

LUCY CORIN

# 18 Small Apocalypses

## BATHING

One thing about after the apocalypse is you can't get dirt on you—I mean you can, but you better not—it stings and itches like crazy, and I don't know about you but I can't get anything accomplished if I don't feel clean. Plus water's a problem, even after everything. And sand—you know I read in a book when I was a kid about how to wash by scrubbing with sand—but now that's just as bad—what would you expect, it's just another kind of dirt. Everything makes for one rash or another, some with welts, some with, well, stinking welts, or welts that take over your whole body, or welts that blend in with other people's welts, or the welts on the animals and trees, or the welts on the dirt and on the water. The whole point of the apocalypse was to feel clean. What a load.

## CROWD

I have come to an aquarium. Here is a plexiglass column of water and silver fish. Each fish is like two fingers from my hand. The silver fish swim clockwise, and they swim in a mass, the way little fish swim, in a cloud given form by the columnar tank. I can see this in the home of a bazillionaire among white sofas and a mishmash of Italian art. The bazillionaire likes how many fish there are in there, how they move like a machine, especially because of his appreciation for large amounts in small places. He can see that they are the axis of the planet, that they are turning the planet from their tank. The fish keep a constant speed that means the fish on the outside swim more slowly than the fish at the center. It's that mathematical. Occasionally a fish will turn backwards and push against the silver current for a stroke or two and then flip back. It will make a rush from inside to outside or back again. Occasionally a fish will unhinge its jaws for a beat, as if to let the quiet water they are all rushing through wash its insides out. Together the fish beat a rhythm of moving forward, a counter rhythm of a series of singing movements across the tank, and a third rhythm of the pulsing of jaws. There are only three rhythms visible and still they are incomprehensible. The fish seem delicate and hollow. Their silver skin is bright and young but their faces and bones make them ancient. This is why I feel so sad: all the rest of the aquarium is

dark. I wanted the world simpler because I wanted to take it in, and now that almost all of it is gone, it is still too much; it's so much that soon I close my eyes as if I can join everything else that has gone dark, but then it's even worse because you know what happens when you close your eyes is everything is possible again.

## GRANDPARENTS

In New Jersey, in the morning, in the plaid kitchen, in the condominium across the Hudson River from a park over a landfill, she takes one of the silver-plated pill trays from the countertop and places it at the corner of his place-setting in the eat-in nook, next to his miniature glass of juice. The wallpaper's lines of color, blue and green on white, are printed to look, I think, like hand-torn strips of crepe. Some party.

Back at the countertop, she squints at her tray of pills.

I squint, and I can see how, in her peripheral vision, the wall shivers, the edges of the colored lines like guitar strings plucked recently but no longer making sound that anyone can hear. She knows to ignore her peripheral vision. She knows she has to concentrate. She knows she's old and must steady herself against everything she expects will happen.

When her husband comes in she bucks herself up. He's fat after years of demanding sausages (okay, not just sausages; meat and stuff) but with this medication, he's lost his appetite, and orders half of everything. Still, he can hardly walk now, and although he's getting shorter, he hasn't lost any weight. His breath rasps and he stops in doorways, as if the threshold to each new room is a step up. He sounds like blown paper, wads of it, or tumbleweed, which you never see in New Jersey.

She's always guarded against his anger, but now she guards against everything, nothing else to do. It's awful and it keeps going just like that. After breakfast they sit on the terrace and wait for lunch. Then she brings it to him. They talk about dinner. After lunch he makes a reservation. Then they sit on the terrace. He works through the paper, and she squints at the rows and rows of terraces on the building next door. After a while she picks up the magazine part that comes with it. She reads the classifieds. She remarks about the prices of apartments. Also ads for easy chairs, how expensive and unreasonable. She counts the years since they bought their apartment. She remarks about getting a decorator up. She remarks about a seven year old girl on a terrace across from them, who is leaning over the edge. She squints to make sure. She remembers me, little, leaning over the rail like that, scaring her to death. She pictures what the girl sees, looking down, that new, unfathomable distance, identifying objects from that godly angle. She feels so very

angry. I can feel it from here and this was like, I don't know, like 20 years ago by now. "Look what that girl is going to do," she says. Her voice is aghast, she's gesturing with the folded magazine, and she's trembling. "That girl is going to spit. There," she says. "She spit."

