

## ANDREW JACKSON

*Home, On a Hill in Castroville, 2017*  
Oil on board, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## BEN PACK

### Out the Window

Watching nature  
from an urban desk

I live in Los Angeles on a street whose name means “high view,” and indeed from the window of my fifth-floor apartment I can see a lot. To the north, the Hollywood Hills rise like small mountains, and in the early morning they reflect the golden sun, while the apartments across the street linger in lavender, navy shadow. Sometimes I step onto my postage-stamp balcony to sip espresso and soak in the world, but most days I gulp down my coffee at my desk. I tell myself the view will be there tomorrow—the trees, the hills, and even the people will look no different, so don’t dawdle, write—work. Except the world does change, often unexpectedly, and I find myself staring and wondering what has passed my notice. Given scrutiny, even the placid trees can start to shift in sinister ways. Inevitably my gaze, my thoughts, and my productivity go out the window.

While I have had many windows and many desks over the years, I have always kept them together. Despite the distractions, I like looking. While living in Hollywood several years back, my bedroom peered straight into the living room of another apartment. I watched a mini soap opera unfold there and on the balcony as an out-of-work actor lingered every day, all day, chain smoking. Perhaps he wasn’t an actor, but he was attractive in an angst-ridden way, which was enough for me to invent his occupation. I could never hear him, but I’d see him yelling at his girlfriend and yelling on the phone. He’s angry with his agent, I thought: he’s not getting work. He paced a lot, and I watched his life grow darker day by day until suddenly at the end of the month he disappeared. The painters came in to recoat the walls with another shade of ghost white. I moved out a week later, never catching sight of the new tenants.

There was another apartment on a busy street, just beyond the crest of a hill that curved down toward the freeway. Late at night, speeding cars would sometimes lose control and crash on the bend. I’d wake up and look out the window to discover vehicles wrapped around trees or smashed against my building’s foundation. It happened frequently enough that I stopped calling 911 and began going back to bed without a second glance. No one ever died, and another neighbor always phoned it in. More than once the drunk driver hit and ran. In the morning I’d see the tire marks, scratched into the grassy median, the only remnant of the previous night’s mayhem.

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My current neighborhood is busy too, but in a different way—half a block north is a strip club and an all-night diner. It’s not Times Square, but the sidewalks always have pedestrians: old Russians with their pushcarts going to the store, tourists trying to find the Hollywood sign, middle-aged homeless men loitering around the library, young drunks shouting as they stagger home from the bars. The side street where my building sits is quieter, but you can always hear the traffic from the major cross streets north and south. Sirens and helicopters punctuate all random hours. Once, a police standoff went down a block over at a construction site. A homeless man had been throwing things off the top floor. My boyfriend and I crouched near the open window listening as the cops barked demands through a megaphone: “Stand down, you’re surrounded.” I wondered if they’d shoot the guy; it felt like a scene from *S.W.A.T.*

That was an exception though—on most days, the view from my window is surprisingly serene. Palm trees and eucalyptuses grow out front, screening the buildings across the way. Five stories up, I have to look straight down to glimpse the sidewalk. I can always see more blue sky than asphalt. It feels like a little hanging garden—a good place to write and get work done.

Below on the street, the only birds I ever notice are sparrows and the occasional pigeon, rats with wings, eating

crumbs, pecking at nasty food wrappers. Filthy city fowl. I never thought of my neighborhood as biodiverse, but then one day while I was at my desk, a hummingbird buzzed past the window. She just hovered there, midair, wings vibrating in a blur, maybe three feet from my face. I stopped typing, worried that the slightest move might scare her off. Frozen, I watched as she zipped in and out of the palm tree a dozen times and I wondered, what is she doing? There were no flowers and I’d always assumed hummingbirds survived solely on nectar. Then I saw her go after the palm fruits. Was she drinking the overripe juice? She paused on a branch, and for just a moment her wings stood still. I could see her breathing in and out, and I thought, wow, life is amazing—hummingbirds are amazing.

Around the same time, loud chirps began to wake me every morning. Not songs, but short staccato alarms, like a chorus of angry off-beat metronomes. One would start, and then a series would follow trying to preempt the first. Damn crows, I thought. Even though I’d never heard a crow make such a sharp, small noise, I needed to name the source of my irritation. Weeks went by and I was getting more and more annoyed. Trying to glimpse the culprits, I pressed my face against the window and saw a flash of neon green dart past. Not ugly black crows, but feral parrots with curved beaks and long tail feathers. I watched one join another, and then a dozen more flocking around the neighborhood, chatting to each another in midair. How tropical, I thought, like living in a rainforest canopy. Suddenly a nuisance became a charm.

I began noticing other winged creatures too—a hidden world living five stories up. While sitting on the couch reading pages of a script, I heard this sudden rush of air outside: whoomp! I turned just in time to see a hawk swoop down like a dart, chasing some prey perched on my balcony rail. The raptor turned abruptly midair and its target screamed. The sound sent me bolting from my seat. It was so loud my boyfriend called from the other room, “What the hell was that?”

