

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 damned. 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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