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## How To Map A Desert

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# HOW TO MAP A DESERT

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**Senior Project submitted to**

The Division of Social Studies

and

The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

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by

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Annandale-On-Hudson, New York

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“By daybreak several inches of snow had fallen, and the trails were completely hidden. Even the landmarks of the day before were so unfamiliar to us that we had little hope of returning along the route over which we had come.”

—Desert Trails of Atacama : American Geographical Society

[-23° 29' 21.642" -69° 56' 14.946" ]

The desert stands before us like a board game we unfold from a box. Some sections hiss up sulfuric smoke from holes that stem into deep flowing lava, and others hold still as the wind moves sand closely to the ground. The one thousand kilometers of terrain are structured in arcs, bends, and flat ground, with salt plates, geysers and brown sand. We are in the tones of light, too harsh at times, too white. The sun reflects off the ground, the sky, the car door, in jumps of grey, gold, gravel and white that can't hold in place long enough. Although uncontrollable, the terrain shows signs of humility in places, stubbornly dry but with shrubs, covered in dust, growing on the sides of the road, or in the middle of nothing, next to a rock. These small miracles, in shades of aging green, can be found on flat areas, mounds or even at elevated heights where the pressure weighs down heavier on their possibility. Past these mounds, to the end of sight, and probably beyond what is visible, yellowing stalks, shoot up from the sand in a random scattering, guiding our view of what is here and what is not. The rain might not have grown them, dispersed as they are, but the rivers that flow beneath the desert account for these growths. What is below tells the story of what is above.

I unfold the desert from its box every morning: today at four in the morning to get on the road, but sometimes in dreams as well, unintentionally. To unfold is a process that occurs above ground, with corn soup and hot coffee for breakfast, as the laying out flattens the folds where the paper is starting to age. The beginning of this unfolding is helped along by steam. It rises softly from the bowl and mug at the breakfast table, to heat the eyelids into opening, as the creases of the desert fold back onto themselves once again. Here, last night, one large square

collapsed neatly into four sections was put away. Now, when the house is still and the roads are empty, the map on the table already has circles drawn in different colors, larger and smaller, intersecting each other at times, or meeting the cross down the middle of the imagined landscape where the map has been folded and unfolded. The difference between waiting and walking marks its beginning here, where the urgency of the road is sucked up towards the sky, from steam; where the hollowing sound of a spoon against a ceramic bowl echoes inwards. It occurs with a pen in hand to look for what could be beneath this board game, on the other side of the map, flipped over, where no information has been recorded. It proceeds by drawing a new circle, in a different colored pen, to demarcate the disappointment of yesterday's end with this refreshed morning. Now there is condensed water in the creases of the wooden windows and a renewed coolness held within by the mud walls. This moment will as well move along, just as the picture will be taken later, and the last sip of water will be drunk from the bottle. It is time to fold the map back onto itself, to put on shoes, to get in the car and to drive out again as the calm before the search comes to an end. Ritual must be respected if chronology is to work in one's favor.

In the morning, making breakfast, and for the rest of the day, the passing of time is marked by the movements, rounded or in straight lines. It is counted in waves, by the slope of the soup into the pot, out of a cardboard carton, or the running water in the bath at the end of the day, or even still, the horse hoof prints left in the sand, from the pressing and rising in circles perpendicular to the ground. I have tried to tell the tourist riding the horse that the desert means potential loss, but when I point down at the marking, it is usually gone. Sand shifts quickly.

The town of Chuquicamata is growing exponentially.

Copper and gold have been found.

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Housing for the miners is undertaken by a government adjunct project. The plans outline that three kilometers north from the mine, a small oasis is the heart of what will be constructed: the water that flows beneath dictates the movements of the people above. A project report concludes that there is only enough money to build half the structures needed. What happens when the money runs out will happen when the money runs out. White battered trucks begin to arrive with planks of wood, metal sheets for the roofs, nails, plastic tubing, insulation and doors. Instruction manuals on the safety procedures are handed out to the construction workers. It begins.

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Construction hours are from 9am to 6pm. The sun in the morning and the cold winds at night have established this working schedule. All the construction workers have rough hands and rounded stomachs, drink coke and eat empanadas at least twice a week. When there is no more money and the materials have been used up, five unfinished houses stand wobbly with wire poles sticking out from the top. As the men step back to look at them, the sun sets, casting their shadow onto the houses. Behind them, the sound of an engine starting up is heard, and a single truck sets out. It moves in the direction of the prison camp ruins, 107 kilometers from the construction site. North. *This is a country of men who possess sensitivity and foresight.* The father of the truck driver might have been imprisoned there, which would explain how he knows the road, or perhaps it is simply because he is Chilean that he knows the road.

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The people in town tell him not to travel at this hour. The fog banks, they say. The tourists found dead last month, they say. He knows the people are superstitious in this area of the desert. Was it his grandmother who had a witch pendant from here? The need to drive on in this direction cannot be explained to the man at the gas station. It cannot be explained to the women gathered at the brink of the last street in their town, as the truck recedes. Their strange glances follow even after the truck has moved away, into the night. The truck driver drives on towards the lowland. On the *Ruta 5* highway, the wheels turn fast, as the road cuts through clusters of white on either side. This is the salt desert. Straight ahead, where the road meets the horizon, there are discreet mountains huddled together in a line. These are the Andes, a stretch of small protrusions lined to appear as if they stand tall. This is spectacular, but invisible at night. It is better to guess the outline of things than to travel in the dark. The truck must go out when no one can see it. What was it that his father used to say? *The mountains to the right, the sea to the left, and everything else follows.*

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“Count to 15 at 80 kph on *Ruta 5*, and turn off the road on the left,” he tells himself out loud, surprised that he remembers so well. *Memory is practical or it is useless.* His father repeated it to him, but so young, he could not imagine one day finding a use for it. An entrance of two large, yellowing shrubs appears on the left of the road as the reassurance that the vowels of each number were held for the right amount of time. A smile forms on the truck driver’s face. His father was right. This counting is an old trick used by the military, perhaps, at first. Used by the locals, perhaps, at first.

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When he returns to the construction site, all the workers help unload the truck. With no more materials to keep building, they have been sitting around waiting. To unload, they form a line of men from the truck to an area where the materials begin to pile up. Everything is marked with spray paint or rusted and falling apart. Nails, wood planks, and dented sheets of metal are worn and frayed at the borders. The objects are divided by their material in neat mounds, with pieces large and small and irregular. This organization does not conceal that they are all used beyond their date of expiration. The construction workers look to each other as they pass the materials on. They look to the truck driver and back at the mounds as they pass the last artifact along, a heavy wooden board shredding filaments at the edges and breaking in half down the center when it is finally thrown onto its mound. The explanation the truck driver offers: “they need to be used.”

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[-23° 29' 21.642" -69° 51' 14.946" ]

The road I travel everyday to and from was laid out by someone with a truck full of cement. There is no assurance that anyone is out here, although this is evidence of intention and progress, and there are signs every so often indicating how far the next town is. On the paved road, going at eighty kilometers per hour, between sand on either side spreading thin, voice doesn't echo out. It leaves the mouth with a flat sound, and the taste of heat, whistled out the window, flattened against the door. The road is the same whether it be Monday or Thursday, known little and too much, a steady presence in the search, with its habits and complaints. It guides in and out from home, with its pieces dry, cracked, and almost rotting at times, each drive discovering an overlooked incident. Early morning now, but soon, slowly and unnoticeable at first, as the car speeds by, hints of gold, rust, copper and moss will light up on the side of the road, where it meets the sand and trips down. Where the road ends at this slope a new frontier is established, similar to the creases of white in tan hands that grip the wheel or the dents in our own bodies, the bodies of those who drive through the desert.

Driving through nothing, time is held and stored somewhere, maybe pushed down into the asphalt, smoothed out by the wheels as they continue forward. The wind, temperature and placement of the shrubs by the road change very little, as the known landscape of the desert before the sun comes up, has been established years ago, and will continue. The asphalt still cold under the wheels, is a relatively new addition, but at night the sand also cools. This intrusion is built into nature, as the wind sways sand onto the road, or stalks growing along its edges lean onto it. There are still twenty minutes before the sun will come out to beam on the windshield and momentarily blind, a time frame that has been established as the right time to

set off. The pane of glass is hit first, from cold to hot, then the face, looking outwards and past the sun's light. Transition is not always so smooth. It can resemble the spots of white in our photos where no information has been captured, where we now have less data than we set out to obtain. Color begins to appear with light and heat. I was here before that, already on the road before the sunrise, as a calculated achievement of human over nature, repeated on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays. We are versed in colors, and their transition from the grays of the early morning. This knowledge is not something that echoes.

At these odd hours, in the early morning, thoughts are not yet formed. Every step or bending of joints is a substantial decision that surprises the body only after it has been carried out. In this way, it is easier to embark with faith, which requires closing one eye and opening the other. Today, we open the eye that knows the approximate estimate of thirty-five minutes to the spot we have chosen. This is five more minutes than yesterday, five minutes further, in a different area. I could close both eyes for a moment, and keep driving, with no exits or curves for fifty-six more kilometers, only holding the wheel in place. The plainness of the road, with one color and one direction and one steady speed, is the simple way it gives itself over to us and we grow intimate with it. But not all is given on this drive. The road is our mapped line but pavement has not reached the ends of where the sun can't see still. This is a landscape meant to be driven through with others to keep a sense of direction. Long road, and straight, but there is still this need, in the silence. No Violeta, Leonilda, or Rosa today in the passenger seat, so that I can be the first one at the new site.

Here we are.

In the 1920s, a nitrate extracting factory was built in the Sierra Gorda desert region. This factory was used by the government as a prison camp in the years of the dictatorship beginning in 1973. The housing structures were not modified when the use of the camp changed. The people held within this site either died or lived on to tell their story and the story of the others who could not tell it. The truck driver comes to take the materials from here and build new homes with them in the present day.

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At the housing site, construction continues, filling in the missing pieces with the materials from the piles. The construction workers have adapted to this new style of building. They take saws to wood planks and chop off edges to redraw their smooth ends. Dented metals are left out to heat under the sun and then molded straight into the shape desired. The construction workers accept the spray-painted materials with little trouble, as they're only meant to hold up the houses, not to be seen. Hot days of this construction work end with cold nights to patch up the sweat. The aridity makes it difficult for the plaster to dry correctly and the heavy walls slide slowly before they are held in place. From afar, kilometers away, the structures look crooked, even now when they are more whole. This complex will house thirty-eight miners and their families, the creation of a small town with its own rhythm. It will be more than makeshift, it will be where people cook dinners and hang up clothes to dry, and sit together under a blanket. The construction workers do not ask about the origin of the miraculous materials that allow construction to finish. When the government doesn't help you out, you become accustomed to a sense of creativity you call survival. The construction workers have questions, but it is more pressing to finish the job, before the sun sets in the desert and the cold takes over. *You cannot think of what you don't have, but of what you want.* The construction workers are good at looking forward.

