

Waikato Institute of Technology, New Zealand

Gail Pittaway

Interislander

Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, Media, Drama and Storytelling in the School of Media Arts at Wintec, Hamilton in New Zealand. She has had both creative work and academic papers published, and has co-edited journal special issues, conference proceedings and a book of academic essays. She is one of the co-editors of *Meniscus: International Journal of Creative Writing* and is a regular reviewer of books for Radio New Zealand's *Nine to Noon* programme and a drama critic for *Theatreview* website. She is currently writing a food memoir for a doctoral thesis, enrolled at Central Queensland University.

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Creative writing – Poetry – Death – *Pyschopomp* mythology

Interislander *

Be ready to pay the Ferryman –
The cost is higher these days;
he'll take credit
old pennies won't cut it –
but there's no going between islands without it.

Best to embark on foot;
you won't need your car at the other end,
but you'll miss the drive up the heavy steel ramp;
the crew in their heavy suede gloves steering you
about the turning circle, as you shunt
around the parking deck
and nose in –
each park a harbour, a bay.

No, instead, walk up the hot gangway
Through the glass covered tunnel,
Avoiding the heels of the folk ahead.
No-one, you notice, has luggage.
A dozen stairs, then you're on board
and there's no going back.

In the jostling you worry about security
then remember you don't have a bag;
all you had was the means to pay, not yet taken
and there's no sign of the Ferryman yet.
Perhaps he's on the radio
Checking the weather, taking soundings?
Making the passage right.

So you go on the aft deck to look behind at the city
already dwindling to flat pack blocks and plastic towers.
Avoiding a funnel, weird tubes and pipes, places you can't enter,
you find a piece of rail to hang over and watch
the wharf cranes semaphore to the music of the spheres
as, with hardly a lurch, the ferry pulls out
and you are suddenly inter-island

Ahead, as yet invisible, the other shore,
the island which you are inter;
As over the Tannoy loudspeaker
the Ferryman
welcomes you
aboard.

* This is the name of the ferry between the North Island and South Island of New Zealand

Research statement

Research background

The Ferryman (sometimes named Charon) is a figure from Greco-Roman mythology cited in Aristophanes and Virgil and later in Dante. He is depicted as a surly, often hooded figure, who must be paid a fee of one *obol*, the coin which was placed under the tongue of the deceased. This practice developed into one of placing coins over the eyes of the dead and was continued in some western communities until at least the twentieth century. A *psychopomp* is a guide for the dead, a figure which occurs in several traditions and mythologies. However, Charon is a lowly form of such, being only a ferryman, a worker steering the passage of the souls from one shore, across the River Styx to the other side, the shore of Hades. Without this payment, the passage is refused and souls are left stranded.

Research contribution

This poem employs literary devices of allusion, association and pun to locate the commonplace concept of death as a journey in a geographical setting; a ferry ride between two islands. The poem attributes ancient motifs to contemporary life and revisits the idea of Charon as a worker, in order to acknowledge the ordinariness of the passage to death. The literary devices relate this poem to a tradition of poems about death, even as the intention is to remove the traditional association of grief and fear. To ‘inter’ is to bury, and the poem employs a grammatical pun on the official name of the regular ferry between the North and South Islands of New Zealand, where ‘inter’ operates both as a prefix meaning ‘between’ and as an active verb.

Research significance

Using the allegorical idea of the journey in this poem links the everyday to the mythological. This poem is the product of scholarship and craft, and is published in a collection of academic writings.

Works cited

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