Northwest Coastal Poetry of Place

The often rugged coastlines of the Pacific Northwest create many places decidedly "Northwest" in flavor, and visiting coastal places is part of the experience of living here. Some say coastal areas are "the last wilderness." As "edges" between sea and land, tidal zones offer homes to as much as forty percent of all living organisms. And beaches attract people for recreation, for relaxation, for spiritual renewal, and for escape from routine. They are places of transformation in our lives, just as they are continually transforming themselves through tides, storms, erosion, accretion, and even the occasional shipwreck.

Northwest coastal places offer rich opportunities for poetry. However, some knowledge of the place is necessary for a poem to skirt cliché, and certain approaches are more rewarding than others.

Perhaps one of the most effective approaches is showing people engaged in activities characteristic of coastal places or dependent upon the particular coastal landscape. The recreational activities typically engaged in along coasts are almost limitless—body-surfing, boogie-boarding, fishing, clamming, crabbing, hang-gliding, sandcastle-building, birding, and whale-watching, to name a few. Coastal resident David Campiche lets a kayaking excursion provide the skeletal structure of his "Bone White":

> Small gray kayak on bronze sea
> Dark angry sky and four miles from shore
> Sand Island ahead, just above flood tide
> Beckoning hand from a world away
>
> Printed in the sand
> Pale bare feet
> Tell a story as I pass
> Tide will cover them

Walking on the edge of the salt meadow
Canada goose catapults from tall thick grass
Settles two dozen yards away
Honking pulse bleating like the shiny plastic timer in my
kitchen

Goose with a mother's cry won't go away
Won't leave me be
And I spin like a compass needle back to the spot
Where naturally, her nest lays

Slurry of mud and down and four bone-white eggs
I turn and scurry up the beach
Not wanting to endanger the lair
But before I've retreated 100 yards

Eagle's shadow is upon the nest

Four long miles across choppy sea
Royal and sea-green now as the sky breaks open
Hard weather somersaulting like my thoughts
Small kayak caught in the lee of storm

Weeping cry of mother goose.

The kayaking unifies the poem, from line one, when we see that it's a "Small gray kayak," through the second-to-the-last line, when we are presented with "Small kayak caught in the lee of storm." The kayak's journey beginning under a "Dark angry sky" and ending (in the poem at least) "as the sky breaks open / Hard weather somersaulting" parallels the Canada goose's experience of recognizing a danger to her eggs as she honks and bleats at the speaker of the poem, followed by the implied breaking-open of the eggs after the "Eagle's shadow is upon the nest." The speaker's kayaking experiences reinforce the meaning of the Canada goose's experiences.

Campiche tells his story through images from the landscape, even coaching us on how to read the poem when he says that his "Pale bare

feet / Tell a story as I pass." We are then given the goose's "catapulting" from tall thick grass, her honking, without any reason given, and then the narrator's discovery of the "Slurry of mud and down" with "four bone-white eggs," and his "scurrying" up the beach away from the nest, and then the "Eagle's shadow . . . upon the nest." We understand the drama unfolding before us almost entirely through the images.

Of course, the speaker must understand what he is observing, and know the habits of the birds he's observing. "Local knowledge" is essential to such "poetry of place"—to be able to name and identify "Sand Island," "flood tide," "salt meadow," and "eagle," and make sense of the birds' behavior. There's a world of difference between what might be called "tourist poetry of place," which describes a place new to the speaker, often with no more point than to express awe and reverence, and this more authentic poetry, which sees connections, uses exact terminology, and makes sense of what's being observed.

The five main metaphors, too, all drawn from the human world, clarify and emphasize the more important actions of the poem. At the opening, Sand Island is "Beckoning" like a hand, which helps explain the motivation for the speaker to land there. The Canada goose "catapults" from the grass suggesting a fight, if not outright warfare. The metaphor of the goose's "Honking pulse bleating like the shiny plastic timer in my kitchen" conveys the irritating insistence of the goose's noise and emphasizes its importance. The most striking metaphor of the poem, the narrator's spinning "like a compass needle" back to where the nest lies, presents a physical image that indicates the speaker's sudden understanding of what's going on. And then we're back to the sky "somersaulting like my thoughts," which suggests a pretty intense storm both on the water and in the speaker's guilty thoughts. Hand, catapult, plastic kitchen timer, compass needle, and somersault bring into our understanding some characteristic activities of a particular place uninhabited by humans.

