KATHERYN HOLT

Deep Blue, 2019
Mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48 in

COURTESY DESTA GALLERY

JOANNA KADISH

Ice Dunking

Confronting my fear of sharks

Unable to move, struck by a sudden jolt of fear, I stood as still as a tree stump, taking deep breaths of the hyperoxygenated air on an Alaskan beach below Anchorage not long after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. I couldn't get enough of the wild, sweet smell, breathing so deeply of it I became light-headed. Hovering above me in the deep-blue bowl of a sky that crackled with star-filled light, a dark smudge: a bald eagle's wings poised flat as a board, spreading into a seemingly effortless glide. Around me all sides were rimmed by cold metallic mountains of a bluish-green cast, glittery and snowcapped, dense with hybrid spruce, birch, and alder running to the waterline. Trenches between mountains glittered with ice where active glaciers and ice fields flowed to meet Kachemak Bay.

Southern Alaskan waters looked ominous, a dark purple, with a lot of ripples and crosscurrents, hit by fractal wobbling coins of sunlight, blinding me so I had to avert my eyes. Mark refrained from charging into the water like a wild dog released from captivity, something he might have done in the waters off Hawaii or the Caribbean.

He went in slowly. "Balmy," he said.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire."

"I heated it up for you."

Having swum all my life, practically since the time I could walk, I knew I could do this, I had never felt stronger or more capable, but it doesn't matter how often I dunk myself in ice water, each time I feel trepidation. By August, the air temperature off the coast of southern Alaska dips from an average high of sixty-eight degrees, down to sixty. The water stays roughly the same, midfifties through September, about the same temperature as Bodega Bay, an hour and half north of San Francisco, due to the ocean current moving up the coast bringing warmth northward for a few months.

I immediately began to shiver. It wasn't just the cold I feared.

I brushed aside the things that could go wrong—a sudden squall, losing a fin—instead I focused on the things I had to do well to make it through. Better not to think overly much about the dangers. Mark worried about sharks with all the seals around. I thought it weird that he was voicing what I was thinking. I would never dream of being the one to bring it up to a man's attention, not unless

there was immediate and pressing danger—I didn't grow up with nine brothers for nothing. As a child, I had to show ingenuity and resilience; if I cried, I was hounded unmercifully, same with my brothers. My father never singled me out for special treatment. My mother did, but I invariably flouted her wishes and joined my brothers' rough games. But I also liked flowery dresses. I was a bit of a cross-dresser in that respect.

My hesitation must have showed on my face. Mark asked me if I wanted to back out. Part of me loved the edgy kind of exercise where any misstep could end in my death. Sometimes I questioned how far I could take it, usually when right on the edge, at the point I had to take a plunge and I had to acknowledge the perversity of my actions. There was no going back.

My tremor turned to nausea. I had to ask myself for the umpteenth time why I was doing this crazy thing, wrestling my decision like an addict with her favorite drug.

After all, I was fit from lifting weights three times a week, swimming every day to strengthen my lungs, and whittled by a paleo diet. Definitely not the kind of food a shark would like. Although the best cold-water swimmers have a lot of body fat, neither of us had much insulation on our bodies, one of the reasons we didn't attempt this swim in January.

The whole idea of swimming in August was to leave wetsuits behind, without worries about the nerve damage that can occur with prolonged immersion in frigid water. And whatever the time of year, there're always sharks. And unless we attracted one with a fetish for spandex, or had a wetsuit that repelled sharks—and so far there aren't any—we were better off traveling without.

Wetsuits chafe the underarm and neck, isolating the swimmer from the water, although they confer a speed advantage of up to four seconds per hundred meters. We weren't racing, though I didn't want to wear something that slowed me down.

I told Mark I would hate myself if I didn't do it.

That morning, I settled on a Speedo technical swimsuit said to reduce drag, a neoprene cap, and short-blade fins to amp my speed, oiled my body up, and adjusted my goggles. I finished by submerging my face and blowing bubbles, hoping to alleviate the icy shock, making me gasp. The blood rushes like an SOS from the extremities to warm the brain, heart, liver, and kidney. I love how our bodies know what to do to keep us alive. My energy was adapting and changing, and I wasn't backing down, despite the tremors in my gut. We had a support boat, relieving some of my anxiety.

