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-weary 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

together—her grip tightening under the surface—to rise again with animal roars into the sun.

I'm convinced I was the only one in the park, and maybe in the whole state of Utah, who was awake and saw what I saw next. I looked up at the stars, which were as vivid as I've ever known—and then, over the darker trees and canyon peaks, something moved. I squinted as a group of stars swirled in the sky: not falling, but rather forming into some kind of pattern. I watched as the silvery shape held onto the figure of a baby whale, like a paisley, and dove into the inky sea. Then it was gone, the singing echoing in my head as though from the end of a long passage. I stood awhile in the night, surrounded by black trees and the unseen Virgin, a little man in the bowl of a canyon, certain of little else than a daughter's pain and a daughter's love.

2.

I went to middle school with a boy named R'Shane. Not only was his apostrophe cool—his parents couldn't agree on a first name, so split the difference—he seemed smarter than everyone, but didn't especially get good grades or care about school. He always had something funny to say and, although I was too full of fear for him to give me much attention, he would flash me mischievous grins or roll his eyes at the folly of the popular and beautiful, which we were not. He was flabby with freckles and clearly poor. But none of this daunted him in the least. He held his head high, and for this I secretly loved him. I say "secretly" only because I didn't tell him so. It was the kind of love I had and continue to have for characters Steve McQueen might have played—smart, aloof, disregarding norms while able to summon the right kind of respect for the right kinds of things. When he cared about kickball, say, or a group project on what items we might keep if stranded on the moon, he gave it everything he had—not to get a good grade or please a teacher or look good, but because he intrinsically cared about that thing. He had passion and wasn't afraid to show it. That is why I loved him and, even though he didn't live to see the horrors of high school, it's why I love him still.

That morning, the news infected every inch of what I thought was our impenetrable middle school. The lights seemed dimmer, and single tears fell down the teachers' rigid cheeks. Girls who had regularly called him "gross" to his face burst out in sobs and left class. Everyone was quiet and thoughtful and no one laughed. Perhaps it was how he died that shocked us all: the finality of it, the lack of a protracted deathbed scene. The images found in the whispered accounts were vivid enough to give us significant pause. I got my information from the source I thought best—his closest friend and biggest foe—a nervous skinny kid with permanent bed head named Paul. He'd known R'Shane his whole life. The giggles that bubbled beneath the surface as he told me, and that rose to his lips as waves of ache, expressed, I thought, a serious awe and a very deep pain. A young boy blown away by a remarkable stunt and then by an absence he had never known.

R'Shane was out riding his green Kawasaki dirt bike as he did most days after school in the forest near his house. (How like McQueen, I always thought, but again, never told him.) A fine rain had fallen. On the surface street he took to get back home, an all-out quarter-mile dash of giddy law-breaking, he hit something—a gnarled branch, or a crack in the pavement—that sent him flying off his bike. A telephone pole's supporting cable stopped him in midair and rendered him in two. Just like that, it was over, and I was not one of those who cried. I only felt anger for not telling him any of these things and how I was never going to have the chance.

The next day, everything was back to normal, and I was shocked—shocked to see the teachers forcing us back to worksheets, making us "dress down" and play games; shocked to see the popular and beautiful laugh it up between their "private" feigned dramas and intrigues. Chatter that was purposely in earshot of those who were not in on it and would never be in on it—I was now without R'Shane's visible disdain to help me see through it all. I believed his particular kind of honesty was worth more than a day, but against such forces I never said a word.

R'Shane's face has appeared to me many times over the years, especially on the days people have given me the gift of themselves and I have said and done exactly nothing about it. And I see it now: his freckled cheeks are cold and damp, his expression frozen in joy as he races against the rushing wind.

3.

When I was nineteen I owned an Alfa Romeo Alfetta sedan with a stick shift—no sports car, to be sure, but pretty tight for a four-door. We had been out drinking and smoking, and as I drove us home for more—cousins and brother in the back, another cousin in the front manning the stereo—the drive-thru order was being distributed to serious dispute. Hendrix's "Purple Haze" cranked, the road peaked, and we took the hill toward a traffic light at the bottom. Each direction had two lanes and we were in the left. Someone tapped an unwrapped cheeseburger on my shoulder, and when I didn't answer the call, left it there, its warmth seeping through my jacket. I looked and couldn't stop laughing—I'd never seen a cheeseburger on my shoulder before—until someone in the back tried yelling but spit fries instead, his finger pointing forward out the windshield. The light was red and two cars, one in each lane, side by side, sat waiting for the green, but it was too late to brake—I remember making that calculation—and Hendrix said, to absolutely no accompaniment, "Excuse me, while I kiss the sky!" as all feeling left me and the whole world went silent and slow. The wheel turned beneath my fingers and I watched, as though from a nearby height, this car full of young idiots go *between* the two stopped cars, enter the intersection and sail right through under the red lights, safely to the other side. Back behind the wheel, I immediately turned into an alley and shut off the stereo. Everyone was frozen.

