

A Quiet Full of Longing

Claire Dockery

The densest darkness I have ever felt grew out of a rural Michigan winter. The star-prickled night had turned starless; a snowstorm made the wind visible. Our high-beams formed a small, inadequate knife. Inside the sputtering 2000 Honda Odyssey, we all felt swallowed, I imagined, by the thickness of it: the winter, the night, our quiet stares out the windows. I had set Covenant's "Call the Ships to Port" to loop on my iPod and Grandpa was dying.

When I think of that New Year's visit to my grandparents' house near Traverse City, buried among the naked and skeletal cherry orchards, I can't separate the images from that song—the almost-kitsch of its early 2000s four-on-the-floor kick drum, the ambiguously European accent of the vocalist, the swirling howl of the synths. And, of course, the lyrics: *A billion words ago / the sailors disappeared / a story for the children / to rock them back to sleep.* My grandfather was already a story, the strong, gentle, stoic man who had lost his sense of self to dementia. The World War II vet, the only one who pretended to enjoy the dubious pies we'd made from orchard-picked cherries in summers before, had vanished into the darkness of an earlier rural winter. On the long, quiet drive to the nursing home, listening to Covenant, I knew Grandpa to be a story, and, perhaps for the first time, I realized that we were too—the altogether typical family lost for words, unsure how to digest phrases like "aspiration pneumonia" and "very weak" and, of course, the pressing dark. In my own headphone-wreathed uncertainty, I listened on: *a thousand generations / the soil on which we walk.*

If someone had asked me, at that time, to name an anthem for my life, "Call the Ships to Port" may well have been it. To me, it was a song of loneliness, a song I stumbled across via one of my internet friends. They outnumbered my "IRL" friends those first few years of high school, following a cross-country move and the 2006-2010 awkward phase, featuring tight graphic tees, ill-fitting Vans, and a bad attitude I was afraid to properly substantiate with poor academic performance. "Call the Ships to Port" stood for a manifold search for one's likeness—for people online who liked the same music, for a kindred spirit among anonymous faces, for people who shared the same story. For years, I misheard the first lines of the chorus as *a quiet full of longing / we call our ships to port*, referring to the far-flung ships of lost familiarity. And suddenly, here were the ships, in the Odyssey in the dark, setting sail towards the unspoken question of how we should react to the news about Grandpa. *A brother and a sister / for better or for worse*—here, the family I had clashed with time and time again, united in fear.

The clashes had begun in an altogether typical fashion, when I fell away from the Catholic conservatism espoused by my father and by his parents before him, including the man dying in a nursing home in Traverse City, Michigan. Different generations, different worldviews—in the face of the densest winter we had ever weathered, it all felt superficial. *A billion words ago / they sang a song of leaving / an echo from the chorus / will call them back again.* The echo from the chorus, in this case, came in the form of a late-night phone call. Then, together again, in such a mundane, anonymous room, in a nursing home in Traverse City, we dropped anchors in a port of countless families, in a grief that suddenly lost its facelessness. Three generations, three lifestyles standing side by side, and meanwhile, I watched my dad become a childhood memory. He knelt at his weak, sleeping father's bedside and stroked his thin hair the same way he had once stroked mine and my sisters' when he sang us to sleep, in comfort, in reverence. I thought back to



Covenant

"Call the Ships to Port"

Northern Light

10/2002

Sony KA2 · Metropolis

a black and white photo of Grandpa, then a broad-shouldered silhouette against Sleeping Bear Sand Dunes, holding hands with the child version of my father. How my dad had led me up Sleeping Bear the same way. And again, *Covenant*. *A hundred clocks are ticking / the line becomes a circle*. We stood solemnly, fumbling with our hands, afraid of making Grandpa's end more real by speaking of it. No one spoke, save for a sentence from Grandma: "You're not alone."

As it turned out, the circle stayed still that night. We never learned if Grandpa was conscious to our presence there, or if he remembered any of us by then, but his sheer will to live prevailed, for better or worse. We called it a New Year's miracle. *Tonight we walk on water / and tomorrow we'll be gone*. He died on a sunny March morning a little over a year later, some distance from the song and the winter and the night, the single light left on too late in a Michigan snowstorm. At his funeral, though, "Call the Ships to Port" returned to me, the brief survivor of a story too large to grasp. By then, I had learned the correct verses to the chorus: *a choir full of longing / will call our ships to port*. It felt significant to replace "quiet" with "choir," even just in my head in a pew of a half-empty chapel. We came forward to put voice to a grief that had called us together. We spoke of our own fragments of my grandfather's life, and acknowledged that his passing made us more aware of our own. Like the speaker of the *Covenant* song, we were moved and summoned by longing—for the vanished man, for a chance to unravel the wasted moments of needless silence.

The densest darkness of that darkest winter was a blanket of our own creation, one we finally aired out that March to pull apart between us. We had all sat quietly in the *Odyssey* and feared. Feared death, feared isolation, feared the aloneness we had let fester by (fittingly enough) sharing in Grandpa's stoicism. Disjointed, we had joined not the choir, but *the countless lonely voices / like whispers in the dark*. The last time I saw Grandpa's face, a spring sunbeam made him look almost alive again. At the cemetery near Elk Lake where he and my grandmother now both spend their age of silence, a ceremonial guard performed "Taps" as he was lowered into the earth. Finally, for the first time since his death—for the first time since realizing he no longer remembered us—I cried openly, and joined my family in doing so.