Way beyond the shore, I forgot sharks for a minute and took advantage of the tide pushing me along the craggy cliffs toward the horizon line, using it to guide me. Instead of avoiding the tides and currents, I wanted to use them to access remote places. To accomplish this, I used a *dolphin kick* technique perfected by Michael Phelps, a combination of vertical and underwater kicking that allowed him to dominate the world swimming scene for the better part of a decade. When done at top speed, it brings humans a step closer to our ocean-bound kin, a seemingly perfect symbiosis of power and grace. This motion allowed me to achieve a singular feeling of utter bliss, half mermaid and half eel.

Coming up for air, I spied glistening brown fur on a couple of serpentine-shaped otters, noses in the air and flipper-feet pointed up. Every now and then they barked ear-splitting sounds. Seals played nearby, and in the distance a humpback whale sliced out of the blue-black water, spraying wide like a garden hose, mitigating the shock of water in parts so frigid ice stuck to my eyelashes, and yet magically it seemed my discomfort was assuaged by the euphoria that flooded my entire being, and my ice cream headache receded. I knew the seals might attract sharks and I needed to keep an eye out, but sharks are super fast; if one decided to attack, I couldn't outrun it. I'd have to face it down and that thought gave me the jitters.

My quest to swim with sharks started when I met Mark. Having surfed and dived Caribbean waters long before he met me, he talked this up as something we had to do, recalling his encounters with sharks with the kind of reverence with which mountain climbers regard Mount Everest. On a trip to New York, we visited captive sharks up close at the New York Aquarium in Coney Island. At the time, they struck me as best to avoid, and I expressed a similar revulsion for snakes and spiders.

Mark called them magnificent and inquisitive and pooh-poohed my fears, saying that seeing one would prove as thrilling as when we had swum with pods of dolphins on several occasions. He regaled me with stories of their beauty, describing a special sort of energy flowing round them and the exhilaration he felt when a shark passed him by. I had never seen a shark without a barrier between us and wanted desperately to see one in the wild, although the possibility had me worried. The International Shark Attack File says that historically sharks don't like to feed on humans and that most attacks are simply due to mistaken identity. Even as I listened to the guide at the aquarium saying that sharks don't like to eat people because they have no blubber, I didn't quite believe him.

"You want to catch them on a good day is all, when they aren't hungry," the guide said with a smirk.

Mark said anyone who loves swimming as much as I do should learn a shark's body signals and not shy away from learning self-defense in the water. Particularly the signs of irritation in a shark: lowered pectoral fins, gaping jaw, zigzag motion, and arched back; and among shark defense maneuvers, how to dress (nothing shiny) and being respectful of the big fishes' space, it's their territory after all.

It's basic common sense. Anyone who enters the ocean should know this stuff.

People have lost limbs, and sometimes their lives, enduring a shark's exploratory bites. Sharks travel alone and have an average of three hundred teeth as sharp as knives, cutting through bone like paper. The odds are stacked against their prey; some sharks have fifteen rows of teeth in each jaw, while the bull shark has fifty rows of teeth in total. But, even so, it's possible for victims to deflect the aggressor.

Mark quelled my objections, saying, "At least they don't stalk their prey, despite what movies like *Jaws* would have you believe."

"I was at the beach the other day and heard a man yell, "Help! Shark! Help!"

"What did you do?'

"Nothing. I knew the shark wasn't going to help him."

I got him to laugh just as he promised to teach me how to outmaneuver any large fish that went after me. First off, he had me watch a video of a diver facing an oncoming shark that was obviously displaying signs of aggression. The diver inched upward, always facing the predator, each time jabbing at the shark coming at him in attack mode until it swam away. The posture I would have to take was decidedly aggressive and demanded I call on reserves I wasn't sure I had in my arsenal.

Mark's mantra: go for the nose, eyes, and gills. I thought: treachery abounds.

"I was attacked by a shark," he said.

"Did you punch him in the nose?" I asked.

"No, he just attacked me for no reason."

