

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Angela Dahlin for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on April 24, 2002.

Title: Violence and Voice.

### *Redacted for Privacy*

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Chris Anderson

Violence and voice seem to be related. In this thesis I detail personal experiences with violence, and then put them into the context of research done about the ways in which violence affects the writing voice, as well as the speaking voice.

Helene Cixous' writings about the writing voice and women "writing our bodies" inspired the study of the connection between violence and voice. Cixous' ideas sparked the question, "What happens to the writing voice if the body has been abused?" In my research I read about various women whose voices have been stifled by violence. Their experiences and research intertwine with mine to explore the answer to this question.

Violence and Voice

by  
Angela Dahlin

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of English

Presented April 24, 2002  
Commencement June 2002

Master of English thesis of Angela Dahlin presented on April 24, 2002.

Approved:

*Redacted for Privacy*

---

Major Professor, representing English

*Redacted for Privacy*

---

Head of the Department of English

*Redacted for Privacy*

---

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

*Redacted for Privacy*

---

Angela Dahlin, Author

## Table of Contents

Violence	1
Voice	33
Voice Lessons	53
Works Cited	55

Violence and Voice

Violence

Voice

## I

She doesn't "speak"; she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the 'logic' of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. [...] Her speech even when "theoretical" or political, is never simple or linear or "objectified," generalized: she draws her story into *history*.

Helene Cixous "The Laugh of the Medusa"

I've taken voice lessons since I was a kid, fine-tuning my singing voice. My teachers usually had me sing songs such as, "You're never fully dressed without a Smile," or "The Sound of Music," songs from musicals sung so many times by so many different people that they lose their meaning, or songs that were intentionally written to be devoid of any meaning, meant for "pure entertainment." I also sang in Italian, operatic songs my audience couldn't understand. These are the songs they wanted me to sing.

When I chose my own music it was usually for solos in church, and I usually chose songs of sorrow and regret sung by grown-up women. The first time I sang in church I was nine years old and sang, "Part the Waters," a song sung by a Swedish singer, "Evie," who had crossed over and recorded in English. My dad loved her music, and we always listened to it in the car on family vacations. My sisters would fall asleep, but I'd stay awake, belting out my vocals, "*When I think I'm going under, part the waters, Lord. When I feel the waves around me, calm the sea. When I cry for help, Oh! Hear me Lord, and hold out your hand. Touch my life, still the raging storm in me.*" And my first time on stage, in my hometown church, with old Sunday school

teachers and substitute grandparents staring back at me, I sang this song. And grown men cried; I could see them wiping their eyes. And old women gave me worried looks as I sang words too powerful for a nine-year-old little girl. Grown-up words. Revealing words. And it felt like a confession. I didn't realize I was still a little girl. I thought I was grown-up, too, and this worried them. "Yes, sometimes I feel like I'm drowning," I looked into their eyes and sang: "There *is* a raging storm in me."

As a little girl, I used to stand up in church and give a testimony, holding a microphone in my hand, proclaiming what Jesus meant to me, looking into the eyes of the crowd, and crying. Other little girls were coloring and giggling, and I was testifying. Other little girls sang songs written for little girls to sing in church, and I sang songs of spiritual longing and regret. I would sing them, releasing them, telling my secrets, making my confessions, and then grown men would come up to me with tears in their eyes, telling me how they'd been "moved." And surrogate grandmothers would hug me and examine my eyes with theirs, saying how powerful my song was, looking at my eyes again, trying to find behind them an answer to my understanding.

When I did grow up, and I grew up fast, I began to sing songs that weren't as "moving" or "powerful," lyrically, choosing instead songs that hit impressive notes musically. "Up-beat" songs like "Let There Be Praise" allowed me to wow crowds with my voice, but didn't leave me feeling naked and vulnerable afterwards. I particularly remember singing "Let There Be Praise" in a regional musical competition for my Nazarene church. I don't remember if I won, but I do remember getting my period—too early. "Part the Waters" would not have been appropriate for that performance.



## II

In old Ireland, the women were the ones to sing the lament songs, mourning the dead. To outside listeners it sounded like unintelligible wailing, but each song was written by the deceased's closest female relative, and the lyrics were often brutally honest, detailing abuse and protesting neglect. One mother addresses her living daughter in a song of lament:

My friend and my dear one,  
He beat you with the bridle,  
With the nine-thonged whip,  
And then with a stick;  
You never told me,  
Till I found the marks on you  
In bed a year later.

She then addresses the offending husband, beginning the more audible part of the song with a term of endearment and then pivoting into a curse:

My love and my treasure!  
I gave you presents—  
Twenty dairy cows,  
A trough to knead bread—  
My curse on you instead,  
Not on livestock or harvest,  
On hearth or home,  
But in your heart and veins,  
To leave you maimed,  
You sour-tempered lout!

The women would sing these songs of protest, but they would drown out their words by beating on pots and clapping and singing in an inaudible wail, so that only the women in the inner-circle of mourners could understand the content of the songs (Bourke 171).

### III

Spring 1995

I wrap the cord around my neck to hurt him, hurt him worse than he hurt me. If I die he'll be sorry, and he won't be able to forgive himself. He won't be able to laugh and to lie about me, and he'll have a hard time telling the truth. "But what if I die and it gets worse? What if I live and it gets better?" The herd of black and white cows outside my car window beckons me back; "Look, the sun is shining;" they say. "The grass is green;" they say. "We'll give you milk;" they say. "Come back and live."

I once knew a girl who killed herself, or tried. She was a senior in high school and beautiful, too beautiful and too smart and too talented. She shot herself in the head because her brain couldn't take the burden of her talent much less her beauty. But it was a late winter night, and it snowed, and the bullet froze in her head and stopped the blood. And she lived, not quite so beautifully, and not quite so thoughtfully, and not with as much talent as before. But she lived. And we were happy, but disappointed. When you live the legend is overshadowed by your life, and we can't tell your story because there's no ending. I would not disappoint them. And I would not use a gun but a rope, and I would not do it on a winter night, but on a sunny day, on a country road with cows nearby. And everyone would be sorry, and I'd become a melancholy legend, a girl who had so much talent and beauty and brains, a "tragic ending to too

short a life.” And they’d search their hearts and brains for what they’d done to hurt me, and even the guiltless would blame themselves. Even the guiltless.

They say that troubled girls hurt themselves, starving themselves, having “unprotected” sex with boys who don’t love them, smoking cigarettes, drinking and taking drugs, cutting themselves and killing themselves. Boys, they say, hurt others, fucking girls they don’t love and calling them fat when they get pregnant, selling drugs and leaving children, hitting girls and killing them.

The other day I fell down the stairs in Moreland Hall. It had been an unfortunate day, and I had been late, and I was getting coins for the meter so I wouldn’t get another parking ticket, and I wasn’t looking, so I fell. I knew I was falling, but I didn’t catch myself. Everyone gathered to see if I was all right, and I sat for a while, grateful that someone noticed I was injured. My leg swelled up and bled a little, and I spent the day limping. That night I sat with an elevated leg, holding a bag of ice on it. My daughter wanted the ice, and though her legs are pink and healthy, with no sign of injury, she took the ice and held it to her shin, just where I’d been hurt.

“Ava owie too, Mama. Ava owie too.”

#### IV

I've always been a fighter. When I was two years old my parents got me a T-shirt that says, "Liten men Tuff" which means, "Small but Tough," in Swedish. I loved Wonder Woman and my mom would make me a crown and those magical bracelets out of old oatmeal cartons and aluminum foil. I had a Wonder Woman shirt and I'd jump off the coffee table proclaiming, "Wonder Woman!"