Between two and three o’clock every day, the bees come out and swarm. Their hive is hidden in the crown of a palm tree growing out of the road median. When my window is open, I can hear their faint buzz above the traffic. I’ve never seen so many bees and it’s terrifying to think of them all together like that—five hundred stingers ready

to kill—but it’s also reassuring to know they zip around the neighborhood pollinating the irises and jacarandas.

The most amazing creature outside my window is not an animal though, but a plant. I grew up in Virginia where the maples and oaks look like giant broccoli—thick trunks with full tufts of foliage sprouting out the top. In contrast, the eucalyptus tree in front of my building has ratty bottlebrush limbs. The branches seem too long and spindly to stand up straight, and indeed they sway back and forth in the slightest breeze. The tree’s astringent citrus smell percolates through the window screens. Its flowers are minuscule, barely flowers at all, just tiny tufts of yellow-white fuzz all bunched together.

Over the summer, I noticed the tree beginning to grow. At first just a few green sprouts here and there. I could sense the softness of their touch just by looking at them. Slowly the limbs stretched out, reaching for the sun. The leaves expanded from tiny buttons to silver dollars; the ends tapered like the tips of a meringue before fattening out over time. I had never watched a plant grow, and at first I didn’t notice. I’d thought of plants as static things, but of course they simply change on a scale we humans rarely perceive.

Then I took a vacation back east for a week and a half. When I returned, the eucalyptus tree had moved. I don’t mean that it grew a bit more here and there. It had moved as if taking a whole step to the right. The sun that used to shine through my window in the late afternoon now hit the new leaves. Instead of hot rays, I now had dappled light. Like a giant reaching up and out for a yawn, the new growth had shot skyward, before the added weight tugged the branches down. It was like seeing my niece between holiday visits; one Christmas she was crawling at my ankle, by the next Thanksgiving she stood at my hip. The eucalyptus did the ten-month equivalent in ten days.

Annoyingly, it had also invaded the balcony. The new branches scraped back and forth along the rail, making an unpleasant sound, like a metal rake on cement. This plant is out of control, I thought, as if it were some rowdy teenager. It needs to learn a lesson (as if it could). So I abandoned my writing, took a pair of kitchen shears, and hacked off the tops. Immediately, I regretted this decision. The result was ugly—the branch now ended in an amputated nub. I had initially tried to cut through the thickest part but failed, so I resorted to hacking off the smaller shoots farther

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up, leaving a visible scar in the bark. For days I thought I would try and fix it somehow. Redo the surgery to make the patient less grotesque. But I dawdled, afraid I would only make things worse.

I woke up about a week later and discovered I had been too slow. The tree had moved again. Sometime in the night, the limb that was once in easy reach had shifted six feet away as though recoiling from my apartment. The tree knows what I’ve done, I thought. It’s moved away to protect itself. Or perhaps, I reconsidered, what if this had been its intent all along, to grow using the balcony as a crutch before strengthening enough to stand tall. I was just too stupid to understand its plan.

Of course I’m anthropomorphizing, but lots of research supports the idea of plant “intelligence.” They don’t have brains or neurons, obviously, but plants “know” how to seek out light and moisture. Their roots will change direction before reaching a solid object. Some can “hear” insects chomping on a neighbor and produce toxins to defend themselves from infestation. As a kid, I remember playing with a few Venus flytraps potted at a family friend’s house. I could trick the plant into closing on a blade of grass, but only once. After that, it seemed to learn. Its jaws only shut halfway, and eventually not at all. Somehow it knew I wasn’t a tasty bug, but an obnoxious impostor.

I know it’s silly, I know it’s not “true,” but I can’t help



thinking that the eucalyptus has a will of its own now. That it's more than just a thing, but a willful being I can't comprehend. Instead of me staring out, what if it stares in— 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. And what does it see? Me sitting at my desk, whittling away my life, surrounded by books and printed rough drafts—scribbling ink onto its murdered cousins pulped into paper, another relative sliced and glued into a shelf. This eucalyptus has been here for decades, the witness to how many sunrises? Ten thousand? A hundred car crashes? Five hundred wannabe actors? At least. In its presence, hummingbirds and hawks come and go like the morning dew. Unless lightning or some pest strikes, it will live here for decades more, long after I leave, biding its time, thinking perhaps: You quick-moving bastard, your work is but a breeze, and your window on this world is small. It will close much sooner than mine.

**Ben Pack** moved to Los Angeles in 2002 and has lived there ever since. Currently, he teaches undergraduate writing at the University of Southern California, and with his colleagues he coleads a creative writing workshop for former prisoners in the surrounding neighborhood. His previous work has appeared in the *Rattling Wall* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly Journal*. The eucalyptus tree mentioned in his essay has now grown to within inches of his window; it watched him write these words.

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Grow Houses, 2017  
Oil on board, 16 x 20 in



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