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About a Yellow Ball

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ABOUT A YELLOW BALL

By

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Bachelors of Arts in English
University of San Francisco
2006

Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the

Masters of Fine Arts

English
College of Liberal Arts
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2012



THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

Shannon Salter

entitled

About a Yellow Ball

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

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and Dean of the Graduate College

May 2012

Abstract

These are poems made from many things: color, eggs, oranges, many kinds of seeds, leaves, wind, California, the desert, birds. They are things alive in the world and alive in my heart. I cannot take them out of the world, but from my heart I can have whatever appears on its surface. The language of steam.

They are poems that like to be at home.

California is my home and so is the Mojave (and so is every desert). I live in a valley about four hundred miles from the Pacific Ocean, in the city of Las Vegas. What better place to rejoice in the material of our soul than a city in the middle of the true, beautiful void. This is a place where life and death happen at once, where oleander blooms in June and people sometimes keep Joshua trees in their yard. It is the place where I first understood faith, that it is the ability to believe in what is not there, to know that an empty bowl is actually filled with the whole of humanity.

Ultimately, the poems are concerned with space. They are enamored with the spaces between us that make us selves, and the spaces inside of other spaces within the heart. They try to look out and look in at the same time; they try to close the spaces between a self and all the other selves in the world, between one thing and another. Like all poems, they try also to close the space between a thing itself and the line it occupies. Of course, these kinds of spaces can never be completely closed. But the reach is what makes a poem believe it is a poem, what gives it its life and place.

Some spaces can be closed. A word follows the one before it and one line comes after another to create something brand new. Here is the “principle of magic”, which Jack Spicer defined in a letter to Robin Blaser as the fact that things simply “fit together”.

An unseen force draws the words into one another, and it is faith in this force that makes the poems true. Jack Spicer felt the outside coming into his poems, the words delivered to his heart and mind from something and someplace else.

There is a Sanskrit word used in several belief systems to define a fifth element or other spiritual force. The word is Akasha, which means the spiritual essence which fills all space; the sky. As the fifth element, Akasha is the intangible energy which runs through each of the other four elements, encompassing and connecting all things on earth and the universe.

Wind, earth and water are everywhere in these poems. Fire is present as the sun.

Acknowledgements

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the editor of *The Bitter Oleander*, where some of these poems first appeared.

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Part 1

all eyes go to the sea

a bright orange star under the table
and red marigolds
a trace of sugar

God still in the window
when the daisy turns to sun

* * *

a bird finds her shell
full of sea glass
artichoke smooth in sand

this is before we are
an array of eggs
asleep on the shore

empty candelabra
no need to look for yolk

oranges on top
of oranges
brake for the grass
clean strip of asphalt

I want a dinner party
everyone
sparrows hopping and an owl

shag carpet up to my knees

a river parade

* * *

we have to do as it does

what's there already
is a lunchbox
blue plastic with snaps and
your name in cursive

an owl
eyeing grass

piano keys on the sidewalk

the shift up is also a tilt
pine trees leaning with wind
one asks
is he on a golf course
or a cliff

an island made out of rock
could be sugar
the sun is just above you

* * *

this is after a bird fell out
a sparrow
and sighed before a wave

smooth artichoke

Today, on the floor

The table beside the door

outside
sparrows were hopping no bigger than
chili peppers

I tasted wood
which tasted green

I heard sparrows discussing the bible
over pie crumbs, pieces of lettuce
contemplating
the narrow
a promise of freedom

the sparrows could have rolled down a mountain
could have become owls
oleander

today the sparrows made a pact
with the sun
the sun would be up there
and they
would hop on the ground

the sparrows would hop on the floor

to Nipton

underneath the carpet
a yellow star
an onion
train smashing our pennies like paint

the moon is a slideshow over Hotel Nipton
stucco river cactus
on the orange
mountains claw into the curve
look what I've found

the center of an egg
we all ran into the wind with our hands

pennies falling out of mouths

Little rounds

There are little things inside of what is

the curve
a way to hold hands

that's brand new

the way an owl's voice
forges the periphery
but you can never see one
so you keep his gift inside your ears

