

WILLIAM BALTHAZAR ROSE

Coley Gate, 2014
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

RICHARD C. RUTHERFORD

Balance and Motion

The relationship between
humans and the earth

I love it when earthquakes take place at night. Coming out of my sleep, I already know what wakes me. And I ignore the close vibrations: windows rattling, startled sounds from little girls. I feel for the signature that moves through me, rumbling secrets through my cells. I have become pretty good at identifying the quake's origin—how far away, what direction, how deep—and I can assign a close approximation on the Richter scale.

I'm obsessed with examining context, fascinated by evidence of the cycles in our universe: a leaf spinning on an autumn breeze; seasons, sunrises and sunsets that imply our blue world twirls around a star; images of our place on the trailing arm of a swirling galaxy. I like to imagine myself sticking my head out the window of the high-velocity ride called the Big Bang; I'm screaming out my ecstasy, my youth behind me like vapor. Am I significant just because I am capable of perspective? Sometimes I wonder if I'm just a trait poised along a cosmic double helix.

The mysteries of life are not always evident and I don't like to take things for granted. So I try to read the signs of minerals, creatures, and plants, lacing together disparate information with strings of memories until an observation suggests itself. I have nothing better to work with. I do my best to include myself in my observations because I need to feel close to the mystery.

I search for a formula that combines firsthand observation with belief. I need to create an equation that explains my existence, absolves me of sin, and at the same time, predicts my immortality.

Gaia.

I spent most of my life in a narrow pass—squeezed between two mountains—marking a boundary along tectonic plates: the Pacific and the North American. East of me, a sag called the Salton Sink holds putrid water. Just to my north, the sink's opposite, Mount San Gorgonio, defies gravity as rumpled granite with nowhere to go but up. To my south, Mount San Jacinto seems to strike a pose—her north side sheared off like split wood. Mount San Jacinto is leaving what is now known as Mexico, riding north along the Pacific Plate. If I pull back to a remote perspective, I can imagine that boundary, the San Andreas Fault, as one of Earth's battle scars, gnashed by a jagged set of molars. Close up, I put my hand on vertical shears and picture them continuing far below.

I close my eyes and imagine this mountain pass: with oak trees in the flat land, chaparral accumulating until the next great fire, creek water running well out into the open; quail, deer, bears, and rabbits. Now, housing tracts cover what once were orchards.

About twenty miles separate the peaks of San Gorgonio and San Jacinto. The desert between them lies over alluvium—a thousand feet deep—layers of sand, clay, debris, and rock. These layers create the underground labyrinth that holds water. Where I stand now, no surface water trickles, flows, puddles, or rises up from below. Water beneath this arid land has been squandered. Now, water is a commodity, delivered from distant sources. I am one of those who squander. I am part of a destructive force that continues to change the face of this land—insignificant, yes, but no less effective than any other form of erosion.

How can I disassociate myself from this feeling that I am alien to the natural world, a human force of destruction? If I fix my leaky faucet, if I recycle and sign petitions, am I less destructive? How can something small, like humans, deplete the providence of a mountain?

Always the question: am I relevant or insignificant?

I accept my complicity but try to diffuse it with understanding. In the same way that I absorb the signature of an earthquake, I notice a U-shaped canyon once carved by ice or how the fault line bends the mouths of streambeds. In the center of the pass, well drillers once pulled a core sample from over eight hundred feet below the surface. That core sample included a section of redwood. I wonder if the tree grew in the flatland or if it washed down from a mountain, and I wonder: how long ago. No doubt, some of my thin body came from that redwood.

Like a rosary, I recite observations that I consider sacred.

I know underground water travels at about a quarter mile per year, working its way down, through the alluvium, until solid rock or impervious clay creates a bottom. I imagine it trickling in darkness—a life force of its own—within the body of a beautiful mountain. I can picture the water, percolating down, accumulating until it moves laterally. And if that water, moving through the jumble, runs out of its holding basin, it either sinks farther or slips sideways—from earth into air—and springs into view.

