



*I am such a long way in I see no way through
and no space: everything is close to my face,
and everything close to my face is stone.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

BARBARA HURD

THE SQUEEZE

When a rock and a hard place are more than metaphor

MY FIRST ATTEMPT AT CAVING ten years ago began in inspiration and ended in terror. I'd been teaching creative writing at an environmental camp for middle school students who were scheduled to take a field trip to a nearby cave. For two days before the trip, I primed them with stories about Mohammed in the cave, Plato's cave, why caves so often symbolize rebirth. It's a hidden space, I told them, an unexpected, inscrutable space. I didn't anticipate trouble. I didn't mention claustrophobia or the guide's warning we'd need to belly-squirm down the initial passage. We all loved outdoor adventure, and on the day of the expedition, two guides, eleven students, and I fastened the chinstraps of our helmets in anticipation and climbed down a rope ladder into a muddy pit, at the bottom of which was the mouth of the cave.

One guide explained the sloping first passage, how to get through it, what lay beyond. Head first, he said, and then scooch with your elbows. At the far end, he explained, the tunnel opens up on a ledge and then you squirm down into a big room where you can stand and stretch.

I bent down and peered into the chute's entrance. It was, by any caver's standards, an extremely easy passage, fairly round, maybe two feet high. It actually looked tidy, a railroad tunnel in some miniature train layout. I stood up and watched as the kids kept disappearing down it. They'd lean over, stick their faces in, and then lie down and start squirming. The last I'd see of them was their feet wiggling, the toes of their boots showing against the hole's interior floor, and then nothing. My heart started to pound a bit.

"Ready?" the last guide asked me. We were the only ones left in the pit. I was supposed to go, and then he'd bring up the rear.

"Yep," I said. And stood there.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yep," I replied and got down on my hands and knees, down on

my elbows, and looked in again. My headlamp threw a small circle of light into what no longer looked tidy, looked, in fact, like something gouged open, the interior walls jugged and slimy. The guide waited. I lowered my upper body and then my hips to the cave floor and dragged myself forward on my elbows, pushing with my right hip and then left, right boot and then left, the tunnel growing darker and muddier, my light smaller and smaller. And then something was moving toward me, not stone, not anything I could see, maybe sound, maybe wind, and then something else: the Mack truck that barreled into my cousin's car moments before his death. I felt it as clearly as if I'd been in that silent car with him, windows rolled up, both of us speechless as an impossibly large pair of headlights, steel bumper, and grille loomed into the side-view mirror, bore down on our watery bodies of burnable flesh, only I wasn't there, I was here in a dark tunnel and couldn't see what I felt, knew only that I was about to be flattened by the thing that moves inside stone, the thing that was hurtling up that tiny tunnel toward me—who was by now scratching and clawing my way backwards.

When I came back toward him, rear-first, knees bumping in reverse, frantic, I heard the guide scramble out of my way and felt him catch my shoulder as I turned to scurry up the ladder and out of the pit. "Just wait for a few minutes," he said. "It'll pass. You can try again." I looked at him steadily. My voice was eerily calm. "No," I said, one foot on the first rung.

"Absolutely not." Something had been suddenly siphoned out of my mind and all that remained was what I knew not to do: not to try again, not to even look back. He urged again but I shook him off and climbed out of the pit and into the sunshine.

But slowly I did try again. Something drew me, some curiosity about that unexpected terror and a lifelong love of stones. As children, my friend Jeanne and I had created endless small-stone

dramas in the woods behind my house, built hospitals for injured stones, nursed them back to health. We'd gone on to college together, signed up for two semesters of geology, mostly because we'd heard that in the labs you got credit for rubbing and licking stones. We loved geodes and the rock exposed when road-building crews dynamited away the side of a mountain—anything that let us look at what's been concealed for thousands of years. How could I let one afternoon of terror keep me from the ultimate intimacy with stone: to go inside it?

IT'S APRIL IN WEST VIRGINIA, season of tender green and the cows out in the meadows at last after a winter in the barn. I've explained to the two leaders what I want: to crawl around in the dark, to try another tight spot, to be helped through any panic that might follow.

