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Answers the Dog Whispered

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ANSWERS THE DOG WHISPERED

by

Allison Marie Wilkins

Bachelor of Fine Arts
University of North Carolina, Wilmington
2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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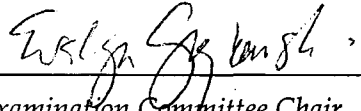
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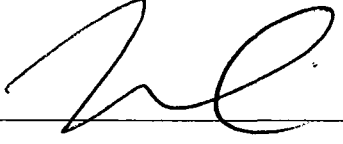
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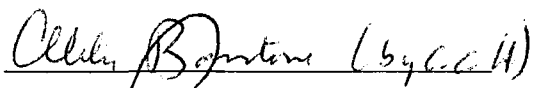
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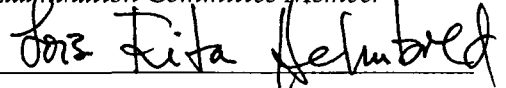
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ABSTRACT

ANSWERS THE DOG WHISPERED

by

Allison Wilkins

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A woman writing must learn to fuse all of her identities in order to be true to herself and her writing. She must think about the issues that affect all women, and then she must decide how to handle them herself. These issues are what make up the body of poetry in “Answers the Dog Whispered”. The poems are about answering the questions that life asks of a woman.

The poems range in topic from motherhood to grief, erotic love to family, relationships to writing. Their common unifying theme is a strong woman’s voice that pushes the boundaries between the formal and abstract, narrative and image driven words, truth and fiction. The voice in these poems pushes through grief, anxiety and confusion, looking under every stone to find some moments of poetic sanctuary that she needs to go on. It is through the combination of all these elements that the poems in this collection help the speaker accept her role as woman and redefine herself in that role.

The language of the poems is ordinary and simple, reflecting a love of Anglo-Saxon and Latinate words, but in no way are the poems simple. The poems themselves

offer a range of vision from very constrictive formal sestinas, haiku and pantoum to loose free verse. There are poems that push the idea of the line break, and some that stretch the image in new and exciting ways. Ultimately, this collection in all its range reflects the complexity of being a woman writing poetry. Virginia Woolf says it best in *A Room of One's Own*, “who shall measure the heart and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?”

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ONE

Papa's Tractor

I was supposed to be apprenticed to Grandma
constructing buttermilk biscuits

learning to knead her self-rising flour
into a firm, but not tough dough

She was looking for me
to drag me back into the house

where I belonged
but I couldn't get enough of the rust

under my fingernails
and the red clay against my shins

instead I climbed on his scaffolding
the stacked columns of silver splashed red

stared through its slits
crouched, hidden with knees to chin

watching him plow the garden
skillfully guiding his red tractor

I sifted his tomato ripe dirt
through my fingers

secretly begging to be raised
onto the cracked black leather

seat of the tractor
to help him rip open the earth

Buttermilk Biscuits and Gravy

The South lost the war,
denied civil rights in the name of
a white god who loved to hunt,
inbred blue blood,
cotton and tobacco,
good ole days.
The South loves gravy, fried foods,
and puts ketchup on everything.

Thick drawls,
slothy seeping dip smeared teeth/tongue/gums.
I considered myself an ignorant redneck
if ya'll accidentally slipped out—
I tried to lose my accent, took up with
some girls from Jersey. Copied their words,
and they quizzed me,
ba(o)ll, ca(o)ll, jug handles.
Turn, not cut, the lights on and off.
I denied West Virginian
mountaineers and North Carolinian
plantation owners. I hated
living in the first notch on the Bible belt.
Hated Southern hospitality because
it meant three-hour conversations
over a pitcher of sweet tea.

At 22 on my wedding day, my family
claimed that it was about time, and when
would there be babies?
This is when I moved

2,000 miles West, to the land
of radical acceptance, open minds, and liberal
points of view. I traded the red clay
for red desert sand, Blue Ridge Mountains,
for the Rockies, and miles of farmland
for commercialized development.

Vegas taught me to gamble, to drink
water in 120-degree heat, and to never
have a car without an alarm unless you want
a thief to steal it. Vegas showed me
that even the most liberal secretly votes

Republican. And each trip back South
reminds me of what I'd denied
in the name of virtue, the history
of the land that bleeds. Here I miss
home. Here I long for cold winters
and snow to cover over these neon lights
for only one night, instead of sweltering heat.

