

BO BARTLETT

The Whale, 2017
Oil on linen, 60 x 60 in



COURTESY OF MILES MCENERY GALLERY, NEW YORK

DAVID M. OLSEN

Ghost Tree

*Death is not the biggest fear we have; our
biggest fear is taking the risk to be alive.*

—Don Miguel Ruiz

It's after midnight when I park in an alcove near tourist stop seventeen, Ghost Trees, in Pebble Beach. For the past six months, I've parked here almost every night, hoping to catch a glimpse of something most tourists don't even know about: an elusive and deadly big wave that breaks about a hundred yards offshore. The wave that killed my father.

It takes special conditions for the wave to form, and so far, all I've seen between reading chapters of my father's old books have been small rollers and sea-foam. When I crack my window, the white hiss of an ocean stirred by bad weather is deafening in the relative quiet. A tenuous thrill spiderwebs from my torso and through to my toes. Tonight, a northwest swell is about to meet an incoming winter storm, which is what I've been waiting for. It's why I took the job working graveyard as a security guard in this gated haven for the nauseatingly rich.

I switch off the ignition to my company-issued Chevy S-10 and pull my Sony a7 from its padded case, snapping in a low-light telephoto lens, and I take aim. The ocean's glassy cobalt stirs with anticipation. A small set folds in from the horizon, but there's something about the air pressure, the relative calm, that makes me think that it's just getting started.

I set the camera aside and pick up a dog-eared copy of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* from the small collection of my father's books under my seat. Books my mother brought me in rehab seven months ago. My father was a high school English teacher at Robert Luis Stevenson School in Pebble Beach and was well-liked by his students. Because of his laissez-faire style, but also because he'd made the cover of *Surfer* magazine riding a monster wave at Mavericks. This feat held some cachet, even with the offspring of the one percent.

I'm starting to read a section that is finger worn and underlined by my father when headlights draw my attention. A moment later, an El Camino passes with a surfboard in the bed. The driver tucks the car behind a stand of cypress trees and kills the ignition. The headlights stay on a moment, making cirrus lines of fog glow wool gray. I know I should drive over and do my job. I know what they're thinking, but I also know that, somewhere in my primal depths, I want to see what's about to happen.

The guy gets out and suits up in the dim orange glow of

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the dome light, then, reluctantly at first, sprints across Seventeen-Mile Drive. The thing that strikes me even more than the cojones to sneak into a private community in the middle of the night to surf a deadly wave is the fact that this figure, lithe and vibrant and crossing the street, is not a he. The wetsuit contours a feminine hipline and breasts. What looks like black hair is tied into a ponytail dancing between shoulder blades. Tucked under an arm is a long gun-shaped board. And she is alone. This is either bravery or a death wish.

Before I reach for the camera, I read the underlined text my finger rests on: *There is nothing else than now. There is neither yesterday, certainly, nor is there any tomorrow.* For six months, I've been parking here, struggling with that quote. I think of that early morning twenty years ago, standing on a rocky ledge, waiting for my father to paddle back. The cracked surfboard that washed up hours later. I had successfully buried those memories with alcohol and the army for twenty years, but after waking up in a ditch in a stolen truck seven months ago, things had changed. I'd spent a week in the hospital after the accident, wondering how I'd gotten there. Everything was a blur after my medical discharge from the army. Getting sober felt like waking up from a coma or being birthed again. Every day, or week,

or month, I became more aware. Buried memories and pain shimmering around me like ripples on water. Ripples of the Ghost Tree wave.

I grab my camera and switch to night mode. The figure momentarily disappears behind a small Carmel stone wall and reappears moments later paddling out to sea. I follow her with the camera. The haunting bell-shaped curve of a thirty-foot wave forms in the distance. I have a distinct memory of my father telling me he was going to teach me to surf this wave. A pressure like drowning soaks my lungs and the urge to drink hits.

A wave crests, and the ant-sized figure glides over it on her belly. She expertly paddles around the sets rolling in. It takes nearly thirty minutes until, finally, she sits up and looks out toward the horizon. I steady the camera on my doorframe. Interlacing tides shatter the ocean's surface, reflecting tiny glimmers of the nearly full moon. An algae bloom makes the shallow parts of the sea glow a faint cerulean, the whitecaps, bright and foamy. Another wave forms farther out, and the girl turns and starts to paddle. It builds slowly, water and energy combining to create a moving mountain. The wave crests, and I snap photos of her paddling, dropping, standing. My pulse presses the backs of my eyes. The wave collapses over her, and I lose her but keep snapping. The wave peels perfectly from right to left until it fades into churning whitewash. I scan the water, but she's gone. My hands are palsied with nerves. I check the viewfinder again. Nothing. I flip the camera to play mode and scroll through the photos. I find her tiny silhouette on the wave, which builds with each shot, eventually cresting, and then I see it: her standing upright, surfing through the barrel of a dimly glowing thirty-foot wave. A deadly wave, mastered.

