

## **The Ferryman**

My charges are often afraid. I try to see this world through their eyes -- the blue light without source, the empty canopy overhead, the depthless black waters, and the mist. Always the mist. I do not feel the cold anymore, but they sometimes talk amongst themselves about it, hold their arms to their chests.

Enter the boat, I tell them. There is nothing to fear. I am here to carry you to your final home. I use the word home because it has a round sound to it, warm and inviting. I have had a long time to refine the language of invitation. If their eyes remain untrusting, their bodies unmoving, I reach out and take them by the waist, lifting them gently down on to the wooden bench. I arrange their legs into what I hope is a comfortable position. Some will plead with me, ask me to put them back, and I smile and shake my head. I do not apologize, because you cannot apologize for duty. These passengers I give the cup right away, hold it insistently to their lips. They are thirsty when they come to me, and they drink without question. I watch their faces, the way they smooth from forehead to chin, the way the distance drains from the eyes. They become like shallow pools, full of that blue light. There is no talking to them after this. Without memory, there is nothing.

Before the other shore, they must drink. These are my instructions. And then I help them onto the black sand, watch it give under their feet, and lose their figures to the mist.

There are times I enjoy the solitary return, the meditative motion of oar against water. And at times it feels empty, and I speak aloud to myself. I can shout and sing, if I like. The air here eats sound.

This trip, it is only a woman who waits for me. I judge her to be thirty, perhaps. She does not embody feminine beauty, her features are too blocky and not entirely symmetrical, but her face has a pleasing earnestness.

"This is death, I guess," she says.

"Yes," I say.

"I don't have anything to give you. I read once that you have to pay the river man."

"Ah," I say. "I require no payment. People used to bring coins for me, but what use are coins here?" It seemed a cruel joke, those first centuries, the dead coming bearing gold, gold I could do nothing with but rub between my fingers or throw in the river. I threw it in the river. I imagine, sometimes, that Apollo told people to pay me, his way of mocking me. I am not sure if this is true. I am not sure if he even thought of me enough to mock me. He has not come.

"I see what you mean," she says, looking around. "No stores or anything on the other side."

"I would expect not." I hold out my hand to help her aboard. "Some people leave me gifts, though, things of value they carried to this place. I only take what is given willingly." I show her the place, in the bow, where I have tucked my keepsakes.

She fingers a book of poems, written in Urdu, lovely and sad. "What happens," she asks, "if I come with you?"

There is no if, but I allow, at times, the illusion of choice. Some people find it comforting. "You move on into the next world."

“And is it like the other world? The one I come from?”

“No,” I say. “It’s a place of peace and rest. “

“Sounds boring. ”

“It isn’t boring,” I say, though I’ve never been there. The boat is my domain. I have been told I cannot enter that place, and no one returns to report of it. I do, at times, feel a curiosity that nearly overwhelms me. I have almost stepped out of the boat to follow, but my body will not obey. The word of a god is binding, and I gave mine, once. Regretting that day is of no use. There are always more dead sent to me, always more waiting, and they need my guidance and care.

“Have you seen -- well, the place I come from?” She points vaguely upwards, as if it had a direct dimensional relation to this place.

“Yes,” I say. “When it was new. It’s been a very long time.”

I can smell the earth on her skin, and it is different than I remember. It is the smell of too many humans. It has an oily quality, this smell. Death can’t keep up with the smell and the things that make it. Before there were too many humans, before we needed a place to store them once they were worn out and I was needed to row them, I bathed in water that had memory, naked with Apollo. My body was beautiful then, or more beautiful. It was not twisted by singularity of motion and purpose. I can’t see the whole of myself, because the river does not reflect, but I feel it in my shoulders, can see it in the thinness of my legs, the caverns between my knuckles, the wrinkle and jut of my elbows.

There is no use in remembering any of this, but there is something in the way this woman looks at me that dislodges the past from the dark place I keep it. The

body I had, and his. I remember exploring each other, cramming fingers into mouths and feeling the ridges behind teeth, the throat flesh like nectarines searching for the mechanism that made sound inside us. I remember tasting his ears, the ripe caves under his arms, the place where toes met. We threw each other off high places to feel the scream of air, the juddering impact of bone on rock. We explored the bottom of the sea with outstretched fingers, then flopped in the hot sand and licked the salt from each other's lips. I remember. He sang to me, trying to get something of the air and the water into his voice, and it was ugly at first, but I listened, gave him words to form his sounds around until the songs became golden and pulsing. I could still sing them, but that will not bring him to me. It has been countless ages since I even hoped.

"How did you die?" I ask the woman. I have been keeping a record. I make notes by century in my mind, tracking the most common causes. It is productive.

"Car crash," she says. "Though you wouldn't know it to look at me."