Wheels in the Intersection

Driving home from the grocery store
I saw a dog grooming van, a man
in a wheelchair, and a sedan
all at the intersection of Katie and Maryland,
between McDonalds and the Easy Loan.
And it's almost funny,
to see these things with wheels all bunched together,
and wonder which one doesn't belong.

But I could give you details.
Tell you that the dog van was lavender
with fuchsia writing, phone number and all,
a gray poodle face painted over the windows.

The silver sedan stopped
half way through a right hand turn

and the man in the wheelchair
wasn't in his wheelchair
but face down in blood,
which seeped out around him
toward the tires.

Vegas just kept going—
only these two cars on the side
of this road watched a man die.
Cheeseburger fry grease.
The Golden Arches worshipped the sky.

Cut

For Richard Allen Raynor

What a thrill—
My wrist instead of my heart.
The flesh broken, split
Except for a sort of hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a door,
Painted red.
Then the thick goo.

Rockstar,
Your drummer left the band.
The silence sounds
Drum rolls

Letting go of nothing.
I pushed you away,
Clutching my knife
Shimmering silver strength.

A celebration, this is.
Since the first snare
A million men play,
Bassist every one.

Whose side were you on?
Not mine
Allen, you were killing
Me so I needed to bleed you

Your thin
Brittle feelings
Rockstar
Confused me—

The stain
Of me
On your black tee shirt
Darkens and tarnishes and when

You miss

The sounds of our
Music and laughter
Drumming your brain

How you'll cry—
Lost girl,
Dirty girl,
Dead girl.

A Lie

My fingers circle your neck
forcing your voice box
to shut up.

My grip wrings the last
insults
I squeeze the air out
until you're a dark shade of Carolina blue.

I scan your eyes,
whites bloodshotting,
searching.
And then release you with a kiss
on each strained lid.

Later, my fingers
will scar
your back, guide you
into me,
circle your knuckles,
trace the calluses on your palms,
and promise to never leave you.

Battle

My mother fought for me
when I was twenty. Fought for me
like I was the battle between all
abusers and abuse-es. She saw what I –
blinded by pseudo-love could not –
he was aspiring to be a monster.

My mother knew, in the way
that mothers do, that our fighting
was more than passion, sometimes
it was hate – the brutal crashing
of two idealists creating their own
together but separate reality. She told me
I was too good for him, and of course,
I couldn't believe it and be with him.
But the look that came with her words broke
me more than he ever would –

her look physically crumbled me –
that strong fortress built to protect me.
A mother's disappointment
when she realizes that her only daughter
is too stubborn and independent to be
the strong stubborn and independent daughter

she was raised to be. The daughter who could
change the world is stuck in a world
that she's created. It was a mother's look
that look brought me out. She
fought the battle I was
and won.

Sins We Write

Only trouble is interesting
that's a rule of fiction.

If addiction is unconsciousness
and the poem is consciousness,
then how do we become
conscious in the world?

It's dangerous to base identity
on pain, poems on pain.

What if there is nothing
to confess? Can you
get pleasure out of all
the possibilities if you
have nothing to confess?

Live in the gray areas.

Confess the sins.

The Treehouse

a NC apartment hovering
over garage,
 washer, dryer
spawn of the motherhouse
 (born in 1931)
first home, all mine
 (me alone)
winter cold leaves
 covered the porch
oak topped maple
 giant wood roaches
 flippant in mulch
hardwood floors
 happy happiness

AM routine

Wake up – 4 lines

- 1-write
- 2-shower
- 3-get ready
- 4-leave

poems flowed,
smoking, snorting
ash-dropping
 tip- tapping among
keys patting, poems
 language filled
diluted self
 happy happiness

up nose
 random boys beds
always cold

Months. Months. Months.

lies on lies
pretending control
 enjoying the alone (?)

trapped in self
in home

And one morning:
my face, my pillow
my thick black blood.

Charlotte Airport: Woman Waiting

Twenty minutes before boarding
I watched a woman,

anorexic thin, tight skin,
brown hair tied in a bun,
a too huge white sweater,
tapered jeans—Waiting,

Newsweek folded under her arm,
silver Cannon camera
and Reese's pieces in hand.
Arms crossed, clogs. Waiting.

Announcement of the arrival from Seattle,
passengers spewing from the gate, doubled,
singles, families. Her faced changed
with each person passing. I watched her

and hoped her person wouldn't come.
I wished this woman the pain of loss,
wanted her to hurt like I will.

Hers was the last off the plane.
A small part of me still waiting.

