

MIRAGES

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The desert is never empty. At the worst, it's full of death.

That's a hell of a thought. He wondered at the offering of his failing mind.

Dancing mirages flickered in and out of sight on the horizon. He searched for solid objects like rocks or dunes or even the occasional dead bush—something on which to hang his hope.

If he could make it to that stone, he might live.

If he could touch that dune crest, he might see another soul.

Maybe that scraggly, dead bush meant water.

The rhythm of his trudging matched the slowing of his heart.

What kind of thought was that, that would keep a man's mind dark and occupied under the sun, under the relentless onslaught of dehydration and the slow, sweating loss of life through pores.

Pausing in his trudging only added to the desert's fullness.

Pausing only plopped one more drop of life into the bucket of sand.

The mirages, though -- they appeared and disappeared. They flickered into and out of and into existence again. Sometimes they swallowed the object of his hope. Sometimes they swallowed it; and when he had dragged his feet through enough sand, they dispersed and left only sand behind as if they were real water and had somehow, in the course of a few minutes or hours, eroded away whatever hope he had chosen to pin his life on.

In those moments of despair, he still understood that to pause was to die. Even still living, he could be counted as fill in the vast bucket of death, so he chose a new hope and moved on.

Minutes, hours, life, death—time and sun made him start to wonder if he would know the difference between one and the other.

When a man dies, does he know it? Can he know it?

What kind of thoughts were those?

He thought he had heard that a man's feet became cold when he died -- first the feet, then the fingers, then the calves and forearms.

His feet were cold. Cold feet, but he knew they couldn't be cold. The sand had to be near a hundred degrees, perhaps more. He'd seen a lizard two days back, when he was still fresh, still certain of his direction. It had balanced on two legs: front left and rear right. It had quickly shifted to front right and rear left. Like a man juggling a hot egg, it juggled itself over the sand.

Another mirage covered the sand ahead. Beyond the silvery wavering ripples, a single tree, dead as any bush or stone, pushed up through the silvery ripples.

He blinked. The tree resolved into two objects: a dead tree and the dark form of a tall man standing next to the tree.

A man. Another human being. A companion. A savior. At the very least, someone to talk to.

He would have laughed if his lips hadn't been so dried and blistered and cracked that they were fused closed in a grimace of determination he hoped would not become permanent -- not be his death mask.

Cold feet, a dead tree, and a living man. People saw dead relatives when they died. He was dying. Perhaps he was dead.

He looked down.

The silvery, liquid flow of the mirage crossed the sand and wrapped itself around his ankles.

His feet moved of their own will. He felt no attachment to them at all.

With each push, each lift and slide over the sand, the mirage splashed. Ripples and droplets rose and danced and fell back into the silvery shimmer.

Now, he chuckled. His lips cracked. His own blood wet the tip of his tongue.

The desert played with him.

It cooked his brain in his skull.

Like a child, he pushed on through the illusion, through the puddle, across the shallow lake toward the dead tree and impossible man. He even allowed himself the foolish luxury of kicking at the water, of playing along and taking pleasure in the ripples and splashes, even though he knew, or at least part of him believed, the game would only hasten the filling of the desert with another grain of death.

The cold illusion rose up his calves, and he believed he was dying. He wondered if he were lying down, if he were lying down and staring at the sun through lidless eyes now blind. If he were, his brain, his cooked and beleaguered mind, played this game to give him some relief in the moments of passing. For that, he was grateful, though he resented the fact that illusion filled his last minutes.

The cold had risen to his waist when he found himself staring at the feet of a man. The man seemed to fly, to hover a few feet above the sand.

The mirage still held him, cold up to the waist, but it ended abruptly against a shore of sand mere inches away. He reached out and grasped hot sand beneath the booted, flying feet. It sifted and poured through his fingers and into the watery illusion where it created clouds of chocolate that drifted around his waist.

He looked up.

The man stood on air above the sand. Boots, black and scuffed and scalded, twisted slowly in a breeze so gentle that he couldn't feel it.

He stepped forward, but his feet met resistance, a wall, the end of movement.

So, he thought, flying men and feet that think they are underwater. This is my end.

The sun, merciless as ever, unblinking, poured heat and burning rays down into the bucket of death.

He reached up and touched the boots.

His hands believed the boots were real.

He touched the mirage, and his hands believed the water was real.

If he were dying, he decided, he might as well enjoy what little comfort the illusions of death brought him. He cupped his hands and splashed mirage on his face.

Cold. Cold and hot at the same time. His cracked and blistered lips burned as if the water were real, as if they were touched by cold, clear spring water.

He licked his lips, and the illusion was complete. His swollen tongue felt the water, believed in the water.

Perhaps, he thought, that's all anything is. Perhaps if he believed in the water the way he believed in stones and bushes and dunes . . .

Perhaps.

He closed his eyes. He let his feet feel wet. He let his legs feel cool. He let his hands dangle in the pool he imagined himself in. He knelt and immersed his head, and for the first time in three days, he was cool. The sun was no longer an enemy. The desert was less full.

He dared to open his eyes, and the cold continued, caressed, and healed.

He laughed at himself, and his mouth filled with water. He coughed, sputtered, stood back into hot air and scalding sun. Spitting and retching, he emptied bile into the mirage, and the bile floated on the surface, orange and green on silver and blue.

Water. Belief. He believed in the water, and it was real. Not a mirage.

A desert spring.

Or perhaps it was death, and in death water came to a man in the desert.

He immersed himself again. This time, he sipped. Slowly. Only a little.

And again.

And again.

And finally, he moved along the wall of sand. Along and away from the flying man until he stood once more on smooth, dry sand.

His pants, what was left of them, dripped water onto the sand. Where the water touched, the sand swallowed and the sun created short-lived puffs of steam.

He dripped, and he marveled at how quickly the sand dried, at how quickly the little droplets died.

Finally, he looked back to the tree, to the flying man, to the spring that might be a mirage or death.

He walked the edge of sand and silvery water until he stood beneath the dangling man, a man hung by the neck, a man much like himself.

The man was dead, not flying -- hung from a dead tree by his own belt.

So much work to hang yourself in the hot sun, he thought. The water was so near.

The boots turned slowly.

He sat in the shade made by the hanged man and sipped from the spring in which he now believed.