Life Without Julie Murray 2008

On the film, *A Life Without Death* (2000)

In his 1960 novel *The Woman in the Dunes*, Kobo Abé describes sand thus:

> ..sand is sand wherever it is, whether from a beach or desert.
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> ...(T)he size of the grain .... shows very little variation and follows a Gaussian distribution curve with a true mean of one-eighth millimeter. Air or water currents set up a turbulence. The smallest wavelength of this turbulent flow is about equal to the diameter of the desert sand. Owing to this peculiarity, only the sand is extracted from the soil, being drawn out at right angles to the flow. If the cohesion of the soil is weak the sand is sucked up into the air by light winds, which of course do not disturb the stones or clay - and falls to the ground again, being deposited to the leeward.
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> -*The Woman in the Dunes* - Kobo Abé

Abé then goes on to describe the particulars of it's behaviour in the aggregate, of it being the antithesis of all form, a shape-shifting menace which devours everything, the only certain factor it's movement " ...(it) didn't even have a form of it's own... yet not a single thing could stand against this shapeless destructive power."

As the captive Niki fails again and again to escape the pit he has been lured into, the sand becomes ever more monstrous and invasive to the point where it seems to have entered his body and courses where his very blood does. It encrusts his eyes and corners of his mouth, and abrades his skin, which breaks and bleeds. He vacillates between rage at its persistent incursion and slackly accepting it as a new and inexorable condition of his life. This complex picture of sand deepens throughout the novel to become a living metaphor for the unfamiliar anxiety and fear Niki experiences as his firm ideas about liberation and stasis are all but inverted. His confusion is exacerbated since it never becomes clear to him which incidents or perspectives in the evolving events are suitable for hope and which ones of despair. Agonized by his captivity he imagines the crumbling, rotting house as a ship, floating on the sand. In it one is always mobile, going somewhere.

Appropriate, perhaps, to the character of his desperation, Niki's vision schemes a pair of barrels as his vessel, one inside the other and hinged like a gyroscope, but does not include a means of propulsion nor any kind of rudder. He spends the entire novel down in the sand hollow with the woman (never named) in a collapsing house battling the great quantities of sand that falls daily into the pit.

Frank Cole's encounter with the forces of this same substance involved circumstances that were in most ways the diametric opposite of those in Abés story. Unlike Niki, Cole's survival depended on his constant mobility. His yearlong push across the great sands of the Sahara is a veritable practical manifest of Niki's structure that can float on sand, ride it's waves and currents and always manage an even keel, though Cole's means were a lot more traditional and dependable. He started out on the west coast, in Nema, Mauritania, and made his way through Mali, Niger, Chad and the Sudan, respectively, until he reached the Red Sea on his eighth camel.

His film about this extraordinary endeavor, *A Life Without Death* (2000), begins with a spare and brief synopsis of the four year period of preparation preceding the journey, during which he disciplined his mind and his body, a period where, he informs us in uninflected voice-over, he deliberately sought isolation so that loneliness in the desert would not be the thing that killed him.

In the film, his apartment and his circumstances assume the emptiness of a desert long before he ever climbs a camel, something he does with the strength and evident physical discipline of an athlete. Interested in how one gets by in these parts of the world, I hitch a ride on his caravan of blind faith - which I gather wobbles nearly as often as the fiercely heated air he moves through - and live vicariously the fear that he experiences directly. I never meet him, though, in spite of the fact that he tells much about himself and is in the frame as often as not, on or off his mount. In squarely composed shots the viewer is presented with the preparation's itemized accounting in list fashion; Cole in an otherwise empty room hoisting weights, pacing around his Steenbeck while teaching himself Arabic from a book, sleeping in an empty room, interviewing himself. From the beginning we understand that each shot and its set-up, while documentary, is crucially at the same time a dramatic construct. One example of this deliberation is the lighting arrangement and noir-ish angular framing he employs as he films himself sharpening his knife, a long, anciently tapered dagger which, in a pool of furtive light he drives against the sharpening stone again

and again. Each movement is rigidly choreographed and measured; it's meaning a succinct encapsulation of the information he wishes us to know. Nothing in these scenes is extraneous. Nothing left to chance. Except, of course, for the whole of what will be an entire year crossing the desert.

