

CONVERSATION PIECES

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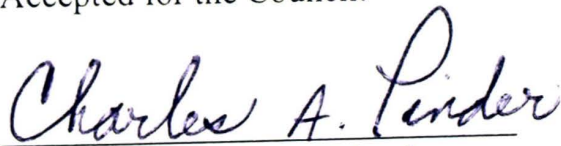


Dr. Blas Falconer, Thesis Director

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Dean of the Graduate School

Conversation Pieces

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts Degree

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Sara, and to our child who is due to arrive in May of 2005. Without Sara's encouragement this book would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my mother and father. They have always been sources of hope and optimism. And I can't forget my little brother who has helped me through some large obstacles in life. I have been blessed by the many friends I have made here at Austin Peay. Without the encouragement of my friends, the ride would have been far less pleasurable.

I would also like to thank my director for this thesis, Dr. Blas Falconer. He spent many hours guiding me in the right direction. His insight and skill proved invaluable.

This collection of small poems is also dedicated to all those who have dared to dream and imagine.

FORWARD

Conversation Pieces is a collection of small poems. My purpose in writing these poems is not to astonish you with a new philosophy, or amaze you with a stunning vocabulary, or awe you with death-defying stunts. My intention is for these poems to provide moments of relaxation and escape from the stresses of daily life. Walk with me for a while. When you are ready to go, go. I don't mind. I'll wait on you until the next time.

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate subordinate emotional intelligence and self-efficacy as situational moderators for satisfaction with a transformational leadership style. Additionally, the present study replicated past findings that transformational leaders are rated as more satisfying and effective by their subordinates than transactional leaders. Participants included 78 employees of a healthcare organization located in the southern United States. Participants completed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale, Occupational Self-efficacy Scale, Satisfaction with my Supervisor Scale, and a leadership effectiveness questionnaire. Both satisfaction and effectiveness had a strong positive correlation with supervisors who were rated as transformational. Emotional intelligence and self-efficacy did not have a moderating effect. Implications and future directions are discussed.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I don't know you, but maybe I do.
Maybe our eyes met back when
the earth was coming into shape.

You, a tree or a muskrat,
me, a waterfall or a yellow cat.

As the mountains were colliding
and the ocean was filling with water,
perhaps we glanced at each other,
astonished, having to share the moment
with someone or something.

Our glance was not intimate
or sexual or bizarre, but natural
and thrilling, as thrilling as the marvelous
eruptions of volcanoes,
as the tones of color sweeping
through this once colorless landscape.

There is a chance we will glance
at each other once again, perhaps hold
hands this time, still naked and sinless.

MORNING SCENE

I wonder if anyone is seeing what I'm seeing
this Sunday morning: A couple of red birds
play in a tree across the street.

Certainly there are people out this morning
gazing at trees.

Perhaps a farmer out in the woods, his arm
around the shoulder of his grandson, teaching
him the secret beauties of life.

Or maybe someone on top of a high-rise
apartment, sniffing the morning air, seeing
a park in the distance, beyond the metallic
vastness of the city.

I believe my view is unique. No one sees
these birds fluctuate on the branches as wind
stirs their feathers, spots of mud on their beaks,
drops of blue paint on their wings.

I'll never see this scene again,
but neither will they see me in the same
way.

THE APPLE FOREST

I was out in the woods yesterday, trying to escape the stress of the day, when I heard a rustling of leaves. I looked around and saw a girl in a pink dress pushing a black wheelbarrow. She stopped, annoyed I had spotted her. I walked up to her and asked:

What are you doing out here all alone, pushing a wheelbarrow?
I am picking apples for a big party, she replied.

I looked around at the barren branches of the trees and said:

Little girl, there are no apples out here, it's winter and nothing grows in the cold.

She shook her head and urged me to look inside the wheelbarrow. I stepped close and looked in and saw many plump and delicious looking apples.

Where did you get those apples? I asked.
There, she replied, pointing up at the trees, *and there and there.*

I looked again and saw beautiful apple trees everywhere. I rubbed my eyes but they were still there. She giggled so loud it scared a bunch of squirrels from their hiding places. Then I heard a scream from deep in the woods:

Maria, time for supper, Maria!
I have to go, the girl said.

She picked up the wheelbarrow and began walking away. Before she vanished, she tossed me an apple. I caught it, tried to take a bite, but it turned to fireflies in my hand.

