

Necessary conversation

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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[Redacted signatures]



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scenario

blackbirds
converge
and separate,
one fluid movement
glides upward
then recedes
above two white cars
 that appear
 to slow—
 almost stop—
as they meet
on a gray highway
that runs like a wet watercolor
into a foggy-gray-white sky.

none of it means anything,

nothing at all.

Render

Lake Poinsett, South Dakota*March 15*

the sun is shining
we go without jackets
the bottoms of our jeans are wet from snow

on the lake
fishermen drive four wheelers
ice augers and five gallon buckets strapped on with bungee cords—
a wake of water splashes knee-high as they drive

a truck carefully inches off the ice

the geese fly above our heads
chatting loudly—
going home again

burning off

three weeks after the trees
showed themselves
I drove home
between fields
of dark and light

night
was sliced
open in the distance
by a burning ditch

erupting serpentine—
thawed
through frozen earth

Northwest Public Lake Access

Lake Poinsett, South Dakota

We walk among sea glass—
brown and green—
our shoes fill with sand.

We must relay water levels to my father.
Which boat launches are open?
Is the water deep enough to launch our boat?

We stand, clinically staring
at the growing expanse of rough sand
between us and the colloidal green water.

The lake is satisfying, a strange calm,
the warm day grows
a bit cooler.

My brother photographs
us looking at the water,
sun shining on our faces.

In my head I'm peeling off my socks and running
into the water, sitting on the warm rocky sand
until pink reaches the tops of trees.

But we are here on business.
We inspect the concrete slabs added to extend the launch,
and walk slowly back to the car.

“Beer cans?” my brother notices.

“This is South Dakota—people leave their broken tractors in the fields
and their beer cans at the beach,” I say.

Not like North Dakota, where he grew up
with its manmade lakes
and the rich red river valley farmers

or Minnesota where we
grew up swimming and fishing
along untouched shoreline.

Here in my surrogate home,
I convince myself that those beer cans
are part of what makes us different.

While standing on the firm gravel of the parking lot,
I can see my brother calculating
the distance between the rocky lake bottom

and the hull of dad’s boat in his head.

explaining poetry

Each poem is a novel
a whole story contained inside—
it has a *once upon a time*, a *happily ever after*,
a climax, a fight scene in the middle,
conflict resolution,
and a love story intertwined
with a story of revenge.

Each stanza is a scene from a movie—
warm bodies against each other or
a whole freighter rigged with explosives,
a chain reaction,
a Rube Goldberg
held within.

Each line is a photograph
telling a narrative of its own—
an old man's graying hands
next to a young girl's pink ones—
juxtaposition, composition contained.

Each word is a move in a strategy game—
one roll of the dice in Risk.
I can take all of Europe
with a word like "conquer."

heirloom

Even when I was very young,
my Grandfather was always old.
He built my microwave cart—
the handle a dowel rod attached with long nails,
their small flat threads exposed—
lightly rusted.

Even after ten years
his actions guide us.
“You know what Grandpa Dick would do.”

build it simple

I took the kitchen cart from my parents' house—
Mom wasn't using it,
but she made it clear
she wants it back.

build it strong

The patio table he built
sits in my parent's backyard
aging along with them.
After the coats of stain had weathered to gray,
we started painting it—
layer after layer of Iowa Paint
color matched to the house's siding—

to preserve what's left.

spend the money when you need to

The glossy lid of Grandma's cedar chest reflects light coming in through her living room window.

She points to the label from the furniture store on the lid's underside as she opens it,

"Your grandpa always said that if you spent the money in the right places, it would make a difference."

render

"To reduce, convert, or melt down (fat) by heating."