He was playing with me, but I was used to that with my brothers, they liked to kid around. I felt no inclination to play the victim and ask for special status as a woman. I knew advanced swimming techniques and told myself that if a dangerous situation presented itself, I would know what to do. Seals that fight back by attempting to injure one of the shark's eyes often escape. I reminded myself that the brave conquer their fear by learning about the things they fear and using their understanding to face things they're afraid of. It wasn't about pleasing Mark anymore. It was about being aware of what makes me vulnerable and being ready to face it. By talking to myself in this way, I found a measure of confidence.

But I didn't want to be foolish about it, and I successfully convinced Mark to bypass Australia, although I've heard the beaches are awesome. There are more deadly shark attacks in Australia, although more unprovoked attacks occur in the U.S. Wildlife experts have a pat explanation: of the twenty-six shark species identified as having bitten humans without provocation, twenty-two live around Australia. They say these attacks might be due to overfishing, the sharks driven by hunger to attack humans when they really would prefer a nice juicy seal.

I assured Mark I knew to be vigilant, my eyes scanning for sharks, ready to raise the alarm if need be, not relaxing my guard for one second. Eyes peeled for predators, lured by the rush of that perfect glassy wave, we swam the warm turquoise waters of Saint Lucia, the salt washing over limbs, eyes, and ears. Amid kisses from warming sunshine, we skimmed giddily euphoric on a liquid dance floor, though we stayed out of fishing areas and murky water, cover to the *orco*, a kind of monster found in ancient fairy tales that feeds on human flesh, and made a point of swimming or diving in clear water. I got to see sharks some distance away—ignoring us, which I was ecstatic about. Seeing sharks in the flesh gave me an endorphin rush, a sensation something akin to doing meth, the feeling akin to seeing a horror movie, with that anticipatory sense of narrowly averted danger.

But now I wanted to see one up close and personal, and I suggested we could indulge my fondness for cold-water swimming and at the same time run into lots of wildlife, not to mention sharks. There's something exhilarating that happens to the brain when swimming in pure, icy water, the kind of cold that lights the brain cells on fire. Part of the joy may come from the tightening of blood vessels, said by doctors to reduce inflammation and any pain that comes with it. One time in college, a few friends joined me skinny-dipping in hot springs adjacent to a freezing-cold pool in the Tahoe wilderness, jumping from one pool to the other in a dizzying two-step. After a few dips, the body can't distinguish between hot and cold, the nerve endings registering the extremes as the same, sending my spirits to the highest level possible without the aid of drugs, going with my desire to do things *au naturel*.

The kind of sharks we would likely see, the great whites, account for about one-half of all attacks on humans. Great whites are partially warm-blooded and can't stay motionless for long periods in the cold. They need occasional short bursts of speed in hunting to keep warm—it's a comforting thought that they have to keep moving and can't stalk their prey. (Generating their own heat allows them to see better and swim for long periods at high speeds.) If the potential dinner is too restive, the great white gives up easily (yay) and goes somewhere else. Hearing this made me feel good about our chances of surviving an encounter.

In Alaska and other northern coasts, there have been no unprovoked attacks for the past two hundred years, but that doesn't mean that one couldn't happen.

Right at that moment, I was chilled, even with fast swimming I knew my hands and feet would likely be numb when I got out. The number of times a person does this is not a predictor of the ease with which it can be done again, each time takes courage. Open-water swimmers deal with tides, chop, and wind, along with drastic variations in air and water temperature. Depending on currents and tide, a five-mile swim can become a fifteen-mile swim. Add sharks to the mix and you have a crazy stew.

I learned how to swim laps as a three-year-old in Southern California pools and found that I was a creature of the deep, more agile in the water than on land, loving the cool of the water zapping the lethargy of the desert sun out of my bones.

Growing up, I spent many summers bathing in alpine ponds and glacial rivers in Montana and British Columbia. But I also learned that, as seductive as water can be, it can also be terrifying. In one of my earliest memories—I don't know how old I was, perhaps four or five—my oldest brother pushed my head down before I could catch my breath numerous times. I kept gulping water, having tried unsuccessfully to spit it out when he let my head up for the briefness of seconds. I became light-headed and giddy, filled with a nameless terror. The inability to breathe was overwhelming. He let go when I was about to pass out and nearly asphyxiated.