In grade school I picked fights with boys. In first grade Paul Pratt wouldn't give me my scissors, so I grabbed them away from him and chopped off a chunk of his hair. In second-grade a smart-allack tough-kid wannabe, Wes McCoshum, told me that he thought my dad (the orthopedist) didn't know what he was talking about, and he was going to see a specialist for his knee. I tackled him to the ground, biting him and pulling his hair. Once I punched a kid, Joe Cortez, upside the head for grabbing my rear-end. He was expelled; I was commended.

As I got older I fought over more than scissors, and eventually the fights became more one-sided. The last time I *really* hit a boy he wouldn't hit back. That's when I decided to quit hitting boys, and later I found that men hit back, and when they do it hurts more than fighting boys.

V  
February 1996

I gaze at Alain as he gazes at Bianca, a twinge of jealousy coming all over me, but I lie back on the scratchy, polyester, Motel-6 bedspread and let the room spin. Time passes, and it's dark; I'm alone.

I finish a quick shot of Cuervo, grab a cigarette, and step outside. Everyone's gathering, discussing the journey home. I had hoped Alain would stay here with me, but his dark muscles are leaning over Bianca, and Bianca's eyes are staring up at his. I think she sees me looking at the two of them, and I know she likes it.

Alain grabs her arm and kisses her too long, the darkness spinning with the light. Suddenly I'm at his side, my fist ready to grab his attention. I make my right knuckles crunch his cheekbones. Bianca steps back, and I punch him again, with the same hand, on his same cheekbone. (Alain and I have held hands and pondered rain drops on falling leaves; we've loved together, and cried together, and the stars used to laugh for us). Alain turns around and stares at me, his gaze becoming mine; as I aim my knuckles for a full on shot at his right cheekbone, I hit my target for the third time.

He pulls me away to the room where I wanted him, telling me to snap out of it, but I can't quite do it. I wander outside again, and float home as my sister drives, and I don't see him again for days.

At school he smiles down at me after four days of silence and longing, his eyes forgiving. "There are flowers and cookies for you at your doorstep," I say—and smile, gratefully.

## VI

I am brushing my teeth when Dad walks by the bathroom saying:

“C’mon Ange. I need you to help me carry these beds upstairs for Claire and Sam.”

Annoyed and groggy, I continue to brush my teeth.

Suddenly Dad strikes my upper body somewhere, so quickly that I can’t even tell where I’m hit. But now I’m sprawled on the bathroom floor. He had knocked me down on a hotel bathroom floor five years ago when I was thirteen. It had happened just as suddenly and with no apparent provocation. Then, I had thought, it would never happen again.

“Dad! What did I do? I just needed to brush my teeth!”

I start screaming. He claps his hand over my mouth and says:

“Be quiet, Angela. Sh, Sh, Just be quiet. Now c’mon and help me.”

Dad’s anger is coming out in his accent. Usually my father can conceal his Swedish accent quite effectively, but when he feels passionately about something it becomes more apparent, his consonants becoming distinctly annunciated, like when we sing in church.

“No!” I scream; “No! I’m not gonna help you!”

He squeezes my face harder.

“Help, Dad’s hurting me! Somebody help me!”

He releases my mouth. I begin screaming more loudly.

“Be quiet Angela! Just calm down.”

I struggle to my feet, pushing him away. I try to shut my bedroom door and Dad forces his way in. He grabs me, trying to pull me out the door, clapping his hand over my mouth, squeezing my face and crunching his nose to my nose, his eyes bulging and his teeth grinding:

“You *are* coming. Just be quiet and calm down.”

He releases me, and I get up wiping my bloody mouth, my jaw sore from his squeezing hands.

I run down the hall and see my older sister and her friend, and my best friend, laughing. I point to my best friend Leslie and shout: “*You stop laughing!*” I don’t consider that they probably have no idea what happened: why would they? My dad’s not the hitting kind.

I run upstairs and my eye catches my mom’s.

“Couldn’t you hear me screaming? Why didn’t you do anything? Why didn’t you come help me?”

“I didn’t know what was going on. You’re always screaming, Angela!”

I’m barefoot, but I run out the door and I keep running as fast as I can. I’m eighteen and lean, pure muscle, from daily workouts and weightlifting. But I hate running. I’ve always hated running. My dad used to make me run with him when I was a chubby little kid, and I’d scream and cry and cling to the stop signs, saying, “No more Daddy! No more! I wanna go home!” But he’d pry my fingers off and grab me and drag me along with him on his 2.2-mile route.

I finally get to my friend Alain’s house. My face swollen and eyes red, I bang on the door, but nobody comes. I bang again, and his host father, Alan, answers the

door. (Alain is an exchange student from Belgium, born in the war-torn country of Zaire. He has a scar on his left shoulder from an enemy's arrow hitting him when he was four.)

I tell Alain the story.

“Angela, your father loves you. Sometimes my father does crazy things like this too. Come on, I will walk you home. What you gonna do, stay here forever?”

As we near my parents' doorstep, I see my dad through the window. I sneak inside and rush down stairs. My father had betrayed me, the one who I'd always trusted and admired, the one with whom I'd thought I had a special bond because of our physical resemblance. I look just like his mother. We sing father-daughter duets together in church, our voices blending so naturally. But he's always warned me that my mouth would get me in trouble, always quoting proverbs at me about reining in my tongue. Now I'll be expected to keep quiet about this, too. They want me to stop screaming. But I won't.

A couple of hours later my mom knocks on my door and tells me that Dad wants to talk to me: “Just go talk to him, Angela. He wants to apologize. You can't not talk to him forever.”

Dad meets me outside, beside the pool. He has tears in his eyes, unusual for him. As an explanation or apology he says: “I'd like to tell you a story, Angela. Far-mor once told me about a time when she was a teen-aged girl, and was outside, in front of her house talking to a couple boys with one of her sisters. Her father walked up to her, looked at her and slapped her across the face. Then he just walked away, never explaining why he had done this. She never forgave him. And long before your



mother and I had children Far-mor told me, 'Jan, *never, ever* hit your children.' And now I've done it Angela. I don't know what came over me."

Dad started sobbing. I've never seen him get this choked up over anything but Jesus.

As a child learning to ski, I used to ski between Dad's legs, trusting him to keep me from falling. Now I grieve for those days of beaming, of unflinching admiration, of riding on shoulders and flying on feet, of swimming in oceans wading out just far enough to scare Mom, of wild waltzes in the living room both of us carelessly knocking into the pool table.

## VII

August 1996

We had a few friends over to our house, and of course, Jeremy, my younger sister's boyfriend and my former friend, was included. He had subjected everyone to watching *Seven*, a movie with Brad Pitt about the seven deadly sins that I found to be unnecessarily violent, and one Jeremy found fascinating. After seeing the obese dead man eaten by maggots in the first ten minutes, I decided to wait in my room downstairs until it was over. I came up and caught the ending, where the deranged, pathetic man played by Kevin Spacey voices his manifesto. This inspired one of Jeremy's brilliant insights, and I, of course, had to disagree. Jeremy made one of his ill-informed comments about the Bible, and I felt obligated to set him straight.

"Oh, shut up, Angela. You don't know what the hell you're talking about!" I had had enough; this was my house, and my parents had left me in charge.

"Camilla, could I talk to you?"

We went into the kitchen and I began to plead my case:

"Camilla, Jeremy has got to go home. He's being rude to me; he's been rude to everyone all night. Mom and Dad left me in charge, and I'm not letting him stay here again tonight."

Jeremy, of course, came butting in on our conversation:

"Angela, what are you bitching about now?" I grab Jeremy by the shoulders and turn him toward our front door:

“C’mon Jeremy; you need to go home.”

Before I even get out the words he punches me in the stomach.

*Okay, stay calm—don’t let them say this was your fault. Don’t fight back; if you don’t fight back what can they say?*

SLAM! He bangs my back against the wall, egging me on, trying to get me to fight:

“Look at you! Look at you! You think you’re so tough. You can’t do shit! You probably weigh about twice what I do but I’m kicking your ass. Look at you—God you’re pitiful!”