There are spaces, the morning
little seaweeds
tilting inside
bowls of miso
egg yolks bobbing one round
prayer I whispered
into the back of your neck
a parachute unfolding a parachute—
clarity
the little big spoon

There are spaces between spaces, there is the damp
wild closeness
of rest
and inside
there are little seeds

a pinky finger and a thumb
folded into owl's sound

little rounds

the scent of hay

Little Birds

Beneath purple cattails
a fat sparrow
dreams an egg
pulls dried grass from the ground

little birds like to go for walks

all the time hunting bugs
all the time

building momentum

for the world's
smallest wave

A place as vast and dry

The bugs of summer die

This evening a sound bug
beat himself furiously
against the glass patio door
now he's on his back
in the cusp
two or three legs jolting and no rhythm

I remember the cockroaches
it took them a long time to die this way
a day or more on their backs
frisking slower and slower
until nothing

The desert seems cruel in its deaths

But there is also
the mysterious etching
of afternoon leaves
on the far wall
when the sun is a miracle
slipping all its orange through branches
forging shadow
that only a place as vast
and dry as this can touch

after a while I crouch
glimpse the sound bug
through glass—
becoming small
wings and body pinching
into heat
pressing forward towards their own

Oranges

There are moments when
the thrust of life overwhelms
and our bodies sift
into the earth

in a field of dry grass
there is one thistle glowing

the miracle of our sky

the way we don't come loose
from the sun

I wait for breath in the form of fruit
dream a little hole
a cloud moves through leaves

there are endless piles of oranges
more than we knew

new birds

in the morning
daisies

tiny footsteps
clicking up through
ground espresso
cream this as the cow
a cool, wet skin

I eat sandwiches like when I was little
tomato and yellow cheese
on buttered toast

the pepper I took
from your two soft spots
new birds
between chin hair

Persimmon

a wind inside the yard
softens persimmons on our tree

shadows lift into their round

a moth collects dust
on its wings

an old man is taking down his fruit
looping string around stems
tying them up on a branch
to frost
in a yellow breeze

when he sings at night
he will sing to them
he and the moon
for the fruit in the air

a little galaxy of autumn sweet

the man's heart turned to sugar
on their skin

Part 2

what is

here is the secret of a bird's cage

an empty brown bottle
and a blue butterfly

the reach of a pond
inside the grey wood on our balcony
the flutter
or a little girl's ribbon
from her sleeve

here is the ministry of an hour
the clicking of planet's we dream
soft pink salt
that makes an apple
inside the bath
the way you said yes
again and again
yes

here are wings made of sand dollar
crumbs from sandwiches
we ate in the car

really you said, really?
yes but it's too soon to say so
yes but let's just sleep and dream

all poems are love poems
this is only what is

near waking

our sleep is a balloon in the daytime
a sky
folded over
as it breathes

the shadows of love are not the shadows of god

the wholeness of something
we cannot say
our dog's tongue

a bee cradled inside purple
as thin as its wings

You might like it here

in the river there are ducks wild
with the mists of March
our wondering
floral
bulging at the seams

the myth of heaven indicates the soul

jars of wine we drink
until afternoon
slices of peeled apple
oranges
purple grapes bobbing
in the red

flowers cannot contain themselves

the life of stars
these stars
the death and breath of our hearts
we are children

forget what it means to be alive
remember the air and the river

make a little hole next to the dreams you carry
come in to where you live

you might like it here

andrew

a piece of corn inside
a raindrop
your soft blonde

is the center of a shell

you show me your red bruised
finger
of a hundred kisses
starfish
from every ocean
come out of it
twinkling at the ends
of little gold hairs

there are dandelions
unfolding from your ears
a new fern from your neck

tomorrow

there will be spanish moss
a silken elm
above your eyes

the kitchen will be a sunflower

and we
its field of sun

The way in

the son is much larger
than his dad

yes

that pink house with a slide in the yard
a stone fountain and round red berries

tell everyone who asks
this is a heart

tell everyone

the tree next to the sand

is its shadow
grown from clouds and leaves

and children

up on the lifeguard stand
are skinny fish
strolling one by one

white undersides of gulls in the air

The myth of heaven we grow

I started walking home across the Bridge . . .

