The car carrying Ysabela Molini and her infant son climbs up a Dominican mountain road, taking hairpin turn after hairpin turn, the jade greens of the mountains melting into a smoke-grey sky. When the road begins to tip the other direction, the countryside laid out below stretches into a haze of purple-browns. The car creeps through villages, slowing behind motos stacked with two or three helmetless riders, until it finally arrives at the small village, and the stucco house, it set out toward. A man with greying hair comes out of the house when he hears the car pull up.

"Where is Joelle?" asks Molini.
"He is working," the man replies.
"He's in the mines?" Molini asks.
"No, he's working up at the house up the hill."
"He promised me fifty bags of kaolin," explains Molini. "I have been calling and calling him and he doesn't pick up...I need the kaolin."

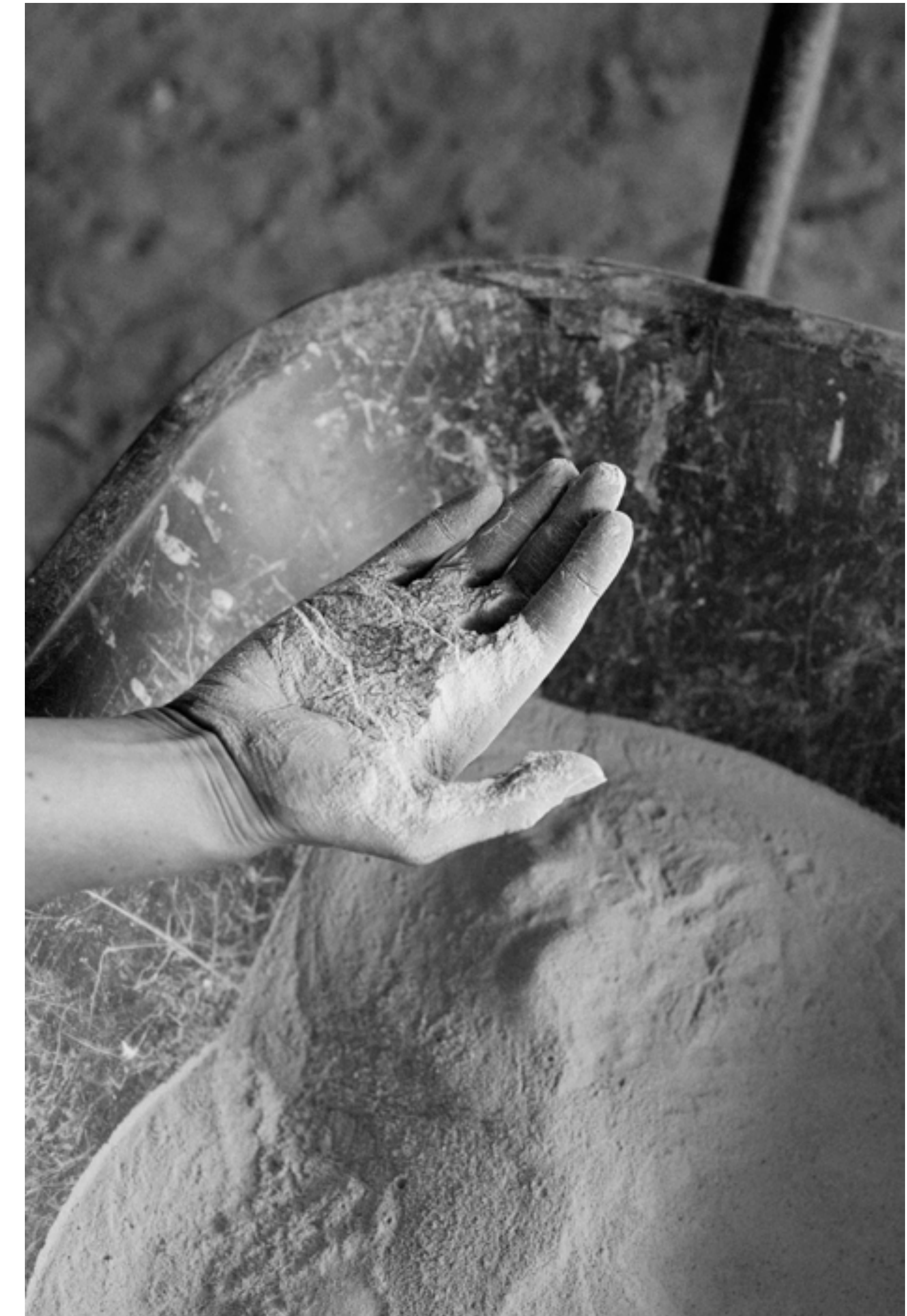
Kaolin is one of the key ingredients in a basic clay body used for ceramics. Molini needs it for her studio, Casa Alfarera, to continue making elegant ceramic pieces that nod towards mid-century modern design.

