

## Crossing

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*Donna Glee Williams*

**T**here's a woman on the ferry, the only passenger. It's a long way to go for just one person.

The woman isn't really dressed for the wind and spray; she looks cold. Her bag is small, suggesting a short visit. But her stay on the island will not  
5 be short. She doesn't know how long, but it will not be short.

The water on one side of the ferry seems much brighter—like green olives—than the water on the other side, which looks like a muddy brown eye. It must be the twilight slant of the sun that makes it seem so different, she thinks; surely it is the same ocean.

10 But what does she know about ocean? She is an inlander from the high hill-and-valley land, where there are cities and streets and any water you see is hurrying to get somewhere else. She hurried, too, to get here, to cross the sound and find the island, but still it took her a very long time and she doesn't know what to expect.

15 She has never been in such a flat place before, though the flatness is made up of the hills and valleys of the waves. But when she looks far, the petty topography disappears and all she sees is the knife-sharp line between the clouds and the ocean. She scans the horizon for the island, but there is nothing to be seen.

20 Will she be met at the landing, she wonders? She hopes so. A human face would be a comfort, even with no words spoken.

No words. What would that be like? Is it even possible for someone like her?

25 For her, there have always been words. Her very earliest memories are worded: Her mother singing to her, reading to her from little books. And the craving, the hunger: Pleading with her mother not to leave her alone to face sleep and the dark, but to stay with her and tell her one more story. Just one more, Mommy. Just one more.

And now, here she is with her little bag, going by her own will and intention to the island where the stories stop. She shivers in the damp wind. The sky is changing. It was all gray and lowering when the ferry left the dock. Now the sun is falling behind them and the clouds have broken into streaky veils across pale blue. She watches the shapes and sees a face stretch and blur into the mouth of a barking dog or perhaps a dragon.

She is afraid of silence, but it soothes her too, the way the boatmen leave her alone, merely gesturing where she should go and where she should sit. The ferrymen on this route must be well used to silence, she supposes. Or the opposite could be true, also; people coming this way might be frantic to cram in their last few words, to hold one last precious conversation as long as they can.

But the ferry feels like it is, in and of itself, a quiet place. The tension of indecision that has clutched her chest, jaw, and gut for so long is draining away now, replaced by some new feeling and a little shiver from the cold.

She is still afraid, of course—less about actual silence, really, than about the fact that her bag has absolutely no paper in it, no book to read, no journal to write. No pen to write with, either. She feels naked and more than naked: skinless. Time. Without words. But she is past the terror of contemplating the inconceivable and well into the terror of fact. She is on the ferry.

The island isn't even a trace on the horizon yet. She settles back against the railing. The seagulls that followed them for so long, squawking so urgently, are gone now. Only the wind, the slap of the waves, and the creak of the boat. One of the ferrymen puts a mug of something hot into her hand. He's gone before she can say "thank you." She mouths the words anyway, feeling how her tongue presses against the cutting edge of her teeth, and the way her lips move against each other. She wishes she'd asked how long the trip is, but then she realizes that it doesn't matter. There's nothing but a little band of pale skin where her watch used to circle her wrist.

She holds the mug under her chin and lets the steam warm her face. It smells spicy—savory, not sweet. Some kind of broth then. What is it called, she wonders briefly, then lets the thought go and takes a sip. It's very hot, hard on tongue and lips, but warms her core all the way down and leaves a glow of heat in her belly. She takes another sip of the nameless drink and huddles lower under the rail that shields her, a little, from the wind.

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She must have fallen asleep because she wakes up.

Someone has taken the mug from her and thrown a blanket over her lap. She pulls it up to her neck and over her shoulders, leaning back to hold

it in place against the wind. It's scratchy and a little musty, but she's grateful  
70 for the protection.

It's colder now, and darker, and the horizon isn't ruler-straight any-  
more. Is that the island? Just a thin band between sea and sky? She'd ex-  
pected more, somehow, some kind of shape. Of course where she comes from  
is full of shapes: ridges, valleys, balds, hollows, peaks, and passes. Is that tiny  
75 ribbon of a different darkness all there is?

And then she sees the light, like a star, but brighter and too low. It must  
be the ferry landing.

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The boatmen don't take a straight path to the landing. Sometimes the  
80 light shows over one side of the boat, sometimes over the other. She stands  
up and watches, her blanket flapping around her, one arm hooked around a  
stanchion. The waves are rougher now and she feels a little sick until the cold  
wind blows the queasiness away.

She almost cries out in surprise when something dark looms over them  
85 and then slips past. It's tall and thick, some kind of piling rising straight up  
out of the water. A channel-marker, perhaps. That must be the reason for all  
this back-and-forthing; the ferrymen are following some path she can't see,  
some path shown by the pilings. She watches as the tall forms appear and  
slide past them, first on one side, then on the other.

90 The ferry landing is close enough now that she can make out the lamp  
and the post that holds it and the circle of light it casts around the end of a  
long empty pier.

One of the boatmen suggests she sit down with an inviting gesture to-  
ward the bench. They are very close now. She hears quick footsteps on the  
95 boat, then the *twack* of heavy ropes falling on something flat, then the grind-  
ing creak of wood against wood. The wind changes. The ferry is still. Not  
still—it bobs roughly on the waves, but it's not going anywhere. She's arrived.

She stands up and one of the ferrymen takes her arm. He has her bag  
in his other hand. She reaches to take it from him, but he smiles and shakes  
100 his head. She can see his teeth and glints of light in his eyes from the lamp at  
the landing.

He helps her across the deck and steadies her as she steps across from  
the lively boat to the pier. She sways a bit; her legs seemed to be confused by  
the sudden solidity under her. The boatman keeps one hand on her until she  
105 finds her balance, and the others, the ones with the ropes and the boat-hooks,  
hold everything in place for a long moment.

Then she nods and he lets her go, plopping her bag beside her. He  
reaches out for the blanket and she hands it across to him. The gap between

them widens; the boatmen are coiling the ropes and stowing the hooks. They are leaving her. "Thanks," she calls out across the water and lets that be the last word. 110

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