

Blow, winds, and crack
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Rooks swirl around around the beeches on the common, like some deathly bridal crown. A swift — in single figures now, in August's second week — cuts through the silky sky. Implacable, glass-eyed, a herring gull watches from its post. Its months of nabbing ducklings from the pond are done, but still it watches, hungering. Nature is about her heartless business. All is well.

It's not. We're fucked. How many times I've weighed that word. Deleted it. Tried others. None will do. The word is fucked. The world is fucked. The International Panel on Climate Change published yet another grim report today: humans, it says, are unequivocally responsible for climate change. Sea level rise — to which we're bound by past emissions — is irreversible, threatening the lives and livelihoods of countless millions, not to mention biodiversity. We have warmed the atmosphere by 1.1 degrees; our climate is unravelling. Under every credible scenario — the IPCC is clear — we'll be at 1.5 degrees of warming by 2040. 1.5 degrees: so meek a figure. So readily dismissed for sixty years; the sixty years we've understood the mechanism of this hell we've made. And we've not acted.

As last year in the boreal summer, the east Siberian region of Yakutia is on fire. One of the planet's coldest landscapes is aflame, thanks to a heatwave fuelled by a hundred years of burning fossil fuels, and ploughing soils, and felling forests, raising livestock. By the start of August, this year's fires themselves had released more than 500 megatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, speeding the melting of the permafrost, releasing further climate-forcing methane locked in the ground since woolly mammoths trod it.

It's called a feedback loop and it's a beautiful idea: each stage in a chain reaction reinforces the conditions which set it off, meaning it grows faster and more sure, its result more inescapable. There is a Lear-like inexorability to it; born, as it is, of stubborn vanity, refusal to own the blame and alter course.

We have refused. You, I, each one of us. As Yakutia burns, we drive a hundred miles to twitch an albatross; we write our jolly articles, promote our books; we sign petitions to spare a death-marked alpaca; we plan our next year's travels, drugging ourselves with the comfortable lie that watching nature keeps it safe.

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!

No, Lear, of climate change we have seen nothing yet. These Covid years will seem frivolity compared with what's to come. Our every waking thought — our every muscle's twitch — should be devoted to averting this catastrophe. Screaming against the gale, making our weakling press and governments take heed and act.

For Lear's last scene is partly wrong.

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

The oldest will not bear most; but those to come. And mine's the guilt.