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The families that are to live here slowly set off in loaded cars with cardboard boxes tied up with twine. They bring pots, lumpy mattresses, blankets, sweaters, cans of food and thermoses with hot coffee. The directions on how to arrive at the new construction site state that the nearest gas station is 15 kilometers out, and that the showering systems will be up and running next week. To date, only fifteen of the thirty-eight structures have been completed. Some miners begin to arrive, but it will take time for others from further away to get here. For the next two weeks, more and more will make the trip out to this oasis, built for them and for the country's economy. As they drive, from north or south, the mountains, or seaside, they will need to become accustomed to the angle of the sun in this region.

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The surviving bodies rose and walked out of the prison camp, leaving behind the rooms they had lived in. They walked down the alley of houses and out the entryway back into cities and small towns. If the men between the walls rose and walked, they do not have the privilege of being artifact. If the materials used to construct those walls are exported out of the camp and used to build new homes, they cannot be the memorial. The truck driver is the philosopher. The miner living here is the hope.

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[-23° 24' 52.578" -69° 43' 57.0714"]

“Buenos Dias”

“Buenos Dias, Patricia,” is the echo. We are among others now with three jeeps parked in the sand, and women stepping out of them. We begin today, as all others have begun, with a hot cup of coffee out of the thermos huddled around the car. Lidia has brought the coffee today, so I offer the car trunk where some can sit and others lean while we sip for a few minutes.

Although we won't take off our sweaters for another hour, because the morning is still cold, we are the flowers of the desert huddled here, with pink, orange, and purple shirts and dresses underneath. In all, we are twenty-six but today we are only five women. When the metal canteen mugs are empty, we stand up. I take the shovel out of the trunk while Angela, Violeta, Rosa, and Leonilda return to the two cars they've arrived in and do the same. Now, and for the rest of the day out here, we resort to the sounds of the wind, and the crunching sand we press down on with our feet. There is not much more to say.

The landscape of today is dry salt cracked into a horizon full of small chipped plates which might look like snow from above. On the ground though, the sound is unmistakably of grainy fissures, with friction of salt against salt against the rubber of our shoes. The sound is loud and seems to travel upwards, but from above, we might not be visible. We turn over salt discs by hand with whitened fingertips if the shovel is too sharp for the terrain, or what should be beneath. First we touch with a hand to get a feel for the texture, then insert the shovel into a crease of the salt plates, where they break up, in order to turn over larger pieces. Over the years, our fingers have become course from this touching against. The search grows harder on the body as the surface seems to grow larger into the edges of the horizon. If we look in one

place, that means we are not using that time to look elsewhere, that means we are disregarding everywhere but this small area our shovel lifts up. The first days of the search, this feeling was what made our heart beat faster, and forced us to sit and take breaks from the heat. How to map a desert? Nothing shows. There is land that differs in color, that has been moved around, that deepens or compresses under the weight of feet. We look for lumps, ridges, dark colors, or mounds as our index. That is our vocabulary, the lines we have learned to draw onto our desert. For a while, we wondered how to trace the way back if crumb is already part of the ground. We have grown into a way of seeing, looking closely at the level of the grain first, then growing tall to see how the lines of geography shape into rounds. After all, the men in the helicopters were looking from above.

I come to a shrub of barley, and sit. The walking at this altitude with the blaze of the sun is a reminder that you are not in control. The breathing is heavy in the lungs, the body wants to plunge deeper. From this spot on the ground, I can see the others moving about, each in their own direction, staring down with a sense of caution in their slowed-down gestures. Five old women out in the desert is the synonym to lost. I know what we look like. Small shovels the size of arms distinguish us from pilgrims, from hiking clubs, from archeology students. We look down, and although nothing comes to the surface of the desert, we persist, going up mounds, or walking further away from the parked cars. No found objects or pieces thereof and we keep walking, with nothing to prove that we are doing this right. We know this is irrational. But if we have nothing, there is so much more to gain. Brown sand in some parts, and white salt in others, are fragments of fragments of rocks or plates that once were whole. The terrain is broken beyond reconstruction; it is not a reassuring indicator. We are schooled in textures and



their meaning, and now know to identify where ground has more salt, less rain; where a river below is stepped on or tampered with. In some sense, we know more about this desert than geographers do. They have mapped out the natural irrigation tunnels that create oasis. We know the last stone turned over did not reveal Mario or Alberto or Ricardo.

I get up to join them again, in my own direction. Winds spiral sand on the ground with a slow hot haze. These movements of sand are the waves that hide and reveal, the waves that we hope will be gentle to us and generous in their moving of the ground. I take off my sweater now and tie it around my waist. The sun is carrying out its first scorching. It will have many more as we are forced to sit and drink out of plastic water bottles and get up again slowly. I see Lydia stop to unravel her sweater from her torso, both arms up in the air, clothing coming off from her hips towards the sky. We each pause in our own area, spread about several meters from each other, enacting the same movement. In the beginning, when we only had our loss in common, we learned to watch each other. We discovered that we react to the sun in the same way, that at the same time, we all were spread about the desert, stopped in our search, enacting this raising of the hands towards the sky. After that, we taught ourselves to walk similarly on the sand, to create more things that held us together, to take two steps, to pause, to stare down, to imagine what could be beneath. This searching is a form of repetition, enacted through looking and looking again at the ground for a slight bulge that could be instructive. What should be here might be elsewhere, up on the highest point of the mountain range, or in the water of the sea, or ten meters in the direction not looked in. So we look. And we look elsewhere, and closer, or further away. We look, while we repeat our sitting and drinking, while we pause to take off our sweaters, while we drink our strong coffee in the morning and get ready to leave at the end of

the day, all together. The orders given to the men who looked from above were that the bodies should never be found. In between retrieving and recalling, despite our aging bodies, or the probability of finding, there is a reason to come here still.

Wind hisses. The sun is beginning its descent.

Who were the people between the walls?

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The desert camp of Chacabuco extends thirty-six hectares. The entrance still faces the north-east but the archway that marks it has crumbled with only two planks of wood held at the top from either side, not able to meet in the middle. Within the outline of barbed-wired wall, there were rows of small home-like structures, each with two or three floors that could house up to six people. The rows of houses are still recognizable, although the structures themselves have fallen apart over the years. The most conserved parts of the camp are the church at the western tip, and the open courtyard at the east. In 1973, when the government transformed the old nitrate factory into a prison camp, the renovation required the purchase of barbed wire, mines, and the construction of surveillance towers. There are still mines surrounding the prison camp but whether they are meant to keep people in or out is unclear. There are no signs.

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The truck driver goes out on Wednesday night and has enough material loaded by the time the sun is coming up. He goes back and forth to this abandoned camp site, once a week, sometimes twice, if the work moves along more quickly and he can get there and back in time before nightfall. At the ruins, there is less and less to look at. The good wood gone, the full bricks used up. The remains of the remains. Four more houses left, and the trips will end. This is good, he thinks. When the drives become shorter and lose their haunting quality, he stays around longer in the early hours of the morning to walk around the camp. He is completely alone, and calm in this place, among the stone structures that once were inhabited. Before the sun comes out, in the golden glow of night, he kicks along a stone in the sand as he walks down the alley separating the rows of houses. What was it his father wanted him to see here? No one for hours and kilometers, he thinks. A

few more steps down the alley, he stops in front of the exterior wall of one of the structures. This one seems to evoke something different than the others. It is held together well, the least torn down, the exterior facade still whole, with only a few places where the stone has crumbled at the corners of the roof. He steps closer to the entryway to get a better look at the arch holding it all together, curious as to how arbitrary destruction is. How has this held up? As he goes to touch the wood of the doorway, he stops, thinking he hears heavy breathing from behind the wall.

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He, behind the wall, has he always been there?

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It happens as the sun is coming up and could have been no more than the shift from night to day. But there is a man. There is a man sitting in the dark shadows within the square structure. At the entrance of the house, the truck driver feels someone looking from an angle behind the wall. In these situations, it is best to go on with what you were doing, and make believe that nothing unusual has occurred—“In these situations.”

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Naturally occurring optical phenomena have never created a man. Lakes: the reflection of the sky. Shrubs: the glossy vision, yielding to the heart or the heat. A man is novelty, the truck driver thinks. A man has never occurred before. Within the prison camp, though, all is possible. He sets off again in the same direction the next week, although there is little usable material left.

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To talk to a mirage. How?

Speak a first phrase and hope it will be answered.

Speak as if speaking to oneself at first, so as not to cause unwanted humiliation, attention, etc.

Mumbling, turned louder.

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The truck driver walks up to the structure and stands by the door waiting to be noticed.

“Hola?” He waits outside for an answer. A short groan is heard from the structure’s entry.

It takes three more trips before a word is formed in response, with only coughs as a sign that there is someone there. The truck driver waits until the sun sets, and his curiosity grows uncomfortable. Then, he walks out of the camp back to his truck. At least there is the certainty of a presence. It is not a mirage, nor a hallucination of the heat, like every one that steps into the desert will tell you they’ve seen. This certainty is only available to the truck driver here at the camp. It is gone completely when he walks out to the truck and sits there drinking the last warm sips of coke from a bottle he throws to the bottom of the passenger seat floor when it is empty. He turns on the radio and drives out of the complex onto the highway. Gone.

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[-23° 24' 52.578" -69° 43' 57.0714"]

Before the sun finally goes, it grows wide, thinning out on the horizon, like dust that settles back down. We know this sign to mean that we must leave now, although nothing has been found again. We return to the two cars we've arrived in, as we wave goodbye and watch each other. After so many years, it's not as strange anymore, but when we first played out these goodbyes we extended the moment as long as possible, walked slowly as we looked to see that everyone had gotten in the car. Although we knew we would be back the next day and that we couldn't possibly stay out here in the dark, there is a force in the desert that pulls in and does not want to release you back into the cool night air of towns. The desert is without time, and so it is about urgency. The wind shifts the sand so that the land will not be the same tomorrow, but we can't know to identify these changes. Deserts all used to be bodies of water, and still flow at night when they are left alone. We say goodbye, hurried now, as we've learned to act quickly, to hug and wave.

