



The Kentucky Vein

Colleen S. Harris

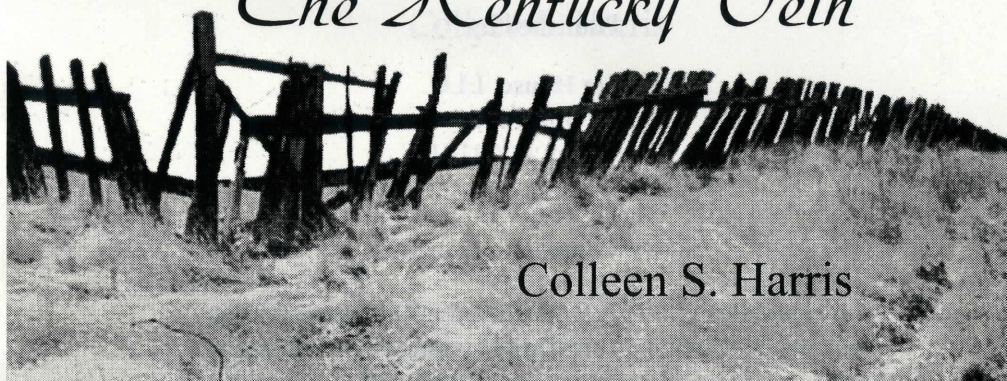


Text copyright © 2011 Colleen S. Harris

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The Kentucky Vein

Colleen S. Harris



(10) 00873987X
(13) 078-0-987390-7-9

THIS BOOK IS PRINTED ON 30% RECYCLED PAPER

Printed in the United States of America

Text Copyright © 2011 Colleen S. Harris

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by

Punkin House, LLC.
P.O Box 12201
Covington, KY 41012

www.PunkinHouse.com

The characters and events portrayed in the poems in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, or locales is entirely coincidental and not intended by the author.

(10) 098323907X
(13) 978-0-9832390-7-9

THIS BOOK IS PRINTED ON 30% RECYCLED PAPER

Printed in the United States of America

Acknowledgment is made to the following publications,
in which some of the poems in this book first appeared:

Red White & Blue

"Blue Nurtury"

"Lantana"

Valley Review

"Sacrifices"

When You Learn Things "born the Way"

The Kentucky Vein

Colleen S. Harris

Hawk & Whippoorwill

"Violet Pools"

Bellowing Ark

"The Ant"

"Daddy's Grave"

Third Wednesday

"Fishing"

Santa Clara Review

"Second Sight"

Sagehen Review

"Of Blue Collars and Electrical Tape"

"Conversations with a Horse on the Kentucky Scenic

Byway" forthcoming in Knocking at the Door, Birch

Press, 2011.

I would also like to thank those who read and commented
on these poems in their various stages: Melly Peacock,
Greg Price, Rosemary Rayston, Robert Ward.

First Copyright © 2001 Corleum S. Harris

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The Kentucky State

Collection



Copyright © 2001

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 0-9832390-7-9

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Acknowledgment is made to the following publications,
in which some of the poems in this book first appeared:

Red Wheelbarrow:

“Blue Nursery”

“Limoges”

Chaffey Review:

“Sacrifices”

“When You Came Home from the War”

Lamplighter Review:

“Gold Frame”

“When You Came Home from the War”

“In Praise of Kevlar”

Hawk & Whippoorwill:

“Violet Petals”

Bellowing Ark:

“The Ant”

“Daddy’s Grave”

Third Wednesday:

“Fishing”

Santa Clara Review:

“Second Sight”

Sequoia Review:

“Of Blue Collars and Electrical Tape”

“Conversations with a Horse on the Kentucky Scenic
Byway” forthcoming in *Knocking at the Door, Birch
Bench Press*, 2011.

I would also like to thank those who read and commented
on these poems in their various stages: Molly Peacock,
Greg Pape, Rosemary Royston, Robert Ward.

*For the family I found in Kentucky:
Beth, Luke, Matt & Jeremy -
My soul is a bit of a gypsy,
but you all have become my home*

Table of Contents

The Green of Breakable Things

The Green of Breakable Things.....	1
The Barn.....	2
Planting Season.....	3
Red River Gorge.....	4
Tobacco.....	5
Front Porch.....	6
Violet Petals.....	7
Fishing.....	8
Through the Window.....	9
Honeysuckle.....	10
Light.....	11
Sunday Service.....	12

The Landscape of my Body

Cricket Song.....	15
In the Beginning there was a Word.....	16
Annie Peck Writ Small.....	17
Coming in from the Field.....	18
Foal Season.....	19
The Ant.....	20
Blue Whispers.....	21
Sustenance.....	22
The Cough.....	23
Second Sight.....	24
Skin.....	25
Baptism.....	26

A Blue Period

Limoges.....	29
The Blue Cow.....	30
The Blue Hand.....	31
The Blue Nursery.....	32
Quarry.....	33
Tricycles.....	34
Bluegrass.....	35

The Blue Banjo.....	36
Breached.....	37
Sacrifices.....	38

In the Time of Storms

Hopscotch.....	41
A Green Sky.....	42
Swerve.....	43
The Rifle.....	44
Stone Fences.....	45
Bells.....	46
Marehaven.....	47
In Praise of Kevlar.....	48
When You Came Home from the War.....	49
Kentucky River.....	50
Tornado Warning.....	51
Inheritance.....	52
Memories.....	53
Gold Frame.....	54

*Conversations with a Horse on the Kentucky
Scenic Byway*

A House of My Own.....	57
Manure.....	58
Conversations with a Horse on the Kentucky Scenic Byway.....	59
Clearing Weeds from Daddy's Grave.....	61
Renewing Vows.....	62
Memory Quilt.....	63

Between: American Heartscapes (essays)

Transplant.....	67
Of Blue Collars & Electrical Tape.....	73
The Catholic is in the Blood.....	81
Giants of Idaho.....	87

The Green of Breakable Things

The Green of Breakable Things

The vase shatters against the hardwood.
Between the shards, flowers grow
through the planks. The vase was hand-painted,
selected from my mother's things
when she died. I put it on display for her anniversary
but I hid it in my bureau for winter.
When I sit on the couch, I remember its place
and burst into bloom.
I am the fresh-cut green of breakable things.

The Barn

The barn reigns loudly over horses,
stands broad and firm, and all is saved.
The barn bears corn and starves the crow,
protects me when I pass through night fields.
The barn eclipses me when I enter,
shadow swallowing from the hunger for love.
The barn turns into a crystal cathedral
when I call out my middle name.



Planting Season

Rattletrap pickup trucks scurry through town,
endless, like locusts.

When I walk in the street,
they are windmill shadows.

The trucks are full of seed. They linger
at feed stores, humming with need.

They follow me past the farm.

The face of one driver is my daughter,
the teenage girl who will never be born.

Red River Gorge

The red gorge sprawled to my horizon
like a woman made lazy by love.
Wind lapped at leaves and stone as I climbed
up the rockface. The breeze shut its eyes
and the trees were caryatids, hair aflame.
I feared the gorge would swallow itself into desert.
I feared men would come with sickles and slice
the mountaintops for their insolence.
I became too wild to go home.
I became a stone of the mountain;
the red trees acolytes of eastern hills,
chanting devotions to the wind.



Tobacco

The tobacco crops have no heaven.
I travel them in search of sustenance,
find nothing but hunger in their green stretch.
Planes overhead spell *Grace* in smoke.
These crops have no fathers.
I watch women growing old in the sun
and bow to them,
count my years in sheaves until they are lost.
This tobacco bears no harvest,
sentinel stalks of green death.

Front Porch

I stood there my seventeenth summer.
The porch widened and offered its cushion.
When I stepped up, I found a wide swing
the breadth of my need.
The porch was rickety, but held me.
When I sat on the railing, I thought of oceans.
When I knelt by the bleached rocker,
I lost my words.
When I put on my shoes, my pockets were empty.
When I hit the first step, the hound rolled over.

Violet Petals

The violet petals are twelve shades shy of twilight.

I lick them hoping for grape-flavored sugar,
find nothing but purple pulped on my tongue:

The violet petals are the velvet

of my mother's best dress,

dark like shadows beneath Catholic pews.

They are royalty, dressing us up for confession

then falling asleep by the cuckolded clover.

Fishing

I call to the bass circling at my toes,
pluck their silver sequins to sew into my dress.
They dance like harrowed nymphs.
I lie back in the boat, trail my fingers in the water
to feel their mouths kiss away dead skin.
I bait my hook, and they name me traitor.
I keep their bodies on ice and fillet them carefully,
carefully, as though I am a doctor
curing them of something other than life.



