

## Fire Season by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

Photograph by Breno Machado. Courtesy of Unsplash.com

We waited through the Winter of the pandemic, wearing masks, hiding from our darker fears. And then Spring came—apple blossom pink, pear blossom white. The wisteria falling lavender-blue over the garden shed, and then the jasmine, a wall of bright white, filling the evening air with sweetness. Here was another story, each year returning, and longed for as the garden comes alive with colors and fragrance, and in the vegetable garden harvesting the first lettuces, planting the tomato seedlings for later. And the California poppies painting the edge of the pathway orange and yellow, wild roses pink beside the roads. How we waited for Spring this year, and how it touched the deep fabric of our being, reminding of what emerges, seeds becoming plants, becoming flowers or vegetables.

But even as I watched the speckled newborn fawn on shaky legs, together with her mother eating the grass growing high outside the garden gate, something was missing. The rains did not arrive, the storms did not wash in from across the Pacific. And in the mountains the snow did not fall. And so, even amidst all this beauty, this awakening which each year is so very new, we are waiting for the fires. Last year they burned for weeks just down the road, and only a few days ago the still burning embers in a tree burst into flame. The days are already hot, though the scent of Spring is still in the air, not yet smoke.

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This is the brave new world into which we have stumbled—fires, floods, a primal reminder that climate change is not just carbon emissions, not just science and data, but a landscape waiting, not knowing. Last year thousands of migrating birds fell from the sky, starved to death as they flew farther to escape the smoke. What will happen this year? Whose house will be burned, who will flee to escape the flames? Will we be safe, or is safety just a story that belongs to another time, before this great unraveling?

Last year here in California it was an unseasonal dry lightning storm that caused the trees to catch fire, burning millions of acres. How will this year unfold? We are lucky here on the coast to have escaped the worst of the pandemic, to already be mostly vaccinated, even as in India crematoriums are overwhelmed. Many long to return to normal, to leave this trauma behind. But those of us who live near to the land, who can feel its pulse, hear its secrets whispered in the trees, know that this is just another dream, that “normal” is now lost, a nostalgic memory. The pandemic has taught us about uncertainty, and the need to listen even more closely to the Earth, to sense her present imbalance. Despite all our computer models and plans for a future of green economic growth, we do not know where we are headed (or heading). Here on the coast there is no plan for living with the wildfires, except a prayer and a bag packed.

Meanwhile, in East Africa, the Somali pastoralists have already moved on, after watching their animals die in the years of drought. They’ve left the land they’d walked for centuries, moving into camps. They know that climate change brings hunger and migration, as they suffer the effects of our use of fossil fuels. They did not put carbon into the atmosphere. They are too poor to pollute. But they are among the first to suffer. Here our lives appear the same, food lines may grow, poverty increase, but for most of us our lives are not yet broken. But we can feel how something essential has changed, a barrier passed. Do we feel the tipping point first in our souls, before the fires and smoke turn the air red?

Will the fires and floods finally awaken us, turn our attention back to the living Earth? Or have we lost that connection, that place of belonging? How long before we are forced to wake from this nightmare of alienation? I used to imagine how Spring would come after the hard Winter of materialism, after all those years when we put profit before people, before the more-than-human world. Now, even amidst all the colors and sweetness, I know that this is not the real Spring I was waiting for, but just a moment of wonder, of magic, before the land becomes too dry. Before climate crisis creates a bleaker world. Before we too begin to be broken.

At the end of the Middle Ages there was a mini ice age, when the Winters stretched far into Spring. The crops failed, people starved. At first they burned women as witches as a way to placate the gods. But this did not help, the Winters turned colder, the rivers froze. It makes me wonder how we will react—who will we demonize as a way to assuage our fears? Will we seek refuge in authoritarian regimes, which promise us stability; or populism, nativism, which promise us a voice? I am sure we will find a victim to blame, anything to escape the deep knowing that our way of life is over, that we cannot continue with this story of exploitation and consumerism, this plague that is burning the land.

There are stories that destroy us, and stories that sustain us. This Spring gives us a glimpse of what can sustain, simple beauty, “A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the beginning. In Eden garden...”<sup>1</sup> Here we are a part of something being reborn, vibrant but also sometimes hesitant like the fawn. The fires will come again, the land will burn, but we can keep alive this seed that belongs to the cycles of the seasons and our own soul. This knowing passed down through generations, held in the old stories long before we forgot to remember, of how civilizations fall apart, and amidst their ashes green shoots appear. This is the dream we need to keep alive in the coming decades. We can discuss being carbon neutral and energy efficient, but there is another, more potent story being woven into these dying days of our present civilization. It is a story so simple that it is easily overlooked, of how to be with each other and with the Earth in a way that does not exploit

but nurtures. It is a return to how it was in the garden before we were exiled and learned about competition rather than co-operation.

