

first time, the solitude of that dry and dusty landscape, littered with rocks and rubble. The experience still haunts me to this very day. For a moment I thought briefly of Santiago and the Mapocho river which runs through it; I thought of the shrinking glaciers melting in the sun; I tried to imagine that fertile valley, replete with life and vegetation, nourished by the fast flowing waters from the mountains, reduced to a barren and inhospitable nether-region like the one I saw from the bus window. At once I was struck by an overwhelming reverence towards the power of nature.

Arriving late into Antofagasta and wearied from the heat and the long journey, I booked myself into a small hostelry near to the bus station. I drank a couple of beers in some bar or other round the corner and checked tomorrow's route on my map then made my way back to my room for an early night.

I arrived at my final destination late the following afternoon, once again I was exhausted from the arid, merciless heat which drew the sweat from the pores of your skin and dried the saliva in your very mouth, a heat which grew steadily more intense as the day wore on. Jumping down from the trailer of the pick-up truck in which I had hitched a lift, I had found myself on the outskirts of a small village of brittle adobe buildings painted in jaded pastel colours; the whole place shimmered before me in the heat of the afternoon sun.

Not far from where I alighted, I found a small and basic hostelry where I could lodge for the night. The building too was made of adobe and its walls had been painted pastel blue; inside, it was cool and airy. The owner showed me to my room and no sooner had he gone than I collapsed onto the bed, exhausted.

I awoke around six, when the sun was no longer so fierce. I showered, taking care to wash out the dust which had collected in my hair from travelling on the open road. Relaxed and feeling somewhat refreshed, I set out to explore the village. The place was pervaded by a feeling of weary isolation and save for a few children playing football in the shade of the plaza, there was not a soul to be seen. The buildings, with their tin roofs and wooden shutters, seemed to suggest the impermanence of the place: the whole village seemed locked in a fragile coexistence with the land around it. Whilst the basic structures dominated and tamed it, they