

## THE LONG (?) GOOD-BYE

Recently I watched a montage of security video clips of people falling (or jumping) onto the tracks in subways around the world. Interestingly, the same scenario worked out in each of the dozen or so instances shown. Most of the people on the platform showed alarm, threw their hands up, ran up and down the platform. Some ran toward the end where the train would imminently arrive, trying to get the conductor to stop. But nothing ever impeded the train's arrival. Finally, one person would jump down onto the track, risking his or her life, and drag the fallen one to safety, just before the train rushed through. In a world where so much of human behavior seems to be an insane partnership of greed and stupidity, this frequently recurring heroic behavior might give even the most hardened cynics pause.

When editing #17 I was surprised by the darkness of much of the work, including my own piece. I did not set out to create a theme issue. If that is what #17 turned out to be, it was completely by accident. But the darkness is out there; we sense it, encroaching on our peripheral vision. Eight years ago Al Gore predicted that extreme climate change would show up in the late 21st century. Although there was general scoffing at his warnings, many of his predictions have already been fulfilled. For instance, we are two years from a North Pole and Arctic Ocean entirely free of summer ice. Have we moved into the Era of Elegy? The Era of the Long Good-Bye?



James Lovelock, the English scientist who first predicted global warming and created the Gaia Hypothesis, the foundation for most modern ecological studies, believes it is already far too late to turn the process of degradation around. In 2008 he predicted major world crises from global warming in twenty years. And the suddenness of the change was reinforced just this year when scientists discovered that the Triassic mass extinction they believed had been caused by volcanic activity occurring over 600,000 years actually took just over 10,000 years and resulted from a monstrous release of methane from ocean floors around the world. When the water was warmed to a certain point by the volcanic activity, the release was sudden and lethal. That warming of the oceans is happening right now. How far are we from the critical point where enormous amounts of methane, a gas that causes atmospheric warming at a far faster rate than carbon dioxide, erupt from the ocean floors?

The most heroic scientific undertaking, as James Lovelock suggests, would be to find ways to generate artificial food to offset some of the lost production caused by drought, blight, or agricultural land being swamped by rising ocean water. Not everyone will make it, but the tremendous loss of life some have predicted (Lovelock says 80% of the world population) might be avoided. Survival doesn't mean building retro bomb shelters and filling them with canned food and guns. Neither does it mean moving to another planet, in this or any other solar system. I just saw Christopher Nolan's "Interstellar," a marvelous movie. Like him (if I understand what he is saying), I find the idea of seeding another planet with humans, in adult form or as fertilized eggs, repugnant. To abandon virtually the entire population of the earth to certain death in order to pursue some cruel scientific scheme of preserving the human race is as monstrous a betrayal as the hall full of drowned human clones that Robert Angier used to fake teleportation, the magician's ultimate "Prestige."

Explorers and astronauts do not have a monopoly on heroism. What about writers, artists, musicians, and other people in the arts? Regardless of how fast the predicted outcome arrives, who will write the elegies, who will elevate our collective tragedy to the lyrical or the epic? This kind of writing should have nothing to do with careerism. In fact, under the predicted circumstances, there will be no historical legacy for anyone's endeavors. These works will



find their sources in the deepest parts of the collective unconscious, as we speak to the ancestors about what we have done and where it has brought us. There have been terrible events in human history: plagues and famines that killed millions. The Black Plague alone killed almost half of Europe's population, but artists and writers continued to work. And they continued to find redemptive light in the human experience, as

grim as their daily lives must have been.

Who will emerge from the well intentioned but useless hand-waving crowd and jump down on the tracks? Human history is studded with examples of people who rose above greed and stupidity and horrible circumstances with great visionary compassion. Not all were prophets, saints, or bodhisattvas. They were most often anonymous,

like the rescuers in the subways, making their statements without recognition or celebrity. This is not a plea to "rage, rage against the dying of the light." It is an invitation to celebrate all that is or was beautiful, and to capture the magnificent parts of the human soul in word, sound, and image—that persistent ghost of the heroic in our lives.

