

Deep Sea Walkers by Leyla Beban, excerpt.

A cloud of grit and coral turns the water opaque as the body, wrapped in rough, beige sailors' cloth, slides down the sea cliff. Tumbling down to the sea floor, the body hits a protruding rock and is flung into open water. It falls slowly and silently, heavy in the water. This trench is the deepest part of the ocean, every sound muffled by the miles of water above. The corpse falls through shades of navy blue, indigo, and dark grey before finally reaching the ultimate black. It descends in darkness for a while, scaring away strange denizens of the deep. The water gets colder and colder as the body nears the bottom, until the temperature is almost at the freezing point, where few creatures can survive.

Finally the corpse hits the rocky seafloor with a muted thump. It bounces slightly and drifts to the left, coming against a heat vent. It settles at the base of the vent, warmed by the hot water coming from the depths of the earth. The final resting place for this corpse is the deepest grave anything has ever had: a dark sepulcher with water forever undulating overhead.

The ocean cares not who someone was; it isn't important who's body fell so far into the depths. Man or woman, adult or child, all that matters now is the water and the dark and the crabs that come to feed.

...

For a while all is quiet. Nothing happens. Hours pass, or days; without light in this pitch darkness, time sneaks by unnoticed. After an indefinite period of time, there's movement over the human corpse. It's something even darker than the water around it; so dark that somehow it's visible. The thing unfolds from the corpse, stepping out of the cloth wrapping. Now it's clear that the thing is the shape of a human body, a shadow of the human. The shade straightens up. It pauses and appears to look around. Then it steps away from the body, moving smoothly and fluidly. It moves toward the heat vent, presumably attracted by the heat or the movement. It reaches out towards the hole, but quickly withdraws its hand when it feels the heat.

... It walks away, leaving behind its corpse and its old life, and sets off into a new existence.

There are things that roam the depths of the ocean, the souls of people interred at sea. These beings are called Deep Sea Walkers. Sailors, divers, unlucky explorers; once at the bottom of the sea, their souls exit their bodies and wander the bottom of the ocean, forever to wonder at the marvels of Mother Nature's strangest creatures. It is a better fate than most; to walk with extraordinary sea creatures and see some of the most beautiful sights on Earth. Each soul has its own random,

wandering path that takes it to the deepest parts of the world, where it sees things that no human has ever seen before:

... It is great luck to be buried at sea, for which would you rather do: stare at a coffin lid for all eternity or see the most amazing sights in the world?

A Walker knows its destiny, and fulfills it, come what may. There are long stretches of time when nothing happens, but the sights they see make up for everything. A soul may walk for years and not see a single ocean dweller, but never for one moment does it consider abandoning its fate: these are mindless creatures, their only task to witness marvels. A soul's life is characterized by events that may be long periods of time apart. A Walker never knows when the next amazing thing will happen: and thus they walk to know.