He throws me against the stairway railing. My knees buckle. I can’t stand up, and I see my sister crying behind him.

*Don’t fight back—don’t touch him. He’s just a little shit and this will be over soon. If you don’t do anything your sister will defend you. She’ll get him to stop, and they won’t say it’s your fault. It’s not your fault.*

He punches me in both my eyes, one after the other, like a boxer in training. Everything goes blurry—the room looks like it’s lit in red, and I can taste blood in my mouth. *My lip is bleeding—they gotta know it’s his fault if my lip is bleeding.*

But no one does anything. My sister’s screaming and crying, but she’s not making him leave. Everyone else is gone except for Bianca, a friend who we took in to live with us because her mother threw a glass vase at her head. Bianca’s Jeremy’s childhood friend and she’s yelling at me, calling me fat, saying it’s my fault.

*Don’t fight back. Don’t fight back.*

Finally it's over, and I stagger to my room to go to sleep. I wake up in the morning and go to the kitchen to get some cereal. He's sitting at the table eating breakfast.

## VIII

February 1999

Levi's driving me to work in his black Mustang convertible, the one that costs us one-third of our income each month. We need money; construction work is sporadic during Idaho winters. So, even though I'm seven months pregnant and attending college full-time, I'm returning to work. Valentine's Day is two weeks away.

We're taking the back road to Boise, and the countryside is striking this afternoon. It's still cold, yet sunny enough to look like an early spring, pastures unusually green, deceptively peaceful. We're discussing the magnificent houses scattered along the way. Levi, with his newfound construction expertise, is educating me on the various building styles and the quality of each house's construction. He can tell all of this from about a mile away, driving at fifty-miles per-hour. These houses are like the one we'd like to build one day, when we have the money. That house, and the baby, who will arrive in a couple of months, gives us something to look forward to. Throughout our relationship, it seems, we've always been looking toward the future, with hopeful uncertainty, and a stubborn determination to make our hopes a reality. *We will* be together. *We will* become engaged. *We will* be married. *We will* have that house....someday.


Levi hasn't taken this road many times, and he asks me something about the directions. "I've never been here before; I don't know." We begin to bicker, and he thinks I said something, but I didn't. He glares at me, whacking my leg, not hurting

me, but reminding me that he can. (The first time he hit me was in this car, about six months ago; he punched me in the leg, leaving a bruise that took months to fade.) It's been a month since the last time; he's due to hit me again.

I begin to scream at him, screeching: "I don't know what you think I said, but I didn't say anything!" He thinks I corrected his grammar. (He is insecure, and I'm the "expert." He's working, I'm going to school, and school is easy for me. For him, it's always been difficult. So, he hits me.) I continue to scream in protest; sometimes I give in, trying to keep the peace, but this is not one of those times. How can he have the nerve to treat me this way when I'm the one saving our asses this time? I'm seven months pregnant, but I'm sucking it up and going back to work; he could at least be grateful.

Now I'm daring him to do it again, almost wanting him to do it, so I can win, knowing everything I say will be justified if he hits me. I say: "When you're angry, you don't give a shit what you say. You've called me a bitch and told me to fuck off. How would you like it if I called you an asshole, or hit you every time I became angry?"

I smack his cheek with the back of my hand for emphasis, careful not to be too forceful, not wanting to set him off completely. (This is the first time I've ever fought back in any way.) *Whack!* He backhands my nose, making me bleed, the first time he's ever made me bleed. We're entering town now, a car driving right along side us. I notice the driver looking into our car, another car behind us.



I examine myself in the vanity mirror, my lip swelling, my nose still bleeding. I'm going to work in a half an hour with a swollen lip; maybe if I don't talk too much they won't notice.

"Look at what you did, Levi! My lip is swelling; I'm supposed to go to work like this? God you're such an asshole. You don't just hit me like that! You've hit me before, but it's never really physically hurt; *that hurt!* I barely touched you! The one time I get angry, like you do, you do this to me? What if you were to hurt the baby? Goddamn it, Levi!" I'm crying now, and I know he's feeling bad, like I want him to.

"Oh my God, Angela I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" I sigh, starting to calm down, the climax over.

"You can't keep on doing this. You always say you're going to work on yourself; well, obviously that's not working. You need to start going to counseling, *now*. I will not allow my child to see you hit me. You've got to take care of this." He has that pathetic puppy-dog look on his face, once endearing, now nauseating.

"I know, Angela. I don't want that either. I'll work on it."

"No, you need to go to counseling." Silence.

"Please forgive me, Angela." Silence.

We're pulling into the parking lot across the street from the daycare where I work. During the summer after we were married he used to make me lunch, and we'd have picnics here on my lunch break, in his beloved convertible. We're starting to analyze the problem. I'm asking him the kinds of questions a shrink should:

"What motivates you to do this? What are you feeling in the moments prior?"

Although I alluded to his scholastic problems, both of us are reasonably intelligent. He's taken two years of college; in fact, we met in Psychology class. So, he knows some of the sociology and psychology behind physical abuse, enabling him to give the right answers. From what he says, I'm the first woman he's ever hit. We're calm now, and my lip is only cut from the inside; the bleeding has stopped. He drives me to the front door of Great Beginnings Childcare. "*Our child has had a great beginning,*" I think to myself. When he kisses me goodbye, it hurts.



## IX

“Sh. Shhh. Don’t tell. It’ll be our little secret.” The after school specials would say through the older middle-aged man staring down at the too-pretty little girl with wondering eyes—eyes too pretty for her own good. “Our secret will be that I’ll touch you wherever I want to and however I want to. Our secret will be that I’ll pretend that you like it, that it’s your fault, that I’m helpless and you’re not, and our secret will be kept.”

I feared having to keep this secret as a child, and I told myself if that big, sad man ever touches me, I’d tell. My mom said I should tell. “Don’t be afraid to tell.” But my attacker wasn’t a big man; I was nearly his size, and he wasn’t an older man; I was nearly his age. And the secret didn’t begin in a whisper in a dark room, but with a vow in a garden. Everyone there agreed to the secret, for better or worse, and I kept it, for a while.

I knew from the after-school specials that when I told it would be the beginning of the end. And I told, and I cried, and I’m not finished telling. I thought that once would be enough, but it’s not. I thought that when I told I’d be protected, but I’m not. And I thought that if I wanted to tell I’d be able to, and people would understand, that they’d put the picture together, that I wouldn’t be blamed.

## X

May 1999

He is lying on top of me, heavy. I am feeling romantic, wanting to reconnect with him physically, after my body belonging to the baby for the past month. But I still bleed if I walk too far, and the doctor warned me to wait six weeks before any strenuous physical activity.

We've finally had a night alone, a date, like before, and we made out like teenagers. Our passion has always been there, through the hitting and the yelling. I never withheld sex, didn't like to see it as a reward or punishment. It just was. And that part of our relationship didn't really suffer. At times I felt like he wanted me more than I wanted him, but I liked the power of that equation, my ability to drive him crazy.

This is one of those nights, and he can't stand it.

"Please, Angela, let's just try it."

"Levi, I don't think it'd be a good idea. I'm still healing, and the doctor said we've got three weeks. But I know, I want to, too."

He gives me his old mischievous smile, the one that used to send me.

"C'mon," he whispers, "If it hurts, I'll stop; I promise...just tell me." I smile and nod my consent.

*A little bit, okay, a little more, okay, a little more,* "No no, it hurts, you said you'd stop, stop Levi, stop, please don't it hurts, please!"

