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China Lake: A Journey into the Contradicted Heart of a Global Climate Catastrophe

Barret Baumgart
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Combining personal narrative and climate change research, this catastrophic book is capable of shaking the most secure temperament to its core.

The best way to look at *China Lake* is as a long essay. The author seeks (and obtains) interviews with climate scientists, government tour guides, citizen activists, and other inhabitants of a climate landscape where the line between existential terror and magical thinking is tense to the point of breaking. This is a place where the scientists of the twenty-first century relive ancient shamanistic desire to control the weather; where the darkness of earth worship mingles with New Age belief in mystical healing, where humans are at war with both the earth and the sky. It is, in two words, terrifying and awesome.

The author depicts himself as a slave to his own nature. His attachment to his mother and addiction to nicotine mirror the tension between the desire of the human species to survive and its reliance on oil. The book becomes more impactful by the mixing of the personal into the cosmic. The author himself becomes a sort of shaman, delving into the darkness of climate crisis and depicting what he finds there, in this modern petroglyph.

It is difficult to pin down a specific audience for the book, though many people should read it; covering military, religious, and scientific ground, it may end up being most popular among conspiracy theorists. This is a shame. Its message should be heard more widely, bleak as it is. Ultimately, the book is pessimistic, even despairing. *China Lake* pulls no punches, sugarcoats nothing, and never, ever talks down. Whom is this book for? The answer is unclear. The fact of its existence is a scream into the void, a statement that should be heard by the gods but which may only reach the ears of other mortals.

China Lake presents in literary form what science has thus far been unable to communicate: climate change may be survivable—maybe—but there's no telling whether it will be worth the cost. A devastating artistic achievement.

ANNA CALL (May/June 2017)

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