CONTRAST OF WHITE AND YELLOW PORCH LIGHTS

When I see white lights I think about curtains,
always curtains flapping inside a funeral chapel,
near a white coffin, surrounded by white flowers.

Beyond the curtains a sanitarium on a hill,
dark clouds and lightning in the background.

And beyond the lightning, a pale and angry face.

But when I see yellow lights I think about hot

panthers leaping through jungles, landing on patches
of moss, slowly licking their paws. Beyond them

a small town jamboree, old men sipping moonshine
around a courthouse, tapping their boots to bluegrass,
youngsters dancing under the stars, alive and sparkling.

MAGIC SHOW

I walked to the edge of town
and made friends at the carnival.
They showed me the art of mixing
hemlock, slapping hexes on rabbits,

levitating a few inches
off the ground. I baked them butter
nut cookies, set off on my own,
found a home and stage in a quaint

English village. Night after night
I mesmerized crowds under strung lights,
turning cats into elephants,
blowing rainbows from my nose.

Tonight, after the show a boy tugs
my sleeve, asks: *How do you do that,*
mister? I take him to a bridge,
lean over the rail, snap my fingers.

The carnival emerges
from the water below.

My friends wave at us. One
of them bites a hot dog, mustard
squirts up on the boy's cheek.

GHOSTS

After pumping gas I go into the station
to pay. An old man is telling a young cashier
that he's not afraid of ghosts, but of the living.

He turns to me and says, isn't that right?
I can say anything. Instead, I tell him
a friend of mine died last Sunday of old age.

My friend was a nurse in the Second World War.
He saw a tree once on the side of the road, body
parts scattered in the branches. Overwhelmed,
he couldn't move for a moment, couldn't move
until a lieutenant put his hand on his shoulder.

I am afraid of ghosts, what they signify, something
beyond this life. I don't tell the man in the station
about standing in the rain last night, watching

low clouds float by, thinking this could be part
of my friend, maybe his hand waving hello,
or maybe his mind fully stimulated.

THE MIND OF THE COMPOSER

Louie adores his radio. He takes it wherever he goes,
but doesn't turn it on, never has. The other day he was
out in his garden, humming a song that wasn't there.

I peek through his window, catch him hugging the radio.
I believe he hears something beautiful, a beauty even Mozart
couldn't bear. He spots me outside his window, and allows

me to see what he hears: A gorgeous woman in a bright
red dress in front of a black piano, snow falling lightly
on them. She sings confidently as a bird sings before dawn.

For a moment, I hear what he hears, not her voice, but
the voice of each flake softly whitening her hair.

THE AGEING PROCESS

Either you smoke or you don't smoke, no in between.
 But for fun, when this man asked me yesterday if I smoked
 I replied, *I don't know, but an afro is nice*. I wanted to break
 the monotony of the day, the same way I did in high school,

not only to get a rise from the teachers, not only to impress
 my heavy metal pals, not only to catch the eye of the pretty
 girl in the back of the room, though that sparkle was definitely
 worth it, but to take us away from the timeless forest of wooden

chairs and desks, away from the annoying tick-tocks of the clock
 on the wall, frozen, intimidating, unwilling to move. I expected
 the man to do something when I answered him, but he only put
 his head down and walked away. I'm getting older, can feel a throb

of arthritis in my hands, that knack I had in high school has almost
 vanished to a place all knacks eventually go. But that's cool. I'm
 browsing now through the fruit stalls at the market, something
 I would never have done years ago. I study and sniff and squeeze

something odd, oblong, quite exquisite. I take it home, put it on
 the kitchen counter, carve it open. I chew. The meat is delicious.
 I let juice run down my face until a sticky pool shines on the linoleum.

FINDING LOVE

The bus stops.
I get on, find a seat,
kick off my shoes.
I glance around
at the exposed hearts
of passengers,
pulp of pink fruit.
I rest my head
in my hands and listen
to their hearts
purr like kittens.

A girl touches my
shoulder. *Don't look.*

But I do, and see
that instead
of a heart,
there's a tornado there,
pulling me.

SOLACE ON A SNOWY NIGHT

I read a poem to my
family. The crackling
of the fire in the hearth
intensifies as I pause
on the path of sentences.
My wife holds our son
in her lap and kisses
his cheek. They look
at me and smile. We
continue on the path
and I pause again
when the terrific spires
of a palace can be seen
beyond the hills.
We'll enter the palace
soon, close our eyes
and sleep.

