

1-1-2006

## Answers the Dog Whispered

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.25669/m1im-sfru>

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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  
December 2006**

UMI Number: 1441740

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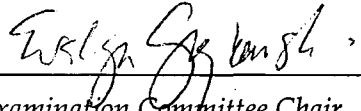
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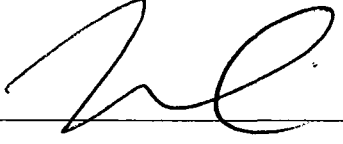
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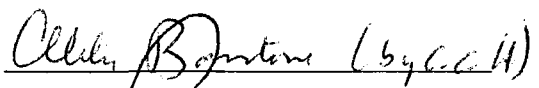
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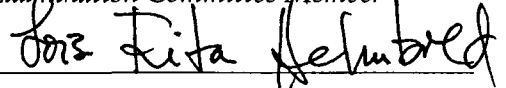
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ABSTRACT

**ANSWERS THE DOG WHISPERED**

by

Allison Wilkins

Dr. Evelyn Gajowski, Examination Committee Chair  
Professor of English  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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.



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 9<sup>th</sup>, 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



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.



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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*Atlantis*: "river rock", "When Interstate 40 Meets 86"

Thesis Title:

Answers the Dog Whispered

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