"When you enter the gate" -- I nod to the black void behind us -- "that which brought about your death is wiped away, and you are made whole."

"Handy, she says. I'm sure it makes it easier for you, not having to see mangled limbs all the time. "

"It's for your benefit, not mine," I say. "Car crashes are popular these days. I hope it was quick."

"I think so," she says. "All I remember is lights and a lot of noise."

Years ago, I asked a man to draw a car for me. They look like metal beetles, he told me. They move quickly with their combustion engines and everyone has one.

He told me they make boats with engines like the ones in cars, and that it would save me a lot of effort if I had one, though I would need to find a way to get gasoline down here. I tucked all of this into my mind. It's important to keep current, so I can have meaningful conversations. This is perhaps selfish of me, since I will be the only one to remember.

"What was your occupation?" I ask her.

"I'm a flight attendant," she says. "You know what that is?"

"Yes," I say. "You serve drinks and peanuts to people on airplanes and tell them to buckle their seatbelts and not to panic."

"No more peanuts," she says. "People die of peanut allergies. I thought you would know that."

"Ah," I say. "Most people are not forthcoming about their cause of death."

"It's a sensitive topic," she says. She's smiling. I like her. Talking like this is rare. It has been decades, or perhaps centuries, since someone has been so -- friendly, the word is.

"Did you like your job?"

"Do you like yours?"

"Yes," I say.

This is not a question people ask me. This is not something I consider. I am what I do, what I will always do. It does no good to remember before. It would be easier if I was not able to remember that a before existed. I have tried drinking from the river. It is sweet and clings to my tongue, but it doesn't take away my memories.

“I made this boat myself,” I tell her, “with a tree I used to climb when your world was fresh and green. “

Apollo came to watch me build the boat. I know I must have looked strange, my body bent over the saw, wood dust in my hair and beard.

This was a tree I made for you, he said.

And I can do with it what I please, I said.

So you're set on this, are you?

Someone must care for the dead humans.

He did not understand this, and told me so. Apollo was interested in the living. He had begun to explore their bodies instead of mine. By this time the world was not new to us, but with the humans he could experience it fresh again and again. He liked the desperation with which they clung to experience, a desperation that only came of mortality, he told me. They frightened me, their fragile lives that could break at any moment. I saw the way it thrilled him.

He brought them to me, naked, the wet of their fear shining and pungent on their skins. First beautiful men, who stumbled up to me as if led by a rope. They pressed their lips to me and I could taste their fright, acrid and bitter. I did not want to take this unwilling offering. I sent them away.

Then Apollo brought me a human woman. He liked the way he could enter the women in a new place, a place I didn't have, and that they would grow another human inside them. He told me I ought to try it, placed my hand on her breasts. They were soft like rotten peaches. He placed my hand inside her, and it also felt too

soft and smelled dark, like disturbed earth. She cried as I touched her, and I felt sick and sorry. I don't want this, I told him. Please. I don't want this.

He left me, disappointed. I watched as he sang his songs with the words I'd given him to the human men and women and bent light for them and made their fluids into flowers to delight them. Some were not charmed by his songs and smiles and did not want him, tried to escape him, but he placed himself inside them anyway. There was something fierce and violent in his face when he did this. When he came to me later, smelling of the humans he'd taken, I wanted to turn him away. It's wrong, what I've seen you do, I said. There's something sick inside you, I said. Then heal me, he said, pulling me to the grass.

You never grew anything for me, I said as our bodies united. When we finished together, he gathered our seed in his palm, then tipped it to the earth. A tree for you, he said, as a sapling sprang up. No more humans, he said. Only you.

But there were more humans. I watched from the branches of the tree, before I cut it down. Before I made my boat, before the river and the mist. Always the mist.

"I was a shitty flight attendant," the woman says. "It took me forever to pour those drinks. People got so impatient, and the plane was never completely steady. And those little plastic cups. You can't fit hardly anything in them. Do you know about corrupt corporations? I suppose you wouldn't. They're always cutting corners and making people miserable and I had to serve them miserable little drinks."

“I may not be a very good ferryman,” I say. “My hands get stiff from paddling, and sometimes it takes me a long time to get my passengers to the other shore.”

“You poor man.” She understands. Somehow, this woman has reached me. “Would you like mine?”

“Your hands?”

“Sure,” she says. “I won’t need them where I’m going.”

I ought to tell her that I do not know for a certainty that this is true. But I’m looking at her hands, and they are lovely. I have seen a lot of hands, and there is something singular about the formation of these. I flex my own. Curled into claws by ages of desperate grip.

“Maybe I’ll just take one,” I say.

She holds out her right hand. “It won’t hurt, will it? Since I’m already dead?”

