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ALL THE TROUBLE IN THE WORLD

The Lighter Side of Overpopulation,

Famine, Ecological Disaster,

Ethnic Hatred, Plague, and Poverty

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5 ECOLOGY

We're All Going to Die

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Mankind has done harm to nature, at least if looks and smell are anything to go by (and they are in the rest of life). But the environmentalists can shut up. Everybody's a radical Green now. I've had an impoverished Haitian in Port-au-Prince tell me he was worried about the Creole alphabet. "It has too many letters," he said, "we must conserve resources." And a writer in the January 1994 issue of *Audubon* magazine reports that her six-year-old daughter criticized the nursery furniture, saying, "They killed trees to make my bed."

Few people doubt the earth's ecology is in awful shape or have qualms about the price of fixing it. CBS News and the *New York Times* took a poll in 1989, and 80 percent of the respondents agreed with this statement: "Protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards can't be too tight, and continuing environmental improvements must be made regardless of the cost."

"Regardless" would seem a bit strong if people thought about it. But the fact that they don't think about it reflects a near consensus

that humanity is making a horrid mess of this world. For a very average example of modern reasoning on this subject take Vice President Al Gore's book *Earth in the Balance*, which has sold nearly half a million copies as of this writing. The flyleaves of the paperback edition contain words of high praise from the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New Republic*, and M. Scott Peck—in short, from everyone who matters.

Earth in the Balance presents no original research, and, though it has a chapter at the back called “A Global Marshall Plan,” it proffers no new solutions. *Earth in the Balance* is really just a compendium of all the ecological frets and dreads that have been accumulating in our minds since the days when James Thurber's grandmother worried about electricity leaking out of empty lightbulb sockets. What's interesting is the book's casual—almost unconscious—assumptions, made evident in hundreds of judgmental word clusters scattered through the text like something you didn't order in a pizza topping:

the global ecological crisis

a rapidly deteriorating global environment

the dangerous truth about what we are doing to the earth

Musty logic-choppers of the Aristotelian ilk would call these phrases *petitio principii*, or “begging the question.” It is a famous old logical fallacy to assume as true (“the global ecological crisis”) that which is to be proven by argument (an ecological crisis is being suffered by the globe).

But logic is so annoying. And what's logical thinking ever gotten us anyway except things like the atomic bomb? When Gore says things like “Our ecological system is crumpling as it suffers a powerful collision with the hard surfaces of a civilization speeding out of control” (which summons mental images of a hundred-mile-per-hour Guggenheim Museum putting a huge dent in Mt. Rainier), he's not

just being full of shit, he's indicating that the disputation is over. The debate, if there was one, about whether the earth is a filthy wreck, has been decided. This orb upon which our brief mortal span is tread—what a dump.

When viewing some of the dumpier parts of the earth, it is hard to imagine that there might be arguments in favor of pollution. And yet there are. By any standard of measurement the majority of people on earth are now richer, healthier, and longer-lived than they ever have been. So say the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, et cetera. These improvements in the human condition came with the industrial revolution, which created most of our pollution. Robert Kates, director of the World Hunger Program at Brown University, estimates that the production of goods and services on our planet has increased by 500 percent just since 1950.

The countries that are most industrialized and hence, one would think, most polluted have the best morbidity, mortality, and income statistics. National well-being might almost be said to be a by-product of pollution. Figures compiled by the Nobel laureate economist Simon Kuznets in his book *Economic Growth of Nations* show that our modern comfort is borne aloft on a dense cloud of factory smoke. From the end of the seventeenth century until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the per capita gross national product of agrarian England and Wales grew at an average rate of 1.9 percent a decade. From the middle of the nineteenth century until the 1960s, industrialized Great Britain's per capita GNP grew, per decade, by 13.4 percent. Likewise, the U.S. per capita GNP, between the 1840s and the 1960s, grew by 17.5 percent per decade. And Japan's, between the 1870s and the 1960s, grew by an average of 32.3 percent each ten years.

You can say, “Yes, but all these good things will be bad for mankind in the long run.” And I can quote John Maynard Keynes, “‘In the long run we're all dead.’” You can say, “We're poisoning the earth for future generations.” And I can say, “I thought you were in

favor of population control.” You can say, “All this pollution may be fine for man, but we’re destroying the rest of nature.” And I can say, “There’s always one fox who thinks burrowing should be abandoned because it makes life so hard on the hounds.” And you can say, “Fuck you.” And so forth. But the question of ecological ruin is debatable.

The people who believe that, as a result of industrial development, life is about to become a hell, or may be one already, are guilty, at least, of sloppy pronouncements. On page 8 of *Earth in the Balance*, Al Gore claims that his study of the arms race gave him “a deeper appreciation for the most horrifying fact in all our lives: civilization is now capable of destroying itself.” In the first place, the most horrifying fact in many of our lives is that our ex-spouse has gotten ahold of our ATM card. And civilization has always been able to destroy itself. The Greeks of ancient Athens, who had a civilization remarkable for lack of technological progress during its period of greatest knowledge and power, managed to destroy themselves fine. On page 3 of *EITB*, Gore says that after encountering Agent Orange in Vietnam “I started to feel wary of all chemicals that have extraordinarily powerful effects on the world around us.” Ten pages later Gore tells how his concern for the environment and other global issues was intensified by the near death of his young son. And I believe him. Love and a sense of life’s fragility can make us all better or, anyway, more conscientious people. Yet how wary was Gore of the anesthetics, antiseptics, and antibiotics that saved his son’s life?

But let us, for the time being, leave the vice president to the indignity of his office, surely punishment enough for his rhetorical sins. *Earth in the Balance* is popular, but *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* has become a kind of *Thomas the Tank Engine* for the environmentally minded. Citing various odds and sods of sources and often no sources at all, *50 Simple Things* comes forth with some wonderful statements. “Every year in the U.S. we lose 7 billion tons of topsoil— an area the size of Connecticut,” says a tiny page 89 subscript, the kind

that used to run in the margins of *Mad* magazine. Connecticut has a land area of 5,544 square miles. We’ve been farming most of America for 150 years; 831,600 square miles should be gone. That’s the whole Midwest. And come to think of it, I haven’t heard anything lately from my sister in Cincinnati.

Another subscript, on page 18, claims, “The average annual energy bill for America’s hot tubs is \$200 million.” Okay, but try seducing someone on a compost heap.

On page 17 yet another unattributed subscript says, “About 75% of the water we use in our homes is used in the bathroom.” Thank goodness. Think of the mess it would make in the den.

Ecology types seem a bit obsessed with water, maybe because so many of them live in California where the water is fizzy and comes with lime slices. They’re worried about how long it will be until Lake Michigan goes flat and earth’s citrus quarries are depleted. Someone named Karina Lutz, managing editor of something called *Home Energy* magazine, contributed an essay to *50 Simple Things* in which she avers, “Every drop of water wasted is a drop less of a wild and scenic river, a drop less of a salmon run, a drop more in a dam filling a glorious valley.” Perhaps. But most of the water we use ends up going pretty much where it was headed anyway, even if in temporarily icky form. It’s not as though we’re hoarding the stuff in the attic or filling jerry cans and running over to Hoover Dam to dump them into Lake Mead.

A careful reading of *50 Simple Things* leaves you wondering whether you’re going to die from environmental disaster or intellectual annoyance. Failing either, you can worry yourself to death. On page 81 the book flatly states, “All milk sold in the U.S. today contains pesticide residue.” I put some beer into the baby’s bottle (or would have if I had a baby) and called the Food and Drug Administration. “Well,” said Catherine Carnevale, director of the Office of Constituent Operations, “that’s probably one of those statements that someone can make without fear of being contradicted because measurement

only goes so low.” Dr. Carnevale explained that the limit of detection in chemical tests for pesticide contamination is .01 parts per million. She said that in 1992 the FDA had checked 558 milk samples representing sixty major dairy-producing areas of the country. And, indeed, 48 percent of the samples did have detectable residues. But these were traces of breakdown products from the DDT family of bug killers, none of which has been used for a decade. (So it’s the milk you drank with Bosco while watching *Sky King* that’s killed you already.) And the highest level of 1992 milk contamination found by the FDA was .04 parts per million, that’s $\frac{3}{100,000,000}$ ths more than what’s technically known as “none.” Dr. Carnevale stated she felt this had “no toxicological significance.”

I’d barely gotten over this panic when, on page 40 of *50 Simple Things*, I found the sentence, “Baby powder, for example, often contains asbestos.” I quickly changed Junior, poured cake mix down his diaper, and called the FDA back. “Around fifteen years ago,” patiently explained Dr. John Bailey, acting director of the FDA Office of Cosmetics and Colors, “there was concern that talcum powder, as it was mined, could be contaminated with the type of asbestos that’s associated with lung disease. Considerable research was done by the FDA and by cosmetics companies. Contamination was found to be either very low or nonexistent. The type of asbestos involved was not of a health concern. From our perspective it’s not an issue.”

Remember, FDA employees are serious about fear. We pay these people to panic about an iota of rodent hair in our chili, even when the recipe calls for it. FDA employees are first-class agonizers, world champions at losing sleep. When Meryl Streep got hysterical about Alar, they actually checked the apples instead of Meryl’s head. And let’s assume that FDA employees are also human. The more things they can find to be anxious about, the bigger their budget is going to be. They’ve got every incentive to tell us to run for our lives. So, no matter what it says about asbestos in *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*, don’t use your kid as an oven mitt.



Ecology is the science of everything. Nobody knows everything. Nobody even knows everything about any one thing. And most of us don’t know much. Say it’s ten-thirty on a Saturday night. Where are your teenage children? I didn’t ask where they said they were going. Where are they really? What are they doing? Who are they with? Have you met the other kids’ families? And what is tonight’s pot smoking, wine-cooler drinking, and sex in the backseats of cars going to mean in a hundred years? Now extend these questions to the entire solar system.

