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COVER/Fried Orange, acrylic on canvas, 18” X 24”, January 2003
by Guy Beining
Relics

Ricky Rood

A decrepit tree, the Totem Oak, stands in my front yard. If I were a responsible neighbor, the Totem Oak would be cut down. At its base, the trunk is two feet in diameter. The top of the tree is gone, and all that lives are two single branches. A large branch goes to the left, about fifteen feet off the ground. A smaller branch goes to the right about three feet above that. Two feet higher the rotting trunk ends, too rotting, too spongy to be called abrupt.

On Tuesday, at the gray of dawn, a lone black buzzard sat on the smaller, higher branch. A vulture. It was in the direct beam of the summer’s northeastern sunrise, warming I presumed. The buzzard turned its head in response to the noise and my movements. There was no flinching as if it were about to fly, only a raised diligence of observation. I returned to bed.

I’ve been sleeping alone of late. My mind never settles. The tosses, the turns, the snores, and whistling breaths of a bed partner are intolerable. I have moved to a single bed, pushed up against the wall. A photograph of my father, when he was about the same age as I am now, more than 40 and less than 50, hangs above the bed.

I woke again at 11. Such sleep is uncommon. Totem Oak was unencumbered by the bird, and I would be at work in time to join lunch with my friends. I am a scientist, and I have had
enough success unraveling the complex and the arcane that the world provides me a lot of leeway. I can structure my day to my whims; I can play with marbles and kaleidoscopes, while I sit and read the comics; I extract structure from chaos; I write it down for the seeming benefit of the world and my ego. It is a truly a privileged position and a convenient way to accommodate a life-long insomnia.

My work is spent with the conservation equation, a ubiquitous equation found in any physics book, any chemistry book, in any language. This equation lies just below the surface of my actions day and night. The conservation equation is simply a statement that things are conserved. Much like the money in your checking account, you have the money you start out with, plus that you earn, minus that you spend. When the balance goes down, or up, you take notice. I study, mostly, the gasses that exist in trace amounts in the atmosphere, like ozone; we have what there is, plus that which is made, minus that which is destroyed. We have developed an uncommon ability to destroy ozone, and the world has taken notice. Lives are spent tumbling the conservation equation around and arguing about its solution or, really, the lack of its solution.

On Wednesday morning I slept slightly past sunrise. I opened the solid door and the Totem Oak stood unoccupied. I had expected to see crows, as their noises were what shook me from my tenuous sleep. Beyond the Totem Oak, standing in the street, separated from my yard by a creeper-covered fence, were the children who wait for the early bus. If it had not been the caws of the crows, then in a few minutes their conversations would have wakened me. The children were quiet, however, looking at my house. They saw me open the door and Lydia, the dark haired girl from next door, pointed to the roof. I stepped out in my robe and slippers. Along the crest of the roof were five black buzzards. Their backs were towards the children. Their heads were turned to their right, each watching with a single eye.

“Horace was going to throw rocks at them,” Lydia said. I wondered what it’s like to have an old fashioned name like Horace.

“I was afraid I might break your window,” Horace said.
"Good thinking," I called back. "They're just black buzzards, looking to warm themselves in the morning sun. They're common. Perhaps they like to watch the sun rise over the hill this time of year."

"They smell death," Horace called back.

I had to be at work. People had flown across the ocean to talk with me about the conservation of water in the atmosphere. Water is important; too much, flood; too little, drought. The subculture of scientists that studies water has been doing it for a long time, and the way they solve the conservation equation is mired in the methods of thirty and forty years ago. Scientists become entrenched, comfortable with what worked for them in the past. It's like being burdened with millions of miles of wire and telephone poles at a time when the world is becoming wireless and satellites reflect our conversations from space. Soon Guatemala will have a better, cheaper phone system than the United States. Every now and then you need to rethink, stop the incremental progress in favor of something new. Leapfrog. I dressed. Twenty minutes later I walked to my car. The buzzards turned their heads from right to left as I crossed the front of my house.

