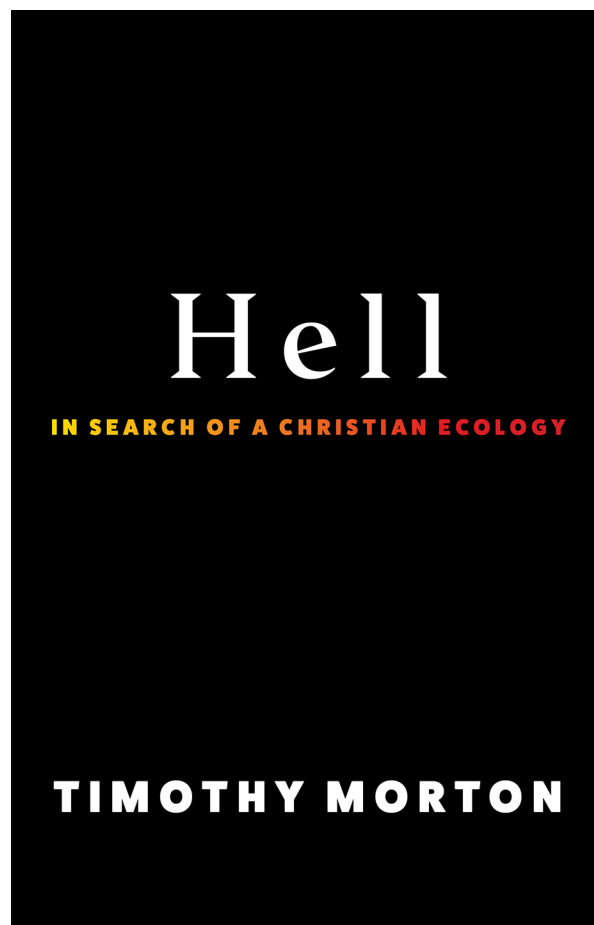


Timothy Morton. *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. liii + 257 pp. \$110.00/£92.00, hardcover; \$26.95/£22.00, paperback; \$25.99/£22.00, e-book.

Reviewed by William Ilan Rubel

WILLIAM ILAN RUBEL ([golgonoozans@gmail.com](mailto:golgonoozans@gmail.com)) is a Vancouver-based writer and professor, active in eco-theater, ecophilosophy, and postsecular studies.

- 1 **I**N *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology*, Timothy Morton takes the question of our future coexistence with each other and with nonhumans into the “absolute contingency of a genuinely future future” (lii). A self-professed “dark ecologist” who grew up in the 1980s on a combination of acid house, *Star Wars*, Monty Python, and William Blake, they bring the counterepistemological sensibility of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to bear on our situation. It is high time. Blake has often been celebrated as an inimitable poet and painter whose vision of “a Heaven in a Wild Flower” (E 490) expands as much out of quantum-tangled indeterminacy as enraptured beauty, but *Hell* is perhaps the first book to apply that vision to the climate emergency, inviting us to see beyond the iron jaws of the future closing around us.
- 2 Fortunately, it accomplishes this without didacticism. Written in a wildly engaging and improvisatory style, the book brims with scintillating puns, winks, and synchronicities. From the outset, it is clear that *Hell* engages with Blake because what Blake means by imagination is difficult, in the way that ecophilosophy is difficult, undoing “the Ratio” (E 3) or the modern optics that circumscribes ecosophical or haptic attention. Scarcely using the word imagination, *Hell* opens imagination’s doors in the “infernal or diabolical sense” (E 44), as a mode not of mere problem-solving or pastiche but of attention. In this haptic sense, imagination is the permeable perception that the earthly is the divine, the spiritual is the ecological, and “every thing that lives is Holy” (E 45).
- 3 An Oxford-trained Romanticist, Morton has helped awaken environmentalism from its dogmatic slumbers with



works such as *The Ecological Thought* (2010) and *Hyperobjects* (2013). Written “in the form of a violently beautiful conversion” (244n18), *Hell* arrives as a more personal testament. Its hyperpersonal tenor generates “affect ... a transpersonal vibe-like thing” (121) in response to the reality that we are madly, frenetically working against ourselves as we careen toward three-plus degrees Celsius by the mid-twenty-first century. Like Los carrying a “red Globe of fire,” “putting on his golden sandals,” and entering the “Door of Death for Albions sake Inspired” (E 244, 242, 144), Morton steps into the fiery milieu of *Marriage* to write about our ecological hell. Although *Hell* makes only indirect reference to it, Blake’s famed design of Los entering the caverns of the grave offers a curiously fitting image for what it feels like to read a book that ventures where mainstream environmental discourse does not go: a radically ecosophical descent into accident, mutation, anomaly, and miracle.<sup>1</sup>