Blue Las Vegas

only blue
 against
shades of beige skyline
 sun bleached

unnoticed
until the West and East
 coast strangers collide

if Las Vegas is alive
 its heart only throbs
 at night

You are it
 blue dyed hair
distinguishing mark
 for the crowd's face

You only alive on stage
 each note a penny
 dropped into the slot
producing song
 endless collage
 bland casino
on fire after dark

each note a penny a memory
 a lever pull
 almost a win
but always a song
 hypnotizing song

but black is gray
red is pink

and You are always one
closer to the jackpot

moving to the next
 flashing machine
and the same
 dull song

The Poetic Equation

My life is spent collecting fragments
so that one day I can write a poem
and pray that it is meaningful.
The fragments always seem separate
but their common denominator is me—
the poet who pieces together
in mathematical certainty.

TWO

in his arms I can still think of you

I still have the microwave,
you told me to keep it – I might need it.
Your little silver radio is still

plugged into the bathroom wall
so that I can practice singing
in an empty shower stall.

Rok and Gimpy are doing well;
I joke that I have custody,
but have gotten no hamster support

since our divorce. These are all the things
you purposefully left behind – wanting
me to need you. Sometimes late at night

when I'm lying in bed alone, awake,
sometimes I wish you were there.
Right there beside me, on the left side of the sheets.

But only because you are here and he is there
and if I close my eyes, I might forget
that it is only you.

The Other

Last night I dreamed of another
man while I slept beside my husband.

The other man, too, had a wife
but it was the poetry, the words

that tangled us together.
I blame his syllables

for sneaking in my sleep,
they were there, we were there

together
poems kisses caresses.

When I woke— my husband,
lips smacking and snoring—

disappointed me for who he wasn't.
I woke him up,
 made him love me anyway.

Series

It begins:

this human had two heads and four legs—
In the beginning, we always say in the beginning.

Hello, this mad moon cries
and her beautiful black rose sweats iron
from roads gone. She can sing him out
of what shadows behind him,
and whisper to him to please sleep
here beneath.

It ends:

This human is split.

The roads erode under hurricane skies.
She stares as he tells her words
she could never say and walks away.
She pulls a piece of the sky down,
thin thread unraveling.

Work in Progress

Morning tangled,
terrified to open my eyes and lose you.

You are mad about what we weren't,
a girlfriend to poetry and memories.
She was me
and yes, the boy did kiss my feet
he tried to free me.

I felt winter's dead urge
whisper through him,
 winter mint lips
 between sights of breath.

Image of you lying
between black polyester sheets
curled next to the indentation
 where my head should be.
Seeing you play guitar makes me tremble,
an aggravated assault on the space
 between us.

Clicking like a sign before thunder
 my life, my you.
I apologize for everything.

If you met me on the beach in Venice
would you still follow me home?

Instructions for After My Death
For Wymann

I wonder if there is anything
past the black of it all
or if it's like getting drunk,
passing out – just a space
in memory before the next life.

I sit at my computer, this warm
spring night typing my will,
as if I will die tomorrow.

And I hope that I die first
or if love can stave off death,
we can go together,

I want my ashes burned
with yours, shaken together,
mixed and sprinkled over
the Blue Ridge Mountains
of Virginia in the fall
when the leaves are the most beautiful

Because Frank O'Hara Tells It How It Is

Each morning on the way to the coffee pot
I wish that I had a magical button
to make it brew so that I could stay
in bed for the rest of my life
or maybe just five more minutes
and amuse myself with thoughts of you
and where we could go for lunch, maybe
the Firebelly Lounge, or even Elizabeth's if
only we lived in the same city or even
the same state. But I get up, fumble
with the lighter to light my Parliament,
pour spoonfuls of sugar into an empty
blue marble mug and I count the drips
of lingering coffee falling from the filter
and I love you too much.

The Art of Line Breaks

the border of belonging

the unbreakable line

excess

seduce me to mislead me

the textual body border

the disabled abnormal body

live inside the line, the border

but mess it up, erase it, break it

change it, get lost in it

show me your synapse

break it before it's vacant

vitality on the page

think phrases phrases

is it a poem?

linearity gives way to non-lineation

voluntary amputation

disappearance and return

resonating fat syllables

if you long for it

it will disappear

start and end at the same time

river rock

your hands
chiseling away rough edges
currents softly
eroding the riverbank

your hands
strong and stable
the bedrock supporting
my foundation

touch me

Coffee

There is something similar between hands
pressing firmly into naked skin—
especially when the hands are of a man
who refuses to admit that you are his other—
and sipping on hot coffee
without sugar or cream, drinking it dark.

