

JEANNE ROSEN SOFEN

Summer Reflection, 2010
Acrylic and art papers on canvas, 30 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHERRI BUIJK

Girl with Rope

On that July afternoon when the girl found the rope—lying like a dead snake between two boulders, each arranged in the canyon as hospitably as two gray and brooding hosts amid the sedimentary slip-and-slide—there was a good deal of bravery on display in the Lagunitas Creek swimming hole. Someone made their first dive into the water from a good height off the larger boulder, the one that gave most frequent foot and runway to children, dogs, divers, sunbathers where it lined the creek bed; others jumped and jumped for the better part of an hour into the cold water, still cold as glacial melt even in the height of summer. Others still were a pair of golden retrievers who tried to rescue a child who needed no rescuing, and everyone laughed to see the panicked dogs tugging at her shirt with their teeth, trying to swim her to unneeded safety.

Hey, a boy's voice floated to the girl with the rope. She saw two boys where the one voice had come from. If we both jump and we crack our skulls on the bottom, which one of us do you think you'd save first? The taller one with the bleached tips spoke while the other made a show of stifling his delight, both of them pulling themselves up to the top of the rock.

The girl saw this for what it was, snorted, and intended to show them both some ice, but then she saw that these two might make promising prospects, might enjoy her own bravado. She said, I'd let the dog get you both, and when the boys decided they liked this reply, they all three became a group. They lined up on the smaller boulder and they argued over how deep the water must be and if there wasn't a way to swim into a channel down deep in its rocky bed, a rumor long familiar to frequenters of the creek. The girl swore that she had lost her mother's graduation present in this hole, a necklace with a tiny chunk of pink granite set in the silver of a tiny dolphin's tail, and she swore she'd one day get it back. As she questioned and sat down with her thinking, the boys argued over the possible site of this channel, and then they argued over the true name of the color of one of boy's swim trunks, and they argued, also, over the next release date from this particular designer. Money Boy says they're gonna be short shorts, the tall one told the girl, but sometimes Money Boy and me have artistic differences. Did you return your dad's call, Money Boy? You told me to remind you to call him back. The other

Nature was that way, they thought—you couldn't talk about it without sounding like some kind of fanatic, like someone who talked about god.

one said, Stop, stop, god. Stop calling me that, protesting that he didn't even have that much money. Maybe later I'll call him back, the other one finished, sounding like later would be a lot later than tonight, tomorrow.

You guys are weiners, the girl said as if through the tough mental fog of military-grade decision making. Look, let's try jumping higher. She showed them where, some other summer, she had jumped with her girlfriends, first off the pedestrian bridge and then off the water power station above that, which was a dare that she of course survived. You'd think I was a badass or something, she said huskily and like someone who had rarely ever stopped laughing in her life from the most blessed childhood anyone could ask for and whose throat was still raw and scarred from the endless river of laughing that still and always ran through it, bursting up into her shining, always half-wet eyes.

The boys liked her for many reasons, but for one thing, she was wearing a T-shirt with nothing at all underneath and jumping into the water, so that was a good start. She had been jumping for more than an hour and they had watched her from the high rock, studying her, making comments between them in half-shaped analysis, some comments too foul to repeat and curiously, as is the case with most of us, these lewd ideas were commingled with thoughts of genuine praise, respect, and even fearfulness.

She was clearly the bravest at present around the watering hole, and that was saying something because of the presence of the two dogs as well.

Teach me and Money Boy how to backflip, the tall one asked, managing to hack up some kind of move, and the other smirked to see his friend putting himself out there, going for it. I bet you know how, right.

The girl smirked, this time just as good as the boy's friend had smirked, and something powerful in her made these boys wonder if they were really steering the wheel here, but then they relaxed, reassured after doing the math that at least it was still good odds, the two of them against one.

Okay, she shouted in her husky way. You're on. She told them they would have to try somewhere else down the road, where the water was perfect for backflips. She glanced at the children in the creek below, glanced at the boys, showed them what she wanted, and they listened quickly.

