ten paces. Turn. Face each other. Toss your bandana and shake.

NELLY NOOK: Whoever drops a petticoat to her knees needs to high tail it out of town.

ANNIE CRANNY: Yeah. The cowgirl standing with all her petticoats fixed around her waist wins.

(Music)

NELLY NOOK: One, two, three...count together.

ANNIE CRANNY & NELLY NOOK: Four, five

(Annie turns around.)

NELLY NOOK: You turned around you cheating swine.

ANNIE CRANNY: How'd you know that gal?

NELLY NOOK: I could hear your cheap spurs dragging in the dirt. Turn back around. We'll count together.

(They turn facing away from each other.)

NELLY NOOK & ANNIE CRANNY: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten...

(They face each other, toss bandanas, and shake their hips rigorously to the of the music.)

ANNIE CRANNY: Give up Nelly.

NELLY NOOK: I ain't never givin up.

(They shake until exhausted. They eventually collide into each other.)

NELLY NOOK: You still have all of your petticoats.

ANNIE CRANNY: Yep. And so do you.

NELLY NOOK: Then we're even.

ANNIE CRANNY: Like we are every time.

NELLY NOOK: The Nook & Cranny gang rides again.
You ready?

ANNIE CRANNY: Got a few things to finish up before
we get on the trail.

NELLY NOOK: You should have finished your chores
yesterday.

ANNIE CRANNY: I was busy petticoat slinging at the
saloon.

NELLY NOOK: What you got left to do?

ANNIE CRANNY: Finish pickin the sugarberries from
the sugarberry bush.

NELLY NOOK: Yeah.

ANNIE CRANNY: I got to roll up some tobacco leaves
so we got enough for chewing and spitting on the
prairie.

NELLY NOOK: Yeah.

ANNIE CRANNY: Polish my pink cowgirl boots.

NELLY NOOK: Yeah.

ANNIE CRANNY: Write a "Dear John" letter to my
once beloved John.

NELLY NOOK: Yeah.

ANNIE CRANNY: Fill the wagon up with provisions.

NELLY NOOK: There's only one chore you said
that's worth a never so mind, the provisions. The

sugarberries is no longer sugary. They is sour, so it's best to leave them be.

ANNIE CRANNY: Yeah.

NELLY NOOK: If we roll the tobacco leaves up with our tongues and chew them on the right side instead of the left sides of our mouths when we pucker, the leaves will last longer. What we have now is plenty for two winters.

ANNIE CRANNY: Yeah.

NELLY NOOK: You should remember you took all the boots you owned cept the ones presently on your corny feet for trade last month. You got some varmint meat and canned corn.

ANNIE CRANNY: I did that?

NELLY NOOK: Yeah, you did.

ANNIE CRANNY: Gosh darn it! Those was some pretty boots.

NELLY NOOK: Pretty is as pretty does, I always say.

ANNIE CRANNY: Yes, you always do say that.

NELLY NOOK: And how long you been frettin to say you gonna write John Majors, "Dear John" letter?"

ANNIE CRANNY: But I means it this time.

NELLY NOOK: Let me help you. I'll script it for you. You write. "Dear John."

ANNIE CRANNY: (As she writes) "Dear John." (Pause) Do you think I should write his full given name?

NELLY NOOK: If you want. It is a formal correspondence.

ANNIE CRANNY: (As she writes) Dear John Major Minor Sergeant.

NELLY NOOK: Good Riddens!

ANNIE CRANNY: (As she writes) Good Riddens! (Pause)
And I need to add something a little personal like.
(Pause)

(As she writes) I never want to see you again and I won't be seeing you again causing I'm headed west with Nelly Nook.

NELLY NOOK: That leaves the provisions. (Pause) You fill the wagons while I round up the herd.

(Annie collects "movie popcorn" and loads it into the wagon. Nelly gets teddy bears and ties them up with rope. She ties the wagon.)

[Music: Sound Effect of horses moving.]

(Annie and Nelly sit.)

ANNIE CRANNY & NELLY NOOK: (Sung with music)
"Oh give me a home. Where the teddy bears roam. And the big and small critters all play. Where seldom is heard, a prejudiced word. And the skies never have acid rain."

NELLY NOOK: Right on schedule. Making our way west before the chill comes into the air.

ANNIE CRANNY: You mean nightfall.

NELLY NOOK: I mean what I'm meaning. Day and night is the way that it feels. The night will be upon us because my body will feel different. I'll feel the

quiet of the land around us. I'll feel the coziness of the air and the smells of the day going to sleep.

ANNIE CRANNY: I can just see it. Light and dark sky, simple.

NELLY NOOK: That's why I'm richer than you Annie. My feelings never limit me. But your eyes limit you.

