

# Desert Diaries

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**NOTE TO READER:**

This document (AM.3) is an excerpt from *Desert Diaries* and is intended to accompany the thesis:

*Desert-Mapping: Site-Specific Modes of Resistance to Territoriality and Colonisation*

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
School of Arts and Humanities, Royal College of Art  
March 2024.

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– Excerpt from *Desert Diaries* –

# Prologue

2012

The dry heat hits like a wall pushing into one's body, creating a sensation of skin on the verge of searing. Simultaneously, bright light comes from all directions, causing the eyes to squint and water. Momentarily blind, the body only has its skin covered in a new temperature. As vision adjusts, reference points remain ambiguous: eternity stretches out as perspective vanishes. A new sense of the horizontal floods out from beneath one's body, creating vertigo for a previously underestimated spatial plane. Inside this new scale, the body struggles to find its bearings - is it a fixed point going nowhere or raw energy ready to flow in all directions?

My first encounter with the desert was a flood of monumental sensations. The totalising experience crept up from the airport through oil fields, acting like steel insects pumping the land. Suddenly, the road shot out into the raw, seemingly barren landscape, painted in warm, dusty colours. It seemed like I had landed on an alien planet - all appeared open, a limitless space. There was a sense of newfound freedom. Memory or interest in the city vanished as this new space captured and consumed all focus. An abundance of thoughts and ideas flowed, a new liberating and wild sense of arrival. This place appeared to offer a rebirth, a fresh or actual start at living. Nothing would be the same again. Since the first visit, these deserts remain unreal and yet familiar. They offer the stranger, foreigner, outsider and refugee a sense of potential. However, there is no chance of a new start without risk. The diverse possibilities of a new beginning with land, space and the body are challenging. To feel like I have returned home and yet to remain a foreigner is a confusing contradiction. To gain freedom and yet be ready for danger is another. The scale of the desert makes me feel insignificant, producing physical and psychological hurdles. The vast expanse, isolation and connection to deep time liberate me from human constructs I've been taught. I can no longer understand distance - positionality and proximity are upended. I can sense that this experience might provoke acceptance or retaliation, meditation or violence.

The freedom I initially felt on arrival - the unlimited possibilities - also contained its own destruction: violence, control and occupation. This was threaded through the endless miles of barbed wire surrounding private land, nuclear testing, national borders and military encampments. Contained in my first impression of the desert was an unfamiliar and freeing experience, but that which followed was the flip side - the danger of potential abuse. Alone on ranch land, my friend was woken by a refugee who was beaten, bloody and barefoot, begging for shelter. A rancher would later point a gun at my head because I stepped across a cattle grid onto private land. These experiences and others revealed that freedom points in unpredictable directions in the desert.

## DEVIL'S CORNFIELD

February 2022: We said our goodbyes outside the Death Valley gas station, just seven minutes from Devil's Cornfield - knowing this was probably the last time we'd cross paths. Two unlikely people travelling together for 72 hours was now coming to an end. During that time, we discussed Trump, military service, suicide, drug addiction, strip clubs, prostitution, weighted duvets for PTSD, and how to travel to Europe on a budget. We had also created a fictional company that supplied water to travellers in the desert. There were very serious, harrowing conversations and then moments of belly-creasing laughter. Throughout this journey, my companion had experienced travelling without a gun for the first time in their life. They had grown up with 45 guns in their family home. They slept with one under their pillow. Unknown to me, they had left their weapon in Reno out of respect for my customs. Had they changed in such a short amount of time? I felt relief that we weren't travelling with a gun, but also worried for them. Maybe they would have a panic attack on their return home. Was I changing too?