It feels like an eternity, but I keep my hand on the radio. I should call this in, but it's been too long. I could get the coast guard out here in twenty minutes. They were too late for my father, but maybe this will be different. The thought of her struggling for air sends a cold ache through my chest. I press the button on the radio, and at that moment, the tip of a surfboard pokes from behind the stone wall, followed by the girl, wet and wringing her hair with a free hand. The muscles in my stomach relax, and I pick the camera up. I snap more photos of her crossing the road. She glances in my direction, smiling. I snap one more and

drop the camera. With the naked eye, our distance is jarring. She can't see me inside the alcove. Moments later, the El Camino sputters to life and winds its way back along the desultory, moss-dripping tree canopy and disappears into the low fog.

* * *

I walk into a small, rectangular room, and the first thing that hits me is the humidity. The air is damp and smells of white-knuckled sobriety: stale alcohol, bad breath, and sweat. Strong coffee brewing in the kitchenette masks the odor somewhat.

Happy Hour, a clever moniker for the 5:30 p.m. AA meeting, takes place in Old Town Monterey, in the basement of a professional building behind Trader Joe's. I sit in a collapsible metal chair along the wall. The center of the room is a collection of mismatched folding tables. It seats about twenty and is covered with a brown plastic cover that looks to be from circa 1980.

I'm early, so I watch people file in and follow an undefined route to their seats. At 5:30 p.m. exactly, the meeting leader, Chad, rings the bell. A second later, the door opens, and a girl with black hair steps in from the cold. Heads turn and she smiles wide, a grin that fills the darkened recesses of my world with a comforting light. Her high, tightly freckled cheekbones flush red. Nerves sour my stomach and force me to look away. It's her. The girl from the wave. Her face, after scanning the photos I'd taken of her a hundred times, is etched in my memory.

Chad leads the group in the serenity prayer. The girl casually pours coffee into a Styrofoam cup and scoots by a few burly blue-collar construction types in faded Carhartt. She gives a feigned conciliatory nod and settles into the open seat beside me.

She leans in and whispers, "They don't mess around with their coffee." Her eyes go wide, indicating chemical alertness.

My throat dries up and tightens. I cough and lean to stand and get water, but the girl taps my arm and hands me her coffee. I take a sip. The bitterness clings to my tongue, and I want water even more, but I feel obligated by the gesture to stay. Chad formally opens the meeting and introduces an out-of-town guest who is here to speak and pick a topic.

"My name's Jim, and I'm an alcoholic. I'm visiting from Maui," the man says. He pauses so that people can be impressed. Instead, a mild annoyance passes over the crowd. People in Monterey aren't impressed by matters of place.

Jim pushes a strand of blond hair against his thinning scalp and talks about feeling angry for being served soda in a shot glass at a wedding in San Francisco over the weekend. He quickly recalibrates; he wants to talk about the fifth step: *Admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*

He says the fifth step tripped him up for years. He just couldn't do it. "I've done way too much shit, you know. I didn't want to admit to anyone that I'd stolen from my own sick mother. That I'm responsible for my brother's overdose. I couldn't admit that to anyone, especially not myself. I guess what I'm trying to say is that, at one time, admitting to myself, God, and someone else the nature of my wrongs seemed impossible. I wrote my story down, the nature of my wrongs, and I shared it with God, and with my family at AA. After that, a huge burden lifted and my life started to change. You have to face the thing you're most afraid of, or you'll never get out of the hell you created. The topic is overcoming fear, I guess. Anyway, Jim, alcoholic. Thanks for listening."

My father must have known that, too. And with the epiphany comes an understanding, a forgiveness that washes over me. I consciously or unconsciously blamed my father for deserting me, for taking an unnecessary risk, for being selfish. But that wasn't it at all. He was considered a mooch, a failure by Pebble Beach standards, supported by my mother's trust fund. He had his own fears and domestications that he had to break free of. He earned his freedom because he had taken the risk to truly be alive. To ignore the fear of death. To ride monsters.