ANNIE CRANNY: Speaking of rich. We need to sell the herd in California to the Republicans.

NELLY NOOK: We're not selling the herd to no political party. Those teddy bears is going to the orphans at the Saint Benedicts Home for Displaced Children. It's the right thing to do. Make up your mind Annie. You a part of this gang or not?

ANNIE CRANNY: I is. Just a shame we ain't getting gold for this here herd. Especially Sheila, the bear with the leather jacket. She's one baddass bear. She can't be trained but she could bring in a nice price at auction.

(Nelly and Annie stare at the bear.)

NELLY NOOK: (Changing her gaze to Annie) You put one hand or one foot on that baddass bear and the Nook & Cranny Gang is no more. I'd be a coming for you Annie with more than petticoats.

ANNIE CRANNY: Hold your horses.

NELLY NOOK: I mean the words I be sayin Annie Cranny.

ANNIE CRANNY: I mean. Hold your horses. We reached Blood Bath Mountain.

[Sound Effect: Pulling back the reins
on horses. Sudden stop.]

(Nelly and Annie step off the wagon.)

NELLY NOOK: I feel my body on an angle, but my breathing is steady. Don't feel like a reason to have concern.

ANNIE CRANNY: It's too steep, Nelly. I can see it. More than we could anticipate.

NELLY NOOK: You lettin your eyes put a fright in you.

ANNIE CRANNY: Maybe so. Anywho. We can't make it up the side of this here mountain with horses, wagon, and a herd.

NELLY NOOK: (Giving the horse water) Let's take a moment to ponder our situation. (Pause) This horse ain't scared. The whole body is nice and calm. Still like, almost like it's not alive. (Pause) We can do it. Courage, not fear needs to guide the lead horse.

ANNIE CRANNY: I can't.

NELLY NOOK: Yes, you can.

ANNIE CRANNY: No, I' can't and I won't.

NELLY NOOK: Then I will.

ANNIE CRANNY: If you could see this mountain, you'd know like I know that we need to turn around and find another way.

NELLY NOOK: There is no other way. I can't see the mountain, but I can feel. And my feelings tell me this can be done. Why do you think folks east and west of Missouri call us the Nook & Cranny gang?

ANNIE CRANNY: Because we can find every nook and cranny in the frontier?

NELLY NOOK: Because we find the nooks and crannies and we ain't defeated by them.

ANNIE CRANNY: Then you take the reins and guide the lead horse.

NELLY NOOK: I'll have to throw some ropes to clear a safe way. Unleash the teddy bears. Let the badass bear Sheila lead the pack. Get her on our side and the rest will follow.

(Nelly throws the rope and gets back on the horse. Annie unleashes the bears and puts the badass bear in front of the herd.)

[Sound Effect: Struggles.]

NELLY NOOK: Higher...higher...higher...higher...

ANNIE CRANNY: Get moving teddy bears.

[Sound Effect: Herd moving.]

ANNIE CRANNY: Get moving teddy bears. Come on teddy bears. Hee Haw.

(They sit in the stagecoach.)

NELLY NOOK: Giddy up.

ANNIE CRANNY: Gal, I don't get you at all.

NELLY: What's there to get? I'm a straight shooter. I say what I mean and I mean what I say.

ANNIE CRANNY: Do you ever get scared?

NELLY: My feelings tell me everything. I don't need eyes that have vision. You have sight and your sight is a

deception. My soul feels and my soul belongs only to me. Do you know how I knew I was a brown-skin gal? (To horse) Giddy up.

I could hear the whispers when my Mama and I walked into a general store. I could feel all the shuffling feet to one side of the room real quick-like. The people in the room were uncomfortable. I could feel the touch of my Mama's hand clutching me as if I needed an extra security. Those who loved me and those with a bad taste in their mouth because we were in their plain sight. And everyone in that general store had vision. All they could see was our outsides. They couldn't see my soul. They couldn't see my Mama's soul. If they could, they'd know every living body man, woman, black, white feels. My world has been those who see and those who don't until I learned the secret.

ANNIE CRANNY: Secrets belong to those who see and those that's blind.

NELLY NOOK: The secret? Blind folks usually see more than folks that ain't. We ain't trapped by illusion. Like people that looks like an angel on the outside, and they like a devil on the inside. My feelings, not like your eyes, never do me wrong. The hair stands up on the back of my neck when there is a person is carrying the spirit of the devil within five paces.

ANNIE CRANNY: What about more than five paces?

NELLY NOOK: Then I rely on my memory. I remember all shades of the devil. Folks giving in to a nasty stinkin side of humanity. Some folks just ain't kind.