Thursday morning, before sunrise, the planes that have patrolled my city since that day the Trade Center collapsed woke me up. At least that is what I think they are. Either that or sophisticated bombers flying to the Middle East. I thought originally that flights from Washington's airport might have been diverted to Baltimore and were flying over my house. But, now, Washington National is open, and the planes still fly in the dark. Their mission is necessary, but they bring me no comfort. My neighbor, Lydia's father, fills with pride and sleeps better when he hears the planes. I only feel fragile, exposed, and I wonder what the chemicals that come out of their engines do to ozone. How do these chemicals change the conservation equation?

I fell back into a fitful Thursday-morning semi-sleep. As it was getting light, there was a soft thud on the roof, followed by a few seconds of scratching. Closer to wakefulness than sleep, there was a second thud. The third thud, and I was completely awake. I lay there looking at the ceiling as the forth and fifth buzzards landed and, I guessed, walked to arrange them-
selves on the top of the roof. Their lives must involve more than simply smelling death; they must also seek the warmth of the sun, each other’s companionship, perhaps, the beauty of the beginning day. There was no more sleep of any kind.

The problems of yesterday’s foreign water scientists came to mind. As water moves around it changes between ice, liquid and vapor. Vast amounts of heat, of energy, are consumed and released as the phase changes. The phase changes depend on the temperature and how much dust there might be. The temperature and dust depend on the phase changes and whether the water floats in the air or falls to the ground. Water is an especially fickle thing. Many argue that it is just this attribute that makes life possible, the recycling of water, the moving of energy. Some argue that life and death are just another way to consume and release energy, with death making a reservoir of energy available for more life. I decided to stay home until nine o’clock and call whatever wildlife expert the county employs.

Over the phone an enthusiastic woman named Catherine told me about the habits of carrion eaters. She is an ornithologist, whose primary job is understanding the impact that development of natural wetlands and replacement with artificial wetlands has on bird populations. Her job is mandated, indirectly at least, in the name of environmental protection. Catherine speculated that the birds were in the area because something large had died, perhaps a deer. And, yes, they do like to warm themselves in the sun; they need to dry their feathers. “Give them a few days. I doubt if they will bring you any harm,” the young Catherine advised. She spoke the comforting language of the rationalist, based in observation, cause, and effect.

That night, Thursday night, I went to bed, but I did not sleep. The airplanes gurgled high in the night. The moon was bright and underneath the skylight I could read in the moonlight. Above my single bed there were two more pictures, one to the right and one to left of the portrait of my father. To the right is a picture of me at the county fair when I was about six. I am on a simple bench outside of a screened building that says Lenoir County Lions Club; there is musty wet sawdust around my bare feet; I am holding an entire turkey leg. To the left is a picture of my grandfather, who kept pigeons. In the picture the bent old
man is walking down a dirt sidewalk with two pigeons in front of him, leashed with light strings. The white of these black and white pictures glowed in the moonlight. There were three faces with the same eyes but different anticipations. There were two pigeons and one turkey leg.

Near dawn on Friday, through the skylight, I saw the first buzzard a moment before the shake of its landing resonated through the house. Then his four friends followed. I was not sure that I had slept, but I did not see every hour of the night on the clock. The able Catherine’s description of the carrion eaters surfaced. Without them the world would be deep in rotting flesh and fur. I wondered about my fingernails and sloughed skin. Why didn’t it pile up? What ate it? How was conservation being maintained? These creatures on my roof are simply filling a niche, transferring energy from one form to another, lifting the flesh of road kill to the sky.

Again, at work there would be those who traveled to talk with me, this time, about the lack of conservation. When we measure all of the pieces of the conservation equation, what we have, what we make, and what we use, then put them together, they often don’t add up. There is no equality. Mathematics is a language with limited verbs. So, if you add things up, and things are not equal, then something important is missing; that motivates the talking, the traveling, and the pursuits. I walked to the car before the sun had risen above the trees, before the buzzards left. They were never there when I returned in the evening.

On a summer morning, the world is full of the smell of death. It is a smell from my childhood. A squirrel had died in the wall of the house. “Something died,” my father said. “All we can do is wait.” On the drive to work I noticed the smells coming through the cracked car window. Raccoons, possums, and lost pets spotted the pavement and adorned its edges. Crows and an occasional buzzard attended them: some black buzzards, some turkey buzzards, with their hideous fleshy heads. The crows had figured out the traffic flow. They could judge speed, and they had an understanding of what was normal. Cars did not bear off the edge or even over the line in the middle of the road. The crows hopped beyond the white line on
the edge of the road or into the other lane about one second before the car got there.