They drove off, and I tried not to follow the truck out of view. I sat in my car, staring out into the endless land. Maybe that was my last human interaction, and I would just vanish here, and that would be that. I drove aimlessly for at least an hour until the rock formations turned yellow and a small lane to the right appeared. I reversed and went back to it. Parking the car twenty minutes later, I headed into the colourful mountains resembling Star Trek scenes. The paths had no rhyme or reason; they went in all and any direction. Some snaked, and some took massive vertical leaps. It was hard to keep a sense of where I had come from and where I was going. One path caught my eye from a distance, and I attempted to make it in that direction. I wanted to grasp the path from two positions. I wanted to compare the view of the path from this great distance with the experience of being a walker on that path. By the time I had made it to the other side, I realised it was a very narrow trail that, in many ways, led nowhere. Perhaps coyotes had made it. It was more a line, a graze, a ghost trace than a chiselled ledge. I walked the line. The vertical drop and the surrounding total silence felt ominous, but the colour of the rocky formations was unreal.

My thoughts detached themselves from my physical body. If the body plunged to its death, would my thoughts and past memories just hover and then merge into the yellowness of its surroundings? Is this how the past and present haunt or creep into the future? Ghost traces of other times - good and bad.

## BARSTOW

January 2019, cold and sunny. The motel has three locks on the room and a sign saying visitors shouldn't open the door to strangers. If someone claims they work for the motel, the sign advises phoning reception to check -fifty dollars a night, a third of the price of the better hotels. I arrive at 21.17. Before checking in, I drive the perimeter and observe the layout, clocking the most secluded parts of the motel. Latitude 34.8921, longitude -117.0057. It is an L-shaped beige building with two floors. All doors face onto an open-air corridor snaking around the exterior with occasional stairwells. In the centre, hidden by bushes, is a small aquamarine pool shaped like a kidney. It is a forty-minute drive from the training grounds - a ravine journey starting in a post-industrial-looking town with a legit but old-timey train bridge and a long straight road into the military base. This last stretch is peppered with an alarming number of hand-made crosses - the graves of groups of two, three or four soldiers huddled together. These people died whilst travelling in or out of the base. The drive is either 36.3 miles or 39.5 miles, depending on your route. I prefer the scenic route that cuts out the motorway. Each morning, I eat porridge out of a styrofoam bowl, which can break if I accidentally stick my fork in it. There are no spoons.

# 1. TRACE MOMENTS

January 2019: I pack a lunch in case we end up on the road. I don't know where we are going. My uniform for this desert mission is a dark green hat, black and baggy second-hand worker's jeans, thermal leggings, two thermal polo necks, a thin feather-down jacket, a resilient black jacket with tons of pockets, steel-toe capped boots and hiking socks. Anything that needs to be cleaned at the end of the day hangs to dry by the sink rail. The room contains two Queen double beds, and both are stripped of their top blankets, so it is only clean sheets. One is used for laying out maps and equipment. The other is used for sleeping. All remote controls, light switches and telephones are wiped down on arrival, and I never walk around in bare feet.

March 2018: The Navy SEAL veteran with PTSD watches me from behind his curtains. As I park, he rushes out to ask why I've changed cars. He feels something might be wrong. Nowadays, he voluntarily wears a suit as his new uniform. His need for structure is in earnest. He mans the perimeter of our cheap block of flats with dignity and stress. He is lost and needs purpose. Forsaken by his government. Now, he works to make sure I am safe.

April 2022: We are in the middle of rugged land that undulates a little but not too much to block your view. Sitting on a concrete floor in a caravan that has been extended into a house, my new friend recounts how she prepared for the Chinese and Russian cartel. During the pandemic, the cartels moved into an isolated region of Yucca Valley. Moving like assassins under cover of night, strange transactions take place with groups of heavily armed men. Now, a new type of violence patrols the dust. This terrifying apocalyptic vision unfolds while we stroke her dying dog, who can no longer stand.

