KINONIK

WOMAN IN THE DUNES (1964)

Directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara

WEDNESDAY June 3rd 7PM

SATURDAY June 6th 2PM / 7PM



An entomologist visits a coastal village to collect tiger beetles in the sand dunes. He misses the last bus. The villagers offer him a place to sleep: a shack at the bottom of a sand pit, reached by rope ladder, shared with a young widow. In the morning the ladder is gone. The woman explains: every night they must shovel sand into buckets that the villagers haul to the surface, or the dunes will bury the house, then the next house, then the village. The sand never stops. He came to collect insects; he's been collected. An ant lion digs a conical pit in loose sand and waits at the bottom for prey to slide in. The steeper the walls, the more impossible the climb.

Kōbō Abe wrote the novel in 1962; Teshigahara filmed it with Tōru Takemitsu's score scraping and buzzing like an insect caught in glass. The cinematography turns sand into skin and skin into sand—close-ups of grains sliding across a woman's shoulder, sweat pooling in the hollow of a collarbone, the texture of labor and desire becoming indistinguishable. He tries to escape. He fails. He tries again. He stops trying. He and the woman develop something that might be tenderness, or might just be what happens when two bodies are pressed together by circumstance and gravity. He discovers a method for collecting water through capillary action in the sand and becomes absorbed in the project. By the end, he has a chance to leave. He doesn't take it.

This is what the return to nature actually looks like. Not transcendence on a mountaintop, not Riefenstahl in a short-sleeved shirt conquering a peak; just sand, labor, the body reduced to what it can do, and the disturbing discovery that you might prefer it to the life you left behind.