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A Mourning Walk around the World: A New Mother's Buddhist Journey through Death, Grief and Beyond

Kathleen Willis Morton
University of New Orleans

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A MOURNING WALK AROUND THE WORLD:
A NEW MOTHER'S BUDDHIST JOURNEY
THROUGH DEATH, GRIEF, AND BEYOND

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
The Low Residency Creative Writing Program

by

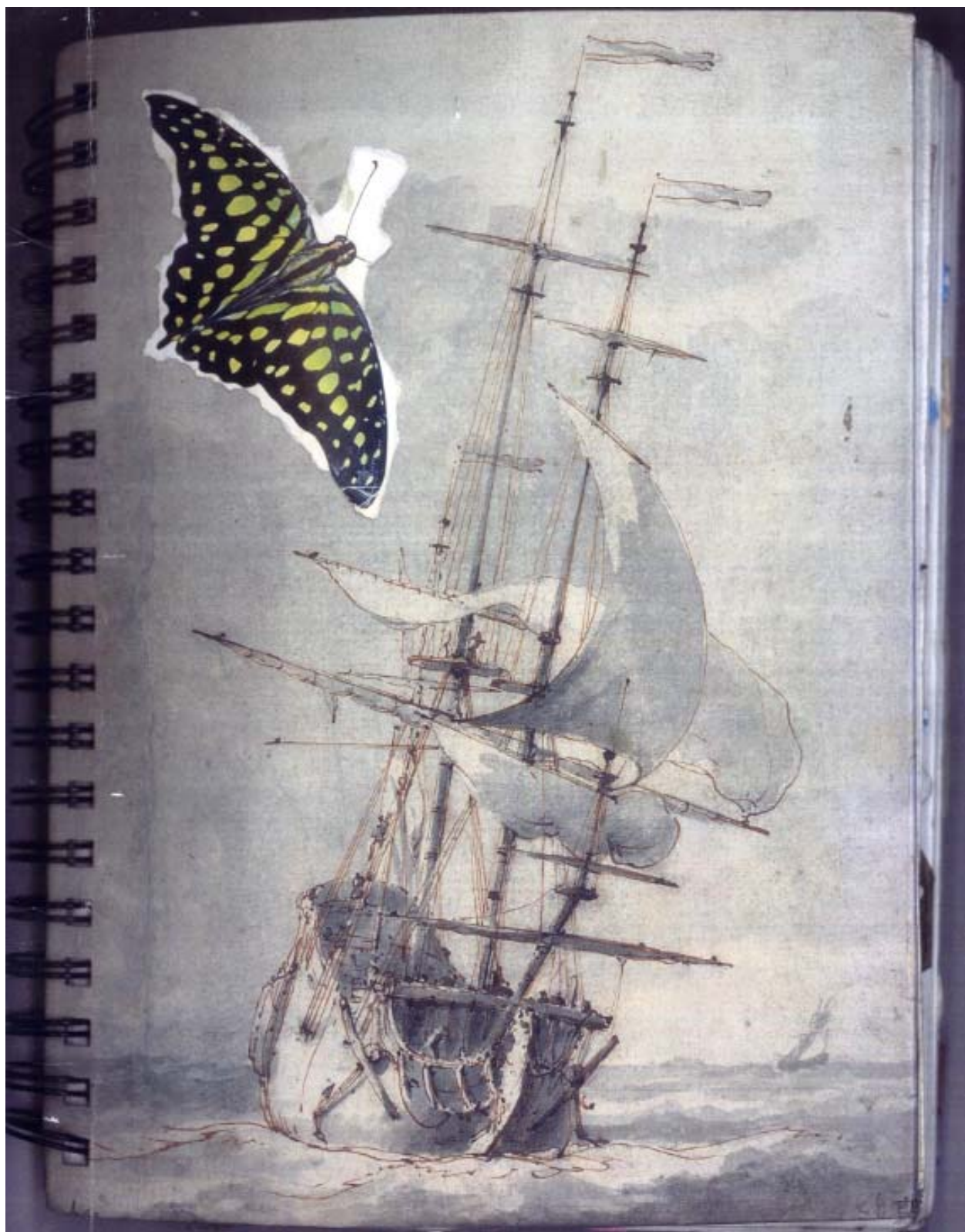
Kathleen Willis Morton

B.A. Lewis and Clark College, 1992

December 2004

TABLE OF CONTENTS

To The Reader	2
The Still Moment of Mystery	5
Entries from July 28 th	
Aloha, Nights on the Shore.....	16
Impressions from Hawaii	
A Place Denser with Memory	25
Impressions from Hong Kong	
Small Boxes, Wide Doors	36
Entries from July 28 th	
Hard Berth	43
Impressions from Guagzhou	
Bitter Roots and Jasmine Tea	54
Impressions from Chengdu	
The Something Worse Summer.....	65
Entries from June	
A Different View	75
Impressions from Tibet	
The Comfort of Small Votives and Veils of Smoke	95
Impressions from Nepal	
The Charnel Ground	103
Impressions from India	
Hard Birth	114
Entries from June 11 th and the NICU	
The Surprising Comfort of Snowflakes.....	122
Impressions from Germany	
Memories Like Poppies and Ammunition.....	127
Impressions from Belgium	
The Butterfly House	134
Impressions from Austria	
The Toll at Midnight, Turning Wheels.....	142
Impressions from Prague	
Vita.....	152



To The Reader

First Noble Truth: Life is suffering.

Second Noble Truth: The origins of suffering are desire and attachment.

Third Noble Truth: There is a way to end suffering.

Fourth Noble Truth: The way is the path.

The Buddha

Walking Away

The moment of Liam's death came gently at home in the dawn as he lay on the bed between his father and me. He took a breath and then did not. The warmth left his body as I sat reciting, as best I could, the Tibetan Buddhist prayers prescribed for the moment of death. I forced myself not to cry yet. I didn't want to hold Liam back.

I also entered a bardo—an intermediate state—when Liam entered the bardo existence between this realm and the next. My sorrow did not end 49 days later like his bardo existence ended with his promised rebirth.

Chris, my husband, quit his job as a brewer. I quit my job, too. We booked a trip around the world. I told everyone we were running away and tried to sound sarcastic, or matter of fact, or something that didn't belie the blackness I felt. I wanted to walk away forever going nowhere, and lie down and die at the same time. Everyone we knew said, "How awesome. I wish I could go on that trip." I wished they were going instead of me too. The trip didn't seem as much like the privilege everyone thought it was, but rather a consolation prize for losing our son.

A Wandering Account

This is not a traditional story of what happened and why. No one knows why. Not the doctors, not my husband, not my family, not me. All we have is what we think happened to the best of our knowledge. All I have is what I remember — impressions of events that imprinted my mind stream. Liam's life is the boulder that tumbled into the path of the stream during an awesome, fierce, and beautiful storm, and changed its direction forever.

This is not the story of the death of a baby. It's an attempted presentation of how precious his life was, even though it was as short as a sunset. It's the attempt to make meaning of the events of his life and my life after his death. It's the re-telling of the journey of motherhood interrupted and detoured, a journey through grief, around the world, and back home to begin again. It's the tale of how what we planned for life was not what life had planned for us. It's the adventure of making our way in a storm.

It is a narrative that has no arc because life's important moments and lessons don't usually follow in a neat line; they swirl like eddies in a tidal pool, washing in and out with the tide. They are flashes of insight, incidental jewels that are strung together like pearls on a velvet cord, or lives strung out in a chronicle of reincarnation. Every lesson, gem, life, is discreet but reflective of each other in its luster and held together by a common thread. In this case the thread is what is missing, my son. The thread is also how I obsessively see his spirit but feel his absence reflected in the world around me.

This is an account from a new mother's perspective that is informed by a Tibetan Buddhist worldview. It's the impressions of a mother's feelings of loss.

Though my thoughtful and caring husband suffered a loss too, it's not about his feelings of loss. Chris was with me through every step of Liam's life, and birth, and death, and on our long walk around the world, yet I can't bring a lot of his words and feelings to this page because in those isolating months of acute grief I couldn't really feel them. So, to try to do so now in this re-collection of that struggle would feel dishonest. I can only retrace the steps we took together, not the thoughts that pushed and pulled him along the path beside me. In my heart, I think we were the mirror image of grief-struck, disillusioned, childless parents flailing to stay afloat.

This tale is about coming to terms with what's missing. It's about letting go. The sections of this book are not chapters; they are a collection of incidents that made an impression on me, valuable moments that informed my journey, flashes of light, dark clouds, glints of sun on water, crashing waves.

The Still Moment of Mystery

“What the caterpillar knows to be the end, the butterfly knows to be the beginning.”
Mark Twain

The End at Home, Portland, Oregon 1998

I was changing my son Liam’s diaper when I noticed his left hand and part of his arm had started to turn dusky-plum blue.

“Liam,” tears came again, “you have to let go now, baby.” My knees sank to the floor. I folded over the bed where he was lying and pulled him to my side. He was so thin it hurt me to hold him.

I told him to let go. “Liam, if you need to go, you should go.” I had been repeating that phrase for 45 days when I could gather the strength. Every day, I knew it might be his last. I gave him permission to die. Hospice workers and Tibetan Buddhist tradition says to do that so the person can have a peaceful death. I was desperate to give back something to Liam even if it was only a peaceful death. Every night as I held Liam bundled up between his father and me in bed I thought, please not tonight. Just let him live until the morning. Every morning I didn’t move until I knew that he was still breathing. Then I’d kiss him, and I’d think, “Not today. I hope he doesn’t die today.”

When I saw his hand was blue I knew it wouldn’t be long, and for the first and last time, I told my son what to do in almost a scolding manner.

“You can’t hold on any longer, Liam. It’s time for you to let go.”

My father-in-law, who was a heart surgeon, told Chris and me that this might happen eventually because Liam’s heart was defective and it didn’t circulate enough blood.

My voice was soft and shaky like a butterfly flying against the wind when I finally got Chris on the phone at work.

“Chris, you have to come home. His hand is blue. You have to come home.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Chris had only been at work for a few hours, and it was only his second day back. He didn’t want to go back to work, but we had no idea how long Liam would live. When we left the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Emmanuel Legacy Hospital, Liam’s cardiologist said, “If he’s still here in a week, call me. I’ll want to see him again.”

When Liam had been home a week we decided not to call the doctors anymore.

“Will they be able to tell you anything that will make a difference in his condition?” my father-in-law asked.

“No,” we answered, remembering the grim diagnosis that was documented in his medical records:

The child has sustained extensive bilateral cerebral hypoxia. This seems to be a more global change that would suggest more of a global perfusion problem, rather than emboli...The prognosis, which is very limited for this child, has been discussed with his family. ...His prognosis of such severity, I think the family should be appraised of this in order to make decisions on his care. I would support their decision either way, to either avoid futile care (in view of his very serious neurological findings)...

Futile care. That was the phrase that hit me the hardest. How could it make sense that medical care for any child would be futile?

I finished changing Liam's diaper and swaddled him in a blanket. I put a hat on his head even though it was June 27th. He should have been fat and warm, bouncing and giggling on my knee. Instead, I took his temperature every couple of hours to make sure it had not slipped below 92 degrees. If it was really low, Chris unbuttoned his shirt and bared Liam to his diapers. Then they would lie, bare chest to bare chest, under the comforter, with the light streaming in the bedroom window, until Liam was warm again.

Liam's eyes were dulled and glassy. He was somewhere, trapped inside a body that on the outside looked perfect in every way. His skin was downy like a white peach. He had our coloring. His hair was amber, a subtle blending of his father's auburn-brown and my strawberry blond. When he was born a plump 7 lbs. 8 oz. he resembled me. As his cherub frame waned to probably less than 4 lbs. due to his condition, he took on the sharp angles of his father's face. He looked perfect outside, but inside—his heart and his mind, his wisdom and his skill— had reached their fullest potential at six and a half weeks old.

"He won't walk. He won't talk. He won't be able to feed himself. You will be lucky if he recognizes you as his parents." Dr. S., Liam's neurologist, said at our initial meeting. With each sentence he spoke, the tide of my blood pulled back. I could feel my face blanching, my jaw and body slackening. "He might not even be aware of his surroundings. Let me make this really clear. I'm not talking about mild damage. I'm not talking about medium damage. This is severe." His eyes were unwavering.

Chris arrived home. But that was all we could do, just be with him. I didn't want to put Liam down. I sat in the white chair by the bookshelf and held him. I picked up a thin copy of The Life of the Buddha, by H. Saddhatissa, and I began reading it out loud to Liam. I sat, and read, and held my son all day because I couldn't bear to let him go. I didn't know anything else to do. I didn't want to do anything else. I didn't get up to eat or pee. I sat and held my son all day. Chris was across the room sitting on the couch. I didn't notice what he was doing. I just felt the barely-there weight of my son in my arms for the time being.

That night, I lay next to Liam on the bed. I turned on the T.V., which was on the bookshelf at the end of the bed. I didn't really want to watch T.V. I just didn't want to watch my son die. The square room was like a T.V. screen. I watched from outside myself. I saw Liam on the bed wrapped in his blankets: motionless, silent, still breathing. I sat next to him, propped up on the pillows, and stared at the happy-everything-will-be-ok-in-a-half-hour-world on T.V. I was still on the surface like a calm ocean, but underneath I was dark and shifting restlessly. I felt I should be talking to Liam. I felt I should be doing something. I felt I should hold him and comfort him. I flicked off the T.V. and turned to him. Each breath could be his last. I didn't want to miss it, but it was too hard to focus my attention on him. I tried to talk to him.

"Liam, Mommy's here. Don't be afraid." Hysteria rose to the surface of my voice like a shark with obsidian eyes. I gasped and choked on my words. I couldn't talk to him and stay calm at the same time. I didn't want to disturb his dying. I didn't want to distract him with my moans and cries that might hold him to this imperfect body and world. I turned the T.V. back on and watched every crisis resolve on the half-hour. I

floated above my grief. Chris was upstairs meditating. My son lay dying beside me. Though I couldn't look at him, I felt the rise and fall of his breath throughout the Thursday night must-see-T.V. line-up, and into the night when all three of us curled up under the covers and let the dark of the room enclose us. That night I didn't make my panicked plea for one more night. I just pulled Liam close and whispered with my lips touching his soft cool temple. "Mommy has you, Mommy has you." I wasn't sure he could hear me, but I hoped that he could feel my words.

I heard a little whine just as I was beginning to doze off. I was instantly wide awake. "Chris, turn on the light." I looked at the clock; it was almost 2:00 a.m. Liam whined again softly. Liam exhaled and was still. I moved the blankets away from his body so I could see it. Chris and I were vigilant for I don't know how long. Liam was lying on his right side with his right arm bent and his palm beneath his head. His left arm was folded across his chest with his other palm down on the bed. By chance it was the same position the Buddha was in when he passed into Parinirvana. Chris and I were propped up on our forearms lying on our stomachs beside him. Liam's belly and chest did not rise again. We were still. The world was still. It was the moment we knew would come. That mysterious moment that connects this life with the next. The only moment we can all be sure will eventually come for each of us someday.

We rose slowly and sat on either side of the bed. I closed my eyes and tried to perform as best I could the Tibetan Buddhist ritual for the moment of death. I heard my cries as if from a distance. I told myself to hold back my tears so that Liam could pass away undisturbed. We didn't touch him.

In that mysterious moment, this is what I remember seeing in my mind. There was amber light. There was warmth. There was a person with long hair and a beige dress with her back to me who squatted down, opened her arms, and scooped up a plump, pink, laughing baby who kicked and waved his arms. I thought it must be Liam though I didn't recognize him in a healthy body. The person walked away from me, carrying the baby who was looking over the person's shoulder at me. I felt calm. I noticed I had stopped crying and gasping for breath. As I slowly opened my eyes I heard a small voice say, "Mommy." With my eyes then fully open, a thought popped into my head. It was Liam, and he knew I would want to hear him speak just once. It hadn't occurred to me until just then that I would never hear my son call me Mommy. And yes, I would have wanted to hear it. Those were things — speaking, laughing, thriving—that he would never do, no matter how long he lived.

I turned to Chris and looked over his shoulder to the clock. It was 5:30 a.m. Three and a half hours had passed into nothing.

"We should clean him up before he gets too stiff," I said. "Will you do it? I can't."

Chris had to do a lot of things I was not strong enough to do.

Pretending

When Liam was four weeks old we had to buy him preemie clothes because all his newborn clothes, hand-me-downs from my sisters-in-law and crisp new outfits from his baby shower, were all too big. We went to the same store where we ordered Liam's blue and white gingham stroller with a chrome chaise and white-wall tires.

The saleswoman recognized us. We had spent a long time with her placing our order for the stroller and had spoken to her several times on the phone. As we looked through the small selection of clothes for premature babies she was silent. She didn't congratulate us. She didn't come over to dote on Liam. I could feel her sad eyes on us. She looked away when I looked up to meet her gaze. I tried to pick the cutest onesie from the sad assortment on the rack of premature sizes for my son who was not born prematurely but was dying prematurely

Chris and I loved to push Liam up and down the street in his buggy and pretend we were a normal family.

"Oh, he's perfect," the man at the Ben & Jerry's shop said. He put his arm around the pregnant woman standing next to him and gave her a gentle squeeze. What we couldn't see behind my perfect son's soft, dark eyes was the terrific clot of blood that blocked his aorta and the flow of blood to three of his limbs that would eventually stroke the twenty percent of his brain that was not already damaged. We couldn't see the tremendous global brain damage that robbed my son of the most basic of human survival instincts: to nurse, to cry, and to respond to the world around him.

"Yes," I said to the man. "He's perfect."

We encountered another couple on the street. "Oh, a red-head. We have a red-head too," said a woman holding their two-year-old. "Just wait till he's this age," the man gushed to us. "They're such a blast."

"We can't wait," we beamed back to them knowing full well Liam would not live two more years, maybe not even two more days.

Some people did notice that there was something a little different about Liam. “What a cutie,” the owner of the bar on the corner said screwing up her nose. “He’s got some snot on his cheek though.”

We laughed. She wasn’t the first to comment on the thin plastic tube taped to his face. Why did everyone think we would miss a glob of snot that big?

“No, that’s his feeding tube. He’s very sick.”

“Oh.” She conspicuously didn’t skip a beat. “Isn’t it amazing what they can do with science these days.”

“Yeah,” we said, but I thought even with all the miracles doctors were able to perform, nothing could make my son well. We just smiled. We didn’t tell her that it was more amazing that science could do nothing for us, or Liam.

“So, have you adjusted to the shock of being new parents yet?” she asked.

Chris and I stared at each other looking for an answer.

“I guess that means no,” she said.

We were in shock but not because we were “new” parents. Parenting a terminally ill child, assessing all the information the doctors delivered to us, and deciding what was best for Liam, we felt like we had done a lifetime of parenting already in just a week.

Taking Care

Chris went into the bathroom and ran hot water over a washcloth to clean Liam for the last time. He returned and pulled Liam a little nearer to him so he could change his diaper. Chris turned Liam on his back. I winced and turned my head away.

The right side of Liam's face and the corner of his right eye were dark cherry-red with still blood that had begun to pool on the side on which he was lying. His eyes were basalt, skin like lilies-of-the-valley, lips the color of gray flannel.

As I stood up I saw Chris cleaning Liam's bottom, wiping away the tar-like excrement released when his energy let go of his body. Chris held Liam's cold feet and wiped him clean with slow deliberate strokes taking care to make sure he wiped away all the dirt just like he did every day in the same gentle manner. He did not grimace. If he was overwhelmed or afraid to touch his son's cold, dead body he didn't show it.

"I'm sorry you have to do that honey," I said, "I just can't."

"It's O.K.. He's my baby. I love him, and I want to clean him." His voice was a thin trickle.

"I'll call Sharon," I said leaving them alone in the room. Sharon was Liam's hospice nurse who came over every other day. She didn't sound as if I'd woken her when she answered the phone.

"Sharon, it's Katie." My voice was flat.

"Hi," she said slowly raising her voice to make the one word into a question.

"Liam passed."

Sharon exhaled. "O.K. Do you want me to come over now or do you want some time alone with Liam?" She knew some people were afraid to be alone with their dead children. We had talked about what would happen when the time came. She had to come over to officially pronounce Liam dead.

"No, you don't have to come now. He actually passed away at 1:58, but we didn't want to call you then."

“O.K., I’ll come over in a couple of hours. Did you call the funeral home?”

“Not yet.”

“Do you need me to call for you?”

“No.”

“O.K., I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

Chris called the funeral home. The man who answered told Chris that they wouldn’t be open till 9 a.m.

We were grateful to have a few extra hours with Liam. We lay on the bed with Liam between us.

“Maybe we should read him Horton Hears a Who one last time,” I suggested.

Chris’ voice undulated with tears held back as he read. It was the story we read to Liam every day when he was hooked up to all the monitors and IVs for the first week of his life that he spent in the NICU. Chris dissolved into tears half way through the story when he read, “...I’ll just have to save him that’s all. Because, after all, a person’s a person, no matter how small.” We reached over Liam to each other, and cried, and waited.



Aloha, Nights On the Shore

“We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next to find ourselves... I travel in large part in search of hardship – both my own, which I want to feel, and others, which I need to see. Travel in that sense guides us toward a better balance of wisdom and compassion...”

Pico Iyer

With the awkward steps of a diver beginning a shore dive, looking backward at the shifting sands and struggling to find sure footing, we left Portland, Oregon on October 15, 1998.

The night air was moist and sweet with Plumeria blossoms when Chris and I made our way from the Kauai Airport terminal to the Hertz office across the street. For that leg of the journey, we rented a car and planned to save money by camping on the beaches. My throat was killing me. I was exhausted by the time we found our car in the lot of identical brown Chryslers. I lacked even the strength to muster much excitement about being in Hawaii, a place I had always wanted to go.

Hawaii was the first stop on our trip around the world. We would travel from one coast of the United States all the way around the globe to the other side. With any luck, we would find ourselves on the other side of the enormous sea of grief surrounding us.

After we threw our packs in the trunk, I ran to the front of the car, out of sight, and threw up in the bushes. I pressed my forearm across my abdomen in a reflex motion to stabilize my incision that was still raw, and new, and now aching from the violent spasms that purged half-digested airplane food and grief. I remembered thinking after we were told about Liam’s prognosis that I would have my scar longer than I would have my son in my life.

We made our way to the Kauai Youth Hostel. Since it was late, we would spend the night there rather than trying to make camp in the dark. We were not really in the mood to make a lot of chitchat with the other guests, which we would have usually enjoyed. I felt like I just needed some peace and quiet, so we agreed to splurge a bit and get a private room where we could be together rather than in two bunks in the single-sex dorms.

I switched on the light once we got into the room. The cockroaches were so bold they didn't even bother to scatter, though there was nothing in the room to give them cover except for the sagging bed with sheets and blankets so dingy and limp they seemed to sigh. The rank smell of the room suited my mood. I slid the window open in its aluminum frame and dropped my body, still bloated from pregnancy weight, onto the bed. I let out a guttural moan and began to cry. Chris stood in the doorway as my grief swelled over him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. His shoulders dropped.

"What do you think is wrong? My son is dead. My throat hurts. I'm tired, and sick, and this place is disgusting."

"But you said you wanted to go on this trip," he said, dropping his pack to the floor, letting it hit the ground hard.

"I didn't say I wanted to go on this trip. I just didn't want to stay home. And I don't want to be here. I don't want to be anywhere. I just want Liam." My loud voice made Chris cringe. He quietly crossed the room, sat on the bed, slowly took a book out of his pack, and headed for the door again. At the doorway he stopped. He took a deep

breath and reached out to me with his eyes, hazel like a sea darkened by an impending storm. But he turned and left me alone in the bare, dark room.

I was in Hawaii, in what some people would call paradise, and I was in hell. When Liam was alive, and slowly dying, our perspective was different. We didn't argue at all; time was too precious to spend any of it fighting. Since Liam passed, there was a tension between Chris and me that was growing. The tension was like a towline on a boat moored to a buoy on a pitching sea. We strained against each other's hold, but it was that tension that held us together too. Without it, we both would have gone under in the force of the storm. We pulled and pushed against each other because it was the only way to stay upright at all. We were angry at life and death, so we ended up being angry at each other, which was unusual for us. Before Liam was born we had our spats, but mostly we were confidants, buddies, lovers, friends.

