

# No easy despair

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**The Fragile Species.** By Lewis Thomas. Scribners: 1992. Pp. 192. \$20.

In one of his earlier books, Lewis Thomas muses over the question of how our culture might introduce itself if we were to get a sudden chance to make ourselves known to a distant extraterrestrial civilization. Suppose we could send only a short message and that an answer could reach us only after several centuries. What would we send? But, of course. Some Johann Sebastian Bach. And then, as an afterthought: no, that is not possible. It would be bragging.

Sending Bach would certainly be bragging, and I am not sure it would be appreciated. I would rather send an essay by Lewis Thomas. It would be hard to find a more lucid introduction to the human condition. *The Fragile Species*, the fifth collection of the author's essays, continues in the tradition of his earlier books. It rolls forward gently and effortlessly like a mountain creek. Thomas is, by turns, deadly serious and gently teasing; sometimes ironic but never sarcastic; full of insight but never preaching; fuelled by deep emotion but never sentimental; precise and analytical yet a masterly synthesizer; intermittently reductionistic and holistic (sometimes in the same paragraph); equally fluent in science, medicine, literature, poetry and music; and able to empathize with every manifestation of animal and human life except one — boredom. I don't believe he knows what the word means.

The latest essays are once again the notes of a biology watcher. But Thomas's tone is less detached than in his previous books; the clouds are darker, the threats appear more ominous. AIDS and drug abuse are among the hard facts of life, and he does not refrain from calling a spade a spade. He abhors euphemisms such as 'substance abuse' or 'correctional institution'. I would add 'recreational drug' to his list. The increasingly younger ages of drug addicts, particularly in the poorest sections of the population, indicate that something has gone, in Thomas's words, "so badly wrong with the way we live together and the way children are treated in our society, that we should begin thinking about education in an entirely new light".

Thomas points out that our species is "brainless enough to menace all nature unless distracted by music". He reassures the weak-hearted, however, that our species is young and fragile, like an over-confident adolescent who does not

quite know what he or she is doing: "Growing up is hard times for an individual but sustained torment for a whole species, especially one as brainy and nervous as ours". We are new at the game and have not yet learned it. After we have shaken off this century, all might be running well again. Unjustified optimism? Perhaps, but Thomas's warning is clear enough for anyone willing to listen.

He also warns against triumphalism in medicine. As he reveals in the wonderful essays on "Becoming a Doctor" and "In Time of Plague", medicine is the eternal profession. Medical knowledge and technical savvy are biodegradable — since time immemorial, doctors have been trained to *do* things. For many centuries, the only hope for patients was to avoid — even by turning to homeopathy — unnecessary treatment by the medical profession, which adhered largely to the ancient idea of Galen that most diseases were usually due to congestion.

Now we live longer and more healthily, although we must concede that our general health has improved not because of medical science, but because of plumbbers and engineers. Our mental balance, however, has hardly improved; we are more afraid to die and less easily comforted. The steady increase in medical technology is inversely related to the

time doctors spend with each patient. Most of the time they seem to be somewhere else, worried about income, grants, tenure or parking.

But our lives are full of ameliorating circumstances. The sun is always breaking through the clouds in Thomas's sky. He remembers the abandoned term 'pleasure centre', identified accidentally by James Olds in the 1970s. Olds noticed that when rats were able to deliver an electric stimulus to a specific area in their brain, they would continue to do so for hours on end, forgoing food, drink and rest until they died of exhaustion. No matter where an enormous amount of reductionist research has taken the phenomenon, Thomas believes that the pleasure centre exists and still regards it as fair game for speculation. He does not mind that the problem became stuck, seeing it instead as "one of the loveliest of all the possibilities raised by biological science in memory". What was originally a side observation caused by the misplacement of an electrode has taught us that there is such a thing as pure pleasure. Jumping from science straight into the world of poetry as only he can do, Thomas suggests that the pleasure centre transmits to us and other vertebrates the great news that we are alive. And who knows, perhaps invertebrates have it too. If so, Thomas would "organize brass bands everywhere for dancing in all the streets of the world", until he ran out of money.

Contradicting the *Zeitgeist*, Thomas fearlessly states that major truths are often more easily pronounced by poets than by academic scientists. But one would be quite wrong to think that he has distanced himself from science. The



**The formation of streams on slow-moving or stagnant ice in northern East Greenland. This picture comes from *Glaciers*, an illustrated study of the life and history of glaciers, by Michael Hambrey and Jürg Alean. Published by Cambridge University Press, price £19.95, \$29.95.**