

DAVID CAMPBELL

Running, 2015
oil on linen, 17 x 17 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

RICHARD HUFFMAN

The Strange Decency of Things

Against his better judgment, Harold leaned the ladder against the trunk of the peach tree. When he was younger it would have been a snap to climb to the top where the fruit was largest. Now it was an effort just to get the ladder positioned right. With no one around to help if he fell he was rethinking the wisdom of it all when he heard the scream.

At first he thought it was a bird. When it stopped and then started again he realized it was someone down by the river, at the bottom of his property. He knew kids liked playing by the water. He had found a trio of young girls there last summer, screeching away like they were being murdered but they were just acting out some sort of hide-and-seek that required them to scream like maniacs when they were found. He had shooed them away and put on a mean act so they wouldn't return. He was worried one of them might fall in the water, which, even in midsummer, flowed strong and deep enough to drown a child. Or an adult, for that matter. *Probably just those kids playing*, he thought. If it was those girls again he would call their parents.

He headed down the slope and through the trees carefully, gripping branches and laying his hand against trunks for support. He wished he could hike like he once did, but it wasn't long before he needed to rest. He leaned against a maple, listening, his own raspy breath the only sound. He hadn't been in the woods since last year. The quiet alleviated his fear of death and he had always hoped it might come quickly in a place like this; a misfired heartbeat, going unconscious before he fell onto a mat of summer leaves with the maple seeds helicoptering down, blanketing his body.

Near the bottom, his property flattened out. He stopped every few feet, cocking his head to locate any noise. The foliage was thick, making it difficult to see very far. *I hope nobody's stuck in the water*, he thought, wondering how he would be able to help. He wished he had thought to bring a rope. *I would just have to go get somebody and hope they hang on*.

Then, there they were. Two boys, the bigger one grinning at the other one, who was on all fours. There was an old wood barrel tipped on its side between them. The boy on the ground looked like he was about to crawl inside. He was sobbing, begging the other one not to make him do it. The bigger boy laughed. "Go out! Get in there! I'm