

PHONY WAR¹

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As in Europe in 1940, we daydream on the edge of cataclysm, this one threatening all civilization. On Sept. 1, 1939, the German Army invaded Poland and the realization spread through most of the northern hemisphere that the world was once again at war. On Dec. 10, the First Division of the Canadian Army sailed for Europe. The Canadian troops expected to enter a spreading conflict, but when they reached their bases in the United Kingdom they found that the Allied and Axis sides, armed and mobilized, were at war in word but not in deed. For months, nothing happened. As some wag put it, having expected to confront the German Blitzkrieg, they found themselves in a Sitzkrieg.

Known as the Phony War, this period of unearthly calm lasted until April 1940. The knowledge that death and destruction were on the horizon did not prevent many people in Europe from continuing to live as they had before. My grandparents, for example, decided during this lull before the storm that they would have their fourth child. My grandfather continued to work at the clothing shop he owned in London until the day he went to work to find that German bombers had left a large hole in the ground where the shop had stood. The awareness of approaching disaster did not alter my grandparents' behaviour. Only the next spring, when Germany invaded Norway, did the full import of their decision to enlarge their family become apparent.

Today we are once again in a Phony War. This time the antagonist is the damage we have done to our climate. Most people who are attentive to the news media are aware of the virtually irrefutable evidence that the planet is becoming warmer as a result of human activity. This conclusion may not be universally accepted in Fort McMurray, or on George Bush's ranch, but beyond these outposts of obscurantism, the debate is over.

The Domsayers

We know that life-altering and possibly cataclysmic change is coming, and we continue to live as we have always done, burning as much fossil fuel as our incomes permit. We justify ourselves by telling friends how we recycle newspapers, use low-energy light bulbs, eschew bottled water or take cloth bags to the supermarket. My own claim to environmental virtue is that I have never owned a car; this pretension is nullified by my habit of making long trips on airplanes half a dozen times a year. Our small gestures toward environmental responsibility, which might be significant in the context of a large-scale effort to decarbonize civilization, are rendered meaningless by a society that fails to address the central issue of people in wealthy countries consuming resources at a rate that, according to persuasive prophets of doom such as James Lovelock, George Monbiot and Gwynne Dyer, guarantees that within 20 to 30 years, many parts of the world that are currently economically comfortable will face mass starvation.

Once this consciousness creeps into your head, it never goes away. No act is innocent, no moment of triumph untainted by the apocalypse that lies ahead. I sit in a committee meeting and listen to a vice-president describe how the "competitiveness" of the university where I work depends on expanding internationalization. As I take notes on his plans to send ever larger numbers of students on semesters abroad in England, France, Guatemala, India, China and

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Poland, to open new semesters in Australia and Brazil, I wonder how much longer "internationalization" will be a viable strategy for any institution. I'm on this committee because I support these plans, but suddenly any scheme that involves hundreds of people a year taking long plane trips seems doomed.

I hire a contractor to renovate my house, telling myself that it's a "long-term investment"; then I wonder whether anyone will want a house in a commuter-belt town in a future when gas will cost more than champagne and Toronto, the city to which people in my town commute, will be unable to feed itself. Participating on a panel at a literary festival, I give my customary response to a question about why my short stories are set in many different countries: that my peripatetic life has made me feel a little bit at home in a lot of places and completely at home nowhere; that in order to unify my personality I must be perpetually in motion. As I utter this long-held article of personal faith, it sounds irresponsible in a way that it never has before.

The next spring, as I'm lamenting the curtailing of the cross-country ski season by the premature disappearance of the snow, I read that over the March break holiday 500,000 people will pass through Pearson Airport in Toronto, and I can't help but see the two events as connected.

Canada As Bunker

The false consciousness characteristic of the Phony War makes us grasp at straws. Reading Gwynne Dyer's disturbing book *Climate Wars*, I found myself taking perverse solace in Dyer's prediction that if by the year 2035, no country in the world will be exporting food, Canada, along with Russia and a few spots in Scandinavia, will be among the few that will still be food self-sufficient. I decided, conveniently, to overlook another of Dyer's predictions: that most of the western United States will turn into a burning desert. It's hard to imagine that 150 million starving, desperate, well-armed Americans fleeing north to where the climate remains moist enough to support agriculture won't make an impact on Canada's food self-sufficiency.

In a Phony War you can't voice your deepest preoccupations, because they sound like hysteria. We all live with the (mostly unspoken) knowledge of the inevitability of our death as individuals. To live with the unspoken knowledge of the inevitable death of our civilization, perhaps within three decades, is far more paralyzing. Many vital activities -- renovating the house, trying to write stories that will last, raising children, saving for the future, even exercising environmental responsibility -- threaten to become meaningless.

I'm on the alert now for signs that the Phony War may be ending and the real war beginning. Recently an acquaintance mentioned that she and her husband had bought five acres of land to retire on, more than four hours north of Toronto. I was surprised. Economically successful West Indian immigrants in their early 50s, this couple has always expressed a preference for parts of the country where the population is racially varied. So why choose deepest, whitest, north-central Ontario? "My husband's read the stuff on global warming," my acquaintance said. "We have to get away from the population centres and up to where we'll be able to grow our own food." I said nothing, astonished to find someone who was acting on the evidence that surrounds us. I suspected that, like most people, I would do nothing until it was too late.