From Below

by Timmothy Merath

I can hear the echoes clearly. They are distinct and crisp, almost as though they're all on exact trajectories to me from their final bounce, without any interference. Each sound, while unintelligible, seems to fit perfectly and expectantly into my ears.

I am at ease and sense a warm comfort wrapping around my hands and working it's way up my arms, settling on my shoulders like a supportive weight. A steadying hand, helping to lead me around and through the tangled nature of life, of these caves. My mind starts to wander into this welcoming oasis when I realize that I haven't heard any of the original sounds. Just their offspring. Echoes without a source. They take on an eery, ethereal aura. Their prior crispness, once pure, now feels like a sharp point on a blade, poking you in all the wrong places of your mind and memory. I feel a growing, accusatory weight all around me, like the faces of a thousand jurors, all duplicates of your mother at her angriest. The comfort has either disappeared or transformed. Or was it comfort at all?

"You don't hear that, do you?" I tentatively ask the guide, with a hint of disbelief that belies my suspicion that he couldn't possibly. A cracking in my voice that shares my fear too loudly.

"Of course I hear it," he answers, too matter-of-fact.

I don't think he really hears what I'm hearing. He's probably on his own track, taking in the cavernous bellows of far-off rushing waters. No one hears this and responds so coolly.

"From where?" I prod further.

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"Most of it begins below us and works its way through the smaller tunnels and channels. The ones we can't reach. It's safer there," he delivers just as flatly as before.

"Safe from what? What is safer there?" I barely eke out of my now quivering lips.

He's not bull-shitting me now. He hears these orphan sounds. He appears to actually know them, like friends. If they are my enemies, he must be, too.

I get a sudden urge to run when his hand, I think it's his hand, lowers slowly onto my shoulder.