A BREAK FROM POETRY WORKSHOP

Let's lie here a while
on the soft grass
beside the creek
and breathe in the clear water.
When it's time to go
back to the zany lounge,
recline on the fuzzy sofa,
plug the juices
back into our arms,
we'll know,
as the funk passes through our veins,
at least we got out for a while.

IN THE CLUB

As the crowd grows restless, begins to chant,
the room goes dark. A guitar squeals, the curtain
opens. The band struts out in tight leather.

When they spot her on the bar, tossing
back her hair, they smash their instruments.
The crowd goes nuts.

The owner of the club jumps on the bar,
pulls her close. She scratches
his face. The band leaps through the ceiling.

The owner and woman embrace
through the falling debris. The scratches
on his face spread and deepen.

WATER COLORS

He's on a bed in a rehab clinic,
inhaling fumes of cinnamon,
tapping a bell for a sumptuous

nurse in a tight leopard skirt.
He pinches her tush. She blushes,
teasingly smacks his hand, erotically

wipes soup from his quivering
chin. His eyes could be ogres,
drooling and stalking plump deer.

His face evaporates. A linear contour
remains. She licks her fingers,
concentrates, smears the lines of his face.

THE FOREST KEEPER

Convicts bust through the door
of the liquor store, beat
the clerk, grab some cash, take
off through the forest. Barks
of hounds close in on them.

The forest keeper shaves
the last bit of stubble
from his chin, slings a towel
across his shoulders, takes
a sip of coffee.

He drops from a tree, scowls: *Pay
The toll! Pay, I say!*

They point fingers and giggle:
*Get a load of those green tights.
Yeah, he's got a Mohawk, what
a goof ball.*

The forest keeper hangs
his head and cries, grabs
a vine, swings away.

CAMARADERIE

I nap on Sunday afternoon. Cartoon bears slide
out of my TV set and hobble around the room.

I squeeze their spongy hands, pour juice and we
chat for a while. They speak clearly with mint

breath. I tell them they saved my life three years
ago- alone in my bedroom after a bad fight I had

a gun in my mouth- but they appeared on the TV
and made me laugh. They blush and look away.

I pinch their chubby cheeks. They get up to go.
I lean close to see their milky bodies slide home,

see their faces half-in, half-out of the TV set,

see the delicate whiskers above their lips disappear. . .

PRANKSTERS

The boys pass through
the cathedral, knocking
over precious relics
with their long eyelashes.

The priest runs over, pushes
Them outside, shouts:
*You can't come back
until you trim those eyelashes!*

One boy replies: *But dear priest,
we are prophets from the tribe
of Saint Tosco, like him
our strength is determined
by these long eyelashes.*

The priest shakes his fist
in the air, says: *You and your
fruitcake buddies better get
out of here before I call the law.*

Another boy clenches his fist
And replies: *But priest, we got
the salsa, you got the chips,
together we'd be invincible!*

TREE MONKEYS

It's not so much the pain
in my arm as those blasted
tree monkeys that creep
me out. It was nice at first,
the elegant way the stranger
glided over to me, snorting
like an unhappy horse,
swooping his yellow cape
around. He said he'd give
me an endless supply of candy
if I let him twist my arm.
Of course I accepted the offer.

As he began twisting my arm,
his eyes spun like fruits
on a slot machine. The tree
monkeys erupted from the bushes,
sprang into the trees.
All they do now is stare at me
as they swing on vines.
Don't they have anything
better to do, these
tortuous tree monkeys!

JOVIALITY

The culprit yanks a lever
on a panel of blinking lights,
causing the saw to lower and spin

on a man strapped to a gurney.
He is not a cocky spy, will not
magically pull out a blade to cut

himself free. The saw churns
through his body, blood splatters
on the walls, on the ceramic floor.
The two halves of his body hop
away from each other.

Years later, they reunite
on a gorgeous beach, embrace
and become whole again.

The culprit is nearby, plucking
lovely melodies on a harp; comets
trace portraits of Cupid in the sky...

REDNECK VS. SPACEMAN

After swerving to avoid hitting a spaceship landing on the road, the truck stops. The redneck jumps out and runs toward the ship; the spaceman jumps out and runs toward the truck. They stand

back to back as if in a western showdown, walk twenty paces, turn and fire their weapons. A laser burns through the redneck's hat; a bullet cracks the spaceman's helmet; he bends over, falls

to his knees, gasping for air like a drying salmon. The redneck picks him up, puts him gently inside the truck, drives to the hospital. In the emergency room the spaceman watches orderlies strap down

a couple of lunatics, watches the redneck yank out a tooth with a pair of pliers. The spaceman pitifully looks up at the redneck. *Don't worry little spaceman, I won't let anything hurt you, it'll be all right.*

SEEN THROUGH BUBBLES OF CHAMPAGNE

A disco ball drops
from the moon.

