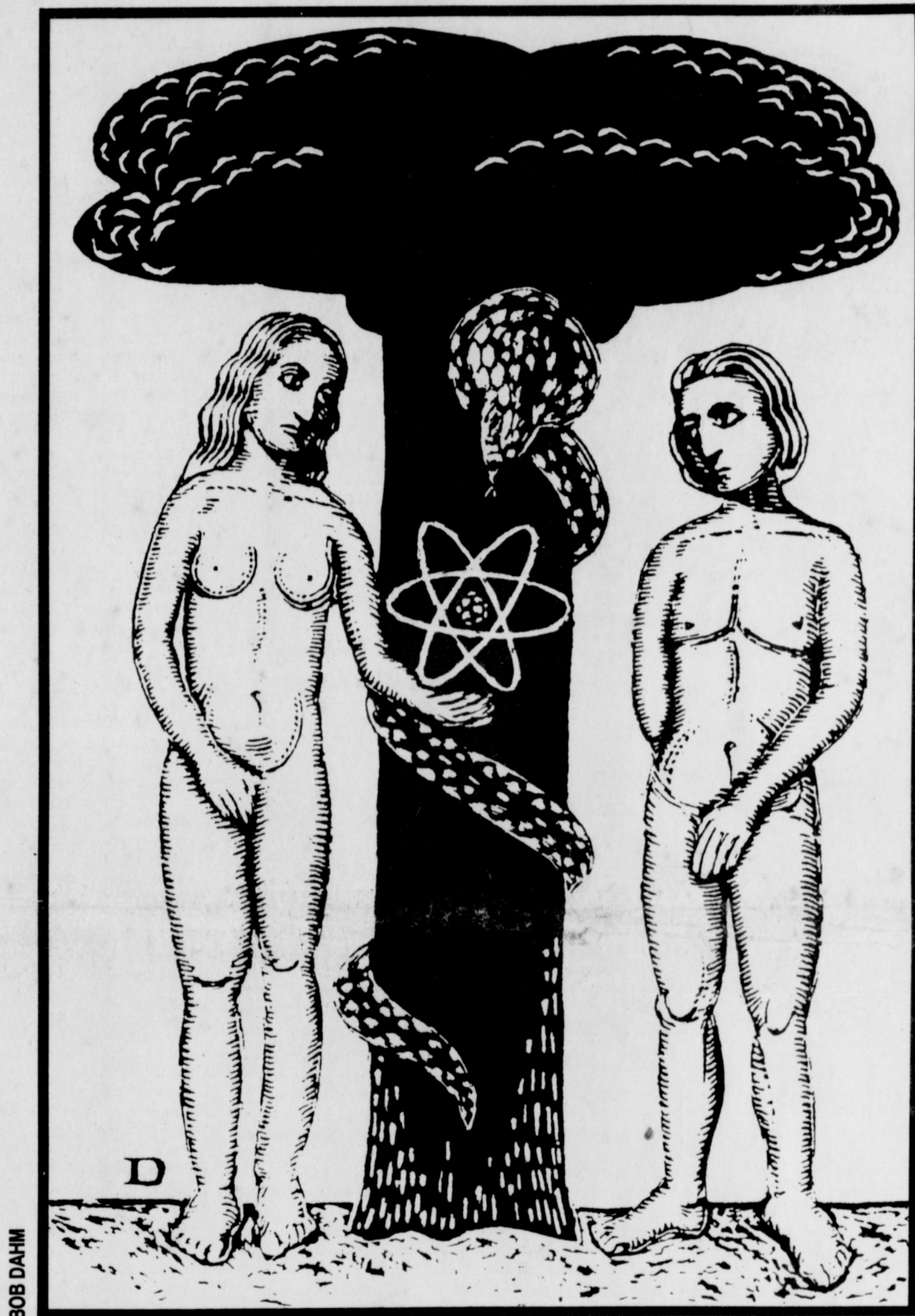




BOB DAHM

AFTER ATOM

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"It would indeed be a tragedy if the history of the human race proved to be nothing more than the story of an ape playing with a box of matches on a petrol dump."

