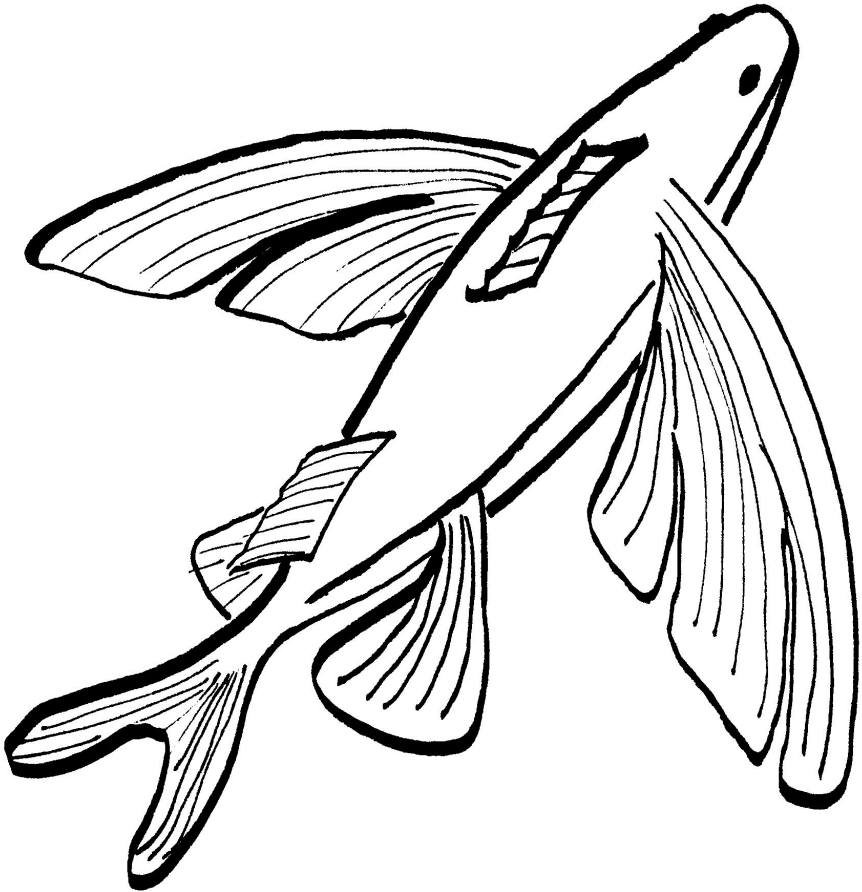


Flying

Delicious freedom—

To glide and soar unfettered.

Weightless in deep blue.



Flying

As a scuba diver, one of the first lessons I had to learn about the ocean was that it is bigger than I am—much, much bigger—and infinitely more powerful. Novice divers are notorious for gulping down their air supply in record time and I was certainly no exception. Every time I entered the water, I was tense, excited, and jazzed to a jangling frenzy by the excess adrenalin coursing through my veins. Instinctively, I fought to stay on the surface with my head out of the water, even though I had a regulator that reliably and steadily delivered air to my lungs. I also fought to stay in one place as the water undulated and surged and slapped, moving me wherever and whenever it chose. It took several months before the lesson began to sink in: It is useless to argue with the ocean. In any contest between a human and the ocean, the ocean will always win. Always. The only option I have in the matter is whether I choose to want what the ocean wants. So choosing allows me the silly little illusion that I am in control and doing what I want to do. Once I began to get the hang of this particular flavor of self-delusion, diving became a delightful game.

Near the end of my first winter of diving, Jon and I were busy practicing this game at a spot called Cortes Banks. Cortes is a shallow reef structure located about 80 miles due west of the U.S.-Mexican border. There are one or two spots on the reef that are shallow enough to warrant a marker buoy, but nowhere does the reef break the surface. Sitting on a dive boat anchored at Cortes, one can scan the horizon for a full 360 degrees and not see any land. The reef has long been an extremely productive fishing spot, for both fish and lobster, and hence is worth the arduous 8–10 hour boat ride from San Pedro harbor. Because the site is unprotected by any landmass, conditions here are frequently quite rough, with long powerful ground swells, sometimes topped with wind-driven chop like icing on a cake.



Such were the conditions on this particular day. It was near the end of lobster season, so we elected to stay and do at least one, possibly two, dives here in spite of the conditions, before heading east to the protection of San Clemente Island. We were diving the Nine-Fathom spot, one of the shallow areas with a marker buoy. We managed to suit up on the rocking, pitching deck without injuring either ourselves or others, which is a real challenge given the 100-plus pounds of gear required to do cold-water diving like this! We even managed to get ourselves overboard into the rolling, choppy waters and made our way with as much haste as possible to the bottom, where we hoped the conditions would be more serene.

Now, what you must understand is that the up-and-down swell action of the ocean surface is translated into a back-and-forth surge action for some depth beneath the surface, the depth depending on the height of the surface swell. If you can dive deep enough, you can get beneath this surge into still, calm waters. On this day, at this spot, the bottom was at 60 feet, which wasn't deep enough.

We set a compass heading for the direction we wanted to travel and began kicking, scanning the reef beneath us as we went, searching for the tell-tale antennae of our intended prey—the spiny lobsters. As we headed into the surge, I realized that I had to kick as hard as I possibly could just to stay in one spot—at least until the surge changed from forth to back, at which point I was carried along quite handily. I quickly realized that I would exhaust myself within a few rounds of fighting. I took a deep breath and recalled my recently learned lesson: Don't argue with the ocean. The next time the surge changed and moved in the wrong direction, I grabbed hold of a sturdy piece of kelp and held tight. Flapping in the “breeze,” I waited for the surge to again turn in my favor, at which point I kicked like hell and zoomed at a dizzying speed across the reef. What a marvelous game! I looked to my left to see Jon doing exactly the same thing. We continued this diversion for about 15 minutes, alternately flapping and zooming. It was such fun that I almost forgot about looking for “bugs” (diver-speak for lobsters). The act of moving through the ocean had ceased to be a means to an end and had become an end in itself—a tandem joyride in unison with the water.



flying

Abruptly, on one of our forward zooms, the world fell out from under me. The entire reef disappeared in an instant. My heart leaped into my throat, my stomach flipped over twice, and my semi-circular canals went completely haywire. I was flying through deep blue space unbounded. Ahead, above, below, on either side, there was nothing visible but an intense and infinite dark blue expanse. The sensation of flying, of moving rapidly and weightlessly through space, was intoxicating! And disorienting. Without any reference points whatsoever, it was hard to tell how fast I was going, or even in what direction. I looked back and saw the drop-off of the reef rapidly flying forward to greet me. Jon was nearby, suspended over the abyss like myself. Reassured, we spent a few moments soaring back and forth, immersing ourselves in the sheer exuberance of flight, before reluctantly agreeing that it was time to begin working our way back toward the boat, reversing our charted compass course.

Several months later, while on our honeymoon in Cozumel, the memory of that soaring flight at Cortes came flashing back to me as I swam away from Palancar reef toward the island. I was in about 50 feet of crystal clear water with sunlight dancing in networks of shimmering ribbons across a vast expanse of white sand. I was weightless and, in the warm tropical waters, unencumbered by the awkward restrictions of a wetsuit. The urge that seized me was irresistible: I spread my arms out at my sides and, kicking furiously, I soared and looped, reeled and rolled in three-dimensional space, doing a perfect child's imitation of a barnstorming biplane. It was a delicious, exuberant feeling of pure abandonment; I was in love, and I was free, and I was flying.

