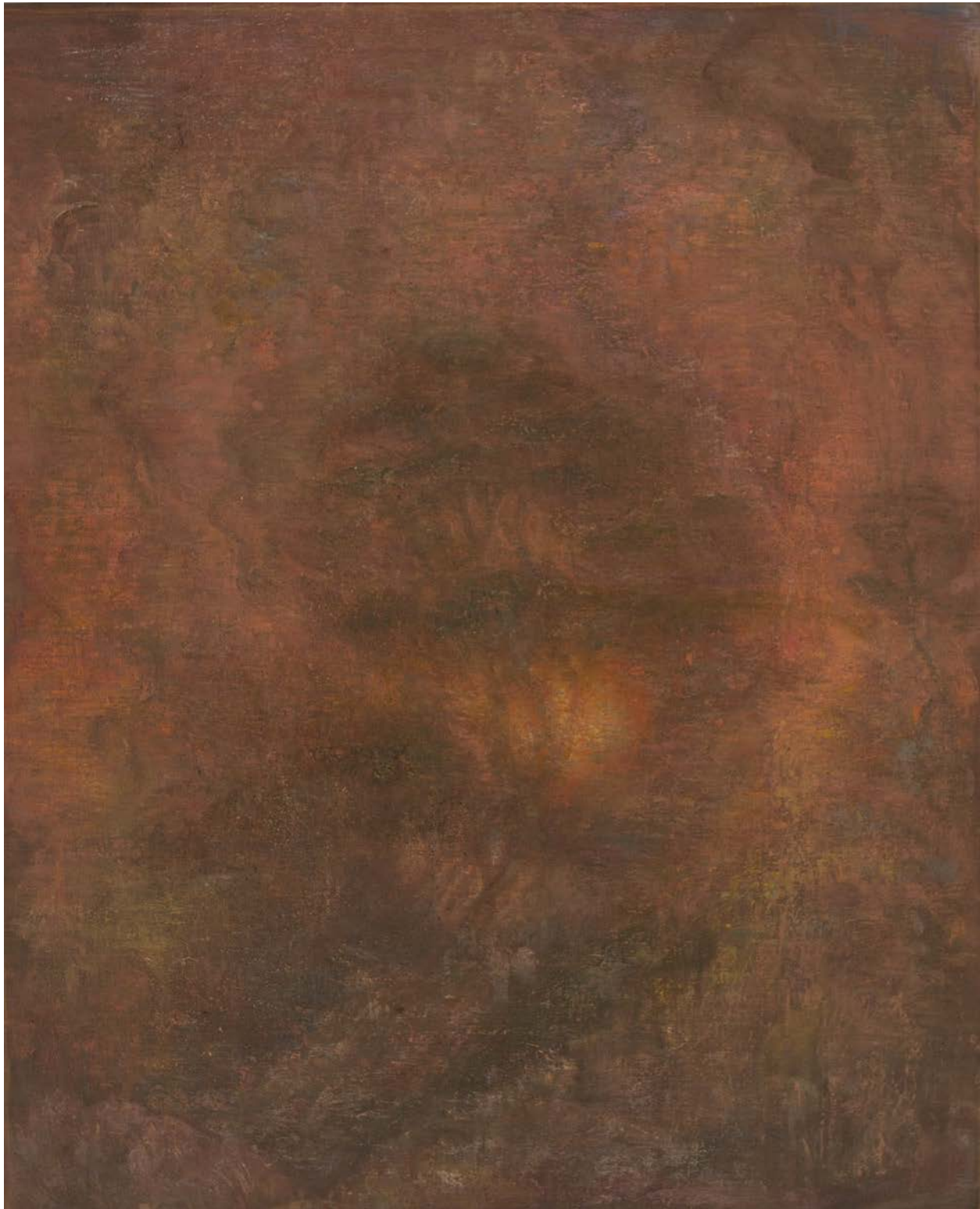


ERIC HOLZMAN

Miazaki Sunset, 2015
Oil on Canvas, 55.5 x 71 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

NICHOLAS DIGHIERA

Silver Forks,
California

*Camping with my kids
and how, at any moment,
I could lose it all*

I have these dreams where Dominic falls. Each time it’s different. In one of them, he and I are framing in a skylight on the roof. It’s sunny and I can feel the warmth of the tar paper under my knees and under the palms of my hands. Dominic is squatted by the skylight. He is five in this dream, stubby with moppy hair, and looking into the opening at the concrete below. The ceilings are high in this house, and when I take my eyes off of him he throws things down the hole. Mostly nails. I can hear a plinking sound as each one strikes. Then I reach for something, I don’t remember what, and he stands to pull something out of his hip pocket. It’s probably some pennies or something else to drop. And he tips over and falls through the hole.

