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## Carved

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Carved

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  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing  
Poetry

by

Amberly M. Fox

B.A. Loyola University New Orleans, 2002

December 2009

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*In memory of  
Vera and George*

*For Mom, Pops,  
Marilyn, and Maudie*

*And for Jeffery and trisha,  
with love and many thanks*

I would like to thank my thesis committee: John Gery, Niyi Osundare and Randy Bates for their continued support and for sticking with me all these years.

I also thank my husband, family, and friends for their endless inspiration and love.

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## Abstract

The poems in *Carved* take the reader on a journey of self-discovery and explore the inequalities of human relationships: between being silent and the discovery of one's voice. The collection also addresses humanity's destructive imprint and the resiliency of nature in reclaiming what humanity sought to exploit and conquer. The poems expose the ironies in how we imagine things to be, compared to their reality. Some of the poems also draw parallels between the process of going underground and that of being reborn, as well as the spiritual experience of caving.

acting, body, cave, childhood, creative writing, darkness, discovery, deer, farm, feminism, Kentucky, Mammoth Cave, M.F.A., nature, poetry, regional, self, silence, South, stalactite, voice, womanhood

## Cave Silence: A Preface

What seven-year-old likes Robert Frost? Why would a child want to read a poem about death over and over? And thanks to my father, Frost was my introduction to poetry. Every night I would have to read out loud, "Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening," from *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children*. I was more interested in the alliterative, tongue-tickling sounds of Ogden Nash and Shel Silverstein and could not understand why my dad enjoyed such a boring poem about a man wandering in the snow. At that age I only understood the literalness of poetry, and it was not until I got to college that I was able to revisit the poem with fresh eyes and realize that perhaps my father was on to something.

That poem has come to influence not only how I approach all the poetry I read but also the poetry I write. I aim for straightforward language, the idiom I was raised to speak, and hope that underneath the surface, my truth will seep through. In this way Frost's winter wood filling with snow, a woman's body, a mammoth cave, or a love note is not simply taken at face value, though in and of themselves they are simple things: a life, a carved out rock, a profession of emotion.

I have always been drawn to the seemingly simple that, once peeled back, reveals the complex, beautiful, or brutal. Like the Imagists and Modernists, I am interested in the image as a thing itself, its reality compared to what we imagine it to be, as in Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar." The jar becomes not just a man-made glass vessel but also a metaphor for civilization. And the hill in Tennessee becomes all that humans are unable to control. This exploitation of the natural world by humans is another subject I have engaged in my poetry. I imagine the slovenly wilderness of Stevens' Tennessee slowly, and steadily, rising up to meet the bare jar and eventually overtaking it, and I explore that theme in "Flint Ridge Road," and many of the other Mammoth Cave poems in this collection, for in the end, our imprint upon the earth and upon each other is fleeting.

Marianne Moore once said that W.C. Williams wrote in "plain American, which cats and dogs can read." This American vernacular is essential to expose what lies beneath because the Modernists' simple language and free verse does not distract the reader from the object itself. A plum is a plum is a plum is a plum. What we imagine this plum to be like, what we thought it would taste like as a child, affects our definition and image of what constitutes a plum. I also want some of the ambiguity of emotion to come



across, as in the Wigwam Village poems, where one can be simultaneously enthralled by the lure of a motel in the shape of teepees, and also ashamed of and disgusted by it. The notion of being drawn toward yet repulsed at the same time is also brought up in “Rose Royal Farm” and “Having a Coke with You,” where the speaker is drawn to the beauty of Kentucky and the romance of Venice, yet repulsed by the redneck hunters and obnoxious tourists.

This dichotomy of attraction and revulsion is also present in the work of Diane Arbus. In fact, I do not think of myself as a female poet just as Diane Arbus did not think of herself as a female photographer. But as a female artist I identify with the struggle of Arbus in defining her own style and the struggles of female poets like Adrienne Rich and Marianne Moore in defining their own voices apart from the voices of their male contemporaries. I think this struggle for a voice is echoed throughout the four sections of this collection, and this struggle is not about discovering an androgynous voice but is instead about producing work that is not instantly defined by the author’s gender. In an interview with Studs Terkel, in Patricia Bosworth’s biography, *Diane Arbus*, she cites Arbus discussing her contradictory feelings about being an artist, “...You grow up split between these two things—thinking you’re utterly average and inclusive or that every human emotion has its echo in you.” There is an idea in *Carved* that expresses a secret knowledge that the masculine “you” cannot know. Despite the dismemberment and dissection of the poet/speaker in “Gutted,” “She Wanted to Be Famous,” and “Premiere,” the “you’s” violent effort is futile. And in “She Wanted to be Famous,” this violence is meant to serve, not to diminish or eliminate female power but actually to reinforce the speaker’s importance, creating the myth of The Black Dahlia. These poems are derived from the internal anger and violence that results from feeling simultaneously that my work is worth something and that it is worth nothing.

The line between the poet/speaker and you/audience is often blurred, especially in “She Wanted to Be Famous,” where I intend that the speaker and audience both become complicit in the murder of Elizabeth Short. Ambiguity arises because most of my poems start from some personal experience or kernel of truth that twists, reforms, and becomes something else entirely, much like the story of Short becoming a myth in popular culture. But rooting my poems in personal experience provides them with an authenticity that is important, because then no matter how many times I revise, mold, or erase parts of a poem; the end product is still a part of me, something I have created.

But why is something I created so important? After reading comments made by other poets I have admired, I have experienced extreme self-doubt and wondered why a middle-class woman should begin to write. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar quote William Carlos Williams in their essay "Tradition and the Female Talent: Modernism and Masculinism", "What is good poetry made of," but "Of rats and snails and puppy-dog's tails," and "What is bad poetry made of," but "Of sugar and spice and everything nice,/ That is what bad poetry is made of." If good poetry comes from boys and pretty, silly poetry is made by girls, why should women write poetry if they are going to be dismissed outright? Self-doubt and frustration seep in when I write and cause me to question my worth as a poet. What have I to say that hasn't already been said, and do I have the ability as a woman to say anything new?

