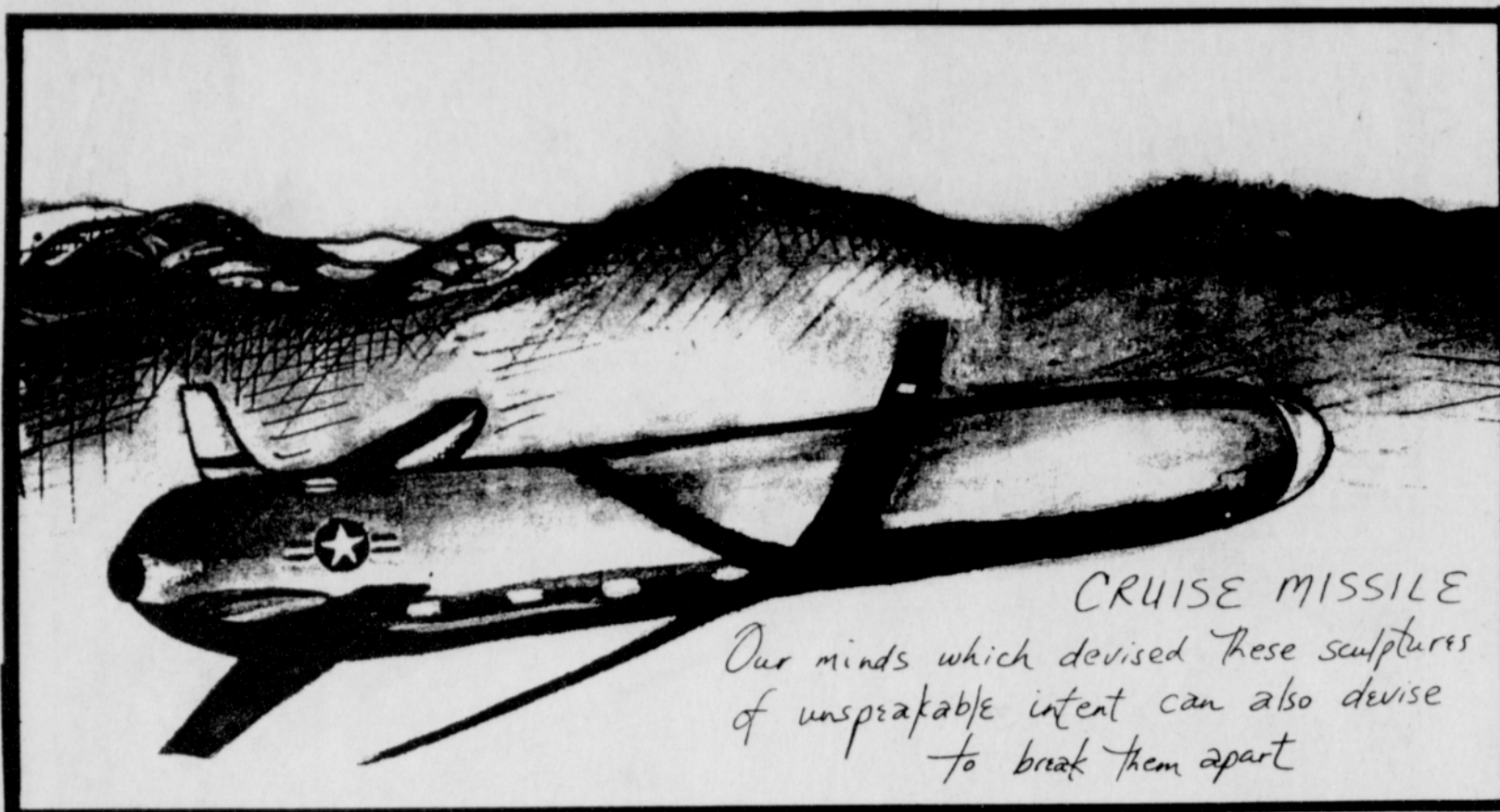




THOUGHTS & DRAWINGS BY HELEN PATTI

MY NUKEMARE

One morning I woke up from a dream that the Pacific Northwest had been nuked. By whom was unclear, not that it mattered — maybe it was Canada. Maybe Nihilists.

I sat up in bed and looked out the window. Everything seemed the same as always, tall spruce trees in a grove gone riot in chlorophyll and dozens of flowers I don't know the names of. Same with birds; I heard a dozen birds I can't name.

But Astoria would be a last shot for anybody launching expensive nuclear missiles. On the other hand, I wondered if a missile was up in the ozone arcing down to kiss the mouth of the Columbia River. A possibility of fanatics scared me.

I got up and turned on a radio: I don't have TV or a phone, too addictive and rude. I spun the dial. The usual prattle and soft rock insipidity. For a moment I was relieved. Then I worried the rock jocks might not know. My dream might have been a real awakening to a horror instantly occurring.

I was still thinking in terms of living for years. I wasn't prepared to realize that my life might have shortened to maybe only days. Or minutes if there was a missile with Astoria's address on the way.

I had hoped for a long relatively undisturbed life. My wish was that a nuclear war not occur until after I was dead. I thought humanity should survive and be spared a nuclear war. But my particular concern was that I be spared. After me, the world would have to look after itself.

I sat at my kitchen table somewhat numbed and unsure. Whole. Untouched. On what might very well have been a dying planet. Earth, in just an instant, one big rotting fruit. I thought squeamishly of the astronomical stench of five billion dead human beings, and God knows how many dead dogs, cats, birds, pigs, horses and cows would be killed and rotting by a nuclear war. Not a very user friendly atmosphere.