When Chris came back into the hostel room I stirred from a half-sleep. I felt my eyes relax behind their lids when he turned off the light and came to bed. It was hard to be with him because there wasn't much room in my world that wasn't consumed with a deep sadness, but it was harder to be alone. He got under the covers. I whispered that I was sorry. He pulled me to him urgently; we kissed gently and his touch anchored me. The distant sound of the waves from the nearby Pacific calmed me. I dreamed of swimming in the ocean.

Signs, Signals, Awareness

We spent 10 days in Kauai before we caught a flight to Hong Kong. A lot of the time we spent on the beaches doing nothing, and it was exactly what I wanted to

do. We hiked the Awa'awapuhi Trail in the Waimea Canyon State Park. We camped on Anini Beach for the first night. It was a lovely park on a white-sand cove. The waves were gentle. A young family had set up camp there too. From the looks of their site with its makeshift kitchen and palm-thatched living space it seemed like they planned to be there a while. The young mother often sat at the edge of the sea, with the warm water lapping at her toes, while she nursed her infant.

I was soon overcome with an aching sickness, which had started brewing when we first landed. My sore throat turned into flu that was unbearable on the thin inflatable mattress. Despite the beautiful view of the ocean from our tent, I had to get away. We spent two nights at the Mohala Ke Ola Bed and Breakfast. I recouped quickly, and we returned to our tent and a different site, Salt Pond Beach, for the rest of our stay.

We hired an instructor, S.P., to teach us how to scuba dive and spent a day in the Outrigger Hotel's pool before the instructor took us out for two days into the open waters. Chris and I had just passed the written test required as part of the scuba certification process and finished practicing in the pool when we drove out of the hotel driveway and passed a woman walking toward the hotel. It was like seeing an apparition, and I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Oh my god, Chris. I think that was K.P. Back up," I said.

As he steered the car in reverse I craned my neck around to see if I was right. I was.

K.P. was the R.N. and certified midwife whom I had seen for my prenatal care with Liam. She was present at his birth and assisted in his delivery. The last time I saw

her, she was holding Liam in her arms. I couldn't believe she was standing in front of me on that very small island in the middle of the ocean, just after Chris and I had passed our test and were about to set out into the deep waters that lay all around us. K.P. seemed equally shocked to see us at the beginning of her vacation. I didn't know what our surprise and unlikely meeting could have meant for her, given the surprise and unlikely outcome of Liam's birth. For me it seemed like a sign that Liam would always be held in the space between me and anyone I encountered. We all exchanged greetings and wished each other the best before we set out in our own directions. Chris and I were headed to explore a depth we had never known.

Underwater we had to learn new ways to communicate. There were only a few vital hand signals, which the instructor taught us: going up, going down, I'm OK, help, danger, out of air, go that way, hold hands, get with your buddy, you lead, I'll follow, slow down. It was a simple language. Minimal. Only the important things needed to be communicated. Grief was a lot like being under the ocean. Things didn't sound the same. The world moved by slower. Objects were magnified larger than life itself. Colors were intensified, but so was the darkness. If I wasn't careful, the pressure around me would crush me.

Underwater we had to be aware of our breath and the fact that it might run out. Under the pressure of my son's absence I thought often about breath—his first, his last, and my own which was often stifled by sadness that was invisible and weighted like the atmosphere and the pressure of the ocean around us; our lives were running out like the air in our tanks.

The first time we went under and “blew bubbles,” S.P. took us to a spot by an abandoned pier called Ahukini. A man coming out of the water said he saw a tiger shark. S.P. shrugged him off and told us not to worry.

“You never have to out-swim a shark,” he said. “You just have to out-swim the slowest swimmer.”

We laughed as we geared up.

“Seriously,” he said. “That guy is a chicken. Sharks are afraid of divers because of all the bubbles and gear. If one does come at you, just hit it; they want an easy meal, not one that puts up a fight.” I wondered if I would be strong enough to fight off anything. Had the Buddha’s teachings geared me up for what I needed to swim through? I was laughing at S.P.’s joke, but inside I was shifting and restless.

We all did our buddy check: buoyancy, regulator, weights, air, and final check. We climbed down the rocks and eased into the Pacific. The water was murky and dark. The posts of the piers were overgrown with long green algae that danced in the current, which pulled us out from the cove, past the pier, and the rippled sand bar, into the pale green water. When I checked my gauges, I was surprised to see we were already at thirty-five feet.

“O.K.?” signaled S.P.

“I’m O.K.,” Chris signaled.

“I’m O.K.,” I signaled.

Purple and yellow neon fish swam by. I was suspended between the surface and the bottom. The water was as warm as a womb. The current rocked me. As far as I could see there were rippling flats of sand and clear water. A small school swam by;

they were black with white polka dots. The smallest one in the bunch had green eyes. I could hear my breath sucking in deeply and gurgling out through the regulator. It sounded like a respirator in an NICU. Being underwater, under pressure, created a measurable awareness that at any given moment we could stop breathing. I checked my air gauge. It was half full. Below my feet was an enormous conch shell resting on the ocean floor.

The next day we made a shore-dive off a sandy shore. We walked straight into the sea. The water was clear: emerald, turquoise, and sapphire. We went to 47 feet.

“Look that way,” signaled S.P.

Chris and I both looked. A giant turtle was swimming toward us. I was transfixed for a minute until I realized he was not going to stop. I looked at Chris; his eyes were as big as sand dollars.

I signaled, “Get with your buddy.”

“Hold hands,” signaled Chris.

We got out of the way as the turtle, about half my size, effortlessly swam by. There was only a small space between us. He was old. I’m sure he had seen many pass.

I could have stayed underwater forever. In some ways, over the next few months, I did. Those diving lessons served us well in the next two and a half months while we were submerged in sadness and travel. Chris and I had little need for words. We signaled to each other. The world was full of signs.

Looking for a Mustard Seed and Truth

In the time of the Buddha, a young mother's son became very ill and died. She was overcome with grief. She went to the Buddha and asked him to bring her son back to life. He said he would help her, but first she had to bring him a mustard seed from the home of a person who had never known anyone who died. She had hope and set off. She searched through many villages and for a long time. Finally she found what the Buddha had really sent her to find, the truth that he was trying to teach her. She brought her son to the charnel ground and let him go. She returned to the Buddha and told him that she found the real cure that he was offering her. The truth that she wasn't alone in her suffering, and that death comes to everyone. She asked him to teach her and he began with this, "There is only one truth, one law, in all the world and the six realms of existence, too; all things are impermanent."

As Chris and I set off for Southeast Asia and the land of the Buddha after our short campout on the shore of our past, I wondered what I would find. I wondered if I would be able to let go. I wondered if the truth that the Buddha taught would be enough to help me. I was in search not of the reason why, but of the reason why not. Why not give up if life is only suffering?

A Place Denser with Memory

“About suffering they were never wrong the old masters/how well they understood its human position/how it takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.”

W.H.Auden

An Observation

The Hong Kong air sweltered in a world laden with ghosts. Just beneath the surface, ancestors and ritual pushed up against the weight of modernization, like unseen corpses settling in a cemetery, unsettling the earth and forcing headstones askew. Hong Kong was dense with people and the palpable memory of family: mothers, brothers, sons, fathers, and children. Amidst monolithic skyscrapers, shrines to modernity and white devils, the ancient and appropriate shrines were low to the ground; stout red-tiled roofs sat low, like the brims of the fishermen’s hats, and weighted the culture down so the spirit of the place wouldn’t leach away.

The Old Woman and Prostrations

Jim, an old friend from college, met us off the plane. From the window of his apartment in Happy Valley, Hong Kong, I saw the old woman across Wong Nai Ching Road come out onto her narrow balcony. In its corner was a shrine, a red and yellow wood box with a scalloped border, three joss sticks in a bowl of rice, and fruit piled on a gold tray for offerings. As she prostrated, the images and statues of deities on her altar accepted her offering of clasped hands pressed to her forehead, then throat, then heart purifying and dedicating her body, speech, and mind. She bowed down onto her

knees; heels of hands hit concrete and slid forward to lay her body out in full prostration. Her hands punctuated the gesture as they came together again and flared up above her head just like the flames that gave way and righted themselves again inside the red rice-paper lanterns on her shrine.

I was familiar with this Buddhist ritual. A memory of this gesture was embedded in my body too. As she gave in and dropped to her knees over and over, I too felt the comfortable surrender. We were separated by the gaping abyss between our two buildings, a thin pane of glass, and a culture, yet the ritual she performed to focus the mind and extract meaning from the long day was my ritual too.

The Bun Man, A Trolley Ride, Questions

Every morning, in the restaurant on the ground floor of the building across the street, Chris and I stopped to buy breakfast from the Steamed Bun Man. Puffs of dough, called Bao, that were slightly tacky to the touch and filled with savory or sweet fillings, were displayed at counter level behind a window that slid open on the far side. My favorite was the sweet pork. It was sinewy, but the bland dough was soft on my tongue. The Bun Man, with a face as round as his Bao, leaned forward with his palms on the glass counter, elbows locked, shoulders squared, and jutted his chin once in my direction. I pointed to my favorite buns and held up two fingers. His chin jutted to Chris. I pointed at two red-bean buns for him. The Bun Man put the warm puffs in a small white bag as I dug 40 Yuan from my coin purse.

“Shey-shey,” I thanked him, taking the bag. I think I saw the thought of a smile pass over his eyes, but it didn’t make it to his lips. I munched my breakfast buns as we

walked down the block to the trolley stop on the left side of the British-China Polo Club's racetrack. The green double-decker bus was already at the stop. We hopped on and waited for it to fill with passengers. I wasn't sure we were on the right trolley and neither of us could ask anyone because we didn't speak Mandarin (or Cantonese for that matter), but I hoped we were headed in the right direction.

In the belly of the trolley we moved along the tracks. We rounded the Polo Club and slid under the elevated highway, which rose to reveal a slice of a Christian cemetery—a small lot of crosses. Next to the concrete pillar that held up the highway, the sidewalk ended. A person lay in a cot with a green, dingy blanket pulled over their head. Next to the bed sat a box and on it, a pan, dentures, and eyeglasses with its arms reaching out. I craned my neck as we rolled by. How does a person end up living in a house with walls made of peering eyes and car exhaust? Are all our walls so transparent? Could everyone on that bus see my walls that were made of baby cribs empty except for blankets of yellow flannel and rainbow silk, tiny syringes for injecting Phenobarbital, vacant breasts, and books on how to birth “the right way” but not what to do when everything goes so wrong?

Traveling Papers, Sights Along the Way, Reaching to Babies Far Away

We got off the trolley and negotiated the streets—clotted with people of all nationalities—to the Chinese consulate. We needed to apply for our visas to mainland China where we planned to continue our journey overland to Tibet. Since the borders to Tibet opened, it had become easier to get a visa to go there. But the Chinese officials were unpredictable; it was always possible to be denied entrance to the

country of which they have so savagely taken possession. The visa office was not yet open when we arrived, so we waited in the line that had already formed. At the front of the line, the woman behind the counter, stone-faced as a temple lion, pointed again and again to a sign, which read, "Due to rules of reciprocity, those holding American passports must pay \$160 more." She barked some directions batting us aside with her hand. Pay or move on was the message we inferred. We did move on since we didn't have enough money with us to acquiesce to the state's demand, and she didn't care when we pointed to a sign that stated a different price altogether for the same visa.

Deflated, we walked back through Victoria Park to Central. Great George Street melted into Hennessy Road, and into Yee Woo Street, which ran parallel to Hysan Avenue, and Caroline Hill Road. All those streets with their Chinese names were the putty that held together the tiles of the colonial blocks and buildings that were reclaimed by China from Great Britain just one year before. I wondered how Hong Kong would change under Chinese rule, since change was inevitable.

The Mid-Escalators of Central, the market district of Hong Kong, was a portage above the sidewalks that was eight blocks long. As we rode the giant escalator, I could see on the streets below a stream of people and activity. Joss sticks burnt slow and bright in storefront shrines. Tea-smoked ducks and pig's hooves were tethered and hung in rows above steaming bamboo baskets of rice. Butchers in bloody aprons pushed wheelbarrows with pigs splayed out, disemboweled, snouts trickling blood, eyes opened. Eels entwined, a quivering dark weave within the pale wicker basket that contained them. Carp and trout crowded tanks that crowded a fish stall big enough for only one woman whose skin was smoked and taut with age; she netted a

catch for a customer, a woman reed-like with black, silky hair, who pointed into the dark stall. The child on her hip with moonlight skin and obsidian hair pointed up to me as I passed overhead on the escalator. His lacquer eyes met my pale blue ones.

Liam's eyes had not settled in color; sometimes they were sapphire, at times onyx and vacant, at other times wise with more presence than I have ever known. They spoke to me about impermanence, told me that everyone suffers, not just us, and about how when he passed, if I could remember to let compassion guide me, humility hold me, and courage temper my wild mind, then he would never be gone from me. At the end of his life when his breath was still, his eyes were wide open.

In my mind I reached through the air thick with heat and spice to touch that dark moon-light baby's outstretched finger with the tip of my own and smiled. I was grateful for the touch of his attention, though he was too far away to reach.

Jade Rings, Temples to Gods of Water and War, Burnt Offerings, Being Human

At the top of the escalators, Chris and I wound back down the narrow streets with trolley tracks running up and down like spines. The sidewalks were knuckled with steep steps. We were looking for the temple of the sea goddess of compassion, Kuan Yin, hoping to make an offering once more, first of our son's ashes in the ocean at home, and now of our tears that came in waves.

On narrow side streets we trolled the antique stalls filled with ivory chops and lacquer boxes. I was drawn to a stand of jade bracelets like the ones that adorned the wrists of Hong Kong's women and girls. Milky green and cold, I also wanted to force a ring of stone that symbolized luck over my large hand so it wouldn't come off.

Buddha said that the likelihood of being born into the auspicious life of a human was as likely as a turtle's head that surfaces only once every 100 years would pop up through a ring that might be floating on the ocean. To be born in the human realm at all was lucky. I wanted a round jade bangle to remind me of this precious human existence. I wanted good luck. I took a picture of the stall instead of buying a bracelet because Chris was worried about spending money so early in the trip.

We didn't find the temple of the sea goddess, but found instead the Man Woo Temple. Smoking incense in spirals shaped like beehives hung inside the dark temple of the war god. Though I looked for the sea and compassion, I found war and conflict. Golden cauldrons resting on pedestals of lions' paws were full of incense ash. New sticks, some as thick and long as bamboo stalks, some slender as chopsticks, were planted in the burnt remains of previous offerings—a smoking, ash garden of gratitude and desire. I also bought incense and planted my offerings and wishes, repeating the words of Buddha, “May we all have happiness, and may we all be free from suffering without too much attachment and too much aversion.”

On our way back to Happy Valley we came across a tourist agency. We were thrilled when we asked for visas to mainland China and weren't required to pay \$160 extra. We were told to leave our passports and come back in two days to pick up our visas.

Halloween, Pretending to be Lions

The next morning was Halloween, and when we woke I felt like doing something to observe the day even though it meant very little in China except to the

expatriates. When we were out buying buns I bought offerings for a day-of-the-dead altar for Liam: pastel lollipops, incense, a small candle, and a miniature bottle of milk. Halloween was my favorite holiday and in the past I savored the Mexican and Celtic rituals of putting out offerings for the dead. Beginning at midnight on the 30th, it's said that the spirits of the children arrive. I never thought my son would be one of them, and I made the small altar more solemnly than ever before. Tradition says that on the night of Halloween the veil between the living and the dead is the thinnest. I'm not sure if what I wanted was to be closer to my dead son on that day, or to be dead myself.

"What should Liam be for Halloween?" I asked Chris.

"How about a duck?"

We talked about a lamb and a pea-in-a-pod. We decided on a lion. The sound of the Buddhist Dharma is like the roar of a lion. We pretended we would buy a little mustard-yellow sweat suit and socks for his feet and hands. I would sew brownish-red yarn all around the rim of the hood and small patches of felt on the socks to make the paws, a little black face paint on his nose and some whiskers. The colors would have looked so nice with his honey-red hair – our little lion who taught us about courage.

I laid out the offerings on the nightstand. Chris and I sat together, lit the candle and incense, and were silent for some time in meditation.

Later that night, Jim's roommate came home to fix himself some cheese sausages and Mac & Cheese before he went out to a Halloween party in Central with a group of other 23-year-old expats. He had just taken the Associated Press journalist credential exam. "I don't know if I'll use the credentials," he said, taking off his tie

and jacket, draping them over the back of a chair, “but it’s good to have options. So what’s your five-year plan?”

Chris and I both laughed because we didn’t realize at first that he was serious. There was a silence as he waited for our answers.

“Well,” I said, “I had planned to stay home and raise my son. But there’s been an obvious change in that plan. So, now I don’t know what I’m going to do beyond this trip.”

“Oh, sorry, I forgot,” he paused, looking out the window. “You guys want some sausage? Help yourself to some tea.”

I felt badly and was shocked by my stark answer. I was tired and my sharp thoughts were on my tongue before I could soften them. And I guess I envied his options and success, feeling like a failure myself and knowing the only thing I wanted was not an option. “No, thanks,” I declined. “We just had rice and sweet short-ribs from the vendor on the corner. Greasy, but good.”

“Yeah,” Chris finally answered his first question, “I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

“Yes, you do, Chris. You’re going to go to grad school when we get back. It will take five years to finish your Doctorate in Psychology.”

“Yeah, I guess I do have a plan.”

I sat on the couch and turned on CNN. Clinton wagged his finger, “I never,” stock prices, weather, peace talks. Jim’s roommate headed to the door, having already changed his clothes, with his mask in hand. “You guys don’t want to come, do you?”

“Oh, no thanks, but have fun.”

I flicked the channels: Japanese game shows, Chinese commercials for dish soap, Kung Fu movies that weren't dubbed – the actors' mouths in sync with the words for a change. We settled on The Bride of Frankenstein. Black and white, shadows, thunder claps, a shock of white hair with a black lightning bolt through it — in a gossamer white gown, she made a startling bride. Even monsters can love, need love. I felt like a monster for not implementing any heroic measures to try to extend Liam's life. That night in bed, while the veil between life and death was sheerest, in half waking dreams of our own, Chris and I found each other and came to full wakefulness in the midst of a deep kiss, tongues and limbs intertwined, the sound of soft skin rubbing against soft skin filled our dark room. The closer we were to death, I think, the closer we instinctively reached for life. Maybe that's what we all do. Maybe that's why our attachments in this life are so strong, because we instinctively know how close we are to death, even though we don't always perceive it.

Casting a Line, Offerings All Around

We filled our days waiting for visas with side trips around Hong Kong. We took the trolley to Causeway Bay to catch the ferry to Lantau Island. It was early, and a few fishing junks, dwarfed by the ferries and container ships, were just heading out. The hulls of the junks' thick beams were as dark as tea leaves. The square, red sails filled with the South China Sea's breeze.

A fisherman, squinting even under the protection of his straw hat, lowered the fan rudder off the back, and, with the long wooden handle, turned the rudder to coax the bow of his junk out to open sea. The woman--in a suit to match his blue, padded,

Mandarin-collared jacket, blue cotton pants, and black cloth shoes--gathered a hulking net from the deck, a matrix of yellowing ropes as thick and worn as her wrists. Bits of cork every few feet on the net kept it from sinking too fast under its own weight when she threw it from the side of the boat. Her body glided, though the weight was great, like a Tai Chi master's movements in the park: plant the foot, heart balanced, knees over ankles, snap the wrist, hold the peacock by the tail, close the door. As the net hit the water, her eyes landed on me just as the lens of the camera that I was looking through came down before my eye. I was surprised by the smile that bloomed wide — a brilliant white across her face stained teal by the hard days of sun and salt, wave and balance, cast and pull, endlessly dragging the pale bright waters for small fish of flesh and thin bones to fill the belly, sell for Yuan, or trade for greens in the market. She waved to me and I to her after the shutter sounded.

We watched from the stern of the Starr Ferry as Hong Kong faded away and we headed for Discovery Bay on Lantau Island. The breeze was cool. The China Sea was almost as blue as the Pacific shores of Hawaii. Once we reached the island we followed the tourist crowd to the bus marked Po Lin Monastery, where the 1,000 foot Tin Tan Buddha sat — a mountain of Dharma rendered in bronze. The bus took us along the southern coast, and once we rounded Lantau Peak, even from miles away, as our bus turned inland and we drew nearer, we could see the head of the Buddha rising like the sun over the mountains.

We made our way past the trinket stalls selling jade Buddha pendants, small strings of mala beads to wear on the wrist, crystal and gold statues of Kuan Yin, piles

of incense wrapped in red, yellow, and pink cellophane. I bought three foot-long sticks of juniper incense to make an offering in memory of Liam.

Once we passed the monastery gates at the far side of the entry courtyard, the hawking and pervasive sound of the shrill Chinese songs playing incessantly from the speakers of the stalls dissipated like the incense smoke rising from the huge cast-iron cauldrons. The smoke was so thick it was tangible. Hundreds of ornate iron boxes held thousands of burning red candles; their smoke was black and blended with the white smoke of the offering incense that rose up until it lost form and became the air all around. There was no answer. There was no question. There were just ritual, smoke, music, and native strangers all around me. Standing before the Tin Tan Buddha, he had no answers, but silently offered me an outstretched hand and downcast eyes.

Small Boxes, Wide Doors

Sharon came into the room where I sat on the bed with Liam. She hugged me, and then slid Liam's rigid body toward her. She held Liam folded in her arms and ran a finger from his temple to under his chin.

"Hi, Liam," she said. I thought she was really saying goodbye but wanted to be cautious of my feelings in case I was not ready to hear that.

Sharon was going to drive us to the funeral home. Chris wrapped Liam in the hand-stitched white quilt with the little black Scotty dogs on it that he received in the NICU. Chris carried Liam from the bedroom. Before he went through the front door, he poked his head out a bit, looked side-to-side, and back over his shoulder to me.

"I just want to make sure there are no neighbors coming," he said. We focused on the car and walked straight to it. We didn't want anyone to intrude on the last moments we had with our son. We dreaded getting caught having to attempt chitchat, or, worse yet, seeing the look on a neighbor's face as they realized Chris was holding our dead baby. If it was cold or mild out, I didn't notice.

Sitting in the back seat of Sharon's car, we were enveloped in the scent of smoke that rose like an apparition all around us. Sharon always sat in her car and had a cigarette while she made her notes when she left our house. I'd watched her through the window. How many cigarettes did she smoke a day? How many children did she visit? How many small lives were smoldering down?

Hawthorne Street was empty as we drove down ten blocks to Holman's Funeral Home. Funny how funeral homes are usually the biggest, nicest houses on the

block but no one lives there. The front door was heavy and wide enough for three people abreast to walk through, though most likely only two of them would be walking.

It was quiet inside. It was warm and neutered of scent, the opposite of death. Liam's body smelled like Wipey-dipes and renal failure, sticky-sweet Phenobarbital and Baby Magic Shampoo. Cold radiated from his body. His skin was so devoid of heat his hair was warm to the touch and still soft.

The carpet was red and thin. The pews in the chapel were brown, and bare, and silent. Why are people always so hushed in funeral homes and at wakes?

A woman came out of the office to greet us. Her tone of voice was hushed. I wondered whom she was trying not to disturb. Her eyes weighed on me like an arm around my shoulder, and she led us down the thick hall. I became hushed too and felt like I was tiptoeing through a nightmare.

"Have a seat." The mortician gestured with an open palm to the two chairs in front of his square, brown desk. There were no pictures on the walls. There was a large window behind him, and I watched the roof of a bus pass the front hedge. I remembered a mortician telling me once that by law a funeral must be blocked from the view of people passing by. Before the mortician sat, he leaned towards Liam in Chris' arms.

"Do you want me to take the baby now?"

"No, not yet," Chris answered, taking a seat.

No wake. No service. It just didn't seem fitting. We had no strength to plan and go through any of those rituals. We decided on cremation.

"Where will you do the cremation? Will you do it here?" I asked.

“No. He’ll...is it a boy?” he asked.

“Yes.” We both nodded.

“He’ll be taken by car to the crematorium in South-West.”

I clenched my eyes and fought away the image of Liam in a stranger’s car alone. I knew the place to which the mortician was referring. It was on the hill near Lewis & Clark College, from where I had graduated eight years before. Out in front of that crematorium I picked up Chris, who was hitchhiking home from a party one morning. He later told me he had stayed there so late, hoping I would show up to the party when I got off work, that he had to stay over.

“Should we have them wait three days to cremate him?” I asked Chris.

“I don’t know.”

