



Wildfires to Floods

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November 2, 2022

I FEEL LIKE WE DODGED A SHORT-RANGE bullet. It rained yesterday. It's November and we hadn't felt rain since last winter, except for the unusually brief rainfall a month ago. Today joyous clouds remained in the sky, their heavy gray bellies laden with moisture. I breathe a little easier. Maybe we will slide into winter without smoke-filled dread. The weight of our drought feels heavy, climate change a constant concern. Last year about this same time I felt traumatized by the massive [Caldor Fire](#) in the Sierras. We witnessed the fire on the news, its devastation on our drive through the mountains, and its up-close scars on our walks from our cabin.

I reread the eulogy I wrote at the time:

December 15, 2021

Give us a few more inches of snowfall and the tarnished trees may close their eyes under a soft shawl. The pines and firs and cedar huddle together, clutching their skimpy white cloaks, covering their wounds, peeking through clefts in their crust. If the trees dare to cry, their tears will freeze into small balls of ice, hanging like ornaments on sooty slag. Fire has forged black blades, like dark fingers, that claw at their trunks, and their underbellies are exposed here and there. An immense fire has burned the forest. The smell of charred wood—not pine, not fir, not cedar—wafts through the air. I close the passenger window.

We are driving up highway 50, approaching Lake Tahoe. This is my second trip since cars

have been allowed to drive the stretch of highway from the foothills up over Echo Pass and down to the lake. Trees have fallen or need to be felled and removed from the edge of the road. Power lines have been compromised or destroyed. Debris from the fire and the fire-fighting, strewn across the highway, needs to be cleared.

My first drive up I cry. I am the passenger, able to observe the charred landscape up close. Scorched trees by the thousands—hundreds are lined up, piled up, shoulder to shoulder, some lying where they fell. A battleground, casualties for miles. Among the scourge, we see bulldozers, logging trucks, contracted workers wearing hard hats and orange vests. Grief envelops me as we pass skeletons of forest service cabins that had housed their people for a century, their lone stone fireplaces standing, metal roofs crumpled on the ground. On the far mountainside, swaths of conifers are reduced to black spires, looking like artistry—an etching with a fine tool against a canvas of white, framed by gray granite. Their limbs are too injured to hold snow.



The Caldor Fire was one of the largest forest fires of 2021. Almost a quarter of a million acres burned. Lots of dry fuel, another year of drought in the West. I flinch at the term “fire season.” I hear there was only one loss of human life. Many more fatalities when we consider the trees, wildflowers, mammals, birds, insects, reptiles and amphibians, the mountain air. I do not want to add a mortality of spirit or hope.

But a wave of selfishness, formed in deep fear, grabs me, and I consider running, burying my head, moving to the Poles, or Iceland. The Olympic Peninsula or the Amazon. Somewhere it’s icy or green or wet. My untrained eye would not see climate change as starkly, as clearly, and I could rest. Rest my concerns, apprehension, dread. In Iceland, I could lie on a glacier, watch icebergs float by, and listen to buckets of waterfalls. I could stroke the green velvet of moist moss coating and supple branches in wet Washington. The Amazon, with life living on every surface, a canopy of abundance.

Here, the snow will melt. Scars will glare. Climate scientists will report. The news will come—has come. I’ll hold my breath until the first rains, praying for more.

I love these mountains. I will stay. I look deeply at what we’ve lost, what we can lose, what we might hold on to. The granite underfoot grounds me. The rock will remain; it is millions of years old. The vulnerable trees along our trail were broken to the ground by massive machinery to contain the fire; the meandering path dug up and spit out. It will take decades before it looks as it did. I mourn the loss of trees, wildflowers, the animals, and the mat of needles on the ground. I will stay, observe from my foxhole, bullets whizzing overhead. Sprigs of rust and black that were born green peek through white and say, “Look at me.” I will look squarely at the tree when its cloak melts, drops away, and it reveals its brittle belly. I will touch the blackened crevasses snaking up its trunk and ask, “What shall I do?”

I open the window and inhale the stench. I smell and see carbon-based life forms reduced to carbon. Their story began chapters ago, eons before us, and continues to be written. The print is now underlined, pages flagged. The volume is heavy to hold, could easily be dropped, has been dropped, must be heaved up, the weight held in our arms while we flip back pages, read the first lines, then the next and the next to find where we are in the story.

November 3, 2022

I got soaked, walking in the rain, day before yesterday. I loved it. This morning, I went out for a hike in the nearby hills, and the ground is still wet. Good sign. I look for other signs, but don’t yet see a blade of green grass waving its arms among the dry brown. Eyes on the hills, I stumble over a journal left in the middle of the trail, a pen clipped onto its spine. THINGS TO NOT FORGET embossed on its cover. I pick up the pen and write on a slightly damp page. The ink runs and blurs, but my few words of hope and healing, plans and prayer, are still clear to read.



image info

March 2023, In Like a Lion

We're four months into a new chapter. I didn't think I'd ever feel anything but appreciation for rain falling from the sky. I had switched my favorite season from spring or summer or fall to winter. Winter. Wanting, needing, craving rain. Wildfires of epic proportions followed seasons of drought that had parched our land and seared our senses. Climate change raised the mercury and our fears. Then, in late December 2022, the rains began. We watched the weather forecast: "atmospheric river," "pineapple express," days of heavy rain to drench California. We breathed a monumental sigh of relief. An intense gratitude, thank you, Planet Earth, for your generosity and forgiveness.

The rains continued and continued—for days. Rainfall above average. Reservoirs filling. We heard nervous jokes about building an ark. Approximately six storm systems brought hazardous weather events into mid-January. I read that, overall, twelve, maybe fourteen atmospheric rivers have hit California, including two in March, bringing flooding and mudslides, intense wind gusts, and enormous surf. Toppled trees, levee failures, and power outages. Debris flow coursed over burn scars, where soil was unable to hold moisture. People were trapped in their mountain homes under historic snowfall. With the non-stop rain came the report, in January, of twenty-one people that had perished, twenty-two if the missing child swept away in floodwater was not recovered.

We raise our collective arms to the sky and duck as the pendulum swings inches over our heads: from sweltering heat waves and the scorching drought that fuels wildfires, to massive rainfall and all of its cascading hazards. We read that climate change intensifies our weather—more moisture in our warmer atmosphere, more extreme rain over more miles of burnt wild land. The planet feels out of balance, and we recognize our responsibility. Can we help rectify a balance? Might we mitigate compounding catastrophes in our warming world?

We lean in, hands together, clasped. Heads together, we share intention, value individual efforts. We donate, support action, make a call. We are a resilient, motivated, creative lot. I grab my journal and add more words of hope, plans, and prayer. And pass it on. ✨