1. *Hell* seems to allude to the image in the context of an invitation into the phenomenological “feel” of the “not-yet subjunctivity shimmering in the very realness of the real” (xxix): “A primordial uncertainty, a lovely hiddenness, a ‘selva oscura’ (Dante), a gate to a secret garden slightly open, stairs down into the darkness of a beautiful under-

- 4 Admirers of the decentering critical streak in Morton's dark ecology may be dismayed by *Hell*'s evangelical direction, but the emphasis on the awareness of strange entanglement ("the ecological thought") remains sharp. Embracing indeterminacy and comedy, they eschew tired words like nature and imagination for the "feel" (xxix) of life as the "possibility of abortion," the "pulsation" of a "miraculous stupidity" or "basic peristaltic wave" of "thumos" with "nothing 'underneath'" (151-52). The point is not to know, with Einstein, but to not know, with Bohr. Mutation and symbiosis may be how the world weaves itself, "but actualizing this truth must be a perpetual act of decolonial, liberating love" (183).
- 5 In that sense, *Hell*'s Christian ecology could well adopt Blake's motto "the Eye altering alters all" (E 485). Morton emphasizes that this alteration is not about tearing away, but about taking the risk of being open and attentive to indeterminate aesthetic interrelations. Its mode is tenderness or "mercy" (xviii), which releases us from a vision of life as the "endless wheels within wheels of revenge" (110). Indeed, the immediate context for *Hell*'s reconnection with the works of Blake is Morton's own unexpected bodily experience, after decades as a Buddhist, of receiving a "massive ... dose" (228) of Christian mercy, felt as "snakes of golden energy" (244n18). Yet their reasons for taking dark ecology into Christian ecology, via Blake, are more practical than esoteric and evangelical. What may look like a sales pitch to the cult of personality proves to be a brilliant exploration of Blake's relevance to the climate emergency.
- 6 Blake appears as a kind of psychopomp, our guide in a descent that inverts transcendentalism and flips Gnosticism, emphasizing imagination as an active, affective force that can break open the tacit modern sense of deterministic entrapment in the ecosphere.<sup>3</sup> An underlying "liberation phenomenology" (l), flowing more from poesis than formal logic, leads Morton to connect Blake with Martin Luther King, offering a vision of climate action as the courage to open the possibility of imagining together a future without fossil fuels: "'I have a dream' gave everyone a stunning 'reason to buy' antiracism. One bought it as soon as one did the thing that the phrase makes one do—open one's mind to the future" (xxix). In this sense, *Hell* is not another book in-

world" (210). Imagination, in this context, is haptic; it depends on an active effort to pay attention in ways that precede and exceed the optic, "melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid" (E 39).

2. In *Crossing the Threshold: Etheric Imagination in the Post-Kantian Process Philosophy of Schelling and Whitehead* (Olympia, WA: Revelore Press, 2023), Matthew David Segall likewise links imagination to an active force and "descendental aesthetic ontology" that can heal the rift that Kant, and modernity, opened between cognition and reality.

tended to compel the reader to feel the closing grip of climate doom, but one that dwells in possibility: "Right here and now, one can sense the affective power, the surging sonority, the outrageous poetry, of *I have a dream*" (210). Morton is not only interested in the increasingly common comparisons of our ecological reality to hell; they insist that the subtitle, "In Search of a Christian Ecology," is as important as the title.

