

Place

by

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Crossing a grey sea with no night into a body of fog Ole Gustafson comes to smell land. Sailing alone a sea of days clear and still or abrupt and perilous he has spoken his soul to the skin of the deeps but heard no answers and has almost forgotten why he had one day after weeks of brooding set a lone course west.

The salt that rimes his deck and beard now catches a flavor of mineral, moss, rot. Shadows of gulls descend from squalling cries about the mist. And past the rush of water against the high prow a harsh chorus mutters deep into this depthless twilight.

Ole feels the sea calmer to starboard, so he edges the tiller thence. The cries of breakers and kittywakes seem to surround him; he can see nothing, only feel the boat riding easier as he trims the mainsail. Here is shelter, a bay or fjord, darker shadows rising all about.

Ole sees a finger of black stone and strikes his sail, unshipping the oars to probe and row carefully to a lee berth. He secures stout ropes to roughly stippled stone, feeling solid ground after time exceeding clear memory. He draws himself up on the unmoving rock, feeling a bit out of balance: Land.

Ole gathers up his bow and quiver, buckles on his sword and kit of flint, lodestone and a little dried fish, birthright of a second son foreclosed from the great hall. He scrambles up the shoreline jumble into the mist. At the first nearly level place he stops. Only the nearest few arm spans about are visible in any direction, all stone misshapen black as slag from an immortal forge. He stills his breathing and quiets his heart to listen.

The whoosh and hiss of the sea, his constant companion, try to tempt him back. Far above, kittywakes call to one another. Wind, whistling somewhere.

What is this place? Ole wonders. A mere rock thrust from the sea? Or some larger unknown that only he has lost enough to find? Some had voyaged west and not returned: because of something they had found, or a fate that found them.

He piles some loose rocks into a cairn to guide his way back. Every five strides he makes another. Presently the shoreline jumble smooths under a carpet of moss. The sea recedes from his hearing, the mist here not as dense. Ole takes a breath, pushes it out, attends the rhythmic life surge of blood in his ears.

Building another cairn, he circles slowly about it studying the moss for signs. There are no spoor, no prints or signs of eating. He prises up a clump of moss and nibbles, spits it out, squats to see if there is any vision closer to the ground. He feels a damp breeze on his right cheek, follows it five strides, where he can hear water plashing. He makes another cairn, and within three further steps finds a fresh brook.

Ole drinks his fill of living water that is not stilled stale rain and chews at a bit of dried herring from his kit. He sits for a time in a changeless twilight, considering: this land has water, and some green. There must be uplands, likely forested. And very possibly, there is life beyond the shore birds. If so, there might be men, so he must be wary.

He makes his way back patiently from cairn to cairn till he hears the sea and the creak of his boat. He finds some land crabs gathered at his mooring lines. They are delicious.

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Ole dreams.

He walks uneven steps from wave to wave that become solid. The new ground rises sharply, he scrambles barefoot, naked but not cold, surrounded by featureless distance. *Where am I*, he asks, and *Where am I going?*

Suddenly there are voices all around him, speaking as after a meal, level and calm and various, words indistinct or unknown.

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He wakes in the bower of the boat and considers whether all of it is a dream. But sitting up affirms a land extending to far mountains whose tops are licked golden and draped in white. Their vassal hills bear forests promising game no less than those of his father and brother.

“This is my place,” Ole tells the vision. “Olesland.”

He gathers his bow and quiver and sword and kit and waterskin to fill. He chews a piece of dried fish and sets off into the land.

At first he is careful, recalling the fog, to mark with stones a path back to the boat. But in the course of a long trek, he makes fewer cairns, further apart, and finally leaves off the markings. If this is truly his place, there is no need to go back. His course is forward, unmarked, awaiting.

Ole walks a long time over stones that ever stretch before him until he sees a mist ahead. *Here at least is something*, he grunts to himself. He tops a shallow rise and stops.

Here is something: a raging grey river many fathoms wide carving sheer cliffs from the stone on which he stands.

He looks about this obstacle, noting that he has been climbing steadily on his way. He then moves up the river, to where he can sup cold, fresh water at a shallow bank and move on to its source. The sun stays with him, coursing a wide arc in the silvered air until its weight dips

north as he dips his weary legs in a bracing cold stream upriver at the edge of the tree line. He takes some inner bark and young twigs from a birch tree to add to his dried fish and to make tea.

Then Ole settles down to rest, and dreams.

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He is sitting on a black stone, naked, surrounded by chattering voices. The talk is too quick and too strange for him whose hearing and language have been slowed by the sea. He tries to speak, his name: Ole Gustafson.

He is given a question:

Why are you here?

The Gods know, he responds without words.

We do not.

Who are you?

Those who ask. We who are here.

I would stay in this place.

The voices fall silent.

And why should I not? Dream Ole tells himself and the unknown others. *There is no other place for me.*

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He awakes to a freshening wind drawing a carapace of clouds over the mountains to a grey and even light. He knows not how much time has passed, only that a dream of some instructiveness has passed in his sleep. This place feels outside of time.

Only his stomach and bowels speak of the cycles of a day: he must hunt.

Ole climbs into the wood, entering a stillness unlike any he has known. There are swifts and terns, long-fliers, but no songbirds. He is swarmed by the small blackflies that these birds eat.

Ole chews on bark and the last of his fish as the land beneath him rises toward a saddle in the mountain ridgeline. He crosses the brook and is approaching the top of the rise when he hears a sharp click from the other side. Bow in hand, he sets careful steps to a cluster of stones at the crest where he can crouch and observe.

Sheep.

Before his vantage lies a grassy valley. At the bottom is a sod-roofed lodge and a square, shingled hut atop a stone mound. In between white woolly sheep browse the meadow.

So there are others. This village, perhaps more, sitting in council, sitting in judgment, perhaps vassals of the same king whose feet his brother washes.

I am weary of the sea, he knows, but have only so many arrows.

As he has pondered a sheep has browsed to the lip of the ridge. Putting questions aside, Ole spends an arrow.

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A hard haul a valley away, Ole has shorn the wool, taken the skin to dry, supped on meat over a banked fire in a stone-stockaded clearing before a cave. *Let them come*, he tells the embers. *I stay here.*

Leaving the carcass on the spit, he sleeps. The voices come.

You leave us an offering?

Yes. Partake.

That life was not yours.

Only my life is mine.

That is so. Do you war on the others?

I do not join them.

That is well. They build their gathering house on our place.

Our place...

Our place...

The fog closes in his dream and he wakes to it, the same fog. Ole takes meat laid on a flat stone and some water, then rises with his bow, his quiver and his girded sword. This will take time, but no hurry. He is where he should be and will remain. Finally.

Having descended stone to stone in the next valley amid unconcerned sheep, he sights his bow at the door of the lodge, wondering who will appear.

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