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Island

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ISLAND

for Gala FitzGerald

I

I know this island.

A wind from this moment blows the light off the sea,
the far crests flinted with silver.

A seal eases from its ledge in the wavessmoke.

Bushes and stones stir and brighten.

A kingfisher hangs in the air, rapidly beating its wings.

It was here the dream began.

I hear the old voices,

the island loud in the stones and rattling nighthawk,

the silence of the yellowing brome

before the wind picks up toward evening,

tethered seeds like small boats along a pier.

The surf makes a rush and whorl round each feather
of the goose barnacles.

Sieved plankton whistle thinly as they die.

The woman who came from the gray rock
goes before me in the dream.

Call her bridgemaker, weaver of the far wave:

in her name is the promise of return.

But I must go it alone like the hemlock

pulled over in the last storm and tilting into the surf,

barnacles and pennants of moss on the raw limbs.

Waiting to cross, each runnel appears
deeper than hell, each trough holds a thousand coffins.

I see a pod of killer whales out on the Sound.

The small boatmen are in danger of swamping.

If the waves say anything, it is

Go now. Leave your shell

as foothold for the young.

II

I had no skin
only bones and the veins draping them
like fishnet on a gunwhale.

I stood in the mantle of a wave,
waiting for my body,
shivering.

Strangers came, seal faces,
ravens overhead complaining,
crabs with their swivelling eyestalks.

Fear makes a bad meal,
I heard one say,
Let the sea cure him.

So they left me there
like driftwood
or fog on the headland.

III

I fell asleep in the gray moss of the waves,
the great moonweeds, swaying and toppling.
It seems I entered a shell or the turreted silence
of the ocean. It's hard to recall—
the moon was young then and closer,
I could discern its work in the ribs of diatoms and the hardening chalk.
I slept a long time in the drift of those skeletons.

IV

Far on the rocks in the fog
the gulls were crying.
Over the steady wavechant
I heard voices and oarstrokes,
men calling the blooded kokanee.

That night I joined them
in the aldersmoke and starlight.
I stood in a circle without fear
listening to flutebone and rattle
as animals walked from the fire.

Beyond the glinting sealrock,
I saw children and salmon
on a ladder of moons.
Song was to help them
from crescent to crescent,
so I raised my voice with the others.

From then on, sleep was broken.
I tumbled in the wrack
without a body of my own.

V

He came again, the one who'd spoken, he tended the waves
as if they were a furnance,
sunkiln he called them.

*These are the only masks
worth having, he said,
these wet guts, these fishbones.
Knowledge is breath and change.
You may never leave the wave
so make your body of its breaking.*

VI

Though you fall away in the dark,
fall without hindrance
from ledge to ledge, the moon making
short work of whatever distinction
your face had,
though you fall with the faceless bodies,
the crescent scars of your own nails
on the thighs of the victims,
though your maggot vanishes and you never find it
on earth again,

say to the tall grass, the delicate seedchains : I go looking
to the lichen-spotted groundling nighthawk : I go looking
to the deadly angels, the veiled amanitas : I go looking
to the crests and blazons of all lifechains : I go looking

VII

A shearwater dives, sheathing itself in light.
The wave rides forward out of the sun
and, with it, all I will ever love—
the hemlock where the heron perches, a shred of fog
that loosens and moves slowly off,
the light changing from green to pewter, changing constantly
as the elements respect no division,
the purple crabs scrambling through the sedge in great numbers,
decisively as under one command,
the seal, the woman, the pivoting surge of the sea itself,
that moon-leashed leviathan,
and the tall, crowned grasses striding toward death.
With these I lean toward what I know
and will come to know as I listen
to the voices of the island:

Pulse after pulse
the sun drives the bloodscrews, the wedges of beginning
into each crack of time.
The seal laughs in the wave,
the sickle moon cuts and cuts again
these cliffs. Nothing stays.
Not grass, not water, not even the sun.
Praise and pass on.