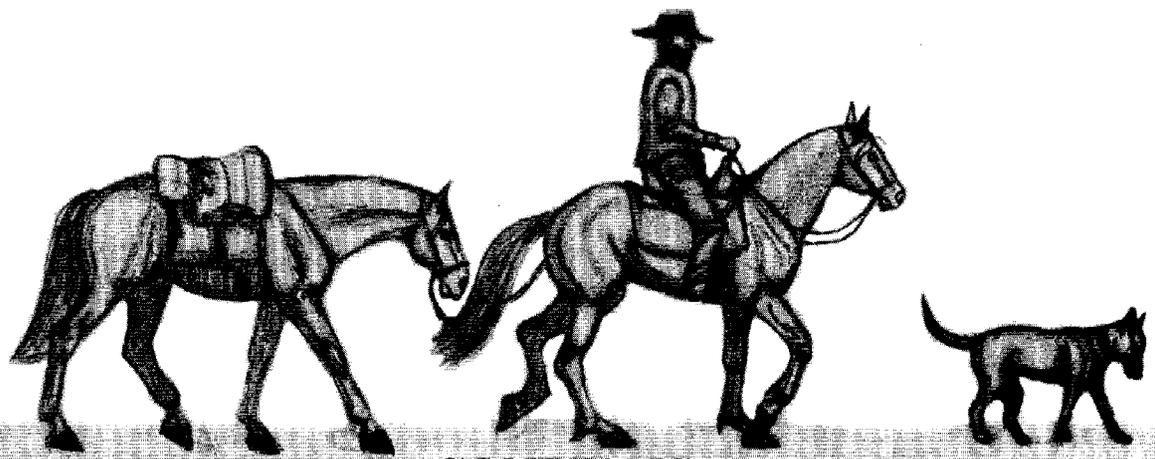


RIDING INTO THE WIND

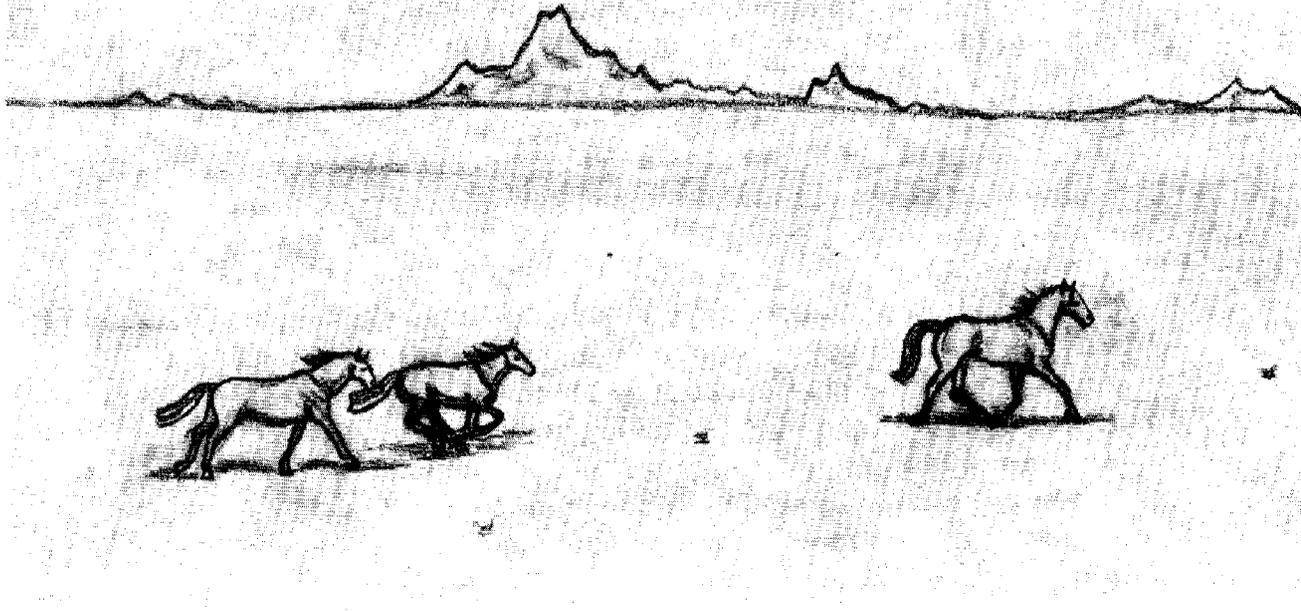
On Horseback out of Patagonia,
a Life Journey



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SEGUNDO

The story of our journey has two voices; mine is one.