“No,” I say. I keep a knife in the boat that I use to score a line for each century that passes. I pull it out and, in one swift motion, remove her hand from her wrist. She dips the stump in the river. “Easy,” she says. “I like being dead.”

I pick the hand up from the bottom of the boat. I place it over my own right hand like a glove, flesh merging with flesh. It feels strong and supple. I snap my fingers. “Thank you,” I say. “Thank you.” With the new hand, I rummage through my possessions. I pull out my favorite, given to me six hundred and fifty three years ago. A tiny rose rendered in leaded glass. Most offerings I toss in the river, after my passengers have disappeared, but I kept this one because it retained, somehow, its red color.



“Nice,” she says, and tucks it between her breasts. “This is a good look for me, don't you think?”

I can row much faster with her hand. Before the prow nudges the shore, I fill the cup for her. I do not want to do it. She would be a pleasant companion to keep in the boat with me. I feel this way sometimes, though never so strongly as now. No one has given freely of herself for me before. I feel her loss already, creeping upon me, and it is like watching Apollo with the humans. I do not want to feel this way.

“I'm ready,” she says.

I have a duty. My duty is to tell her to drink. I tell her to drink. I watch the self-knowledge drain from her face. Her smile becomes slack and empty. She is gone. Like everyone I row to this shore, she will leave me. I will always return alone, and alone, and again alone.

I help her onto shore. I sit longer than I should, watching the place where the mist swallowed her. I have a schedule to keep, but it feels so much heavier. How is it that I have done this for thousands of years? I should slide into it again, easy as falling, but there is this hand. Gift of gifts. It is no good to remember what it was like, to belong to nothing but my duty, but I do.

I wonder, as I gaze at the empty bench on my return journeys, what would have happened if I had asked her to stay with me. Just for a few years. We could speak about the passengers, speculate about the histories of the ones who don't speak. She could serve them overflowing cups of river water, and she would laugh

and wave a hand in front of their vacant faces. She would tell me about the earth, and I would see it through her mind. She would be color, she would be wind and sky.

Instead, I speak to the hand, and I cock it in the direction of my mouth, as if it listens. Everyone seems particularly resistant now, I tell it. I ask it why it thinks no one will look me in the face. Perhaps it's because of you, I say. The rest of me must look so horrific, attached to all that loveliness. I go weeks without using it, letting it lay ornamental across my lap so it will not become calloused and bent.

And then there is the young man. He leaps into the boat without my prompting and leans his arms over the sides like wings. He rolls his head loose on his neck, taking in the small visible radius, then fixes his gaze on me.

"So this is it," he says. He sounds pleased.

"It," I say. "Yes. "

He is pleased to talk about how he died. He explains cliff-diving to me, makes the sound of rushing wind with his mouth, then slams a fist into his open palm.

"Splat," he says. "And here I am."

"I used to dive from cliffs too," I tell him.

He leans in close, grinning. "Is that how you got here?"

"In a way," I say.

He leans over the boat and drags a hand in the river. Feels strange, he says.

"Like cold milk. Do you ever swim in it?"

"No. It's for you to drink, when the time comes, and you pass on into the mist."

He nods.

"Or," I say, a feeling rising in me not unlike that remembered rush of wind, "you could stay with me for a while."

He considers me, crags deepening around his mouth. "No," he says finally. "No offense to you, man, but I think I'm ready to pass on. I bet there are a bunch of beautiful dead chicks over there, yeah?"

"No," I say. The hardness in my voice surprises me. It is too much to ask, for him to become my companion. I know this. I have always known this. But something dark and painful is rising in me, again. It's powerful inside me.

"Well, either way," he says. "I'll take my chances with the beyond. I appreciate the one-way trip, though." He stretches his arms back over the sides of the boat. I trace the full curves of muscle, the tight-strung tendons. This skin has seen sun, likely still smells of it.

Before the thought has settled, I have pulled out my knife and set it into the flesh of his left shoulder, which parts red and willing. He is too shocked to resist, I think, and I do not look at his face as I carve. "Only the one arm," I tell him. Once it falls into my lap, I place the cup between his parted lips and pour. It is not unkindness, I tell him, if you have no memory of it. His absent eyes watch me slide his missing limb over mine. I flex, feel the potent ripple under my new skin.

"Thank you," I say. A white eye of bone stares from the gash I've left. "Thank you." I reach into the bottom of the boat and pull out another trinket I kept, a wooden doll worn smooth with care. I place it in his remaining hand, curl his fingers around it. He rubs a thumb against the painted face, back and forth.

I never take anything from the unwilling. I am a caretaker, here to guide the dead. But I have the arm now. Something has gone wrong with me, I know, because of the pleasure I let myself take in it. I caress it with the woman's hand, raising goosebumps with a light fingertip against the tender inner groove of the elbow. I watch the shift of muscle and remember the roughness of rock in my palm, the jut of Apollo's jaw.

