



*This is a dream* you think to yourself, deciding on the most desirable species of narrative operating on your new circumstances and the order and cost of that narrative's truth.

Picking sharp grass seeds from your socks, you realise you're wearing the same ones you put on yesterday morning. This is the proof of a kind of narrative consistency that obtains in no dream ever dreamt. So within a few minutes of waking up, it's obvious that your predicament requires that you find breakfast.

But you're more lost than you've ever been. You must act. This is an inhospitable myth. You're in the upper Paleolithic, when every inhabited place on earth was an inhospitable myth.

We have countless words for 'story' in our language.

This applies for all languages.

Having discounted 'dream' you've been unconsciously weighing the merits of 'accident', 'disaster', 'stag night' perhaps, 'danger' and 'inexplicable', all under the arch-descriptor 'real'. Your fear is an editorial decision on behalf of your amygdala, and the moment you're conscious of it, that's a story too.

We aren't conscious that we categorise our perception of events according to narrative any more than we consciously notice the brain translating perception into recountable memory. We have stories hiding inside stories, and all are hiding behind common nouns.

If you survive long enough to make it out of this myth, the next days will make an excellent book, or a miniseries.

Both the pleasure taken from giving ourselves to a story and our shared capacity for giving ourselves to a story at all (a capacity for the suspension of disbelief on a continuum from listening to a joke or remembering a constellation to detonating a suicide belt) commemorate a time when questioning certain kinds of narrative was inimical to one's prospects of surviving a season in a desert.

The desert in question, the exact desert, exists. Here is its picture.



Of course you recognise it. It's the desert in which you woke up this morning, where you're rubbing little rubies and grains of quartz from your hair and asking yourself which horizon offers the best prospect of rescue.

But on what will you base your decision? Are you desperate enough to consider auspices? Or attentive enough, rather, since it's attention that alchemises circumstances into narrative (and consider what that means, incidentally, to a people who survive by hunting and gathering in a desert where nothing has ever been built, no land has ever been "owned" and time is conceived spatially—in short, a place outside the farmer's understanding of 'history', a species of narrative concerned with the ownership and inheritance of land, antithetical to myth.)

Attention, then.

First notice the sun, and your long shadow, and the nearby hill of boulders, each one patinated densely black by the sun. Notice also the fat, bitter stems, scorched thorn bushes and tufts of silver grass.

The lions are asleep, so don't worry about them yet.

But on no account name those animals out loud.

*Our parents used to say that he is a thing which dreams when he lies asleep that people have seen his footprints, people have made free with his name, say the people who live here.*

*Whenever he dreams, he believes his dream.*

This is something the lion has in common with the men and women known here as *!gi:ten*, ‘possessors-of-power’: experts in attention and narrative in a place where the margins of survival are very narrow.

All of this is a rather elliptical explanation of why the theatre has one foot in the desert of nocturnal predators and shamans.

The isolated hills you see are volcanic plugs, narrow mounds of black dolerite boulders, each one level at its summit. Underfoot is a kind of rusted igneous grit between tufts of bleached grass. Nothing grows higher than the waist apart from rare thin trees and, to the north if you make it that far, fleshy succulents that might be mistaken for men in the dusk.

Dusk is a long time off. You make an editorial decision of your own and set out for an escarpment to the south.

When I was last in this desert, I picked up a tool. It was a scraper, a wedge for skinning and jointing game, struck from a core of foreign green stone. Comfortable in the hand, its edge was knapped into crescents like overlapping fingernails.

I don’t know the last time it was in any hand, or even what kind of hand that was. It could have been lost in the early 1800s or before the invention of language. The last person to hold it might belong to an extinct species.

This desert obliterates time, you see, and there are two reasons for this.

The first has to do with its geological antiquity. The central plateau of the southern African subcontinent is both the most geologically stable place in the world and one of the most consistently arid. Archeologists are lost without layers, but the desert floor here is a uniquely old and palimpsestic single, exposed stratum where wind erosion makes it effectively impossible to date anything purely lithic with carbon. If you drop something, in other words, it’ll lie there until it’s picked up. No one will ever know how long it’s been there.

Secondly, this desert obliterates time because it is a myth.

You make your escarpment and climb it, reaching the summit at dusk (everything's further than it seems). What you can see from the top goes on forever. It's always been like this, and it's perfect.

