

A Whale-Soaked Sky

By Sophie Ta, grade 8

It was almost silent, except for the soft chimes of the ferry. A blanket of fog smothered the sea until all I could see was what looked like the sky, covered in clouds. The soft rocking of the boat soothed my tired eyes, like a giant cradle lulling me to sleep. The breeze brushed past my cheeks, a whisper of the cold, strong gusts of wind from home, leaving my cheeks a rosy red. My eyelashes were icy cold, as I gazed at the endless sea, my arms dangling over the railing. The air was misty and humid, as drops of dew settled on my raincoat. A splash of yellow in a world of grey.

What a perfect day for whale-watching.

The ferryman walked out onto the deck. He looked old and wise, with a white beard and eyes that were wrinkled around the edges. Ghostly and pale, his steps made no noise as he approached me. He cradled a lantern carefully in his hands, illuminating the faded shadows of his face and hands.

I smiled up at him. "It's a beautiful day, Isn't it? Perfect for whale watching. Me and my sister used to do that a bunch back home."

He looked at me, his eyes were a washed-out sapphire blue, lost with the light that was once present. “The whales will be coming soon, but the sky has to clear up first.”

His eyes were melancholic, as he stared out into the sea. His cheeks weren't rosy like mine, and his hands didn't dare shake from the cold. The lantern began to flicker slightly, turning the mist into warm, comforting honey around us.

The world felt still and colourless. The water was gentle, and the calm, rocking of the boat tried to settle my nerves. The sky was lonely without the birds or the sun, bleak with the clouds fighting above. The ferryman was cold and unmoving, like a statue. The lantern was flickering softly, like the soft flutter of my heartbeat.

Something felt terribly wrong.

I exhaled softly before asking the ferryman in a shaky voice, “I don't feel very good. Are we almost there?”

He speaks in a whisper, before raising his voice. “You died on Thirty-first Street. October 11th, 4:03 am. It was a horrible car accident really, the other driver's in cuffs right now.”

I'm confused. "What type of madman are you? That's impossible. I'd know if I was dead."

It feels like the blush is rushing out of my cheeks. This isn't possible. If I was dead, wouldn't I be in the ground, my mind unconscious? I wouldn't be standing here, my hands numb from the bitter wind, the smell of salt lingering on my nose. I wouldn't be able to see the light flickering in the ferryman's eyes. I wouldn't be able to see anything. I feel alive. I must be alive.

Where am I?

The cruel realisation begins to sink in and suddenly I'm screaming at the top of my lungs. "Where am I? Please, no. I can't be dead. I'm only seventeen! This shouldn't be possible! I'm too young to die! Why should I be dead for someone else's mistake?"

I only get two words in return. "I'm sorry."

"Well, an 'I'm sorry' isn't enough! I'm dead now! I'm never gonna see my family, my friends, anything and everything I ever loved!" My voice shatters in despair as I croak out "I don't even know where I am."

All the strength leaves my body and I slump against the wall in defeat. I cradle my head in my hands, not having enough energy to even lift my head. My hands

are clasped together, turning my knuckles a ghostly white. My hands are eerily still and no tears are able to leak out of my eyes. I can't even cry, because I'm not alive anymore. My real self is somewhere at Thirty-first Street, in a body bag.

How could my life end here?

The clouds roll on, seemingly forever. We've probably been moving for about an hour, and I'm beginning to get impatient. The ferryman hasn't moved an inch from where he's been for the past hour, simply just staring out into the sea. He grasps the lantern in his hand, as the light flickers softly.

"Where are we going?" I ask impatiently.

"We're going to send you to the afterlife."

"... And exactly how are we gonna do that?"

"We can't leave unless you're ready to leave your old life behind."

"I don't want to go."

The ferryman's solemn expression softens, before looking up at the sky. "I know a place. Let's take a break, can we?"