There is confusing evidence and contradictory argument about every major ecological issue. For instance, about the pesticides that “all milk sold in the U.S. today” contains. Some pesticides do cause cancer in laboratory animals. But the test doses are massive to the point of travesty. According to economist Ben Bolch and chemist Harold Lyons in their self-explanatorily titled book *Apocalypse Not* (Cato Institute, 1993), the research that set off the Alar scare used so much Alar that to do the same experiment on humans would require each subject to eat fifty thousand pounds of apples a day for life. (Alar isn’t actually a pesticide, it’s a growth retardant; but it’s man-made and it gets on food, so it’s, you know, yucky.) The original Alar research was done by Bela Toth at the Eppley Institute in 1977. Subsequent research by independent laboratories and by Uniroyal, the manufacturer of Alar, cast some doubt on the Toth findings but did implicate an Alar breakdown product in the growth of mouse blood vessel tumors when the mice drank the equivalent of nineteen thousand quarts of apple juice a day. This may explain why laboratory mice so frequently have to ask to be excused to go to the little mouse’s room.

In 1990, Sanford Miller, dean of the Graduate School of Biochemical Sciences at the University of Texas at San Antonio, told newspaper columnist Warren Brookes:

The risk of pesticide residues to consumers is effectively zero. This is what some fourteen scientific societies representing over 100,000 microbiologists, toxicologists and food scientists said at the time of the ridiculous Alar scare. But we were ignored.

Everything is a poison in sufficient dose. Try drinking nineteen thousand quarts of applejuice if you don't think so. Or have someone hold your head under pure water for half an hour. And being locked in a tiny cage and stuffed with agricultural chemicals by grant creatures in white coats and unfashionable eyeglasses probably isn't good for you either. In *Apocalypse Not* Bolch and Lyons point out, "The presumption that the laboratory procedure is not itself carcinogenic is increasingly suspect." They cite an August 1990 article in *Science* by Bruce N. Ames and Lois S. Gold that questions the health effects of repeatedly filling lab animals with the maximum tolerable amount of *anything*.

Ames is a professor of biochemistry at the University of California at Berkeley and the inventor of the most widely used scientific procedure for determining the mutagenic effects of chemicals, the Ames test. He knows his cancer. He also knows that a distinction between "man-made chemicals" and "natural chemicals" is spurious. "It is probable that almost every plant product in the supermarket contains natural carcinogens," he and Gold said in a letter to *Science* in May 1989.

In an attempt to bring some perspective to toxin scares (or maybe just as a cruel stunt), the American Council on Science and Health publishes a pamphlet called "Natural Carcinogens in Your Holiday Menu." The mixed nuts contain aflatoxins, among the most potent mutagens known. More mutagens, called furan derivatives, are found in the onions. Lima beans, when chewed, release cyanide from cyanogenetic glucosides. (Personally, even as a child, I'd suspected as much.) There's carotatoxin, a nerve poison, in carrots. Mushrooms come with hydrazines, many of which are animal carcinogens. Other

animal carcinogens—quercetin glycosides and hydrogen peroxide—lurk within tomatoes, as does tomatine, which interferes with nerve transmission. Human carcinogens, psoralens, taint celery. Broccoli is host to goitrin and glucosinolates, which harm the thyroid. And the potato is a regular Chernobyl among vegetables. Within the dread spud we find solanine, chaconine, amylase inhibitors, and isoflavones—which, respectively, cause gastrointestinal-tract irritation, harm your nervous system, interfere with digestive enzymes, and mimic female sex-hormone activity. An extra helping of au gratin and you're a toilet-bound neurasthenic hermaphrodite with gas. If you live that long. Potatoes also contain arsenic.

These are just the foods that are good for us, the foods we're supposed to eat more of. I haven't even mentioned things like alcohol, a known divorcogenic which interferes with the body's car-wreck defenses.

50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth says, "Fortunately, there are effective natural alternatives to chemical pesticides." In *Apocalypse Not*, Bolch and Lyons say, "Given the furor about synthetic pesticides and the lack of excitement over natural carcinogenic pesticides, plant growers are busy breeding crop strains that are naturally resistant to pests. Some of the new strains are so toxic to human beings that in one case (a new type of celery) the plant causes contact dermatitis among produce workers." Revenge of the salad bar.

Man damages the environment. Kids damage the carpet. Does it matter? Is it worth it? Depends on the kids. Depends on the carpet. Even when the greatest degree of ecological caution is being exercised, humans wreck havoc. So do cow farts. "The world's 1.3 billion cows annually produce nearly 100 tons of methane—a powerful 'greenhouse gas,' -- claims *50 Simple Things*. The environment itself plays hell with the environment. A storm will ravage a beach no matter how eloquently the Sierra Club argues that the shoreline should be left in pristine condition. Lightning will strike a stand of old-growth timber with ever so many endangered owls roosted therein. Coyotes in Cali-

ifornia have been exposed to *50 Simple Things* and *Earth in the Balance* and know they should be eating lower on the food chain, but they'll still gnaw the guts right out of Bambi. No amount of self-righteousness will turn the bloody tooth and claw of nature from tearing flesh to catching Frisbees.

Of course, that is not an excuse for running a speedboat through a family of manatees or paving Monument Valley and building a Six Flags amusement park there. Fervent ecologists argue that we should be nice to the earth because animals, plants, rocks, and such have as much right to be here as we do. They are our equals. This is exactly wrong. We are endowed with a moral capacity that animals, plants, rocks—and many fervent ecologists—lack. We should not be dirty, wasteful, or cruel. To do so harms others. That's wrong. Therefore we don't disembowel Bambi live the way coyotes do, we shoot him first.

As legal scholar Peter W. Huber has pointed out, "Getting facts right is a fundamental requirement of morality." Mankind is accused of numerous and grave environmental crimes. Each of these alleged felonies must be thoroughly investigated and fairly judged. Otherwise we won't know how large a fine to levy upon ourselves, which type of community service we should sentence us to, or what kind of prison we should all lock each other up in.

III

Some ecological scares are frauds. The earth is not running out of things. In 1980 University of Maryland economist Julian Simon made a well-known wager with several times aforementioned jerk Paul Ehrlich. Simon bet that the average inflation-adjusted price of natural resources would decline. Ehrlich bet the contrary. Simon let Ehrlich choose the time span and the resources. Ehrlich decided on ten years and picked copper, chrome, nickel, tin, and tungsten. The two men figured out how much of this stuff \$1,000 would buy and agreed that

in 1990 they'd figure out how much all of it would sell for in 1980 dollars. If the price went up, Simon would pay the difference to Ehrlich. If the price went down, Ehrlich would pay the difference to Simon. In October 1990 Ehrlich sent Simon a check for \$576.07.

Every metal had fallen in price, tungsten by 78 percent. In fact, between 1980 and 1990 prices fell for all strategic minerals except manganese and zinc. (Expect the Franklin Mint to issue commemorative tubes of zinc oxide sunblock soon.)

Inflation-adjusted energy prices have also fallen since 1980. As of the early nineties coal was down 91 percent and crude oil, 35 percent. Gasoline prices were 6 percent lower in 1991 than they were in 1972 before the OPEC embargo and a full one-fourth less than they'd been in the Buick-filled, boron-splurging year of 1963. (Again, this assumes constant dollars, though personally I've found my dollars to be a bit flighty.) And, Stephen Moore of the Institute for Policy Innovation says, if we perform the mathematical task of adjusting for inflation by indexing prices to wages, we'll find that what the average person pays for oil has been declining since 1870, when the average person didn't even know what to do with the stuff and wasn't about to put it in his horse.

When a resource gets scarce, as oil did twenty years ago, we become more efficient in our use of it. Pretty soon there's more oil than we need. The price comes down. And OPEC nations, we observe with satisfaction, go broke. If there is a permanent scarcity of a resource, we change resources. My sentence "The earth is not running out of things" is actually as much of a lie as anything you'll read in *Earth in the Balance* or *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Identical*. We run out of things all the time. We're way out of whale oil. Also, out of whalebone for corsets. Fortunately, the government of 150 years ago didn't have presidential commissions, congressional committees, Al Gore, and the other apparatus of worry our present government possesses, or Washington might have foreseen this. Whale oil would have been rationed. A black market would have been created. Whale oil

prices would have soared. *All* the whales would have been lulled immediately. And today we'd live in a dim, lampless world where Judy Collins sang duets with tuna fish and everybody had a waistline like Golda Meir. Instead, gaslights, petroleum-based whale-oil substitutes, electricity, and control-top panty hose were invented. When we ran out of whale oil, no one even noticed.

Having mentioned electricity, let me also point out—to you and Thurber's grandmother—that electricity *doesn't* run out of empty lightbulb sockets. It doesn't drip off high-tension wires either. We're not all dying of horrible cancers resulting from electromagnetic fields generated by our IBM PCs, our house current, and our girlfriend who insists on cranking up the electric blanket in July. Americans have been slathered in wiring for three generations. Surely we'd notice if this was killing us (other than when we use the hairdryer in the bathtub or are a black person convicted of murder in the South). At the very least, we'd notice the remarkable health and longevity of the people in the smoky, dark, impoverished, hungry, unelectrified parts of the world. Besides, the earth's own electromagnetic field is more powerful than most man-made kinds. If it weren't, every time we went hiking in the woods our compass would take us to the microwave in somebody's summer cottage. If electromagnetism is lethal, it's a few billion years too late to do anything about it.

Still, power lines *could* have some effect upon our health. That's perfectly true. The problem with this truth, however, is it can't be proven false. It's a two-headed coin. My phone is ringing. That *could* be Uma Thurman asking if she can come over and give me a back rub. Nope. It's the bank again. They've made another one of their errors in arithmetic concerning my checking-account balance. But it *could* have been anyone. There is no scientific method by which the complete absence or total impossibility of a thing can be proven. And there are too many scientific methods by which an impression of cause and effect can be generated.

Watch as I create “statistical evidence that power-line locations

affect cancer rates.” I can do this despite the fact that I know nothing about electricity or medicine and not much (says my bank) about math. Power lines are found all over the country arranged in an orderly fashion aptly called a grid. Cancer occurs more randomly. Random, of course, does not mean evenly spread. Randomness comes in blots and clusters. Flip a penny a thousand times, and you'll see some long streaks of Lincolns as if that coin did indeed have two heads. Now give me a map of the power grid and a map of cancer occurrences. I will find groups of cancer victims near high-tension lines. I will also find groups of cancer victims near bookstores where Paul Brodeur, author of *Currents & Death: Power Lines, Computer Terminals, and the Attempt to Cover Up Their Threat to Your Health* made promotional appearances and signed books.