The entrance to this cave is in a cliff on the other side of a stream that divides a meadow. Walking across the new green grass, I look up at the mountain and though I can't see the opening itself, I can see where the stone gets more convoluted, the folds and crevices deeper, the shadows more suggestive. We scramble up a bouldery slope, inch sideways across a ledge, and suddenly there's the entrance, a rather wide entrance, maybe four feet high. Easy, I think. Three of the others go in immediately. Debbie, Kathy, and I sit outside a while. They describe the passage, how it narrows a bit fairly soon but not for long, and ask me how I want to do it. Do I want them in front or behind me? How close? Someone else nearby?

It's an odd experience, being calmly asked how you want to

tell her, close enough so I can touch the heel of her boot. And Kathy behind me, three feet back, her light aimed as far ahead as possible. I'm amazed how easy it is to tell them what I need.

We squat and duck-walk a short while and then have to get on our hands and knees. Daylight from the entrance fades. The darkness is broken only by the small lights on our helmets. Debbie and Kathy banter a bit as we crawl, as if we were all sitting around someone's kitchen table. It soothes me, though I keep reaching out my hand, making sure I can touch Debbie's boot. We keep our heads low. The walls aren't muddy here but close enough that if I turned my elbows out as I crawled, they'd scrape against stone. I keep my eyes fixed on Debbie's boots. She doesn't have to push with her feet here and so the boots simply follow her knees, one after the other in a steady pistonlike action I find comforting. I adjust my pace to match hers. When her right knee moves forward, mine does too. Same with the left. First one, then the other. I study the soles of her boots, feel our movements synchronized, as if we're hooked to the same pulley system, ratcheting ourselves forward together in the darkness, until I begin to relax a bit, comforted by our steady movement, and am able to swing my head to the side for a second and look at the small circle of the tunnel wall lit up by my headlamp.

It's fairly dry, pebbly almost, gray-brown, and pocked. And irregular, as if a drunken plasterer had crawled in and slathered mud, which then dried in a haphazard pattern of chunks and swipes and small ridges. I'd forgotten how hard stone is, the bony patella of my knees scraping directly on it. Sound is harsh here, too, unmuffled, our boots grating, pants crinkling, water bottles sloshing in the otherwise great silence of a cave. And then the

Something drew me, some curiosity about that

get through a fear that might be about to squeeze you breathless. I think of friends who've helped one another through difficult times. What is it we can offer each other? An unruffled presence, maybe a map of good handholds, words of encouragement. But mostly, perhaps, the obvious demonstration that someone else has been through this and lived. In the middle of a divorce, you want someone nearby who's done it before, who can describe the landscape ahead. When your dog dies, nobody's better than the friend with the most recent dog death in the family. And now, when Jeanne, my childhood friend and stone-loving compatriot, is slowly dying, I want Ann, who survived her sister's death. "Here," your friend says, "put your hand here, your knee over there, find your body's sense of balance, now push with your foot." You're in unfamiliar territory, a landscape where you could get lost, wander, or grieve forever. You need, more than anything, the willingness to be instructed. I want Debbie in front of me, I

others' voices and the ceiling suddenly rise and I look up. Though it's pitch-black except for our six small lights, I can tell this room is fairly large, twenty by twenty, perhaps, high ceilings and sloping floor. The others have been poking around, waiting for us, eager to move on. I want to hug everyone, to toast my own feat. I lean against a wall and look at what I've just crawled through. I don't know what's ahead. I do know that's the only way out.

What's immediately in front of us is a fairly smooth passage, an easy walk. I shine my headlamp on the irregular walls, the sloping ceiling. I want to see everything and don't yet have the experienced caver's ability to construct a passage in the mind, to see without aiming a light into every nook and cranny. Their heads are fairly steady on their necks: mine wobbles and bobs like a lollipop on a soggy stick as I swing my light everywhere I can. The passage soon brings us to a breakdown, a section strewn with fallen boulders.

Breakdowns occur because limestone fractures easily. It also

dissolves easily, which explains the development of the cave in the first place. Limestone is a sedimentary rock formed in shallow seas where millions of shells dropped to the ocean floor, were crushed under the weight of millions of other shells, compacted and pulverized, and finally pressed into stone. Layers and layers of limestone, lifted and folded by tectonic-plate action and mountain-building forces, rose above those ancient seas and now lie beneath topsoils all over the world. Because groundwater is laced with a mild carbonic acid, when it seeps underground it slowly, almost imperceptibly, dissolves bits of the highly soluble limestone, creating tiny fissures, which channel more and more of the water. After millions of years, the fissure becomes crevice becomes tunnel and then cavern, a whole subterranean system of streams that continues to widen and dissolve.