Then all at once the car went ape shit. People were throwing burgers out the window and stuffing fries into other people's screaming mouths. Cokes were squeezed to nothing. I banged my head on the wheel again and again. Someone was being slapped. We should not have been able to get between the cars. It was a physical impossibility—there hasn't been a time since, when I wait for a light behind two cars, that I haven't considered squeezing through. We checked for damage. There was none, and I was deemed a genius. How, everyone wanted to know, did I manage to get between the cars *and* through the intersection without getting smashed? How was I able to keep an eye out for all the possible ways of destruction and death? I had no answer for them then, and I have no answer for them now. All I remember is the feeling of unfeeling. And the silence—I remember the silence the most.

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4.

Up until the first of us entered high school, my two older brothers and I were made to pray out loud every night at bedtime. We shared a room, so it was a kind of communal event. With the lights out and my mom sitting beside each of us in turn, our petitions went something like this: "Dear God, thank you for everything, thank you for Mom and Dad and my family. Please let me appreciate what I have, and please protect us from all those diseases. In Jesus's name, amen."

By "all those diseases" we meant the diseases we saw on TV long ago, horrible unnamed maladies inflicted on the body, deep within the flesh. They could strike anyone. As the images of rotting insides played in vivid color, my dad decreed that we all ask God to protect us from what we were watching. The request was a classic, said without an iota of feeling, and our prayers varied little from night to night. But afterward, in the silent dark cave of my covers, I'd pray my real prayer: "Dear God, please let my penis get bigger like my brothers', please don't let it stay hairless and small forever." I prayed for protection against skinned knees and bee stings. I begged forgiveness for my constant lying. Thus prayer time was always about the same, with one notable exception.

My oldest brother Jeff was in the eighth grade, putting me in fourth. He didn't have much time for me but

I thought he was about the coolest person in the whole wide world. His attitude, though, was shifting. He seemed poised on the edge of something I could not understand. He fought with our dad more and more, and did everything he could—like lift weights and feather his hair—to distinguish himself from the rest of us. I came out of half-sleep hearing his bedsprings squeaking across the room, and the ugly, frightening sound of his sobs. The room was dark; I saw the outline of our mother with him. When he got control of his sobs he sounded angry, but then he heaved or took great breaths and was crying again, which seemed to physically hurt him. Through all of it he was telling a story.

He told the story of Tony. Also in the eighth grade, his family lived in a shack along the road by the berry fields and he had no friends and didn't speak. He was Native American and Hispanic and heavy, yet his legs were thin. The size of his face was remarkable—it was about the width of my waist. His hair was black and always short, stood on end and never moved. He was slow in movement and thought. Tony had joined the football team and played third string defensive end. It was a custom for the team to wear their white jerseys to school every Friday. Jeff had been on the bus that day. Tony's house was the first stop. He walked off the bus and down the shoulder to the little trail to his house, the number ninety across his broad back in dark blue, and then most on the bus burst out laughing. Some of the windows were open and Jeff swore he saw, as the bus drove away, Tony pause and his big head turn; he had heard. Jeff couldn't believe people had laughed, and he kept saying that in great heaves: *they laughed at him, they laughed, they laughed!*

Here was the coolest, above-it-all guy I knew, weeping so hard his bed moved. My mom started to cry, too, and so did I, all from a single story. All in place of prayer.

5.

My middle school offered a basketball team with no cuts. Good and bad alike came out to play. We were the Damascus Tigers and there were at least forty of us out on the gym floor that first day of practice. Coached by the overweight math teacher, he pushed us pretty hard, probably with the idea of thinning the herd. We could hear the rain pounding on the gym roof, thunder rumbling across the dark sky. We were running "up-and-backs," a torture device that is exactly what it sounds like. From the baseline you're to sprint up to the quarter line, touch it, and return back. Then to midcourt, bend, touch, and back. Same with the three-quarter line, ending with the further baseline and back once more. That counted as one, and Coach told us to do five, all at top speed. Soon into the exercise, the disparity between the strong and the weak became pretty apparent, and I was intent on masking this fact for as long as possible. I went off to the side, having unlaced a shoe on purpose, breathing so hard it felt like my lungs were going to come boiling out of my mouth.

Coach waddled over to me with his clipboard, the rain drumming the gym roof, the boys squeaking and heaving up-and-backs like the lives of their mothers depended on it.

