

Little Conversations
by Caitlín R. Kiernan

Most days, the boy named Sebastian pretends that he is writing a book about the woman who lives in the cottage by the sea. Most days, since his unheralded and uninvited arrival at Watch Hill almost a year ago, she allows him to pretend that he is writing a book about her. But the truth is that he merely has nowhere else to go, and she has found that having him around is usually better than being alone, so the woman and the boy have arrived at a sort of *accord silencieux*. On good days, the woman imagines that the relationship is somehow mutually beneficial, but there are bad days, too, when it seems at best mutually parasitic. Those are the honest days, the sober days, the days when every wall seems to contain a mirror and every thought a regret. The days when it is not enough to walk down the sandy road to the narrow beach or along the winding lane to the lighthouse, when the sea air and the sound of the breakers are not sufficient to soothe her nerves. And on those days she hates the boy and wishes that he would go away and leave her alone again. She even offers to pay his train fare back to Brooklyn or New Haven or Boston or wherever it is he's supposed to have come from this week. That changes, too — his place of origin — like her unpredictable moods, like his gender, like the inconstant New England weather, and she wonders if she will ever learn the truth of his provenance.

She is not quite yet a crone, and he is a chameleon, and they sit together, but completely apart, listening to the waves and waiting for the sun to set, because the nights are almost always easier to bear than the daylight.

He has a silver-grey RadioShack microcassette recorder and a cardboard box full of tapes, each one thirty minutes long, fifteen minutes to a side. Most are filled up with some conversation or another, this afternoon or that morning or an evening fossilized on frail strips of magnetic tape, their words captured in thin coatings of cobalt and ferric oxide, by take-up and supply reels and technology neither pretends to understand. The tape recorder is only a prop, of course, an obligatory piece of evidence that he really has come to write a book about her, or (depending on the day) a Ph. D. dissertation, or a magazine article, or an interview for a website. She supposes it is necessary, that he must have something tangible to bolster his story, and most times it doesn't bother her, being recorded. When it does, she simply tells him to turn it off. On those occasions, he rarely argues, which is one way that Salammbo Desvernine knows that she and the boy who calls himself Sebastian have an understanding.

And here it is, a sweltering August afternoon, and they sit together on the small veranda facing Block Island Sound, with his tape recorder lying on the table between them. There are also two sweating tumblers, because he made them ice tea with lemon and sprigs of fresh mint, and they sit facing the sea and watch the dazzling white sun shimmering off the blue-green water.

"You were telling me about Salmagundi," Sebastian says, his clumsy attempt at being sly, but she laughs and shakes her head, because she never talks to anyone about her dead sister, not even the boy and his tape recorder. He often wishes that she would, but there are secrets that will stay secret if she can help it, and usually she can. He doesn't say anything else for a few minutes, sips his tea and watches her watching the sound.

"No, okay, but you *were* telling me about the Salton Sea, about the yellow birds and the dead fish and—"

"That was twenty-two years ago," she says, then closes her eyes and changes the subject. "I wish it were October," she tells the boy.

