

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Vanessa Fawbush for the degree of Master of Arts in English, presented April 23, 2003. Title: Book of Changes.

Abstract approved:

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Lisa S. Ede

I have elected to write a creative nonfiction thesis because it serves to demonstrate my proficiency in the areas of rhetoric and composition. This thesis consists of a series of personal essays based on my effort to reclaim my voice as a writer. In order to organize these essays, I used the eight trigrams, or universal elements, found in the ancient Chinese *I Ching, Book of Changes*. They are: *Heaven, Thunder, Water, Mountain, Earth, Wind, Fire, and Lake*. One by one, I interpreted each element in an effort to create a transformation narrative, my own *Book of Changes*. Despite the chaos of my real story, the universal elements offered a grounding for each essay. Each essay illustrates my survival as a woman and as a writer. Although these essays grew out of a deeply personal experience, this thesis is about crafting an essay—reclaiming my voice and my body of writing.

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Book of Changes

by
Vanessa Fawbush

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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.

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For my parents.

Thank you both for giving me a voice —

I would have never used it if you hadn't shown me how to be strong and love life.

Book of Changes

Introduction

She sits and stares and thinks at a desk in her fourth grade class, holding a journal she made from yellow rag paper. When she tries to write, the pages tear like tissue as she painstakingly erases her spelling errors or entire sentences that she realizes with her nine-year-old eyes are too personal. Later, she takes this same journal home for Thanksgiving vacation knowing she no longer needs to turn it in to her teacher to correct. On December 1, 1979, she finds a fine red pen at home (the kind and color a teacher would delight in using) and she writes (errors and all):

This is the second Journal I have ever made in my whole life. Journal writing sometimes gets really boring If you can't think of anything to write. When I am about ten years old I might bye myself a diary. Journal writing in school is not at all like having your own journal at home. The reason it isn't is because your teacher cheaks it. Right now I am not writing in my Journal for my teacher to correct it. I'm just writing for fun. [sic]

Reading that journal entry from fourth grade, I can relive the moment I became aware of the power and satisfaction of writing for myself alone. The difference between writing for school and writing for myself seemed huge at the time.

Writing with an erasable pencil was nothing less than a slavery of second-guessing myself compared to the freedom of permanence a pen gave me. The fact that my teacher wouldn't be correcting what I wrote allowed me to get past the paranoia of being too personal. I was very private as a child, and writing for school automatically meant that I couldn't share anything that really mattered to me. The

biggest difference, however, was I knew that because I was not required to write this particular December journal entry for school, I had stepped into the realm of what “real” writers do: they write because they want to.

By Christmas Day of that same year, I had an official diary that I began to fill with my embarrassments and ecstasies, my burdens and bedtime stories. This process proved to be a necessary coping and organizing strategy throughout my life. I have learned to allow the mysterious electricity from my thoughts to flow from my brain, past my vocal chords, down my strong arm, and out through the magic minute movements my hand makes as I grip the pen. I find my rhythm and the space between my mind and the page disappears. Poetry happens. I am fulfilled. After completing countless diaries, journals and notebooks, I better understand crisis and joy.

This fourth grade journal is one of eight that remain after my late husband, Mike, purposefully burned most of my possessions. Inexplicably, he overlooked these journals and a few precious books on the shelf under my bedside table. I am grateful they survived. I like to imagine they had a power of their own to somehow become invisible while Mike demolished the rest of my belongings.

My journals hold my history like heirloom quilts, hand woven with the thread of my thoughts. By the time Mike burned my things, I was 27 years old, in my second year of graduate school, and had accumulated 17 years worth of journals. Initially, those eight remaining journals seemed like a trifle compared to volumes of journals, college papers, and poetry I’d lost. When he stole my

writing, Mike stole my history. He made inaccessible to me, in concrete form, the sequence of my thoughts and my development as a writer.

I wasn't able to articulate any of this until I began cranking the arm of my phonographic memory and listening to the loud crackling and muffled music of my muse. She's old and scratched but she still plays.

Give me a pen and paper and I'll give you my passion. I write with my body. I write without my body. I remember and forget who I am. I become new women. I become new men. I become a tree. I am the wind. I am a spontaneous, passionate, disorganized and often confused person. I explain myself best with poetry:

I Keep My Dead Trees

I write in landslides
 Keeping pace with
 Rearranged roots
 And shifting piles
 Of wet pages

My word winds
 Blow and blend
 Bow and bend
 My tender twigs
 And sprout a springtime simile
 Like pencils budding words

I'm always in seasons
 Writing like fast growth
 On the dead and dried
 Moving my acorn eyes
 Toward the bottom
 Of an endangered white
 I sacrifice to write

Moving through forests
 I hold a stick loaded with lead
 And I fill them with it

And they fall

And that's how I find myself
 In woods or words
 (Not as heavy as you think)
 I write with ease
 If I keep my dead trees

For me, this poem is about becoming a better writer because I keep and continue to contemplate everything I've written. I didn't realize when I wrote it that Mike would take much of my writing away from me. It is ironic to me now that this poem survived Mike's fire like an acorn, a dropping from a larger tree, now destroyed. Like seeds deep inside acorns, I incubate my thoughts for weeks or even years before I commit them to paper. I'm fearful of judgments, of people deciding who I am based on a fragment, but the more I write, the more I know how to grow.

This thesis is an effort to reclaim my voice and, in so doing, reclaim myself. Six years after Mike's suicide, I sit at my writing desk thinking of that fourth grade girl, wanting to reclaim her red pen desire — the desire to write for myself — reasserting my voice and becoming *I* rather than remaining *she*.

I chose to organize this thesis based on the teachings of the *I Ching, Book of Changes* because it offered me a platform to discuss my change from *her* to *me*. The *I Ching* asserts that the only constant is change. The after effects of Mike's death seemed so permanent that it was difficult at first to recognize this principle, to remember that nothing but change is permanent. Not suffering and not joy. Even the dead change — the corpse changes — and the memory of who that person was changes. The interpretation of what is left behind receives a new

interpretation and evolves. I am alive, evolving. In a sense, we are all blessed with the possibility of change.

As I consulted the *I Ching* intermittently throughout the capricious decade surrounding my relationship with Mike, it always offered profound wisdom and foretold my life's changes with uncanny accuracy. I'm not an *I Ching* expert, and I don't pretend to be a Sinologist, but as author of "Be Here Now" Ram Daas explained in a recent interview, "The people from the Far East have the maps that we don't have, because they've been studying the territory for so long" (16). The *I Ching* was the map I needed to organize the layers of my story and build up my history. As R.L. Wing explains in his book *The I Ching Workbook*,

[*The Book of Changes*] is an ancient treasure. It has been used by the Chinese to explore the meaning of human affairs for thousands of years... When you use *The Book of Changes* to peer into your future, when you experience the immediateness of your situation through divination, it is like unwrapping, unfolding, and discovering yourself — and, in the process, discovering this intricate and perplexing world to be something that you have intimately understood all along. (8-9)

The *I Ching*, as well as the process of writing this thesis, has allowed me to unwrap my gift, my voice as a writer.

The next eight chapters are meditations on the events that led me to lose — and then regain — this voice. In each essay, I interpret one of the eight trigrams, or universal images, found in the *I Ching*, and delve into the layers of my experience with that universal image. According to R.L. Wing,

The trigrams were formed to describe the evolution of things from the duality of *yin* and *yang*. They were first attributed to Fu His... [whose] colorful history tells of his discovery of the trigrams on the shell of a tortoise he found emerging from the Yellow River, where he had gone to meditate upon the

meaning of life...[Trigrams] are meant to represent all the cosmic and physical conditions on earth. Their attributes as used in *The Book of Changes* are as follows:

Heaven: firmness, creativity, strength, force, power
Thunder: arousing, movement, activity, shock, growth
Water: mysterious, profound, meaningful, dangerous, difficult
Mountain: still, resting, meditating, tranquil, immobile
Earth: yielding, receptive, responsive, devoted, submissive
Wind: gentle effects, small efforts, penetrating work
Fire: illuminating, clarity, intelligence, dependence, attachment
Lake: joy, openness, pleasure, satisfaction, excess (14)

I kept these ancient translations in mind as I wrote each essay. I didn't stray far from these ancient meanings, but I also allowed myself to freely interpret and translate my own experience. The more I trusted my intuition, the more the *I Ching* helped me to see beyond my blind spots, to reflect beyond my own experience, and to create my own Book of Changes.

