

Annihilation, Jeff VanderMeer

Now a strange mood took hold of me, as I walked silent and alone through the last of the pines and the cypress knees that seemed to float in the black water, the gray moss that coated everything. It was as if I traveled through the landscape with the sound of an expressive and intense aria playing in my ears. Everything was imbued with emotion, awash in it, and I was no longer a biologist but somehow the crest of a wave building and building but never crashing to shore. I saw with such new eyes the subtleties of the transition to the marsh, the salt flats. As the trail became a raised berm, dull, algae-choked lakes spread out to the right and a canal flanked it to the left. Rough channels of water meandered out in a maze through a forest of reeds on the canal side, and islands, oases of wind-contorted trees, appeared in the distance like sudden revelations. The stooped and blackened appearance of these trees was shocking against the vast and shimmering gold-brown of the reeds. The strange quality of the light upon this habitat, the stillness of it all, the sense of waiting, brought me halfway to a kind of ecstasy.

Beyond, the lighthouse stood, and before that, I knew, the remains of a village, also marked on the map. But in front of me was the trail, strewn at times with oddly tortured-looking pieces of heavy white driftwood flung far inland from past hurricanes. Tiny red grasshoppers inhabited the long grass in legions, with only a few frogs present to feast on them, and flattened grass tunnels marked where the huge reptiles had, after bathing in the sun, slid back into the water. Above, raptors searched the ground below for prey, circling as if in geometric patterns so controlled was their flight.

In that cocoon of timelessness, with the lighthouse seeming to remain distant no matter how long I walked, I had more time to think about the tower and our expedition. I felt that I had abdicated my responsibility to that point, which was to consider those elements found inside of the tower as part of a vast biological entity that might or might not be terrestrial. But contemplating the sheer enormity of that idea on a macro level would have broken my mood like an avalanche crashing into

my body.

So ... what did I know? What were the specific details?

An ... organism ... was writing living words along the interior walls of the tower, and may have been doing so for a very long time. Whole ecosystems had been born and now flourished among the words, dependent on them, before dying off as the words faded. But this was a side effect of creating the right conditions, a viable habitat. It was important only in that the adaptations of the creatures living in the words could tell me something about the tower. For example, the spores I had inhaled, which pointed to a truthful seeing.

I was brought up short by this idea, the wind-lashed marsh reeds a wide, blurred ripple all around me. I had assumed the psychologist had hypnotized me into seeing the tower as a physical construction not a biological entity, and that an effect of the spores had made me resistant to this hypnotic suggestion. But what if the process had been more complex? What if, by whatever means, the tower emanated an effect, too—one that constituted a kind of defensive mimicry, and the spores had made me immune to that illusion?

Telescoping out from this context, I had several questions and few answers. What role did the Crawler serve? (I had decided it was important to assign a name to the maker-of-words.) What was the purpose of the physical “recitation” of the words? Did the actual words matter, or would any words do? Where had the words come from? What was the interplay between the words and the tower-creature? Put another way: Were the words a form of symbiotic or parasitic communication between the Crawler and the Tower? Either the Crawler was an emissary of the Tower or the Crawler had originally existed independent from it and come into its orbit later. But without the damned missing sample of the Tower wall, I couldn’t really begin to guess.

Which brought me back to the words. Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner ... Wasps and birds and other nest-builders often used some core,

irreplaceable substance or material to create their structures but would also incorporate whatever they could find in their immediate environment. This might explain the seemingly random nature of the words. It was just building material, and perhaps this explained why our superiors had forbidden hightech being brought into Area X, because they knew it could be used in unknown and powerful ways by whatever occupied this place.

Several new ideas detonated inside me as I watched a marsh hawk dive into the reeds and come up with a rabbit struggling in its talons. First, that the words—the line of them, their physicality—were absolutely essential to the well-being of either the Tower or the Crawler, or both. I had seen the faint skeletons of so many past lines of writing that one might assume some biological imperative for the Crawler's work. This process might feed into the reproductive cycle of the Tower or the Crawler. Perhaps the Crawler depended upon it, and it had some subsidiary benefit to the Tower. Or vice versa. Perhaps words didn't matter because it was a process of fertilization, only completed when the entire left-hand wall of the Tower had a line of words running along its length. Despite my attempt to sustain the aria in my head, I experienced a jarring return to reality as I worked through these possibilities. Suddenly I was just a person trudging across a natural landscape of a type I had seen before. There were too many variables, not enough data, and I was making some base assumptions that might not be true. For one thing, in all of this I assumed that neither Crawler nor Tower was intelligent, in the sense of possessing free will. My procreation theory would still apply in such a widening context, but there were other possibilities. The role of ritual, for example, in certain cultures and societies. How I longed for access to the anthropologist's mind now, even though in studying social insects I had gained some insight into the same areas of scientific endeavor.