

Ruta 27

Paso de Jama

Pacana's been playing its tricks,
pretending to sleep – but the landscape
is starring its vomit and wreck
still nursing a passion which cools
to igneous beats where all semblance
escapes like a fumerole—the wild of
trapped heat, the slow-remembered rain
—whose language is lichen and saltbrush—
keeps probing, acidic, incisive,
a sulphurous stain—but

all truth is this vanishing——

We are stunned by the thumping of our hearts, unused to altitudes
of over 4000 metres. Grabbed by a dizzying swell, we lift our
heads towards the imperious Monjas de la Pacana, guardians of
the salt flats. When we're done with selfies and group photos,
Tomás, our guide, is still dawdling around, crouching, sifting the
sand, bringing us gifts of obsidian and quartz.

He carries his soft, pudgy body with unexpected lightness. His
cheeks are red-mauve and his black hair, a ruffled nest. A gentle
way about him, his head tilting or shaking lightly. On the way
here, his hands on the wheel, he's been readying us for [– –].

caldera's now-lithified want
once spumed huge cathedrals of salt,
invisible to us—though the sign reads
'Salar y Laguna de Tara',
Tomás smiles—'*te da la impresión que
es Tara, pero no lo es,*'¹—
and the fire that birthed this marshland's
amnesiac, chimeral, yet bearing
a blueprint of gangrenous sludge,
most hidden of griefs in the tufted
old grass that still moans as it sings—'If

all truth is this vanishing————

¹ Tomás doesn't translate this. / There are no vanishing cathedrals in English. / Who knows whether the three American girls, queasy and spent in the back seats, have heard, / whether their Tara will

'Bolivia doesn't have a diplomatic and commercial relationship with Chile,' he declares, the delicate-timbre of his voice almost belying the political upheaval which would have started with the violation of the Boundary Treaty of 1874, and ended with the loss of Bolivia's Litoral. Now, Chile's port-city of Antofagasta.
Sun Gate. Copper Trove.
Town of the Great Salt Lake

Hail, Pearl of the North.
Here or there does not matter.ⁱ
When you shiver, it's merely your shoreline tempting that
impregnable blue, *the vast waters / Of the petrel and the porpoise.*

be a stone wall edging over a lake of yellow and white and splattered green— / An ancient fire that froths from volcanic peaks?

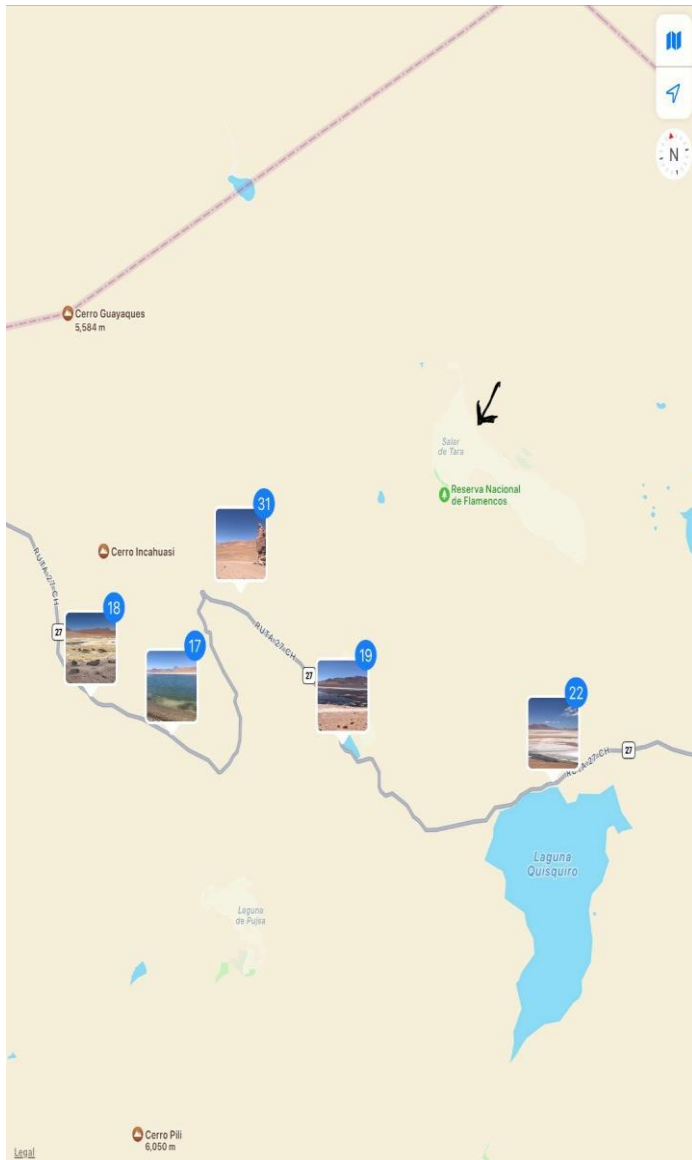
which lake do you seek?’ and the Monjas
keep guarding their secrets, stern faces,
carved eons of frost-freeze and wind.
If snowstorm and rainfall have sculpted
a language of stone, look up here where
pale ochre is hoarding obsidian
and super volcanoes leave ash so
compacted, it takes human form—could
this fabling of names be a truth
beyond our attempt to

