

## DAVID LIGARE

*Monterey Rocks, 2013*  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 90 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## MEREDITH SABINI

# Rocky Points

Last rites for  
a marine mammal

**A**s I get out of my car after work on a hot Friday, my neighbor Virginia shouts over to me, “A sea lion is about to wash up on the beach!” From the urgency in her voice, I know she isn’t telling me a bit of daily news but issuing a plea that I get mobilized into action before the creature lands. When a few of us were visiting on her deck not long ago, Virginia mentioned that sea lions had been turning up dead along the coast recently.

She and I live in adjacent cottages on a tiny beachfront cove. An artist who’s lived here forty years, Virginia is the resident elder. I’ve lived here only a few years, but she sees me swimming regularly as well as gathering up the daily flotsam and jetsam.

“I need a swim! Give me a minute to change and I’ll meet you down there,” I shout back. Typically, tidal action carries floating objects—buoys, pier pilings, and dead animals—past our pocket cove to the large public beach south of it, where they come to rest along the jetty. But sometimes, heavy things get stuck in our cove. Last winter, a buck with a huge rack was washed up onto our beach in a turbulent high tide and got half buried in sand before anyone noticed. If I can maneuver the sea lion over to the public beach, the park rangers will know what to do. An autopsy might reveal something about the cause of these deaths.

In high school, I competed in swim meets, performed in water ballet, and taught swimming and diving to younger kids. Though I never earned an official lifesaving certificate, I did learn how to transport a body, flailing or inert, from deep water to shallow. I’m hoping the same technique applies to sea lions.

When I arrive at the beach, Virginia is already there, a coil of rope over her arm; I’ve brought bungees. About twenty feet offshore, a shiny hulk is bobbing in the surf, too smooth and glossy to be a log. A wave propels it closer. I need time to make a plan, so I grab an old oar, wade in, and shove the animal back into the water. This also gives me a chance to take its measure: it’s about five feet in length and looks like a short man with a beer belly or a small woman about four months pregnant. It’s a juvenile and it seems dead, but I can’t be sure. When have I taken the pulse of a marine mammal?

Between our cove and the public beach, a cliff juts far out from the land. At low tide, the water recedes far enough that it’s possible to walk around from one beach

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to the other. This afternoon, the tide is about halfway in and rising, which means that I'm going to have to get fully into the water and swim the animal the whole way around. It will be challenging, but not particularly arduous.

This is not the first time I have tended animals injured by modern life. I've never had to go far to find them, most have been road-killed land animals—raccoons, skunks, opossums, deer, squirrels. I give them a decent burial as a way of honoring their lives. It is only a minor contribution but grows out of a deeply felt devotion. This venture with a sea lion takes me into the watery realm.

Standing knee-deep in gentle surf, I start to fasten a bungee around the sea lion as it bumps against my legs. But it's slippery and lacks any indentation of neck, armpit, or crotch where a bungee could be anchored, so I'm flummoxed as to how to secure it for our voyage. Then I notice the obvious: it's floating. And from the buildup of gasses in its gut, it should continue to float and won't be too heavy or awkward to tow. I crisscross two bungees around its midsection and attach a length of tow line.

When I look up, Virginia is pointing to the sea lion and shouting, "Does it have an . . . ?" I can't hear the last word over the surf. I frown at her, puzzled. She reaches up and tugs at one of her ears. Ears! I remember her telling us that the presence of ears distinguishes sea lions from seals. I look down at its head: on each side are soft oval

flaps about an inch long. I nod yes. Virginia goes back to her house to call a ranger she knows to tell her about our plan for the sea lion.

We are ready to launch, but I feel uneasy. Marine life, if it doesn't join the local food chain, falls to the seafloor and decomposes, much as leaves drop from vegetation and become humus for the soil. This sea creature is no longer part of that cycle. Do I have a right to play a role in its finale? Why not let it be tossed by the tides and get buried in sand? We humans seem to be interfering with nature's cycles so much these days, it's hard to know what right action is.

I bend down and stroke the sea lion, telling it I am deeply sorry its life has ended early. I say I'm going to escort it to a landing place where others will tend it. I'm already bowing over it; I clasp my hands together in prayer.

With my Teva sandals on as protection against the rocky seafloor, I stride into the water with the animal behind me at enough distance that we won't get entangled. Our cove is especially shallow and I can walk out twenty or thirty paces and still be only up to my waist in water.

As I leave the beach, an image of towing an uncanonically similar animal through water emerges from remote memory: Years ago, my brothers and I were staying in the Sierra at the lakeside cabin. I'd brought along the German shepherd I was tending for a colleague on sabbatical. The day after we arrived, my brothers and I set off in an aluminum skiff to fetch groceries at the general store at one end of the lake, several miles away. We'd gone some distance when my younger brother tugged at my sleeve and pointed behind us. I slowed the boat, looked around, and was stunned to see the dog in the water, following in our wake. She was a professionally trained watchdog who knew how to wait outside a store while I went in, but this was a different environment and I had failed to tell her clearly, "Stay!"

I quickly turned the skiff around and sped toward her, knowing she'd already swum far and would be tiring out. My brothers tried to lift her in, but her thick coat was waterlogged, making her too heavy to hoist aboard. So I tied a rope to her collar and towed her slowly back to the dock. One brother stayed with her while the other came with me to resume our errand. The dog would probably have drowned if we hadn't noticed her.