—American Heritage Dictionary

i told him tonight that

he was "better than poetry"

but

what's scary

is that i meant it.

words clarify

rendering the unnecessary or illogical

once separated

make understanding secondary to sounding beautiful—

beauty is harder when you understand

with him

i understand nothing

with him

pursuing understanding is unnecessary

when the hard

beauty

comes so easy

a modern art sculpture*in the shelterbelt*

a broken down kitchen range—

busted porcelain

and a tree growing

through the cook top

playground

Cass Valley North Elementary, Grandin, ND

I had a tractor tire
as a sandbox
in my backyard,

but I would ride my bike
to school
to play on the big tires

treads that reached
above my shoulder—
laying flat
like stepping stones
on an imaginary river bed

car tires
bolted to telephone poles
like tree branches—
so tall
I was too afraid to climb

tires so large
that I could crawl inside—
tires that collected groups
of children like rainwater

small tires
that made perfect

miniature arches—
casting long narrow
shadows on the gravel
in the late afternoons—

tractor tires
standing on end
that fit my shoulders
like giant wheel rims

tires
I couldn't even
crawl under
now

dropouts

1.

They were wearing eyeliner and pointy-toed ankle boots.

One wore a skirt—

the principal sent them home—

proving the point they set out to make.

Jon never came back.

Two months before graduation

the lines started appearing

in the bottom left hand corner (page four)

of the local newspaper—

crime reports—

lists of kids forgetting to wear their seatbelt

and getting caught with beer.

His were *minor in possession*.

Later, he appealed to the school board.

The principal, a National Guard member, approved—

an honorary diploma to attend the Air Force.

His friend, who wore the wig,

was divorced by twenty-one and seeking custody

of a child who was half crazy from her mother.

2.

During my freshman year
nineteen out of our twenty-one
committed themselves to winning
“class of the month.”
We came in second three times—
failed attendance.

Outside, Terri and Nate smoked cigarettes
as we painted snowflakes with tempera on the window—
billowing—
held up by their white.

Our faculty advisor told us to talk to Terri—
convince her to come to school.
She was not encouraged.

We were scared of her.
We secretly wished she would stop coming—
to purge the impurity.

When we were small, I would play with her.
I wasn't allowed to go into her house,
so we pushed her Barbie van,
that I was so jealous of, outside on the sidewalk.

Later, she came to grand march—
wheezing—watching her classmates as Juniors
in tuxedos and pink prom dresses.

unsolicited

I wake up
to the memory of you

outside
leaves hold tightly
onto half-naked gray branches

your leaf weathering
the fall's gale forces—
clinging
I want you

to fall
gracefully
into the back pages
of an old scrapbook—
pressed

lobster dinner

He told me their tails curled
when they were done
and they turned that red color
like the sky
outside the restaurant window
as the sun set.

I told him the tail
looked like a pill bug,
as he peeled open
its head and torso
and left the two sides
on a plate between us.

I ran my finger
up a wiry red antennae
and saw the large black cricket
that perched
on my living room curtains
this morning, enlarged
by the sun shining behind it.
I killed it in a napkin.
It crunched and twitched
between my thumb and forefinger
as it died.

He struggled to crack
open the claws
like a child unable to twist
the lid off a jar.
Juice squirted
across the table.

He plucked pieces
of the white flesh
from its exoskeleton.
“You’re eating a giant sea bug,”
I told him
half joking.

“Then what are those shrimp
you’re eating?” he asked.
“Little sea bugs,”
I replied.

surrender

If I keep the lights on
he'll know that means
I need to hash this out
before he falls asleep
so that we—
well mostly me—
won't feel restless all night

but he squeezes his eyes shut
as I sit over him—
every quick tug
of the blanket as he rolls over
creates another barrier—
he groans
but does not speak

drunk with fatigue
I slur something designed
to make him feel guilty like
all you care about is sleep
and roll over—
give up—
to forget it
by morning

fireflies

1.

Waiting
for Fourth of July lights
to fill the sky,
the children stand wide-eyed
mesmerized by sparklers
and stray bottle rockets.

I still point,

look, there's a firefly
nature's pyrotechnics.

2.

There are no fireflies
in North Dakota.
It's too cold.

When I was young
I read stories
about children catching
fireflies in jars—
watching their light slowly die.

In South Dakota
they were rare—
a single glimmering light
in the distance—

gone so quickly
that no one knew.

In Iowa
I see fireflies
hopping out of grass,
streaking
past my window,
filling my peripheral.

3.

Riding home he told me,
look, they're like shooting stars
as they flew above the windshield.

4.

One very muggy night
there she was—
blinking at me—

and when I walked towards her
she was still there

just floating
and glowing.