“In the Buddhist tradition,” I started to explain to the mortician, “the body is not moved for three days so the consciousness has a chance to leave the body.”

“Sure,” he said, nodding, not moving, even his eyes blinked slowly and solemnly, “that’s not a problem.”

“Where would you keep him?”

“Downstairs in the basement.”

Chris and I looked at each other and down at Liam.

“I don’t want him to be alone for three days,” I said.

“Me neither. That sort of defeats the purpose, I think,” Chris said.

Cremation. As soon as possible was what we decided and wrote a check for \$75. The mortician stood and reached out for Liam as he rounded the desk toward us. We didn’t move. The mortician retracted his arms.

“Do you need some more time with him?”

“Yes,” I said, but I thought, Could you give me a lifetime?

We all left his office and headed back down the hall past the casket display room, the living-room-ish room, and the chapel-ish room. Rooms to reflect personality. Rooms to reflect value and meaning. Is the body a room for our soul? Is it a flesh and bone motel? How do we make reservations for the next lifetime? Who takes the complaints when we don't get the room we want? How do I make reservations for a happily-ever-after because this was not the life I booked? I made different plans for this trip. I did the Bradley Birthing classes. I didn't smoke or drink. I ate right and did prenatal yoga. Chris gave me massages and went to every prenatal checkup. I swam three times a week, took vitamins, went on maternity leave early after I almost went into labor early. This was not how my “birthing story” was supposed to end. The mortician closed the door behind him, leaving us in the room at the end of the hall. The window shades were pulled down, and the yellow light of the lamp oozed from either end of the cylindrical shade.

Putting one arm around Chris' shoulder, I joined him on the twill couch and placed my free hand under his arms that were full of Liam. Chris told Liam how proud he was to be his father, that he'd never be forgotten, and thanked him for being his baby. Tears ran. My eyes burned. Chris' eyes were red and puffy, too. I took a deep breath, and I reached out to take Liam from Chris' arms.

“I need to hold him one more time, one last time.” I felt my milk let down as I took him to my chest. “Liam, I know I have to let you go. I love you. You're my honey little Buddha boy. You're the best baby in the world. I know this is just your body, so I

can leave you here and you'll always be with me. I'm sorry this body was so bad for you. Next time you'll have the best body." I planted my lips on his cold forehead kissing him. I breathed in. I wanted him to be back inside of me where he was warm and safe.

The door opened.

"Excuse me," the mortician said. He was slightly stooped as he entered the room. "I don't want to interrupt. I just thought you might like to put him in this yourself," With one hand he held out a white cardboard box no bigger than one that might hold a doll.

I swallowed my heart and hugged Liam closer to my breasts, swelling and hot with milk.

"I can't do it, Chris," I said, turning to him. I wasn't strong enough to carry around in my head for the rest of my life the image of Liam in a small box

"It's O.K.," Chris said wrapping his arm around my shoulder and laying his free hand under Liam, never taking his eyes off him. "I'll do it." His voice was like a wave, soothing and strong. Chris lifted Liam from my arms. I was still seated and turned toward the closed door.

"O.K.," Chris said, and I rose without looking at them. I felt Chris' weight lift up from the couch. We reached the door just as the mortician was coming through it again.

"I just wanted to give you this. Oh..." he saw Liam was already in the box. The mortician was holding a small white ceramic heart on a gold string. The inside of the heart was cut away from the outer edge creating a smaller heart inside the frame

of a bigger heart. “Some people like to put the smaller heart with the baby and keep the outer heart with them. So your heart can go with your baby and symbolize how your heart will always be empty from now on.” The mortician backed out the door again.

“That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard,” I said, and Chris agreed.

We decided without further discussion. We would try to leave our fragile hearts whole.

In a few steps we were halfway to the wide front door that the three of us walked through together. By reflex I turned back for Liam. The door to the room we left Liam in was closed already. No. I couldn’t go back. I froze. I felt like I couldn’t go forward without him either. I told myself again that it was just his body; Liam was already somewhere else; I wasn’t leaving him there. I clutched my chest. My breasts were still tender. I turned back to the wide door, took Chris’s hand and walked. Liam’s body was behind me, but his face was all I could see the whole drive home.

The house could not have been more quiet and empty. I picked up the phone and dialed.

“Hello.”

“Mom,” I said. She knew by the tone in my voice, but just in case it might make it more believable to me, I said it anyway.

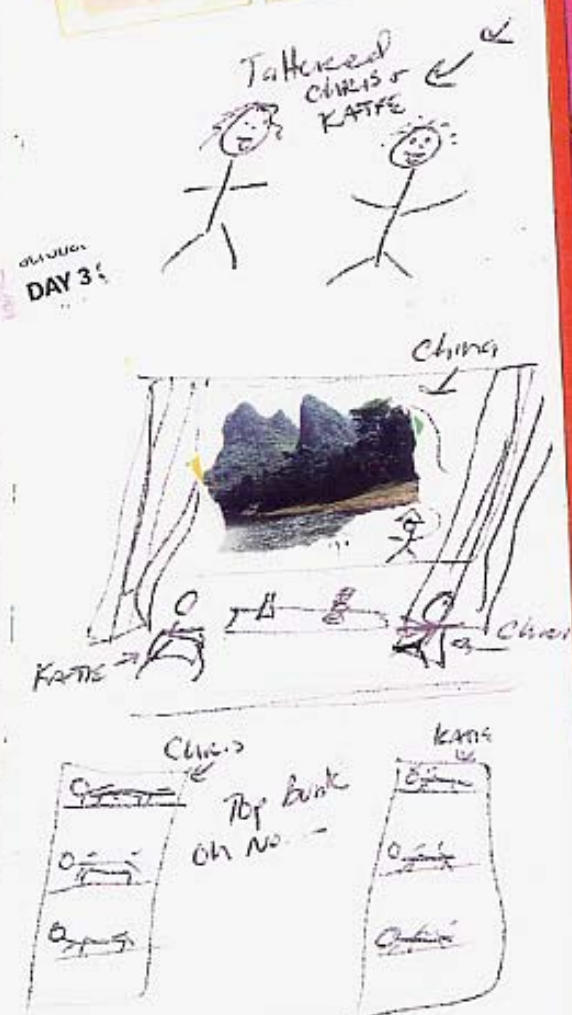
11.5.98 and 11.6.98 and 11.7.98!

CHINA TRAVEL S



50 hrs
 ON TRAIN.

← Tattered Ticket



Hard Berth

“To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment.”
Chuang Tzu

From Hong Kong’s Hung Hom Station in Kowloon we took the High Speed Express Through Train to Guangzhou East Station on mainland China. On the advice of Jim’s friend, who had traveled extensively in China, we headed to Saimen Island in Guangzhou. “Guangzhou is a cesspool,” he said. “I love it. But if you’re only staying a night, the Saimen International Guest House is the only place to stay. It’s clean and cheap.” He added, “And be careful at the station; it’s a den of thieves.”

So, four days before my 28th birthday, Chris and I arrived in the ‘Motherland.’ I was now a mother only in theory; Chris was a father only in his heart. We found our way by map and luck to the recommended accommodations. As we paid for a room, we asked about train tickets to Chengdu, which was a city to the north of Guangzhou. It was the next stop in our route to Tibet. We were told we wouldn’t be able to get a ticket for a couple of days and they’d be happy to buy the tickets for us for 600 Yuan. We declined the offer, took the key, and headed to our room to store our packs before we went out to investigate our options for dinner and purchasing train tickets.

We found another hotel with a ubiquitous travel agency in the lobby. The young woman was stoic as we tried to negotiate a ticket sounding out certain words in our guidebook’s dictionary and pointing to them when that failed: train, Changdu, Wednesday, hard berth, top bunk. We used a calculator to dicker for price, 458 Yuan. We made an agreement, and she conveyed the message with hand waves and fingers

pointed to her watch that we would have to come back at 9:30 that night to pick up our tickets. At least that's what we hoped we'd settled on.

Happy Families, Grim Ingredients

We strolled through the streets. Guangzhou was an anomaly. Its white stone buildings were built in an English style since it once was the English section of town where all the diplomats and dignitaries and their families lived. Now its white paved streets were peppered with traditional market stalls: snakes, greens, turtles, radishes, dogs, tomatoes, bean curd, sprouts. We stopped at a restaurant that had outdoor tables and managed to order tall Singha beers, which were cheaper than buying water. We were happy to be at rest and watch Guangzhou stroll by us.

Guangzhou was also, we deduced, a town where foreigners came to adopt their Chinese babies. Before we were halfway through our Singhas, I had counted seven white couples with a Chinese baby. Two more had passed by the time we were given our menus just a few minutes later. We amused ourselves perusing a menu that read like a zoological list mixed with a botanical encyclopedia truncated to poetic phrases.

Westerners, with smiles as long as the Yangtze, strolled the town with their new Chinese children who had basalt hair and dark eyes that peeked out of Nojo baby-slings while their new parents bought for them tiny brocade jackets and embroidered slippers. I wanted to buy them all dainty jade bracelets and slip them over their small hands before their fists grew too big and different. Perhaps only months before they lost their parents. Maybe they only had a mother to lose. Perhaps it was only yesterday they crossed the bridge to Saimen Island and lost sight of the part of Guangzhou that

wasn't anglicized and already foreign. Soon those second-hand children would cross an ocean and become the positive of the negative that would develop into their new light family photos. We had something in common — someone was missing. Chris and I held hands; neither of us talked but craned our necks to count all the babies around us that were not ours. Would they know what they had to let go of to be carried into their future?

In my mind the strange concoctions of families on parade and the dishes on the menu mixed together as I read and watched. Spring greens delight. Fat, red mom with tall, blond dad and moon-face baby with a dark cloud of hair above. Forest mushrooms with snake in black bean sauce. Tall dad with short dad and baby with a pearl face and porcelain hands. Whole duck roasted with oranges and cashew. Brown mom with gray dad and baby in the pram like a precious offering of a peony. Salt and pepper long beans with crispy young dog. Round, bald dad and slender, blond mom with baby wished for and destined to be loved like a discovered treasure. Fried pig brains and medicinal materials in casserole.

Our baby too was wished for, though his karma and ours meant for his life to pass like a flame running over a match-stick in my fingers burning fast, and bright, and touching me for a brief intense moment before I was forced to let go, and stand in the dark blistered and wounded. We were left to pull together answers from myth and earth, blistered feet from walking and wounded souls, to press meaning from the fullness of his time with us like carbon is pressed to a diamond. Happy Family. Buddha's Delight. I wished we could place an order for my son to be healthy and

whole and with us again. I wished I could place an order for a happy ending, like those adoptive parents had. But it wasn't an option on my menu.

Chris and I relished a light moment together at the table laughing because some of the dishes seemed so unusual and even grotesque to our western sensibilities. But there was something ironic in the menus' offerings. Some of the ingredients were grim, but there was something poetic in their phrasing. The ingredients of Liam's life were grim at best—brain damage and a malfunctioning heart—but there was something poignant and beautiful to savor in the days he was with us. The laughter, and the days with Liam, would nourish us to struggle through the next inevitable fight over directions, and train schedules, and desired destinations, and the times when we would be of no use to each other in that deep-end of loss and despair, because when I looked at his face, and he at mine, all we saw was Liam.

When our meal arrived, the bean curd and straw mushrooms were silken and savory on our tongues. We continued to admire the parade of new families. Our eyes were filled with other people's joy. With the soft touch of our hands, his pouring of tea into my empty cup, my gesture to him to eat the last of the curd and rice, I tried to hold onto our happiness. Silence and space, the night unbidden, touch and words created the maze of our days as we made our way around the world, by meal, by train, by shrine, by fight, by plane, by kiss, country to country.

At 9:30 p.m. we returned to the agent and picked up our tickets. After matching each character on the ticket to the character in the guidebook, we believed we got the tickets we wanted: Guangzhou to Changdu, top bunk, hard berth, Nov. 5th, 10:10 a.m.

A Life Worse than Death

We opted for a cab to the train station rather than taking the chance of finding our way on the bus. Our light skin was a magnet for all the dark eyes in the station. We were the only Westerners in sight. It was harder and harder for me to breathe as I felt the hundreds and hundreds of eyes groping my body and squeezing the breath out of me. They robbed my peace of mind. I snapped at Chris to figure out where we were supposed to get on the train in the maze of the station with signs of strange characters all around us. I stifled an urge to run, knowing there was nowhere to run. I found a less crowded corner and sat on my pack. Pulling my skirt hem over my toes I folded over and hid my breasts. I embraced my knees with my arms and made a hole in which I hid my head. I could feel my blood rushing. I wanted to puke. My face was numb and tingling.

When I looked up, there was a group of seven men who had formed a semi-circle around me not four feet away; they stared lasciviously and dragged slowly on cigarettes exhaling with open mouths. Two of them had crossed arms and squinted down at me. My stomach turned and quickly I was on my feet and hauling my pack over my shoulder.

“Where are you going?” My sudden movement startled Chris who had joined me though I didn’t notice him. “I can’t stand this. What are we doing? What are we doing?” I focused on my dirty toes in my black sandals. Everyone was staring at us.

“What’s wrong with you?” Chris was not oblivious to the stares but seemed unaffected by them.

“What do you think?” I barked and moved toward a seat next to two women. They stared too, but I read only interest and disgust in their eyes, and I was less frightened.

After I calmed a bit we started to wonder again if we were in the right place. We showed our tickets to a conductor. With a sneer she waved us to the far side of the room. Again we made our way to the other side of the room. The throng had begun to shuffle en masse toward the black metal gate that blocked the opening to a tunnel. We joined the mass with our packs on our backs.

“What’s going on?” I asked Chris. We looked at our tickets again, and they didn’t make any more sense to us than they did a few minutes before. We were pushed and nudged. We planted our feet and tried to stay shoulder to shoulder. I was grateful for the extra foot of height I had over the crowd. Together we swayed like a great jellyfish. Chris and I were pushed up against the people in front of us, who were pushed against more people, who were pushed and doubled over the gate. Just as I began to worry that they’d be crushed if the gate didn’t open, it did and the crowd disgorged. A small woman in front of me began to fall. I grabbed her arm so she wouldn’t go down as the people flushed around us like blood rushing through a vein. She righted herself without looking at me and flew into the tunnel like a small mass breaking away from a clot.

The doctors believed that a blood clot in Liam’s heart broke away and went to his brain, cutting off his oxygen, and damaging eighty percent of it.

We ran too, not knowing why. Our feet slapped the concrete. The sound bounced off the cement walls and was absorbed into the gurgle of Chinese phrases and

shouts from our fellow passengers that were so unintelligible to my ears it might as well have been a symphony, the dip and treble of the language shaded like a musical phrase, the sound of so many voices uttering words I didn't understand. Yet I knew there was meaning. I felt their words around me. I knew they said, "Run," though we all knew exactly what seat we would take in the end. I knew they said, "Hurry," though the train had just pulled in. I knew they said, "I'm coming, go ahead," as they waddle-ran through the tunnel, loose blue cotton pants and jackets concealing the strain of their muscles as they hefted square, plastic bags half their size. Chris and I ran, too, loads on our backs.

"Why are we running?" I called to Chris.

"This is crazy," he yelled back.

"Which way do we go?" he asked.

"Follow me," I signaled.

All the while the din around us swelled to the final crescendo.

Liam's voice was mostly silent. We spoke to him with our hearts. His voice was suffocated when at sometime in the dark, warm shelter of my womb his oxygen was cut off. Only when he was having a seizure did he make a sound, that unmistakable tragic sound of a brain-damaged baby. A sharp twisted whine like the sound a burning violin would make if the flames dissolving the catgut could sustain a note and play out a song instead of devouring it. Once, Liam, at a week old, cried when we were leaving the hospital. Once, he shrieked when a fat insensitive nurse ripped tape from his cheek. But he never cried for food, he never shrieked when he was stuck with needles to draw quarts of blood, or to start I.V. lines to replace fluids

and drip drugs to keep his heart pumping, or run in radioactive fluids to take images of his brain.

We arrived on the platform, having emerged from the tunnel up a flight of stairs. The dark shiny flow of people moved past us and onto the train. On the car's iron side there was a plaque and our heads bobbed from ticket to plaque as we matched the characters written there line-by-line to make sure that it said Changdu and car eight.

The ubiquitous music in the car – a mix of Cantonese pop and motherland-nationalist songs – was already playing. Everywhere we went in China there was music. Not music in an uplifting-the-hills-are-alive way, but driving, prying songs that left a curious aftertaste, songs that seemed to eavesdrop on my solitude and spy on my thoughts. As we rode for fifty hours in the belly of the train that crawled its way across lower China, I felt I would slowly suffocate.

The car was narrow. The windows that didn't open on the left looked out to the platform, then to the passing station, and then to the rice fields that flew by. The scratched fuzzy glass was clear as fog and made the dried bamboo-like faces of the farmers and reedy terraced fields seem even more dreamlike even though I couldn't dream, or sleep, or breathe, or cry, or talk, or move for fear I'd be chipped away by the eye-grip of the passengers' stares that were always on me, the bloated pale oddity. I couldn't walk the length of the car because the passage was clogged with men standing to pass the time. When necessity made me take the trip down to the car to the toilet, I held my breath with eyes cast down as I tried to slide past strangers in a space not much wider than my own breath as we all rattled and clanked, rattled and clanked,

down the line, reaching out when possible for balance. When I reached the toilet, the tracks blurred under the hole in the floor of the metal room that was no bigger than a phone booth. Gut twisting painfully, I lifted my skirt and hoped the cramp in my stomach was from the delayed evacuation and not the beginning of a more severe and dreaded intestinal disorder. The breeze cooled my bottom, and I rested my forehead on my knees. Even in that uncomfortable and vulnerable position, I was grateful to be alone in my bare loneliness for a few minutes. Perhaps the way I felt trapped in that train unable to control my own bodily functions was how Liam might have felt trapped in his own unresponsive body.

Making my way back down the aisle I saw people had changed into pajamas and slippers, unpacked thermoses of tea and laid out fruit on the small tables between the bunks. Our bunkmates on the lower and middle berths were also settled nicely, cozy and relaxed grandma stretched out with grandson snuggled under her arm. The man across from her peeled a green apple, leveraged a slice of pale flesh between the blade and his thumb, and directed it to his mouth without taking his eyes from the fields that passed the window.

Liam's condition would have sentenced him to only be able to watch the world pass.

People up and down the car craned their heads out into the aisle to watch the spectacle of the foreign woman climb the narrow metal ladder to the top bunk, a plank that was four feet above my head and a maximum of sixteen inches from the roof of the car. The rungs were so narrow that only one hiking boot would fit on a rung at a

time. I tripped on my long skirt with almost every step, but I didn't want to lift it even shin-high with nearly the whole car watching me.

I thought about Liam and how he would have felt if he had grown older and people began to stare at his body that would be crumpled with disuse and be spasmodically out of his control with seizures.

As I lay in the bunk I couldn't sleep because I felt like I was in a coffin.

In the mornings I climbed down and sat motionless by the window watching the world pass. I was paralyzed with anxiety and couldn't go out to the platforms when we stopped. Chris went and returned offering me food, but I had no appetite. He attempted conversation and shared apples with the other passengers, but I couldn't bring myself to engage. At night I woke with fits and starts, jolted by the metal box that held me. I passed almost two days in that confined space.

In those six-and-a-half weeks in June I was afraid for Liam to die; I was afraid for Liam to live.

11-8-70

28 yrs old today!



Traffic Hotel
Yummie Tea!
great skewers on
road side
tofu, potato, lotus root
all spicy!

Roses from my
love on
my B-day
↓



Chen lost for
shes in chengdu!

Bitter Roots and Jasmine Tea

Where are you?

Some kind of intrusion factor it takes always
longing to cross a border. And who unexpectedly
will loom into the picture crossing you with their life
stream. Who are you & what do you do? And where
were you & what did you see? And what touched
you? Who? What? Where are you? The affairs of
this conglomerate heart stretch the miles it takes to
conjure them up. Back, back to where you were.
There. To sing for my supper. To honor the deities
of any place, restore out of terrorism this song, and
in the disguise of this one body I will report on what
touches the heart even as it is rough with travel.

Where are you?

Anne Waldman

We found a taxi at the Chengdu station without too much trouble. Even with the windows rolled up we could smell the stale air. On almost every corner banners competed: one rallied the citizens to “make Chengdu China’s number one tourist city”; another tried to convince tourists, “Chengdu: China’s most beautiful city.” Sometimes they appealed to both at once, “Chengdu, number one tourist city and make Chengdu China’s most beautiful.” Our red taxi moved through streets narrow and teeming with more bicyclists than motorists. The dark waves of people on bikes rolled up along side of our cab at every stop on our way to the Traffic Hotel. It was soothing to see all those wheels moving at once in the same direction. I wished for jet hair, not my own obvious gold. I wanted to put on the blue jacket and blue pants and blend in, and not be so other and isolated in the vehicle that conveyed me with its meter ticking away.

The Traffic Hotel looked expensive as we approached then stopped in front. I panicked; the cab driver must have misunderstood. I thought he'd taken us to the wrong place.

"This can't be it. Ask him if this is it." I sat up straight in the seat and looked window to window.

"It's O.K., Katie. I can see the sign right there. It's right. It's O.K.," Chris said.

"Oh. Boy, this is nice for a cheap hotel. I was expecting something like a dingy hostel." I felt silly and tried to make my tone more appropriate as a way of saying sorry.

We paid the driver and checked into the hotel. The room was 10 Yuan, which was a little more than a dollar. We paid for three nights. In the lobby was a dim gift shop: calligraphy and scenic scrolls, jade chops and figurines. A small area with tables and chairs was sectioned off by a railing. There was a counter to buy Fanta, Coke, stamps, postcards, Pringles, film, beer, and water. We made our way up to room 412.

Inside the room, the first thing I did was change my clothes and lose the smell of the 50-hour train ride from Guangzhou. Looking in the dresser mirror, I saw myself standing in the middle of the room naked. Chris was off to the side and not reflected in the glass. It was the first time since I left home that I'd stood bare for any length of time. It felt good to be unclothed, especially after being trapped on the train in the same skirt, tee shirt, and sweatshirt. Across my stomach several inches below my belly button the scar of my incision was still bright red and welted. I ran my fingers over it, massaging the scar so it would heal better. I wondered how long it would be before it faded. I turned to Chris who was digging fresh socks out of his pack.

“I like my scar. At least I have something left. And my Liam lines.” I smiled at Chris and indicated the stretch marks that ran at a slant from my navel toward my back. Though my arms would be empty, at least I could carry my scars.

I glanced in the mirror and admired the new pendant I bought in Hong Kong for my upcoming birthday. It was a pearl and three tiny diamonds. Liam’s birthstone was a pearl. Not every oyster shell has a pearl and not every parent is as lucky to receive such a beautiful child. He was a precious pearl, a gem not easily found. The Buddha, Sangha, and the Dharma were referred to as the triple gem. I ran it across its white gold chain and lay it down again just above my heart.

Reporting on What Touched My Heart

The map we got from the front desk before we went for a walk later had a small paragraph that read, “Brief Introduction of Chengdu’s Famous scenic spot. Renovated Hunan River has clear water, green bank, long bridge mirrored in the river, yachts sailing on the water, just like Jadite necklace inlaid with bright pearls, she’s new scenic route of the city.” The first thing we noticed about Hunan River, which was just one block away from the Traffic Hotel, was that it didn’t flow. It moved like gray gelatin. Its banks stank like urine. Trash, a hat, newspapers, and cans were inlaid on the surface; the water was so thickly polluted, the items neither sank nor moved out of sight as we crossed the long bridge to the tea pavilion. The river mirrored no bridge like the map said, but like my mind it held mementos of the past and was unable to move forward at a natural pace.

From a distance in the tea pavilion, the river was scenic, though. A fan of tables reached out from the tea stall toward the river. We took a seat and waited, deciding what we were supposed to do next. I noticed that a man was serving the tables so we waited rather than approach the tea stall. It was midday and almost all of the tables were full. Most people were wearing the same simple cloth slippers. A man read a paper, two women talked leaning into one another, one woman fished a ringing cell phone out of her black leather purse as the waiter set a cup in front of her, then poured steaming water into it from a long cylindrical thermos. We sat for some time before we realized we needed to somehow order tea.

“I’ll go find out what to do,” Chris said and left me in the pool of the chatter around me.