The anger arising from self-doubt and frustration has manifested itself most clearly in the section, "Controlled," where the speakers are literally torn apart. They have no control over how their bodies are used or perceived, and by the end of the section, the reader may notice how the speaker is even unable to identify her own body because it has been so distorted. So much of this collection concerns one's lack of control over one's sexuality, one's relationships, and one's environment, that I want to open with "Gutted," a poem of dissection. In this poem, Marianne Moore's precision of image and syllabics in "The Fish" have inspired my attempt to portray the violent clash of the human and natural world. In "The Fish," the sea, much like a cave, has the power not only to nurture but also to destroy the life within it. And the end of "Gutted" exposes our desire to conquer the world around us, a theme that appears throughout the collection.

The frustration that comes from being unable to control one's own body continues into the second section, "Clandestine," which delves into human relationships. The first four poems explore the criminal aspects of our sexual relationships; how we keep secrets, lie, and finally become indifferent to one another's feelings, as in "This Love Letter." The second half of the section addresses the failure of the speaker's familial relationships, and it is my aim for the speaker to turn inward away from human relationships. The speaker is turning away from the constant struggle for domination and is turning instead toward the natural world, where the speaker seeks the solace and the acceptance she was unable to find in her human relationships.

The third section, "Country Dark," acts as an aperitif for the reader because it introduces the importance of place, in particular, rural Kentucky. While in some poems the speaker may be attracted to this land, in others I hope to convey her notion that she does not belong there, as in "The Homestead." The speaker may wish to be a part of this place but any imprint she strives to make will be swallowed up as the old cannery is in "Flint Ridge Road." The complete ambivalence of nature to our human presence draws me back again and again like Frost's lulling woods filling with snow. The old cannery and the old homestead become monuments to human death, and nature does not even give them a pause.

The natural settings in this section, from the over-grown cannery and the wedge-head skunk, to the frogs of Piglet's Pond and Frost, the young buck, in "Apple-Picking" mean to pay homage to the ominous imagery of nature as in Robert Frost's work. For a poem is never just about apples or trees or taking a walk late at night. This apparent effortless I hope to emulate in my own work.

This rural area of Kentucky described in "Country Dark," is home to Mammoth Cave, the focus of my final section, "Cave Crawl," and it was greatly influenced by Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*. The cave has been exploited by humans and used as a mine, a hospital, a church, a concert hall, and a grave, but this section focuses more on the journey of self-discovery. In *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave*, Alexander Clark Bullitt, writes in his 1844 account of exploring the cave that, "...the guide ignited a Bengal light. This vast amphitheatre became illuminated, and a scene of enchantment was exposed to our view. Poets may conceive, but no language can describe, the splendor and sublimity of the scene. " The coronary veins of the cave stretch out underneath central Kentucky for over a hundred miles, having been carved over millennia around the sandstone cap and into the porous limestone. And it is these miles of trails, domes, and underground rivers that have captivated visitors to Mammoth Cave since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Coming to the end of his subterranean tour in 1844, Bullitt proclaims, "The death-like stillness! the awful silence! the wild grandeur and sublimity of the scene, tranquilizing the feeling and disposing to pensive musings and quiet contemplation..." Upon journeying into the cave one experiences contradictory feelings because the cave stirs fear even as it safely wraps one in silence. It is at once a tomb and a womb.

Consider "Great Onyx Cave" a turning point in the last section, something other than the beautiful adornment that draws the speaker to the caves. Is it history she reads scrawled onto the rocks, where the

passage of time is carved into the limestone, allowing her to place herself within the human timeline? My goal is to represent Mammoth Cave as a natural symbol of human experience, a symbol, not original to me, but one that affected every person who has entered her labyrinthine passageways throughout the centuries.

To me, poetry is the discovery of freedom of voice. That is, without considering my audience first, to create my *own* imaginary garden with my *own* tangible toads. To attend to others' feelings or the style of poetry that is popular, may hinder one's ability to write, for poetry must be a way to write a myth for ourselves. Even if we are chained to the walls of Plato's allegorical cave, we must be allowed to imagine beyond the shadows on the wall.

In my poetry, I have attempted to pursue the way, we as human beings, try to exploit everything and everyone around us for our own gratification. The poems of this collection explore the self's search for mastery and control over her identity and the process she goes through to achieve self-realization.

Poetry should take a seemingly simple thing and mold it into a more complex vision of what the truth may really be. A poet does not merely imitate the external world as accurately as possible like a still-life painting; rather it is the artist's job to manipulate facts to fit her vision. For example, in Diane Arbus' portrait, *Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey, 1967*, Arbus molds the image of the twins by using a specific camera and lens. This was not a candid shot, but one the artist waited for and pushed for until the expressions on the twins' faces matched the vision Arbus had in mind for their portrait. The girls' parents thought the image a terrible likeness, which is partly what makes it so frightening, because we, the viewers, become far more immersed in what the artist wants us to see than in the reality of two twins at a party. In *Carved*, the first two sections are preoccupied with sexuality and relationships. These lead into the third and final sections, where our desire to control nature gives way to reverence for the hollowed belly of the earth. In the final section I imagine the cave as a caring womb that may strengthen the speaker, allowing her to awaken in the darkness. She is able to let go of self-doubt and frustration, and, in essence, she believes herself to be born again as she exits the cave.

I.  
Controlled

Gutted

Splayed

wide on a chopping block  
with my  
one round eye  
bulging but empty, a  
black jade chasm,  
blinded,

bright,  
I shiver as your knife  
runs down  
the long sides  
of my body, scraping  
me opaline  
smooth. You

carve  
out my wispy entrails,  
freed with  
one swift slice  
of your hand—leaving me  
with puckering  
mouth, tail

ribbed,  
flailing against the wood,  
flouting  
gravity  
like fragile helictites,  
emerging from  
cave walls.