Before we leave, I take out the camera from the back pocket of the front seat to look through it at the expanse of land we've walked through today. Through its viewer, one large rectangle with a cross down the center helps to section off the desert of today, and the one of tomorrow. Land continues beyond the frame, but the camera only sees what it sees and the camera only shows me what it sees. The warm machine, stored in the car all day, is what I hold at the end of each search, adjusting the frame until all that is visible is the land we've reached. I take the picture because some things must stay the same on a good day or bad, and there must be something beyond the sunset that is within our control that marks another progression. Angela,

Violeta, Rosa, and Leonilda get in the car now, with the last wave. I do the same, put the camera back into its back seat pocket, strap on my seat belt, and turn the keys to start the car. Before we leave, we circle around the area, to leave a marking in the sand with the wheels, a ritual Rosa started on the first day when she wanted to see the area from all angles. These signs are never there when we return, but they are a way of closing off the day. Ritual is the breathing of our searching, rhythmic and toned, repeated for ourselves in circles or straight lines, in calmed tones of action. It has its origin every day in our own homes when we wake up once again in the morning to boil water for tea, and follows with this circling of the cars. Some things must stay the same on a good day or bad.

Two circles, close together. Then, we set off in the direction of the highway, five kilometers out. Wind shifts the sand more drastically at this hour of the afternoon, and the ground, although flat at first, grows or deepens with ups and downs that make the the steel car creak as it bounces. I look up at the compass taped to the rear view mirror: North-West. Five more minutes and we'll be on the Ruta 5 again, a little closer to home. On the horizon, inflamed by the sunset, the paved line stretching from North to West finally appears with only ten more minutes now. I didn't always need to know how many minutes I was from things, or in what direction I was facing, but ritual demands precisions. Time is not something we control, but there is a possibility of making meaning from its relation to the geography.

The shoes are taken off at the door, the shovel comes into the house. I set it down against the wall where it rests every afternoon and another piece of brown cement crumbles out from where the handle reaches its lean. I have succumbed to the crevice because I prefer an

indentation in the wall to a new place for it every day. I know that ritual must be respected if chronology is to work in one's favor. But the chronology we are looking for is the one that forms history, not the one that tells us how many days have passed in our search with a new crevice from the shovel's metal handle. The small hole that has been carved out of the wall, perpendicular to the doorframe, is close enough to the ground that it goes unnoticed when the shovel isn't in its place. But when the shovel stands upright, the wall's imperfections appear more visibly. There are parts with patches, brown and weak, or bubbles of paint that have swelled up from the wall where the cool humidity in the morning has settled in. When I put up Ricardo's posters, the trouble wasn't seeing his face everyday, or fear of the government, but finding an adhesive that would not succumb to the tearing wall and change in temperature from morning to night. It took a whole week to find, and it was not tape, or glue, or paint, or gum, but a blue synthetic dough. On the box it read "resists separation."

"Ricardo, que quieres cenar?" No answer.

I go run the water for the bath.



From above you can still see this place.

Who looks from above?

---

Between the static on the radio before reaching the highway, and the eternal conversations with the man at the ruins, all is confused. The truck driver does not know what has been heard, or spoken, or imagined. He comes now, with a thermos of coffee on Wednesday nights and a few pieces of pineapple cake. They share these in the structure the man has chosen as his dwelling and discuss the cold, the heat, the roads, the plaster ripping off the walls.

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Figure # 1 shows the structure seen from above. It was sketched imagining what one would see from a helicopter, looking down. Some lines are crooked.

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The name comes on the fifth outing: Luis. Although it means nothing, language allows us to talk about things with care. To the truck driver, this intimacy is a reward for all the drives back and forth to the camp alone. He has at least this piece of information, even if there are so many more pressing questions. The truck driver accepts the name the way he accepts a beer around a spitting grill with men gathered to roast a lamb for the weekend *asado*. He thinks he has done something right, or maybe he has only waited patiently, coming every week standing at the entry way. If it is one or the other, if it is both, he still cannot get up the courage, to ask Luis how he lives here. Not in any theoretical way. The truck driver is not theoretical. Where is the food? the water? To the construction workers, waiting for materials, the truck driver is an outsider who brings rusted objects with a strange enthusiasm that they are useful. Luis is more mysterious still.

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Figure # 2 is a picture of the interior. It shows the paint ripping off the walls. This picture has little value to many people.

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The truck driver brings Luis clothes once he calculates it's been over a month since their first talk, that moment when he finally stepped into the house. Nothing new, just plain shirts and socks he leaves in his car and mentions in passing. "Doesn't it get cold at night?" He tells Luis about the housing complex he is building with the found materials, but Luis hasn't asked why he comes and doesn't comment on the project.

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Figure # 3 is a photograph. Some have concluded that it is the view facing south if one stands at the entrance of the camp. This seems doubtful.

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Talking between the two comes comfortably, as two people who are tired discuss with ease. Not much is said, but they can sit and drink their coffee together without feeling the need to push discussion further. Silence settles in as two Chileans sit together in their same desert and take a break from the scorching sun, under a roof. Luis speaks little and not unprompted, only breaking this pattern to apologize for it. *Perdon*. He had not realized until the truck driver waved through the entryway, on the first day of their witnessing each other, that all this time, he had not said a word. Luis asks for the truck

driver's name in a form of apology. Pedro. *Reconciliation comes with names and dates.*

This is fact number one.

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Figure # 4 is stored in the government archive and unavailable to the general public.

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When they don't talk, they are observing each other. Pedro is short and tan, with a growing belly he carries well. He is even handsome, in the way that his body is the story of his work, round and heavy, hard and waxy, used to sitting or swaying heavy objects from left to right. Sitting down, leaning against the wall in Luis's room, he looks honest, curious and unmistakably like a builder. He is too young, Luis thinks at times, or maybe just young enough? Luis, is taller, thin, in an unexaggerated way. His hair is long enough for some strands to fall into his eyes, and for him to have to push them back every so often, but not long enough to hold behind his ear. An unkept beard, dark green eyes, but nothing more to give him away. If you did not know he lived here, you would not worry about what he eats. But maybe the body needs little.

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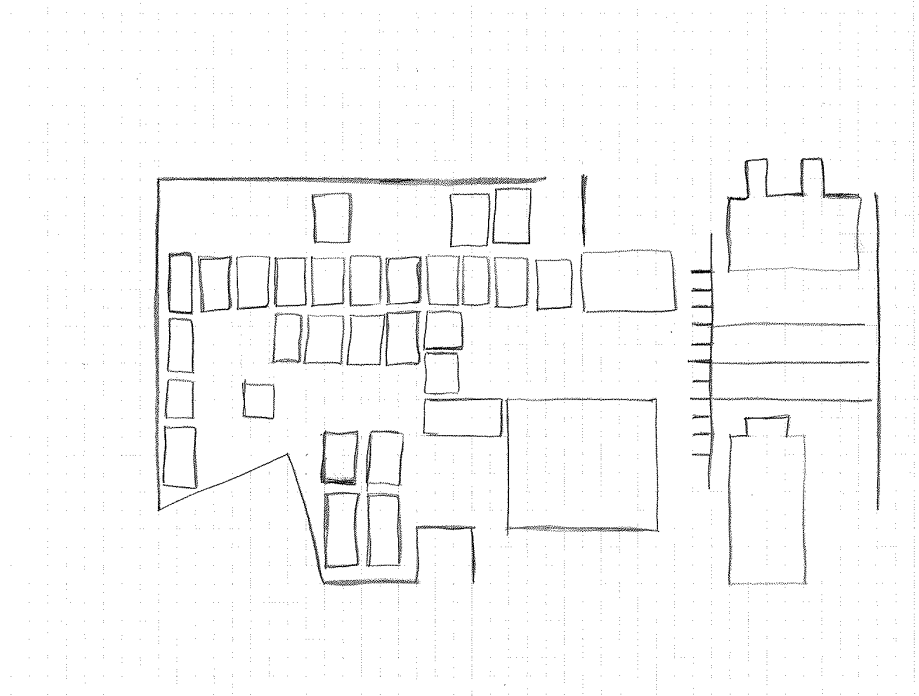


figure #1

[-23° 8' 45.531" -69° 38' 7.3000" ]

Today I pick up Victoria on my way to the agreed-upon spot. She knows how to get there better than I do, so it is my turn to bring the coffee, her turn to direct me when to take the left turn off the highway. Victoria lives four houses down, but we do little apart from one another. All twenty-six of us do little apart from one another: teas in the afternoon with Victoria on Tuesdays, trips to the supermarket with Leonilda (who can't drive) on Wednesdays, and the occasional visit to the bank with Rosa who can't stand to talk to those people on her own. The flowers huddle and remain held together in the desert and then back in our homes or streets. "Buenos días, Pati." "Buenos días, Vicki." Ritual, after all, brings us closer to others when we use the language it requires. We practice each morning when we pick each other up in our cars, each night when we invite each other into our living rooms. We know these hellos and goodbyes to be more sentimental than they ought to be, but ritual restores the emotional. Victoria opens up the passenger door and gets in. Along with the map, she mentions that she's brought new bags of candies for the car: strawberry sour burst and coca verde—the kind we keep for the altitude. Crinkling foil wrappers in the back seats and strewn on the floor are there to tell us when we'll need more. On Tuesday, she must have noticed the bag fell to the floor at a curve in the road, not heavy enough anymore to stay in place. We create our own symbols. Dark road still.

There is nothing here on either side. It still surprises. Years driving on this same road but the expanse is not something that ends. The unfolding is a way of coping, it is not a way of

knowing the ground. In many ways, it is unknowable—to us, to geographers, to the scientist, but there are ways we have adopted its queues into our search: There are twenty minutes left before sunrise. That is something we can calculate with accuracy. Today we drive twenty-seven kilometers. That is something we can know with certainty. These markers tell us nothing about what we want to know but they are there everyday, arriving when we expect them to, and satisfying at least this small knowing of the place. Although the road is straight, the wheel is tempted to curve at kilometer five, the road has a crack from east to west eleven minutes after the gas station, the car creaks from the rise and fall of the unavoidable bump in the middle of the road, at kilometer fourteen. These markers map the road although the road is already on the map. These are the things I know, that I have come to learn through repetition. Ritual, I now understand, is about how the body knows to feel. Even the hold and release of the steering wheel, when the bumps make the hands grip tighter for a second, are important. Victoria looks out the right window, I look out front. There is nothing here.

The sun appears now on the horizon, twenty minutes on the clock exactly, it brings heat instantly. Too hot already for this early hour, I ask Victoria to open the candy bag and unwrap one for me. The sounds of the map folding or of the plastic bag opening are also markers in that we hear them before they occur. We know how the map folds onto itself neatly as paper meets paper in a smooth sound, or how the plastic bag opens swiftly with one pull of the hands, a sound that is sharp, then tight. The appearance of candies in the car was unintentional, with a bag bought for someone else, left in the car, unopened, for days. The sugar melted and reformed to its contained space as we drove in and out of the desert, until they were too hot and pink to go unnoticed. Victoria opened up the bag and handed us each a candy, the foil wrapper

crinkling loudly between our fingers as we unwrinkled their closure. We discovered that this noise is helpful when we need to feel a little bit further from the desert and the car, when we need to feel further from ourselves and our tired search. It speaks of a factory, with its mechanics, far away, with people and conveyor belts and pops of orange and pink and purple. The candies offer a moment of breath, and distance from this heat, with their sound and with their taste. On the first day we ate the candies, alfalfa had begun to sprout, making this one more day in the undifferentiated good and bad season of our search. These signs are crucial in a terrain that has neither summer nor winter as you know to identify them elsewhere. It was a bad day marked by this plant, but Victoria reminds me that not all life is within this desert. We need to remember to leave every so often, and go back into our towns.