The twittering of the blowing leaves overhead and the birds and the people next to me all melted indistinguishably together since to me the words were no more decodable than the conversation of the breeze and birds in the trees. I lit a cigarette and noticed my hands were shaking slightly though I felt calmer than I had in days. I never thought I’d smoke again when I gave it up when I got pregnant, and now this familiar ritual made me sad even though it settled my nerves. I negotiated with myself everyday reasons to keep going. Sometimes that contract was made with the contact in a stranger’s eye, sometimes a lovely view from a cramped and speeding train, a wave rolling in from the Pacific, the comfortable silence that Chris and I kept, a secret pact. We made a promise to Liam, and each other, in the silent hospital not to give up, and not to let go of each other so his legacy would not be a broken marriage, and broken spirits, but a sorrow transcended, so we wouldn’t disappoint him.

Chris returned with two covered cups each containing a small gathering of pale jasmine tea leaves. The scent that was all curled in the unfurled quiet leaves was green, and blossoms, and serenity, and joy, and flora, and so lovely I wanted to smile and cry all at once.

“The guy with the thermos will come around in a minute,” Chris said.

I cradled the cup in my hands just under my nose drinking in the satisfying fragrance, a sacred prayer. I waited for the restorative hot water that would transform the dry leaves in my empty cup.

We sat in the park by the river for hours, looking at the people around us and mostly not talking. A younger man sat down a few tables away and was approached by a hunched old man pointing to the younger man’s feet. In his wizened hand he held a pair of simple cloth slippers. They exchanged a nod, and the man traded his shoes for the slippers. As the older man walked away he had already begun to shine the younger man’s shoes with a dingy rag.

Three women sat around a small table; their hands cracked peanuts and pried out the meat letting shells drop at their feet. Their words fell from their mouths quickly as more shells dropped to the hulls already mounded at their feet.

There was a ritual I couldn’t quite decipher; a man with a long silver rod seemed to be shoving it in the ear of a woman whose head was cocked to one side. Chris speculated he was performing some Chinese form of curbside lobotomy.

The next table over a slender man with fingers like reeds was massaging the neck, head, and shoulders of a man whose dangling arms and drooping shoulders advertised the skill of the masseuse.

The thermos man made the rounds and filled our cups; removing the lid, the leaves danced to the top in a swirl, a reverse whirlpool, from the motion of pouring water. He replaced the lid leaving a sliver-moon of leafy tea uncovered. The Jasmine rose to meet me, gently warming and slightly wetting my face like the breath of a baby.

The Silver Ear Rod man had moved closer to us and was beginning his procedure on his next customer. He stood in back of the woman, and with a practiced twirl he swirled cotton on to the end of the silver rod, then gently tilted the woman's head to her shoulder and swabbed her ear. I was delighted by that uninhibited display of hygiene.

"Chris, you should get your ears cleaned," I said.

"I don't think so."

I did talk him into a shoulder massage and then haggled the price for him, 40 Yuan.

I paid about the same for a bamboo flute from a man who strolled by playing one from his shoulder bag. The flute man showed me how to hold the flute to get a note. He played, and I tried to imitate him for some-time, which I did quickly at first but couldn't do consistently. I started to hand the flute back to the man indicating I didn't want to buy it.

"What? You can't not buy it now." Chris insisted. "You made him stand there for about half an hour showing you how to play it."

"So," I said. But I did feel guilty and bargained for the flute.

"I can't believe you paid 40 Yuan for that." Chris laughed at me.

“What, Chris? You said to buy it, and then you make fun of me?” I waved him away with my flute. “Whatever,” I said to emphasize my dismissal as I brought the flute to my mouth.

We dubbed it “the five dollar bamboo stick,” since I was unable to get another note from it.

The flute man walked away trilling notes full and ripe like small plums as he went.

Birthday Tea, Going Nowhere

On Nov. 8th I turned 28, but I felt like 88. For my birthday I wouldn’t be having a party. No cake. No wishes; there was no use in that. I felt old and used up. Spent. I felt distant from everything, like I’d died 300 times already.

As I dressed that day I said to Chris, “I’m gonna try to have a good day today.”

He gave me a yellow rose he had snuck away to find. We decided to spend the day walking and just see what we found. We headed across the Long Bridge. Just on the other side of it, in a clearing before the park began, a group of people were doing Tai Chi. I followed along for a few poses.

We walked by the tea pavilion. The shelters were not yet unfurled. The chairs were empty. We walked along the bank of the river. An old man came up the embankment zipping up his pants as he crossed our path. In another clearing, at the end of the park, a record played and couples waltzed. They didn’t look down or at each other. It was like they were dancing with the music alone, and their partner was just a mirror image of themselves.

At the corner an old woman wearing a necklace of bear teeth had laid out her wares on a blanket: bundles of herbs, a bear's claw, star anis, antlers, seahorses — I would almost swear there was the horn of a unicorn. We walked, following the crowd.

On another bridge a woman stood perfectly still with her head bowed, the point of her straw hat jutted out at the crowd like punctuation. She was silent and faceless and held a large sign tied around her neck with a rope no thicker than a noodle. I couldn't read the characters, but her bowed head made me think of shame. The other people in the street did not pay any attention to her sign.

We wandered down a narrow street and turned a corner into an outdoor food market. There were tables full: leafy greens in all sizes and shapes, melons, some green, some pale orange; chickens live and clucking in cages, some dead and bare of their feathers, hanging from their feet on a rope strung across the stall; green beans, casks of bean curd; small round burlap sacks open on a table, the moons of rice glowing from inside — the bags of brown and wild rice looked like eclipses.

At a fish stall a man beheaded a large fish on a wooden table blackened with age and the years of guts, and scales, and blood that had spilled over it. It looked smooth like lacquer. Just next to him a small boy stood behind a crate — a chopping block of his own playful design. On it was a fish head that he chopped at with a stick.

It was the radishes at the next stall that caught my eye. They were red with green leaves lacy from insect bites in the field, and large as potatoes. I decided to make a meal of this sharp root. I tried to buy one from the plump vendor, but she wouldn't take my money. She gave me the bitter root and shooed me away with a smile. The

pungent flesh tasted like water and dirt all at the same time. It was elemental, that bitter and bright tuber; it, with the woman's smile, satisfied me for a while.

Soon, we realized we'd lost our way.

"Where are we? Where are we?" I started to cry.

Chris got out the map to reorient us, but I had to keep moving.

Chris ran to catch up to me, "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere," I yelled. Tears were streaming down my face by then. "I'm nowhere and it's my birthday. I have nothing, no job, no baby, and no idea where we are. I don't know who I am."

"Katie, it's O.K." He tried again to calm me but his voice sounded scared and that scared me and made me feel more out of control. "What do you want? Where do you want to go?"

"I want Liam back." I came undone with tears not caring who saw me. I stood in the middle of the sidewalk, but I felt like I was looking down on myself — a speck in a dark and foreign place. "I don't know where to go. I don't want to be here, or home, or anywhere." At that moment time and space imploded and was all nothing. We were all empty shells, fish heads disembodied, cups waiting to be filled, yellow roses, promises, bitter roots, coded conversations, spinning wheels, parents' children, a prayer, rituals to decipher, a dance, notes like ripe plums, pushing hands, a bridge above a river, steam above a cup. Life was streaming by me; all I could do was record the conglomerate sights that unexpectedly touched my rough, travel-worn heart, hoping it would trace back to where I was.

We both knew there were no words to comfort either one of us, so we walked and I continued to cry with no regard for who might see me, until no more tears came. I wanted to keep walking until there were no more days.

The sun beat down. The darkness of the teahouses that lined the street was inviting.

“Wanna get tea?” I asked Chris. I’d come back to myself. I was somewhat subdued, my emotions and nerves receded beneath my placid, for now, surface. “Sorry about before,” I added.

“Yeah, let’s get some tea.” He nodded toward the darkened door of a teahouse two steps ahead.

I was blinded, momentarily, by the dark, cool interior as I stepped out of the bright afternoon and into the teahouse. It was narrow with a low ceiling. There were only a few teak tables and chairs all pressed in close. Light, steam, and smoke from the large kettle on a semi-open fire in the back filled and warmed the small space. When I sat I realized how swollen my feet were, how achy my legs were, how tired I was. There was one old man at a corner table next to a thick bamboo ladder that went nowhere. His beard was long and wispy; his eyes were rheumy coal and betrayed nothing of what he thought of our presence. The wizened man and I regarded each other as benign spectators just passing through. I didn’t feel unwelcome or invited and that felt comfortable to me.

“Ni-hao,” Chris said when the proprietress came to our table. “Hello” was one of the only words we mastered, but it seemed to go a long way if said with a smile. Chris ordered our tea in pantomime. When it was served, in a white porcelain cup with blue

flowers that matched the blue lacquer of the table top, I felt like a little bit of comfort had been placed within my reach. “Shey-shey,” I thanked her as she tipped the lid to the side releasing the steam. I let the leaves steep in my birthday tea, said a blessing, cleared the steam with the palm of my hand, and took the liquid prayer to my lips. The tea was strong like I wanted to be.

The Something Worse Summer

What Really Happened That Summer

It all happened so fast and so slow when the Doppler in the midwife's office registered a faint irregularity of the baby's heartbeat a week before my due date.

Turning the corner that day from Hoyt Street into the hospital driveway the rain fell. In June. In Oregon. An omen. At the red light just before the turn the rain beat into a puddle in the middle of the street. The light changed. The car turned; Chris was driving. I turned my head back unable to take my eyes from the rain falling that summer day. I wanted to stay in that moment before the turn when just the rain was falling, when Liam was born, and before we learned that he wouldn't live long.

What I Learned That Summer

To feed Liam I had to insert a 9-French Nasogastronomic feeding tube into his nose. I measured it from his cheek to his stomach along his seized-up body and pinched the tube at the point where it touched just below his nose. I fumbled with one hand to plug my ears with the miniature stethoscope—the one the nurse at the NICU gave me when we decided to take our baby home—so I could listen. I didn't let go of the tube. I didn't want to lose the length I'd measured off.

I learned that Liam looked like his father and a precious gem.

I flipped the tube over and began inserting it into Liam's nose; it looked like Chris' nose. Liam's eyes were sometimes the color of sapphires. Perhaps, if things

were right, they'd be blue some day. But nothing was right, there wouldn't be a someday, only that minute and my son's unblinking stare.

I learned to move slowly, bend with the pressure.

I slowly pushed the small plastic tube into Liam's nose, feeling it hit the back of his nasal cavity. With the tiniest amount of pressure it bent and continued down his throat. I continued feeding the tube into his nose until my fingers, pinched around the tube, were just under his nostril. Then came the important part. I had to listen to his stomach.

I connected a large nutritional syringe, the kind that has no needle, to the end of the tube. I unwrapped Liam from the blankets and exposed his tummy. I pressed the pad of the stethoscope to his tummy just above his navel, and got ready to listen.

I waited for the cars passing and the dogs barking outside to stop, then pushed the plunger on the syringe forcing a bit of air down the tube. I had to make sure I heard a little squeak through the stethoscope. Then I'd know that the tube was in the right place, in his stomach and not in his esophagus or windpipe. I pressed the plunger a couple of ccs further, and then listened for a couple of more ccs if I didn't hear the squeak.

The tiniest, almost imperceptible, squeak was my assurance that he wouldn't drown in mother's milk. He could've choked and died right then. He could have died right then. I had to make sure I heard the squeak. I had to back the plunger up and listen again until I did. But I couldn't do it more than a couple of times because if I filled his stomach with air there wouldn't be room for milk, and then he'd have to wait

to eat though he wouldn't cry; he never really did. I only had a couple of shots to get it right, so I listened.

I learned that abnormal could feel normal since I'd never known "normal."

Once I knew the tube was placed correctly, I drew 180 ccs of milk into the syringe. The doctors said formula was O.K. But I pumped and gave him breast milk instead. He may have had no sucking instinct, unable to nurse, but at least I could give him that. Liquid gold, the NICU nurse I.S., called it. I attached the end of the syringe to the end of the feeding tube.

The inattentive nurse on the night shift — not I.S. who kept me sane and called the two-foot by three-foot plexi-glass box with lights and wires and warmers that held Liam "sacred ground" — the other one whose pronunciation I had to correct every time she said Liam's name, she hammered down the plunger, forcing all the milk in at one blast, expanding his stomach with a quick rush of milk; three seconds and the meal was over and she'd rush out the door of the private room in the NICU they let us sleep in with Liam while we watched over him.

I couldn't feed him like that. It made my milk seem like prescription drugs, a perfunctory chore, rather than the sweet nourishment and the normal ritual it should have been. At home, I propped Liam on my bent legs, leaned back against the hard wall, and made myself cozy on the bed. I raised the syringe above my head with my hand so the milk flowed slowly and gently into Liam's stomach. I.S. showed me how to do it that way. It took time for all the milk to drain. I was happy to pretend I had all the time in the world. In the meantime, I rocked Liam back and forth on my knees and

sang, “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray.”

I tried not to think about the copy of the Do Not Resuscitate order that was on the coffee table on the other side of the wall in the living room. “You’ll never know dear, how much I love you. Please, don’t take my sunshine away.”

I tried not to think about what would come next. I had no idea what would come next or when his time would come. He couldn’t use an NG tube forever. The next intervention after that would be a Direct Gastric Tube. They would cut his stomach and place a plastic tube in with a capped-off end that would stick out like a tire air-plug. I kept singing, “The other night dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamed I held you in my arms.” It may not come to that, the doctors said. But if it didn’t, it meant that it had come to something even worse. “When I awoke, dear, I was not with you, and I hung my head and cried.”

I learned to hold anyway.

After some time the last of the milk passed through the syringe into the tube. I watched the white line of the milk drain down. My arm got tired but I held on anyway supporting my raised elbow with my other hand when I needed to. The line slipped into his nose; the tube was cleared. I waited a couple of heartbeats more, a verse more, to make sure the milk had passed all the way into his stomach. I removed the syringe, taped off the tube, and taped it to his cheek for the next feeding. I didn’t need to change it until the next day. I hoped I’d have to change it the next day because if I didn’t it meant something even worse had happened; I’d have to do something even worse. Let go.

I learned I had to make decisions I didn't want to make.

My father-in-law, Jerry, arrived after flying for three days from St. Petersburg, Russia, to be with us. Chris had sent a fax to his boat, "Come now, please." Jerry was a cardiac-thoracic surgeon and head of surgery for Maine Medical Hospital, but in his transition to retirement he took a job as a doctor on a Maine Maritime Academy ship sailing to Russia from Maine. He told us about a nurse on board who had a niece or nephew who was born very sick too. ("Very Sick" was hospital code for babies who were likely to die. I, unfortunately, learned that and lots of other jargon I'd rather be ignorant of like: severe hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy, and aortic thrombus with patent ductus arteriosus dependent lesion.) That baby that the nurse told him about had an NG tube too, for a while.

"You can make a choice," Jerry said. "People do make that decision in some extreme cases."

When Jerry was getting ready to leave a few days later I was in the other room changing Liam's diaper. I hurried and brought him out and asked Jerry if he wanted to hold Liam one last time before he left. He took Liam in his arms and cried. I'd never seen Jerry cry. When he was at his car door he turned back and said, through the wide-open space between us all, "I love you."

The decisions we had to make didn't seem like decisions; they seemed like sentences.

We decided to sign the Do Not Resuscitate papers with Sharon a week after we brought Liam home. Chris and Liam, Sharon, and I sat in silence for a long time after

I laid the paper down on the table after signing it. What else could we do? Hearts breaking are unbearably silent.

The end of Liam's life could come in five days, five minutes, five seconds. It was real. It would come without warning. Another week after we signed the DNR papers we decided to discontinue the NG tube and the seizure medication, which were the only interventions we didn't discontinue when we left the hospital. The doctors said he probably wouldn't live long enough for us to have to make that decision. Discontinuing the feeding tube felt like the most horrible thing we could do. It was hard to accept that the worst thing we could think of was actually the best thing we could do to help Liam. I knew in my mind it was for the best but my heart was yet to be convinced. Miraculously, Liam lived for almost four more weeks, something that a neonatal nurse with 30 years experience had never seen happen for a baby who was so "very sick."

What It Was Like Knowing Our Son Could Die At Any Moment

There was an actual physical feeling that all the cells of my body were exploding and flying out from me. Every face, and flower, and song had more than one meaning; the universe was telling me a story, life had a narrative of its own. Every dream told me a new secret, and I was trying to take it all in to make sense of this catastrophe so utterly awful it was absurd. That obsession with interpreting the signs around me transformed everything I saw from then on. I guess I was desperate to find meaning and reason in that unreasonable situation; I sought it out and saw meaning and symbolism everywhere, obsessively.

It was little details that were different too. I had to make sure I had a blanket with me when I went to the grocery store not just to keep Liam warm, but because I might have needed it to cover him up if he died while I was in the store. Living a life while waiting for death was like living in the space where one breath ends and the other has not yet begun; it was like sleepwalking through my worst nightmare feeling more awake, and acutely aware, than I ever had been in my life; it was like drowning in thin air; it was like standing on a deserted shore in awe of a squall that was pulling back and gathering its force to crush me.

At the same time, I was overwhelmed with natural great love for my perfectly beautiful child. He was a lotus, a delicate bloom that had grown out of the mud at the bottom of a dark pond. He wasn't dead yet, and I wanted to live each moment. While we waited for Liam to die we tried to help him live well too. We took him to Opal Creek Forest and walked with him through the old growth. We took him to Cannon Beach and walked against gently blowing sand, watching the waves crash against Haystack Rock. We took him on a picnic at Mt. Tabor Park, which was the only active volcano inside a city's limits. From there we had a view of Mt. Hood in the distance. It was a rare clear day. We lay in the grass of one unexploded mountain, and ate grapes, and cheese, and rustic bread, and sipped a beer looking into the distance at another unexploded mountain. We also took Liam to Buddhist teachings with us.

A Baby Called Joy Victorious

A high Lama, Jetsun Kushog, came to town for a two-day teaching. I had a student/teacher relationship with her since I was seventeen when I attended my first

Buddhist teaching with her and she gave a teaching on the Black Mahakala, a protector deity. I really wanted her to give Liam a blessing. The teaching we went to with Liam was on compassion. I don't recall the exact words of the teaching, but I do remember a moment of realization as I sat on the cushion rocking Liam in his car seat. No matter if people felt we made the right or wrong decisions for Liam, I was ready to accept the responsibility. I was his mother. It was my job to protect him no matter what. His father and I did what no one else could or would do. We decided to protect him from suffering rather than death. After the teaching, on the second day, we took Liam to the front of the room where Jutsunla was sitting to have her give him a blessing. We also asked her to give him a Tibetan name. She named him Kunga Namgyal— Joy Victorious. I hoped that she was right. I hope for Liam, and for us, that joy would be victorious.

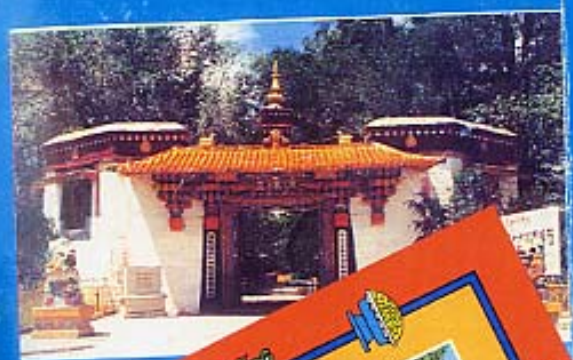
I told her about the many dreams I had about Buddhist Lamas when I was pregnant with Liam and asked her what they could mean. She seemed a bit surprised and said it sounded like he was a tulku (a reincarnated lama), but that he had some obstacles in his karma that he needed to overcome in this life. After most of the people had left, Jutsunla called us to her side again. She wanted to hold Liam and give him a special blessing. She took him, wrapped in his rainbow silk blanket, in her arms. She put her forehead to his, which is a sign of respect for Tibetans. She blessed him again. She gave us a pinch of blessed powder to feed to him that she said would bring him clarity.

After Liam passed away we went to a Tara meditation retreat with Jutsunla in the San Juan Islands of Washington State. When I met with her alone one afternoon I

cried and told her I was too sad to meditate and do the practice, which was a prescribed set of visualizations and mantras. She said I should do the Vajrasattva practice, a purification ritual, for Liam. I told her I felt bad about the decisions not to pursue further medical interventions that may have prolonged his life. She asked me what the doctors told us to do. She said if we did what they thought we should do then I shouldn't feel bad. The problem was that the doctors never told us what to do. They gave us a diagnosis, probable outcomes, and decisions to make.

If someone offered me the option to cut off my finger to make the outcome of Liam's life different, I would have offered my whole hand without hesitation. But that wasn't an option. Someone would say forgoing surgeries, and medications, and therapies, and a stomach tube to help him live longer was horrible, and I would agree. I wanted to do all that but it wasn't going to help Liam walk, or laugh, or nurse, or think. It would only have made us feel better. I didn't want to suffer, but I wanted more for Liam not to suffer. The exquisitely painful irony of the matter was that the very horrible thing we did was the right thing to do. It was a hopeless situation. The only option was letting go, believing that his next life would be better. Even though I knew the rest of my life would be painfully absent of him, and painfully full of anguishing doubts about those decisions. Liam was going to die no matter what we did or didn't do. But, what we did or didn't do would affect the amount and the duration for which he would suffer. We had to stop intervening and let his karma, and ours, guide the outcome hoping that his new name, Joy Victorious, would guide his future and ours.

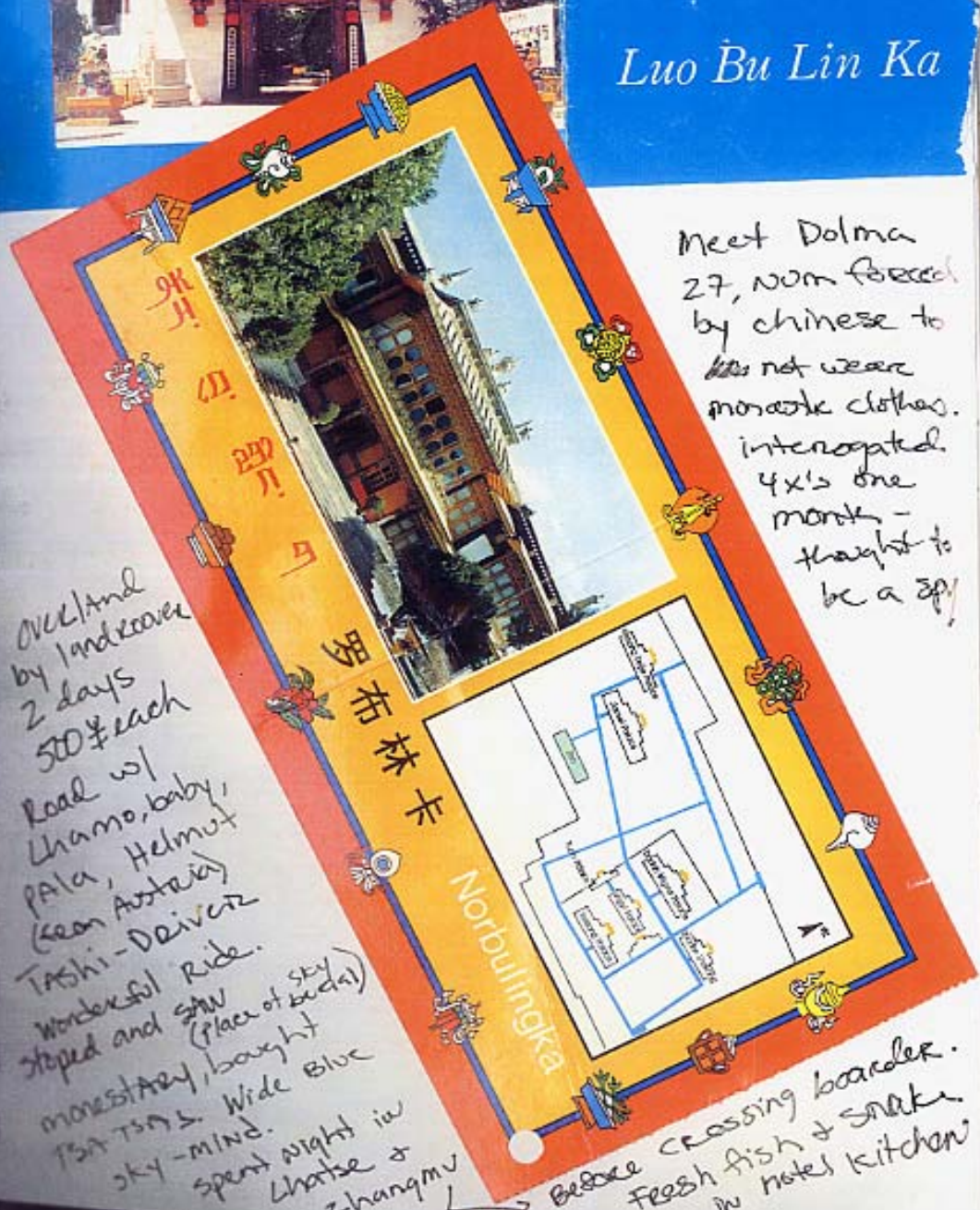
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罗布林卡

Luo Bu Lin Ka



Meet Dolma
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by chinese to
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interrogated.
4x's one
month -
thought to
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overland
by landcruiser
2 days
500\$ each
Road w/
Lhamo, baby,
PALA, Helmut
(Ken Austin)
Tashi-Driver
Wonderful ride.
stayed and saw
monastery, bought
TSA TSS. Wide blue
sky-mind.
spent night in
Lhasa &
Zhangmu

Before crossing border.
Fresh fish & snake
in hotel kitchen

A Different View

“If you have faith as a grain of a mustard seed nothing shall be impossible unto you.”