IV

Some ecological scares are scary. Splitting the atom has destroyed two fair-sized Japanese cities and caused other distressing phenomena such as poorly groomed antinuclear activists and numerous last-person-on-earth *Twilight Zone* episodes. And biotechnology is a worry. What if they take genetic material from wet noodles and blowfish and splice it into politician chromosomes and create a Clinton administration?

But to get the full thrill of fear from Three Mile Island, milk containing bovine growth hormones, or Hillary, you have to uneducate yourself, engage in a pursuit of ignorance, immerse your intellect in nonlearning. Ronald Bailey, author of *Eco-Scam* (St. Martin's Press, 1993), a book devoted to quelling environmentalist hysteria, points out that in the early days of genetic engineering geneticists themselves were frightened by what they were doing. In 1974 a committee of prominent biochemists including James Watson, who with Francis Crick discovered the structure and function of DNA, wrote a letter to *Science* magazine proposing a moratorium on the lunds of gene splicing considered most dangerous. Nobody wanted a variety of anthrax bacteria

able to disguise itself as a free Kool-Aid sample and mail itself to your house. And, following the publication of the *Science* letter, molecular biologists did indeed observe a worldwide voluntary moratorium that lasted two years. Bailey calls it “the first self-imposed ban on basic research in the history of science.” In 1976 the National Institutes of Health were called upon to create safety guidelines to ensure the quarantine of all gene-splicing experiments. And in 1977 Congress (with then representative, you guessed it, Al Gore in the lead) nearly passed legislation limiting the methods by which scientists were allowed to learn about the fundamental elements of life.

But, by the late seventies, scientists were beginning to discover that exchange and interpolation of genetic material happens all the time in nature. Bacteria are particularly inclined to homemade gene splicing, and there is nothing that Congress, the NIH, or the *Science* magazine letters column can do about it. And bioengineering itself turned out to be less like a Dr. Frankenstein’s lab and more like a very precise version of the traditional selective breeding of plants and animals—without weeds to pull or manure to shovel. Man has been breeding livestock for ten thousand years and has yet to come up with a monstrous sheep that can trample buildings and graze a whole golf course for breakfast.

According to Bailey, James Watson later said, “Scientifically, I was a nut. There is no evidence at all that recombinant DNA poses the slightest danger.” Bacteriologist Winston Brill told Bailey, “No one has gotten even so much as a snuffle from biotechnology.” And biophysicist Burke Zimmerman, who in the seventies testified before Congress about the dangers of gene splicing, says in his 1984 book *Biofuture*, “In looking back it would be hard to insist that a law was necessary, or, perhaps, that guidelines were necessary.”

Biotechnologists could still come up with something awful by accident, not to mention on purpose. Nature does it all the time. Nature is forever inventing things like the bubonic plague, though whether intentionally or not is a question too deep for this state college graduate. But, in the meantime, we’ve got a four-billion-dollar biotech

industry that produces cheap insulin, accurate medical tests for everything from pregnancy to colon cancer, new vaccines, the diagnostic process that keeps the nation’s blood supply free of AIDS and hepatitis, and hundreds of other products, with thousands more on the horizon—a small price to pay for an occasional giant sheep.

Atomic power would seem to have a similar benefit-to-panic ratio. Why is a nuclear reactor considered so much more terrifying than any other large, complicated thing that gets hot? In 1991, 54,659 Americans were injured by ovens and stoves. But we’re so scared of atomic power that people living in the vicinity of the Three Mile Island reactor accident may have suffered an increase in cancer occurrences not from radiation but from worrying about it. And this is not something made up by Lyndon LaRouche geeks selling CHAPPAQUIDDICK 1, THREE MILE ISLAND 0 bumper stickers in airport lobbies. The worry hypothesis was put forward as the result of a study conducted by Columbia University and the National Audubon Society. As reported in the May 27, 1991, *Washington Post*:

Jan Beyea, senior scientist at the Audubon Society, said the higher rates of cancer among people living nearest to TMI [Three Mile Island] could not be attributed to radiation exposure. “This increase has occurred both in areas where there was radiation exposure and where there was not,” he said . . .

“We can’t say it’s definitely stress, but it’s suggestive of stress,” Mervyn Susser, a Columbia University epidemiologist who was the principal investigator for the study, said in an interview.

Reactors are dangerous. About thirty-two people died in the immediate aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster and many more have died since and will die in the future. But each year about sixty-five people are killed mining coal in the United States and plenty of other

coal miners will die from black lung disease. Walk through the audience at the MTV Awards and find the NO COAL buttons. Is radiation especially fearsome because it's invisible? Would we feel better about it if we could see it coming the way we can see the cars and trucks which squish flat forty-five thousand of our countrymen per annum?

There *is* the matter of nuclear waste, of which no one is fond. But what's left over when we bum fossil fuels isn't very appetizing either, and there's lots of it. *50 Simple Things* says that in 1986 "6.5 million tons of hydrocarbons and 8.5 tons of nitrogen oxides" were dumped into the atmosphere by motor vehicles alone. (Who weighs these things and how they get nitrogen oxides onto the bathroom scale, I have no idea.) *Apocalypse Not* states that all U.S. nonmilitary atomic reactors would, with fuel reprocessing, "produce an annual volume of high-level wastes equal to about 35 feet on a side." (And who figures this out I don't know either, nor would I care to hold the tape measure.) Assuming some degree of accuracy in such large and loopy quantifications, atomic power would seem to make a smaller, if more permanent, mess. A hundred years of national power generation would leave us with approximately three acres of awful stuff stacked about as high as a New York City brownstone. I can think of a number of areas in New York where three acres of nuclear waste would make the neighborhood safer to walk around in than it is now, and better lit.

Thousands of Americans drown every year. Imagine—with the present age's terror of hazards and enthusiasm for government protection therefrom—if water had just been invented. The Brady Bill would have included a five-day waiting period for above-ground pools; only licensed adults would be allowed to bathe, and children under fourteen would be required to wear life jackets when using squirt guns.

V

Ecological problems are scientifically messy. This is true even when unanimity seems to rule. Things Sting might hug George Bush about

(and George write Sting a thank-you note for) are, in fact, too complicated for either of them to understand. Those of us with the normal amount of brains can't comprehend them. Anyone who studies the ozone hole, for instance, soon feels himself out in that ozone indeed. An immense article on this matter (or the lack of it) appeared in the April 15, 1993, issue of the *Washington Post*. The author was Boyce Rensberger, a fellow who seems to have been paying attention in college science classes while the rest of us were scribbling test answers on our shirt cuffs. But midway through the text, Mr. Rensberger throws his hands in the air:

While there is evidence that the ozone damage is happening, it has proven impossible so far to detect any resulting increase in [ultraviolet light] reaching the ground. . . .

"The amount of increase that the theory says we could be getting from ozone depletion is smaller than the error of our best measuring instruments," said John E. Frederick, an atmospheric physicist at the University of Chicago.

"People get all excited about a few-percent change in UV , but it's nothing to get a 20 percent increase naturally," Frederick said. "If an increase of 20 percent were going to be so damaging, there should be no life in Florida. . . ."

Which may explain Epcot Center.

Even obvious and uncontestable ecological harms must be subjected to ethical consideration and cost/benefit analysis. That is, they must be if we put any value on human well-being, and we'd better because name another animal that thinks twice about the environment. There is nothing the public abhors more than an oil spill. Yet we cannot move around large quantities of necessary fluids without spilling them occasionally. Those of us who drink have proven this by experi-

mental method. And here comes the Congressional Research Service—federally funded, bipartisan, and all that—with a July 1990 report by James E. Mielke, *Oil in the Ocean: The Short- and Long-Term Impacts of a Spill*. Mielke says the damage from even a horrendous splash of crude in the briny is “relatively modest and, as far as can be determined, of relatively short duration.”

The CRS report based its conclusions on a number of disgusting seaside snafus including the 1976 *Argo* Merchant catastrophe on the Nantucket Shoals that nearly got the Kennedy Compound greasy and the 1969 Santa Barbara offshore oil-well blowout that gave us the original of that late twentieth-century ecological photo Pietà: the tarred—and, of course, feathered—seagull. Of particular interest is the case of the *Amoco* Cadix, which ran aground off the coast of France in 1978. The ensuing spill was six times as large as the Exxon *Valdez*'s; 1,635,000 barrels of oil wound up on the beaches, birds, oyster beds, fisheries, and Bretons of Brittany. Several thousand avians died, but no long-term effect on bird population has been discovered. Fish died too, but, again, the effect was temporary—if not for the specific fish, for fish in general. Two years after the spill scientists found “little evidence of histopathological and biochemical damage” to the oysters. This being science talk, I think, for “nothing a little Tabasco sauce won't fix.” Soap cleaned the Bretons, wave action cleaned the beaches, and the saltwater marshes repaired themselves. They did so better, in fact, than man was able to do. The CRS noted that marshes where no attempt was made to remove the oil were “restored by natural processes within 5 years, whereas in cleaned areas, restoration took 7 to 8 years.” A slew of lawsuits later, total damage to France and its minions and wards was determined to be \$115.2 million.

But in 1978 the art of making the public abhor oil spills was in its nonage. Not now. Exxon had to spend \$2.2 billion cleaning up after the *Valdez*. It paid an additional \$800 million to Alaska and the federal government and, as of this writing, still faces \$1.5 billion in civil lawsuits. That's \$4.5 billion Exxon could have spent reducing

the price of home heating oil for the poor or sending somebody at its gas stations out to—speaking of cleanups—clean up the damn bugs on my windshield.

Those bugs, after all, are victims of the petroleum industry, too. And species extinction is another subject of harmonious general angst. We are losing species faster than car keys, umbrellas, clip-on earrings, small pieces of paper with important phone numbers written on them, and camera lens caps put together. Naturalist Norman Myers, in his 1979 book *The Sinking Ark*, claimed the earth could “lose one-quarter of all species by the year 2000.” The World Wildlife Fund has used as a flag- (and fund-) raising cry: “Without firing a shot, we may kill one-fifth of all species of life on this planet in the next ten years.” And in 1989 even the General Accounting Office felt compelled to break its historical silence on the subject of biodiversity and, abandoning its usual duties of toting up government pillage, issued a report professing, “The Earth is nearing a stage of extinction of species unequalled since that of the age of the dinosaurs.”