Eventually, if water drains completely out of the cave or walls are later undercut by streams, the cave ceiling may lose its support, and the limestone begins to crack and fracture and the roof then collapses. The result is a breakdown, a pile of debris that can be scattered over a hundred yards or heaped into fifty feet, debris that can range in size from tennis balls to houses. Of course in the dark you can't see them all at once. We turn and sweep the narrow beams of our headlamps over the boulders in the middle of this cave passage, our half-dozen small ovals of light sizing up the obstacles ahead. The chunks of debris are angular, tilted, propped against one another, some with knife-ridges, others flat as altars.

We move through the breakdown slowly, carefully. Each foot is placed deliberately, the next move already determined. Debbie leads me, calling out directions, showing me how to hoist my body, how

explains matter-of-factly. It's best to go head first and there's a bit of a downward slope at the end.

It's what cavers call a flattener, a squeeze, the kind that can take the buttons off your shirt and the skin off your cheek. Every eighth of an inch matters, which might mean taking your pack off, sometimes your helmet, maybe even your clothes. The most notorious squeezes have names: the Gun Barrel, Jam Crack, the Electric Armpit Crawl, Devil's Pinch. You can even train for them by buying a product called a squeeze box. It's essentially a play torture chamber for cavers, a wooden box, about thirty by thirty inches, open on the two ends. You set it up in your living room, get down on your hands and knees, and crawl through it. The box has adjustable sides and top. You loosen the bolts, lower the lid, slide the sides closer, crawl through again. You keep doing this, keep shrinking the interior space, until you find your "zone of comfortable passage." Or, as another caver puts it, your "too-tight threshold."

I stare at the narrow slit at my feet. Choosing this route could mean five minutes of panic-stricken thrashing against stone. But choosing the long route around means an extra hour of climbing and butt-sliding, a sure strain on my already trembling limbs. Suddenly I want sunshine, a paved intersection with a stoplight and green arrow, oldies on the radio station, and not this dark, silent world in which neither choice appeals.

ATTEMPTING TO SAIL HOME, Odysseus approached a narrow passage of water that runs between the cave of Scylla and the whirlpool of Charybdis. Circe had warned him about the strait, that on one side, the sea swirls and sucks down black water and

unexpected terror and a lifelong love of stones.

to use my knees, how to lean into a boulder and inch sideways. Constantly aware of the fragility of my body, I work these stones like a slow motion, 3-D hopscotch, searching out the safe foothold, the wide-enough ledge, the handhold that will keep me from falling. I forget that I'm deep inside a mountain. I forget about everything but the next move. And the next and the next, and a crawling, scrambling, exhilarating, exhausting hour later we have worked our way through. My legs are trembly, my knees ache, and I'm sure that underneath my overalls, my skin has begun to bloom into bruises.

We pause for water, and Kathy says we have a choice to make. We can take a shortcut through a very narrow passage or continue on the longer, easier way. Two of the guys, Debbie, and Sue choose the shortcut. I want to look at it first. Kathy leads me around a corner and shines a light toward an impossibly small opening. It's irregular, a cleft between an old jumble of rocks, maybe fourteen inches high. It twists around in there, Kathy

three times a day swallows whatever comes near it. That on the other, a six-headed cave monster with rows of hideous fangs preys on whoever passes by. The story has become idiom: to be caught between Scylla and Charybdis is to be squeezed between two dangers. Avoiding one means exposing yourself to the other. How many times do we find ourselves having to choose between two risks? Possible death to the entire crew or certain death to six men? Loneliness or hostility? Unkindness or dishonesty? What to do?

Taking the long route means adding an hour not just to my time, but to Kathy's too, as she will not leave me alone in the cave. Taking the short route might mean the others have to calm a panicked novice. I squat down and look closer, try to imagine sliding my body into that stony hole. I tell Kathy I need to take the long way round.

Lunch is where we meet up again, a half-hour of rest and

squashed peanut butter sandwiches and the story of Sue's moment of panic in the shortcut. Not more than a couple of yards from the end, one arm extended, the other pinched to her side, her head turned sideways to fit through, she'd been seized by claustrophobia. It lasted only a few seconds, and she was able to laugh about it over lunch. I was oddly relieved. Here was an expert caver who'd gone underground all over the world and she could still have such moments.

