

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 on! Get in there! I'm

going to roll you in the river. You do what I tell you!” They were intent on each other, one tormenting, the other pleading. They were just kids, maybe nine or ten years old. He winced when the prone boy screamed and begged not to have to do it. “My God,” Harold whispered.

“What’s going on here?” he said, stepping into the clearing.

The boy on the ground looked up, frightened. His face was smudged with dirt and tears. He sniffled back snot dripping from his nose. He didn’t seem relieved to see Harold.

The older boy eyed Harold like they were equals. “We’re just playin’,” he sneered.

“Playing?” Harold looked at the boy and then at the other. “Doesn’t sound like playing to me.”

Harold wondered why the boy on the ground didn’t get up. He just stayed there like a trained dog awaiting its owner’s command.

“It’s just a game,” the older boy said. “He’s just being a sissy.”

“No, I don’t think it’s a game.” Harold gestured to the boy to get up. “This just a game to you?” he asked the boy.

The boy pushed himself up. He wiped his shirt sleeve across his nose and sniffled again. He shrugged and mumbled something. His shoulders slumped and his chin drooped like he was ashamed.

Harold flipped his hand back up the hill indicating a general direction he wanted the bully to go. “You get on home. I don’t want you on this property again. I catch you here again I call the police.”

The boy stared. He didn’t move off at the command like Harold thought he should. For a moment Harold thought the boy was actually going to challenge his authority.

“I’m not foolin’ with you!” Harold put some bite into his voice. “Now get!”

The boy tightened his jaw. He still seemed ready to take on Harold. Then he snorted a laugh. “I’ll be seein’ you later!” he said to the other boy, in a voice that seemed fabricated from some dramatic actor he’d seen. He walked off, trudging up the hill quickly on sturdy legs, and disappeared into the heavily leafed saplings and underbrush.

When he was gone Harold asked the smaller boy his name. The boy shrugged.

“Why did you let him bully you like that?”

Another shrug. Face downcast.

“You have to stick up for yourself.”

The boy nodded ever so lightly, like he was being scolded.

Harold sighed. “What are you going to do when he comes after you again?”

Another shrug. “I dunno,” in a whisper. He glanced up the hill.

“You come back up with me. He’s not going to come back here, but you need to defend yourself next time you see him.”

A nod, unconvincing.

They walked separately up the hill. The boy trailing behind and not saying anything, stopping when Harold needed to catch his breath, never offering to help; standing off a ways. Harold thought the boy seemed totally uninterested in everything. Didn’t ask Harold his name, or say thanks, or if he liked the woods or was frightened by them ... or anything.

When they came up to the lawn and the fruit trees, Harold said the boy should wait a minute and then sat on a stump to gather himself, his breath coming in spurts. The effort of walking up the hill coupled with whatever was inside of him sapped his strength. He wasn’t sure if he could get back up. *Was that it?* He wondered to himself. *Was that the last time I’ll ever be in the woods?* He laid a hand against his chest. Bones beneath skin thin as an onion layer. His heart weakly resonated against his palm.

When he felt better he pointed to the ladder he’d left at the peach tree. “Can you climb a tree?” he managed, between coughs, thinking any boy who could not might as well give up on life right then.

The boy nodded.

“Climb up a step or two on that ladder, then up a couple of branches till you can reach those peaches at the top. They’re the best right there. Ripest. I’ll come over there and you can drop some down.” Just saying that much wore him down again. *Christ, to be young again*, he thought.

Harold watched the boy climb and, considering the size of the tree, didn’t think he could hurt himself much if he fell. “Get that bunch right there to your left. They’re the biggest.” He gathered himself up and limped to the tree

and stood underneath, neck craned upward. He twisted it around to uncrick knots. “Drop ’em down.”

The boy let the peaches fall as he picked them. Harold tried catching them but they slid off his hands, and then he managed to hold onto one and felt a little better about things. “That’s it. A couple more and we’re all set.”

The peaches felt slightly soft and he was glad they picked them before the birds were at them, or they fell on their own and bruised-up rotten. “Alright. That’s enough now. Come on back down.”

The boy came nimbly and set his tennis shoe against the trunk below the last branch and pushed off, hopping backward on one foot as he landed.

“That’s a good job,” Harold told the boy. He went to tousle the boy’s hair but the boy slid under it and Harold let it be.

Harold selected one of the peaches and bit. It was sweet, about as good as could be had, and he could not help but sigh at how good it was. “Better grab one,” he said.