Through the Window

It is the smell of cut grass.
It is the smell of early Sunday mornings.
The growing smell curls round my feet and prods.
It finds me and undresses me for prayer.
The growing smell is a green blessing
worth the callouses and burnt skin.
It spills into a yearning for acres.
The green smell is forgiving, soft as sweet clover
I crushed beneath my body as a child.
I am born into this green peace.

Honeysuckle

Honeysuckle has fewer suitors
than the promiscuous rosebush.

The honeysuckle falls over fences
within easy reach.

It shelters the dog and feeds the bee,
goes flaccid when children break off branches
to use as dueling swords.

I blow frail bugles, hunting my childhood.



Light

The lamp tumbled to cold tile.
Between sputters of light, shadows stained
the walls. The lamp was an antique,
found in a dim corner
when we strolled through Louisville.
I set it in the corner to brighten October,
but our floor was warped.
I sit across from your chair as you read,
I remember its glow
and reach out to bask in your light.



Sunday Service

The loamy sermon runs
through my fingers and escapes.
It caresses me and puts on its shoes as penance.
Forgiveness is a flavor
worth the bruised and bitten lip.
It cascades into a love of God's houses.
The cantor's voice is entreating,
places me in songs of old joy,
a veil over blue waters I swam as a girl.



Cricket Song

The cricket hopped from my tongue,
landed on my breast, and perched on my nipple.
The cricket called me into dreams.
As I slept, it told stories to the corners of my room.
As I slept, I learned the rhythm of the unborn,
found the meaning of rest.
The cricket denies the taste of my mouth.
When I call it back to my bosom,
its song thrums in the depths of my womb.

In the Beginning there was a Word

It made the first woman blush.
It stroked a mutt by the fire.
The word warned some mother's son
away from the lip of the pit.
It called the sun yellow and the yellow was true.
The word became a sweet chord
that tasted like apples from Eastern Kentucky,
that sounded like the space between
the flamenco dancer's shoes and the floor.
It mated with its echo and multiplied.
Now words move like cows, lumbering
up our throats, lowing across our tongues.



Annie Peck Writ Small

She crept up my shin, crested
the dome of my knee and pondered my thigh.
The ladybug tickled me into knowledge.
As I relaxed, she danced the contours of my skin.
As I relaxed, she became a river pebble
and I her bed,
learning the rhythm of beauty.
The ladybug forgets the landscape of my body.
When I invite her to resume the journey,
her wings whirl with such speed that I fly.

Coming in from the Field

The sunburn is beloved;
proof of work well done.
It slips behind my eyes and searches
for cool waterfalls. It strips me
and preaches a liturgy of fireplaces.
The sunburn is a judgment
against rasping cotton collars.
It bursts into a confetti of raging cancers.
The burn is unyielding;
promises red tigers I will fight in my sleep.



Foal Season

Bones shaping her flesh, the mare
stands at my man's left side.
He does not know I am barren.
The mare prances through furrows
made by cold metal plows,
nuzzles the hand of the man
I have given my years.
When I call his name from the porch,
she neighs, buffs his arm with her hide.
When he reaches for me,
the mare discovers green summers,
joins the herd and mates.

The Ant

The red ant crept from my hairline,
wandered past my freckle, and stopped at my brow.
The red anted lifted me into consciousness.
As I meditated, it lifted wrinkles from my forehead.
As I meditated, I found the strength of ten selves,
unlocked the secrets of seeds.
The ant refused to heed the wisdom of stillness.
When I moved to pluck it from my head,
its footsteps tattooed forgiveness into my pores.



Blue Whispers

The sheets hissed when we slid into bed.
They washed over my skin
and melted into my pillow.
I pulled up the blanket and saw silver stars.
Egyptian goddesses watched as I dove
into your body and waited for answers.
Linens laved the secrets of my inner thigh.
When we broke like waves,
I found my fists balled in the sheets.
Their warmth bound me to my bones.
When I listened, I heard ancient secrets
whispered by cotton as our limbs cooled,
this rippling of flesh against blue fabric.

Sustenance

The bowl embraces captivity.
It sits rested and empty,
and the other pottery has faith.
The bowl mothers ingredients and feeds children,
satisfies me when I ask.
The bowl warms me when I cup its hips,
pelvis hollowed to make room for more.
The bowl is a talisman to protect me from want,
turns to bread when I open my mouth.



The Cough

The cough rattled when I sat up in bed.
It clawed my breath and stitched my side.
I lifted a cigarette and tasted white paper.
I walked to the kitchen and waited for death.
The cough gossiped over coffee.
When it quickened for the second time,
all I heard was drowning,
the pitiful sound of myself lost in my body.

Second Sight

My eye is the eye from my father's head,
a murky green, a milky gauze
filming its sight like rain over warped windows.

I gaze into the mirror and know
he is gone.

When I look deeper, my face is my father's.

I close my mossy eyes in sorrow.



Skin

The ivory skin spread beneath my nightgown.
When I stretched and tickled the skin with lace,
it twitched like something born...or dying.
The skin was unblemished, a snowy coverlet
riding my bones across the slopes of my body.
I found the ivory skin and knew it was not mine.
Mine bears the stretch marks of my mother.
Mine bears the brunt of my dessert.
I stroked the new-person skin in awe.
It trembled while my hand rested on it.
When I woke in the morning,
my skin was lined with fat and age.

Baptism

They told me to raise my arms and sing
the lake into a flowing calligraphy.
I cannon-balled instead and was drowned
by the quiet insistence of water at my pores.
They told me to sink with the weight of my worry
so I could feel how much sorrow
I could hold in the frail vessel of my body.
I floated to the water's skin instead,
was shocked with hearing the burn of the sun
kissing my body free of moisture.
When I touched the lake's skirt, I was drenched
as she whispered to me,
and pointed out the spigot rusted with disuse.
When they asked me what she said,
I was too thirsty to answer
that they were a people who needed
to learn how to swim.



Limoges

The blue plate cracked
under the weight of its brothers.
In the china, fault lines raced for freedom.
The blue plate was older than my grandmother,
carried over treacherous waters by married women.
I lay it on the low shelf to be in easy reach,
I let it collect dust for fear of breaking.
Now, it lays fractured in my kitchen cabinet.
When I set the table, I remember its delicacy
and shatter into my daughters.

The Blue Cow

The blue cow grazes beside my brother.
Its eyes sing of God.
He will not stay home for the war.
The blue cow emboldens the spirit
of the boy I taught to ride.
When I raise my voice the cow lays down,
summoning rain to hide my brother's tears.
When my brother turns to leave,
the cow takes off its uniform
to stand in a patch of mottled sun.



The Blue Hand

I found the blue hand in the bath.
When I looked down and flexed underwater fingers,
I saw the hand from my sister's slender arm.
The hand was delicate, a fine dust of hair
glinting like spiderwebs in the sun.
I found the blue hand and remembered her name.
When I gazed deeper into the water,
my death was my sister's.
I fisted the blue hand in anger.
It changed while the water rippled.
When I opened my eyes under water,
my hand was blunt-fingered, my own.



The Blue Nursery

I built it in my thirtieth autumn.
The blue nursery calmed and offered sanctuary.
When I painted, I found expansive walls
the shape of new beginnings.
The nursery was unfinished, but forgave me.
When I sat on the blue floor, I thought of cherries.
When I turned out the light,
the dark tasted like A minor.
The blue nursery embraced me for thirty days.
When I painted the ceiling, I lost the ladder.
When I grazed the doorjamb, the crib turned to dust.



Quarry

The quarry towered over my head.
One twilight, I heard pebbles tiptoeing its sides.
When I put my hand to the limestone,
the wave of rock crested and froze before toppling.
The next year, the quarry emptied,
and I could find no rogue stones.
When I reached to trace the rough layers
of the quarry wall, it bit my palm
and absorbed my shadow.
The new library of limestone
sits at the center of campus,
still smells like steel-worked stone.
When I turn on a lamp in the reading room,
I hear the heart of beating earth.

Tricycles

The tricycles teased me into coming home.
They were lonely like turkey buzzards.
When I sat on the patio, they were peals of laughter.
When I reached for the wheel, I had overalls on.
The tricycles were shiny with hope.
They rode around the block, searching for dinner.
When I caught a tricycle for myself, it died.
The tricycles herded me onto the porch.
Ribbioned handlebars drooped like cut flowers,
rusted children left too long in the rain.



