

LAURA MALONE

Camille with Veil, 2021
Oil on linen, 48 x 48 in.



COURTESY THE STUDIO SHOP GALLERY

W GOODWIN

Ashes on the Tide

Scott O'Dell's
last voyage

I was a novice . . . Not particularly naive . . . More like a feral sophomore trying to figure out the controls. I had no idea an unanticipated event was about to jump-start my assimilation into adult society, refine my anxious attitudes toward older people, and initiate my first serious thoughts about dying. It would even alter what I believed was my immutable relationship with the sea. I was about to witness many of my convictions detached like kelp fronds tempest-torn from tide-drained rocks. Flotsam, in other words.

* * *

I stand on the brink of a sea cliff not far from where I study and sleep. Though it is a popular spot, for the moment I am alone. At my feet Pleistocene mollusks emboss the sandstone, and after last night's rain, the fossil-shaped puddles mirror bits of the sky. I lift my eyes to gaze out at the tormented sea. Wind-scuffed swells arise from the vague haze where the horizon hides. As each choppy wave draws near, it lifts the dark tops of the kelp forest and, in so doing, smoothes its face, allowing the wave to show its circular soul in a final rush to the shore. The west wind carries the mist of breaking waves on his breath and lacquers my cheeks with briny rime. The wind spins off smaller breezes too. I imagine each is a different portage. One might ferry the larvae of a mutating creature from distant Fukushima, another a molecule of a mariner lost at sea.

Behind me, poking into the windy, misty sky, rise the buildings of the university I attend. Yesterday, summer classes ended. Last night a consequential rain fell.

There on the sea cliff I daydream about rain falling in the dark . . . *Cool, shiny drops chasing gravity coalesce into rivulets, sluice along street curbs, race down concrete channels, collect the grease and grime of the city, and move the emulsified leftovers of humanity to the sea. Not far away, I sleep while the sudsy, gray-brown water pours into San Diego Bay, where it floats on the halocline and stains the waterlines of a thousand boats. It is still dark when the tide turns. The ebbing current greedily chugs the dirty rainwater, bears it away from the nearly landlocked bay, and moves it to the near-shore waters where I dive and surf.*

Swaying from foot to foot on the edge of the cliff, I change my thoughts from sanctified waters sullied to considering how I am going to engage with the sea on this rare nothing-scheduled day of fresh wind, clearing skies, and no classes. On another day, the inshore waters might tempt me with sun-pierced clarity, but this morning the sea below the cliff is an opaque and passionless shade of celadon. *No diving under the bosky dells of kelp today.* I hoped the storm would at least deliver a new swell, but the waves are small and the wind is wrong. The water might even be toxic. *Another day of no surf. At least the wind's producing some shifty headers and puffy lifters. I could call Dana and see if one of the school's sloops is available . . .*

* * *

I grew up on the west side of Los Angeles a short bike ride from the edge of the Pacific Ocean. Back when I was nine, I wanted to be a pirate. Riding my bicycle on the concrete boardwalk, I would stand on the pedals and pretend I was astride the bow of my ship, raging at whales and krakens. Later, during high school, it seemed my hair was seldom completely dry, not with surfing before first period, sail team practice in the afternoons, and diving on weekends. When the time came to apply to universities, I only considered schools that were on the coast.

Mom loved the sea too, though not as much as I do, so it astonished me when, three months after I left for college a hundred miles to the south, my empty-nested parents relocated to a retirement community in the Mojave Desert.

The following year my astonishment turned to heartbreak when Mom succumbed to an aneurysm in that supposedly healthy desert air. I still think being so far from the sea is what killed her.

* * *

When I returned to my dorm room, the phone was ringing “This is Wendy.”

It was Dana at the sailing school. Succinct as ever, she jumped right into it. “Morning, Wendy. Glad I caught you. Just got off the phone with a woman who needs a boat and a skipper. Very specific request . . .”

“Hi, Dana. Specific how?”

