



PETIER BRUEGEL, 'THE FIGHT OF THE MONEYBAGS & STRONGBOXES' (1567)

But, we haven't.
My concern is that we have missed,
Or have by now
All but missed
A window of opportunity.

It is my perception
That for every dilemma
We have backed into,
Nature has reserved a solution for us
And that Nature has also provided
A leeway — a lag time,
Giving us every opportunity
To resolve the dilemma
So that we may endure and prosper.
It is also my perception
That Nature will not suffer folly forever.

For instance, Nature has many ways
To limit populations
And to keep them healthy.
Usually these mechanisms
Take the form of either
Birth control or death control.
Some bird populations, for example,
When they get too crowded,
Lay fewer eggs in the nest.
It's no decision on their part —
It just happens — a mechanism trips in.
(It is said that after World War II,
or 1-B, whichever,
There was an above-average increase
In the ratio of boy to girl babies born,
In favor of boys...)
Other populations use a predator/
Prey relationship.
Sometimes vulnerabilities develop
Because of degraded habitat.
Sometimes the vulnerability is in the nerves —
Stemming from too much close proximity.
Sometimes, in highly successful
Top of the heap predator populations —
Those with nothing bigger to bring them down —
Sometimes something much smaller enters them.
I think of the African leopard
Particularly in an area of the...
Where was it... the Serengeti?
No matter —
What matters is that
Over a vast area there nowadays
Any one leopard can take a skin graft
From any other leopard
Without the slightest sign of rejection —
Something not normally seen
In a population of mammals.
Genetically, they are all virtually identical.
What happened was that some time ago
A retrovirus swept the vast area
Clear of leopards —
All but perhaps one mating pair.

That brings us to retroviruses,
And the human population.
Or for all we really know right now,
We might substitute for the word 'retroviruses'
The term "The thing or things
That make for the suppression
Of the immune system."
But, as I was saying,
That brings us to retroviruses,
And for now we will stick to that term for it.
In the wealthier countries of the world
Population growth is slowing dramatically.
In some there is already
Negative growth, that is, reduction.
In countries that were
Arriving at prosperity,

And where the population growth was slowing,
But which have now been sliding
Back into poverty,
The population is beginning
To grow more rapidly again.
And in countries that have always been
Poverty stricken,
Population growth has never stopped
Its dramatic increase.
The suggestion is
That for human populations in general
In these times,
The arrival at a certain
Widespread level of well-being
Is a mechanism that limits population.

Now I think of Africa,
Probably the most ravaged
And disrupted (not to say raped) continent
On the face of the Earth
Throughout history.
The wealth of Africa has been bled
Since early on
To enrich other empires,
Other nations, other continents.
Its civilizations have been
Repeatedly destroyed.

The point is —
Had our ability,
Especially in the 20th century,
To create wealth and well-being —
Had this ability
Taken the opportunities to do so
In increasingly benign ways,
And had that wealth been
Shared equitably among us —
Which, by the way,
Increases our ability benignly
To create more wealth and well-being —
The human population
Would have found a threshold,
A holding capacity
At which the Earth would have been able
To sustain us well and indefinitely.

But that didn't happen.
We overran the mark
Because of our history
Of bad collective choices.
And now, out of Africa,
So we are told
(I consider it yet unproven —
But it does have a certain
Ironic value),
Out of Africa
Comes
More than one retrovirus.

Whether it is true or not,
It certainly seems
That Nature is saying:
"Time is up."

When I was first listening to assessments
Of the AIDS phenomenon,
It occurred to me,
Hearing the reports —
So many cases in the U.S. three years ago,
So many cases last year
So many cases this year —
It occurred to me that the number of cases
Was roughly following a doubling pattern
Year to year.
So, in the way I have of worst-case situations
To see how bad they might get
So as not to be surprised,

I calculated how long it would take everyone
In the United States to get infected
If the pattern kept up.
I found that sometime in the year 1999
Everyone would have it.

Now, that did not devastate me
Because I understood
That such was not the nature of the disease.
It did something to indicate
The seriousness of the situation, though.

That was some four, perhaps five years ago.
A few months ago
There was some renewed interest
In the subject
And the number of carrier cases
To date was mentioned.
I went back and checked my calculations.
The number of carrier cases to date
Exceeds the number indicated
In those calculations.
I fully expect the pattern will not continue.
If it were to continue,
The whole U.S. population would have it
By 1995.
We are assured this is unlikely,
But I think there is a use
For this type of thinking.

It provides a perspective
With which to gauge the known
And the unknown.
We don't know enough about this disease
To be complacent or confident
About it.

There is renewed argument
Over the means by which it can
Or cannot be transmitted, for one thing.
For another,
Viruses have extremely efficient methods
By which they can transform
Themselves and thereby more effectively
Do what they do.
They can be like keys which
Change themselves to conform
To the lock on the next door
Through which they must pass.
Can or will this virus do that? Who knows?
Lastly — even if the whole population
Being infected is extremely unlikely, as I believe it is,
Surely the whole population will be affected.
Where will it stop?
3 million? 6 million?
12, 24, 48 or 96 million?
At what point does the difference between
24 or 48 or 96 and 250 million
Begin to lose the distinction
In the absolute horror of the reality?
This speculation on the unknown
Gives us a perspective on the known,
For it helps us to realize
The overwhelming negligence
Of the official and public response thus far.

This overwhelming negligence
Seems to be deep-seated in the human psyche.

It is as if the unreported injustices
We have visited one another,
One on one, group on group,
Since time began
Have never gone away,
But have accumulated
And now manifest themselves
In our nuclear arsenals,
In the rapidly degrading environment,
And in the plague that is upon us.

Day by day we measure
Our overwhelming negligence
On the composite yardstick
Of rampant militarism
Government deficits
Private and public corruption
Heroin and cocaine consumption
Religious shamanism
The parade of poverty and famine
Apartheid
Legless Central American children —
The endless litany of our *mea culpa* woes.

Perhaps the greatest woe of all
Is that the word of hope has already been spoken.
Nothing new needs to be found
To turn us from death toward life.
Life abundant is inherent in the biosphere,
Or *Creation*, if you will.
Life abundant for all humans is inherent
In the better side of our history up until now,
Especially in the better side
Of the history of the 20th century,
In our increasing ability to provide
For our own well-being.
We, as humans,
Have only to choose it —
One for all and all for one —
And this we have not done.

We have not —
Perhaps we will not —
But I refuse to believe that we cannot.