

Beautiful Night: Drifting Amongst the Stars

Nonfiction by Anisa Gonzalez

The moon rises overhead each night, casting its illuminating streams of soothing white light over the world, brightening the sea in its darkest hour, highlighting the stars dancing through the sky. It pulls at the ocean, calling the waves into its fluorescent embrace like a siren's song. Then, like snapping a rubber band, it pushes them away in a mercurial waltz. Without the moon, the ocean's theatrical rise and fall with each swell, each high and low tide, wouldn't be as exhilarating.

I like to think the ocean repays this courtesy by holding itself up like a mirror to the sky, reflecting the moon's elegant beauty back towards it. Almost as though the sea is replying to that siren's call with a song of its own. Luring the light towards it with whispered words of gratitude, the harmonies of land and sea enacting a symphony in the midnight air.

"It's such a beautiful night. I'm so glad we did this!"

I turned toward Addie and smiled, nodding in agreement. My eyes picked up on the sudden shift in the water, narrowing in on where the wall of the next wave was starting to build again. Quickly, I threw myself around, lying flat against the grit on my board, and kicked away from the incoming tide. My arms pulled vigorously, propelling my body forward, slicing through the chopiness with ease. My muscles tensed, contracting tightly as I hauled myself upright just as the wave reached its peak. Then, with feet firmly planted, I dropped down into its open grasp.

Spurred on by Addie's gleeful cheering, I turned the nose of my board upwards, the tail end whipping against the curl. Water licked at the rounds of my cheeks, salt stinging in my eyes, but my lips pulled back in a delighted grin. Gliding across the breaking tides flooded me with bliss, the adrenaline pumping into my bloodstream. As I crouched deeper into my stance, I couldn't help but think of how far I'd come.

The summer I turned thirteen, I fought in the darkest, deepest parts of the ocean and my mind. The sea had been an unyielding and uncompromising force. I was hurtled head-first into its slumbering den, awakening the unpredictable, magnificent beast that lay within. It challenged my tenacity and resilience; my loneliness and

self-depravity engulfed me. Anger and aggravation polluted my happiness and diminished my self-esteem. I felt submerged in my inadequacy. Endless hours filled with exhaustion and tears of frustration were dedicated to honing my skills; the broiling heat of the sun overhead marred my skin with a sizzling bright red as a commemoration of my persistence.

It took months for me to feel like I had earned a place in the line. The acceptance, the feeling of *home* that I hadn't felt anywhere but in the water was unmatched. I waded and crawled through the sand to push myself beyond the limitations I'd set on myself. The morning tide reinforced my durability and strength, reminding me that I'm capable of only what I fight to achieve.

A year had passed since that day I felt accomplished. My best friend Addie – more like a sister – and I had a solidified routine. Her dad, David, had become a mentor and father-figure to me. I was welcomed over any time. Every Friday, I would race home, grab an overnight bag, and bike to Addie's house. I was over there so often that I began to store my boards there. It felt like I had two families, two homes. My parents and siblings didn't share the same love of the water as me. Addie and David understood that part of me.

Addie's dad was always supportive and motivating; I can attribute my love of surfing and the reason I experience the love of the water to him. On the day I was prepared to throw in the towel, his comforting words of encouragement demanded I get off the sand and back on my board. Failure wasn't an option, and I wasn't done fighting. He was strict, though, laying out the rules of surfing under his supervision firmly. His normally bright, shining blue eyes turned dark with seriousness and his bearded jawline was taut.

We'd broken just about every rule in the last year. We pushed ourselves too hard, attempted things too far out of our reach and paid the price for it. It always ended with an intense lecture and scolding. There was one rule, though, that was absolute in David's eyes. Breaking it would mean there'd be hell to pay.

No night surfing.

David never, ever yielded to this rule. Despite how much

we'd begged. Despite how much we pleaded on our hands and knees, he never gave in. We had been inspired by Bethany Hamilton's movie, *Soul Surfer*. The scene when she and her friends had gone night surfing intrigued us. And, like the inspired ignorant teenagers we were, wanted to emulate it. David refused.

Of course, we did what teenagers did in this situation.

Planned to sneak out and do it anyway.

It took us some weeks to grow the conviction and assuredness that, yes, we were going to do this. Disobeying David felt wrong, to dismiss his trust didn't settle with me. But the urge to buck against authority and prove we could night surf successfully justified the risks. Plus, what David didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

We completely ignored logic. We dismissed the pitch-black night sky that awaited us, disregarding the encasing darkness that left no trace of light. Forgot about the aquatic life lurking just under the swell of the water, what poisonous jellyfish or lurking predators seeking a hearty meal might be lingering right under our boards. All we cared about was getting out into the moonlight and riding the murky waves.

We had done it. We gathered our wits and boards and dove fearlessly into the obsidian-inked ocean. Giggling carelessly as we glided across the surface, fingers slicing through the current as we paddled out over and over with reckless abandon.