Bluegrass

The bluegrass remembers no sorrows.
I crush it in search of pigment,
am left with nothing but blue strings
in need of a violin.
Footpaths through the field
spell wanderlust in ghostcolor.
I hear tourists moo at cows and avert my eyes.
I weave my lovers
braids of grass until I forget their names.
The wind over a field sounds like men
trying to hymn their women back to life.
I follow the grass to its roots,
welcomed by ribbons of blue surprise.

The Blue Banjo

The blue banjo sat at the end of the drive,
its grandfather dead, the farm for sale.
Bewildered and waiting like a loyal dog,
the banjo had four strings, but two were snapped
and snarled along the calfskin like arthritis.
For five dollars I saved it from sloth.
Now an old man's ghost lives in my fingers,
and my fast picking gives death a new tune.



Breached

The yellow slicker tore against the rusted nail.
The slicker is too large for me,
my father's defense against the onslaught of rain.
I let the storm soak through my dress at his funeral,
had to peel my wet panties
down goosebumped clammy legs.
Now the slicker hangs, ripped, in my closet.
When I wear it into the storm,
wind finds the aperture
and strips his scent from the lining.

Sacrifices

The good people ask me to plant my feet and feel
the earth spit new crops from old soil.
I raise my hands instead and fall
into the dust from which my bones were made.
The good people invite me to erase my ancestors
so I may build new memories
from virgin clay at the banks of new rivers.
I etch my story into my skin instead,
with brambles and blackberry juice,
I am cursed with hearing my blood
cry with each seed I plant,
and none shall bear this toil for you.
The good people tell me to lay the twins
on the forest stone, to listen
for God's whisper to stab through their livers.
I tell the children to grow
hay from their hearts, instead,
to fatten the livestock that feed their family.
When the children slaughter the cattle,
I am no longer hungry.
Believing the harvest has come,
I bend my head to the sickle.
When I lift my head,
it is still married to my body and I see
green shoots have replenished themselves
without sacrifice or blood.



The good people have been
 the can and new crops from the
 I take my hands from the
 into the forest and the
 The good people have been
 so I have built new houses
 from the forest and the
 I took my hands from the
 with branches and blackberry
 I am cured with healing
 city with each seed I plant

and now shall you be
 The good people tell me to lay the twins
 on the forest to listen
 for God's whisper to slip through their lives
 I tell the children to grow
 lay from their hearts, instead
 to learn the forest that feed their body
 When the children slaughter the cattle
 I am no longer hungry
 Believing the harvest has come
 I bend my head to the sickle
 When I lift my head
 it is still married to my body and I see
 green shoots have rejoined themselves
 without sacrifice or blood

The good people have been
 the can and new crops from the
 I take my hands from the
 into the forest and the
 The good people have been
 so I have built new houses
 from the forest and the
 I took my hands from the
 with branches and blackberry
 I am cured with healing
 city with each seed I plant

In the Time of Storms

The good people have been
 the can and new crops from the
 I take my hands from the
 into the forest and the
 The good people have been
 so I have built new houses
 from the forest and the
 I took my hands from the
 with branches and blackberry
 I am cured with healing
 city with each seed I plant

Hopscotch

Sisters scurry out the back door
to glare at the ground, serious as sergeants.

Faint marks scar pale concrete
too ghostly to make authoritative borders,
lines in white chalk too easy to erase.

We use tar chips from beneath shingles
to scar the bright patio.

The stroke of one piece is black as the belt
that will teach us the meaning of *boundaries*,
driving home the playground lesson:
there are some lines you don't cross.



A Green Sky

Dangerous and unpredictable green
skies moan in my ears.

Birds go silent in the broad span.

When I step outside, the green sky boils
until the ground sighs with steam.

The next hour the green sky darkens, spits
funnels, and I cannot remember my name.

I duck my head out of fear, the sky tosses
homes like dice. This is how I learn to gamble.



Swerve

The rain falls like confederates, gray and heavy.
The rain falls until the night is a lake
and the bridge is a gray halo
crowning the river in mid-morning mist.
An angel comes along the curve.
She is the daughter of rain.
She is your granddaughter's twin,
hair slicked to her face at the foot of the bridge,
her mother changing a flat.
There is no room to pass.
Your tires break off their affair with the road.
In the long rain, in the long pause between
drops, the choice is child, concrete, or river.
All you can do is swerve.

The Rifle

It stands in the corner like a petulant child.
When I put my hand on the stock,
I feel my father's hand in mine.
When I look down the barrel, I smell oil and relief.
The rifle is a younger brother waiting
to see if he will hunt with his sister, or bury her.



Stone Fences

The stone fences wind
like arteries around green spaces.
Where the stones start to crumble,
even horses do not cross.
When I approach the fence, bold signs
warn me they are protected by law,
hollering over the quiet of clouds.
The stones are the bones of the men of the land
and cannonballs buried in old battlefields.
The stone fences divide flocks of sheep,
remind each living thing to know its limit,
tell cows to lie down and wait for new rain.



Bells

The bells pealed when we buried the hound.
They shredded my sight and bullied my lungs.
I walked to the yard and saw fresh-turned earth.
The dumb bells tolled with stolen breath.
I ran into the trees and waited for ghosts.
The voyeur bells mapped my path.
When they clanged like calls to war,
I found his collar near a shaded stump.
When I listened, all I heard was that metal storm,
the command to look down
on that small mound of earth.



Marehaven

The houses watched me pull to a stop,
lined up like good soldiers ready to march.
The streets were named for Derby-winning horses.
Eight bells rang out, and the windows all burst.
Horse farms were sold
so these homes could be built.
When I step onto one lawn, grass tugs at my ankle,
asks if I have seen any hungry foals.



In Praise of Kevlar

It weighs the same as steel
and costs more than blood.
He puts it on quickly, betting his life
on fiber developed for bicycle tires.
He trusts it to halt enemies
before the tender meat of his heart.
It guards the slick spools of his humid intestines.
It promises him his daughter's face.
When it catches a bullet,
it leaves a halo on his chest,
proof that angels travel by ammunition.



When You Came Home from the War

Your body was a war-torn city.
We rubbed against each other
and it sounded like violins scowling.
We loved like October maples scream.
And we loved like kudzu, overtaking all things.
We were lovers because there was nothing else
we could think to do with our bodies
but burn them.



Kentucky River

The gray river flows at my feet.
Frogs sing solemn songs at its altar.
When I step into the water, the choir stops
and silence presses ripples into coins.
The river overflows, swells, and swallows the sun.
The river tosses in its sleep.
The river lies in its bed and strums ballads.
I bend to touch the Kentucky vein and it pulses.



Tornado Warning

Static cackled while I waited to hear
who had survived.

It was a slate-colored sound.

It grated my skin, tore hunks from my flesh.

I crouched in the basement,
away from the bladed sky.

The radio snickered as I crept
to the small, high window, waiting to be crushed.

Static mocked my patience, hissing like ocean foam
until I reached the limit of batteries,
until all I could hear was absence.



Inheritance

The wagons lagged behind me in the backyard.
They were heavy like housework.
When I dragged them to shade,
they were lumbering dragons.
When I broke a wheel, the horizon was off-kilter.
The wagons were full of inchworms
harvested from maples.
The wagons basked in the sun,
shining with promise.
When I gave my son my old wagons,
he took them apart.
They lie dismembered in my garage.
The wheel from one wagon rolls
to my foot, a memory cannibalized.



Memories

The boats follow me across windchopped water.

They are sullen like cinderblocks.

When I float on the surface,

they appear a fierce armada.

When I step aboard, I drip with jewels.

The boats taunt the hurricane closer,

outrun the time of storms

and leave me adrift in foam.

The boats idle in the current, rocking with envy.

Their anchors are bodies wrapped in oilcloth.



Gold Frame

The gold frame reins us into square spaces,
sits simple and forgotten, and all is preserved.
The gold frame stops time and saves my family.
The house remains frozen and un-foreclosed.
The flowers smell like paper, the dead dog smiles.
My brother's eyes do not carry
the hard shellac of war.
The frame traps the ghost of a life,
haunting the attic, scaffolding for spiders.



Conversations with a Horse
on the Kentucky
Scenic Byway

A House of my Own

This house has no history.
I walk barefoot and hear
the first cries of untested wood floors.
Ceiling fans whirl like cassette tape reels
recording the music
of a home settling into its bones,
spinning the scent of rosemary
into the fibers of the couch.
This house has no memories.
This house is an empty vessel,
I am the river that will fill it.



Manure

A clean smell, it chimes in spring air
like my mother's voice announcing dinner,
or the sound of my father's pickup truck
rumbling up the drive. A green smell
deep as a cow's calm eyes,
friendly like line-dried laundry,
it says the crop is plentiful and flowers
will march like armies through rich fields.
It climbs up the trellis and takes me home,
says *this is a healthy place for growing.*



Conversations with a Horse on the Kentucky Scenic Byway

You are bigger
than I thought you would be.
I am a little bit
afraid, but you are beautiful
and I have a carrot.