- 7 *Hell* is, in these respects, a deeply Romantic book. A model of poesis as counterepistemological medicine is central to Morton's notion of a "Christian ecology." The point is less to critique Romantic "aesthetic ideology" (Eagleton) than to register how the live aesthetic current facilitates a shift to a universe that feels entangled rather than pure, intimately open ended rather than deterministic. They repeatedly offer the book as the "Blue Pill," not the "Red Pill" (10). In this view, Blake's rejection of "nature,"<sup>3</sup> like his rejection of "Bad Art" (E 565), is not an expression of puritanical recalcitrance but an affirmation of more-than-materialist modes of attention. As Morton might put it, Blake flips the modern idea of nature because it is intensely anti-ecological. An aim, then, of their disarming Blakean style is to convert evangelism from "transphobia, misogyny, white supremacy" to an embrace of love and art: "I can't help talking about it. ... It's called Gospel. ... I feel like dancing" (226). *Hell* draws on Blake to invite daring rethinking of the role that Christianity can play in a landscape where liberated love and art have been demonized as threats to the nation.
- 8 Morton is perhaps the first Blake scholar to all but invite us to come and pet the "plushy Tyger" (85). Part of this call to play is also an uncomfortable invitation into their personal life. Their decision to say "What the hell" and lay it all bare might be greeted as a catastrophe for dark ecology—a capitulation to salvationism and the caving in of a critical thinker to climate anxiety. Their epiphany can easily be read as a nervous breakdown. Yet Blake too was suspected by his contemporaries of being someone whose tendency to care too much—"sweetness of ... countenance" and "gentility of ... manner" (Crabb Robinson)—was the corollary of a presumed excitability or nervous instability.<sup>4</sup> Today one is more likely to link his enthusiasm to his remarkable ability to transmit haptic insights. By anchoring *Hell* in Blake, a "sacred, blazing artist of liberation" (45), Morton not only gives us a context for understanding their intensely personal approach but also deepens the grounding of dark ecology in art rather than intellectual trends. If Alfred

3. "I fear Wordsworth loves Nature" (as reported by Crabb Robinson; see G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004] 429).

4. See Bentley, *Blake Records*, 2nd ed., 698.

North Whitehead's assessment of the Romantics is of any relevance, then the "testimony of great poets" endures precisely because it replies to optic abstractions with haptic aesthetics, expressing "deep intuitions of mankind penetrating into what is universal in concrete fact."<sup>5</sup>

- 9 *Marriage*, in particular, is vital to Morton's efforts to draw on the enduring haptic intuition that the ecological is "sacred," but not in the usual optic (anthropocentric, colonizing) transcendental or teleological ways:

In Blake's *Hell*, the sacred comes down off a high horse, a "horse of instruction" .... After a very messy divorce, the sacred is getting hitched again to the biosphere it comes out of. ... The human form grew out of the biosphere: a beautiful, disturbing, blissful thing made of lifeforms messily and incompletely glued together without rhyme or reason, without a telos. (41)

Using the word sacred in its heretical sense, explaining that it "feels wrong, but ... it's at least a quality or a feeling or a feel" (1-2), they link it to the feel of the biosphere, and, further, to their phenomenological feeling that the "biosphere is the body of Christ" (liii):

The sacred is the feel of biology, its *phenomenology*. By "feel" (and by "phenomenology") I absolutely do not mean "subjective experience of," and in particular I absolutely do not mean "human subjective experience of." ... The basic slogan of phenomenology is, "The *how* is the *what*." (4)

Maintaining that "Blake understood that the sacred belongs to the body" (31), they emphasize immanence or "*subscendence*" (112) rather than transcendence: "What is best about the sacred is its immanence to the physical world, and what is worst about religion are its horrified and violent attempts to achieve escape velocity from this immanence" (44-45).

