

Falling snow covers the boughs of ponderosa pines along Lake Mary Road, southeast of Flagstaff, during a February snowstorm.  
*Tom Bean*

# PRAYERS FOR SNOW

AN ESSAY BY CRAIG CHILDS



**WHITE LAY ACROSS THE DESERT AT DUSK.** The biggest winter storm in years had just passed, clouds trailing into snags and streamers over the divided four-lane of U.S. Route 93. Lone rough peaks and dry braided washes led away from the Nevada line. In the last light, before stars came on, we could make out a softly glowing skim covering everything ahead, snow reaching down to almost 3,000 feet in elevation. Mountains were covered, white battleships anchored on an almost treeless plain. I'd never seen so much snow this far west, nearly to the canyon crags and high-tension power lines around Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. Eastbound, heading for Flagstaff — her in the passenger seat, bare feet in fuzzy winter shoes; me on the wheel, clicking off brights when lights came toward us — we didn't think much of the storm. It seemed that all winter we'd been hit with storm after storm. We were pushing 65, bound for the pines of Northern Arizona. Asphalt shined wet.

Around here, you never ask for weather to let up. If it rains, no matter how wet your parade, be thankful. Precipitation is a gift. Last winter, we were drowning in largesse. It was late February, and Tucson already had two ground-blanketing snows, saguaros wearing cornices on their arms. The *Farmers' Almanac* predicted a cold and snowy winter for the state, the map of Arizona bearing a single snowflake between Kingman and Las Vegas. For what it's worth, the *Almanac* claims 80 percent accuracy, and this time it was right. We were driving into the wake of one of the biggest storms on record.

**THIS ISN'T A STORY ABOUT ACCIDENTS** or urgent highway matters, other than touching the brakes, slowing to 60 in light and chunky slush. You won't be reading about a rollover on black ice or an empty back road with a car bogged down. This is just a drive to Flagstaff, planning to get there safely in one of the finest, most copious winters in recent memory.

Snow came on around Dolan Springs, high enough in elevation for flakes not to melt into freezing rain before touching ground. Snow wasn't falling. It had already done its business and moved on. Bare desert was miles behind us. The weight of this storm dropping all day and into the evening was an hour or two ahead. Weather had been predicted, expected, snowplows ready for a big one. Final measurement: Flagstaff would receive the deepest one-day snowfall in its recorded history, dating back to 1898. Almost 36 inches of snow came down in one fell swoop.

Driving toward the tail of it, we were looking at the most recent blizzard in a series that started back in October, what meteorologists were calling an "active storm track." Record-breaking numbers of weather warnings had been put out across Arizona by the National Weather Service. Heading home from a trip to Death Valley, we'd been hit with a storm a week earlier that swallowed that moisture-deprived landscape, full coverage down to a thousand feet, creosote bushes buried like fat pompoms. We woke one morning in a tent sheeted with snow, knocking open the fly to see an unthinkable



expanse of rocky moonscape buried in white.

In Phoenix, this would mark the sixth-wettest winter, and one of the colder winters, in the city's history, while 2018 ranked as the seventh-warmest year ever recorded in Central Arizona. You wouldn't call it climate change unless you saw it in the context of centuries, recent decades clustered with increasing highs and lows, records broken, then broken again, trends intensifying in all directions. Rather than change, "instability" is a better word. Or "aggravation." Climates are always changing, but they are not always unstable, not always aggravated. One year you thank your stars for all the precipitation, and another you wait out drought like gripping it in your teeth. It's always been this way in the mercurial Southwest, but records show more ups and downs than we've ever seen,

Tall grasses jut from the snow-covered landscape surrounding Bismarck Lake, a small reservoir northwest of Flagstaff. *John Burcham*

more volatile than mercurial. Flagstaff would go dry by the end of the summer following this wet winter, and forest fires would rage.

