

From the Kitchen

23 September 2009

I remember, growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, that from time to time our sense of security would be shaken by another account in the media of increasing tension between the USA and the USSR. The threat I felt was that an idiot president (on either side) would press a red button, leading to annihilation of all life on earth (except perhaps the roaches).



In the 1980s the perceived threat seemed to be more about lifestyle – computers and robots would firstly take on our boring and menial jobs and then get smart and take over everything. Humans would feel useless and life would have no meaning.

In the late 1990s it was the millennium bug, which was going to bring down major computer networks and force businesses and governments to their knees; and aeroplanes would fall out of the sky.

Now it is the threat of major ice-melts causing the oceans to rise; of climate changes which will alter the seasons; of mass extinctions of flora and fauna species, reducing the biodiversity we need for our own survival. The roaches will probably make it through.

What makes the present threat different (if it does) is that there is evidence of it being real *and* we can do something to alleviate it. The threat of nuclear disaster seemed purely in the hands of a few governments; the threat of computer/robot takeover was largely fanciful; thousands of people worked on preventing the threat of the millennium bug, perhaps unnecessarily.

Every single person, every family and every community can do many things to reduce the extent to which we pollute. Whether climate change is due to human activity or not, our impact on the environment is unsustainable and detrimental. Another difference is that, while governments should be leading and are not, the threat can be responded to by each of us. We don't have to feel helpless or wait for 'them' to show us what to do.

Impending disaster is loved by the media. It sells newspapers and television advertising and provides rich material for movies and books. It can also be salutary to speculate on how the world may be if ... The latest issue of *Overland* (issue #196, Spring 2009) printed stories of a future Melbourne by four writers. In July this year I attended a master class, where one of these writers, Lucy Sussex, asked us to write on "My Backyard 50 Years Onward". This was what I saw in the crystal ball ...

I don't think that I'll ever get used to the constant noise and the smells. I look out over the backyard with anger and frustration – it looks like a piece of a Mumbai slum has been surgically excised and transplanted. From my second-floor bedroom window the view is of a rough horizontal surface of metal and plastic sheets, thatch and collections of vegetation.

All this covers what two years ago was our own private oasis of vegetable beds and fruit trees. The latter now form part of the unstable structures housing some eighty people. Multiply this by the thousands of other backyards.

I am still amazed that so many people lost their houses when the Greenland ice finally slipped into the sea five years ago.

Fortunately we had the money to convert our roof into something resembling terraced beds and we can grow much of our own food, with some left over for the unfortunates below. But none of us are any longer able to eat to our tastes and luxuries are impossible.

The slum has spilled into the downstairs of the house and would have crept upstairs if it were not for the security door.

Screams pull me out of my musings and I'm horrified to see one of the makeshift roofs below collapse, followed by a few flimsy walls. This leads to a house-of-cards effect and within fifteen seconds a quarter of the shelters below are no more than a undifferentiated mess.

How much longer can Mary and I support our privilege?

Stories of doom are probably easier to write than those which explore how things may be better. Can we envisage a world in which we have done all the right things to reverse the damage done by humans for hundreds of years, and in which we live in a new, harmonious relationship with our surroundings? I would like to think that we could.

I look at my woolly dog and wonder: will we still have pets in 2059? He loves swimming, so he probably wouldn't mind that the beach will be closer. Oh, just a minute ... I think he's eating a cockroach.