I lean over and look in. It’s not something you want to see, your son all twisted up like that, legs wrapped back where they shouldn’t be. He’s moving, but I can’t tell if that is just reflex. I run across the roof. I run down the ladder. I run through the house. I run everywhere. I’m always yelling in these dreams. I don’t know what I am saying, but I suppose if this happened in real life I would be yelling and I wouldn’t know what the words would be either. When I get there I lift him up and he feels like a tiny, warm sleeping bag filled with kindling. There is a meat sound to his wheezing and I can feel his bones shifting like rocks knocking together underwater. And his eyes are open. Way open. They are glassy and bright and the green in them hurts to look at more than anything in the world. I never expect that, the eyes, but it’s always the same. And his mouth is open, closed, open, closed, open, closed. But the only thing coming out is the wheezing and the meat sound.

I wake up here. I dry heave sometimes. Then, if he is around, I go to him. I watch him sleep. His breathing is easy and clear. Light snores. And then I go make some coffee and stare out the window wondering how I could ever love something so much.

* * *

We are driving Highway 50 through the Sierra Nevada and this stretch of asphalt has been climbing for miles. It’s early afternoon and the clouds are close and thick, blanketing the peaks. The day has been dragging; I decide it’s time to camp.

*Dominic pulls
the invisible leash
again and Finn jerks
forward, like the air
connects them.*

“How about this spot, guys?” I say this and look in the rearview. Their necks get long as they struggle to look out the driver’s side of the van.

“The trees are big, Dad.” Finn says.

“Is that a river?” Dominic asks.

“Looks like a creek, buddy.”

“I think it’s probably a river,” he says.

“I’m sure we can find out,” I say and slow down and turn into the campground.

The camp road is wider than the van. But just. We thread between tall evergreens shooting up in a boulder field. The boys point to rocks and say they are going to climb this one or slide down that one or Dad, can you roll this one down the hill. I drive around looking for a level campsite.

I park in a site near the back, beside the creek. As I turn off the engine, I hear the water rushing by below. There is a picnic table a few steps away and the boys are unbuckled and out of the van running to it. They fight over who is going to jump off of it first, but Dominic wins because his is older and faster.

I think about asking them to help set up camp. But I watch instead. They quickly go from table jumping to a game where Finn is some kind of animal and is Dominic’s pet. Dominic is sitting on our bear locker, pinching invisible food into Finn’s mouth. He makes sure Finn does the tricks correctly before offering the treats.

I set up alone. They play a little longer, then I gather them up and we walk over to pay for our site.

Dominic says, “Finn, come here, boy. Come here.” He

is pulling an invisible leash as we walk the narrow road back to the camp manager’s RV.

“Cut it out, dude. He’s your brother not your dog,” I say.

“It’s a game, Dad,” he says, still pulling the leash. Finn is panting and hobbling around like Quasimodo.

“I don’t give a shit. We don’t treat people like animals, Dominic. This is common sense type stuff.”

“I’m not an animal, I’m a pet,” Finn says.

“What’s the distinction?” They both dawdle behind me.

“I’m not extinct,” Finn says.

“No, not *ex*-tinction. *Dis*-tinction. What’s the difference between an animal and a pet?”

Dominic pulls the invisible leash again and Finn jerks forward, like the air connects them. And Dominic says, “It’s just a game. He isn’t going to go extinct.”

I stop questioning.

We get to the RV and pay the manager. He tells us there is a trail called Potholes at the other end of the campground that leads to a stream. We decide to check it out.

As we turn to walk away, Dominic says, “He said stream, Dad. I told you it wasn’t a creek.”

“No, buddy, you said it was a river. That’s not the same thing.”

