

Dreaming the Invisible  
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When the foundation stone for Notre-Dame de Paris was laid in 1163 everyone, architects to stonemasons, knew they'd be working on something they wouldn't live to see completed, nor would their children or grandchildren. They couldn't be certain that the engineering would hold, or what the light, filtered through rose windows into a stone glade, would be like.

As the walls rose course by course, carpenters prepared the lumber for the roofing. It took half a century to fell the oaks, lay them down with their heads in the north to align with the Earth's energy, strip their bark, submerge them in swamps to preserve them from rot, cut them into beams, and set them out to dry. The attic framework made from these beams was called 'the forest' — not the three-hundred-year-old wild forest from which the trees came, but one made by humans, which would last another seven hundred and fifty years, until the fire this spring.

It took a century to build Notre-Dame, and it looks as though it will take about the same amount of time to end the world as we've known it. Deep in a climate emergency, those of us who could do something about it can't seem to muster the collective will to respond. The agitation of the elements — rising waters and winds, spreading fire and dust — is devastating to some. Others mock the warnings and profit from pushing us closer to specicide. Hopeful things happen, but not enough of them, and not quickly enough. Have we lost the stonemason's belief in the invisible future, the carpenter's almost ceremonial preparation for it?

Many more of us once had relationships with the rest of the natural world that included mutuality and respect. Native Americans renewed prairies with fire, British farmers planted hedgerows to protect the soil. We've been kin to grizzlies bringing salmon inland from the rivers, leaving the remains of their meal to fertilize the great trees. We've acted like the fungi that grow along tree roots, tapping them for nourishment and transmitting information through the grove.

If just for a moment we considered not our aspirations or our fears but what we're actually doing, it looks as though we can't hold up our end of the relationship anymore. We can't seem to stop ourselves from causing harm. Are we as a species worn out? We've had cave paintings and symphonies, tenderness and mysteries — and are they completed now?

Perhaps, after all, the story we're in isn't primarily about us; perhaps it was always the story of the Earth. Perhaps the Earth's dreaming of us is fading away, and because her dream is such a very long one and we are so fleeting, we don't know it yet. Is that why we're having such a hard time dreaming ourselves into the future?

Tony Hoagland wrote a poem called Peaceful Transition, which another poet, Marie Howe, said was "soaked with grief for what men have done to the living world." He prayed that if "the time of human dominion is done, / ... the forests grow back with patience, not rage." Tony Hoagland was nearing the end of his own life, and one of the things he found there was a quiet prayer for mercy. It undid me, the nakedness of that request, its hope for the unearned kindness of the living world as its dream of us comes to a close — a close that will still take a rending century or two.

It seems a lot to ask, considering, but don't we have to ask it for our children, and for all the people who would have done things differently, if they'd had the agency? And perhaps we can offer, in exchange, the courage to put down for a moment everything but our own naked grief, feel it all the way to the bottom, and find there what it asks of us.

At the foot of my bed, a small member of a four-legged tribe who decided to cast their lot in with humans waits, mostly patiently, for his dinner. What will happen to his kind? Will they return to some older version of themselves, from before they trotted into that firelit casino? What of all the creatures, all the ecosystems, we have altered and destroyed? If we fall out of the Earth's dream, will the nonhuman survivors gather on every drowning continent to hold a Ghost Dance, calling back the spirits of their murdered kin?

The ocean just beyond the foot of my bed will go on when we don't, and once we've stopped poisoning it, it will heal and grow new life, in the immensely long ages of its own living. And if, some aeon far in the future, humans emerge again from the waters to walk upon the land, the cultures that are like fungi and grizzlies will be the first to return, and with any luck that's where it will stay for a very long time.

As for the cave paintings and the symphonies — all the testimony we might offer in our plea for mercy — they would not be diminished by our passing, they remain among the universe's lovely creations. Just for a moment, for what it's worth, I want to dedicate them to clouds and waters and mountains, to all those who swim and fly and lope across the Earth's long dream.