The day starts in the outskirts of Paris. It's pouring rain and I didn't pack an umbrella. In an attempt to remain dry and adult, I run the whole way from the subway exit to the building entrance.

The receptionist has possibly not smiled since the beginning of their working day. As I get closer, their palms open up and my wet fingers hand them my identity card. They look at the picture on my card, then back at me, then back at the picture, then back at me again and put the card in a little box with color-coded dividers. I pin a laminated visitor tag to my chest and in the back of the room a metallic door opens with a buzzing sound.

The French army's national photographic archives are housed within several low, rectangle-shaped buildings separated by large pieces of lawn. Everything is surprisingly green and grey, wide and flat.
A figure—so far away that the whole body is the size of my smallest finger—is wearing a military uniform and running under an umbrella.

I walk past an enormous empty roundabout with a vertical concrete form in the middle. I assume that by turning around it I'll understand what it is, but it's an abstract sculpture.

The director of the archive center is waiting for me in the main entrance. He is friendlier than in our email exchange and walks with exaggerated steps through the narrow, carpeted corridor that leads to the research area. Two visitors are sitting behind fake-wooden desks with excessive amounts of paper on top. The first one, probably the oldest among us, explains he's studying the evolution of French army tanks. The second one, barely much younger, has a silk handkerchief folded in the top pocket of his jacket.

The unnecessary civilities are exchanged and I am shown to the computer I can use for the day. The background image is a photograph of a small group of soldiers caught in a sandstorm. The director and I sit next to each other on low chairs, in front of the screen and the sand. He asks me to describe my research. The more I say, the more his body slides down his chair in irregular, high-pitched tones characteristic of cheap furniture.

- To be honest, I'm not sure there any images about this particular episode of history.
- But there are more than 14 million images in this archive.
- Very true, how do you know?
- It's the first thing written on the main page of your website.
- Yes. Well, it happens from time to time that some images don't exist. And it would be complicated to list all the images that were never made, wouldn't it? But let's see.

The archive's search engine operates with keywords. Sitting straight now, the director rubs his hands against one another and starts typing. Algeria. Independence. Monuments. Transfers.

Hundreds of images appear. He opens the first series and scrolls through. I freeze in front of photographs of dead bodies lying on the sidewalk, only the legs and the feet are in the frame. The caption says something about civilians shot during an illegal protest in Algiers. My interlocutor scrolls on with professional composure before suggesting we be more specific about the words we use.

*My eyes are still thinking about the meticulously aligned pairs of shoes on the concrete.*

The director gets tired of hazardously putting words together to find images which may or may not exist. He mumbles something about watering plants and I continue typing alone. Monuments. Transfers. 1962. Transferred monuments. Repatriation of monuments. Public monuments. Transfers to France. 1963. Statues. Colonial statues. Sea transports. Port of Algiers.

Thousands of images later, I am standing in the coffee room decorated with unwaterable plastic plants and different types of cameras, lenses and camera bags displayed on glass shelves. I walk around them several times and drink two cups of coffee before finding my way back to the computer.

Photographs by the sea.

The caption says they were taken only a few days after the Algerian Independence in July 1962, documenting one of the first transfers of public monuments and statues from Algeria to France. Palm trees, a French flag and a bronze horse attached to a wooden platform with large chains. Busts carved out of their pedestals, more leafless trees.

Instructed by French authorities and coordinated by military forces, the massive dismantling was undertaken under the guise of artistic repatriation and preservation. From one side of the Mediterranean to the other, this maritime exfiltration of hundreds of tons of concrete, bronze, and marble reverses colonial time-space when they are reassembled on empty crossroads, busy roundabouts, and rural town squares days, months, or years later. Anachronistic shapes that set the present moment in time.

Lying on dry soil, the white marble faces look confused, almost concerned. A young soldier with a mustache poses proudly among these figures of the past, all looking in different directions.

It's still raining when I exit the building. Turning around the abstract sculpture, I realize I don't remember the way out. I cross the lawn in an uncertain direction and my shoes sink into the muddy soil, slowing me down.