The grey-haired man points up the hill, and the car, where a nanny and a reporter also sit beside Molini, begins to follow the road toward the house where Joelle works as a keeper. But the gates are locked, the doors are closed, the lights are off. Molini stops someone walking along the road to ask if they know where Joelle is. "He's working on a construction site up the road."

Back to the car, back up the hill. Molini stops at one house under construction, then another, asking for Joelle. At the third site, the foreman says he knows Joelle and nods to another worker to call for him. Joelle steps to the window of the car, hands flecked with concrete, t-shirt stretched over the ball of his stomach.

"Joelle, you promised me fifty bags of kaolin three weeks ago. I'm completely out. Why haven't you been picking up my calls?"
"I haven't gotten any calls from you," he replies. "Maybe you have my number wrong?"
Molini taps his contact on her iPhone and Joelle's pocket starts to buzz. "Joelle, do you have any kaolin mined?"
"No, you see, we are having these legal troubles...there is some missing paperwork."
"Missing paperwork?"
"Yes, there is a certificate we need now..."

He was referencing a certificate of mining rights from the Department of Natural Resources, a which license costs sixty thousand pesos a year, about one thousand US dollars. Molini's car pulls away from the construction site, heads back up and then down the mountain road with an empty trunk.



Months later, after the mining rights have been cleared up, Molini returns to Joelle's house, the car pulling up past laundry laid flat on the lawn to dry. Chicks follow a hen across the stunted grass. Joelle emerges, carrying a sickle, followed by a shovel-wielding brother, and Molini follows them over the ridge.

Joelle goes in front, using the sickle to chop vines to the side. They scramble and slip down the steep slope, hands on moss-marked branches, boots on mud-marred ground. Brambles collect in Molini's hazel grove of hair. A loose heel comes off her boot. Insects skitter through air sometimes sweetened by the scent of paper-white flowers.

The group arrives at a ten-foot divot in the ground where a landslide has exposed part of the hill's interior. Joelle motions his sickle toward the white streaks in the side of the earth. Molini leans over and scoops up a handful of clay, moving it between her fingers, feeling its plasticity. The clay is moist, dense, speckled with bits of mica, which sparkle slightly in the jungle-filtered light. "Too wet," Molini's judgment comes down.

Joelle nods, and they begin slipping through the jungle again until they arrive at a small hole dug into the ground. Once a mining site is identified, it is in constant danger of being washed away by a landslide or rainstorm. Joelle's brother begins digging deeper into the mine. "The deeper you go, the more pure the kaolin becomes," Molini affirms. Joelle's brother scoops out a shovel's worth, and puts it on the ground before Molini. She sits, on her knees, running her fingers through the white powder. The clay is white, powdery, air-light, and clumped slightly where a few drops of moisture remain. "Perfect."

Molini motions toward the shovelfuls that are pure enough to be put into a plastic sack. The other mounds of kaolin are streaked with brown. "You get a clay with all these particles, it's fine for making roof tile, but not plates," she says, waving her hand over the unwanted earth. "Sometimes, I order a hundred and fifty sacks, but I have to send half the sacks back, because they are so impure." Joelle sells Molini a sack of kaolin for seventy-five pesos, about a dollar and fifty cents in American currency.

When the hole grows big enough, Molini crawls inside it to cool down after the hot hike. She sits there for a few minutes, surrounded by the mineral that has become her life.

In 2013, Molini started her ceramics studio, Casa Alfarera, with a commitment to use only clays that could be sourced locally, in the Dominican Republic. "The Dominican Republic is the only country in the Caribbean where all three main minerals that make up a clay body—silica, feldspar, and kaolin—can be found," she explains. But sourcing and mining the clay often presents challenges, sometimes much more dangerous than missing paperwork. "There was one time when I went to a certain area to get a fine, strong, white clay, which was near a gold mine that was under contentious debate," Molini relates. "I had my first son with me at the time; he was a baby. I would just put his carrier down and go feel the clays. Then these men came up over the hill with their guns pointed at us. After a while, I was able to talk their guns down, and convince them that we just wanted some dirt, not the gold." She spoke evenly while relating the story, then laughed lightly: "And we left with the clay."

