

En Route to Togiak

by Moe Bowstern

Much of the time I've spent as deckhand, I've been on a leash of some kind. On a small boat, there's little that irritates a skipper more than seeing crew sprawled in the galley reading a book or writing poetry when any number of things could be cleaned, sorted, piled, stacked, scrubbed, polished, sharpened, repaired, or seized in decorative knot work. We were to be working, or asleep. Even standing at the rail we were expected to be observing horizons with keen eyes.

We were looking for fish, of course, but also anything that might offer a clue to better fishing. Tide rips might hide streams of swimming silver, or a deadhead—a tree or other timber so waterlogged it bobs vertically in the water, where a stray wave could punch a lethal hole in our hull. Tenders running fish to the cannery might signal heavy fishing. We were required to spy on other boats. What were they doing? Where were they going? Why was there a North end boat on the East side? How big was the bag of fish they just hauled aboard?

All this looking of course done without notebook or any other recording technology outside my writer's brain. At the time, I resented it. I stared mulishly over the waves, my city brain desperate to fill itself with chatter. I eventually learned to see. Nowadays, 30 years later, my friends remark on my excellent eyesight—I who can't read a stop sign without my glasses—because while traveling 65 miles an hour, I still catch the flick of an osprey over the highway.

Fishing trained my brain to know a speck in the waves as fish, piling, or murrelet; to smell the difference between estuary, river, and sea water; to discern a land breeze from an ocean wind. Fishing taught me patience and also how to sink into a dream. The rhythm on board was good for letter writing; during the winter months of crab season I wrote letters every morning on the hour-and-a-half commute to the grounds over the icy blue waves before I chopped frozen sardines into bait with a dull hatchet.

I sang a lot on the boat, made a lot of art, and wrote long letters back home to my friends. We didn't have a lot of free time, so it was precious; I would work all day composing letters and thinking about my friends, then when I got a free moment I would scribble notes.

I went herring fishing for a few years; in 1996 our little boat made the long trip from Kodiak Island to Togiak Bay, across the Shelikof Strait, through Unimak Pass and across the eastern edge of the Bering Sea. We drove for 24 hours, stopped in the Shumagin Islands for fuel, drove another 24 hours to the herring grounds. We each took two-hour watches; with four of us on the boat, I had long, lovely periods of time to gaze out at the sea while the engines roared on, powering us forward.

Traveling on a boat and keeping watch took us out of the usual calendar time. We stayed up all night in the little community of Sand Point where we stopped for fuel, enjoying the novelty of walking on roads. I found a phone booth; at 5 a.m. it was 9 a.m. where my mother lived, and it happened to be Mother's Day. While I spoke with her on the phone, a pair of young martens came out to play on the wooden dock where I stood; I remember describing their bright eyes to her. I

wrote this poem as a postcard to my parents, wrote it down in one of my special waterproof notebooks and then sent it from the post office.

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West Bering Sea, 1996

Venus hangs low and bright in the fading dark of the spring Alaska sky.
The Big Dipper, one of the few constellations to punch through the atmosphere,
 swings directly above the mast, ten boat lengths up.
The beautiful weather of this crossing has fallen me in love again with the sea.
It is a sweet, sweet romance; this time
she leads and I follow
in full awareness of my enchantment.
I wash my shirts in the sink
and dream, at night, of walking.

—Moe Bowstern

Moe Bowstern is editor of Xtra Tuf, a zine chronicling the experiences and adventures of commercial fisher folk in Alaska and beyond since 1996. She has performed annually at the FisherPoets Gathering since it began in 1998. She has appeared at the Sea Music Festival in Mystic, Connecticut; the Working Waterfront Festival in New Bedford, Massachusetts; the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada; and Tony's Bar, "Kodiak's Biggest Navigational Hazard," in Kodiak, Alaska, among other places. Xtra Tuf #5: The Strike Issue won the 2007 Lilla Jewel Award. Moe has worked on fishing boats since 1986, when as a miserable 18-year-old boat cook she once inadvertently threatened the lives of the crew by serving pasta tossed with shards of glass. She has fished salmon, halibut, herring, tanner crab, and cod in Alaska; shad on the Hudson River; shrimp in Miami; and mackerel, crab, and lobster in the Moray Firth of Scotland.