The bittersweet dark
brew, conforms to the cup, warms hands
and the scent of the ground coffee
bean ruptured skin,
awakens senses like no other.
And then you think of that man:

the man
who wakes while dawn wavers the last dark
moments—with intentions other
than the night before when his hands
lured you and he fingered your skin—
to make your morning coffee.

And then he pours it, gently serves you coffee
in bed. This man
whose breath is heavy on your skin,
who cracks the blinds, shattering the dark
who softly smiles, hands
you the cup, and retreats to the other

room. And you think there is no other
who can prepare coffee
this delicious, or whose hands
are so skilled with your body. This man
who appeared from nowhere in the dark
crawling into your skin.

And so you touch your bare skin
with one hand, holding the cup with the other,
you close your eyes to relive the dark,
satin of your flesh, warm coffee
dripping to the spot where the man
spilled himself and you begin again the feeling of his hands.

When he leaves, your skin dusted by his hands,

he runs to the arms of the other woman, this man,
whose aftertaste lingers like dark coffee.

Weekend Pantoum

I close my eyes. I remember again
the way that the swirls are inked across your back.
All it takes is one teasing thought
to feel you wash over me like a wave.

The waxing sun inked on your back rises from deep blue swirls
of sea. My fingertips trace their detail into your shoulder blade
while you lap at me like a wave.
Nagachampa tunneling to the star-tacked ceiling.

Your fingers and hands lift my shoulder blades;
head drifting into the black fuzzy blanket;
star-tacked ceiling; hunter green floor.
Dawn whispering through the Venetian blinds.

The blanket covers our damp bare bodies;
Smashing Pumpkins promising we'll be perfect,
eyes closed blindly while you whisper to me
"I love you; I love the way you taste."

I love you through a phone call,
my one teasing thought—
we're perfect.
I close my eyes. I remember again.

An October Night Looking Out Over
Las Vegas from Room 19006, Treasure Island Resort

– the lights twinkle
tiny pegs of color in the Lite Brite making a whole picture.
I want to pluck these orbs of neon, transform the street lamps
into phosphorescence on the shore, squares of flickerings
from casino windows into a dimmed back
porch light, the chasing lights of advertisements
into the sturdy frame of a house, and all the background dark
into bricks and a roof for this new home. I want to manipulate
these pegs, trade this picture for my own.

When Interstate 40 Meets 86

--want to think of my last cigarette,
it's fastened vapor tails non-connected,
urging past buckled oak trees
the blue-sky shattered stars
speeding four hours closer.
Unknotting my hair in anticipation.

Leaving here at eighty miles an hour
two raindrops chasing after one another
on the windshield
of this car.

Nutella and Banana Crepes: A Truth For Nathan

You are dangerous,
with intense dark eyes.

You've smoked just enough
cigarettes for your voice to hesitate

on each syllable, to scratch
each word. You love poetry,

are gifted with the rhythm
of words, their cadence, assonance.

I think we might have but
it's hard to tell, my memories

distorted by cloudy smells
of Virginia splitting into existence.

Guitar scorned fingertips sketching
my ribs. You eased me

with Godiva martinis
at the Café de France,

Jack Kerouac, the Beat generation;
fed me foreign delicacies,

bought me books on poetry
and politics by Adrienne Rich.

There was truth
when you kissed my cheek,

when we stalled at the Landfall
stoplight, turn signal blinking out of sync

to the traffic light. What if
our words did not collide

in Wilmington,
stuffed with sandy air.

Making Poetry

going to bed with you
is writing poetry

your fingertips
words gently placed on my page

into faultless arrangement
like pantoums

repeating their lines
across my quatrains

the sound of your sighs
against my skin

softly alliterative
my pores speak to you

the master of written word
your tongue

veiled by my soft tissue
the mighty sestina

lexically persisting its flicker
building its strength through

thirty-nine duplicating lines
deploying the envoi at finish

my breasts

inspired by Lucille Clifton

my breasts are small breasts.
they sing funky blues songs
in the shower.
they go braless under tiny
black spaghetti straps
because they can.
my breasts are free breasts.
they don't like to be held down
or pushed up
or cut by underwire.
my breasts are sexy.
my breasts are magic.
they swell for the pink
of my baby's mouth
and peak for intensity
of pleasure.

The Mother or the Other

1.

I'm tired
of the miracle of life.

It's so easy to get pregnant
to forget to take the Pill, or not insist
on the condom, or maybe he forgets to pull out
(as if that even works). And then once she's pregnant

if she decides to keep it, she does the right things:
resolves herself to happiness, gets married or goes it alone,
doctor visits, healthy foods, baby weight,
buys pink and blue everything, yellow and green for neutral
and keeps the receipts just in case,
wanting to be surprised by the sex—
In 9 short months
she'll pop out her baby bundle of joy.