Many seasons have passed since the alfalfa sprouted. New candies are purchased now, in response to empty candy bags, not nature's progression. We stop at gasoline stations, or the supermarket; we buy them for each other or for our own cars. They are a thing we add to our shopping lists among life and the need for new socks, between avocados and coffee. We have adopted this noise to our grid, with the slippery sweetness of the candy on the tongue, and the melting between teeth. With it come the rules of the grid: the bag must not be removed from the car. It is a placeholder, held in place by a force unknown to it. I've come to learn that symbols are things that cannot be said too loudly. Hot. The water will last less today.

The way the sun melts into the horizon in the desert is unlike the way we know it to act in cities. In Santiago, or Valdivia or Valparaiso the light switch is turned on, and the office can continue its work, but here this slow fall marks the definitive end of the day. The construction workers pack up their tools, the tourists on horses are led back to their hotels, Pedro gets into his car. Without a water system, or electrical wires lined up and stretched from pole to pole, there is little decision making in how the day begins or ends.

---

Pedro has started listening to classical music on the radio on his drives back from Chacabuco. It moves in and out of reception the whole 107 kilometers but is the only station without commercials. The static keeps him awake when his back slides into the seat and he is forced to sit up straight to switch the dials and look for better reception. *The desert is comforting when it is not terrifying.* What was it that his father meant to say by this? Pedro has always lived in and out of the desert, never more than walking distance to an open view of it. The things his father said to him come echoing back on these drives, between the static, the music, and the few words Luis has said. His father's words echo from a voice that seems to be more than just his, sounding now like the lines he remembers from Luis, and maybe other voices as well.

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The past must not be confused with the present must not be confused with the future.  
(It is unclear where these sounds are coming from.)

---

While Pedro drives, Luis has begun talking alone, practicing what he wants to say, sitting, facing the eastern wall of his house structure. He opens his mouth wide to make vowel



sounds, and imagines the shape his lips form, drawing their reflection with his eyes on the wall.

---

Static

Turn the knob to 99.1 and back to 105.3

Static.

---

Pedro has stayed too long today. He knows this because of the tone in Luis's voice, and the rising sun that appears in his rear view mirror when he finally turns the key in the car to start the engine. He has not slept. There is little danger out here in the desert, though. If he swerves too far left, there is no road yet to tilt him. There is no police or witness, or even a small green shrub that could be crushed and tell others later of the recklessness.

---

The compass tilts to the south. Is it weighed down by sleep?

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Figure #5 is a page from the nitrate annual productivity report in 1921.

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“ehhhhhh oyyye cuidado !”A scream from far away but instantly up close. Pedro brakes. There are five women walking in front of his truck, from East to West, pink, purple, orange. He is unsure of where he is now, thinking he might have closed his eyes for two seconds, or maybe more—more likely more. He leans up to the edge of his seat and onto

his steering wheel, holds it tightly, looking from left to right, if he can identify mountains in the horizon, or a familiar groove in the sand. Everything is desert and the compass points south. He rubs his eyes with his palms.

---

Dreams of driving are not uncommon. They are the first pear picked, the last grape eaten out of the bowl. When the compass is too heavy, does it still tell time?

---

Pedro turns the truck around to align it with the needle when it meets East. He drives on slowly, eyes shutting every so often, hand reaching for the coke bottle on the passenger seat. He thinks he is on the path home, with maybe ten more minutes before the highway, but the mountain range should show up soon if he is right. Tones of pink and orange and purple appear in the rising sun and light up the sand all around the truck. The sun shines directly onto the windshield and then through it, warming up Pedro's face. He lifts his right hand to block the light for a moment, so that he can look out to find a small cloud in the distance and use it as a point of reference with the compass. Almost East, just a slight angling to the right. He looks again out front and a small mound appears in the distance. Pedro keeps driving towards it, thinking this might be right. It grows taller as he gets nearer. More dots now in line with this first one, and they all grow together. The Andes. He would like to shower before setting off again for the morning shift. His boss awaits.

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[-23° 6' 9.6408" -69° 21' 0.2982"]

Restored hope is built into the kilometers separating the new space we look through, from the one we leave behind. On the days when we drive to new areas, there is this small hope that assembles inside the car with laughs, hurried talk, or Violeta telling a bad joke about the way the sand looks the same here as it did yesterday somewhere else. We quickly move on from the joke, as we've learned to incorporate it into the small talk of these mornings, when someone unmistakably settles the excitement with the real knowledge that we have found nothing to date. Today we find a little more energy in our bodies, even at this hour and with the fear of the surface being too large. This space not yet dug through—not even walked across—this place could finally bring our search to an end. It will take time to feel around for the borders of failure as we delineate how far this new area covers, and how many days it will take to cover it. We are aware of that work that still lies ahead before conclusions can be made.

The space we outline on a map, with our pens, cannot be seen once we lift our eyes from the page and the circles disappear on the real landscape. We have seen a lot of sand, the way eyes staring into snow can no longer tell if it rises or caves in. We've seen the sand stretch and lay out like a foreign piece of mold that only grows greener and grayer as you let it live. When we are not strict with ourselves, we feel the strength of our fear build up like the desert grows. It is constructed slowly, as we recall that we have been searching for a long while now with nothing to show for these years but the same printed-out faces on the same poster boards. We will keep searching, but what if we are looking in a place where nothing will be found? The untold fear is that we will look everywhere and still nothing will be found.

Coordinates are our leap of faith when we travel to a new site. We gather a line vertical and horizontal to find the closest road to the spot of sand. We line straight dots from where the road ends, through the sand, to the chosen area, creating our own road. As every leap of faith is acted out, we drive to these sites with one eye closed and one eye open. Coordinates tell us that today we are not digging the same sand as yesterday (this is the eye we open), although that is hard to believe (this is the eye we close). Three left turns can lead you back to the beginning, if the straight line is not held, and the error can go unnoticed as this place looks no different from anything else we've seen kilometers from paved road. A different line on the horizon, maybe more straight, but sand is everywhere and on all sides. This is when it's important to look to the map at the circles drawn, and then up at the area. We repeat this as many times as needed to make both eyes open up and see the circles reflected in the landscape.

There is a sense of urgency that goes along with the search, held in the car, waiting to step out. When we finally arrive at the area we will remember though, that the sun only provides light for so long, and people only remember a short history. We need to work with the light, with hands stretched out to begin feeling the ground, fast, like the fire that can smoke up from a magnifying glass dragged out under the sun. We will step out into the new search to feel the difference of the grain of the ground, walking in small circles closer and further away from the parked cars. The line pulled from the imagined moment of finding and the original moment of loss are like the foot that leaves the ground not knowing if it will come back down. Why should it? But a moment later it rediscovers the sand, when it can no longer hang suspended,

and falls deeper into the ground. We are able to lift up each leg every so often, against this gravitational threat, because we remember how the sun sets quickly once it starts.

Time is something we are not in control of and have not found a way to work into our grid. Over the years, this grid has developed from the noises and sights and voices, either real or imagined. Our construction of it has laid down intersecting lines in all directions of the desert, so that we can follow towards one way. In the beginning, before we could point to where the bodies could be buried beneath the sand, we felt we had to point, although our fingers don't extend any farther than our arms. We walked and walked further, turned when we felt inclined to, and walked back to the car when it grew dark. We did not know the ways of mapping the desert yet, how we would need water, and lots of it. In the beginning, before we could read maps and divide up areas in which to look, we felt where the road curved and the wheel gave way, following the paved trace. We still do not know who drew the map or if the place exists or if we will ever be led to it. In the end, maps are things that are intended to answer future questions.

We've arrived.

Truck drivers are those most informed about the roads of our country. A select few have been chosen to carry out mapping duties. Their job consists of checking on signs. Where there are incorrect, rusted, or fading signs, they must take note and bring it to the attention of their superior. This seems fairly easy. The truck driver is used to driving alone, without attachment to place, going past towns and clusters of people with no more reason to stop than to fill up the gas tank. He can see the road and the signs and the grouping of houses as a description of the conditions of the gravel, the inaccurate distance displayed on the sign, and the slanting of buildings into the sand. All the drivers are given booklets, maps and a disposable camera to document their findings.

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*Route 25. Road sign at kilometer 34 reads Antofagasta 194 kilometers. The 4 is worn out and looks like a 1. Urgency: low.*

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The mining complex is finally done, and all the inhabitants have settled in. The pipes carrying the water out here have been connected to the last fixture. The showers work with low water pressure, and the gas stoves take around a minute to heat up. The town functions. Pedro explains this in passing, as he pulls out his notebook, more eager to talk about his new line of work. There are so many corrections to be made, he says. Luis has been waiting, facing the wall, mouthing. His 'O's are more perfect than the 'A's, likely because the shape of the A projected on the wall requires more effort of imagination.

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Figure #6 is a list of names divided up into four columns. At the end of the name there is either a circle or a cross. For some of the people, only a nickname is known: 'el gordo', 'el doctor', 'el profesor', 'el nino'.

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*Picture A. shows the left turn off Ruta 5 towards Chacabuco. It is a dirt path. Sign needed. Urgency: high.*

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Luis is interested in Pedro's new found attention to things: the way he looks at signs as if they were hiding something in plain sight, the patient glance he gives the rising and falling of sand prints, the precision with which he follows the movement of a flake of paint on the wall, swaying back and forth until it peels off. He thinks Pedro might be interested in the structure of this place, too. The prison camp must be explained from an anthropologic perspective, though. Will he understand? Luis has pictures and papers he pulls out from an envelope. The pictures are inscribed in a white border, with writing in pencil underneath each one. Some pages are only writing, and others have diagrams that are slightly fading on the thin pieces of paper, but each page is catalogued in a specific order and referred to by its figure number. Luis has kept these things, over the years, the envelope growing thicker. *Someone must be the archivist*, Pedro remembers his father telling him at the dinner table. It didn't make much sense then, but he has an urge to flip through the pages and understand their order. Figure #7 is captioned: "the last frontier."

---

Pedro drives on, through night and sunrise and night again, while greasy napkins and empty soda bottles pile up at the feet of the passenger seat. Every trip ends, two or three days after it began, back at Chacabuco with Luis. After bare road and grey sand, talk is a

thing like an object, with edges and curves. Pedro comes to show his mapping: mostly stale directions of where missing signs must be. Every now and then, he takes the liberty to comment on the status of the road: bump, crack, dangerous inclination. Luis, on his edge, is prepared to explain a new section of the camp every day. They talk in this manner, as most people do, each of their own work, until it is the other's turn. *Reconciliation comes from conversation.* This is fact number two.