Molini's car pulls up to another mine. She and Franklin Díaz, one of the studio's ceramicists, get out and walk past a wall of soft red clay. She gazes in wonder at the filmlike strips of hardened clay on the surface, then picks one up. "Hear that?" Molini cracks it in her hand. "It's beautiful."

After the minerals are packed into bags—often repurposed sugar sacks—they are brought to the production facility that Molini created for Casa Alfarera in an open-air space behind a car motor facility and a rarely used baseball field. "The silica and the feldspar are in different conditions when they arrive from the mine," Ysabela explains. "The silica is in sand form, and the feldspar is a stone, and the clays are wet clumps." The lumpy clays are spread out under the sun to dry completely, a process that can take days. If it rains, the clays are rushed back under the storage pavilion. The silica also arrives wet, so it has to be dried, then washed to remove impurities. This is a simple process of swirling the silica in water four or five times until it runs clear. Feldspar comes from an arid region—the minerals are from mountains of dry rock—so this material can be ground directly: going straight from the sack to Frankenstein.

Frankenstein is the grinding machine Molini had jerry-rigged together with a tractor engine that pulverizes the minerals into powder. Once everything is ground in Frankenstein, it is sieved through fine mesh screens. "Our clay is so good because it's such a fine particle clay," boasts Molini. The particles are weighed out on a small hanging scale. The process of sieving and weighing can take up to one week for one thousand pounds of clay.

The weighed-out minerals are then placed into holding pools (each one holds one thousand pounds of clay) according to an exact recipe that Molini holds close.

Frijan Díaz, one of the studio workers, is checking numbers written on the back of an envelope with Molini. She pulls up a Dropbox file on her phone, a recipe from the last time they did a blend: 30 percent yellow iron oxide clay, 20 percent white high-fired clay, 20 percent of another white high-fired clay, 12 percent feldspar, 10 percent kaolin, and 8 percent silica sand. When the minerals are gathered together according to the recipe, water is added, and the clay is left to sit for a while. The water is drained out, and the clay is moved across the gravel fields to the drying molds, where it remains for a few days. Then it is wrapped in air-tight plastic and dated. "The longer it sits, the better it gets," notes Molini. "We want to let it sit as long as possible. Right now, it's about three months...but the Chinese would let their clay sit for years." Sometimes Casa Alfarera's clay can't sit at all: when the studio gets larger orders, they can quickly run out of clay. "Three thousand pounds of clay gets me through three months, at the rate I'm going now," she says.

Not using a premade clay to produce ceramics can add an additional month of work for every piece. But this is a price Casa Alfarera is willing to pay. "If I have my own clay, I know more about the piece and I know more about the quality of the piece. And nobody else has that clay, so it has a specific look," Molini says. "I get calls every day from schools, from other potters, looking to buy my clay. I don't want to sell it, because then other people will have the same clay." "We only use one clay body, and that's what we're mastering, that one clay body."

When the clay is done aging and ready to be used, it is taken over to the pug mill, which compresses the clay to get rid of air bubbles that could cause a piece to explode in the kiln. As the clay comes out of the mill, it resembles a salami-shaped roll; it is measured and sliced with a wire before being thrown on a potter's wheel. Juan Peña Garcia is one of Casa Alfarera's throwers. He started making ceramics at thirteen, when he was a student at the National Center for Arts and Craft. Garcia later taught autistic children ceramics, and made folk ceramics sold in souvenir shops.

Garcia's brows narrow when he picks up a lump of clay. He centers it on the wheel, pressing it down into a cone, then pulling the base back up. He thumbs the center down until a hollow is created, and a vase has taken shape. The wheel squeaks slightly, and Garcia turns his head in sync, deep in meditation. He slices the vase form off and puts it down in front of himself. "When I'm on the wheel, I disconnect from the world in a way," Garcia says, white teeth winking, pausing for Molini to translate. "It's like having contact with nature all day, you feel like you're a part of the piece." His neck seems like it's loose on a hinge as he forms a piece of clay moving on the wheel. "That's why I spin my head."

After the piece is thrown, it needs to dry fully before it goes into the kiln. Drying can take from a week-and-a-half to three weeks or longer depending on the piece's size. When the piece is dry, sanding starts. "Any mark of the hand that is undesired is erased with sandpaper and a sponge to leave it as polished as possible," explains Molini. "The better this job is done, the less rustic the piece looks and the finer the quality.... We sand it as close to perfection as possible."