“Reading from my notes here . . . Private charter . . . three people . . . a thirty-to-forty-foot sloop . . . an empathic captain. Her word. Made me think of you. Might have a snag, though. It’s Labor Day weekend and she needs to do this tomorrow. Please tell me you’re available.”

“I am. What time?” Her succinctness was rubbing off.

Dana replied, “Fantastic. They’re arriving at eleven.”

“I’ll get there by ten thirty to prep the boat. Are they students, or is this a pleasure cruise?”

“They’re not students. It’s not really a pleasure cruise either. The charterer—her name’s Elizabeth Hall—said they’re all experienced sailors but they’re not familiar with our waters. They need the boat and a captain to take them offshore to scatter the ashes of her late husband, a writer named Scott O’Dell.”

“Intriguing . . . though I don’t recognize that name.”

“Probably because he wrote children’s books. Have you ever scattered ashes at sea before?”

“Nope, but I guess it would be kind of cringey if not done to leeward.”

“Cringey indeed. Also, be sure you’re at least three miles offshore. Coast Guard requirement.”

“Got it.”

“She’s a professor. Literature I think she said. Isn’t that your major?”

“Yep, English lit. I look forward to meeting her. Should I wear black? Offer condolences, stuff like that?”

“It’s not a funeral, Wendy. Just handle the boat and leave them to do whatever they want.”

* * *

I arrived at the sailing school office early, and after talking with Dana for a few minutes, I collected the paperwork and boat keys. I walked out to the marina gate, swiped my key card, and strode down the low-tide slope of the ramp to the familiar sounds and smells of the docks. Gulls mewling. Dock lines creaking. Sea lions barking. A loose halyard tapping. My nose involuntarily wrinkled as I inhaled the dank odor of low water mixed with a whiff of diesel. Dana kept all the school’s boats docked together, making it easy to find *Venus*, the thirty-four-foot sloop she had designated for the outing. I climbed aboard, started the engine, and removed the mainsail cover. I was coiling lines when I saw Dana escorting two women and a man down the ramp. As they stepped onto the floating docks, one of the women stooped to pick up something.

Watching them approach, I thought to myself, *Great. Three old geezers. Bet they all get seasick.* I waited for the group by the boarding steps. After Dana finished the introductions, I addressed the group.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you and your friends, Mrs. Hall. Please accept my condolences.”

“Thank you, Captain. I appreciate that, although it’s been almost a year since Scott passed. By the way, Hall’s my professional name, so please, just call me Elizabeth.”

“Okay, Elizabeth, and you can call me Wendy.”

“Like call me Ishmael?” said the woman with a smile.

“No nautical formalities required. Looks like we have a perfect day for sailing, so please, welcome aboard.” It was only later I realized I had totally missed her reference, known to all English lit majors.

Dana excused herself and headed back to the office. I lent a hand to the three people as they boarded, all the while studying them through the dark lenses of my shades. I guessed they were each in their seventies, yet they all seemed fit and alert. *I should kick myself for calling them geezers.*

I recognized Elizabeth as the woman who had picked up something by the ramp. Pointing to the large tote she was carrying, I asked, “May I put that in a safe place for you?”

Elizabeth pulled back. “Thank you, Wendy, but I prefer to hold on to this.”

After reviewing the safety and operational procedures with my passengers, I stowed the dock lines and fenders, returned to the cockpit, and put the engine in gear. After

motoring through the marina’s overpopulation of seldom-used boats, we entered a broad channel leading to the open ocean. Soon the first swells began to nudge and lift the boat. We four sailors worked in unison to raise the mainsail and unfurl the jib. Experienced hands hauled the sheets until the crumpled sails filled and formed a brace of sleek airfoils. I turned off the engine and steered without speaking while my three passengers trimmed the jib and main like the seasoned sailors they were showing themselves to be.

An uncomplicated zephyr descended from a cloudless blue sky to brush and dapple the sea surface. Casually steering with one hand, I nuanced *Venus* around a kelp paddy. Elizabeth noticed and looked back at me. “Nice move. *Venus* seems very responsive. Is there a story behind her name?”

