

Hearsay

The 20 year drought, they say, ended with the late rains and floods in the fall of '75. Late summer of '78 the grasshoppers hit: the garden an utter loss, fruit and seedlings in the orchard decimated. That fall, so much rain the valley looked like the marsh it was a century ago before the earthquake, overgrazing and drought dried it out.

Then, the little ice age: fourteen below one clear late February morning, freezing every night for a month each day for a week of frozen pipes, cracked blocks and aching knuckles, the sun despite an absence of clouds unable in days of Siberian wind to lift the mercury past that point. Nothing in the records even close and not even the oldest oldtimers could remember it so cold.

Palms forty or fifty feet high in the yards of old homesteads planted that long ago by men and women who thought they knew what was what, dead. Native mesquite and acacia frozen back to the root. Trunks of stone fruits in the orchard split to the heartwood.

A turning point they say: the past century or so a freak mild phase between eons of glacial advance. Could happen overnight: the wobbling earth, the polar tilt, the poltergeist El Niño-La Niña up to their usual tricks. A mere one or two degree drop in the average mean and we're back in the deep freeze where men in skins with leaf-shaped stones hunted shaggy elephants until they both went extinct, the marks of tools on bones of human and non-human alike found in caves in our own time showing all flesh was eaten.

'81 was the wettest year anyone could remember, in '82 hardly a spit from that first half-inch in May to that night-long drench in August. Too late for the corn, too late for the autumn wildflowers. Then the mill broke down. Flat broke, no money to fix it, living day to day on odd jobs and credit. Hauling from a neighbor's well (electric pump and company power) in the old Chevy pickup: one drum per tree four drums per trip seven trips per week and the price of gas for the truck figured in on top of everything else.

Every day about noon the clouds build up, you can smell the moisture. Tidal waves of red dust swell up and roll southeast to northwest across the valley. Lost the sapling almonds and figs,

but managed to save most of the apples plums pears and pecans
and they made their best growth since the last broken record.
No rain falling here but it floods these dry washes and rainbows transfix
the storms that pass us by. Just so we count our blessings:
tumbleweeds don't grow as tall without rain, mosquitoes
don't breed so thick, you don't see rattlesnakes quite as often.