Why not focus on the nagging, swollen
and stretched out with maternal love and instincts.
Think past the first ultrasound pictures, to labor pains,
episiotomies, horrible cravings,
swollen feet, aching backs.

These beautiful
glowing women choose to be mothers,
dedicate themselves for life
to the great cause of humanity,
continue the human race, breeding babies that need love,
and give despite the fear of never having enough love to give.

2.

No one praises the girl who doesn't get pregnant,
who starts fucking in high school and still graduates
with honors, goes to college, is successful.

No one talks about the girls
who responsibly take the Pill at the same time
every day, who demand the condom

or won't give it up. Who rubs their backs, massages their feet?

It's much harder to be that girl.
To make the choice to go against
what everyone says is "natural,"
to be the daughter who won't be a mother.
To be that woman,
who chooses herself
over reproduction, over ovaries, over uteruses,

the selfish scorned woman seductress,
not the virgin but the whore,
as if all conceptions are immaculate. No one ever says,
"way to be a woman,"
to someone who isn't a mother.

Lady Madonna

a bastard of blue blood sat writing her poems,
fractions from her life and shards created
to make her more than.

Her thoughts echoed inside,
jumped over other thoughts,
multiplied, pluralled
until she forgot her point.
Her whole life's existence unglued.

She thought about jumping off her balcony
to see if she would die or only hurt her ankles.
She decided to pass on her early exit, pass on the poems,
and go eat grilled monkey instead.

Writing Ugly

I wanted to write you ugly,
a teenage daughter's angst
the shit and piss of dirty diapers

the blood and milk
the inks of woman's body.
I wanted to write you ugly

because motherhood is ugly
but I couldn't

negate your grace
as the daughter who hated your nursely patience –
knowing one day I would need your opinion and advice

when my mind clouded with anxiety
thought everything would kill me,
make me sick, vomit or shit.

I would need the stabilizing of your diagnosis.
The voice to tell me that my husband
gave me sparkle and shine

like a freshly waxed hardwood floor,
that multiples, multiples of men
before dulled me, scuffed and marked

but never penetrated deep enough.
I wanted to write you ugly
battle out my fear

but you are, have always been,
exactly what I fear the most
selfless, constant.

You have always been my mother.

Mothers

swollen belly
9 months full ready
to burst

glowing
beautiful
am I to be

to burst
out of me

sick of the swell
waiting for the unwelcome
blood to come or not come
find me again

head (explode)
remind me I'm not

THREE

Pop's Poem

The first missed days
were Sundays

And then Camelot
Nursing Home where you
leaned in spite of your wheelchair
untreated malignance
eating your colon waiting
for Grandma to die first
so that you would
never leave
your white dove alone.

Chill

I've never felt anything as cold
as my lips pressed on your forehead
that final goodbye kiss
like kisses given with bowls
of neapolitan ice cream
in the orange recliner
those kisses that dimpled
your skin

and later I knelt by my bed
petitioning the Mother and Father
to ease you to the Other Side
I woke the next morning

still kneeling
hands folded
after dreaming
that you told me
to quit crying

December Poem

In the parking lot I
reached for the handle
to open the door —

Remember the phone call sitting in
the Atlanta airport terminal
waiting for a flight home
and Remember the June funeral
I refused to wear black
and wore a white sundress,
which kissed the back
of my knees when the breeze wrapped around me
and Remember everyone waiting,
waiting to catch me if my body broke
under the weight of your death.

—when I was empty
I re-buckled my seat belt,
and started the car.

February 9th, 2004

1.

I remember bowls of strawberry ice cream
eaten in the recliner; your war wisdoms
(even though the war in Germany
ended the day before you
should have been shipped out
from Newfoundland); my Sundays visits;
Christmas Eve barbies; winter coupled
bowls of spicy chili (no meat made
special for me);

walls of water around tomato plants;
the garden; hills of squash
and cucumbers; my little feet cracking
your back as you lay on outdated olive carpet;
buckwheat pancakes crisp with butter
on the outside, soft in the middle; frosted
flakes with orange juice instead of milk;

then cups of coffee, two spoonfuls
of creamer and two of sugar; playing
poker, with your money, the sorted change
kept in empty vitamin bottles; the birthday
you shared with my father, your youngest son,
exactly 30 days before my own;
garlic; Vidalia onion sandwiches;
big bear hugs and forehead kisses.