A few other people tell their stories, and I watch the clock. When it's almost over, I start to feel relieved that I won't have to share.

"We have fifteen minutes left," Chad says.

The room falls silent. Maui Jim looks directly at me. I have no idea why he's singled me out except maybe as punishment for sitting next to the new girl. There's something about her confident posture and small features that makes her stand out, and me by proxy. Maybe he thinks

“I think if you’re a risk taker, someone who rejects the ravages of mundane life, then you’re living in heaven.”

we’re together because she offered me coffee. “I want to hear your story,” he says. Then adds, “Please.”

“I . . .” I don’t feel ready. I didn’t, until a few moments ago, realize what my fucking problem is. I glance at the girl; she looks away. It dawns on me that could possibly help me. It feels disingenuous, a trick at the expense of my father’s memory, but if she hears my story, maybe she’ll help me face Ghost Trees.

“My name’s Nick, and I’m an alcoholic,” I say. The room says hi back. “I’ve been sober for six months last Tuesday. I drank for twenty years . . . started when I was fourteen, after my father drowned.” Something catches in my throat. An unfamiliar itch that sweeps me back to the shoreline where I waited for him that day, surrounded by photographers and media. “It was at Ghost Trees . . .” Tears well, but I hold on to them. I tell about my childhood without my father. I tell them my story about the military, about how I used to triangulate cell signals for key al-Qaeda personnel, and how the Army attachment with me launched mortars into the villages below. The drinking to overcome the moral arguments about collateral damage. When I’m done, I don’t know if I’ve said it all or not. Or how it came across. But I feel lighter, stronger, more capable. The room nods and thanks me.

“We have one more minute,” Chad says.

The girl next to me shifts, speaks up. “My name’s Moon, and I’m an alcoholic.” She fixes her gaze at the floor.

In the harsh overhead lights, I can really see her now. Her solid, petite frame with tribal tattoos forming a sleeve down her left arm. Behind her dry, feathered hair hides dark, almond-shaped eyes. Though beautiful, she gives the impression of being robbed of her youth: the girlish elasticity sucked away before the bones of womanhood could take hold. Meth taken too early, in her teens. I’ve seen it before with kids growing up in Carmel and Pacific Grove. She’s probably twenty-five, though battle hardened and could pass for thirty.

Moon continues, “For me, I just drank because I loved a good party. I grew up in Pebble Beach and had everything. I surfed and drank with the boys—the ones who could keep up. Then I did the same thing in college, at the University of Hawai‘i. I never did graduate, but I did keep the party going after it turned out I could really surf.

I loved the high of it all: the big waves, the drink, the parties, the hard drugs. Even when they started to take me away from the ocean. I probably could have gone pro, but I got involved with a rough crowd on the North Shore. Ended up in prison for possession with intent to sell, and I could blame my boyfriend, but that’s not what we do here. My family paid for the best lawyer they could, and I got eighteen months. Boyfriend got seven years. And, just to be honest, AA is part of my parole. My parents cut me off completely, though. I haven’t seen them since I got out a few months ago. Don’t really plan to.” She glances around, an innocence, no, a vulnerability in her liquid eyes. “My name’s Moon. I’m an alcoholic.”

The room murmurs a thank you, and Chad rings the bell. We stand, link hands, and pray. After the prayer, I turn to Moon, but someone pulls her aside. An older woman who knows her mother; they exchange numbers. I don’t want to stand awkwardly behind her, so I turn to leave. I step toward the door and feel a hand on my shoulder. I turn. It’s her.

“I know who you are,” she says. “Your dad was Sam Drzal.” We exchange numbers.

* * *

It’s two in the morning, and we’re bundled in scratchy blankets on a camping mattress in the back of her El Camino in my alcove.

“Do you believe in hell?” I say.

“In a way,” Moon says.

After a week of texting about recovery and surfing, we decided to meet. Our rationalization was that Ghost Trees was going to hit again and we had to at least watch.

“How do you believe in hell ‘in a way?’”

“I was a philosophy major until I dropped out,” she says. “My favorite subject was the Toltec people. They believed that life was essentially a dream, one that we are the center of. Heaven and hell are both possible, depending on how you live your life.”

“What are we living right now? Heaven or hell?”

“I think if you’re a risk taker, someone who rejects the ravages of mundane life, then you’re living in heaven.”

“So, are *you* in heaven or hell?”

“I thought I found heaven in Hawaii. But my heaven became my hell.”