set eyes on what’s real—?

What should we call the site of absence, where the nitrate hand
disappears inside the mouth of another?

Call it by its phantom pain: *Dia del Mar. Semana del Mar.*

Mourn for it like you mourn for the body curled beside you in
sleep, now waking to the sour breath of another.



Ruta 27, Paso de Jama, October 2023

Call it 'The Ten Cents War'.

The blue of absence.

But the Pacific stays. Its double superlatives courting sunlight in seven hundred and seven hues: *the largest, the deepest*.

Mar Pacifico. Sea of Peace. Favourable winds, said Megallan.

What is truth but one moment in the vast expanse of time?

And Diego de Almagro, who wasn't a stranger to absence, having lost his own eye in battle... Perhaps it was blindness that led him back to Cusco: No gold in this blasted land!

He marched back, men and horses, all starving and tattered, hopes dashed by that other expanse of unforgiving dryness. *Hata*

Kamac.

*More delicate than the historians are the map-makers' colors.*ⁱⁱ

Perhaps a map is the most deceptive of signs. A fiction of Cartesian proportions. Ours. Theirs. Now gone! A reversal of sight, mythologized by a language that fibs as it signs.

'Show us the way to Antofagasta.'

The sign says Salar y Laguna de Tara.

'Que no es. Esto no es Tara'.

'Y qué tiene Tara de particular?' asks the Spanish tourist.

For this isn't the presence of absence. The site of [— —]

² Without light, there is only the apparent darkness of the unseen. But visible light is just a small portion of all the light that exists. Beyond us is a hidden universe radiating at wavelengths and frequencies we can't see with our eyes: radio waves, microwaves, X-rays, gamma rays, infrared, ultraviolet.

Drink from the flanks of a dying beast. Who would have thought an old horse to have had so much blood in him?ⁱⁱⁱ

And the inhospitable desert frolicking on the coastline, flowering again after years of drought?

El desierto florido. See to believe.

Not seeing, how could Almagro have known² / the precious silver of a waiting seed?³

³ The Atacama, Tomàs tells us, has the largest astronomical project in existence. ALMA, its Large Millimeter / submillimeter Array, boasts 66 high-precision antennae. At 5000 metres above sea level, astronomers can capture the ticking signals of dying stars, blasts from the hearts of galaxies, emissions from giant planets—all invisible in the absence of optical light, in the endless

disappearance. None of us – except for Tomàs – has ever seen⁴ the *Catedral de Cenisa*, spiralling ash cathedrals formed from Volcan Llaima’s eruption, thousands of years ago.