* * *

The young men drove in the way that young men drive, fast at the corners and oblivious to signage, carried by a loved but dubiously functioning steed of a Toyota, bumper stickered and bumper carred, all the windows down for no air-conditioning and the pulse of a drum and the clang of a guitar spiking all passengers' thresholds for intensity. They arrived at the trailhead, where the girl from the back seat pointed, yelled, There! They crunched the parking brake, slammed doors, and piled away toward the mountain climb, where they brought their sounds of the car with them still, one of them carrying a tinny speaker buzzing out the clang-a-lang of love you babies and you make my crazy heart crazier, and on the thrashing sounds went up into the woods.

The girl tumbled out of the car when she was ready to. She liked to show them that they should wait, the boys with their cars and their speed. Look, she showed them. Pretty rad, right? She showed them the rope she had found, the long blue-and-green cordage coiled like a snake between the rocks near the creek. This'll come in handy when I teach you guys some lessons.

Looks like you're gonna hang yourself with that thing, they both tried to laugh. There was something about the way she slung that mass of rope around her shoulders, slung

at a slant from arm to hip, that made them wonder. You know where you're taking us, right? the boys asked her, suddenly aware of how cold their damp bodies could be in the shade of the woods, the height of redwoods above them now a sudden flash of high-winded chill. Me and Money Boy have bad feet right now, dude, one of the boys said. Yeah, the other one said, our feet are like, broken. They told her how many miles they had hiked the weekend before, and the weekend before that, and where they had done it, and what kinds of tents and bags they slept in, and how few pounds it all had weighed in their bags.

As they moved up the trail, the girl swore to them that she knew the place as well as she knew her own vagina, which she knew well, she told them. Very, very well. She let this hang on the air, let it transform their faces and guts. One of them she liked better than the other, the one who was smaller. The one who was staring but who wasn't really staring, she knew, when her T-shirt lifted open as she jumped. You live out here? she asked him, knowing he didn't. No one knew about Lagunitas. No one but her and like five other kids and the stream of tourists who had been told about the creek.

He had gotten a job at a ski lift out east that past winter, and then he'd stayed on, drifting around the north of California. Lake Tahoe, he said, proud and like he didn't think she would know what he was talking about. It was the best thing he'd ever done, he admitted to her, telling her about the waffles they served all the workers in the morning, the way they ate at long tables together in the frosty dawns, the way they joked about stupid shit and then they rode the ski lifts to the very top, to the very top of the mountains. He talked about the way they had nothing and liked it, the way fifty dollars a week had been enough. This dude calls me Money Boy, he said to her, but it's just a joke. He wanted her to see him for the way he was becoming, for the way Lake Tahoe had made him.

She replied by telling him that she had grown up here, that Lake Tahoe was, like, her backyard. The boy looked shy, went red with blush and heat.

Lake Tahoe's my homeboy! the other boy hooted as they climbed through the old forest. It was redwoods, all of it, as strange and still as anything these boys had ever seen. It's chill here, he breathed. It's cool that you live here, the smaller one added. Both of them wondered things

they didn't bother to say, or couldn't form into words that wouldn't seem flimsy as burnt sticks. Nature was that way, they thought—you couldn't talk about it without sounding like some kind of fanatic, like someone who talked about god. They watched the way the trees looked soft and strong at once, an orange fur spilling out from the seams of their tower-sized bark.

Redwoods spook me a little, man, the taller one said. They're like, too tall, he said, turning his chin up, looking to the tops of them. Like what if one of those boys decided to die, right now? He asked the question as if it didn't bother him so much as puzzle him, calculating the volume, the weight, the way the tree would swing one way or another. Like that one, he showed them, pointing to a tree that looked as much dead as it was alive, half of its bark charred with a lightning's black. That one would crush us like a couple of bugs.

The girl laughed, showing them which branch of the trail they needed, pointing to the shadier, steeper trail that led east toward a ridge that had been visible from the road. You guys really are a couple of weiners, she said, fingering the loops of the rope across her chest.