I look at him hard, and he looks back and keeps going. I try to push him off and he holds my arms down, like in the movies, and looks me in the eye, as I whisper “no!” over and over again, all along biting my lip. As he stops, when he’s through, I release my lip and roll over to look at our daughter in her cradle next to our bed, while he gets up and goes to the bathroom and brushes his teeth. I go after he’s done and wipe the tears from my eyes and the blood from the floor. When I get in bed, he’s turned away from me. Silence lies heavy on my head.

## XI

February 2000

I remember it like a dream. I had finally decided to take my name off of the apartment's lease, after months of procrastination. I went into the manager's office, hoping to catch our landlord before lunch, wanting to be in and out as quickly as possible. No one was there.

I squint over to our old apartment across the way. Levi's living there with one of his work buddies, so I think I'll leave him a note asking him to do this for me, feeling a bit awkward since I haven't seen him since Thanksgiving, only talked to him on the phone.

From the outside, I can see that there's no furniture, and a haggard-looking maid is picking up.

"Hi. I used to live here. I'm looking for my ex-husband...what's happened?"

"Dunno. I just know I spent the last three days cleaning this place up. There was kitty litter and scraps of paper strewn everywhere."

"But what about all of our furniture and everything?"

"I dunno nuthin' 'bout that. They just had me clean up."

I glance into the room that was my daughter's nursery. There's no crib. I had left one here for visits; now it's gone. The Sesame Street characters we'd put up all over the walls are all torn down, the toys I had left for her to play with on weekends, the clothes hung neatly in the closet, the extra bottles and diapers, all gone.

I check in our old bedroom, hoping to save what I can. The floor is covered with garbage, the closet bare except for a few empty shoeboxes.

“Haven’t gotten to that room yet...” the maid explains.

“Do you know when he left? Where’s his roommate?”

“Dunno...just know it’s been vacated for over a month. They’re trying to clean it up so they can rent it out again. Somebody’s gonna hafta start payin’ rent.”

“Where’s the manager?”

“He might be over at Wellsprings. Right back there. He manages them too.”

“Um, thanks.”

I knock on the door of the “sixty-five and over” apartment building office. The manager’s wife is there; I remember her from when we moved in. She had seemed so excited about my pregnancy.

“Is Gayle here?” I ask.

She looks up: plump-faced, big-haired, bleached-blond and wide-eyed.

“Oh my goodness! Oh honey, I’ll try to find him for you. He’s been doin’ some repairs. Go ahead and have a seat.”

The cozy lobby has a fireplace, two plaid armchairs and a cushy couch. It all looks very “Christmasy” in the middle of February. I notice a Thomas Kincaide book on the coffee table, *Simpler Times*. Levi had gotten me the same one when we were first dating, had given it to me with some chicken soup when I had a cold for a week during the summer we worked in Cannon Beach. Reading Kincaide’s reflections on a past when the important things mattered, things like family, faith and home, looking at portrayals of how he envisions that imaginary time, had literally made me feel better.

Levi had written me a long wordy note inside the cover, always trying to impress me with his words. *Simpler Times* was one of the things that must have been thrown out with all the garbage.

As I sit and sit, my mind starts racing, imagining all the horrors that could've taken place, wondering if I'll have to pay for all the damage and unpaid rent, wondering if Levi's even still alive, after the drugs and his suicide threats. I decide to leaf through *Simpler Times* as I wait; maybe it will calm me again.

Opening the book, my name in curly-Q lettering jumps off the page. My eyes race through the letter Levi had written me. Oh my God! My love life is sitting on the coffee table for all these old folks to read. Is my whole life dispersed throughout that apartment building? Are my wedding gifts now adorning the manager's kitchen?

As the manager's wife comes back, some old people are waiting in the lobby, talking about a field trip they are about to take, or have taken. I swing open the door to the office. Making an effort to remain composed, I hold up the book.

"What was *this* doing on your coffee table? I was sitting here waiting, looking through it and saw a letter Levi wrote to me. It's *mine!*"

The manager's wife answers in a hushed tone as she shuts the office door behind me.

"The maid brought it over here. She didn't want to throw it away."

"Well it's mine, and it has a private letter. You shouldn't have put it on the *lobby coffee table* where *anyone* can read it! What else of mine do you have hidden around your building?"

“Nothing. It’s all in storage. We had to impound it, and we’re gonna have to auction it off. Levi took off, and we don’t know where he is. He hasn’t paid rent for the past couple months. We’ve been trying to find you.”

As I drive the forty-mile commute home, I can’t help but cry. Seeing that apartment empty, everything we had built up vanished, made the loss of our marriage tangible. In that apartment I had kept a blanket that Levi had bought for our engagement. It was blue, made out of some kind of linen, with tassels embellished with carved, ivory beads. On the day he asked me to marry him, Levi had set up a picnic on the beach, and this blanket had rose petals and sea shells scattered all over it, and we drank sparkling wine and ate whole crab with our hands.

Although we had had a troubled and violent marriage, the day of our engagement was the most magical one I’ve lived so far. Levi led me on a hike down to Crescent Beach, by Cannon Beach, a location so deserted that you can find hundreds of whole sand dollars on its shores. Walking down the trail, through an enchanted rain forest, we had to crawl through the bottom of a huge tree trunk; closer to shore there’s a rope bridge balanced across a stream, and from this bridge we could see the ocean with the sun settling into it. When we got to the bottom, I could hear an acoustic guitar serenade; one of our friends was a music major. Levi and I held hands and walked along the beach, and I could see lit candles by the blanket with scattered rose petals. Every girl’s dream.

Behind our picnic was a huge rock, and after dinner we walked around it. In six-foot driftwood letters were the words, “WILL YOU MARRY ME?”

As Levi got down on his knee, and the waves of the evening ocean crashed, I thought to myself, "*After all this, how can I say no?*"

My dad once commented that Levi and I were very photogenic together, with our matching green eyes, his dark hair against my light, both of us with our wide grins. Our friend, the musician, took pictures of us that evening, with the sunset and the ocean behind us, and a diamond solitaire ring on my finger.

All of the photographs we took that day came out blank.



## XII

*I have a grandmother who's been married three times. Her first husband is my grandfather, a photographer who traveled all over the world, taking pictures during World War II, taking pictures of Ava Gardner and Frank Sinatra. He cheated on my grandmother and left her for another woman, left her with two kids.*

When I was seven, my family took a vacation to Sweden to visit my grandmother, "Far-mor," she's called. During that trip, Far-mor and I became closer. In the garden of her summer home I mustered the courage to ask her frankly, "Far-mor, why did you and Far-far divorce?" She frowned, thinking of the best answer, and then replied, "Sometimes, even if you love each other, you just can't get along." But that wasn't the whole truth.

I visited my grandmother again when I was eighteen, alone this time. As both of us grew older, we became more comfortable with the truth. We talked about love, leading her to discuss her relationship with my grandfather. By this time I had learned to speak Swedish fluently, so she told me the truth in Swedish: "*Han bara stod i dorvagen och sa att det var over. En kvinna som jag hade aldrig sett stod bakom honom, och din far och far-bror stod backom mej. Och han bara stig ut.*" "He just stood in the doorway and said it was over. A woman I had never seen before stood behind him, and your father and uncle, just six and seven years old, stood behind me. And he just left." It was a blow from which she has never fully recovered.

*My grandmother's second husband was a music professor with an "artistic temperament." He humiliated my father constantly, calling him lazy. My father is now an orthopedic surgeon. My grandmother's second husband screamed at everyone, unpredictably. Finally, after ten years of marriage, my grandmother left him. The damage had already been done to my father.*

My father is never satisfied with himself. English is his second language, and he speaks it almost flawlessly, very deceiving. Dad sometimes complains that he's, "just a doctor, nothing exciting." He would've liked to have been an opera singer or an actor. But he does spend most of his life acting, pretending to be an American, he says. A former "card-carrying atheist," he seems to be in constant penance, reading the Bible compulsively, cover to cover each year for the past fifteen years, fearing he doesn't know enough, afraid he hasn't done enough. My father doesn't know how to be a father. He's picked up what's expected of a "Christian father" from churches, Bible studies, and books, and he puts that together with the good-time persona of my grandfather. I've recently observed that Dad is most comfortable being a dad when we're "recreating," teaching all three of his daughters to play tennis and to ski, taking us sailing when we were younger. Those are the kinds of things he did with his father. I never knew my grandmother's second husband; I only know what he's done to my father.