---

Someone must take the liberty to comment when it has not been asked of them.  
What can they show to prove that there is something missing?

---

Figure #8 is a page with small crosses drawn on it. Some are gathered in clusters and others are isolated and dispersed, but most have lines between them that connect to look like branches. These formations are the stars seen from the prison camp at night in the months of summer. There is no mention of the constellations, but that these shapes are this is evident. The Chilean eye knows how to look at the sky, trained from childhood in the boy scouts, or in the army, or simply from looking out the window before going to sleep.

---

Tonight, they take on architecture, with warm canteen mugs of coffee cupped between palms. They sit, huddled around the thermos as Luis asks Pedro to imagine the place from above. In this way, one is forced to think of the decisions made in shaping what lies on the ground. Someone built this place, Luis explains. Cities are built upon ports or rivers, he continues. You learn this in geography class, in school. Some buildings touch the water,



others lean into it, edged from further up. Clusters. Do you understand, Pedro? This *used to* be a nitrate factory, Luis ends. For a moment, it also leaned in.

---

If you have learned of the dictating nature of water, you, as well, will see constructions in the desert with uneasily convinced eyes. Where does the prison guard sleep at night?

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*Fill up the tank before getting on Ruta 5, although you may have more than half a tank full. The gas station on the way is not always open, and you must be prepared for this.* Pedro is beginning to understand that very few people know this road like he does. The archive must be personal, it must be useful.

---

Luis explains the aridity and vegetation today. The anthropologic study of structure extends to the natural surrounding as the constructed perimeter defines where the exterior ends. How does he know this, thinks Pedro, uninterrupting. The Atacama grows alfalfa, millet, barley and shrubs. The temperatures are high in the day, and cold at night, with fog and mist in the early morning. Luis does not know the desert like the back of his hand. He knows it with his whole body. It suffers as one, and is released into the cool sunset air altogether. Geography explains the things he cannot say. Things like “I used to be a prisoner here.”

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[-23° 6' 9.6408" -69° 21' 0.2982"]

There is a grid made up of lines from the north to the south, cross-sectioned every fifty centimeters, with squares in all directions. Only as far as the frame can see, though; you cannot take it all on at once. Through this sectioning off of the desert we have learned that ritual is about defining space in which to ask questions: to chose a square, to ask a question, to lift a salt plate and look beneath at the underbelly of the map. To carry out this process, flat land and uneven elevations must be taken into account as existing on the same plane, as belonging to one square or the other, defined by the ones around it. We pay attention to these signs, depths or bulges, because they could have been constructed with intention. Not for us, of course, but someone might have built them for themselves.

We believe ritual is connected to symbols standing in for unanswered questions, although everyday it is made more clear that maybe we believe what we want to believe. Here, we are looking for what we would like to find: the rock caves, salt mounds, stones piled high on each other. These constructions could be evidence of a a single guilty soldier—and all we really need is one. Maybe this guilt only welled up for a moment, or maybe the construction of the sign was carried out quickly, through his drunkenness, even hesitating, with hands that trembled. We believe in this guilt of the weak one, or the strong one. He was building the sign that that was necessary, if history did not turn out the way it was promised to him, or he simply needed to remember where to come weep at night, when he doubted if all he had done was real. We look for the signs left in the sand, but maybe there is no use believing in guilt, because nothing has been mapped. We know that symbols are drawn by people we do not get to meet.

Part of the reading of the symbol is imagining how it was concealed under a fine layer, so that it might be found, but only if you know to look for it. What is a symbol and what is not? Here again we are alone.

To the left, in the third square of the grid, counting from the top, there are rocks thrown around to look like a cross. It could be there. Two squares to the left, and one to the top, three stones are piled on top of each other from largest to smallest. It could be there. Further, almost out of the grid, on the farthest left corner, there is a dent in a sand mound that might reveal air underneath. It could be there. This is a process of failure and elimination. How much must you eliminate, before you fail? I sit down for water on square number four.

Looking out, at the others searching, walking in their own way, I understand how the desert has become our house, sand-filled, swaying from side to side. Lidia looks over and waves. She knows the way I bring my life out to the desert, and how I carry it back home, so she tries to break it up with this action. “Pati, bebe un poco de agua.” So I drink more water out of the plastic bottle. It is almost to the quarter mark. I close my eyes and listen. There is little here. With no sound, and this darkness behind the eyelids, I begin to think I could disappear. How much must you fail before you are eliminated? After all, to disappear, you don’t need a shadow in the sand to conceal; there are too few palms to blame nature with sin. Things do not disappear, bone can be burnt, or pieces can be broken up, indistinguishable from the formed bottom of the desert—“Ricardo...” I can feel them starting to move towards me, even before I open my eyes. I have committed the error. The flowers of the desert are congregating again

towards one space. We will all meet in square number four. Over the years, I have learned that ritual proceeds in silence.

Rosa stretches out her arm to hold my hand, Brunilda places her palm on my back, Victoria leans in. The flowers have come together. I will drink from my bottle to show them I'm fine. Huddled here, I wonder what we might resemble from afar, from above, from below. Desert flowers are not easy to look at. They bring up questions few know how to answer. Where is the nearest water source? How are they here? Why here, if there is no one to look at them? I take the last sip from the crinkling plastic bottle and get up. To maintain lines and time in the desert, we only roam until our water runs out.

It's time to go again. We circle and exit. The silent days and the ones that are missteps all exist on the same plane, three thousand seven hundred and fifty meters above water, in the grid that we've established, where the body is deprived of an adequate supply of oxygen. The walking is heavy, the driving smooth. The compass taped to the rear view mirror reads North. The highway will appear in six minutes. Calm.

---

Figure #9 is the enlarged portrait of a young man. Although the hair is longer and the eyes a little more sunken in, the face is unmistakably Luis's. The short and straight nose, the small ears, the long and curved eyelashes have stayed the same over the years. If Luis had disappeared in the dictatorship, this would be the image his family members would post onto cardboard signs and hang up in their living room. Instead, it is here in the archive. The envelop has grown thick.

---

Luis and Pedro speak now answering each other. Conversation is fact number two and they are eager to know what follows. If Pedro explains the ways of the cement, signs, and towns, Luis offers what he knows of the shrubs, the stalks, the air. "They began to appear as the only thing I knew," Luis says. "I began to think they were the last thing I would know." "The what?" "The color of a shrub drying out." "What does that look like?" "Yellow cement." "The raspy smell of a stalk." Luis follows. The more he says, the more he seems to remember. "What does that smell like?" asks Pedro. "Sealed fungus." "I knew all of this, Pedro, and more. The equation made up of the humidity in the morning, minus the aridity at midday, and the sand winds, which lead to the shriveling of the paint on the wall. I knew that. I could tell when a piece of wall would flake off, a second before it actually did. Those were the last remnants of thought."

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The sand moved by the winds at night has accumulated on a spot of ground.  
A mine goes off.

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If this place exists, it was not all imagined. If this place exists, it is not part of the past.

(It is becoming more clear where these sounds are coming from.)

---

The blast startles Pedro, but it is the fifth Luis has heard in his years living here. The moment of impact comes out of nothing, seemingly from nowhere but the back of your head. Pulled up, the whole body straightens and freezes, traumatized from a new sound. After the body loosens up, and the arms are given back their weight, the anxiousness of being the only witness begins to arise. No one but Luis and Pedro have heard it. The mine, a vestige of the dictatorship, has erupted today, years after it was intended to work. The finality of explosions or implosions cannot be dictated. Pedro feels the last reverberations leave the tightened muscles. There are objects that are not reminders of the past, they *are* the past, but are here, alongside democracy and mourned dead bodies. The mine should be heard, Pedro begins to think, with no real explanation for himself other than that the feeling of the tightening and release are new and worth knowing. Who drives up to hear a mine go off? Should there be more signs indicating how to get here? Pedro takes pencil to paper, unsure of what to write down. The past is a present removed from consequence, some believe. Or rather should he write about how the sound although loud will slowly be confused with the desert sand when it lifts up in the afternoon? When the sand lifts, it has to come back down, and not exactly where it was. It might build over the site of a mine, and then we are forced back into remembering. Is that what this is, remembering? When a mine goes off, if you are not a soldier, or an amputee, it is the first time you have heard this noise. Can you remember something you do not know?

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Picture B is taken from the interior of a car, looking out at the desert on the road. It is unclear what we should be paying attention to. Pedro's note reads: 'this place is important.'

---

To live and drive in the desert takes time. Either you are born into it, or you come to join the group. It is another dent in the body.

How long has Luis been here ? Why?

---

Figure #10 is a letter written by Luis to his mother. In it he tells her that he is still eating and that the desert nights are cold. Towards the end, he writes that she needs to take care of herself. He signs 'tu hijo'.

---

*If you are to live in the desert, you must know the way the body feels heat. It swarms in, first, at the level of the eyes. The body is hit. Hot. The air is dry. At the interior of the eye's perimeter, weakness settles in. Deepens. The hot grabs the whole body. First go the eyes and ankles. Everything in between swells. With dry sweat, at the back of the knee, settled in palms, in the small of the back, the body is patched with the want to sleep. It tempts. The body can only take so much. When it can take no longer, it takes more still. There are places of which we do not know, where muscles reside. Those places can weaken as well. The body tells us more than we tell it. Believe, it might say. The physical story is the truest, the way the body bows under heat. Or under man.*

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When Luis practices mouthing vowels facing the wall, he pays attention to how the lips move, the way the creases at the edge of the mouth open and close together onto each other. Confined in a room, man can find ways out of boredom. Confined in a room is maybe where the most interesting thought is born. There is a curriculum men impose on themselves in prisons, whether it be written or oral or silent. If Luis has forgotten about the curriculum, Pedro's coming and going is the reminder.

"There have been songs used when torturing," he practices.

(The 'O' is perfectly rounded today.)

---

On the drive to Calama, Pedro leaves the radio untouched. He has been commissioned to build a housing complex on the outskirts of the city in response to the recent mining activity and the expected growth. This time, there is enough money to buy all the materials. Would Luis like living here, he wonders. A year of discussion and there is still nothing close to an explanation of why he is here in a deteriorated prison camp. If conversation is fact number two, is there something beyond? These are the instructions for reconciliation, but Pedro is unaware of what has been broken.

