

J.D. Smith

Laying Siege

The city would fall
 in a day of hard fighting,
The thickest walls breached,
 the gates rammed to splinters.
The troops could be rendered
 dog-pickings and pike-fruit,
The rest soon dispatched
 or made concubine, slave
Driven far from their gods,
 farther still from each other,
Their language extinguished
 like slight, unfed flames,
Their goods seized or pissed on,
 the garden-plots salted,
Their banners made tinder
 or wiped in latrines,
Their remnant herds slaughtered
 and turned on great spits.

Every stone could be taken
 from column and mortar,
Left for the sappers
 to lengthen our roads.
In a fortnight the palace
 could be shorn from the landscape
That travelers and traders
 making way to live cities
Might wonder why flat land
 by a river lies vacant.

If this kind of victory
 in itself is sufficient,
Its completeness — perfection —
 can bridle its power.
There's no making of legends
 without some kind of witness

J.D. Smith

To tell and retell
 our great deeds and small doings,
Make their fame multiply
 like flocks on lush land.
Since mothers must frighten
 bad children with monsters,
And monsters must bear names,
 let that name be ours

As we spent a whole season
 in setting up war camp
Supplied from the capital
 and most of the provinces,
Let more seasons draw close
 the routine camp followers,
Tent taverns and brothels,
 stage players and bards,
All policed by our soldiers
 and bound by our laws,
A town overshadowing
 the town to be taken,
Its envoys turned back
 by blizzard-thick volleys,
While we turned lumber
 to storehouses, engines,
Throwers of great bolts
 with tips sharp or flaming,
Catapults primed to lift
 great stones, every missile —
a bloated horse carcass,
 a pot of tar bubbling —
In volleys or single,
 but mostly by lot,
Confounding the watches
 of morning and night.
Just as random go sorties
 by scouts and outriders
Who at times reach the walls
 to unnerve their defenders
And like them, will fall — be let fall —
 but their bodies recovered
To hallow our fighting
 with vengeance, with names.

In a week, in a year
 comes the foregone conclusion.
Though the capital lacks
 neither trophies nor captives —
The crowds have shown boredom
 at the latest parades —
In the far outlands
 that trade with mixed coinage
Our spoils will show forth
 as a lantern of power
And cast its long shadow
 on the next town to take,
Magnified by our prisoners'
 shouting and wailing
As long as their being
 justifies their short rations.

Nomads and raiders
 may come for our riches
But they'll be roughly met
 and tossed on far middens
Like rags spent and shredded
 to burnish our prowess.
Our legions fast swollen
 by the dread of far peoples,
We might seize whole kingdoms
 by reaching their outposts
And raising fresh flags,
 showing the coinage
To be rendered in tribute
 and whose face defines it,
Leaving a regiment
 to hold our fresh conquests.
We might then imagine
 somehow greater triumphs.
If rescuers approach
 they must rise up to meet us.
Where will they draw water?
 How long dare they wait?

J.D. Smith

Romesco

I am eating romesco sauce, simply
“romesco” to those in the know
like foodies and hipsters (they overlap)
and peoples of the Iberian Peninsula,
who account for 1.2 percent of my genome,
according to the spit-in-the tube test,
and none of our family lore.

I hadn't even heard of romesco,
to be familiar, until the age of forty
because, as fellow native Thom Jones
said in “The Pugilist at Rest,”
“I had grown up in Aurora, Illinois,
and had never heard of such things,”
but I would learn of romesco
from the woman I would marry
(aka Ms. Wonderful)
who, though no more Iberian than me,
had learned to make her own.

In this way and others I married up
as men seldom do and now
find myself eating romesco
on crusty bread, a perhaps-redundant choice
because her recipe calls for breadcrumbs
and I start to wonder why
I'm wondering about this
instead of how to repair the world
(Tikkun Olam, friends)
or at least reduce neighborhood litter.

