

# The Silences of Ararat



# 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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# The Silences of Ararat

by  
L. Timmel Duchamp





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*For Nisi Shaml, a true alanya.*



You've often asked me why I've stayed in Ararat, against, as you say, all reason. That's a question that has twice in my life here occurred to me, but that I almost reflexively brushed aside. It's funny, in a way, because you'd think that from Ararat's founding on, leaving must have been a no-brainer, while in my own mind, it was staying here that was the no-brainer, in the sense that it has always seemed too obvious for me even to think about. But probably my biggest obstacle in finding a simple answer to your question is the difficulty I've acquired, living here, of putting forbidden thoughts and ideas into words. So much of the story involves forbidden things, which is why I haven't tried to tell you any of this face to face, on your rare visits here.

I have a feeling you're likely to say, after reading this memoir, that while I've given you a long, complicated answer to what you probably assumed was a simple question, I've dodged other important questions that my account raises in your mind. And you would probably be right. But maybe that's an index of the difference your living in Philadelphia and my living in Ararat has made to our respective lives.

I intend to give this to you to take back to Philadelphia with you on your next visit here. I am counting on you not to let anyone else see it for as long as I'm alive, and to keep it safely concealed. Yes, I'll be putting a spell on it to make it invisible to whomever lays eyes on the physical manuscript. But who knows how long such spells even last?

May you be as responsible as you need to be.

—Paulina





## 1.

In memory, that summer of crisis is suffused with thick golden light, tinting everybody and everything as though in an old, cheaply-developed still photograph. In the natural world, light that golden belongs not to late July and August, but to late December and January, when the sun barely buds above the horizon; and such winter light is always, of course, thin and without warmth, not thick and sweltering. That summer glows in my memory because that was the summer I really saw Hermione, really took in more than the façade created by her branding, and began to feel more for her than casual, detached affection. And because, toward the end, it finished off for good what remained of my sense of wholeness.

That summer, Hermione had it all. Everyone in Ararat, including Hermione herself, said so. Her husband adored her, and her husband's subjects idolized her. Her son enjoyed the best of health, excelled in everything princes were expected to do, and was so handsome, the women at Court liked to say, that he looked "good enough to eat." To top that off, she had just landed a small speaking part in a professional production of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. And last but not least, she was pregnant with a second child—by choice.

Her husband's PR machine went absolutely nuts with this second pregnancy, branding her a veritable blonde Madonna. (In Ararat, no Madonna could ever be holy,

but this one came as close as one could get.) Well, why wouldn't Leo's PR machine go all out? Consider: she suffered not a moment's morning sickness (in contrast to her first pregnancy, when she'd puked several times a day for six of the nine months), and she radiated Madonna-like beauty and health, making pregnancy look like a champagne and strawberry picnic. Inspired by the images of her plastering all social media sites, many of her husband's subjects themselves deliberately conceived, imagining that pregnancy would make them bloom, too. (Ararat actually had a mini baby-boom, for a few months putting a blip on years of population decline.) When one pundit remarked of the Queen, "Now *there's* an example of true womanliness," the rest of the pack adopted the comment and applied it to the Queen whenever her name or the fact of her presence at a royal event appeared in a news report. "Womanliness" in Ararat usually indicated weakness and irrationality. Thanks to Leo's PR machine, for one brief moment, it became a label to be cherished.

Hermione flung herself into the rebranding with abandon. Dropping her trademark crisp, trim look, the Queen favored flowing gowns foaming with white lace that complimented the peaches-and-cream lusciousness of her skin, revealing her pregnancy as a discreet but palpable roundness that made everyone who saw her long to press their hands against. Ararat's public discourse privileged the expression of both proprietary and proud sentiments, and thousands of people emailed her messages of support and suggestions for diet and exercise and what music it would be best for the royal fetus to hear. Although the Queen read none of the public's

emails herself, every time she spoke into a microphone she offered general thanks to all those who sent them for their wonderful support.

I have to admit, the branding of her image, combining “white” purity with womanly fecundity, revolted me. In person, though, I barely noticed it, distracted by the glimpses I began to see of an intensity I’d never before noticed. Those glimpses intrigued me. Maybe, I thought, there was something below the surface of wifely perfection composed of expensive grooming and constant deference to her husband and his most trusted advisers. Hermione was, after all, an actor. It was just possible she was consciously playing the role of the young third trophy wife and not merely following the script without noticing she was doing so.

