



Storm Coming



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Sail on albatross wings for a moment. You are bones and feathers, weightless, and you are floating - flying, gliding, sailing - adrift on a sea of consciousness. Eyes, sharp like light through a prism, pierce the distance and you can hear the horizon calling. Sail on, then, and if you must, dream of mountains and trees and greens and yellows, and giant shadows, but know you are here, too, always here, where a vast flatness keeps you bound in mind and spirit to the edge, where we began and where we will end, where we must wait patiently for images to help us, and where we sit in quiet contemplation while our dreamer's eye puzzles and wanders and finally finds itself alone on a beach somewhere, full of light.

Be aware now, the fishing line is barely visible because it dives at a shallow angle into the water. It is stretched taut at this end by the ebb current, and it sings faintly in the wind. The waves dance around it, covering and uncovering and covering again. Beads of saltwater form and cling tenuously, shining for the instant they remain separate from the rest. This gossamer thread points backwards towards shore, and if you were out there, floating maybe, and your eyes could follow its entire path, you would see on shore at the other end a rod stuck deep in the sand, quivering in the breeze, and a man alone.

He was an old fisherman whose hands were so crippled by arthritis that he could barely work the reel on his dilapidated surf rod - not that it mattered, of course, for he was long past the days when he cared if he pulled a meal out from the sea. No, he was here because the ocean was here, and even though it was so damned cold that his hands would freeze if he took them out of his pockets, so marvelously cold that his breath crystallized and cracked like glass and fell to the ground in slivers, even so, he still came to this beach every morning to watch the sun rise and to cast his line into the waves. For all the movement he displayed, this man was a fossil: he faced the winter wind with a grim serenity. The etched lines in his weathered face bore witness to his vigilance; he was hunkered down, curled like a fetus against his sand dune womb, his skin cold and tingly from sitting so still in the wet sand. He peered out steadily from inside the cave of his hood, eyes half closed and hidden behind the large and crooked nose, mouth dour and toothless.

The sea had rarely seemed so restless. With the power of planets moving through space, squall lines built heavy and gray on the horizon. While the man's mind listlessly calculated time and distance to the approaching storm, his hands, aware of the cold, quickly and mechanically packed his ragged pipe; but he didn't light it. He just liked the smoothness of the ivory mouthpiece against his gums. The wind came in gusts, shifting intensity like good music, and the man realized belatedly that the usual Wednesday morning breeze had shifted to offshore. That had not happened in a very long list of Wednesdays.

Moving dark and slinky, a strange bulge approached through the waves. He strained to see - to identify - the shape. Mysterious, wonderfully strange, something new. The sun abruptly appeared between layers of cloud, throwing its jagged light everywhere. He stood up painfully on wobbly legs, which, for him, was a sign of great agitation and

excitement.

Balancing there and shielding the glare from his face with his hands, he cursed his eyes for not working as they used to. The eyes are the last thing a person should want to lose - no more sunrises or sunsets, no more watching the pelicans soar in line along the crest of a breaking wave, no more reading books by candlelight late at night when you can no longer hear the birds crying or the seals barking, just the noise of gentle waves breaking and spilling on the beach and the hushed murmur of sand moving in the water.

Yes, his eyes were tired and old from too much reading in dim light, he knew that, but he believed that this was not the only reason he couldn't see the object clearly. He knew that dawn on the ocean was itself a formidable mystery - there was a power there, a profound, boundless, planetary power that penetrated him to the core - a magic time when the air becomes much too thick with the light of the new day and distances seem longer than they are, when shadows live and move inside the waves. Sound and smell sharpen, even for the ancient and decrepit. He turned his face to the burning orb and allowed the warmth to creep in underneath the chill of the early morning. Eyes closed, he listened for the spill of whitecaps out past the break. He tasted flavors of seaweed beneath his tongue, delicious. The rocks smelled of salt and guano, as did he, and this more than anything made him feel at home.

He turned his head deliberately down the beach, looking for familiar images; he saw a gull, western gull maybe, picking at some kelp down that way; and a flight of spotted sandpipers, the wings unmistakable. Looking down around his feet, he imagined that the surf rod would seem crudely placed, done with no sense of aesthetics - jammed bolt upright in the sand nearly to the reel - but the setup was ultimately practical. The line played out into the swell, and the tip of the rod rose and dove slightly as each wave rolled past.

The phantom shape, moving quickly towards shore, lurched past his line and nearly snagged it. The man lowered himself slowly to the ground, too tired now to care. His old bones creaked and popped as he moved, and his eyes were droopy. So tired. Mostly he would doze in fits, dreaming off and on about crocodiles, mermaids, and a man with a mustache and a hook for a hand who chased him through dark alleyways.

It's a woman. She floats in with the waves; the water curls and breaks over her pale flesh. She rolls onto her back and stretches her arms towards the sky, fingers spread wide as if welcoming someone. Her skin glows with a feeble blue electric phosphorescence. Now she is crouching knee-deep in the water, the sun is directly behind, burning her shadow into his eyes. Is she facing him? He stands up effortlessly, he feels his heart expanding, he needs to urinate. Her feet are long and slender, pointy, as are her hands - young hands, good for work in the garden or for digging for clams, soft like a feather and the color and texture of alabaster. Her hair is an impossible shade of green, like shallow water still as a mirror and flowing, moving, billowing, as slippery and clean as an underwater plant. It falls down around her waist, down to the ground and between her toes.

She stands up slowly and awkwardly reaches toward him. He cannot move, his feet have grown roots into the ground; he can see them, winding their way into the mantle of the earth. He closes his eyes and screams, but his voice trails off with the wind until it is nothing. Silence is healing. He is becoming lighter now, bones become hollow as he sprouts wings from his back, the wind tugs at him and lifts him skyward. Eyes bird-like, he sees her and beyond her, past the horizon and around the curves of the globe.

The man wakes slowly, savoring the light first through his eyelids. He focuses painfully on the distance - the line between sky and sea is blurred in shades of gray. Undulating lines, wavefronts born by the storm, form on the horizon and march quickly towards him.

He looks down and she is there, laid out before him. She seems to have come a long way, for she smells of other places, other seas. Her body, too fragile, is cut and bruised by reefs and bloated by saltwater. He tears at the seaweed that encases her like a mummy's rags,

and picks at the snails and bits of shell stuck in her hair, finally combing the long strands with his fingers.

Her eyes are closed. What a curse to lose your eyes, he knows. Nothing left to do but bury her now. He digs at the sand until his hands are raw and hurting, feeling the grit beneath his nails - he lowers the body into the ground and covers it. Please stay warm and safe. It's cold out here, and there's a storm coming.

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This story is fiction, but its origins were all too real. Aaron Gladman was kayaking one day under the Golden Gate Bridge when he came across a dead woman floating in the water. He spent several hours with her, waiting for the Coast Guard to arrive. He had nightmares for several years, until he wrote his "dream" as this story.

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