“There is, and it’s an interesting one. Did you know Dana used to be a dolphin trainer at SeaWorld?” Elizabeth nodded. “Well, it seems they have a tradition of naming their performing dolphins, so when Dana started the sailing school a few years ago, she named each of the boats after one of the dolphins. Guess which one was her favorite.”

“*Venus!*” She clapped her hands like a little girl. “How delightful! Our boat’s named after a dolphin! Do you think we’ll see any today?” Elizabeth flashed a conspiratorial smile at her friends, who responded with knowing grins.

“Oh, there’s always a chance, but I’m out here three or four days a week during the summer, and I’ve only seen them, like, maybe twice. Never more than a few at a time either. They’re common almost everywhere else on the Southern California coast, so it seems like a mystery . . . but I think I’ve solved it. See that blue tower over there? That’s SeaWorld. We’re positive wild dolphins can hear their imprisoned kinfolk crying out in misery from their prison cells, so they avoid these waters for fear of being kidnapped, enslaved in tanks of synthetic seawater, and forced to work for dead fish.”

I went quiet. *Oops. Said too much.*

In a soft voice, Elizabeth broke the uneasy silence I had caused. “I believe we all agree on that topic. How did keeping cetaceans in captivity ever become an acceptable practice in the first place? Scott always says . . .”

She stopped speaking, and her eyes traveled up into the skies of her imagination to recompose her words. Absent-mindedly wiping salty drops from her windward cheek, Elizabeth resumed speaking. “What I meant was Scott

used to say . . . we all carry the sea in our blood. And here we are breathing in this brine-spattered air and incorporating it into our physiologies. He believed the sea links all the creatures—pelagics, benthics, surface skimmers, and surface dwellers like us. It keeps us on an even keel, metabolically speaking.”

Two miles to starboard, the crew could see the white Mission Beach roller coaster and the blue SeaWorld tower rising beyond the shore, but no one really noticed, so entranced were they by the oceanic vastness opening before them. Conveying four human spirits and the memory of a fifth, *Venus* sailed over an ocean both revealing and secretive. No doubt many sea creatures were at that very moment keenly aware of *Venus*’s swept-back keel passing overhead.

I thought how, surrounded by the wide and restless sea, a boat’s cockpit becomes more than a simple enclosure for the occupants. The space transforms into an intimate sanctuary where, just then, Elizabeth’s companions were silently granting their friend all the time she needed to reminisce about her late husband.

While pelicans and cormorants roamed off toward the horizon, Elizabeth continued, “Scott wasn’t superstitious, but he could be whimsical. He liked to portray the ocean as ‘mighty and masculine’ while characterizing our pleasure boats as ‘feathery and girlish.’ He probably would have expected his captain on our feathery *Venus* to be a scowling Charon transporting us across the gloomy River Styx instead of our smiling Wendy steering us over this bird-dotted Pacific Ocean. I know he would have had a good laugh to learn he was making his final voyage on a boat named after a dolphin. I mean, sure, *Venus* was a goddess born from an oyster, but for goodness’ sake . . .” Elizabeth gave her friends another smile before completing her sentence, “. . . we’re on a boat named for a *dolphin!* How serendipitous is that?”

My curiosity about the serendipitous mystery would have to wait as Elizabeth continued speaking.

“Scott relied on the seafaring Chumash Indians for so much of what he wrote about the ocean and nature. The most obvious example would be *Karana*, the Native American protagonist in his first book. *Karana* survived only because she observed nature and learned from it. In the book, she makes clothing from cormorant feathers, and you know what? Just this morning I found a cormorant’s tail feather on the dock!”

“I thought I saw you pick up something,” I said, suspecting she had crafted her comments as a lead-in to the feather.