*

You are a terrible guard-horse,
letting strangers like me
walk right up to your fence.
Do you worry
about razors in apples?

*

This fence is really just your way
of being polite.
I have seen you gallop.
I have seen you clear dead woodfalls
piled far higher than this.
You looked like a symphony
trying to fly.

*

Do you moo at the cows?
Can the cows whinny back?
Do you count each others'
children at twilight?
Do you know each others' names?

*

Your grandfathers carried mine into war.
Do horses choose sides?
I suppose it doesn't matter,
they all died together.

We never said we were sorry.
I think they must have loved each other
to have shared both beds and blood.

*

The stallion is jealous
I brought you flowers.
He has the same wind-driven eyes
as a man I loved
who smelled like oranges and cloves.

*

Bullets work the same
on people as horses.
At least you get to be useful –
dog food. Or glue, holding a child's
first handprint turkey to its feathers.
Some mother will put you
on an avocado fridge, then save you
in a photo album.

*

They are building a neighborhood
and calling it Marehaven.
Your field is in the way.
See the *Sold* sign in the east pasture?
It is good of you to crop the grass
and keep the carpet neat.

*

Little girls worship your withers.
Anna Sewell is our priestess
and heaven is a horse at the skirt of a lake
beneath a blooming dogwood tree.
Are horsedreams filled with little girls,
patent leather shoes at your ribs?



Daddy's Grave

I stand here in my simple denim.
The grave is overgrown and lush with green.
When I pluck weeds from near the stone,
they come up like dirty, workworn hands.
You were sturdy like wooden pews
built to bear the weight of doubt.
But I know you slept on the kitchen floor
to keep the new puppy from crying.
I know when little girls ask for ponies,
sometimes we get them.

Renewing Vows

The lake swallowed my doubts.
It was dark as a coma.
When I walked its edges,
I was invisible as a bullfrog's call.
When I dipped my finger in,
I heard smooth stones croon like a choir
of drowned girls.
The lake was cradled by its sound foundation.
It lay beneath the moon, shimmering
with expectation.
When I asked my fortune,
dawn slid over and into the lake,
burning like a bride
under her new husband's hands.



Memory Quilt

Start with patches of color, generous as Germans
who made their homes in the mountains
and became my grandmothers. The smell
of a woodstove staving off snow, of bread
tasting like broad valleys and looking homemade.
Hold it together with the sound of bare feet
on rough paths up mountains, the rackrattle
of Daddy's coal-colored cough.
Sew it all with my mother's gnarled fingers
threading the needle without help,
even when she could not make out my face
in the deep deafness of her eyes.

Between:
American Heartscapes
essays

Memory Quill

Start with patches of color, generous as German
sweaters, their homes in the mountains
and between my grandparents. The smell
of a woodstove staving off snow, of bread
rising like broad valleys and looking down
at them. Hold it together with the sound of bare feet
on rough paths or the silence, the ruckus
of Daddy's red-colored cough.
Sew it all with my mother's gnarled fingers
threading the needle without help,
even when she could not make out my face
in the deep darkness of her eyes.

Between:

American Heartscapes

essays

TRANSPLANT

I am a native New Yorker—but not really. I grew up on Long Island. This, any real New Yorker will tell you, is more New York than Potsdam or Syracuse, but not *quite* as New York as The City. (If you listen hard enough, you'll notice that's how it's said— "The City" —capitals and all.) Long Island is as ethnically diverse as the city, if you look at the regular towns and avoid thinking about the Hamptons, which it seems everyone thinks makes up the majority of the Island. My conversations, when I am out of state, go something like this: "Yes, I grew up on Long Island. No, not the Hamptons. Think more Spanish Harlem, only not as romantic." A place just as trafficked and crowded as the city, only with less glamour, fewer options for public transportation, and less impressive law enforcement.

The Long Island I knew was very different from the Island where my parents grew up, which was largely undeveloped and largely populated by whites. What I consider *my* Long Island is a series of overdeveloped townlets all connected by too-busy parkways and expressways, with the hum of Spanish in the background, litter tumbling in the breeze over street corners and the smell of powdered sugar from the Entenmann's plant mixing with the stench of cigarette smoke outside Brentwood High School. The Long Island I knew was just coming into itself as a microcosm of everything great and awful. The rich homes and the sandy white beaches juxtaposed with increased gang activity, school shootings, and hypodermics on the public beaches. Walking quickly past crackhouses on the way to school, and driving around to see huge houses beautifully decked out in Christmas lights in December. The kaleidoscope of a high school where we changed classes to the tune of Haitian Creole, a mix of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Argentinian Spanish, and the sweet hum of Hindi. *This* is my Long Island.

I am convinced there are three kinds of people who are born on Long Island. First, there are those who never

leave. Rooted with the sand in their bones, they will grow, live, die and be buried there, and are only happy when their feet are on Long Island soil. Then, only slightly different (a matter of degree, really) from that first set of folks, there are people who consider Long Island a staging ground, a jumping-off point that will end with them moving to The City. They skip class to take the train in for the day, go to New York as often as possible, cannot wait to pay \$2200 a month to call a tiny patch of the city their own, and dream of working days and exploring and partying by night.

There is a third kind of Islander: the one who cannot wait to get out. I grew up with a few half-baked dreams, but only one real desire: to be *elsewhere*.

I thought my *elsewhere* would be a toss-up between an ivy league school, California, or Spain. Kentucky was not on that list. I come by my love for the bluegrass state the long way around. Kentucky, for me, was a lovely accident. When it came time to go to college, I could not afford to attend my first choice, Middlebury, and I was not accepted into the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. Bitter about this turn of events and the dent it likely put into my dream of being a diplomat, I decided simply to attend my safety school, a tiny college in the middle of nowhere that I had never heard of, visited, or put serious thought into attending.

Centre College had a full time enrollment of under 900 students when I matriculated in September 1997, which was markedly smaller than the size of my high school. Located in Danville, Kentucky, population approximately 15,500, it was as different from what I knew as I could hope. After getting slightly lost on our drive down from New York, my parents stopped to ask directions. The friendly woman at the smoke shop tapped her lips, and said "Oh, piddle!" before deciding the best directions. True to our feeling of being in some sort of comedy, her directions did indeed include the words, *turn off the paved road*. My parents dropped me off and floored the accelerator on their way back to civilization, with the



sage advice “Don’t get pregnant!” echoing in their wake.

I arrived before the rest of the students and discovered, much to my dismay, that there was only one restaurant within walking distance to campus, and zero stores, unless you counted the SuperAmerica gas station on the corner just off campus. The Super WalMart was a few miles down what everyone referred to as the “four lane”—US27, which had two lanes going in each direction.

At opening convocation, the entire freshman class and not a few upperclassmen sat in Weisiger Theater, listening to the dean welcome us. I will admit that I was distracted—I had never seen so many white people in one place at one time. I was still boggling when I heard the speaker remark that my incoming class was the most diverse in the school’s history. Chuckling, I thought to myself, *Diverse? Well, you got tall people and you got short people...*

The first week of school, a baby cow got loose from the stockyards just off campus. It ran about confusedly, stepping on a girl’s foot and trampling the lawn in front of the library until some brave Phi Delt football player tackled it to the ground as, apparently, is done with loose baby cows in universes where they rampage in public. This was not considered out of the ordinary, and I was likely the only one who called my mother that night, begging her to come get me and bring me home from the set of *Little House on the Prairie*.

Today, I consider attending that proud little school the best accidental decision of my life.

I received a wonderful education, but it went beyond books and economics graphs. I learned how to entertain myself with no transportation. I learned how to navigate a hot bar to avoid those items most likely to cause food poisoning, and learned from others’ mistakes. It doesn’t matter what the recipe card says, if the chicken is green, you should not eat it. (Thanks for taking that bullet, Luke.) I learned to be just un-wild enough on Saturday night that the entire population of the dining hall did not stand up to applaud on Sunday morning when I walked in.

I also learned quite a bit about Southern culture. And no, "Southern culture" is not code for "bring back the Confederacy of yore," as so many of us Northerners often take it. I had pooh-poohed the idea of a Southern culture at all, assuming (again, as so many of us in the North do) that the Civil War was fought, that it ended, and that everyone went right back to building the union—just without slaves.

