

GRAHAM NICKSON

Tree of Birds, 2014
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 144 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JACOB ANTHONY MONIZ

The Pacific End

The majority of the San Joaquin River runs through the agricultural bottomlands of the Central Valley, avoiding most of the urban areas below Friant Dam. About ten miles west of Modesto, the San Joaquin meets its largest tributary, the Tuolumne. Near Vernalis, it's joined by another tributary, the Stanislaus River. This confluence marks the line between the San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties, right through the heart of Ripon, where a pair of distributaries—the Old River and Middle River—split off from the main stem just above the delta. Eventually, the San Joaquin merges with the Sacramento River. The combined waters from the two rivers then head west through the Carquinez Strait, entering the San Francisco Bay and escaping through the Pacific.

I found out after you left that Ripon was originally called Murphy's Ferry, named after a man nicknamed John "One-Arm" Murphy. He worked a ferry crossing on the San Joaquin River where the Highway 99 bridge is now. I went there once and tried to imagine it, John Murphy and his one arm relying on support cables and the river current to bring him back and forth across the river's width. I tried, but the hum of highway traffic from the 99 brought me out of it.

What got me so hung up on this was the fact that you and John Murphy share the same last name. I was wandering around downtown, pretending like I belonged after years of constant and conscious dodging, when I ran into Jeremy Byrd. We made polite conversation, asking the other how life had found them, when he started telling me about this girl he'd met. Her name was Katy and she worked at the library. He focused mostly on her home-grown looks, pretty and blonde, but mentioned that she'd told him about Murphy's Ferry. I put up with his story for close to twenty minutes just so I could ask about the name Murphy, but he didn't know anything else about it.

Your family didn't come to Ripon until the twenties, so there's probably no connection. Still, it got me thinking about your name. I fixated on it. When I went and tried to imagine the ferry, I thought of you, Brandon Murphy, standing on some old wooden planks, offering to help me, Caleb Simão, cross the river. I imagined you with one arm tied behind your back, gesturing with the other for me to come aboard. I imagined myself asking, "How are we supposed to cross when you've got one arm tied behind your

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back?” and you answering, “Caleb, I could cross this river with both hands tied behind my back!” In my imagination we’re young again, fifteen and sixteen, like the time we first met. That’s the vision of us that I like to keep, our skin soaking in the sunlight. Peaceful. I worry sometimes that you’ve forgotten it, that picture of two boys falling in love next to a river in California. I worry that it’s too much for you to hold onto. It’s like you took that picture and cut yourself out of it. It’s easy for me to find myself, but I have to work to remember you, relying on memories to fill in the empty space you left behind.

The thing about time is that memories eventually pool together into a singular past. The first time we met, the first time we talked, our first fight and our last; it all becomes one. It takes effort to open it back up, to look up the details and read back the past. Things happened so quickly back then. You and I got caught in the current and we drifted, far and apart.

* * *

It happened on a Tuesday in August, midafternoon, the summer before our senior year of high school. It was over a hundred degrees that day, the heat hanging heavy in the air while the sun watched, silent and distant, from above. Several hours earlier, I had challenged you to a race across the length of Ripon. You’d responded with a challenge of your own, determined and unyielding in the belief

that you could outrun me, setting the time to beat. In the end we ran together, side-by-side along rows of suburban homes of a similar shape and design, daring each other to match the other stride for stride. You were the sprinter, the fastest hundred-meter runner in San Joaquin County, and I was the distance runner, enduring the pain for as long as I could. We moved outward from the center of Ripon, past our high school on Main and toward the river at the end of Jack Tone Road. The distance between homes grew larger the farther that we ran until, eventually, manicured lawns were replaced by rows of almond orchards planted neatly on the side of a country road. We stopped at a sign that read Caswell Memorial State Park, our six-mile marker.

You collapsed to the ground with theatrical style, your cheeks full and flush with color. “Get up,” I said. I took your hand and dragged you back to your feet, slapping my hand to your chest as I did. I felt your heart beating faster than your breath and said, “Catch it, catch your breath.” Your mouth formed words that fell silent in your breathlessness, but their meaning came across in your playful, taunting grin. I moved away and paced up and down along the length of the sign, locking my hands behind my head and stretching, lungs expanding in my chest with the sweet, restorative air of the natural reserve.

I remember walking beside you down a hard-packed dirt track, trailing past the orchards that bordered the reserve. The meticulous rows of trees laid by the hard-worn hands of men gave way to the entangled grace of Caswell, tall trees surrounded on all sides by grasses yellowed by the sun. You wouldn’t recognize it if you went today. Housing developments have replaced most of the surrounding orchards since the drought began. The reserve is a patch of yard now, marked by the intersecting paths of people you and I will never know. They came and made it their own without our ever noticing.

You and I had planned to stop at the nearest embankment but kept walking instead, enjoying our conversation. I can’t remember what you said, but I can still imagine the way that you said it. Your voice was a relief from the silence. It rose and it fell, a stream of words passing the spread of your smile. You had a perfect smile. It reached your eyes and then they met mine, green and emboldened. You made me smile and I found myself shaken, unnerved by that contradiction between worship and contempt.

The sun was blotted out by leaves and tall trees and I could see the river glistening through the foliage and the limbs. Our walking slowed as we moved deeper into the woods, stopping only once we’d reached the end of the path. We stood on a narrow ridge overlooking the water and looked to where the river forked, turning away from the footpath, away from Ripon and the valley.

After a moment, you said: “There’s a car down there, somewhere.”

I’d already heard the story. Every kid in Ripon had, but I asked you anyway, “How’d it get there?”

Your eyes were staring ahead, off into the distance of one of the forks. I looked in the same direction, but couldn’t make out whatever it was you were looking for. “It was a while back, maybe in the fifties or sixties? This guy got really drunk and drove his roadster down to the river. I don’t know whether or not it was on purpose, but his car ran straight off a ledge and into the water.”