## QUESTIONS

I have some questions I would like to pose regarding the End of Times. Why disguise angels as aliens? Is the pope the antichrist? Is date setting okay? Who are the 144,000? Is the millennium literal or figurative? Is the United States of America in Bible prophesy? Does end time render stewardship of the earth irrelevant? Will there be a partial rapture? Will the Lord provide until Jesus returns? What is the marriage supper of the Lamb? Does what's happening in Israel today mean the end times are quickly approaching? What is the abomination of desolation? What about the weather? What about the economy and Capitolism in general? Is the devil working overtime? What are tribulation saints? Can the mark of the beast be accepted by mistake? Where did the EU get its start? What is a red heifer? How long is a generation? Can you lose your eternal rewards? How do we know the Tribulation will last seven years? I am afraid of the end of the world and yet I long for it. What should I do? What will the apocalypse mean for narrative? Boy, you know, I have some more questions. Is there a Palestinian people? When will Gog invade? If Jesus is God, why was he unable to do certain things while on earth? Was He nailed through His palm or his wrist? Are there different kinds of speaking in tongues? Explain about parables and why couldn't He just say what He meant? Did tombs break open and dead people walk the earth? I am unmarried and thirty. What can I do? Is having money a bad thing? When does daylight time begin and end? Is it possible to win the war on terror? Are horoscopes real? What is the difference between white and black magic? Is genetic research okay? What is dispensationalism? Can I get a tattoo and does content matter? Should I store up food? Is it possible to be free of racial tension? How can I pray for this nation when there seems to be no hope? Why do my prayers go unanswered? Would it be okay to get in touch with my deceased family members? Could you see heaven if you got close enough? Should my family become involved in Halloween and get a Christmas tree? Is there free will in heaven? Are there gifts for the spirit today? I just want to end it all. What should I do? Will the rapture happen this year? What is a Bar Mitzvah? Why is everything so confusing? Could a cloned human being be saved? What is eternal life? If what matters is what's deep inside, how can I go to heaven? Are names erased from the book of life? How can I overcome health related discouragement? What can I do to stop worrying? Should we pluck out our eyes? I keep making mistakes. How can I stop? How do you plan to maintain this site after the rapture? Do you have any fliers or pamphlets you could send me? Why won't you answer my e-mail? (<http://www.raptureready.com/faq/rap23.html>)

## AFTER

What was left? An enormous collection of transparent things. We couldn't be more minimal. That plastic cup, including the ice. Your lenses. A stack of tracing paper. Also tracing paper in the wind. And wind. And other "transparencies." Think of the bottles and bottles of water. Including thinking. A matter of clear glass versus clear plastic, vs. gin vs. vodka vs. tap vs. Voss. A room with two doors in shotgun fashion. I'll stand in this one. It looks like static coming down hand over fist. Now, if you stood in that one you'd ruin it. You can't even come in because of the enormous collection of transparent things that are wobbling, invisibly.

## APOCALYPSES PAST

After the apocalypse we didn't even talk about all the crap we'd read about it before or seen in movies. Like we were embarrassed of our whole species' imagination. Even what we'd gotten right just seemed lame and obvious. It was a new taboo—talking about the predictions was this thing you just didn't do. As opposed to cannibalism which was pretty reasonable. Or wanton sex, which was necessary, heroic even. One night or day or whatever it was, we were sitting around a campfire and I was like, *what do I keep trying to remember?* And it was ghost stories. I mean never in real life did I ever actually tell a ghost story. I just saw it in so many movies it seemed like, having been a kid, I must have done it. Like steal cookies from a jar which I never did either. Who has a cookie jar? No one ever again you can bet on it! So there we were, all fucking and eating each other by the fire and I kept having all these apocalypse stories from my childhood right there on the tip of my tongue, but for everyone's sake, I held back.

## HER SUICIDE

After her father killed himself she wanted to know which gun. Possibly the hunting and guarding gun they kept in the house as a family and all learned from. Probably that was the gun, but she thought maybe, in the most considerate way, he might have gone and got a different gun, just to clarify the event for everyone.

## REVIEW

The original appeal of the collection—its large scope—also seemed to be its one weakness. After all, if an apocalypse is just an ending, then couldn't

most stories fit the bill; what is a story but the telling of the end of one thing and, perhaps, the beginning of another? [http://www.bookslut.com/fiction/2007\\_07\\_011370.php](http://www.bookslut.com/fiction/2007_07_011370.php)

## MATH

I was talking, at a party, with a man about *Lolita*. He seemed surprised that we both liked it. I told him it was a very well-liked book. He was being really flirty. First when we met at the party he just looked at me, and then as soon as I said something he said, “You’re witty!” He reminded me of someone and I was trying to think of who it was. I figured out that he looked like a friend of mine — a writer who’s written a book about *Lolita*, and also some novels. I told him. Now, he said, “Is your friend a good writer?” Well, he’s well-liked.

I thought of this other writer I know, who looks like a famous actor — everyone knows it, and he’s even written about it. He was the teacher of another writer friend of mine. I was at her place the other day and met her ex-husband and you know who he looks like? That famous actor, and consequently also that writer who looks like him, my friend’s teacher. I mentioned this to them and neither one had ever noticed that he looked like anyone, but they agreed completely, so I’m not making it up.

In light of all this, it’s interesting to me that when we read a book we don’t look like anything. And also, something I thought about during both movies of *Lolita*: how important it is, in the book, that we don’t see her except in our imagination, because if we saw her she’d be just a kid and we’d freak out. I thought about that music video with sexy Liv Tyler and her father lusting over her as if we don’t know he’s her father. But maybe the goal is we do know he’s her father. So what about the guy at the party? God I hardly remember him, except he was a math genius. But I remember hoping all the time we were talking that he could quickly explain math to me, suddenly, in an ejaculate burst, in a way that I’d really get it, all the parts of math that I always longed for, that I knew were on the other side of all the math I couldn’t bear, and because of this I have the same lingering sense of loss that I might have had if we’d slept together, or been married once for several years, a long time ago.

