

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.