When the fires come, when the buildings burn, friends and neighbors are what we need, communities to support us, the kindness of strangers. We experienced it last Summer as the firefighters risked their lives holding the line. We were fortunate in our small town that this time no one lost their home, unlike so many inland. Hand-painted signs are still beside the road, thanking the firefighters. We cannot escape the imbalance of nature we have created, but we can learn how to walk together into an uncertain future.

Years ago I had a series of visions of the future, of a civilization waiting to be born. I was shown how we would find new ways of healing, bringing together the wisdom of the shaman with the techniques of modern medicine. I saw how we would be given a technology as simple as photosynthesis that could provide us all with free and unpolluting energy from the sun. I saw earth magic coming alive, plants speaking to us again after centuries of silence. But I did not see how we would transition: the hard broken road we would have to travel, what we now call climate crisis and social breakdown, the unraveling caused by our present unsustainable way of life.<sup>2</sup> Visions are often simple and clear, full of light and love, and lack the messiness of everyday. I did not see the farmers leaving their cracked and barren land, the camps of refugees, migrants fleeing hunger and violence, sometimes being sold into prostitution. I still do not see how this present civilization will finally break apart and die, become just a shattered monument to a people who have lost their way. But I hold true to the magic of those visions, and I also sense how many of today's stories, especially the distortions of social media, will be lost as the waters rise.

Sadly many see the coming climate breakdown from within the same story that created this "crisis," that nature is a wild destructive force that we need to control, to protect ourselves from in order to save our way of life. This is like the early white settlers in North America who saw the great forests and plains as a threatening wilderness that needed to be mastered, not realizing that they just did not understand its ways and wisdom, did not know how to look or listen.<sup>3</sup> And now, as we stumble into this present landscape there is an even greater need for a deeper awareness, to be receptive to the spirits of the land and the beings of light who can help to guide us, who are always around despite our censorship of the unseen worlds. We are always part of a fully animate world, even if we have abandoned this knowing. Visions can sing to us, can show us the songlines to follow, the dreams we need. We can no longer afford to remain isolated within our rational consciousness.

I used to think that I would live to see the future of my visions. Now I only hope that my grandchildren's grandchildren will walk in a kinder world, alive to a multidimensional kinship, knowing that everything they can see, hear, and touch is sacred. I do not know how much will have to burn before we abandon our patterns of behavior that are poisoning the Earth, destroying Her wild places. Before we can again hear the music that connects the seabirds with the flow of the tides. Visions are full of promises, and not all of them are realized. How the worlds come together, how dreams are woven into consciousness, is one of life's greatest mysteries.

As Spring turns to Summer we wait for fire season. And we can also sense the deeper cycles of this time, which belong to our shared destiny with the Earth. Fingers pressed

against the bark of a tree one can feel the roots reaching deep into the soil, and also the shared knowing of all the trees, linked together in a living network. Scientist Suzanne Simard uses the term “wood-wide web” to describe the fungi in the soil—they’re called mycorrhizal fungi—that connect trees together, communicating with each other and forming an integrated whole. She also noticed how old trees in the forest, what she calls “Mother Trees,” with large root systems, nurture the smaller trees. Outside our kitchen window is such a tree, huge and hundreds of years old, part of the forest that used to cover the hillside. Living beside it we can feel the land that was here with the Indigenous Peoples, when trees were living beings and spirits—not just wood to be clear-cut. And this land is waiting for our return, to welcome us back, not as strangers or settlers, but part of a community, where we too can be nurtured back to life.

The fires remind us that our present story is broken, its myth of progress and endless economic growth fostering ecocide. Nature in both Her beauty and violence is a calling to return, to rejoin the “great conversation” where the wind and the stars speak to us.<sup>4</sup> As we travel this liminal landscape between stories, between civilizations, we need the support and guidance of this greater community. As we experience the primal insecurity of a civilization unraveling, we need to feel that we belong, not to a political ideology, a race, nation, or some conspiracy theory, but to the living presence that has sustained us for thousands of years, back to when we journeyed as small groups of hunters and gatherers. Then we were awake with all of our senses, with ceremonies and dreams attuned to both the seen and unseen worlds, long before we “settled” the land, and then forgot it was sacred. ◆

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1 Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Spring.”

2 In a recent open letter, published in *The Guardian*, December 6, 2020, 258 climate scientists and academics gave “A warning on climate and the risk of societal collapse,” caused by the “the way modern societies exploit people and nature.”

3 As Chief Luther Standing Bear said, “Only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness,’ and only to him was the land ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery.” From *Indian Wisdom* (1933).

4 Thomas Berry writes: “We are talking only to ourselves. We are not talking to the rivers, we are not listening to the wind and stars. We have broken the great conversation. By breaking that conversation we have shattered the universe. All the disasters that are happening now are a consequence of that spiritual ‘autism.’” From *The Dream of the Earth*