2.

The first stroke; hospital; surgery;
another stroke, and another, and another;
banisters on the walls; Daddy in the garden;
the day you wouldn't wake up;

the nursing home;
my Sunday visits; the day I found you
on the floor, blood gushing
down your forehead
and your sheepish grin; the dentures
that didn't fit; my carrying the conversation

for the first time ever; when I asked if you
would be at my wedding, “if I’m above
ground and able”; your body wasted
from 200 pounds to 98; and then Father’s day 2003;

3.

Eight months since the blue and red
of carnations on top of a casket, opened,
then in the ground;

the fear
that I will remember you wrong.

And When You Were Gone

I moved
to Las Vegas

beyond the stalked corn fields
and Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

I left the changing
dogwood blossoms, yellow pollen coated cars
clothes hanging in humid heat
deciduous leaves, late dusking hours
fishing in the morning's cool clutch
and the winter white of December frost stretched across an empty garden.

I left you,
the cold gravestone, didn't mourn
in the warmth of your home.

There is so much color here—many hues
of neon lights against a black canvas night sky.
I traded the natural for the fabulous

I left the calm of night
The lights here
would have marched across your eyes,
each step in time to rhythm,
as it marches across mine,
from mirror reflection.

I left so quickly
I left before it could hurt

In Las Vegas I don't have to think
you will never teach my children
to play five card stud, to eat ice cream out of the carton,
to plant tomatoes, the difference between small and large mouth bass,
how to talk to strangers.

I left you dead in the ground
I left you

because I couldn't say
good bye.
Refused the cemetery.

*"Once you lose someone it is never exactly
the same person who comes back."
--Sharon Olds*

Curing your Memory

For: Uncle Tony (Feb 27, 1962 – Sept 17, 1999)

The snuff-chewed years
finally swallowed your tongue.

Brown tobacco
juice stained your golf-ball white
reality—leaving the black
tarpaper missing from your final
roofing job—

So many factors affected your curing schedule—
the soil, the position of the leaf
on stalk, the weather, place of the growth,
belated medical assistance.

And I lit a cigarette, inhaling
the same toxic fire-cured flavors—daring them
pushing them
to try and harvest me too.
I pretended that you were at my graduation,
that disease had not yet strangled
your shrunken body;
the field production not quite finished.

My eyes trembled,
when you called.
I could hear tears on your sandpapered voice,
afraid that I would not forgive
you for not being there, because you
could not forgive your body

beginning to ripen.
Decreased hydrolysis and respiration,
the rapid destruction of chlorophyll,
healthy cells, converting starch into sugar
removing your moisture. You knew it wouldn't be long.

After doctors
surgically sliced out your tongue

you scripted a message across the wall:
"Everything will be okay."

But I knowing,
 blindly driving
through Hurricane Floyd,
 took forested side roads beginning in Warsaw
 with fragile directions because I-40
was still drowning, to take comfort
 in the arms of my lover.

It must have seemed
like you were still sleeping.
Stem drying complete in the killing out stage.

I drove through water that attacked
from every direction
refusing to believe that you had ever been sick.
All I could hear burning
 in between rain coated cigarettes
were the tongueless utterings of words
 spoken though a tracheal pipe
long distance over the phone:

"I'm so proud. I love you.
I wish I could be there."

FOUR

Definition

A writer once told me that to be
a poet you must feel like a poet:
wear the silk scarf, the black plastic glasses,
drink wine with dinner, become vegetarian,
smoke specialty cigarettes when someone
is watching, buy a typewriter and use it,
grow a library, harbor an addiction.

At the time I thought that she made sense
but now that I wear the glasses
and quit smoking,

I wonder where talent factors in,
the art with language, the mystery of form,
the gift of imagination, observation, the choice
to sound out syllables for line breaks,

or not. The poem's choice
is somewhere in the lines and words and form,
and the poet is the vessel carrying the pen to shore.

For Corduroy

My puppy loves
to play, brings Piggy,
chewed and purple,
to my feet. Rocks back
on his hind legs, butt
in the air, downward
facing dog, and lays Piggy

on top of my toes,
waiting for the throw.
He waits patiently
for me to grab it. We play
tug of war when he retrieves it.
He pulls Piggy by the ear,
head low to the ground,

weight shifting in rhythmic
jerks, until I let go. He
rests his head on his front paws
if it takes too long
for me to notice him. And
if that doesn't work,
he lets out one short whine,

before repeating himself.
Sometimes when I'm stationed
at the computer, trying to write,
he lays at my feet and licks my toes.
Other times he digs the stuffing
out of Piggy until I back
the chair away from the desk,

as if he understands
that the writing was there before him,
not to spite him, and if he lets me work,
I can be free to play until
the next poem comes along.

