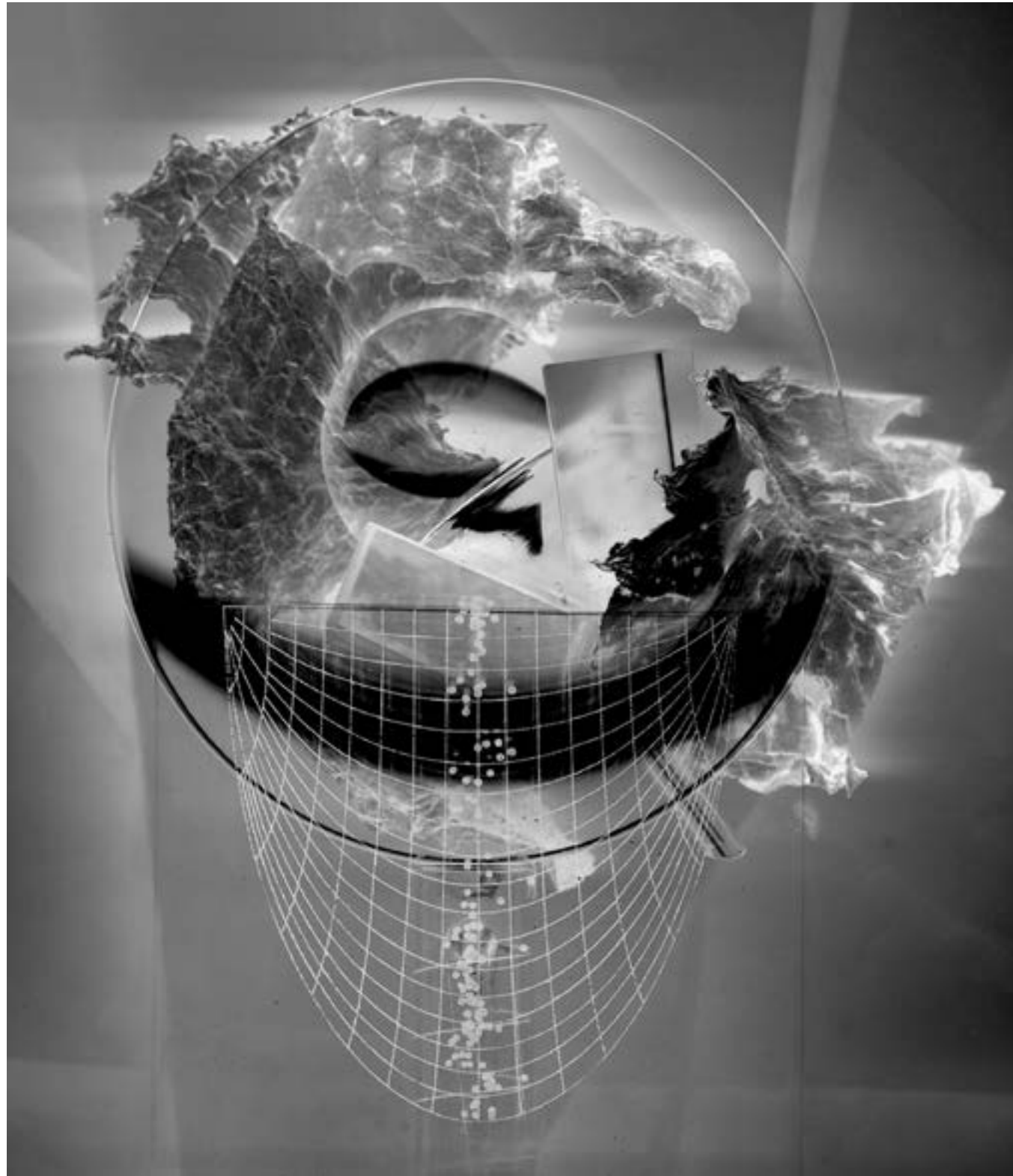


## CHERYL CALLERI

*Gathering Symmetry #7, 2017*  
Pigment print, 5 x 5 1/2 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## NICHOLAS DIGHIERA

### Clam Beach, California

#### Life lessons from camping

I was nine years old, leaning with both my hands against a tree, when my mom said from behind me, “I’m sorry.” She was already crying.

She swung the stick she was holding, thick as her wrist and six feet long, and hit me across the ass. She did this again and again, the thwap of it echoing up into the mountains, until the stick broke into pieces too small for her to hit me with. When she was done I turned around. By then I was crying. She was still crying. She said, again, “I’m sorry.” There was no explanation of why.