Elizabeth smiled mischievously. She reached into the pocket of her windbreaker, carefully extracted a black feather, and held it up for us to admire. Then she smoothed the glossy quill and poked it into the top of a sheet winch as if it were a nautical totem.

“Now *Venus* is truly a ‘feathery’ boat!”

We all laughed.

Elizabeth continued. “You know, at times, Scott’s intuition about the sea could seem magical. Would that it were so, but of course he saw what he wanted to. That’s what writers do. The fact is he derived much of his ‘magic’ from Chumash insights to the commonalities uniting humans and nature. In his writing, he invoked that concept by using the English equivalents of the Chumash words for the links between nature and humanity: bloodlines and rutted paths.”

Moved to contemplation, the people on *Venus* lapsed into silence. After twenty minutes, I leaned forward and whispered to Elizabeth, “We’re three miles out now, so we can heave to anytime you wish.”

“Thank you, Wendy . . . Yes, please. Let’s do it now.”

I turned the boat into the wind and onto the opposite tack without releasing the jib sheet. The sail backed and the boat immediately slowed. After lashing the tiller to leeward, I eased the mainsail until it luffed, and *Venus* immediately settled down into a slow sideways drift.

Elizabeth removed a closed half-gallon metal can from her tote. Holding the container with both hands while her friends steadied her, she crossed to the leeward side of the cockpit and carefully pried off the lid. She took a deep breath, paused for several heartbeats, and then poured some of the ashes onto the water. I stared through the shifting reflections and refractions as a twinkling portion of the particles immediately sank, specks of bone I supposed. The remainder dispersed on the surface for a few seconds before absorbing water and slowly sinking. Elizabeth, her eyes wet and shining, passed the can of ashes to the other woman, who scattered another portion upon the sea. Quaking with silent sobs, she handed the remaining ashes to the man. He inverted the can over the water and tapped the bottom. Just then a stray vortex of wind lifted Elizabeth’s cormorant feather from the winch and sent it flying away.

I watched the three friends kneeling at the rail, shoulder to shoulder, gazing intently into the sea. Solar rays refracted and stabbed into the depths, where they illuminated galaxies of shining particles drifting downward, white and silver against deepening blue green. Scott O’Dell’s mortal remains vanished on diverging journeys to become part of . . . who knows? Maybe a field of eelgrass? A cell of bioluminescent plankton? A dolphin’s cornea?

Still hiding behind my sunglasses, I stayed in the back of the cockpit, where I could monitor the safety of my passengers and watch for boat traffic. I was also struggling with my emotions.

I never knew Scott O’Dell . . . I barely know these sweet people . . . Yet here I am getting all weepy . . .

Elizabeth sighed, then pulled a dark-green bottle of wine and a stack of plastic cups from her tote. She removed the cap from the bottle and turned to me. “This particular pinot noir was Scott’s favorite. We would be honored if you’d join us in a toast, Captain Wendy.”

Tears pooling in my eyes, I accepted the proffered cup, saying, “Thank you. I’m so grateful to be included.”

“And we’re proud to include you. Now then, at times like this, my never-superstitious Scott would say, ‘Rituals guide where rituals abide,’ so whenever we drink spirits on a boat, we like to respect the old ritual of splashing a little into the sea for, well, you know who . . .”

“Yes, of course,” I blurted, and we shouted as one, “to the Old Man of the Sea!”

We all leaned over the leeward gunwale and poured wine onto the water. Elizabeth then delivered a toast to Scott O’Dell, a tribute so personal it would be ungracious to include it in the same paragraphs as my weightless banter. When she finished, we sipped wine in silence for a while until Elizabeth said, “Captain, may we head back now?”

I nodded, unlash the tiller, and released the taut starboard jib sheet. Elizabeth handled the other jib sheet while her friends trimmed the mainsail. The bow fell off the wind and the sloop leaped forward. Silent under a press of restless feelings, I pointed *Venus* toward the marina entrance.

That could be the end of this story, but look at brave *Venus* still sailing out there . . . I know what a surfer or a sailor would say here.