I wrote the following poem for Mike after we first met. Later, after it was published, I began to read it as an expression, not of the love I had for him, but of how deeply rooted my need is to write. As the title of the poem suggests, it's just like breathing:

Just Like Breathing

Remember how you could just sit down
 With paper and pencil
 Like they were ready
 For your wind in them
 Like they were trees again
 And you would blow your words
 All over them
 On and on
 Not thinking like the breeze
 We really are
 Well that's how I love you
 It's just like breathing

The following essays are filled with my breath and my poems. Writing is my pulse and my home. Through writing I free my thoughts, my hand translates my universe, and, for a moment, the paper holds the infinity of me.

Heaven

I was conceived in the summer of 1969 in a trailer house on the shores of Lake Eunice, Minnesota, and I was swimming in that same lake by the summer of 1970. I learned how to swim before I learned how to walk.

I grew up with my single mom, now a business woman in Seattle, where she is called the *Barracuda* by her admiring peers. But back in 1970, as a young mom, she would hold me close to her, show me how to suck in my breath and puff out my cheeks, count “1,2,3!” and pull me under the water. Trusting my mom would not let go, I learned to float, and to swim on my own.

To me, heaven is that tethered moment — floating but connected. I did not have words for this until I was 16 years old, and my dad told me about the concept of synchronicity. In order to help me understand synchronicity, my dad gave me his copy of Carl Jung’s *The Portable Jung*. I was 16, and I loved it when my dad paid attention to me. My dad’s a poet, and except for the times I thought he was going to poison himself with liquor, I truly admired him.

We sat down on the couch in his study, and just as he handed Jung’s book to me, he saw something written on the bottom of the cover. He turned the book upside down, and together we saw it was my name, Vanessa, written in child’s scrawl with red pen. Beside it were two V-shaped squiggles, practice V’s I suppose, which resembled small birds in flight. What child wrote this? It didn’t look like my handwriting. My dad and I looked at each other. Our eyes and mouths turned O-shaped because neither one of us knew it was there, waiting for us to find it that day. Ever since then, I realized *it’s* always there, waiting for all of

us — the moment we discover that certain parallels converge beyond just chance, and the events of our lives are connected to something profound.

I always thought that when I got married I would make a permanent bond with something profound: love. I grew up on Walt Disney movies, singing “Someday My Prince Will Come,” trying to visualize my prince. I didn’t know how important it was to hold on to my own independence, to be able to swim on my own, when I found him.

When I turned 18, I enrolled in college as a philosophy major and moved into my dad and step-mom’s basement in Moorhead, Minnesota. It was then that I began to lose sight of my independence in order to take care of some one else. I’d spent my teenage years arguing with my mom to let me move to Moorhead so I could be with my dad. She’d refused because my dad drank too much. My dad drank so much he lost his appetite as well as his job. I grew up so afraid for my dad’s health that when the phone rang at night I thought he’d probably died.

By the time I moved to Moorhead to start college, my dad was at the peak of his career as an alcoholic. I thought I could save him. Within three weeks after moving in with him, I found his vomit in the toilet. Realizing that I could use this opportunity to confront him, I gathered my courage and walked to my dad and stepmom’s bedroom where they were in bed watching television. I asked my dad, “Why did you just throw up?”

My dad answered casually, “It’s just a Snicker’s bar.”

My stepmom was quick to add, “He ate it and then he went to bed. Everybody knows you’re not supposed to lie down after you eat. It can make you sick.”

I thought the rule was you’re not supposed to go swimming after you eat, but I didn’t argue. After 15 years of marriage, their alliance to each other, and to the story behind the vomit, was too strong. It didn’t matter that I thought their logic was absurd; they were both determined to avoid confronting my dad’s illness.

As painful as it was to stop trying to save my dad, I gave up on confronting his illness, and moved to the west coast to spend my sophomore year at the University of Oregon. A month later I fell in love with Mike — a man who had his own illness: a bipolar disorder, more commonly known as manic-depression.

It’s the little details that allow you to get to know a person quickly. I once read in *Seventeen Magazine* that you should always apply eye makeup with your ring finger because it is the weakest and most sensitive. By using it, you will avoid pulling the delicate skin around the eye area and therefore cause fewer wrinkles. I knew Mike with my ring finger.

At six feet tall, Mike would often turn heads with his athletic build, good looks, and tanned skin. With a quick tilt of his head, he would flip his long blond bangs to reveal his green eyes and I would relax. It was easy to be with him because he was often in deep thought. I am normally self-conscious but he set me at ease because we skipped over small talk for the bigger conversation topics like world pollution or religion.

Although it would be several years before I recognized Mike's serious mental condition, initially his mania inspired me. During his manic episodes, his energy was boundless. The summer before we got married, he made a solo cross-country trip by hopping freight trains and returning by bicycle. The next summer, he biked alone through Canada. During winter he would spend hours creating bicycles from materials he found in dumpsters. He built one bike that he rode lying on his stomach with his arms stretched out like Superman. Another he built upright but pedaled it with his hands. He also built a bicycle carriage for two in which we could sit and pedal side by side. Without stopping to eat meals, he would spend eight to ten hours at a time building these bicycles in his parents' garage. I'd never met anyone with so much focus. Sometimes, if his design was not sound, he would stop to ask me for my ideas and we would solve the problem together. It didn't matter that he had no soldering iron to weld the bike parts — he would use the metal tightening strips that plumbers use to fasten pipes or the interlocking pipes from vacuum cleaners. He enjoyed the process rather than the product of creating these bikes, and would often disassemble a bike just hours after creating it in order to use its parts.

A caregiver by profession, Mike worked with the elderly and the mentally disabled as a Certified Nursing Assistant. I admired his ability to help people who required the same care as a baby. I couldn't get past the fact that they were adults, complete with muscles, body hair, and sex drive. Caring for them seemed scary to me until I saw how they squirmed with happiness in reaction to Mike's kindness.

By teaching me how to get over my fears, Mike and I learned to face challenges together. We climbed Oregon's South Sister (elev. 10,358) in an afternoon. He also taught me how to skateboard, river board, snowboard, surf, golf, and to play *The Entertainer* on the piano. I was proud of myself when I was with him. After dating for four years, we married.

Because I celebrated the high times and rode through the low ones, I was a perfect candidate for falling in love with a bipolar man. I did what I thought anybody would do: I tried to take some responsibility for Mike's mental condition. It took me eight years to discover this was like trying to take responsibility for a tornado.

Mike first attempted suicide, and landed in the emergency room, before I met him, when he was 17. He visited a psychiatrist sporadically after the attempt, and his friends and family began to just accept him as "a little off." He divulged his inclination toward suicide to me within a month after I met him. The more we got to know each other, the more he talked about whether or not he should kill himself. He said he wanted to die because he valued the environment more highly than he valued himself — if he were dead, he would no longer take from the earth. He thought of suicide as the ultimate selfless act.

By our first Christmas together, Mike had purchased a shotgun. I hid the gun from him until he promised to return it to the sporting goods store. He kept his word, but that spring he came over to tell me he had hooked up a garden hose to the exhaust pipe of his parent's Volvo. He did this after another unsuccessful suicide attempt: he'd made small cuts on his wrist — crossing the knife

perpendicular to the vein, rather than using the effective technique of slicing parallel along with the vein. Perhaps when a person slits his wrists he is actually trying to cut off his hands because his hands are violent. Hands reach beyond the mind and express passions beyond the minds' intent. The violent person cannot be free until he's rid himself of the fist, the trigger finger, or the palm that grips the knife.

After several suicide attempts, Mike became very familiar with how his body reacted to and instinctively rejected self-inflicted pain. He talked with detachment about how the body offers incredible resistance to death. He told me he did not resist suicide on a psychological level, but on a purely physical level. Regardless of his body's innate survival instinct, he also told me several times that he was meant to kill himself. He said he felt like there was a force that pressed on him and wanted him to die.

That same force pressed on me and ultimately sabotaged our marriage. A month after our wedding Mike fell into an episode of depression. He told me he wanted a divorce because he was meant to be alone. He began to drink heavily, not because he was an alcoholic, but because he knew it bothered me. By that time, my dad had put an end to his battle with liquor. He'd quit cold turkey, with no help from Alcoholics Anonymous, 12-step programs, or therapy of any kind—he just quit. Mike told me that if I didn't stop trying to become “a career woman” and start paying more attention to him, he would quit his job and drink every day. He didn't pursue the divorce, or quit his job or become an alcoholic, but found alternative ways to manipulate me as his depression deepened.