We are losing species. And no one likes to take the position of “Have you looked under the couch cushions?” But a layperson might want to ask one or two questions. Are we talking rhinos and tigers, or are we talking shower-curtain mold and windshield bugs? Are we really opposed to every single extinction? I don't recall donating to Save the Smallpox.

And a scientist might want to make more technical queries such as “What the fuck's the Government Accounting Office talking about?”

One reason we are losing so many species is that we've decided there are so many more species to lose. According to an article by Charles C. Mann in the August 16, 1991, issue of *Science* (and I love citing *Science*—anything so hard to read must be deeply wise), taxonomists used to think the earth had three or four million distinct kinds of living things. Then, in the 1960s, tropical rain forests were brought to taxonomy's attention. These wet, steaming locales proved to contain

a terrific (you can take my word for it) profusion of life forms. Says Mann, “On the basis of new sampling techniques, Terry Erwin of the U.S. National Zoo calculated that there are 30 million species of insects; recently, mycologist David Hawksworth reckoned that there are 1.5 million types of fungi. And no scientist has even a guess at how many microorganisms remain to be added to the tally . . .”

Some biologists now think the total number of species may be nearly 100 million. However, to date, only about 1.4 million of these have been captured, looked at, and named. “As a result,” says Charles Mann, “those who prophesy the end of half the world’s species find themselves in the awkward position of predicting the imminent demise of huge numbers of species nobody has ever seen.” Several of which might cure cancer, of course. And several of which might cause it.

Then there is the matter of whether our theories about species extinction bear any relationship to real life, that is to say, death. Most of the research about species extinction has been conducted on islands because islands are controlled environments and scientists can get drinks with little umbrellas in them there. But the earth is an island only in the greeting-card-on-recycled-paper aphorism sense. And species that suffer loss of habitat on islands do not have the same options as species that suffer loss of habitat on landmasses do, such as moving to the suburbs and raiding our bird-feeders. Island logic also tells us that an increase in habitat size means an increase in number of species. But it doesn’t necessarily. You can build your bed as large as you like and still get very few people to sleep with you.

Current research also takes for granted that habitat loss is permanent. It’s politically and economically difficult to get Benetton, Bloomingdale’s, and Blockbuster Video to tear down the mall, dig up the parking lot, and run a hose in the ruins to return the site to its original wetland conditions and get the shower-curtain mold and windshield bugs growing again. But according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, fifty million acres of new forest have sprung up in the eastern United States since 1920. This in the most crowded part of our

country during a period of great population growth and blowout urban sprawl. The National Wilderness Institute says, “Most wildlife is more abundant today and more widespread on both private and public lands than in 1900.”

One of the best-studied areas of habitat loss and regeneration is Puerto Rico. It’s an island, so the scientists can get mai-tais and frozen mango daiquiris. It’s tropical, so there’s lots of life and not just in the bars. And Puerto Rico is one of the few rain-forest sites where long-term biological records have been kept. Charles C. Mann, in that *Science* article of his, notes that Puerto Rico is thickly forested now but had been “almost completely stripped of virgin forest” ninety years ago. “Yet it did not suffer massive extinctions,” says Mann. “Even birds lost only seven of 60 species.” We don’t want to lose seven species of birds—New York City pigeons, my aunt’s horrible canary, the kind of chicken that’s served at hotel banquets. . . . Maybe we do want to lose seven species of birds, although probably not the seven that went for scrambled eggs in the denuding of P.R. But, anyway, the point is living creatures are reasonably resilient or they wouldn’t be living, and in some places at least, man is giving them a chance to resile.

One more consensus issue which some people find less than fully consensual is recycling. I have a friend, Jerry Taylor, who is the director of natural resource studies at the Cato Institute. Cato is a libertarian think tank and an excellent, brilliant, and nobly run institution (I happen to be a research fellow there). Libertarians are great believers in voluntary human behavior, the free marketplace being a good example. Jerry pointed out that when used items—Ferraris, for instance—have real value they don’t need to be “recycled,” they get sold. “If recycling is so great,” said Jerry, “how come no private individual will pay you to do it?”

“Sex is great,” I said, “and no private individual will pay me to do that.” Jerry said he wasn’t surprised.

Jerry Taylor wrote a paper about recycling for the American Legislative Exchange Council, an organization devoted to state gov-

ernment concerns. The title of the paper was (Jerry's one of those people who love to carve out common ground and create mutual good feeling among antagonistic groups) "Three Cheers for the Throw-Away Society!" Here Taylor presents figures showing that fast-food packaging—about which people are always complaining between Big Mac bites—makes up just one-tenth of one percent of municipal waste.

Taylor points out that if you measure trash by weight (and anybody who has to take out the trash wouldn't measure it any other way), we're using less packaging per person than ever before.

Taylor argues that the packaging we do use cuts down on food waste. He cites the work of Dr. William Rathje, author of *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* and head of the University of Arizona Garbage Project. (One can't help wondering what Dr. Rathje's Ph.D. is in; journalism is this author's guess.) Dr. Rathje excavated landfills in the United States and Mexico and discovered that Americans discarded twice as much food packaging but Mexicans discarded three times as much food.

Taylor praises the little foil and plastic-laminate juice boxes, "aseptic containers," that have been banned in some places because they are hard to recycle. They *are* hard to recycle, but they require fewer natural resources to make, less energy to fill and transport, and no energy to store. Plus there's all the money that's saved when they can't be recycled. As Taylor's colleague at Cato, Senior Fellow Doug Bandow, wrote in a 1992 newspaper column, "Most recycling programs are financial disasters. Even in the Northeast, with the highest collection and disposal costs, curbside recycling programs usually run at least twice as much as the cost of disposal through either landfills or incineration."

You can throw paper recycling in with the rest of the garbage, and you don't have to sort out the color advertising supplements. "Fully 87% of our paper stock," says Jerry Taylor, "comes from trees which are grown as a crop specifically for the purpose of paper production. Acting to 'conserve trees' through paper recycling is like acting

to 'conserve corn' by cutting back on corn consumption." To cap the argument Taylor presents a National Wildlife Federation study showing that recycling one hundred tons of newspaper produces forty tons of toxic sludge. "Thirteen of the 50 worst Superfund hazardous waste dumps were once recycling facilities," says Taylor.

I asked Jerry if he could defend Styrofoam cups, those little guilt goblets that have caused so many moments of shame during coffee breaks at environmentalist conferences. Taylor rummaged in his files and produced the work of chemist Martin Hocking, who figured out that making a paper cup requires 36 times as much electricity as making a Styrofoam cup and generates 580 times as much waste water. Green types need no longer have burned fingers, lukewarm java, or decaf dribble stains on the fronts of their DON'T BUNGLE THE JUNGLE T-shirts, unless they want them.

The heck with biodegradability, too. Taylor quoted George Proios, executive director of the New York State Legislative Commission on the Water Needs of Long Island (just a splash, George, but plenty of ice): "If biodegradable products end up in landfills, they will break down and form leachate and methane gas, the two major problems with all current landfills. Non-biodegradable materials, such as plastics, are therefore far more desirable in landfills than biodegradable materials."

Jerry Taylor went so far as to have a kind word for the cardboard boxes CDs are sold in. He reminded me that manufacturers never spend more money than they have to. All that junk around a Red Hot Chili Peppers recording is there to facilitate display, provide space for sales copy, and protect against breakage and loss. And it's also there, let me add, to keep the little bastards who protest that CD boxes waste the earth's resources from shoplifting the things.

Everyone agrees earth is swell compared to, say, Neptune or Washington, D.C. But, ecologically speaking, that's all everyone agrees on. I can find people to say good things about dirty air. "Measurements from Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland

show a general increase of forest resources. The fertilization effects of pollutants override the adverse effects at least for the time being,” claim Pekka E. Kauppi, Kari Mielikäinen, and Kullervo Kuusela, who must have some pretty advanced college degrees just to spell their names. That’s from an April 1992 article titled “Biomass and Carbon Budget of European Forests, 1971 to 1990” appearing in, one more time, *Science* magazine.

Or DDT. In her book *Trashing the Planet* (HarperCollins, 1992), Dixy Lee Ray—zoology professor, past chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, and former governor of Washington State—calls the charges against this famously pestilent pesticide “unsubstantiated.” And Ray maintains that, by not using the stuff, we’re causing a huge increase in worldwide mosquito-borne disease. She gives the example of Sri Lanka, which had 2.8 million cases of malaria in 1948. Then DDT spraying started. By 1963 there were only 17 malaria cases. Then DDT spraying stopped. And Sri Lanka had a million cases of malaria by 1968. The United Nations Department of International Economic and Social Affairs 1986 publication *Determinants of Mortality Change and Differentials in Developing Countries* (a fun read) doesn’t quite agree with Dixy. The UN says Sri Lankan malaria cases did number in the teens until DDT use was abandoned but went up only to about *half* a million in the late sixties. And, by the early eighties, the annual infection rate was down in the 50,000 range. The Sri Lankans have been shooting each other a lot. Maybe the noise scared the mosquitoes away. Personally, I think DDT breakdown products wear out their bio-welcome—all that stuff from the *Silent Spring* era still hanging out in my café au lait. And Dr. Carnevale of the FDA, who was so generally reassuring on the moo-juice question, said she thought so, too. Still, 17 malaria cases in a tropical hole like Sri Lanka is impressive.

And even the worst specimen of our society’s consumerist madness and capitalist profligacy, a product that fairly stinks of waste, has its defenders. Patricia Poore, editor and publisher of *Garbage, the Practical Journal for the Environment*, uses Pampers on her kid.

VI

Environmentalists do not like all this contradiction and complexity and wish it away when they can. Al Gore will brook no argument about the greenhouse effect. In *Earth in the Balance* he says, “The theory of global warming will not be disproved.” A 1992 Gallup poll of four hundred meteorologists and geophysicists found that 60 percent thought global temperatures had risen in the last century, but only 19 percent attributed this to man-made causes. Greenpeace itself surveyed four hundred Greenpeace-picked scientists, and just 13 percent deemed runaway global warming probable. This does not deter Al. Says he, “Scientists concluded—almost unanimously—that global warming is seal and the time to act is now.”

