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Shaver Lake

I wonder if you have a place like this, too: a certain pinpoint on the map, near Melbourne, Australia, or outside Medford, Oregon; a particular locale in Brisbane or Butte County broadcasting images of hellfire and spewing Instagram feeds of residents running from the exploding hills to the ocean and driving through torrents of embers. A hellscape in the news that is personal, and that shames you, because when you see the photos of its huddling, soot-soaked refugees, if you're being honest, what you feel is not basic concern for human well-being but a bitter vindictiveness. A resentment that manifests in a thought spoken only to yourself yet clear as a sentence: *You all should have known this was coming.*

For me, this place is Shaver Lake, where 214 people trapped in a campground ringed by flames prayed and posted to Facebook and in some cases doused water on their burning hair as they waited for helicopter pilots to navigate “the most harrowing flying they

have done in their careers” and lift them from inferno to safety. I grew up forty miles from Shaver Lake, not that I knew—back in the 1980s—what was coming. It was only five years ago, when my scattered family began reconvening annually on the lake, that the future became obvious. I claim no special clairvoyance for seeing what could have been apparent to anyone as we drove up the twisting roads to what used to be vistas of green pines—except now half the trees were red-brown, standing like mummified corpses haunting the mountainscape. Meanwhile, on the lake’s surface, a zombie humanity carried on. Billows of black smoke shot from the exhaust pipes of pontoons, waverunners, and pleasure boats. The air carried the growl of backfiring pistons and an eau de NASCAR that wafted past sunburned middle aged parents drinking Coors Light adrift on pink inflatable unicorns.

Perhaps you too have been the outside person entering such a spectacle: Watching numbly as family members ask what’s wrong with you, aren’t you having a good time? Declining politely the pontoon ride, incurring suspicion as you ask the group, wouldn’t a day on the paddleboards be just as fun? Trying, as you drink your flat Coors, to hide a dread that hits in waves of nausea. Bargaining: OK, I’ll come again this year, but can we trade the double-wide RVs for tents? At least substitute compostable forks for the plastic ones? As your loved ones roast s’mores over propane-powered heat and whisper: *Geez, she’s gotten so self-righteous.*

It’s my mother on the phone. I should have known better than to send a text involving the word “despondency.”

“Maybe you just need to get away,” she says. I look out the kitchen window at a world toned sepia with hints of radioactive orange. In half of California, the air is worse. Where my mother stands, seven hours south, it apparently is better.

"You know, you've been holed up for months, that gets to a person. Hey . . . you there?"

"I don't want to get away!"

"Excuse me?"

"I want to face this reality, I want us to deal with it!"

She is used to this kind of outburst from me. Not often, not more than once every five years, but furious when it comes. We can trace these moments back to when I was nine, when she briefly took up smoking. "If you smoke, you'll die!" I screamed at her. "And if you die, WHAT WILL I DO?"

Now as then, she is quiet, a parent defusing regression.

"There won't be anywhere to escape to, Mom! Do you know what is happening?"

Exhale. "Of *course* I know what is happening. It's all over the news. I can't turn on the TV without seeing Shaver Lake . . ."

"But see that's it, Mom, that's it! It was so obvious that this was coming! That we can't live like this!"

Exhale. "Well, what is it you think we should do?"

And this is where the conversation takes its routine turn, like an old song headed for that worn-out chorus. I say we have to change the way we live. She says that would mean changing the whole economy. I say, then we have to change the whole economy. Sometimes, at this point in the conversation, we talk about trucks and cars, how supposedly they can't be more efficient. Today, the metonym for the economy is the airline industry. She says, we'd have to stop bailing out the airline industry. I say, then let's do it! She says, that would have trickle-down consequences. I say, then let's deal with them! She says, we'd all have to fly less. I say, isn't that what's been happening for nine months of pandemic, and aren't we all ok? She says, but vacations . . . I say, maybe we don't need so many far-flung vacations!

Today the bridge of this old song delivers us to a familiar final verse. "I still think the scientists are going to come up with a solution. They'll think of something. They'll fix it."

This is the refrain that pushes me over the edge.

Always when I hang up from this conversation, I have to ask, what did I expect from it, or even hope for? I cannot answer these questions and yet I cannot keep from having the conversation with my mother. I am a baby crying against the suckling breast, make this right!

And if the roles were reversed? I have a good friend, my age, who is rightfully horrified by our destruction of the atmosphere. Quite rationally, and largely out of care for her children, she has made the crisis the center of her existence. She marches with environmentalists; she eats vegan to avoid the pollution connected to raising meat; she buys only cotton clothes locally manufactured; and there is nothing self-righteous or smug about the way she describes any of these actions, only shaking terror. The other week she sent an email, short, blunt, as she raced off to the demands facing her. Her twelve-year-old has become suicidal.

As I write this, the Creek Fire that incinerated Shaver Lake is still only six percent contained. Meanwhile, more than 3.4 million acres have burned on the West Coast this month—more than 10 times the acreage burned in the entire US 2019 fire season. Soon we will all have a personal Shaver Lake—and whether this year, or next, or the next, those of us in reality will say, *We should have known*.

These days I read the Book of Common Prayer before sleep, and the language I once found so touchingly dramatic and eloquent now seems merely apt.

Lord, hear our prayer.

And let our cry come to you.

A baby at the breast does not care about being seen as morally superior. A baby wailing angrily to the parent only wishes to live.

And if we were to turn instead our cries to God?

In the Book of Common Prayer, in Psalm 4, God talks back.

"You mortals, how long will you dishonor my glory? How long will you worship dumb idols and run after false gods?"

It is the author of the Psalm, not God himself, who then continues: *Know that the Lord does wonders for the faithful; when I call upon the Lord, he will hear me.*

Would the Psalmist write that line in 2020?

I lie down in peace, the Psalmist says, for only you, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

I am a baby who walls against the wrong breast. Perhaps you are too. Let us prepare ourselves, now, to hear the hard answers.