“I’ve been in hell my entire life,” I say.

“And what are you going to do about it?”

I point toward the waves breaking in the distance. A calm wind sneaks through the blanket, and Moon moves closer for warmth. Above us stars shimmer bright and clear with spectral patches of the Milky Way painted through them. “I have to surf Ghost Trees. But I need your help.”

“Having a death wish isn’t the same thing as being free from the burdens of life.”

“It’s not a death wish. It’s a life wish. It’s the only way I can get out of the hell I’ve lived for the past twenty years. It’s why the universe, or God, or the Toltec, brought us together. Jim’s story last week made me realize it.”

She smiles and cringes slightly. She humors me. “And why did our higher power bring us together?” She borrows the term *higher power* from AA.

“My father was planning to teach me to surf this wave.”

Her lips tighten in a straight line. “No. No way, Nick. I’m not helping you commit suicide.”

“Thanks for the show of faith. I grew up surfing, and I was an army ranger for chrissake.” I’d surfed with my father as a child and occasionally during the army and was even a surf instructor in Santa Cruz for a while after the army. But I’d never surfed anything over ten feet, and certainly never a wave as technical as Ghost Trees.

“You told me you coordinated cell phone signals for mortar and drone strikes.”

“I can do this. I have to do this.”

“You know, Sam was my mom’s English teacher at RLS.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“He’s a legend here, and in surf culture, worldwide. Kids at RLS still talk about the ghost of Sam Drzal that haunts Ghost Trees.”

I scoff. “Then they feel it too.”

“I’ve never even surfed this break,” she says.

“Yes, you have.” I never told her about the photos, and it feels too late. But I take my cell phone out anyway. I flip to a still of her inside the barrel of the luminous wave. A filter I added makes the algae bloom brighter, and you can almost see her face.

“You can’t prove that’s me.” A wry smile creeps into the corners of her mouth.

I flip again, and it’s the close-up from the street, her face turned toward the camera.

“You . . . wait, you knew who I was when I got to that meeting.” She seems agitated. I see the thought flash through her eyes: she’s the reason I told my story.

“It’s not like I knew you would show up to AA. Besides, I come here every night.”

This seems to trigger something in her. Her posture loosens; she turns to me. “There’s a reason why I surf at night. I don’t want the attention. Will you delete those?”

“I will, if you really want me to.”

“I do. Surfing is about me and the ocean. Somehow, I know that if I just keep surfing, I’ll find heaven again. It’s out there, somewhere.”

“Then you understand what I have to do?”

“Yeah, I get it.” She slides a hand over mine. Her fingers are firm and cold. “If that’s your journey, then you should take it. But I can’t be responsible for your safety out there. It took me three years to surf the North Shore with twenty-foot waves. These are over forty feet.”

“I can do this.” My words lack the confidence to make them true. I’m no longer afraid of dying out there; I’m past that. I’m afraid of living the rest of my life haunted by this wave. I’m afraid of failing. I have to take this risk, or my hell will continue forever, an endless loop.

She pulls my hand to her face and kisses my palm. An urgency that was dormant pulls at my stomach, turning into a free fall, a slide down the steep face of a wave.

“I can teach you to surf bigger waves. But not this break.”

“I’m going to surf Ghost Trees.”

She rides death waves in the dark, and she can survive them. She's dangerous and edgy and beautiful.

"I can't stop you from doing what you need to do. But this break . . . Nick. He died here because it's that dangerous. It's probably the most dangerous wave in the game. *Nobody* surfs it anymore." She points toward the sea; a fresh set is folding in, each wave bigger than the last. They crash in white static, cranked up, a rumble in my chest. "Let's just start small, okay? Let's start in Big Sur, or South Moss." She places my hand on her chest; the space between her small breasts is firm and muscular. We kiss briefly and I pull away. Her eyes flash copper in the moonlight. A vehement need burns in them. She rides death waves in the dark, and she can survive them. She's dangerous and edgy and beautiful. She scares me, and I like it.

"South Moss, huh?" I repeat and kiss her back. She pulls me toward her, over her, and slides the wool blanket over us.

"We'll see," she whispers, her breath hot against my neck. We disappear into the blankets, into our own tiny universe. Towering pines sway and whisper with the gentle winter breeze. The storm is getting closer. The wild winds are coming.