*My grandmother's third husband is a sweet man. He's like a grandfather to me. Now that my grandmother's past eighty, he cares for her daily. But she can't leave him alone. If she does, she'll come home to find him sprawled out on the floor, drunk as hell.*

Stig, my grandmother's third husband, I've always thought of as the silent musician. He doesn't speak English, and I didn't speak Swedish until I was fourteen, so we didn't talk much. But I remember him from my visit when I was seven. He took us fishing, and I thought he was funny, moving jerkily and eating loudly, copycatting our English and making us laugh. I remember his room full of drums. He was a percussionist in the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra, and he has beautiful drums from all over the world, and he let my sisters and me, with our sticky hands, play them.

I remember when I found out he was an alcoholic. He had just retired from playing in the orchestra. My grandmother visited us in the States, alone. When she arrived home at their apartment in Sweden, she found him passed out on the kitchen floor. Far-mor called my mom, and Mom told us girls. Until that night, Far-mor did not know that Stig was an alcoholic, neither did the rest of us. It was easier for him to hide it when he was working full-time. I guess you can be drunk and still play the drums.

*My grandmother does not have the best luck with men...I look just like her, a mirror image, they say. When my grandmother was a teenager her father hit her. Only once. She was standing in their front yard with her sister, flirting with some boys. Her father walked up to her, looked her in the eye, and smacked her across the face. Then he walked away.*

My father says I have Far-mor's mannerisms. We rub our noses in the same way and with the same frequency. In conversation, she and I will sit the same way, and then notice we're sitting identically, and rearrange ourselves into another identical pose. As I grew up, I would notice my grandfather looking at me in a strange way, a look of regret, maybe, as if he wanted to apologize to me, or to Far-mor, through me. I think he did, in a way. So my likeness to my grandmother has taken on a mystical quality for me, like I'm a reincarnation of her. But what does that mean?

My grandmother has suffered, yet she still has serenity and wisdom. I love that she calls me "darling," with her Swedish accent, stroking my cheek with the back of her hand. Looking at my hands, I imagine them turning into hers. Her hands, with fingernails still painted, garden at her summer home, knead the bread we share at rare Swedish family meals; those hands typed food into my father's young mouth and clothes onto his growing body. Far-mor's hands rebuilt after every disappointment: they are strong. I want to inherit her hands, but I'm afraid of her sorrow coming with them.

In my bedroom, on my chest-of-drawers, sits a black-and-white photo of my grandmother on her wedding day, invisibly pregnant with my uncle, hair swept up, her profile smiling in the direction of my grandfather, toasting to their future. Next to it stands a full-color photo of myself on a hike, holding my daughter, hair worn up, the forest behind me, my profile smiling toward a clear, blue lake.

## Voice

## I

The other night I came home and heard a scream—it came from my neighboring apartment building. And my heart dropped—I knew that scream, followed by a yell. I grabbed my daughter from her car seat, pounded up the stairs, and banged on the door, trying to sound bigger than I am. And there was silence. “Does anyone need some help in there?” I demanded. Silence followed again, and then a shaky female voice, “Oh no...I was just on the phone,” the voice said, trying to laugh. I knew she was lying, and so did she. I sighed, silently agreeing to play along. “Okay—I’m in apartment 206...if you need anything.” I walked down the stairs feeling small as I am—small difference. At least now they know that I know; maybe that’ll stop it, or just stall it. I called the police, but I don’t know if they ever came, and I don’t know if he’s hit her again—in a more private place. I can’t blame my faceless, trembling neighbor for keeping the secret. *He* was there, still inside the door, and she was with him. I hope that she finds a way out, and that she tells, if she can, and I hope someone’s there to listen.

Last year, when I began to write for my Advanced Composition class I wanted to keep the secret, too. I had already divorced my husband and been separated from him for more than a year, but I didn’t know if I was ready to write about this for strangers, or for myself. I wondered if people would believe me, and if they did, what they would think. I tried to write around the secret, for a while, but then I finally had to come to the point. I had to write about it. I couldn’t *not* write about it, anymore.

But as I wrote, my feelings and remembrance of the surrounding details flooded out, but my description of the blows I'd received from my husband remained fuzzy. My writing group couldn't "envision" the attacks, or fights, for instance the fight that took place in Levi's black Mustang: "How hard is he hitting you, with an open or closed fist? Where are you hit and how many times?" I could describe the cars behind me, next to me, and in front of me, but I couldn't articulate the details of the assault. Even now, as I write the word "assault," I wonder if it's an accurate description of what happened.

My husband hit me, but I never had to go to the hospital, never had a broken bone, just bruises and a little blood. The duration of the fight with my father lasted longer than any fight with Levi, and Jeremy left me more bruised than Levi ever did. I'm not trying to excuse my ex-husband's behavior. It was inexcusable—that's why I left him. But I am trying to put it in perspective. After I left my husband, my mom, trying to help, gave me several books about domestic abuse. According to one of the books, Levi's assault was "mild to moderate"—except for the "last straw incident," when he took out a butcher knife, threatening to kill himself while I feared for my life.

Maybe this phenomenon is like what Alice Munro describes in "Royal Beatings," another example of a victim finding solace in the inanimate objects around her, like Ruthie's yellow lampshade. Those things remain stable while your world and your mind are spinning. I think this is part of it. When I read that story I could relate with Ruthie's hope, that, "this can't be happening if that lampshade's still there." But I think it's something more as well, a connection between body and mind; my body's been abused, but so has my mind.



While I was with Levi I couldn't write anything "creative," only what I was assigned by professors. There was no poetry—nothing about Levi—I even found it difficult to write him notes in cards on Valentine's Day. Even Levi, with his jealous tendencies, found this disturbing, considering I had written my all-time favorite poem about Alain, the one man who never hit back.

And I was quieter. My family noticed this. I've always talked too much—my father used to lecture me on "reining in my tongue," and my mother constantly asked me to keep my voice down. And throughout my childhood, teachers would continually remind me to raise my hand to speak. When Levi began to hit me, I still spoke up in my college classes, finding solace in the detachment of academics. But family dinners at my parents' house were unusually quiet. My sisters were especially disturbed by my quiet nature over Christmas break, which fell midway between my wedding and my separation. There is a picture of me taken during that time, my face gaunt from morning sickness, my hair swept up in a fashion to Levi's liking, my legs covered by a heavy blanket, sitting in a rocking chair, staring at the fire—one of the few pictures in which I am not smiling. It must have been taken when I wasn't looking. It's a picture of my loneliness, my silence forced by the secret. I have a hard time not telling the truth. People know when I'm lying, my family especially. And so I remained silent because the secret plagued my thoughts, and I've always spoken my mind.

## II

In "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous subverts the Medusa myth by turning her grimace into a smile and filling her gaping mouth with powerfully beautiful words. In her writing, Cixous attempts to inspire and celebrate the subversion of "male-dominated systems of interpretation that classify female bodies, mouths and words as inferior"(1523).

Cixous believes that the dominant masculine culture has caused women to hate ourselves, to concentrate on what we're lacking, to make us feel that our "lack" makes us less. She calls this an "antinarcicism" and an "antilove." Cixous asserts that it's time we recognize our potential and quit accepting the gag that's been placed in our mouths. We need to start writing and speaking with abandon.