And never mind that only a few years ago global *cooling* was real and the time to act was *then*. Anna J. Bray of the Heritage Foundation gathered a number of chilling pronouncements from the cool disco era:

Meteorologists disagree about the cause and extent of the cooling trend. . . . But they are *almost unanimous* [emphasis almost unanimously my own] in the view that the trend will reduce agricultural productivity for the rest of the century.

—Peter Gwynne, *Newsweek*,
April 28, 1975

[T]he threat of a new ice age must now stand alongside nuclear war as a likely source of wholesale death and misery for mankind.

—Nigel Calder, *International
Wildlife*, July 1975

The cooling has already killed hundreds of thousands of people in poor nations. . . . If it continues, and no strong

measures are taken to deal with it, the cooling will cause world famine, world chaos, and probably world war, and this could all come by the year 2000.

—Lowell Ponte, *The Cooling*, 1976

The global freeze that killed us then and the global boil that will kill us soon are both caused, of course, by technological progress.

The continued rapid cooling of the earth since World War II is also in accord with the increased global air pollution associated with industrialization, mechanization, urbanization, and an exploding population.

—Reid Bryson, *Global Ecology: Readings Towards a Rational Strategy for Man*, 1971

An increase by only a factor of four in global aerosol background concentration may be sufficient to reduce the surface temperature by as much as 3.5 degrees Kelvin . . . sufficient to trigger an ice age.

—Dr. S. I. Rasool and Dr. S. H. Schneider, *Science*, July 9, 1971

And—here the reasoning truly escapes me—we were supposed to do the same things to stop the earthly shivers that we're now supposed to do to halt the planetary sweats.

At this point, the world's climatologists are agreed on only two things: That we do not have . . . tens of thousands of years to prepare for the next ice age, and that how carefully we monitor our atmospheric pollution will have direct bearing on the arrival and nature of this

weather crisis. The sooner man confronts these facts . . . the safer he'll be.

Douglas Colligan, *Science Digest*, February 1973

World-savers are chefs with only one recipe. Toss the salad. Toss the steak. Toss the coffee. And hurry up about it, says Albert Gore: "The insistence on complete certainty about the full details of global warming—the most serious threat we have ever faced—is actually an effort to avoid facing the awful, uncomfortable truth: that we must act boldly, decisively, comprehensively, and quickly, even before we know every last detail of the crisis."

Put this together with other Gore statements:

Vast amounts of unused information ultimately become a kind of pollution.

[C]oping with all that data will be extremely difficult, not least because most of it will never enter a single human brain.

If, when the remaining unknowns about the environmental challenge enter the public debate, they are presented as signs that the crisis may not be real after all, it undermines the effort to build a solid base of public support for the difficult actions we must soon take.

And we must boldly, decisively, comprehensively, and quickly conclude the vice president is a nut.

Some of the vice president's co-opinionists are worse than nuts. There is Jonathan Schell, who is most famous for his book *The Fate of the Earth* about "nuclear winter." Not that Schell doesn't believe in global warming, too, but *The Fate of the Earth* concerned the sad results of an H-bomb exchange between the United States and the

Soviet Union. Schell described, in harrowing detail, the awful effects of an atomic war we weren't having. He scared the Birkenstocks off the kind of people who were, incidentally, no help whatsoever in getting rid of the USSR. *The Fate of the Earth* depended, for its frightfulness, on masses of seemingly objective, supposedly scientific ratiocination. But here is Schell in the October 1987 issue of *Discover* magazine telling us what value he truly places on objectivity and the scientific method:

[W]e need to act on theory alone, which is to say on prediction alone. It follows that the reputation of scientific prediction needs to be enhanced. But that can happen, paradoxically, only if scientists disavow the certainty and precision that they normally insist on. Above all, we need to learn to act decisively to forestall predicted perils, even while knowing that they may never materialize. We must take action, in a manner of speaking, to preserve our Ignorance.

Dixy Lee Ray and her collaborator, Lou Guzzo, have made a collection of such damning quotes. Another comes from atmospheric scientist and global-warming alarmist Stephen Schneider, as cited by Schell in the article above. This is the same Dr. Schneider whom we just noted going on about spray cans and ice ages. Schneider has made a career of telling the public that the climate is going to change drastically any time now, and indeed every spring and fall he's been right. Dr. Schneider, if Schell quotes him accurately, is a self-admitted liar and knave:

[W]e have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified, dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we may have. Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest.

For Schneider, Schell, Gore, et al., science is daytime TV with no facts, just emotions, opinions, and themselves as Geraldo Rivera. What do the ignorance mongers expect to gain from this?

People with a mission to save the earth want the earth to seem worse than it is so their mission will look more important. In fact, there's some evidence that these people want the earth to *be* worse than it is. Michael Fumento, author of *Science under Siege* (William Morrow, 1993), has compiled additional damning quotations. Fumento notes that in 1990, when cold-fusion nonsense briefly promised an infinite supply of bargain-priced, ecologically harmless energy, environmentalist pest Jeremy Rifkin called this, "The worst thing that could happen to our planet." This is not a new position among the pesky. In a 1977 issue of *Mother Earth*, Amory Lovins wrote, "It would be little short of disastrous for us to discover a source of clean, cheap, abundant energy because of what we might do with it." And in 1978 the inevitable Paul Ehrlich said, in the Federation of American Scientists' *Public Interest Report*, "Giving society cheap, abundant energy . . . would be the equivalent of giving an idiot child a machine gun." (Not a meal, a bath, some toys, and a warm bed or anything like that.)

Ronald Bailey, who besides being the author of *Eco-Scam* is also the producer of the PBS series *TechnoPolitics*, believes that environmental advocates enjoy the idea of living in apocalyptic times. Their drab existences—spent sorting through trash, wearing lumpy hand-knits, attending indignant meetings, and trying to get the photocopier to work with recycled paper—are made exciting by the imminent end of the world. Said Stewart Brand in the *Whole Earth Catalog* of yore:

We have wished, we ecofiests, for a disaster or for a social change to come and bomb us into the Stone Age, where we might live like Indians in our valley, with our localism, our appropriate technology, our gardens, our homemade religion—guilt-free at last!

We were **all** pretty well bombed into the Stone Age, back then, as I recall. But in “homemade religion” Brand may have a point. Worshipping the earth is more fun than going to church. It’s also closer. We can just step off the sidewalk. And sometimes we can get impressionable members of the opposite sex to perform sacramental rites with us. “Every drop of water wasted is a drop less of a wild and scenic river, Jennifer. We’d better double up in the shower.”

The specter of biosphere doom serves the mystical needs of people too sloppy and self-indulgent for regular religion. And it is a scary story to tell in the (energy-conserving)dark. But the ultimate appeal of ecological catastrophe has to do with politics rather than Yahweh or Rod Serling.

Ecological utopias could be achieved only by massive political coercion. Said David Foreman in *A Field Guide to Monkey Wrenching*:

We must . . . reclaim the roads and the plowed land, halt dam construction, tear down existing dams, free shackled rivers, and return to wilderness millions and tens of millions of [acres of] presently settled land.

Just who is this “we”?

Again, in *Earth in the Balance*, the proposed solutions to environmental problems would require a huge increase in political power over individuals. Says Al Gore:

Human civilization is now so complex and diverse, so sprawling and massive, that it is difficult to see how we can respond in a coordinated, collective way to the global environmental crisis. But circumstances are forcing just such a response.

The whole dreadful history of twentieth-century politics has been made up of “coordinated, collective” responses to supposed

threats that were always said to be “complex and diverse” and “sprawling and massive.” Nazis, Fascists, Bolsheviks, Maoists, Islamic Fundamentalists, and my silly commune in Baltimore in 1970 responded “in a coordinated, collective way” to the Jews, the bourgeoisie, private property, class enemies, decadent Western culture, and the pig cop on the local beat. The results were universally horrendous (except at my commune, which got busted for marijuana).

VII

If increased political power over the individual is the answer to environmental difficulties, then let us go examine ecological conditions in a region that had half a century of coordination like Billy Hell and collectivity in carload lots.

There was no shortage of political power in Eastern Europe’s Communist bloc. And, when it seemed as though government regulatory influence over individuals might be slipping—such as it did in Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968—the helpful Soviet Union sent tanks.

In the territory once occupied by that Communist bloc, where the borders of ex-East Germany, the erstwhile People’s Republic of Poland, and former Czechoslovakia meet, there is a region known as the “Black Triangle.” Here the landscape is full of fuming smelters, malodorous chemical factories, and enormous power plants burning coal of such a low grade that the swamp muck of the Carboniferous period can still be whiffed in the smoke. On bad days no smoke is visible; it can’t be distinguished from the air. On good days the atmosphere is the color of used bathwater. The buildings are stained with soot. Nature is grimy to the touch. The breeze has texture, like grit in a sandwich when the lettuce hasn’t been washed. Inhaling is bad breath in reverse. A drag on a cigarette cleanses the lungs.

In the Czech Republic portion of the Black Triangle is the drab villiage of Chabarovice, and in Chabarovice is a horrible toxic

waste dump. How horrible, no one is quite certain. But Czechjournalists assured me it is so horrible that whenever Czech journalists are doing stories about horrible toxic waste dumps they immediately go to Chabarovice and tell how horrible it is. Horrible things have been dumped here: all sorts of lethal contaminants from communist factories plus, some say, Russian chemical weapons from World War II, and, say others, German poison gas from World War I. When scientists came to analyze the dump, it was so horrible that their instruments worked horribly, and they couldn't even tell what kind of horrible stuff they were analyzing.

Chabarovice is an hour and a half north of Prague. I drove there in September 1993 with two Czech friends of mine, Ivanna Husák and Martin Weiss. We'd heard Chabarovice had been ruined by the dump, but the Sudetenland-era fake Bavarian concrete town hall and the pokey socialist terrace houses covered in mildew-colored stucco didn't need ruining. We'd heard people were fleeing Chabarovice, but it seemed as though everyone with the wit or ability to move had done so already. We tried to find the mayor. His secretary said he was at home. His wife said he was at the office. In Italy or France this would mean His Honor was having an affair. In Chabarovice it probably meant he'd run off to be a busboy in Stuttgart. A crippled drunk man gave us directions to the dump.