Mathew 17:20

Changdu to Tibet overland sounded like nothing but hardship from all six of the people whom we met who had made the trip themselves. From Changdu we would have to take a train to Xi'an, spend a day, and visit the bird market and the 10,000 Clay Soldiers. From Xi'an it would be another day train ride to Xinning, formally known until 1959 as the Amdo region of Tibet when the Chinese invaded. From Xinning the only option was a local bus that would take 3 or 4 days. One traveler said that he got into a screaming match with a bus driver 12 hours into the ride, because the driver wouldn't stop to let him take a pee. Once we got to Tibet there was no guarantee the border guards would let us in. All the seasoned travelers we spoke with said it was the worst bus ride of their lives.

I'd had my fill of hard roads for the time being. It was possible to take the easy road if we wanted. We wouldn't have to weigh the pros and cons, choose between bad and worse, or convene an ethics committee to review our decision like we did at the hospital.

Still it wasn't until we had our packs on our backs, tickets in hand, and had walked two blocks from the hotel to the train station that I stopped walking and looked at Chris. He instantly read my mind and said, “Forget this.” He broke a smile for the

first time in days. Quickly, he was headed back from where we came, waving over his shoulder for me to follow.

“Yeah, forget this. What the hell are we doing?”

All the way back to the hotel and up to our new room, once we rechecked in, we laughed, rehashing our sudden decision.

“Right, it’s not a test,” I said.

“I don’t even care about the soldiers. It was just a way to break up the train trip,” Chris confessed.

“It really won’t cost all that much more to fly when you add up all the lodging and food for the next few days,” I reasoned.

“Plus fees!”

“Plus who knows if we’d ever make it. The Chinese might send us back once we got to the border and then we’d really be mad.”

We flopped on the bed and, relieved, sleep overcame us more easily than it had in quite a while. When we woke, we went to one of the several small travel agencies on the hotel property and booked our “tour of Lhasa,” the capital of Tibet. We were only able to buy air tickets if we bought the whole package that they offered.

Thoughts Along the Path

I let Chris sit by the window on the plane so he could see the view of the Himalayas and Tibet as we approached since I’d enjoyed that view once before when I traveled to Tibet as a student.

When we collected our bags, the sun was so bright it glinted like a white diamond. Boarding the bus, the air was thin and crisp. It smelled clean, like nothing at all. I was grateful to be back in Tibet. Many Tibetans I knew could only dream of stepping on that sacred ground at the top of the universe, and I was there again.

We got off the bus at the Tashi Mandala Guest house just off the main square in Lhasa. The square, in front of the Ja-Kung, is one of the most sacred spots in the entire world for Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists because it houses the most sacred relics and statues. People journeyed there from thousands of miles away, prostrating – like the old woman on the balcony in Hong Kong — to that very spot. Though I'd not literally prostrated from my home in Oregon to Tibet something inside had given way – like a body in full prostration — with every step of that journey.

It was my grief that pulled me down, and my belief in Buddhism that pushed me back up again to look for the path that would release me from this suffering. Or was it the other way around? Was it my belief in Buddhism that pulled me, compelling me to lay my grief down; and maybe, was it my attachment to my grief that pushed me up again, struggling to find footing on this path? With every step it was a battle between attachment and letting go. I could have let go of my grief easier if, at the time, I could have recalled Sogal Rimpoche's differentiation between having something and being attached to it. He said if you held a coin on your upright palm you had it, but it was resting gently without your attachment. If you clenched your fist over the coin and turned your hand upside down you also had it, but now you were attached to it. Grasping. It took your energy, and focus, and attention to hold on. You were limited in what else you could pick up. Grief could be like a closed fist around

treasured memories. It was consuming and a constant strain on my heart and mind. It limited the amount of joy I was able to take in. There was little room to feel anything else in those dark, fisted days of my journey, but I tried.

Checking In, Checking out the View

We checked into the Tashi Mandala Hotel, which roughly translates to Fortunate Universe Hotel. I didn't know it then, but it was the last we would see of our so-called tour guide. Though the agent wasn't specific, I did think that the tour would consist of more than a bus ride to the hotel. In any case, it was O.K. with me. I felt more like we were pilgrims searching rather than tourists sightseeing. It suited me fine to make our way every day, unscheduled, trying to open ourselves to the world again. I set my backpack on the bed in room 312 and turned to take in the view. I could see the Potala Palace. There was still a layer of glass and miles between the Dalai Lama's former palace and me, but at least I could see it from there. I thought about how many layers of sadness I had to go, but at least I could feel a little hope. The view was auspicious. Tibetan Buddhists talk about cultivating the right view of the world as a way to alleviate suffering. I reminded myself to always remember to look out the window for another view when I was in a room, especially if that room was my mind looking for the right view of the world and a way out of misery and attachment. I sat and took in the view for some time before we decided to head out into the land of the snow lion and find something to eat. In a few days' time, our families in America would celebrate Thanksgiving. There, at the roof of the world, where we had come to view our experience, I tried to cultivate a sense of thanks for the time we did have

with Liam and for the lessons we learned from his life and death. My celebration and thanksgiving would be in my footsteps, each one that I was able to take on the path both beneath my feet and in my mind.

Tea and Dreams

We found our way through the cold, bright Tibetan streets to a traditional Sa-Kung (restaurant). The one we chose was up a narrow flight of stairs in a square whitewashed building. There were just a few tables in the close dark-wood beamed room. We kept our coats on because the room was almost empty, and in general the restaurants were not warmed except by the company of others. The menu was simple. Mho-mhos (dumplings) and Thunk-pa (soup), with Sha (meat) or without, was the standard. I recalled a dream from when I was pregnant with Liam. I was in a football stadium filled with people waiting to hear a teaching by His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. No one but me seemed to notice the Dalai Lama was sitting on a high bleacher step. He told me to sit down on his right. He whispered something in my ear and my head felt full of light like I'd realized something but I never heard the words. He handed me a cup of warm, salty Tibetan tea and told me to drink it. In my waking life I had tasted the traditional tea many times, but I never acquired a taste for it. In my dream it was like liquid comfort. Nothing had ever tasted so good or soothing.

In the Sa-Kung, in the land from which His Holiness came, but could never return, I ordered the Pu-cha (Tibetan tea) rather than the Nargmo-cha (sweet tea) that, like most tourists, I had opted for in the past. I wanted to test my dream against reality. When the tea was served in a stout porcelain bowl, I removed the lid and the steam

rose to the roof like the smoke from a butter lamp that carries a prayer to the deities. The tea, salty and oily from Yak butter, was as good as in my dream. It quenched. At that moment I was awake to the elliptical nature between the world around me and the dream world beyond me. As I sat drinking tea and waiting for the Sha Mho-mhos I ordered, I remembered the other auspicious dreams that I had had when I was pregnant.

In one, I was camping in a gymnasium full of people. I lay on my cot and looked up. There was no ceiling, just the open star-filled sky. I floated up into the Himalayas. Looking to my left, I saw through the wall of a house. The Dalai Lama was sitting down to a meal with other high Lamas that I couldn't name except for Sakya Trisen and his sister, Her Eminence Jutsun Kushog. He motioned for me to sit at his side and for me to eat from the slices of meat heaped on his plate. I hesitated because it's not respectful to take His Holiness' food, but he offered so I felt like I couldn't refuse. There was a full moon; the snow on the mountains was illuminated a blushing pink and white.

In another dream, I climbed a twisted set of stairs to a monastery entry. There was a red curtain, and I knew the Dalai Lama was behind it. I sat down in the large shrine room reading a Tibetan text. It had the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism on it: a conch shell, an umbrella, a banner, two fish touching, a symbol of knots, a lotus, a wheel, and a vase. I think I remembered focusing on the vase. Just then the Dalai Lama walked toward me from behind the curtain. He pointed at the book and said close to my ear, "That is your mind."

No Escaping Change

The next day we walked around Lhasa. The streets that were wide dirt paths when I visited many years before as a student were now paved gray corridors of open commerce. Small, whitewashed mortar and wood structures that once held family-owned shops and restaurants and living space on top floors were replaced with typical Chinese-designed cinderblock buildings crammed brick-face to brick-face. The shopkeepers looked mostly Chinese. There were now crossing signals blinking on the streets, which had been thoroughfares to carts and horses instead of smog-belching cars and scooters. Change, which had been the preoccupation of my life, and thoughts, had overrun Tibet too. I don't think I thought Tibet would be exempt from the laws of impermanence, but the flashing, crowded streets of a once serene Lhasa were a portent that weighed me down. With every step I was fighting the urge to just lie down and give up. No matter where I went, even if I ran away to the top of the world, I could not avoid the true nature of life.

As I crossed a street and stepped onto the curb, my breath stopped short and tears flooded my eyes. On the curb sat a woman in a long matted yak-skin coat with her hand out to me. Her face was like worn leather, shiny with dirt and, probably, yak butter used to protect the skin from the weather. Her black hair was braided to her waist in the traditional thin braids. Tucked in her coat and peeking out from his repose next to his mother's bare breast was an infant. Despite his newness, he had skin as equally weathered as his mother's. He reached out to me, too, with his tiny new hand. He had his mother's dark imploring eyes that reached even further than his outstretched hand into my heart. I took a few more steps and tried to catch my breath,

to stop the tears. I turned to go back to them, but didn't know how I could help. No money I could give them would ever really be enough. It wouldn't be the solution to the real problem, the problem being that life is suffering, no matter who you are and where you go. I turned back to the path in front of me and willed myself to move on through the swell of confused emotions that overtook me.

Later we were in a cyber café on a rooftop near the Ja-Kung, which was yet another reminder of how this once ancient city had been invaded by powerful forces. Another tourist caught my eyes as she passed the table where Chris and I sat. She said something like "Isn't this amazing," with the wide-eyed delight of a child. I was aware of my own cynicism, but I was genuinely surprised that she could find such enchantment in the midst of so much obvious suffering. Didn't she know the history of the place in which she stood? Didn't she know the amount of blood that ran in the streets below in the 1960 uprising when the Tibetan people tried to rebel against the Chinese invasion? I mustered some manners and managed an answer to her friendly question. "Yes. It is. I'm also amazed at the change. This was all so different seven years ago."

"Well, change isn't bad is it?" she said.

I really couldn't answer her. I just shrugged my shoulders and tried to smile. "I guess it depends," I finally said.

Years before, walking the Bar-Core, the circular road around the Ja-Kung, the shopkeepers were impudent. As I perused the yak sweaters on the tables, they offered me tea and invited me deeper into their shops. They told me stories of the abusive police and government and asked me to tell people at home in the West. On the terrace

of a monastery that I visited I saw a monk walking quickly in my direction, his maroon robes snapping in the wind behind him. He looked straight ahead as he passed me, but he slipped a note into my hand as he slid by me. The note was printed in English and Tibetan script. It was a paragraph about the human rights abuses going on in the country and a paragraph imploring the reader to report the contents of the note to people in the West.

This time on the streets of Lhasa I saw more Chinese people than Tibetans. The Tibetans I did see were mostly beggars. They didn't pass on notes of resistance and defiance. They had no fight left in them except for the fight to stay alive. They seemed vanquished. I wondered what that meant for me. Seeing these people so dejected, whom I'd admired because of their tenacity in the face of extreme adversity, I wondered what hope there was for my comparably smaller problem and me. Lhasa, as the Tibetan Shangri-La that it once was centuries ago, was truly gone forever. Lhasa was the seat of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism was the seat of wisdom that had brought me comfort and helped me make sense of everything I experienced. If it could be gone from this place, could it be beaten out of me too by the unrelenting adversity of daily life? Chris and I finished our tea and talked about the nature of impermanence as the leaves in our pot of tea softened and let go. We talked about Liam and letting go. We talked about email and how no matter where you go these days, you couldn't avoid the cyber connection to the world. I wondered about a real way to stay connected to the world. In the street below, a crowd gathered on either side of the main road. We saw a handcuffed monk being walked, with reluctant steps, through the street by the police. It was the same monk we'd seen previously that day running

through the Bar-Core trying to evade the police. There was a loudspeaker playing a tape from the police car that followed the monk and his captors. We couldn't understand the Chinese announcement. I asked the waiter who'd come to collect our empty cups what was going on. He told us the announcement said the monk had committed some crime and that he was going to jail. He added that they were going to kill him. I didn't know if he meant to tell me that they were announcing the monk's death too, or if the waiter added his own subtitle to the translation he provided for us. The politics of the region had not changed that much since 1959, but the attitude of the people had. Existence would not change for me or anyone else; there would always be suffering. I guessed it was how we felt about that suffering and how we handled it that would make any difference for us.

The Long Ride, Release

After a week in Tibet we started to plan our next move. Winter was coming on fast. We knew that we only had a matter of weeks to make the trip overland to Nepal, or we could be snowbound for quite a while since even the flights in and out would slow to a trickle. In all the tourist guest houses there were notes posted from other travelers who were looking to put together a traveling party to keep expenses down. We made the rounds and weighed the options. We decided on a direct route because we found we were too tired for adventure. I really wanted to stop at some sights that were sacred to Tara and the Sakya monastery. Most of our lamas belonged to the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Tara was a female deity of compassion. But, Chris wanted to call the Austrian man, Helmut, who posted a sign saying he had rented a car

and a driver and was going to drive straight through to Nepal in two days. We met with him and he told us that we would be sharing the car with a Tibetan family as well.

On November 20th we met our group. Helmut introduced us to Lhamo, her infant son Tenzin, and her father, whom we all called Pala (father). Our driver's name was Tashi. We all squeezed into the Land Rover after our brief introductions and headed out of Lhasa. I was happy to have the company of the Tibetan family. Chris and I tried to practice our Tibetan over the next couple of days. Lhamo seemed pleased to have traveling companions who knew a bit of Tibetan. She smiled when I told her my Tibetan name was Lhamo too. Speaking to her baby, she pointed at me and told him that I was Lhamo too and that I was his mother too. Over the next two days we all took turns holding Tenzin as we bounced over the rocky terrain.

Tenzin was the first baby that I had held since Liam died. Previously, in restaurants, or stores, or on beaches, I would avoid babies. It was too painful to be around them. I was jealous of their mothers and angry that my baby was taken from me too soon. It didn't seem fair. But in this close car, driving through the tall, imposing Himalayas, I held that small boy in my lap and something in me softened.

Several hours into the ride I showed Lhamo a picture of my baby that was taped into the journal I kept. She asked me where he was. Was he with my mother, she wanted to know? I tried several times to say the word for dead in Tibetan, but she never understood me. Finally, Chris looked it up in our dictionary and handed it to her pointing to the word.

“Oh,” she said, “I see. He is dead.”

“He’s dead,” Helmut said. “Your baby is dead?” He seemed shocked. “That’s awful. What happened to him?”

Chris tried to explain. I hugged Tenzin.

By midday we stopped in a town that was familiar. When I was a student traveling around Tibet, I camped on the roofs of several different monasteries and a nunnery. As my present travelers and I untangled our cramped legs from the car, I recognized the monastery on the hill in the distance. At Dragoon Monastery I saw a sky-burial. As we headed into a restaurant to order some lunch, I recalled that awe-inspiring event:

The other students and I arrived in the late afternoon at the monastery. The corpses were already in the middle of the courtyard, and the monks were already gathering for the transfer of consciousness ceremony. As the courtyard began to bustle with activity, I climbed the ladder to the roof where I would be out of the way, but still able to see.

A small fire was lit in front of the corpses. Through the burlap in which they were wrapped, I could make out the form of their bodies. One was large, sitting cross-legged, and doubled over. The second body was smaller and curled in the fetal position. Both bodies were placed with their heads to the fire and katas (white silk scarves) were tied around their necks. A kata is given to someone as an offering of thanks, a blessing, or for protection on their journey. Katas always bring to my mind scenes of animated bows and blessings of tearful departures, long anticipated arrivals, or excitement from having received the blessing of a lama. All of these scenes are full

of emotion and life. Seeing katas on corpses made the bodies seem weighted and still heavy with emotion and spirit. The relatives of the dead and the monks were dry-eyed with solemn faces, and their hands were busy with familiar ritual gestures. I couldn't hold back, though. I began to weep for people I'd not known and couldn't even now see except for the outlines of heads, shoulders, and knees bulging from the burlap and tied with rope like packages of meat from the butcher down the road.

The monks took their places sitting cross-legged in a semicircle around the bodies. The head lama sat opposite the monks and the corpses on the far side of the fire. The low drone of chanting began and the monks started to slowly rock in meditation to draw out and release the life energy from the bodies. With the repetition of mantras and a certain syllable, pronounced Hri, which emanates special powers, the consciousness of the dead person was transferred to another realm.

The chanting continued until the sun was behind the mountains and the cold night was beginning to settle in like a cloak around my shoulders. The fire was left to burn out and the bodies were placed in a large wooden crate next to the main entrance to wait for their ultimate disposal, and final release.

In the morning I hiked the mile and a half or so to the very top of the mountain to the sky-burial site. By the time I had arrived, the larger of the two bodies had already been destroyed and the relatives were standing or squatting and talking in low murmurs. Some were leaning against the wall of a small stone one-room building. Fifteen to twenty vultures, the smallest of them no less than three feet tall, were already dancing and frenzied as they tried to crowd in near the altar. One man herded

them back, waving a large stick, throwing stones, and yelling over the hissing and squawking of the vultures.

The altar was a circle of rocks built up about one foot high and about five feet in diameter. In the field that surrounded the altar there were small stupas (shrines) draped with red, yellow, blue, green, and white prayer flags. Massive hairy yaks wandered in the distance, inattentive to our gathering.

A monk walked out of the stone building tying on a long white apron stained with spots the color of rotting flesh, rust red with a tint of green. He took down a large silver hook and a long knife from a hook by the door. He walked to the altar and stood for a minute in silence. Then he began to chant. He walked toward the remaining corpse while the vultures and their guard challenged each other with two steps forward and two steps back.

The wind skimmed over the mountaintop and washed over me. I felt awake. There was no sense of sadness or squeamishness. The lump I thought for sure would be in my throat was not there. I stood quietly, numb, and waited like the relatives who silently kicked stones at their feet and shifted their weight back and forth.

The monk raised the hook and brought it down with a sinking thunk sound into the back of the corpse and dragged it onto the altar. As he cut away the burlap I could see that the corpse was a woman. She was small, but not frail, with long gray hair and spots of bluish green on her feet where they were beginning to rot. The only cries that could be heard were from the hungry vultures now becoming more aggressive. The monk, still chanting, sank the hook into the soles of the corpse's feet, stretched the legs out of the fetal position, and began to cut flesh from bone.

The bones were nearly scraped clean by the monk's knife when the man with the stick could no longer hold back the vultures. They converged on the altar just as the monk dashed out of the way. They devoured the flesh. Fighting over the larger pieces, they tugged them between their vise-like beaks and picked the bones clean. All the while, their great black wings battered the air with a steady beat like a heart. A small piece of flesh flew up from the carnage and landed on the shoulder of a person who was watching. A man picked it off nonchalantly and threw it back on the altar unfazed. I caught the black hard eye of a howling vulture in my own. My Tibetan guide warned me to look away so I wouldn't threaten it, provoking an attack.

The vultures were shooed back from the altar and the monk once again approached. This time he began to crush the bones with a large hammer. When he reached the skull he cut the last patches of hair from it and threw them onto the altar. His chanting grew louder as he set the skull down again. He brought the hammer down with one hard crushing blow and ground the bone and brain into dust. He mixed all the bone dust with tsampa (barley flour). Once again the vultures were allowed to approach.

When the rocks were scavenged bare, they flew away. The people silently dispersed while the monk put away his apron and tools and rewrapped himself in his top robes. I silently walked away, amazed at the sense of peace I felt. Though this burial was more aggressive than any other I had seen in Asia, I was reluctant to call it violent. Life is not passive and painless, so why should the ritual passage be? Tibetans believe that the body should be returned to one of the elements. At such high elevations it is hard to find wood enough to consume a body by fire. The ground is so

frozen most of the year it is very difficult to dig six feet down. The rivers are few. There is no choice but to give them back to the sky.

As I walked back to the monastery, past a stupa with flags fluttering, I looked back. A feeling of peace came over me as I looked out over the Himalayas. That woman was completely free from this world of painful existence. No bone or flesh rotting in the ground to give those left behind a false sense of attachment. She was well gone before her bones were devoured, so there was no need to be attached to her remains. Material things, flesh and bone included, are an illusion. In the end there is only nothing.

A person's consciousness is said to remain in an intermediate state called the Bardo for 49 days before the person takes rebirth. On the 49th day after Liam's death, we brought his ashes to Cannon Beach on the Oregon coast. At the Schooner's Cove Inn we set up a shrine next to the sliding glass doors that opened right onto the beach. We made offerings, recited our Sadhanas, and meditated. According to Jutsun Kushog's instructions we mixed Liam's ashes with fine white porcelain and pressed them into molds called Tsa-tsas and made little stupas -- canisters that usually hold the relics of lamas and sacred objects.

On the altar I had placed some red roses that I picked from the bushes at home. Liam was born in June and the flower for that month is the rose. Liam's life was beautiful like a rose, but not without its thorns of brain damage, blood clots, and seizures. On the altar I had also lit candles and placed our favorite pictures of him. I put out lollypops for offerings. I wanted to give him something sweet.

It was close to sunset when we took the roses and the Tsa-tsas out to the beach. We walked a short distance to Haystack Rock, a massive and ancient rock formation just offshore. As the surf rolled in we took turns throwing the tsa-tsas and the ashes of our son encapsulated in the beautiful little sculptures as far as we could into the foaming surf. I rolled up the legs of my jeans and let the cold Pacific numb my feet. I wished it could numb my heart too. When the ashes were all gone, I threw in the flowers. I even threw the identification tags from his ashes in the ocean too. On the shore I wrote a note in the sand that read, Liam we love you. The tide came in and took back with it the last two words, love you. It felt like an answer.

As the sun got lower, we walked back toward our motel. I went inside and got the blue box in which the funeral home had put Liam's ashes. We lit a small fire and burned the box. Back in our room we sat on the small patio and opened a bottle of champagne. It was a bottle we saved from our wedding day to drink when our first baby was born. In the days just after his birth, so flooded with unexpected trouble, we never drank it. As the stars grew brighter over the ocean, on the 49th day after our son's death, we drank a toast to his fortunate rebirth. We sipped quietly into the night.

Crossing the Border

As Chris and I sat in the warm guesthouse below the Dragoon Monastery eating dumplings and tea, I thought about not being attached. We drove the rest of the afternoon until the stars overtook the sky. We slept that night in a guesthouse in Lhatse, Tibet.

Driving the next day, I was struck by how wide and blue the sky was, and endless. When we stopped for lunch I was approached by a young girl who held her hands out to me. I thought she had a few rocks in her hands, but when I looked closer, I could see that they were nautilus fossils. I asked her in Tibetan as best I could where she had gotten them. Her hand swept over the unending rocky landscape. At one time in geologic history, the top of the universe was the bottom of the ocean. I bought two fossils from the girl to put on my altar when I got home. I held them in my open hand standing on the open Tibetan plateau. Everything is tied together in some way. I couldn't see the ocean from the Himalayas, but they were still connected. I couldn't hold my son anymore. Maybe I didn't need to.

We spent our last night in Tibet in the border town of Zhangmu. We had driven as far as we could.