How fast would the car have to go before it hit the crows? What was the range of the crow’s expectations? Sixty miles per hour is eighty-eight feet every second. What if the car was only forty-four feet away when the bird decided to hop? I dared not go faster than seventy-five, and threatened not a single crow. Over the weekend, I would search the woods near my house for the carcass of a deer. I should check for clearings Catherine had said, “Black buzzards really work by sight more than by smell.”

Thursday’s sleeplessness was followed by Friday evening’s collapse. At seven o’clock it was still hot outside, and I was having the sleep of the dead on the couch. I woke with a cringe from my stomach and burning in my head. I stood. It was barely past nine, and I felt like I had been beaten unconscious and risen from a mugging. The glow of the rising moon started to fill the night, bright enough to cast a shadow from Totem Oak. I shut the shade that covered the skylight. The prospect of the lunatic glow of two pigeons and the leg of a turkey was too much.

I went to the closet in the guest bedroom. There is a shelf above the clothes rod, and on the back of the shelf are boxes of relics. I found the Chinese puzzle box that held the gold Illinois Railroad watch of my father. A stranger was driving through town and his car had broken. He was in a hurry as he had been called to attend to an injured child. My father drove him the last sixty miles. The next morning my father had had the car fixed, and he and a friend had driven the fixed car down to the stranger’s house and left it there. Unannounced. The man had mailed him the watch a week later.

I reached behind the boxes, between the boxes and the wall, to find the shotgun of my grandfather. Twenty years ago, I had broken the gun down to its pieces, oiled them, and wrapped them in soft cloths. Then I bundled all of the pieces together inside a woolen Army blanket. I uncovered the barrel of the gun and held it up to the light. The inside was shiny. With the cloth I wiped the smudges of my fingerprints and then found the action. It was not cocked and the two triggers jiggled a bit. I snapped the pieces of the gun together, pushing the dark wooden forearm under the barrel, against its spring. The gun tensed
into shape; I closed the hinge and aimed the gun towards the light fixture in the ceiling. The rough diamond serrations on the stock and the hard metal of the butt reminded me of the huge bruises that the recoil of this gun had left on my ten year old arm. I remembered there being some shells, which I had stored in the shed out back, deliberately away from the gun. "Guns and ammunition must only be brought together with thoughtful consideration," my father had said when this gun was given to me. The shells must be sixty years old.

I set the assembled gun on the bed and removed a large cardboard box from the closet. In this box was a small steel case. Inside the steel case was an oily string and beaded on the string were three teeth from a wolf. When the man who was the father of my grandfather was a boy, perhaps fourteen, this wolf had attacked him. His horse, in fateful paroxysm, managed to mortally injure the wolf. Some weeks later the teeth of the wolf became the trophy of a child, then evolved into a family charm to ward off violent danger. The teeth were divided amongst the children and passed down. Some saw it as a joke; others trembled when there was only one tooth left in their line, only a tooth for the eldest son. I can neither sustain nor break the ritual. I avoid it.

It was midnight. From the back door I could see the shed in the moonlight. The moon was above the trees in the clear sky. I re-opened the shade of the skylight, illuminating the white in the pictures. On the nail from which hung the picture of my pigeon-walking grandfather, I placed the string of wolf teeth. I returned to the sleep of the dead on the couch.

Saturday morning, late, there was a light drizzle on the skylight. No omens sat on the branches of Totem Oak. I opened the door, walked into the front, stood in the cool drops of summer rain and looked on the roof. There were no birds. Inside, the sight of the teeth hanging over the picture first startled me, and then embarrassed me. Taking them from the nail, I walked into the guest room. There, I disassembled the shotgun, wrapped the relics, and returned them to their closet. On Monday I would call Catherine, thank her, tell her that the birds were gone, and that I had learned that observations of buzzards flying had been key to the development of aeronautics.