Ivanna and Martin went off to see if they could find anything in the environs that glowed or had two heads. I climbed a wobbling six-foot chain-link fence that had been erected when the dump was closed in 1991 and that bore what I assumed was a warning sign: **STREZEN PSY.**

One immediately evident horrible thing about Chabarovice was that the toxins hadn't been buried or even left on the ground; they had been, in fact, exalted. The Chabarovice site was an artificial hill of strip-mine tailings maybe forty feet high and covering a couple dozen acres. A hole two hundred yards wide had been scooped out of the top of the hill, and into this crater liquid toxins had been poured to form

a sort of miniature Lake Titicaca of hazardous slime. The road up to the dump was littered with metal pipe and pieces of boiler machinery, not from anything nuclear, I hoped. The scum basin itself wasn't very big, no larger than the skating rink in Central Park. It seemed to have been receding, the contents evaporating out into the stuff I was breathing or seeping down through the rusty-looking, munched-up bedrock rubble and into someone's dinner cabbage. A wide beach of chemical residue the color of an old dog bone surrounded the pond. Whatever filled this reservoir was also subdued in tint. I guess I expected the malignant hues of party-of-ten-loud-women Patagonia jackets, but the goo was cloudy, curdled, grayish green-beige. These were natural colors—that is, the colors things naturally turn when they're very sick or dead. Indeed, no living item was visible in any direction. Other than me—and how long I'd stay viable was a question.

A wooden ramp ran out from the shore of the ooze lagoon so that fifty-five-gallon barrels could be rolled to a liquid grave. The ramp was the size and shape of a small boat dock, giving the scene the look of everybody's nightmare about what might happen at the summer cottage if we don't do something about the environment soon.

On the other side of the gunk, opposite the wooden ramp, was a field of steel drums and plastic sacks, all of which seemed to be leaking something with an unhealthful appearance. Interspersed among these were chunks of strange fibrous matter of the kind that erupts from the worn-through places in cheap upholstery or dribbles out the seams of bargain winter parkas. And here and there was some regular trash, friendly and reassuring by comparison.

A wind sock was mounted on a pole beside the pond. I guess when the wind sock pointed in the direction of downtown Chabarovice, the villagers were supposed to scam. Of course the villagers would have to be in the dump to see the wind sock, so they'd probably want to scam anyway. I was careful to keep the breeze at my back. But there was still plenty of smell—industrial solvent, mostly, the odor of model airplane glue. This brought back memories, though not nostal-

gic ones. I was fourteen or fifteen, a little too old to be building model airplanes but down in the basement fiddling with a Stuka dive-bomber or an F4U Corsair, staying out of the way of a hectoring stepfather and wishing I were fiddling with girls, if I knew how, or smoking cigarettes, except my folks would sniff that as easily as I now sniffed the Chabarovice dump. And I knew I was just going to take the model airplane out behind the garage and burn it as soon as I'd finished it—for kicks, although not very good ones.

I walked down the mound of strip-mine junk and climbed back over the fence. Ivanna and Martin were waiting by the car. "What does *Strezen Psy* mean?" I asked. "Patrolled by guard dogs," said Ivanna. So there's one good thing about East bloc toxic waste—dead Doberman pinschers.

VIII

Czechoslovakia was a socialist country. The nation wasn't ruled by a few plutocrats who just wanted to shackle rivers, plow land, and so forth for their own selfish ends. No, the state was run in a coordinated, collective way for the benefit of all Czechoslovakians. Indeed, since Czechoslovakia was part of the great international socialist movement, it worked for the benefit of everyone everywhere.

Of course you can argue, as European Greens do, that communist countries were polluted because a clean environment was not a communist priority. The Communists cared only about development, about increasing industrial output, about building a workers' paradise. And they did all of those things so well.

The Communists had the same success creating workers' paradises as they had creating safe landfills. In fact, all over Eastern Europe, the landfills and the workers' paradises are nearly indistinguishable. The grand effects of Al Gore's dream of infinite government planning for the good of all mankind can be seen the moment you cross what used to be called the Iron (a recyclable material) Curtain.

I'd driven to the Czech Republic from Frankfurt. I was motor-ing at 120 miles an hour on the autobahn through the rolling Hesse countryside. But this wasteful and polluting exacerbation of the global environmental crisis came to an abrupt halt at Eisenach on the old East German border. From there on I was persuaded into more ecologically responsible behavior by the fact that every single kilometer of road was under repair. And needed it. And so did everything else I could see. The houses were shabby when there were houses at all. More often there were concrete "worker flats," shabbier still. These eight- or ten-story vertical root cellars were built midst ample land for Fremont, California-style private homes with gardens and lawns. But that would be inefficient. "An acre of lawn needs more than 27,000 gallons of water every week," says *50 Simple Things*.

Germany is a seriously clean country. A friend of mine was riding a train to Stuttgart once, and, looking out the window, he saw a farmer on a ladder washing the windows of his barn. But in former East Germany there was actually litter along the highway. And worse than litter, whole Trabant automobiles (products of East Germany's coordinated, collective response to its citizens' transportation needs) had been abandoned by the side of the road. Trabants that were still working wobbled and smoked and shuddered around me with the equally ill-built and awful-running East German Wartburg cars and IFA trucks and Czech LIAZ semis, Skoda sedans, and Jawa motorcycles. The whole of the traffic in the East seemed like something that should be crushed at a county fair by a pickup truck with gant tires.

Empty factories, forsaken ore breakers, and slag heaps dominated the scenery. The smell of burning lignite penetrated my air-conditioning system.

Dresden needs to be bombed again and done away with for good. The road from there to Prague ran beside a rail bed. An unpleasant little coal-fired narrow-gauge locomotive lurched along the tracks, spewing stink. It would have caused the most stolid of nine-year-old boys to leave off model railroading and go play with dolls. I stopped

for fuel at a small garage in Dippoldiswalde and there encountered the most un-German thing imaginable. The restroom was dirty.

The East German political system, like the Dippoldiswalde septic system which survives it, didn't work. Getting a mass of people to labor, will-they, nil-they, toward abstract goals for the sake of people in the mass doesn't work. It can be done temporarily in dire emergencies such as last-minute decoration of the gym for the prom or during famines or when Nazis invade. Even the Soviet Union worked while Nazis were invading it. But on the morning after V-E Day, the proletariat was sloshed on the job again, Stalin was back to killing people, and the peasants were hiding their pigs.

In Prague I was given a tour of the Tatra streetcar factory by Ivan Husák, director of marketing and sales and father of my friend Ivanna. The plant looked like one of those WPA arts project murals from the 1930s where brawny men snuggle drill presses and hug rivet guns in a bower of levers and gears lit only by the romantic glow of a welder's torch. The plant also looked like it hadn't been swept or dusted since the WPA was disbanded. The old brick machine sheds were full of oily soot, caked grease, rusted iron filings, and general grime. The Tatra factory was a Miss Havisham's wedding cake of socialist realism.

Lack of greedy capitalists siphoning away corporate profits hadn't done Tatra much good. Nor had lack of greedy capitalists done much for Tatra workers. They make between \$360 and \$430 a month. Executive compensation may be a big issue in the United States, but I doubt Tatra workers feel better because their bosses get a maximum per month of \$640.

There's nothing very wrong with the Tatra product. The factory is ancient and shabby, but what's made there is well crafted. The workers work harder than I'd work for \$2.25 an hour. The streetcars have a 1970s box-it-came-in modern look but are fairly comfortable. Hundreds of them, including quite ancient models, are reliably whirring and clanging around Prague. Tatra mechanical designs are straight-

forward, what's known in manufacturing as "proven technology." The equipment is built to be operated with low maintenance in tough climates. "They work in *Russia*," said Mr. Husák. The problem is competition. Tatra had been selling to a captive market. I looked at a sales map showing where Tatra streetcars were in use. Dots appeared all over the old Soviet bloc plus one lone dot in Cairo.

Tatra is hoping to finish a new factory, hoping for deals in Brazil, Manila, Oslo. But production is down, from a thousand streetcars a year before the Communists were overthrown to only two hundred now. Mr. Husák told me this in the company's modest conference room while a very slow electric kettle boiled water for tea.

Various German companies make more sophisticated streetcars. And Tatra itself may be bought out by the German affiliate of Westinghouse. And do people really want streetcars anyway? I liked Ivan Husák too much to ask that, but few urban mass-transit systems operate at a profit anymore. People would rather drive themselves. Although *A Dodge Minivan Named Desire* isn't much of a title for a Tennessee Williams play.

IX

If collective, cooperative enterprise can't succeed in building streetcars, how is it supposed to provide clean water and air, remove toxins from our food, save endangered species, prevent deforestation, and cool (or, as it may be, warm) the globe?

It can't. And the Communists left behind a wretched mess. In 1991 the Ministry of Environment of the newly free Czech Republic published *Lights and Shadows*, a report on the country's ecological situation. It is a government document of unlikely frankness and says, in the charming diction of the English-language version, "As it follows out of analyses made by the most varied research institutes, in respect of principal environmental quality indicators we are the worst country in Europe."

According to *Lights und Shadows*, energy use per unit of net income is, in the Czech Republic, 30 percent higher than the world average. “One-third of agricultural land suffers water erosion.” Forty-eight and a half percent of the nation’s forests “are distinctly and permanently damaged.” (No matter what Kauppi, Mielikäinen, and Kuusela may say about smog being good for the firs.) And Czechs discard “35 metric tons of solid refuse per person per year.” I hope that includes strip-mine tailings because we famously wasteful Americans produce only .8 metric tons per person. A paltry 5 percent of Czech garbage is recycled. And that’s the good news, if the Cato Institute’s Jerry Taylor is right about recycling economics. Czechs might have wound up with thirty-five metric tons of cans, bottles, newspapers, and mine waste neatly separated and stacked on their back porches with nobody willing to come pick it up.

“The water quality,” says *Lights and Shudows*, is jeopardized in almost all water sources,” and “sewage treatment is eleven years behind water supply development.” This means, I think, that you have to run the faucet for 132 months before you fill the Mr. Coffee. And, says *Lights und Shudows*, air pollution measurements “rank our republic among the worst on the world scale.” For instance, in 1988 the Czech part of former Czechoslovakia produced 840,000 metric tons of atmospheric particulate matter—pieces of junk in the air. That’s 28.3 tons per square mile, compared to only 2.3 tons per square mile in the continental United States. I can understand why the Czechs have trouble breathing. What I can’t understand is why they aren’t squashed flat.