Salar y Laguna de Tara:

Our only verifiable realities are the images on Alamy, Flickr, Pinterest, Wiki, Google, YouTube, Trip Advisor... All representations of the Salar de Tara – designated a Ramsar site in 1996 – date back to a time before June 2018, when it closed to tourism in an effort to preserve its fragile ecosystem. Amongst the 28 species that thrived once the influx of visitors subsided, were Andean geese [*Larus serranus*], ducks [*Lophonetta specularioides*, *Anas georgiaca*, *Anas flavirostris*, *Anas Puna*], flamingos [*Phoenicopterus chilensis*, *Phoenicoparrus andinus*,

proliferation of dust, where stars are born. Billions of stars, infinitesimally present, as they die—yes, even so, in death—

⁴ Radio telescopes convert signals into images that are visible to the naked eye. When light reaches us from cold, distant objects in

the Universe, absence does in effect become presence. For not only is there no absence without presence, but emptiness is often a matter of perceptual blindness. When ALMA ‘opened its eyes’, when it peered ‘through the opaque dust lanes’, a largely unmapped part of the celestial spectrum was revealed. [see Wiki]

Phoenicoparrus jamesi], rheas, known as ‘suri’ or ‘ñandu’ [*Rhepennata tarapacensis*], desert cats [*Leopardus garleppi*], and cougars [*Puma concolor*].

Tomás doesn’t tell us when the misleading signage appeared, but it’s clear that in his mind, what is supposedly the most sublime of Chile’s salt lagoons, has left a trace. A sign of a sign. For us, irretrievable, unknowable. For him, perhaps, a fading memory, prone to the fuzziness of in-betweens where things become half-real, half-imagined.

YouTube features a Salar de Tara clip for dummies, shot in 2020 and garnering 1565 views. *Ruta 5*’s narrator wears dark sunglasses and adventure gear, his greatest feat, a leap onto a wall half his height, which, he declares, has been put up to shield the wetlands from outrageous winds. This is the same enclosure we visit on the route that is–not–Tara. It is next to impossible, for the

untrained eye, to judge whether some of the filming actually features the sapphire splendour of Tara, in a mixage of sorts.

The gigantic ash cathedrals never make an appearance.



When we've done leaning over the wall which guards the wetland that is—not—Tara, a Brazilian girl, dissatisfied with the road-sign story, asks Tomás for clarification.

'Now it's exploitable place for the lithium,' he answers. 'Perhaps, some Canadian company, but nobody knows anything—'^{iv}

Mongabay, a journal of environmental journalism, has an article on Sorcia Minerals, also known as Encorcía Metals, an American company, and the largest shareholder of International Battery Metals. May 2023: Having already laid hands on the Salar de Maricunga, Sorcia casts its gaze on the Salar de Tara.

⁵ **Marcha de la Muerte**

Salar de Atacama

*Toconao, Toconao,
flats are deep, road signs lie.*

Has it been forty years
since they scraped flesh from stone,
razed the salt from its ground,
drilled the deep, clawed the sky?

For the Lickan Antay community of Toconao⁵ which co-administers the site, the advances in conservation will have been futile if Sorcia Minerals⁶ is allowed to extract lithium from their ancestral lands. 'What bothers me is that a product is being sold as a sustainable solution for the world when it's not [...] You can't sacrifice one zone to satisfy another,' Francisco Mondaca, civil engineer and head of the environmental unit of the Atacama Indigenous Council, points out.^v

According to Sorcia Minerals, the selective absorption lithium technology invented by Dr John Burba in the late 80s, will successfully⁷ reinject 'over 90% of the extracted brine in its

⁶ SQM, Albemarle—
was it you fathered drought,
drained the gold from its brine,
ripped the lung from its heart?

⁷ *Toconao, Toconao,
flats are deep, road signs lie.*

natural state, minimizing the consumption of water and using mobile and modular plants that are less invasive⁸ to the land'.^{vi}

Cristina Dorador, Associate Professor in the department of biotechnology of the Faculty of Marine Sciences and Natural Resources at the University of Antofagasta, is not convinced. These technologies are merely pilot studies, she says. The quality of the brine makes all the difference and none of these extraction measures have been applied on a large scale. To date, there hasn't been any research to study the effect of green lithium extraction plants on actual wetlands.⁹

Has it been all this long
since they mined lithium fields,
tore the air from its flight,
stunned the gull, starved the duck?

