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The Guard of Sipán

by J. Todd Hawkins

In 1987 in Perú, an archaeologist found the unlooted tomb of a god-king known today as the Lord of Sipán. The tomb contained priceless treasures and large food stores, both of which the king would need on his journey to the afterlife. Also found were the remains of several men and women, a child, a dog, and two llamas, all apparently buried alive. One of the men had had his feet removed prior to being interred, presumably in keeping with the tradition of dismembering royal guards to prevent them from fleeing the king's side in the afterlife.

Night has passed, I think, though these squalid airs
still hold no heat. Darkness sounds like thunder
here every heartbeat, every hour we heirs
of glorified empire abide deep under

soft hills mined to sand, green hills grazed to dust.
We wait while their wars take our young red sons,
mock seas in fierceness, the cruelty in rust.
Boys sing secretly for he who outruns

the lord's men. A strong man, though, knows his arms
are not his own—knows others know his body best.
Still, my hours reek of bleak, blaring alarms—
like now: one woman's woken from rest:

in stillness she shudders as llamas bleat,
and knows I must kill her if she tries to eat.



Photo (detail) by Jenny Mingus