Mine was coming.

After another hour of climbing and crawling, we split into two groups, Kathy and I staying behind to poke around more leisurely while the others scrambled off to find a further passage. Kathy wants to show me some small rimstone pools just up a small incline. Miniature dams on a miniature terraced hillside, they look like an aerial scene from a film of the Indian countryside. A little farther up the incline I see a cleft in the stone. A tight passage, Kathy says, but short, maybe fifteen feet. You're on your belly but there's still a good four inches above your head. I want to try it, I tell her. Away from the others, Kathy's calm presence nearby, I want to do it. Kathy hesitates and then leads me up, describes it again, pointing out that if she goes first I'll see her light on the other end. It'll be something clear to scooch toward. She wiggles through in fifteen seconds with no trouble. I start through.

I get a third of the way in. I'm on my belly, arms stretched out ahead. I can move my head, lift it slightly to look for the end, lay it sideways on the floor, inch forward with my hands and elbows, but I have to stay flat on my belly. I can't sit up or draw my knees up close to my chest, which is what I suddenly want to do.

How to explain it? Some curtain falls, blocks off your ability to be rational. I stop where I am, head turned sideways, staring at the passage wall. I'm pretty sure Kathy's talking to me but my heart's begun to race, its pounding far louder than her calm voice, which sounds muffled now, trying to get through to me, halfway out of a nightmare, the sheets wrapped around my face, the air thick with dread, only these sheets are made of stone and I can't claw them away from my face, can't even get my hands close to my face. My body's instinct to escape is suddenly distended, swollen, flooding every available place in my mind. A reckless instinct, incapable of negotiation, completely oblivious to the tiny part of my shrunken mind that sends out one last gasping word of restraint—*wait, wait*—it sweeps wildly through the body, which wants immediately to heed the new command: *run, run*. I try to bend my right leg, as if readying for a sprint, but my knee smashes immediately into the wall. It's as if I'm in a full-body straightjacket shoved headfirst into a too-small casing inside solid stone.

I think Kathy's still talking to me. I can see her headlamp, but it's not the welcome light at the end of a tunnel; it's a train light too far into the tunnel to stop and it's barreling toward me, who is

blocking all the space with my body. The stones have begun to edge closer, the ceiling to lower, and I look at Kathy again and, miraculously, I hear her say, "Take a deep breath." She says it in the same tone she might offer me orange juice, a poached egg for breakfast. I close my eyes and breathe, picture the air filling my lungs, feel my chest expand and then drop, imagine the exhaled air keeping the walls at bay. I breathe again.

THE BEST ADVICE for managing a squeeze comes from Buddhism. The squeeze, Buddhists say, is the unbearable place. The place that makes us want, more than anything else, to be elsewhere. The uncomfortable, embarrassing place where the irrational, the fearful, the panicking parts of ourselves want out, to jump ship, to leave. Buddhists are talking, of course, about mental squeezes, when one part of the mind presents us with irrefutable evidence of something another part of the mind absolutely will not acknowledge. What to do? The usual reaction is to suppress one part and carry on as if it doesn't exist, meaning something in us shrinks, gets smaller. It's a strategy we resort to often. Getting a little smaller, after all, means gaining a little more wiggle room. Now maybe we can squirm another inch, sidle sideways, slip out of the crack. But if we're in the grip of a real squeeze, denial doesn't work anymore and all the evidence becomes palpable: you can't live with him and you can't live without him. There's no more forward and there's no backward. There's a rock in front of your face and there's a rock digging into your back.

Study the rock, the Buddhists say. Open your eyes and study the rock that's pressing into your nose. Look at its color. Note the variations in texture. Breathe. If you can get your glove off, feel it. Muddy? Sandy? A bit of slime? What, exactly, is pressing into your back? Is it ridged or smooth or lumpy? Where, exactly, does it press? Into your shoulder blades, your bum, your ribs? These are impossible tasks, and exactly what a Buddhist would recommend to someone caught in a squeeze. Study the *placé*. Watch how your mind leaps to absurdities. Watch the way panic looms and recedes. You're not going anywhere at the moment, so you might as well be curious about where you are.

