

Don't Hold Your Breath

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I have a little boy of eight in the house. He is in love with the stars and planets and the birds and the trees and what's more: "I'm not little," he says, "I'm eight, I'm a big boy." And I guess he is. Boys at his age used to get shipped off to boarding school to be whacked and bullied into disciplined adults, eating sprouts and all. Never mind all that: today's bedtime story is about the sun. We have in front of us an encyclopaedia of the solar system, so heavy it flattens the duvet. The sun is a star, a giant ball of nuclear fusion so hot you can feel it burn your cheeks across ninety million miles of space. It doesn't rise and set like they say it does, but burns continuously while the earth spins round and round and we, sucked towards the centre by gravity so we don't fall off, move in and out of the shadow that we call the night. This much my boy knows. Or says he does. Today I'm going to try and explain what happens to stars. How they arise from the compression of gas clouds in space and how they burn up their insides and then grow bigger and become red giants before finally exploding and going nova. He looks worried. I explain what will happen when the sun turns into a red giant, how the sphere will fill the whole sky, but how no one will see it because it will be so hot that everything gets burnt up. Every ant, every molecule of water, every little eight-year-old boy. His eyes are wide open. He's not feeling so big now. Don't be afraid, I say, it won't happen for five billion years. Don't hold your breath. "Megatron will stop it," he says, slamming his eyes shut and going to sleep. He misses the part that has hope: The habitable zone of the sun's heat will be flung out as far as Jupiter, where the ice on Titan will melt and spawn a new wave of life.

I tiptoe down stairs where my wife is sitting bathed in the glow of the television. She is watching a sort of rough guide tourist piece about a man who goes to live with a tribe of people who live – what he calls – primitive lives deep in the Zambian rainforest. His pitch is that he is going to drop the dangerously edgy hallucinogenic drug they use in their initiation ceremonies. It's self-indulgent, his mission, but he makes one observation that stops me thinking about anything else. These people are poor. They're wearing scrawny t-shirts and have yellow teeth, flies are crawling in and out of their eyes all the time and they live in huts made of branches and leaves. But they are happy. They smile a lot and they sing like crows. They have nothing but they are happy, and this is how he explains it: they spend three hours a day sorting out their food, and that's it: that's work. The rest of the time they play. They dance, they have sex, they worship the sky, they take drugs and they laugh. It's obvious, I know, but what a sharp illustration of how leveraged our own time is with all these cars and houses and Eames loungers and health care to work for – the mortgages, the nannies, the paid holidays, the whole frantic business – and here they who

have nothing – and nothing includes no way to escape their predicament and no defence against disease – they who have nothing have all the time in their lifetimes to themselves. And now I can't sleep. On the news, they were talking about African development aid. Is that such a good idea? I heard myself asking. If it means the industrialisation of Africa: helping people to help themselves by turning them into stress rats like us. For which comment I got a thump from my wife.

The next day I walk the boy to the bus stop. He's off to learn more of that abstracted version of events they teach at school. It never stops; idealism is shoehorned into his brain at every opportunity. He had two hours homework last night on algebraic equations, at age eight – so it's entirely up to me and his mother to impress upon him the materiality of the universe. She does it with love and thumps: I talk and point. It's one of those bright cold early spring mornings where everything is starting to push out of the soil and the buds are getting fat and the insects are starting to appear and the birds are hopping about with excitement at the coming season. As we walk and talk our breath coils out of our mouths like smoke in the cold air and makes us both laugh. He wants to know why it happens. The streets are all full of the school rush, and I try to describe the chemistry of carbon exchange, with the trees taking in carbon dioxide and spewing out oxygen, compared to the smoking exhausts of the long line of cars waiting to get through the lights, burning oxygen and spewing out carbon gases. That's what they call greenhouse gases, that are apparently making the world heat up, I tell him. I try to explain the complexities of the carbon cycle and pretty soon find myself out of my depth, wading through a story about how the seal catchers processing seal blubber into oil on treeless islands in the southern ocean used to slaughter huge numbers of sea birds so as to use their bodies as fuel in the burners. But before I get to the point where I explain that all life forms fix carbon, that's what our bodies are, too, they could use us as fuel, too, I notice him watching the car exhausts, his face steadily turning pink, then turning red: What are you doing? I ask him. "Holding my breath," he blurts out. And the held breath shoots out of him like the life that it is. "I don't want to make the pollution worse," he says. "I don't want to breath out greenhouse gasses." I don't thump him: I hug his little head.

What is all this? What have we done to ourselves? It is as though we have fought the world for a living long enough, and now we are suing for peace; as though the entire humanist project to contain the terrors of the world has arrived at the edge of its territory to find that the terrors, though pushed back, are as strong as ever on the other side of the fence. The great featherweight Gertrude Stein watched the fields of France being pulverised by howitzers ninety years ago and said, "the landscape is such a natural setting for a battle or a play that one must write plays." Narratives are better than thumps, is the message; and in the field of human relations this might well be so, but here's the rub. Nature's not a

person. Nature's not a mother. We are not fighting it but living it. The industrial landscapes pursued with such terrific thoroughness, the agricultural deserts as well as the suburbs, the minefields as well as the wind farms, the cities themselves, are the outcomes not of rage but of stories, narratives in the dream of the human domination of the world. That's why I hug the boy's head. It's good that he sees himself as a particle of nature, a being rather than a human being, and his life as fundamentally consumptive. He knows if he holds his breath he will die. He knows he must live in the present. So now I must try and teach him this: the bolt-ons and band-aids of the sustainability movement that try to manage our fear of the future are but another chapter in that book of domination. It will not, in the face of the red giant, ultimately sustain. And nature as we know it now, in this snapshot of human time, will not stay as it is, however we try to preserve it.