⁸ What's it like when they gorge
all this flat's grainy white—
won't they choke on the spoils,
lithium's curse, lithium's gold?

⁹ *Toconao, Toconao,*

Route 27¹⁰

Paso de Jama

Putana's been playing its tricks,
pretending to sleep – but the landscape
is starring its vomit and wreck
still nursing a passion which cools
to igneous beats where all semblance
escapes like a fumerole—the wild of
trapped heat, the slow-remembered rain
—whose language is lichen and saltbrush—
keeps probing, acidic, incisive,
a sulphurous stain—but

all truth is this vanishing—

caldera's now-lithified want
once spumed huge cathedrals of salt,
invisible to us—though the sign reads
'Salar y Laguna de Tara',
Tomás smiles—'te da l'impression que

flats are deep, road signs lie.

¹⁰ Perhaps absence always leaves a visible trace, some sign of its own struggle with space-time. And so this verse, which was metrical, but not iambic, not dactylic. Metrical, but not trochaic, not anapaestic, and not spondaic. This verse which moved in amphibrachic breaths, and wore the lilac of volcanic tips, of water painted into the chemical colours of Tara's lagoon. This purplish-mauve of distance, of desire, of the unmappable [u/u]—

es Tara, pero no lo es,’—
and the fire that **birthed** this marshland’s
amnesiac, chimeral, yet bearing
a blueprint of gangrenous sludge,
most hidden of griefs in the tufted
old grass that still moans as it sings—‘If

all truth is this vanishing——

which lake do you seek?’^{11 vii} and the Monjas
keep guarding their secrets, stern faces
carved eons of frost-freeze and wind.
If snowstorm and rainfall have **sculpted**
a language of stone, look up here where
pale ochre is hoarding obsidian
and super volcanoes leave ash so
compacted, it takes human **form**—could
this fabling of names be a truth
beyond our attempt to

set eyes on what’s **real**—?¹²

¹¹ It came in tercets, in waves of ‘push-pull’ purple and gunmetal blue—‘sprightly, ironic’, ‘bittersweet’. The rocking-lilt, now erased and almost absent, but not quite—

¹²

[— —]

Language is truth. Truth language.

Marcha de la Muerte¹³

Salar de Atacama

*Cretic Dimeter*¹⁴

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | \ u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | \ u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u u /

/ u / | \ u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u u / | / u u /

/ u / | / u /

/ u / | / u /

¹³ On the way back, Tomás tells us the story of his distant ancestors, the Tiahuanaco, whose empire dissolved by 1000 CE, at a time when Lake Titikaka had shrivelled to a diameter of 30km.

¹⁴ And so it is with the memory of sound, whose silence is never absolute, whose absence inhabits [/ /].

ⁱ T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker', *The Four Quartets*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Bishop, 'The Map' (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 1, Lines 31-2, (Essex: Longman, 1958).

^{iv} Michelle Carrere, 'Chile: Salar de Tara, en la Reserva Nacional Los Flamencos, está en la mira de la industria del litio', in *Mongabay: Periodismo Ambiental Independiente en Latinoamérica*, 23rd May 2023, <https://es.mongabay.com/2023/05/salar-de-tara-industria-del-litio-chile/>

^v Alexander Villegas, 'How Chile's Progressive New Plan to Mine Lithium Faces Indigenous Hurdles', Reuters, 20th July, 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2023-07-20/how-chiles-progressive-new-plan-to-mine-lithium-faces-indigenous-hurdles>.

^{vi} 'Sorcia Minerals Earns Lithium Rights in the Salar de Maricunga, Chile, 30th June 2021, 12:16:56 PM, ensorciametals.com.

^{vii} Annie Finch, 'Dancing with Akhmatova in Amphibrachs', <http://www.stosvet.net/12/finch/index.html>.