Then it's off to the kiln for bisque firing. Molini imported special refractory bricks and iron from America to build her kiln, a structure that is tall enough for a person to walk into. "Like all potters, we put as much as we can into one firing," notes Molini. "So it can take a week to fill the kiln, depending on production." The kiln boasts three gas burners on each of its sides. For bisque firing, the temperature is raised incrementally every hour, reaching nine hundred and fifty degrees Celsius. This process can take ten to twelve hours.

Next up: glazing and then one final firing. "I remake a lot of the same glazes, but they are always slightly different every time," Molini says. "Sometimes I make a white glaze and I decide that I want it blue, so I add cobalt, or I want it green, so I add copper. Or that same green I can fire differently: if you fire copper oxide with oxygen in the cabin of the kiln, you get green. If you deoxidize it, it becomes red... It's like magic, that part."

Molini opens a recipe book, where hearts float next to glazes with ingredients that don't need to be imported.

"The melting point can be too low or too high, and then the pots come out looking like this..." Ysabela holds up a small disc, a splattered fuse of deep blue lumps, "...which was once a teacup."

Some of the most captivating—and challenging—pieces that Casa Alfarera produces are ceramic tables and chairs. To make a chair, one hundred pounds of clay are thrown onto the wheel and formed into an hourglass shape; then a section the width of a human body is removed from the top portion of the clay with a wire. After the ceramic form has been fired and glazed, a seat is worked in, just above the pinch of the hourglass. Franklin Rodríguez is one of the ceramicists who throws the chairs. "The better the clay, the better the piece," he says, forming a small snake of clay with his fingers as he speaks. "This is the best clay I've worked with in all my years as a ceramicist." Rodríguez has been at the wheel for more than thirty years, but feels he is still growing,:

"A lot of the craft depends on how you develop yourself."

Santo Domingo's skies are cut up by power lines, which portion out blue-grey into trapezoids and triangles before clotting up at the street corners in tangles of black. It is a common practice to tap into the lines, stealing electricity from the grid. The electric company, unable to pay its employees, will shut off the electricity until the government fronts the bill. When Casa Alfarera first started, they used an electric kiln, but whenever the electricity zapped out, or the voltage shifted, there would be problems with production. "At that time, at the beginning, there was an electrician there almost every week—he was nearly on salary," Molini laments.

The electric kiln was positioned in a colonial-era house that acted as both production and retail space for the studio's first few years. The building was acquired by Molini's father-in-law in the 1970s, in near ruins. Slowly, the space was restored: fake facades were stripped away, alcoves and arches were discovered and rebuilt. A second floor was added. There was a room for the electric kiln, another for the thrown pieces to dry, and outside, under a banana tree, two foot-powered wheels were positioned. The clay was processed and dried on the roof. When the space became too cramped, and an alternate production area, with room for a gas-fired kiln, was found, the colonial building remained as a retail space. Here, azure-blue plates are stacked on thick wood tables, hexagonal planters patchwork the walls, and delicate bud vases are sheltered in stucco alcoves.

Before starting Casa Alfarera, Molini studied ceramics at the Pratt Institute of Art in New York. She returned to the Dominican Republic, where she was raised, after graduating. At first she began a small ceramics studio with a colleague, but they parted ways due to philosophical and creative differences; the other ceramicist was only interested in making singular pieces that could be considered fine art, whereas Molini wanted to make useable ceramics that would be a part of daily life. "I don't consider myself an artist, I consider myself an artisan," Molini explains. "Everything I make does not need to be original."

"Initially, I tried to differentiate myself by throwing extremely thin pieces on the wheel," she says. "And it's very beautiful, it has a quality that's sublime, really, but in practice, for restaurants, it doesn't matter how good the pot is, or how high you fire it, the stoneware needs to be a little thicker."

"In ceramics, there is no height that you can reach, you just have bridges to build..." Molini reflects. "You make one thing perfect, but it is only a small element of the whole pot, like the rim or the glaze."
Aside from solving the technical problems that a ceramicist is faced with, Molini also situates her practice in a time long past, when each region had its own ceramics maker. "I don't want to export, to be lost in a sea of other ceramics," she says. "I just want to be the local potter for this island." What does it mean to have the earth that you live on serve you in your day-to-day life? When one eats from a plate or sits on a chair made from the very soil of the place they are from, what kinds of connections are formed? And are those relationships not only between person and place but also person and maker? "To make a pot, you have to put a bit of your soul into it," Molini thinks.

"I love the process of making something from dust," Molini says. "Something that could last for a thousand years...so long after I do."