The next time we see this kind of chiaroscuro is during an operation he filmed at a hospital in Chad, closer to the end of his journey. A German doctor working at the hospital permitted him to film while helping him procure visas to continue travel in the area. The change of scene is shocking. The viewer is pulled from the broad and blistering light of the desert and thrust deep into darkness, into the interior of the body itself. Quite literally. As scalpel cleaves belly and gloved hands dig among livid tissue extracting the baby during a c-section. This is a rare and visceral encounter with a fundamental force of life wildly outside his control.

Still at the beginning there is a shot of his empty apartment but it's not clear whether he has recently packed up or whether it has always been like this. Nobody comes to visit. No goodbye scenes, or waiting in line at busy offices for visa's and vaccines. In dry, unadorned statements he informs his invisible audience something of the nature of his quest, but even that is not entirely clear. He seems bent on cheating death but is magnetically attracted to it at the same time. He shuffles a ream of formal-looking papers and stands up from the table. The camera approaches the top sheet. Such is the established mood of the film that it could as easily be a last will and testament as what it is; The Retardation of Aging and Disease by Dietary Restrictions. Only in the west.

While his grandfather trembles uncontrollably in the end stages of life, Cole states flatly that he would willingly give up his own life if only it meant his grandfather could live. This, and the final shot of the film (not of the wide expanse of the newly encountered Red Sea as one might expect, but of Cole's face looking upon the scene, uttering, "Alive!") offer something of a clue as to the trajectory Cole has set himself up for. One might think that such an undertaking would by it's extreme nature, cleanse the body and soul of grief, but it seems in that moment, instead of euphoria, Cole is experiencing something else. Maybe baffled disappointment. It is poignant, extreme and absurd all at the same time.

His second guide, employed to take him through Niger, is an Arab in a region where there is factional fighting between Arabs and the nomadic Twaregs. This man endures sleepless nights of unrelenting fear before he finally turns back. Cole describes how, as they rode

together, the guide became sick and was forced to walk. He expresses his admiration for this 65-year-old man who made the 300 km "physical feat", while in pain and urinating blood. Cole sees it as "defying old age, defying death". He assumes the guide is in pursuit of the same objectives as Cole himself is, and not simply a man trying to save himself, obligate to what Werner Herzog once referred to as "the monumental indifference of nature".
Cole may be remembering his own grandfather and his heroic take on this event might be the expression of his anguish at being unable to forestall the inevitable, a sorrow, it appears, he can never escape. This is not the first, nor the only time in the film when there seems to be something oddly unrealistic in his perception of the world. Odd, because, while he is expressing these thoughts he is obligate himself to that very nature and witness at all times to it's blind and brutal reality. In spite of his admitted anxiety within this place, a place to him irresistible in it's beauty and challenge so clearly evidenced by his cinematography, he manages to pause regularly in order to construct with his camera some symbolic realities-within-realities. He stages numerous walk-ons with his camels. He frames apparent departures through the arched branches of dead trees. In a curiously premeditated shot, he has set up his camera to film himself off in the distance tugging at his clothing while in voice-over he describes his loss of control of his body as a result of abject fear. A fear he experiences from the dread of not being able to find the wells marked on his ordinance survey map and discovering roads obliterated by the desert sands.

To see the kindness of reality requires an awful lot of beauty. By the manner in which Cole frames the landscape and attends so closely to that which composes and inhabits it, rock and sand, beetle and scorpion and occasional dried salt beds, it is clear he has been ladled plenty of this unquantifiable stuff to fortify him along the way. He films under a full moon. The dark powdered blue is like no other and the landscape a curved penumbra holding the night as a bowl of milk. It is dark and it is light. Occasionally he comes upon and films, dunes of sand that have blown themselves into supine forms, one merging into the next all the way to the edge of an imaginary bed. Just as a body would turn in it's sleep, so do these hills swap themselves for something else in the dark so that whatever peak a traveler might have pegged his survival on before the sun went down is guaranteed to have shifted during the night. Cole uses compass and map and his camel follows dutifully along.

