

Sinking, Singing

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 93

Sinking, Singing

Short Fiction by
Gwynne Garfinkle





Published by Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

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ISBN: 978-1-61976-270-1

Cover and book design by Kathryn Wilham
Cover music lines from “To Points Unknown”—
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Cover bookcase photo courtesy Kathryn Wilham

Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin
Kempton:
www.writersmugs.com

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

Acknowledgments

“We Gotta Get Out of This Place”: *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*, Vol. 10, Issue 1, 2020

“Emily and the What-if Imp”: *Fantasy Magazine*, Issue 72, October 2021

“Sinking, Singing”: *Not One of Us*, #60, October 2018

“Beyond and Back”: *Not One of Us*, #70, April 2022

“The Clockwork Cat’s Escape”: *The Clockwork Junglebook* (*Shimmer*, Issue 11)

“The Two Mrs. Mansfields”: *Not One of Us*, #63, March 2020

“A Wild Patience”: *GigaNotoSaurus*, April 1, 2020

“Resolution,” “The Discography of Theodore Grayson,” “De Bergerac Duels His Dragon,” and “A Good Cast Is Worth Repeating” are previously unpublished.

For Alta

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We Gotta Get Out of This Place

My mom used to drop me off at Ye Olde Rummage Room on Saturday afternoons when I was thirteen. I bought my copy of the Rolling Stones' *Big Hits (High Tide and Green Grass)* there; the disc was a little warped, but the cover included a booklet of color photos of the forbiddingly gorgeous young Rolling Stones. The shop consisted of a few rooms cluttered with old clothes (before the term "vintage" came into vogue), magazines, what else? Knickknacks, baseball cards, Kewpie dolls? I seem to recall doilies on the tables, braided rugs on the floors. But I was laser-focused on one corner that contained a bin of old LPs and a rack of 1960s teen magazines.

One day I was flipping through LPs by Donovan, Herman's Hermits, and Elvis, when I found a copy of *The Best of the Animals*, with Eric Burdon and the rest of the band posing sulkily on the cover. I took the LP out of its paper sleeve. Would there be fine spiderwebby scratches, or deep gouges to make the needle skip? Side one looked okay, aside from a spatter of fingerprints, and I flipped the record over.

I stared in incomprehension: my name was carved in haphazard capital letters into the inner groove, along with a couple of jagged Xs. Time seemed to stand still in the shop. I looked around; there was no one else in the room or what I could see of the next room. For all I

knew, there was no one else in the store aside from the woman behind the counter. The cozy browsing atmosphere of the place had changed to something fraught.

I put the album back in the sleeve and examined the cover. It was in decent shape, with no markings aside from the store's \$2 sticker. I looked at the disc again, and my name and those Xs confronted me once more. Could the record have belonged to someone with my name? That seemed like an awfully big coincidence. I'd never known anyone whose first name was spelled the same way as mine. Could someone I knew have put the record here for me to find? There were plenty of kids at school who disliked me (mostly because I liked sixties music better than top 40), but none who would go out of their way to do such a thing. Besides, I didn't think any of them even knew about this place. No one but my mom knew I was going to the Rummage Room today, and I hadn't been in several weeks. How could this be happening? My face felt hot, my hands cold.

I slid the LP inside the cover again and glanced at my watch. It was about time for my mom to pick me up. I didn't want the album now, but I couldn't bring myself to leave it, either. I brought it to the counter at the front of the store. The stout, gray-haired woman took my cash and put the LP in a paper bag. I went outside and stood at the curb on Woodman watching cars drift by. The sun was beginning to set. I had on jeans and a t-shirt, and my arms felt a bit chilly. The cars, the trees, the sun itself seemed unreal. In a couple of minutes, my mom's car pulled up.

"Did you find something good?" Mom asked cheerfully as we headed home.

I shrugged. “Just one album.” I’d been in such a good mood when she’d dropped me off. Now everything felt wrong.