I've  
given all, for you, gills  
gasping,  
to work your  
thumb into my skin, down  
my spine, along  
the red

line  
until with one quick heave  
you ex-  
tract my bones,  
like bespattered white rice,  
bleeding me in  
dry ice.

## Alluvium

A river pours down my throat—  
a spring snowmelt of waste rock tailings,  
a pipeline of whiskey and rum—  
leaving a slurry of coarse sand silt  
from headwaters to river mouth.

Sphagnum lines the reservoir of my lungs,  
stomach, intestines,  
                  then settles  
within the diameter of my veins, controlling  
the deluge until I swell and bruise dark gold  
from inside out.

I am carved, controlled for exploit,  
a ready supply of electricity until,  
with all your pumping, pumping  
and surging, my capacity is breached,  
and my capillaries burst and over-  
flow  
in a fecund flood  
through my peatland heart.

She Wanted to Be Famous

*for Beth Short*

In the bright light of day, they found you, gone  
to pieces, somewhere near Hollywood, in a vacant lot,  
your torso nude, face  
    severed, stained  
    lips sliced—  
and where once were breasts,  
    bloodless hollows like empty saucers.

Your pale  
    legs, spread-eagled, covered with bruises,  
then stuffed with weeds and  
    twisted into a pose so perverse  
even jaded cops puked at the sight: a mutilated starlet,  
a dime store dummy in lifeless repose.

We shaped you, couldn't get enough of you then: our molded myth,  
our obsession, our vamp in lacy black. We knew your photos,  
saw the knife gleam in your blue eyes before, your indiscretions  
gnawing at us, we sliced  
    those sweet cheeks  
    from ear  
    to ear,

until nothing of you remained.  
You had hung on uniformed men, had begged them  
to toss some scrap your way, but you were ours, carved  
by our hands, a small doll of raw porcelain we,  
with loving care, had pieced together. So from your hair  
we stole a final souvenir—a withered dahlia of black.



Premiere

This is my only chance to be  
pulled  
aside for a close-up, for an assistant  
director to chat me up  
and ask me to  
move  
just so, for the camera to  
capture  
my décolletage  
in precisely the right light,

but poor lighting  
and a grainy frame  
as I enter and exit—  
pretending  
this building holds  
what the prop sign says,  
*McKinley Music School* for the gifted—  
obscure

me. Like the blur  
in a bad photograph, a face  
not my face  
appears  
impatient, as if I couldn't remain  
still long enough to be  
exposed.  
Hair that *is* my hair hangs  
lank on an off-  
center body that cannot  
hold itself  
together against  
sharp editing  
and odd camera  
angles that dis-  
member my  
torso from  
my legs.

At one hour and eleven minutes:  
made-for-TV-movie history.  
Out of the low-budget background,  
a particleboard door swings open,  
a woman, brown hair  
to her waist, struts  
in  
a hazy four-second jumble of  
lips and  
arms and  
legs I  
tell myself must, just must,  
belong to me.

## II. Clandestine

## Waking from Vodka Sleep

We're sewn into this motel room,  
a nest littered with fast food debris.  
From a thousand nights passed,  
our slow speech echoes  
the whispered voices of lovers.  
The alarm clock spasms.  
*Throw it in the ice bucket!*  
What is one more night of  
heavily used sheets, 4-channeled  
tv's, and stained carpets to us,  
so long as we're stitched  
together by the single thread  
of our crime?

We've lived our clandestine lives  
here, lives no longer ours, in fact,  
but ones we've donated to peep holes  
and hourly rates, only to be born again  
within a new room somewhere else, always  
with a different rental car  
waiting outside.

Here, in this run-down lair, we hide,  
pulling the thread-bare blanket up  
over our heads, shielding ourselves  
from the never-ending pattern  
of headlights flashing through the windows.  
In our heart of darkness we light  
menthol cigarettes and laugh  
as the fiery ash falls down around us.  
For all we know, *this*  
is only the lull, the quiet moment  
after the chase scene,  
that rapturous second before  
we're caught.

## Enfleurage

*You smell like booze,*  
you tell me, like potato and grain  
vodka mixed with spicy rum—  
snow-covered Russian pines  
mingled with burnt cane fields.  
*I can't smell a thing,* I answer  
because it's emanating from my pores,  
evaporating from my heated night breath,  
but I can smell you—  
the odor of sweet fats and honey  
mixed with the repellent vapor of lye.

I call up another scent, the enveloping  
smell of sea salt and earth  
left in the crook of another's neck  
after the ethanol from his sandalwood skin  
had evaporated. I inhale deeply,  
exactly as I did then  
when he said something  
I couldn't quite hear, and I leaned in,  
ever so closely  
to taste the skin of his throat  
to catch those bronze notes  
lingering in the air near him.

This remembered essence  
binds with my alcohol tonight, an enfleurage  
of past lovers, oils, petals of skin  
pressed ever so slowly, tenderly, until  
the absolute is distilled.

One false breath, one pause,  
and it's too late.  
The flowers are bruised,  
the volatile oils  
dissolve, and leave  
only the withered petals  
of a thousand worthless blossoms.

## Waking Up

In between cigarettes  
you asked me how "it" was,  
as if, for a second,  
you could doubt your performance.  
I answered, *Good*, and *You are new*.  
Oh, what I meant came out all wrong  
so I ordered another drink, something pink  
and sweet, at the gay bar you brought me to.  
Maybe you'd ignore my slurred words.

Now as I wake from vodka sleep,  
head caving in, you lie quietly sleeping  
yet smiling, with both knees  
pulled up. I can't understand  
how you can sleep that way.  
Do you sleep smiling when you're alone?

Stumbling to the bathroom,  
almost tripping on  
your shoes,  
I accidentally knock the shampoo bottle  
over, then shut the door a little  
too hard.  
Nothing. Still nothing.  
You don't sigh,  
you don't even change positions.  
I stall, slip into my shoes, put on lip gloss,  
sunglasses. I wait, staring into the morning  
filtering like a thief through  
your one apartment window.