The boy chose one and polished the fuzz off against his shirt. He ate with the juice running from the corners of his mouth. He held the peach out away from his chest and ate so it wouldn’t dribble onto his shirt. The peach juice mingled with the dirt and dried tears on his face and then he finished, holding the pit with bits of pale orange flesh clinging to it and flung it off. “That’s a good one,” he said.

It was the first thing the boy had said that Harold was able to understand. “You can have another if you want.” Harold smiled when the boy took up the offer and chomped into the next one. There were six on the ground, altogether. Harold had two, knowing he would pay for it in his guts later, and the boy ate the rest before calling it quits. Each burped satisfaction at their accomplishment.

Harold smiled at the boy and said he should sit for a few minutes before going home. He asked the boy about himself, where he lived, his name, who his parents were. The answers given quietly, with a shrug, as though the boy wasn’t sure he was James who lived on Elm Street, though he said so.

Harold wanted to tell the boy something that would help him out. He felt like the boy needed something to keep him from getting pushed around.

“That boy you were with,” he began. “I know you don’t want to have anything else to do with him, but it won’t be

the same for him.” He glanced at the boy to see if he was listening. He wasn’t sure.

“He’s a bully. Once a bully gets it over on someone he won’t stop until he’s stood up to.” He lowered his gaze, trying to make eye contact with the boy, who had slouched against the tree and worried a scab on his elbow until it began bleeding.

“Whatever it takes ... even if it means you taking a licking ... you have to stand up to him. Might not be anybody around the next time he tries rolling you into the river. That’s a serious thing he was trying to get you into doing.”

The boy lifted his foot. He loosened a piece of rubber from the sneaker and tossed it off. “You ever do that?” he asked quietly, seeming to talk to his shoe.

“What? Stand up to a bully?”

The boy nodded.

Harold thought about the question. There was truth and then there wasn’t. Maybe something better than truth.

“Yes,” he lied.

“Uh-huh,” was all the boy said.

“I let a boy back me down in a bowling alley once. Not much older than you then. It was over a girl.”

Talking about it, though it was something he thought of at times, brought it back clear as a bell. He could see himself, just a string bean kid then, standing against the wall where Joey Moss had pushed him and told him if he moved from there he would beat the crap out of him. And Harold had stood there, afraid to move while Joey Moss bowled an entire game with Jeanne Sanderson, the girl who was supposed to be Harold’s date. He was to walk her home after, but a renewed threat from Joey Moss when they were done bowling made Harold stay on, pressed up against the wall, people staring and laughing, and he endured it until he was sure Joey was long gone.

Harold had missed three days of school after that, feigning sickness and not wanting to see either Joey or Jeanne ever again, if possible. Finally, when his mother forced him to go to school, he crept through hallways and classrooms on the lookout. He saw Jeanne once. She said hi politely as though nothing had happened, but the interest she had shown in Harold a week before was clearly absent.

He didn’t see Joey that day or the next or for an entire week, and he began to think the boy had moved elsewhere. It was a relief. And it wasn’t. How would he ever get the

revenge he planned every night? The tortures he had lined up for Joey Moss? The misery and pain?

And then one day he was there. Walking straight toward Harold and then past without the slightest hint of knowing him; but Harold had smiled when he saw Joey coming closer. Not to be friendly, but like the boy with him had done. On all fours like a dog doing its master's bidding. Licking the hand.

Harold wanted to say he had stood up to Joey. That he had salvaged his pride with a noble act. But he hadn't. He had done the same thing he watched this boy do.

He had seen Joey Moss now and then over the years while they finished school but there was never another incident between them. They went in different circles and Harold really didn't know anything else about Joey Moss. But even now, in these late years, he sometimes dreamed about how he could have done something to make Joey respect him, to at least know he wasn't afraid.

It baffled Harold that this incident so long ago *still* bothered him. This thing with the two boys by the creek brought it all back home. He realized that by telling the boy to stand up to his tormenter he was telling himself that and was regretful he never had. Joey Moss didn't bother Harold again but the memory of it ... that was the torment ... what he had done to himself by doing nothing.

So he told the boy the story about Joey Moss and his fearful confrontation with Joey. How he had whipped Joey Moss good, and how the girl he lost came back to him because he had been brave and how it had changed his life ever after that.

The boy, James, finally looked directly at Harold. "Really?" he said, hopefully.