January 2022: I arrive by Greyhound bus and descend onto a street which is blinking with casino lights. This strange world of dazzling illumination is accompanied by hidden speakers playing musical theatre tunes. Freezing cold wind and tiny



slices of ice travel horizontally down the Reno street. It is an urban desert - unpopulated but still a circus-style nightmare. The only people here are skittish - dispossessed and sick, ignored and abandoned. As the buildings change, so does the music. I pass a small cluster of benches, gently spotlit. Invisible speakers are playing Pink Floyd's The Dark Side Of The Moon. I catch "Run, rabbit, run". As I walk diagonally, pushing my body forward into the wall of wind, a red line of liquid moves across the pavement towards the curb. The distance between it and me is slowly closing. I understand - too late - that I'm walking through someone's blood. The incident, or cause of this bleeding, is unknown, and the body - the rabbit who was advised to run - whose blood now stains the streets, has vanished.

April 2022: Easter is crowded in Joshua Tree. I fight to find a spot for the car in the national park. I blink twice as I take in the distinctly American version of Felinni's Amarcord: Spring-breakers are getting their shots ready before hiking without water containers. Men walk past me in neon hot pants and jockstraps. Once on the trail, someone shouts snake, and all hell breaks loose..

June 2022: He stands up. He's dressed in desert camo. A few old tattoos that remind me of what little I remember of the 90's - prison tats or affiliation to a working group, army, sport or other. Not fashion tats. He's taller than I expected and dwarfs the children that have run in to grab some sugar packets and not pay for it. Bending down, he methodically sweeps the crumbs from his breakfast off the table and onto one of his large, blistered hands. He closes his hand, waves at the waitress and walks out. Halfway across the lot, I see him drop the crumbs by some birds. He kicks his boots on the front tyres of his dirty white Ford and pulls out onto the highway.

March 2019: They're all wearing hair nets and blowing smoke towards the open desert with their backs to the kitchen door. There's a dust devil far in the distance. I wonder if they are watching it too. The colours of the land get swept up in the devil and start to blur together as if someone dropped too much water onto a semi-dried watercolour. Things start to mix easily. It's weirdly reassuring. To watch something dissolve for a moment. Not to be able to make sense of what you're seeing. One

of the cooks catches me leaning by my truck watching the same view. She nods, I smile. We turn back to the dust devil.

## MILITARY

January 2019: I stand in a fake yet real space of war. It is a stage set with actors and pyrotechnicians waiting for the actual fight. Training the soldiers of the future. Every day is war day. The fake cafes and shops are peeling - have they been forgotten because they are merely background material? Background skin. Yet, they serve a very real function in preparing navigation and action for territorial conquest. Driving back, we pass a pair of trousers abandoned miles away from anywhere. Left behind by a soldier. Someone jokes that he must have shat his pants.

September 2018: If you look hard enough, their website contains a document listing all the establishments that soldiers are banned from visiting in the civilian town of Twentynine Palms. It includes certain car parks, bars and strip clubs. On some previous occasions, soldiers have done questionable acts, and these sites are now off-limits to all.

## 2. TRACE MOMENTS

March 2021: I take a risk and slow down the car beside a woman struggling outside Slab City. It's a boiling hot day, and across two miles of desert, Tracy carries three suitcases for her daily cleaning job. She gladly takes the offer of a ride from me. We squeeze her bags and cart into the back. I can't work out her age. Is she younger or older than me? She dreams of opening a veteran museum out of a trailer, where five dogs live happily together. They poke their nose out of a bunk bed window when we arrive.

April 2022: He watches me from a nearby rock, two hours from any roads or people. I'm sitting in a strange oasis —water in the desert. But the water is shallow. If I jump from these rocks, I'll break my neck. I attempt to move out of view from this creeper, but I know he is waiting. When I step out of the oasis, he will be there. It's like a game of cat and mouse playing out in a furnace. I feel a mix of fear and anger at being so tracked.