Cixous writes that we must "inscribe the breath of the whole woman" (1527). The woman can write her self, individually, a solitary seizing back of her own story and her own body. We can also write our collective place in history. Instead of being complacent in a place of oppression and suppression, which is how our history has been represented thus far, Cixous says, "it is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language" (1527). By speaking or writing, using our voices, we move out of the silent realm of the symbolic.

When I first read Helene Cixous' ideas about women writing our bodies, her ideas excited me as a woman, a writer and a teacher. A new form of writing could change everything. For the first time I realized that even the linear format for writing

may be representative of masculine oppression, the same writing I'd embraced as a student and endorsed as a teacher. Not only should we call the content of "canonized" literature into question from the feminist perspective, we should also be critical of its form, and what that form may represent, what it includes and what it excludes.

But then the thought came to me, how can I "write my body" if it's been abused? Writing is painful, and I still have wounds that haven't scabbed over. How can I "lay myself bare?" I began to wonder about the correlation between our bodies and our writing, and how our writing might be affected if our bodies have been abused. Cixous recognizes in "The Laugh of the Medusa" that women have been repressed and abused collectively, but what if "daughters" born out of the "revolution" continue to be abused individually? "The Laugh of the Medusa" was written a couple of years before I was born, and look how far we've come. Female bodies continue to be dismembered, and our words are still met with a fist.

As a writer, I found solace in the phallogentric tradition: "academic" writing offered enough padding to let me play without getting hurt. When I tried to write about my personal experience I felt muted, like the words were hiding somewhere out of reach. I wondered if other abused women, wanting to write, had met with this obstacle, what *Quiet as It's Kept*, a book about the trauma of recovery, calls "the contradictory need to proclaim and deny."

Susan J. Brison, a philosophy professor at Dartmouth College and a visiting associate professor at Princeton University, writes about her struggle to regain her voice after being raped. One day in 1990 on a walk in France, she started out singing and ended up in a ditch struggling for breath. "Although I had said I'd do whatever he

wanted, as the sexual assault began I instinctively fought back, which so enraged my attacker that he strangled me until I lost consciousness” (B7). Brison’s experience echoes my own. Without exception, each violent incident I’ve endured has occurred after my verbal or nonverbal protest against the will of my attacker, and every time the attacker aimed for my mouth in order to stifle me. In Brison’s case, her attacker disabled her ability to verbally protest by choking her, cutting off her voice at its source.

Brison’s recovery was almost as traumatic as her assault. As she was recovering in the hospital, Brison was continually reminded of how “lucky” she was to have survived, and she accepted this conclusion, for a while: “I did not yet know how trauma not only haunts the conscious and unconscious mind, but also remains in the body, in each of the senses, in the heart that races and the skin that crawls whenever something resurrects that buried terror”(B7). Brison’s ability to relate and communicate with the world around her had been forever altered. She tells of a well-meaning friend who would insinuate that, had she been more careful, this would have never happened, “[not pausing] long enough for me to point out that I had been attacked suddenly, from behind, in broad daylight” (B7-B8).

In real life there’s no ominous prelude. But our belief that there is serves to protect naïve worldviews, the assumptions that only darkness is danger and only strangers can bring us harm. But the “victim’s” shades have been shattered, and the reality is too harsh for her no-longer protected eyes, so she doesn’t trust her judgement anymore; her senses are keen, like a dog’s; in fact she’s reverted to an animalistic state, to the lowest rung on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: survival. Her instincts are acute,

but she doesn't trust them, so they begin to break down. Unsure of how to react to her nightmare, Brison became unable to speak:

Even after my fractured trachea had healed, I frequently had trouble speaking. I lost my voice, literally, when I lost my ability to continue my life's narrative. [...] I often had bouts of "fractured speech" during which I stuttered and stammered unable to string together a simple sentence. [...] For about a year after the assault I rarely if ever spoke in smoothly flowing sentences. (B9)

Sometimes even when the conscious decides to react a certain way, our subconscious disagrees. Even after Brison had decided to write about her rape, she had difficulty doing so: "I can see now that my writing about violence had become increasingly hesitant and guarded, as I hid behind academic jargon and excessive citation of others' work" (B9). Brison, too, needed the padding in order to play, but finally she began to strip it off. Ten years after her attack, Brison has enough sense of security to begin taking risks again. She's had her first child, and she's just publishing a book based on her rape entitled, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self*. A year after her attack, Brison had a voice; now she's beginning to use it.

Karen Ann Chaffee, teacher of writing, contributor to *Women/Writing/Teaching*, had a slightly different experience from Susan J. Brison. Her attacker was not a stranger, but a father, and her mother was a willing accomplice. Chaffee struggled throughout childhood to find a voice:

In October 1964 I cannot open my mouth. My jaws are locked. My head throbs.  
 "I don't know," the doctor says to my mother as he removes the stethoscope from my chest, "there is no medical reason for her not opening her mouth."  
 "Well, something must be wrong. She's been like this for a while," my mother responds. Actually, I've been like this for more than a

while, but my mother hasn't bothered to notice. My entire body has been the home for numerous pains, twinges, and aches. [...] The doctor chuckles and asks my mother, "Have you told her lately to be quiet?" My mother looks at me with those fearsome yellow eyes. She squints, narrows her gaze into my soul, and sneers, "I'm always telling her to shut up." (32)

Chaffee attributes her literal loss of voice to the physical and verbal abuse she suffered at the hands of her parents. In "Voicing My Self" Chaffee chronicles her journey in search of a voice, her speaking voice as well as her writing voice. She details her attempt to empower her own daughters' voices: "From this house, I give my daughters permission to assert their voices, to demand recognition, to speak female in a male cultural/educational system/academy. When will I give myself permission" (36)? Chaffee concludes that she still hasn't fully realized the potential of her voice, as a writer or a person: "My voice comes to me slowly; since I am unfamiliar with its sound, I have trouble hearing it. I do not always recognize its cadences, but I will" (42). Chaffee, too, responded to violence with silence. Through a lifetime of struggle, she's beginning to make herself heard.

Cixous' dream has not yet been realized, as women continue to fight for their voices. As long as our bodies are demeaned and damaged, the freedom Cixous envisioned will not be fully ours. We cannot write our bodies until we own them and restore them. Until that happens our voices will continue to be morphed into another mold, or stifled all together.

### III

Half of the abused don't have a voice, or they do, but we as a society don't listen, because it's in a dialect, with an accent, "unintelligible," or unintelligent. We figure they had it coming to them—they belong in the cliché—we shrug it off, let it go. It doesn't surprise us. The other fifty percent keep quiet about it—don't want to be seen as victims, lumped together with the cliché—or they write about it in the third person.

In *Feminist Messages*, Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser write about "Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures." Radner and Lanser argue that women use verbal, cultural and written codes when the content of their messages is too subversive to be stated clearly and aloud. They liken feminist or feminine coding to coding of African American slaves, coding done in song, coding done in secret, coding whispered in the kitchen:

Coding presumes an audience in which one group of receivers is "monocultural" and thus assumes that its own interpretation of messages is the only one possible, while the second group, living in two cultures, may recognize a double message—which also requires recognizing that some form of coding has taken place. [...] We are thus adding our voices to a general understanding among feminists, African Americanists, and scholars of other oppressed and suppressed people when we state as our first premise that in the creations and performances of dominated cultures, one can often find covert expressions of ideas, beliefs, experiences, feelings and attitudes that the dominant culture—and perhaps even the dominated group—would find disturbing or threatening if expressed in more overt forms.(3,4)

The writers make a differentiation between various kinds of codes: complicit codes (determined ahead of time and used by an entire community); explicit codes (recognizable as a code even by those who cannot decipher it, thus making it more dangerous); and implicit codes (whose very codedness is arguable, and may be done unconsciously by the writer or speaker). The writers recognize several kinds of implicit codes: juxtaposition or the ironic arrangement of texts; distraction or “drowning out” with “noise,” interference or obscurity; indirection or the use of metaphor, impersonation or hedging in order to obscure meaning; trivialization through jokes or the use of “frivolous” means of communication; incompetence, or a claim of incompetence. They find several instances in which writers such as Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, and Gertrude Stein use these coding tactics (9-24). These tactics are used when the content of what is written is too subversive or personal to be dealt with directly. I used several of these tactics in the writing of my personal essays about violence, tactics I did not recognize until after I had read this essay and realized my frequent reliance on them. I was aware throughout the writing of these essays of my difficulty in finding the words to express my experience; this essay helped me to understand my difficulty, and my unconscious attempts to conceal the truth of my experience. I was stifling my own voice.