* * *

We stash Moon's El Camino in the carport of my employee apartment, and she rides with me down the narrow forest-lined roads. Moon and I have been surfing almost every

day for a month. Along Seventeen-Mile Drive, we pass some of the hundreds of fat alabaster-brick mansions built like shrines for the wealthy elite.

"Stop," Moon says. "Pull into that driveway back there."

I reverse and stop at a corrugated iron gate gilded with sparkling bronze. Behind it is one of the largest mansions in Pebble Beach, an ornate palatial affair worth tens of millions. Moon leaps out and presses numbers into a keypad. The gate swings open.

"Stay here," she mouths.

She sprints with surprising speed and agility around the circular driveway, disappearing behind a stand of shrubs. The place is dark except for a couple of security lights. A few minutes later, I see her run from the bushes; lights flicker on inside the house. She's triggered a silent alarm. She rushes into the truck, sweating and breathing hard.

"Go!" she says.

I floor it, tires screeching away from the house while more lights flicker on. Moon is holding something in her hands, something small.

"What the fuck was that?"

"My parents' house."

"You just robbed your parents?"

"I took what was mine."

"What is it?" I try to keep the edge out of my voice, the way new lovers always try to be delicate with each other.

"It's a diamond my grandmother left for me. It's all I need to start over."

"If it was yours, why did you have to steal it?"

"It's supposed to be for when I get married. Which isn't going to happen."

"So, it wasn't yours."

"You want to find your heaven out there on the water? So do I. The only way I can do that is to get the hell out of this town. This town is my ghost, my fucking hell. Now I can stay gone."

I want to be angry, to argue with her, but she's right. We have to break the patterns that we form. The self-flagellation. The bad memories that return again and again. "What's your plan?"

"I'm going to sell it and move to Kauai. It's low-key there. It's my heaven." She looks at me and her eyes are liquid again. I nod and kiss her knuckles. We continue in silence.

Fifteen minutes later, we park in my alcove and kill the lights. It's overcast and dark out. I wear a headlamp and lay out the supplies. Two long, narrow gun-shaped surfboards, two 4/3 wetsuits, booties, hoods, and wax. I pull the tailgate down and we sit, staring out at the ocean.

"How did he die, exactly?" she says a moment later. I don't say anything, and she pulls me into a side hug.

"He was the only one that really surfed this wave back then," I finally say. "A photographer from *Surfer* magazine came out to shoot him. They waited until a big day. The wave he caught was probably forty or fifty feet. They got the shot, too. He made the cover for the second time, in memoriam."

"Did he get pulled into the rocks?" Pebble Beach is a misnomer; jagged rocks line the shores along most of the beaches.

I shake my head. In the distance, a large one peels off, and when it closes its monstrous jaws, a low thunder rolls through.

"You don't have to do this," she says. She's still afraid I'm going to drown.

"Nobody really saw what happened. He surfed the wave and started to paddle in, but something caught him. His leash on a rock maybe. He washed up in the kelp a few hours later separate from his board."

She kisses me on the cheek, and the warmth from her lips turns icy from the cold breeze. "You really think this is what you need to do?"

"You still don't think I'm ready?"

"It takes years of training for waves like these. Also, there's something different about the way this wave breaks along shallow rocks. There's a reason nobody else surfs it."

"I thought it was the airtight security," I say.

We both lightly laugh.

"Or the kelp forest," she says, "the rocks, the depth of the wave, or the Herculean current."

"Let's go," I say, and I strip down, a towel around my waist, and pull on my wetsuit.

"I'm not going," she says. "It's too big." She's not afraid of the wave; she's afraid for me. "Come with me to Kauai. I'll train you there, on Hanalei Bay. It gets big there, too."

I look out, and the waves do seem larger today. A heavier winter storm, more wind, colder water. It doesn't matter; this is my moment.

"There anything else I should know?" I say.

"Shit." She stands and hugs me. "Stay away from the rocks, and don't try to paddle up the channel. Even if the sets slow down, the big ones sneak up on you."

I finish suiting up but leave the booties. I want to feel the board under my toes. "You sure you're not coming?"

"I can't do that. If anything happens, how do I get that memory from replaying over and over. I just get a new version of hell. One where I killed the only person I've ever loved."

We've never used that word before, and it detonates in my chest like an RPG. I don't say anything. I'm too stunned. She kisses me on the forehead. She knows that the declaration broke me open; she must've read it on my face. She turns my shoulders toward the ocean.