There are health consequences to this contamination. *Lights und Shadows* estimates that in Teplice, one of the most polluted regions of the Czech Republic, 13.6 years are cut from the average life span. I can’t vouch for the figure, but I did visit Teplice, and I’d trade a few years of my life to never smell the place again.

Lights und Shadows argues that a grimness in nature has grim social effects, too. “According to a set of selected indicators . . . the

region below the Ore Mountains [that is, the Black Triangle] is the worst region in the Czech Republic.” The report goes on to cite such statistics as 50 Qvorces per 100 marriages in the deforested Sokolov District, .32 suicides per 1,000 population in the strip-mined Chomutov District, and 76.2 abortions per 100 live births in the Ústí nad Labem District where the wretched town of Chabarovice is located. (A sad tally, but it does leave one wondering what blue-skied and eco-conscious America’s excuse is. Our divorce rate is about the same as Sokolov’s, our white males 65 and over kill .45 per thousand of themselves a year, and black women in the United States get 63.8 abortions for every 100 kids they have. Could sexual liberation, Social Security, and welfare be as dangerous as atmospheric particulate matter?)

Lights und Shudows has an afterword by Václav Havel in which that worthy says, “There are many reasons why the environment in our country is in such a catastrophic state. One of the reasons is the fact that the previous establishment was founded on a sort of proud ideology which proclaimed that Man was the final, though mortal, master of the Earth.” But do things get better when that establishment thinks Man is Earth’s final, though mortal, wet nurse?

I drove north to have a look at the Chomutov strip mining and found a big hole in the ground. Irony-proof Marxists had named it “Czechoslovak Army Mine.” The hole down the road was called “Defenders of Peace.” I climbed a mound of greasy brown rocks and stared into a sixty- or eighty-foot-deep pit that was certainly not abysmal. That is, it had a bottom. It had too much bottom. From where I stood to as far as the eye could see, everything looked like the bottom of a pit.

The landscape left behind by strip mining has been called “lunar” and “Martian,” but it is, of course, “earthly.” This is what our planet looks like if we strip off all the waste and litter of organic life. This is true wilderness, not only untamed by man but undomesticated by amoeba or lichen.

Out in the middle of the pit was a large, skinny piece of machinery with the appearance of an erect mechanical centipede. Excavating buckets moved along its length like undulations of body segments. The buckets were scooping up rock at one end and dumping it out at the other. This parody of digestion must have had something to do with the search for or seizure of coal. But it was hard to tell, everything in the hole including the mechanical centipede being the same dull, rusty shade. Later I examined a lump of the brown coal being mined in Chomutov. It crumbled in my fingers and looked to be about as puissant a fuel as old linoleum or rotted wine corks.

There is a strong aesthetic element to the environmentalist movement. Most modern people who have been to college will call any view without man-made features beautiful. The fact that they would rather be in a motel than on an ice floe doesn't make them liars. They do think the ice floe is prettier. The "exterior decorator" motive behind ecological activism is so prevalent that it has led Jerry Taylor to say, "Environment is a luxury good."

But, personally, I like strip mines. The Czechoslovak Army Mine looked like a swell place to hold a Led Zeppelin concert, put the members of the U.S. House of Representatives, contemplate the vanity of, as it were, earthly ambition, or stage that enormous Demo Derby to which the rattletrap motor vehicles of the ex-Soviet bloc seem so perfectly destined.

I didn't care that the mine was ugly. I did care that no one knew if it was profitable. Environmentalist organizations usually have strong opinions about everything. A Greenpeace Czechoslovakia report on these mining regions said, "The material being removed from the top of the mining sites has a greater value than the coal below." But the same report also said this undervalued coal allowed the local electric power plants to make 10 billion Czech crowns (about \$357 million) "of tax-free profit a year." And Dr. Antonin Mucha, a physical scientist working with the Greenpeace-associated organization Children of the Earth, disagreed with both these positions, telling me, "It's very diffi-

cult to say the brown coal is not economical. But . . . there is no sense in using it for energy production."

Petr Pakosta, chief of the Department of Environment in the Most District—a place where there's so much strip mining that the entire city of Most had to be moved out of the strip mines' way—said, "If the coal were used as a chemical material, it would be worthwhile to mine it. But since it's used to heat, 80 percent goes up the chimney, so it's useless." Or maybe it's useless. Mr. Pakosta lacked the only real means of discovering such things. The free market takes a lot of abuse, especially from environmentalists, but they might as well protest against tablespoons and yardsticks. Price is just a measurement. A measurement is information. And without information it's impossible to make informed decisions. "It's a law that coal belongs to the state," said Pakosta, "so there's no price to it."

OKD, the Czech national coal company, has—even with such a priceless advantage—managed to get itself into high-priced trouble. According to the financial page of the *Prague Post* (September 15–21, 1993), OKD is nearly one billion crowns in debt. Under the Communists, the company was able to sell twenty-four million tons of coal a year. Now it can find buyers for only fourteen million tons. And still OKD goes looking for more coal.

I went to a village near Most, Libkovice, which was being demolished to make way for the digging of needless coal. I asked Stanislav Brichcek, who would have been the mayor of Libkovice if there'd been a Libkovice to be mayor of, if this vein of coal could be worth "the material being removed from the top of the mining site." He said, "Not taking into account the destruction of the village, the mining will be"—he wobbled the flat of his hand in the international sign for dubious undertakings—"so-so profitable."

That's a big *not*. According to Greenpeace, ninety-six historical villages and all of ancient Most have been obliterated by strip mining, and the Czech Republic has a thousand square kilometers of open mine pits, none of which have been restored with topsoil or used for

Led Zeppelin concerts. A thousand square kilometers is four hundred square miles, an area nearly as big (and nearly as useless) as Los Angeles in a nation smaller than South Carolina. This is too much strip mine even for me. Environment may be a luxury good, but don't luxury goods make life worth living?

One good imperiled by the mine company was luxurious indeed, a whole castle. At least, it had been luxurious. Schloss Eisenberg, as the stately pile is called when Germans rule the Black Triangle, or Jezeri Castle, as it's known when Slavs do, is a few miles north of Most. During World War II it was used as a Nazi POW camp for French military officers. (Very different from the camp, in *Stalag 17* but, anyway, all French tunneling was probably done toward the wine cellar.) In 1948 it was taken over by the communist military, who used it, to judge by the state of the décor, for indoor grenade practice and bachelor parties. But the outside of the palace was still splendid and the inside had all the great halls, vaulted ceilings, fireplaces as big as two-bedroom New York apartments, sweeping staircases, tower keeps, secret passages, and gloomy dungeons that this type of residential real estate demands.

Jezeri Castle was built in 1720 on foundations dating to the Middle Ages. The style is late baroque and highly theatrical. Huge grotesques support the front door lintel. There are no symmetrical façades. Two hundred rooms form a floor plan as complex as paisley. The architectural details are dense and fluid, and the roof is a flood of ogee curves. Every view of Jezeri Castle seems intended for representation on china plates and souvenir ashtrays. In America a thing like this would be worth its weight in water slides. The parking concession alone would bring in more than all the strip mines in the Czech Republic (and probably take up the same space). But, under the coordinated, collective economic system of Eastern Europe, Jezeri was going to be torn down. A coal pit comes to within a few feet of the château walls. It is as if, later in life, the dwarves had a falling out with Snow White and claim-jumped her castle.

Jezeri was rescued by the efforts of an artist couple, Jaroslav and Vera Stejnych. During the 1980s they moved into the abandoned property as combined squatters and preservation committee. They staved off the mining company with the connivance of a Communist Party official who was having an affair with a friend of theirs. Jaroslav said he wants to restore half of the castle, the half that looks toward the birch woods of the Ore Mountains, and leave the other half, the half that faces the coal pit, as a "monument to communism."

The village of Libkovice had no such fortunate sex scandal, although it was a romantic enough place for one. Until recently Libkovice was beautiful. Half-timbered cottages, hundreds of years old, sat in their gardens along gravel lanes. A dollhouse Chartres of a church faced the common. Grain fields rolled away toward the mountains. Put this within Lexus and Acura range of New York and think of the orthodontists, personal injury and accident lawyers, advertising executives, and people who are occasionally mentioned in "Suzy Says" who'd be snapping up weekend getaways. Of course, that, too, would mean displacement for the villagers of Libkovice, but at least they would have soaked some Manhattanites before they went. As it was, the flowerbeds were overgrown, fruit was rotting on the trees in the dooryards, the houses were gutted, the church was stripped, and angry graffiti appeared on the walls around town. STOP THE MADNESS said one message. STOP THE EXCESSIVE RATIONALIZATIONS LEFT OVER FROM A MORIBUND CENTRALLY CONTROLLED ECONOMY would have been more to the point but harder to spray-paint.

Ivanna Husák, Martin Weiss, and I drove to Libkovice on a drizzly, chill autumn morning. A few miles from town we saw an old man with one eye standing beside the road. He was waiting for the leftover, moribund centrally controlled bus. We gave him a ride. His house in Libkovice had been expropriated, and he'd been forced to move to another village. He was alone in the world except for his dog. But he wasn't going to let the government have his home without a

fight. So he left the dog to guard the empty house, and every day he took the bus to Libkovice to bring the dog food.

The house had been built by his family. It was a hundred years old “but newly reconstructed,” said the old man with a rustic’s proud disinterest in the antique. It had six rooms, outbuildings, and a yard. And he had a firm idea of what the place was worth. He’d wanted 374,000 crowns (\$13,400), but the government compensation had been only 109,000 crowns (\$3,900).

The Czech Republic has yuppies, too. And we were a mere fifty miles from Prague. What would somebody who, for example, had just gotten the new McDonald’s franchise in Wenceslas Square pay for an authentic Bohemian peasant cottage (we’d met the authentic Bohemian peasant) in a quaint village like Libkovice? (And didn’t the place just scream “Central European Peter Mayle”?) Ivanna and Martin agreed that 600,000 crowns (over \$21,000) would be the minimum. In Prague itself, they said, six-room houses went for a million crowns.

The old man took us to one of the last occupied homes in the village, which the ex-mayor refused to leave. I could see why nobody had tried to make him. Stanislav Brichacek was a gangling man, no longer young, but with big raw hands and a fierce set to his features. It wouldn’t have surprised me if, somewhere under the cluttered farmyard at the back of his house, guns had been buried to fight the Communists and the Nazis before them and the Sudeten Germans before that.