The silence breaks with the sound of birds screaming overhead, like streaks of black paint covering the sky—a sign of life in this empty world.

The fog clears to reveal a small, isolated island. As we depart from the ferry, the sound of waves crashing against the shore rings in my ears. My steps creak as I walk on the wooden dock, damp and slippery from water overflowing along the edges. I take step onto the island, trailing behind the ferryman as he drifts along the shore, his ghostly figure engulfed in the mist. Bits of rock crunch beneath my feet, as the cold and damp air seems to surround me in its grasp. The tide is high, as waves of water rush towards me, submerging me ankle-deep in frigid, bitter, cold. The tips of my toes are numb, but my teeth don't dare chatter. We settle down on the shoreline, lying down and staring at the clouds.

I close my eyes, trying to tune out the sound of the birds and the waves. I try to feel the warmth spreading from the top of my head to the tips of my fingers, to the soft flutter of my chest. But I can't feel anything. Only the ever-numbing weight on my shoulders.

The ferryman breaks the silence. "Tell me a bit about your old life."

"I don't know what to say."

"Tell me anything."

“There wasn’t anything special about it. I lived with my grandparents, and they’d make me lunch to bring to school every day, with little Post-its attached to the side. It always had some real sweet words on it, which made me smile a bunch. We lived near this cliff by the sea, and I’d go alone sometimes, to watch the sunset, my feet dangling off the edge. I had to be home by the time the streetlights lit the road, or I’d be in huge trouble.”

I think this is what they meant by your life flashing before your eyes. Every memory rushes to my head, and I can’t think anymore. Memories pass by at lightspeed, not giving me enough time to mourn what’s already passed. It’s too much. I exhale, trying to organize my thoughts. My vision seems to blur. My breathing gets heavy, like a mountain is on my chest, squeezing all the air out of my lungs. The lantern goes dark, leaving me alone with the stormy sky above. My forehead is sweaty, and my cheeks are burning up. I cover my eyes with my hands, digging my fingernails into my palms.

The ferryman extends a hand, my entire body is shaking, like I might just break. I clench one hand around my stomach, attempting to hold myself together. I grasp the ferryman’s hand, staring up at the cracked folds of his waterstained clothes, the cold veins of his hands, and the worn soles of his brown boots. His hand feels like the sea, like cool wisps of air, cradling my hand in mist. The wind

I close my eyes and imagine the waves from back home, wild and reckless, pounding against the cliff, I feel warmth at the thought of home, blooming from my chest and spreading to the tips of my toes. My face softens and my fingers unclench, as my breathing begins to steady. The lantern comes alive, a bright ray of light shining into my eyes. The ferryman silently gestures for me to continue.

“Me and my sister, and we’d borrow the old man’s boat to go whale-watching. This old man lived in this shack on the beach. When we were little, we were convinced he was a merman, and when the moon was full, he’d swim into the sea. He was real nice. He let us use his tiny boat, rickety and old from the hardships of the past. On the nice days, we’d go out to sea, and watch the whales, and on the bad days, we’d sit on the front porch, rain pelting on our heads, filling up our boots to the ankles. We’d do cartwheels on the street when the rain cleared up.”

“How old is your sister?”

“She’s fourteen now, but she’s just a little kid in my eyes. I’ve practically been raising her since she was a baby. My real parents aren’t around much, but she’s gonna be just fine.”

I pause. “I wish I had more time, y’know? If I knew I’d be gone at seventeen, maybe I would’ve done things differently.”

“How was school?”

“Well, I mean I wasn’t the best student, but I got good enough grades to get by. I wasn’t going to go to university anyways, ‘cause I was gonna get a job after graduation. I wanted to buy some real nice things for my family.”

I sigh and look down at my knees. “I miss them a bunch.”

The ferryman's washed-out eyes seemed to be almost all-knowing. His face was blank but seemed to be almost nostalgic, in a way. “You kind of remind me of myself, in a way. Before I died.”