1941 Farmall "H"

My Dad bought a tractor
after moving to a smaller house,
with a smaller yard,
and having to sell
his John Deere "Lawn Tractor"
for a push mower.

He bought it
on the way home from work,
as if it were a gallon of milk.
And it sat in a gravel lot
until my mother was fully prepared
to accept it into our garage.

Maybe she thought
it was like Uncle Mike
buying his Corvette
when he turned 40—
and again at 50,
or all of those in their midlife
who try to rebuy their first cars.

But I could see him:
in overalls,
carrying a large tailless cat,
as he watched his grandfather
(a man I only ever knew
as pale, thin, and white haired)
fixing his tractor

on a farm that was the most farm
that I had ever seen.

Geese, goats, sheep,
lilies, rhubarb, and watermelon—
all seemed to grow wild

the trees are blooming

the little purple buds
and pointed green leaves
grow only at the ends of branches

so small
so exacting

out the side

obscured

views of farm houses

windows dark

against white siding—

whiter than the snow—

lighter than the early evening sky.

snow—

faster than we are—

blurs the lines.

i'm not sure where i am in that.

if i was,

i'm not sure you could see me.

Refrain

waltz

I wanted
to know how

to shape the
words on the

page to be
exactly

like you are
rhythmic and

fiery not
holding back—

keeping teeth
clenched, the words

seeping be-
tween the steps

like me but
unleashed and

dancing light
across the

dark pages
each beat a

poem of
creation

arte

I drew pumpkins and gourds for three days
for the new art teacher,
a mousey woman with stringy blond hair.
She spoke soft words of encouragement
and told me she *enjoyed my drawings*.
Each of those first days I came to class
hoping for something more exotic—
screen printing, oil painting, or maybe stained glass.

I told everyone I needed to switch classes
for the language requirement,
but I left Art to be *con sus amigos*.
There I was called Elisa,
I won games of Spanish bingo,
and learned to sing “De Colores.”

The next year my family moved
and at the new school
sloppily painted gray mountains
hung on the wall of a paneled room
with a TV in the corner—
down the hall from the drill press and the table saw.
The Shop teacher taught Art.
They watched old videos of Bob Ross
and painted *happy little trees*.

My first day of Spanish II
the teacher asked us to take turns
writing conjugations of irregular verbs
on the chalkboard
and when she got to me
I said, *I only know one.*
She pointed to the next desk
with a concerned smile.

the painter

I sit and look. Then I paint.

--Dan Wahl

he sits:

knees together,

pigeon toed—

a little bit of pink

peeks out above

short white socks,

“these

heavenly

socks,” Neruda says

that match paint splatters

on the black canvas of his sneakers.

I sit in a quiet place holding a stone.

I don't think about anything, or rather,

I think about nothing.

the day before,

he brought it into the office:

six by nine—

indigo streaks

and a warm red center—

“I'm not sure I like it.”

“You will.”

I let myself look at the stone,

the way it is,

without framing it inside a thought.

his pen
scribbles
unrecognizably—
blue on blue lines—
among notes on Neruda
 “...white hills, white thighs,
 when you stretch out like the world.”
he guards it—
the heel of his hand to paper
lightly.

*I let the observation sink in.
When it's time to paint, I let the observation seep out,
through my hands.*

barely noticeable—
in the oval opening between
hand and pen—
are the beginnings

I try not to think then, either.

tune

guitar chords—
each string compounded against the other,

and the soft piece of flesh on a fingertip
striking and withdrawing,

the callus that has formed to keep
the repeated movement from bruising

and breaking
open

I can see the light hitting the guitar strings
casting long thin shadows on the floor

the whole has opened
and closed

swallowed up inside
I still hear the quiet hum

gallery

the lines blur

we stare cold

towards

living, breathing, art—

that yellow one

like describing a woman you've known for years:

“that one with the brown hair”

it doesn't speak of her—

doesn't stop you from thinking she's any less

than color against a white wall

and that

golden square

is warmly

something other than a blonde

letting up

it's dark out now
and it shouldn't be

in my office
on the second floor
of our two-bedroom townhouse
I can hear the rain falling
louder
on the roof and windows

I'm looking through
old video clips on the local news's web site—
the channel 13 chopper was up this weekend
doing a report for the best roads to take
to get to the big game

