

Stitching Sky to Sea

By Bethany Lee

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An interstitial guide to the connections
between the sailing memoir, *Close to the Surface*
and the poetry of Bethany Lee

One day, several years ago, I pressed “send” on the first full draft of what would eventually, after many more rewrites and edits, become *Close to the Surface: a family journey at sea*.

The next morning, I cleared the living room carpet of extraneous cats and dealt out a full deck of poetry, each piece printed on its own sheet of white copy paper.

I had promised several friends that I wouldn't turn in another book of poetry before I finished the memoir but I had a folder full of pieces just waiting to be assembled into a collection. Oh, and I also had a contract and a deadline.

After another day or two of looking for places the pieces seemed to want to connect, the structure started to click together.

This part of the process feels like putting beads on a necklace, like planning a set of music for a concert.. There's not one *right* way to order a poetry collection but there are many, many wrong ways, sequences that heighten the dissonance between the poems or turn certain pieces into hurdles for the reader. When I order a collection, my hope is to arrange them like music in a way that highlights the unique nature of each piece within the beauty of the whole.

Some poets may know from the start, even before they write their first word, what themes they plan to tackle in any given book. Not me. I simply write, as often as possible, as authentically as possible, and trust—if my work has me in common, it will connect with itself, too.

So far, each of my collections has waited until the last minute to sort itself into sections and this time was no

different. As I gathered and ordered the pieces, thoughts of my sea journey still felt present in the room.

I worried that it was just the echoes of the memoir influencing the poetry book. And then, yielding to the confluence, I wondered if that was really such a terrible thing.

Not every poem in *Coracle* is inspired by the sea. And there are other themes and threads to trace in it and in my other collections

But when my editor suggested this project, saying that she as a reader would love it, I knew she was right and I thought you would love it too.

In the following pages, I'll do my best to map the connections between these books and point you to the intersections I know about. Maybe you'll find a few I missed!

The title to this guide, "Stitching Sky to Sea," is taken from a song, the first song I wrote after a years-long songwriting hiatus. Now that the memoir is out of my hands and into yours, I'm hoping to do some musical recording but you can find a rough rendition of this piece on my youtube page.

The second verse includes those words which were inspired by my memory of the way the horizon sometimes looks perforated, needle-punched, as if a great seamstress is always and forever mending our world back together.

Take a walk with me
The sun is setting slow, stitching sky to sea
In the cooling sand, a fire is kindled low
Won't you take my hand?
Could I ask for more but a moment and a stone
To lay an altar for an offering of these hallelujahs

Coracle

Today is not a day
for questions
Even my thoughts
are still, held like holy water
in the bowl of my skull
balanced above the furnace,
the bellows, and the fire
On balance I think
I have had
more happy moments
than sad, more
joy than sorrow
but damn if you can't sleep
through contentment,
spend half a life
awake only to the pain
I write to build
a boat for all of it—
thwarts of days,
ribs to bridge the night,
shims and steps
for mast and helm,
and, drawn over the form,
the caul that sets it floating
Every evening I beach my craft
loose the frame
and let it come to rest
By morning, the skin
takes a tug to refit
sometimes a patch or two
Not a day comes
when I don't have to stretch
to contain all my life
asks me to carry

The Coracle and the Copper Bell takes its title from two poems in the collection, the opening and the closing piece.

The first poem, *Coracle*, is another expression of my intention, from chapter seven in *Close to the Surface* (p 86), “...this is incarnating the intention to live *wide awake*” even though it takes all the stretching I can manage to carry what comes along.

I initially chose the word, “caul,” for its meaning as a membrane, a skin that stretches to carry and protect.

But the first time I read this poem aloud, I heard my own voice say, “...the *call* that sets it floating,” and I fell into the space that poetry creates, where there is room for surprises, for layers, for more than one thing to be true at a time.

The closing piece of *The Coracle and the Copper Bell* is called *May the Practice Continue* (p 143) and it ends with the realization that only comes after practicing a long, slow intention of staying awake to one’s own life. *Close to the Surface* is part of my story of living that intention.