It was such an old, tired script.

I kept reminding myself that the very idea that her conformity was conscious was so attractive to me that it was likely wishful thinking. Needless to say, I kept my speculations to myself.

## 2.

A lot was going on that summer besides the usual deaths from the brutal summer heat and wildfire smoke that hung over most of the continent like a pall that the news media serving all the member states of the Congress of Christian American States were careful not to report. The King’s mother, Lady Elena, and his brother Paul, the Prince of New Canaan, were on an extended visit to the Court, and because of that, the royal couple hosted large parties every night at dinner. Certain topics

were always beaten to death at these dinners (or at least at the ones I attended). The Minister of Trade continually urged the King to wage war against the (putatively) godless Republic of Cascadia for its health and safety regulations, which barred many of Ararat's products from being sold there. Worst of all, members of the Moral Purity party, including most of the King's ministers, campaigned hard to persuade the King to criminalize sexual relations (defined loosely as "involving any genital contact") outside of marriage. This drove me nuts, particularly since the King often ranted about the need for female chastity. Whenever I heard such rants, I had to bite my tongue, because I kept wanting to ask him if he thought all the women he'd had relations with outside of marriage should be shamed and jailed. When I asked Andrew, my husband, about it, he shook his head at me and put his finger over his lips. We were in bed, so this surprised me. Did he think the King's men had bugged our bedroom? When I raised my eyebrows at him, he said into my ear, "Do you *really* think he'd care?" We never, of course, spoke of it again.

Although no one at Court ever talked about it, another hot topic that summer was Steven Arundel's production of *Measure for Measure*, scheduled to debut on September 10. Many people thought that Steven had given the role of Juliet to the Queen as insurance against the backlash that performing *Measure for Measure* anywhere in Ararat would likely provoke. More than one preacher asserted that possibility as fact and called for the King to save his Queen from being used as the pawn of the (putatively) godless entertainment industry. I knew Steven well at that time, but he brushed me off every time I tried to

discuss the political implications of the production with him. The Queen had been a professional actor before her marriage. She had taken a long leave from the theater when she married and had only recently begun to play small, roles. Although Steven claimed he paid no attention to politics and routinely displayed ingenuous surprise when one of his productions stirred up controversy, I had long seen through his pose. Steven knew exactly how and when to push his audience's buttons: and he delighted in doing so.

When I asked him pointblank if he hoped that the Queen would preserve the production from pickets or even bombs, he said, "She makes a beautiful Juliet, don't you think? And how much better a real pregnancy is than a cushion strapped to the stomach." Reading between the lines, I understood him to be saying not only that the audience would allow themselves to feel sympathetic to the pregnant-out-of-wedlock Juliet, but also that the Moral Purity people would be deterred from offering even the slightest threat of violence to Ararat's own purest-of-pure Madonna.

Steven was right, of course. The Moral Purity party never did turn against her. They, like the rest of the nation, were in love with her image—even when their infatuation required pretending ignorance of the subject matter of a play the preachers told them was an abomination to the Lord. I've no doubt that if tragedy hadn't struck the royal family, the play would have been a runaway success, and the Moral Purity party would have backed down in the face of the Queen's involvement in the play.

No, only one person in Ararat ever turned against the Queen. And he was the last person any of us at Court imagined doing so.

### 3.

Elena Golke Summers Thibodeux had always favored her younger son over the older. Her son Leo knew it; her son Paul knew it; and everyone in Leo's court knew it. Sometimes Leo claimed he didn't mind, but most of the time he outright denied it. In the bitterest hours of the night, when everyone in the palace but a dozen or so servants and security officers were sleeping, he would toss and turn under the merciless lash of the conclusion he inevitably arrived at: there must be something hideously unlovable in his character if his own mother rejected the son who not only had used his share of the family's billions to accomplish Great and Impressive Deeds but also (or so he believed) exemplified the character of the upright man of profoundest integrity, in favor of the one who charmed with an ever-flowing stream of lies and exaggerations, the one whose accomplishments offered only a pale reflection of his older brother's. At such times he would phone this minister or that, this "friend" or that, and demand assurances from them that he was the best son a mother could have, and that if his mother refused to acknowledge it, it was because she was stupid, or because someone—usually Paul—had been telling her lies, or because she was "taking it out" on him. At such times, he liked to be told ("reminded of" as he liked to say) a particular one of his many self-narratives, viz. that he had had to bootstrap himself to greatness, without