ANNIE CRANNY: I still say blind people have no advantages. You're not abled people. I could leave you right here in this desert. And sure as silver, you would die because you couldn't see where to go. I wouldn't do that, of course.

NELLY NOOK: Feel that?

ANNIE CRANNY: Feel what?

NELLY NOOK: Little prickly pokes on my face and arms. And the air smells different.

[Sound Effect: Wind/Fan.]

ANNIE CRANNY: My skin's a little prickly, that's all.

NELLY NOOK: (Screaming) Dust storm! Circle the wagons.

[Sound Effect: High winds, panic, wheels moving rapidly.]

(Nelly and Annie drape a cloth around the audience.
Nelly turns on a large standing fan.)

ANNIE CRANNY: We gonna die.

NELLY NOOK: (Feeling with her foot) We gotta anchor the teddy bears to this standing rock.

ANNIE CRANNY: I ain't standing over there. I see bones of dead bodies all around that standing rock.

NELLY NOOK: You gonna be a pile of bones if you don't anchor down with the herd.

NELLY NOOK: I know about these dust storms. They start out fierce, and they tucker out.

ANNIE CRANNY: I gonna die. I'm gonna die.

NELLY NOOK: The herd isn't moaning. The horses aren't runnin. This storm is gonna pass Annie.

[Sound Effect: Fades to calm.]

[Sound Effect: Wind/Fan off.]

ANNIE CRANNY: I was sure it was the end.

NELLY NOOK: I wasn't feelin such.

ANNIE CRANNY: We're not too far from the outpost at Eddie Joe's Bluff. We can water the horses and the herd. We can rest a spell. I'll get the wagons ready.

(Annie moves the cloth from around the audience.)

ANNIE CRANNY (Cont.'d): Badass Sheila Bear wandered away straight ahead of you. Go fetch her. Will you, please?

NELLY NOOK: She'll come back shortly. She's bonded to us.

ANNIE CRANNY: We need her now, not when she good and ready to move on.

NELLY NOOK: Right... Keep workin then.

(Nelly walks over. She struggles to keep her balance as she walks.)

ANNIE CRANNY: Whatcha feelin now Nelly?

NELLY NOOK: Ground ain't steady under my feet.

ANNIE CRANNY: That would be right. I'd reckon if I was over there, we'd be feelin the same thing. Cause you walkin in quicksand.

NELLY NOOK: Come help me, Annie.

ANNIE CRANNY: Fraid I ain't gonna do that. Little busy over here, securing the herd to travel. On my way to sell the herd at auction to the highest bidder at Eddie Joe's Bluff.

NELLY NOOK: You never cared bout those orphans.

ANNIE CRANNY: That would be right.

NELLY NOOK: I never trusted you.

ANNIE CRANNY: Aw. We still friends. We just have a difference of opinion. Time for us to go our separate ways. Not to worry Nelly. Quicksand is just like the name says... Your demise will be quick.

NELLY NOOK: Sheila? (Reaching for Badass Bear.)

[Sound Effect: Sound of stagecoach and horses moving away.]

(Annie dismantles the stagecoach and all items of the frontier.)

NELLY NOOK: Annie, don't let me die this way. Help me.

(Return to present day living room.)

NELLY NOOK (Cont.'d): Help me.

ANNE: I told you I'd help you get to the clinic for your appointment. Sorry about the English Muffins. Burned a little. Where did you get that dog?

NELL: Dog?

ANNE: That stuffed dog you're holding.

NELL: It's a bear to me. It's one of the few things I find comforting.

ANNE: It's a dog. Feel the ears. But it's cute. I like the bandana.

NELL: You need to leave now.

ANNE: Sure, we can leave now.

NELL: No, you. Go. I don't want you around me, in my apartment, breathing the same oxygen, taking little trinkets because you think I don't know, using me to make yourself feel big and encouraging me to feel weak and less than...

ANNE: I understand. You're a little anxious about surgery.

NELL: I'm not anxious. I may not have surgery. I'm gonna think about it. Right now, I'll do what I know for sure. Cut people out of my life that are dead weight, pulling me down like quicksand, beginning with you.

ANNE: We've been

NELL: No, we haven't been friends. I've been drowning and holding on to you like a lifeline.

ANNE: I've encouraged you.

NELL: You've encouraged me to feel broken.

ANNE: You can't manage without someone to help you.

NELL: I'm going to rely on myself more. And I'm going to find a way to spend more time with my people...
The Blind.

(Lights Out)

(End of Play)

Writer's Note: Improvisational music is underscored throughout the play that has western rhythms and themes. When indicated in the script, this highlights an emotional change in the story that should be accompanied by emotional changes in the musical score.