I remember walking my clarinet downhill,
the four blocks to the football game
and sitting in the bleachers
where we played ten-year-old pop songs
mixed for woodwinds and brass

then walking home uphill
sometimes a neighbor
would offer a ride
and I'd take it

now I hear the distant rumbles
and even the horns
from yesterday's game

the rain starts letting up
but it will be dark out
for a while

kinetic energy

I-35—

vehicles exit the cities

in long chains

of double orbed light—

blur together

the inert gases,

neon and argon

combined with

red, blue, and green phosphorus—

charged

with electricity

to make white light

in bent glass tubes

flowing,

but never breaking,

they do their dance of exchange—

infinitely trade places—

retain their long fluid line

in constant effort

to arrive—

swirling

in straight lines,

curving into circles,

moving because they are in motion—

to reach towards

what is always there

and what always changes

acres apart

I grew up on black earth
going to school with farm kids
who had designer jeans and new trucks
whose fathers *invested* in farming
whose combines cost more than their houses

I moved onto brown dirt
that grew only corn and beans
where tractors were left in fields to rust
where kids helped their families chase cows
between pieces of land left unfarmed

June 29th 1996

For my sixteenth birthday,
instead of making one,
Mom bought me

a mini-cake from Hornbacher's—
chocolate with shortening frosting.
I stomached one piece.

Beth walked the three blocks
from her house to mine
to give me two cards.

One for my birthday,
and one that said, "We'll miss you so much."
She hugged everyone goodbye.

My brother's friends
helped load the truck:
bed frames, mattresses, end tables.

When the house was nearly empty
my sister and I drove
to my grandparents' house to stay the night

while the others stayed
to finish packing.
She bought me a milkshake on the way.

The only present
they could give me that day
was to let me leave.

I-29

through Sioux City, Iowa

we curve past the mighty Mo—
four lanes of asphalt
edge rocky escarpments

we pull into the left lane,
but the car we are passing speeds up
just enough to keep us
from changing lanes

behind us,
a black square of metal overtakes the
rear window—
honks, flashes its brights
cursing the difference
between 9 miles
and 15 miles over the limit

it's minutes
of excruciating pain
for the box on wheels
as we speed up
to pass the car on our right

the Hummer flies by,
weaves between cars in front,
jockeying for a better position
in a race

that no one but him
is running

a few miles later,
a large motor home
speeds past us,
pulling the speeding SUV's little sister
in a matching shade of gold

we turn towards each other
unable to decide
for a moment
which driver
we hate more

remembering Blue Mounds

*The park attendant...was beaten to death, and officials say robbery was the motive.
No one has been arrested in the killing of Carrie Christine Nelson, 20, who was
discovered in the park's headquarters building by other employees Sunday afternoon...*

--Sioux Fall Argus Leader, May 23, 2001

“You don’t understand,”

you said,

and I didn’t.

Because I had never been there,

it hadn’t been close to me

like it was for you.

I didn’t know the trails

and what the building

she was killed in looked like.

What I did know

was that it was not a place

where people get murdered.

At this park,

less than an hour from Blue Mounds,

I walk heavy-footed—

the light

making shadows

even darker.

I imagine
the trees and hills look
much like they did to her,

and I know what it feels like
to be a young woman
alone,

in the dark.
Something in me
thinks I know her

even though I didn't know
the deceased
when she wasn't.

Ledges State Park

near Boone, IA

“Are you having a good time?”

he asked

and I couldn't help but wonder,

if I really were,

would he have to ask?

the water was cool in places

we waded through the creek

passing little kids with butterfly nets

catching dragonflies and minnows,

older kids jumping into pools of water

created by the road as it passes through the creek,

and college kids hiding in sunny corners

sinking beer cans into the sand—

throwing rocks at birds' nests

water rushed past my ankles,

a sandstone wall

grew out of the small creek,

someone had carved “B+N”

with a heart around it,

thin trunks angled over us

I gave him a half-smile and nodded

and we waded on

take-out seppuku

you got angry with me today
when I offered to give you half
of my sesame chicken

later you said
it was because every time I offered
or insisted that you must still be hungry