The first tactic, “juxtaposition,” I used intentionally, in my positioning of my strangulation essay after my voice lessons essay. In both cases I was cutting off my own voice, wanting someone else to tell my story or write my song, as the case may be. This juxtaposition was used to illustrate a theme of my essay voice and violence/violence and voice.



“Distraction” was unintentional, and was used especially in the essays about Jeremy and Dad’s violence toward me. The final product may look starkly honest, but in my first and several subsequent drafts about Jeremy I focused on the story of my sister’s friendship with him for several pages, and on trivial verbal fights we’d had in school. The actual physical violence was told in less than two paragraphs, but the essay itself was about six pages long. In order to reveal the true story I had to peel back layers and layers of distraction.

In my first attempt to tell the story of our fight, I trivialized Jeremy’s violence toward me, by using common language, cuss words, flippant dialogue and sarcasm. I trivialized my topic, earlier, by discussing my idealization of Wonder Woman and my fights with grade school boys, making myself into a kind of comic character, the Norman Rockwell painting of the proudly smiling pig-tailed girl with the mussed up hair and the black eye sitting outside the principal’s office. My inclusion of this was an attempt, however unconsciously, to take some of the blame of men’s behavior toward me, to shrug it off, to shake it off, to laugh it off.

In both my story about Dad and my story about Jeremy, there was a glaring incompetence not found in my other essays, even the ones about Levi. There was a choppiness, a stuntedness, trouble finding the right word, trouble sustaining an image. This difficulty frustrated me incredibly, but after reading about coding, I was better able to overcome it. This problem was not so troublesome in my essays about Levi; I did have a hard time describing Levi’s punches, but the rest of my telling of the story came fairly easily. I think that this incompetence stems from my reluctance to tell the stories about Jeremy and Dad. I told them because I knew I had to, because I knew

they were the missing link between my grade school fights and my marital abuse. But I didn't want to tell them—I had to make myself. With Dad's story the block is my relationship with my dad; it's improved. I think I've forgiven him—I've tried anyway. I didn't want to bring it up, but I knew I had to. I don't want to blame him for my problems with Levi, but I know there's a connection, and I couldn't *not* write about it. Also the truth of Dad's story implicates my friends, my sisters, and my mother, and their failure to act. One of the main messages of that essay and Jeremy's essay is that no one did anything. Only after I left Levi, and I confronted my mother for my resentment about her failure to act, did she admit the *possibility* that my fight with Jeremy was not *my* fault. This isn't something I want to tell strangers, or acquaintances, or friends. I'm proud of my family; they are some of my best friends, and in the aftermath of my separation and divorce, they were my closest allies and most dependable supporters. I don't want to implicate them, but I had to tell the story. This internal tug of war resulted in a display of incompetence. You'll notice in the sections unrelated to my family, or to anyone except myself, or in cases where my portrayal of family members is positive, my writing is the strongest.

I used indirection most in the beginning stages of my writing. Before I had decided on my thesis topic, before I had taken Advanced Composition, I wrote three short stories, each having to do with the same violent incidents I related here: one with Jeremy, one with Dad, one with Levi. I wrote in a kind of possession—I was compelled. But I *could not* write the stories in the first person. The victim had to be anyone but me. I was impersonating myself, a former self, with whom I refused to identify. This distance was safe and sufficient and acceptable for some scribbled

stories hidden in a notebook in the back of my closet, but it was not the whole truth. It was the truth told slant.

The women Radner and Lanser use as examples of coding are from the early twentieth and late nineteenth centuries. They are from the generations of my mother, my grandmother and my great-grandmother. This is what Helene Cixous wrote about when she said: "Because we wrote in secret it was not good." One would think that in the turn of the twenty-first century women would be able to write out in the open, tell the truth and tell it straight, but a woman who's been abused reverts back, back to a former self or a former life or a former century, unrecognizable and restricted. Until we're safe, we must use a language that protects us; until we're not blamed we must use a language that protects those involved.

Sometimes, after I got divorced, I'd run into someone I knew but hadn't seen for a while. "How's Levi?" They'd ask. And I'd tell them we'd gotten a divorce, and if they knew me well enough they'd ask why or what happened, or I'd just volunteer the information: "He physically abused me." I'd say, and inevitably they'd correct me exclaiming and questioning, "He *hit* you!?" But I could never bring myself to say, "He used to hit me," the first time around—I'd wait for them to correct me.

## I

Now women return from afar, from always: from “without,” from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below; from beyond “culture”; from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to “eternal rest.” The little girls and their “ill-mannered” bodies immured, well preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. But are they ever seething underneath! What an effort it takes—there’s no end to it—for the sex cops to bar their threatening return. Such a display of forces on both sides that the struggle has for centuries been immobilized in the trembling equilibrium of a deadlock.

Helene Cixous “The Laugh of the Medusa

Afghan women are afraid to let go of their burqas. I read that even those who, prior to the civil wars and the Taliban regime, once worked and considered themselves modern, receiving advanced degrees, wearing make-up and western styles, continue to wear the head-to-toe covers that only let air and light in through vents covering the women’s faces. Jamila Majahed, a prominent news reporter prior to the Taliban regime, explains: “Women are afraid, and I include myself in that statement. The Northern Alliance says the burqa is now optional, but we know better than to trust them” (Burkett 388). These women have witnessed and been subjected to worse than I hope I’ll ever be able to imagine, women being stoned to death and beaten in the streets, women’s hands being cut off for stealing food for their children—but any woman who’s been abused can identify with the Afghan women’s hesitation.

Like them, we remain guarded and flinching, watching our tongues, looking behind our backs, keeping our fists clenched. Like Nadia, once an Afghan school principal, says, “Maybe we’re all a little crazy from what we’ve suffered, or maybe

we're just being realistic. Since it happened once, it's hard not to consider that it could happen again" (389).

Consider most American wedding ceremonies; usually the bride is "handed off" from her father to her future husband, like a changing of the guard, or a POW, being swapped from one regime to the next. The question, "Who gives this woman?" and the answer "I do," are dripping in sociological significance, but we continue with this ceremony for "sentimental reasons," or in the name of tradition, or because we're blind. We fail to see the resemblance between the traditional wedding gown and the traditional burqa, both covering the woman's face and body from head to toe, both allowing her to breath through a gauzy net material.

A twenty-something female student commented the other day, "I think women pretty much rule the world right now. We give men too hard a time. We should just relax and take it down a notch." She was probably never knocked down for brushing her teeth or slapped for saying the wrong thing—or maybe she was. At any rate, Americans, even American women, often have a false security, even a smugness, when we consider women's rights.

In the early 1990's in Afghanistan, seventy-percent of Kabul's teachers were women, as were almost half of its doctors. Often education can serve as insulation, giving us a sense that we can control things outside of ourselves. Nadia says: "I saw some neighbors, a husband and wife who were also educated professionals. In the midst of a heated conversation, the woman pulled back her burqa for an instant, to show her husband something or to emphasize a point—I'm not sure which. I could see a Vice and Virtue man turning the corner, but I couldn't warn them...I had to watch

[the Vice and Virtue man] beat her.” Nadia looks away then whispers, “That woman is still in a mental hospital in Pakistan” (388).

