SHELBY GRAHAM

Mother of Pearl, 2013
digital print (detail from scroll), 30 x 40 in

JONAH RASKIN

Here Comes the Rain Again

A Californian reflects on the Drought

Last December, somewhere in the middle of the long drought we're in, I gathered memories of rain, as though remembering might seed the clouds and make it rain again. Maybe I was thinking magically, maybe I was deluded. I know that I craved rain, and remembered a December when it rained every day for three weeks. In a cabin with a wood-burning stove and two small windows, my son and I watched it come down ferociously, and wondered when it might stop—if it might stop. Roads flooded, redwoods crashed down, and the earth shook. Power lines came down, too. That season it rained more than nine feet—still a local record. Despite the memories of that storm and the disruption that it caused, I longed for the kiss of the rain, as I had once longed for a lover who mailed postcards from Italy promising to come back, though she couldn't say when. We did live together again. We were happy for a time, and yet her return didn't mean as much to me as the return of the rain that made the earth green again and felt like a huge dose of a natural antidepressant.

"Yes, that's it exactly," a friend from South India, now living in the Central Valley, told me when I described the healing properties of rain. "Californians are such wimps when it comes to drought," she added. "In Coonoor, a village in the Blue Mountains, the red, pink earth would dry up and crack at the end of the rainy season. In Kerala, I experienced monsoons. The sky just opened and water poured onto the earth. There were no raindrops." She and I talked the international language of drought and rain that the Eurythmics sang about in "Here Comes the Rain Again," which became my own personal anthem that I played rainy days and sunny days, when I woke in the morning and went to sleep at night. There's nothing like a drought to make one appreciate rain, and nothing like rain to conjure fears of flooding. In a world going to extremes, drought and flood go together.

Recently, I found the Eurythmics album buried in a closet. I wiped away the dust, and played it at the end of January when Governor Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency and called for citizens to reduce their use of water. I wanted to be a good Californian. I took one-minute showers and flushed the toilet only when necessary. I cheered when nearby towns imposed mandatory limits and when restaurants only served water to customers who requested it. Reduction in use was an idea whose time had come a year

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earlier, and maybe before that, when California was clearly in the midst of an unofficial drought, but still a drought.

Living with less, and having lower expectations, seemed to be the governor's favorite mantra. During the drought of the nineteen seventies—Jerry Brown's first term in office—I lived with two dogs in a town on the coast range where it rained on average more than four feet a year. It rained half that much my first year in California, when I learned from Wallace Stegner, a fount of wisdom on nearly everything about the West, that the Golden State, at least its southern half, was built on the edge of a vast desert. Now, in the drought of 2013–2014, his words reverberated louder than ever. The desert seemed to be on the move, inching its way north, up Highway 5, through the Great Central Valley, turning green fields into dry fields that might have shocked T.S. Eliot, author of *The Waste Land*.

Day after day, weather forecasters on the radio predicted rain. Indeed, skies would darken, moisture infused the air, but rain never arrived. Then, on the first Sunday in February, I woke to the sound of a rain so light I could barely hear it. Before breakfast, I put on my fedora, slipped out the kitchen door, gazed at the sky, then walked in the creek bed, the dry brown leaves crunching under my boots. I could see that it would have to rain for days before water would flow in it again.

That afternoon, I attended a party in the Mayacamas, the mountain range that runs north and south and divides Sonoma from Napa. I looked down at the valley floor and across the floor to Sonoma Mountain. The rain came down gently, steadily, and seemed to delight, tickle, and amuse all the young women gathered together that Sunday. They were farmers or worked for farmers; they understood the necessity of rain. The party was to honor their work in the fields, though a few men, mostly husbands and fathers, joined their wives and lovers. Now, it turned into a celebration of the rain. In the living room there was an altar with a statue of a goddess, and in an adjoining room hot cider, bread, and vegetable spreads. Someone read a poem about the unfolding of the world in a drop of rain. There was singing and dancing and the cries of infants in their mothers' laps—all of which made me feel happy from the inside out. That night I went to sleep with the sound of rain in my head, a strange mix of memory and desire.

The next morning I walked in the fields and the vineyards behind my old farmhouse. A solitary hummingbird perched on a barbed-wire fence, nervously twitching its tiny head from side to side. Sleek horses in the pasture munched tufts of grass, and a couple of ornery bulls chomped on dry weeds. Two farm workers planted strawberries and added mulch. Another farm worker spread manure in a low-lying corner of the farm where it often flooded.