When they found it, the water that was perfect for backflips, the dive the girl had said would be better than any dive, what they saw was a shift of forest from redwoods to oak, and what they saw was a curtain of green and rock and roots that dropped off, sheer and complete. The girl pointed, a glimmer of blue some fifty feet below. We'll just have to climb down to that shelf there, she showed them, one bulge of gray boulder the only good wedge of foothold midway down the cliffside.

You're not serious, the smaller one mouthed, almost out of breath with the sight of the drop, the route she proposed through a series of crags gripped occasionally by vine and branch and root, leading down to the boulder below. Oh, she replied, unfolding lengths of rope hand over hand, I am so serious, friend. This is the best place in the county. It looks steeper than it is, she said. Just do this, she told them, wrapping one end of the rope around a sturdy branch of oak tree. Just hold on to this as you go down. That'll make you feel better, she said, knowing this was a dare. I dare you, she didn't say but knew they would feel. I dare you not to climb.

* * *

On the way down, the small one, whose name was Charlie, and who knew, always, that he was thought of not as Charlie but as the small boy to the side of Will, thought of everything he had not let himself think since he had come to California. For some reason, he had put it all into a closet, the things he dreaded deciding, and now, as soon as he met this girl who told them, Go down this cliff, hang on to this rope, he felt the decisions as real and big and in front of him. They were like weights hanging off of his ankles as he climbed, moved on the half-foot holds of crags that held his feet from falling to the water below. Something clear was coming into him as he placed his foot here and not there, as he held on to the rope like it would save him if he slipped. He thought of his old life in Chicago, his father. He thought of where he would go when there was no more left of California, no more of his own earned cash, when there was no more time.

I don't do heights, he stammered to Will, who followed behind him a few feet back. The girl had already scrambled down halfway to the boulder's safety, the bottoms of her bare feet flicking back at him like the whites of blinking eyes. Will just grunted, held on tighter to the rope, then said, Money Boy, what are we even doing here, but it wasn't ended with a question. It was a bigger question, bigger than California, bigger than the redwood trees nearly falling, almost nearly falling after their hundreds of years, thousands of years are over.

There was a trust fund, Charlie knew. There would always be a trust fund, looming over him like a sentence. Have your wealth, it said, have your unearned mountain of power. Put it on the chess board of this world. But he knew, now, with the broad sweep of the redwoods, everything perfect in the forest below him, the trees with only just their bark and leaves to keep them dry, the girl with only just the shirt, the boys he had met in the bars of Lake Tahoe with only just the bars and the mountains, the silent and eternal mountains, with only the snow and ice—he realized he had already made his decision, long before here, long before California, and this was the finality of that deciding, the ending of that story, the beginning of another. He would leave the money, as carefully as you sneak out the window of your room in the night, and he would never come back for it, would never touch it. He would learn how to say goodbye.

Hey! Will yelled to him. Look at her, she's jumping! Dude, he yelled, what the—

And the girl had jumped to the water, and the splash that followed her body was big enough that it splashed the cliffside, splashed the fingers of the small trees that clung to its sides.

At the base of the trail, the old ranger nursed his can of sardines, slowly, irritatedly, watching the children on the rocks above him. He was this close, as he would later describe, to turning those kids in, calling somebody up who would clear them out. But something in him did not. Something rose up through the consternation, indignation, and announced its sense of imagination, its wish to feel what it must be like to be among those three, and he let his own heart go off with them into the woods, to be like them for just a moment as their last music faded into nothing more than occasional tweets of birds and hums of wind through arms of oaks.

Cherri Buijk is an MFA candidate at Florida Atlantic University and an English and history graduate from the University of Michigan. Her fiction was recently nominated for the AWP Intro Journals Project at Florida Atlantic University. Her nonfiction has been selected for the Best of the Alternative Weekly Press and her journalism has been published in *Detroit Metro Times* and at *AnnArbor.com*.

JEANNE ROSEN SOFEN

Forest Reflection, 2018
Acrylic and art papers on canvas, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST