

New Flash Fiction from Elise Ochoa: “Desert Crossing”

If you’ve never seen a desert, I mean, a *real* desert, you’d think the sand looks like murky brown water rippling in the wind. Sometimes I would tell myself that, as I traversed the barren land of sand and dunes. I wandered the desert for so long, my face was wrinkled around the eyes from squinting through the sun. My eyebrows were always raised; my forehead had ripples too. Did I see Someone?

On the days a light breeze brushed the sand, I imagined the dust rising like ocean spray after a wave. But then my tired feet would burn with the heat, and I’d have to keep trudging. Occasionally there would be people: tourists, scientists, gypsies. They’d pass me water. I’d take it without a smile. I always left them with my lips as dry and cracked as they were before. I never got hopeful when I crossed these types. They weren’t you.

✘ My lips were waiting for you. My lips were waiting for your cool, sweet dew. When my heart began to tell me you were near, I would go whole hours sitting in the sand, just daydreaming of you. I twirled my long, knotted hair around my fingers. I cradled piles of sand in the form of you. Those days, it was even harder to set out across the barren land than during the hottest sun-drenched days.

My heart told me you were coming. And my heart found me the oasis. It told me where the palms were. It told me where the underground spring was bubbling up. When I found the tall green palms and the low green shrubs, my hunchback straightened. I no longer needed to bow against the wind. I stood tall; my eyes widened.

Tangled among the shrubs were myriad silks, pillows, jewels. I

untangled the silks, polished the jewels, scrubbed the pillows until they shone as bright as my eyes. I worked day and night, drinking from the natural spring, energized, building for you. I grew dates and pomegranates and juicy melons. No longer skin and bones, I had hips for you to grab from behind and caress.

I saw you coming from many dunes away. I knew your heart was leading you to the oasis, to me. It was a windless day. The air was clear. I saw your strong shoulders first, then your long legs, then your tousled hair. Details came slowly. I bathed in them all.

Soon, you weren't just a shadow. You were a man. A man with scruff. Thirsty, like I once was. But, unlike me, you were confident. Lost, but not *lost*.

As you approached, your thin sandals kicked up the sand behind you. I stood at the entrance of the palms, with lavender silks, gold cushions, white melons surrounding my beautiful silhouette. With my elbows at my sides and my palms up, I opened myself to you with a smile.

You squinted in my direction. You coughed, dry, short. My smile faltered slightly. You wiped your forehead with the crook of a glistening arm. My heart fluttered. I ran for the fresh spring water. I ran toward you with the water. Like gold, I offered it.

But, like the heat, I must have wavered in your eyes. A fiction.

You blinked me away. Just a dune.

Your form grew smaller and smaller to my eyes. They bleared until you disappeared. Invisible, I cowered like Romeo, slowly dying at the feet of your not-coffin.