While I taste charred and sweet red peppers,
almonds, oil, the aforementioned breadcrumbs
and think of how those parts make up
a larger whole, like marriage,
boreal forests dry and beetle-ravaged, burn.
Borders tremble under the weight of untold crossings.
(And whither, by the way, my country?)
Knowing this, I also know
anything short of a renunciation

like that of Saint Francis —
who started out as a rich kid
with a whole lot to renounce —
will fail to move the needle
or, to mix metaphors, nudge the structures
that, to mix again, lock in so much devastation.
Such a turn would alarm my creditors
and my wife (aka Ms. Wonderful)
who signed up for nothing of the sort,
and this bourgeois sacrifice would still
do nothing to bring back my parents
so I am still here, with romesco,
crusty bread, my wife (aka Ms. Wonderful)
and wine I once couldn't have imagined.

In spite of knowing what I can't un-know
of what prevails beyond our slight walls
I am called by the Golden Mean, the Middle Path,
the wisdom of the ages by any other any name,
to relish this abundance so long as it does not
discomfit the pets or increase others' suffering,
to savor oil and acid, taking on my tongue
like a sacrament the roughness of ground nuts and crumbs
while Greenland melts and republics self-immolate.

What the hell?

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Funeral

Dad's ashes now join Mom's inside the double urn,
On either side our flowers and those from friends
Reminded of their fast-approaching turn.
We may not see them once the service ends.

A sermon's made to hold his four-score years.
A song is sung about a country road.
A eulogy is tried but stopped by tears.
A flag unfolded, folded, is bestowed.

The last on which our lives were shaped now cracked
Beyond repair, we're left to wonder how
To navigate a world of orphan fact,
Pretending we can be the grown-ups now.

Outside, a truck downshifts into a curve.
The world goes on. It has a lot of nerve.

Newspapers

I started with, if not Neil Armstrong, then
The naked, napalmed girl and Watergate
And helicopter flights to follow when
Old centers failed, and I would graduate
To features, columns, in-depth analysis,
Reviews and editorials — a range
Ensuring there was little that I'd miss
In touring realms that I would surely change.

I stop at headlines now, as others steer
The ship of state — into a reef, I dread —
But for this current and indefinite spell
A mortgage must be paid, and deadlines near.
I set the pages down and leave the dead
To bury their dead, if not us as well.

The Thing In Itself

1. Let us consider the thing in itself.
2. Not the thing as we are accustomed to seeing it through filters of habit.
3. Not as symbol for some other thing — thing in a sense of the word that also includes an idea, an ideal, or a reality potentially found in some dimension or dimensions not perceptible by our senses and the tools we use to extend them, dimensions such as those posited in string theory and other theologies. And definitely a thing in the more common and tangible sense suggested in the grammatical trinity of the noun as “person, place or thing” consisting of molecules and possessing mass and volume.
4. Nor let us consider the thing only as a collection of other things, whether in their own time and place or as precursors to or components of some other thing, which likewise can be considered in another time or place, at its own level of aggregation, with a lens of higher or lower resolution, ad infinitum.
5. Each lens could as well be a considered a separate thing.
6. Least of all should the thing be considered in a primarily instrumental light, as a means to getting or making some other thing. Questioning that approach, of course, is hardly original. The task has been undertaken by thinkers such as Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant or John Ralston Saul who are more often cited than read, whether by real or self-styled intellectuals. Instrumental rationality nonetheless deserves further examination — “interrogation” as *au courant* academics might say — because it is both ascendant and ubiquitous, a mental artifact deployed unthinkingly, more an atmosphere or habitat than a consciously chosen world view. We are again reminded of Keynes’ assertion “Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.” Asked to describe this atmosphere of default assumptions, most of us would have the same difficulty as we would in describing the air, as a polyglot dolphin or unprecedentedly sentient fish might have in describing water.
7. Let us consider then, as best we can, the thing in itself.
8. What thing, then?
9. Anything will do. A wealth of choices — i.e., everything — is available.