Past Kingman, she scanned through radio stations and we sang when we recognized the song. We merged onto Interstate 40, which crosses the top third of Arizona, its surface rippled with frozen hardpack. Spindrift had stiffened into rumble strips, bringing us down to 55, brake lights of semitrucks tapping ahead of us. Every 10 miles we drove 10 mph slower as guardrails became waves, the interstate skimmed by plow blades. By 6,000 feet we'd slowed to 40 and the interstate was

turning into a trough. The storm was still ahead of us, moving about as fast as we drove, no snow left behind to fall. It had hit like a bomb and traveled on. People in Northern Arizona were already calling it the "snowpocalypse."

Although I gripped the steering wheel more carefully — radio off now, touchy with the accelerator — I was glad for the inundation around me. Forests were laden from here across the state to the New Mexico line. Creeks would be piled upon, running water visible through windows in the snow. This meant groundwater filling up. The drying of aquifers — lakes held between rock formations deep underground, often tapped by pumps and wells — would level off for a moment. Springs that died years ago, reported dry on Hopi and Navajo lands, would flow again this spring. Water in this dry country is

life. The best, most efficient forms of storage are not dams or water towers, but white, snowy mountains and natural reservoirs packed inside lenses of rock, fed by faults and fissures, watered by the sky. The longer these stay full, the longer there is water for creeks, springs, ditches and wells downstream. No matter where in the state you turn on a tap, it traces back to the falling of rain and snow, and the land that holds it.

**DARKNESS FILLED THE HIGH COUNTRY.** Craning to look up through the windshield, she said she could see stars between the clouds. When a storm passes and the sky clears, you can still feel the discharge in the air. We were both a little giddy with weather, down to about 35 mph on hard-plowed ice, passing the hazard lights of trucks slipped off to the side and stuck. Molecules that pick up negatively charged ions inside colliding pressure cells and shifting moisture gradients have a direct effect on human biochemistry. Scientists don't agree on how or why this happens, but they agree that it happens. Moods change with weather. In controlled research environments, exposed to the same positively or negatively charged ions as in the outdoors, people behave differently. Ions like those in



Heavy snow creates a postcard-like setting in downtown Flagstaff on a January morning. *Tom Bean*

a storm are known to increase recall of positive memories. Storms make us happier.

On the outskirts of Flagstaff, we reached 3 feet of fresh snow. Ponderosa pines, usually dark as if robed, stood in bright pillows, their boughs buried in each other's overburden. Headlights illuminated a wall of billowing white forms to either side of the interstate, where traffic crept along at 20 mph, snowplows flashing their shocking array of lights.

I hesitate to call it "traffic." Only a handful of vehicles were in sight: a hundred yards ahead, a hundred feet behind, the ones who hadn't pulled off or turned back. Interstate 17 coming into Flagstaff from the south had closed.

Turning off for Flagstaff felt like sinking into a town at the

bottom of the sea. Street benches were gone, parked cars visible only by a curve in the snow, the slopes of windshields feet below. Street lamps were hooded and pillared, their circles of light falling on soft sediment, powder on powder. Snowplows had turned Historic Route 66 through the middle of town into a bare white strip with high banks to either side. Sidewalks and businesses had been given up.

A friend, Kevin Fedarko, a Grand Canyon author and laureate, was lending his house on Grand Canyon Avenue, a few blocks off the main drag. Side streets had been plowed maybe once or twice as emergency measures. Getting to his place, we plowed with headlights and grill, tires spinning and grabbing in four-wheel-drive. Snow came up and over the hood. Everything looked new, one street blocked and drifted over, another ending in a sideways truck stuck and left there. Lights were on in most of the houses, windows warm. A few people were out leaping through potholes, marveling at the deluge. We found our way to Kevin's darkened house, where we'd spend the night. It didn't look like a house, other than the open mouth of its porch. The roof, like the roof of every structure around it, was a fairyland of frosting, architecture swollen and blown out of proportion. It looked like a cartoon of itself. The driveway was a quick spin of the steering wheel, gunning the accelerator to get us off the street, snow kicking up behind us like gobs of frozen cheesecake.