March 2022: Washing the dishes at the rented accommodation in Yucca Valley, the surrounding land and buildings seem to shake. At first I think it is a vehicle playing music with loud bass. But I look outside, and there is nothing but quiet insects busy with their own ingenious work. The intermittent shaking goes on for four hours or more. I use earplugs, but my rib cage can still feel the reverberations. At the gas station the next day, I overhear two people complaining about last night's noises. "What was it?" I ask. "Bombing in Twenty-Nine Palms marine base", they say. 30 miles away. "They went on way longer than they're supposed to".

February 2022: The lighting is low. The temperature is warm. The furniture looks old. The people look tired. Most of the room seems coated in dark tones like navy blue carpets and brown cushions. There's a constant hum in the room — noises of clicking, dealing, chair movements, slots. No one looks happy.

The Casino has a smell of ancient cigarettes. Baked in. In a way that makes me nervous. I go to sit on a bar stool and realise the counter is broken. The wooden framing that should finish the edge of the counter is ripped off. So I have to lean on raw ply and dirt and cigarette ash. I was here in 2012. This time is different. I'm not sleeping in the Walmart car park this time. I sit down even though I don't want to —the smell. I'm forcing myself to experience it. It's baked into the casino —a recipe of sweat, anxiety, euphoria, poverty, abuse, adrenaline, cheap beer, cheap spirits and many other things I can't imagine or don't want to. I don't smell desert. I don't smell creosote bushes after rain. I don't breathe the same way.

February 2022: Tiny bits of tin foil are still left in the wardrobe. The previous owners lined the interior of their entire house with aluminium foil, usually used to wrap food. They believed the CIA was listening - they had worked on the military base in the 1950s. Sometimes, I see the glints of the escaping tin foil in the backyard. I wonder what they worked on.

## MILITARY

January 2019: This place is full of terrifying contradictions. Fake limbs which look too real were used to prepare for the shock and awe of conflict and carnage. At the same time, fake eggs and fruit were allowed to chip, revealing cheap plaster. Now, sound and smell machines prepare a 3d sensorial atmosphere. The smell of sweet chai, Iraqi biscuits or burning flesh. How do they do it? I think about this while the sergeant tells me that he dreams of running Disney tours in Europe and each night revises for his exams.

Day 1

Eight to fifteen tanks pass me on the road. I was listening to a religious station, acclimating to the local tone, and filming with a GoPro gaffa taped to the dashboard. The view of Fort Irwin's long road had been blocked until I came up to the top of the hill, the last of the ravine's twists and turns. Reaching the crest, I hit the straight-as-an-arrow road towards the checkpoint, and suddenly, the faces of commanders and gunners confronted me like whiplash. Tank after tank after tank, their child-like youth caught me by surprise, and my first thought was, "They are not ready for war". Instead of fear, I felt concern.

I wait for the chaperone at the checkpoint. It consists of a brick visitors' building, with toilets and a small car park. Immediately after this building, the road splits into three lanes leading into the facility. There is another parallel dirt road near the entrance, which is probably for more oversized

military transport. The checkpoint operates under a sheltered structure, keeping the entry point hidden from aerial view. Beneath the shelter, drivers arrive at an electric barrier that must be activated by control personnel to enter. There are no barbed wire fences or large walls like the ones I've seen on parts of the US/Mexico border. It is just open land. From the checkpoint, a straight road into the military town spreads out beneath the horizon at the bottom of a valley. As we leave the checkpoint, a sign informs us that there is zero tolerance for sexual abuse.

#### Day 4

The Sergeant has many tales to share. They include when 'Top Gear' with Jeremy Clarkson arrived to blow up cars. The actress who played Leeloo - the character in the 'Fifth Element' - also visited the military site for research. She wanted to know what being a US soldier in the Middle East was like. For a new movie she was working on in Hollywood. My chaperone informs me that they've also hosted foreign spies. He then clarifies by saying: "They didn't know that we knew, but we did". The chaperone then makes a joke that my cover story of being an 'artist' is a good one and winks. Only two hours from Los Angeles, the border between truth and fiction appears more blurry than expected. These anecdotes are part curious gossip and part fact - indicating the weirdness of how space is understood, claimed and managed here. Peppered alongside these stories and my tour of the military simulation, the Sergeant has a five-day phone dispute with an unknown person on site about a large-scale training event, which has, or has not, been adequately organised.