“I said stream,” Finn says.

I look at him. He’s smiling, but I can’t really tell anything at all from it.

“No you didn’t,” I say. “Come on.”

We walk back to the van and the clouds part. The sun cuts in, but it’s still cold while we rifle through the van, grabbing our water bottles and donning our jackets. The blue footprints are near our camp and we follow them. It’s a short walk to the edge of the campground and then we are on the trail.

It’s quiet. We pass granite boulders that give way to open patches carpeted with brown needles. Then the trail disappears and we are at the edge of the water. I look downstream and watch as it flows between Jacuzzi-sized pools, one flowing into the other as far as I can see. There are no loose rocks. The stream is broken apart by large, clean boulders creating islands into the horizon.

“Guys, are you seeing this?”

“Dad, can I go jump?” Dominic looks at me.

I walk over to the stream and dip my hand in. It’s clear and very cold and I wipe the back of my hand on my pants.

“It’s cold, guys,” I say. They both clamor to the edge and stick their fingers in.

“That’s chilly, Dad,” Dominic says.

Finn says, “Can I swim?”

“No, buddy. You don’t even know how to swim. And we don’t know where this goes. What if you get washed away?”

He shrugs.

Then I look downstream again, to the horizon, and watch the high clouds undulate as they move by. The stream pushes downhill across the pocked face of the rock and disappears into the sky and I cannot conjure a place or time better than this.

“Let’s jump,” I say and smile. “Just don’t try shit that’s too far. That means you, Finn.”

“Yesssss,” Finn says. Dominic echoes.

And we jump.

They jump from island to island. I jump too. Some of the jumps are far and I wonder if Finn can make them. He is deft and clever, and when he sees a jump he can’t make he finds a way around. Some of the gaps are short and I watch their eyes light up as they fly. The shallows whip into froth as they squeeze through skinny portals. These notches give way to wider openings where the water is still and deep, deep blue. There are dead crayfish everywhere and we poke their carcasses with sticks. We split up, but I am never far from them. And we laugh, each one bounding back and forth across the water.

At one point it spreads wide and there is an oversized bonsai tree at the edge of the water. It’s alone on a rock, its roots laid about it like discarded rope. There is one large slab of pink granite with a blade of agate running through it almost forty-feet long. This slab is at the downstream side of the wide pool, and it dips low in the middle, where water pours over it as an afterthought, like it never saw it coming. I walk over to the edge.

“Guys, don’t come this way,” I say.

The water spills over the edge and into a jagged crack that goes underneath a cliff band extending in front of us. There are dozens of smooth logs piled up and they fracture the water as it hits. The fall isn’t far. Probably thirty-five feet. But it’s killing distance.

Both boys tiptoe over and I shoo them back.

“What did I just say?”

Finn says, “Not to fall off the edge.”

*The stream pushes
downhill across the
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rock and disappears
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“No,” I say. “What EXACTLY did I say?”

“Not to come this way,” Dominic says. It is unusual that he admits that he has heard me. I pause a moment.

Then I say, “So why are you?”

“Sorry, Dad.” They say this together.

I come back from the edge and we circle right and head out onto the cliff. We keep close to the edge because the cliff is an arrangement of jags and juts but it’s not dangerous to keep them walking or jumping to my right. I hang to the outside to fence them in, one eye on my footing and one eye on them. Ahead, there is a large rectangular boulder on its side with a smaller boulder attached to it, like a bench. I tell the boys to stick to the long, flat run they are on and stay back from the edge. They nod. I jog ahead to see the rectangle. It’s right at the cliff, the sky pouring down to angular boulders below. I set my water bottle down and turn back.

They are both waiting, stuck at an impasse. It’s a gap too large for them to jump with a steep drop into a deep hole. Dominic is throwing rocks into it.

“Stop,” I say. And he does. Then I say, “Come on guys, we’re going to sit on that boulder and have some water. Watch the clouds.”

*Exquisite and acute
panic claws its way
up my throat and
threatens to tear
out of my chest and
there is no dream to
save either of us.*

“I can’t jump this, Dad,” Finn says. He stays back but bends to look.

Dominic starts backing up, getting ready. His one fist is balled up and the other hand is gripping his water bottle so tightly that his fingernails are bright pink.