the yucca play cellos

a little tortoise
crawls from its bowl

the bridge is a cocoon
a nest
water from Yermo
the dry that makes cut wood fertile

there are some crows and eight horses
most refreshing is the river
a lemon
the old man who came out of the dark
with a towel

his pond he built with jasper rock and agate
big goldfish he said were koi

they were koi

The last day of March in Las Vegas

a spider curled in the center
between two cattails

I see the sun in his web
when I lean

and down there is the black cat
that came one night into my apartment
laid around in my closet
and on my desk

I want to get inside sky

an egg boiled soft
this dream of spring

and down there is the woman from El Salvador
a little tired
the space between a sparrow's wings

it is April and the dust is coming

when I get to home
I will tell everyone that I am you

find our nest

song of inside

amidst the white flower
there is purple

a steam

drifting lavender shadow
through tiny veins

a universe at work

the silent pull of birds' nests
empty for winter
cupped by thin, grey branches
as swollen air

the desert is a space for infant stars
a dome of yellow pollens
a teapot
that whistles sparrow
between our lungs

the desert
moves inward

it gives itself

for the longing
that can fill its eyes

Sandstone

where are the petals from today
the pinecones chewed in the park

our dog's slobber
your face and the moon through glass

here I have a fine blue sky
a stone
and in the middle of my chest

something I don't understand

our dog's tail moves like a clarinet
one page on the carpet

here are the hard spots on your feet I want to smooth
a canvas lampshade

if we make sand can we fly then
Jason

we will be the noise of birds

reaching here

earth and a pinecone
rolled over sun
on the balcony
where our dog eats cattails

this morning I boiled the eggs just right

soft like a piece of fat
cold from the fridge

the shells slipped off like diamonds
two perfect domes on my plate
the orange peel too
a planet's sky

the yolk in our hearts is a womb
and inside it
an orchestra

yellow I know is home

penne

back to back
asleep in the sink
two penne noodles

I thumb them down
faucet water
inside the drain

go into your spoon

goodbye noodles

Part 3

The apples, the apples
for Zoe

Birds are a force beyond

a leaf weathered thin like an empty sail

what page should we keep it in?
the little wing

half of a heart

keep it in a page with color
the page with balloons
that carry people
into sky

the way is this way

new wing-tips
mystery of trees

the stems and branches of a child's bedside

red and gold skins smooth from the orchards
a garden full of bone-white clouds

Zoe, do you remember the apples?

a quiet in the snow beneath our hands
these roots

a scream we call awake

Exactly what needs to be

Sparrow dead on the ground

soft little sky
turned over on a root

most animals know
they find a place

everything is leading somewhere
and you believe
it is here

a bucket filled with arugula
red chard and potato

maybe it got scared

do you remember
that blue glow
around a corner

I started out inside a shell
among olive leaves

From in

When we come back together
we make a pear

Lend an ear
each of us
to the slow easy rumble
of a child's drool

Babies give kisses
with wide open lips
because that is what they see
as we pull away—

the end of our kiss
the hole of our mouths

Today the sun was yellow leaves
on the ground
and beneath my steps
I heard it sleeping

In the glow was

a coldness

and the pears at the market
made a song like fireflies

little whispers from in their skin

Glow

I go to see the cherries
in the park beside your old house
their flowers have gone

I'm a dandelion in this field
yellow butter and applesauce
spread on toast

our dog wades in the noise of bees
and the mimosas by the wall
already a ballet
of pink anemone

our dog's wet breath in my palm

Our own balloon

I didn't know you'd been sweeping the moon
all this time
into its neat little pile
on the balcony

I thought it just went like that

little pathways between neon
ten million hands the same as leaves

let's get one of those boats we can live on
or sleep on grass
live in a big wicker basket

