

# Caves

by Robert Creeley

ROBERT CREELEY '47 died on March 30, shortly after being named the poet for the Literary Exercises conducted annually by Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa chapter during Commencement week. In his memory, at what would have been a fitting homecoming (Creeley was born in Arlington, which borders Cambridge, and first published his poetry in an undergraduate literary journal), portions of a recent work, "Caves," were read during the ceremony.

Phi Beta Kappa vice president Judith Vichniac noted that the prolific Creeley had published more than 60 books. Her brief narrative also hinted at the wide geographic reach of his energetic life: he left Harvard in 1944 to become an ambulance driver in India and Burma for the American Field Service. He returned for a year, married, and dropped out again without completing his degree. Later stopping points included a farm in New Hampshire; France and Majorca; the experimental Black Mountain College, famously associated with Franz Kline, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Paul Goodman, where Creeley taught and edited the *Black Mountain Review*; the San Francisco of Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and other poets; the University of New Mexico; SUNY-Buffalo; and, most recently, Brown University. Citing the Bollingen Prize judges, Vichniac noted the "stubbornly plain language" of Creeley's "instantly recognizable," pared-down poetry.

Porter University Professor Helen Vendler, who read the selec-

tions, made it clear that "plain" need not mean simple or easy. In 2004, Creeley visited French caves renowned for their prehistoric paintings, and, she said, was moved to consider the impact and influence of caves, their stone walls as a medium, and the paintings made upon them.

As an introduction to her reading, Vendler briefly interpreted her four selections in light of that experience. The first section recalls a child's love of caves and spaces where he found solitude and room for the making of art. The third captures the astonishing experience of entering the caves in France and seeing the works that unknown artists were compelled to make on those dark walls. The difficult fourth section metaphorically recapitulates life from the birth passage to death, as the poem moves toward the suggestion that art is the legacy to posterity—the answer Creeley found to the "what's left" at the conclusion of the sixth and final section, where he explains the difficulty of art-making: the struggle to keep current with life even as one captures its echo passing by.

"Caves" appears here, complete, by courtesy of Penelope Creeley, who married Robert Creeley in 1977. She was present in Sanders Theatre for the reading on June 7. To hear Professor Vendler reading the poem, visit the Web edition of this article at [www.harvardmagazine.com](http://www.harvardmagazine.com).

~The Editors

Illustrations by Naomi Shea





So much of my childhood seems  
to have been spent in rooms—  
at least in memory, the shades

pulled down to make it darker, the  
shaft of sunlight at the window's edge.  
I could hear the bees then gathering

outside in the lilacs, the birds chirping  
as the sun, still high, began to drop.  
It was summer, in heaven of small town,

hayfields adjacent, creak and croak  
of timbers, of house, of trees, dogs,  
elders talking, the lone car turning some

distant corner on Elm Street  
way off across the broad lawn.  
We dug caves or else found them,

down the field in the woods. We had  
shacks we built after battering  
at trees, to get branches, made tepee-

like enclosures, leafy, dense and in-  
substantial. Memory is the cave  
one finally lives in, crawls on

hands and knees to get into.  
If Mother says, don't draw  
on the book pages, don't color

that small person in the picture, then  
you don't unless compulsion, distraction  
dictate and you're floating off

on wings of fancy, of persistent seeing  
of what's been seen here too, right here,  
on this abstracting page. Can I use the green,

when you're done? What's that supposed to be,  
says someone. All the kids crowd closer  
in what had been an empty room

where one was trying at least  
to take a nap, stay quiet, to think  
of nothing but oneself.



*Back into the cave, folks,  
and this time we'll get it right?*

Or, uncollectively perhaps, it was  
a dark and stormy night he

slipped away from the group, got  
his mojo working and before

you know it had that there  
bison fast on the wall of the outcrop.

I like to think they thought,  
though they seemingly didn't, at least

of something, like, where did X put the bones,  
what's going to happen next, did she, he or it

really love me? Maybe that's what dogs are for,  
but there's no material surviving





pointing to dogs as anyone's best friend, alas.  
Still here we are no matter, still hacking away,

slaughtering what we can find to, leaving  
far bigger footprints than any old mastodon.

You think it's funny? To have prospect  
of being last creature on earth or at best a

company of rats and cockroaches?  
You must have a good sense of humor!

Anyhow, have you noticed how everything's  
retro these days? Like, something's been here before—

or at least that's the story. I think one picture is worth  
a thousand words and I know one cave fits all sizes.



Much like a fading off airplane's  
motor or the sound of the freeway

at a distance, it was all here clearly enough  
and no one goes lightly into a cave,

even to hide. But to make such things  
on the wall, against such obvious

limits, to work in intermittent dark,  
flickering light not even held steadily,

all those insistent difficulties.  
They weren't paid to, not that we know of,

and no one seems to have forced them.  
There's a company there, tracks

of all kinds of people, old folks  
and kids included. Were they having

a picnic? But so far in it's hardly  
a casual occasion, flat on back with

the tools of the trade necessarily  
close at hand. Try lying in the dark

on the floor of your bedroom and roll  
so as you go under the bed and

ask someone to turn off the light.  
Then stay there, until someone else comes.

Or paint up under on the mattress the last  
thing you remember, dog's snarling visage

as it almost got you, or just what you do  
think of as the minutes pass.



Hauling oneself through invidious  
strictures of passage, the height  
of the entrance, the long twisting  
cramped passage, mind flickers, a lamp  
lit flickers, lets image project  
what it can, what it will, see there  
war as wanting, see life as a river,  
see trees as forest, family as





others, see a moment's respite,  
hear the hidden bird's song, goes  
along, goes along constricted, self-  
hating, imploded, drags forward  
in imagination of more, has no  
time, has hatred, terror, power.  
No light at the end of the tunnel.



The guide speaks of music, the  
stalactites, stalagmites making a  
possible xylophone, and some  
Saturday night-like hoedown  
businesses, what, every three  
to four thousand years? One  
looks and looks and time  
is the variable, the determined  
as ever river, lost on the way,  
drifted on, laps and continues.  
The residuum is finally silence,  
internal, one's own mind constricted  
to focus like any old camera  
fixed in its function.

Like all good questions,  
this one seems without answer,  
leaves the so-called human  
behind. It makes its own way  
and takes what it's found  
as its own and moves on.



It's time to go to bed  
again, shut the light off,

settle down, straighten  
the pillow and try to sleep.  
Tomorrow's another day  
and that was all thousands  
and thousands of years ago,  
myriad generations, even  
the stones must seem changed.

The gaps in time,  
the times one can't account for,  
the practice it all took  
even to make such images,  
the meanings still unclear  
though one recognizes  
the subject, something has  
to be missed, overlooked.

No one simply turns on a light.  
Oneself becomes image.  
The echo's got in front,  
begins again what's over  
just at the moment it was done.  
No one can catch up, find  
some place he's never been to  
with friends he never had.

This is where it connects,  
not meaning anything one  
can know. This is where  
one goes in and that's what's to find  
beyond any thought or habit,  
an arched, dark space, the rock,  
and what survives of what's left.

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