After I graduated from college, I spent another few years living and working in Lexington, Kentucky. Most of the people I met who could trace their roots back far enough (and there were more than a few) could say that their families had been poor in the old South. And while I'm sure you could rattle the admission of a slave-worked plantation out of one or two, the real reminiscences and family histories I heard when we were getting honest over whiskey were not over slave labor, but for the ownership and working of the land. From this comes the desire to recognize the South as something that was more than a bastion of slavery, which no one will sanction until such a measure also includes mention of remorse for slavery. The Southerners I know are stung that this is the one thing that is remembered. Not the gentle ways of their ladies, the stress on developing a polite society, the celebration of the harvest, or the grit of the working poor that populated the South then and populate it now. Not the way their women trained sharp tongues to deliver insults sweetly. *Bless your heart, she's a healthy girl.* Not the relationship with the land. They are forever stained by history, by the choices of their forebears, bruised by the ungentle care of their grandfather's fathers. While I have felt the weight of my own family's choices, I have never seen anything like the shared history of the people of the American South. With the annual re-enactments, even the land cannot forget.

And that, in itself, is a wonder. The thing about Kentucky, I tell people, is that I never knew there was so much space. There is land-with-a-capital-L in Kentucky, the sort that made the half-acre yard of the house I grew



up in—a great deal of space on Long Island—seem postage-stamp sized in comparison. The kind of land you can run across until you grow tired, until you can run no more, fall to the grass, look up and see miles more land in front of you that your feet haven't yet touched. And covering all that land, like a God-sized quilt, a wide open sky unstabbed by skyscrapers and only occasionally blemished by factory smoke.

It is enough to drive an urbanite mad. Or to make them a poet.

Country like this is a lot like the sea—it is a stark reminder of how small you are and how many more miles there are in the world. Like the sea, it requires deep knowledge to navigate—a stranger will find that one pasture looks like any other. It takes time and multiple passes to learn the subtle differences of shading in crumbling rock walls, to begin to recognize this barn from that. To identify the county you travel through by the brush on the side of the road. To feel the difference when you've crossed the line from a dry county into a wet one without the landmark of a sign blazing LAST STOP FOR LIQUOR 99.9 MILES.

I want to tell people I was born here, in this land of green open spaces, of kind-eyed cows and graceful horses. Even in the face of the stain, I want to claim a history that goes back farther than that of my parents, to be able to identify my family through centuries instead of holding a stunted family tree that stops with my grandfathers. I want to tell people that New York was a mirage and an exile, and bluegrass is the color of my bones. It is an easy enough falsehood, and easy enough to disprove simply by asking where my people are from. If I fail to answer with a county and a string of historical relations, I am proven a fraud. So I hold my tongue, but on the inside, I am singing that these fiddles have cried to me before.

My native accent has even abandoned me. After ten years there, Kentucky flavors my speech. At least, until the Yankees start losing. And then all pretense of my belonging goes out the window, and I am just one more



carpetbagger fleeing to the South to try to rewrite my history.



OF BLUE COLLARS AND ELECTRICAL TAPE

It is a common enough American child's memory of a father. He left the house before dawn, with coffee and a lunch packed by my mother, the rumblecrunch of his truck out of the driveway a vague sound crawling through my sleeping head, a reminder that the house was a little emptier. That same dry sound in reverse after five o'clock, preparing us for the arrival of a rough man weary after a wearing day, short of temper and long of criticism.

My father, his two brothers, my mother's four brothers, and both of my grandfathers were union electricians. The way the union divvies up work among members is with a list. When a job finished, or when my father was laid off, he went to the bottom of the list, and the men at the top of the list were offered jobs as work comes up. As they moved from the top of the list to the bottom, his name moved up. When there was work, he quickly moved from job to job, with little downtime. When there was no work, the list moved slowly. Picture a proud blue collar man sitting at home waiting for the phone to ring, hoping it is the Union Hall with a job for a few days—or longer—and a paycheck so he can move off unemployment. Essentially, this meant that that when there was not enough work to go around, everyone got a little, and no one got enough. Often, my father would roam as a journeyman, going to other local unions within IBEW across the country to get on their lists, spending long months on the road while my mother watched three children. Recently, I found a letter he sent me from when he helped rewire some of the auto plants in Michigan. My father rarely wrote anything, much less letters—I treasure it, fingering his all-capital lettering until the torn notebook pages are withering, thin as onion skin. He also sent me letters from when he helped wire the baggage carousels at Colorado's Mile high airport. I like to think of him as being part of the essential infrastructure of the country—it makes me smile.

At some point—I was too young to remember the year—times were tough enough that my proud father, the man who mistrusted the government and raised us on flinty Clint Eastwood, went to ask for government assistance. (I can only assume it was the food stamp program; my mother will not speak of it.) He was told that he could not receive help until my family lost the house and we were considered “poor enough.” You can imagine his response—back on the road, even more angry with the government, more of an absence from our home.

Likely because of these long absences, though I didn’t connect them at the time, routine was extraordinarily important to my father. He sat at the head of the dinner table we congregated around every evening between 5:30 and 6:30pm. We always ate dinner as a family at the kitchen table with the television off; the very few exceptions usually being the times when he worked out of state and was not home at all. Friday and Saturday nights we would gather around the television with snacks. My father would allow us to choose a movie to watch. *Rocky*, *Rambo*, all of the Eastwood westerns and the *Dirty Harry* series, Bronson’s *Death Wish* series, and a handful of Disney VHS movies made up our media library. These were the movies where he taught us his understanding of right and wrong, of his idea of justice, and morality, and what the role of law enforcement and government authority was (ineffectual and meddling).

My father was by nature a violent man—his favorite movies were action thrillers with gun-and fist-fighting; put his hand through windshields and walls on regular occasions, and even his foot through the television after the Raiders played particularly poorly in a playoff game. It was a running joke that every time the car in the driveway had a busted windshield, that “There was a bee in the car.”

It baffled me, then, that my father could not stomach violence against a woman on-screen, and would have to walk out of the room during scenes of rape or of a female character being beaten. I never did understand it, until my mother mentioned to me, when I was in my mid-



twenties, that when he was a boy he used to have to put his mother under a cold shower to sober her up before his father came home. And that his father came home with his fists and a fierce thirst for liquor. My father never raised a hand to any of us in anger, though his red face was enough to send us scurrying for cover, and he never drank anything stronger than beer—Budweiser if he was flush, Meisterbraü if times were lean, and Saint Pauli Girl if his brother was visiting.

My father may have put his workboot through the television when the Raiders choked in the playoffs, but he also slept on the kitchen floor with our new puppy for the first week, because the poor thing cried so pitifully. He would get up in the dark of the morning, his joints creaking from sleeping on the floor, and go about his day.

This irreconcilable man was my father.

When I remember him, his work is inextricably tied into those memories: sunburned in summer from working outside; freezing and enjoying tomato soup and grilled cheese for dinner in the winter, hands chapped and red from working in the cold; whittling the casings from copper wire retrieved from a jobsite at a campfire on the beach, turning the flames green. When my father cut himself on a stray piece of wire or jagged poke of metal, he didn't use bandaids for his wounds. He bound his injuries with black electrical tape, despite my mother's cries that this was not sterile. He would roughly tell her that he knew that, but the tape allowed him to continue to bend and flex his hands as he needed to so he could get wiring right and use his tools without him bleeding all over the place and hindering the progress of his work. Surprisingly, I can't remember the constant scrapes and deep cuts from wire on his hands ever getting infected. It is likely that the germs knew better than to try.

What I do remember is the day my mother picked me up from school after the sixth grade trip to see the Statue of Liberty. She told me quietly, "Daddy got hurt at work." After the initial stomach-drop, she explained that he was fine, but that he had been pretty banged up, and had a lot

of stitches on his face. "It will upset him if you get upset or act scared, so please prepare yourself," I remember her saying. It wasn't enough. My father had caught the full force of a traffic light in the face, when it snapped back into place after being pulled out of the way so that he could work on the wiring up in the bucket truck. The metal awning over the traffic light, which jutted out like the bill of a baseball cap, caught him in the face. He had two black eyes, a great stitched gash over one eye, his face had been split from the side of his nose to the lip, and there were rows of other stitches in the swollen patchwork of his face.

There is no way to prepare a child for that sort of encounter, much as you may try. My father looked like Frankenstein, face swollen, ugly black threads stiff and prickling from his face. I carefully moved close to kiss an unhurt scrap of face, and came away smelling of A&D ointment. I must have looked stricken, because he said, "It's all right, kid, I'm fine." And he was, though I would later overhear my mother telling her friend that the plastic surgeons had said two inches to the right and it would have sliced his throat; an inch to the left and he would have lost his eye. I held my tears until all the lights were out, and my parents were in their bedroom across the house. I cried into our yellow lab's fur, drenching Buffy with my first understanding of what it might be like to lose a parent, to have them horribly damaged before you were ready to let go of them. I hated my father's job after that, and I hated that I contributed to his need to work at it with my need for clothes, shoes, and food. And I hated my father for working that job instead of in a nice, safe office.

That incident was likely the worst of his injuries, though there were others, like the time his hand slipped and he pulverized it with a sledgehammer. He dropped to the ground in silence, kicking his legs so that his body turned in circles like a stilted breakdancer. The foreman on the job laughed and asked if he was wrestling a squirrel. He never cried out in pain, and was always proud of that silence.



The traffic-light-to-the-face incident did not prevent my father from getting back up there and doing his job as soon as he was able, though I cannot decide if this was his natural stubborn refusal to submit, or the simple need for a paycheck. Summers, he would sometimes bring the bucket truck home and drive it back to the jobsite in the morning. In the dusk, or sunny weekends, he would give us rides in it, all the way up in the driveway to touch our neighbor's massively tall tree. Afraid of heights, I was not interested. When I declined, I was called *coward* and *chicken* and told to *get your ass in there*, and he sent me snuffling up into the sky. I wish I had paid more attention; I might be able to recollect the feeling of it, and imagine how it must have been for him. But the bucket swings to adjust to your body weight as you move upward, and it pitched with every motion I made. I was gripped with terror. I remember height, the treacherous swing of the bucket, and sunlight through leaves close to my face in the brief moment I opened my eyes.

This immersion-in-fear technique was also used to get me to learn how to swim by shoving me off the high dive when I was too scared to jump, and to ride a bike, by simply pushing me forward when my tentative initial attempts were pitiful and wobbly. This resulted in my mother's disgust at my fifth grade class picture, in which I sported a huge scrape on my chin resembling a generous dollop of raspberry jam. I am thirty years old, and have yet only mastered the dog paddle, still suffer a debilitating fear of heights, and refuse to ride anything but a stationary bicycle due to my poor balance. My cerebral learning style did not correspond well to my father's physical teaching techniques, for the most part.

I am ashamed now to admit that I wanted no part of my parents' sort of life. It looked like the worst kind of drudgery—the same day, every day, scraping to get by, carefully budgeting, my mother often living without her husband, both of them sublimating their lives and dreams to provide for my brother, my sister and myself. My father had wanted to be a chef. My mother had been in

school to be a nurse. The result of their staying three miles from where they grew up, marrying and having a family horrified me. I went to college in a place as far from home on Long Island as I could imagine: Kentucky. I rarely called home, caught up in building an identity and a life that had nothing to do with my roots. At a small, private liberal arts college, I was one of only a handful of students who had jobs in town, and in that land of lawyers' sons and debutantes' daughters, I felt every quilted stitch of the working class life I came from. When I decided to stay on campus for the summers to work, since it was cheaper than flying home, looking for a job, and flying back, my father believed I thought myself too good to come home. "What, too good for us now? Too big for your britches is what you are!" he yelled into the phone. I heard my mother holler back that they had raised us to be independent and learn to work, and wasn't that what I was doing?

I brought a boyfriend home to New York for a family wedding, biting my lip the entire time. He was everything my father wasn't—son of white collar parents, he wore a button-down shirt every day, and never, ever wore jeans. Even worse, he was a Republican. I prayed they didn't get the chance to discuss politics. The boy sang opera, attended a Pentecostal church, and came from old money. Imagine my surprise when instead of the envisioned disaster, they spent all night making a beer can pyramid on the barbecue. I was shocked. Surprisingly, it was my mother who disliked the boy. In the way that mothers are often right about the most important things, I later found out she was right about his character. But my father liked him quite a bit. I went back to college with something more of a blessing after that.

I took to higher education well, and my academic success in high school continued through college. I planned to go to graduate school and get my Ph.D. in political science, and become a professor. While I was at Emory University, my mother informed me that my father had some issues and they were working on it. It took her



until I went home to New York for minor surgery to tell me that his issue was a cocaine habit that had destroyed their savings, kept him up nights, and resulted in her kicking him out of the house. He attacked her and my siblings, the police were called, a restraining order was issued, and my family as I knew it was never the same. Look at that: a paltry two sentences to destroy the fabric of a person's reality, of a life, and make them question their own history.

Even chewing on this some five years later, two thoughts come. First, how does one move from drinking beer (admittedly a case every two days, likely the rate a functioning alcoholic) to snorting coke off of a bar a few blocks from home? I have no answer to this, other than to point at the family history of substance abuse on my father's side and the generous application of beer to any issue by electricians at large. I still find this an impossible leap for a man so dedicated to providing for his family. Second, how do I reconcile all those years, all those lessons on hard work, the man I knew as my father, with the skeleton I saw a few months after who was arrested for stealing a six-pack from a 7-Eleven, and then again arrested for possession of crack cocaine on a New York City street corner? I have no answer to this at all, other than to acknowledge that the lessons of hard work I was taught by the man my father used to be have served me well. If I saw him, I would ask him, but I have not seen my father in over four years.

As for myself, I finished college, and went on to graduate school. I hold multiple master's degrees, and I work indoors with heat or air-conditioning, depending on the season. I am a middle manager in an academic library. I wear nice shoes to work, and it rarely rains in the bookstacks. My life looks nothing like my parents'—at my age, they were married with three children and a mortgaged house—while I remain single, the biggest drain on my resources my basset hound, Otto. When an appliance breaks in my apartment, I call a guy who calls a guy to come fix it at no cost to me. My free time is my

own, and instead of chasing toddlers, I write poetry and stories.

I no longer have to work multiple jobs, though I will never be able to scrape the smell of hamburger grease from beneath my pores from those college summers, and I cannot wear food-scented perfumes because it reminds me of my years scooping ice cream for a paycheck. And every time I pass a man working high in a bucket truck, or construction workers blistering in the sun, or electricians working in a half-finished building collecting snow on their Carhartts, I remember my father with a pang of guilt. I wonder if that man has growing daughters, and if they have ever seen him come home a bloody mess from a job that pays too little, too seldom. I wonder if he will wait until his children are grown before having the breakdown that will sever him completely from the people who loved him best, volatility and all.

I wonder, if I asked him, if he might know my father.



THE CATHOLIC IS IN THE BLOOD

With 68 million baptized members, Catholicism is the largest religious denomination in the U.S. American Catholics are the fourth largest population of the denomination in the world. There is no good way to tell a lapsed Catholic from a practicing one, other than to follow them to Church on Sundays, as most of us who are lapsed still identify on questionnaires, in our social circles, and at social events as Catholic.

The last time I stepped into a Catholic church and stayed the whole mass was in August 2003. I only remember the date because it was my best friend's wedding, and true to the form of rituals of guilt and other sufferings, I remember standing as a bridesmaid in three inch heels for the whole ceremony. The Catholic is in the blood, though. The words were the same, and when I fell into the call and response, it felt like coming home.

But as I said, I haven't been to church in years. I am not as bitter and angry as my father was, but I am not a believer like my mother. I am in limbo, a sort of pre-Purgatory. I have seen too much of the world to believe in a God of goodness, and I have seen too much beauty to believe there is no higher power. I have too many friends of other faiths—or no faith at all—to believe in a deity that could callously toss them into eternal fire. I have known too many devout who committed crimes against themselves and others to believe that God puts much stock in prayer, and I imagine God should have bigger things on His mind than whether the sex organs of folks match or not when they curl up to sleep together at the end of a wearing day.

Besides those contradictions within myself, the very premise of grace, the foundation of forgiveness, confuses me. Born where Gen X meets Gen Y, I have never known a world where something cannot be assigned a price, and prayer and praise seem poor payment in the face of a sacrificed son. If believing in selfless love is to believe in God, then I wonder if my mother isn't God in a form



I can almost understand. Hers is as close as I have come to the kind of love the Church preaches. It is my mother I think about when I drive past a church, now. She is a strong woman in her own right, but I envy her the comfort she finds in her faith.

You can get a taste of Catholic if you sit through a full mass, but I don't think you receive the full effect. Even better, wait the hour after your first mass in English (or Spanish), and let the priest greet you for the mass in Latin. The pew is hard, but you should stay and listen. You might feel it. You'll definitely hear it. There is an ancientness to the chants. But to feel the tide of the Church, it is best to have been brought there as a sleeping child on the shoulder of your mother, or of her father, who came to church as much for peace as for faith. To have grouchy attended in dresses with starched collars, or a clip-on tie and shined shoes. To have felt the same songs and the voice of the same priest wash over you at your cousin's baptism, your father's funeral, your sister's wedding.

