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The Things of This World from A to Z

Alvin Greenberg

i

Apocalypse is at hand. The flames of the holocaust rage through the hearts and minds of all the inhabitants of the earth, from senile amnesiacs who cannot remember why their feces steam with blue fire to newborn infants chomping down on tender nipples with a fierceness never before known. Even six-year-olds return to the breast, their teeth sizzling; twelve-year-olds with silver braces flashing on their incisors; husbands, in their sleep, in the middle of the night. Irreparable harm has been done. Whoever thought it would take such a turn as this? The famous pediatrician to whom decades of American mothers have turned for advice on child-rearing has said, in an interview with *The New York Times*, that this phenomenon can only be taken as a manifestation of the act of love. At his press conference a movie star best known for her refusal to appear nude on the screen has bared her chest to show the thirteen stitches required to close the wound inflicted on her by the aging comedian with whom she is currently appearing in a family-style movie. "What are we to do?" she cries, for all woman-kind. "Do not deny it," advises the pediatrician, "or irreparable harm will be done."

Bands of male penitents roam the streets, their jaws bound tight with leather straps, coils of nylon rope wound about their faces, their muffled cries driving wives, mothers, daughters into locked bedrooms. Dentists work round the clock to meet the demand for voluntary extractions. No one really wishes any harm to be done. Whole military divisions, their vast firepower utterly useless against this blight that sifts through every brain cell, every bloodstream, have been shifted to desert encampments or Antarctic installations. Still others have been sent to roam the high seas aboard crowded troopships. The space program grows by leaps and bounds. No cost is spared. Spaceships loaded with thousands of men, none of whom has more than a few weeks, a few months at the most, to live, leave daily for Venus and Mars. Brassiere companies, many on the verge of bankruptcy following the recent movement away from underclothing, have

rushed onto the market with new metal-lined and plastic-shielded models. Their factories work three shifts. It makes no difference that both factories and workers are doomed. All deliveries go by air. Management talks of opening new plants in the South, in the Midwest. Rumors of new breakthroughs circulate: bras with combination locks, welded aluminum breastplates. Their stocks soar.

Old crones, meanwhile, pursue martyrdom. Their sons grown up and gone, their husbands dead, their lovers toothless and bedridden, they suddenly strip to the waist and rush from their homes, withered breasts flapping as they run. They do not get far. Some younger women, on the other hand, seek to fight back. Militant groups are organized which roam the streets like bands of Amazons, some already missing a breast, some both. They attack solitary males of all ages, biting their penises, sometimes severing them. They achieve considerable success, for the men put up little resistance. Nonetheless, they soon become disheartened, and fewer and fewer of these groups are seen in the streets. It is hard work, motivated more by vengeance than by need. A political cartoonist in *The Chicago Tribune* lampoons them for their "tasteless occupation." They begin to squabble among themselves about their true aims. It is whispered that their sisters in Asia are better organized, more efficient, but, communications being what they are these days, no one can know for certain.

ii

Every age has its historian, every historian his age. This is mine, then, and I, I presume, am its. I am not separate from it, from its needs and its end which grow, respectively, stronger and closer day by day, but am free all the same, in my own way, to look upon it. I am in jail, my cell on the second floor of the county courthouse, overlooking one of the main streets of the city, so that I can see a great deal of what goes on. My guards, knowing of my interest, of my writing, of, perhaps, how little time is left to tell these things, rush to my bars almost as soon as they come on duty, to report to me what they have seen, heard, tasted, during the hours of their absence. They are remarkably regular at their duties. Perhaps I am the only prisoner left them now. Much else comes to me through the newspapers and the national news magazines. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* compete frantically for my attention, offering more and more fantastic bargains for three-, five-, ten-year subscriptions. I agree to continue taking both, getting several added free weeks from each by enclosing payment with my order blank. I am already a lifetime subscriber to *The New York Review of Books*.

Still more information comes to me through the medium of my color television set, which runs incessantly in the corner of my cell. It is new, a gift from my family, to entertain me in lieu of bail while I await trial, and its picture tube has a twenty-four-month guarantee. On it I see panel discussions, of what has now come to be labeled simply *mal de finis*, by teams of medical doctors, sociologists, and psychologists; marathon entertainment shows, featuring top comedians and singing groups, to raise funds to aid both the maimed and those who, in spite of themselves, continue to inflict these injuries; real-life scenes captured by roving cameramen at bus stops, drive-in restaurants, day care centers, shoe stores; new

game shows built around the dual concept of temptation and self-restraint, offering ever more marvelous prizes, giving away ever fewer of them. The President of the United States comes on at prime time, appearing on the west porch of the White House, the First Lady by his side, to appeal for calm, but when the TV camera zooms in for a closeup shot of his earnest face I can see the fleck of blood at the corner of his mouth.

