

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