

Conversation Pieces
Volume 11

Talking Back

Epistolary Fantasies
edited by
L. Timmel Duchamp





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From: Victoria Elisabeth Garcia



To:

Sarah Winchester

Architect of "The Winchester Mystery House"

San Jose, CA

c/o Boot Hill Cemetery

Dear Mrs. Winchester:

About twenty years ago, I sat on a stone bench in your garden, squinting at your roses and trying not to cry. I was in my early teens. Along with a dozen other vacationers, I had just toured your house. We had trouped through in a tight herd, following a guide whose voice swooped and rose like a vaudeville comic's.



The first chapterbooks I ever had were collections of ghost stories. When I ran out of children's collections, I started getting the grown-up silver ones with die-cut covers. I needed ghosts, the same way some little girls need horses. If there'd been a ghost stable I could have visited, where I could have gone to currycomb the spirits of the restless dead and whisper to them and braid their clammy hanks of hair, I would have.



You were in all the best ghost books, you and your specter-stuffed Victorian folly. In your younger days, according to the books, you were a much sought-after socialite, the prettiest girl in New Haven, Connecticut.

Victoria Elisabeth Garcia

Your name was Sarah Padre. When you turned sixteen, you flirted and danced and pinned your hair up, and before long, you caught the eye of William Winchester. Your family was certainly not poor, but William was rich beyond imagining, the heir to the Winchester Repeating Rifle Company's fortune.

Your baby daughter died when you were 27. You never had another. Fifteen years later, William caught tuberculosis and followed her, and then you were alone. Grief froze you, and the world went thundercloud gray. It was like choking on an ice storm. Your sister, who had married William's brother, took your place as first lady of the company. You would never plan the menu for a business gala again, or take the arm of another General.



I'm filling in gaps, now. I mean no disrespect. Rap once if you object.



A psychic in Boston told you that you had been targeted by the spirits of the thousands killed by the Winchester Repeating Rifles. On his advice, you sold everything and sped out to California, trying to put miles between you and the curse. It worked, or at least it seemed to. Flat, scrubby California loosened misery's vise a little. Grief's cold grayness warmed a little and became a color less like iron and more like dry chaparral. According to a book that I can no longer find, you went, first, to the middle of the Mojave, and you built an ark in which you lived for months, waiting for a flood to come and wash a new world in. That didn't

To: Sarah Winchester

happen. The only thing that flooded in was Winchester money—a thousand dollars a day, more money than you needed, more money than you wanted, from a company that never stopped making ghosts.



More gaps to fill in. I wish I could do something other than make up your feelings. I wish I could do something other than make up your life. Rap once if you would rather not be made up.



When you came out of the desert, you went to San Jose, bought a twelve-room farmhouse, and you started to build. They say you believed that if you ever stopped building, the ghosts of all those killed by the products of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company would catch you and suck you away to the other side. Others say that you were building a home for the ghosts, a cozy, twisting nautilus shell to share. You hired over a dozen workmen and built stairways that ended in ceilings, doors that dropped off into nothingness, a séance room with a secret entrance. You never knew more than a day in advance what you were going to build. Hallways branched and corkscrewed, and whole rooms were swallowed by the incessant outward spread. You spent thousands of dollars on Tiffany lamps, rare woods, gingerbreading, and fantastical windows with spiderwebs and cryptic quotations. You were building for yourself. You were building for William and your daughter, for dead soldiers, and for dead Indians. You were building, some say, as a way of stabbing at the Winchester Repeating Rifle Company and your sister

Victoria Elisabeth Garcia

and brother-in-law. You were intentionally wasting resources. You were spending for the sake of making the money go away.¹ From 1884 until your death in 1922, the hammers never stopped falling.



I say, *They say*. I mean, *I think I used to have a chapbook that said; or Wasn't there once some staple-bound gossip sheet from a county historical society that talked about...* Your story is a river, fed by tributaries true and untrue, verifiable and unverifiable. Rap once if you object to being a river. Rap twice if there is something else you would rather be.



In 1987, I came to California for a parliamentary procedure championship with my best friend, my mother, her secretary, and the secretary's six-year-old daughter. My best friend wanted to see movie stars. The secretary wanted clothes. My mother wanted to eat seafood and wander around San Francisco, the way she had when she was in her twenties, but all I wanted was you.

I dragged everyone miles and miles out of the way. All of them complained. The six-year-old spent the drive sullenly squishing grapes against the hot inside surface of the car window. I think she was trying to make fruit leather.

When we reached San Jose, the secretary and the six-year-old took off for downtown, to look for boutiques. The rest of us went on the tour. There were red ropes everywhere. There was plastic under our feet. After your death, in accordance with your wishes, all your furniture was sold, but your house has since been

refilled with reasonable approximations. We saw those. We stopped to count the thirteen coat hooks in one room, the thirteen circular coffers in the window of another. We saw two staircases that ran smack into the ceiling, one chimney that missed the ceiling entirely, one door that opened onto a drop-off, four windows that opened onto bricks. It was exactly what I expected to see, and yet, that wasn't it at all.