any help from anyone, being, as it were, completely, “in every respect,” self-made. (Never mind the billions he had inherited.) I know this, because Andrew often had to assure him of this “fact” during a middle-of-the night phone call, and though Andrew more often than not left the bedroom when taking such calls, I heard enough of this on those occasions when he didn’t leave the room to have it all down by heart. (Andrew always left the room when the matter of discussion was one of “security,” but not always when the King’s need for stroking was the point of the call.)

I’ll admit I sometimes wondered, with the resentment of someone woken out of a sound sleep, why the Queen’s assurances weren’t enough. In the sharp light of morning, though, I knew why. Hermione sufficed to stroke his ego during the few fleeting moments he was pumping his cock into her (and if you’re wondering just how I can be so certain about how brief and fleeting were those moments: please be assured, I have it only through corroborative hearsay). And he always got a boost when he saw videos and stills of her at his side, beaming wifely adoration on him. But he needed more than just Hermione’s stroking to soothe his fear that his mother didn’t love him unconditionally and more than any other person in the world (including Paul): he needed the assurances of men who were respected in the world, whose adulation he craved more than anyone’s but his mother’s.

It was true that Paul had, by means best left unexamined, managed to become a ruler on his own hook—but of a principality that was barely capable of keeping itself from being absorbed by its neighbors. And although Paul

proclaimed values that sounded (in speeches, anyway) like Leo's, his little principality was riddled with corruption from his Chief Advisor to the mayor of every city and town to the sanitation contractors. Every policeman in the Principality of New Canaan took bribes; every government official enriched himself through graft. (The ones who resisted peer pressure usually came to terrible ends.) The very length of his stay in Ararat showed just how little interest Paul took in controlling his ministers and providing a strong, paternal example to his subjects. Leo knew that if he'd been visiting New Canaan, he could not have stayed more than ten days—if that long. Leo had a deep, abiding fear that his ministers and advisers would pursue their own agenda absent his personal, paranoid vigilance. I have it on good authority that Leo sometimes suspected that his ministers and advisers had chosen him to head their monarchy only because of the money he'd poured into the "Ararat Project" (which is how insiders talked about their violent revolution back then).

Leo, of course, did everything he could to encourage Paul to prolong his visit, for Paul's presence was the price of Lady Elena's visit to Ararat. And so the King aimed his entertainments at pleasing Prince Paul rather than Lady Elena. When on July 31 the prince announced that he (and therefore Lady Elena) would be departing the next morning, the King, desperate to keep that from happening, urged his lovely Madonna of a queen, to whom no one could refuse a thing that summer, to do everything in her power to persuade Prince Paul to stay. He exhorted her before not only Prince Paul and Lady Elena, but half of the court as well. "Speak," he said to



her. “You’ve got to get them to stay at least a week longer. I’m not good at saying the kinds of things our nearest and dearest need to hear, so you do it for me. Let them know how we really, truly feel about their leaving us.”

Everyone present knew Prince Paul should have gone months ago. Something about the way he’d repeatedly planned to leave and then put it off had created a weird sense of unreality, of time suspended. And because most of us had long since tired of the prince’s slippery, pathological charms and drunken escapades, we figuratively held our breath, hoping he would stand firm—hoping that the King was not serious in his declared wish to get his brother to stay even longer.

I thought I saw the Queen’s brows contracting into a frown, but when she looked at the prince and bowed slightly, her face smoothed into an embodiment of warmth and affection, and I knew she had gone into actor mode.

