Beachworld
by Stephen King

Fedship ASN/29 fell out of the sky and crashed. After a while two men slipped from its cloven skull like brains. They walked a little ways and then stood, helmets beneath their arms, and looked at where they had finished up.

It was a beach in need of an ocean -- it was its own ocean, a sculpted sea of sand, a black-and-white-snapshot sea frozen forever in troughs and crests and more troughs and crests.

Dunes.
Shallow ones, steep ones, smooth ones, corrugated ones. Knifecrested dunes, plane-crested dunes, irregularly crested dunes that resembled dunes piled on dunes -- dune-dominoes.

Dunes. But no ocean.

The valleys which were the troughs between these dunes snaked in mazy black rat-runs. If one looked at those twisting lines long enough, they might seem to spell words -- black words hovering over the white dunes.

"F--k," Shapiro said.

"Bend over," Rand said.

Shapiro started to spit, then thought better of it. Looking at all that sand made him think better of it. Looking at all that sand made him think better of it. It was the time to go wasting moisture, perhaps.
Half-buried in the sand, ASN/29 didn't look like a dying bird anymore; it looked like a gourd that had broken open and disclosed rot inside. There had been a fire.

"Too bad about Grimes," Shapiro said.

"Yeah." Rand's eyes were still roaming the sand sea, out to the limiting line of the horizon and then coming back again.

It was too bad about Grimes. Grimes was dead. Grimes was now nothing but large chunks and small chunks in the aft storage compartment. Shapiro had looked in and thought: It looks like God decided to eat Grimes, found out he didn't taste good, and sicked him up again. That had been too much for Shapiro's own stomach. That, and the sight of Grimes' teeth scattered across the floor of the storage compartment. Shapiro now waited for Rand to say something intelligent, but Rand was quiet. Rand's eyes tracked over the dunes, traced the clockspring windings of the deep troughs between.

"Hey!" Shapiro said at last. "What do we do? Grimes is dead; you're in command. What do we do?"

"Do?" Rand's eyes moved back and forth, back and forth, over the stillness of the dunes. A dry, steady wind ruffled the rubberized collar of the Environmental Protection suit. "If you don't have a volleyball, I don't know."

"What are you talking about?"

"Isn't that what you're supposed to do on the beach?" Rand asked. "Play volleyball?"

Shapiro had been scared in space many times, and close to panic when the fire broke out; now, looking at Rand, he heard a rumor of fear too large to comprehend.

"It's big," Rand said dreamily, and for one moment Shapiro thought that Rand was speaking of Shapiro's own fear. "One hell of a big beach. Something like this could go on forever. You could walk a hundred miles with your surfboard under your arm and still be where you started, almost, with nothing behind you but six or seven footprints. And if you stood in the same place for five minutes, the last six or seven would be gone, too."

"Did you get a topographical compscan before we came down?" Rand was in shock, he decided. Rand was in shock but Rand was not crazy. He could give Rand a pill if he had to. And if Rand continued to spin his wheels, he could give him a shot. "Did you get a look at --"

Rand looked at him briefly. "What?"

The green places. That had been what he was going to say. It sounded like a quote from Psalms, and he couldn't say it. The wind made a silver chime in his mouth.

"What?" Rand asked again.

"Compscan! Compscan!" Shapiro screamed. "You ever hear of a compscan, dronehead? What's this place like? Where's the ocean at the end of the fucking beach? Where's the lakes? Where's the nearest greenbelt? Which direction? Where does the beach end?"
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