Kevin had kindly shoveled the walk to the back door, and we crunched and squeaked through a waist-high slot, a canyon leading to a porch-lit clearing big enough that we could open the door and fit into a mudroom. We stamped and scraped inside, kicking a few pounds of snow back out the door.

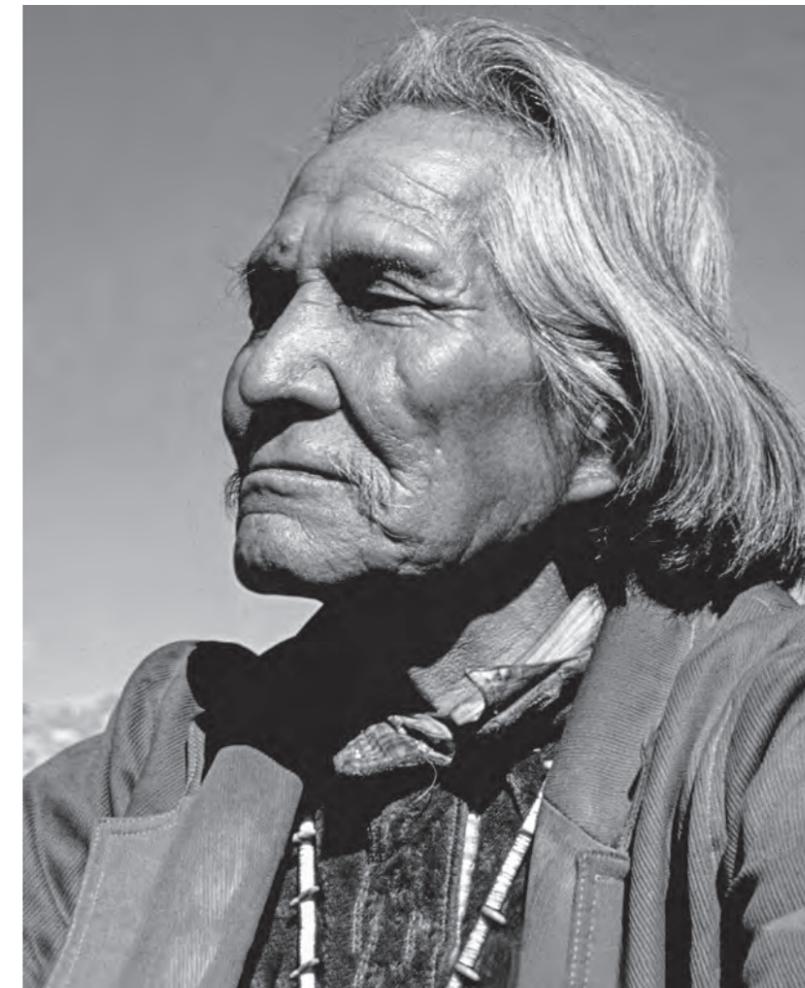
A blanket had fallen over the town. It felt like a spell, a castle put to sleep. The air was blue with darkness and the reflection of snow. A night like this, you forget summer ever happened. Spring and fall are abstractions. There is only winter, and it is only deep. Everyone in town was thinking the same thing: nothing but snow.

If I prayed for snow, it would be like this for decades. Early summer each year, the creeks and rivers would be turbid and loud, running high through July and into August. Snow would pile upon snow and springs would come out of the cracks. Prayers are not always answered, not in these dry places. Nothing sharpens thirst like drought. As much as I celebrated this abundant, cold winter in Arizona, I knew it would be answered by warmth and little rain. In this land of extremes, climate change was here before it had any catchphrases. Snow fell as hard as the searing sun of summer. Only now, extremes come faster, harder, less predictable, counting on an almanac as much as the Weather Service.

The house was more than a century old, with a couch, a wooden table, chairs, and stacks and stacks of books. It felt like a sunken ship, everything still in place. We touched a match to an oil lamp, slid on a glass globe. She got blankets from a closet. I started a fire in the wood stove. We gathered on the couch and curled into each other. Through the crack and pop of firewood, we listened to the silence of Arizona snow outside, the sound of water waiting. **AH**

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