

comes, she will pass beyond. So for days we sit on the beach, naked and innocent as toddlers, and talk about the art of words, about how she might begin.

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It's cold down here. The warm bands of water flow higher up. Someone is playing with the light. Green going murky, then wands of light, dark again. It's so noisy under the pounding surf. I think I am drowning. I am bouncing, rolling along the bottom of the ocean, being dragged further out by the undercurrent, above the whole heaving chest of the sea. It is stupid to die body-surfing only yards from shore. I paw at the surface, desperately kicking for the light. I have always been a lousy swimmer, and lousy swimmers shouldn't be body-surfing in big waves. There are no lifeguards on this beach. It's the proverbial "one last one" that's doing me in—catch one more good wave and I'll call it quits. I have stayed out too long, past exhaustion, past good judgment.

I'm up, sputtering. I turn in time to see a huge wave breaking. It doubles over and crashes on top of me. A half gasp filled with surf foam. A great hand of water pushes me beneath again. Why is it so lonely? All those connections we make throughout our lives, inaccessible at the very last. I am hauled deeper, the undertow as heavy as a whale. The panic has passed. You just get so tired. You just get plumb tired.

Then, as if it were only making a point, I am released, or spat out because I no longer have the strength to fight. Effortlessly, I rise to the shimmering surface. The first breath comes as great gifts often do, with great agony.

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I stand beneath a Hawaiian luminescence, on a moon-bleached beach, smiling at the ripples tickling my toes, the water black, gel-like. Offshore, the surf breaks white like the dust bank of a chariot battalion, held in permanent stasis, approaching but never any closer. The shadowy palms, the crinkled face of the sea, the sand reflecting many shades of midnight blue. Beneath the stars, the ocean's tang is not sharp. A scent of lush grass. The air so soft it is difficult to find the boundary between one's skin and the night. Tomorrow, I'll make my way back to the mainland, back to my unfinished life. So, I'm leaving the islands yet again.

I walk across a vast rocky field. The trail appears and vanishes at will under bushes, through clumps of grass, and around boulders. Rats rustle boldly in the shrubs, the mongooses have long gone to nest. At first I am startled to find a scarecrow in a barren land. But it is a man. He stands limply, giving the impression of being strung up by his own clothes, his head canted at the moon as if in conversation. A thin, bearded face, deep eyes hidden beneath the brim of his straw hat. Sandals on his feet.

Ow's-it? he says. Good, I say. We shake hands. He has been drinking. He wants to know why I came to the island. It feels like home, I say, but I could never stay long. He is from Portland, Oregon. I admit that I have lived there and that I loved it despite the rain. His voice lights up, Really? What a small world! I lived behind Common Ground Cafe, he says, tipping back the brim of his hat, peering at me. Have you been there? Yes, I reply, the feng shui in that place is still terrible. We share a chuckle. He flings questions at me, anxious to know if I have been there, or there; did I remember so-and-so? I have the feeling that great pains lurk in his past. I can tell by the way his eyes search mine that he is a man crushed by loneliness. A face of irreparable grief. I'm so glad to see you, he says; most people can't appreciate this beauty. I nod to be agreeable. Really, anyone can see we are both fugitives. Cloaked in his aura of sweat-liquor, we stand there and talk about things gone, as a fat moon climbs over us. When our legs begin to ache from standing too long, the night growing old, it is time to bid goodbye. He pulls me into a crushing hug, shivering as if a violent gale is sweeping through him, then he hurries into the dark forest.