“You never know what lies beyond the next wave.”

* * *

We were an hour from the marina entrance when something in the distance caught my attention. With the tiller between my knees, I rose for a better look. It only took a second to confirm what I thought I had seen. I could not help myself from shouting, “Dolphins!”

While it was unquestionably true I had previously seen very few dolphins in those waters, it was equally undeniable a lot of them were at that very moment hurtling toward *Venus*.

“I see them! They’re coming this way!” shouted Elizabeth.

“They’re all around us!” said the man, his eyebrows raised, his mouth agape.

I could scarcely believe my eyes. In seconds, the dolphins arrived, surrounded *Venus*, and slowed to match our speed. We heard their trills and chirps. We saw them looking at us. Within a few minutes, the spectacle of hundreds of dolphins surrounding a sailboat began attracting other boats.

“My goodness!” exclaimed Elizabeth, glancing at her friends before turning to me. “I gather you really aren’t acquainted with Scott’s best known book, are you?” Her tone was kind.

“I’m ashamed to say I’m ignorant of his work.”

“No cause for shame. It was *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. I’m told children all over the world read it in school. They even made it into a movie. Scott’s affinity for dolphins was a lifelong affair, so you see . . .” Elizabeth smiled at me as she continued. “I understand dolphins are uncommon here, Wendy . . . so having such a multitude visit at this precise moment is . . . well, I’m moved beyond words.”

“Elizabeth, I’ve never seen this many dolphins at one time, not here, not anywhere. I’m sure you know sailboats are usually too slow for dolphins to play in our bow wave. They almost never stay more than a few minutes, so this is truly amazing!”

The nine-year-old in me wanted to run up to the bow and scream her lungs out, but I remained quiet. I was wondering, *When the day comes to take Mom and Dad’s ashes to sea, will there be dolphins?*

That day, dozens of Scott O’Dell’s “girlish” boats bloomed above the arrayed depths like flowers on a blue field, their occupants enchanted by a dolphin-wreathed sloop from the local sailing school. I imagine we had

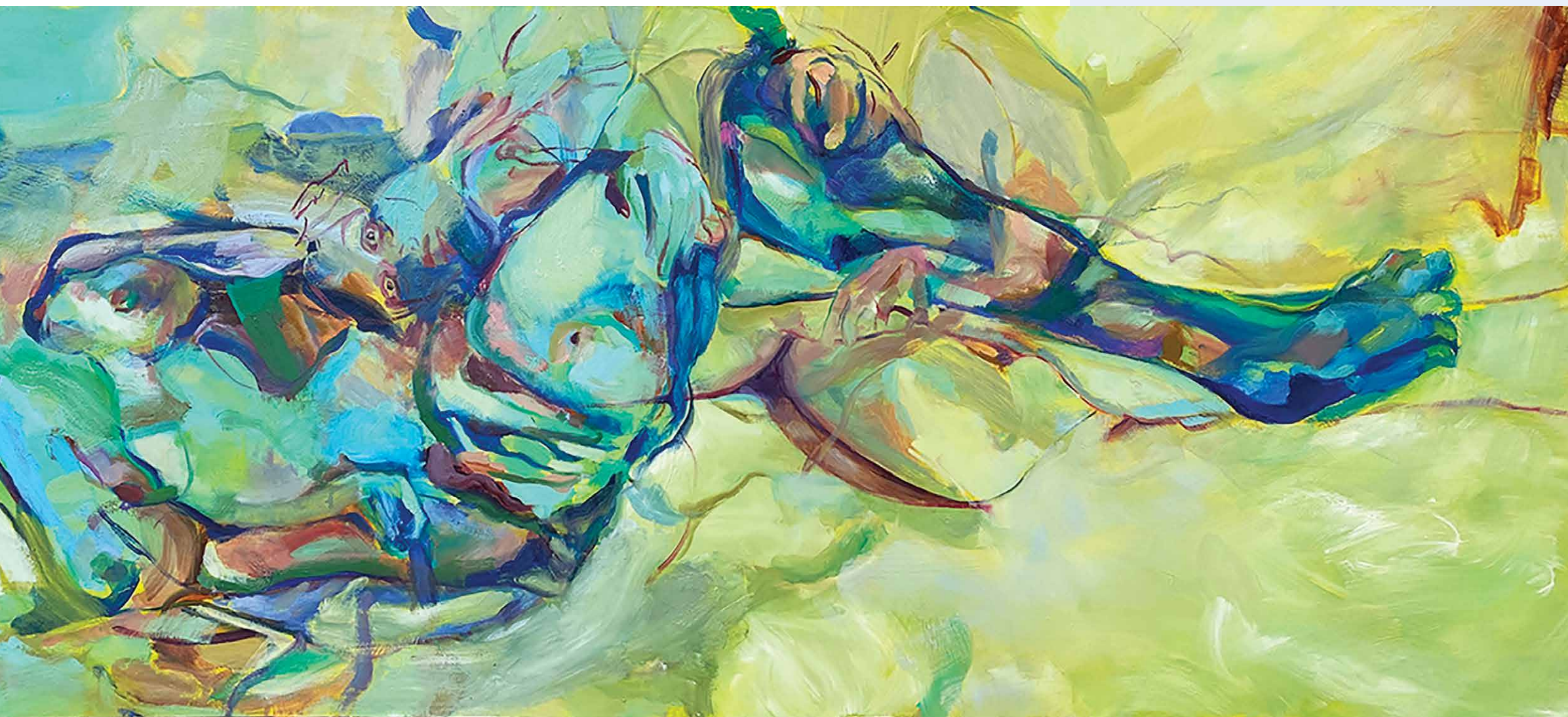
stumbled upon another instance of the commonalities we all share, one of those bloodlines or rutted paths Scott O’Dell wrote about.