It would be years after our marriage before I realized our marriage mimicked my dad and stepmom's relationship. I see now that my stepmom had defended my dad's alcoholism because she did not want to believe he was sick. In the same way, I did not want to believe Mike was really sick. I wanted to avoid consequences for him and ultimately to save him. I thought it was up to me to keep him happy. Doesn't marriage mean taking care of each other? I couldn't differentiate the line between generous caring and pathological behavior.

Looking back, I realize you have to love somebody a lot to stop saving them so they can learn to save themselves. My pride came from believing I could save Mike. I broke the basic rule of being a life guard: first look for objects to use as a life line, and only as the last resort get in the water to save the victim. I took so much responsibility for Mike that we both became victims, exhausting each other. When I finally made it out of the water, it was too late to save him, and he was too weak to save himself. After four years of dating and four years of marriage, I gave up. I left him in March of 1997, and he killed himself that May.

Several years after his death I found the card I'd given him for his 27th birthday in January of 1997. In it, I'd written nothing more than "Here's to Heaven in '97!" I remembered how badly I'd wanted the relationship to end, and how I lacked the energy to write anything more meaningful than the trite rhyme inside the card. I didn't know that Mike's life was about to end, or that the card would have predicted such a profound moment, waiting to happen. The tether was tenuous, but for a moment it tugged at me just enough to make me catch my breath.

Thunder

Throughout my marriage Mike tried to control me by telling me that if I made certain choices (i.e. going shopping or even just spending time with my sister-in-law) I would have to “accept the consequences.” His consequences varied. Sometimes he would not talk to me for days.

There was one incident, with no warning, when he destroyed all of his artwork (detailed pencil drawings, ink prints, ceramics, papier-mâché and carvings). He later told me he did this because I’d hung my ex-boyfriend’s small self-portrait in a more prominent place than his own artwork. Once, after Christmas, I was talking with my mother-in-law about buying dishes with the \$100 she had given me. Mike overheard us and said, “If you buy those dishes I’ll quit my job.”

Mike would tell me on a regular basis, “If you ever leave me, I will either join a monastery, become homeless, or commit suicide.” He always said these words in the same order, with the same humdrum emotion. At the time, this did not seem like abuse — it was just a statement I chose to ignore because I loved him and thought I would never leave him. It took me three years of marriage to realize that this almost monthly mantra, as well as the other incidents, were forms of manipulation Mike used to control me and limit my choices.

I didn’t start asserting my own choices until I discovered the language of self-worth. This discovery coincided with my learning a foreign language. I spent six weeks learning Spanish in a study abroad program in Ecuador in late June of

1996. Ecuador showed me who I really am. I am a strong woman. I am meant to explore and experience and learn and teach. And be in love.

During my six-week stay in Ecuador, I lived with a host family and went to school in Quito, elevation 9,000 feet, population three million. While getting to know people there and wanting to practice my limited Spanish, I often said *estoy cansada* when I meant to say *estoy casada*. I meant to say I am married, but I actually said I am tired — I suppose in my unconscious mind the two were similar.

Near the end of the trip, the study abroad program offered a trip to the jungle. That's when I bloomed. It was not a conscious decision; I couldn't help it. In Ecuador the jungle is called *La Selva*. In *La Selva*, I smelled the wild ginger flower along the *Napo* riverbank, not far from the *Amazon*. I smelled something so sweet and so rich and untouched that it inspired poetry and sexuality. And all of a sudden I remembered who I really am.

When I returned, it was difficult to explain these changes to Mike — that I really was *tired*, that I wasn't in love with him anymore. After eight months, he finally agreed to move out. I only had a week to breathe before he proved that he could still manipulate me. The evening I walked to his parent's house to tell them about our impending divorce, I came home to discover that Mike must have kept a spare key. He had ransacked my house and stolen everything he could find that fit into our car. Everything else lay in the house, demolished.

Upon seeing the destruction inside my house, I began to scream the scream from my nightmares in which I would watch myself experience something horrifying. It hit me all at once that I would not wake up in a safe place, and then I

lost track of my breath altogether. For a few minutes my scream was so uncontrollable, I had to scream in order to breathe.

Mike's dad had given me a ride home that evening and was just a few steps behind me. Once inside my house, his mouth mirrored the bookcases and drawers — open and empty. Tiny nails shivered on the cold plaster walls where my family photos once covered them. Without their screens, my TV and computer resembled carcasses. The guitar my dad gave me when I was 16 lay on the floor with several splintering holes and limp strings.

Then Mike's dad noticed the warped nine-iron golf club lying in the middle of the destruction. The club belonged to a set that Mike had inherited from his grandma after she died. Mike's dad moaned, "Dear God, he took it out on my mother."

I was in a state of physical shock, but I still noticed the narcissism in his comment. I snapped at him: "This has nothing to do with your mother. This is about our divorce. This is revenge. This has nothing to do with his grandma."

At this point, Mike's dad realized he would not wake up from the nightmare either. "I'll go look for him," he said. "Here," he said as he handed me the phone, "Mike didn't destroy this. Call the police."

A few minutes after I dialed 911, a police officer peered into my living room from my front steps. In a flat voice showing no compassion, he said that because I was married to Mike, this was our mutual property. He continued: "You can't press charges against your husband for destroying your joint property."

When I explained we were divorcing and that Mike had been threatening to kill himself for the past week, the officer called in a description of Mike and of our vehicle. He spoke with as much energy as a toe hair. I wanted to scream at him, “What do you mean I can’t do anything about this? How does my marriage vow legitimize the destruction of my property? Mike and I sat down together at a Thai restaurant just last week and split up our possessions! We wrote it down! We both agreed on what was mine and what was his! How can this be legal?” But the officer was already pulling out of my driveway.

As he drove away, Mike’s brother and his wife pulled up in their car — they lived in the house next to ours. They’d seen the patrol car leaving, and once inside my ruined home they didn’t need to ask why the police had been there. They took me to their house while we debated what to do — pacing like astronauts in a space ship with an oxygen leak.

When Mike pulled into the driveway about two hours later, we all rushed into their bedroom. They lifted their bed up over me while I scuttled under it. The bed was too low for me to fit all the way underneath, so I wedged myself up against the freezing cold stucco wall. The bed sat slightly lopsided on top of me, but they thought that was better than hiding me in the closet in case Mike decided to look in there.

They both stood in the living room with my husband and discussed his psychotic actions for over an hour, while I lay on the hardwood floor and bore the weight of my terror and the weight of the bed on top of me. I remember thinking it was like they were talking to a rabid dog. While they tried to reason with him, I

froze solid underneath that bed. I was like one of those miracle kids who falls under the ice and yet somehow still survives; all functions slow down, working just enough to keep the brain alive. I felt no life.

Only two months before that night, I had consulted the *I Ching*, with the question, “what would happen if I left my husband?” The book offered the answer: “Shocking.” It reads:

The sudden force of stored and kinetic energy in the cosmos will be released in a powerful and *SHOCKING* way. Like the awesome clap of a thunderbolt that explodes in the hushed moments before a storm, it will instill in the hearts of all who hear it an intense reverence and awareness of the overwhelming power of nature. All things in the cosmos will be aroused to movement through fear. (134)

I had thought of thunder as the drumming sound my eardrums sometimes make when I shut my eyes, and my eyes water. I did not think of lying underneath my brother and sister-in-law’s bed for an hour and a half. I had thought of thunder as the effect of lightning splitting the air apart and the sound of the air crashing back together. I did not realize that when the lightning splits the air, and there is a moment and space with no air, I could fit into that moment and space of nothingness.

At one point, my sister-in-law surreptitiously came into the bedroom and whispered to me, “Stay quiet. Stay behind the bed.” After another 20 minutes Mike left. I got up from behind the bed, and my brother-in-law told me to leave. “Run,” he said. He pulled out his wallet. “Here,” he said, “take all the money in my wallet, go anywhere you can, just hide.” I grabbed my bicycle and flew down

the dark alley behind our houses. I felt as desperate as if I was a hunted animal about to be killed and eaten to sustain someone else's survival.

After two days, I began to regain some sense of lucidity and decided to call Mike from a payphone outside a convenience store. I used a payphone so that he could not trace the call. When he answered I screamed at him, "What in the hell are you doing? Stop destroying my things! Are you going to stop?"

He said he would not stop. He told me he had burned all of the things he'd stolen from me. He then calmly told me he was going to kill me. He paused and said, "Actually, I'm going to wait until you have a family, and then I'm going to kill you all." Unlike any of his previous self-destructive threats over the years, this one had the power to destroy *me*. I had left my apathy in the jungle of Ecuador and now I was terrified.