10. In Chinese “the ten thousand things” refers to the inventory of all that is, the catalog or inventory of the things of this world.
11. This errs on the low side. Cities, armies and flocks can easily number ten thousand members, and then one considers counting their more numerous tack and gear. (As *The Fixx* reminded us in 1983, one thing leads to another.)
12. Yet ten thousand (10,000, 10^4) seems more than adequate to convey the idea of plenitude, a multitude, a great deal, a lot, unless we are considering a quantity of more or less identical things, like dollars or bushels of grain. Our hunter-gatherer brains cannot necessarily encompass such a quantity, or more, of different things. Saying 10,237, or twenty thousand, is unlikely to imply a greater sense of abundance; the higher number cited cannot further impress a saturated mind.
13. Likewise, while at least fifty times as many species of beetle have been described, to say “the five hundred thousand things” lacks poetry and risks pedantry.
14. In college, drunk on a high opinion of my own wit and capacity for transgression, and on one or another type of rotgut, I solemnly posited that any quantity greater than ten thousand should be called “a shitload.” (Not to be confused with a “buttload,” which has mistakenly been attributed with scatological connotations. It derives from an antiquated unit of measurement applied to casks. A butt—derived from a medieval French and Italian meaning “boot”—is 108 Imperial gallons, about 130 U.S. gallons, or two hogsheads.) This was in the days before I had to support myself, whereupon I learned the hard way that ten thousand plus one dollars doth not a shitload make.
15. That the world at large failed to adopt my locution now seems fortunate. One probably does not want to hear about a monk being distracted from his meditation by the shitload of things.
16. Ten thousand times ten thousand is the stuff that dreams and federal budgets are made of, and perhaps but a rounding error in the macro and micro scales of cosmology and molecular physics, depending on the thing considered.
17. That most anything can offer itself for consideration represents a silver lining in the cloud of unknowing and in the low-lying fogs of forgetting or being tongue-tied. To refer to a quantity unknown by its proper name to someone, if not

- necessarily the speaker, is to partake in the innocence — and the confusion — of a prehistoric ancestor, or a toddler.
18. From the primordial ooze of “thing” arise — *inter alia* — animal, mineral, vegetable, earth, wind, fire, water, artifact, concept.
 19. Yet vagueness can serve to remind us of the limits of knowledge. *The Thing from Another World* (1951) takes as its subject a hulking anthropomorphic creature whose tissue traces turn out to be, under microscopic examination, plant matter. Taxonomies failing, one must call it all one knows with certainty, a thing. How a large and cellulosic life form manages to move, let alone survive in the Arctic waste surrounding an exploratory station, is never explained. Nor is the source of that entity’s urge to kill. Sometimes disbelief must not only be suspended, but also battered like a piñata.
 20. In another drama of northern latitudes, Hamlet explains the appearance of his father’s ghost by telling Horatio, “There are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”
 21. Changing poles and premises, John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982), a loose adaptation of the earlier film, casts an even wider net of ambiguity. The eponymous entity goes unseen and, like a virus, displays no vitality outside of the host it possesses and transforms. When one of its victims is decapitated by desperate crew members, the head sprouts arachnid legs and continues to menace the survivors; as in the original, the limits of invertebrate load-bearing must be ignored.
 22. This is not the only thing the staff of the Antarctic research station have to worry about; the breakdown of trust and burgeoning paranoia among the isolated crew pose as much of a threat as the thing itself, and likewise work through their hosts. Considering when the film was made, it can be viewed as an allegory of what Europeans often call the Second Cold War.
 23. In another film whose name I cannot recall, a crew of gangsters — not necessarily one of the more articulate professions — refer to their upcoming contract killing as “a whole thing.” (The term for a fractional or superabundant thing goes unspecified.)
 24. What the phrase lacks in denotative clarity, though, is more than made up for in connotative richness.
 25. Entire languages — to take a ubiquitous category of thing — emphasize one or another quality. English possesses a vast

lexicon containing a large number of precise and nuanced terms, more than a few from other languages. Spanish, on the other hand, has at first glance a smaller lexicon but a great many words with multiple meanings according to context and adjacent phrasing. The verb pasar (“to pass”) and its variations across parts of speech easily fill several columns of a dictionary in small type.)