"Don't paddle up the channel," she repeats. "And take this." She removes an inflatable rip cord vest from her backpack. An airbag for big-wave surfing. There have been zero big-wave deaths since its invention. She must know that I can't use it; they didn't have them in my father's day. Wearing it makes the act impure and defeats my purpose for going out.

I navigate the rocky ledge down to the damp sand below. The tide spills around my ankles, making the bones in my feet ache. A distant memory tries to form. A memory of being woken too early by my father and being dragged to the freezing shore. A hollow, unnerving sensation fills me with dread. I remember watching the methodical loading of the boards, the waxing, the wetsuit. It was a ritual completed without fear of what he was about to do. I'd always wanted that fearlessness. I'd always wanted to take the risk of living my life the way I dreamed it could be. Surfing this wave with my father. But my father is still here, in this bioluminescent glow, and I know this is why I am back. This is my journey. I scan the surf for a pause between sets. I find it and jump on the board, frigid water seeps into my suit. I shiver but paddle harder. I turn back and see Moon watching me through my camera.

It takes me nearly twenty minutes, but I paddle around the channel and move into position. I feel an initial wave swell under me. It lifts me nearly twenty feet off the horizon. I feel light, hollow, and fragile. I'm made of glass and teetering on a rocky tower.

A wave swells from somewhere deep and treacherous

and lifts me even higher. Dim lights dance over plate glass windows that watch from the spread of mansions above the cliff line. I see a camera flash and I smile.

I am looking down the steep face of the third wave when a primal panic hits, and I pull back. The wave rolls away in a soft thunder like the chop of helicopter blades. Mortars are popping in distant memories, faint screams in a faraway village. My father's cracked surfboard washes ashore. I clear my mind and think about now, this moment. When the next wave comes, it's bigger than the last. Bigger than anything yet. As big as the wave my father surfed. I look down the face, and this time I paddle.

I hear it start to crumble, and when I look over my left shoulder, it's nearly on top of me, thousands of tons of water peaking, cresting over. The lip tilts, and a cavern forms in the wave, a tube two stories high. I race down the face and leap to my feet. Wind bursts in my ears. A lightness fills me, a levity; I'm something like a winged god. And when I stand and carve right, the wave barrels behind me. I trim the board and the curl subsumes me. It's dead quiet in the abyss sheeting over me, and the water is glittering blue and green. Glowing. I sense him around me now, in this wave. The kids at RLS are right.

I shoot out the end of the barrel in a cloudburst of spin-drift and fall, skipping along the surface from the speed. I instinctively turn and start to paddle back out; I want more. But Moon is waving her hands and trying to signal something. When I look out, I realize why. Another massive wave is cresting. And I'm paddling up the channel. It sweeps me up and launches me thirty feet off the water and slams me so hard the surface is cement. I have no breath. I'm churning in a deep blackness. The power of the wave is reckless and inexorable. I can't move a limb. It owns me.

Just before I suck water, I see the surface, I push toward it, I explode into rich oxygen and breathe deeply. I feel alive. Moon is gone from her perch. I turn, and another wave just as powerful is coming. It lands on my head, and I spin through the darkness again, fighting for breath and life. When I surface, Moon has found me.

She pulls me onto her board; my body is heaving, gulping for air.

"You fucking did it," she says. "You're fucking crazy!" She slaps my shoulder, angry and smiling. She's wearing the rip cord vest over her bathing suit. No time for a wetsuit.

"He's here," I say. I point seaward.

She turns and sees it. The final wave of the set and it's bigger still. It's bearing down on us.

"All we ever had is now," I say.

She smiles and kisses me hard on the mouth.

"I love you," I say.

"I know."

We watch the mountain approaching. We clutch each other tightly and brace for the impact. When it hits, the world is dark again, and we're rag dolls in a spin cycle. But somehow, we maintain our grasp on each other. I feel calm. My transaction with the ocean, with Ghost Trees, is complete, and I'm free. Moon grips me tighter while the current takes us. We have each other and we have this moment, and that's all that matters. Somehow that's all that ever mattered. And all that ever will.

David M. Olsen holds an MFA from the University of California, Riverside, and is a graduate of Stanford's Online Writing Certificate Program in Novel Writing. He is the former fiction editor at the *Coachella Review* and is currently an editor at *Kelp Journal*. His work has appeared in *Close to the Bone* (UK), *The Rumpus*, *Scheherazade*, the *Coachella Review*, and elsewhere. He resides on California's Central Coast, where he surfs frequently.

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The Messenger, 2018
Oil on linen, 48 1/4 x 66 1/8 in



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