I went to court the next day to obtain a restraining order. The judge spoke to me with stern sincerity. "This is not just a restraint on Mike," he said. "This also means you must not attempt to contact him. I see so many women break these restraining orders—I need you to promise me that you won't." I promised I would not be one of *those* women. To me *those* women were the ones who became statistics.

Even though Mike was bound by the restraining order not to be within one city block from my place of employment, I began to suffer panic attacks. During March, April and May, I stayed at a friend's house and walked to school in fear for my life. I taught classes as a graduate teaching assistant but was constantly distracted by the thought that Mike would walk into my classroom at any moment.

Once, while teaching, I was in mid sentence, and I suddenly forgot what I was talking about. I stood there and stared, and my students, college freshman, stared back. They didn't say anything, and I don't have any idea how long I stood there. I felt myself breathing fast, my mind turned off, and fear took over. Although the room was full of people, I felt totally alone. I felt my own presence like I was magnified 1000 times by a camera zoom lens completely out of focus.

The experience taught me it is possible for my own body to betray me. My panic attacks put me in a catatonic state. I felt no trust for my own blood flow or my own breath. I began to understand why women go back to their abusers; it's less terrifying to live with him than to wonder when he'll strike again with no warning whatsoever.

When I told a friend about my panic attacks, she showed me some literature provided by the local domestic violence center where she volunteered. There I saw the "Power and Control Wheel." The wheel outlines eight common tactics that abusers use to control women: power and control are at the hub of the wheel; physical abuse is only the rim that encircles it.

As I read the wagon wheel sections of the chart, I found all but one applied to my marriage, and the one that did not apply was "using children"— we had none. All of the other wheel sections were relevant:



Until I saw that chart, I did not know that verbal abuse is the core of domestic abuse. During my marriage, I had no idea my husband was learning a language too — the language of “Power and Control” — and that the next lesson was physical violence.

When Mike killed himself, he proved to me that his threats were real, and that he could have taken me with him. After his death, I learned that several of my female friends had been physically abused by their boyfriends and husbands. As

they shared their stories with me I found out that, like me, they had also ignored the verbal abuse they'd suffered. When the physical abuse followed, they'd ignored that too. Black eyes and broken ribs healed every time. Until each woman recognized her own self worth and left the relationship, she had felt her own apathy was more powerful than the abuse she suffered.

For years I would dream Mike was alive. In my dreams, I would inevitably ask him how he'd survived death. One time he told me "reverse concentration." Another time he said he had been living in South America. After five years, these convincing dreams still go on for hours, leaving me mesmerized and exhausted.

I never thought I would be so relieved that someone I loved was dead. I know several women who have never had that sense of relief. One of my friends suffered abuse for years. Her attacker still lives in a nearby town. She suffers from panic attacks and wakes up from her nightmares punching the darkness.

My nightmares went on for years, but Mike will never be a threat to me again. When he asphyxiated himself, he found that space between the thunderclaps. He will remain in that space with no air, but thankfully, I can breathe again.

Water

I called Peg three days after Mike died. My mother-in-law had recommended her. Driving to Peg's house meant forty minutes of following several skinny roads through dense woods. Peg, now in her 60's, became a therapist after first losing her husband and then her son to suicide. When I told her I'd lost my 27-year old husband just two days ago, she invited me (even though we'd never met) to visit her home in the Oregon coast mountain range for an overnight retreat.

Since obtaining a restraining order against Mike, just two months before his suicide, I'd discovered the unrivalled relief of screaming in my car. With the windows rolled up, going 60 mph on the highway, I felt no fear of scaring strangers who, if they heard me, might think I needed rescuing. So I drove and screamed the scream of the wild in my car. This scream, which is much bigger than me, is a drowning force like water.

Gripping my steering wheel, I imagine I looked like Alex from *A Clock Work Orange*: my eyes felt propped open, unable to look away from harrowing images, tears streaming down my face as if someone stood over me with a generous eye dropper. With my eyes and mouth wide open, I gripped the wheel and gunned the gas pedal. The sun would intermittently blast through treeless curves in the road for just a few seconds until I would speed into a dark wall of tree shadows again. At one point, the road converged into a single lane in order to fit under a small creosote soaked railroad bridge. And all along, the road followed the steep edge of a murky creek. I think most of the coast range roads follow

creeks or rivers. It's probably just easier to lay a road where water has carved a way, but I couldn't help thinking of how easy it would be to glide from my traffic lane into the shadowy water.

I found Peg's mailbox and turned on to her property. She owned several acres of forest. Although the previous owner had planted fir trees to harvest at Christmas time, Peg had no intention of ever cutting the trees, and they had grown tall and crowded. As I parked my car in a small clearing, two farm dogs ran toward me and barked hellos. After I allowed them some sniffs, as well as a few pats on the head, they were gone. Peg had instructed me to push a button on the side of a large shed when I arrived. The button was easy to spot, and when pushed it made no sound. I waited silently in the sun. After about five minutes Peg greeted me with a firm hug. "I'm glad you've decided to come," she said.

"Thank you for having me," I replied.

Peg led me to an archway, handmade with supple sticks woven in and around live branches. It was an entryway for the path to her house, and she'd decorated it with shells and little star ornaments. Beside the arch was a steel bowl about the size of a birdbath. She picked up a mallet and struck the steel so that it made a low moaning gong sound. This was apparently her ritual for entering her home. "Your turn," she said as she handed the mallet to me, and I also announced myself to the house.

The path to the house was overgrown with bushes and towering trees. It was the end of May, and every leaf looked like an Olympian, young and strong, competing for the gold of the sun. Peg walked steadily in front of me. She was a

thick and wrinkled woman with a calming presence. Wispy, white and gray, her hair reminded me of driftwood. She seemed to be a woman who belonged in the coastal forest — as if she had been a wise old tree before a fairy turned her into a woman. Halfway to the house, the path opened up at a wide, low creek bed, and we stopped and tossed a few stones into the moving, whispering water. She told me that while I was staying with her I should spend time throwing stones into the water, “some simple and fancy stone throwing, ” she said.

I tossed a stone, and as it plopped into the water, I realized that until Mike killed himself, the only people I’d ever known who had died were my grandma, when I was four years old, and Matt, a boy who sat behind me in my high school history class. Matt had killed himself by sitting in a car with the engine running in his parent’s garage. I’d attended his wake and viewed his stiff 17-year-old body. The make-up made him look 40 years old. I’d had a crush on Matt because he was smart and shy, with a nice face and soft brown hair. Usually when boys talked to me it was just to tease me, so I preferred the quiet ones. Matt and I had spoken only a few words to each other. I saw that he was smart and nice, and for that I thought he was the most desirable guy in school. Then he died. His younger brother found him on the garage floor, just inches from the door to the house. I imagined Matt, at the last minute, had tried to open the door to save himself, but succumbed to the poisonous and debilitating fumes before he could reach the doorknob. At the time, I had no idea how a boy that young could have been so sad.

Standing by the riverbed with Peg, ten years later, it occurred to me that Mike was the same age the first time he tried to kill himself. He was also 17 in 1987, just like Matt. As a junior in high school, Mike had told me he'd taken sleeping pills, written his family a suicide note, and walked up into the woods behind his parent's house. His younger brother found the note on the kitchen counter and immediately knew to look for Mike in the woods. He ran around the trails until he spotted the tip of Mike's shoe behind a bush. Mike was unconscious.

Mike was rushed to the hospital where the doctor discovered that the coating on the pills had formed a wall that blocked the base of Mike's bladder. A tube had to be inserted through his penis to break through the coating. Mike woke up during the procedure. Each time he recalled the story he would always mention — almost as if it were the moral of the story — not to use the *coated* sleeping pills to commit suicide.

Peg and I walked to her guesthouse — a gutted school bus that had been renovated into a sanctuary. She pulled a rope, and the front door bent inward at its middle to open up into a kitchen complete with propane burner and fridge (not running, but very handy for storing tea and sugar and anything else mice might want). There was a dining area with comfortable benches for long hours of talking or reading, as well as a double bed at the very back of the bus. Behind the bed were sealed plastic bins full of fresh bedding. I opened the back door of the bus, and discovered it had been backed up over the creek so that Peg's guests could fall

asleep with the sound of the river running by. I sat on the bed and listened to the river washing over rocks, pouring past this isolated place, thoughtlessly, endlessly.