But I still couldn't breathe, and I choked for a time before I got my breath back. The violence of the assault shattered my nerves. My throat felt flayed as if it had been cut into by the sting of a whip. My father yelled at him when he saw me choking and said he couldn't watch TV for a month, but that didn't change what happened to my psyche. I realized that my favorite activity had a dark side: water can be deadly. I could die if I was submerged long enough. And most shocking of all, I learned that it wouldn't always be true that someone would be there to save me.

While my breath struggled to return to normal, I scanned the beach. Everything was as it had been before. The earth continued its trip around the sun. Little kids ran into the water.

I almost died in that watery embrace, but I understood that water didn't bear a personal animus towards me. Water had been kind to me, buoying me up, allowing me to explore new frontiers; I believed in its magical ability to caress and heal. I was more afraid of my brother, so I stuck close to my other brothers. The beauty of buddying up with the bros, they also had to deal with the oldest sibling's bullying ways.

I continued to swim the ocean, having gained some understanding of the implicit dangers, where tides add a level of complexity not found in pools. There's the proliferation of life on a scale that seems otherworldly, like science fiction, but right under our noses. I've always been drawn to the life that is lived in the ocean, the origin of all life, the mover of kinetic energy, which, like the wind, takes on a circular motion as it transfers energy. And while we breathe air, if an air bubble gets into the bloodstream, it can cause respiratory failure, and we need water to carry nutrients to cells.

Out in the middle of the bay, I knew that a shark could come along at any point in my journey and end it all. There was no force field protecting me, and that gave me an Atlas-like strength, it was as if I had been transported onto the backs of dolphins.

I paid attention to body alignment and breathing, trying to stay calm, drawing all the oxygen I could haul into my nasal passages, my heart beating faster to pump more blood to my muscles, my cells working at maximum capacity to synthesize ATP. Working the larger muscles and elevating the heart rate burns more calories, generating internal heat.

My senses were in such a state of high alert, I felt like my eyes bugged out of my head. I was certain I looked like a cartoon character or space alien. But looks don't matter when you know a wrong move could result in death, and that sense of foreboding spurred me along. Likely there isn't an open-water swimmer alive who hasn't at some point thought, "What is underneath me right now?" I imagined a great monster of the deep rising up underneath to take me—*schwomp*—in one great bite.

It could happen on the calmest day.

Mark swam ahead; I followed in his wake. As if I wasn't already a nervous wreck, my agitation grew as I mulled over Mark's stories about meeting up with sharks, most notably, a bull shark, known for its nasty disposition, one of the most serious moments in his life, heart in throat, outmaneuvering this animal, mano a mano. Most of his encounters had been with hammerheads in Indo-Chinese seas that came close enough to touch and likely were simply curious, but he knew to move aggressively when one of them approached and didn't simply pass him by. He pushed hard on the animal's nose, as if to say in language the shark could understand: "Get away." The aggression paid off, the shark went elsewhere. But hammerheads have never been known to attack humans.

Michael Spalding, a marathon swimmer, sprang to mind. He has the dubious distinction of being the first living human known to have been attacked by a cookiecutter shark, which gored a three-inch-wide crater in his leg while he was swimming at night under floodlights along the thirty-mile channel between Maui and the Big Island, in the very waters I often swam. Squid, attracted by the lights, massed around him, forming a slow-moving bait ball.

But we weren't swimming in the dark under lights. Even so, I played it safe and concentrated on the flow that comes from the fluidity of the water and the rhythmic movement of the body. I started doing the freestyle, less efficient than Phelps's technique, for a change of pace. Mindful of the shape of the lifting arm, the fingertips dipping back in, and the paddling feet, I went into *pratyahara,* or sense withdrawal—the fifth element of yoga as described by the sage Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras*. I was also mindful that the shape of the hand can look like a fish to a shark.

A pod of orcas swam by, apparently oblivious to our presence. The pod was more interested in dislodging a seal that had found itself on an ice floe, a terrifying and fascinating spectacle. The killer whales went underneath the floe and pushed it upward, dislodging the web-footed, torpedo-shaped mammal, which then disappeared underwater for a brief time. Several times they did this, and each time, the seal flopped back onto the floe. This process kept being repeated, like a game.

Seeing the orcas, I tried to contain my excitement and worked to perfect my yoga breath, making every stroke and tilt as aerodynamic and dolphin-like as possible, no jolting or jarring but a steady, smooth rhythm, rolling with the underlying chop of the water, keeping my hyperattenuated eyes on the fish darting below, looking for sharks, knowing it was rarely possible to see them rising up—they're usually too fast, traveling up to forty miles per hour.