Perhaps time, the only thing he has plenty of, is the least formidable element he is facing, in spite of the urgency of his situation. An element that in it's abundance allows him periodic

respite in such austerity. The length of any day, whether it brings with it unendurable boredom or unrelenting threat, is necessarily abbreviated in the film form, so that, for the viewer at least, his encounters with the circumstances of the Sahara seem to shift abruptly and take turns that are palpably sudden. Flat horizons, rare cloud cover, grass scrub and any number of skeletons of animals come under the gaze of the camera, a gaze not so much contemplative as it is calculating. At other times the subject and its arrangement is startling in its composure, so carefully and precisely framed and serving nothing but the beauty of itself. It is during these moments the viewer is permitted whole and unmediated access to something of the awe of the Sahara, it's structure and inhabitants.

Sound is captured along with image and the wind in its infinite harmonious variety often becomes the substance of the scene before us. It whistles under pressure or groans deeply, raising sudden spinning cones of sand whipped into entities that seem alive for short, sudden moments. Otherwise sounds heard in this flat open space are of themselves, alone, and have no echo. The soft thumps and quiet crunch of sand that accompanies the walking camel contrasts with the lighter version attending the man. It is so quiet one would think the man would be tempted to talk to his camel. We hear the hissing of a snake - suddenly happened upon, and occasionally the high-pitched scree of birds tearing the sky along its edges, but nothing else. No airplanes ever pass overhead, small or large.

The music in the film, composed by Richard Horwitz, contributes to the gravity and momentum of the camels in a deeply resonant score that fills the landscape and measures the great arc of the sky as it throbs in the depth of our bodies. These are interludes of great relief and one could suppose, describe something of the interior rhythm that our traveler must have experienced with a similar sense of unnamed optimism. More than occasionally, one hopes. The body singing to itself could never die of loneliness this way.

Meanwhile, the camels bear the aloof expression of the perennially unperturbed and exhibit no haste unless forced. These bad-tempered beasts are magnificent in their obdurate resistance and, moments later, impassive compliance as they heave to their knees and then onto their platter-like feet, great, doughy pancakes that terminate their long limbs. They bellow loudly, mouths agape. Somewhere I learned that camels can aim and spit a date stone as accurately as an archer, and can close at will their nostrils in a sand storm. They rest with their legs neatly tucked beneath them, compact as a log. Periodically Cole films while riding.

The camel's head bobs at the bottom of the frame; floating as if swimming and swaying from side to side absorbing it's surroundings. It's stride so long the ground moves beneath it in slow motion. We get a sense of the relative size of things when Cole, camera at shoulder level, films close-up the white, thin legs of the camel as they pass through the frame one by one. The large, woody knots at their joints give them the appearance of trees.

This creature seems instinctively inured to it's place in the desert, regardless of the outcome, whereas Cole seems earnestly alien to it, and one can't help but feel that is not a good thing. It is impossible to turn one's eyes away, however, because in spite of this Cole really does overcome adverse conditions and manages to cross the Sahara by camel alone. He was the first western person ever to accomplish this and he may get to keep the title for the foreseeable future since the worlds deserts are expanding apparently without pause and becoming ever more inhospitable in the process, even to those people ancestrally acclimated to the extremes of temperature and lack of shade. Sand is quickly becoming the dominant feature threatening to swallow everything. What I imagine to be the old fashioned desert, to which inhabitants of hundreds of years have long since developed a nuanced and fertile relationship, one not so bleached and featureless and which supports life, is itself being swallowed. The last-hottest place on earth is getting hotter. Today's archeological digs in the Middle East can only occur in the first few months of the year as the temperatures in that region, routinely reach unendurable and life-threatening levels. The crowded streets of the city of Beijing, China, are subject every year to a particularly pernicious yellow smog as airborne sands of the advancing Gobi invade and the fingers of the desert dunes move slowly nearer, like a larcenous hand across a table. These events last longer each year and are lately accorded the expectancy of seasons, they are so punctual.

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