In the morning we walked the last mile or so over the Friendship Bridge into Nepal. We bought a visa from the border guards. We decide to forgo the bus to Kathmandu and splurge on a taxi instead. We bargained the driver down to 2000.00 rupees, which was the exact amount of rupees I had left over from my previous trip.

As we descended in altitude, we shed layers of clothing. It seemed my sullen attitude was melting away too. The mountains dwindled to a fraction of their size. The snow receded to reveal green leaves. Winter melted away before my eyes. I felt better than I had in days. Our driver, Krishna, had a broad white smile that reminded me of the glaciers we had just come over. He was very friendly. We communicated — not with words, because we didn't share a language, but with gestures. We stopped a few times throughout the daylong drive. Krishna's brother, who was along for the ride,

bought some small, sweet oranges from a roadside vendor and shared them with us. We stopped for tea and all drank a cup. As the men smoked Bidi cigarettes, I squatted and helped a Nepalese woman with lovely bright eyes sort stones from a wide bowl of rice. In the car, when we continued driving, Chris conveyed to Krishna that he liked the music he was playing, and Krishna turned it louder. The sound of tablas and sitars swelled around us as dusk came on.

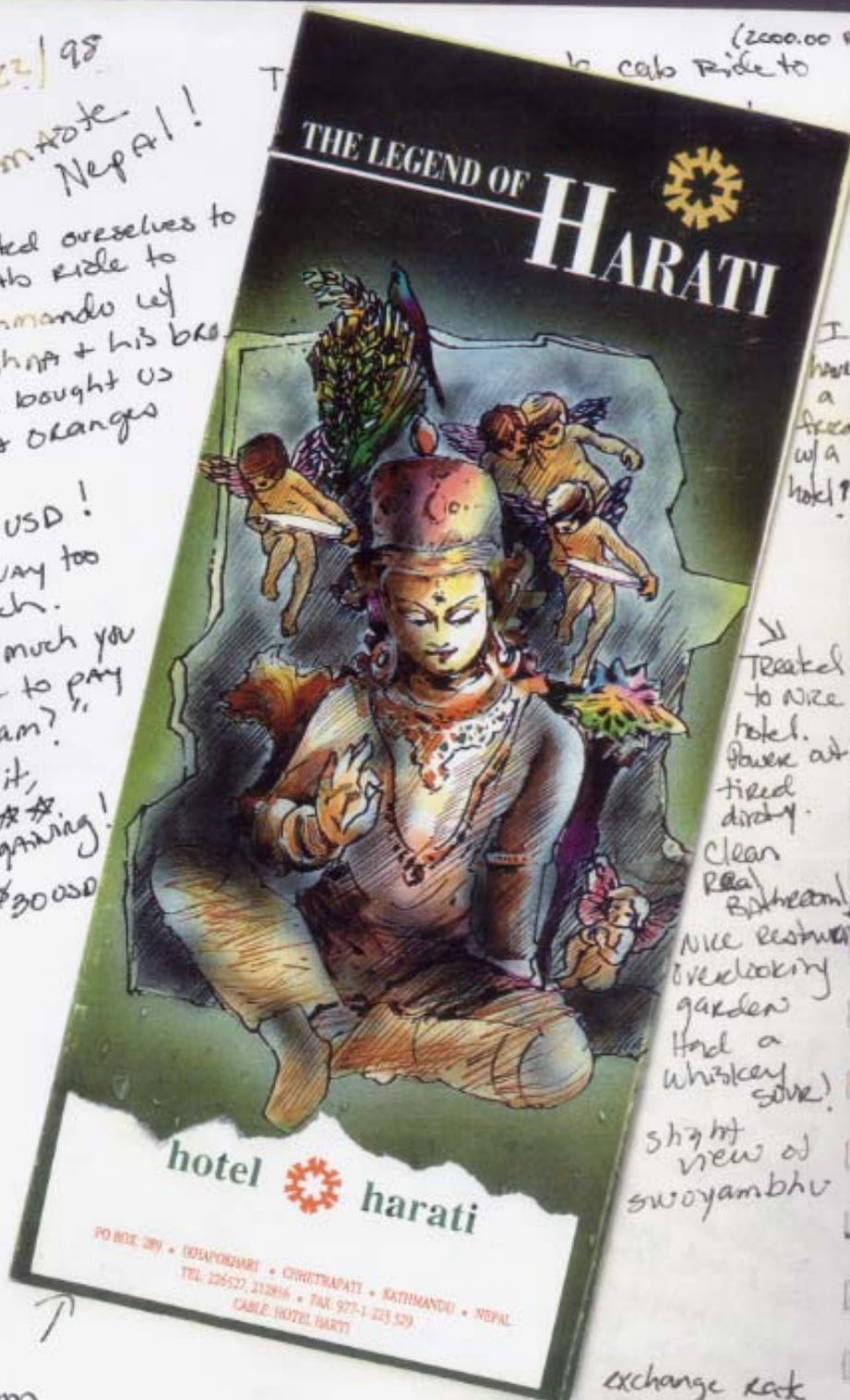
As we approached Outer Ring Road and Kathmandu, I saw a circus in a distant field. Houses and people swelled up like waves on the shore as we approached the sea of humanity that has been pooling at the base of the great Tibetan plateau for millennia.

11/22/98
Namaste
Nepal!!

Treated ourselves to
a cab ride to
Kathmandu w/
Kushna + his bro.
bro. bought us
Tea + oranges

\$60 USD!
Oh, way too
much.
"How much you
want to pay
madam?"
Love it,
BARGAINING!
PAID \$30 USD

sign
from
Liam



(2000.00 Rps)
to cab ride to

I
have
a
friend
w/ a
hotel?

→ Treated
to nice
hotel.
Power at
times
dirty.
Clean
Plea!
Bathroom!
Nice restaurant
overlooking
garden
Had a
whiskey
sake!
shyht
view of
swoyambhu

exchange rock
65-67 Rps - \$1

The Comfort of Small Votives and Veils of Smoke

We hadn't yet made arrangements for a hotel in Kathmandu. Krishna said he'd take us to his friend's hotel. We wound our way through the narrow streets of Kathmandu's old city, Chhetrapati. Everywhere I looked the shops and homes were lit by candles. Warm yellow light filtered out through the intricately carved wooden shutters. Pathways were lit by small twinkling votives. The glow gave a gentle feeling to a city with rough and ancient edges. We knew from experience that this was yet another power outage and there was no way to know when the light would return. "Kay garney" is a phrase that the Nepalese use often. It literally translates to, "What can you do?" It really means something more like, "There is nothing to be done, so find a way to deal with it."

People passed close to the cab's windows carrying lanterns that lit only portions of their faces; in the shadowy glow they appeared skeletal. It felt as if we had driven not only from Tibet to Kathmandu but back to an ancient time. I realized that many people had passed through these streets over many lifetimes and there was not one person who could give me a mustard seed like the one that the sad woman who went to the Buddha for help searched for. In each of those homes and shops that had stood for thousands of years, a light had gone out. For generations in those homes people lit candles on their altars for the brothers, and mothers, and daughters, and sons who had passed.

When we arrived at The Hotel Harati, which was very nice with a driveway and marble lobby, we knew right away that it would be more expensive than we had intended to pay. But we decided to at least go in and check the price. Luckily bargaining is a way of life in Asia. The pleasant front counter man told us the price per night was US \$60. I explained to him that we were sorry, but we'd have to go somewhere else because it was more than we could afford. He said, with a smile, "How much do you want to pay, madam?" He agreed to \$30 a night without dickering on price. We checked in.

I was happy to be staying in such a luxurious hotel. The room was clean with a western shower and toilet rather than two porcelain footprints on either side of a hole over a pipe for a toilet and a western shower instead of a showerhead attached to the middle of the wall without any basin or curtain to contain the water. Even though Chris thought \$30 was too expensive for our budget, we decided we'd stay at least a night or two to refresh ourselves. I had a shower and soaked in the hot water and candle glow that lit the white tiled room. We went to the restaurant on the main floor that overlooked a wide green lawn surrounded by a tropical garden. It felt like an oasis. We ordered dinner. I even had a whiskey sour, which seemed very posh for Kathmandu and the kind of travel to which we were accustomed.

Walking through the candle-lit lobby to the restaurant, I had picked up a brochure for the hotel, which I was in the habit of doing because I pasted bits and pieces, business cards, sugar packets, postcards, and used train tickets into my journal. The brochure told the legend of the deity Harati. I felt like we had come to the right place, and that we were on the right path.

Harati is a benevolent spirit connected to earthly fertility. She lived in the time of the Lord Buddha. Her love for children overflowed the bounds of her own family and drove her to kidnap children and take them away to an enchanted garden where she told them amazing stories. The distraught parents of the missing children appealed to the Buddha. To make Harati realize the pain she had been causing, he arranged for her favorite child to be taken away, making sure that Harati knew that it was the Buddha who had taken her child. Very quickly Harati realized what the Buddha was trying to teach her, and she went to him and begged him to give her child back. He did of course, but he also reprimanded her for taking the other children. She realized her mistake and returned the children, but she asked the Buddha to make her a special protector of all children. Buddha granted her request and made her the Patroness of Children and Protectress of his holy places. Her shrine stands next to the great Buddhist monuments of the Kathmandu Valley. Parents still invoke her patronage and protection for their children.

The brochure said that Harati's most sacred shrine was on Swayambhu's Hill, not too far from the hotel. I told Chris that I had to go there before we left. When we got to our room after dinner I remembered to look out the window and check the view. There was an obscured view of Swayambhu's Hill from our window. Like that view, the correct worldview was sometimes obscured. I was trying hard to see past my own pain, but everywhere I looked I saw the pain of others, and it wasn't any easier to take. In fact, it was beginning to overwhelm me. I thought I should become like Harati and find a way to help children and other parents who had lost children. I loved that she was a storyteller too. But I had no idea how to help myself or anyone else.

Remembering

Chris and I had been in Kathmandu together before. Several years earlier, after my Tibetan studies program ended, Chris came over to meet me. We barely knew each other and had no idea that we'd get married and have a son. We never would've imagined that we'd be back in Kathmandu again after his death. In our travels so far, this was the first country that we had been to in which we shared a history: being young and in love and childless. Seven years later we had a child, but we were childless. We were still young and still in love, but we were struggling to make love be enough to keep us together when the sadness we both felt was pushing us apart.

I was reminded of being with Chris when every hair on his head was not familiar to me as it was now. I remembered looking at him and just seeing his face. Now when I looked at him I could hardly see him at all. I saw Liam. Some days I couldn't take my eyes off of him because it was a comfort. Other days I could barely look at him because it was such a painful reminder. Some days, that longing and grief turned into anger that I turned on Chris. We fought a lot, not about anything real but about things like money or where to have lunch. He was so afraid to run out of money, to be left with nothing, to be stuck in the middle of nowhere. What I now realized was that maybe the money was just a substitute for him to hold onto, one thing, at least, which he could control. He wasn't really afraid to run out of money. He was afraid to feel what was already true; we had nothing and were nowhere without Liam. If he could keep us from running out of money then maybe he could emotionally reverse

the reality that we had already lost everything, that we were emotionally and almost spiritually bankrupt.

In Kathmandu we wandered the streets trying to find our way to houses and teashops we remembered. I also remembered feeling hopeful there, and energized, and alive. We met with old home-stay families and friends who stayed behind to live in Nepal after we returned to college. I was reminded of who we used to be. Liam changed us.

We would have to go back to Oregon, to our lives, and the history of Liam would be imbedded in our hearts and mind stream. Nothing would look the same to us again.

Mom's Lodge and Shrines Like Mine

I just wanted comfort, and I didn't care what it cost. I felt like I'd paid too much in this lifetime already. Running out of money and having to go home early seemed a small price to pay if I could be happy again, even if the happiness lasted only as long as a hot bath. But I knew it was important to Chris, so I agreed to change hotels, to exchange the luxury of a carpeted room with a proper bed, drapes, and western toilet for the friendly but exceptionally no-frills room at Mom's House Lodge. It was an unheated cinderblock room. There were two beds with straw mattresses covered by wool blankets, and no sheets. We would use our sleeping bags to stay warm. We did splurge and get a room with an attached bathroom of the standard Nepalese variety that included a squat-a-potty and an open shower. And it was fine. I liked that it made Chris happy to be saving money. I liked the simplicity of the room. It felt minimalist. We

could get by, make do, not be so attached. I loved that at the bottom of the entrance steps a man sat every day selling incense. As I came and went, I had to walk through a cloud of billowing, perfumed smoke. The fragrant white curtain reminded me of the veil between this life and the next. It reminded me that life is like smoke.

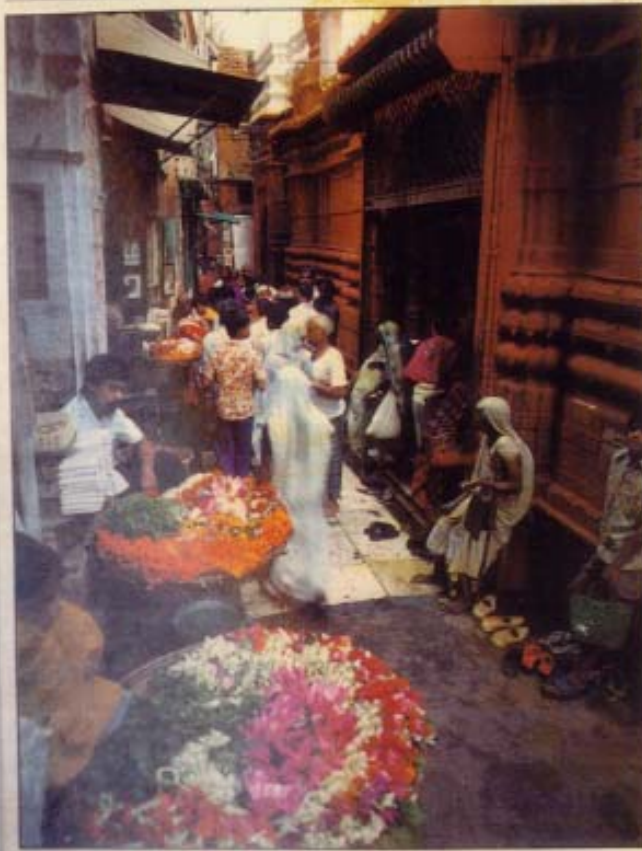
The day before Thanksgiving, as we were leaving Mom's Lodge, I ran into a colleague, M.D. I was surprised to see him, to say the least. It was strange that again we were running into people from our lives in Oregon no matter how far away we went. When I was pregnant with Liam and still working for Powell's Books, I had worked hard to be eligible for a promotion. I interviewed for a position in the Public Relations department where M.D. was the head of the department. As fate would have it, M.D. called to offer me the position I desperately wanted a few days after Liam passed away. I went to his office and said that I really wanted the job but I couldn't start right away because I needed some time. I asked if I could start in a couple of months. He said he couldn't wait because the holidays were coming up and he needed everyone in the store. I decided not to take the promotion. When I lost Liam, I lost everything personally and everything I worked for professionally too. Seeing M.D. standing right smack in front of me as I left the guest lodge the day before Thanksgiving was a shocking reminder of what I'd given up as well as lost. I tried to trust that I made the right choice to quit my job and travel around the world. I tried to trust that there was a reason I was on that path, at that time. I tried to be thankful for what I did have, time to know my son though it was not long enough, and memories.

Because it was Nepal and life goes at a different pace, it took us two more days of going back and forth to a travel agency to complete our travel arrangements to India.

As it turned out, we left Kathmandu without ever going to Harati's shrine on the hill. Maybe I wasn't up to what I might find: a shrine covered in flowers and offerings beseeching healing and protection for children, a shrine like the one I had for Liam since the day he came home from the hospital to die. It was too late for me to ask for healing and protection for my child. Kay garney. What can you do? There was nothing to be done.

BANARAS

INDIA



← spent one day at SIKHANATH - very quiet, clean, soothing

got very sick!
Thank goodness for Cipero

went off by myself to Ganga for awhile. got semi-harrassed by men. bought nose ring from River vendor

she actually tried to bargain w/ me for a glass & silver nose ring based on its quality. she asked 100 rs. I settled at 25 rs. after offering 10 rs. and spending 10 mins. w/ her finger in my nose trying to get the ring into the hole in my septum. I had not worn a ring in awhile. Yuck. I got very sick if this can stick. I saw her nose ring in the street.

The Charnel Ground

We wanted to go to India to see some of the Buddha's holy places like Lumbini, where he was born; and Bodhgaya, where he found enlightenment under an Acacia tree; and Sarnath, where he gave his first teaching, and turned the Wheel of Dharma for the first time. We didn't plan to stay in Varanasi, but it was a good place to start. We had decided to take a plane rather than go overland. Varanasi was central to the places we wanted to visit and the air ticket there was cheap. We wanted to stay in the old city near the burning ghats, which are concrete platforms with steps leading down into the Ganges River on which funeral pyres are built. During a funeral the steps are painted brightly and lit with thousands of candles. The Ganges, and the burning ghats on it, is one of the most sacred places on earth for Hindus. Many old people give up all their possessions and go to live the last days of their lives on the banks of the Ganges bathing in her waters and praying. Corpses bound in cloth and draped in marigolds and carnations are carried daily on the shoulders of family to the burning pyres on the ghats. Their bodies are consumed in the flames stoked with incense and prayer. The ashes are gathered and then scattered in the flowing waters where they mingle with the ashes of millions who have gone before them. We had no ashes to add to the river that is thought to originate in Tibet, but we had our tears and our wishes for a good rebirth to cast in. We had our sadness to set on the pyre to be consumed. We managed to find our way by bus and taxi to the Dashashwamedha Ghat; it was the main ghat on the river; its steps holding thousands. It was one of the oldest funeral ghats in one of the oldest cities on earth.

Scraps, Fire On Water, Mosaic Beauty

When we got out of the taxi, young men wanting to carry our bags for a fee swarmed us. We felt we could manage, but we accepted the offer of one of the boys in the crowd to lead us to a guesthouse so he could collect a fee from the owner.

“Right this way. Just ahead. Very good place,” were the things he said over his shoulder as he turned every so often, enticing us not to give up as we wound through the narrow streets that felt like gangways between the brick buildings. Arriving at the Yogini Guest House, we settled into our budget room, about a dollar a night. There were two rope cots with straw mattresses and no sheets. To make it feel more homey and to freshen the air of the dank, closed room I lit some incense that I had bought from the man at the bottom of the stairs in Kathmandu. I laid out my sleeping bag and set my pack on the bed for a pillow.

I was starting to feel as old as what Mark Twain had written about Varanasi. “It is older than history, older than tradition, even older than legend, and it looks twice as old as all of them put together.” Losing a baby is like losing your future. I wanted to just sit still and remember the past. But at the same time, that past was too hard and my body just wanted to keep walking, to not think at all.

Not far from the Yogini was another guesthouse called the Vishnu that had a veranda that overlooked the Ganges. I spent a good part of the first couple of days sitting there drinking tea, reading, and pasting together a patchwork of memories from torn bits of fliers, maps, postcards, and notes in my journal. The tearing, and pasting, and piecing together occupied my mind. The scraps were shattered bits of my days, and I was trying to put them together to make sense, to glue down the memories

before they faded, to make some kind of mosaic beauty of the chaos. The whole trip I was obsessed with collecting, and pasting, and preserving.

While sipping hot sweet tea at the Vishnu just after sunset one faded day, off in the distance on the Ganges, I saw the silhouette of several people, illuminated by lantern light, in a small boat. They lit small candles and set them adrift on the Ganges. The shore was teeming with worshipers as well. I watched as the boat drifted past me in the distance with the quick current, leaving a trail of fire in the water behind it. Liam was perfect and severely damaged all at the same time. I could love him, and I could let him go too. Fire could float on water.

A Rickshaw Ride Into Night

Sarnath was a relatively short distance from Varanasi so we were able to make a day trip to visit the place where Buddha gave his first teaching. The small community was quiet and clean compared to the gangways of Varanasi that were bursting with people, and dirt, and dogs, and noise. We spent a relaxing day walking around. Years ago we had attended a Kalachakra teaching there given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It was calming to be in Sarnath again, an oasis of calm in a crowded and chaotic city in India, and remember the many teachings we were fortunate to have had, just like living in the Dharma during the emotionally chaotic days of Liam's life was soothing to me.

In the rickshaw that we had hired to drive us home that evening, I lost it again. Our driver had stopped for the third time to make repairs to his bike for which he insisted we pay. Night was coming on. Being in a dark and unfamiliar place terrified

me. I had no idea how far we were from the guesthouse. I felt like we were at the driver's mercy.

"At this rate the driver will construct a whole new bike, part by part, before we reach Dashaswhwamedha ghat." I sarcastically joked with Chris.

I tried to control my growing panic, but my skin began to tingle as if I was going numb except for the tightness in my chest. A man approached our rickshaw and leaned on the driver's seat staring at me unabashed. I couldn't breathe. Chris leaned back to avoid him, leaving me fully exposed.

"What are you doing, Chris?" I yelled.

"What do you mean?" Chris shot back at me.

"Do something."

"What?"

"Anything. Something. Make him go away," I said. "You could at least lean forward to block his view."

Sighing, Chris tried to put himself between the man and me. The man just craned his neck around Chris.

"Leave me alone." I yelled at the man. I motioned with my hand for him to leave, but he just smiled and chortled as if I was some amusing caged animal.

"What do you want me to do," Chris said. "I don't want to fight with him." Finally the driver was ready to go. We left the man by the side of the road. The terror stayed with me.

"I didn't want to go to Bodhgaya or anyplace else in India with you," I yelled at Chris.

The men in India could be invasive and rude. A lot of them had no respect for women at all and thought nothing of grabbing and groping any part of a foreign woman they saw. I felt like I had no strength to fend them off myself. I felt like Chris would not protect me either. He thought I was being unreasonable, and maybe I was. Maybe that's not what I was mad about. Maybe the leering man was an incarnation of death that stood by my side from the moment that Liam was born. It wasn't logical that Chris could divert the staring eyes of a whole country any more than he could protect us, or Liam, from death. These thoughts didn't occur to me sitting in the rickshaw as my skin crawled while the leering emanation of death, disguised as an indifferent man with penetrating eyes, stared at me, looking in, I imagined, to my aching heart ready to rip it out just as death had stood by for the six and a half weeks that my son lived.

We rode in silence the rest of the way back to the guesthouse. The darkness closed around us. Yellow light from the kerosene lanterns spilled out of the many stalls along the roads where shopkeepers sat cross-legged on wooden platforms staring out and waiting to measure off portions of garam masal, saffron, or silk.

Holding It Back

I was alarmed as I passed through the jammed corridors walking back to the guesthouse from a walk I took alone on the Ganges. In the distance I could see that the people were clearing a path for something to pass. Everyone fell silent as they moved to one side or the other clinging to the rough stone buildings as if they couldn't get clear enough from what was moving by them. The crowd split in front of me. A man

swaddled in a white Punjabi and shawl held a muzzled creature that I'd never seen before by a rope leash. I couldn't identify the animal I saw coming toward me. It was not taller than a full-grown hog, but was as burly and hairy as a brown bear. I jumped into a doorway as it approached. Because I couldn't take my eyes off the animal, I knocked down an old woman who was in front of me. I stooped to help her up as the creature passed. Everyone on the street was silent and staring. It seemed as if the animal wanted to break free, there would be little chance that the man and his short rope could hold it back. Its size, about half as tall as the man, its dark eyes, the way it slightly bucked at the muzzle suggested it was capable of great harm. Later I learned that the animal I saw was a wolverine, which is said to be the fiercest and strongest animal on earth.

After the people in the narrow street began to move again, I continued on to the guesthouse. I turned a corner into a darker alleyway that led away from the crowd. I watched my swollen feet in black sandals, stepping over litter, and piles of shit, and a stagnant puddle with a dead rat. I realized looking at my feet in the filth that I was unable to look up for very long at the path in front of me. I forced myself to look up, but imbedded in the vendor's colorful displays of fruit, and silk, and incense, and tea, glass bangles, and fresh vegetables, I saw old people who were dying, beggars with weeping sores, children who were stunted and shrunk by hunger. The ancient city, the sacred place where people came to leave their dead, was pressing in on me. Inside I felt like my mind was becoming a dark creature, unknown to me. I was tethered and in control, but only by a short rope of willpower that might not be enough.

