

# birds v. trees



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You could see it coming across the horizon, the horizon where I had been looking for something less vague than a dust cloud of particulate matter. But there it was, arriving, like the bad feeling which always accompanied the butter my sister used to spread across surfaces of bread, Eggo's, and the like. I knew something was wrong with this. The Pacific, the dust cloud, the dim memory of something I was looking for, not bread, not butter, but something perched out there, something I could no longer see. The woman with the binoculars was gesticulating energetically and dropping names like peregrine falcon, baby bald eagle. She was wild about birds, wild about introducing me to birds, but all I could make out was the advancing vagueness. I'm not blaming the Chinese. I myself have let particulate matter fly, but you know how when you see something, or can't see something in this case, how you sort of jump to conclusions. It's just that I do have a hybrid car and I am not really a big hair type of person, so the whole aerosol thing is not possibly my fault, and I think the kind of cloud I am talking about, if you had seen it, well, you would have probably thought something similar. Those people! That's what I thought. I thought, *Those people!* in a really nasty tone. I'm not proud, I'm just being honest. And in a way it's not fair.

You know, I am not even sure where those particulates were coming from milling around out there, around the horizon where I'm not even sure there was a peregrine falcon. Maybe it's my fault. Maybe it's something I don't know I'm doing. But there's my Prius, and I have also heard that there are some countries, I'm not necessarily saying the Chinese, but some countries, which lack a grip on their particulate matter. The thing about such a big ocean is that it's hard to know where things are coming from. Like in art. Why do artists paint such insane vistas? In southern France, my sister once told me, the light is just like those paintings you've seen by famous painters from there. I thought the whirling colors were more a product of great imagination, but she said no, it was the light. She also pointed out the dark cloudy dimness in some very satisfying paintings of cities on coal burning days. It's possible if I was an obnoxious gas or a liquid droplet or just a piece of unusual matter floating among other particulates I might capture the attention of those who admire atmospheric variance. I might look exquisite sweeping across a blank canvas adding color and texture. I might also make people gasp and wheeze and lose focus. I was trying to focus on the birds, especially since this lady was crazy to point them out to me. But her binoculars, her insistent tone of voice, all the very important clues she was giving me about the whereabouts of this falcon, none of these could compete with the hovering,

drifting cloud of particles. The missing bird passed through my mind muddled with thoughts of the Saharan desert when the wind blows hard enough and the Mongolian desert where the dust kicks up and starts flying across Japan and all those miniature dust things reflecting the sunlight, casting little dust shadows onto the ocean and also big coal smoke stacks spouting out all sorts of black clouds in China and India until that gigantic bunch of particulate matter floats across the Pacific approaching the Oregon coast like you wouldn't believe. I guess this could be considered quite interesting artistically speaking. In Washington, where my sister lives, they get soot too, and dirt and dust, smoke, smog, what have you. My sister says it isn't the Chinese per se. She says how much haze attacks the coastline we share is wind and weather based. She says fifty percent of electricity in our country comes from coal and it's power plants not cars that produce more than two-thirds of troubling emissions. She has a lot of these very specific things to say every time I ask her what her gas mileage is. She does not drive a Prius. I often think that my sister is part of the problem. Certain habits of hers have always troubled me. I'm not talking about the butter thing, that's fine. It's the deeper things, fundamental things, you could say. Birds, for example, are not interesting to her at all. I mean maybe, in passing, she might see a bird and say something nice about it, but if she met some woman with binoculars I think it's a

fair bet she would not even try to glimpse that peregrine falcon. In fact, to be perfectly honest, it really would surprise me if she even noticed an advancing cloud of particulate matter if it hit her in the face. And really, to me, that's the scary thing.