

years, lupine was the dominant plant. Some years, heavy rain filled a dry pond basin and thousands of frogs suddenly appeared, only to be devoured by migrating egrets. Some years, butterflies were so plentiful that I could stand in their midst—my head just above the cloud of them—and see only a white ground fog, jittering. One year, my cows gave birth to fifteen bull calves in a row. One year, I watched the herd navigate a dangerous, wind-driven wildfire until they stood safely on the charred pasture behind it. One year, eight pregnant cows were on a steep hillside when an uprushing fire killed them all. Not all cycles fit calendars. Natural forces provide balance; the math works through dormancies, ascents, and declines.

Just as water retains no constant shape . . .

Some people believe that we have no souls, that our complex sense of awareness is only a sophisticated tool to aid our propagation, and that we hope to extend our now into eternity. Some people believe the eternal soul is a fantasy, an extrapolation of false indicators. I've been to churches, read Stephen Hawking. Nothing gives me solace.

Historians ignore emotions, choosing instead to chronicle a list of facts.

It used to bother me that pumping water for irrigation dried up most of the springs. The truth is, I wish those underground lakes were still full—so I could pump them. I feel I'm being drawn forward by forces beyond my control. Whenever I have had power, I've used it in some form or another. I catch myself being elitist. Under the right circumstances, I would violate any moral code. Having once been righteous, I am left only with a carefully constructed set of ethics, and a residue of guilt.

Animal, mineral, or plant. If I subscribe to an immortality, I desperately choose mineral. I am a delicate balance of atoms and fantasy encapsulated in a fragile shell.

As always, Mount San Jacinto grinds north like a stately queen in a game of slo-mo chess. The rooks are rubble. I walk across the alluvial plain of my home until I come to a small, protruding jumble of dark rock—the helmet of queen's knight. I take off my shoes, climb up, and connect the soles of my feet to warm stone. Standing very still, I try to sense, if not movement, at least progress.

Maybe every instant is a stream pouring into blackness. Maybe I am only the light I reflect and there is no motion.

I reach out and touch my granddaughters' heads or put my ear to my daughter's pregnant belly. Orbits and swirls condense on the head of a pin. And just for an instant, I exhale.

Richard C. Rutherford has previously been published in *Hypertext Magazine*, the *Writing Disorder*, *Squalorly*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Visitant*, and many other fine literary magazines. For thirty-seven years he raised cattle at the edge of the desert. He has a large collection of stories.

WILLIAM BALTHAZAR ROSE

Etruscan Hillside, 2017

Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in



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