Peg looked at me and said, “Grieving Mike’s death will be a little like eating a bad oyster; nobody likes to throw it up, but it makes a person feel better.” She added, “Things such as crying, talking and writing will all be part of that ethereal vomit.” She left the bus and the quiet of the woods entered. I tried to write but I was crying too hard to see. Then I realized that whether my eyes were open or closed, I saw Mike’s corpse. The funeral home had allowed me to view Mike before he was cremated. I had waited with some family members in the lobby behind closed doors as Mike was rolled into the funeral chapel. Before we went in, the mortician warned us that the poison from the carbon monoxide had discolored his skin. I didn’t make it three feet into the chapel before grief disabled me. Upon seeing his corpse in front of the chapel pews, my legs buckled, and I collapsed onto my knees.

Mike looked like a giant lying on that stainless steel stretcher. The funeral home had covered his entire body, except for his head, with an enormous white terry cloth towel. I have no idea how long I cried on the floor of the funeral chapel, but when someone finally helped me up, I asked if I could be alone with Mike. A few moments after the door closed, I staggered toward my husband’s corpse. A dead young person does not look dead like a dead old person looks dead. A dead young person looks like they might be able to come back to life.

I told Mike I loved him and then unconsciously, as if he were just sleeping, I reached for one of his eyebrows and smoothed it with my finger. When I looked

down, I saw that the towel did not cover parts of his neck and back. His skin was purplish and bloated, and there appeared to be large bumps underneath and in between the muscles of his neck and shoulder. That small grotesque detail proved to me that he was dead.

As I lay there in Peg's bus, the sound of the river disappeared, and the pain of losing Mike peaked. My mouth opened wide as if to scream, but instead I stopped breathing. That's when I heard it — the next realm of sound. I listened and realized that beyond the sounds our ears hear now, there is another kingdom of sound. It's like the sound of large cats screaming. Cougars, jaguars, lionesses scream in agony, and it's just on the other side of what we are hearing now. Lost in that searing sound, my body felt pressed down as if under a giant hot iron.

Just before dawn, I awoke to a comforting silence. My throat ached, but I could not rise to drink. I lay there, seeing this man of my dreams, my husband, dead. The image seemed to put my own life in danger. Death was close to me now, as a widow. In a sense, I was married to it.

Then slowly, I heard the river moving below me, as if it began to flow again with the rising of the sun. My trance seemed to float away with the current. I stepped off the bus, and walked along the river's edge, keeping pace with the stream. I crossed the river on an old wooden bridge with no handrails, and walked onto a narrow path through the forest. Just ahead of me was a small pond of still water. As I crouched and peered over its edge, I began to break into pieces, divide into separate perspectives.

When I was about eight years old, I discovered that my essential self is something other than my body. I discovered this after prolonged stretches of time staring at my eyes in the mirror. The effect was similar to staring at a hologram: after some time my perception would change. Staring into the mirror, trying to see past my eyes, it would happen every time — I recognized my essential self. I could feel the corporeal as separate from the original and eternal me.

Looking into the pond had an even deeper effect than looking into the mirror because beyond my own reflection, I could see myself underneath the surface, staring up from the bottom of the pond. I was down there long enough to think, “It’s quiet down here. And fluid. There are two of me. Maybe three.” These words crossed my mind as I looked at the Vanessa on the shore, who was gazing at the surface of the pond. Then, the reflection itself gazed back at both the shore Vanessa and the underneath-the-surface-of-the-water Vanessa. I became all three at once — and all three Vanessa’s were connected by the water. Broken apart, the water barely held me together.

I dared to stay under the water. Somehow, the underwater Vanessa could breathe down there; the part of me that can drown was now untroubled. Before Mike died, I didn’t understand how easily my body would eventually settle and disappear into thin yellow silt.

The gentle gong sound of Peg’s welcome bowl snared my-above-the-surface attention. I felt a smooth stone underneath my hand, which I threw at once into the surface of the pond. The water splashed up on my face. Stepping away

from the underwater me, I took my reflection with me, and walked back across the bridge into a muggy June morning, feeling my life force, thoughtfully, endlessly.

Mountain

The day before my husband's funeral, I spent hours on the phone with my family in Minnesota, every one of them telling me I should move back "home." It didn't matter that I was 27-years old or that I hadn't lived in Minnesota for four years — I was still their *little Vanessa* and they all assumed the move back to Minnesota was best for me. My grandpa told me the same thing he always told me when I called: "Oregon has more wasteland than any other state in the country." I tried to explain to him that he was probably thinking of the desert lands of Eastern Oregon.

I told him, "I live on the other side of the state Grandpa, just an hour from the ocean."

"How far are you from the wasteland?" he asked.

When I finally hung up the phone, I thought about how difficult it was for me to call one place my *home*. I can appreciate my mom's goal to "climb the corporate ladder," but by the second grade I'd already moved eight times. I used to be a shy kid, and I can't help wondering if the moving had something to do with that. Even on the playground, the slide was too quick, the merry-go-round too dizzy, and the swings too free for me. I liked the sandbox — a whole world kept quietly in one place.

My second grade teacher took turns interviewing one student a week in order to make each of us feel "special." We took turns sitting in front of our classmates and she'd ask us all the same questions from a mimeographed form. During my interview, the teacher asked me what I liked to do. I remember looking

at the blank stares of my classmates. Their small faces tilted, some toward me, some away — they were all waiting to go outside and play. I told my teacher, “sit and stare and think.”

My mom kept that second grade interview for me, and I came across it sometime in high school. I laughed at myself at first, but as I grew up, the words “sit and stare and think” have become a mantra for me. It seems simple and perfect now. It captures my shyness and my desire for pause and wonderment. I was an only child and I was content just to stay in one spot, even if the spot was wasteland, and think to myself.

I have found no better place to sit and stare and think than on top of the hills surrounding Corvallis, Oregon. It was important for me not to run away after Mike’s suicide. I wanted to stay put, in his hometown, partly because I was holding onto the past, but I also needed to embrace my future. I didn’t want Corvallis to be a black spot on the map that I could never return to because it was full of bad memories. I needed to make my own good memories. Death tweaked my awareness, and it was instinctual not to disturb what was familiar.

Even after living there for four years, Corvallis seemed slightly unfamiliar after seeing Mike’s body in the morgue. Trying to sleep the night before the funeral was impossible, so I walked my dog down the same path my husband and I had always walked down. The path seemed surreal. It was the same sensation I’d experienced when I was first getting used to plane travel — for at least the first few days after getting off the plane, it felt like I’d landed in a dream.

Mike and I used to take our dog for walks in the hills that surround the valley where we lived. His awareness was keen and he taught me to look high for mistletoe, look low for miner's lettuce (a delicious clover), and watch out for stinging nettles that can snare the skin on your arms and legs with such quickness and depth it will stop you in your tracks. I still have the four-leaf clover we found there together. Now it sits in a dictionary, pressed on the pages between molecule and moment, after its magic had been pressed between his lips and mine.

Once we reached the hilltop, we would gaze at the mountains that surround our town to the south. I would try to meditate like my best friend, who lives in Colorado. She told me, "Follow the entire line of the horizon, scanning every inch, without breaking your concentration." I would try this horizon tracing but it was extremely difficult for me because my mind wandered, and I always lost track of where my attention was on the horizon. I once told Mike how much I admired his ability to meditate for such long periods of time. When I asked him how he was able to sit so still for so long, he said that while focusing on his breathing, he watched his thoughts as if they were just clouds passing over the sky. Unlike him, the times I can fix my attention on my breath's rhythm are rare, and if I ever last more than two minutes I get so excited that my concentration crumbles like a hot cookie.

Now, the night before my husband's funeral, all I had left was a handful of crumbs. I returned from walking my dog and began to go through the few photos from our past, gathering them to give them away at the funeral in the morning. Going through my things, I found an unfinished poem called *The Move*. The poem

reminded me of all the reasons I ever wanted to leave my husband, and find some way to ground myself.

I grabbed a pen and finished the poem:

The Move

Nobody will know me
 In my new place
 I can do what ever
 I want to wear new leather
 Boots up to my knees
 Take a stand
 Find a god
 Damn moment to seize
 For myself
 I will define wealth
 As a single space
 In an infinity called me
 The one
 No body
 Will know
 Or wonder about
 Or discover
 The ways I've lived before
 They won't even know
 I've only moved next door

After the funeral, I called my family and told them I was going to stay in Corvallis for practical reasons, to finish grad school. I told them I would be OK. I didn't try to explain the real reason I stayed in Corvallis. I'd moved too much. My poem *moved* me — that was enough. I needed to sit and stare and think.