When I discover a secluded place with seeping water, it feels like confidential knowledge. Places like this are where cottonwoods, rabbits, and coyotes drink; the kind of place where young lovers meet, where secrets are buried, where children build dams and go home muddy in new school shoes. I wonder if those hidden trickles were last year's rainstorm or melted ice from ages ago.

Most of the springs have been gone for decades. When I was a boy, we played in parched gulches with dead cottonwoods. We could put our hands on dry clay walls that still bore signs of trickling water. At the mouths of canyons, we found large flat rocks pocked with divots, evidence that Indians once chose this place—in shade with water—to grind acorns. I close my eyes and imagine this mountain pass: with oak trees in the flat land, chaparral accumulating until the next great fire, creek water running well out into the open; quail, deer, bears, and rabbits. Now, housing tracts cover what once were orchards. Now, none of the plants and trees are native.

Om.

Fluid matter like water and magma, rattlesnakes, and air moves easily along fault line boundaries. I was fortunate enough to be looking at Mount San Gorgonio during the

Big Bear earthquake. I saw dust expelled from cracks all over the south side of the mountain. I saw small landslides. And I felt jagged movement as the two mountain peaks moved six inches farther apart.

In the early 1990s, we had a weather pattern named El Niño. That winter, our normal rainfall of about fifteen inches increased to fifty-four inches. Sunrises and sunsets were watercolors from the red side of the spectrum. During one monthlong period of constant rain, a small stream began running from the nearby foothills, past my house, following gravity toward the distant Salton Sink.

One day the stream stopped flowing. At about the same time, I noticed the sound of falling water, a rumble from the foothills. That presented a baffling situation: it was still raining, the creek had stopped, and yet I heard water roaring. My girls, the dog, and I went hiking. We took high ground parallel to the streambed, getting closer to what was surely a waterfall. But we were in sagebrush, desert foothills. I had hiked all over those hills and knew them only as broken granite and chaparral.

Halfway to the top, we found the stream moving fast down the hillside, maybe two feet wide and a couple of inches deep. Then, it just emptied down a man-sized cavity in the granite. I worried about my daughters' safety, so I warned them back. But I needed to look down the hole. The little stream poured straight into darkness. What I had been hearing sounded like a waterfall because it was a waterfall—only this one fell into the earth. I had the feeling that this was a rare glimpse into something more than geology. While an astronomer might look back into time and an astrologer might see the future in an arrangement of cards, I looked down into the hole and felt something like a summation of time—a birth and a death encapsulated in an instant. I stepped back, blinking, and held my daughters' hands.

The rains continued. A week passed; the waterfall sound stopped and the stream started running past my house again. I hiked back up to the water hole and found the void filled with debris, water running over, as if it had never been there in the first place.

Later that spring, I showed my secret to an old water witch, who told me that those foothills represented a lesser fault—a fracture. He said that during the heavy rains the water seeped down, rinsing debris with it, until it cleared a chute to a deep cavity, an aquifer.

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Indicating the little ridge continuing north from where we stood, he pointed out a distant patch of rocks protruding above the ridge, saying that I could take a broom handle to the rock outcropping, hold it to my ear, and when the train, a mile farther north, passed over the fault line, I would be able to hear its engine thrum transmitted through solid rock, vibrating the broom handle and my eardrum. I did that and heard the locomotive as easily as if I were standing close by. Somewhere below me an aquifer pulsed a long syllable.

Full of grace. Another prayer that connects.

In the early 1970s, I leased twenty-three acres from a retired postal employee who had bought the former almond orchard as an investment. I raised calves—as an investment—while working as a carpenter in Palm Springs. I was fortunate enough to continue pasturing cattle long after giving up the heavy physical requirement of carpentry. More than that, though, I was able to spend my days outside, with gratitude, in nature.

Diversity over time is a kind of pattern. Some years, drought forced me to learn new aspects of market dynamics; how I might be victimized, or given opportunity. Some

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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