### 3. TRACE MOMENTS

April 2022: The water must be polluted, Walmart has all these bags of test kits. Radiation? I think of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The past is killing the present – previous directives acting like the black death. A killing reduced to a magic trick. Smoke and mirrors, it's there, and then it's gone. But not really gone if the Grim Reaper is hanging out in Walmart. Are we all marked for death here but just don't know it?"

March 2022 (voice memo): Everything is a soft cream colour in hues of yellow. It had been wide open for an hour and now i've been inside a ravine for an hour. I'm not an expert in geology so I cannot immediately recognise rock formations without taking photos and comparing with books. But I know I'm lost. The route is unclear from the map. I'm following last year's rain, which created a temporary flash flood and now looks like a water bed. This was supposed to be the path. But it's so bright and everything is so bleached or wind-weathered that it's hard to see hard lines or changes in movement in the ground. I could turn back. It might be better. Returning would be two hours. Going forward should be two hours. But that's if I'm following the correct route. I need one litre per hour. I have three litres left. I can't afford to go wrong.

### MILITARY

January 2019: Someone has tagged the wall with gaffa tape –a strange upside-down face. In silver, it makes me think of the future's archaeological relics. Plastic faces. Is it part of the military set, or is it made by a renegade soldier?

January 2019: All the buildings are made of breeze blocks. All grey. Is this what it looks like in Iraq? In the middle of the Mojave, they blend with today's grey sky but not the land. I wonder if Disney would like to design a warzone. Or maybe they have. Would people buy candy and queue for this? Or would they

decide to run screaming into the open land and seek another way of living? The group of probably 20 buildings are all half-made. The missing bricks which would complete them are scattered about the land. I think of Tetris, then Minecraft and then Lego. Everything is rectangular. The buildings resemble a residential or military compound. I saw something like this on the US/Mexico border with the Border Patrol in 2012 – cheap housing for large groups all arriving with families. But inside the simulation, I'm unclear of the purpose. Each building has an identical window with no glass or plastic. The distant mountains are framed within these windows. It reminds me of the quintessential portrayal of 'nature' – a landscape poster in a hotel or office. It's supposed to be calming, but within the grey frame it is unnerving. I forget to breathe. The sergeant is speaking to me. His words have been blending into each other. Looking away from the windows I swim back to him.

January 2019: There's a Starbucks here. And a Domino's pizza. And a Subway. But it's different. Everyone is in camouflage.

## 4. TRACE MOMENTS

April 2022: Sweating profusely under a large-brimmed hat, I am a tiny dot on this land, standing amidst a crowd of black rocks. I push on up the crater, straining under the weight of six glass mirrors. Slowly walking the sheer black perimeter, I regularly turn in circles, trying to take in all the geography simultaneously. Occasionally I stop to arrange the mirrors in various sequences. Through the viewfinder of my camera, the mirrors reveal different fragments of the crater and the horizon. This confusing perspective seems a more honest embodied reality – standing inside and outside this landscape – the strangeness of enveloping scales and directions. The mirrors enable a new cartographic understanding of the surrounding space. Image-making with fragments echoes the vulnerability and limits in my sensory perceptions, witnessing and receiving different information from my haphazard navigation through the landscape.

February 2019: The space smells of smoke and sweat stored by the seats that host a myriad of bodies. It's 7 am, and I'm late to get to Death Valley. As I rush through the casino with my bags and tanks of Gatorade and water, men and women sit with cigarettes and Bud Lights, playing the slot machines. Bits of gold jewellery hanging off arms, necks, and fingers glint alongside the lights of the machines. There is a quiet, sleepy look as if they might have sat down twenty years ago and never returned home.