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[ -23° 8' 45.531" -69° 38' 7.3000" ]

By driving, I have learned to be with Ricardo. On the road with no cars coming in the other direction, with street lights only every ten seconds, I look into the rearview mirror and align the car with the white lines on grey road. He is here, with the sun setting behind me, or in the early morning, with the window rolled down to let in a little breeze. There are a series of conditions that must be prescribed to for this to occur. Soft light, a sense of breeze, and an empty landscape are all necessary in the defining of the space. Once within, I can look at the reflection of a thing receding like the white lines on the road, or the rock that goes there, fading smaller and smaller. That these things are left behind does not mean they can't serve: lines drawn on the road still point straight, curves still angle with the same degree. It is important to remember that the reflection of the objects in the mirror are closer than they appear, and that one must adjust accordingly. But looking into the mirror for too long, it starts to seem impossible to commit to this danger. I look out front and back up into the mirror and out front again and back into the mirror until the wheel shifts briskly over the line into the other lane. I have acted this out many times, ended up on the wrong side of the road, from watching the sun fade behind me and the car angle go awry. Ritual occurs within a space that I alone know the terms to, but I do not control when it begins or when the car shifts it to an end.

At home, taking out the shovel from the car, it feels heavier today. I wait longer at the entrance, leaning on the doorframe for a moment, before beginning to take off my shoes. The right foot is held, and slips softly out of the boot with an extra tug from the heel. I close my eyes to feel the curves, the heel first, then the tilt forward to that crest, unnamed, made from the space

between the ankle and the front of the foot. What is that? What comprises a foot? My own body is made up of two feet, each with five toes, connected by two ankles to the legs. The foot releases from the shoe and reaches the ground. Nothing has been found today, again. Dinner still needs to be made, so I let the steps continue: it is four steps to the fridge, three from there to the stove. Counting means I control the time. It is not something to be taken lightly.

Victoria comes over because she says she's heard me screaming Ricardo's name. I don't know, I tell her. I tell her we are all broken up. Out in the desert, you can pick up a stone that falls apart in your hand, simply pulls away from its center into two or three pieces. Did someone squeeze lemon above it, to crack the stone in this way? Or did it come together, different pieces bound to look complete? When are we like the stone that does not know if it has been formed or broken, if it has been built or deconstructed? We are like it when we breathe in long enough, and eventually want to breath out, with the lungs only inflating so wide, having to cave into themselves again as the natural progression. When our shoes are too heavy at the entrance of our door, because they are the last moment separating the exterior from the interior. When we pick up another developed roll of pictures from out in the desert and slide them, one after another, into plastic pages of yet another photo album. Every day is severed, with a morning and a night, and a transition if you are able to feel it. There is an above and a below, a hot and a cold, a loss and a search. There might still be whole bodies lying out waiting to be found, or fractured bodies, or no bodies at all. And maybe no one is waiting but us. We too have been moved beyond reconstruction—moved out of sleep, or out of view, or out from history. What do I hope to find in the end? *In the end*? Victoria leaves and tells me to come over for tea and fruit in an hour if I feel like it.

At the end of the day, I know that there are actions that allow one back into faith. I run the water for the bath.

*Ruta 5. Kilometer sixty eight. There are no signs for sixty-eight kilometers from Calama towards Antofagasta. There are no exits for this stretch of the road. Sign needed. What the sign should say has not been decided. "Tones of pink, purple and orange roam" is one suggestion. The other is: "No exits for the next sixty-eight kilometers."*

*Urgency: high*

---

With all the work to be done in the extension of Calama, Pedro forgets to come on Wednesday. The next week, the day comes and goes without much more than a new empty coke bottle thrown to the bottom of the car floor. He drives around still, from the work site, home, to the supermarket, to gas stations, to the bank in the center of the city. He takes down notes, clicks a few pictures, writes instructions for others who might drive out here. It's been three weeks now since he's visited Luis.

---

How does one ask a question that has not been prompted ?

Someone must take the liberty to ask that which has not been asked.

---

On Tuesday, Pedro comes equipped to push, only in the way that silver bends slowly. To catch Luis off guard, he thinks Tuesday might offer breath. If he will be upset, or gone, or mouthing to himself, it is impossible to know. Pedro parks the car at the perimeter of the camp, as he always does, and heads directly to Luis's house structure with little looking around, or kicking of the dirt, or noticing of all the crumbling of the houses on either side. He stands away from the house entryway, and looks in. He is here. Pedro looks down at the crouched figure of Luis, breathing deeply, back turned towards the doorframe. This is how he found him on the first day, he thinks. Nothing has changed. He turns around and makes his way back to his truck.

---

“The dictatorship is over. There is no use looking for people. We must begin with what we have.”

(This is overheard on the radio, as Pedro flips through channels, looking for one without music.)

---

Four weeks now since Pedro has driven to see Luis. It is harder to weld back into habit, once time swells in between. When on Ruta 5, the compass points North-West, to where Pedro knows Luis must still be, he is tempted to go back. But he has nothing to say. Pedro has not been tortured. He has not been imprisoned. He was too young when Luis was at the edge of a place he did not know yet. Now, to talk of the heat, bring him pineapple cake, or mention the last soccer match seem irrelevant.

---

Figure #11 is Luis’s national identity card. The picture inscribed in the rectangular card is the same that has been enlarged in figure #9. In this smaller format the image is more clear.

---

How could this be a place where people are imprisoned?

You don’t need much. You have what you are given and  
then you invent.

It's wood and cement. And crumbling now.

There is not much here.

It doesn't look like there ever really was.

This is true. If you were to end up at Chacabuco by mistake, two wrong left turns in the desert, you wouldn't quite understand how this place functioned, even in the days of its glory. It is so far from anywhere, so stubbornly planted, that there requires a whole orchestration of trains and cars with cargo and men to begin to imagine the process of life. This imagination is difficult.

It is wood, cement, nails, plaster,  
white and red paint, and mines.

If you think about it though,  
you don't need anything at all. A man.

Two.

Given a space, anything can occur. It need not be within.  
As long as your two feet are planted, the rest is invention.

I could hit you right now, Pedro. That is one option. A.

I could hit you in the nose. That could be A1.

or the shoulder A2.

or right in the center of your chest A3.

You see how this works?

Pedro feels the drop of the night imminent.

I could do that. And out here, no one would know. It  
doesn't even have to happen in the desert for no one to  
know. In truth, this isn't where it happened.

---

To adjust to other's space is fact number three. Names, conversation, and now, space. Reconciliation is carried out the way an ox plows through dirt, in the time of machines. It turns the ground for the new season. First, punctures down with weight, then trudges forward. This might be abandoned land, rooted for meters beneath. What lies below tells the story of what lies above, says the farmer to his child. Dry dirt seals to the ground. Compact, it cannot be turned through the till all at once. Chile is the land of grapes, corn, and wheat. Space is allotted for crops to grow separately, each season changing this configuration. What the wheat leaves behind this season will grow the grape next season. The farmer is careful with space, so that chronology will work in his favor. Reconciliation is something one does with oneself, with others, with space, and with time.

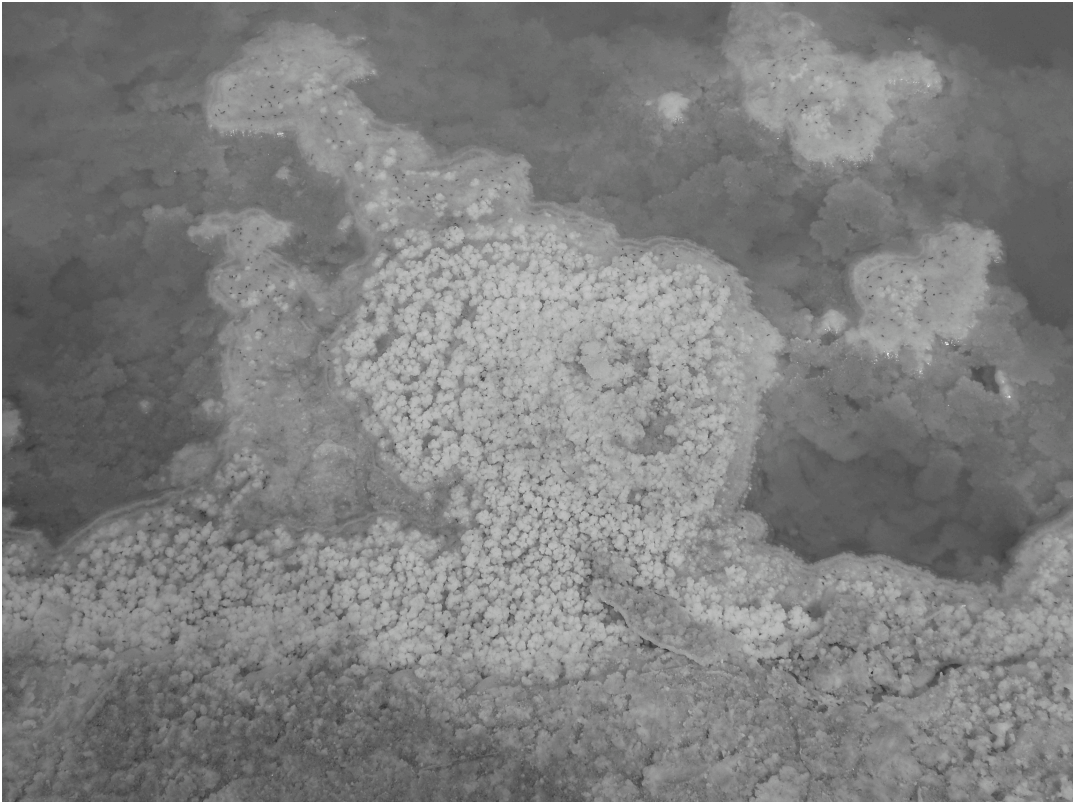
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*You don't need anything at all, Pedro repeats.*

---

Thirsty after having talked too much, and not slept last night, Pedro makes his way out of Luis's house. He walks in zigzags towards the entry of the camp and steps out under the entry archway. But he can only sit in the truck, without really wanting to leave yet. He needs just a little more time. What exactly was done to Luis? It is close to being admitted. Just a little sleep before a new bending in. Pedro sets his head back on the seat, and begins to slouch slowly. A few minutes. A few more minutes won't matter now. It's been years.

---





When the wheel of a car hits a bump, it jumps for a moment before settling back down. Pedro's truck rattles with its whole structure when it falls back, as if the wheel could tell what was beneath. Nothing disappears, elements are displaced, says the chemist. The rubber of the wheel gives over to the dent as it bends in.

---

Pedro steps on the pedal to force the truck over the bump but the front wheels spin and the smell of gasoline starts to grow hot. He puts the truck in reverse, angles left, then right, to ease it out of the ditch, but the wheels only move forward a little, caught again by a bump at the back. In front and behind, the truck is stopped. Pedro knows this frustration too well, he knows how the whole truck dips into the sand with spinning wheels and the effort it requires of his heavy body, to get them working again. He lets out a swear when this happens, his head nodded forward, his stomach pressed up against the steering wheel. Pedro keeps a stick of wood in the car for these moments, to help him poke at the wheels and get them turning normally again. He reaches his arm over to the passenger seat floor, pushing aside empty coke bottles until his fingers hit the plastic rug lining of the bottom where the stick lies hidden. With his tool in hand, he steps down from the truck into the hot air of the afternoon to begin the work.