"Seems to be a regular problem with you," he said, even though this was the first time I'd done it. Feeling the exquisite pleasure of having stopped, all I could give him was a pathetic smile. Laced up, I made to reenter the flow, but as I did, I saw the most violent accident I've ever seen in my life. I don't know who was coming and who was going, but it happened as one of the rushing rivers of boys touched the baseline and was springing forth as another guy was coming back, just behind the first. So one had the force of going down, the other of going up, when they collided face-first, and I seemed to be their private viewer.

They stopped among the teeming runners to look at each other, stunned, mouths open, bleeding. One was James Dinette, the coolest kid in school and the best athlete by far. The other was his opposite. I only knew him as Kermit, a doomed name that the presence of thick glasses and pale skin did not help. He had braces, too, which the collision seemed to emphasize. Beautiful James Dinette stumbled beside homely Kermit, who staggered with his hand out against retaliation or in apology. Both were wearing choral masks of horrific sadness and were bleeding from the nose and mouth. Large red drops splotched the gleaming waxed floor. Practice came to a halt gradually, as one by one everyone realized what had happened, stilled by blood.

Ice was eventually administered, and even though they had a row the whole length of the gym to themselves, they sat on the bottom bleacher side by side, their legs touching. Neither was angry at the other. They just sat, the two of them, one usually beautiful and the other usually not, but both the same now in their pain.

6.

I was literally raised by trees. On our land stood a row up the fence line—a holly, a blue spruce, a pair of Douglas firs, and a little lavender. Once, when I was about ten, I'd climbed higher than ever on the spruce, whose limbs were the firmest, with the idea of spying on my family. I ventured out on a limb until I was in view of our house, its face less than twenty feet away and below me. I lay completely stretched out on it, the splayed branches nesting my arms and legs, the limb itself supporting my torso. Branches bowed above and all around, giving me cover to begin my mission: spying on our front door through an opening framed by bluish needles. No one could see me. No one knew where I was. I felt like if I stayed there I could surely cheat death.

My brother Mark came outside with the football, looking for me and calling my name. He tossed the ball gently to himself, waiting, listening, finally shrugging and going back in.

My oldest brother Jeff soon appeared. Thinking he was alone, he dropped and gave the world twenty, rose and stripped off his shirt, and stepped closer to the house, flexing in the reflection of the big front windows. Satisfied of his superior bod, he reentered the domestic situation, shirt in hand.

My sister appeared later, dressed neatly, strolling up and down the walkway. She was talking to herself and gesturing, even laughing once or twice at what she said. I understood she was rehearsing for a conversation she intended to have, probably with our mother. As I had this insight, she stopped, three-quarters down the walk, and her shoulders tensed. She looked in my direction, but not up. She rubbed her hands together and patted her hair and went inside, letting the screen door slam.

My mom came out with a huge jar of tea, set it on the lawn in the full sun. The jar was glass with orange flowers on it. I could see the floating tea bags. Later it would be brewed and cooling in the fridge. She crossed her arms and looked all around, for nothing and at nothing, it seemed. Just a general taking account, a vague appraisal, I thought, of her life and where it had gotten her. These were the moments before my dad returned—the salad chopped, the meat marinating, surfaces clear. She patted her hair and went in, careful the screen door didn't slam.

As I began to get drowsy, my dad came roaring beneath me in our wagon, home from his salesman job. The dogs came bursting out, circling his legs, his briefcase. He bent down on the walkway, picked up a rock, and threw it onto the gravel drive. He, too, took a general appraisal. The lawn was mowed and most of the place was in order. Nine-to-five work was worth it, his manner seemed to say. A bubble of joy rose in him and he actually shook for a moment. It was the end of the Carter years, and his evening news ritual held much in store for him in terms of the I-told-you-so style of mockery. Plus, it was Friday, payday for him, and rare sirloins to look forward to. The good things were piling on him. He'd be out of his suit before the screen door could slam.

Up there, in that serene, shady privacy, I realized I loved these people, in versions past and present, real and imaginary. I vowed one day to show them, too, not by the stale act of telling them, but by representing them as truly as I could in all these very moments. Even though I eventually dozed, free-falling to the ground, giving myself my first shiner, I am still in that tree, overlooking and dreaming. I am convinced there is something in preservation, that moving on is not everything. Beyond all pretense and surfaces, we have our stories, which root us to this world, shaping us long after the facts are in, no matter how black or blue.

Eric Day lives and writes in Phoenix, Arizona. He is currently working on a collection of creative nonfiction about growing up in rural Oregon in the 1980s, called *Raised by Trees*.