“Oh my god,” Addie laughed heartily as I paddled next to her. “That was freaking insane.”

“It's colder at night,” I shivered, sitting upright on my board as I made it back to the line. “Makes me miss the sun.”

“No way,” Addie said, shaking her head. “It's empty; it's quiet. I could get used to this.”

I hummed nonchalantly in response, adjusting my position on my board. The dark-green paint blended in with the shadowiness of the water, and it looked like I was floating on the mere strength of the current. I could barely see the outline of my long, tanned legs right in front of me, my hands disappeared the second they were submerged.

“How much longer do you wanna stay out here?” I asked, craning my head backward toward the starlight overhead.

“I could live out here,” she replied, mirroring my tilted position, and sighing serenely through her nostrils. I followed suit, swallowing the salty sea air and circulating it through

my lungs. My lips and nose felt dry and cracked, the salinity stripping the moisture from them. My fingers felt leathery, swollen with overhydration.

“Who are you, the little mermaid?” I scoffed.

“Aye, don't hate Ariel like that. Girl had mad talent *and* bagged a hottie. I will take the compliment.”

I didn't have a comeback – because she made her damn points – so I settled for childishly flicking water at her instead.

“But to answer your question,” Addie continued, “I think we should probably head back after catching a few more. I'll go first!”

Addie was more advanced than me, executing tricks I wasn't confident I could successfully maneuver yet. She had the grace and poise of someone who'd been doing it her whole life, carrying so much more experience in her form than me. But she never made the difference in our skills an issue. She always rode at whatever pace I felt comfortable with, never dared me beyond what I could handle and instructed me on areas I could improve.

“Oh my god, this is great,” she squealed, swimming back toward me. “Your turn!”

I smiled at her before kicking away from a newly forming wave just starting to rise in the distance. In a practiced motion, I laid flat and rowed myself, each tug pushed my endurance. We had already been out here for at least an hour, and I was starting to feel sluggishness weighing down my movements.

Looking back, I credit what happened next to my overconfidence. My over-eagerness and impatience disregarded that as much as I felt at home here, this was the ocean's territory. The ocean governed her seas with an iron fist. I shouldn't have forgotten that my place here was a privilege afforded to me by the hospitality of the seas.

So, when I went to stand, assured that I had placed myself in the perfect position, I felt the water under my board abruptly snap in the opposite direction. I didn't have time to be shocked. I didn't have time to scream or abandon the ride. My footing faltered; my ankles rolled over on themselves as my board was ripped from beneath my feet.

A loud, resonating *crack!* shattered the placid night air. The impact sent shockwaves of excruciating pain racing down from the back of my neck to the tips of my toes. I was submerged within seconds, being dragged into the torrential tug of the waves.

This normally wouldn't bother me. Surfers get accustomed to near-death by drowning more than what's considered socially acceptable. I was a national and state-ranked swimmer and member of the dive team. I'd trained to hold my breath way before I ever took up riding the ocean's billowing surfs.

But this was different. My board jerked violently to the side, thrashing me along with it. It felt like I was being slammed into a brick wall underwater, unable to escape the tenacity of the current. A sinking realization hit: an undercurrent. *Not good.*

My hands reached for my ankles, the panic releasing precious oxygen from my lungs. I gasped, gulping a mouthful of seawater. I knew I needed to release my board and head to the surface, to swim diagonally against the shore until I was greeted with the sweet, secure embrace of sand. I could replace the board; I'm not sure modern medicine was advanced enough to replace brain activity just yet.

I felt weightless; my body was at the mercy of the tide, floating perilously within the current's domineering grip. As I began to sink deeper into the darkness of the ocean – my fatigued frame descending further into the pitch-black abyss below me – a sudden tranquility overcame me. My lungs were no longer burning and seizing, clenching in despair as they cried out for oxygen. My nostrils flared in defiance, instinctively and desperately seeking the warm night air that lay just above my fingertips.

I could feel the anguished howl of my heart thrashing fervently in my chest, almost as though it was hopelessly trying to break free of the bone prison it was encased in. The rhythmic beating pounded fearfully with a shuddering breath, the sound echoing in my head and screaming mutedly through my waterlogged eardrums. Through my salt-seared retinas, my line of sight blurring and blackening with each second the depths welcomed me under, I gazed up.

For a moment – a split second where I felt suspended, unleashed from the corporeal world – I felt peace. *Silence.* Beautiful, blackened silence. It was me, the water, and nothing else. It was an eerie, cold tranquility. I reached for the surface, grasping at the emptiness enclosing on me. My eyes opened to the world under the swells.

The frothing impact of the waves curling over each other,

folding against the sharp horizon melted into wispy, fluffy clouds overhead. Glistening shades of vibrant cerulean and caliginous teal interwoven through delicately painted streaks of pearl white. Long, billowing tendrils of seaweed pirouetted gracefully along the nebulous edges of oceanic skyline. Streaks of the moon's radiant light broke through, splattering orbs of milky white across the inky ocean sky.