I’d long suspected that Prince Paul irritated, even disgusted her, as he did me. (Since he usually pretended I didn’t exist, I seldom had to render him personal deference, which Hermione had to do often.) He frequently teased and mocked her for being “cultured”—for liking theater, opera, and dance, for sitting with her head bent over a book whenever she could, for talking, he claimed, “like a dictionary.” But the Queen hated discord and was an actor of considerable skill. And she had made an art of pleasing her husband. So she took the prince’s hands between her own and smiled into his eyes. “Please, say you’ll stay,” she said. “It would mean so much to us. Really, Paul. You can’t go yet. And there’s no reason to, is

there? Everything's fine in New Canaan. We would have heard if it weren't. You can afford to stay another week."

"Lovely sister mine," the prince said. And he pulled her hand to his mouth and planted a wet, full-contact kiss on the back of it. Anyone could see he loved having her suck up to him. But then he was used to flattery from his mother, and I'd heard he'd turned against his wife when a few months after they'd been married she began tapering the steady stream of it she had used to snare him. His smile was smug and patronizing. "But this time I'm serious. And besides, Bella will kill me if I put her off again."

The Queen shook her head and frowned at him. "And I'm serious, too, Paul. If you can't be generous enough to give us just one more week, I'll be compelled to take you prisoner. Lock you away and feed you on bread and water. And force you to tell me all the stories about you and Leo the two of you have been holding back from me."

Paul tossed his fluffy blond head and guffawed, flashing his teeth in an evil grin: the Queen had piqued his interest. She was practically inviting him to tell whoppers designed to embarrass the King. "So that's why you don't want me to go? So I can tell you what bad boys Leo and I were before we were Born Again?"

The Queen laughed low in her throat and flirted her eyes in the King's direction, drawing attention to his predictable scowl. Prince Paul, as she no doubt intended, saw it and howled with laughter like a bear that has lost its mind. The King forced himself to laugh also, and soon every Minister and courtier present was smiling and laughing to order as well. And then Prince Paul said

loudly that he preferred not to be locked up and tortured even by so lovely a sister, and so he would extend his visit for another week. And that if his brother didn't like having his secrets spilled, tough shit.

And so the King got another week with his mother—and the Queen was stuck with the burden of charming and stroking a man who made her skin crawl.

4.

The Queen had rehearsals that first week in August, which allowed her at least some time away from Court. She had lines in only a scant two scenes, but Steven had worked her presence into several others, where she appeared in a window above and behind the scripted action, off-scene and imperceptible to the characters. When she wasn't in rehearsal, though, obedient as always to Leo, she personally saw to Paul's entertainment.

The King diverted as much time as he could spare to the Lady Elena—who in turn spent every moment she could with her grandson, Max, whom she declared to be the spitting image of his father at the same age and very like to his cousin Florizel, six months his junior.

On the surface, everything appeared at Court much as usual. Prince Paul's verbal excesses and alcohol-fueled raucousness offered nothing new, except that the Queen, who never touched a drop of alcohol during either of her pregnancies, was now in the evening always nearby, feigning eagerness for each new story about the King and Prince's boyhood escapades. The King kept his bone-achingly thin and bottle-blond mother beside him, leaning into her, his mouth mere inches from the

diamond bobs dripping from her earlobes, confiding to her in a voice pitched too low for anyone else to hear what I imagine were boasts of his importance and success, through which he hoped to win her approval. Occasionally he dared to put his pudgy hand on her arm, only to have her brush it off.

The day after the Queen persuaded Prince Paul to stay, though, I detected a difference below the Court's surface at the reception before dinner. Max, standing beside his mother and uncle, tugged on his mother's hand, annoyed that he did not have her and his uncle's attention. He wanted to tell them a story, he kept saying, a story that his grandmother thought *excellent*. Prince Paul, though, continued to hold the floor; he had no intention of stopping in the middle of *his* story. And while Prince Max pulled at one of the Queen's hands, Prince Paul played with the other, running his finger over the palm, tapping its knuckles, smoothing his thumb over the inside of the wrist. I felt revulsion on the Queen's behalf—but then was struck by the expression on the King's face. He stood several yards away, in conversation with Andrew and Cam Rogers. But though he was speaking with them, his attention had zoomed in on and shrunk to an invisibly demarcated sphere containing his wife, brother, and son. I wondered where Lady Elena was, looked around for her, and found her seated in one of the few chairs in the salon, sipping white wine, attended by the Queen's secretary, Janet, and Emilia, Cam Rogers's wife.