But I know now you'll never  
open your eyes. *What I mean—*  
*It's all wrong!* Now  
I can't get away from you  
fast enough, though I know you hear me  
fumbling  
with the lock, and outside

in the melting snow  
all I can think of  
is your mattress on the floor  
and, oddly, Reese's Pieces,  
sugar to swallow, and how well  
you'll still sleep each night.

This Love Letter

is my second in two days.  
I remember how  
when first together  
we wrote every day.

4:17

You sleep, then shift,  
your thigh touching mine,  
...whole again. My eyes will not  
close. I put my hand on your back,  
your eyes flicker,  
I hope you're dreaming  
of poems we'd quote:  
"Tonight I can write the saddest lines,"  
from our early nights filled with Neruda.

4:37

Still, I want to hold you.  
For the last one, the one  
I ripped to shreds, while  
you were out, I'm sorry.  
The pieces, two  
innocent scraps of paper  
I found later, said:  
*We have left*  
and *leave*.

4:56

I want to wake you  
to trace history onto  
your open palm:  
no reason  
to explain.  
We are...  
I need you to wake  
to trace the blade of my shoulder,  
claim it as your own.

5:25

I crawl back in.  
Soon, just before your alarm  
screams, I'll depart:  
car  
airport  
plane.  
Still, content,  
you'll sleep.

## Having a Coke with You

Travelling backward on the train, my stomach lurched. The same wave of nausea from last August, leaving New Orleans. I kept busy then by recalling smells, tastes, landscapes that may cease to exist. I burnt my tongue on dining car cappuccino. No more Venezia, no more Lagoon, no Lido, no sweaty Rialto market. No stroll with you, Marco, through alleyways and twirling, twirling, twirling (but no kiss), turning cheek to other cheek until with all that billowing my skirt elastic popped. It could not have been the last night, not the last gin and tonic, not the last vaporetto and hot glass flowers that never wilt in cemetery vases. I said, *Marco, I must not*, and felt like a buttoned-up Katharine Hepburn. *I must something, must go. You are this place*: a vessel, some mythical urn that tells the story of two boys nursing at a wolf's teat and the birth of Roma, but this is not Roma. Venezia. Doges and Palazzo Ducale, San Marco all pigeon shit, but still cleaner than Jackson Square's cracked slate. Some gondolier shouted, *Casanova, you know him? First sex machine*. And New Orleans, no, Venice, has sunk. Is no longer. Swallowed by Chinese glass everyone wants to take home to gather dust. I only wanted someone to say, *Ciao, bella!* as on those kiosk t-shirts. Instead they stare dumbly at my breasts. Instead, Germans belch Heineken and Americans lug suitcases filled with all the wrong clothes.

Leaving Venice, slouching toward nothing. No more yellow-arrowed signs pointing → *this way to the end of the sinking world, this way leads to what you are not—could never be a part of.*

This masked speech of yours was a part of it, Marco. *Umm. do. you. like. me?*

*You bring all the cute American girls down the back.*

*No, not Osteria dei Postali, to Campo Santa Margherita. There is a square, where it is easy to find me, and we will sip Coca-Cola.*

A woman in Dorf Tirol told me, *That's an American drink*. In Venice, the empty bottles float down il Canal Grande like cannoli. Marco, you tossed your gum, matches, cigarettes in to join them, to marry yourself to the sea, and you said, *Come dance the samba with me, and look into my eyes*. As if you'd tell my future with a wave of your hand and our lips would meet. You snapped, flashed, and still only got profile shots. You wasted your time, Marco, on Neruda and serious looks, but all you got was a free coke. Smiles, smiles, smiles. False promises. For what you wanted is already gone, washed away by floods, hurricanes, and night sweats under live oaks. I lost it in the Vieux Carré when I was fifteen, when it evaporated into lousy street musicians, caricaturists, and the smell of the river in summer.

So when I burst upon the Ponte degli Scalzi, I became a hollow eggshell—a haircrack, a pinhole—having leaked out, sunk into the green edible algae. You see, I have nothing left to give you: no limestone, no cypress, no marble, only paper, the dissolvable napkin this is written on, flammable, adrift in an authentic gondola for a mere 100 Euro. I left a note for you, Marco, scribbled in invisible ink. I hope you lose it. Forget it. Leave it for someone else to find when *acqua alta* comes, yes, keep it until then. I'll wait for you to toss it. Let it float away with the tide. Only then may it return to me.

*For Grace*

## The Quiet Honeymoon

As we sit in the Buick Skylark's squeaking seat,  
I grow bored with you both, endless hours  
spent inhaling smoke he doesn't even try to blow  
through the cracked window. Your eyes water,  
my half-formed lungs hurt. A quiet honeymoon,  
both of you like Benjamin and Elaine  
at the end of *The Graduate*, staring at the slow,  
winding asphalt. Did you ever really like each other? Were you ever sure?

Now we're in the National Park, and he wants to pull over,  
smoke some pot. Some kind of happiness dwells in you still—  
fresh memories of the VFW reception and the reverberating thud  
of my heart enveloping your tanned body. So you don't bitch  
too much. Not yet. When he ambles off to take a piss, you tell me  
you see a white-tailed deer through the trees.

After checking in at the Caveland Motel you both argue  
over which cave tour to take. You fear you'll suffocate, drown inside  
the bone-dry earth, so you want to take the shortest tour, the least time  
between walls that swallow you. He reneges to regain his silence.

The next day, lined up at the entrance,  
you're assured by the large group: old and infirm,  
young children fidgeting and complaining. This tour is all  
but wheelchair accessible, and though you don't admit it, I know  
you want to see the stalactite waterfall. In three years,  
you'll see Niagara Falls with me, but for now,  
frozen flowstone will do. And despite  
the coughing and shuffling, you swear you can hear  
water roaring through the rock.