You don’t notice the patina gathering
and then one day
it seems like the copper bell
has been green forever

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The Courage to Go First

For Michele

Twice I have been through a tunnel with you
We floated through one in a boat once
borne up by a rush of swell salty as a womb
narrowly missing the rocks on the other side

You were there as well
the day my child came through their passage
out into the world of breath
where there is no escape from stony catastrophes

And now, both of us fragile, a little more broken
we have picked our way through the concrete hollow
under the cape that bisects the shoreline
You set your feet carefully on the rolling jasper
and I followed, watching for the strength beneath your
choices

I have been following you a long time now
through dark places into the light
though you would say
you are making a path, not a pattern
finding your own way and falling
healing and moving on
and yet you can't help but leave wisdom behind you
hanging in the air like perfume

I want to be there for many more transits together
and the day you go through the tunnel alone
I have a feeling you will leave us laughing

This poem is tender, close to my heart, partly because it's impossible to put into words the admiration and gratitude I feel for Michele, my mother-in-law. But also the first stanza always makes me laugh.

The whole story (my side of the story, at least) is in *Close to the Surface* (p 239) and I hope those who read it go on the wild ride with us, through the tunnel in the rocks to the reef on the other side, laughing along at the unexpected delight and the making of a new family memory.

The second tunnel mentioned is at the Oregon coast, where one day on a family trip, I followed Michele through again. Since that first trip through the tunnel at sea, we had each walked through the recovery of a broken ankle and braved the fear of falling that comes after pain.

So that day, I watched where she stepped and followed, sometimes choosing the same firm ground, sometimes opting for another foothold if it seemed the rocks were wobbly. I couldn't help but notice how often I do that in my everyday life as well, listening to her wisdom and finding my way nearby.

I hope you have someone as wise and kind and courageous inspiring you on your own paths.

It was a night like this, from p 105 in my first poetry collection, *The Breath Between*, is one of the snapshots not listed in chapter twenty four of *Close to the Surface*. I'm glad I wrote about it elsewhere, though. That night with our friend Ryan in Chacala was stunning, a night to savor.

Polaris Abandoned

The north star has fallen
It's still there, in the sky
but we've tilted away
and it's no longer a reliable guide

We're wobbling between polestars
and everyone believes
they know which to trust
No one wants to admit we're adrift

The north star has fallen
I'm afraid to tell the passengers
They think it's the navigator's job
to get us all back home again
I don't want to be the one to say
there's no going back

This is the sort of news
messengers get shot for
and I know exactly how fast
I'd sink if they tossed me over

It seems to be a bad time
to be setting off on a voyage
with all these unpredictable suns
circling the night sky
but now is the only time we've got
and we can't stay here

The north star has fallen
but that's okay
We're heading south

Early in the memoir, in chapter one (p 23) I shared about an exchange with a family member who wanted to know our itinerary for the trip. Because of the uncertainties of the sailing life, we had more of an orientation than an itinerary. This was unnerving to her and I tried to express that it was unnerving to me as well but the way it had to be. To stay safe, we had to get comfortable with uncertainty.

In chapter twenty-one of *Close to the Surface*, I share the account of seeing the Southern Cross for the first time. After years of tracking the night sky by the Big Dipper and the North Star, which, as the poem alludes to, has shifted in the past and will one day shift again, it seemed almost impossible to adjust my orientation.

Since our return, I have heard so many people talking about personal or societal disillusionment. I know many who have felt like dependable systems or structures were no longer steady. Those of us protected by racial or gender privilege may have felt especially disoriented in the last few years as we have faced deeply embedded inequities that more marginalized people have been aware of for a lifetime.

I hope that as a society, we are learning to listen to different voices and follow different stars, eyes open to the ways we may have been headed in the wrong direction, hearts open to the hope of navigating our way to a better world together.

Impulse

I didn't have a desert handy
to follow in the footsteps
of Moses and the mystics

So I began to learn to walk on water
against the flood at the river's mouth
into the salt and wild

If the surface of the water
is where the Spirit moves
that's where I want to be, too
out where the sea is always
turning into sky

If you go
if you stay there long enough
the things of the deep may break through
reveal themselves for a moment
before returning to the source

I cannot remain in company
with wonders from beneath
caught as I am
in the air below the stars

But I want to be in attendance
when they rise

Impulse is the source of the epigraph for chapter ten of the memoir, where “wonders from beneath” rose to meet me at the surface.

I talk in several places in *Close to the Surface* (p 38 and 319, at least, maybe more) about not knowing for sure why I wanted to go to sea. Even after we returned and all through the memoir-writing process, I kept asking myself that question and trying over and over to find the words to express my growing understanding of the answer.

I think I may be wondering about this for the rest of my life. But *Impulse* and *A Few of the Reasons Why* are both attempts to explain—to myself most of all—why I went to sea and they help me remember to live out those intentions still.