But something loco had entered my brain. Trying to control my breathing, I told myself not to worry, having never heard of orcas attacking humans. Orcas have big brains and aren't as easily fooled as sharks, which are not known for their intellect. And I was certain of my life-saving skills, particularly the tired-swimmer carry. As a child, I practiced every chance I got, using my brothers as stand-ins for panicked victims, intent on becoming the best lifesaver the world had ever seen. I learned how to outmaneuver their flailing arms and attack from the rear.

When I taught swimmers back in the day, I told them that even the most inexperienced need not worry about drowning in calm water if they have the strength to float, and yet I couldn't shake my sense of imminent death. It was then that I realized this special sense—something I should thank my brother for, the one that nearly killed me—is what drives me to do this thing. Why? I wanted to tease

this idea apart. Is it possible that I have a secret desire to finish what my brother started?

Regardless of what brought me there, I had to acknowledge that the only way to get out of my current predicament alive was to accept that death is possible, it happens to the best people.

There are plenty of swimmers who take on challenges knowing they might die in the process. In 1810, the English poet Lord Byron, who had a clubfoot but was a great swimmer, swam in the company of a friend who was a Royal Navy marine across the Hellespont, the narrow strait that separates Europe and the part of Asia that is now Turkey. Although the point at which the two men crossed was only a mile or so wide, the powerful currents that surged through the narrows forced them to swim nearly four miles before they eventually waded ashore. Lord Byron is said to have done it to honor the memory of Leander, the mythological Greek who swam these treacherous waters each night to meet up with his lover, Hero. I had no such claim, other than to stake my standing as an athlete, and so I boasted about my adventures to my brothers, with my boyfriend as witness.

The last five hundred yards I lost the breathing rhythm that I had worked so hard to achieve. It fell apart, pummeled by relentless waves and the movement of icy currents through the warm ones, and the difference was stark. The frigid water stabbed me with ten thousand needles. My skin pulled tight. My muscles stiffened. Guided by the silt from glaciers and other runoff, the icy grit, the coldest water I had ever been in, I saw where the currents sheared against each other. In contrast, the warmer currents felt like bathwater, but they were murky, turgid; nothing friendly about them.

Suddenly a huge gray wall appeared, darker on top and fading to light gray, like an ombré fabric, except it was covered with a matrix of tiny, hard structures shaped like curved, grooved teeth. I saw that all of the spines of the denticles pointed backward toward the tail. My nerves up my spine jittered like the hind legs of crickets. It dawned on me that I was looking at a living animal's skin. As I observed the animal in its preeminence, I could see movement in the gills. Then an enormous blunt nose nudged me, pushing me forward. My heart stopped for the briefest of seconds and my breath ceased. It hit me that this was a shark. I suspected I was as good as dead.

Right then an enormous eye came near, the cornea mostly black and the iris dark blue. Catching my breath, I gazed on what to me looked like the lidless eye of Sauron showing no fear just curiosity, totally surreal, an absurdity. Its amorphous presence plunged me into a horrible ecstasy. I recognized that the shark was merely curious and not there to attack, but I was afraid, and my driving impulse made me push hard on the eye, for I remembered this is what I needed to do if I felt imperiled.

What Melville said in *Moby Dick* about Stubb's ease in killing the whale flashed in my consciousness, although I had no plan to kill: "When close to the whale, in the very death-lock of the fight, he handled his unpitying lance coolly and off-handedly, as a whistling tinker his hammer. He would hum over his old rigadig tunes while flank and flank with the most exasperated monster. Long usage had, for this Stubb, converted the jaws of death into an easy chair."

Even then I didn't lose my cool; like Stubb, my mind retained a laser-sharp focus. I took care not to touch the beast the wrong way, and knew instantly that it would feel relatively smooth if I moved my hand from head to tail, but rough the other way. The shark pulled back from me as if I had applied an electric current to it. I lost my calm and moved as if I had been the one stung, getting the shakes as if I had palsy, unable to contain the violence of my bleating heart crying weakly, plaintively, and looking for succor where there was none.