Earlier in the day, I had gotten lost. My aunt and uncle, replete with my cousins, were camping in the mountains and we had decided, as a family, to spend the day with them. Through a series of miscommunications, I had trekked miles upstream on a snow-fed creek without letting my mother know. After hours of not being able to find me, she lost her mind with fear and panic; and after I returned, soaking wet and shaking, her fear had consumed her. She beat me with that stick and told me I couldn’t leave the car for the rest of the day.

My mother and I don’t talk about this. Her shame about how she responded is as fresh now as it was nearly thirty years ago. I feel completely ambivalent about the event, though. It’s air through my lungs.

I didn’t understand any of this until the summer of 2015.

\* \* \*

I’m thirty-three now. I have two sons of my own, and we are spending the summer living in my van and driving across the American West. Dominic and Finn, eight and five, have never lived with me without their mother. We are about halfway through our fifty-three days on the road, and I am becoming aware that maybe we weren’t ready for this trip. Or maybe it’s just me.

We are on Highway 299 in California, driving west toward the Pacific Ocean. It’s just before lunch. The sun is high. No clouds can be seen. Dominic is reading a book in the back seat as we maneuver through corners that conform to the shape of the Trinity River. Finn is napping. The stereo is playing song after song and the air coming in the window is thick with humidity that’s holding on to the coolness of morning.

Finn wakes up. I see him feeling the seat in the rear-view. Feeling his crotch.

“What’s up, buddy?” I ask.

“I think the water spilled again, Dad,” he says. His bottle is prone to leaking and he is patting the seat around him with the palm of one hand holding the bottle in the other.

“Is it open?”

“No. But I think it leaked.”

“Are you sure? Dominic, check if it’s open.”

Dominic puts his book down and grabs the bottle.

“It’s closed, Dad,” he says. “I don’t think it leaked.” He gives the bottle back to his brother and returns to his book.

“Then what is it, Finn?”

I already know what it is. And he already knows what it is. Because this happens almost every day and no one can seem to do anything about it.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I think it’s water.”

“If the bottle hasn’t spilled then it can’t be water, Finn. What is it?”

“I don’t know, Dad.” He is still patting the seat.

“Yes you do. Yes you fucking do. What is it?”

It would strike me as peculiar here, if I were thinking about that, how quickly things are going beyond my control. But I’m not thinking. I’m just reacting.

“I DON’T KNOW.” He’s red-faced now, his tears just beginning to trickle out.

“Don’t you fucking yell at me,” I say. And then I yell, “TELL ME WHAT IT IS, FINN.”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell me you fucking peed, Finn. Say it.”

“I think it’s water. I didn’t pee, Dad.”

“SAY IT!”

We are driving uphill through back-to-back hairpins and there is a line of cars behind us that I cannot see the end of. Finn is crying in the back, Dominic is staring at his book but no longer reading, and I am screaming.

“SAY IT!”

“I think I peed.” Then he is quiet. Defeated.

I pile more on.

“Don’t think, Finn. Say what you did. Say you peed.”

His tears are the real kind that seem to come from everywhere and don’t stop. He is rubbing both eyes with balled fists. He says, “I peed, Dad.”

This doesn’t feel like winning.

I whip the wheel over at the next turnout and slide the van to a stop. And I scream and scream and scream.

I scream at him to get out and change into clean clothes, giving him baby wipes to wash with. I scream at him to get the paper towels and a trash bag. And I scream at him while I soak his piss up with towel after towel until the seat is mostly dry. He cries. He tells me that he wishes that he was home. That he had never gone on this trip. I scream back that if he can’t control his piss he probably shouldn’t have.

It’s because I want him here more than anything that I know this is wrong, but that voice is tiny in my head, and I cannot hear it over the monster I’ve become.

Things settle a bit while I make them lunch. I can’t eat because my shame is nauseating, so I walk around outside the van while they eat in silence inside.

I call my mom.

“I can’t do this,” I say, starting the phone call. “I wasn’t cut out to be a parent.”

She doesn’t miss a beat, saying, “You’re a good father and you are trying something that most wouldn’t.”

“Failing, Mom. I’m failing.”