I gasp. “You used to be alive?”

“ I used to have an old life, but I remember nothing. I’ve been here for a very, very long time. My job is to help people come to peace with themselves so that they can live up in the sky. As we cross the bridge between the living and the dead, I like to hear their stories, to replace my own I have long forgotten.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to go yet.”

The ferryman pulls a couple of sheets of paper from his pocket. They're origami paper, dotted with fluorescent patterns of pink and red, with flowers blooming on the surface. "Something that helped me when I first came here was folding paper cranes. You can write a message on the paper, fold it up, and send it into the sky. The message will arrive to a person of the living, through their dreams, for any last words you've wanted to say."

I pick out two sheets of paper. A white sheet, with bright yellow daffodils that shine like the sun for Grandma and Grandpa, and a red sheet with soft pink chrysanthemums for my sister. The ferryman hands me a pen, as I try to think of what to say for my final goodbyes.

Dear Grandma and Grandpa, How are you doing? I hope you guys are doing okay after my death. Just know that I think I'm in a better place right now, and you don't have to worry about me anymore. I'm so grateful for everything you've done for me, and in the seventeen years I've lived, it's been the best life I could've ever wished for. I wish we could've had more time together, and it's so tough to let you go. Take care of yourselves. I love you.

Dear Lorie, I hope you're doing okay. Please don't worry about me. I promise I'm in a better place now. You're so grown-up now, You'll be fine without me. You will always be my little sister in my heart, and I want you to promise me to never give up on your dreams. I love you to the world and beyond.

It feels kind of bittersweet to let go because it feels like I'm giving up on seeing them again. I'm glad I got to say goodbye.

"Do you know how to fold a paper crane? The ferryman asks beside me.

"Yes, but I haven't made one in a long time."

"Let me show you."

In about fifteen minutes, I was able to fold my letters into tiny paper cranes, sitting in the gentle cradle of my palms.

"How will we get them into the sky?"

"It's quite easy, just hold them in the palms of your hands and throw them into the air, as you would a baby dove."

I toss the baby birds lightly in the air, and I could feel the flutter of paper wings flying on the tips of my fingers. As the paper cranes began to lift into the sky, words left unsaid floated among the clouds, and I watched in childlike wonder as the paper cranes flew off into the fog.

The ferryman chuckles at my disbelief. "And here comes the whales."

I hear the sound of home ringing in my ears, swelling inside my chest. I look up at the grey clouds above, and the sky shatters, breaking apart to reveal the sun, stinging my eyes. The clouds clear up to reveal the clearest blue I've ever seen. It shines, glimmers, and gleams in a way I can't even describe. The entire world seems to shine with a million rays of light, like the clouds have never covered up the sky a day in its life. No matter what happens, I'll be happy to go, knowing I've seen the most beautiful sight in the world.

"It's beautiful."

"It sure is."

The whales croon happily, swirling in my vision, Except, they're in the sky. Not the sea. They flip playfully through the air, flying like there isn't a care in the world. They ripple through the sky effortlessly, like they've been doing this their whole lives. The flutter of fins swirling across the sky, streaking the canvas of the sky with shades of dark blue. They bring the smell of the ocean with them, the smell of salt filling my lungs. The sun radiates beams of light into the water, blinding my eyes. Their calls are filled with joy, as they call to one another from across the bright blue skies.

Who knew that death could be so beautiful?

I'm broken out of my trance by the voice of the ferryman. "Are we ready to go?"

“Um, can I make one last request?” I sheepishly ask.

“Why of course.”

“Um, well it might not be possible, but after what I’ve seen it seems like anything is possible. Can we see my sister one last time?”

The sky begins to blur like a watercolour painting, revealing an image of my sister, dressed in all black. She’s at my funeral. She lays some flowers to rest on my grave, before saying one last goodbye.

“I miss you.” She whispers as I head off into the whale-soaked sky.