“Fucking stop right there, Dominic.”

He looks at me and says, “What?”

“Don’t what me. Yes, sir, is what I want to hear.”

“I can make it, Dad.”

“I don’t give a fuck, you aren’t going to try. What if you fell?”

And they don’t say a word. I don’t either. I think it’s the first time we’ve all thought about what would happen if he fell. If any of us fell. I ask myself if this is what love is, this agitation with your children because they unwittingly try to destroy themselves. Sometimes it feels like the moment you stop watching them they’ll explode into a million pieces and it’s only your love holding them together. That you can’t look away, not for a second.

A songbird flies overhead and croons a warbling note.

Then Dominic says, “Yes, sir.” His shoulders slump and he stays put.

I walk over to the gap and straddle it, then I ferry the boys over. They swing on my arm like Indiana Jones, like it’s a game.

“Stay right here while I get over to the cliff,” I say.

I turn my back on them and walk to the cliff; at the edge, I turn to my right and call them over. Dominic is already approaching and I open my mouth to say something about him not listening to what I said even though I just fucking said it. My mouth stays open, but nothing comes out. I realize that I don’t see Finn. I turn back to the left and he is walking between the edge and me. A space of one foot. My turn startles him and he does a two-step shuffle to get his balance back but he starts to tip over anyway.

Things happen quickly.

I play the whole thing out. The fall. The timelessness of it. The agony of waiting and waiting and waiting for him to hit the ground knowing that when he does the situation won’t improve. The running. The wailing. And the bloody, wheezing bag filled with kindling that surprisingly isn’t Dominic. The phone call to their mother. The endless nights of whiskey and crying and apologies. As I see these things, I also see an arm extend so fast that it cannot be mine. I see the fist at the end of the arm seizing Finn’s jacket like a vice. The fingertips get some of the thin skin on his chest too, but the fist does not care. Then the body possessing this arm pivots back, and Finn is brought around like a prize in an arcade crane game and delivered at his brother’s feet. After this act is complete, I realize this arm was mine.

“What the fuck were you thinking,” I say. But I don’t get past that. I sit down on the bench boulder that Dominic is now sitting on and I start to cry. Finn hasn’t said a word. Dominic is quiet. He holds his water bottle and flicks the cap open and closed. He takes a drink. I pick up my bottle and do the same.

“Drink some water, Finn.” I snort up the snot that has begun running and then wipe the rest of my face-mess on the back of my hand.

“Okay,” he says. He pops the top on his water and it shoots a small jet onto his jacket. “It did it again, Dad.”

He looks up at me and tears are streaking down his face. His eyes are glassy and the blue in them makes me ache. The whites are hot pink and the only thing I can think is how happy I am there are words coming out of his mouth instead of meat wheezing sounds. He has clear mucus leaking out of one nostril and he licks it away and he is more beautiful than anything I have ever seen.

“It’s the pressure, buddy. The altitude. Pushes the water out.”

“Okay,” he says. He brushes at the water on his jacket even though it’s already soaked in.

The clouds are moving a million miles an hour. Piling up on themselves. Tearing apart. They keep smashing together and bubbling up out of each other, giving birth to new clouds. The wind is moving fast up there but down here it’s still. I can feel the waterfall in my chest in all this silence we are creating. Finn takes a drink and I hear the hydraulic sound of the water moving through the straw. He swallows and makes a sighing sound. Like it’s a commercial for Coke and we are having an afternoon at the beach.

Then he says, “I almost went extinct, huh.”

Again, my mind goes back to the dream. I play it all back. All the times I have seen Dominic’s dying body bleeding out. But it’s the eyes. That’s the hardest part. Looking into his eyes, dream upon dream, and knowing that there’s nothing I can do and that he is going to go on to the next place without me. That he is afraid of what comes next and so am I and there are no words to fill the gap between us that will make anyone feel better.

I look into Finn’s eyes again and see that same look even though this isn’t the end. Exquisite and acute panic claws its way up my throat and threatens to tear out of my chest and there is no dream to save either of us.

It was *this* close.

And I say, “No, buddy, I did. I almost went extinct.”

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, Washington, and is humbled that you read his work; he lists you, the reader, as one of his finest friends.