- 10 In rethinking the sacred as the ecological, *Hell* engages in the distinctly Blakean strategy of inviting us, with compassion and humor, to look at the "deadly terrors" (E 25) of modern optics. In Blake's work, these terrors are on awful display, from the hammering doubts of the speaker in "The Tyger" to the hoary anguish of manacled Urizen. Yet, as the infernal narrator tells the officious Angel in *Marriage*, "All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics ... & it is but lost time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics" (E 42). Contemporary speculative thinker Isabelle Stengers might be writing about Blake when (discussing

5. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (1925; New York: Free Press, 1967) 122.

the relevance of Whitehead's haptic metaphysics for our "times of collapse") she pinpoints the germ of ecocide and suicide implicit in what Blake might call modern epistemic "doubt" (E 142):

His [Whitehead's] call is: "We are children of the universe." We have become so accustomed to thinking that the universe is indifferent to what makes us thrill that we recognize any thesis whatsoever as "undoubtedly objective" so long as it has the allure of a "truth that hurts," a truth translatable into the defeat of commonsense.<sup>6</sup>

- 11 Throughout *Hell*, Blake appears as a "Glad Day" figure—that is, not as an apocalyptic one but as a counterepistemological one, radiating the joy that comes with undoing epistemic and perceptual regimes, or with relaxing the optic circumscription of the haptic. In that sense, Morton contributes to an ongoing intervention into Blake studies. Northrop Frye cast Blake as an apocalyptic visionary who, like Jesus, met with trials and consolidated the "whole body of error in his society into a resolve to destroy him," yet numerous scholars after Frye (including Steven Goldsmith, Mark Lussier, and Peter Otto) have qualified this assessment, emphasizing Blake's counterapocalypse: a moment of attention that, rather than announcing a pure discourse at the end of historical time, opens into the promiscuous event.<sup>8</sup>

- 12 One of the great appeals of Morton's dark ecology has been its ability to disrupt essentialist (protofascist) notions of the "sacred" and "natural." In *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2009), they insist on critical theory as an antidote to ecocriticism's "petty, small-mind-

6. Isabelle Stengers, *Making Sense in Common: A Reading of Whitehead in Times of Collapse*, trans. Thomas Lamarre (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023) 32.

7. Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947) 403.

8. Arguably, this liberation occurs in the world and not in the text of *Jerusalem*, despite its initial call to expand the senses into the awareness that "I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine" (E 146) and its marvelously condensed concluding lines:

All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone. all  
Human Forms identified, living going forth & returning wearied  
Into the Planetary lives of Years Months Days & Hours reposing  
And then Awakening into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality.  
(E 258)

That conveying the event of ecological attention is exceedingly difficult is evidenced as much in the lucid yet elusive philosophical recursions of *Hell* as in Blake's intimation that all things are "Human Forms" going forth and returning into "Planetary lives." Morton's use of the word "biosphere" resonates, at least, with Blake's word "Bosom," a kind of virtual fold of infinite interrelation.

ed, anti-‘theory’ vibe” (*Hell* xxxvi). *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2018) pushes even further, suggesting that ecological awareness and ecological phenomenon share the form of a Möbius strip: our coexistence with nonhumans, which looks like a tragedy, may flip into a comedy. In *Hell*, the most wild and unexpected part of the comedy, “where someone cries just after they smile as they notice the other guy is their long-lost brother” (9), turns out to be Morton’s sudden recognition that Jesus is the biosphere:

I had a weird experience while serving vegan meatballs to my son Simon (fourteen). I palpably “saw” that my whole life had been a prodigal-son-style cosmic joke. It was as if I had made my way around a thirty-seven-year-long Möbius strip. I thought I had been transcending Christianity in the most decisive ways possible, only to find that the last thirty-seven years had been training me to receive a massive (I mean, *massive*) dose of it. (228)

In *Hell*, there is certainly the sense that a massive joke is being played, with the cry of “Holy Holy Holy” (E 566) even as “Earth is burning, as if becoming Hell” (xxviii), but humor is its vital strategy to shake up the ponderous and violent “ontotheology” of “beautiful soul[s]” (32, 7).