I try not to notice that my body has become mismatched, incongruous. I attempt to distract myself with conversation with the dead, with the collection of data, but my passengers are anxious, resentful, taciturn. Most need the cup before I pull the first stroke of my oar. I feel them staring at my body, even after they've sunken into blissful unknowing. They seem to recognize what I have done, to call me monster. I explain to them that I had not intended to do it, that he denied me companionship, that I took so little from him and that I removed the trauma from his mind. They do not, of course, respond. I grow tired of their blankness.

And then the arm begins to remind me not of the pleasures of the earth, but the hideousness of the rest of me this place has created. I begin to mark weeks instead of centuries. A decade passes in small hashes before I take the next arm. The procedure is careful, as kind as I can make it. With one hand I slice, and with the other I press the river water to her lips. Her features, tight with fear, fall loose, and she smiles vacantly after mere seconds. I want only the beautiful stretch from shoulder to wrist, so I can keep my first gift. I reattach this girl's hand, placing it in the pink yawn of her socket, and the flesh meets and reconnects. Her fingers wriggle happily in the air. As I send her off, I wonder if I've sabotaged these humans'

ability to exist in this place I know nothing of. As I run my fingers over the glorious new landscape of arm that reminds me of bananas and smells faintly of salt, I promise myself I will take nothing more.

Another two decades go by before I take the legs. I take them from a runner. When I ask her how she died, she tells me it was the blood doping. I make a note of it, that it is a form of cheating. I try to remind myself of this, once the legs fuse to my hips, that I have taken the legs of a dishonest woman. She must use her arms to crawl into the mist. She smiles at me over her shoulder, her torso dragging in the wet sand.

If there hadn't been a woman whose breasts were full from nursing the baby she'd left behind, I wouldn't have taken her torso. But I remember the joy on Apollo's face when he drank from the breast of the first woman who had his child, how gentle he was with her. There is a connection between the mother and that being she has carried. I want to own that vessel that was so recently full with life, to be tethered to him. I imagine it a boy, this child.

It surprises me, how sore the nipples are, how the new heavy flesh changes my balance as I move, how they rub against my beautiful arms. I run my fingers over these new tender mounds as the boy child ages in my mind. He is crawling now, knees turning green against grass. He speaks his first word, and it is Water.

My passengers have become terrified of me. They shrink away, even when I hold out my hand. I do not blame them. I must be a creature of their nightmares -- a gorgeously assembled body attached to a leering, aged skull. I have told myself that

I cannot take a head. The other parts, they can move into the next world without. But a head? That must be necessary.

But I discover I cannot even do my job anymore. Not in this condition. It is difficult to even lift them into the boat because they shrink from my touch, cringe when I speak to tell them of their final home. I need to give them the cup of forgetting immediately, or they will try to jump out into the river to swim back to shore, and I must fish them out because all must drink, and all must cross. I thought I knew loneliness, I thought I knew emptiness. But this -- the revulsion, always, and the horror. It is unbearable.

I wait until I ferry a woman with sleek black hair and prominent cheekbones who attempts to bite me as I lift her, gentle as I can, into the boat. The knife has grown dull from the many surgeries, and I need to hack to make it through the layers of tissue and bone. I have already given my other passengers the river water, so they gaze happily at me as I fish the woman's brain from her skull and place it back on the gaping neck. I douse it with river water and it shines against the grey whorls. I then pull the skull on like a close-fitting cap. It takes longer for her flesh to meld with mine, and I fear for a moment that it will not work, that I have done this terrible thing for nothing. But, at last, I feel the familiar warmth of joining, and run my hands over my new bones, new skin. I play her agile tongue over her small, smooth teeth. I sniff through her nose, wiggle her ears, flip her hair. My hair.

I turn back to what I've left of her, watch as her tiny root-like nerves reach and reconnect brain to neck. The arms and legs move. Not quite the way they

should, with too much jerking and twitching, but they move. I fill her pockets with as many of my keepsakes as they will hold.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” My new voice is husky but undeniably feminine. The twitching body takes forever to be absorbed into the mist, and I can still see it projected against my new eyes as I row back.

I lean this completely new body over the side of the boat and plunge my mouth into the water, sucking at it. If I drink enough, I can forget. But I do not forget. I remember the humans I have taken from. I remember Apollo. I am beautiful now, as I once was when he wanted me. My passengers will see my beauty and they will be kind to me. I will speak with my new voice and they will be comforted. They will seek to sit close to me and their words will spring unbidden -- they will clamor to recount their last moments. I will listen attentively and remember. Their final journey will be pleasant, joyful. I will be a good ferryman, a kind conveyer of souls. This must be enough.