An Account of Complexities and Uncertainties, With Openings (p 84 in *The Coracle and the Copper Bell*) mentions a lot of heartache and includes the image of passing around sliced peaches as a nod to the ways we each can offer our small, invaluable gifts to each other.

It’s probably more romantic to imagine fresh peaches in the orchard but when I wrote, I was picturing the peaches from the deep storage locker on *LiLo*, (p 115 in *Close to the Surface*) and how we would open a can and share them around. Without refrigeration aboard, there was no way to save them for later.

Eat the peaches together, friends. Eat the peaches now.

A Few of the Reasons Why

Out of the face of the deep the world begins.

~Rev . Dr. Angela Yarber

Because I wanted to find out

Because I wanted to spend a little more
time floating in a saltwater womb

Because I wanted to know
if I could survive a storm

I tried not wanting
It seemed easier
I kept wanting

Because I wanted to see the moon set
again and again into the west
over the crest of the sea

Because I wanted to commune
with the spirit of the wind
hovering over the waters

I don't know
how much of this I knew
before I left and what
was only clear after returning

But now that I know the power
of having the courage
to become from desire
I will never be satisfied

I will live in the wanting

Uncharted

If I had the choice
would I pay the price?
The life I have now
for the one I lost to get here?

I doubt I would have braved the trade
if offered the exchange

For the sea one must sail
from one life to the other
is treacherous and deadly
and no one makes it across unmarred

Shipwrecked, though—set adrift
only one choice was given
to row against the tide
toward a shattered shore
or to set out through the storm
on an uncharted course
with faith the world is round
and the stars to guide me home

I wrote this poem, which includes the epigraph for chapter thirty-one in *Close to the Surface*, years after our return from the ocean when another sea change moment took me, unwillingly, from one season of my life into the terrifying in-between space of grief.

It was helpful to have the experience of the sea journey in my thoughts—in my very bones—as I wrote this, reminding me that I would someday love my life again, maybe even, although it was hard to imagine, befriend the very loss that set me on a new path.

The Gathering

You can't always see a storm coming
But at some point it arrives
A hint on the horizon
A change in the pressure
The wind rising
And rising again

You don't want to wait too long
To shorten your sails
You get down and stay low
You do what you have to do
To get through
You do what you can
To stay kind

The storm doesn't come
Carrying a schedule
"I'll be gone by morning"
And once you're in the dark
You can't tell where the cloud bank ends
And where the light begins

At some point you will have done
Everything there is to do
And the only thing left
Is to wait the wind out
Let the waves roll over
Shudder to the surface again

It's an uncertain
Underwater journey
You're not doing courage wrong
If it doesn't feel brave

This poem was one of my first attempts at writing about the storms we encountered on our trip, specifically the storm I wrote about in chapter fifteen of *Close to the Surface*, titled, *If It Doesn't Get Any Worse*.

Like so many life experiences, a storm at sea is just about impossible to describe to those who haven't been through it and unnecessary to describe to those who have.

I told a friend once that I considered just writing "BIG WIND AND WAVES!" in size 48 font on every page for five or ten pages and leaving it at that.

They said, "Oh, I would read the heck out of that book!"

I did end up finding a few more words to say about the storm for the memoir. But only after finding my way to these words, which serve as the epigraph for chapter twenty and which have accompanied me through many scary/brave moments since:

*You're not doing courage wrong
If it doesn't feel brave*

There's a story at the end of chapter nineteen in *Close to the Surface* about the very first night I ever spent at sea (p 207). The poem, *West of West* (p 73 from the poetry collection *The Breath Between*), makes an attempt to tell pieces of the same story.

I mean...if you get to sing with the dolphins while sailing through bioluminescence in the Pacific Ocean, I think you're allowed to talk about it more than once.

The Darkest Point in Our View

I.

You walk on the high side
You sleep on the walls
This is what balance looks like today
You hold on with your toes
and both hands
sometimes with your teeth
You don't feel strong
or grounded
You don't feel okay
You eat anything you can keep down
You endure whatever comes up
You have thoughts you don't want
You have fear
You wish you could run away
You don't know what to do with the fact
you will never be this young again
You just want to be safe
and for it to be over
You may not recognize yourself
beyond the horizon
The storm erodes your marrow
You went expecting to return but
you are discovering
along with all who have left
there is no way back
only beyond

II.