The other voice is Nathan's.

This is his story of our meeting a *gaucho* named Segundo on the *pampas* of Santa Cruz.

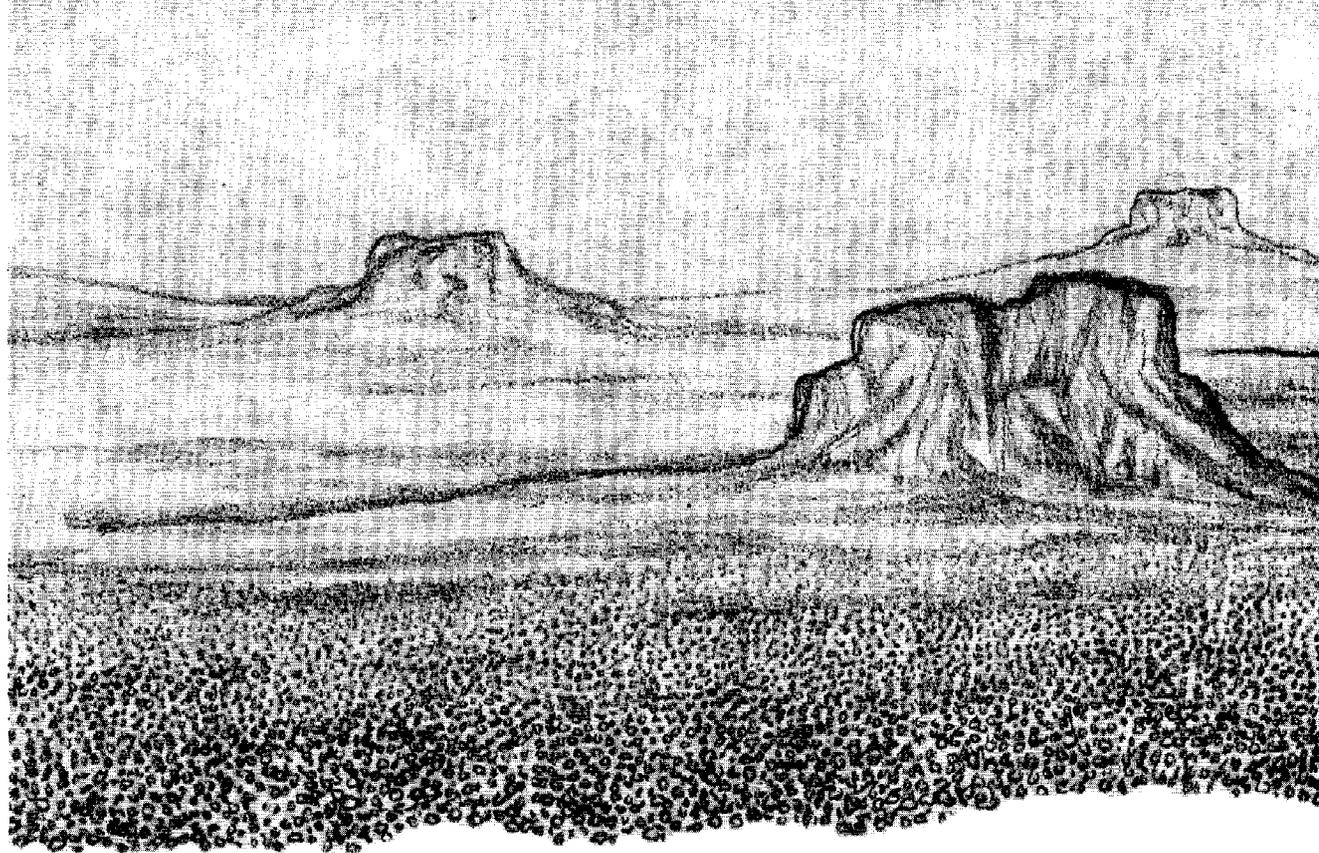
The pounding of hooves on the earth comes to me on a sudden gust of arctic air, moments before the herd of horses bursts out of a hidden arroyo, drawing a shroud of dust behind them that billows and curls forward, a breaking wave to swallow them up from behind as their flying legs stretch and hammer on the barren plain in a race before the storm.

I glance at Elly. She is hunkered down turtle-like against the cold wind. I edge my horse closer to hers.

"Horses, Elly!" I yell.