26. Likewise, criminal argot—the only kind of argot that seems to come up for discussion—suffices for its users. No differently than doctors, economists and literary theorists, criminals use language to hide meaning from outsiders while efficiently sharing it among themselves. That knowledge “puffeth up” like any other, though, and its possession can be mistaken for the arbiter of all other things. No matter how much ink is spilled and how many words are spoken in the name of inclusiveness, the need to include oneself and exclude others seems deeply rooted in the human condition.
27. The invisible velvet rope can be set anywhere. In a particularly colorful (read “divey”) burrito place in my hometown of Aurora, Illinois, a late-night diner of uncertain sobriety and no visible means of support was once heard to tell another patron “You don’t speak Spanish — you are *nothing*” (of which more below).
28. We look for fences until we can find one that places us on the “right” side. Hence, much as dogs sniff each others’ hindquarters, in a less necessary and more obnoxious ritual small talk in certain East Coast social settings almost invariably includes the question “Where did you go to school?”
29. The thing that makes one something rather than nothing often represents some vague desideratum or inchoate notion, as it was for the judge who said he knew pornography when saw it.
30. Who gets to determine or claim ownership of an essential if elusive quality can be a matter of contention, particularly in defense against appropriation. To wit, the locution “It’s a Black thing,” occasionally expanded to “It’s a Black thing — you wouldn’t understand.”
31. For an outsider, interpreting this expression in the world at large can pose difficulties. During the 1990s I was one of a very small number of Whites who attended a speech by Louis Farrakhan at Northern Illinois University. There I saw a young African-American woman, presumably a student, wearing sweatpants with a backside bearing the slogan “It’s a Black

- Thing.” Should this wardrobe selection be interpreted as:
- a. an expression of ethnic identity and cultural pride;
 - b. a knowing wink of double entendre;
 - c. an unambiguous attempt to promote in-group assortative mating;
 - d. self-objectification mirroring the larger hierarchies of race, class and gender, where ultimately the oppressed comes to think in the terms of the oppressor and courts attention on the basis of that valuation;
 - e. all of the above; or
 - f. a lack of alternatives until laundry day?
32. To say “It’s a White thing” is generally unnecessary, and as a joke it falls flat. As the dominant culture is White, cultural phenomena are assumed to be White unless otherwise indicated; linguistically, Whiteness is the “unmarked” condition. Thus John Singer Sargent is not known as a White painter, nor John Updike as a White author. Most film directors are not known as chroniclers of the White experience. One is hard-pressed to name a director analogous to Spike Lee, but as a chronicler of the White experience.
33. If every identifiable or self-identified group has its own thing and/or things, then one can reasonably paraphrase Christ’s words as “By their things ye shall know them.”
34. The following tangent calls for a disclaimer. As noted of Italian-Americans in a preamble to some cuts of Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*, the vast majority of the Italian-American community are law-abiding, hard-working citizens who contribute to society and should not be conflated with the generally larcenous and sometimes murderous subset of that community that is about to be depicted. The same was done for Cuban-Americans in Brian de Palma’s 1983 version of *Scarface*.
35. Vast majorities, though, do not necessarily make for good movies. Larceny and murder have far greater cinematic potential than punching a clock and paying taxes.
36. But back to the digression. In an episode of *The Sopranos*, soldier and aspiring made man Christopher Moltisanti invokes the need to defend the dignity of “Our Thing.”
37. In the days when Italian-Americans were more likely to be bilingual, the Kefauver Hearings were conducted by senators whose names generally did not end with a pronounced vowel. They asked questions along the lines of “Are you now or have you ever been a member of La Cosa Nostra,” (“our thing” or “the thing of ours”) intoning the capital letters, em-

phasizing the consonants and flattening the vowels in a way that identified the speaker as an outsider who did not know enough to use the phrase offhandedly.