But we remain sympathetic—not empathetic—and smug in our delusions of safety and civility, smug in our belief that this sort of mistreatment is foreign. Even Jamila, the Afghan reporter, retains illusions in her view of who would act in such a way, saying: “Educated men respect women” (389). Maybe some do, and others use their educations as another way to justify their mistreatment of women.

I have a cousin, an educated woman, a nurse, who is married to an educated man, a doctor. I’ve had extended visits with them, and I know he’s an even-tempered man, but he uses his money to control his wife, a woman who founded and runs a free medical clinic for meager, if any, pay. He threatens to take custody of their children and holds them hostage with his money. He feels perfectly justified in doing so. Many believe that only lower-class husbands hit their wives, but maybe upper-class wives just have more at stake. It’s not just money—it’s education and a sense of stability, even a desire to retain an image. My cousin was named her town’s woman of the year.

Susan J. Brison admits in “Violence and the Remaking of a Self,” that she didn’t want to be labeled as a “victim.” Many educated, wealthy, women may feel the same way. They have their reasons. But often, things are not as they seem.

I recently saw the man who I had heard yelling and beating my faceless neighbor a couple of nights before, driving a clean, white, Maxima, wearing a tasteful,

cotton, blue shirt and perfectly faded blue jeans: attractive, unassuming, “clean-cut.” When I saw him, I was attracted to him; then my eyes followed him toward his building and I wondered, “Is it him?” He put the key in the door to the loud apartment, and I knew.

I can’t place them at sight. They look like any boy you’d know: a college student, bright, hard-working...maybe hard-hitting too.

Maybe Afghanistan is not as far away as we’d like to think. Like Pavlovian dogs, Afghan women have been conditioned, conditioned not to reveal any part of themselves, not to speak, not to laugh. And *we* want them to shout! Even *they* seem to want to cry out, but can’t yet bring themselves to. So, they make a somewhat-conscious decision to cover themselves up, and those who speak do so in a whisper. I am like them. *My* shout comes out in a whisper. But the farther away I am, the louder it gets. Maybe ten years this side of September 11<sup>th</sup> there will be a celebration, a soprano-ranged, choral, SHOUT from Afghanistan. And I hope it’s followed with a laugh.

## V

To write. [...] [I]t will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being “too hot”; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...)—tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak.

Helene Cixous “Laugh of the Medusa”

Up until about six years ago, I would've been one to say, “women rule the world,” as well. Women seemed to rule *my* world, outnumbering men in my immediate and extended families. My mother seemed to be the one in control of her household and of her life: earning a Master's degree in Chemical Engineering in the 1970's, in Sweden, in Swedish, her second language—while nine months pregnant with my older sister; owning her own import and export business for a while; pursuing a doctorate in Theology and actively preaching for a while; teaching Cambodian refugees and unemployed Swedes to speak English. Her credentials read like a mini-series on the women's movement in the late twentieth-century. Baby-boomer women professed a desire to “have it all,” and it seemed my mother had achieved that. She also had migraines and heart palpitations, anxiety attacks and arthritis. Now that we're all out of the house she's a high school counselor, spending her days talking and smiling, and her nights grinding her teeth.

These psychosomatic illnesses may have been brought on by excessive work, but Mom calls her work her “escape.” It seems more likely that they are a result of a



division of self. My mother is opinionated and loud. As a child, when I couldn't find her I would follow her voice and her booming laugh. But my picture of my mother is not in a suit but in an apron, one that's lasted over a quarter of a century and has a brightly colored cartoon picture of a curly-haired blonde man eating spaghetti. All of her advanced degrees, except the first, were funded by my father, as was the business she "owned" and the food she cooked.

The time that my father became violent with me when I was eighteen, my mother felt powerless to do anything, and when Jeremy hit me my mother blamed me. I had believed that all of Mom's external signs of liberation bespoke something internal as well. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe my mother is another example of education serving as insulation. The first thing my mother did when she found out Levi had been hitting me was to buy and read several books on the subject of abuse. Proactive, to be sure, but also an attempt to control a situation outside of her power: "If I were a man," Mom said, "I would kill him with my bare hands." Instead she read and read and did nothing. Like me, my mother finds solace in academics. The "academy" is a contained environment in which we are able to measure progress and control our results. The same cannot be said for a household or a life.

## Voice Lessons

I shall speak about women's writing about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

Helene Cixous "The Laugh of the Medusa"

I'm a writing teacher now, helping students to find their voices. I begin every term with a diagnostic essay called, "Where I Came From," based on their personal experiences, their interests, their life stories. First I share my own essay entitled, "Where I Came From"—an abbreviated version of my life story—to help get my students started and in an attempt to make them feel more comfortable sharing personal details with a perfect stranger. In it, I have one sentence hinting at my abusive marriage, "He held me up with the angels, but then he had to knock me back down." Its' coded—it's cliché—but it's enough. It allows my students, some of them, to be honest with me, to skip the gloss. I've had students write about a step-father's molestation, a father's violence, a mother's beatings—students both male and female telling the truth, "laying themselves bare." Sometimes it's in code—sometimes it's in black and white—but there's no mistaking that it's there.

I don't know what benefit students derive from this. Maybe for some of them it's the first time they've ever told anyone. But I know that the beginning of my way out was telling one of my teachers, Dr. Ponsford, a psychology professor. He's the first person I told out loud. And the first time I wrote it down was the beginning to

regaining my writing voice and all the internal power and the liberation that goes with it. A year ago, sitting in a desk on the first day of my Advanced Composition class I wrote:

I think the idea of losing oneself is supposed to be looked at in a positive light in this class. But the time when I lost myself the most was not a positive time in my life, in most respects. And it was not a moment of passion. And it was not a moment of sorrow. It was not a moment at all. It was so gradual I couldn't even see it happening. I did not lose myself to music, though I have. I did not lose myself to writing, though I have. I didn't lose myself in a book; I didn't lose myself in a bath, though I've done both and sometimes at the same time. I lost myself to a man. I let him have me—or maybe I didn't. I took away parts of myself in order to be agreeable. Now I'm putting them back.

Last night I read my thesis to my dad—beginning to end—out-loud. And he listened—silently—reclining in the leather chair in his office, taking on the pose of patient, as I sat in a wooden chair next to him, taking on the pose of therapist. After I was finished, he commended my work and said:

“When I was younger I had an imaginary world, and it was beautiful—full of lights and colors, sounds and tastes. Then one day I looked around me and saw that reality was not like the world I'd imagined. It was dark and it was ugly. I decided I had to face reality, really see it for what it is, and if I looked hard enough, I might find some beauty, better than I had imagined, beyond the ugliness, or behind it, on the other side.”

Dad and I were able to talk last night, for hours, after I read to him. And we were even able to laugh—together.

## Works Cited

- Bourke, Angela . "More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry." *Feminist Messages*. Ed. Joan Newlon Radner. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. 160-182.
- Brisson, Susan J. "Violence and the Remaking of a Self." *The Chronicle Review*. 18 January, 2002: B7-B10.
- Burkett, Elinor. "It Was A Slow Poison." *Elle*. March 2002: 214-217, 388-389.
- Chaffee, Karen Ann. "Voicing My Self: An Unfinished Journey." *Women/Writing/Teaching*. Ed. Jan Zlotnik Schmidt. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. 27-42.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. New York: Bedford St. Martin's. 1520-1536.
- Radner, Joan N., and Susan S. Lanser. "Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures." *Feminist Messages*. Ed. Joan N. Radner. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. 1-30.