At home, I propped the paper bag containing the LP against my shelves of albums. I turned on the radio, sat on my bed, and stared at the bag as if there were a malevolent entity inside it, invading my room plastered with Beatles posters. “Under My Thumb” came on the radio, which somehow made me feel worse, though I loved that song.

Mom had made chicken, rice, and green beans for dinner. I silently pushed the green beans around my plate. Every minute or so I pictured those carved letters on the LP’s inner groove, and a jolt of adrenaline went through me. “Are you sure you don’t want to go to the movie with us?” Mom asked.

“What are you seeing, again?” I asked.

“*An Unmarried Woman*,” Dad said. “It’s supposed to be good.”

I chewed and swallowed a bit of chicken. “I just don’t feel like going.” I noticed my parents’ looks of amiable concern. They couldn’t help me, not with this.

When my parents left for the movie, I wished I’d gone with them after all. I thought about calling my best friend Elsie and telling her about the album, but I knew it would sound crazy. Maybe she would even think I’d defaced the LP myself. I couldn’t tell her or anyone. I sat on my bed and listened to the occasional sounds of my neighborhood—a door slamming, a car driving off, a dog barking. Finally I got up and took the record out of the bag. I looked at the disc again. My name and the Xs were still there. Had I hoped I’d imagined the whole thing? Maybe that would have been even worse.

Was there something obscene about the Xs, or were they more generally threatening? Threatening to X me out?

I put the album on my turntable and sat on the bed with my arms wrapped around my knees. Side one sounded fine. A little surface noise, but nothing out of the ordinary. I was listening too carefully for anything strange to enjoy the English R&B music. “House of the Rising Sun” with its eerie keyboard and howling vocals was too ominous for me right now, even though it was the main reason I’d wanted to buy the album.

Heart pounding, I got up, turned the record to the side with my name and the Xs, and sat on my bed again. There was a fair bit of crackling surface noise on the first track, “We Gotta Get Out of This Place.” I let out a gasp: men’s voices were whispering in the surface noise. *Be careful the world is not yours. How dare you think the music belongs to you? The world is ours, never forget.* The men kept whispering, sometimes inaudible, sometimes crystal clear in their contempt. Sometimes it was one man, sometimes a murmuring chorus. I couldn’t tell how many of them there were. *Who do you think you are? Ugly little girl. You’re nothing. The music is ours. The world is ours.*

I got to my feet and crept to the turntable as if towards a rattling snake. I pulled the stylus off the album, stood there breathing fast. Then I lifted the record off the spindle. I held the album in my hands, the carved words and the Xs menacing me. I was tempted to bend the record until it broke, take the pieces outside, and throw them in the trash.

It really wasn’t fair. I’d always liked the Animals whenever K-Earth or KRLA played them. I had paid my two dollars and change for the album. The music was mine

as much as anyone else's. Who were these men to tell me anything?

I put the LP back on the turntable and put the needle down at the start of side two. "We've Gotta Get Out of This Place" started to play again. When the surface noise began, I made myself listen past the whispering men. I tapped my foot to the rhythm. Then I began to dance. I waved my arms and shuffled my feet. I must have looked goofy, but it felt good. It felt free. I danced defiantly around my room. I could breathe again. I danced to Eric Burdon's guttural voice that warned of my untimely death. Those men's voices would always be there, but I moved to the song of escape.

Emily and the What-if Imp

Emily was nine years old when she met the what-if imp. She was rereading her favorite book when the thing she loved turned sour. Something had its hooks in her mind. It worried her like a dog's teeth as she sat motionless on her bed. "What if you ran away?" the what-if imp asked. "What if you ran away from home, like the girl in the book?"

It made no sense. Emily didn't want to run away from home. She had no museum to run to, no little brother to travel with. She had two older brothers, but she knew they wouldn't want to go with her. Still the what-if imp said, "You must want to run away."