Harold looked away from the boys eyes. "Really," he said firmly. "Cross my heart." He made a crossing sign over his heart.

"But," the boy began, "he'll kill me."

Harold considered what the boy said and figured it was true. The other boy would wallop this one. "Do it at school where he isn't expecting it and everybody sees. Just walk right up and smack him as hard as you can. If he hits back you can't cry. No sniveling about it. Just do your best. He might not even try to hit back he'll be so surprised. Might just start cryin' himself." Harold imagined Joey Moss doing that, stunned when Harold hit him right in the eye. Jeanne

standing there as surprised as all the other students and then, if there had been a fight, she would have dabbed a hankie at Harold's cuts and scrapes afterwards, saying what a brave thing he had done to the school bully. "Let me see you make a fist," Harold said.

The boy folded his hand into a small loose ball.

"Tighter!" Harold said, putting his hand on the boy's and squeezing gently. "That's it! That's a good hard fist. You hit Joey with that and he'll never forget it."

The boy nodded and appraised the fist. He seemed surprised to find it attached to his arm. He smiled a slim, satisfied smile, then looked puzzled. "Joey? His name ain't Joey. It's Tim."

Harold coughed, realizing what he had said. "I thought that was this other boy's name too."

The boy shook his head. "Uh-uh. It's Tim."

"Oh." Harold sat back. He hoped he was doing right. He wasn't sure. He thought about telling the boy the truth about himself. But it was too late for that. He had set the boy on a course, and Harold could only hope it worked out the way he intended, but ... he didn't know what ... just that he felt tired. "I need to go in the house now. You can stop by another time and let me know how things turn out. Pick some peaches if you want. Too many for just me." Harold stood. His right knee almost gave in. He stumbled and caught himself and the boy seemed to move a step nearer. Harold said, "It's okay," waving the boy off and reminded the boy to stop in again.

"Okay," the boy said and waited.

Harold walked him around the house to the street and stood at the curb to watch for traffic with him, though there wasn't much in his end of town. "Keep an eye out," Harold said, meaning for cars, and the boy said, "I'll watch for him."

The boy meandered across the street, intent on his hands, clenching and unclenching them into fists. He threw soft uncoordinated punches at the air, looking a bit like a newborn bird in his awkwardness. Harold sighed and closed his eyes and shook his head, unsure of himself.

When the boy turned the corner Harold walked back and onto his porch. He flopped back on the swing. He felt shaky and closed his eyes, then tried to rouse himself but could not.

He dozed, chin slumped onto his chest, hands flopped beside him on the rough wood slats. He dreamed vividly

of this new boy, James, walking into the bowling alley and smacking Joey Moss a good one; a solid right hook that knocked Joey flat. Jeanne standing behind the boy, wide-eyed at his nerve.

"It was my coach," the boy said.

Harold saw himself come in and tousle the boy's hair and pat him on the back. Then he saw Joey Moss sitting there crying, and it worried Harold. He went toward him but Joey cowered away until he was pressed up against the wall, his cheeks tear streaked, a fear in his eyes that stunned Harold.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Harold assured Joey but Joey shriveled into the wall until he was almost a part of it. Harold had to coax him away and put his arm around Joey's shoulder and wipe the tears away with this fingertips and coo to the boy like he was a baby. Then Joey said, "I'm sorry." Harold understood that maybe he was and it was a good time to let Joey go. "Well, it's all right then," Harold said and Joey, relieved, beamed a thankful smile.

They walked out, the three of them together, from the bowling alley into the woods it backed up to. "Good luck," Harold told Joey and the new boy. Joey smiled and shook hands with Harold, as did the other boy, their grips firm, and then the boys shook hands and strolled away, turning to wave as they went.

When they were gone, Harold smiled at the strange decency of things and walked a ways into the trees, glad it was autumn. Above, there was the canopy of yellows, reds, and oranges. The sky, a crisp blue, feathered in swirls of white. The leaves from summer covered the earth in a soft cushion and it felt wonderful to lie back and smell the loam and feel the cool air and hear the year-end songs of birds and watch the seeds of the maples helicopter quietly down, covering him in unruffled sleep.

Richard Huffman completed his creative writing undergraduate work at Eastern Washington University, and his graduate studies in sociology and creative writing at San Jose State University. His short stories have been published in *The Reed*, *Chicago Quarterly Review* and others. He lives in Santa Cruz, and has completed a gritty western novel.

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The Giant (Ambush), 2013
Oil on Canvas, 7 x 12 in



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