- 13 Arguably, *Hell* focuses on *Marriage* and *Songs* because the satirical, playful Blake of the revolutionary 1790s offers expedient antidotes to our climate doomism, even if, in the Blake of later texts too, the full-blown visions of the “mighty Polypus growing / From Albion over the whole Earth” (E 159) or “the Great Red Dragon with Seven heads & ten Horns” (E 558) prove puffs of air. “Error” is “Burnt up the Moment Men cease to behold it” (E 565). Climate doom fails to recognize that the apocalyptic image of the “green & purple” streaked Leviathan rushing “toward us with all the fury of a spiritual existence” is one of the “reptiles of the mind” (E 41-42). In *Songs* and *Marriage*, the whole game is to laugh at the ecocidal ego:

Charlie Chaplin declared that tragedy is about close-ups, whereas the wide shot is comedic: tragedy is a small distorted region of comedy space. ... I want a biodiversity of emotional responses to our plight; that we see our plight not as some tragic destiny of the human race but as the necessarily awful part of a comedy when actual violence might break out. Wouldn’t it be great if global warming gave us the chance to see that humans are interrelated and that humans are interrelated with nonhumans? That being the Devil’s body parts isn’t so bad? (65)

When the monstrous reptile of the mind vanishes, the biosphere appears (in haptic, intensive form) as the “Divine Body of the Lord Jesus” or the “Imagination” (E 148), and seeing this leads to relationship, not sanctimony:

If there’s no way out of Hell, because every way out drills me down further into it, because I am a physical being, then there’s less than no point trying to scorch my way out. I might (as well) get on with it. Do my best to be kind. Smile. (70)

In brief, Morton emphasizes the lighter sides of Blake’s Christian wrath. Their sensibility remains that of a DJ, remixing speculative realism and poststructuralism as salutary acid tabs. Like the “plushy” image and “willful misspelling” (85, 192) that belie “The Tyger,” their wrath is meant to melt the cold secular rationality of the horses of instruction.

- 14 Through their relentlessly playful emphasis on wrath as rhythm or haptics, Morton makes *Marriage* and *Songs* as relevant to our times of collapse as to our times of EDM festivals:

Palpitating in Greek is *thumos*, which we hear in the last syllable of *rhythm*. (The *rhy* comes from *rhein*, “to flow,” as in body fluids.) This is the “life” that Blake means when he writes “every thing that lives is holy.” Everything that palpates is holy. Everything means ... everything. (149)

*Hell* is their way of stepping out as the fool, less climate crusader than scandalous lover of the biosphere, a naked young rainbow figure:

One of my favorite Blakes is *Glad Day* .... A good alternative title would be *Vitruvian Man Goes to the Disco*. ... *Glad Day* is Vitruvian Man stepping out of the square and the circle, putting his best foot forward. He’s gotten on the good foot and there’s rainbow light exploding behind him. *Glad Day* is the visual equivalent of “The Divine Image” with its line “Love, the human form divine” .... The human form—the human body, part of the biosphere. (63-64)

With lucid contemporary references, they make Blake’s counterapocalypse relevant to our moment.

- 15 In short, Morton offers brilliant insights into the Blakean links between wrath, enjoyment, and imaginative energy. Speculative metaphysics clarifies these links. For Blake, as for Whitehead, “enjoyment” is wild in the sense that it is more primary to experience, and to the universe, than consciousness: “The term ‘enjoyment’ refers to the fact that what is felt is an element contributory to the real internal constitution of its subject.”<sup>9</sup> Arguably, enjoyment is essen-

9. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978) 220.

tial to what Blake means by imagination: the etho-ecological intensity that escapes the “Watch Fiends” (E 136) of mechanical time. Wrath is the release of aesthetic enjoyment. In a vivid passage, Morton hints that the key to shifting from an ecocidal to a multispecies Christianity is to intensify the aesthetic, not vaporize it. A growing problem with grim climate discourses is the tendency, in the name of stark realism, to subordinate imagination (which opens into new narratives, the future) to the logic and arithmetic of the past:

How to see global warming as part of the human drama, not as the end of it? How to rebuild the play when there is a fourth wall collapse, and when this collapse coincides with the actual theater on fire? When being on fire is what causes this collapse, what happens? The play was shit. We need another play. (220)

- 16 Against moralistic, abstract climate ethics, Morton emphasizes the aesthetic. Ethics is “about being a body” (14) with “sensual enjoyment.” Blake’s tygers of wrath set loose a joyous haptics that dissolves the optic circumscription that makes the world appear “finite & corrupt” (E 39):

It makes one think about “wrath.” That’s the chemical composition of these tigers. Wrath is not destructive anger that is acted out in the master-slave duality. ... Wrath is wise because it creates in the form of acknowledgment. Seeing slavery for what it is, really seeing it, not slavishly, and not masterfully, would be seeing with the burning eyes of the tyger in the distant deeps or skies of the imagination. (107)

*Hell* picks out Blake’s deeply spiritual theme: friendship. What seems so simple, coexistence, requires an altering of the eye, a shift from optic (frozen) to haptic (flowing) attention. Yet we are “angelic demons” (42). Self-centered optics is our default mode. To see that is, itself, to melt the freeze: “Friendship cannot exist without Forgiveness of Sins continually” (E 201).