Earth

At Mike's funeral, I stood next to his mother. I hadn't seen her for two months — I hadn't dared ever since Mike told me he was going to kill me. His mother and I stood close together, and I will never forget the way her breath smelled like blood. It was a rotten smell, just like when I floss my teeth and my gums bleed. Having to live through Mike's suicide was like a bleeding. Blood smells tinny and ripe, and the mouth is often open when one is in agony.

She asked me if I really believed he would have killed me.

I said, "Yes." Then she said she was glad I did not have to live my life in fear and, for that reason, she was glad he was dead. She is glad her son is dead for me and for my safety. We stood together in silence and awe, and watched the wind bend the tall grass on her parent's farm field near Lebanon, Oregon.

We hugged and she breathed her dark purple breath. I never told her that throughout my marriage she was my best friend. And now, it didn't seem to matter because her son was dead, and she accepted the loss with the grace of mother earth losing her clean air and forests in a game of craps.

About thirty people gathered at the farm to pay their respects to Mike that Saturday of Memorial Day weekend. Somebody planted a tall young tree, and we each wrote messages on strips of white muslin cloth and tied them to the skinny leafless branches. Suddenly, a pouring rain drenched us, but left as quickly as it came. With the warm sun above us again, somebody mused that Mike must have planned the shower to snap us out of our somberness. People laughed. I silently recalled that his moodiness was not always so delightful.

Mike's dad, drenched from the shower, approached me and thanked me for the eight years I had spent with Mike. He told me he truly believed I kept Mike alive from the time we met when we were both 19.

I responded to Mike's dad, "I can't accept your gratitude. If I take any responsibility for Mike's life, I must also take responsibility for his death."

His dad looked to the ground and walked away. He was trying to compliment me, and I should have just said "thank you," but my anger prevailed over the simple and tactful. I swatted at guilt like it was a fly making its rounds at the funeral.

Mike's grandparents, both still spry and celebrating life in their 80's, offered no words of understanding. They seemed to bend like the grass in the wind, unable to argue with the force that pushed behind them. Should I have told them that Mike was mentally ill? Would it have mattered? Was it my responsibility?

I walked across the soggy yard to ask Mike's best friend when he thought Mike started to "lose it." He attributed Mike's madness to LSD, a drug commonly available when Mike was in high school during the 1980's.

"Mike told me he dropped acid every weekend when he was junior." He went on, "He spent one of his acid trips watching ants for hours. His observations convinced him to avoid stepping on ants ever again."

I then said, hoping to be corrected, "Mike told me that during that same period, he also stopped showering and brushing his teeth so as not to kill the life forms that grew on his body."

“Yeah. That lasted about a week until,” he chuckled, “we tossed him in the river.”

We laughed together, but our eyes and the corner of our mouths pointed down. “After he met me, he always took showers,” I said. “He washed his hands so much they turned red and chapped.”

Mike’s best friend touched my shoulder and said, “I think you’re very lucky to be alive.”

Many of Mike’s friends approached me to offer their sympathy and encouraging words. One of them told me how much she loved Mike because he was an enthusiastic environmentalist with a sense of humor. She reminded me that Mike and I made up a tune for the Chief Seattle quote written on the back of one of Mike’s t-shirts. I would sing each line and Mike would make the sound of a spirited electric guitar riff during the pauses between the lines:

The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth. For
we did not weave the web of life. We are merely strands
within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

She told me, “Mike is everywhere now; he is part of the stream that evaporates into the clouds that comes back to rain on the trees and flowers.” I pictured the cycle of H₂O diagram from my eighth-grade science book. Her words were well intentioned but were incongruent with Mike’s actions. Mike stopped his own life force. The stream cannot stop itself from evaporating into the clouds. Mike interrupted his own nature. I was too angry to be comforted by the fact that he was everywhere now. He stopped his own pain and left me to live with mine. I was jealous of him, as if he had left early for vacation before all the work was done.

Mike's extended family — aunts, uncles and cousins — kept their distance from me at the funeral. Unlike his parents, they were devout Christians. Perhaps their love for Jesus taught them how to be compassionate under normal circumstances, but suicide is not normal. If I had not attended the funeral, perhaps there would have been no reminder that Mike had done anyone any harm. They spoke of him as if he were an angel. I could not forgive him so easily. He showed me there is hatred in love. He showed me that I am terrified of death and that it can ruin me before I actually die. It was easy for me to visualize my own death at his funeral.

I drove away from the funeral alone, my mouth open and dry. At 60 mph, I traveled, thirsty through the valley. I watched birds dart, dive and divine their ways past my windshield. It seemed as if they'd come to kiss me but just before seduction they would swoon and swerve to the side of my speeding car, so as to stay alive. I drove and I stared at the dozens of swallows and birds with red wings. And then one bird, a brown beauty in love with speed, dove under my car and before I could gasp, she stole the space between the four wheels of my vehicle, beyond me. She *spoke* to me. At first I only heard the silence of the absence of consciousness, but within seconds, she surfaced and I saw she meant: be strong and never again fear death because it's only a space between the wheels.

Wind

During the spring of my senior year in high school, my friend Tommy and I were voted “the most likely couple to achieve world peace.” In 1988, the era of big hair and shirts with shoulder pads, we were pictured in each other’s skinny arms with long straight hair wearing authentic hippie clothes. Finding these clothes was not an easy task while living with my modern business woman mom in a suburb of Minneapolis. Tommy and I had to shop regularly at downtown thrift stores to find our flower children castoffs and beatnik berets. It took me months to save up for my \$88 pair of Birkenstocks. Our running joke that spring was to sign people’s yearbooks with the intentionally ironic words, “Don’t change!” — we’d heard someone in the popular crowd use this expression in all seriousness. We couldn’t wait to get out of high school, become of age, find true love and *change*, and come back to our 10-year high school reunion having achieved real world peace.

After graduation from high school, Tommy and I went to separate colleges. When we saw each other again during Christmas break, Tommy gave me my first copy of the *I Ching*. I had no idea what it was. Tommy explained that *I Ching* is Chinese for *Book of Changes*. He told me, “When asked a question, the *I Ching* evaluates your situation and offers an insightful response.” Tommy went on to tell me about the history of the book, but I wasn’t really listening. I was just excited to expand my experience with mysticism beyond asking the *Magic 8 Ball* or the *Ouija* board for advice.

Tommy grabbed the *I Ching* and said, “This is nothing like the *Magic 8 Ball*. Here, I’ll show you how it works.” Tommy sat cross-legged on the floor, pulled his long brown hair into a ponytail, and began to pass three coins back and forth between his hands as he contemplated his question. I was skeptical. Tommy saw my smirk and offered some advice, “It’s not like you have to be spiritual to believe there are forces at work in the universe that are bigger than you,” he said, still moving the coins back and forth between each hand. “The Chinese just found an efficient way to catalog those forces. Think of the *I Ching* as a map. This method of tossing coins shows you where you are on that map. Once you know where you are on the map, you become oriented. You gain insight into your situation.”

Tommy tossed the coins onto the floor in front of him and drew a line on a piece of paper. He repeated this process six times. Each time he tossed the coins, he counted tails as a two, and heads as a three. Then he added the total. When the total was even, he drew a straight line (—). When the total was odd, he drew a line broken in the middle (- -). He drew each line successively above the last (so the first line was drawn at the bottom and the last line was drawn at the top). His result looked like this .

I tried to look interested, but the process made me sleepy. “Pay attention,” Tommy said, “This is the good part.” I sat up straight, trying to focus.

“These six lines,” he told me, “form a hexagram. A hexagram is actually made up of two trigrams — the lower and upper sets of three lines.” As pairs, the eight trigrams can be combined to create 64 different hexagrams. He said, “By

tossing the coins to divine your two trigrams, you have essentially obtained a cross section of the universe.” He pointed to the chart and traced his two trigrams to find his hexagram (☰☷ is hexagram 48).

Upper trigram Lower Trigram	☰ Heaven	☳ Thunder	☵ Water	☶ Mountain	☷ Earth	☴ Wind	☲ Fire	☱ Lake
☰ Heaven	1	34	5	26	11	9	14	43
☳ Thunder	25	51	3	27	24	42	21	17
☵ Water	6	40	29	4	7	59	64	47
☶ Mountain	33	62	39	52	15	53	56	31
☷ Earth	12	16	8	23	2	20	35	45
☴ Wind	44	32	48	18	46	57	50	28
☲ Fire	13	55	63	22	36	37	30	49
☱ Lake	10	54	60	41	19	61	38	58

Tommy said, “Now you can read from the corresponding hexagram in the book.