At night, back in our musty room, you tell me  
stories of living on your own in Florida,  
the smell of sand, the taste of seawater. He's been gone  
a long time, had to drive across the county line to buy beer,  
but we're too tired to wait up for him. Exhausted by the silences,  
you leave the bathroom faucet on and talk to me until we both drift  
to sleep, listening all the while to the falling water.



## Prayer during a Storm

Dear God,  
Please let the thunder stop, let the rain stop pounding  
my window, stop driving the nails into our Sears siding.  
Please, God, let the rain stop long enough for Mom  
to get to work tonight. I promise I'll be nicer to her, yes, even though  
she's always yelling at me and You never do a thing, not a thing.  
Please, God, I promise, I promise—I do,  
the lightning—  
it makes shadows behind my dolls on the shelf,  
and sometimes they move.  
I know Mom had a fight with Rick tonight,  
and sometimes grown-ups fight. Only,  
they call it "having a discussion,"  
and I know it always ends in doors slamming.

*One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-*  
God, let me make it to four-one thousand  
next time. What if lightning strikes our house? If  
it catches fire, will I save my brothers? I'll just yell  
to wake them up or Nanny will be mad at me. Dear God,  
please let Mom not get  
to work. Let there be a flash flood  
down at the crick in the park, so she turns  
back. I promise then  
I'll be nicer, much more nice,  
but if there is a fire I won't wake Rick. Please forgive me,  
but I won't.

*One-one thousand, two-one thou*  
We'll all stand outside in the rain in our pajamas  
watching our house burn and Mom'll come home to hug us,  
and I'll cry and cry. I'll say,  
"The smoke, the smoke, I couldn't wake him up!"  
And then she'll be thankful she still has my brothers and me.

*One-one thousand, two-*  
Please,  
God, make her come now, your thunder keeps shaking  
the walls. She'll just know I'm upset, she *will*, and she'll come  
lie beside me the way she did when I was little, I just know  
she will. And she'll hold me and rock me till I fall asleep.  
Then I won't care about—

*One-one thousand*  
Please, God, I promise I'll pray all the time how Mom  
wants me to. I'll go to church every weekend even every day,  
if You want, but make  
this thunder stop. I promise, I promise, I—  
I'll even be nice to Rick though he tells me I'm wrong about everything.  
And I will not wake him, not ever  
but You know the truth.  
He just has to have  
the last word.

Last week, he made me cry—did You see when I ran  
and hid in the closet after he yelled at me to stop  
singing along with my new tape? Did You hear  
*how* he told me I couldn't sing? He screamed  
how I was tone deaf and interrupting the game on tv. Then  
he threw his car keys through the wall.  
*I* had to clean up the pile of drywall dust  
and the chipped paint left on the carpet.

*One-one thou*

God, why did You let her marry him? I cried every night,  
just like this. I cried and cried, but You didn't do anything, not  
anything, when You could smite him  
with this lightning, You *could*.  
Mom says it's just because he was  
a cop, and I'm spoiled. Please God, let Mom come home now,  
please not to the hospital tonight. Make this storm stop.

*One-one*

## Introduction to Caving

I can't quit  
fidgeting with my gear  
as the school bus jostles us  
back and forth. I adjust  
my kneepad buckles, switch  
my helmet light on, then  
off, in the morning sun,  
because there is no

turning back. As we exit  
our rusted ferry, I can't pay  
attention to the cave's blasted entrance  
with its unguarded oxidized door,  
too afraid to be in over my head.

Why, we haven't even reached the end  
of the wet black cascading stairs  
and already my thigh muscles  
shake. Because I tell myself not to,  
I wedge myself, like a coin  
lost in couch cushions,  
between boulder outcroppings—  
looking down into the Stygian pit

as we head into the test crawl. I can still  
turn back. No shame,  
just too claustrophobic. I can wait,  
if I want, with the rock algae  
growing beneath these electric lamps  
and join the Travertine tour later  
when it passes through.  
You, your smile half-cocked,  
ask if I'm ready. But

if I stop, I'd only prove  
you right, when long ago  
you said we wouldn't work  
because I can't ever keep up  
with you. This cave conquers me,  
but here in the dark  
I'm alright. Here  
I can sit and sing,  
banging rocks together  
until you're ready to come  
and find me.

III.  
Country Dark

## Flint Ridge Road

They built a cannery into the side  
of a hollow hill, rendered the land  
into pasture and filled jar after jar  
with sweet summer peaches, while  
Miss Lucy Cox carved her way  
day after day into the limestone beneath them.  
They took dominion over stalactites  
and wilderness alike. For a short time,

a doe licks her black nose,  
stares into the afternoon, and soon  
a wild turkey ruffles his wings  
and scatters into the brush as I rattle past.

In the last sixty years, a forest  
has sprouted from this old  
farmland. The saw mill and cannery  
have dissolved into the hill  
as the water carried  
the petrified peach pits away  
underground.

A washed out gravel pathway,  
the old highway, is all that remains,  
winding its way up and down  
to the stone arch—the dug out  
sink hole of Miss Lucy Cox, where  
two hummingbirds chase each other  
into the trees, as a sigh of air  
it has taken a lifetime  
to release, rushes to the surface,  
cooling the August ridge.

## The Homestead

A remnant hurricane breeze has made its way  
to the Kentucky farm, cooling the dry September pastures,  
so out I go, dodging the brown thistle and cow patties,  
pass the lumpy cow pond, sprouting weeds,  
and zigzag through a row of cypress  
until I reach the shady foundation. Here,

farm has overlapped farm, and only old mossy stones remain  
of someone who tried to make a go of it. How long did it take  
for the roof to cave? How long before the mud and grass  
covered the abandoned bricks? Counting the saplings  
in the kitchen, I step over tree roots that long ago  
dug their way under the front stoop.

