

ANN LOFQUIST

Otter Point II, 2011
Oil on Canvas, 8½ in x 13 in.



courtesy: Winfield Gallery

STEVEN HADDOCK

The Other Jellyfish

Surfers run toward the water and walk away from it. The sea beckons them, and only grudgingly do they slip from its grasp after “just one more” wave.

Bounding out the front door on a hot summer day, I could feel the sap rise in my veins and a giddy feeling overtake me. It wasn’t just the knowledge that I would soon be at the shore; an atavistic liberation was taking place inside.

On land I was, as my names implies, a fish out of water. When summer came around, my body would flip-flop breathlessly back toward the waves, toward the hypnotic rhythm of sand, sea, salt, splash, sand, sea, salt, splash. Home at night I would feel the prickly tautness of salt-encrusted skin, sand from every crevice and follicle coating the sheets while I sought the cool side of the pillow.

Most days I just carried bus fare and a backpack with my towel, book, mask, and fins. Some days my friend and I would haul our scuba tanks, wetsuits, and weightbelts to the bus stop and board, avoiding the bemused or annoyed stares of the passengers whose toes we trampled. My mom didn’t just tolerate these activities but encouraged them, helping me get scuba certified before my fourteenth birthday.

I would leave behind the crowded, rumbling city bus and head toward my true habitat at the sea. As I hiked down the narrow stairway leading to the sandy crescent of my cove, I would hear the waves breaking, and I felt as though I could judge the temperature of the water by the crispness of its sound. I would plunge in openmouthed, gliding just above the ripples in the sand, and be cleansed. At the time, I didn’t know about the 30 million bacteria and 300 million viruses I was ingesting with each mouthful, but I was cleansed nonetheless, free, and connected to the animals living within.

I had no real-world problems. My teenage solitude vanished in the company of the beach and a book. I still have some of those books, their pages stained with sunscreen. As I read, I became the languishing youth in Albert Camus’ *Summer in Algiers*, admiring the “cool-limbed girls” in the North African port; Churchill sparring with Stalin in Paul Johnson’s *Modern Times*; the explorers of mysterious islands in the novels of Jules Verne; or a “baitman” being dangled under a Venusian sea in Roger Zelazny’s *The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth*—years later I would reenact that scene hundreds of times during blue-water dives in the open ocean.