An Emotional Back-up, An Unexpected Exit

For the next three days I couldn't leave my bed. I was delirious with fever. I only got up to squat or retch in the bathroom a few feet from my bed. When I was awake I watched a little mouse that scurried around the room, or the moon that would pass slowly over the carved wooden shutter. Chris came back to the room several times to check on me. Once he brought me some chicken and Nan, round flat bread cooked in a Tandori oven, but I wasn't able to eat. I lived on Cipro, an anti-diuretic, and water.

On the third day of my incapacitating bout with what was probably amoebic dysentery, the toilet pipe backed up, filling the bathroom an inch deep. We called the manager to come to the room to fix it. He said he would go get someone from the lower caste to clean it. He made a joke that they would touch anything. The lowest caste in India is said to be untouchable. Orphans too are said to be untouchable, because of their great misfortune that caused them to lose their parents. I felt untouchable too. Kids who lose parents have a name. Husbands and wives who lose their spouses have a name. What do you call parents who lose their babies? It's an unnamable situation of despair. The name, widow or orphan, at least recognizes the beloved person who lived. It seemed unfair that when someone asked me if I had children, I would have to choose between saying no, which seemed to betray Liam's memory, or say yes, but he died. And then I'd be stuck in an awkward situation because most people don't know what to say or how to respond to an answer like that. At worst some people resent that you told them and think that you should not talk about such a loss.

There was no other room in the Yogini for us to move to. It was clear that the filth that had backed up into our room wouldn't be cleaned and fixed for some unknowable amount of time. What did that signify? Move on or be flooded with thoughts, feelings, emotions that I'd painfully been trying to purge? Maybe I couldn't bear the emotional toll any more of my grief. I literally couldn't keep anything down. I needed to let go. I had no bones or ashes to leave at that charnel ground, but maybe I was ready to leave behind some of my grief.

We moved to the Ajay guesthouse, a short walk away that was right on the Ganges and had a nice rooftop view of the city and the river. Before long we learned that the good view didn't come without a price. There was a group of monkeys that had staked their claim on it first. They would swing down from the nearby trees, scamper over the rooftop and snatch food from the tables and jump on people. More than losing food or a pen from the table, I was afraid of being bitten; the monkeys carried all of India's diseases. Their screeching pinched my nerves. It was impossible to sit still and relax because I was constantly looking over my shoulder for the wild monkeys to attack.

The next morning I felt well enough to join Chris on the rooftop café and try to eat some tea and toast. The monkeys seemed out of control. Another traveler who must have been staying there for some time, at least long enough to devise a plan to deal with the monkeys, had a cap gun. Every so often when the monkeys got too close to his breakfast, he picked it up and fired it. The Monkey Gun Man helped a young boy from the guesthouse fly a kite in between bites and shots. Chris and I passed some time chatting with the other guests, but I still felt unsettled.

Chris and I talked about a plan for the next few days. We alternated between arguing and discussing where we would go next and how we would get there. I'm not sure what it was that broke the short tether reining in my mind like a wild elephant. The boy let out the slack on the kite; it sailed up into the blue sky. The man fired another shot, and I bolted out of my chair and ran down the steps. I couldn't stop myself from running. I had to get out of Varinasi.

Chris ran behind me. "What's wrong? Wait. Stop."

"I can't take this. I'm leaving. I have to leave." I repeated like a counterproductive mantra and kept running. I started to pack my bag immediately and frantically once I reached the room.

"Just calm down. We'll go, just calm down, so we can make a plan." Chris agreed to leave, though I'd still not given him a sane reason. I laid on the bed and tried to breathe.

It was 8 a.m. We went to the travel agency we saw near the Yogini guesthouse. The agent told us that there was only one train a week to Lumbini, but luckily it was the right day; it would be leaving late that afternoon. He told us we needed to go to the train station to buy the ticket. When we got there the man at the ticket window said that train had no first class accommodations. I didn't think I could take an 11-hour train ride in a crowded third class car, so we didn't buy tickets.

By the time we got back to the agency to see what other plans we could make, it was 3 p.m. The agent told us the options we had for flying further south in India. We also asked about going north to Delhi where we could pick up the next leg of our

round-the-world tickets and continue on to Germany. We weighed our options. The next flight to Delhi, connecting to Frankfurt, Germany, would be leaving at 4:20 p.m.

We decided to try, even though it seemed impossible that we'd be able to make it given the pace of life in India, which requires, sometimes, a half hour to get a cup of tea. We paid for the tickets anyway and ran back to the hotel to get our packs while the agent called to get us a taxi. When we got back to the agent, we groaned when he told us that the airport was about an hour away and we'd have to stop on the way to pick up the nonrefundable tickets. Our plan seemed doomed, but we hopped in the cab and hoped for the best.

The streets were clogged. We were at a standstill not five minutes into the ride. I reminded the driver that we had less than an hour to catch a plane. He somehow made his way through the intersection clogged with people, rickshaws, cows, and vendors with their carts. He picked up speed and started driving fast.

"We'll either be dead in a car accident or in the plane, but either way we'll be leaving India today," I joked to Chris. Either way would be fine with me, I thought. When the driver stopped to pick up the ticket, he told us that the flight had been delayed till 4:50 p.m., which gave us some hope. We got to the airport just in time to walk on to the plane as they shut the door behind us.

When we got to Delhi we had some time before our connection. I was feeling less panicked and started to feel bad that Chris had to give up his plans for continued travel in India. Part of me also wanted to stay and go south. I wanted to see the Buddha's holy shrines. I also really wanted to go to the Maldiv Islands and explore the Kerala region of India, which is supposed to be so beautiful and relaxing.

“I don’t know, Chris,” I said. “Maybe we should fly to Kerala.”

“You need to decide, Katie,” he sighed. “I don’t want you to get mad at me if we go south and you’re miserable.”

We asked at the ticket counter about the price and available flights. Before I could make up my mind, my gut made the decision for me. It was wrenching again and I needed to find a bathroom quickly. I didn’t feel in any condition to take on India and its mixed bag of agony and delights any longer. I decided for us to go on to Europe.

My seat was on the aisle. I didn’t mind not having a window; I’d seen enough. I shut my eyes as the plane took off and climbed. We left India; I left something of myself there, but I took something with me too.

Hard Birth

“This existence of ours is as transient as autumn clouds. To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance. A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky. Rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain.”

The Diamond Sutra

I Was Prepared For Everything Except For What Actually Happened

Being pregnant with Liam was like desperately wanting something and having it all at the same time. It was like being safe, and happy, and not lonely, and beautiful for the first time in my life. It was like the feeling of waking up to the full sun pouring through my bedroom window, warm, bright. People commented on how bright I looked and healthy, and, yes, radiant, and I believed them because I felt it too. When I looked in the mirror, for a change, I liked what I saw. My perception of self changed as I changed, from the inside out. I could not have asked for a better pregnancy. I felt strong. Once the vomiting, which was constant, stopped and the exhaustion of the first trimester subsided, I felt great. Throughout the next few months I was filled with clarity of purpose and a sense of calm that seemed to envelop me like steam rising from a cup of chamomile tea cradled in the palms of my hands. Work had become extremely busy with impending special events and author appearances for which I was in charge. The stress of the long hours spent on my feet began to take its toll. At six months the exhaustion and vomiting of the early months of pregnancy returned. It was clear that the best thing to do for the baby and myself was to reduce my hours at work despite pangs of guilt for not being stronger. Fewer hours was a tremendous relief

and allowed me to get in some extra swimming. Floating weightless in the water was an ideal respite.

I read every book I could find on pregnancy and natural childbirth; that's what I was planning on. I skipped all the small sections in every book about complications. I wasn't planning on having any of those. We took birthing classes and learned all the techniques for handling a totally natural childbirth. We learned all the right questions to ask to avoid any unnecessary interventions. Is mom O.K.? Is baby O.K.? We were totally unprepared. The classes and the readings had not prepared us for what would happen if the answer to those questions was no.

I had always dreamed of being a mom. As I grew out and the due date grew nearer, I struggled with the dream and the reality of being 'just a mom.' I planned for staying at home and at the same time actively worked toward, and applied for, a promotion at work. I really wanted them both at the same time. I didn't want to decide.

I had other dreams too. Not dreams of ambition about work and self-definition, but real in-the-dark-night-dowsing-the-future-dreams. These are the ones I remember: I was in labor. I was calling for help but no one came in time. I delivered the baby myself, but the baby is only 'half-done,' I thought; it had a tail like a mermaid. I dreamed of labor often. I was usually calling for help. I dreamed of the Dalai Lama and other high lamas often. They offered me food and invited me to be near them. I didn't place too much import on the dreams at the time. I had been attending teachings with Geshe Kelsang. I chalked the dreams up to residue of the teachings at play in my midnight mind.

I had other fears too. Instead of attributing them to nightmares I assigned them a hormonal origin. Once I was hysterical because I knew that one day my baby would want to go to the park alone, and I wouldn't be able to protect him. I cried because my nipples were a bit flat and might make nursing difficult. I was sure that my baby wouldn't be able to eat because of me. "I won't be able to feed him."

The Unexpected, A Mystery Moment

On June 10th Chris and I went to see K.P. at 3:30 for my 39th week check-up. For the second week in a row my blood pressure was slightly elevated, but K.P wasn't alarmed because the week before my blood and urine had already been tested to rule out any complications. The tests all came back perfect. At the end of the visit, K.P. tested my blood pressure again to see if it had come down, like it did the week before. She also had another listen with the Doppler.

That was when the flags went up. We heard the baby's heartbeat decelerate. K.P. was cautious. She wanted a reading from a monitor before I left the office to check for fetal heart rate and movement. The technician adjusted the monitor a couple of times; with her hands she shook my belly vigorously. The baby's heart was beating. But the baby was too still. Unresponsive.

K.P. wanted to admit me to the hospital across the street to be monitored. She reassured us and we tried not to be alarmed. At the entrance to the hospital, I pulled on Chris' arm.

“I just want to stop here. When we go through those doors everything will be different. When we come out we will have our baby. I know K.P. isn’t going to let us leave until our baby is born one way or another.”

“I know,” Chris agreed.

Taking my hand as the automatic glass doors opened before us, we went in together.

Early the next morning we decided on K.P.’s advice to induce labor. As my contractions came on stronger over the next few hours, our baby’s heartbeat got weaker. After every contraction his heart was decelerating more. While K.P. and the OB/GYN who had been consulting on my care for the last couple of days stood by my bedside, the baby’s heart took a turn for the worse, which the doctor could see reflected on the monitoring strip. “We have to deliver him now,” she said.

Liam Christopher Morton was born by Cesarean section on Thursday, June 11th, 1998. Liam was delivered in four minutes at 6:09 p.m. When they took him out of me on the operating table, he needed to be resuscitated. The pediatrician, and nurses, and attendants worked methodically on him. Chris hovered over the warming bed that Liam was lying on. I was still being sewn back together, vomiting and shivering on the table under the bright surgical lights. They were so busy I had to ask if it was a boy or a girl. They held him up to my lips so that I could give him a kiss. I’d never felt any joy to compare to the saturating bliss when my lips first touched his forehead, so warm and soft it felt like kissing a rose petal in the sun. Then they handed him to his father who carried him directly to the intensive care unit. Liam didn’t cry; he never moved. The doctors didn’t know what was wrong with him so they waited, and we waited.

It was hours before I could see him again. I couldn't move my legs due to the spinal block they had given me before the c-section. I kept trying to wiggle my toes, desperate to make them move. I was still in a morphine-induced state of mind that kept me from comprehending Liam's dire condition. I was aware of only my euphoria because my wished-for baby was finally in the world. Finally, around 11:00 p.m., my legs had enough feeling that I could move them. I had to get up; I couldn't go to sleep without seeing him. I could feel the blood drain from my face. I heard the nurse say to someone, "Get the smelling salts." I made it to the wheelchair beside my bed without blacking out, but I had to sit very still and let the wave of nausea and dizziness wash over me. Chris wheeled me very slowly into the intensive care nursery.

I knew instantly when I saw Liam that he was in trouble. I put my hand on his head and exhaled. I heard very clearly a voice in my head say, he has brain damage, he is going to die, and we are going to have to start over. I was afraid. The thought was so loud I thought I had actually said it. I was ashamed by the morbid thought that shot through me. I took his hand, unfurling his long slender fingers, and wrapped them around mine.

Transferred to Sacred Ground

On Saturday somewhere in the dawn hours the nurse and doctor came to my room and asked me to come to the nursery right away. Despite the sleeping pill I took because I hadn't slept in three days, I was alarmed and awake right away. Liam had begun to have seizures and they needed to transfer him to the NICU at Emmanuel

Hospital across town. Chris went with Liam in the ambulance. My mother helped me pack my things and drove me over there too.

We stayed on the unit with Liam for a week. Three meetings punctuated the whole experience in the NICU:

Late in the afternoon on the day Liam was transferred, we were called to a meeting with the neonatologist, the cardiologist, the cardiac surgeon, and the neurologist who were all assessing Liam's conditions and ready to give us the diagnosis. The prognosis was not good; it was the unthinkable worst. Liam had a fatal heart condition. They could operate, but he might die, and they couldn't repair the severe brain damage that was already done. They doubted he would be able to think. Later when I read the doctors' reports they put it even more clinically, "Liam's condition is not conducive with life."

Our Lama came to the hospital to give Liam a blessing. He held my hands as I cried and he reminded me to have courage. I asked him what mantras I should recite, and he said I could say some Tara mantras if it made me feel better, but that didn't matter so much. "This is the Dharma," he said. "This is what you practice for." The teachings that the Buddha had given thousands of years before in India were the words that Geshela had taught me. One of the Buddha's most famous teachings was the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. It was the teaching that we had been getting from Geshela while I was pregnant with Liam. At the last teaching we attended, before Liam's birth, Geshela spoke about a chapter that described how we lose control of ourselves. Our minds becomes like a herd of wild elephants stampeding madly,

causing great harm and danger. Geshela told me to have control, and to have courage. Those words were the wisdom that protected me during my son's slow death

We met with I.S., the nurse, and Doctor M., the neonatologist, to take Liam off life-supporting drugs, and oxygen, and monitoring machines. Huddled around Liam's body, Chris and I held his hands as the neonatologist went through a check list of heroic measures that we had to decide to request for Liam or not. Tears streamed down our faces. Tears welled in I.S.'s and Doctor M.'s eyes too. Defibrillation? No. Drugs? No, except for anti-seizure medication. Oxygen Machine? No. Blow-by Resuscitation? No. Nasal Gastronomic Nutritional Support? My breath caught in my throat, my heart skipped. "Oh my god, what are you saying. I don't understand what you're asking. I don't know what to do." Chris understood fully but couldn't make that decision yet either. He took my other hand in his. I.S. calmed me with a soft touch on my shoulder, and a steady gaze, "It's O.K., you don't have to decide this now. It probably won't come to that."

When we left the hospital to bring Liam home under Hospice care, the doctors said that if they had to estimate how much time Liam had to live they would say a week, or maybe two at the most. It was possible he could live longer, but not probable. Who can say anything for sure?

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12/4/98
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 will take care.



Walking
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 Woman
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 by resting
 fountain
 singing oper.
 Beautiful!



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DAS WIRTSHAUS

Tisch: 22
 Bed. 7 Rg.: 88



Apfelwein klein 0,4 l
 Kutscher Alt 0,4 l
 Carolus Doppelbock 0,4 l
 Selters Mineralwasser 0,25 l
 Warmer Apfelstrudel
 Gemischte Würstchenplatte
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Walked to
 Sachsenhausen
 and went to
 Zum Greßelt
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Hot Bath 1 before bed.

The Surprising Comfort of Snowflakes

“God! Art is long, but our life so short.” (Faust 1) Goethe

Arriving in Frankfurt, we chose the Manhattan Hotel from an information board at the airport; it seemed like it would be an easy walk from the station once we took the train into town. If the first thing a person noticed about India was how old it was, the first thing I noted about Frankfurt was how clean it was, at least comparatively. For some reason, it was an overwhelming relief to be in such a clean place. My mind was so cluttered with the struggle to find clarity on the recent past that to be in a surrounding that had some order and reason lifted a weight from me that I didn't know I was carrying. In Germany even the public trash system was ordered with clean, clear directions to follow. On almost every corner there was a bin for trash and a bin for recycling. When we checked into the hotel it was early in the morning. As we got off the elevator we started down the darkened hallway, and after a few steps our passage was suddenly illuminated. The lights were on motion sensors to save energy. Chris was impressed that even the hotels were environmentally minded. I just found it comforting to know that for a while I could count on my dark path being lighted without any effort from me. After traveling through so much darkness and disorder, a thing as simple as a well-lit hall was a relief.

Our room was modern and austere in its design. The beds were black lacquer box platforms with plush mattresses and fluffy down comforters. The bathroom had a huge tub and, almost immediately, I sank into it up to my nose. I floated in the hot water

and thought of Liam in my womb; I wished that I could have him there again where he was safe, before the beginning of his long dying that started the minute he was cut free from the maternal ocean of his amniotic sac.

When I was able to drag myself from the bath, I was still feeling pretty sick. I only had energy to crawl under the sheets and wrap myself in down — sightseeing would have to wait. Chris didn't seem too disappointed. He was pretty tired too. I was completely drained, and I slept for most of the day and the early evening.

I felt a bit better after sleeping the day away, so we walked several blocks to a main square to find something to eat. We treated ourselves to a nice dinner at a restaurant called Oscar's with dark mahogany woodwork, candles, and stemware. A really nice meal is the one indulgence on which Chris will happily spare no expense. Chris ordered wine and a couple of courses. I ordered less since it was the first time in almost a week that I was able to eat anything at all. I remember a pasta dish with a soothing cream sauce. Though we had been together almost constantly for the last five months, there were times when I think both of us felt like the only company we were keeping was our own private demons. We splurged and ordered a dessert. It felt good to be sharing something sweet again, and be enveloped in pale candlelight, and each other's company.

Angels All Around

In the main marketplace the next day we strolled through the shopping plaza. The window displays were ready for Christmas. It was cold. I was layered in all the

warmer clothes that I brought in my pack topped with a Gore-Tex jacket. We didn't expect to be in Europe till later in the year, so I wasn't really prepared for the weather. I found the cold comforting, like I'd been sweltering with a high fever that had finally broken. The air smelled crisp. We passed bakeries. The smell of bread and strudels filled me with warmth. I didn't stick out so much in the streets as an obvious tourist, so the anonymity and lack of unwanted attention from the locals I passed was a relief. I felt like nothing and I wanted to be left alone to walk through the streets unnoticed like a ghost.

The shop windows were lavishly displayed. There were nativities and angels all around. I don't believe in heaven, but sometimes I wished I did. In India it made me sad to think that Liam could be reborn into a state of poverty like much of what I saw. I don't believe in God, but I believe in compassion. I don't believe in messiahs, but I do believe in the power of even the smallest infant to change the world. I know that one had changed mine. I believe that a human birth is precious, but I don't believe in preserving a life at all costs, especially if the cost means that a person's spirit will be trapped in a body that doesn't function well enough to allow them to make meaningful relationships with people and the world around them. I had left the land of the Dharma, but the Dharma was still in me.

The festive and bright decorations of Christmas were cheerful, but a sad reminder for me; a good part of the world was celebrating the birth of a miraculous baby boy. I was missing my own, who passed powerfully through my life like a shooting star, as I stumbled ahead on my long mourning walk around the world. The lighted carousels of the winter markets twirled around with smiling children.

Christmas was a celebration of one special birth. I found joy in that season celebrating rebirth.

That evening we had an early dinner at a quaint restaurant called Das Wirtshaus. As we were ending our meal with warm apple strudel, a light snow began to fall. The flakes closest to the window glowed golden with the light flooding out from the restaurant. In the distance across the square the flakes stood out, specks of white, against the velvet night. Holding a snowflake, you can see the beauty of a storm, small, delicate, complex, unique, fragile, and melting away before your eyes. Liam was like a perfect snowflake in a storm.

Walking though the almost deserted cobblestone square, the tiny flakes touched us and dissolved. Through the falling snow I saw a woman in the distance standing next to a fountain. She was lit from behind by a streetlight, and all I could see was her silhouette. Her voice was ethereal, the most beautiful I'd ever heard in my life. Maybe she was really an angel. She sang an aria in German. I imagined it must have been a song about love, or loss, or a child. Her body was encased in darkness, but the voice coming from it was so light, and clear, and enchanting. I was surprised that such awesome beauty radiating such joy, and strength, and compassion could come from such a dark, shadowed place.



quintest town
in universe



visited Brugge w/
danny a couple of
years ago. never
to return
w/ chris

Van Memling tot Pourbus

15/8 - 6/12/1998
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zondag
18:00

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met a very sweet girl
named Katarina on the train.
she was 14 and heading to
Prague. I see her
very sophisticated
and charming

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TRAINS IN EUROPE so easy!

Memories like Poppies and Ammunition

Our plane reservations had us scheduled to leave from Frankfurt to Vienna in a few days. We decided to make a side trip by train to Belgium.

Part of Brugge's allure is its history. Some of the castles and buildings date back to the medieval age. It is one of the few towns to be spared from the destruction of World War I. The town gave me some perspective on my relationship with Chris. It was a town surrounded by destruction. The nearby towns and fields held the blood of thousands of young men, some not really more than boys. The countryside absorbed the tears, and fears, and frustrations, and rage, of widows and suddenly childless mothers. But still in the heart of all that sadness was a place of comfort, a picturesque town of castles and canals surrounded by walls and moats. When we arrived in the evening the rain was falling hard and cold. Though we didn't think the 'T Geerwijn Bed and Breakfast was far from the train station, we got a taxi to spare ourselves from the downpour. It was a quaint building with a pointed brick façade that was typical of the houses in that part of the country. We checked in and spent the night in a warm bed listening to the rain fall all around us.

The next few days were spent wandering around the town square under the massive belfry. I bought chocolates and Chris indulged, as did I, in the rich Belgium Doupple and Tripel Bock beers for which they are famous. The season was beginning to turn. The trees lining the canals reflected on the still, narrow waterways. The green was leaving their leaves, but their passing as the foliage began to die was no less beautiful than the tree in full bloom. Ironically, it was even more beautiful with the

reds and yellows that signaled the end of the season, and the end of fall. Death can be a thing of beauty, a gift. At one canal I stopped to look at the town sitting on the motionless canal. The trees had all gone bare. The line between the real trees and buildings, and their reflection was nearly imperceptible. The differences between you and me, us and them, life and death, nature and humans, enemy and friend, are as much an illusion as the trees reflected on the surface of the canal. Life and death are part of a whole cycle and one can't exist without the other. One raindrop on the surface of the canal and the whole image will change, ripples circling outward.

Hinges, Family Portraits

Several times during our stay in Brugge it was raining too hard for us to go out and walk around. We stayed in the B&B, read, ate from my stash of chocolate. I read To Kill a Mockingbird, which I had picked up in the New Delhi airport. I felt a certain empathy for Jem and his sister. In a similar way that they feared Boo Radley, who lived in the house down the street from them, because he was unknown and hidden, I had feared the unknown moment of death that was hidden in my own home. But when death came, it was gentle and simple, like Boo.

On dryer days we passed time in museums, on tours, and in the local restaurants and shops, indulging in the delicacies of waffles, fries with mayonnaise, chocolate, and beer. We visited an art museum that was housed in one of the city's castles. In it, a huge gothic chapel had been incorporated into the exhibit. It was interesting to see it presented that way. As if worship and art could be looked at in the same way. The sand-colored stone walls were intricately carved and hollowed out into

recessed coves for prayer. The sculptures and artisans left a chiseled testimonial that even in hard places there could be made a space for looking beyond this worldly realm for a better place, for inspiration, and for answers. The paintings were dark, ornate, and complex like lives. Triptychs and diptychs were the convention, as if to convey that any situation or scene was far too full to be communicated in one frame, or along one narrative line. The past and present of any event are hinged and flexible. Past lives are like many framed paintings; our many lives are hinged together. Birth and death are the frames that separate the canvases of lives.

