

CRISTINA SAYERS

Kings of Summer, 2015
Acrylic, ink, and found paper collage, 20 x 24 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

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Guest of the Great White

A Surfer's Account
of Living with
the Shark Mystique

Sharks don't scare me. They terrify me. They cruise through my nightmares, plump with evil portent, jaws like jack-o-lanterns—caudal fins swishing behind them, propelling their orbit beneath my bed. When my comforter morphs into the sea surface, I stand on the pillows, which make worthless rafts, expecting at any second an eruption of gills and teeth and wishing I'd sprung for the extra thread count.

The dreams recur, sometimes every few days during the late summer and early fall, when sightings of great white sharks along California's coast, and occasionally an attack, splash across the news. Because I'm a surfer, the headlines always say the same thing to me: "They're back."

It was discovered in the 1990s that the great white (*Carcharodon carcharias*), assumed responsible for 100 percent of the documented fatal attacks on humans in California, resides in the Red Triangle, the wedge of ocean from Big Sur out to the Farallon Islands and north to Bodega Bay, late summer through midwinter. They then fin south to an area between Hawaii and Mexico, diving deep (as far down as 3,500 feet) to do nobody-knows-what in an eerie place with a cheery name: "The White Shark Cafe." The annual exodus provides cold comfort, however, to surfers, divers, and those whose galeophobia is so bad they won't enter public swimming pools.

I stop short at making the sign of the cross at hot tubs, myself. But the specter of that spiny maw and those space-black eyes at the business end of a shark double the length of my Prius visits me often, even when I'm awake. I take refuge in a fortress of denial built on all the scientific and statistical factoids I can find to prop up my mantra that it really won't happen to me. More people die from soda machines falling on them every year than are killed by sharks, I tell myself. Falling coconuts, champagne corks, cows, being left-handed! All of these raise your mathematical likelihood of imminent death by a larger percentage than sharks. But sharks are what we dream about.

Especially after the first time you see one.

There was no dorsal fin, no "duh-dum." It was just one of a thousand golden, sunset-hour surf sessions I've had along California's Central Coast in October. Except for the twelve-foot-long shark that burst from the water about fifty yards seaward, breaching like a whale and bisecting the sunset with a gray and white streak. This is how they attack,