

The Only Things

This is a funny story. In the same way it's funny to know we're all doomed in one fashion or another; the end is all but here. It was the beginning of the millennium, and everyone was writing about it. They all mentioned the same things. Tanner had no interest in this, but he wrote about it anyway. Although, that's not quite accurate. To tell the truth, he had all the interest in it, but didn't want to be perceived as such. To hide this fact, he privately told people that he cared for none of it and wrote only for the money. He lied. And so he spent his days burying words into the stories that he said he didn't want to write.

Today he was feigning sickness over the phone with his editor so that he could excuse himself for this afternoon's meeting to talk about his latest collection. The stories were going well—all darkness and introspection feeding on a collection of disenchanting narrators. Matter-of-factly existential. People loved it, or loved

bemoaning it—good news all around. Two of the shorter stories were slated to appear in national magazines before the year was out. The hype would be on and he would spend the spring making appearances, talking smartly on NPR. People would say how very down to earth he was, and still so young. A solid man to have a drink with.

But this afternoon he was bored. And there was nothing he wanted to do less than suffer traffic on the bridge for an hour of dull conversation, rehearsed praise and some stern down-to-brass-tacks talk about deadlines. So he coughed a little and graveled his voice to affect the proper demeanor when explaining how he hadn't been able to sleep much. "It's been such a pain in the ass."

Voice mail would have been best, but no luck. So he made his excuses live—unaware that he risked his last words being lies. In a minute he

was back on the couch, doing nothing. That's what stood out to him, later, upon recollection. He remembered how complete nothingness preceded everything: the monumental crashing noise, the shaking coffee table, the cracking and crumbling of walls into slabs and chunks and dust. When the earth opened up its new crevice like a massive wound that the ocean spilled into as blood, he was on his couch reaching for the paper.

And although we have already arrived at this point in the story securely enough, without arousing any suspicion as to the legitimacy of Tanner's pre-apocalyptic life, it seems necessary to point out that almost none of this is true. Not in fact at least. It is true that he joyfully wrote stories about the beginning of the millennium. But in reality, no one had published any of it. And although there was a great earthquake on the coast only days before the chaos erupted, he was nowhere near the ocean. But that's how he told the story anyway.

The way he had figured it, once the end of the world arrived there was no need to remain true to actual histories. He could be whomever he wanted—and who would know the difference if they couldn't seem to remember the alleged career of some obscure but famous short story writer whose voice was praised by the critics of his day? Some people even said they'd remembered reading his work. Of course, all evidence of the world as they knew it had been destroyed. Everyone simply took everyone at their word. It was ideal for Tanner.

It is also true that he remembered the days before the apocalypse for their notable nothingness. And so, figuratively speaking, you could say he had been calmly sitting on his couch reaching for the paper when the end arrived. The rest was entirely conjured, but he told the story faithfully and with great ease of conviction. The beauty was in the details: that he'd called in sick only moments before, that he'd been hoping to reach the voice mail instead. And that the details were unnecessary, yet somehow took on great significance in their meaninglessness compared to what followed—that was the clincher. No one questioned him after such a somber display of remembering.

It was like a revelation, his new life. Among the tumbled skyscrapers and the gone-dead phones, he was every man he had ever wanted to be. He was pure genius: speaking unfathomable truths in such a way that it moved the survivors to tears in their everyday lives. He made the most impenetrable thoughts unfold into beauty as simply as dandelions unclenched in the early light. And the new world was filled with dandelions—and cockroaches, of course. The heartiest things were all that was left. It was a tornado-swept earth, overrun by slinking alligators, comatose turtles, hard-scrabble bugs, weeds and all the most insidious vines. And humans too, sparse and trunk-strong collections of humans wandered with their perpetual sunburns across the wide spans of nothing. Dotted the nothing with torturous rarity were unexpected meadows of gorgeous unspeakable

greens. It was Tanner's world, and he led his nomads between each oasis on spirit and genius alone.

This went on—the wandering, the moving forth, the collecting of the living like fish in a net—for, well, what is time in a world past its end? It went on for as long as one might imagine. Until one particular night, a night when Tanner was beyond tired—exhausted nearly to death—and he found himself collapsed at a water's edge, where the river roared in magnificent sounds. The beauty of the world was still the same, this he knew and said aloud. Even without all that was, there was still all that happened to be. The sky was dark and the stars rose out in it. It was his solace, in these strange days, that the night looked very much like night. It was evidence, in fact, that the earth's own Armageddon had apparently gone unnoticed by things like stars and wind, which happened the way they always had. He laid beneath the dark. It was his proof: this place would go on, absolutely, regardless.