History

We went on a daylong tour of the battlefields of the Great War known as the Fields of Flanders. Our guide Lode was born in the nearby town of Passchendaele, which was one of our stops. In Passchendaele we stood in the damp cold air and listened as Lode told us of the four-year-long battle that played out on the field in front of us. Hundreds of men died fighting over a few miles of land. Over the duration of the war hundreds of thousands of lives were lost. The land and the weather itself was just as awesome an enemy as the attacking German army. In the rainy seasons more men died from drowning in the muddy trenches where they ate, and slept, and fought than were killed by gunfire. A labyrinthine path of wooded planks was set up for the field service to cart away the wounded and dead. To fall off the planking could mean death for the aid workers too; they could drown next to the wounded they went to rescue. So much suffering in such little space seemed unfathomable to me. Lodes told of these events with passion and detailed rendering because his grandparents and

parents had lived through the war. This was not history to him but family lore passed down. His grandmother lived in Ypres, the town where young soldiers left for the front lines. While her husband was fighting the war, she fled that town with her fourteen children and one wheelbarrow. For a woman to make such a desperate move, you could imagine, Lode explained, how bad the suffering was, not only for the soldiers, but for the locals too. The farmers of the area still dig up bullets and unexploded bombs in the poppy-dotted fields. The poppies are now a symbol of remembrance. As we drove down the narrow roads between the fields, Lode pointed out live shells resting against electrical poles. There is a company that scours the back roads looking for live ammunition to pick up and bring to a repository. To me those bombs seemed like the seeds of our karma. An action can explode immediately or it can be buried in the fields of our future, and even then it might not detonate. It might just be transferred to the repository of an even more distant future. Bombs were nestled in my poppy mind field. We wandered through abandoned trenches and an Australian dugout that had been recently discovered, complete with bunk beds. We walked among the peaceful graves on fields that rumbled with battle for years. We walked through craters on the preserved and infamous Hill 60, nicknamed “Hell with the lid off” because of the savage battles to control the coveted view. Some of the craters were large enough to be seen from the air.

At times during the tour I was moved to tears by Lode’s stories. I felt dwarfed by the open fields and sky, but Lilliputian when Lode recreated before my eyes the lives and deaths that were played out on the ground beneath my feet. I was at the same

time assuaged and distraught by the realization that life does go on despite disproportional suffering, irreplaceable losses, and life-altering battles.

Impossible futures

One evening we went to dinner in the marketplace that was only a two-minute walk from our B&B. We were probably halfway through our meal when I noticed a long table in the center of the room. At one end was a couple with an infant. At the other end there were six disabled adults with a chaperone. I was stunned by the juxtaposition of the two parties seated at the same table. To anyone else it might not have seemed so ironic, but to me it looked like the extreme possible outcomes of my life had been set out in the pans of a scale. Hinged together at that table were two inaccessible futures of some alternate existence that wasn't my story. They were possibilities of a life, but not my life.

By the tracks

When we were packing to leave Brugge I discovered that my bag of exposed film was missing. I had shot over 75 rolls of film.

"How could you lose them, Chris?" I was furious. "You know how important those pictures are to me."

"Well, why didn't you carry them, then?" he snapped.

"I didn't have any room in my pack. I guess I should have made room since you don't care about my feelings." I was devastated.

"How do you know I lost them?"

“You had them last.” I was speaking about the rolls of film, but I unintentionally I had given him the unreasonable responsibility of care-taking my feelings too; they were more than I could bear.

As we walked to the train station in a swell of light flurries, we fought the whole way. On the platform, waiting for the train, I noticed for the first time how dangerously close I always stood to the tracks and the oncoming trains as if I was poised for a decision. When we took our seats we discussed seriously the option of not staying together. I wasn’t certain that we would find peace, either, with our loss or with each other.

In Belgium I learned to appreciate that it’s all–life’s choices and possible outcomes, our stories, and our history (his-story)—so mediievally ornate and gilded, and gothically dark; they are sweet like chocolate, and as desperate and frightening as the bloody battles at the Fields of Flanders. Buried in our memories is our past as vital as poppies and unexploded ammunition.



"What the
Catastrophe knows to
be the end; the
butterfly knows to be
the beginning."
Turner



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“Insights emerge not chiefly because they are ‘intellectually true’ or even because they are helpful, but because they have a certain form, the form that is beautiful because it completes what is incomplete in us.”

Rollo May

When we checked out of the hotel in Frankfurt we forgot to return the key. That turned out to be a stroke of luck for us, because we wouldn't have gone back to the hotel if we hadn't. Since we were there, I insisted that we ask to go to the room again to look for the missing film. Chris thought I was nuts and that there'd be no hope of finding it, but he indulged my whim and even said he wanted to go up to the room and look for it himself. I literally jumped for joy when he got off the elevator with the bag of film. Chris was thrilled too, not so much about the film, but because I wasn't angry anymore and he was off the hook. It's amazing how quickly emotions and thoughts can turn around. I guess it's true that the mind is like the sky; sometimes it's covered with clouds and darkness, and just as quickly as it became obscured, it can lift and be bright again. I was learning that marriage was a bit like that too. Together we were learning to weather the unexpected storms and enjoy the bright days.

We had an evening to kill before our flight left for Vienna in the morning. We stayed at the vintage Victoria Hotel. We strolled the tree-lined streets of the Sachsenhausen section of the town, which is the older, more prestigious section. We wandered in one of Europe's most well-known Christmas markets just a block off the Main River. In the market the square was lit by of hundreds of strung bulbs and carousel lights. The night around us was filled with a honey-yellow glow. Again, I was

struck by the sad beauty of the carousel. The ponies went up and down like emotions, and the gilded parade went round and round like life after life on the karmic wheel. Every day, every fight, every kind gesture could be a beginning or an end. Or both.

Vienna was elegant with gilded coffee and opera houses. The holiday ball season would be starting soon, and while we wouldn't be in India celebrating Buddhist style, which would be not celebrating Christmas at all, I began to anticipate the holiday and the prospect of attending a traditional Viennese Ball with chamber music and dancing. Since we thought we'd stay a while, we booked accommodations for an efficiency apartment with Lauria Apartments, Rooms, and Hostels, rather than booking a hotel. The first day we did a bit of shopping to stock the small fridge and settled into the little suite.

Books and Papers and Communion

One of my passions is bookstores. I particularly like Shakespeare and Co. in Paris—an outpost for the expatriates of the '20s, and still a refuge for wayfarers, writers, and wanderers to the Left Bank today. I knew that there was a sister store in Vienna, so we set out on a little mission to find it. It was a good excuse to get us out and about in town to see what we would find. At the bookstore, I decided on When Nietzsche Wept by Yalom, since Nietzsche was one of Vienna's most well-known residents. Plus, I was struck by the similarities between Buddhism and existentialism. That book turned out to be a beacon of sorts for me. It is a novel about the imagined therapeutic relationship between Freud, Nietzsche, and Josef Breuer, one of the founding fathers of psychoanalysis. Over the next few days I devoured the book. In

stately coffee houses, drinking café Viennese served in small cups on silver trays, I also perused the many daily papers hung on wooden dowels. In the International Herald Tribune I read about the impeachment of President Clinton, the crisis of which didn't prevent the bombing of Iraq, relationships, betrayal, and war.

The icy rain continued to fall all during our stay; we were turned in to the cafes, and my mind was turned inward, too. I don't remember a lot of the sights and sounds of Vienna as well as I remember what I read there.

In When Nietzsche Wept, Yalom wrote that growth was not the only reward of pain, that creativity and discovery were begotten there too. He quoted Nietzsche: "One must have chaos and frenzy within oneself to give birth to a dancing star." I felt for sure that I had given birth to a dancing star when Liam passed from this world to the next, but now that that star was beyond my reach, the chaos and frenzy seemed to consume me. Yalom wrote in Nietzsche's voice, "Because death comes — that does not mean that life has no value." If I was given the choice to relive the last few months since Liam's birth exactly as they were, or not to have him at all, without hesitation, I would choose to give birth to Liam and the dancing star he became. In that pain, I discovered that a meaningful life to me meant being able to create something good, and to communicate in a valuable way to the people in the world around me.

It was said of a midwife in Yalom's book that she found a passion for life in the moment after a child was born and before it took its first breath because she was "renewed ... by immersion in that moment of mystery, that moment that straddles existence and oblivion." I had been immersed in that mysterious moment between oblivion twice. I needed to find a way to create some meaning out of those mysterious

gifted moments. It seemed important to tell my story not because it is unique or more profound than the story of anyone else's loss, but *because* loss is so universal and basic. We all suffer. We all want to find a way out of suffering. There is a way out; it is the path. I chose to leave my life as I knew it and walk a literal path around the world. I hoped that along the way I'd find the right view, stumble on the right thoughts, do the right things, and find the right words to guide me.

Sitting in the café in Vienna, I read in the Herald that over 75 years before, Danish explorers found a warlike tribe of Eskimos called the Avrilisarmints, all of whom were poets. All the men, women, and children of the tribe composed long poems and communicated through poetry like the ancient bards of Greece and Scandinavia. The article said, "If the Poetry Society does not fit out an expedition to mingle with the Avrilisarmint tribe, exchange ideas, candy, blubber, tallow, and calorific conceptions, it will miss such an opportunity as may never come again." Even 75 years before, and long before that too, people were writing about the value of creativity, discovery, and communication. The insights that occurred to me were not new, just new to me.

Detour

Checking our email one day, we were surprised to hear from our friend who was care taking of our house that there was a big problem with the tenant that he wasn't able to handle. Once again we found that our plans were unexpectedly changing. The renter had sent a letter to our friend saying that he had done some research into the rental market, and decided that the price we agreed on for rent was

too expensive. So, he calculated that he had already paid enough to cover the next three months and therefore he wouldn't be paying any more rent. He also concluded that we had no choice but to accept his actions because it would take at least three months for us to evict him, and by then the lease would be up. He signed off saying that he hoped we were recovering from the recent death of our son and that we shouldn't take his decision personally because it was only business. Needless to say, we were astounded by his ignorance and audacity. Our trip had come to an abrupt end with that letter. We had no interest in arguing with him over the matter, and we didn't have enough money to continue to travel and pay the mortgage on our house since the rent he paid only covered ninety percent as it was. We found the nearest phone after getting our friend's email and called him to get all the details. In the end, we decided not to press the issue with the tenant or try to continue our trip. Chris called our renter and told him that we were surprised that he was so unhappy with his living situation and that it wasn't our intention to exploit anyone. We priced the rent fairly, and if he disagreed then we'd be happy to take his letter as a thirty-day notice. Chris told the renter that we'd be home in 30 days, and we expected him to agree to be gone. Otherwise we'd be home in two days and we would see him in court. I think he was surprised that we responded so quickly to his letter, and saw that he'd be in for a fight if he tried to carry out his plan, so he agreed to move out in 30 days. I was furious, but also not surprised as most of the plans we had made in the recent past seemed to lead us down a completely different path than we had expected. The renter and his malicious nature was another detour.

Sudden Appearance of Fluttering Wings

The day before we were scheduled to leave, we spent most of the day at a butterfly conservatory called the Schmetterlinghaus. The air inside was humid and warm and it was tropical compared to the cold rain outside. The butterfly house was in the Burgarten, a park in the center of town that was transformed from the private estate of a Baron. The greenhouse housing thousands of species of tropical butterflies was built onto the back wall of the old city. There was something reassuring in that juxtaposition of a brick wall and an unexpected tropical oasis.

The first time we took Liam outside the walls of the NICU, Chris and I took him for a walk around the children's garden at Emmanuel Hospital. We sat with him under a tree and enjoyed the sun on our skin for the first time in days. We hadn't left the hospital except when the nurses changed shifts and we were required to leave the ward. For Liam it was the very first time he felt the sun. In the hospital's garden there was a brick path that swirled around the small plot of land, which was enclosed on all sides by the hospital walls. There were colorful plants, herbs, and cheerful sculptures of turtles and other creatures. The bricks were engraved with the names and dates of the children who had passed before us.

There was also a plaque on the wall in a section of the garden planted with flowers to attract the butterflies. It was a quote by Mark Twain that read, "What the caterpillar knows to be the end, the butterfly knows to be the beginning." I felt like a truer thing couldn't be said in Liam's case. His brain damage had encased him in a cocoon, unable to reach out to anyone around him. I believed that I could see a spark of awareness in his eyes at times. I believed that some of his gesticulations were

intended and not just a product of muscle seizures. But it may have been my wishful thinking. To become the fullest he could be he needed to go beyond the cocoon of his body. What was the end for us was just the beginning for Liam.

In Vienna, we spent most of the afternoon walking around the small tropical greenhouse, through trees where the trunks had been carved out to make way for the path, and beside miniature waterfalls. It was easy to miss all the life that was fluttering around, but when I stood still and paid attention, the whole room seemed to come alive, teeming with silent fluttering wings. It was like an optical illusion: when you stare at something long enough, another image appears. Only in this house of butterflies, it wasn't a stagnant image that suddenly appeared, but movement and life replacing stillness and confinement. It was hard not to think of Liam in that place. The blue of a butterfly's wing was like his eyes. The amber spots on another reminded me of his hair. The red of another resting on a flower reminded me of his tiny mouth.

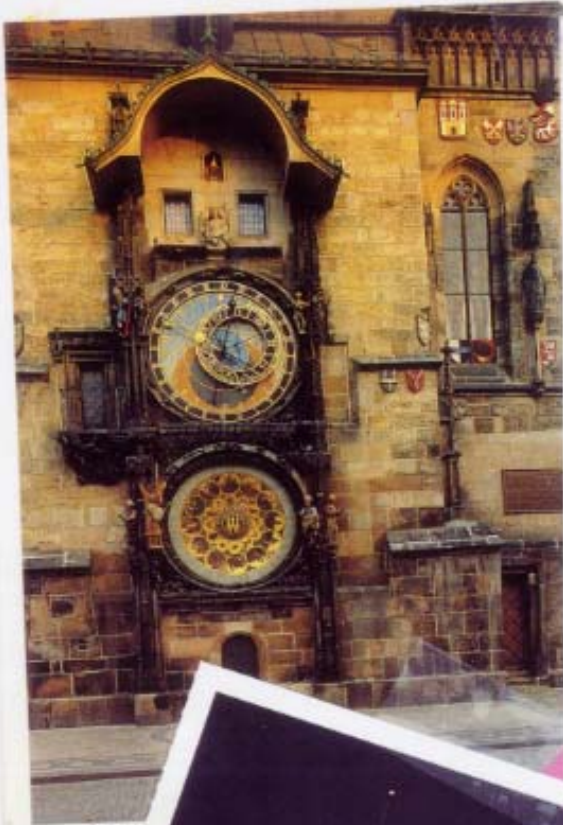
That temperate butterfly house alive with silent beings unbound and fluttering around me was an unexpected and pleasant surprise in the middle of a bitter winter. We were nearing the end of our trip, but it was also a beginning.

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The Toll at Midnight and Turning Wheels

“But I don’t believe in ends. Times past are not times gone so long as they live inside you...I’m the past and I’m the now and, in rare moments, I believe I’ve the future in me too.”

Thomas Moran

Usually when someone approached us as we were getting off a train, we ignored them. I thought Prague’s station would be no exception, but I saw a woman walking quickly toward us. Before I could look away, I thought I saw a panicked look in her eyes. I thought she needed help — maybe her kid was lost somewhere in the station. Opening my gaze to hers, I let her approach. I had read in a guidebook that the municipal symbol of Prague was a bear. If Prague was a bear, I wanted it to be the warmhearted mama-bear kind of bear.

“You need room?” she said pointing to the map that had several circles drawn on it. “I have good room. Clean, good price.” She pointed to one of the circles around Staromestska Radnice, “Oldest square in Praha. No stay, just look.”

“Just look?” I asked thumbing my shoulder straps and hopping a little to help hoist my pack to tug the straps down tighter. I questioned Chris with my eyes.

“I have a metro ticket for you,” she tried to entice us, “I will take you there. If you don’t like it you no stay and still I pay for the metro.”

Chris repeated the terms to make sure we had understood. “If we don’t like it, we don’t have to pay?”

“Ne,” she nodded firmly.

“And you pay for the metro?” I added.

“Ano,” again a firm nod.

“No?” I asked, glancing at Chris.

Her hands shot up in front of her, palms toward me. I’d misunderstood somehow. “Sorry, yes, yes,” she pumped the air for emphasis. I later learned that ano means yes in Czech. Chris and I agreed with a what-have-we-got-to-lose shrug of our shoulders.

The voice of the conductor had the cadence of a Bohemian folk dancer. The metro wasn’t crowded. There were no other travelers like us that I could see. December must have been a slow month for tourism in Prague. Our guide was silent, patting the air in front of her hip at each stop, not yet, not yet. But she held the pose of a mother bear ready to react. Czechs boarded and deboarded, lips straight as pencils, shoulders hung low. The conducting voice sang out the name of the stops, daadadaa-starodadada. I recalled the staro—something from the map. Our Mother Bear Guide sprung through the sliding doors and motioned for us to follow. She darted between pillars and people on the platform as if chasing a butterfly that kept escaping her claws. Scampering, we followed her lead to the escalator.

It was the steepest escalator I’d ever seen. I was forced to lift my chin up higher than I’d been able to muster for the last three months. The escalator felt nearly vertical as we rode up the first time. The walls all the way up were lined with 68 frames meant to hold advertisements, but they each held a picture of the Buddha: long lobes, stylized curls and blue bindi knot, gaze and lips were resting in an expression of natural great peace. I was comforted to unexpectedly find him. I wasn’t following the itinerary I thought I needed to, but I was on the right path. We rose to the surface

while the golden glow of Kaprova Street's lights enveloped us into the amber Prague night.

Parizska street and Dlouha street were laid at just the right angles so that as we walked west, St. Nicholas Church on the left, and the Old Town Hall on the right, seemed to simultaneously step aside extending like arms to hold open invisible gates as we entered Old Town Square, Staromestske Nam. Tyn Church with her twin Romanesque towers, topped with black peaks that were punctuated with golden stars, reigned over the square. The fine dusting of snow glittered on top making it look more magical. The town looked like a fairy tale. I desperately needed a happy ending.

Mother Bear brought my gaze back to reality with a heavy swipe of her paw through my line of vision, "come, come, not far." She pointed to the cobblestone Tynska St. that was more of a passageway really. She led us lumbering across the square. We slipped down Tynska. Again, streets laid at odds begged buildings that had stood for hundreds of centuries to step aside, revealing the continuing path; I walked toward what looked like a dead end and suddenly there was a way out, a path I didn't see around a building's corner. We walked on to number 12, our for-a-time home. I wouldn't be staying long, but I knew right away that tucked away apartment in that fairy tale town was the right place for now. I was handed the skeleton key to the outer door and had to push hard to open the wooden Baroque door in opposition to the iron hinges that held on tight.

A Tucked Away Place Called Home

Number 12 Tynska was a small studio apartment: one full bed, a table, wardrobe, sparkling bathroom with washer and dryer, in the corner an efficiency kitchen. I felt safe there, like I could really rest for the first time in months.

When I turned the T.V. on, the screen sparked into focus and I saw “Tootsie” trotting down a New York street.

“Oh, Honey. Look, it’s Tootsie,” I said. That movie was a joke Chris and I shared. At home, when I told Chris that I was sick and needed to watch Tootsie and drink Theraflu, he knew that I was really, really sick because one New Year’s Eve, when we were too sick to go out, we rented it and forgot for a little bit how bad we felt. I always joked that a person couldn’t help feeling better after a sappy movie like that. For Dustin, life sucked so he reinvented himself and found fame. Then risked it all for love, revealing his true self. And everything was O.K. at the end.

“Do you feel better already?” Chris asked laughing.

Not understanding the Czech dubbing, I didn’t watch for long and switched to CNN. Fundamentalists in Iraq were angry and vowing revenge for the bombings. A billionaire in a high-tech hot air balloon raced to be the first person to circle the globe. He glided above the polluted seas, starving children, warring nations, and rerouted around China, whose officials denied him permission to float through the air above them.

Photographs and Memories

In the holiday market in the square, shoppers gathered around great tin tubs of fresh fish. They pointed and the vendor, with hands that looked as tough as his leather apron, grabbed the desired one, clutching down just behind its gills that pumped staccato. The vendor clubbed it, weighed it, gutted it, and wrapped it in the day's old news. Fish was the traditional holiday dinner for Czechs.

Children rode ponies around a ring—a living carousel. The children were swaddled in woolen coats, mittens, scarves, and hats, the same bright colors of the large umbrella that covered the ring: red, yellow, green, and blue—a karmic kaleidoscope on a simulated Samsaric wheel. I watched for an hour or so, and imagined Liam going round and round.

On the other side of the square in the Old Town Hall I went to see an exhibit of photos—Czech Press Photos '98.

Flash, color—Czechs overflowed the streets smiling and holding flags. The women's hockey team had just won the Gold Medal.

Flash, color—on a catwalk surrounded by blank-faced spectators a naked woman knelt in front of a man with her mouth open guiding him to her with her hand. Photo from the Sex Industry Trade Show.

Flash, color—wedding, joy, flowers in midair.

Flash, color—Clinton met Havel, blue shirt, red ties, extended hands, straight spines, and lines of dignitaries with frozen smiles.

Flash, black and white—yachters raced for the cup, sails full.

Flash, black and white—a world cup match, a muddy muscle of a player suspended in midair, toes pointed like a dancer, hair splashing up around the ball he had just head-butted.

Flash, color—the woman held up a picture of herself taken before the man hunted her down in the streets of Bangladesh and doused her with battery acid that ate her flesh to the bone. In the picture that she held, her mouth was as straight as her long black hair. Her dark eyes were wide. Could she see the future? In the larger photo before me, her hair was still straight but her face was a swirling eddy of scar tissue and reconstructed flesh. Her mouth was half devoured by a bottle of acid in the hand of a man who tried to take her life, and knew he'd at least take her prospects of marriage, because he wouldn't take no for an answer. And yet, she smiled for the more recent photo and her eyes were brighter than before. Could she see a different future?

Flash, color—the baby's skin was vellum. Ribs protruded, belly and cheeks sagged sallow, and eyes were set deep, cast in the shadow of his skull. Why was that baby dying? Did he know his mother loved him? Closing my eyes, the darkness only developed the image further. Liam was so thin, the days just before his death. His bones were hard against my hands even through his clothes and blankets. His eyes too were sunken and dark. When his ashes were returned to me in a small box wrapped with blue paper I wasn't surprised by the small size of the box but by how little it weighed. It was not heavier than the images that were hanging before me. It was not heavier than the album of photos of Liam, which was all I had left.

Songs and Light in the Snowfall Night

New Year's Eve in Prague in Old Town Square, snow fell toward my cup of mulled wine, disappearing as it met the rising steam to make nothing. Focused on the snowflake, I understood the storm.

People gathered around two men who were playing guitars. They were singing "Knocking on Heaven's Door" in Czech. People wore warm smiles and passed a flask to blanket them from the cold, huddling close and not minding the snow a bit. Their voices rose to the top of the streetlight, to the bright star on top of the shimmering hundred-foot balsam fir dressed for the holiday before the doors of Tyn Church, to the hands of the Astrological Clock, to the top of the tower. It rose up further still and I was lifted too, just high enough to see a time in the distance when I could think of Liam, or see his picture, and smile instead of cry. We all waited for the stroke that would set the wheels on the astrological clock in motion. The great gold gears would turn; the bells peal; figurines representing vanity, greed, and doubt, and a statue of the grim reaper ringing a knell and turning an hourglass upside down, would parade through open windows from the darkness inside the tower to dance around the moon and stars on the clock's face.

At midnight, Czechs and foreigners, babies in strollers, old men and women, lovers, nuns in habits, all of us travelers on a compulsory journey, gathered in the square beneath the astrological clock. Sparklers and candles were handed throughout the crowd. Light was passed wick-to-wick, person-to-person. Each life we live is like the flame from one candle passed to another. It's not the same flame, but it's not entirely different either. I was on the verge of starting over again. I wasn't entirely

different, but I wasn't the same either. Sparklers sputtered flecks of light like departing souls, and flames bowed to the Czech symphony performing on the stage in the snow-dusted square. There was song. Though it was not in my language, I felt it was about hope.





Vita

Kathleen Willis Morton received her B.A. in English, with a minor in Anthropology from Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. She Attended the Prague, France, and Madrid summer residencies in the course of completing the low-residency MFA program. Her focus for the MFA was in the genre of literary non-fiction, but she also enjoys writing poetry and screenplays. She has published a few poems, a couple of articles for periodicals, and a literary non-fiction essay.

She currently lives in Long Beach, California with her husband and children. Oliver is 3 years old and also participated in the France and Madrid programs. Frances will be born on December 4th, 2004, one day after her mother submits this thesis to the graduate school.

While Katie will miss the UNO low-residency MFA community of writers and the wonderful guidance of her professors, she's looking forward to learning to surf, writing and rewriting to pursue publication, and spending more time with her children and husband. She can be reached at katiwm@yahoo.com.