I imagine it is thus for all of us who were raised within a religious tradition. Even after you walk away, it sings in your bones, the joy and sorrow so tangled we can't pry them apart.

Those of us who fall away do not always turn into merry atheists or devout agnostics. There are over 4,400 books listed under the "Spiritual Self-help" category on Amazon.com, and any number of online forums and support groups for lapsed Catholics. A simple Google search for "lapsed Catholic support group" provides 39,900 results, including local churches, online groups, and YouTube missives from archbishops. We are not alone in our funk of faith, and there are any number of routes back.

And still we go our merry ways. And more often than not, those ways do not lead us back to the church.

It is not the religion so much as the rhythm I miss. The almost-monotone song from a priest in glowing vestments. The strict give-and-take between the priest and the parishioners. You almost cannot tell if it is a



blessing bestowed or a curse. I remember fragments:

Priest: "Peace be with you."

Parishioners: "And also with you."

Priest: "We lift our hearts."

Parishioners: "We lift them up to the Lord."

Priest: [says something I don't remember]

*Parishioners: "It is right to give Him thanks
and praise."*

Half a beat off and everyone knows you are new— or have been gone awhile. The goal is the sweetness of anonymity, all voices blending into a single voice. Perhaps so God can better hear us. Or perhaps so it will be more difficult for God to pick us out individually. Either way, it is a comfort, falling into this sea of voices. Knowing what words come next, knowing exactly what is expected of you in this quiet, dark space, so unlike the brash, chaotic world outside. Being carried along by the song, guided by the experienced cantor. Here, you need merely recite your lines and be forgiven. There is even a book, in the pew beside you next to the hymnal, that has the script. You may pick up the book and follow along there, reducing your half-beat delay to a mere heartbeat. The regulars will still notice your cadence is off, as good soldiers might, but they appreciate and welcome the effort.

Asking forgiveness comes naturally in Catholic churches. Shadows and aged wood make your secrets feel at home. There is a dark booth in the back where a priest will take your quiet confession, and assign you the chastisement of bead-counting and prayer. There is a padded kneel-bar in each pew, easily nudged so that at any point (allowing for your neighbors' feet to move out of the way), you might drop to your knees from the hard wood of the pew and fold your hands before your face. Stained glass windows break up the light, make it less damning, less eager to ferret out your ugliness. The Catholic God offers us salvation, but understands our desire to shelter our shame.

It is considered poor manners to pray with your eyes



open, but no one minds the elderly folk who softly snore during the sermon. They have earned their rest, and they always wake up in time to hand their grandchildren cash for the collection plate. Not change, either, but ones and fives, and the occasional twenty. Most have been at the church longer than the priest, and if not, they have known the priest long enough that he is as comfortable as the knee rests, or the cool interior during the smother of July. There is great comfort in knowing that today's mass was spoken thus hundreds of years ago, and will likely be the same a hundred years hence.

I am convinced that if you are trained in the faith early enough, it seeps into your blood. I stand out quite oddly when I visit other faiths. I once dated a man who was Assembly of God, and everyone looked at me awkwardly as I walked into their house of worship in a dress and pantyhose, gently gawking at folks in overalls and their children kicking the metal folding chair in front of them. An old woman in front of me stood up during the impassioned sermon and shouted "PREACH IT BROTHER JOE!" I almost keeled over from the sheer audacity of it. I learned I am not comfortable being comfortable in front of the god of my childhood.

I have visited other faiths. I tried that Assembly of God church, but missed the dark, quiet corners of Catholicism, the quiet and private communion of confession as opposed to shouting tearfully from the altar. I became enamored of paganism, of the balance between male and female energies, and the emphasis on natural rhythms and beauties. Of the idea that energy applied equals energy received, and that all things and persons might be accorded equal value. I felt naked praying under a night sky with no high-beamed roof, and the face of the Goddess was always Mary's. I consider myself long-lapsed, but my heart, it seems, is still quite Catholic.

Asking forgiveness may come naturally as a Church practice, but the giving of it is not so easy. At the age of twenty-six, I had a hysterectomy to preserve and restore my health. While the details are not relevant to



my relationship with Catholicism, the aftereffects became central to it. I am angry at a God I am not sure I believe in. I rail against a faith that values females as wives and mothers, when I am not the former and will likely never be the latter. I am left *between*, looking for something foundational I can't define, some certainty I can't quite reach, always dissatisfied.

How many of us are there, who live somewhere between faith in God and faith in ourselves? The search for meaning pervades American culture. We accumulate belongings until there are reality shows about those of us who can't move for the piles of clutter we have hoarded in our homes, like dysfunctional dragons and our treasure. We work ourselves to death for companies that owe us little loyalty, tune out of family life in favor of virtual worlds, finding close companionship in strangers through text. Doctors prescribe happiness in pill form, and still we are no closer to filling that hole inside ourselves. The popularity of the mid-life crisis is now preceded by even younger Americans feeling lost, generating the "quarter life crisis" and its concomitant self-help section. Some need is not being met, and its lack is being felt earlier and earlier in life.

And yet I am unwilling to go back to the church of my childhood and admit that I have lost more than half of what spilled from my lips so naturally before I knew the first thing about living. I can still start the Creed, though I do not remember if it the Apostles' or the Nicene:

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.*

After that I am lost, though there is an echo of "died, was buried" that I know comes later. I am convinced it doesn't count to God's ears if I have to look it up, since it should be burned into my heart in calligraphy after all those years reciting it as a child. It is the same with the Hail Mary—I can make it only partway through the beginning, and the final sentence, but the middle is a faded scroll



in my memory. I can say the full Our Father, or Lord's Prayer, but in the odd arithmetic that has sprung up in my head around these rituals, that common prayer hardly seems worth much in the coin of faith. I feel awkward knowing that I may need to return to Saint Anne's parish and request my baptism and confirmation records, if I want to be married in the Catholic Church. If my fiancé is not Catholic, he will have to take classes, regardless of whether we plan to practice. I have a lingering fear that they will require that I recite the Apostles' Creed from memory before allowing the marriage to go through, that I will fail and be denied, and left alone. Again.

In 2009-2010, the Catholic church instituted a million-dollar Catholics Come Home ad campaign, aimed at lapsed Catholics and those who had distanced themselves from the church in the wake of the church's sex scandal. The advertisements aired on multiple channels in the Chicago area between Christmas and the Super Bowl. The message? That the lost lambs can come home. That no matter the mistakes made, forgiveness is in the offering.

I did try to go back, once, immediately after my surgery, hoping for a healing touch, an understanding hand, and a priest to help me find my place in a faith I had neglected. Adrift and in need of solace, living far from family and not wanting to burden friends, I looked up a local church, wrote out directions, and drove there in tears, lonely, so lonely, and wanting comfort. Even knowing I might be considered a remedial case, or turned away completely, I craved the cool darkness, the knowing eyes of a priest, the comfort of answers and the smoothness of well-worn wood under filtered light.

When I got there, the door was locked. Apparently even God has office hours. I have not been able to bring myself to go back, but I still color in the "Catholic" choice when answering questionnaires.



GIANTS OF IDAHO

Biblical legend has it that two hundred *grigori*, or watchers, came down to earth and took human wives. They taught humans forbidden knowledge like bronzeworking, cosmetics, and astrology. Their children were the *nephilim*, the fallen ones. The *nephilim* were giants with voracious appetites who ate all the food, the livestock, and running out of those, the humans. In the cities they occupied that ran out of all that, in the end they ate each other. By the time Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, there were actually large populations of giants and men living in various cities. When the flood came, Noah and his family were saved by God. The giants didn't get tickets for the ark, and were assumed to be wiped out.

I think the surviving giants may have found refuge in Idaho.

Soda Springs, Idaho is a beautiful, middle-of-nowhere town. Close to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, it sees its share of good snow. It is also where one of my best friends, Mazie Marie Kukachka (say *that* five times fast) was going to get married, and add an illustrious "Fitzgerald" to her list of names. The drive up from the Salt Lake City airport is desolate, majestic, or intimidating, depending on your mood and the slant of the sun. I remember seeing two men in cowboy hats on horseback riding with a herd of cattle across the reddish rock, and thinking it was beautiful country.

The roads in Soda Springs are strangely wide. Giant-tread wide. I do not know the exact historical reason for this, though I can guess. Mining occurs not too far out of town—you can see the red glow of slag running down a high point in the distance like a small leak in Hell, if a local points you in the right direction. The roads likely had to be wide enough for the trucks and equipment required for big hauling. This makes sense to me, but in the four days I spent in town I didn't see a single large vehicle other than the all-American SUVs we rented for the drive from the



airport in Utah. A good thing we chose SUVs instead of something more environmentally friendly—those gaping dirt roads would have been impossible to maneuver had it rained.