there's a discount on red

Strength is greater than power

If we had wings they'd sound

fwaap

fwaap

fwaap

and when you get in the air

their sound is a big wet river

stay asleep and the bees

won't lose their stingers on you

the stillness of hummingbirds

we could never fly like that

our wings would flood everything

in the tree the bees are in there

and the little pollens

all that was ever yellow

they fall

onto our red balconies

the emptiness in sun

it gets heavy

holding your arms out like that

the earth is in its own

Las Vegas in March

I walk to where there are apricot trees
a satin obi tied in a bow

look at the sun in their limbs

a pistachio
pink and orange koi in a stream

here is a breath of wild fruit
heaven inside a bell

the layers of your heart you give away
freely

one last bird in the air

river

there are dolphins but not during monsoon

a body and its heart growing
an apple eaten clean by a cow

going in
there is only

that we don't love enough

all those little hands

hot gold teeth in a breeze

late afternoon in the villas

the hairy man with his Japanese wife
melon we chew with our tongue
oily pools on our mouths and a spoon

little boy doing the man on the moon

your curl
in the morning
face scrunched up
a cherry tomato
salad dressings you mix Ranch and Italian
curtains on a bluefin lake

a kite actually can get caught in something
thin air space and heavy duty string

I wanted to see how high it could get up there

palm tree and a clean glass vase

Las Vegas in August

little bird
there are watermelons for breakfast
tomatoes for lunch
the umbrella on our patio lifted in wind

it is August and the stars are falling

in the morning we will wake and be tired
have a swim

I don't believe in any secret
and there is a dead cricket in my bathroom

another beside the couch

the star that dropped into the pool
made our dog sniff the leaves
and the ground around us

flowers at night

there are little hairs on the sides of leaves

bottles of coke
glazed with rust we drink
sitting in the rain

when dark shines through glass
it becomes wolves

yellow and orange stones that smell like fruit
a candle
lemon seed inside a bowl

Las Vegas in September

and Candy at the pool goes into the Jacuzzi
and old friends sit down on a bench

when it rains in the desert
it rains

this is the way we wind our clocks

vodka and an Arnold Palmer
watermelon soaked in the grass

we make cheese with lemon and boiled milk

a seed resting in the white
falls apart over fenugreek and cloves
ginger stays on our hands
a new moth

Part 4

Afternoon in mid-October

Bees return to our patio shrubs
are they bees

loose stucco on the wall
a river
its place in moss

we talk about what matters
and this

go to the pool
lie in the bush with our dog
home is not a choice or a time
you only get this much
and then you do it all over

or is it this

sparrows coming back
our dog's tail sticking out of the bush

flowers at dawn

we think of birds when it's time for sleep

beaks and pistachio almond
a silver bead on top of cake

there is a river that peels your skin
a melaleuca shaking its leaves

the new pink will be a butterfly
stillness
inside your palm

the wind we carry will become an orange

the round will come and go and go away
come back to ask us

grasslands and rice outside the train

ode to moth

everyone should live in a place with moths

in the tree there were so many
now I live next to a pool

there are crickets in most places
and bees

the sound oranges make
when you open them
and they become sky

I want to see dust rise from a light bulb
an angel in the snow with its wings

Quiet in early evening at the villas

between palm fronds
a river
an airplane letting go of thin white cloud

I want to eat runzas on a train through Pittsburgh
all that mustard seed in a field
and there was a yellow ball
I'd like that too

I watch the pool through wooden shutters
take care to bring the bluebirds in at night

the desert is a keyhole
patterns we see in leaves

the blooming things

Through the greenbelts at the villas

There are clouds all over today
and it rained a little
on our walk

little halo
piece of cherry on its stem

our neighbor gave us two tomatoes

elegant tomatoes the good ones
at the swimming pool
red cups full of rum and pear

I have a new floaty with a drink holder

a piano and the memory of sound

To our dog's eye

Our dog's eye is a well
a sparrow
above the rose bush on our patio

I will open the garage for you
tell you plates are clicking
if you cannot hear them

a small fork and a grape tomato
the kind that are orange

it would be nice if the paprika were smoked
and I could see you
see me
standing in the doorway
the sky stretched out our dog's yawn
as crickets
cross to the other side

the white side of blue

when a moth dies it makes a circle up to heaven
sets its wings on a little shelf
goes on into noon