“Did he survive?”

“He made it out of the car all right, sure, but God knows if he survived.” You let your voice blend into the silence and continued to watch the water. “Nobody ever talks about what happened next.”

You were content to remain in stillness, but I hadn’t grown to appreciate it yet.

“Do you think it’s still down there?”

“The roadster?” You smirked and raised your eyebrows, every action exaggerated. I smiled back and you replied, “No, definitely not. There’s no way anyone would just leave it there to rust and break apart. Someone raised it up, for sure.”

* * *

A little while later, you asked, “What two rivers are these, you think?”

We were in the water now, swimming in and out of the current before it could carry us away. You floated on your back, drifting where the current couldn’t reach you.

I stared at the fork, confused. “It’s just one river.”

“No, they’re different.” You righted yourself, the water rising and falling at your chest. “When the river splits, it becomes something completely different than before. This is where the San Joaquin ends; those two streams, they’re something else.”

I thought about the bits and pieces of rivers that I’d seen on drives to the Bay Area. “It’s all one river, Brandon. They meet again at the ocean.”

“You don’t know that though. These streams might never meet again. Like, they might have been this one river before, part of the same thing, but look at them! They’ve incontrovertibly gone different ways. Maybe one pools into a lake or spreads out in some wetlands. It’s physical, Caleb; those are two new rivers.”

I felt a little stupid and swam to the shaded portion of the river, allowing myself some time to think. The topographical study of rivers hadn’t come up in the high school curriculum. I looked over at you, drifting to the opposite end, your eyes brightened by the light.

“Where’d you learn the word *incontrovertibly*?”

You laughed, splashing water in my direction. “I was waiting to see if you’d noticed! Ben said it the other day at group.”

Your face dropped a bit after mentioning Ben and your youth group. Afterward, when we’d left the reserve, you asked me how I’d known what to ask. I didn’t want to tell you that I knew your face, the contradiction, your eyes and that smile. It was too much, and it was all too soon. Instead, I said, “I just knew,” and that seemed good enough for you. You said, “God wanted you to ask,” and that felt good enough for me.

* * *

“Do you ever feel alone?”

You didn’t laugh or try to brush the question off like I’d expected you to. Maybe you knew my face, the same way that I knew yours. You took your time finding an answer, looking to the water as if it might drift into view.

“Yes and no. Ben says that there’s a hierarchy when it comes to relationships. At the bottom are our friendships; the middle, our family; and at the top is our relationship with God.” You continued to tread water, but looked up to match my gaze. “I have a personal relationship with God, so knowing that, I’d say I never feel alone. Still.” You spoke softer now, choosing your words carefully. “There are things that God hasn’t been able to answer. Praying hasn’t been enough. So, in that way, yeah. I feel alone.”

We drifted closer as you spoke. The cries of birds in

the reserve, cicadas, and the river; life beyond the sound of our voices had begun to fade away.

“I don’t feel alone with you,” I said, surprising myself. “Growing up in the church, I always thought that it was our human relationships that mattered the most. That’s what I thought it was all about.” You didn’t disagree, so I continued. “I expect to feel God through other people, but that’s been missing for a while now. When I’m with you, I feel closer to Him than I ever have before. I don’t know how else to describe it, except to call it a connection, and I’ve never felt it as strongly with anyone else. You said that there were questions God couldn’t answer. Maybe you just need someone to stand with you when you ask them.”

You laughed and my thoughts rushed to panic, abruptly aware of the blasphemy that overlaid my words.

“My arms are getting tired,” you said. “We should move out of the water.”

There was always something frustrating in the way that you did that. It felt dismissive, the way you could smile and take your time during such an important conversation, but it was equally as charming and enticing. I wasn’t used to it yet and watched you swim upriver to the opposite embankment, arms strong against the current. I followed after you’d already reached the shore, caught by the promise of your potential reply.

“It’s an epistemic rupture,” you said. A flood of excuses and apologies came to mind and I kept my distance from you, mud and dirt clinging to my feet after climbing out of the water. You’d gotten mud all along your stomach, but it seemed dangerous to mention in the moment.

“I don’t know what that means,” I said.

“What you’re talking about, it’s a rupture in the knowledge we’ve been given.” You shortened the distance between us. “I think I understand the connection you’re talking about. I’m attracted to you, Caleb. There are pieces of it that are physical, pieces that I don’t really understand, but I want to. I went to Ben and I asked him if this was a sin. He said that it was, that feeling this way was incontrovertibly wrong, but I don’t believe that. This moment couldn’t have happened if it was.”

I was never the kid who worried over questions of faith. That feels funny to say now, considering the way it all happened. Maybe I misunderstood what you said to me by the river or perhaps I tricked myself into believing something

else, but in that moment I was confident in the belief that we would be the answer to each other’s prayers.

“Do you have to get back soon?” I asked.

You laughed and a smile spread across your face. I realized that you’d been holding your breath at the sound of its release and smiled back.

“No, not for a while,” you said.

“Good.” I moved toward our things and began to pick out my clothes. “There are some oak trees deeper in the reserve. I read once that if you lean your head back against an oak’s trunk and stare through the branches up at the sky, it hypnotizes you. I want to see if that’s true.”

There was no wind to disturb anything in the reserve that day. Neither one of us had ever ventured so far into the woods before and it was almost as if the trees themselves knew it. Nothing else seemed to move until we reached the oak trees clustered at its center. We chose the oak with the widest stretch of branches and sat at the roots, our backs supported by its trunk. When we looked to the sky, you asked me, “Are you hypnotized?” and without pause, I replied, “Yes.”

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Sun in House IV, 2014
media, size



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