

Madonna of Bones

Contributed by Heather Rose

When you live in the doorway with things coming and going all around you, when you seek elusive tracks beyond the pale of men, sometimes what you find takes another shape, speaks in another voice than what you were expecting. This poignant excerpt from "White Heart" by Heather Rose speaks to that moment:

Ambrose found a high, west-facing cliff of limestone caves hidden within the dark tangles of ancient she-oaks so beaten by wind and salt and rain they had twisted into a near impenetrable wall of snaking branches. So tightly locked were the branches it was impossible to discern root or trunk from branch, or tree from tree. All was a seething mitosis of life flattened to rock.

Behind the tree, tunnels ferreted back into the cliff, winding, twisting away beyond the ceaseless roaring forties gale. Ambrose stored his supplies back over the ridge away from the sea, taking only a torch, flint, lantern water and dried sticks of wallaby. He smelled tiger.

He crept down a long narrow passage disturbing nothing but his own memories of the sandbanks he had burrowed in as a boy making a fort with an old sheet of corrugated iron. He had imagined the broken roots sticking out of the sand walls were severed veins.

The tunnel widened and Ambrose swung the torch beam into the blind dark and gasped.

Above him hung stalactites, thousands and thousands of smooth dolomite shafts of every hue of brown. From the floor, stalagmites reached up. Here and there they joined the stalactites in perfect union, making columns to walk between like a great hall. From gold-flecked to caramel to russet-stained, infinitely slender to thick and sturdy, each formation caught the light of his lantern and shone back at him, silent witnesses to the wonder of time and water, hidden within an underground palace.

Ambrose wandered across the pale damp floors, stooped and crawled through soft black passageways sniffing the air and listening, coming upon caverns and caves filled with webs and lace and tendrils all made from a million tiny threads of rock. Day passed into night outside but only the tortured trees bore witness as the sun sank and the black night wind rushed across the pewter sea two hundred metres below pounding the waves into surly submission. On the boulder-strewn shore, seals took rest. In summer, whales would return to rub their bellies on the smooth round rocks below sea level.

Inside the cliff, in the warren of passages, Ambrose leaned against the rock, hearing nothing, long used to his breath and heart loud within him, the smell of unbreathed air. The aching for tiger was so great, the wretched aching yearning for a glimpse, a glance, something more than track or clue or hint or promise. Real and warm and live and watching, he wanted to see it.

Where are you? For a moment he felt he had been there before, knew this place, had said these words in a dark cave in some other time.

He slid sideways into a tunnel, for a moment unsure which way he would go to light and sea.

Sleep. Time to sleep, he thought. Too weary. He knew how easy it was to lose direction through sheer fatigue.

He crawled into the next cave on hands and knees. The floor was dry and powdery. The ceiling low and unmarked by formation. He lay upon his back staring into the utter darkness above him.

After a while he took the candle lantern from his pack and lit it, the flame glow suffusing the tiny room. The walls were porous pink and brown, like stomach lining, he thought. No other tunnels led from this cave. The only entrance was the one he had come in by. I am at the end, Ambrose said. There is nothing beyond here.

He rolled on to his side, then he saw it. He crawled on his belly toward it.

On the floor stretched against the wall of the cave under an overhang of rock was a skeleton. It had a long dog-like body. The head was large with a long jaw. Ambrose gazed at the empty case of bones.

I see you, he said. I see you, tiger.

Within the shell of bones, behind the ribcage, he saw two miniature skeletons, half foetal arcs of spine and oversized head, four legs apiece curled into body.

Your babies, he said to the bones. Your babies.

He watched her in her slumbering death. Waited as she must have waited, for the light footfall of mate.

He listened for evidence that he was not alone. But he was quite alone and for the first time he knew this with all its power.

He reached out and ran a finger along the bone of her foreleg. It was cool and smooth and held him suspended. After a long time he blew out the lantern.

He lay down beside her on the stone. She lay with her pregnant belly toward him and he guarded her through the endless night.

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