Careening through the textured waters of that beckoning summer day, the dolphins stayed with *Venus* all the way to the channel entrance. Only then did they leave, carving perfect trajectories through the water.

W Goodwin is a writer and a visual artist bound by blood and experience to salt water. Goodwin graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles, studied scientific photography at the Brooks Institute, traveled across multiple continents and oceans, taught high school and university-level sciences, raised two excellent children, and founded two so-so businesses, including a sailing/navigation school from which this story was born. Goodwin’s photographic art and short stories have appeared in numerous literary journals, news sources, and websites. Goodwin currently lives at the foot of the Colorado Rockies with partner Jan and dawg Pete.

LAURA MALONE

Tangled, 2021
Oil on linen, 27 x 60 in.



COURTESY THE STUDIO SHOP GALLERY

MAURYA SIMON

A Fleeting Bliss

*Mi madre tells me that, on the night she died,
Abuelita lit a hundred yahrzeit candles, which
she'd arranged haphazardly in the sand.*

*Then she stripped off her flannel nightgown,
her body withered yet mysteriously aglow,
as if she was enshrouded by moonlight.*

*No one else saw this miracle: only mi mamá
witnessed how Abuelita's feet, then her body,
rose above the ground. How she slowly floated,*

*a transient angel, across the beach toward
the vast ocean, her long white hair trailing
its cloudy banner behind her.*

*Abuelita hovered over the dark water,
then turned to signal adios to my mother
before she silently sank into the waves at last—*

*her skin melting into the fluid blue current,
her bones turning to foam—a beautiful alchemy.
Then her sighs rose up into the cries of seagulls.*

Maurya Simon's poem in this issue is drawn from her poetry volume *La Sirena, A Novella in Verse*, which is forthcoming from Cloudbank Books. An earlier volume, *The Wilderness: New and Selected Poems* (Red Hen Press, 2018), received the Independent Book Publishers Association's 2019 Gold Medal in Poetry. Simon's poems have been translated into Hebrew, French, Spanish, Greek, and Farsi. A University of California professor, she lives in the Angeles National Forest in Southern California.