Then I stop beneath an enormous ash to let the breeze  
wind its way under my arms into my shirt. Not far off  
lies the pile of rotted wood and rusted tin that once was a barn.  
One grayed wall still stands, much like brick chimneys  
after a flood or fire has claimed the rest.

Resting beneath my feet, dug out of the hill,  
an old spring house stands adjacent to a dried up well  
I've come here to cover after a newborn calf fell in last week. For two days  
we couldn't find it, until I heard its weak lowing  
inside the well, there in the black  
saw thin crescent whites around its pupils.  
We wrapped it in rope to lift it out.

I slide down the dusty hill and step over the rocks,  
where a flood has washed them into the mouth.  
Bent iron rods still keep the springhouse from caving.  
What is this buried in years of dried mud? A jar, gray and bare,  
or maybe a mangled fork? I want some clue of who stood  
inside this carved-out hill.

The room is empty save for a large skunk in one corner,  
who waddles out waving his wedge-head and ruffling his tail  
like a flag deeding his land. I stumble back—  
breathing in from a safe distance the ragweed rich air.  
It is his house now, not mine.

## Rose Royal Farm

At Piglet's Pond the mud frogs skip,  
once or twice, before they disappear  
into the milky water. How many poems  
have been written on the quiet, the solitude  
of nature? Maybe I'll write

about my dizzying reflection in their wake...  
something about the human imprint,  
how machines dug out this old cow pond  
now filled with Japanese Koi that in a lazy frenzy  
suck on the algaed rope of the moored fountain.

I could write about the eerie creak  
of the floating dock down at Big Chief Pond,  
its echo off the surrounding hills once  
giving two deer pause—their white ears flicking, briefly, toward  
me before they returned to their grazing, unafraid.

Can I leave out how later, just  
before dusk, three hollow shots rang out  
to ring in the season? How the day before  
I had driven past two camouflaged men  
with matching camouflaged crossbows?

No, poems like this won't mention  
the enveloping veil of fear that settles  
on an old farmhouse as day ends.  
For country quiet isn't like city quiet.  
I imagine, just outside the window,

someone watching,  
following me through the house—each creak  
another coyote ready to devour  
my cat, who lies unsuspecting by the fireplace,  
each rustle another rapist.

Country dark is not  
like city dark. Country dark  
is cave dark—full,  
like the stars that blanket  
the voids in other poems.

My useless eyes search  
for an escape through the pitch, but  
I'm ready, without the comfort of smog and street  
lamps, to spend another restless night  
listening to the chorus of last season's crickets.

## Apple-Picking

Frost, we named him,  
but he did not speak to us  
in a New England burr,  
only in the soft crunch, beneath  
his hooves, of late summer grass.  
There he stood, a silhouette  
against the horizon's last clouds  
as they turned red to orange to purple,  
and his velvet antlers, just breaking  
from his skin, faded into night.  
Gingerly he had come into our yard,

up to the apple tree, as if he belonged,  
as if he knew nothing else  
but that he lived in the thicketed holler  
and we lived by these trees  
along this ridge. Undeterred  
by the baying dogs, out of the dusk  
he came, lifting his white tail,  
then lowering his neck  
to pick from the ground the fallen,  
worm-ridden apples,  
one,

then another, then  
with a tilt of his ears, hopping  
on hind legs—spindle thin  
beneath his barrel weight—to pluck  
the fruit ripening, just beginning  
to redden and sag on the bough,  
so much sweeter for his effort.

Meanwhile, we stood still at the window,  
holding our breath  
to keep from fogging the glass  
as the dogs at our feet  
milled about and whimpered  
until, as the darkness fell,  
only our ears could tell  
our useless, straining eyes,  
he'd had enough and must,  
at an easy pace, have wandered  
back over the black hill.



#### IV. Cave Crawl

Our Way to Mammoth Cave

*Autumn, 2005*

I want to show you the land I came from,  
for us to snake down the Blue Grass Parkway  
over to 65 and on down to Cave City.  
So we go and we stop  
at Big Mike's Gift Shop, and suddenly  
you become a child transfixed  
by sparkling things— by milky-green glass,  
tiny flecks of quartz, and amethyst geodes. You

want to liven up the plumeria and azalea  
in your tropical garden with the shiny rocks.  
They are probably the same hunks of glass  
I turned over in my hands as a child, but that memory  
dies when I flip over an onyx box and read, *Made In Thailand*.  
Maybe my Hillbilly flashlight was made in India.  
It's a tongue depressor with a box of matches glued  
to one end, a clothespin glued to the other.

I leave you palming blue glass  
to wait in the car. I've seen it all before.  
The parking lot is littered  
with Louisiana license plates,  
stuck to their cars like dusty Band-Aids.  
Should I track down the owners  
so we can swap escape stories  
or compare hurricane wounds?

Still, this city and its caves remain mine.  
How can outsiders understand  
a store filled with nothing  
but concrete geese, iridescent garden  
gazing balls, and feathered dreamcatchers  
hanging limp and motionless?  
Soon I spot you walking toward me  
with a sweating bottle of Ale-8.

I'm glad all the rocks were hot  
to your touch and that the leaves  
have yet to turn. I want to see you  
shake your head, dismissing the souvenirs,  
the mini-golf, because soon, after we've gone,  
the deer here will blend into the brown beech,  
and the red maple will blanket these limestone hills.  
But they are not what I want you to see.

## Wigwam Village #2

As a child, I always wanted  
to stay in the teepees,  
misnamed Wigwam Village #2.  
On the vintage postcard I treasured,  
they were pristine white cotton swab tips  
dotting the pastureland, air-conditioned oases  
of buffalo hide bleached by many suns,  
not the garish cottages of crimson and wet-gray  
concrete we sit staring at today,  
ours the only car in the lot.

This May rain has not let up,  
and while we watch through the wipers,  
the stooped owner, or handyman,  
no, owner, wanders door to door  
unlocking each and flipping light switches  
on and off. No doubt  
he's been doing this  
twenty years. Here in the lot  
I'm waiting, still wondering  
what it's like to sleep in a teepee.  
Above the giant Teepee gift shop  
a small "For Sale" sign flaps in the wind.  
Inside, I bet, a thousand dusty dreamcatchers  
hang limp from the angled ceiling.