A galaxy of stars under the waves.



Aurora, Photograph by Jacky Karwáthová

Then, like the snapping band of the moon's pull, my leg was yanked viciously in the opposite direction of the current. My mind echoed an internal scream at the blunt, aching pain that shot through the skin and penetrated muscle. Suddenly, like being sucked into a blackhole, my body was pulled upwards. The light was approaching too quickly, too harshly. Water sloshed hazardously over my face, forcing my eyes shut.

Erupting from beneath the surface with a screaming gasp, something hard slammed into my ribcage, forcing a choked, startled cough from my washed-up lungs. I could hear my name being yelled, but my flooded ear canals had yet to be relieved and my vision wasn't much better.

Frantic hands gripped on the tender underside of my forearm, lifting me onto something solid and floating next to me. "Get the fuck on!!"

Meekly, I gripped at whatever it was, limply folding overtop. We were moving then, each splash punctuated by me spitting up water. My vision started to clear, realizing

the raft propping me up was a slim green board covered in drawings of sea turtles. I clung to it like a newborn babe clings to its mother; releasing a trembling, whimpering breath.

Addie helped drag my defeated body to the comfort of solid ground. I immediately flung myself into the sand, knees colliding with clotted sand. My hands laid flat as I lurched forward, spitting up a blazing mixture of acid and saltwater. The convulsions that wrecked my body weren't like anything I'd ever felt, and I could feel the sting of the ocean's pride shuddering down my spine and rattling my bones. I felt *humbled*.

"Holy shit," Addie exhaled sharply, eyes wide. We were both breathing hard, chests rising and falling aggressively as oxygen forced its way back into our lungs. Once I was confident that I had expelled the remaining liquid in my chest, I laid myself flat, my back pillowed by the damped sand beneath me. I struggled to steady my racing heart and anxiety ridden hands.

Addie laid down next to me, lacing our fingers together. The sound of the waves crashing against the shoreline danced in the air as the panic began to subside.

"I won't lie..." Addie said. "I totally thought a shark got you and was ready to haul ass to shore."

A bark of laughter escaped my lips.

"Damn, the loyalty just flew out the window, didn't it?" I cackled, laughing as the burning in my nose faded.

"I love you, okay? But if shark-y got a hold of you, what am I supposed to do for you? Could you imagine my five-foot-two ass trying to convince a six-foot shark to let you go? You want me to die with you? Are we Romeo and Juliet? I think you'd want me to live," she said, proudly.

"Yeah, yeah," I chuckled lowly. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, traitor."

"This is harassment." There's a beat of silence. "In all seriousness, though, thank God you're okay. I was terrified, dude. If I didn't die with you, Dad would've killed me."

"I think we should probably head back," I muttered. "The near-death drowning has humbled me for tonight; I'd like to go to bed."

"Yeah, you're right," Addison agreed. "Are you alright to get up? Here, let me help you."

I felt okay but accepted her outstretched hand anyway. As she hauled me to my feet and began collecting our towels and sandals, I peered out over the black skyline. It

looked so different up here. The images underwater played over and over in my mind, piquing my curiosity and intrigue. How could something so beautiful on the inside look so ominous and foreboding on the outside?

We made it back a little after two o'clock in the morning. We snuck past David snoring egregiously in the living room. He'd always been a heavy sleeper. He'd slept through a hurricane before, so stealthily making our way back through the house without alerting Addie's dad of our departure was effortless.

We quickly settled in Addie's room. I tossed on an old, stained tee-shirt and sleep shorts. I crawled into the queen bed next to Addie, sinking contently into the feathery pillows and warm blankets. My hair felt disgustingly matted despite the quick rinse at the beach, but that would be tomorrow's problem. The fatigue and weariness of the night's events were starting to rest in my bones.

Addie and I made a secret vow to take the events of that night to our graves. We locked pinkies so tight it felt like my blood flow was cut off. And while I promised to never speak of it again, I never promised to forget the memory of it.

My mind was lost in the gallows of the seabed. That world that I was given a fleeting glimpse into; the privilege of experiencing something that was like nothing I'd ever felt before. I couldn't discredit that it may have been panic, an adrenaline induced hallucination as my brain labored to find fresh air. But something like that, a feeling like that, doesn't vanish. It builds, it swelters, and it overflows.

The next day, sitting in the line under the burning bright sunlight, sweat and saltwater mixing in a medley of adventure, I dove deep. I rode my board down as far as it would take me, my eyes searching and yearning. The water was so clear, so blue and warm. I could feel the heat of starlight flickering at the shore.

Diving under the sea, playing in the cerulean waters that awaited just below me, I discovered a piece of an expedition I had yet to take. A world of unmistakable beauty fluttering under my feet and with every paddle out, I was determined to explore this unexplainable dream. It became an inside joke amongst my friends soon after. If you ever wanted to find me on the surf, just look down.

That's where you'd find me.

Drifting amongst the stars.