The vineyard owner—the son and the grandson of farmers—sat in the vineyard in his battered pickup truck, the door on the driver's side wide open. Rick had never witnessed a year as dry as this one, he told me, not in sixty or so years. His crew had recently pruned the vines; usually they wept after being pruned, he explained. Not this year. They were bone dry.

"What name does the creek have?" I asked, eager to know more about the waterway that drew me to it as it cut through oak and buckeye trees. "Five Creek," he explained. "Though old maps call it Fire Creek."

A day later, the morning air smelled like rain, felt like rain, and soon I heard the sound of rain whipped by the wind. In the distance, tires squished on the two-lane road that led to the freeway. The sky grew darker, the rain came down, and, as though in a dream, I sat, watched, and listened. The rain went to my head and altered my body chemistry—or so it felt. At the end of the day, I drove from Santa Rosa to Napa to talk at a fundraiser for college students, and felt like I was submerged in an immense sea. The cars that came toward me on the road seemed like sharks moving swiftly through the deep, their headlights piercing the blackness of night. Kathy, the woman who had invited me to talk at the fundraiser, told me, "I woke in the night, heard rain on the skylight, and I was happy for the first time in a long time."

On the radio driving home, the forecaster predicted eight to ten inches of rain with possible flooding, though that seemed an exaggeration. The next day the sky opened up and a cold rain pounded the earth. I put on boots, raincoat, and cap, and on the deck behind the kitchen I opened my big red umbrella. I could hear raptors screeching overhead. In my wild garden, the daffodils had been beaten down to the muddy ground, though the tulips I had planted thrust themselves into the light. I opened the gate that led to the farm, walked uphill along the edge of the field to a sturdy old fence, then made my way downhill to Fire Creek roaring along with renewed life. In the meadow, gopher tunnels collapsed, their underground passageways exposed. Two hummingbirds perched on the barbed wire fence; they didn't fly away when I moved slowly toward them.

When I got home I was soaked to the bone, my pants covered with mud. I took off my clothes, hung them to dry in front of the fire, then put on warm socks, pants, a shirt, a sweater, and a maroon cap. For six days it rained and for six days I walked in the fecund rain, stopping to talk to the farmer and the farm workers who told me that it had rained nine inches. In the vineyard, Rick, the usually taciturn grape grower, now wanted to share feelings. "I was sick and tired of looking at the poor brown hills," he said. "Now, I'll enjoy watching the green grass come up."

By the end of the week, the sky cleared, the sun warmed the air, and the temperature rose to seventy degrees. The mustard grass bloomed, the fields turned yellow and green, and the grapevines began to bud slowly. Hope took root in my soul, though almost everyone in the know told me that the rain was only a small dent in the big drought that wasn't going to go away. "Rogue rain," they called it; rain that defied the paradigm.

Juliet Christian-Smith, a climate scientist and a member of the Union of Concerned Scientists, told me that 2013 was the driest year on record in California history, and that dry years would surely come again. "We're in an unprecedented condition of dryness and it will happen with increasing frequency," she explained calmly, almost matter-of-factly, when I asked her if we were in a crisis. There was no need to alarm citizens unnecessarily; they were already in panic mode thanks to the media. Juliet added, "Climate change tells us that the past is no longer an accurate predictor of the future. More people are demanding more water. That's obvious. What isn't perhaps as obvious is that we need to be less vulnerable and more resilient. We have to rethink the way that California addresses the problem of water."

Near the end of February, I found a kindred soul as eager and as willing as I to walk in the rain. Born and raised in England, he had followed streams and rivers ever since his boyhood. Now, he followed them in California, though he was careful not to trespass and make himself a target for irate property owners. We kept to paved streets in proper neighborhoods, avoided puddles and speeding vehicles, and listened to the song of the red-winged blackbird, a sure sign of spring. The world, or at least my corner of it, seemed fresh and clean and vibrant—if only for a moment.

Stephen, my buoyant rainy-day English friend, sang his own song of spring. He didn't want to make war on drought, as local politicians urged, but rather to build community, conserve, preserve, restore, and recharge: save water, plant native trees and shrubs, dry farm, and rely less on cars.

"When people get together, share information, and recognize that we're in the drought together, strange and wonderful things happen. I've seen it with my own eyes," he explained as the raindrops beat on our hatless heads. Sitting down with me for a proper English tea in a café, he added, "It's much easier to keep water clean day in and day out than to have to clean it up after you've thoroughly fouled it. Maybe this drought will serve as a wake-up call to California."

I did not have to go home to hear Annie Lennox of the Eurythmics sing "Here Comes the Rain Again." The song was in my head, the rain was in my blood. In the distance, I could hear the beat of the dreaded drought knocking on the big door that someone, somewhere, would soon have to answer.

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