In the parking lot of my postcard  
three cars dot the grounds, but  
it was sunny then.  
Pointing to the umbrella in the backseat,  
you ask if I want to get out  
to take pictures. I shrug.  
*Let's go to Taco Bell*, I say.  
It doesn't seem worth the effort  
just to be disappointed.

Heading back down Dixie Highway, your eyes  
focused on the wet-black road, you ask,  
as if you were really interested, what it says  
on the back of my postcard. *Not much*, I say,  
shoving it in my jacket pocket.

Later, at home and warm,  
while you busy yourself in the kitchen,  
I carefully slide the card, addressed MTV in NYC,  
back into its desk frame, pausing to read:

*Could you please play a Block  
of Motley Crüe. My shirt size is XX-Large.  
Tracy Matthews,  
Glasgow, Ky.*

Once safe behind glass  
the wigwam village gleams  
again, and looking closely, I can see  
nuclear couples cooking  
at the communal grills, while their children swing  
higher and higher, their laughter echoing  
over the tops of the bright white teepees.

## Big Black Mouth

*Mammoth Cave, 2005*

Sweating in my jacket, I line up  
in the heat yet can feel the chilled air  
rushing up from the entrance,  
a rush that could darken a lantern  
with a single breath. Hairs rise  
on the back of my neck  
as my eyes trace the line  
of the iron railing and neat concrete  
steps that drop down into the black.

Our guide resembles  
my grandpa: cantankerous,  
with his beard and rosaceous cheeks,  
feverish eyes and gin-soaked breath.  
He asks, *And where are you from?*  
*Kentucky*, I say awkwardly, *but*  
*now I live in New Orleans*.  
Not awkwardly at all he says, *Well,*  
*I'm glad you've been washed back here*  
*so I can lead you through the cave*.  
His smile knows I'm back here for good,

and as he swings back to the group,  
his arms raised like a ringmaster,  
he sings out for all to hear, *Well, as this here*  
*young lady can attest, all the accounts are wrong!*  
*John Houchins, who founded this cave*  
*in 1798, couldn't be a Kentuckian! Maybe*  
*a Tennessean, but no Kentuckian, 'cause no*  
*Kentuckian would ever, ever, follow*  
*a wounded bear into a big black hole*.  
With a wink, he offers me  
his rough hand as we begin our descent.  
I hold my breath and feel the cool air seep  
through me as we enter the gaping mouth.

## Great Onyx Cave

Low-ceilinged and wet,  
this insignificant cave's clay walls form  
stiff peaks, which drip and, as we  
navigate the flat half-mile  
inside, splatter our jeans.  
Around us, the sandy floor puddles  
into dry hunks of caramelized sugar.  
Shuffling through with our lanterns,  
like those before us, we become a part of  
this claustrophobic artifact,  
scooping out the cave's insides  
with our steps and greedy hands.

Like a too made-up girl, the cave only shows  
her mask of decoration, what she thinks we want  
to see. One column resembles curled witch talons, another,  
two opossums playing dead, their tails coiled  
and sparkling for thousands of years, so here come  
the tourists, seeking adornment:  
the ceiling iced with rosettes,  
orchids, swags of gypsum—all  
piped through limestone fissures—nothing  
unusual, it seems, about this petit-four:  
nothing so dark as onyx remains,  
chiseled away seventy years ago  
in the dead of night.

Drop after drop of sepia buttercream  
has squeezed through the layered limestone.  
At our heads, millennia of springs  
and thunderstorms have adorned  
the perfect rope border, and behind us  
a wavering water table has sketched a ceiling  
patterned in Cornelli lace, growing ambrosia  
for our greasy hands to blacken.

This sticky confection offers itself to us,  
lets us devour so quickly stone and slice  
in the darkness, and still we return to the surface  
unsated and wanting more.

Wigwam Motel, Room #9

The bathroom's funhouse mirror  
distorts my face. My mouth appears equine,  
nose too broad, eyes sunken and beady.  
I've already stubbed my toes on the squared chair  
that scrapes against the curved walls, and I feel off-  
kilter brushing my teeth. I am  
beyond recognition within the teepee  
as I reach for a towel and discover  
a smeared gray boot print.

There on the bed: more boot prints!  
But to evade the renegade mosquitoes  
who have me cornered, I hide under the sheet.  
Wrapped tightly, like an overgrown papoose,  
I huddle in the musty room with nothing  
to do, except stare at the two paintings above my bed.  
In one, a brave sits astride a gray horse; in the other  
a chief sports a gray wolf head pelt on his scalp.

Perhaps in his youth, the chief was a Pawnee scout,  
covered in the wolf pelt while spying  
enemy territory—seeing as the wolf, hearing  
as the wolf. Perhaps the Lakota brave  
appears so strong because he has not yet  
fought at Red Cloud. Perhaps the nameless  
artist painted the faceless entirely from memory, from  
what he dreamt as a child: noble eyes,  
weathered skin, sharp nose bridge, spear-throwing arm.

In this relic left from the days  
nuclear families stayed here amid  
summer road trips, I can still see their troublemaking sons  
holding pow-wows, circling the wagons in front  
of the teepees, aiming their cap guns,  
like John Wayne, hoping to save America.

Ugh! The room is humid despite the box AC  
wedged in the curved triangular window, and I can't sleep  
with these two brown faces staring back at me.  
So I number the Kentucky tribes I still know:

Creek,  
Cherokee,  
Chickasaw,  
Shawnee.