I listen for the desert
getting clean underneath a bush

a lawn chair pulled close to the pool
clouds loosening
orange peel resting in the grass

night is warm in Las Vegas

the petals
from today

leather wet from the sprinklers
left outside
where the stars saw

maybe I will eat a piece of cheese
red sauce with capers
tuna fish
from the night before

the petals are a red
you will not see past

prayer when the fan turns

Part 5

a poem about a yellow ball

the rubber was from a tree in Sri Lanka
the tree was from a seed
seed slept until soil woke it

the yellow was from the high leaves
from sun falling
against shoulders and backs
of slender green

the yellow contained no phthalates
the yellow was shy but only
upon waking
the yellow
always said
yes

the air was a miracle and a mystery
no one knew how it got inside
the good hot air

the air was captured but it was glad
the air had nowhere else to be

time was secretly drawing the air out
slow and easy
it didn't hurt the rubber or the yellow

someday all the air would be gone
the air would go someplace else
the yellow and the rubber
would go back to sun
and back to seed
time would keep their song

Las Vegas in November

in the park
a little man from the Philippines

feet like raisins with the smooth
of fine red clay

his toenails are a crest of sand and mist
his smile
an empty flower pot on its side

the soul is always

a small ache inside a leaf
valley of gold leather fern

There, rest

Be the apple in an autumn wood

We can go there tomorrow
or right now
here
the thin flatbread from Ethiopia
moist like a jellyfish
a portobello cap

there are holes in your pillow
mine too
and you can hear the bees
you see the young bug on the wall

I know you pray for me
if our hands could touch

flowers in the dark
grow up to be the sun
a seed spread open for rain

we have to stay silent for a while
you are a bean and I am a leaf

the space beyond joy
doesn't look like a piano
and we've never seen a fig tree

rapture

when are the birds real

coriander

black flies a tiny carnival
between the seeds

there is no place like a chair

the edge of us

flatbread cooked on the stove
a shine from yellow butter
we call sight

at the end of life we have our song

red jelly ribbons in strawberry mouse
grains of soft rice

just enough

Mother's Day in Las Vegas, 2011

the fat man outside the liquor store

takes his flag down

a slow pink wind through the desert
minnows

the dark taste is orange blossom
a little farm and a broom made of sticks

children run circles in your living room
pull off the sofa cushions and bounce on the floor

we can make our ocean from bells

behind the counter
a telephone and a crystal ball

what voice is made of
for Varanasi

the petals are a yellow soap
we taste on our breath
a painted tiger in the air

when we want to breathe
we shut our eyes
listen for fish left in the grass

in our footsteps there are
butterflies

white moon lifts off our skin

for Andrew

cheerios on the kitchen floor
a red bowl

grace of little red tongue
between crooked teeth
his laugh fills the room
big as the sun

we pour wet slices
or pear and milk
teach Andrew how to do the butterfly

they put something in the water
so it stays blue
light we try to keep our arms around

an orange falling off its branch

for love of
that wide eyed grin

we go in

angels

my heart goes down slow
behind telephone wires

a long stream
of birds
making their little song in blue

what is far away is not far away

the smell of mud on our dog's belly
mallards he chased
in an old pond

his chest moves
the roar of angels

the green light I see

Part 6

We are living

one

1

your sitting shape
is our dog breathing
seeing far away

milk starts out as grass and then the big
smell of aloe
yolk-rich apple tide

2

you come into the kitchen and my glass turns
sweet peach pit glazed

there are sheep on the lawn
I'm not sure you saw
one reach follows another

animals with fur step this way
scales and sheen blink the moon
everything here is a stem
water far away

we are the bed breathing

1

I taste a circle
one side and another

electric grape fuzz
we say our sky is many *things*

first we put sound in
and then we listen

my dad calls
asks how are the herbs I'm taking

everything swims when it comes time

2

if gorgonzola were meat it would be cherry
a lot of bees around the seed

for inflammation in the lungs
eat one spoonful of applesauce and one lemon's
crushed seed

when it comes time to swim
I choose push

Las Vegas in Mid-November

wood pulls itself apart
paint first
we call it chips
and then the body

a mosquito flies *in in*

my ear is a jar
our floor too cold for my feet

succulent tips becoming rose
winter burn

There are only

on the patio
among wet leaves
our dog's face in the bush

the woman on the next patio
smokes a cigarette
in California there are only
daytime odes

olive branches now empty
our dog eating a piece of stick

principle of magic
after Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser

the good dirt is red
a mesquite tree
yellow lamp on the lawn

there are new seeds on our trees in Las Vegas

two ducks have come back to the pool
did you know
there was a mallard's nest near the old lake
I saw her sleeping in a bush

