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Long Dream of the Fisherman's Son

Ethan C. Grant

Valparaiso University, Ethan.Grant@valpo.edu

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—At midnight then, we started down the hillside. We had traveled for miles and miles through endless midnights and unrisen dawns and had seen our campfires glaze the black skies gold brown and had watched the smoke twist away into darkness. We had come so far, and now, at midnight, at last, we were starting down the hill.

She ran somewhere ahead of me, down there in the shadows. There was darkness everywhere save right where I was, and where I was there was a soft sort of light, a dim torchlight which followed me. The lightness and the darkness were perfectly divided. I could see through the night the green hillgrass—it looked brown and gold in the light. It rustled fiercely in the wind, bending back and scratching at my legs as I ran. The black sky seemed painted on, the grass seemed planted and artificial. I felt as though I ran over a museum display: suspended forever in a perfect, temperate midnight.

The hill unrolled before me, so far—I had never known before how impossibly far. In all directions it stretched, grass everywhere and darkness everywhere, and her running down ahead of me. She was shrouded in darkness and silhouetted by darkness, but I knew her darkness from the darkness all around. I could see her moving, running toward that which neither she nor I could know.

And soon we came to the sea. The sea was a sound at first, an indistinct rumbling in the distance. Then the winds took on the sea’s mist and there was sea-salt on the air. The wind was rushing in harder then, determined to drive me back, to force me into the ground, to bury me in the grass. I felt so heavy and full, but I kept on my feet. And soon I heard myself crying out to her:

“Mae! Mae!” But the cry was engulfed by the wind. Downward I flew, she flew, we flew—we flew, we floated, we floated like two young gulls caught in an updraft. And I cried out again:

“Mae! Maebell!” Then she came to a ledge where the hill dropped away to a rocky cliff overlooking the seashore and the rippling sea-shoals. I was aware of these things, though I could see little and truly know little. I ran on through the museum-lighted grass, beneath the painted, starless sky, and at last I was with her on the ledge. Without hesitation or pause, I dropped down beside her, as easily as a migrant bird returns to its nest. The grass here had shortened and scattered in the sand, and we sat there in the sand, among the moss-slicked sea-rocks.
She rested her glistening white feet on the mossy rocks, her toes spread out wide like a lizard’s toes. And I looked at her toes, and I found it beautiful, the way the moss pushed up between them. I thought I might love her.

We sat facing the sea. The waters were nearly visible, but I didn’t need to see them: I could feel the waves, could know their texture from where we perched. Heavy and warm, they slid to the shore, warm, hollow like a cave, dripping, a cavepool. They crashed against the sea-rocks and flattened down the earth.

Her hair fluttered as my hair fluttered. I could see her in the low torchlight, her black hair whipping like madness, the tips of her ears poking through. She stared straight ahead to the space above the waters. Shapes moved out there. I could feel them too, but I did not know them. They circled and shifted and twisted around in the vast untouchable nothingness from which blew the wind.

I looked at her for a long time in silence.

At last I spoke: “Where are you going?”

She turned her head indifferently toward me, and then turned back. “I’m just going.”

“I know. But where,” I said, “where are you going?”

There were white lines in the distance. The ripples had gained a texture, a form. There was light coming into the waters: hollow, ancient.

“Have you seen them turning?” she asked.

“What?” I heard myself demand. “What do you mean?” “I can see them out in the darkness, turning. They’re turning in the darkness.”

She stared dreamily out at the waters. Her toes gripped tighter on the mossy rock. Her skirt flapped in the wind as she rested her chin in her soft white hands. I was sure then that I loved her.

“Do you love me?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She said listlessly, still staring off at the empty turnings.

“Will you ever love me?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed, “yes, no, I don’t know.”

She looked at the waters as I looked at her.

“What do you want me to do for you? What do you want? I’ll do anything, go anywhere for you.”

She turned to me again. A shadow of a smile haunted the corners of her mouth. I loved her for it.

“Will you go to the ends of the earth for me?”

“Yes! Yes, I already have. We’re already there.”

She was silent for a moment. “Yes, but will you sew for me a seamless shirt?”
“Will I what?” The wind had fallen. It blew in softly now, and I could hear the waves. They crashed just the same. Pulled back, crashed. There was shifting in the darkness. But light was coming in, I was sure of it.

“Will you sow for me an acre of land between the sea-surf and the sea-strand?”

“What? No . . . no, I don’t understand you. Why are you asking me this?”

Laughing, she stood, and idly prodded a rock over the ledge with her foot. “In time,” she said. “Just give it time.”

“Where are you going?” I asked again, but she was already gone. I turned around to see her leaving, but she was nowhere anymore. She was not moving back up the hill, not parting the grass in her wake. There was no more grass for her to part. The hill was gone. Only sharp, rocky outcroppings remained in its place, leveled, stretching for miles to the horizon, to nowhere at all.

The footprints she had embossed in the sea-moss began to fade. They were already gone. I thought of them, but they made me think of love, and it made me tired to think of love.

Then I thought I felt a turning—

And I was down on the beach, spread out on the sand. There was indeed a light come into the waters. It was not the gaslight, the museum-soft light of before: This light was ethereal and silver, like starlight, but there were no stars in this sky of painted blackness. The silver light gilded the wet sand and sea-rocks and danced like lightning over the tops of the cresting waves. Peace. I felt its peace. The warm waves washed over me, and rolled back. The shapes in the distance were gone. Fleeting. As if I had never known them.

A gathering of sea-lions ambled about a little ways down the strand. They moved senselessly, aimlessly, like blindfolded initiates in a candlelit sanctuary. And yet, there came a pattern into their movement. They circled in the sand, revolved in the sand, in orbit, in equilibrium. But one sea-lion broke off and made for the waters. He seemed almost to fly as he dug his flippers through the sand and plunged into the billows, pushing off for nowhere, his head bobbing through the water before disappearing under the waves. I wished to follow him into the deep, the eternal, receiving warmth. But I knew, somehow, that I was in my place, and in my place I was meant to stay.

There was forever a beach now. The cliffs had washed away and the rocks had been ground into sand. The sea-lions had hobbled and danced and had circled and turned, but now they were gone. Their tribes had risen and fallen, had thrived and perished, and now sea-lions were no more. Now I was alone in the silversoft light. And though I lay there for ages and ages, the light never grew, never rose over the sea to drive back the night and bring in the dawn. It was as midnight now as it had ever been before.

Memories. We had traveled once. We? I thought of footprints in moss, but it made me tired, inexpressibly, inhumanly tired to think of footprints in moss. We. We had traveled: all the midnights, all the broken hours of sleep, of waking, of campfires glowing and smoking coolly in
darkness, the nightgrass bowing and crackling in the wind:
We had traveled. We traveled.

The waves moved in slower now. They flooded over me and
tugged at my hair and washed down my face in clean salty
streams. So much warmth, such peace. I was so tired. I was
wearied to my marrow, but there was no sleep deep enough
to get at my weariness. I would not succumb to it. Now was
not the time for sleep.

Turning, turning.

Sleep, no. Sleep. No.

Where is left to go. Got to go somewhere. Midnight’s long. I must go. Must I go.
They are turning. Where.
Once we rode the hill. Give me sanctuary. O. Give me hill.
Parsley, sage. Time. On to Western waters.
Dance the Maypole.
Sage, dance.
Time, dance.
Turning, dance.
Dance, May,
dance.
Rose-May.
Onward
Western
waters.
Nightwind.
Nightwaters.

Sleep.