38. It would never be *his* thing.
39. The pronunciation must have occasioned snickers in the strangely unwelcoming “social clubs” of New York and other cities. Crime was organized — the Apalachin, New York meeting of 1954 did not arise *ex nihilo*—but its perpetrators did not seek the intellectual property rights involved in Nike-style trademarking and brand extension. We have yet to see La Cosa Nostra LLC, or Mafia Solutions.
40. Would it have been pedantic, or an illustration of fascination with the other that is the warp to xenophobia’s weft, for one of those senators to have referred to “La Cosa Sua” (“your thing” or “that thing of yours”) when addressing a witness. Perhaps fortunately for the dignity of the Senate and its things, air quotes had yet to be invented.
41. Like less articulate men of action, learners of another language hold fast to the new word for “thing,” which covers a multitude of gaps in vocabulary.
42. This comes as no surprise. To learn a language is to exist in a primal condition of limited knowledge. “Thing” may then amount to the extent of speech, and an achievement under the circumstances. The language learner or traveler in a land whose language he does not speak may come as close as possible — for a contemporary person — to the pre-Socratic condition. A simulacrum of that innocence and confusion is experienced by someone speaking a non-native language who knows the word for “thing” and also the words for listing its characteristics — but not yet the precise term that takes not nearly as long to say.
43. Wonder, aphasia, or a general absence of verbal facility do not explain every appearance of the word. Sometimes vagueness hides action like a ninja’s smoke bomb or the cloud of ink shot by a fleeing squid.
44. The thing referenced can be a transgression of greater or lesser severity. In 1972 Billy Paul crooned “me and Mrs. Jones, we’ve got a thing going on.” The persona of the speaker is not Mr. Jones, given the subsequent line, “we both know that it’s wrong.” To call this thing by its proper name, adultery, raises the specter of consequences — divorce, or lasting scars on a marriage that does survive, along with emotional and economic instability that can reverberate for generations.

45. Such vagueness covers a multitude of other sins as well. A thorough study of wiretap transcripts and films that base their dialogue on them could reveal a high incidence of characters doing or taking care of an unstated but quite possibly indictable thing — an umbrella term conducive to amnesia under oath. It seems reasonable to assume that, much of the time, the thing discussed is a whole one.
46. Where art leads, commerce follows. Budweiser's "urban" (i.e., African-American) *Wassup!* campaign was eventually extended to the Euro-American (White) community with a working-class ethnic relay of "How ya doin'?" A later variant included a line of plausible deniability in which each caller asked the next down the chain of command, "Did you take care of that thing?" At the spot's end, the low man hangs up the telephone — a land line, of course. Having forgotten to take care of whatever that thing may be, he expresses his dismay one letter short of Homer Simpson's signature exclamation with a sudden "Oh!"
47. Shortly after Douglas Coupland's "McJob" entered the language I was more innocently and less lucratively than gangsters cobbling together a life of part-time jobs with no benefits. At the end of one part-time and on the way to work on a freelance assignment, itself a kind of one-off McJob, I excused myself by saying, like the rough character I wasn't, "I've got to take care of a thing for a guy."
48. That "thing" was writing catalog copy.
49. I wasn't necessarily wrong, just grossly hyperbolic. Taking care of a thing is the basic unit of any job, and any career. You take care of a thing for a guy (in the wider sense that includes women). Then you take care of another thing for another guy (or the same guy), and a series of other things after that, for one or another guy or guys. Rinse, lather, repeat. Then you retire to do your own thing, which may or may not require taking care of.
50. I would prescribe no particular way of classifying things, but I would submit that taxonomy reveals character, or at least perspective. In the song "Kiss Me Deadly" Lita Ford sings "it ain't no big thing" of the following:
 - a. Not getting laid
 - b. Getting in a fight
 - c. Being late for work
 - d. Encountering bad traffic

- e. Having to borrow ten dollars
- f. Having nothing to eat
- g. Lacking a television

Items b and f would, in fact, appear to be big things to much of the population. Then again, Ms. Ford — or her musical persona, at any rate — may be made of sterner stuff than most of us.