I thought the only way to fly
was to swim
climb into branches
sit down in leaves when it is warm

the good dirt fits around a seed
this is what happened

We are only flowers

our table is round so we feel the pull
glass stems and bulbs
a pair of plates
brown olives on the ground they came out of
just one street over

* * *

the orange poppies we planted
didn't grow
even when we spoke next to them

a handful of tree pods
just like California

our dog whining at the sky

anchovies in a bowl with oil
our rose bush spins its own wool

to the new palm tree beside the gate
this is bees

not even on the clock

* * *

rose sings the low notes

high notes are in the trees

did you hear about the horses in Anchorage

all the way to the sea

it's no wonder our daisies died
flopped over

we use water for a storm
sometimes a brine

* * *

clouds move
fresh garlic smell

a piece of air from somewhere

garlic on our hands
in the morning

Where are bees

leaves can tell the last blue
before light undresses
into pink

a pool full of petals
little nook for one root

* * *

flowers have a song
lungs and pollen
to sing for bees

all roots
contain light
our dog's is yellow
an aquarium

angel green moss
breathing leaves
our patio

you know
the stars are music
our shadows take up space

at the end of lemon is another yellow
flowers open
on the bottom of the pool

inside we make light
soft sheets and wings to sleep on
I only forgot that I am tired
and a bird

* * *

hold still and you see little worms
an ice cream truck
Over the moon song

I was no longer on a branch
in a pond
I was underneath a coffee table

the door is open

a woman in a dolphin tank

soft erotic dance at the old MGM
the water burst
inside our governor's house
America

when our wave reached the Pacific
we heard trees say *I love that face*

free oranges for the woman in purple silk
who plays a gold harp

* * *

desert you are a Joshua tree
flower our eyes with
bee wings
outside the yellow wood

we saw a seagull
sitting on the lawn
I wanted to be sure

it said *not so fast*
I'm an orange tree trying to grow here

I thought I saw sun
inside the moon
California behind a cloud

worms are roots that guide the seed
in dirt
we become eye
I want us to be an egg
lemon and ocean
where we keep our lawn

when I was little my dad said to look at the moon
and he would look also

* * *

I saw mountains rising
our patio was a swimming pool
we were a seed

I asked
where is grass and where are bees
where is the pool I am going to float in

flower in a clay pot
give me your song

I kept it

January Second in Las Vegas

No wind and a boy
starting to ride his bike

little armadillo
the line is a circle
flower seeds falling on me

here is a bug I've never seen before
except on the cover of a book
it was a shadow

the desert makes its sky out of a lagoon
underwater
we are the seeds of a daisy
everything slips off easy
our hands are also a narrow road
so small as the sea

Curriculum Vitae

Publications

The Bitter Oleander (Fall, 2011): “andrew,” “from in,” “song of inside”

The Desert Companion (December, 2011): “Mojave air”

The Bitter Oleander (Spring, 2012): “What Voice is Made of—for Varanasi”

The Bitter Oleander (forthcoming Fall, 2012): “January Spring” (a poem in five parts)

Education

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

4505 S. Maryland Parkway Las Vegas, NV 89154

Dates: August 2009 – May 2012

Degree: Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, emphasis on poetry

The University of San Francisco

2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, California, 94117

Dates: 2002-2006

Degree: Bachelor of Arts with major in English and minor in Sociology

Academic Honors

- Graduated Magna Cum Laude, 2006
- National Society of Collegiate Scholars, 2002-2006
- USF Dean’s List: eight semesters, 2002-2006
- USF Writing Award; short story titled “Into the Blue” published in USF journal, 2004

Work Experience

UNLV English Department

4505 S. Maryland Pkwy, Las Vegas, Nevada 89154

Dates: August 2009 – currently employed

Position: Graduate Teaching Assistant

Geos Language Corporation

Nagano City, Japan

Dates: August 2007-August 2008

Position: English Language Teacher

Metro Philadelphia Newspaper

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Dates: September 2006 – August 2007

Position: Sales/Advertising Coordinator