Penguins squirm
out, slide on slacks,
spin around
on pieces of linoleum
like break dancers in scary parts
of Harlem.

Pumpkins celebrate
like señoritas
in loose red skirts,
twirling and sweating
uncontrollably.

Matadors join
in the fun,
tug wrinkles
from vibrant
vests, sniff single black
roses as bulls of ice charge.

JUSTICE

In the house on the cliff, a father
sleeps on the sofa while his son
swims in the ocean below.

A shark brushes by the boy's legs.
He screams. The father hears
the screams but ignores.

The shark snatches one of the boy's
legs, jerks him under. The hero
swoops down from a crack in the sky,

punches the shark, takes the boy,
flies him into the house on the cliff.
He drops him near the sofa where

the father snores. *That'll be fifty bucks,*
the hero says. The father pulls out a gun,
shoots the hero. The hero catches

the bullet, picks up the father
by the neck, tosses him into the ocean.
The furious shark hears the splash.

AERIAL

I went outside this morning
and dived into the sky, arms
and legs spread, head held
back, flying through clouds,

flying through the atmosphere,
into the bleakness of space,

flying past a silver craft,
faces pressed to the window,
faces long and hollow,
mouths wide open,
my cheeks flapping in the wind.

SOBERING UP

An old drunk staggers
into the doughnut shop
early this morning.

The waitress, his ex,
prances over, scribbles
his order on her hand,

goes back to the kitchen,
crams her face into a pot
of hot grease, comes out

of the kitchen with a tray,
her face sizzling blue. He
closes his eyes, can smell

her as she crawls closer.
He lights a cigar, orders
another cup of coffee.

ETERNITY

I'm sitting out on my deck this evening,
watching the sun weaken in the windblown
trees, waiting for these charcoal flames

to die so I can cook a couple of pork chops.
I've got my phone out here, a dictionary,
a book of poems by Billy Collins. I'm so

hungry I could eat a couple of meaty poems
at this stage. His "Velocity" makes me contemplate
eternity once again. Its not often I contemplate

eternity, but when I do, it takes a while, as it's
taking a while for these flames to burn out
so I can cook without burning the meat. I don't

want to think or write at this point, but I grab
a pen and scribble anyway, as if I have something
unique or remarkable to say. Perhaps Captain

Cook felt this way aboard his ship at midnight,
hunched over maps by candle light, jotting down
secret cannibal rites, or the texture of seals

while trying to find the shoreline of Antarctica.
Of course when I'm done I'll revise what I've
written from which I hope something wonderful will

fly one day, perhaps land on the shoulder
of Cook as he leans over the railing of his ship,
looking through a telescope, spotting the beach

of ice for the first time. Maybe it will startle
him, spread brilliant wings and fly into the sky
as this orange ash from the charcoal is flying now.

A VISION OF MY FINAL DAY

If this was my last day, of course it would be no time to have monsters or ghouls peek out of clouds and snarl magnificently. This would be serious time.

I'd want to spend the day with my family and friends, do magical things like sip tea, play cards, bake cookies.

I hope it would be sunny that day because I'd want to go to the park later and see the ducks beside my favorite tree, the one with bright red berries,

to play catch with my son, teach him how to throw a knuckle ball, to hold my wife's hand as we watched the ferry arrive on the river.

I would hug my family as the ferry bumped the shoreline.

As I walked to the river I'd say something significant, something my son could repeat to his college professor or a nice girl or a stranger he'd meet one day in a foreign

place. I'd want it to be that way. Don't know what I'd say to him as I sit here, cozy, writing this, but at that moment I'd know.

FREE, OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

I went to the art exhibit but found the door
locked when I got there. I turned around

and saw a tiny postcard tacked in the corner
of a bulletin board. It looked so harmless

and helpless there. I had to pause and spend
at least a minute pretending to care. I'm

sure it would have done the same for me if
fortunes were reversed. I squinted

and inspected like an art connoisseur:
Two white flowers floating in a stream

of blue marbles. On one of the petals
of the flowers, some strange marks,

like hieroglyphics, or scars from years
of neglect from art lovers, rushing

into the grand show room. Maybe
they were simply telling me thanks.