She hears me this time. Her windburnt face emerges from the turned



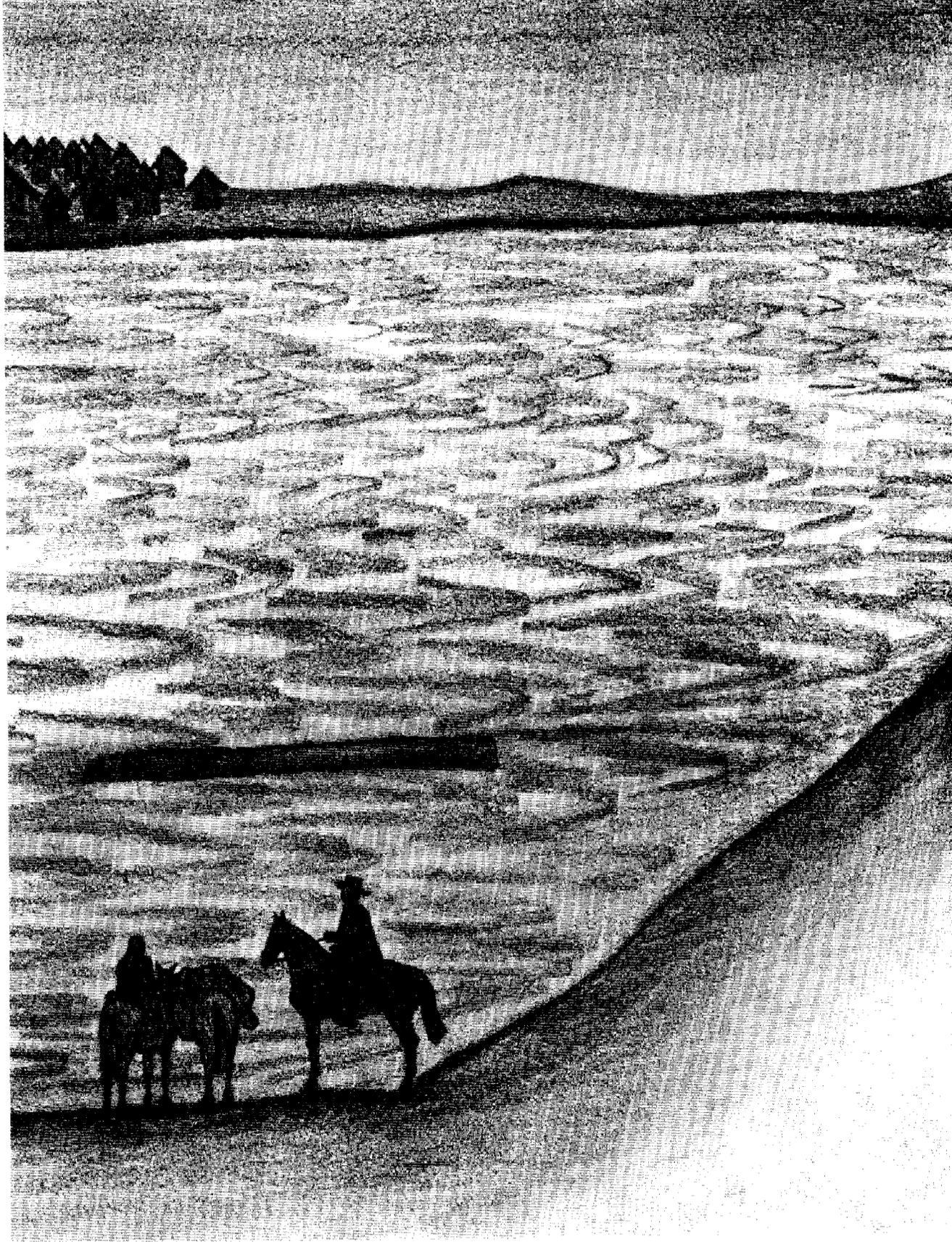


DEATH MESA

We will always wonder what it might have been like, riding up the valley past the military and on to Laguna del Desierto, over the pass at McLean's to Lago San Martin, the way the *gauchos* at la Tercera told us to go.

No one noticed us arriving at the military encampment of La Florida. We rode right up between the rows of tents and sixty pair of eyes looked up from tin plates in great surprise when we appeared in the doorway of the large mess tent. We could have just as easily continued on by and, chances are, they would not even have noticed our hooftracks in the dust.

