How it all ends

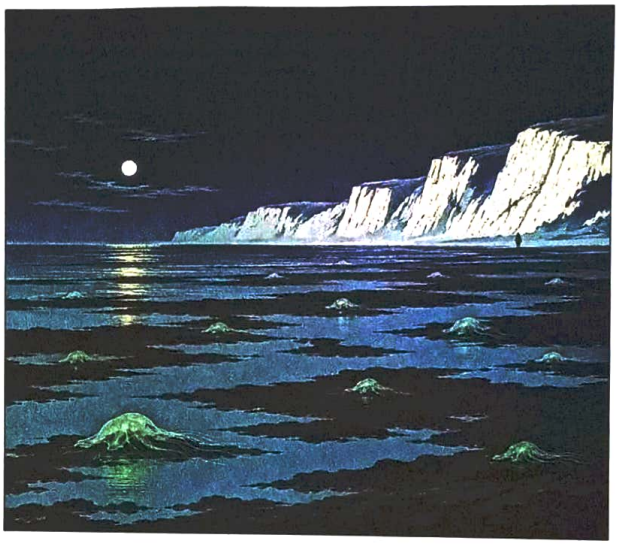
THE END OF EVERYTHING
By M. John Harrison.
Serpent's Tail, ₹599

M. John Harrison's post-apocalyptic, sci-fi novel — it made it to this year's Booker shortlist — is dizzying, intense and heady, melancholy and hard-hitting. It obscures more than it reveals, morphing and shape-shifting like the mysterious alien life-form (the "artefact") at its centre.

The *end* appears, in the not-so-distant future, against the sound of distant artillery from humanity's dwindling war with the alien, iGhetti. At the edge of the sea, where chalk plateaus lead to mudbanks, beachcombers scavenge mutating objects deposited by the tides. Among them is Philip Tennant, who discovers a sentient artefact, which gradually acquires the persona of a child with guileless curiosity. In a less unpredictable, streaming-platform-friendly narrative, this might have led to a reworking of the mentor-and-mentee trope, akin to the Mandalorian's efforts to save Grogu, the universe, and the Star Wars franchise. Harrison baits the reader, tempting one to believe that this might be another such feel-good, post-apocalyptic adventure. It isn't.

Old masters of British sci-fi, Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss and J.G. Ballard, or even a younger Harrison himself, once melancholically conjuring the beauty of the slow fading of 'afternoon cultures', offered some hope that the dying world might disclose a final grandeur, some strange revelation of human potential. Here, the disaster reconfigures the very *being* of those who survive it. In the small "culture town" society around Tennant, a twelve-year-old boy urinates on Tennant's elderly aunt, Marnie, for fun; she kills him without remorse; elsewhere, 'normal' people take a bite off the artefact's forelimb.

The real horror lies in the ordinariness of this post-disaster world, and in the possibility that consumption might outlive humanity's end. If catastrophe has compromised the continuity of human experience, the remnants of consumer civilisation persist with banal obstinacy. Shopping malls abound with kitsch, chocolates remain available, labels on soft-drink bottles retain "the improbable colours of advertisements from two generations earlier". Cars run, fuel is still aplenty, and someone, somewhere, readily finds a bottle of Scotch. The artefact soon develops a fascination for haddock and chips and a very British appetite for the cold, tinned mackerel Marnie mashes into porridge. Later, it reanimates a museum exhibit and "with a shy, inturned smile" gapes for hours at "a boxy tube TV from the 1950s repurposed to show fragments of soft drinks ads from the middle Thatcher period".



Harrison's aliens subvert the familiar traditions of invasion sci-fi. They have come from elsewhere, certainly, but are remoter than the artefacts in a more fundamental sense, incomprehensible to humans. Experts associate them variously, with dark matter, the banking crisis of the late 2000s, or spiritual tourism by intelligences from an astral plane; the popular understanding is that they have "come out of the internet".

From H.G. Wells to Ted Chiang, the arrival of the incomprehensible generally revolves around an encounter: something comes from elsewhere, and humanity must understand what it wants. The iGhetti have no such convenient point of entry. They had been leaking into the world for centuries, leaving behind transparent, jelly-like astromyxin, most of it dead. Their presence intensified around the turn of the 1980s, when they descended upon New York, Dubai, China's financial centres, and London, the old imperial metropolis. Now, contorting shafts of light, recurring "bad patches" of time, and new stars in the sky announce their presence from afar.

Harrison hints at a darker history of the pre-disaster world. Towards the end of Part One, Tennant discovers two naked human beings in bathtubs, their mouths open, muttering incomprehensibly, their bodies alive despite the removal of their entrails. Rubber cables connect them to machinery. They are the parents of Hampson, a man who studies and dissects living artefacts, calling them monsters. Harrison seems to suggest that the end of the world may not have begun with the aliens, but with humans experimenting beyond the limits of morality and empathy, in utter disregard for the lives of others.

Towards the end, travelling through another of the nameless "culture towns", all of which appear the same at noon, the artefact tells Marnie: "Your present day, like ours, is always-already vanishing. No history will be left at this site. Only heritage — an interpretation of the past as much an act of theft as the appropriation of another culture's artefacts and customs."

Deeptanil Ray