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by Paragraph

How was it that we let our childhood be so overrun by fear of quicksand? This mysterious, shadowy colloid which terrorised so many greyscale movies co-starring banyan trees was always rumoured to be close by and yet just out of sight; the only sure way of finding it, with one's feet. And its name, a cruel joke: one always sank *slowly* in quicksand. 'There's a patch near the baths at the south end of the beach' we said; 'there's a patch at the back of the school...'; 'there's a patch which came up after the rain, at the edge of the gully'. A zombie pugilist, quicksand deflects all efforts to fight it, using opposition as fuel: to struggle entails a faster descent. Into what? Quicksand collects into itself two archetypical horrors of the unconscious: drowning and premature burial. And yet. What I'd do now to have that B-grade terror back, to trade it for real workaday fears — of a cancer fuelling every cough, a stroke behind every headache, the persistent anxiety that I'll never earn enough to fix my teeth. 'All dentistry is a delaying operation,' the surgeon says. Is he sad, upset with my mouth? 'But isn't that *all* medicine?' I reply. He winces but says nothing, so I add 'and culture, too?' Silence. Then: 'We start the root canal in a week.' And the oxymoron dies. Quicksand suddenly seems quick. Just like that. Modern dentistry is a miracle.