it reminded you of how you
had set your plate precariously
on the arm rest

and spilled
your whole plate on the floor
egg roll sliding over fried rice

like samurai sliding
down wet grass
home from great loss

preparing to take their own lives
the image
too much to bear

resonance

he turns down the tinny sound of his computer speakers
and sings along louder
(a Beatles cover—
one of the later ones)
to fill
what she left

the hollow indication of his voice bounces back over
the cavernous reflection—

every piece of missing furniture
every sound he heard her once speak
every song she sang

under the eaves

I wait
for the water to pour
on the first gray evening after
a week's worth of solid sunshine

the impatiens
live up to their name—
wilting in the heat
like me

at least it gets a lot cooler at night in Arizona
I tell my fiancé who was from there
and he tells me it only gets down to 85
but it's a dry heat, I say

and we wait out
the muggy weather
nature's wheel spins wildly
unable to balance

it doesn't rain
it just gets hazier—
the streetlights glow a muddled yellow
through the thickness of the air

refrain

the piano plays
a little louder
with my thumb at the dial

the world parts
body
from idea

lines from novels resonate among his key strikes
I could feel their minds stirring like poplars in a storm¹
The sky is a clear rinsed cobalt after the rain²

the notes find themselves lying on the sidewalk
and small parts of us find themselves on the sidewalk

like worms
dissected—
broken apart—
but still growing

¹ *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy

² *Love in the Ruins* by Walker Percy

window

Whatever's in front of me is covering my view

so I can't see what I'm seeing in fact

I only see what I'm looking through

—F. Apple

listening to music

while on a city bus

I focus

on a dark blue Ford

in a lane below us

my vision distorted

by the spotted window

between me

and the car

I look out again

fixed on the brown

grass along the curb

a bicyclist leans

one foot on the ground

the other on the pedal

waiting for the light to turn

and then back

to the shadowy

black and gray
the blurry cycle broken
only by song

Interruption

not quite spring

The sky was so blue
it was hard to look at.

His wool coat
buttoned to the top,

cotton gloves appeared
at the bottom of his sleeves,

he even wore a hat,
but his bare

feet caressed
the cold concrete.

where Rosa Parks was sitting

an international student set his bag on the seat
they had saved for her
a few days after her death

a sign was taped to the red vinyl of the bus's first seat
with a photo in which she seemed to hold
up the whole of creation with her cheek bones

her wide white smile
held back the hatred of a generation
and her eyes conveyed a brightness

a light that suggested she had conquered psychology—
understood us all—an understanding that I did not possess
it made me feel empty

I wanted to ask the student
to move his bag—
to put it on the other seat next to him

but he might not know
why it's so important
that I said nothing

**the air was warm
and made us hold our breath**

through our window
between
careful slits of curtains
two robins—
parade—
through green September grass

we were uneasy

for autumn
for the warm moist air to break
for mournful hope
for cold death

collective

slick black cement
curves its way along
charcoal green inkblots
against the black sky

the yellow-green of fall
revealed in the small orb of our headlights
takes us back

from the blurry reflection—
lights on a lake
interrupted by
rain and reason

dusk

at the beginning of summer
it had been bright out,
but now

the light casts summer
shadows of warmth—
brings new brilliance
to the landscape—
life to the dying

scraggly grass
growing vibrant green,
tips of soybeans
turning yellow

these evenings
devour
the crispness in the air
with a hunger unsatisfied

interrupted

as we drove home
we came up fast
behind a slower car
and quickly slid into the passing lane

but I imagined our car slamming
into the one in front of us—
metal to metal—
the front end collapsing toward me—
crunching like trashed aluminum foil

I would have to readjust
my stretched out legs to avoid impact—
put my bare feet
on top of the Styrofoam take-out box
with a half a Rueben and fries in it
that was on the floor in front of my seat

and then—
unimagined—
he placed an open hand on my knee
held it out
just long enough for me to take hold
and I thought
if we were to go, this would be...
and he gripped tighter

**on the highway between
home and the interstate**

“this is the house,
the one with the cool trees!”