---

*Between route Ruta 5 and Chacabuco: found objects. There is no sign. Vehicles traveling in this area can get stuck or roll over these things. Danger: high. Sign needed: if you do not come with a stick you need to turn around and find a paved road.*

---

Pedro stands outside the truck, looking down at the sand that lies directly in front of the wheels. A compact mound extends the width of the truck, from the left wheel to the right, fifteen centimeters above the ground in an arch. He thinks this thing is too crafted to have been formed by the wind, that its outline is too precisely curved. Standing with both hands crossed on his stomach, he wonders if it could be a tree trunk. It could have fallen off a truck transporting materials from one end of the country to the other—but why would the truck drive through the desert? He kicks the thing with his foot, and sand falls off the top slipping down the curved sides to reveal something hard and white underneath. He crouches down to see what this is.

---

Figure #12 is missing from the folder.

---

Pedro leans down to the level of the mound to brush away the sand that sits on top of the white hard object. He does this for the whole length, working down the arch, until the top area of the object is mostly uncovered. Pedro wonders if it could be an animal horn. But so long and wide, it seems unlikely. Maybe a prehistoric animal? The high density of salt in the desert is known for conserving, but this thing was found here on the surface of the ground without digging meters beneath. If it is a horn, there must be some other part to the body nearby. He sits down facing away from the mound and his truck, to look out at the expanse of desert wondering where the rest lies.

---

“The origin of words today, Pedro.” Luis practices alone. “The word *mine* comes from the Latin ‘a measure of weight’. The etymology tells us that a mine goes off depending on the weight put on its sensor. The amount of weight necessary varies, but what also factors into

this explosion are the age of the mine and how much rust it has accumulated. Hours before we heard the explosion there were heavy winds. The sand must have lifted up and buried the mine deeper with more pressure on its surface. That is the only explanation I can think of, with no one to step on it. You see how easy that is? Think of a rock weighing down on the string it is suspended by, pulling it taut. This is the kind of weight I'm referring to, the kind that has the potential to break, to fall from its knot. The weight of the mine is important because it shows the potential for explosion or implosion, marking a beginning and an end. This weight should be understood in the most precise way possible, to begin to know how time can be divided in discreet ways. Do you see Pedro? It is important to know how this is possible. We know that the origin of weight is the bone. This is the simplest way I can explain it to you. If we didn't have bone, all the weight of our bodies would gush down to the ground with nothing to hold it up. It is the body that tells of the beginning and end, when the bones grow with calcium to form themselves and when they are left out as the last thing to carry. When they feel light, and the muscle has gone, when you are no longer holding up a body, then you will know it's the end. But I don't know if the mine coincides with the end."

---



Pedro takes out the disposable camera he was given when assigned his documenting work. He keeps it in the cup holder slanted, and doesn't know if it actually works. Although he's taken pictures, and the machine reads that there are fifteen left, he's never developed them, and the heat in the car might be melting the film. He doesn't think about this, but he always makes sure to write down anything he takes a picture of. *The archive must have textures, so that its survival will be guaranteed.* He remembers his father in phrases that come without prompting. Pedro gets out of the truck and stands ten meters away looking at it from the front. The truck fits into the frame along with the mound on the ground and desert on all sides. This will offer perspective on how large the found object is, he thinks. He takes the picture, then walks back to the truck to record, in the most accurate way that he can, where exactly he believes himself to be.

---

Figure #13 is a page ripped out of a notebook with stickers from three oranges stuck onto it. The line underneath the stickers reads "today, an act of kindness."

---

*An estimate of 20 minutes south of Chacabuco, driving towards the Ruta 5 (probably with minor zigzags), there is a large cream-colored object at the surface of the ground, covered in only a minimum amount of sand. Sign needed. Paved road needed. More information needed.*

---

Figure #14 is a short diary entry from April 30, 1974: "Today we played soccer in the courtyard. *El nino* is a great goal keeper. He says he used to play for his school before the coup. At least there are activities to do here."

*Chacabuco. Kilometer 45 on Ruta 5. Mines surround the old nitrate factory. Sign needed. Urgency: high. What the sign should say: "Beware of mines." Note: Do not enter the prison camp, mines surround the entrance. Stay on the road.*

---

Pedro doesn't go back to the camp for days, then weeks. Instead, he keeps to working long hours and driving the truck anywhere his boss asks him to, even if it is pitch dark or the early morning hours, or a road he doesn't know. He doesn't seem to sense the fear that one might feel in the desert, from being alone or without direction. He turns the volume up on the radio.

---

*Chacabuco. Kilometer 45. There is no sign explaining that the nitrate factory was transformed into a prison camp. Sign needed. What the sign should say: "This was a prison camp." Note: For the sign, look into history, to include dates of when the transformation occurred. Look into where the people who were brought here came from, where the prison guards slept at night and how the water system worked. The perimeter of the prison camp is not where it ends, beware of mines. More information on this geography needed.*

---

Pedro looks through his notes, hoping that they can lead him back to where he bumped into the object. The note for that day reads: "*Compass points south. Sun appears in the east from behind the mountains. Chacabuco probably no more than fifteen minutes in the general north direction. Encounter with three women. Is there an oasis nearby? Look into oasis nearby.*" He drives back to Chacabuco only as a starting point to the journey, to repeat everything the same way as it was done on that day. Waits in the car until just before

sunrise to set out with the compass pointing south. He starts the plastic timer he bought at the gas station, with little hope that it will help keep him on track, but at least it is one more indication. He lets the wheel go when it wants to and leans back in the seat. Everything must be reenacted the same way in order to get back to where the object was found. Is it still there, he wonders. Could someone have moved it? If he doesn't find it, there is a larger chance that he is not looking in the right place than that it has been moved. Why did he leave and think he could come back? His directions are intuitions at most, with no fixed point, with no way to map the desert.

---

Luis steps out of the house and walks down the alleyway to the entrance of the camp. He stand there for a while looking out to see if there is any movement on the horizon. He doesn't take a step outside the perimeter of the structure, but he stands upright, looking.

---

Figure #15 is a notebook-lined page with two dates written down: "March 16th in the morning, March 20th at midday."

---

Chacabuco grows cold at night—these recent nights colder than the ones before.

"Torture, today, Pedro," Luis begins. "Do you remember the body and the weight? The heat, also. The heat will be important. We've heard that torture is arbitrary. They've told us on the radio, on the TV. But that is was arbitrary was already evident on the body. As if this was news, Pedro ! Now they carry out studies, Hah! I read, that they try to prove this, the scientists, the anthropologist, the everyone. What the body felt, they ask, who was where

and who did what, they ask. Hah! What happens in that moment is a push towards something it does not know exists—the “it”? The “it” is he, the prison guard, who has been given an order, he, the inventor of torture, or even he, the man who decides this will be useful. He pushes for something he does not know exists, but hopes will be found beyond a certain point. Hopes? I don’t know if he hopes really. We hope, we hoped...but he...maybe he just thought there would be something. Or maybe he didn’t think. Without knowing the end, without even any rational link to the end, he pushes. Who is the “he”? It’s the man doing the torturing. Only that man this time, not the first man that ever tortured, or the one that gave the order, only the one standing in front of you, or behind, or anywhere you think him to be with a blindfold on. Do you understand this, Pedro ? Do you see how there were three men before and now there is one? Pedro? You’re not even here! Hah! You’re not even here! Pedro? ”

---

Half an hour on the road but Pedro has already fallen asleep again. A bump jolts him up in his seat; his stomach hits the steering wheel. He lets out an aggravated moan, but this was planned, this is exactly what he wanted. He rubs his eyes with his palms and looks to the compass on the dashboard. South. He grabs the camera out of the cup-holder and steps outside.

---

*Timer reads 24 minutes 33 seconds. Truck faces north. Nothing visible on the horizon, but a few scattered yellow shoots north-east. Nothing remarkably visible on the left, or the right. Pictures taken to document.*

---



Imagine rain in the desert. Within a few hours, the ground would soak in the dampness through its indistinguishable layers, allowing the water to fall deeper and deeper below, making its way between grain and grain of sand. Meanwhile, on the surface, the ground would turn a darker brown as some kinds of sand would be differentiated from others. The weight of the water pressing down would grow heavier, as it continued to rain. But a couple of inches on the surface is all that is necessary to reveal where sand is weaker. The water would burn down through the border of the surface to swell up the tunnels of irrigation. Above and below would be indistinguishable at this point. These tunnels that connect oasis and stream out until they dry up, would be part of the two inch pool on the surface of the ground. The network that once was beneath, now radiated above, would tell us where the water has been moving this whole time. If it rained in the desert, some plants would suffocate, and other new ones would grow, some caves would fall onto themselves, and the salt would be diluted. Tell us what is here and what is not. To map a desert you need water.

---

Pedro ties rope around the end of the object that he's brushed the sand off of. He stands five meters away and begins to pull with both hands by his shoulder, body turned away from the object and weight leaning towards the ground—it's heavier than he imagined. His feet slip back into the sand, with his whole body forming a diagonal now, stomach leaning forward and away. A small tug finally comes, as the thing budes forward and Pedro stops to wipe the sweat off his forehead. The object has only moved a little, but it is uncovered completely now from the sand. He sits down next to it to, takes out the measuring tape he keeps in his pant pocket and opens it up between his arms. The long arched object is fifteen centimeters at its widest point in the middle and thins out at one pointed edge. The other end is bulky and seems like it was attached to another part. Pedro touches the smooth cream-colored surface with his hand, and notices that the object is laced with darker tan lines throughout. This is a bone.

---

Luis is back in his house again after his walk to the entrance of the camp. He takes a break in silence to sit facing his wall, although he has no need anymore to imagine the shape of vowels as they can be drawn from his mouth. He knows how to recite endlessly, even if only to himself. Now, instead, he begins to imagine what his face might look like if it could be reflected from the stone. He has not seen his reflection in years, but in the archive there is an image of him from the same year he was detained. When he looks at the photograph, all these years later, it is difficult to think that the boy looking back at him, so young, would become him. Between then and now, he was displaced from one spot in the country to another, tracing the roads that map out the Chilean landscape. Both Pedro and Luis share a country of origin and have traveled up and down the coast, inching towards the interior mountains and then back again to the sea. Although Pedro did not live through the dictatorship, they share this country of origin. Maybe they share nothing more and maybe there is no fact number four. Names, conversation, space and a road that leads nowhere in particular and stops nowhere in sight.

---

Figure #16 is a newspaper clipping. The headline reads: “five dead in an encounter with police.” There are no specific names of the victims. The article tells of how the men were attempting to escape from the vehicles transporting detainees to Chacabuco. They were in turn shot dead.