## Catching Our Breath Outside The Tuberculosis Huts

*Dr. Croghan, from Louisville, had these cabins built  
from rock, within rock, to make Mammoth Cave useful.  
The coughing men stumbled into darkness,  
with their soiled handkerchiefs and mounds of feather blankets.  
Filling their lungs with the healing vapors of cooking fires  
and torch smoke, the sick glowed with translucent skin,  
while their eyes adjusted slowly, then shrank  
like cave fish.*

Away from the group, I hear their breathing  
overpower the guide's story of the huts.  
Wanting to appear attuned to the haunted,  
the cabin currents, I raise my lantern, push it  
past the wooden frame of the cabin window.

Around the small flame, the oil swirls,  
throwing shadows indistinguishable in this pitch  
lake room without a roof. The paraffin light reflects  
off nothing.

The long throat of the cave  
sucks it in, swallowing our lanterns  
and us, consuming my vision of a three-legged stool  
overturned, a half-hidden tin cup in the corner  
glinting like gypsum. When no one is looking,

I sneak up to touch the dry door frame,  
but my hand can find no rusty hinge  
to suggest there was ever a door here.  
Like cadavers awaiting their autopsies,  
the helpless know no privacy.  
No need for a door or roof when you're dying  
and already two miles buried.



Violet City Lantern Tour

*surrounded by a silence  
that sounds like the silence of the place  
except that it came with us  
and is familiar  
-Adrienne Rich*

Imagine the smell of saltpeter,  
the black smoke of kerosene lanterns  
mixed with sulphur. Let your other senses  
take over; sniff the air and listen.

Stumble into the open darkness  
of Mammoth Cave's Methodist Church  
and whisper; envision the faded fabric  
of bonnets, the cracked, overworked  
hands now outstretched under the earth.

A silence as loud as the dark  
overwhelms you  
as you fall  
behind with the comfort  
of monotonous footsteps  
shuffling up ahead.  
Kneel in the dirt. Stay still.

Keep blinking, keep thinking  
your eyes will catch some light.  
But then as the darkness pervades  
thorough as death, wrap yourself  
in quiet, wait for young Stephen Bishop  
to amble over in his slouch hat,  
smiling, white teeth lighting up  
like Christ's aureole before you.

*You put the salt and red pepper  
in the toe of your shoe, mix in  
a little stolen saltpeter—  
he taps at his worn out sole,  
This'll keep you safe.*

Listen. Strain to localize the sound  
of creaking lantern handles,  
sneakers crunching to get traction,  
as the annoyed tour group, their faces  
distorted in the wavering light, returns  
to find you, contrite as Cain.

*'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far  
and Grace will lead me home.*  
Palm a handful of cave dirt,  
cold and silky. Pray for  
calcium nitrate, but before  
you rejoin the others, toss it  
over your left shoulder.

## Nearing the Top

Over and under the rocks,  
I've clamored all day, crawled  
bent over into a cavern  
leading nowhere, only to discover  
four mounds of stones  
gathered a hundred years ago  
by hands now dead. Here  
in their caving bloomers  
with matching bandanas,  
front knotted to protect their low  
chignons, with a dried spit curl  
poking through coily, they climbed,  
led by their lard lamps,  
their pockets filled with limestone.

Each girl chose a mound, balanced  
on tiptoe, and placed her rock,  
reaching to keep it nearest the top  
without toppling the manmade  
stalagmites. For a while,  
the guides would lead  
their tourists to the narrow outcrop,  
sheltered from the tour route,  
to build their little towers stone  
by stone. Some tucked little  
state flags in the top, some snuck in  
to carve a sweetheart's name  
for good luck. The Knoxville girl  
etched hers beneath  
a petrified butternut branch, and  
the Louisville girl placed hers  
on the Kentucky monument  
already by then nearly up to the ceiling.

But they were too late.  
They couldn't scrawl  
their names in delicate candle  
smoke script,  
could only gather sand.  
A forgotten war monument,  
the leaching vat and pipelines  
now hold only dust.  
The artifacts have all been safely  
stowed and catalogued:  
cane torches, pottery, and mummies.  
I have no stones, no tapers nor burial trinkets,  
only a snotty nose, the wadded Kleenex  
stuffed in my pocket.

The park ranger's voice breaks  
my reverie. In my hidden fist  
I clutch, tightly, the soggy tissue  
as though it were a lover's lock of hair

I'm thinking I might toss  
into Bottomless Pit, to arc  
like a blue Bengal flare into the deep:  
neither name nor memorial  
but something of me sloughed off,  
something to leave behind.

## The Keyhole

*We are told that this is the end of the  
cave; but it is only one of many ends,  
and some of the avenues have been closed  
by fallen rocks or by the stalactite growth,  
and the real end is yet unknown.*

*--John R. Proctor  
formerly State Geologist of Kentucky  
in Century Magazine, 1898*

Like a muddy superhero, I fly  
to nowhere—arms outstretched,  
legs splayed, wedged  
between two boulders nearly touching,  
like a trapped fly between  
two window panes. Straining  
for a foothold, anywhere,  
I writhe in the clay puddle.

Here in the keyhole,  
in my brand new jacket and hiking boots,  
now a sad excuse for a costume, I wallow  
breathless, groping with my makeshift  
gardening gloves for a groove—some notch  
to help me gain a few inches.  
I feel foolish tears welling up again.

Nothing but quiet. I am the last,  
abandoned by the others gone ahead,  
yet I cannot make it through.  
They'll have to send an extraction team  
with jumpsuits, pulleys, and levers, cover me  
with donated quilts, and spoon-feed me  
chicken broth to keep my strength up. Alert  
the media! Send them in with flashbulbs  
and voice recorders to take down  
my final testament. Tell the public,  
*She came to explore and never returned.*

I dig in,  
like a pinned moth  
rock back and forth, until  
ass hits ceiling, until  
helmet cracks, sprinkling dust,

and I've crawled through!  
The hole seems wider now,  
not as if I excavated the earth of my own  
volition, but as though the cave heaved,  
and gave me up, knowing  
it could not keep me for itself  
any longer, despite our embrace  
and suddenly, broken apart,  
we are lost to each other.

## Vita

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