Contributors to past issues of *Windfall* have centered coastal poems on birding (Shelley Kirk-Rudeen's "Birding the Coast," with a "fly-off at 6 a.m."), flying kites (Judy Todd's "Flying Kites with Hallie at

Long Beach"), and whale-watching (Mario Milosevic's "Early January Migration," in which a "mushroom of breath" sprouts on the back of a surfacing whale). What else do we do at the coast? What hasn't been written about?

In our afterword of the last issue we discussed "workplace" poetry of place, and there are few locales with as many "workplace" activities suitable for poetry as a coastal region. Virginia Corrie-Cozart's "Prosper Tanka" gives us an overview of the sort of economic activities that have engaged Northwest coastal residents in the past:

> Salmon cannery,
> Store and post office once hung
> Over Coquille mudflats.
> Fishermen mended gill nets.
> A shipyard flourished for years.

The nature of commercial fishing has changed drastically over the past fifty years, with the dozens of Northwest canneries that once operated along the coast now for the most part long closed, fishing seasons and catch limits more restricted, and shipyards less flourishing. The history of a place is part of its present, though, and a place can be understood only with a sense of its past kept in mind. In the poems of *Dismantling the Hills* Michael McGriff captures the sense of a changing coastal economy as he writes of Coos Bay. In "Seasons Between Night and Day," for instance, we begin to understand the human cost of the changes:

> My mother sleeps. Somewhere between her and the stars,
> my father and hundreds of other men
> punch out of Georgia Pacific's sawmill forever,
> the forklifts behind them at half-mast,
> other machines chained to barges
> with Japanese names
> before the workers file out from the alien yard.

After “men dismantled the mills / plank by plank, smothered eternal fires / and left only one hushed smokestack, / its shadow drinking the pond’s oily water,” the kinds of jobs change (“When the Spirit Comes to Him as the Voice of Morning Light”). McGriff presents a view of the coast not likely to be found on postcards:

> This father and daughter
>   sell wood by the cord
> in an empty lot
>   by the nickel plant.
> They sell rugs
>   that hang like cured skins.
> Wolves, dream catchers,
>   rebel flags. They sell
> bumper stickers
>   and used fishing poles.
> They buy mushrooms
>   and they sell mushrooms.
> They sell butterfly knives.
>
> —from “Buying and Selling”

How else has the coastal economy changed? Susan Peterson Parker writes of a different kind of work along the coast in her “Rockaway”:

> I’ve got a job cleaning weeklies
> Coast side of 99
> For a friend of my aunt’s
> And I’m thinking of going back to Portland
> Over my second beer in this local tavern.

The growing tourism industry may be replacing some of the traditional work of more extracting industries such as logging and fishing, but there are also still many landscape-based jobs waiting for poems. The coastal Pacific Northwest produces a significant proportion of the world’s cranberries, with cranberry bogs in the Lower Fraser Valley and on Vancouver Island, Whatcom County, Grayland, the Long

Beach Peninsula, and Coos and Curry counties. Commercial crabbing for Dungeness crab is strong along the coast. The oyster industry has dominated some areas such as Willapa Bay and engages many people in Puget Sound, on Vancouver Island, and along Hood Canal and the Oregon and Washington coasts. There are still ship-building and repair, charter boat operations, logging, and other economic activities typical of the coast. It is often by engaging in work that we develop a relationship with a place, coming to know it and its characteristics, inhabitants, and temperaments.

Besides centering on characteristic activities, a second useful approach to writing of coastal places is to incorporate the point of view of a child. Around the time she was writing *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson published a short essay entitled "Help Your Child to Wonder" (reprinted in book form as *The Sense of Wonder),* in which she encourages parents to take their children into nature while their world is still "fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement." For children, learning how to feel is more important than learning facts about nature, Carson says, because the desire for more knowledge will grow from the "sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love" developed from the sensory impressions of nature during childhood. Carson hopes for every child a sense of wonder "so indestructible that it would last throughout life as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength." For such dynamic natural areas as along the Pacific Northwest coast, it's particularly rewarding (for both child and poet-adult) to see the world alongside a child, or to interact with children as they encounter the world afresh, or even to recall childhood impressions.