This was a thought of central importance to Tanner, that the world would go on. It was his true destination, as it were, since in fact he had not wandered between any oases with any group of nomads. He had not led anyone anywhere. For, in reality, the world of the apocalypse was as horrible and desolate as one might imagine. There were few survivors and no dandelions or alligators or turtles to speak of—and certainly no unexplainable patches of sudden green, no

untouched meadows in any line of regular sight. But when Tanner appeared out of the rubble—nearly dead and partly wishing he had been—it occurred to him that the small place in which he had emerged was in need of new truths. And this is what he saw. This was his vision.

His mind filled with a world that had somehow endured despite it all. So when he finally encountered people, ripped of hope and faces, disfigured and ill-fed, he told them that he had arrived from elsewhere. That he had collected men, women and children all along his way. That there was something out there. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The land was charred blacker than night. And night was everywhere. Stars did not exist beneath the heavy clouds of thick and macabre dust. Horror spit itself forth into every inch of air. Fire took the place of trees. This was no world for anyone, and there was barely anyone left in it at all. Eyes seemed like a waste.

But that was no story to tell for the strangers whom he saw, stumbling dazed into half-left walls. What good was it to hear anything like that? Instead he told his tales of the gathering and saving and wandering. He said he'd seen water. And so the story went, that one night beside some water's edge, in epiphany and tranquility it came to him. He told them he knew—that the world would go on. This was amazingly untrue. But he said it anyway. And after that thought emerged, he said, he knew then he must once more rise up to leave the

green and turtles and waters behind. (There were, actually, roaches everywhere, and he used them as proof.) And he said this all brought him: “Here, where I’m standing right now. Where I knew you’d all be. Where I was needed. And when time comes, I will take you there. Or somewhere just as good. There is a spot of green almost always within thirty or forty or seventy miles.”

For now, he explained, they would need to stay. Gain back health. If he’d learned anything in his brief but extensive travels, it was that traveling with the ill, the weak, was bad plans. Plain and simple. Strength was the key and when strength returned, their journey would begin. In the apocalyptic world, people believe anything.

There was mild expectation among the remaining—a small hope that survival would reap them an encumbered, but existent life. They made barely a camp and at least stayed warm since there was no lack of fire. They sat and waited. They ate what little there was. Some smoked cigarettes and some got stoned one hit at time by a couple of joints from an empty box. The only things in the world were those that burned. Reverie came for a few one night in a scalding bottle of whiskey. Tanner tried to gather hope from the chaos and dust, but disintegration had begun.

In time the ill got worse. The disfigured fell apart in their limbs. The few that were healthy began to grow unsteady; no one’s condition

improved. And in his waning days Tanner himself acquired a viscous shiver—a rattle so deep in his bones that the earth nearly quaked below him. All was approaching the end.

His stories began to lose their weight, as this does now, in light of the understanding that there was never a chance for salvation. That the apocalypse, by definition, must always finish badly. And though he would like to have said that there was even this—a small collection of the undead cobbled together to waste away among the remains—waiting for him somewhere, if he could somehow join it, he knew better. There would be no more conversations. He knew from the empty sounds of the wretched moanless world outside his dark tomb of cement and mortar, that what he once could imagine as partly green, then fiery black, was merely and plainly dark. Pure unhappening.

Although there was wind. And roaches scurried through the small open spaces among his own darkness.

And he could move, sometimes, a finger or almost straighten his leg.

There was, near the end, the voice of a woman. He could no longer tell if she, too, was imagined. It was accompanied by all but nothing. There was just a plaintive wailing, and occasionally a comforting talk—as if knowing that if she was the last voice on earth, there was

no one but herself for dialogue. Tanner listened. This or that. Her words were uncanny in their insignificance.

But more than her voice was the song of her steps, quietly displacing small rocks above him into falling space, unraveling the chilly rattle of tumbling stones. Some overhead he could hear. And after that, finally, the rain. The last rain of the world threw itself upon the earth like a grand conflagration. Tanner felt water on his head. He imagined small gorgeous feet settling on rubble above his back. He knew of a planet in revolution. Beneath his hands, the ground was wet.