I sound a little too excited,
and strangely
these “cool trees”
look cool

because they are dying—
missing branches,
whole sections—

asymmetrical Rorschach’s
or statues of pines
instead of actual trees

too errant, exceptional
too striking
to be mortal, to be real

like my grandmother’s hands,
speckled skin
and twisted fingers

they are sculptures of hands—
the fine art
of age

numbers

you said you were
too drunk
to really remember

You weren't the first

I've lost
count
of those I know

to have a hand slid—a clasp unclasped

who have been raped

without wanting.

and when it grew
beyond one
hand's worth

Held down—

I started believing
that they (she) might
have been partly
responsible

flailing—

incalculable—

those who have thought they deserved

his hand

when the numbers

became

too large

silenced.

to believe such evil

without reason

numb

At 5pm it was mostly dark—
the sky a pale blue in the west
reaching to dark navy in the east.

Anyone I was skating with had gone home.
I hadn't brought my boots
since I was getting picked up.

I skated alone, waiting
the yellow glow of the street light
reflecting off the flooded lot's frosty ice.

Dad must have been running late.
Cold,
I started home.

I tried to skate the gravel roads—
carved lines into the compacted snow
getting stuck on rocks that poked through.

It was just four blocks.
I could only feel my toes when I wiggled them
and hit the insides of the skate boot.

In the garage
I pulled to loosen the tight laces
with frozen fingers—

tossed the skates
and heard the blades clang
against cold concrete.

My toes struggled
in two pairs of socks
to get into the quiet house.

I stumbled up the stairs
and my brother hollered from the basement,
they started the war.

Together we stared at
the small streaks of light across
the night vision green screen.

I huddled in the corner of the plaid sofa—
pulled my cold legs
tight against my chest

as we watched
the air raid
over Tel Aviv.

in 20 years

I will only remember
those who I danced
that awkward seventh grade two-step with—
two clammy hands around each other's necks

I don't remember dancing with you

September

in Minnesota

Breezes smell less green—

I shudder.

Wandering among yellowing trees,

I remember them clothed

before their naked sleep comes.

Newly bare branches

silhouetted against cold concrete

foreshadow:

faces at their windows—

eyes without mouths—

quieted by cold.

among old friends

shadows

turn the green

fern-like leaves

black

against blue sky

I wait for light

to reach through

the wispy branches

and snatch me up

from this

descending

indifference

I know

that being here

is better

than understanding newness

or understanding

without

unspoken

a small part of her
crawls out from underneath
his silence

he stares back
at her from the front seat
watching the clouds stand still above the car

she waits for silence
strong enough to support her words
and watches the power-poles pass by—

he waits
for what he doesn't want to hear—
the seams of the interstate hesitate
with him

after you've gone

the leaves churn outside my window

break from branch

and float on

waiting to be splashed*Ledges State Park*

On tip toes
she reaches out,
arms spread wide.

shelter

ducks swim
in the shallows
of a flooded corn field

tilled rows—
smoothed—
into a glassine reflection
of spring sky

they've forgotten
they can
fly

waiting

for the ice
to thaw
on the big waters

separate

wet black highways,
April snow,
the base of a windmill recedes
into the dark sky

in order to speak my life into silence—
to make its sense—
I require
your visibility obscured

I see it turn,
two parts of the whole—
the light signals as the blades pass—
everything begins again,
I watch it fall apart

previously at rest

I bend
and claw at the dirt
to prepare it for planting.

I pop the rectangular roots
out of their plastic containers
and sink them into the soil.

My muscles stretch
and support
at unfamiliar angles.

Days later,
when the flowers bloom,
the parts of me that cultivated

are still in pain—
unable
to sleep

notice

I walked quickly
to get my mail

on my way to catch
the bus

whose stop
was in the opposite direction,

but I hesitated
as I saw a cardinal

tapping across the top
of the aluminum mailbox.

A brief declaration
of red,

against all that was not.

necessary conversation

some days,
the silence seems created
by the weather
instead of filled by it

we talk about it
when we have nothing better to say
when we have suffered by silence
when we have been persuaded
by the strange insistence of the void

the sun peeks through—
provides small breaths of blue
before an instant uptake
blows a light spray of rain
against a partially sunny sky

dark and gray,
blue and bright,
sprinkling and raining,
windy and not quite

as if everyone under that sky
were standing
next to strangers
as if everyone
were struggling in awkward speechlessness