I open my eyes. In front of me is a damp wall of bedrock. Dark brown, grayish, a thin skim of viscous mud. A few inches up, the wall's pebbly surface shows through. Small craters and crust, a little more tan, speckled. This is limestone, I know, the primary rock in which caves form. I'm lying in a small tunnel, I tell myself, in which the stone has been dissolved, so what's left here, crowding me, has to be less soluble than what's gone. I try to see the tunnel itself and the room behind me that we've just left, try to picture the breakdown we crossed through before lunch, the ceiling above it, the mountain above that, the valley we drove through to get here, the sinkholes and disappearing streams so

typical of karst, this landscape of pocked and riddled limestone. A book I have at home flashes through my mind—photographs of karst landscapes all over the world, in England and New Zealand, in China and New Mexico, their deep pits and sunken bowls and, underneath, their caverns and tunnels, like this one I'm frozen in. I turn my head sideways on the floor to rest. I breathe, I hear Kathy's voice, I hear Rilke's voice: *everything close to my face is stone.*

Odysseus lingered at the entrance to the passage. In the end, he did as Circe had advised: he passed through on Scylla's side of the strait. Scylla saw them coming, of course, twisted her six heads down to the ship and plucked six men from the deck. Odysseus did what commanders-in-chief do in every major battle, what each of us does in large and small decisions a dozen times

a year: he chose the certain deaths of a few over the probable deaths of many. We do it all our lives. We reject small parts of ourselves, which then die—unexpressed dreams, secret longings, the hopes we say were minor once we've chosen to discard them.

The Odyssey is the quintessential Western hero's story, full of agonizing choices and ordeals. The hero makes all the right moves and eventually gets home again. His adventures teach us about the indomitable human spirit, about courage, perseverance, and the need to make hard choices. I raise my head. My helmet bangs immediately against the ceiling. A warning, I think, lowering it slowly. Odysseus couldn't avoid the Scylla vs. Charybdis passage entirely; it was way too late to turn around and find another route home. But I want to know how Western thought would have been different if Odysseus had lived a little later, been able to read a bit of Buddhism before he set sail. Caught between two dangers, what if he'd heeded the Buddhist advice, lowered his sails, and studied the passage between them? Why couldn't he have waited, spent a few days timing Charybdis's thrice-daily thrashings? It seems he could have charted the pauses, understood the pattern, and then steered his boat to that side of the passage during a lull and avoided Scylla altogether.

The trouble with a squeeze, Odysseus knew and I know, is that it imparts a certain urgency. We think we can't stand being caught between a rock and hard place, can't stand it one more second, and so we flail our way out, bruised and panicky. To resist the panic, to wait until the mind can consider more carefully, just to wait at all, in fact, requires patience and a tolerance for boredom, neither of which makes for the high drama of legends.

A diagram in a cave rescue document flashes through my mind. It shows a caver caught in a vertical crevice. Her left arm is



stretched up, as if reaching toward the rescuer at the top who leans over, shines his light down into the crack. Her right arm is pinned to her side, straight down. Her head is turned to the side. The two crevice walls squeeze her the whole length of her back, her rear, her knees, her chest. She can't breathe well. Her feet dangle. There's nothing below them. Her only possible course of action is to stay calm and completely still while others work their ropes and harnesses. To squirm at all is to risk slipping further down. In fact, any movement on her part will only jeopardize her position. I'm suddenly grateful for the stone my body's stretched on. I lift my head carefully, turn it to the right, wiggle the toe of my right boot a bit, feel how firm the cave floor is beneath me. Breathe.

Ten years ago, about to enter a cave for the first time, I might have read the wrong things to my young creative writing students. Or to myself. Instead of myth and metaphor, maybe we should have studied mud and rock, studied the literal in front of our faces for a while, let the figurative emerge on its own. It does. It will. I might have avoided panic, gotten through that squeeze, been able to follow my students into that cave, might have been able to sit with them in an underground room and learn something about stone fissures, cave minerals, how sediment weathers underground.

Kathy's reminding me to breathe. I twist my head toward her; I inhale and count to ten and know something else that might also be true: no matter how many physically bigger guides precede me, no matter how many times I squirm through a squeeze, it might be this hard. There's a rock pressing into my back, a rock in front of my face, and nothing to do but look at it, slow down my breath, my urge to flee. I will my hands to unclench, raise a gloved finger, and run it slowly down the dimpled surface of stone. ✎