



Too Little, Too Much, Never Just Right

DAWN M. SMITH

YOU ARRIVE HOME TO SOUTHWEST NEW Mexico having been dust-stormed in Oregon and snowed and rained into submission in Wyoming, barely escaping before floods blew out monstrous chunks of land along the Yellowstone River. Still, there were warm, sunny days in Idaho and Colorado.

From your patio you notice smoke in the distance, at times even flames. At least thirty miles away, the [Black Fire](#) tears through parts of the Gila National Forest. It's only May. The monsoons were nearly non-existent last summer; the winter rains never came. Every day since your return, you monitor the weather forecast, hoping the winds will stay calm. It's too early to hope for rain.

A scant nine years after the [Silver Fire](#) devastated the mountains, the Black Range is again under attack. A lightning strike started the 2013 fire, during which approximately 139,000 acres burned over several weeks. The human-caused Black Fire is on its way to becoming the second largest in New Mexico history. Before it can be contained, it will destroy over 325,000 acres.

You are horrified, and yet grateful.

Horrified at the size of the fire so close to home. Horrified to think of the damage to the miles of wilderness you are just beginning to know. Horrified to think of what it will mean for people on either side of those mountains, so much closer to those flames. Horrified as the spring winds push the flames ever further, ever faster,

the direction not mattering. Whatever direction it goes, it will still be a disaster.

Grateful that those winds are keeping the fire from spreading in your direction. Grateful for the over six hundred firefighters—local, state, and national—risking their lives to bring this disaster under control. Even more grateful when the monsoons arrive early, ending the nightmare in the fire zone.

Grateful to get any rain at all at home, where you live in the rain shadow of several mountain ranges. For a while, you revel in the daily storms as they dig their way through the multi-year drought that has plagued the area. Just a few inches, not enough to make much of a dent in the drought, can turn grasslands green, urge flowers to bloom.

But the rains keep coming. Friends on the west side of the Burro Mountains register over fifteen inches by the end of June. To the east, the surging Mimbres River sends debris down the mountains from the Black Fire into the Mimbres Valley, once again threatening homes, damaging crops, rangeland, and irrigation ditches. To the north, the flooding Gila River also tears through farms and rangeland, cutting away the earth and destroying crops.

At last the rain moves to your side of the Burros, bringing waters that had accumulated up in the mountains down through your floodplain, filling springs in the local creek, a creek that has only flowed once since you moved here. In a few short weeks, your new worry is potential damage

to the new fence, especially in the places where it meanders over normally dry wash. This fence keeps the cows out yet allows wildlife access to graze. You have nothing against cows. Your beef is with the ranchers who put more cattle on the range than the fragile landscape can support, contributing to the ongoing ravaging of the high desert country surrounding you.

You are pleased when the fence holds. You clear the debris, everything from rocks to fallen trees, that collected during the worst storm. You hire a tractor to repair the damage where the dry wash crosses the dirt road to your house.

You are relieved to escape a worse fate when you learn that a key bridge to the north has been destroyed, isolating two nearby towns. And yet, you are grateful to live in this place, where whining and complaining is not a standard response. Instead, those isolated towns organize a community effort to prepare meals for the road and utility workers who are spending long hours repairing bridges, roads, and communications to the affected towns.



Here you are learning a contrasting face of climate change to the one you left on Cape Cod. That peninsula has been shapeshifting forever, the Atlantic Ocean never content to leave it alone. But tidal creeks you used to kayak now disappear for hours during high tide, more often melding into temporary bays, compliments of sea-level rise, the visible face of change ramping up during the twelve years you were there. In your first years there, only the biggest full moon tides created those transient bays. It was exciting, rare, and beautiful to glide over the land, knowing it would reappear in a few hours.

But soon you would miss the days when you would disappear down the creeks, far from where powerboats could travel, your haven during peak tourist season. In the last year you lived there, you seldom saw the creeks at your favorite spot, the tides almost constantly covering them and the salt marsh meadows that surround them. It was always an open-water paddle by then.

You are still learning the way things used to be here at your new home, how rains came

more regularly, often less intensely. How the wildland fires were often smaller, less intense. While drought is part of the western landscape, climate change has intensified its impact, even as it has intensified the rains in other parts of the country. Two decades of drought have changed this mountainous region, making it less capable of handling the heavy rains of the monsoons.



Later in the year, the first winter rains fall on your land, slower, gentler rains, delivering scant inches rather than feet of rain. You watch the land absorb the water rather than watch it run off. You see it not creating the level of destruction you lived through during the intense monsoons. But there is more snow than rain this year, and the winds come back, often at fifty mph or more. Power often goes out. And things look to be much worse in the coming years, the wet seasons wetter, the dry drier. You might be living in Wonderland, thinking first there's too much, now there's too little, but never just the right amount.

Here you are more attuned to the dramatic weather changes, and you think harder about your role as climate change becomes more intense, more obvious. You make sure you have defensible space, a fire break around your house. You clear debris from fence lines before the monsoons. You try to live more locally, buy from the farmers' market and other local businesses. You install solar panels, while still trying to be aware of your power use.

But recycling is limited here, and you are two hours' drive from the nearest small city. You must rely on online shopping, with the increased shipping it generates, for many essentials. Your house is larger than you need, and you are not ready to give up the truck and travel trailer that allow you to wander the country rather than stay close to home.

And you know few other people will ramp down their pillaging of the planet as much as they should. The ad industry continues to bombard with sales, new products, latest upgrades. You have no problem resisting. Your needs are basic, but what about families with children who watch their friends get newer, better everything? Not so easy for them.



And the multibillionaires continue to build their monstrous yachts, their rockets planned for their escape from the planet whose destruction they are bent on hurrying. The demand for fossil fuels has not yet abated. New drilling is once again on the table.

And the wars—Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Mali, Somalia, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, to name a few—mean construction and deployment of more weapons, which blast tons of pollution into the atmosphere. Not to mention the destroyed cities, homes, and lives that will need to be rebuilt.

Yet you find hope in the people of the Netherlands, coming together, creating pedestrian- and bicycle-only towns, and supporting local small businesses that have much less impact on the environment. They know too well the danger of rising sea levels. You find hope in the youth fighting for their future. Hope in the small island nations, standing up to the powerful countries who continue to ignore reality, trying to save their countries while also developing mitigation plans.

Thus you remain torn between hope and despair. It is still possible to turn the mess we have made of our home around. Some days you are sure things will change for the better; some days you have to avoid the news to keep from completely giving up. But in this place where the land draws you to make a closer connection, where the open space brings abundant wildlife, where you feel drawn outdoors every day to celebrate your neighbors—the pronghorn sampling the cholla fruits, the javelina foraging on ripe gourds, the mule deer, the jackrabbit and the cottontail sharing grasses, the bats feeding on agave blossoms and sugar water from the hummingbird feeders, and the ever-changing population of birds supplementing their diet at the other feeders you hang by the patio.

You watch the seasons through the lens of wet and dry, green and brown, flowering and fruiting, and the waves of wildlife migration. And you hope, you have to hope, because that's what you've always done. ✨