February 2022: As the sun goes down, we slide off the road towards a gas station. We still have three hours before we hit the scummy motel. Stopping and starting to photograph military sites, we are running behind. He waits for me in his truck while I fill up mine. "Can you get me a Redbull and gum?" he shouts from across the lot. "You don't trust the coffee?" I call. He tilts his head and smiles "Shit, no." The gas station is tiny and looks like a creepy nineties movie set. Inside, I ask if I can pay for tank five. "Sure", the unusually cheerful assistant replies, punching in my number. "And can I have a receipt, please?" She smiles, "No problem, honey, it's always good for a murder alibi." Taken aback, I laugh and then finally say, "Yes, exactly, thanks", and head back out into the warm twilight, wondering if this alibi is my own or for someone who will "borrow" this receipt from me further down the road...

January 2019: They forget to tell me it's starting, and suddenly I'm in the middle of a battle. I duck into a doorway, not knowing which direction the action will come from next. Guns, tanks and helicopters drop a variety of ammunition. I use my polo neck to breathe as the room fills up with smoke. There is the odd sensation of being in and outside the action. Over speakers, a voice describes the present and future violence like an omniscient God, telling the invisible audience what they are witnessing. At the same time, my body is in the dirt, breathing black smoke, which will give me a sore throat for a week—the fiction finds a way to create a real imprint on my body.



November 2013

JW: "It's not safe"

CX: "Define not safe."

JW: "Well, if you slip, there's no one to save you."

SM: "He means if you slip, you're crack your skull open, and you'll be dead"

CX: "Oh."

JW: "You scared of heights?"

CX: "No."

JW: "Can you swim?"

CX: "Yep."

JW: "Then I recommend you come."

SM: "Not many people know about this tower."

JW: "The view is incredible. You can't see any buildings in any direction."

SM: "The water's not cold. But it's two buildings deep."

CX: "How did you find it?"

JW: "We drove around for hours. We had a rough idea of where it was."

CX: "What do you do up at the top?"

SM: "We just just tread water and look out at the land."

2022 Yucca Valley, Mojave desert: She points from her kitchen window, "Those ten acres over there are free. They plan to sell. You could buy it. You just can't leave it "unmanned". Otherwise, a cartel is likely to move in."

February 2022: I see her from the window of the Greyhound. She stands on the curb saying goodbye to her dad or a man whom she knows. She's getting on alone. I scan her and see she's wearing slippers and maybe pyjamas. It's freezing outside, and it's not going to get any warmer where we're going. She's got a soft toy. Where is she going? The next stop, which is the last stop is Reno, 11pm. She's going to Reno? Alone? It doesn't seem safe. It doesn't seem safe at all.

September 2013: The drive was always long and persistent. But it became familiar. I drove there most nights to look south towards Mexico. I'd drive past the place where my bank manager was shot dead when he played an extra in the film *No Country for Old Men*. He was the first one to be killed by Javier Bardem. I'd wonder where the tree with the cash and the suitcase is. I was always trying to guess the tree. There's not many out there. I wonder if anyone else thinks about the fictions that played out there. Do they care? The light is that light which makes everything look electric and yet translucent. Nothing feels real and it feels peaceful this way.

April 2018: I'm told to go only during the day. "You don't want to be there at night. And if you can help it, you really don't want to have to cross the border. Try and do everything on this side. It's one of the most dangerous towns over there, and you're going to stick out. You can't blend."

"Don't cross the border. Don't go to the station directly because that means you're crossing."

It's hard to find a parking spot in town, but finally, I found one near the highway and the border station. Concrete in the desert always has a dusty quality. I can't find my sunglasses and my eyes start weeping from the light. Then I realise they are lying on the curb – the Dollar General glasses that I throw around by mistake. Crossing onto the highway, I walk alongside the gridlock traffic, moving slowly towards the station. Weaving around trucks in the middle of the road as there is no pavement. Entering the station, this is the last day to change my visa if I can.