Ex-mayor Brichacek explained how all the mineral rights in the Czech Republic belong to the state, and so does the coal company. Under the Communists, the coal company could tear up any village, farm, or town it wanted. This had changed. Sort of. The new government said that whether a village was to be destroyed for the sake of coal was up to the mayor of that village. But then the new government said that so many people had been forced out of Libkovice that it was no longer large enough to have a mayor. Brichacek had written letters of protest to the Department of Interior, Department of Environment,

the Parliament, the president, the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. “I have written everywhere except to the main railway station,” he said. He’d received no answers.

“The law is flexible according to the miners’ wish,” said Brichacek. He then explained how the government figured compensation for expropriated property. The bureaucrats would make a reasonably fair appraisal of a house but then “depreciate” it by subtracting 1 percent of the value for each year of the structure’s age. Thus a \$20,000 home would go for \$19,800 if it was one year old, \$19,602 if it was two years old, \$19,405.98 if it was three years old, and so forth. This kind of mathematics would put Versailles or the White House within the range of most pocketbooks.

X

Ivanna, Martin, and I drove to Most to have lunch with the district environment department chief, Petr Pakosta, the man who’d pointed out that Czech coal has no real price. Most is all high-rises built of cement slabs, with as few windows as prison blocks. In fact, the only way to tell that these apartments aren’t prison blocks is that there are no ACLU lawsuits trying to close down Most. One monument had been saved from the historical town site, a cathedral that the Communists had somehow put on wheels and moved for miles and deposited in the middle of a highway interchange.

An old lady directed us to the government offices, another cement-slab high-rise. “Go to the ‘carousel,’” she said, making, I guess, a joke about government runarounds or maybe about the architecture, which couldn’t have been less carnival-like.

“It is panel-concrete technology abandoned by the British in 1962,” said Pakosta. A form of modern architecture too lousy for the British is an awful thing.

Pakosta was a rounded, bearded man, his blond hair going gray. He had a jolly look and an engaging manner—Santa’s younger brother

who'd gone into politics. Pakosta said the Most District, one of forty such administrative districts into which the country is divided, had 550,000 dumps. About 30 of the dumps were very bad. How many were as bad as Chabarovice? Who knew? In Most the coal company owned 75 percent of the land (and counting) and paid no taxes on it. And Most had all those bad health and worse social statistics mentioned in *Lights and Shadows*. And other problems besides: There used to be 112 pubs in the old city of Most, Pakosta said with signal regret.

It took **all** lunch to pry these items from Pakosta. He didn't want to talk particulars. And not because of bureaucratic caution or official reticence. Pakosta was perfectly forthcoming. But, when I asked him about environmental practice, he answered me with ethics and philosophy. "Mainly it is a moral devastation," said Pakosta, "that started with German liquidation of Czechs. Then the significant influence of superpowers, such as the Soviets, deciding about our borders gave Czechs inferiority and feelings of helplessness. State control and state property make people indifferent to the place where they're living, losing both positive and negative interest. It's not a matter of communism or socialism but a matter of all big complexes where people are losing their identities." And their pubs. We were having lunch in a dreary restaurant on a high-rise first floor.

For a while, I was exasperated with Pakosta. "More specifics, please," I kept saying, reporter-like, wanting ugly facts and scary numbers about communist eco-flubs. But Czechs have suffered from enough "big complexes," from enough nationalism, Bolshevism, and fascism, to know that the damage done by the bad specifics of pollution is nothing compared to the damage done by the horrible generalizations of political theory. Even at the Greenpeace office in Prague I'd heard about the benefits of "identity," of individualism. Dr. Mucha from Children of the Earth had told me that the ecological damage in the Czech Republic was "not a problem of the planned or open economy but a problem of ownership. Everything belonged to all of us and to nobody." In an American Greenpeace office someone would

have thrown a plant at his head. (The plants in the office of Greenpeace Czechoslovakia, incidentally, needed watering.)

And yet the idea of coordinated, collective action persists. Ivanna, Martin, and I drove back to Prague for more interviews. It is the only big city in Europe never destroyed by fire or war (or political theory either). The damage that Nazis, Communists, and "Marxists with human faces," as the reformers of 1968 liked to call themselves, did to Prague was the infliction of a grayness, partly of soot and partly of spirit. The outer boroughs of Prague are still gray. But the center has changed. There are brightly lit shops, billboards, and real cars from Western Europe. The streets are full of active, busy working men and women (and working girls, too, since some of Prague's newfound commerce is conducted at night in fishnet stockings). Tourist flashbulbs pop. Video screens flicker. Neon tubes glow. Prague is being colorized. And not everyone is happy about this.

The Czechs are so mired in the experience of huge ideologies that even freedom—just people doing what they like in a world of legal equality—seems to be a huge ideology. "Advertising is a kind of terrorism," said Vojtěch Kotecky, eighteen and a half years old and a member of the Rainbow Movement.

"Huh?" I said.

"Very hard advertising creates an air in which we must consume so much," explained Vojtěch, who told me that the Rainbow Movement was trying to ban nuclear power and protect the ozone layer—which seem large tasks to undertake before finishing high school. Vojtěch thought that maybe advertising should be illegal.

Did he want a return to the former government? I asked. No, definitely not, he said. The old regime was all about centralized control, resulting in problems such as the destruction of Libkovice. He and his fellow Rainbow Movement members had gone to Libkovice and stood on the roofs of buildings to try to stop the demolition by the coal company. One fellow was nearly killed when a house was knocked out from under him.

But, I said, how could advertising be banned without the kind of centralized control that the Communists had?

A law could be passed. “This government refuses to use the democratic process,” said Vojtěch.

“This government *is* the democratic process,” I said. The Czech Republic has, in the past few years, had its only free elections in six decades.

“There is a false dichotomy between communism and the West,” said Vojtěch. “*ALL* is based on a centralized economy.” He suggested a “decentralized and self-sufficient economy.”

(“. . . where we might live like Indians in our valley . . .”) The Rainbow Movement must still be on the *whole Earth Catalog* mailing list (“. . . with our localism, our appropriate technology, our gardens, our homemade religion—guilt-free at last!”), even though the thing went out of business before they were born.

How, I asked Vojtěch, could such decentralization be enforced without a great deal of centralized control?

Vojtěch, in a very non-American-adolescent way, said he didn’t know. He was also clean, well barbered, and pleasant.

Vojtěch took me to the Czech Parliament building to meet a sort of mentor to the Rainbow Movement, Pavel Seifer, an MP and deputy chief of the Labor Social Union Party. Seifer didn’t think the Czech government was very democratic either. (His party had lost most of their Parliament seats in the last election.)

Seifer was a hip MP. He wore a little gray goatee, a dark shirt with a light tie, and one of those fashionably large sport coats that practically have room in them for two Labor Social Union Party members. Seifer claimed that the free market championed by the present Czech government was ideological while the environmentalism championed by him was not. “What we hate most about the current political situation is this ideological edge,” he said. “We expected that with the death of a regime based on ideology there would be an end to ideological argument. The way to democracy is through

democratic instruments, not ideology.” He said he “hadn’t heard any successful U.S. or British politician saying they are going to build up capitalism.” And, lately, of course, he’s right.

Seifer explained his program for fixing environmental problems. He would do it as Vojtěch would, by passing laws. This in contrast to the government’s program. “The premier is saying, ‘First we have to make money to protect the environment,’” sniffed Seifer.

The Czech premier, Václav Klaus, has actually said much worse than that. “Ecology is the whipped cream on a piece of cake” is one quote attributed to him. But Václav Klaus may be as foolish as he likes and this doesn’t make Pavel Seifer worth taking seriously.

“Is the ecological situation worse now than it was under the Communists?” I asked Seifer.

“Objectively, yes. In some areas it’s not worsening, but only because of reduction of production,” said Seifer. “There are not so many factories but more trucks and cars.”

“Would the Rainbow Movement have been allowed under communism?”

“Only illegally,” said Seifer. I grunted. He added quickly, “With the present government such organizations are allowed but subsidies are being eliminated, thus they are suppressed.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “If environmentalism is so democratically and nonideologically popular, why do environmentalists need government money to lobby the government?”

“They need,” he said, “offices, phones, and ways to send letters—a way to exist as an organization.”

Or, as Václav Klaus might say, “First we have to make money . . .”

And Premier Klaus would get no disagreement from Petr Gandalovii., his deputy minister in the Section of Technical Protection of the Environment. Ivanna and I met Gandalovii. for a late dinner. He was an energetic young man who seemed to be about out of energy. Gandalovič talked about what a financial and legal tangle it was trying

to reprivatize the Czech Republic, trying to give everything an owner again. Each piece of property has to have a person or group of people with a direct and real interest in making sure that property doesn't get covered with soot, buried in chemicals, deforested, demolished, eroded, irradiated, or turned into a strip mine. Unless, of course, the owners want a strip mine, in which case they have to argue with their neighbors.

"The trouble with righting old wrongs is in the setting of precedents," said Gandalovič. If one problem is fixed, then everyone else with that problem wants the same fix immediately and that's expensive. For example, he said, the strip mines are being privatized, but they're hard to sell because the expropriation of surface property is no longer a matter of government-enforced eminent domain. "Now owners of mining claims must negotiate with landowners."

"In that case," I said, "um, what's going on in Libkovice?"

Gandalovič looked like a man sent to empty a bathtub with a teaspoon. "It's still under the old laws," he said. And he summed up the coordinated, collective environmental problems of the Czech Republic. "The air will blow away, but the system will remain."

"Speaking of air blowing away," said Ivanna, "we were at the dump in Chabarovice."

"Yes," said Gandalovič, "there are eighteen thousand such chemical dumps in the country. About five percent—nine hundred or so—are dangerous. To properly seal Chabarovice, to put a clay layer beneath it, would cost fifteen billion crowns [about \$536 million]. The whole Czech budget is only three hundred sixty billion crowns." So, if the Czechs spent all of their tax dollars on nothing but dump repair, they could have the worst of the problem under control in just thirty-seven and a half years. "With Chabarovice we had various options," said Gandalovič, "from the highest tech to fencing and guarding with dogs."

I said, "I've got some bad news about the dogs."