Strange that no one had thought to tell us about this impressive military presence in the remote Andean valley, replete with one small aircraft, tanks, personnel carriers and a corral full of mules. We had envisioned spending this evening by a campfire, listening to the parrots in the *ñire* trees and maybe to the wail of guanacos. Instead we wound up on straight-back kitchen chairs in the field office of Destacamento La Florida, listening to the irregular clicks on an old Underwood as the corporal typed up a lengthy report, using only two





LEAVING PATAGONIA

It is time to leave the Patagonia and move on to all that follows.
It is hard to leave.

I have been comfortable in this place so far away, so stark and unforgiving. A place that defines me, the worst and the best of me; a place devoid of clutter. A place that does not ask questions of you and only demands that you endure. Patagonia is addictive.

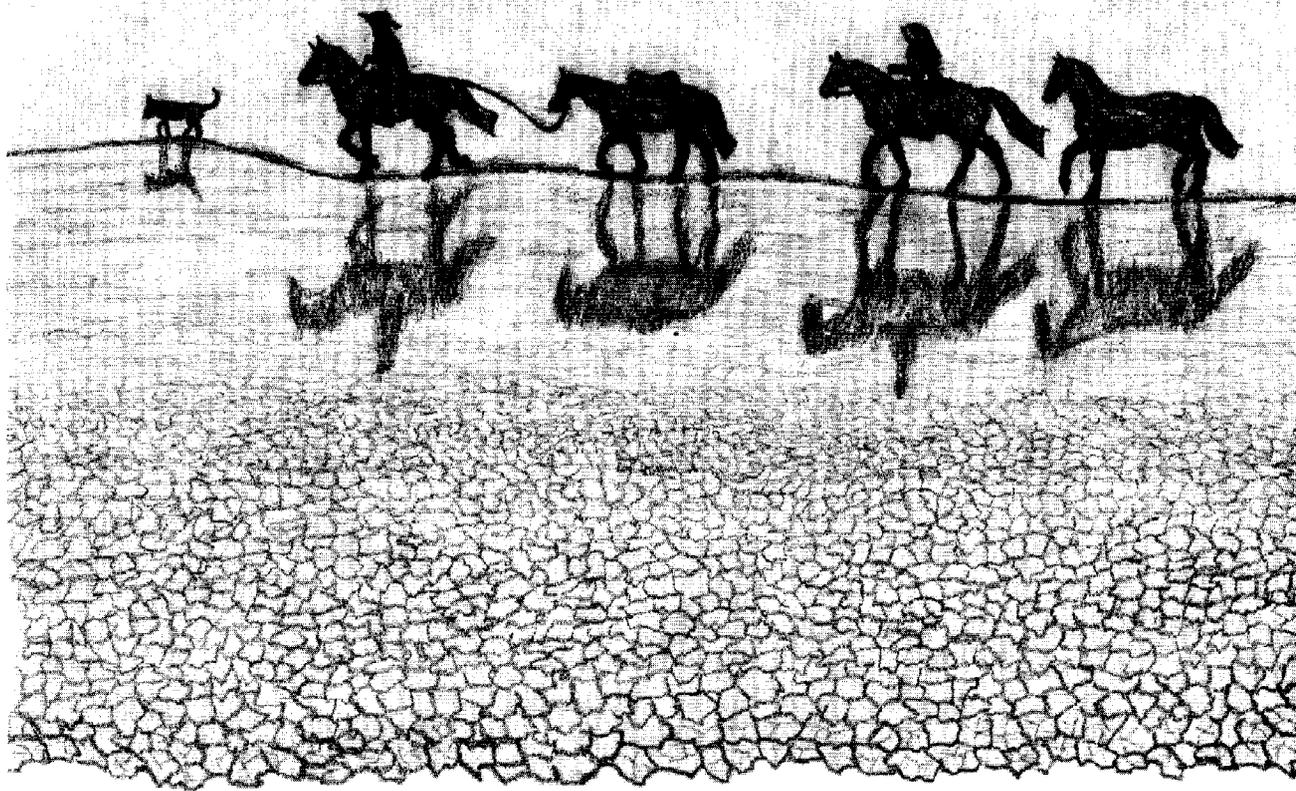
Patagonia is the place where I needed to lose myself that long night in July in my mother's room; the room where I lived during four teenage years and where I still reside a teenager.

The beer coasters I collected in Germany the summer I was sixteen and worked at an international student camp in West Berlin remain pinned to the left side of the window, in rows of four, on wallpaper that has remained unchanged for forty years.

Forty years!

I cry without tears and without a sound.