My mother, who is friendly and nice, laughed at all the tour guide's jokes. He told two per room.



Now that I'm grown, I spend a great deal of time with people who are in love with ghosts, and also with vampires and werewolves—the whole supernatural lot. We hang on the plots of books and television shows about beautiful dead people whose shirts are cut just right. Even though many of these books and television shows are vapid, and we know they are vapid, we are rapt. They were made to appeal to something childish in us, and so we gobble them, like six-year-olds gobbling liquorice. It is harmless enough, I think. Most of the dead people are benevolent: those that don't start out that way always become so—if they're beautiful enough.



“I can feel her here,” said my best friend, after the tour, as she examined a jumbo pencil in the gift shop. She was talking about you. Maybe she could feel you, but I couldn't. I'd been expecting to hear you tolling like a bell in my head. I'd expected the panes of your stained glass windows to shiver and part like aspen

leaves so that I could walk into the heart of your house, where you would be, a conscious speaking ghost, tending the other ghosts like they were rare monkeys in a private zoo, or house plants, or patients in an infirmary. Why could *she* feel you, when all she wanted was a glimpse of Molly Ringwald and a chance to put her hands in Lucille Ball's footprints on the Walk of Fame?

I walked out of the gift shop. I found a bench, near the fountain. I felt stupid, and I stewed. I was fourteen—a specialist in both. I had stewed quite a bit, on that trip. I would stew quite a bit more.



You saw almost no one after you moved to San Jose. As far as San Jose was concerned, you were Sarah Winchester, a deranged widow with more money than sense. No one there remembered Sarah Pardee, the tiny beauty from New Haven who had played the piano so wonderfully well. The one time you threw a dinner party, no one came, and you sat alone in your dining room, watching piles of food go cold. You weren't one to allow yourself to be bitten twice—you had one child, and no more; one husband, and no more; one dinner party, and no more. After that, you dined only with your assistant.



“This isn't my story,” is what I said to myself, over and over, as I sat on your bench. I wasn't sure where the idea came from, but it made me tear up. There were a lot of things that made me tear up that year—untouchable boys, old movies, strange, complicated science fiction novels that I read and reread nearly to the

To: Sarah Winchester

point of memorization, without managing to fully understand. You weren't going to be the consolation for everything. You weren't going to manifest and turn my life into scintillating television. And why should you? Why should you be anything but dead?



There are those who say that your house was not a device for trapping ghosts, but rather, for sorting them. With your swirls of hallway and your invisible doors, you sought to confound the malevolent and the rifle-shot, but you were also trying to guide in the sweeter ones. Maybe, after all the loss, guilt, and fear, you found a way to be Sarah Pardee again, to dance and play music and have dulcet conversations with people death couldn't take from you. Maybe you'd found a way for death to give you companionship instead of always taking it away.



I wonder what you'd think of our benevolent televised dead. I wonder if you'd be angry, because so many of your ghosts were shrieking, freezing, terrible things that could scream you bloody and spin the breath from your lungs. That would be understandable. It would be fair. But I suspect you might have found them hopeful, lovable even. I suspect you were a woman who could appreciate a walking dead man with flawless skin and good Italian shoes.



In the 1970s, a televised séance was held at your house. A famous self-help psychic channeled you for

Victoria Elisabeth Garcia

the cameras. Her head fell back and her eyes rolled. She did everything a medium is supposed to do. When she spoke as you, she said:

“Who are these people and what are they all doing in my house?”

And I suppose, in my convoluted way, that’s what I am trying to tell you now. Dear Mrs. Winchester, this is why.

¹ Newitz, Annalee “The Winchester Mystery House and Other Ghost Stories of Industry in Silicon Valley,” (1997) http://www.techsploitation.com/socrates/Winchester_Silicon.html

Biography

Victoria Elisabeth Garcia lives in Seattle with her husband, author John Aegard. Last night Midge, her corgi mix, broke into the dog food bin and ate approximately two weeks worth of kibble.

From: Eileen Gunn



To:

Mr. Oscar Wilde

Division 89

Cimetière du Père Lachaise

6, rue du Repos, Paris 20e

Paris, France

01 43 70 70 33

September 19, 2005

Dear Oscar,

I read the recent review of “Lady Windermere’s Fan” that appeared in the *New York Times* (by Ben Brantley, no less), and knew I had to write to you. Of course it’s a glowing review—it even takes a whack at Henry James—and I’m sure you stayed up late to read it online, before the paper edition hit the streets.

I was annoyed that Brantley dredged up, even while mocking it, James’s opinion that the play lacks characterization—that the attribution of witty epigrams to all the characters makes it difficult to distinguish them from one another. It is, of course, a comment you’ve heard before: even your brother Willie made a similar charge, in a *Daily Telegraph* review in 1892.

