

Diagenesis

Caius Buran

The tourists stumble behind Jerico, unsteady like newborn horses traipsing after their mothers in grasses their rot will one day feed. They're dead, though they still move. Slick calcite formations glimmer in the pale, ever-dimming beams of the group's headlamps bobbing along the cave's walls. He knows this dread, this quiet, this unsaid.

His expeditions to the deepest, darkest depths have been nothing . . . nothing at all compared to finding Father in the water. Jerico remembers the way blood danced in the creek:

 ribboning across the stones,
 playing in the sun dappled waves,
 coiling around his thin, pale legs . . .

It was sudden:

 one misplaced step,
 a small tumble,
 an inopportunistly situated rock . . .

Jerico didn't scream or cry—just pulled Father out of the water, rested him on the creek bed, curled up on his still-warm chest, and fell asleep.

Two years later, when he was ten, the family dog was flattened under a tractor. A year after that, liquor guided Grandfather into a stroke. When he was twenty, Jerico's first boyfriend, André, succumbed to lung cancer. Three months later, Jerico saved two teenagers from a cave-in,

guiding them out with the corpse of their sherpa draped across his back.

So, Jerico knows death. Its stillness. Its peace. Its weight. When he carries bodies from the unforgiving planet, he carries Father out of the water with them.

The tourists are dead—the cave tells him as much—but they have a ways to go. EMTs pulled Father from the muck and, days later, the earth swallowed him miles away from where his heart had last pulsed. The tourists are dead, but their blood pumps. The tourists are dead, but there is work to do first.

Maybe Jerico's dead too.

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