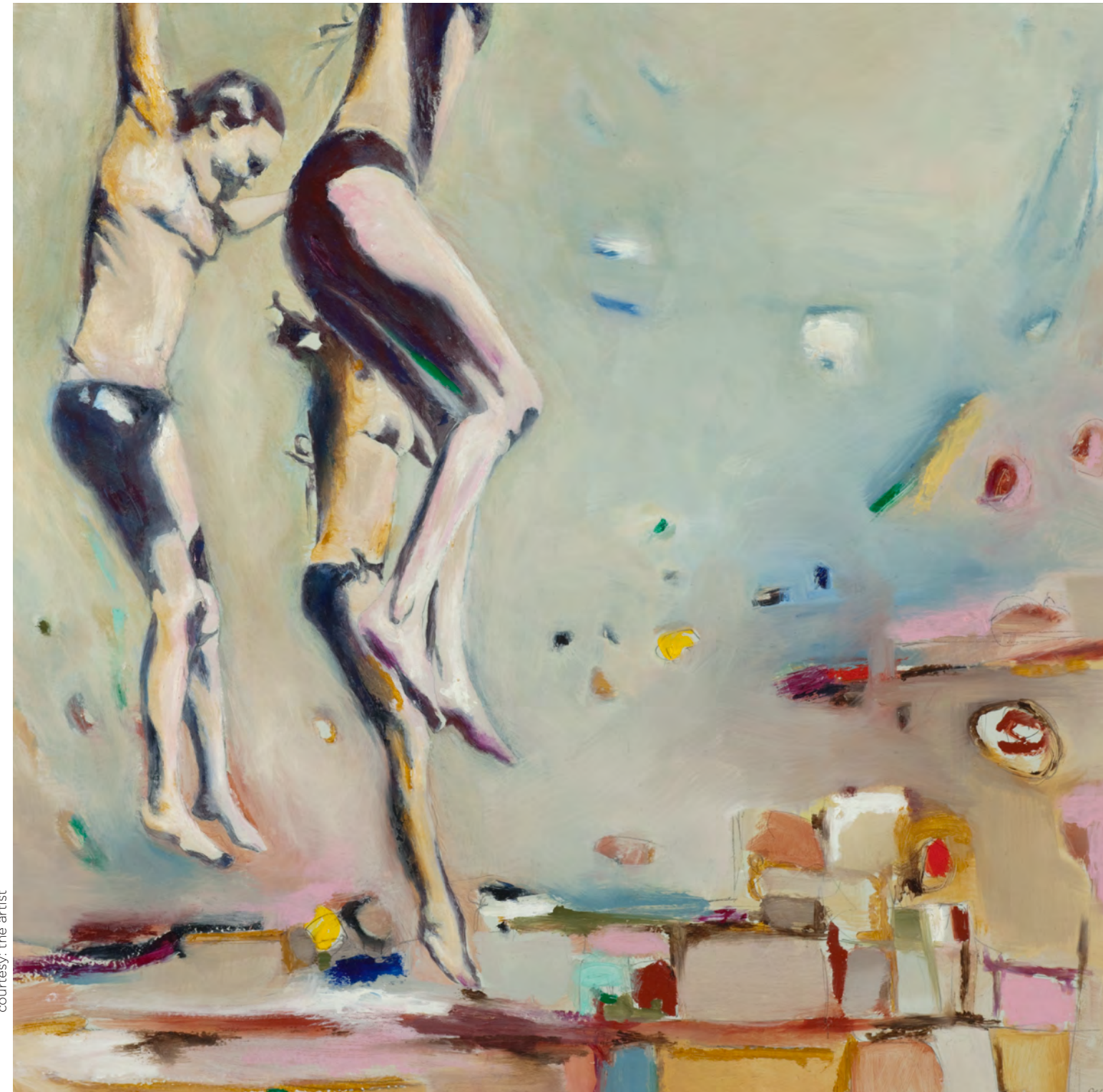
I stand alone, looking at the moon.

I stand there a minute, or, perhaps, a full turn of the stars as the invisible rats scurry around me in the silver weed.

**Andrew X. Pham** is a Whiting Writer and a Guggenheim Fellow. He has won the Kiriya Prize and is a National Book Critics Circle award Finalist. He is the author of *Catfish and Mandala*, *The Eaves of Heaven*, and he translated *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*. Andrew is Chief Spoon at Spoonwiz.com

## SARAH BIANCO

*Jump #3*, 2012  
Oil on Panel, 16 x 16 in.



courtesy: the artist