Days passed. At school and in her room Emily pondered running away from home, though she couldn't imagine going farther than a few blocks. It would not be an adventure like in the book. It would be no fun at all. She tried to figure out what to pack. She only had a few dollars. She grew more and more miserable.

Finally she told her mother. "But why do you want to run away from home?" she asked.

"I don't want to!" Emily said. "I just can't stop thinking about it. It's like *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*."

Her mother smiled and patted her shoulder. "You don't have to run away. It's okay." After that, she teased

Emily about how she'd liked a book so much, it made her think she had to run away. Her brothers found out and teased her too. No one understood. Still, telling her mother had broken the spell. Emily thought the what-if imp was gone. Instead it curled up inside her and slept.

It slept a long time. Ten years later it sprang forth fully grown. "You're reading about a woman who stabbed her lover with a knife," the imp said. "What if you wanted to stab your boyfriend, or maybe one of your friends?"

Emily looked up from the paperback she was reading on her dorm room bed. "But I don't want to do that. I know I don't."

"But what if, what if, what if?" the imp sang.

"I don't, I don't, I don't!" The more she protested, the more agitated she became. Was there a way to prove she wasn't a danger to those she loved?

"There is a way," the imp said. "If you ponder for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Emily pondered. Her mind filled with squiggles of misery. She felt sick inside with counterfeit danger and genuine shame. Deep down she knew none of this was real, but by now she had spent so much time thinking about it, surely it had to mean something. She had to be a horrible person to think such things.

"That's true," the imp said with a smirk, as it tied her into cobwebs of nonsense that tightened when she struggled. "You must be a horrible person."

Finally the imp fell asleep and left Emily in peace. She thought it was gone. Months later it popped up again, stronger than before. Traitorous what-if imp, ugly twin of her imagination! Emily knew she had to do something.

Dr. W. gave Emily pills and told her to think of the imp as a brain burp, which Emily found vaguely comforting and made the imp feel insulted. The pills didn't help, and the imp returned after flouncing off and sulking for a few days.

Dr. X. thought the imp came from Emily's repressed anger. The imp preened at its increased importance. Emily didn't think she had any repressed anger, and the imp never showed up when she felt angry.

Emily read in a book by Dr. Y. that she could get rid of the imp by snapping a rubber band on her wrist whenever it appeared. Her smarting wrist only made the imp more lively. It played jump rope with the rubber band and sang "What if, what if?" in time to its skips.

Then Emily found Dr. Z's website, which described another tactic. She resolved to try it. One day the imp was doing a wild dance, juggling knives and chanting, "What if you used these, what if, what if?" The knives flashed and glittered in the air.

Emily lunged for one of the knives. It vanished before she could catch it, and the imp, startled, dropped the others, which disappeared before they hit the ground. Emily took a step forward. "More, more!" she said. "More phantom knives, more hypothetical horrors, give me more!"

The imp stood frozen, as if it had stage fright. Then it crept back inside her so quietly she couldn't detect its presence. "I know you're in there," Emily yelled. "Come out and show me what you've got!" But the imp hid.

The next time it issued forth with its what-ifs, Emily laughed. "Is that all?" she jeered. The imp spun faster with its knives and its terrible visions. It was trying so

hard to impress her. It all seemed a little pathetic. The imp began to shrink. Emily loomed over it. Out of breath, the imp retreated inside her once more.

Now that the imp was so small, Emily had more room in her mind to spin words and stories, even the convoluted plot of a novel—although she suspected that the imp, bored with nothing else to do, was helping her to juggle plot threads. Still, Emily knew the imp was lying in wait, hoping to batten and unfurl at the first sign of weakness.

Emily and the what-if imp coexisted more or less peacefully. She knew she would never be rid of it. From time to time she had to dance with it until it grew tired. They whirled together amid the phantom knives. Then the imp curled up inside her and slept, and Emily went on with her life, until the next time.