I call for the guard in the time-honored manner, by banging my tin cup on the bars, but though the guard hurries to my cell, he is too late to see what I, and perhaps millions of other viewers, have seen. The President, with his customary gesture when standing beneath the glaring television lights, has wiped his brow with a handkerchief and then, before returning it to his pocket, dabbed gently at the corners of his mouth. John, the guard, believes me, but in the same way that he believes his superiors when they tell him that I am a dangerous criminal: he would prefer to see for himself. I point out to him the terribly pained expressions on the face of the First Lady as she stands at her husband's side. He acknowledges this but, after several minutes of standing outside the bars watching the TV set, remarks that as far as he can remember she has always worn that pained expression on her face. Then he goes away.

Much later in the evening, while I am watching a black-and-white rerun of an old Dracula movie starring Lon Chaney, John returns and hands me a news clipping through the bars. It is an old and unimportant article on a speech the new First Lady made on her husband's behalf during his first, unsuccessful campaign for the Presidency. In the accompanying photograph, she has the same pained expression on her face. Who is to say where it all began?

iii

Thus have we established the proper sense of thesis and antithesis. The world outside, death raging, or if not yet raging at least close at hand, the timetable known to all, like the preliminary symptoms which have already begun to appear; soon people will begin to drop in the streets, at their jobs; whole populations will cease to exist in a single night. And myself inside, here, secure, detached, both a part of and yet apart from. There you have it: History and the Historian, the Mass and the Individual, Freedom and Imprisonment, the World and Man. Where will it take us?

Some have simply taken off. It is what they have been waiting for. Not for nothing have they kept their pantries fully stocked, their cars finely tuned, all these years. I can see them in the early hours of the morning as their vehicles pass below my window, making the turn at the end of the block onto the freeway ramp. They have applied, on the previous day, most of them, for their accumulated vacation time. Some have simply resigned, others opted for early retirement plans. In the evening they load their station wagons and camper trailers, while their wives and female children make last minute preparations behind the safety of locked doors. They go to sleep early, after calling their real estate agents to have their homes placed on the market. At dawn they are on their way, many of their vehicles fitted with heavy steel screening between the

front and rear compartments, as in police cars. On the freeways they compete for space with trailer trucks, Greyhound buses, college students returning to campus for the beginning of the fall semester, traveling salesmen.

Most, however, go about their daily work as before, in spite of the sometimes radical and inconvenient changes made to accommodate to new circumstances. In banks, women workers enter through separate doors, gather in collective safety behind the bars of tellers' windows. Female patrons remain in locked cars and use only the drive-in tellers, or stay at home and bank by mail. In factories, male foremen limit themselves to supervising female shopworkers by remote TV cameras. Typists gather in large, locked offices, receive and return their assignments through narrow mail slots, travel to and from work on chartered buses, with women drivers. Secretaries inhabit locked inner offices, while their bosses sit cramped behind narrow waiting room desks. And yet productivity has risen sharply. Workers and bosses alike labor on, untired, long past normal quitting time. Absenteeism, except in the cases of unfortunate women victims, is practically nil, and even the injured return speedily to their jobs. One hundred percent of striking workers appear on picket lines, and arbitration sessions run twenty-four hours a day. Meals are brought in to them. Meals everywhere appear on time and show the greatest care in planning. Meats, leafy vegetables, starches, fall into perfect balance. Children scurry off after dinner to do their homework. School attendance figures soar. The median score on the nationwide reading achievement test rises two full grade levels.