Those wide dirt roads haloed everything in dust, including the two worn-looking diners in town. I wonder if anyone had ever considered paving them (the roads, not the diners); certainly it had to be difficult to deal with dirt roads in the rain or other inconvenient weather. The roads contribute to the entire town looking like an inconvenience, since the space they require only serves to highlight how little else there is in the town. Diner one or diner two, a single hardware store, and any number of other squat, dusty building, shabbily clothed and appearing to be shut down for good. Paving those Soda Springs roads would make the town look more industrial than it really was, I suppose, but it would be less depressing than that empty span of soil trampled to concrete hardness.

Coming from Long Island, I had never lived in a town without properly paved streets, providing definition and a reassuringly firm foundation under daily life. It felt foreign. Did no one expect the place to last long enough to need the roads paved? Soda Springs is not a new place, by any means, nor decently old enough to die out and let the buildings fall and let the roadscape win. Families have lived there for decades without branching to other parts of the country, so it can't be that no one expected to stay... unless the people told themselves they would leave—next week, next month, next year, after the baby is school-aged, perhaps. I didn't meet enough people to ask about it. Even when there *was* traffic on the road (which was mostly us, in town for the wedding and wondering what this strange place was that had spawned our wild girl Mazie), the road dwarfed the cars, making them seem small and inadequate for whatever task they were scurrying about. In light of the broad western sky and the mountains in the distance, perhaps the similarly overscale roads were an intentional reminder that our concerns and daily struggles are small in the face of our Maker.



10 I always thought possibilities were 'wide open,' as the phrase goes, but those wide hard-packed roads in Soda Springs make me wonder if wide-open isn't also the way a small town dies out, with too much room and not enough to fill it and make it habitable. I grew up in a city where everything was cramped: the buildings, the people, the streets, our yards. There was barely enough air to go around, amid the yelling, the exhaust, the high-rises and the breathing. But the country, where there is land-with-a-capital-L, is different. There is always room to breathe, always space on country roads. There is a difference even in the word we use depending on the place we are in: street versus road. A *street* is citified, shrunkened, and always paved. Civilized, somehow, and oft-traversed. It always has a sign, properly naming it. A *road*, on the other hand, is a country thing, as likely to be paved as not, with machinery just as likely to appear on its span as a passenger vehicle, or even the occasional cow, identified as much by the people who live there ("the road by the old Janssen place") as by some vague and easily-forgotten number. A street is a vehicle that takes you from one place to the next, and a road—well, a road doesn't necessarily lead you anywhere. A road is just a nicer place to lay your feet, one step up from a *path*, a sister to nature, and only a step or two removed from a *trail*, a happenstance footpath through full wilderness.

Those Soda Springs roads disturbed me long after the wedding, the drive back to Utah in which we dodged suicidal turkey buzzards, and my return to the regular rhythms of city life. I dream about them quite often now, especially when I feel cramped by the city. It was just a strange part of an already-strange landscape to me. Knowing that as a *road*, a facilitator of travel, things other than cars are implicitly invited to use them...what other massive things might take those huge roads as an invitation to walk through town? What thing that might have a footprint large enough to justify that girth? The country up in Idaho is beautiful, with the mountains, no building taller than two stories to challenge the view, the

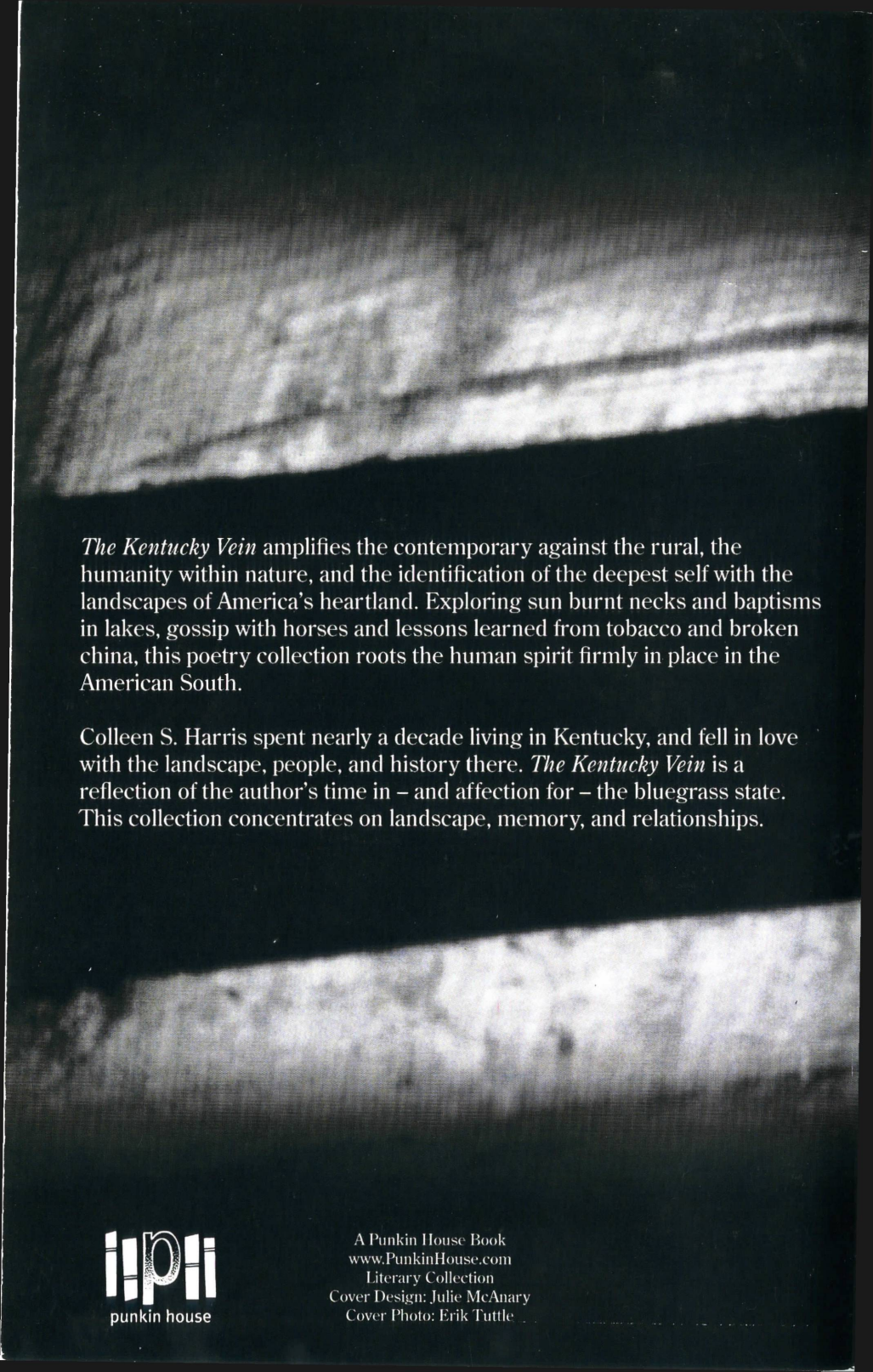


occasional cowboy riding past and roads wide enough to make travel by giants comfortable. Those Soda Spring roads may even be large enough for God's feet to pass. I imagine he visits mountains and forgotten people on a fairly regular basis.



About the Author

Colleen S. Harris works on the library faculty at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She is the author of three books of poetry, including *These Terrible Sacraments* (Bellowing Ark, 2010) and *God in My Throat: The Lilith Poems* (Bellowing Ark, 2009). Her poetry has appeared in *The Louisville Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *The Adirondack Review*, and various others. When not writing, Colleen spends her time being bossed around by her basset hound Otto.



The Kentucky Vein amplifies the contemporary against the rural, the humanity within nature, and the identification of the deepest self with the landscapes of America's heartland. Exploring sun burnt necks and baptisms in lakes, gossip with horses and lessons learned from tobacco and broken china, this poetry collection roots the human spirit firmly in place in the American South.

Colleen S. Harris spent nearly a decade living in Kentucky, and fell in love with the landscape, people, and history there. *The Kentucky Vein* is a reflection of the author's time in – and affection for – the bluegrass state. This collection concentrates on landscape, memory, and relationships.



A Punkin House Book
www.PunkinHouse.com
Literary Collection
Cover Design: Julie McNary
Cover Photo: Erik Tuttle