If I'd started out by saying
this was going to be about the moon
what image would have jumped to mind?
Would there have risen in your thoughts
a bright full globe
the sort the cow jumps over?
A flashing at twilight—
brief, slivered arc?
The moon nearly full
pregnant, tumescent?
A perfect hemi-
sphere?

Look again
See the shape
of what is not
illuminated
This too is part
of the beauty
Attend to the scar
in the flawless sky
the darkest point
in our view of the past
This too is part of the wholeness

From this poem came the epigraph for chapter thirteen. It's another try at talking about the stormy days both at sea and in my everyday life. It's another try at reminding myself that the dark spot in the sky is also a part of the moon, and that the places in my own life where I can't see what's happening are not only still part of me— part of my growth and unfurling—but are part of my beauty, too.

Deciding Again

You can decide to be a mystic if you want
They fart, too
Don't think that disqualifies you

All it takes is paying attention to the mystery
as often as possible for as long as you get
Boom—there you are

But here's the deal
I don't want you to say no one warned you
So listen up

There's no off switch
Once you start loving everything
you can't stop

But you can burn like the bush that was not consumed
You can break wide open like an apricot stone
You can shine like the sea reflecting the stars

Crocuses will blossom
from the wounded bulb of your heart
Blossom and die back and grow quiet and leaf again
It will hurt every time

You will no longer know any other way to live
but porous, tender, awake to your own fear
and loving anyway

Over and over, you will get lost and return home
until one day you begin to make a home in being lost
You will no longer know any other way to live

If you're not ready for your birthright today, that's
okay

You can decide again in the morning
All there ever is to being a mystic
is deciding again in the morning

One day, I was talking to a friend of mine and somehow we got on the topic of the practice of paying attention to the mystery, the practice of loving the world. I used the word "mysticism" to describe this way of living and at one point he said something like, "I know what you mean but I think most people will not. You might not want to say 'mystic' quite so often."

So because I have a deeply-buried vein of stubbornness, I went home and wrote this poem about being a mystic.

This was one of those times when I let my soul guide the pen, my wisest self saying what the rest of me needed to hear. And the penultimate stanza also found a place as an epigraph for chapter thirty-four.

Beyond navigating, weather forecasting, sail trimming, provisioning, and all the other abilities I honed on the trip, a steady calm in the face of uncertainty might be the most useful skill I brought home from the sea. I am grateful for all the times we got lost and found our way and for the active practice of making a home in that state of uncertainty.

It's never easy. I keep practicing every day.

To Keep Faith

Trust your bones
Trust the pull of the earth
And the earth itself
Trust the hearts of trees
The stone at the edge of the sea
And all else true

Trust that water will bear you up
Trust the moon to keep faith
With ebb and flow
Trust the leafing
The chrysalis, the seed
And every other way
Death gives birth to resurrection

(Epigraph from *Close to the Surface*, chapter
nineteen)

Other poems with memoir or seafaring connections

From *The Breath Between*
p 49 How to Navigate at Night (p 59 in *Close to the
Surface*)

From *The Coracle and the Copper Bell*
p 16 Casting Off
p 18 In Early Spring, Embarking
p 20 Becoming (epigraph for chapter 26)
p 38 The Best We Can Imagine Together
p 39 Supplicant of the Swift Water
p 55 The First Beyond
p 86 Tasting it Fresh (p 357 in the memoir)
p 133 Of Skin and Soul (The geese mentioned here
were a specific flock that flew overhead at our home port
of St Helens, OR. And yes, I counted them.)

Gumboots, Mostly, a poem about chitons and other wonders, is from *The Coracle and the Copper Bell*, (p 41). As I wrote it, I watched in surprise as two seemingly-separated strands of writing wove themselves into one thread.

If you don't know anything about chitons, go look them up before reading any further. They are wild-looking creatures and fantastically interesting. We have seen them on the Oregon coast as well as at Isla Isabel (p 224).

I don't know what prompted me to research them and write about the ways they have developed the ability to see through their skin. I do know that I never get tired of reading or writing poems that blend science with soul.

I think the ocean will probably always be working its way into my writing, no matter the genre. I want to leave you with a few words from another piece of music inspired by my time on the surface of the water.

Almost and Already Home

In the night, in the floating
Out to sea on the foam
In the flight past the terrors
You are almost and already home

Like the high-wheeling shorebirds
Who abide where they're blown
You are held in the falling
You are almost and already home

Let the wide winds of freedom
Take you past all you've known
May your heart keep repeating
You are almost and already home