Here I am now, pulling another whiskered creature about the same shape and size who did die in the water. Many animals begin life in a liquid medium, so perhaps for some it is not from ashes to ashes, dust to dust, that the circle of life proceeds, but from water to water.

I was conceived in a small town on the Southern California coast, born in a larger one in the north, and I've always lived near the ocean; it's home. I know how to ride the breakers, dive with snorkel and mask or tank and gauge. I love to swim through a kelp forest, letting the long ribbons of seaweed entwine my limbs. I am entranced by the mystery and beauty of the underwater world. But I've never knowingly swum beside a large marine mammal, alive or dead. Were it smaller, I'd tuck it into the lifesaving position next to my body.

When the water level reaches my chest, I push off from the gravel seabed and begin the overarm sidestroke that I could do forever. As I lead us into open waters, a flash of fear seizes me. I am paddling away from the comfort zone of the shoreline, and heading toward the unbounded horizon, with nothing but water seeming to stretch into infinity. This is a solo venture and my heart pounds.

I keep us in deep water long enough to pass the rocky outcropping by a considerable distance. This wide detour means the trip is longer, but it's the only safe way. Even though the surf is mild at the moment, I never take a chance near a rocky shore—too many tales of people getting dashed against cliffs by rogue waves along this coast.

It's late summer and I see that the public beach is crowded—children digging sand castles, couples cuddling under sunbrellas, colorful blankets spread with food. It's a popular weekend spot among Mexican families. I notice three young men sitting casually atop the rocky ledge who seem to be following my progress. From where they sit, they can't tell what I'm towing or where I've come from. I imagine them picturing a mermaid emerging from watery depths.

As I approach, they signal with their hands a willingness to help. I point to the spot on the beach where I'll try to land my cargo. Keeping the sea lion in the water while I untie the lines, I explain in Spanish that it needs to be brought up to the dry sand, *la arena seca*, so that park rangers can take it away. Two of the fellows try to pick it up but can't.

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"*¡Muy pesado!*" They laugh and call over the third guy. Even together, they can't get a firm grip on the animal and end up dragging it up the beach by its flippers. I worry they are hurting it.

A crowd quickly gathers. Children cluster around, while parents cast suspicious glances my way—rightly wondering why this gringa has introduced a corpse into their TGIF festivities. Several parents caution their children not to touch. On another day, I might be sitting here enjoying the mariachi music, making sculptures in the sand with the children. Today, I am merely an intruder.

I planned how to get the animal to this resting place but didn't anticipate its effect on those who would witness its arrival. Hoping that my age and gray hair lend credibility, I summon up my public lecturer voice and explain, *en los dos idiomas*, that the animal just died, tomorrow park rangers will come for it, and no one can catch anything just by touching it.

"*El león marino acaba de morir, y mañana los guardabosques van a removerlo. No es posible de contagiarse nada simplemente al tocarlo.*"

My Spanish really isn't up to science level, so I say to the kids, "Who has a pail to fill with water so that we can wash off *el animal*?"

"Why clean it if it's dead?" a tall boy about twelve challenges me.

*I'm struck by how instinctively the children give the dead respectful treatment. None of them pokes at it or tries to pull off a whisker.*

"So you can see and feel how silky and soft its fur is." I'm hedging my bets, hoping he's never petted a marine mammal before and might like the chance to brag about doing so.

It works. He's intrigued and moves aside to let the younger kids pass. They eagerly run to the shore, fill up their plastic buckets, and start pouring water over the sea lion. They giggle as its sleek skin emerges from the sandy coating.

I guide the children in exploring it. We gently touch its nose and mouth, look at the tiny opening beneath its tail. We stretch out its feet and admire their sturdy webbing. I point out the ear flaps and tell them about the seal, *la foca*, and the sea lion being like cousins, *primos*, one with ears inside that we can't see and the other with ears outside that we can see. I give the lesson loudly, with a formality that I hope calms the parents.

I'm struck by how instinctively the children give the dead respectful treatment. None of them pokes at it or tries to pull off a whisker. A few parents hover in the background, watching their young ones, who may be in contact with death for the first time. Once the sea lion begins to decay, no one will want to be this close. For the time being, it doesn't look dead, smell dead, or feel dead. It looks like

a viable specimen of a breed most of us would never have a chance to touch.

My task of delivering it to a resting ground has been accomplished. The rite of washing the body has been performed. Yet I feel reluctant to leave, not wanting this rare experience to end. Perhaps I will retrace the route and swim it in reverse, bringing my part of the journey full circle. But then I remember the rising tide. By now, that rocky outcropping will be submerged, making it difficult to track, risky to navigate.

I wind the rope slowly over my arm, feeling both the sadness of the animal's passing and the meaningfulness of sharing it with others. I fasten the bungees around my waist, securing myself to life, and head up the road toward home, on foot. Virginia will be pleased. We've done what we could for the departed.

**Meredith Sabini** is a widely published author of poetry, essays, and professional articles. She compiled the popular work *The Earth Has a Soul* (North Atlantic Books, 2002). Founder-director of the Dream Institute of Northern California, a nonprofit cultural/educational center in Berkeley, she is of Amish ancestry and lives in the Bay Area.

## DAVID LIGARE

*Woman with a box, (Pandora), 2016*  
Oil on canvas, 38 x 48 in



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