It's a wilderness; people live here.

A wilderness without people is a species of park, an untended garden. The difference between the two is something to do with time and memory—and how a kind of continuity that might be called 'mythic' is experienced by the people surviving inside it.

A park is a wilderness without myth.

In this desert, myth is a means to map an environment with the forensic attention required to survive by hunting and collecting. It is a heuristic method for the accurate prediction of change intended to neutralise dangerous contingency and a shorthand of priceless economy to explain and teach everything to be noticed.

Myths are tied to physical locations in ways directly analogous to the memory palaces of the *ars memoria* of Renaissance Europe (not a classical invention but a hunter gatherer survival.)

We know from some miraculous ethnography recorded in Cape Town in the 1870s that the people who lost this desert at the end of the 1800s, the |Xam-ka !ei (the 'punctuation marks' represent click phonemes), conceived of time spatially. The past was a place, the dead were everywhere and the kind of transformations that belong to creation stories were genuine possibilities.

They explained that the Water, whom they called !Khwa, emerged from the waterpits where he lived to forage in the arid veldt. He walked on broad columns of precipitation, his breath was mist and his scent was the smell of fresh rain on parched earth. You could point at a rain cloud and say *Look, there's !Khwa*.

!Khwa was the protector of certain animals, the agama lizard among them. Generations of close observation of the desert revealed that the agama lizard bobs its head when it's going to rain. Knowledge like that has mythical import in a place as dry as this.

In rituals of making rain, the specialist would 'hunt the Water'. He or she would trap !Khwa and butcher him in the veldt in the same way you would an eland. Where his blood fell, rain would follow.

The Water was myth. He was a metaphor. He was absolutely real.

Here, where time isn't a succession of unrepeatable events but a knot of landscape and narrative in a place where where a lapse of attention is fatal, myth serves as a form of observation. It provides commentary. It might seem as if the environment—hills, larvae, springbok, stars and other people—is an archive of essential information about itself. You can watch a myth unfold on your way to the hunting ground, another on the walk back, and another still when you're asleep and dreaming.

Where 'culture' and 'environment' overlap for practical reasons to do with the mortal dangers of hunger, predation, thirst and fighting, myths are alive, and accessible. A myth might be unfolding right now on the other side of the hill or hot flats. And where there's no distinguishing between the mythical and the literal, myth is a mnemonic, and a calculator; it's calendar, instruction book and encyclopedia.

The escarpment on which you're standing is known as the head of the agama lizard. It's known to be an excellent place to conduct rituals of rain making.

I hope this will be useful to you if you survive the night.

The sound you can hear, now, is a pair of lions on the shaded slope talking to each other, as lions always do at dusk. They're triangulating. It's a conversation about protein.

*Lion*, you say to yourself, out loud.

The people who survive in this wilderness call dusk *the lion's shadow*, believing that lions can hasten twilight by standing in front of the sun. Now you know how the lion earned the 'respect name' *the thing whose head is darkness*—a name you should always use instead of just coming out with *lion*, as if you don't know a thing.

Lions aren't stupid.

Speaking of lions, we know from its bones that the European cave lion was nearly a metre and a half tall at the shoulder, and we know from its depictions in Ice Age rock art that it was maneless. I'm convinced, even in the absence of any ethnography comparable to the words that came out of this desert,

that children of the European Paleolithic were taught to call their gigantic lions similar respect names for exactly the same reasons.

Every wilderness, as a place where people live, remembers the species of continuity that shaped our consciousness in this desert. The idea of ‘the time of myth’ is perhaps a glimpse of this continuity.

Of course, there are no lions here anymore. You’re lost on a walk to find some engravings on a little hill about five kilometres from a farmhouse on a gigantic sheep ranch. An hour earlier you found a scraper of green stone which someone might have put down for a moment before the invention of writing.

You’re an ambassador of history here.

Where people survive by hunting and gathering, history arrives with weapons, exportable myths and fences. Wilderness is transmuted into property through the medium of labour, which sons kill to defend, and the transformation is certified by the loss of a corpus of literature of which this desert is the model.

History is a machine for the obliteration of time, too.

Quotations are from The Bleek and Lloyd Collection of !Xam ethnography:  
<http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za>

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