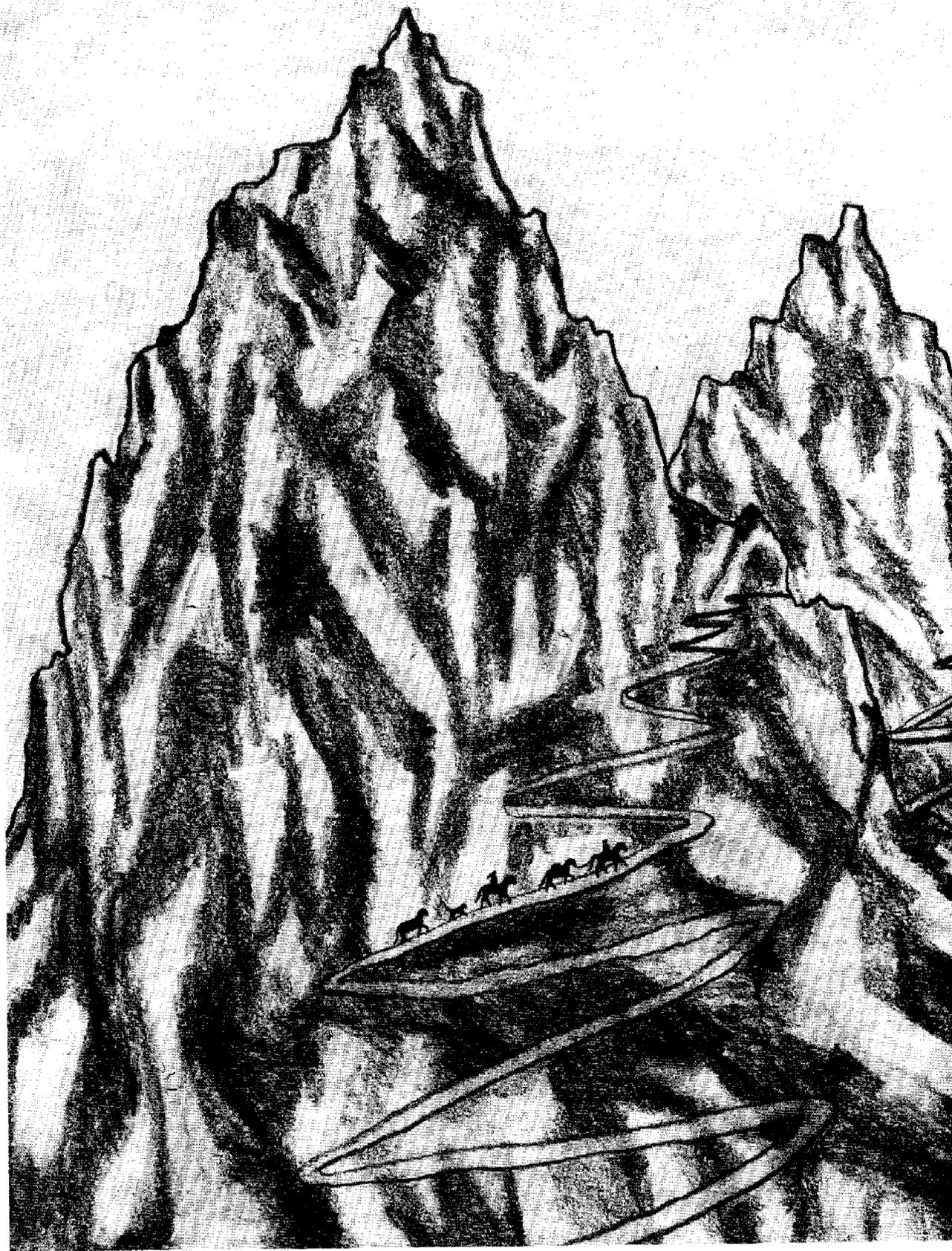
THE WHITE COLT

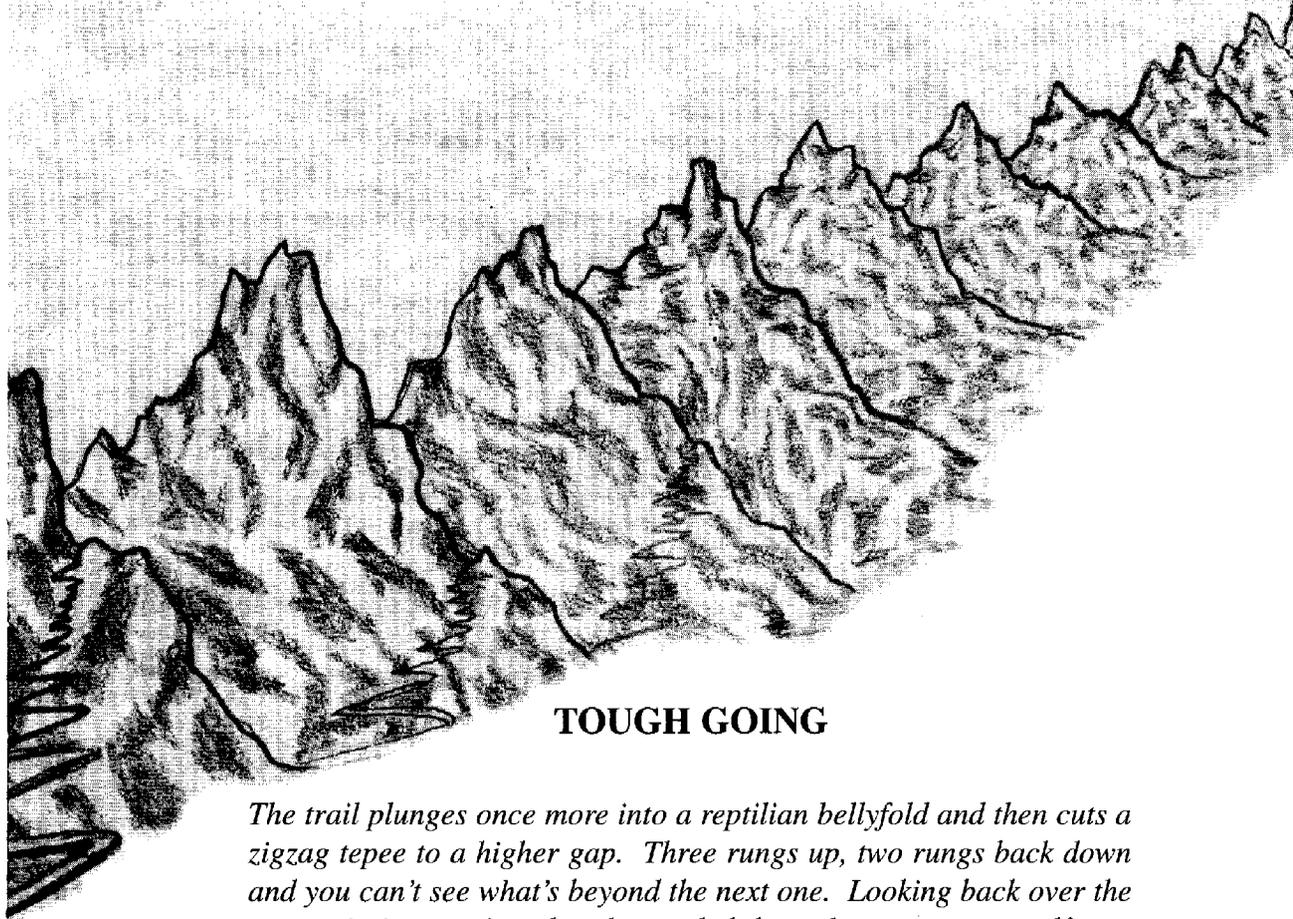
Between the south of Chile, where it rains up to three meters in a year and the north where it does not rain, not ever, there is a transition zone, the Norte Chico.

This arid land is dependent on the winds to come in from the south, bringing rain. For the past three years the winds had, instead, come out of the Norte Grande and brought the desert down with them. We rode into ranching country that had not seen rain for three seasons.

The drought in the Norte Chico has for me a shape, a voice. It drags itself along, one painful step after one painfully slow step in the bone-dry *arroyo* between withered bushes, its belly swollen the way a white balloon looks filled with water. But you knew there is no water in there, no feed either. Just hunger gas. Seeing us, the white colt lifts its head and lets out a hoarse wail, allowing itself a feeble moment of futile hope.