- 17 Where the didactic horses of instruction have failed, Morton’s act of friendship is to risk writing with passion to spark “the shared transpersonal rush that would actually motivate people to get out of bed thinking that ending fossil fuels was ... exciting, even sexy” (xxviii). They choose, likewise, to focus on exciting—even sexy—poems, such as “The Tyger,” a song of experience that asks devastating irresolvable questions. For them, the poem is, more than a work of art, a work of wrath or living creature. To many, it may seem to have lost its claws, but Morton’s reading makes playing with “The Tyger” exhilarating precisely because its claws are bright and sharp, highlighting Blake’s use of ambiguity to unsettle binary optics:

Conceptual rigidity is the enemy. Ambiguity is how to defeat it. “The Tyger” hinges around the ambiguous border between person (wise) and machine (idiot)—there’s no way to decide whether the singer and the tyger are either of these. (68)

What is the tyger’s symmetry, which optics finds fearful, other than *ecopoiesis*? “I can never be sure that I am done with it. That damn tyger is still burning bright somewhere. It is as if Blake had created life” (198-99). Marvelous resonances bounce between Morton’s reading and their point that the ecological cannot be tamed: “I *am* the tyger. Don’t frame my symmetry, baby” (198).

- 18 From start to end, *Hell* throws Blakean wrenches into the mills that might domesticate ecological literary criticism or constrain it to the merely formal or impersonal. This argument for wrath, as the tyger’s play, bookends *Hell* and is vibrantly expressed in its exordium and in its closing pages. Profoundly personal, the exordium opens with a vigorous rejection of the conversion of “And did those feet” into a patriotic anthem: “I never did understand that poem. But I always understood the hymn ... only too well.” In response to the questions of whether Christ’s merciful countenance shone forth, and whether Jerusalem was built, in England, Morton answers, unequivocally, “No, it didn’t. No it wasn’t” (xvii). But, in response to the call to build Jerusalem, they reply, “Yes, we can. We will” (xviii). With this radical affirmation, they recline, like Albion on the analyst’s couch (E 114), and deliver a free associative account of the dark ecologist as a young man, recounting the traumas of sexual abuse, poverty, and patriotic education alongside the lifelines provided by DJ David Dorrell’s LOVE Records, acid house, and Blake. Their recollections of being saved by LSD, MDMA, and raves are as important to *Hell* as their recollections of finding refuge “almost every week from the ages of thirteen to eighteen” in room 7 of the Tate Gallery, “a smoked glass paradise in the middle of the ground floor, where the Blake paintings were” (45). Toward the end of the book, Morton once again addresses their refusal to be framed, or to allow professional embarrassment to inhibit their coming out as “born again”:

Conversion? *Being born again*? I like the latter. It has the right kind of absurd, abject, embarrassingly-worst-thing-that-could-possibly-have-happened-to-me, definitely-not-a-professor-thing vibe: why I trust it. (225)

As if Morton had not already taken enough risks, they press on, sharing intimate details of the “flowing and rippling” sensations of their ecotheological awakening. Far from riding these currents above the world, they ride them deeper into the world, taking them as prehensions of a “future future”:

It's really quite obvious, isn't it? The past sucked. Just look around you. So we had better make a future world. Jesus is all about the future being better than the past. ... That's what mercy and forgiveness mean. Trust me, I have only just learned that, after fifty years of unforgiving revenge.  
(xviii)

Consciously written "with" Blake (45), *Hell* is daring on many levels. Its move closer to the "feel" of a different ecological future is also a move closer to the feeling of Blake's friendship, at a time when we need it most.