

THE MORNING AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD

BY J. N. NIELSEN

The world did not end at the stroke of midnight;
Clocks kept their time, computers did not crash,
Generators continued to spin in their bearings,
Transmission lines humming and crackling as before,
The infrastructure of industrialized civilization intact.

The four horses are in their stable yet,
Munching on grain and hay,
Awaiting their apocalyptic riders,
War, disease, famine, and death,
To saddle up for an excursion.

While not quite retired, the four horsemen
Have not loosed their full fury upon the world,
Riding out to wreak havoc and mayhem —
Preferring occasional sorties, diversions of destruction
To wholesale slaughter and wanton ruination.



SETH TOBOCMAN

War, proud upon his steed,
Decorated with medals and ribbons,
Worshipped by the devotees of Mars,
Cuts a stylish figure in his uniform
Spattered with blood and gore.

Famine, wan and shrunken figure,
Rides a starving nag, ribcage visible
Through the sagging skin;
Horse and rider emaciated,
They plod along slowly.

Disease, discolored and deformed,
Clutches a hood about his head
To hide the marks on his face;
Following War and Famine,
He seizes the stragglers that remain.

Death, celebrated in many a triumph,
Undisputed master of the Horsemen,
Whether riding ahead or bringing up the rear,
Glories in his power over young and old,
Rich and poor, happy and sad, well and ill.

The grim quartet, astride their steeds,
With hooves clattering across the sky,
Bearing down upon the beleaguered people,
Followed by thunder and lightning,
Enact a convincing theater of doom.

This dramatic, sublime Twilight of the Gods,
In which the victim might be persuaded to participate
As a player in a greater, more noble destiny,
Relief from the mundane cares of life,
Seems a call to higher sacrifice, seductively appealing.

Ask not the date of doomsday;
It is not the horsemen of the apocalypse
That should inspire us with fear.
Today and everyday is doomsday,
Today no less than tomorrow or yesterday.

The sinister horsemen of peacetime
Ride silently among us today and every day,
Scarcely noticed but for the need to avert our eyes —
Horsemen not of the traumatic but of the chronic:
Poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and despair.

Such ills are the fuels of civil strife,
The despondency, desperation, and unrest
Of indecisive low-intensity conflict:
The car-bomb, the assassination, and the ambush,
Hostages, Juntas, surveillance, and military advisors.

Not the clear sound of hoofbeats approaching,
But the muffled steps of infiltrators in the night
Are heard in the dark world of covert operations:
The mercenary, the assassin, the gun-runner,
The profiteer, the spook, and the double-agent.

But no enthusiast for doom has ever been
Dissuaded from his belief in the coming end of the world
By the mere failure of the world to end abruptly.
No evidence can contradict a faith in the end of days;
No fact can intervene where certainty is in play.

When the black helicopters do not appear
Hovering menacingly over the homes of tax protesters
To dispossess them of their freehold,
Fell messengers of global conspiracy
Abducting the inhabitants and disappearing —

When the rioting in the streets of cities
Is but the drunken enthusiasm of revelers,
Not angry mobs calling for revolution
And the lynching of politicians,
To be shot one by one or hung from lampposts —

When the militants and the survivalists,
The Posse Comitatus and the Klan,
Fail to rally the masses to their cause,
Left with unfulfilled fantasies of race war,
Nuclear annihilation, and vigilante justice —

When the social order does not descend into barbarism,
Swept away like an illusion, a surreal moment in history,
Which may or may not have really happened,
Fragile civilization doomed to collapse upon itself,
Expiring with the century that nearly spelled its doom —

When the UFOs do not land upon a mountaintop
To take into a safe and secure womb the true believers
Who waited faithfully in this desolate place
Certain that salvation would descend from the skies
And land upon this very spot —

When the heists of The Order fail to inspire revolution;
Or the rampages of Jonesboro, Springfield and Columbine
Fail to stoke the rage of the dispossessed; and bombers
Fail to ignite the powder-keg of simmering resentment after
Waco, Texas; Ruby Ridge, Idaho; and Oklahoma City —

When no members of Delta Force rappel from the roofs
And smash through windows into living rooms
In a government-sanctioned home invasion
Targeting the vocal critics of national policy
And writers of crank letters to the editor —

When no mysterious agents of government —
ATF, FBI, CIA, NSA, NATO, UN —
Or malevolent NGOs — The Masons, the New World Order
Rand Corporation, the Trilateral Commission —
Come in the night to seize the papers and effects of patriots —

When Armageddon fails to arrive as scheduled,
Like a locomotive careening out of control,
Shaking itself to pieces as it jolts and sparks
Down fateful rails on a one-way journey
To its inevitable rendezvous with destiny —

When the dire warnings of catastrophe,
The shrill cried unheeded, the masses unprepared,
The atmosphere tense and pregnant with crisis,
Issued in nothing more than an unexpected quietude,
A crisis unfulfilled, a punctual anti-climax —

When the sun rose once again upon a new day
A new year, a new century, a new millennium,
Blazing brightly, boldly, and coolly in the winter sky —
The morning after the end of the world
Was a morning like and unlike any other.

No Cinderellas we, returning to a pumpkin rather than a carriage
The carriage was there still, after midnight,
And still at dawn it waited for us in the early light.
With a certain melancholy we return, hesitating,
To mundane lives, after the lure of danger and excitement fades.

Suburban surrealism engineers a numbing sameness,
Repetitions of winding drives and cul-de-sacs,
One home indistinguishable from another,
The same cars parked in the same driveways.

Inspired by desperately sought distraction
We shall make our own apocalypse,
We shall forge our own Armageddon,
Beating our ploughshares into swords
For lack of the genuine article.

Doomsday is not one but many,
Harper's Ferry and Andersonville, Gallipoli and The Somme
Mountain Meadows and Donner Pass, Auschwitz and Dauchau,
Sand Creek and Little Big Horn, Hiroshima and Nagasaki —
Names that resonate, that ring in our ears.

How much easier it is to face doomsday:
Armageddon, Götterdämmerung, gigantomachy,
Than to face the doom day in and day out,
The grinding circumstances, the dismal routine,
An implacable timeclock begrudging every passing minute.

The sweet swansong of glory and destiny
Calls to us like the Sirens to Odysseus,
Whispering in our ears the seductive sounds of fate —
That is, whispering sweet nothings, a gentle nihilism
To lull the unwary into sleep and oblivion.

We dream the elusive, ineluctable dream,
Distracting ourselves with fantasies of doomsday,
Drawn in by the drama and excitement —
The ever-present doom surrounding us
Apparently unable to slake our thirst for horror.

We wait for a just anarchy, come to save the pure in heart,
A clean sweep, a clean slate, a new world —
Surely the Day of Judgment is upon us!
Surely the wrath of gods shall fall heavily upon the wicked!
Surely the unrepentant shall be held to answer for their crimes!

Certain of justice delayed, that it will not be denied,
We wait, choosing to wait rather than to act —
Waiting for the end of our days,
Waiting for a sign, waiting as the hours drag,
The days pass, the years fade, and life slips away.

Waiting until waiting no longer has any meaning,
We forget why we have suspended our lives,
Waiting only in order to wait — waiting...
The wait having become an end in itself.
Waiting until doomsday

Which has,
At length,
At last,
Long last,
Arrived.



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