Ancestors

The first Wilkins stole a chicken!
To think I am here
because some man
stole a chicken – his punishment –
be hanged or be sent to the colonies.
He chose plan B and
eventually became a plantation owner
in North Carolina, which eventually
led to me. To be nothing
without a chicken,
life hinging on a chicken.
Nothing more
absurd. Perhaps hinging life
on god or science or art.
I wouldn't be here if.
Maybe I'm ridiculous
or maybe I'm realistic – either way,
nothing without that chicken.

Answering a Call from an Unknown Caller

The man's voice on the other side wanted
Shane Jenson, a stranger's number recycled.

The man told me all about Shane, his job
as a pit boss in the casino, education from UNLV,

how generous and kind, and on he rambled
hoping maybe his stories would make me know Shane,

to realize that yes, in fact, I did know him,
because Las Vegas wasn't that large a place,

or maybe he thought I would slip
Shane through the phone to be with him in Florida

(The man was from Florida, born in Baltimore
and went to school with Shane. They'd been best friends

for 20 years, even though they hadn't spoken in over two.
Shane had stayed in Las Vegas, and the man had moved

back East. Sometimes numbers get misplaced).
With every paused breath, I tried

to get him off the phone. I even checked the phonebook
for this Shane Jenson. I had to leave for appointments and errands,

but each time I was almost free, a panic
arose in the man's voice, a tension surfaced

through the phone. As if hanging up
meant his friend was lost forever.

On the Train to Milan

I want to change my *biglietto* –
the distance wearing on me each day–
mi dispiace per departing *senza te*.

There are families – we
are family, me, you, the dog as *tre* –
patty caking mothers, smoothing
kisses, couples slurping each other's lips.
I listen to words of musicians
whose meanings you fill.

I'm going to change my ticket.

Come home to you – leave
the green Italian humidity I should adore
for parched desert, leave
the colors for the bleached.
A *madre* gives her twin daughters
candies, sweetly they suck, content
to just be and I because I will change

my *biglietto* am content,
will be content,
can cool my insides
self destructing, melting.

These families reassure me.

Crave

I have this black and white picture of you
smoking a Parliament. It is in a collection of people I miss—
I miss
being in those moments and when I look at me
in the rest of the pictures, I know that I
was living like

there was nothing to it then. Just like
the night at the Allman Brother's Concert, it was just you
and me, tripping on puddles of mud, and I
dance with a yellow rose. There is no way I could dismiss
that night from my mind. You showed me
how to see the music. I had miss-

ed that before. I miss
how you play with my hair, like
it's made of silk; and how you hold me
and touch my cheek as you
look in my eyes before we kiss. I miss
how you tell me that things are okay, and that I

will be all right. I
miss
how you call me "Miss
lizard queen," like
you
think that makes me

seem so proper. I always laugh when you call me
that, especially in the middle of the night, as I
fall asleep next to you
under the green fleecy blanket. I miss
the way the blanket smells like
sunflowers and incense. It's the small things I miss...

miss
me
like
I
miss
you

Every Night

we share some type of carbohydrate for our anti-Atkins lifestyle,
and we prop our feet up on the dual reclining couch while watching a little TV,
usually *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill*, or *Jeopardy* and *Who Wants to be a
Millionaire*, depending on whose night it is to have the remote, and then
my dear husband goes to school.
Every night things happen exactly the same,
he leaves at 6:20 and returns at 10:43.

One night,
 it was all over,
someone killed him,
 he wrecked his car
 he was stuck somewhere under
a tire, or breathing his last
 breath, the weight of a cargo truck crushing,
 tires exploding, gunshot, mugging,
 my heart lunged up and down and up and down
because I couldn't remember
 if I told him I loved him
 or if I had kissed him goodbye, entranced
 in the answer to final Jeopardy. 15 minutes late and I
 called
his cell phone. Nothing. And then again
 30 minutes later. I watched the news for
 a fatal accident on the 215,
I wished for my stepfather's stupid
 scanner, to pick up the emergency
 call, heard footsteps on the stairs
 that sounded like his
 but were not, and paced and paced and paced

Then finally he was home.
He was delayed by a woman
talking in a dim parking lot.
I kissed him with relief.
*If I ever doubted that I love you,
now I know for sure.*

That night under the covers
snuggled into him
I wondered what scared me more
the fear of losing love,
or of changing routine.