51. Even big things might not be all that big.
52. African-American usage again comes to mind. The flavors of a language or a culture at large, like those of a ripening cheese, travel from the margins to the center, hence increasing non-Black use of the expression “ain’t nothing but a thing.” The phrase is fraught with connotation; in particular, it implies a degree of dualism, suggesting there exists something outside of the realm of tangible and easily replaced.
53. In regard to tangibility, one does not say, for example, “Ain’t nothing but a Theory of Relativity.” In regard to replaceability, one does not state “Ain’t nothing but a First Folio Shakespeare.”
54. This dualism can arguably be traced to several possible sources. Two are the Calvinism that underlies much of the Black church, and the Pentecostalist fervor that infuses other parts. Both make promises beyond the things of this world. There is also the struggle to transcend the catastrophe of slavery and be seen as human rather than a “thing” for sale.
55. A variant of that expression is “Ain’t no thing but a chicken wing.” The logic of the saying is overdetermined. No other part of the bird rhymes with “thing.” Compared to a breast, thigh, or drumstick, moreover, it is small and notably not all that meaty — less of a thing than other pieces, and little better than nothing.
56. Much has been made of that next-to-nothing. Whether because tastes changed first, or the dark arts of marketing stimulated demand, Buffalo wings have spread across North America. More than a second-best choice of animal protein, they offer, as George Will once said of potato chips, a platform for elevating fat and salt to one’s mouth as efficiently as possible. The traditional accompaniment of celery sticks at first seems like the tribute that vice pays to virtue, but facts get in the way: those sticks provide a second platform for the salt and fat of blue cheese.

57. Like the improvised potage in the folk story and children's book *Stone Soup*, a virtue — or a high profit margin — is made of necessity. If the trickster Coyote of Native lore were to go into foodservice, he might well be selling chicken wings. Perhaps he has while, like the Devil, convincing us that he does not even exist.
58. Such hierarchies, straight or tangled lengths of the Great Chain of Being, did not prevent Williams Carlos Williams from declaring “No ideas but in things.”
59. For better or for worse, Williams wanted to write his poems in “plain American that dogs and cats could understand.”
60. Things are not necessarily guaranteed to bear ideas, however. A careful consideration of the facts at hand in a barnyard suggests that not much of anything depends on a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens. If that were the case, it would be stored in a shed where it wouldn't rust.
61. If not all constellations are seen or named the same by all cultures, it is still notable that the same groups of stars are relied upon across a hemisphere. We likewise assemble meaning from the placement of things. Without these connections, approaches however tentative to meaning, ideas effectively cease to exist.
62. Drawing connections between things requires contemplation, and Americans have felt generally ill at ease with contemplatives. Sitting around and looking into space can seem like a waste of time when there are crops to raise and bottom lines to bulk up. The European experience that many Americans' ancestors fled had proven that an aristocracy trained in dead languages, ballroom dancing and inbreeding had clearly made a hash of the world. Robed persons given to fasts and chanting, for their part, weren't likely to pull the body politic's carriage out of a muddy rut. Learning and intentions hold no interest without a tangible outcome, and what is tangible are things in the least abstract sense, particular assemblies of molecules, things.
63. Hence pragmatism, derived from the Greek *pragma* (meaning thing), the inspiration or implicit grounding of lyrics such as David Bowie's in “Modern Love”: I don't want to go out. I want to stay in. Get things done.” Those things are left unspecified, presumably for being mundane and possibly numerous rather than criminal or shameful.
64. In this cultural context it is thus hardly surprising that a small chain of gymnasiums in and around Washington, DC is named Results. This sort of labeling does not work as well

for liberal arts colleges or churches, though some of the latter have positioned themselves in the spiritual marketplace through the Prosperity Gospel (always more photogenic than its Social counterpart). Such labeling can be undertaken with good intentions, but it also provides a way for members of the flock to meet those who would gladly shear them, believing primarily in the things of this world.