It seems so, well, *earnest* to criticize a Wilde comedy as being inhospitable to the serious examination of character. We might as well lament the lack of one-liners in *De Profundis*. And, if it were true, wouldn’t it be

less an error of voice than a triumph of egalitarianism? It gives us a glimpse of what life would be like if everyone were as witty as Oscar Wilde.

But we'll leave earnest alone for now. Brantley has spurred me to take another look at *Lady Windermere's Fan*. I wonder if character and plot are not just as important in it as wit. For your plays are not casually plotted: they are as complexly structured, and as fragile, as meringue. Once the froth heats up, it sets, and there is no way to reshape it. The author's will is paramount: if a character in one of your plays took independent action, the plot would break apart in airy chunks and float aimlessly away.

In terms of character, *Lady Windermere's Fan* positions young, respectable Lady Windermere against wily Mrs. Erlynne. At the emotional climax, the older woman's mask of wit slips, and we see desperation beneath, as a practical, self-aware woman who has marketed herself like soap briefly acknowledges her own selfishness. She adjusts the mask, and the play proceeds—to a resolution in which neither the wicked nor the good get a well-deserved comeuppance. Essentially, nothing happens, and everybody gets on with their lives. Lady Windermere may know a little bit more about life, but she remains profoundly ignorant, and is happier that way.

I look for character and truth in the play, and find a small, tightly framed portrait of your friend Lily Langtry. Mrs. Langtry, like Mrs. Erlynne, had left an illegitimate daughter for someone else to raise, and was entering middle age with the resume of a hetaira. Mrs. Langtry, of course, refused the part of Mrs. Erlynne,

saying that she was too young to play the mother of a grown daughter. Do you think perhaps you cut too close to the bone, there?

So *Lady Windermere's Fan* does have plot and character and the truth of life as you have seen it, and none of this, at first glance, derives from the epigrams. Is the essence of the play the story and the moment of truth? Is the wit for which you are famous unnecessary to it?

I ask this question not as a critic, but as a student of your work, and as a writer who both wants to work with wit, and is aware that wit is often facile. Does the use of wit somehow work against the writer? When I first read your work, at sixteen, I thought that your brilliance and success meant that wit—especially the reflexive Irish wit, which crosses the lines of class, religion, education, and geography, and is as much a part of my heritage as yours—was a useful attribute for a writer. I took you as a model of the kind of writer I wanted to be. What I've found over the ensuing years is that wit, although it enables a writer to be funny and serious at the same time, is a difficult tool to use well.

In fiction, wit is often scorned as the enemy of plot, which until the advent of modernism was an even more revered concept than character—and in genre fiction, still is. Perhaps it is easier to deploy wit in drama and in criticism than in fiction, but even in drama, as Brantley demonstrates, it is sometimes regarded with suspicion.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, each character uses wit differently. Lady Windermere uses it to express her emotional state; Mrs. Erlynne to flatter and cajole; the bitchy Duchess of Berwick uses it to belittle others. Lord Darlington, usually seen as your own spokesman,

uses wit to question the idea of classifying people rigidly into categories of good or evil. (I wonder why you would object to that, dear Oscar?) Contrary to Henry James's remark, character and wit are completely and functionally integrated in this play.

It has been over a century since the first performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Ladies no longer carry fans: plays and stories—and movies—are now predicated upon other flimsy pretexts. But wit is still used as a weapon, and the choice of target still reveals the character of the marksman. Your play is not only a lesson in craft: it is a lesson in ethics, and a reminder to me to choose my targets carefully.

Other news: As I sometimes do when I visit London, I dropped by Tite Street last month. I hoped to see something of you there—a flash of brilliance, a discarded copy of the Yellow Book, whatever. Nothing. The area has become quite upscale once again, and across the street from your home there is now something called Oscar Court, where a one-bedroom flat goes for £545,000. Ellen Klages was with me, and we stepped into the dreary local to get out of the rain, and watched a tiny portion of an interminable cricket match. Australia led, as we left. They led for days....

In other words, I think you're better off in Paris. When I visited you there—when was it? six years ago?—I left a few coins to tide you over, should you require anything. If I were not sending this as email, I'd enclose a little something here as well, enough for dinner on the Left Bank, or at least for lunch at one of the brasseries near Père Lachaise. Can we leave it that, should we meet up again, I'll stand you to a meal that's

To: Mr. Oscar Wilde

just a bit beyond what I can actually afford? And you can teach me more about wit.

With great affection,
Eileen

Biography

Eileen Gunn is a short-story writer. Her collection *Stable Strategies and Others* (Tachyon Publications, 2004) was a finalist for the Philip K. Dick, James Tiptree, Jr., and World Fantasy awards. Her story “Coming to Terms” received the Nebula award for best short story, 2004. Since 1988, she has served on the board of directors of the Clarion West Writers Workshop. Oscar Wilde has been her personal hero since she was sixteen.