I wondered if all of us would start dying. A few days or weeks (if a missile didn't drop on us). I would be sick from radiation very soon, vomiting and evacuating my bowels at the end of the world. Uncontrollable diarrhea. And death. All of us dead in our beds. Where else would we go at the end of the world. Most of us to our clean houses with gardens and mowed lawns.

We all knew it could happen some day. Even after the Cold War ended and the doomsday priests proclaimed morning in the nuclear age. But we always hoped someday was someday after tomorrow, that it would never someday be today.

We tried to beat time. We raced against the juggernaut of inevitability. Too few voices against so many missiles. So many Daddy Warbucks making big bucks off their big bangs. We were reasonable. Obeyed the law. Let the government put us in jail if we defaced a missile or tried to stop trucks, trains or boats carrying nukes. Our reasonableness doomed us. Our little squeals of terror probably amused the nuke lords.

I thought of the movie *Dr. Strangelove*. The absurdity, the illogic of world suicide. We were all afraid of what nuclear weapons might do to us but we made ourselves helpless to stop the madness of building so many of them they can blow up a dozen Earths. Too many swallowed the nonsense that God's will determined our future. And in the meantime we split atoms like peas and built enough missiles to nuke every condo and grass shack on the planet.

We were on our way out anyway, I thought. The slow genetic bum of radiation these past 50 years. All those lies about acceptable levels. There aren't any acceptable levels. And all they talk about are single sources and specific effects. Hardly anybody mentions the cumulative evolutionary damage down the line. Or about all the other combinations that bombard our bodies and genes. Industrial pollutants. Pesticides. Radiation from nuclear power plants. Tobacco smoke.

I hoped prevailing westerly winds would blow the radiation over the mountains. Of course it would go around the world and come back at us across the Pacific Ocean. If we were lucky the radiation would dissipate. Storms could blow it south or north of here. (Anywhere but here; anyone else but me.) If we could live long enough our offspring might tolerate radiation better, like flies got used to DDT. Little chance of that, actually. But million to one chances might be all any of us had left.

It's a good chance civilization would be over for awhile if everybody that's got a nuke used it. Back to savagery. Of course world suicide, blowing everything we've ever done back to the stone age is savagery of a monumental form. Everything quickly — or more likely gradually — coming apart and not getting fixed. Pretty soon nobody remembers how to fix anything. Or how things work. Or how to build anything. And worse, no new ideas. Maybe we're smarter than that and can rebuild quickly what might be lost, like after most wars. But sometimes in history the light goes out. A nuclear war, even a small one (a small one?), could put the lights out for a long time. Maybe forever.

If radiation didn't get us we would soon run out of food and uncontaminated water. Most of what we eat here on the Oregon North Coast and south coast of Washington comes from inland cities by truck, and they would be blasted for sure. Local farm and dairy products would not last. Pretty soon after a nuke hit Portland or Seattle city people would be scurrying for the coast. It wouldn't take them long to get past roadblocks set up by locals to stop them. (We couldn't kill them all.) We would be crowded with strangers with dwindling cash, idle and hungry and most of them without shelter. Raging violent mobs would soon attack locals and clean out their homes and stores. Eventually we all might degenerate into vicious little groups that attempt to rule with terror and murder, and fight like street gangs with other vicious little groups. The same futile pattern of our cycles.

Samuel Johnson said nothing so concentrates the mind as knowing you're going to be hanged in the morning. That's how I felt wondering if I was only hungover from a bad dream or if it was real.

I remembered when I was a kid. Duck & Cover. Stay away from the windows, teachers used to say. Stay under your desks until the all clear signal. Even the bomb was a baby then. We were baby boomers growing up with the baby bomb. We always knew our future was the mushroom cloud.

I looked out the window again. Astoria was still Astoria. Unchanged. Untouched.

~MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

SECOND DEATH

If a council were to be empowered by the people of the earth to do whatever was necessary to save humanity from extinction by nuclear arms, it might well decide that a good first step would be to order the destruction of all the nuclear weapons in the world. When the order had been carried out, however, warlike or warring nations might still rebuild their nuclear arsenals — perhaps in a matter of months. A logical second step, accordingly, would be to order the destruction of the factories that make the weapons. But, just as the weapons might be rebuilt, so might the factories that make the weapons, and the world's margin of safety would not have increased by very much. A third step, then, would be to order the destruction of the factories that make the factories that make the weapons — a measure that might require the destruction of a considerable part of the world's economy. But even then lasting security would not have been reached, because in some number of years—at most a few decades —everything could be rebuilt, including the nuclear arsenals, and mankind would again be ready to extinguish itself. A determined council might next decide to try to arrest the world economy in a pre-nuclear state by throwing blueprints and technical manuals for reconstruction on the bonfires that had by then consumed everything else, but that recourse, too, would ultimately fail, because the blueprints and manuals could easily be redrawn and rewritten. As long as the world remained acquainted with the basic physical laws that underlie the construction of nuclear weapons — and these laws include the better part of physics as physics is understood in our century — mankind would have failed to put many years between itself and its doom. For the fundamental origin of the peril of human extinction by nuclear arms lies not in any particular social or political circumstances of our time but in the attainment by mankind as a whole, after millennia of scientific progress, of a certain level of knowledge of the physical universe. As long as that knowledge is in our possession, the atoms themselves, each one stocked with its prodigious supply of energy, are, in a manner of speaking, in a perilously advanced state of mobilization for nuclear hostilities, and any conflict anywhere in the world can become a nuclear one. To return to safety through technical measures alone, we would have to disarm matter itself, converting it back to its relatively safe, inert, nonexplosive 19th century Newtonian state — something that not even the physics of our time can teach us how to do.

~JONATHAN SCHELL
THE FATE OF THE EARTH