God

1.

My mother's god is a man,
demanding servitude
concealed in his soft-sell, pet names.

My sweet little lambs

He has no female equal
in his chauvinistic fraternity,
shuns the doubters from his righteous show.
He wants your soul for the ticket to grace,
dangles sin, testing faith,
wrote His Word in patriarchy
blaming Eve for evil.

2.

My God is a woman
prehistoric martyr of matriarchy.
She, creator, before God was a man
my mother and whore,
the one who listens, forgives,
accepts saint, sin, and sinner,
protects me from myself.

May Grace fill you my child

My God is the one
who tucks me in at night and then
crawls in beside me.

Haiku

Your hand on my back
A fossilized impression
Skin-glazed scapula

New Mother

I'm a mother. For nine months
she was in me tiny developing. We

ate together and slept together;
she let me know when it was time

to go or whatever with a tiny kick
or shift on my bladder. She came

out all red and slimy—so beautiful.
The first days were okay. I loved

her need for me, my milk, my voice,
my smell. She'd wake and cry

and wake and cry and wake and cry.
It was so much harder to please her

out of me, to sense her need. Her screams
loud, high pitched steel machinery

grinding, and she was so red, eyes glued
by wetness, drool dripping down

her little chin. I would hold her,
rock her, feed her, change her, stroll

her, walk her, sing her, nothing worked.
I'd put her down to sleep and walk

away—hide myself in a closet
to escape the reverberations of her screams.

It was harder, her out of me.
One day she stopped screaming,

silently sleeping under a sheet.

Register

There is so much burning knowledge
in the monotony of being
a convenience store clerk.

Punching the register in the numbers
it swerves back in the narrow
miss—close range of my ovaries.

Register
even if I wanted her,
could muster the strength
to emerge myself in motherhood
now is not the time.

Instead, I count dollar bills
their surface blackening my fingertips
dropping the money in the safe.

First Massage

As I took my clothes off
I was glad that you
were a man.

And as you fingered every
muscle, repeated rubbing
and rhythmically rolling
all my stresses away,
I secretly wished
that you would touch me
the wrong way:
slightly brush against
my soft bare pink
or remove the sheet completely
and replace your strong hands
with moist full lips.

I played my fantasy
through closed eyes
as you caressed my body
professionally.

More Than One Way

Because there is more than one way
to die in a revolving door – I most certainly will –
perhaps the doors will just get stuck
or my shoestring will get trapped and wrap
around me cutting off circulation
or I will panic and my heart will explode
in anxiety or I will trip
knock my head against the glass
become unconscious and never wake up.
Maybe in the rescue the glass will shatter
severing my jugular or while waiting
I will suffocate meaning
while I think of the most pleasing
ways to die: jumping off a building
on ecstasy, dying gently, disappearing
into a black hole, have my words sneak up
and devour me in my sleep.

Poem

In the dark basement—curled up together
again I can still see the soft glow of the burning
but you are not there (I am reminded)

It is you It is me
and we are not constant

Morning (the sum of the angles of change)
pours spoonfuls of coffee grinds
into a blank filter
everyday when I wake up
eyes & skin & hair remains & I breathe
this pattern—mud, gray, blood red

We are an arrow in flight

Past battered glasses
listless on the windowsill—
the coffee pot brews
 across the room I can be in eternity

Time changes the perspective
of everything—lingering coffee dangling
from the filter blue marble mug catches
the drips of notebooks and memories
in the fireplace that illuminate everything

My face changes in the car
 (the face changes as the heart beats)

Sylvia

*Who shall measure the heart and violence of the poet's heart
when caught and tangled in a woman's body?
– Virginia Woolf*

A hole
sliced thin
under the skin
split like a hinge.

I can feel it too,
the dimmed light
from a husband
too good,

as if
you meant
to be a failure.
This wife life

clinking in sleep,
awakening
pre-dawn
to the wordless hole

that darkens and stains.
These short
staccato lines
clinging

to the next.
Unable to hide
from what is
always with me.

To Be Human

Live with the isolation between
existence and community.

Enjoy the 40 million minutes in your lifetime.
Create a narrative to make a linear connection

but remember that contact can never
be completely achieved.

The abyss of disconnect,
disjunctive lyrical events,

movements between the narratives
we have with other relationships

and that lyrical energy is immediate.
A delicious evening indeed,

joy is incomplete until you find
someone to share it with,

someone to bridge and connect.
This is my experience of the world

and it is not incredibly special
but I give it a poetic life.

I put it on the page.

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