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Fretting at corners under an eerie orange sky

by JAMES MATTHEWS

When the sky changes, people and birds and every other animal become wary that something's happening. Portents in the sky have been referenced in works from Homer to medieval legends, folklore across time and geography, Shakespeare, instances in various books in the Bible, to modern literature and music and film.

Red sky at night, a sailor's delight.

Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.

The orange weirdness over Ontario last week wasn't without precedent.

Atmospheric smoke caused by forest fires along the Canada-U.S. border in May 1780 plunged North America into an unnatural darkness. Similar to 1816, when Mount Tambora in Indonesia erupted and wrought dark day-fog and famine. People rioted and crops failed.

In 536 AD, a volcanic catastrophe plunged Europe, Asia, and the Middle East into perpetual night for more than a year. The dust veil darkened the sun and decimated crops, animals, and people. World temperatures plummeted.

The sky turned an eerie orange last week as smoke from wildfires obscured the sun. Smoke was smelled and tasted. Warnings of smoke and unhealthy high temperatures were the order through much of the week. Conditions rendered simple tasks arduous and imposed upon one's will and one's mind.

I did a walk-through of my friend's house and lugged his recycling to the curb one night last week. He and his missus are in Ireland, so I'm minding their house. Outside, somebody said something about the evening humidity, and it was as if I'd heard my grandmother gripe about how it felt right mauzy.

??Tis right mauzy, it is,? my Newfoundland grandmother would've said. ?I allows the sopping heaviness around you and in the clothes on your back will drop the black flies right to the ground.?

A man and a woman shared a cigarette under the eaves along the side of the house. One of them was who must've spoken about the night's heat.

?Was there somebody home yesterday evening? I walked through your house and put the bin to the curb.?

He texted back that they'd gone to the airport in the afternoon.

Huh.

?Could be the squatters,? I texted.

Huh?

?Yeah,? I said. ?Squatters. Things are getting weird here. Weatherwise. The sky is making us all weird. Looked off and everybody was wary at corners, fretted about what could come around.?

HUH? Capitalized like that.

I texted: ?Can't blame them, really. The heat is hellish. The sky is spooky.?

?Squatters. We left only yesterday.?

?That's right,? I texted. ?I see your point. It didn't take long. I'll leave sandwich fixings for them.? Only I texted sammich fixins. Full bellies will soften their dispositions. ?I'll make sure there are clean towels, too.?

?JAMES.?

?Enjoy Ireland. If you see Garron, tell him I'll send money for the Jamesons. Don't worry about anything. And ttyl.?

Happy squatters are less likely to damage a property. He'd hearted that last text. Added one of those smiley faces that have replaced the King's English for many people.

From what I can tell, they're a skittish couple, I told him. This was two days later and followed a string of question-mark texts from him and his wife. I assured them that the safety and integrity of their house, belongings, and plants were my foremost concern. And squatters are people too, I said.

Threats in all-cap texts feel very much like threats shouted in person. Bristling verbiage of uppercase descriptors. Perhaps it was whatever the sky had done. I'm as much a climatologist as my grandmother was, so I don't know.

But they've moved on, the squatters. Didn't say thanks or goodbye. The sammich fixins are gone, the driveway is littered with butts I have to push a broom though. I haven't smoked in years but my throat feels as if I do.