The *I Ching* is really just a guidebook for finding the best strategy on how to act in any given situation.”

In the fifteen years since I received my first *I Ching*, I have found it to be remarkable not only for its uncanny ability to reveal events, but also for the calming rituals it inspires. In order to use the *I Ching*, I must take time to pause and consider my goals. I have to use both the logical and the creative sides of my brain. It requires me to evaluate important questions before reacting, but it also

requires that I trust my intuition. The *I Ching* helps me recognize the patterns in my life. It also helps me accept that some things are out of my control, and teaches me how to find strength during those times. Many people use *I Ching* on a daily basis; I use it when I've exhausted all other resources, namely friends, family and therapy. I have found that the *I Ching* can be just as accurate, accessible — and more affordable — than any of the above.

There are nuances to this ancient book that took me years to grasp. For example, you shouldn't ask the *I Ching* yes/no and either/or questions because the book can't accurately answer questions formulated in this way. If anything, the *Ching* is more like an ancient Chinese Internet search engine: you go to it to find directions or instructions. If you were to ask it, "Am I going to the lake today?" you would be short changing yourself. Instead you should form your question to seek more information regarding your specific goal. For example you could ask it, "What's the best approach for me to get to the lake?" or, "If I go to the lake, what will I find there?"

One of the oldest books on earth, the *I Ching* dates back 4000 years and has inspired great minds such as Confucius, Einstein, and Carl Jung. According to *The I Ching, An Illustrated Guide to the Chinese Art of Divination*, "German mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716), inspired by the Eight Trigrams, perfected the binary system of numeration and invented integral and differential calculus, which are the theoretical ancestor of modern computers" (19). Also, "Martin Schonberger in his book *The Hidden Key to Life*, noted that the 64 hexagrams of the *I Ching* correspond exactly to the 64 DNA codons, the

genetic code of life” (20). I discovered several of these impressive correlations as I researched the *I Ching*, and I can attest to the powerful role it has played in my own life as well.

I was 19-years old when I first posed a question to the *I Ching*. On January 8, 1989 I asked, “It’s the beginning of a New Year, what should I be most conscious of?” I did not consult the *I Ching* again until 1994, five years after I’d asked my initial question. By that time Mike and I had celebrated our one-year wedding anniversary. Mike delighted in researching eastern philosophy and happened to mention that he was unfamiliar with the *I Ching*. As I showed him my copy of the book, we saw my original question written on the inside cover. We looked at it in amazement: I had asked the question on Mike’s 19th birthday, and in the same year I’d met Mike. I wrote about this amazing coincidence in my journal and called it “spooky.” The book confirmed for me that we’d been *destined* to be together.

It seems ironic to me now, years after his death, that Mike was unfamiliar with the *I Ching*. The book’s main premise asserts that the only constant is change, but Mike’s bipolar disorder limited his ability to conceive of change and choice. I’ve heard the definition of insanity is like trying something over and over again and getting the same results. For Mike, everything was often a matter of only right or left, yin or yang, life or death, right or wrong.

Near the end of our marriage I remember telling Mike that the plates of the West Coast fault line shifted below him, and the atmospheric pressure alternated above him — the dog’s nose turns gray, fruit ripens and decays, and the guitar

becomes out of tune — but the analogies didn't help. Mike didn't sense the impermanent nature of things. I didn't realize at the time that bipolar disorder eliminates the gray area. Life's options are seemingly few when everything becomes a question of either this or that.

I grew up believing I had limited choices, but for different reasons. I'd always thought of all of life's experiences as if each one was just a phase — I didn't think I had much of a choice about things because everything just passed by like the seasons of the year. As a kid, I went to four different elementary schools, and by the time I was 25 years old I had moved 24 times. Even my dad's alcoholism seemed like a phase. He was a drunk for years, but now he is sober. Mike's history with suicide also seemed transitory. He had tried to kill himself before I met him, and I thought his suicidal tendency was just a phase too.

Near the end of our marriage, Mike's depression had reached an all time low and his paranoia was so high he told me he thought aliens sometimes drilled through his skull in the middle of the night. When I consulted the *I Ching* to find out what would happen if I left Mike, and the book foretold that if I didn't maintain my energy something “shocking” was going to happen that would be out of my control, it became clear to me that the *I Ching's* accuracy was beyond just “spooky.”

Mike's random violence made me question everything I thought was true, and understand the human capacity for hatred to extremes I never thought would be directed at me. The person with whom I had shared the most intimacy of my adult life had wanted to harm me. The person with whom I'd spent eight years,

my whole adult life up until that point, was dead because he wanted to be dead. I no longer believed that I could trust my own judgment, much less that of other people. There were no longer such things as simple questions or conversations. I didn't know how to describe myself to people without giving them some of my history, but I also didn't know how to talk about my history without talking about Mike.

I spent the first year after his death in survival mode. I bought anything I thought I might need for any reason — fondue forks, a feather boa, The Thigh Master — I bought it all like it was bottled water. By chance, I came across the *I Ching*. Mike had burned my first copy so I bought the book but I didn't use it right away; I feared its ability to predict my future.

I didn't use the *I Ching* until the one-year anniversary of Mike's suicide. By that time, I felt so hopeless that it seemed the only way out was to seek the book's prediction on the next phase of my life. I asked the book "what is the best way to work through the problems I'm having because of Mike?" It gave me the answers, "Peace" and "Stagnation." The *I Ching's* response was clear: Mike had found peace, but I still suffered.

Before asking the *I Ching* my question, I thought I suffered because Mike had victimized me. After receiving the answer from the *I Ching*, however, I realized that the reverse was true: I suffered because I continued to victimize myself. Even the way in which I'd phrased my question emphasized this. How could I be having problems because of Mike? Mike was gone.

I had to forgive Mike, and more important, I had to forgive myself. I had to stop going over and over what he *and* I did wrong. Instead, it was time for me to focus on what I do right.

When I went to my ten-year high school reunion that summer, I'd already been a widow for a little over a year. I'd heard that most people go to their reunions to brag about how successful they've become. Although I hadn't achieved world peace, I was at least trying for inner peace, and I was most likely to succeed.

The sun was setting as I walked from my car to the reunion, and a warm summer wind smoothed over my skin like silk. I wore a long chocolate brown clingy dress and I felt beautiful enough to melt. I was hoping to see Tommy, but someone told me he was off surfing in Hawaii. I thought about how Tommy and I had laughed at our classmates who told each other, "Don't change!" As my classmates shared their stories, I didn't tell them I was a widow. I just told them about me: a graduate student, living in Oregon, who hoped to be a teacher.

Someone said, "Aside from those funky clothes you used to wear, you're just as sweet — you haven't changed at all." The comment grounded me — after all I'd been through, there *was* something essential in me that hadn't changed. That's the thing my classmates were talking about — I'd laughed at them a decade before because I didn't realize the expression "Don't change!" was a compliment. It took me ten years to recognize that as I grow older, I don't just go through phases during which I have no control. Instead, I get to make choices and decide for myself who I become.

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl said, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (75). In the same vein, the *I Ching* asserts that change is the only constant, but we have a choice amidst the chaos. I see both the yin and the yang, the beautiful and the awful, and I know I can't step outside the circle. I can't remove myself from these chaotic forces, but I can embrace them both, and accept the suffering along with the joy. Mike couldn't do this, but the *I Ching* showed me I can.

Fire

Mike visited me in a dream the morning he was cremated. It was one of those dreams that I'd heard of other people having who had lost someone close to them. The dream was lucid — so full of light and life — it felt absolutely real. Sitting next to Mike, I could feel a warm and alive energy force all around us. The force spoke to me: *the only way you will survive this is through forgiveness*. I didn't hear the words. I felt the words.

The dream left a profound impression on me, but as I searched for ways to forgive Mike, I could not let go of my anger and bitterness. It's interesting to me that bitter is associated with taste and the tongue. Is this where we get the expression "it left a bad taste in my mouth?" I read that tastes are found on separate sections of the tongue: salty is at the tip, sweet and sour on either side, and bitter is way in the back. My acrimonious memories of Mike lived in the back of my throat for almost a year. The effect was nauseating. I could not force my toothbrush far enough into the back of my mouth to scrub away the bitter taste of Mike's actions. Perhaps if I'd complained more to someone, to anyone, my angry tongue might have had a chance to air out a little. Instead, I smiled a lot. I learned to close my teeth together tightly and stretch my lips open and apart as much as possible. This, of course, was not happiness. But I am an Aries, a fire sign, which is known for its stubbornness, and I was not going to give into grief. Of course I grieved anyway. I'd go for long screaming and crying car rides. But I always went alone. And if the topic of Mike's suicide came up in conversation, I prided myself on telling the story with any gory details that came along with it, with a dry

face, tearless. The story was on the tip of my tongue and easily retrievable. But the meaning was in the back of my throat and only came out as screams when I was alone.