Then my voice goes really high, like a child’s, as I fight to talk through the tears. I tell her everything that just happened, and she listens like a stone. She doesn’t criticize and only reaffirms that trying is the hardest thing you can do as a parent. I spend the whole call telling her how much I love them and how much they deserve a better father. Cars race by on the 299 beside me, and I feel my neck getting burned by the sun. There is a buzz in the forest from all the bugs. I tell her this love is too much to bear.

Then I hear them wrestling, and I wish they had just said they were done. I finish with my mom and go back to the van.

They are punching each other in the back seat, and I say, “Do I seem like I can handle that right now?”

“No,” they say.

“Then cut that shit out.”

They do.

I wash the dishes. Dominic dries. I can’t stop bringing up the seat, though, like some sick, self-destructive addiction. We are halfway through the dishes and I ask, “Finn, do you understand that you just peed where Dominic sleeps at night?”

He says nothing. He is looking at his shoes. The ground. His own shame.

“Do you even care?”

More cars pass on the highway beside us, and I can hear the locusts in the trees even louder now, rubbing their legs together. And in a voice that sounds like a dream, he says, “Yes.”

This answer doesn’t matter, though, because that’s not what I am after.

I don’t know what I am after, I guess. I just want to tell them how beautiful they are.

Instead I continue to mutilate them with words and watch helplessly from behind my eyes.

We put the dishes away and I drive. They fall asleep, Finn with tears dried to his face. I listen to music and cry.

The 299 twists by and soon we are in Arcata and I head north on the 101. I look in the mirror and see that the boys have woken up. I don’t know how to fix what happened before. I feel like I’ve stabbed myself in a way that I cannot repair. They are just sitting in the back seat now, saying nothing. Looking out the window. And I just want them to love me as much as I love them. But I have no words to say this in a way they would understand.

But I try anyway.

“Finn, do you want to see the ocean?”

He answers my question by opening his eyes all the way and nodding slowly. There is no evidence that he was weeping earlier. The smile on his face is openmouthed. Toothy.

I steer the van to Clam Beach. And when I park they are already at the sliding door waiting to jump out.

We walk the sandy path toward the water. The breeze is cool and light and the tall grass on the short dunes flows around us. The sand is hot even though the beach is covered in fog and I can’t see the sun. Soon, sandals are off and the boys are sprinting to the roaring sound in front of us. There are driftwood logs piled in spots near the edges of the grass. Beyond that is a slope of sand that extends to the watery horizon. The boys are out front and a haze makes it look like they are running in slow motion. I hear seabirds above but there are none to be seen in this fog. I walk forward and listen to the boys exploring this space. They laugh and ask each other questions about things on the beach. I sit back from where the water reaches. I dig my toes into the sand.

“Bring your shoes over, guys.” I wave at them and they trot over, little rooster tails of sand flying behind each foot.

They babble over all the things they have seen already and rush off to see more.

The waves break, the shushing sound moving forward and back. It moves through me as I watch these little boys run around. Dominic is digging in the sand and rolling and rolling. Finn is collecting crab parts and putting them at my feet. And the air moves through my beard, and the waves come close and then far, and things settle in a way that makes all this time seem so precious. So rare.

Forgiveness is the brilliance of being a child. I think back to my mom, talking to her earlier in the day. Beating me with the stick. And a love too big to bear. Dominic and Finn are zooming around in front of me, laughing and yelling and running into and out of the water. They couldn’t be happier, though less than two hours ago we were on a dusty roadside pullout bearing witness to the monster that I become. These kids, they forgive me in a way I cannot do for myself. They provide this holy touch that just, for a brief moment, wipes the sins clear and they make it okay to be flawed. It’s like they understand these sins without knowing the words to describe them, and they absolve them anyway. These guys know I’m trying. And that I’m failing. But it’s the trying they see. It’s like they understand how big this love is and how hard it is to hold it all up.

So they continue to run the beach, their unspoken forgiveness like small bandages covering the wounds between us. And my mom is out there in the world somewhere, having hung up the phone feeling those same bandages of forgiveness.

The earth spins and the sun moves somewhere behind all the fog and this time will soon come to a close. And when it does I’ll keep trying to hold all this up, with these two little boys to tell me it’s okay to drop it every once in a while.

For now, though, I shout, “Hey, I love you guys,” but they are far off and I don’t think that they can hear me. But I think they already know.

**Nicholas Dighiera** is an organic meat machine consistently in existential crisis. He can fix almost anything and his favorite piece of playground equipment is the swing. Currently, he resides in Seattle and would be humbled that you read his work, some of which can be found in *Fugue*, *Wordsworthing.com*, and *River Teeth*.