

THE SKELETONS OF DREAMS

He found giants
in the earth: Mastodon,
Mylodon, thigh bones
like tree trunks, Megatherium, skull
big as boulders—once,
in this savage country, treetops
trembled at their passing.
But their passing was silent as snails,
silent as rabbits: nothing at all recorded
the day when the last of them came
crashing through creepers and ferns,
shaking the earth a final time,
leaving behind them crickets,
monkeys, and mice.
For think: at last it is nothing
to be a giant—the dream
of an ending haunts tortoise and Toxodon,
troubles the sleep of the woodchuck
and the bear.
Back home in his English garden,
Darwin paused in his pacing,
writing it down in italics
in the book at the back of his mind:
*When a species has vanished
from the face of the earth,
the same form never reappears*
So after our millions of years
of inventing a thumb and a cortex,
and after the long pain
of writing our clumsy epic,
we know we are mortal as mammoths,
we know the last lines of our poem.

Philip Appleman, “The Skeletons of Dreams,” originally published in *Darwin’s Ark* (Indiana University Press, 2009)

Alan Diehl shared this inspiration at the Board Meeting of the Inter-Religious Council on May 5, 2016.