---

Three hours of pulling and hunching in the sinking sand and tying new knots when they weaken. Pedro is sweating fast, with his underarms slipping against his damp shirt, with his forearms hot and reflecting the sun. He has managed to tie three knots around the bone: one at the middle and the others at the ends, but they slip and move closer or farther apart as he pulls the three ropes together. He’s turned the truck around and opened up the back

doors so that they are closest to the bone. Two more hours with pulling and stopping and sitting to take a warm sip of coke, but Pedro is finally able to tug the bone up onto the platform of his truck. The sound when it hits the metal floor is deep and reverberates for a moment throughout the walls before the silence settles back in.

---

The compass can point south weighed down by sleep, but this time, the compass has been made to point south. What is the weight that makes one re-enact a day? What is the weight that makes one come back?

---

*24 minutes, 33 seconds from Chacabuco, in the general South direction, large bone found. Size of about a man and a half. In the immediate surrounding, after some digging through the sand, other bones found . They lie in a long shape wide at the center, thinning out towards the end, the whole surface the length of approximately ten men. It is unclear what this was. Bone taken from site for further information. How to drive back to this place is unclear. Pictures taken.*

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In schools across Chile, geometry classes are being held in which students learn to draw perfect circles with compasses. First history class, but then, after mid-day, comes geometry. Holding the tip of the compass in place, and not letting it hop, while turning the knob, is not easy for the students. But when the module will be over in four weeks time, they will all know exactly the right amount of pressure to give the turning to create perfect circles of all sizes. They will even make their own designs with small circles inscribed in larger ones or crisscrossed, creating new angles and shapes. The radius of the circle from Chacabuco to the site of the bones is 24 minutes and 33 seconds long. It can be drawn in the sand with a rope that is held at the prison camp and pulled until it is taut. If the site is in the general south direction, once the circle is drawn, it can be divided into four equal sections to narrow the area of interest. This circle is large and covers a good part of the desert, maybe intersecting other drawn circles before it, or ones that are still to be drawn.

---

Figure #17 is a map made by hand, outlining Chacabuco and the nearest highway. It is not drawn to scale but one understands from looking at the image that the nearest town is not near. The highway continues out of the page on the top right and bottom left, with Chacabuco drawn in the center. The slow and precise lines show that this diagram was made with care and with time.

---

*You don't need anything at all*, Pedro repeats to himself for weeks in his truck as he drives around with the bone in the back. He slides it left or right when he has other materials to transport and offers a smile when construction workers catch a glimpse of it while helping him unload. If he understands Luis's line or not, at least he repeats it to himself. He has been able to come to Chacabuco and drive up and down the country on the long highways only because of the phrases by which he remembers his father. He saved them, because

the tone in his father's voice changed when he said these lines to him at the dinner table years ago. Just as he recognized that tone, he knows to echo Luis's lines now. Although Luis is not as old as Pedro's father, time keeps going, and he will be that old at some point. The younger generation will one day have to pick up the phone and inform those younger still that there has been a death in the family. The fact that we age is marked by the picking up of the phone and dialing, holding in place information that someone has not yet received. The call is not a decision, it must be made, and the how to tell the story is not something you are allotted time to figure out. We age by telling the story of the deceased to those still alive, in that moment before mourning, when what matters most is the passing on of information. Then you hang up. This transition of the young picking up the phone is not something recognizable at first, but when their phrases begin to stick, that is when the dial tone is ringing and you are hearing sounds come out of the phone, sounds you do not understand the meaning of yet.

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*Object found at 22 minutes 33 seconds identified as whale bone. Old man at the gas station mentions that the desert used to be a body of water and that is why the sand still attempts to sway like the waves, remembering or re-enacting. He says two years ago, marine biologists were brought out to look at the site of the bones, but without enough funding the investigation was brought to a close. He didn't believe them that they had found whales in the desert, but when I show him the bone, he is made to believe.*

---

If the rain doesn't come, we won't know where there are things beneath the sand.

---

Calama, Chuquicamata and Chacabuco are some of the lined points of the last frontier. Not because this place remains uninhabited, but because after walking on it, across it, and having seen it from the air, there is no understanding of it. A city like Santiago is filled with smog, hurried and growing, a smaller city still like Valdivia is the space of discreet welcomes, warm dinner rolls and a seafood market. The Atacama desert is the driest on earth. With coca candies for the altitude, or the largest bottle of water, those that walk here still bend to the heat, knees pointed. If what is below tells the story of what is above—the irrigations, dictating where people can walk—there are few magnets connecting one life up top to another on the bottom. The architecture of driving in the desert is one that is done against all. If the desert is no place for a human to live, don't tell that to the desert people, for they'll know you come with ideas about water, compasses, and gasoline.

---

It's over, Luis.

It's not about the dictatorship.

I know it's over, I know some of the men are dead.

Or if they're not dead at least they've left the country.

It's not about the dictatorship at all.

It's about what happens between men.

What happens between men can always exist.

Do you remember that day I could have hit you?

I could have done that.

I remember.

*You don't need anything at all really.*

I remember you said that.

Staying here is not going to change anything.

Think about it. Think about it really well.

No one gets out alive.

You might leave, and hide, or you might even die years later.

But no one gets out alive.

You touched something. Whatever it was.

Anything is an artifact once it has been breathed on.

And this place, my Chacabuco,

it has been breathed on.

Not only by us and the soldiers

but by the whole orchestration.

This was one small dot of an operation of such a horrid grande scale.

But that it was big is not the point, Pedro.

It's exactly the opposite, it's what happens between men.

Remember.

They're going to die rotting away unknown somewhere,

and they'll have thought they got away with it,

didn't get any jail time, or held in court,

but there must be guilt.

There must be pools and pools of guilt we can't measure with anything,

There must be pools of guilt. There have to be.



But if there aren't, there is still Chacabuco.

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Figure #17 is a piece of wood that has been carved into with nails. Parts of the wood have been removed, creating hollow lines differentiated from flat areas. There is a below and an above.

---



[ , ]

Today the unfolding comes before it is prompted. At two in the morning Ricardo sits in the chair by the bed, and looks on while I sleep. His hair is slicked back, with a white button-down cotton shirt, and he is smiling. He is always wearing the same shirt, although I saved them all for him in the closet, and ironed the ones that needed ironing.

---

Pedro, he said his name was. A young guy, *gordito*, really nice. He picked me up in the middle of the *pampa* after I stayed behind a little while longer. The car wouldn't start up and I realized it was my fault for wanting to stay once everyone had gone. I thought this was the place, and if I could only stay a little longer, maybe I could find something. But when the car wouldn't start I thought I'd have to stay the night. No one is out here looking for anything like we are. No one can come help you if you're stranded in the desert. But Pedro, he just showed up. I had already set my head back on the seat thinking I would sleep through the night until the flowers showed up in the morning with the sun. No one is out here looking for anything like we are, but maybe there are more people that navigate this desert with their own set of tools and rituals. He said he drives around, that he is a truck driver, that he takes pictures of signs, that he knows the bumps in the road also. I told him I take pictures, although you can't see much in them, other than the circles the car wheels trace in the sand when we leave. He showed me some of his pictures. Pedro, he said his name was.

---

What happens in the desert does not get written into history books. Who was there to witness? When you come back to a river, the water is never the same. When you come back to the desert, there is no water above ground anymore. How to reconstruct the sounds? A witness is not one who sees, a witness is one who believes.

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The sounds of water in the desert go unheard because they occur beneath the ground. Pedro did not know about the irrigation systems, although he knew the way the roads connect in their own network above ground. I tell him that the below and the above are linked, that these magnets beneath suck us around the desert looking down. He repeats it to me, *what is below tells the story of what is above*, as we drive on with the windows rolled down, the sun setting behind us, and our own towns waiting for us. There must be a way of listening that can hear the water in the desert.

“In 1975, a few miners spotted several bodies, around twenty kilometers southwest of the city, while collecting calcium carbonate in the desert. According to one, the bodies “were still buried but their shapes could be discerned, ” apparently because of the effects of wind erosion. Later they returned but couldn’t locate the bodies again, and the fear of reprisals prevented them from officially reporting findings.”

—FORENSIS

## Works Consulted

This work began as an exploration of the debris left over after a human rights abuse. It began with an obsession about documents, bones and places that remain even after the dictatorship has ended. I began looking into the government documents left over in the case of Brazil, told excellently in Lawrence Weschler's "A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers". The project took me to investigate transparency, to look at the work of Trevor Paglan in making government secrets visible by exposing their physical geography. Because of a book my mother bought me at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, in Santiago, Chile, I started to read declassified CIA documents of the US's involvement in the Chilean coup. Although the project began with documents, and places as evidence, I slowly turned to people and their struggle with the permanence of these things.

This fiction project was inspired by the work of the women of Calama looking for their disappeared loved ones in the Atacama desert. Their story is one of looking without knowing if they will find, without help from the government and against the harshness of the desert. I was first exposed to their project through Patricio Guzman's documentary, "Nostalgia de la Luz" (2010). I later came across photographer Paula Allen's documentation of the women in "Flowers in the Desert: The Search for Chile's Disappeared".

Although I visited the Atacama desert in my childhood, I consulted the American Geographical Society's "Desert Trails of Atacama" (1924) by Isaiah Bowman to understand the climate, vegetation and the slow way that a desert can be described. "Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth" organized under Eyal Weizman from the University of Goldsmith, was also a great document to understand the look of the terrain and the ties it has to political injustices.

In this work, I have focused mainly on one aspect of the Chilean dictatorship and its aftermath in the 1970's. Although the political injustice of disappearance is imbedded in a large system of power, I here have delved into the episode of the Caravan of Death. My research on the specifics of how men were killed and disposed of came from Patricia Verdugo's detailed

account in “Chile, Pinochet and the Caravan of Death” (2001), and the testimony in the “Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation” (1993)

In order to create a work of fiction concerned with the real and the historical, I spent a lot of time reading Chilean fiction and poetry that dealt with human rights abuses of the dictatorship. These were the most helpful works when I felt stuck, or the project seemed impossible. I read and re-read Bolano, I discovered Ariel Dorfman, and heard echos of my own fears in writing about this subject in Patricio Pron’s “My Father’s Ghost is Climbing in the Rain”.

While writing, I realized I wanted the experience of reading to have visuals, to portray the evidence, the things that remain, objects that persist. I included pictures I took myself of the desert in Tunisia, a document I created and shredded, a drawn structure, and took one image from google maps featured on page 73.

(“Atacama desert.” Map. *Google Maps*. Google, April 25)

## Works Cited

epigraphs on pages 3 and 76 from:

Bowman, Isiah. *Desert Trails of Atacama*. Special Publication No 5. New York. American Geographical Society, 1924. Print [30]

Franke, Anselm, and Eyal Weizman. *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*. Berlin: Sternberg, 2014. Print. [593]

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