65. At that point religion becomes a business like any other and may therefore find itself more at home in America than it would otherwise. Nothing is more American than getting things done, whether building bridges and bombs or setting up an Internet, all of which entail business. “The business of America is business,” said Calvin Coolidge in a break from silence, and in some quarters the discussion has since then been considered closed. “Taking care of business in a flash” was Elvis Presley’s personal motto, with an acronym and lightning-bolt signet ring to prove it. The Bachman-Turner Overdrive single “Taking Care of Business” took an ironic view of the topic but eventually provided the soundtrack for an office supply store commercial, enabling the very business it had once shirked. As Thomas Frank’s title goes, *Commodify Your Dissent*.
66. To which Martha Stewart might say “It’s a good thing.”
67. Doing business can be, without pretensions of other goals, especially comfortable for some of those unencumbered by dualism, for whom everything is a thing and nothing more, and to whom, as to the more reflective pagans of antiquity, such as Lucretius, man is but dreams and dust (sometimes minus the dreams), mind an epiphenomenon of matter, and gods (or God) an epiphenomenon of mind. Such amorality turns out to be rather thin on the ground. Instead, most atheists, monists and secular humanists — or those who simply call themselves skeptical or empirically oriented — are encumbered instead by a conscience and one or another concept of ethics. They are hard-working and law-abiding members of their communities.
68. In short, most of the godless (un-godded?) would not subscribe to Dostoyevsky’s hypothesis that without God all things are possible. Instead, they — like most people — want to do “the right thing.” Means by which they determine that may include extensions of evolutionary biology, sociobiology or multiple-play scenarios from game theory in which cooperating with others makes for enlightened self-interest down the line.

69. Yet if some kill cheerfully in the name of religion, as Pascal noted — or in the name of a surrogate religions such as Communism and of fascism — others do their violence in the name of the void itself, where a given congeries of atoms in the form of a person can take its pleasure and enjoys its position vis-à-vis other congeries of atoms — persons, other life forms, and the inanimate world—before returning to its constituent parts.
70. Nihilism is arguably self-limiting, since it does not aim to sustain cultural continuity or even life itself. How many of us are, or know, fourth-generation nihilists? For that matter, how many nihilists do we encounter in daily life? Sociopaths don't necessarily count, since espousal of nihilism on their part may serve as a rationale for pre-existing impulses rather than the articulation of a well-considered position. I wonder how many of us, then, think of nihilists primarily as the black-clad poseurs and pseudo-kidnappers in *The Big Lebowski*, one of whom now and then intones “We believe in nothing,” the subtext being *Wanna make somethin' of it?*
71. Some do. If we are just poor things, sentient for but a little while as far as we know, more than a few would call for compassion as the only viable response, given that all are in the same leaky boat of mortality, and there's no bailing out. Some Buddhists take this approach, and Charles Bukowski famously lamented how others should but don't: “We're all going to die, all of us, what a circus! That alone should make us love each other but it doesn't. We are terrorized and flattened by trivialities, we are eaten up by nothing.”
72. A penumbra of this approach is found in the writings of the Desert Fathers, at least one of whom recommended against throwing or slamming objects. His ostensible reason was that such behavior only served to perpetuate angry habits and impede spiritual development. At the same time, such actions can be read as a crime against matter itself, which even if non-sentient, is the work a Creator and to be respected as such. Absent dualism or belief in a creator, willfully damaging things suggests a lack of self-respect, or collegiality toward a fellow thing.
73. In contrast lies the dominionist approach, a radical de-divinization of the natural world, supported by a superficial and exquisitely convenient reading of selected passages of one of the Creation accounts in Genesis, whereby Adam and Eve were put over “every living thing.” Non-living things

did not even rate a mention. That this commission may have been forfeited in the Fall and the sentence to eat one's bread in the sweat of one's brow is not considered. The dominionist model proved largely academic until recently in light of small populations and relatively low-impact technology. Such an approach, like others, can also provide a superstructure for practical decisions such as whether to kill an animal or pray to it (though some cultures do both).

