

# After the Fall

## Vermillion Sands

2007

I'm not entirely sure when the world ended. I mean, I've got some ideas, but I really don't think that it's important. That's why I don't have much patience for this end-of-the-world baloney.

My anarcho-primitivist comrades rhapsodize about the decline and fall of civilization, but it looks to me like that happened a very, very long time ago. The history of world civilizations has been one astonishing full-scale catastrophe after another for the last six thousand or so years and that makes it hard to choose any single, defining climax of human existence before the degeneration began.

When I'm forced to choose an apocalypse and I'm feeling a touch of Romantic melancholy, I prefer to mark the end of it all with the mysterious disappearance thousands of years ago of one of those ancient societies, like the Olmecs or Easter Island. But when I am feeling bitterly philosophical, I pick something more recent and say that the world ended when we were forcibly expelled, blind and senseless, from our dark, warm, and wet Edens. Our post-lapsarian existences began when each one of us was pulled screaming into a bright, sterile atmosphere where we were beaten by a stranger until we opened our eyes and gulped our first lungful of climate-controlled air.

People always laugh nervously when they hear me say the world already ended quite some time ago, as if it is somehow inconceivable that the world we live in today was not the best of all possible worlds. Why is this such a hard thing to accept, especially if you're already one of those "the end is nigh" types? You've got no problem imagining that Hell is just around the corner up ahead, but is it unfathomable that it has already happened? (Somebody ought to clue that disturbingly humanlike creature Al Gore to that inconvenient truth.)

There's a certain presentist arrogance underlying this disbelief, one that implies that in some way things would be less civilized and more desperate if the world had already ended. Can you honestly say that things could be worse—could you imagine anything more savage—than what happened in just this century alone in places like Nanking, Warsaw, Dresden, Montgomery, Beirut, or Darfur? War, famine, epidemics, drought, genetic contamination, genocidal slaughter—all the grim symptoms of a time of tribulation are there in spades. Surely, everyday life in at least one of these horrific kill zones meets the minimum standard criteria for a nightmarish doomsday scenario. So at what point does the worsening of conditions become eligible for consideration as an unqualified, irreparable, and unmitigated end-of-the-world worthy disaster?

Most folks rely on images plucked from sci-fi movies or novels to establish what the end of days looks like. The checklist includes calamitous meteoroid collisions, tidal waves and floods, fires burning out of control, shattered urban landscapes, widespread economic disintegration, nuclear war, devastating global pandemics, or some *Road Warrior*-style peak-oil barbarian invasions. All of these things and more can easily be found on the front pages of yesterday's newspapers or held in the microfilm collection of your local public library. And, of course, it will all get worse—things always do, just as they always have.

If the world has already ended, others ask, then why aren't there any ruins? Why isn't there some half-buried Statue of Liberty poking up out of the sand like at the climax of the original *The Planet of the Apes*? My point is that people have been living in ruins for centuries.

The Mongol armies of Hulegu it-Khan began their attack on Baghdad—the resplendent capital city of the sprawling Abbassid caliphate—at the end of January 1258. At the time, the caliphate was the pinnacle of Muslim civilization; it was a five centuries-old multi-ethnic empire that stretched from North Africa to northwest India and from the Black Sea to the Indian Ocean. Hulegu’s troops breached Baghdad’s walls and looted the city for seven days, killing several hundred thousand people, toppling the government, and smashing the empire.

For those living there at the time, it must have seemed like *al-Qiyamah*, Judgment Day. “The Mongols swept through the city like hungry falcons attacking a flight of doves, or like raging wolves attacking sheep, with reins loose and faces shameless, murdering and spreading terror,” famously recounted the thirteenth-century Persian historian Abdullah Wassaf. Mosques, municipal offices, palaces, and hospitals were burned to the ground; it is said that the Tigris River ran black with the ink from thousands of books hurled into it when the Mongols sacked the Grand Library. The smoke and stench from the ruined city was such that Hulegu ordered his command camp be moved upwind and upriver from Baghdad. For centuries afterward, the city was a blasted, post-apocalyptic ruin. But people continued to live there amid rubble, just as they had in Rome after 410, Constantinople after 1453, Lisbon after 1755, Chicago after 1871, Nagasaki after 1945, Banda Aceh after 2004, and New Orleans today.

The “end of the world” requires imagining one unified world that is regulated by the same beginning, same purpose, same unidirectional linear sense of time, and the same one-size-fits-all fate. It demands imagining a single, universal center that supersedes all regional, local, historical, and personal heterodoxies.

For more than a thousand years, guileful Christian swindlers have made a fortune pimping this fantasy. They pin the contours of current events to musty, mistranslated, and out-of-context Biblical prophecies in order to propagate silly auguries about some soon-to-come eschatological reckoning. By perpetually ratcheting up the pre-millennial tensions, these charlatans have been able to accrue power and wealth from their easy-to-fleece flocks. This strategy is meant to soothe the jangled nerves of those who hysterically fear change, difference, and the breakdown of traditional systems: “Have no fear, my brothers and sisters,” the prophet of doom preaches. “Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.” What would be the most awful thing that could happen to these buffoons would be the loss of their relevance, a loss that would inevitably follow when it is pointed out to their followers that the Anti-Christ has already come and gone.

But it really doesn’t matter which narrative you want to use. I just think we should all just agree that we live in a post-apocalyptic era and none of us were saved. None of us rapturously ascended into the heavens to be welcomed into the loving arms of some jealous, patriarchal Mesopotamian deity. No one was whisked away by some inter-stellar ark to a better life in some off-world gated community. There’s no sense in stockpiling freeze-dried food, ammo, and water purification tablets in your hardened basement bunker because we have all already survived the end times; for better or worse, we’re all accomplished survivalists. We’ve all been left behind—get over it.

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