

MICHAEL CUTLIP

Candy Tree, 2011
Mixed Media on Panel, 40 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ERIC DAY

Raised By Trees

Rooted by Stories

1.

One summer about eight years ago, my soon-to-be second wife and I drove up to Utah from our apartment in Phoenix to camp in Zion National Park. We hiked the trails all day, put our feet and faces into the Virgin River, and had an early supper at one of the park's establishments. Resting our happy-wearied bones at the campsite, we made a fire, and soon it was dusk. We enjoyed the view from the canyon floor, the clear sky changing over the sheer rock into night. We talked with a glass of wine between us and watched the stars come out and the trees get darker and darker. Soon, the fatigue we were pretending not to feel descended in earnest and we decided to call it a night. We climbed into our tent and were asleep in minutes.

I have always hated tents. As the youngest child in a family of six, they gave me night terrors, and I've never gotten over it. Getting to sleep's easy, but inevitably I wake, gasping for air and scratching for the zippers. I can lie in a tent all day and feel none of this, reading a book in filtered sunlight with the shadows of leaves trembling across the ceiling, and even doze. But in the dead of night, I scramble. Zion was no exception, only this time my fears were accompanied by song—the child's song, "Baby Beluga." Just those five syllables over and over in my brain, as sung in our apartment pool by my daughter, who was around six at the time. It was her voice I was hearing, her voice as carried over water, across a state line and through the process of divorce.

I stepped out into the night, full of huge and stirring shadows, and stood in my socks on the canyon floor. Crickets droned, wind stirred the treetops, and the Virgin tumbled in the distance. I never felt so small in my life, a mere speck in a black bowl.

This was one of the first trips I took without my daughter coming along. Her mother and I had both met other people, my girlfriend healing my shredded life with every new day. We shared custody. When my daughter was with me we'd swim for hours in our apartment pool. It was near impossible to get her out of the water. She would wrap her arms around my neck and I was the polar bear, or the dinosaur, or the shark, depending on her mood. She sang "Baby Beluga" as we navigated around the pool, dipping