## SERIOUS

Slowly, slowly, I began to lose my hold on the ironic.

## ADOGALYPSE

After the apocalypse, she missed her dog. What's the point of apocalypse if there is no dog like all the boys get in their apocalypses? She'd take a zombie dog, if only so she'd get to kill it cathartically and as a symbol of all she'd lost, including her real dog. She thought about howling his name to the spot above her where the moon used to be, sometimes. Her dog died a week before the apocalypse. He died in the backseat of her car while they were driving to the vet. She heard his organs contract and then release forever. She heard his death rattle, the only one she'd ever heard, then and now, because the apocalypse was a loud one and you'd think you'd hear death rattles like echoes for days but the noise lasted long enough that when it stopped all she heard was the memory of her own dog's natural death. She wasn't able to pull over. It was night, the road was twisty, and she was concentrating so hard on getting to the vet as fast as possible that she was not letting herself believe this was it. She'd kept driving, telling him it was okay. "Okay, baby. Good boy." She was driving so fast it was like she was leaving him behind. After the apocalypse, she kept considering if it was okay or not. Okay, okay, you're going to be all right.

## NATURAL DISASTERS

Mudslides in Pakistan claim bunches. Celebrities flock to toxic New Orleans. Zebras contract anthrax in drought. Tsunami elicits tales of terror. But an entire village sounded an alarm and ran to the top of a hill. We used to call her a natural disaster because of her snot and her hair. God, I look like death warmed over, she said, and who could but agree?

## APOCALYPSE (WITH TAHITI)

Instead of the mood of the light from the kitchen in the dark in the heat with the fronds from her limber plants at her elbows suggesting Tahiti in the old days of painters now on coffee cups, she hoped a sheen would drop onto her imagination even as the earth fell away, as the animals died, as the fields fumed, and the turnips in the refrigerator shriveled into the faces of old ladies like: the one she would become if she only waited. It took something psychic to refrain from relaxing into one of the voices in the town that flattened real life. She took a piece of ice into her mouth and let it hurt, perhaps the last ice on earth. She took a look at the house and felt pickled. She turned her mind toward the several moments in her history that were worth considering, and watched the ideas turn in the atmosphere

like model planets and then fail. Home, home, home is where you used to think you wanted to go.

## METH

On the road the man in the maroon car was on meth. They drove behind him. Couple days later they saw him at the store with a boy and a puppy. April got nervous. She thought she should do something. She didn't know where to put her eyes. The puppy was so cute.

The boy was eating out of a plastic bag and the man was carrying the puppy. They crossed paths on the porch of the store. Behind them was the beautiful landscape. The man wasn't carrying any groceries but then they were all on their way back toward the maroon car. The man carried, carried and carried the puppy. He was a little handsome but recently put on some weight. Give me a break, this is not the end of the world.

They were walking to the stairs and the man with the puppy and the boy were about to descend. Cami had said, as they were parking next to the maroon car, "That's that car from before that almost killed us." It had gone up and down the curves in the mountain road as if there weren't curves, just right ahead on methamphetamines. His teeth were still pretty okay. Cami said to the boy, "Is that good?" and the boy nodded with a lot of energy. Cami patted the puppy's head in the man's arms, not breaking stride and trying not to be failing to breaking stride. That was about it. Puppies and little children.

Live and let live? Down at the breakfast shack a man is eating a breakfast burrito and he's the father of a kid he beat, who another lady in the town adopted, and it's like they're all living together in peace in the tiny mountain town. April felt angry. "I am not adopting that boy and that puppy!" she thought as she passed by. She had nothing to say about it to Cami. The two of them, they were on their way.

## SERIOUSLY

Slowly, carefully, gingerly, I began to suspect I remained ironical.

## —ISMS

I was *still* racist and everything else which I realized when I was around this straight white girl who was pretty like a model, which is so confusing to be around, especially now that she's the only one left in the world who thinks she's straight. Maybe I don't want to help it, but she is undeniably sexy and

maybe there is something to be done about it but I'm not doing it. Whenever she's charming, like the way she holds up that coconut in the bald light as if there's a decision left to be made, I try hard, in order to justify my lust, to imagine her as not nearly so fuckin pretty—to imagine her as someone like me—like would I be charmed then? Someone like me, considering the last remnant of something, how hot is that. Then I feel like it's really not necessarily my job at this point to have a problem with getting off on something just b/c that's how I feel about it wherever that came from.

No one calls anything natural anymore. Finally! Natural means something like dead. But it surprises me that there is still so much of my life that is a matter of imagination.

### APOCALYPSE

I've got another apocalypse for you. Psst, wanna buy a \_\_\_\_\_? You fucker, you pigment of the imagination, you \_\_\_\_\_. You conceptual apocalypse. Last call, last dance, outlast. Why you I'll make you over, you. You epic ellipse, idea of us. You consensual apocalypse, last croak on earth.

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