Something in the King's pouting face sent my body into a cold sweat. When the moment at last passed, I sagged with the physical exhaustion that follows an

adrenalin rush. Max's governess led him away, and the adults went in to dinner. The King turned his attention to Lady Elena, seated on his right, which was very much as usual. And yet, when Lady Elena engaged in a lengthy exchange with Andrew, who was seated on her right, the King's gaze focused at once on the other end of the table, particularly on the Queen, seated at the foot—and on Prince Paul, seated on her right. From where I sat I could not see Prince Paul. I didn't need to, though, since the Queen's head was tilted in his direction, her face all warmth and listening interest, her fingers toying idly with the stem of her water goblet.

A pattern established itself. Every subsequent evening I watched the King watching his wife entertain his brother. Usually Max was present, playing some sort of game with the two of them or competing with Paul for his grandmother's favor. I wanted to warn the Queen, but we were not then close enough to warrant my offering her advice.

Making the situation worse, while the Queen dutifully distracted Paul, leaving her husband an open field with his mother, Lady Elena gave him little more than the usual scant attention he had been getting from her all along. The image of the three of them—Hermione, Paul, and Max—intimate, laughing, engaged—no doubt burned itself into his mind and became intricately entwined with the ever-open wound of his mother's preference.

On the fifth day after Prince Paul and Lady Elena had extended their visit, Andrew phoned in the middle of the morning to tell me that the King (referred to, only, as "he") had really, really lost it, beyond, he said, any other instance of his losing it, which was, as he knew I knew,

saying something. I was at the theater, painting flats, and had to go out into the alley for privacy.

I remember Andrew saying, “I’m between a rock and a hard place, Paulina. Someone needs to make him see reason. Or rather, recover it—because it’s like he’s lost it altogether.”

We did not dare to openly name the King. But since we’d been discussing the problem of the King’s smoldering rage every time we were alone, we did not need to.

“He’s asked Cam Rogers to...”

He couldn’t go on, and I could only guess the reason for that. “Maybe this conversation had better wait,” I said.

“I need to talk to you. Cam... Cam had to talk to me. And now...”

“You want to meet me at home?” I asked.

“No. Better not. Better meet at the duck pond in the park.”

Andrew *never* needed to talk to me in the middle of the day. I glanced down at my paint-wet hands and paint-stained work shirt. “Half an hour,” I said.

He got to the park before I did. I found him pacing in the grass, his hair wild, his shoulders hunched, his mouth grim. He halted when he saw me and pulled me to him when I got close. He put his face against mine and whispered into my ear. “Leo’s ordered Cam to have Paul purged.”

If someone had told me that Paul had ordered Leo killed, I would not have been surprised, only curious to know the reason. Paul, after all, was a shady character reigning over a corrupt principality. But *Leo*? Mr. Born-Again Upright himself? Leo, of course, never hesitated to order hits on those he judged threats to his own (and

thus Ararat's) security. But to have someone taken out for patently personal reasons? I pulled back so that I could see Andrew's face. "That's hard to believe," I said.

"Believe it." Andrew's eyes had become bottomless pools of terror. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Because when Cam refused to do it and urged the King to reconsider, Leo accused him of being in on the plot to destroy him."

"Plot? What plot?"

"That's exactly how Cam replied to Leo. 'What plot?' And then got an earful about the Queen's being pregnant with Paul's child and how Max was a bastard the Queen had tricked him into believing his own, how Paul's had his eye on Ararat for years and is intending to take a contract out on him so he can take over once Leo is dead."

This lunatic farrago of paranoia sounded to me like middle-of-the-night suspicions and imaginings. "So what is Cam going to do?" I asked.

Andrew's lips tightened, and his gaze locked with mine. "He's resigned his position as CEO of Ararat and gone home to pack. My guess is that he's decided he'd better go into exile—at least until the King has recovered his sanity."

What Andrew guessed but did not tell me was that Cam Rogers went to Prince Paul and told him that to be safe he'd better get out of Dodge before sundown. What he did not guess (but which we learned later) was that Cam had also asked Paul for a job, and Paul, out of gratitude for the heads-up, had promised to make him *his* CEO, once the two of them and Lady Elena were safe within the borders of New Canaan.