74. High populations and technology of ever-greater speed and intensity of impact, though, have illustrated the dangers of objectifying everything as instrumental, a means to an end. Who determines those ends, and whether one person's telos can be conveniently used by another to pursue his own ends, are left aside. One goal can be coopted in the name of another, per cause-based marketing and the appropriation of words such as "sustainability."
75. A thing, defined differently, can represent the end result of a process of construction, a meaning itself, rather than the raw materials from which meaning is inferred — or made. The size of that thing may be large or small, but it must exist in an analogue to pass-fail grading. Otherwise, "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing (doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa)."
76. Defining "that swing" lies beyond the scope of this essay.
77. Meaning or not meaning, passing or failing, depends on the value attached to positive evidence. The philanderer caught out in his detours and trespasses may offer the last-ditch explanation of "It didn't mean anything." At other times that philanderer might take the same line of discussion as a man wrongly suspected and state, with a greater or lesser degree of veracity, "Nothing happened," accompanied by a quite nearly Clintonian parsing of the words "nothing" (or "no thing") and "happen." Depending on the situation and time frame, perhaps several things "occurred" instead, if they did not transpire or take place.
78. "More than this, there is nothing," Brian Ferry sang in 1982 on Roxy Music's final album, *Avalon*. We can speculate on whether "this" means the end of a romantic fancy or a statement of lighthearted (if benign) nihilism. Both bring to mind the ephemeral nature of popular music success — and popular music lyrics, which succeed or fail primarily according to how well they are sung rather than their own literary merits. In one of Heart's smaller hits Ann and Nancy Wilson sweetly

sang, “It was nothing at all,” which stays with me more than any number of other things.

79. Yet nothing, if not its vaguer sibling nothingness, an abstraction of that which does not exist, represents a thing in itself, a *bas relief* of some other thing, or things in general — anti-matter to the matter of the perceptible. Elevating a courtly parlor game beyond its roots and bringing it into the canon, John Wilmot, Third Earl of Rochester, made use of his poem “Upon Nothing” to satirically populate the parallel universe and conceptual dilemma of the Void with what could not be found in the unduly narrow realm of things that exist: “French truth, Dutch prowess, British policy, / Hibernian learning, Scotch civility.” Footnotes on historical particulars are hardly needed to explain the lines, marred only by the spirit of stereotyping and generalization — itself a flaw seen only through some of the West’s fairly recently developed lenses of cultural relativism. What might a contemporary wag — say P.J. O’Rourke in verse — do with this premise?
80. What kind of thing, then, is this nothing? A mirror image, as of written words — the reverse of what it faces? A shadow? Whatever is found in the interstices between things? By this measure atoms, consisting mostly of space, are mostly nothing, and the hydrogen atom of two particles is next to nothing. Aside from atomic weight, though, is a substance of greater density per unit of volume more of a thing, or is moreness measured in other attributes? Only in space or use of natural resources might the collected haiku of Basho be considered less of a thing than the latest semi-annual novel by Danielle Steel. Contribution to the human cultural heritage may call for a different metric. It does not require false modesty to state that this essay, a thing of some heft at about five thousand words, will be a smaller thing than the 271 words of the Gettysburg Address, or all but a couple of Shakespeare’s sonnets (some of which show that even the Bard of Avon had off days.)
81. Yet Shakespeare and Lincoln are no longer with us. Our contingent existences have been shaped by them, but much goes on without them. They have left us something — some *thing* — to do in the face of changes in (check all that apply): social relations, means of production, evolution of consciousness, globalization, environmental precarity.

82. What lies before us is not what lay before them, lost now to posterity like Cervantes' hand at the battle of Lepanto. As less benign words and deeds offer their reminders that history is not over yet, though some might be working to hasten it. There is again the unique and passing instant, made up of all those that preceded it, known and unknown, a new thing altogether like a kaleidoscope's image with each turn, the open-ended suggestion of the Song of Miriam, or a Tibetan sand painting, tangential to many other things, if not the continuation of one great thing.
83. In any event, comparison breaks down, and abstracting stylized facts from quiddities and granularity — to take a recent season's bit of management jargon — retreats from experience and by neglect does it violence.
84. If sometimes we think we've seen it all, the moment turns to us and says, like Peter Falk's Columbo, "Just one more thing . . ."