—DAVID ORMSBY GORE

"We cannot escape danger, or the fear of danger, by crawling into bed and pulling the covers over our heads."

—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Life betrays us. We must die. Nothing can save us. Not love, not good works, not ageless monuments, not wealth, power or prayer. Our curse is to perceive our end, and to numb the terror we empty our lives as readily as our bowels. It is the most enduring question: *Why must I die?*

Each death is an end to the world. Elaborate constructions of life afterward persist in every culture, yet for all of the rigorous hells and nirvanas a more solid faith gives our scanty lives meaning: that the bloodlines will continue, that humanity will survive the smaller mortalities of its members. Our children; their children. A future time.

The faith has lately been shattered. The human race has brilliantly invented its own suicide. For the entirety of its future humanity, its civilizations and quite possibly all other life on its home planet are threatened with a holocaust conceived by itself. We have seen our world from space, so small and frail, a mote in God's eye; the same technical mastery that sent rockets to the stars is capable also of sending them on a shorter, final journey of obliteration. Even now, in the post-Cold War era, the end of the nuclear arms race and dismantling of the huge

arsenals, it is an act of faith that at any instant deadly missiles have not been launched from somewhere: on a normal day we might all look up and see spiky umbrella-like contrails of nuclear missiles reentering the atmosphere, and all that was normal a few moments before will vanish forever.

History has a fissure more pertinent than the birth of Christ or the sowing of grain. The Sign of the Cross is transposed with a much more powerful icon. The Mushroom Cloud.

Humanity has lived exactly 50 years with the enormous power and consequences of nuclear energy. Yet since the beginning of the nuclear age very few of us have been able to confront the horror that nuclear weapons represent, and because we prefer to ignore or deny the consequences of nuclear holocaust, we have generally allowed a free hand to those who ensure its probability. We cling to promises of our leaders that they serve the best interests of humanity and we pray they are right about their decisions because we are confused and perplexed about what they are doing with the terrible power we have acceded to them. We have made ourselves like trusting children, horrified and hardened by parental abuse, but we feel there is no alternative. We permit our governments to keep secret from us the vital information necessary to preserve ourselves and our descendants. If we are to know we might have to act, and prefer instead to leave the unthinkable to its perpetrators.

It is difficult to hold for very long onto the consequences of nuclear war. The scale of a world destroyed is too large and inaccurate. It is not easy to believe we can so quickly sweep away what has taken centuries to construct.

People nostalgic for the Cold War might remember the daily crises and confrontations that kept everybody a bundle of nerves behind their Happy Day smiles (which resembled terror more than sublimity). Scores of doomsday books written by such popular writers as Nevil Schute, Pat Frank and Philip Wylie fed

a morbidly voracious dread. M.L. Graham of Arch Cape (Oregon) tersely captured the basic scenario of these end of civilization as we know it novels in three paragraphs, which he wrote for the NCTE (Feb'80) and titled "Ground Zero":

More brilliant than a thousand noontime suns the flash and racing inferno poured down from the sky, and in an instant a countryside turned to ash. Little girls with delicate skin were cremated in pink dresses. Old men on park benches vanished. Gone also were the benches and the shade trees flared into burning forests. Shadows were burnt into the ground the instant bone and blood burned away. Seeds that had contained such promise were scorched to lifeless pits by a cosmic zephyr traveling at the speed of death. Love and hope, in its way, were disintegrated.

The giants of war had flung their spears. With unyielding and pitiless menace they had squeezed a formula for horror out of the Earth, then shaped laws around bombs that turned the simple atom into the destroyer of worlds. The bombs quickly became the intent of laws, and the laws became hopelessly snarled with the laws and bombs of enemies. The drift to the final war was inevitable because nothing was done to prevent it.

A shower of radiation particles fell gently like an invisible snow upon the charred land, covering the smoking rubbish piles that had been alive moments before. There was silence. A crazy kind of silence.

The real event that actually happened is no less grim. Kai Erickson, editor of the Yale Review, writes, "These, we learn, are the facts of the matter:

A single B-29, lazy in the morning sky, passes over the center of town at an elevation of 25,000 feet, without attracting much attention. A few seconds later the whole area is lit up with

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