Most remarkable of all is the nearly total disappearance of crime. Rapes, killings, muggings, break-ins, car theft, vandalism, shoplifting, embezzlement—all virtually wiped out. No, not "wiped out," but simply gone. The only known incidents of rape—attempted rape—involve young women willing to take men to their breast but wanting more besides. Child-beating is nonexistent, suicide unheard-of. Teams of policemen sit idly in their patrol cars at quiet intersections. They handcuff themselves together, in order to set a good example. Perhaps I am the last true criminal the world will ever have known. Aside from those who rush, now, helplessly, violently, to the breast. And they intend no harm, are in no sense real criminals, rise and abandon their victims with apologies, their eyes already on another. Their behavior is defined by some as a social crime, the product of an infantile society that has fostered breast fixation at home, in business, in entertainment, in art, but it is in fact a world-wide phenomenon. Playtex announces that it has received orders for its new shatterproof bra from Eskimo villages, South Pacific islands, nomadic Bedouin tribes. The return to the breast is pandemic. Can that be a crime? Even my own crime may go unrecorded if I am not soon brought to trial. Though my guilt is assumed by all, I am, as yet, merely the accused, not the convicted.

iv

I am visited by my judge. *My* judge—the cells of those awaiting trial are all emptied now, except for this one. Perhaps this is the moment of synthesis I am waiting for. He is not afraid to enter my cell, though doubtless he, like John, has

been warned that I am a dangerous criminal. Perhaps it is even he who has been issuing these warnings. He is slightly built, his thin hair is mostly grey, was perhaps once red, and he wears a conservative sport coat and tie, though his shirt is badly wrinkled. I think I would not be afraid to enter his courtroom either. He marches right in and sits down on the other cot, opposite me. John locks the cell behind him and stands outside the bars, watching us.

The judge says that there is something of a problem. I sit respectfully waiting for him to continue. He tells me that he is unable to assemble a jury. I show a true and appropriate concern. How can there be a trial without a jury? He explains that the citizenry is now devoting itself wholeheartedly to its employment, that many even work two shifts a day, that none can be spared from their jobs to do jury duty. He fears for the fate of the traditional judicial system. He grows morose and loosens his tie. I remind him of the demise of crime. It's true, he admits, never has the judicial work load been so light. He brightens and jumps to his feet. For the first time in memory, he exclaims, probably for the first time in legal history, the dockets are cleared. He strides back and forth between my cot and the entrance to the cell. There are no other cases to try, he says, I am the only one standing between him and total freedom.

He suggests a trial without jury, in a closed courtroom. He assures me of his fairness and remarks that, under any circumstances, such a judicial, not to say judicious, arrangement would be most appropriate to my case: "Society is sufficiently alarmed as it is." Will I agree? I sit quite still, looking down at my hands in my lap. It appears, from his patient stance in front of me, that this decision is entirely up to me. Out of the corner of my eye I can see the television screen. It is a mid-morning talk show, and though John has turned the sound down when ushering the judge into my cell, I can see quite clearly that the guest personality is a woman doctor from the University, well-known in our community because of her research on the creation of life in the laboratory. She is wearing a white smock and is demonstrating, with vividly colored slides, the final stages of those symptoms which mark the relentless approach of the end, now not far off. John is peering through the bars, his eyes fixed on her exhibits of flaming fecal colors, from blue through final purple. The judge is also watching. He merely wants to clear his docket; who could deny him such a sense of completion? Is that what all mankind will want as the final day descends: tools put away, lawns raked, houses dusted and vacuumed, garbage carried out, children bathed and tucked neatly into bed, ashtrays emptied?

v

Thanks to my color television set I know, day by day, how it goes out there, the process of the end. And yet my own feces remain grey and lifeless. Why? John shrugs. He is on duty day and night now, the only guard I see, but he will not enter my cell to look. Perhaps he begins to believe that I am indeed a dangerous criminal, as he has been told. What have I done to deserve this sudden distrust? On the other hand, perhaps he is only obsessed with the meaning of his own feces, which, he tells me, steam with blue fire, now tinged with purple, like

those of millions of his fellow citizens, billions of his fellow earth-dwellers. Would he call a doctor for me? He shrugs again. There is nothing any doctor can do for him, for all the others like him, all the others. The end is rapidly approaching now. The stages of the blue flame are known to all, thanks to daily TV lectures. Yet factories continue to roll, students scribble classroom notes, stocks rise and fall, the baseball season grinds on through the playoffs and into the world series, governments threaten each other with restrictive tariffs, cooks prepare paté, bear-naise sauce, charlotte russe. The return to the breast has reached a new stage, for men now lunge at the nipples of other men. Even women begin to turn to the breast, to their own breasts when there are no others. Still I excrete no blue flame. Am I different? Already the deaths begin, even in the street outside my window. I am grey. What does it mean? There is a buzzer on the wall of my cell, to be used to call the guard in case of emergency. I buzz for John. He does not come. I lean on the button with all my weight and buzz and buzz and buzz . . .