I'd grown up happy, but I started to forget that happiness could be real — that *I* was real. I was like a reverse Velveteen Rabbit. My eyes were turning hard; my worn spots were scars — only the scars were on my insides. And I lay in bed, a lot, just like a stuffed animal. I stared at the real world, able and wanting to be held by it, but unable to join it.

As the one-year anniversary of Mike's death approached, I mentioned to a classmate that I was a widow. She asked me when my husband died, and I told her it had been almost a year. Before I had a chance to add how quickly that year had passed, my friend replied, "Oh, so you should be over it by now." She had no concept that my ability to recover had nothing to do with time. While I recognized her naïveté, her statement was also extremely motivating — *I wanted* to "be over it by now."

I called Peg, the only therapist I knew, and she scheduled weekly appointments with me. During one of our sessions she had me work through the all the things I lost in the fire my husband started. I realized that after all of that time and energy Mike spent burning my things, he himself was burned beyond recognition when he was cremated.

The day after he was cremated, I visited his parent's house. Many people had brought food and gifts to his parents, and there was one package in particular that kept drawing my attention. It lay on the floor for over an hour until I picked

up the pretty lavender paper gift bag with the white rope handles. It was quite heavy. I asked Mike's mom who it was from. She explained calmly that it was Mike's ashes. He was packaged so nicely I thought he was a gift. I will never forget how it felt to carry what was left of my husband in one hand after the fire had transformed him. My therapist asked me to consider ways in which the fire had transformed me too. She said, "Nothing touched by fire goes unaltered."

Walking home from therapy I remembered a story that Mike used to tell me. A Zen master once told his disciple, a young monk, not to carry women. Shortly after receiving this advice, the monk found himself in a predicament. He'd been walking on a muddy trail when he came across a woman who was having trouble crossing a particularly deep section of the trail. She was quite stuck and asked the monk if he would carry her across the mud to drier land. The monk paused because he'd been told not to carry women. As the woman sank deeper into the mud he made a quick decision to help her. She thanked him and they parted ways. As the monk walked on, guilt overwhelmed him for disobeying his master. Why had he done the one thing he had been asked not to do? Why did he carry that woman? He berated himself for days. After a week of mulling in guilt he went to see his master and told him what had happened. The master scolded him: "you disobeyed me not because you helped the woman out of the mud puddle, but because you continue to carry her right now."

It took me years before I would stop carrying Mike. I was unable to transform myself until I figured out that I carried the literal and figurative weight of my husband. When Mike came to me in my dream, I honestly believed he had

visited me from the dead, to tell me I needed to forgive him. Now I see that he had nothing to do with the special dream's message. The words were from deep in my own self-conscious, but I'd misinterpreted what I needed to do — I didn't need to forgive him — I needed to forgive *myself*. Now when I dream, I no longer hear his voice, I hear only my own. Now I carry myself through the mud.

Lake

While crossing barren stretches of Montana in the heat of July, on a drive from Oregon to Minnesota, I pick coins out of a clear plastic bag and throw them out of my car window. With each coin I toss, I let go of something that Mike took from me in March. A penny says goodbye to my computer, a dime says au revoir to my childhood copy of *The Little Prince*, and another penny means farewell to my flute. The relief of throwing money out the window is unparalleled — throwing things away from my body, gaining distance from the marriage, and the violence.

This bag of coins is one of the few things the police found in the 1979 Honda Accord that Mike had used to kill himself. The police report noted that there was \$11.09 in change in the baggy. It also listed a paperback book called *The Power of Silence*, by Carlos Castaneda, with many passages highlighted, and an empty bag of peanut M&M's used as a bookmark. In the book Mike had written, "I'm looking for a calm feeling that doesn't have to be forced but comes to me effortlessly and often." There was also a small blue notebook which included a suicide letter. Just outside of the car, in the grass, the police found two empty beer bottles and the wrapper and tie straps from a garden hose. This wrapper matched the hose that was duct taped to the tailpipe of Mike's Honda.

I stop tossing the coins as I approach Billings, and I-90 turns into a busy four-lane expressway. Once there are other cars with which to compare my speed, I become conscious that I am going 80 miles per hour. Ahead of me, I see what I think is a German shepherd running in the median that separates the eight lanes of

freeway traffic. No sooner than I see the dog in the median, it runs into the middle of my traffic lane. The moment before I reach it, it runs back to the median again and I see that it is not a dog but a wolf. And that's when I run over its large dead mate. I immediately look back in my rearview mirror and see the wolf continue to circle the corpse. It is obvious that the wolf cannot leave its dead companion. The fate of the live wolf is also obvious in the rush hour traffic. Instinct rules the wolf, and its instinct is not to run away from the speeding and honking cars and trucks. Instead, she stays with him. The image of the wolves haunts me all summer. I can't think of them without crying. I have left my dead mate, and it feels unnatural.

When I get to Minnesota, I go to work for a newspaper in Hawley, population 2,000. I spend my afternoons interviewing lifelong farmers and grain elevator operators, and taking black and white photos of giant snapping turtles on deserted farm roads. And in the evenings I drive back to my dad's lake cabin where I stay, alone.

I write my newspaper articles, and I write in my journal. I write with sparklers on the Fourth of July. I write with my fingernail on the surface of the lake. I form letters with my body as I swim.

I sit out to dry on the dock and drink cheap wine. The loons laugh, and I cry. And I sing. I sing camp songs, disco and Dylan— random selections like I'm scanning AM radio.

One afternoon, a farmer I interview tells me about a car accident he survived. He and his wife, both in their 80's, inched onto busy Highway 10 and

were broadsided by a semi truck. He tells me his wife was in a coma for three months, and now, three years later, she has still not regained her eyesight. Tears come to his eyes as he explains the pain of almost losing his wife. He says, “You know, it is the women that make relationships last.”

Back at the cabin I slide off of the dock and sink to the bottom of the lake. Mike and I were married at this lake just four years before this summer. His wedding ring is buried down here somewhere in the sand. I gave the ring to him two weeks before the wedding, and he lost it in the lake the day before the wedding. The ring is white gold. Engraved, on the inside, are the words, “I love you right now.” I like to think a Northern pike (or some sand dweller) swallowed the shiny thing, and it will remain in deep dark lake water, drowned forever.

I am still on the sand underwater. I remember having a tea party with my mom down here when I was a little girl. We would sink to the bottom of the lake, the surface three feet from the tops of our heads. We’d sit cross-legged and pretend to pass the sugar and sip our tea. Ha! I come up for air laughing.

The dock is as warm as a sauna bench, and I snooze there in the sun. I awake in a windless afternoon. The lake is like glass, and there are no boats at all. The woodpecker pounds her beak on a dead oak. Several dragonflies have landed on the surface of the lake, and they float, lifeless. The mating dragonflies fall in the lake, stuck together, as if they’ve forgotten about flying.

All of my life I have been saving dragonflies. I always hoped they would learn to avoid getting stuck again after I save them. But maybe they are like lemmings — they fall from the sky to appease a suicide instinct. Perhaps the

dragonfly sees its own reflection on the water and thinks it sees a mosquito! It flies straight down in order to eat the mosquito, and of course its reflection enlarges. How enticing this must be! Then the crash landing stuns the dragonfly and it floats on top of the lake, its wings partially submerged, the water tension too great of a pull on the wings for the body to lift off and fly again.

Maybe they just want my attention. Whatever the reason, I have spent hours helping the blue and green and opalescent bugs slowly crawl out of the water onto my finger and then setting them onto the long wooden dock to dry in the sun. I usually float out on my air mattress to greet them, their eyes bulging out, reflecting a thousand worlds, my ten thousand fingers — but not today. Today I am watching a dragonfly float away from me. It's floating as if something is pulling it out to the middle of the lake. I don't have the will to go save it. Perhaps a turtle will snap it up — or perhaps a pike? Perhaps I've tried to save this one before? It doesn't matter now. I'm letting this one go.

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