Weird to see the animal move away in a rush of water, leaving chaos in its wake, and me choking, and crippled by emotional upheaval, wanting badly for the boat to come and rescue me. I couldn't take my eyes off the point—now just a turbulent eddy—where the animal had disappeared. It was up to me to gather my strength and move slowly, not too fast, moving as if I wasn't scared out of my skin. Looking for Mark and not seeing him, and thinking I was a wuss for wanting the boat.

An overacuteness of the senses possessed me; I fell into a parallel universe. Not gliding through the water or controlling my body movement very well; the cold was. My stomach seemed to hold only nauseating foam. I remembered how fluid my movements had been at one time. I tried to forget myself and bring myself back to that time, but my limbs refused to obey. I used to think it was a bad thing, that my mind and body were somehow disintegrated, believing that I should do more yoga.

But now I think it was beautiful how my body remembered to glide without making much movement, nothing to make the shark want to come back, moving like flotsam and jetsam with the tide. It took me a long time to understand that I would always come back, and there my body would be, waiting for me like a docked boat.

To be safe, unprotected immersion in water less than forty degrees must be kept to a maximum of five minutes. Any more than fifteen minutes and hypothermia will set in. I recalled learning that most people vasoconstrict to some degree, but then their capillaries dilate and their core temp rapidly drops, which leads to severe, possibly fatal, hypothermia. The dilation causes I'm-a-god–like judgment, along with organ failure and death. Only Lynne Cox, owner of fifty-seven major open-water records, has been able to swim for long in that kind of cold. Researchers still aren't completely sure what allows Cox's body to stave off that dilation phase, but after her dozens of cold-water swims, they know she can survive longer than most.

Thinking of Cox in that freezing water made my heart beat faster and my glide gave way to a choppy, frantic breaststroke.

Then I became a rag doll, pushed underwater so many times that I became disoriented, unable to tell which way was up. Had the violence of the current turned forceful, I would have exhausted myself trying to fight it. As it was, I couldn't surface for a while. Panic froze my synapses. In my despair, I believed I couldn't make it, and yet I launched into Phelps's movement, knowing I might simply be swimming to the bottom without knowing and, flailing around, run out of air. But I couldn't fault myself for doing this swim. My feeling is that everything, even walking across the street, could result in death, and especially in water, an element that humans are not naturally equipped to handle. When we are submerged long enough, we die.

What would it be like to die? My early experience with near suffocation was fraught with agony. Nor did I believe there was a painless way to lose consciousness without painkillers. But nobody has been able to say what it's really like, though Dylan Thomas promised: "And death shall have no dominion."

The idea of dying right then struck me as unreal and galvanized me to action. Suddenly, a reserve of energy was available to me, my energy boundless. I didn't know how this came to be, nor could I fathom the tiger heart that panted beneath me, but I respected its remorseless indifference and power. Right then, the shark was the least of my problems. I don't know how it was that I swam in the right direction; I could barely feel my legs or arms. But on my skin, my edges, there was a low hum. Could it be that Athena protected me, like the goddess did for Odysseus in his battle against the suitors? How else was I able to make the right choice? I saw the water grow lighter, from nearly black to a greenish purple, as I neared the surface where the sun penetrated. I resolved to make a sacrifice to Athena if I came out of this.

I popped up sucking up air. Mark appeared next to me, looking star-spangled. Everything seemed perforated with an inner light. I realized I could *be* in the moment, and yet hyperaware of existence and its precariousness. I was like a newborn child, looking at the world as if I had never seen it before. The realization at the forefront of my consciousness that all of this might have been snatched away in a twinkling bowled me over. I accepted how precious and tenuous my hold on life was. This state of being doesn't happen often, where everything takes on a new glow.

"I almost died," I blubbered, my throat raw. "Did you see the shark?"

Suddenly I thought I saw an undefinable shape turn into something else, and adrenaline flooded my body. I kept turning around to see if the shark had come back and was watching me, behind me, turning corners on its way back to me. My heart quickened, my breath deepened, my blood rushed into a vortex. I didn't notice any of these sensations separately, but instead I sensed my insides had been thrown into a centrifuge that was spinning wildly, becoming hot. My eyes welled with tears.

"What happened?" Mark said.