Circa 2012: Gutsy was found in a hole. He was saved by a rancher who fashioned a mini lasso. JW had been sleeping in a boat grounded in the desert in a trailer park. Not his boat. I never saw it, but the home videos looked good. The surreal nature of a boat in the desert. Suspended in dust, which was once a sea bed. He'd heard the whining, but locating Gutsy's hole took him a few

hours. Once saved, Gutsy jumped out of the back of the Ford, which was going at 40mph. Hence the name.

Cira 2013: We'd been there two days before the killing. A drive-by cartel hit. It all happened on the side of the road where you buy the orange juice. By market stalls with the good fruit that you never see on the other side of the border.

2014: If you aren't careful, it's possible to creep up to 100mph and feel like you are driving at 50. You see no people, you see no cars, you see no buildings, you see no markers at all. Everything is muted. You get into a zombie state after a few hours.

March 2022: The snake is in the middle of the path. Which would be okay, but behind me is a dead end, and to the right of me is a drop, and to the left of me is a sheer rock face. It's a standoff. The snake is playing dead, and I'm playing calm.

November 2012: A family of Javellinas are coming past. I don't expect them to get so close. I slow down. I'm thinking I should step back. Or should I just stop? They are like ancient animals on a tour of their land. The little ones move off sometimes and then trot back into the group. There's some meandering. They seem completely at ease in their habitat. This is very much their land, not mine. They tolerate my presence, but they don't seem interested. If I could, I'd follow them. Spend the whole day with them. Cancel my plans. I'd take on their plans. But that's not good for them. They don't need me tagging along. I don't think.

December 2012: Coyotes like to travel and hunt solo. The national park website says they are sociable and have even been known to hunt "co-operatively" interspecies. I've never seen that. I've only seen them alone. And they tend to stop and have a long look at me. Across a fair distance, there is just this moment of looking from both sides.

2015 (voice memo): It's easy to get lost out here. There's no cell reception. I chose what seemed like a simple route. Flat. Some rocks at a few points. I have water, first aid, hat, boots, torch, compass—the normal stuff. But the route has had little to no traffic. Everything looks the same. How am I going to turn around and remember our turns? I should have brought pebbles. There's one tree and broken branches nearby. I'm going to use these as best I can to leave a trace of my past so my future can catch up.

2022 (voice memo in the car): Palm Springs reminds me of what a science fiction novel might depict as the place for a comfortable elite who don't age after arrival and happily forget the world they left behind. There is an uncanny floatiness. I cannot tell what time they or I inhabit here. Until I visited, I'd only known Palm Springs from the Hollywood history that spoke of actors resting here between films. And from Coupland's book "Generation X". The one with the neon pink book jacket. Is this real desert life too? You can see the desert in the distance from everyone's pools towards the south. But other directions are blocked. You can see more on the other side of these buildings - on the roadside - there, it feels apocalyptic when the skies are ablaze with pink, orange and red in technicolour. It's this mix of "suburbia" and "Mattel" - a 1950s America mixed with the Jetsons in the desert - it could be the start of a nightmare or the start of a commercial for a washing machine or a new sliding table for your cocktails and tv dinners. All the remnants of the Cold War aesthetic and ideology - the 1950s sedated housewives and the volatile suited husbands who truly demanded their martinis to be ready at the door. They have come to stand with me in the middle of the road. I keep pushing them off me when they try to open the car door. I wait for a modern car to come and make them vanish with their headlights—Honk at me to get out of the road. But nothing comes to make me or them move.

