

Believe

If I were to scream “Fire! Fire!” in the middle of Harvard Square, would I be arrested on the grounds I was creating panic in a public space through a false statement?

If I yelled “Fire!” anywhere in the American West today, I would be met in a flash with shovels carried by volunteers with water hoses ready to go. Our desert hamlet of Castle Valley located between red rock mesas and sandstone towers of southeastern Utah can now be described as living inside a blast furnace. Temperatures have topped 100 degrees most of the summer, peaking at 114 degrees. Our volunteer fire department was called to three fires this past week -- one ignited by sparks from an axe, another by an overheated jeep engine, and a third fire caused by a man grinding metal that lit up grasses on his farm. And last month, close to 10,000 acres burned twenty miles south of us in the LaSal National Forest due to a campfire left unattended ignited by winds.

For weeks, we watched pyrocumulus clouds rise above the 12,000 foot peaks like atomic explosions. At night, flames crested Haystack Mountain creating a red-orange horizon in darkness. It became a Rothko painting as my vision blurred with smoke.

Our world is burning.

Our world is in drought.

Our world is being carried away by flash floods with rivers running black from cinders and ash. And the Colorado River is running red from eroding sandstone walls if it is running at all.

Climate collapse is no longer our future, it is right here, right now. To live in the American Southwest, is to witness the trauma and terror of this flaming moment. I can burn grasses with my stare.

We can no longer see the stars.

We are not alone. Friends in Portland and Seattle faced temperatures of 115 degrees. On July 10, 2021, The New York Times reported: *Heat Wave Kills Marine Wildlife en Masse*. The article reads:

Dead mussels and clams coated rocks in the Pacific Northwest, their shells gaping open as if they'd been boiled. Sea stars were baked to death. Sockeye salmon swam sluggishly in an overheated Washington river, prompting wildlife officials to truck them to cooler areas.

"It just feels like one of those postapocalyptic movies," said Christopher Harley, a marine biologist at the University of British Columbia who studies the effects of climate change on coastal marine ecosystems.

Numbers have now reached a death toll of over one billion animals from this summer's prolonged heat waves creating along the Pacific Coast.

In Kim Stanley Robinson's epic novel, "The Ministry for the Future," published in 2020, the opening chapter describes a deadly heat wave in India. The old and the young perish first. Thousands of people flee to the nearby lake expecting relief. Instead, their drink the water that is body temperature and are poached. His story of climate collapse through the lens of science fiction reads like hard journalism. Set in 2025, Robinson's characters caught in the web of extreme weather chant, "They knew, they knew, they knew and did nothing."

This is where we are.

"The climate crisis is the test of our times and while some may still believe it is unfolding in slow motion – No! -- This test is now as acute and existential as any

previous one.” John Kerry, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate said in London on July 20, 2021. He went on to say, “It’s about protecting and preserving the fragile world that we share, it’s about understanding that it costs more not to respond to the climate crisis than it does to respond, and it is without exaggeration about survival.” He closed with a urgent plea to “heal and to rebuild a shattered world.”

For as long as I have a memory, Great Salt Lake has been the place where the sun sank into a liquid horizon of blazing colors. For millennia, it has been a flashing mirror calling millions of migrating birds home to touch down on its saline waters of brine shrimp and the rest and nest on the emerald wetlands that border the inland sea.

In 1987, I witnessed the lake level peaked at 4212’ above sea level. It was it’s historic high. For as far as I could see – water – a liquid hand covering land the size of Delaware and Rhode Island combined.

In July, 2021, I witnessed Great Salt Lake’s historic low: 4190’ feet above sea level. From the causeway Antelope Island (that is hardly an island at all) looking north, it is a horizon of salt. Great Salt Lake is evaporating before our eyes leaving a salt-baked, dusty, cracked lake bottom laced with toxic chemicals from the industries that have mined the lake for decades.

If Great Salt Lake dies, the impact on migrating birds in this hemisphere will be catastrophic. The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, 77,000 acres of critical wetland habitat to over 330 species of birds, is an expansive marsh on the margins of Great Salt Lake that sparkles and sings. No longer. I witnessed bone-dry canals bordered by brittle reeds and rushes. The long blue lanes of water teeming with western grebes, ruddy ducks and redheads, cinnamon teals and pintails that flowed into larger ponds where avocets

and stilts could be seen foraging in the shallows have replaced by parched playas. The long-billed marsh wrens cavorting in the cattails with their rasping voices mixing with the hum of insects and flapping wings were gone. There is no refuge – only silence.

Shock makes tears impossible.

We did find open water with a horizon of white pelicans animating the landscape. Small concentrations of Franklin and California gulls dotted the edges of the cracked mud flats. The gulls were joined by white-faced ibises and herons, great blue and black-crowned night herons standing stoically in the narrow veins of water. A double-crested cormorant standing on a weathered post with out stretched wings became a black crucifix against a darkening sky.

As a writer, I cannot convey the heat of the sorrow that rushed into my heart as one who has been raised and buoyed up by this Refuge. I know my life through the lives of these birds. It is a profound disorientation.

Where are the birds?

Where am I?

Where are we in this moment of drought and despair?

The birds have gone silent. We who live among them are speaking. I want honest conversations that do not end on the obligatory hopeful note. We do not get to sing that song anymore. There is a real world and it is dying. Whether we believe it or not, change is upon us.

If the facts don't matter anymore and misinformation does; if we fail to listen to the indigenous wisdom of Native Peoples and remain unmoved toward another way being in right relationship to the Earth; and the stories and statistics that scientists are bringing to

us do not stir us to action on behalf of a living world that is suffering – and if the lives of our children and the future of their children’s children are not first in our minds and thwarting the easy sleep of our privilege, then the question must be asked: Are we too dead to the world to feel it alive.

Believe the long-legged birds who are circling above us desperately looking for water. Believe the forests that are burning whose surviving trees will later stand as sentinels, charred witnesses to animal bodies reduced to ash. Believe in flash floods roaring through burnt canyons gathering debris in rivers running black in the desert even in times of drought. Believe Great Salt Lake is drying up and leaving what’s left to the dust devils who are whipping up clouds of chemicals resting on the dusty lakebed so we can inhale the toxic world we have created. Believe in the once shimmering bodies of water on the horizon we counted on to mirror our dazzling sunsets that are now nothing more than a mirage made of heat waves death-dancing on the salt flats. Believe in the silences. This is more than an ecological crisis or a political crisis – it is a spiritual one.

The Earth will survive us.

We are the ones being baptized by fire.

Terry Tempest Williams
Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge
Brigham City, Utah

30 July 2021