Now I understood about Guillermo making haste to return home so he could fetch his gun and return with two bullets: one for his mare with the





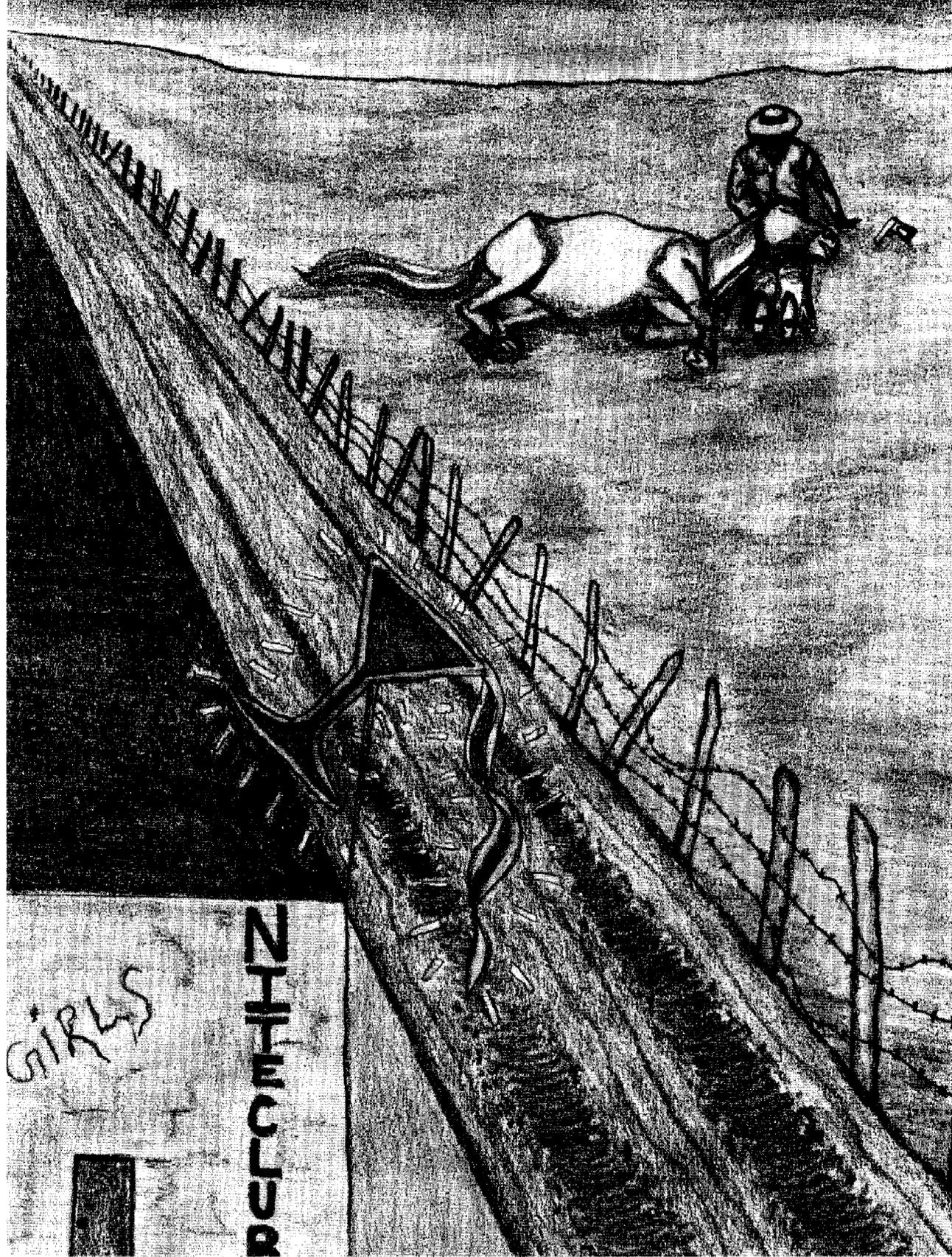
TOUGH GOING

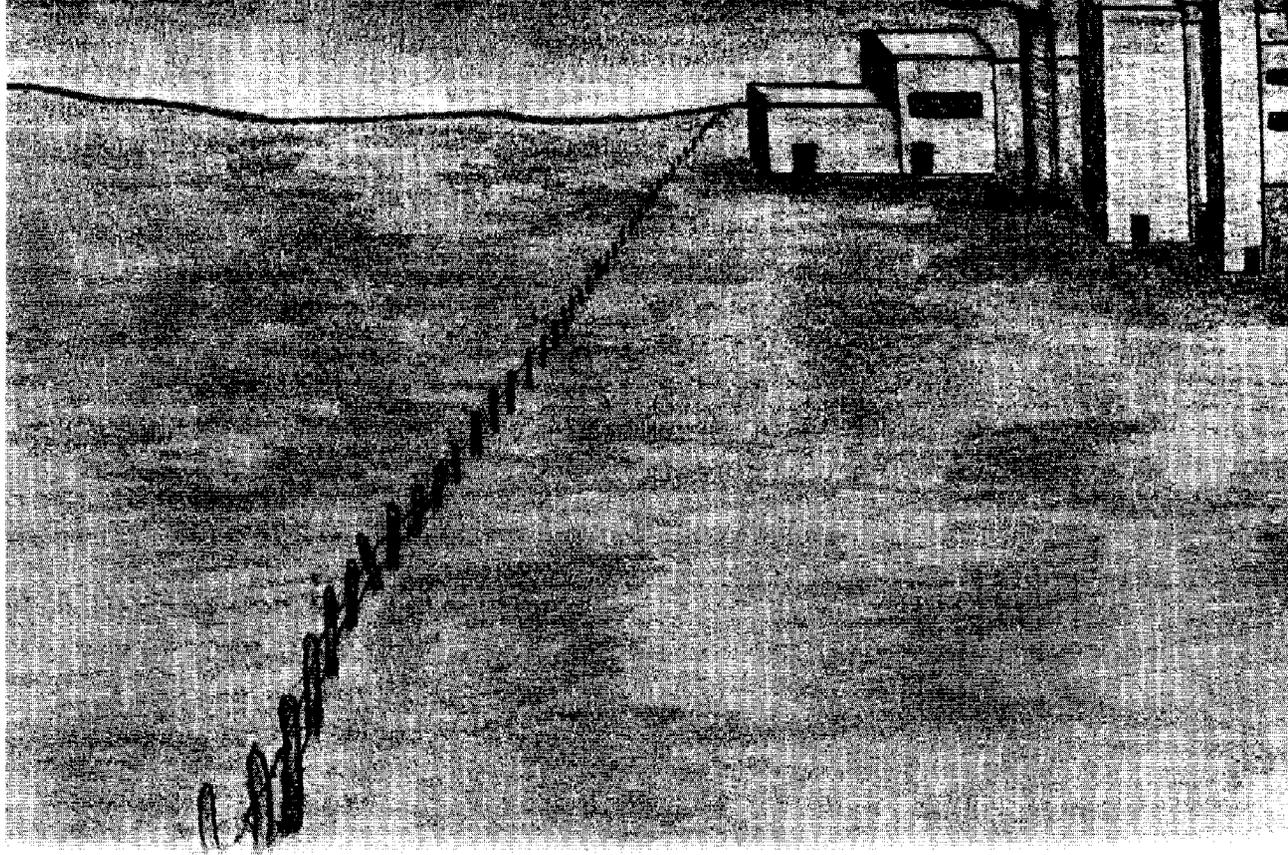
The trail plunges once more into a reptilian bellyfold and then cuts a zigzag tepee to a higher gap. Three rungs up, two rungs back down and you can't see what's beyond the next one. Looking back over the mountain jam you've already wended through, you see yourself as a myopic ant lost on a washboard of frozen tidal waves.

Flutes pipe in the breeze as two bundle-packed Indians approach in metronomic downswing; their spindly legs stretch under enormous bales of coca leaves. We find a wide spot and stop to let them by.

"Hòla, buenas tardes."

My words are snuffed out by the twitter of their wooden flutes. Where do they get the oxygen to play without pause? Their marble eyes register nothing. Don't see us, don't hear us. Beasts of burden with green lips and a wad of coca in the cheek on an unending high of highs - feeling no hunger, no cold, no fatigue, no pain - all the way from the Cordillera Oriental with the raw material for underground refineries





THE ALAMO

I see a green Chevy pickup coming down the narrow drive towards the ranch. I hear gears grind as the driver shifts down. One of Alfonso's friends? Someone looking for us? Either way, they won't be able to see me; I am making sure of that. I draw up my knees closer to my chest, making myself as small as possible behind the *mesquite*.

The gears grind again, as the pickup jerks to a stop by the gate. A boy gets out of the passenger side to open the wire gate. Closes it again after they drive through. He need not have bothered. There is nothing here anymore to keep in. Maracas is gone. So is India. Manuel took Pirata to his new home. Nathan and Chaco are taking Pampero back down to the quarantine corrals for another test. I bite my lip hard, so hard I can taste blood.

The strangers stop by the brick house. They leave the motor running. The driver gets out and now I see that I know who it is. The boy jumps up in the back of the pickup box and struggles to lift a saddle up on the side so the old woman can reach it. She grabs it the way someone does who has handled