The speaker of William Stafford's "With Kit, Age 7, at the Beach" experiences the beach much like his seven-year-old as they climb "the highest dune" and see the waves "leapfrog" as they come "straight out of the storm." The two talk about the landscape in front of them, the child understanding it in terms of human interaction:

That was an absolute vista.
Those waves raced far, and cold.

"How far could you swim, Daddy,
in such a storm?"
"As far as was needed," I said,
and as I talked, I swam.

The father's response contains two meanings, the literal assertion of swimming ability, and a more figurative reassurance that he will be able to meet whatever needs his children might have no matter how stormy their lives. The landscape becomes an occasion to address a childhood worry.

In another father-daughter poem set at the coast, "River, Tide, Tree," Seattle poet C. R. Manley presents his ten-year-old daughter's creating an artwork:

Her canvas today
is a gray, sodden log stranded on a gray beach.
From a tide pool at her feet she scoops wet sand
gleaming with the dark mineral grains the sea rips
from the basalt headland.
She pats the sand into place,
covering the log as if with new bark. And then,
dragging two fingers along its length, she draws
a river's twisted meanders.

The speaker's daughter is engaged in the world of sensory impressions which Carson reminds us is the gateway to the wonder and awe of childhood, feeling "the sand's gritty wetness," seeing the patterns, hearing "the steady drip of water through ferns." Her emotions are engaged as well: "With our day half over, / my daughter's joy is in the rhythm of this smooth, sinuous shape / she has drawn," the speaker says. The poem is a testament to children's ability to live in the totally absorbing sensory world of the present, and an inducement to the rest of us to return there.

Sometimes recalling a bit of childhood spent at the beach provides a metaphor for understanding something larger, as in Dell Hymes' "Remembering Lewis & Clark." The speaker describes spending a summer at Seaside, Oregon, with his mother while his father was in the Oregon National Guard and coming upon the memorial to Lewis and Clark's boiling "bits of the Pacific" to extract salt. Inexplicably, then, he takes a memento:

> No one around, I scrambled past the fence,
> 	then out, a handful of sand
> tucked in my pocket—as if it had been theirs.
> 	Where now, I do not know.
> But I can inhabit that boy, curious,
> 	alone,
> reaching out for some bits of an unknown world.

Hymes as an adult can still "inhabit" the boy that he was, "curious, / alone, / reaching out for some bits of an unknown world." The act of reaching out for a handful of sand many decades earlier parallels the speaker's reaching out to understand the "unknown world" now, as well as paralleling Lewis and Clark's reaching across the continent to collect "bits" of the unknown landscape.

Perhaps the most accessible approach to writing about coastal places is an observation-and-meditation approach. Robert Frost employs the method in one of his most reprinted poems, "Neither Out Far nor In Deep." Frost (despite New England associations, a San Francisco native, we might recall) observes how people orient themselves when they decide to spend time on a beach:

> The people along the sand
> All turn and look one way.
> They turn their back on the land.
> They look at the sea all day.

Frost spends three of his four quatrains presenting what he's observing—the people facing the sea, a ship raising its hull, the wet

sand reflecting a gull. In part of the third stanza and in all of his fourth stanza, he delivers his meditation: Wherever the truth may be, people only look to the ocean, not to the land, and "They cannot look out far. / They cannot look in deep." But they keep looking where it's not likely that they will find any "truth." His pondering of people's facing the ocean on the beach leads to a surprising conclusion (about "truth") that springs from reflection upon the scene.

At *Windfall* we get many poems that accurately present an observation, but without any meditation upon the observation. The poem is often a very accurate snapshot of what's been looked at, but nothing is done with it; there seems to be no point in having described the scene. Or, there is often another kind of problem: the thinking about the scene has led to an obvious or trite thought.