I recounted my story and listened to his encouraging words, saying I did the right thing, buoying me up and giving me the strength I needed. He let me draft off him until I could stagger onto the rocky shore a few feet from mossy forest at the mouth of China Poot Bay, 4.6 miles away from where we had started. I felt my spirits return and I poured myself back into my body again, edge to edge, feeling how

fleshy, how weighty I was, possessed of a heart and lungs, and muscles, but not much fat, all of it intact, thankfully not a shark's favorite meal.

It was roughly one o'clock. I coughed up seawater, my sinuses feeling as tattered as if scored by the sharp rocks underfoot. My legs moved like wet noodles, my limbs felt weak, and my edges seemingly melted into the rest of me, as if I were a big pudding.

I couldn't navigate the rocks or stay clear of driftwood. I lay crippled, wrapped in a big fluffy towel until sensation slowly came back to my feet as pins and needles replaced the numbness, and warm blood from my core spread to my skin and my feet and my hands. I shivered for a half hour or so, and yet through it all I felt an idiotic kind of joy. I had done something crazy and edgy, and survived. Cold-water swimming is decidedly an acquired taste, an adrenaline rush more addictive and exhilarating than anything I've ever done.

I didn't want to get into the boat and look for the orcas and the shark. Mark said I was lucky the shark only nudged me and didn't start biting right off. The animal likely would have leveled me with an exploratory bite if we had met up in the southern hemisphere where shark food is scarce. Listening to him, I couldn't move, my body housed a network of decisions that I had no control over; I was like the deer at the edge of the road, contemplating the unseen danger, as still as anything, powerless to move.

Then we went to Gore Point, one of the best beaches on the Kenai Peninsula to find treasures like sports-logoed fly swatters lost overboard cargo ships and mingled with seaweed and the incoming tide. We saw orange-and-black buoys dotting the black sand like giant horse pills, and the Japanese glass floats that are found in abundance around these parts. I stumbled on the perfect souvenir scattered among pieces of plastic foam and other assorted tsunami debris: a red fuel can with Japanese writing.

Post-Fukushima, scientists found high levels of radiation in California wine, and several bluefin tuna and sockeye salmon found near the United States and Canada carried traces of radioactive cesium, a substance not found in nature that can be directly traced to the Fukushima nuclear accident. Scientists say the levels are too low to worry about, but this underscores how intimately the ocean connects all of us.

The sea lions didn't seem to care about all that, stacking up on the sand on top of each other, basking in the weak, watery sun. The briny air carried their trumpeting voices, punctuated by the meowing sounds of seagulls mixing with the wind's whistle in a kind of loose-jointed orchestra, looking perfectly happy, radiation levels be dammed. Above them a bald eagle soared.

Mark came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. "So glad you weren't hurt."

"I keep pinching myself."

I flashed on the idea that chance, that fickle imposter, flips things this way and that way at random. I guess you could call that luck, my chance encounter with the shark. This trip felt to me like I had been making a feeble attempt to find meaning in a meaningless universe.

Looking toward where tide rips collided, the rolling swells rearing up and steepening into whitecaps, I raised my water bottle filled with triple-filtered spring water to my lips and, as I drank, I hoped that the scientists were right and tried to douse my fear that the second hand of the clock was counting down to some terrible thing, something really surprising that we as a world haven't taken into account, and don't anticipate: that all the beauty of the physical world is an illusion and that all life forms are busy unsheathing their talons, preparing.

I felt that my safe world had become terribly small.

Joanna Kadish has been published by *Literary Orphans*, *Cultured Vultures*, and the *Citron Review*. She was a finalist in the *Black Coffee & Vinyl Presents: Ice Cultures* project, summer of 2018, and in *Cutthroat*'s 2016 Rick DeMarinis Short Story Prize contest, and she received an honorable mention in *Glimmer Train*'s Short Story Award for New Writers contest in 2015 and 2016. Years ago, she was a regular freelance contributor to the New Jersey regional section of the *New York Times* and for several regional newspapers and magazines, including the *Plain Dealer* and *Asbury Park Press*. She has an MFA in creative writing from Bennington Writing Seminars in Vermont and an undergraduate degree in literature and philosophy from the University of California, Berkeley.

KATHERYN HOLT

The Other Side, 2019
Mixed media on panel, 32 x 42 in

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