## MILITARY

2018: Fort Irwin is not responding to emails. Months go by as I work on another more pressing project about canoeing the Rio Grande with a bulletproof box, but I continue to write intermittently. Finally, I pick up the phone. Three or four dead-end calls (numbers I find on the military website) lead to a number for two men who aren't expecting me. They are polite but surprised I have their number. It sounds late with them, which isn't possible. I'm calling them at 2 pm in Texas so surely it is only 5 or 6 pm in California? Yet it distinctly sounds like I've reached a desert evening with the insects conversing after sunset. I picture the two men in a tidy bird-spotting hut with gas lamps and the vast landscape of the desert spread out in front of them. I then imagine a desk with a phone and some tidy paperwork. Nothing more. If they aren't military, maybe they are the Deep Space Network on the base, surrounded by high-tech listening devices, perched up on the mountain in a futuristic pod? The view is probably protected by glass, which is immaculately clean. I bet they haven't seen anyone for days, and this is the first time the phone has rung since they arrived. Naturally, they are surprised to hear a new voice

The two men, in an undisclosed location and from an undisclosed department, give me another number and this phone is answered by a calm and kind voice housed in office acoustics. He is amenable to my ideas and gives me a cell for his colleague. The phone answers immediately, and I'm thrust into the sonic landscape of a truck at high speed on a dirt road. It is a little loud, the vehicle is rattling, and the window is open because I can hear the wind. A lively man is the owner of the phone and is unsurprised that I might want to visit. I have the urge to shout in case I need to compete with his environment. It is agreed that I will send some information about myself and my work and then I can come and have a tour of their war simulation.

January 2022: The road winds like a snake through the ravine to the training center. I wonder what the ravine feels about having us drive through it to play war. Does it feel complicit? Is it painful to have us thumping in by trunk and tank? Each night the sun hits drivers in such a way that flying off the highway and plummeting into the ravine is a real concern. My mind floats back to what the ravine wants. Has it conspired - quite rightly so - with the sun to make this an unpleasant journey? Would it cushion my fall?

## 5. TRACE MOMENTS

The dust is floating before me and hangs like frozen action in the *Matrix*. Time slows down before the wind shifts and everything changes direction. The dust lifts up, turns and runs at me. I grab my handkerchief from my neck and hoist it up over my mouth and duck with eyes closed.

## MILITARY

Inside the fake hotel a sign says "Welcome to the Gift Shop" in large letters followed by "National Training Center" written underneath in fainter text. It is then translated into Arabic. The fact that the sign is not outside the training zone but placed within the action makes its presence confusing. Does the space really function as a gift shop for soldiers or someone else? If yes, when is it active? Who chooses what should be sold and where do the profits go? The space resembles a shop in a national park, small museum or heritage site. Placed in the middle of a fake war zone - which informs real actions in real war zones - it has a disturbing parallel to the spectacle and museumification - or mummification - of war.

## TWO SPACES

Both sites were dominated by groups that operated mainly within one field of expertise. For example, on-site, I was surrounded by soldiers and off-site, in the motel, I was surrounded by truckers. In both settings, there is an immediate introduction to the possibility of abuse or violence. The first thing I saw on entering the road into Fort Irwin was a large sign saying sexual abuse will not be tolerated. The first thing I saw on entering and closing the motel room was a small plaque that said do not answer the door to anyone (even if they say they are hotel staff). In order to navigate both settings, knowing that I was an outsider, I attempted to blend or be inconspicuous. I wore bulky dark clothes, old bags for carrying expensive equipment and had my hair tied up and under a baseball cap. When I lived in a small village in Texas, I had learnt to acknowledge people on the street and wave to strangers from my truck. This was expected etiquette. In the military and trucker setting, I kept my head down, rarely smiled and avoided eye contact unless in conversation.

## MILITARY

The desert space appears to be free (open), but the built environment within it is designed to reward only certain behaviour (closed). As I walked through the space, which included fake mosques, walls painted with fake brickwork and a defunct but previously functioning Arabic cafe operated by actors - with a weathered, hand painted sign for tea next to chairs and small tables - I pinpointed a feeling of limbo or timelessness in which my impressions could not solidify or be maintained because what was real was also unreal and what was unreal was also always real.

-----END OF EXCERPT-----