The observation-followed-by-meditation approach requires an informed look, with access to an accurate vocabulary for the phenomena being observed. In "West Nile at Cannon Beach," Ursula Le Guin observes "Crow on broken tree, cawing," and "a meaningless mineral noise from the ocean." Then the speaker analyzes the crow's cawing: It's "not the characteristic indignant / croak, or the rattle they make when they're courting." The speaker obviously knows more about crows than simply what's in front of her, and continues about them:

> Anthracite-shining, solid of body,
> firm on the ground, heavy aloft.
> Sociable creatures, gossipy. Excellent parents.
> Crows do not migrate. Crows hang around.

Then the meditation starts making connections: Unlike crows, humans migrate across oceans like the one hissing in the background, and that migrating is what has brought the West Nile virus from Egypt. And then a sobering thought of the aftermath of West Nile: The oceans crashed and hissed "ages before anyone cawed, anyone courted," and they will continue to "after we've all gone back into silence / and nobody answers. Never a word." With West Nile virus in mind, we are reminded of our mortality through the sound-image of the ocean's

future hissing and crashing in the absence of spoken words. What might have been a humdrum scene of crow and ocean has become a stealth meditation upon geologic time, human propensity to travel, contemporary epidemics, and the extinction of humanity.

In "Bayocean Spit" Ce Rosenow directs our attention to the past as she observes the coastline where the resort city of Bayocean once stood. The city's history moves fast, from the beginning of resort development in 1906 to the last house falling into the ocean in 1960. Without the poem's sense of the past, we'd have little more than the "rafts of pintails" floating far out on the water and the herons that "stand like thin posts in the muddy flats." The historic background gives the final lines more substantial meaning: "receding tide— / grains of sand / pulled back to sea." We understand it's not just grains of sand that get pulled out to sea.

Sometimes the questions we might ask about a particular coastal place are answered by the details of the place, as in Amy Minato's "At Blacklock Point." As the "we" of the poem scatter ashes into a high cliff waterfall, suggesting an emotionally intense experience, a hummingbird appears among the monkeyflower and red columbine. "How far have you come," the speaker asks, "And with what wisdom?" The speaker immediately realizes that the hummingbird has already given the answer: "Those drumming wings" and "slice of scarlet" at its throat. At a ceremony apparently commemorating someone's death, one element of the nature of the place has given the speaker a comforting answer, wordless as it may be.

Through the poem Minato has given a bit more significance to Blacklock Point than it had before the poem was written and published. As this issue of *Windfall* goes to press, Blacklock Point—a cape within the Floras Lake State Natural Area along the Oregon coast north of Cape Blanco—is suddenly in the news: As a solution to the county's economic woes, Curry County officials have proposed to acquire from Oregon State Parks 627 acres of the Floras Lake Natural Area adjacent to Blacklock Point for private development companies to build two "world-class golf courses," along with an airport terminal,

an interpretive center, and paved walking trails. One of the results of writing about particular places is that the landscapes become imbued with what Washington Irving calls "storied and poetical association." Such "storied landscapes" tend to increase in perceived value. Minato has in a small way struck a blow for protecting the environs of Blacklock Point as a place for hummingbirds and monkeyflower rather than divots and pesticides.

Observing people who have made themselves part of the coast is another route to a poem of place. Robert Scott's "The Storm Walkers" describes a woman who "liked to go out storm-walking":

> What she knew, was born and raised in:
> storms she could recognize by a drop in pressure,
> her body sensing it like a living barometer
> while she would read the warmth of breezes
> which nature sent from off wild sea waters.

In the depiction of someone who seems to be thoroughly attuned to the landscape, we learn not only about coastal weather but also about the relationships some coastal residents have established with the landscape. The woman's father, too, was a "South Slough man. A man of salt and sea." And the speaker, in anticipating the death of the woman, who we learn is his mother, shows he is tied to landscape in a similar way, telling us "I will keep on going without her, / continuing our walks through gray storms of my own."

In writing about coastal places, we might ask how we relate to the landscapes, and why in those ways. What is happening to the coast now, with increased storm intensity, and rising ocean levels? What is the coast revealing now—which may be hidden in a few minutes or months? As places of constant transformation, coastal landscapes offer never-ending sources of poems.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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