



**The Anecdotologist:**  
**Hernán Huaman from Huaraz**

**For Peru.**

**And for all those who love to learn.**



It was as he watched the landslide carry off the municipal library for the second time that Hernán finally gave up on his dream of ever achieving his *doctorado*. His mother had anticipated the disaster that very morning of 31<sup>st</sup> May 1970 when she heard the cock croak like a frog - that, she told him, was a warning that the devil was at work. Doña Almendra Hernández de Soto - the wealthy widow who had funded the rebuilding of the town's library after it was carried off by floodwaters the first time - had felt the same foreboding in her heart that morning when she saw the shape of a decapitated llama in the bottom of her teacup. Propelled by terror she fled to the church to pray for the safekeeping of the city. It was there that, at twenty-four minutes past three, just as an earthquake of devastating enormity rocked the whole region, she was crushed by a falling statue of Santa Agata - patron saint of martyrs, bakers and earthquakes. When Hernán learned that Doña Almendra had died in the tragedy, along with all but ninety-one of the inner city's inhabitants, he gave up all hope of returning to his studies and sacrificed his dream up to God in tribute to his fallen fellow citizens.

The whole city had said that Hernán's desire to become a doctor was a pipe-dream: what hope did the son of a truck-driver and a cripple have of ever achieving such heights? They said his efforts were as pointless as pouring water into the sea. Even when Hernán, aged six and three quarters, had confessed his ambition to Padre Alonzo, the priest had laughed

so hard that he spat communion wine all over the boy, which the nuns insisted was an omen that the aspiration was not only a folly but also a blasphemy.

There were only two people who had ever believed in Hernán's dream of a doctorate. The first was his father, Hector Huaman, who had worked as a truck driver for Huber's Haulage ever since Herr Hezekiah Huber himself had arrived in Peru in 1931 to escape the rising anti-Semitism in Germany. The second was Doktor Devorah Huber.

As he stood on the front step of his *casita* and looked from the hilltop down, way down towards the city and watched the library float away on a tide of mud and ice and debris, Hernán thought back to the afternoon that Herr and Doktor Huber had sat in his parents' one-room home to recruit his father to Huber's Haulage. Outside the hut the citizens of Ancash region queued round and round the hillside all the way along the Rio Santa to Yungay because they had heard the priests preach that there was once a Jew who could make a blind man see and a dead man rise. While his father talked salary and haulage routes with Herr Huber, Hernán sat with Doktor Huber peeling ears of corn.

"Will you heal them, Doktor?" Hernán asked, looking out of the glassless window at the heaving throng.

"I am not a medical doctor," the doctor replied. "I am a doctor because I have a doctorate".

"What is a doctorate?"

"A doctorate is when you learn more about one thing than anyone else so that you discover something that no one ever knew before."

To Hernán this sounded more beautiful than the swoop of a condor, warmer than the fur of a baby alpaca, sweeter than *manjar blanco*<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> A dessert made from sweetened, condensed milk also known as *dulce de leche*.

"I want a doctorate!" he cried.

Herr Huber leaned back from the table in his chair and cried out, "Devorah! I hope you are not filling the boy's head with impossible dreams! What you want, boy, is a job that pays. And studying, boy, does not pay. Don't waste your life on impossibilities."

The doctor shook her head, leaned over to Hernán's ear and whispered, "Nothing is impossible. I am an orphan. I am a Jew. And I was the first woman in my country to achieve a doctorate."

When the Hubers left, Hernán and his father watched from the window of their hut as Doktor Devorah Huber stood on a tree stump and explained to the crowd that they had confused her with Jesus Christ and she could not heal them for she was not a medical doctor. Then Doktor Huber stepped down from the stump and descended the mountain, the crowd parting for her and her husband as they walked.

Herr Huber interpreted the crowd's deference as admiration of his entrepreneurship in bringing modern transportation to their primitive communities. In fact the throng of *ancashinos*<sup>2</sup> were sharing Devorah's message by whispering it one man to his neighbour and so on down the hillside and all along the river. By the time the message reached the foot of the hill it was so distorted that Doktor Devorah Huber had been canonised, sanctified and immortalised. By the time the message reached Yungay she was Jesus Christ himself. And so the name of Huber became revered all across Ancash region and - long after the Hubers had returned to Lima - the *ancashinos* would bow to any trucks bearing the signage of Huber's Haulage as they passed.

Hector Huaman determined that his son would be a doctor just like Doktor Huber.

"But a doctor of what, papa?" Hernán asked him.

---

<sup>2</sup> Inhabitants of the Ancash region.

"Do not worry, my son. We will think of something."

Everywhere he drove, Hector Huaman searched for inspiration for his son's doctorate - in the inclines of the mighty Andes, in the verdant canopy of the rainforest, in the torrid waters of the Amazon. Most of all he looked in the faces of his compatriots as he passed them in his Huber's Haulage truck and watched them bow reverentially like reeds in the wind. In what could his son be an expert, knowledgeable above all other men?

Meanwhile Hernán worked hard in school - harder than any other child in Ancash. He read, wrote and calculated with a tenacity and attention that resembled fury. By the time he was twelve he knew more than his teachers so they told him to stop coming to school and sent him to the municipal library to teach himself instead. Early every morning Hernán descended the hillside to be at the library doors before they opened; late every night he studied by candlelight until the librarian threw him out. Every day he pored over piles of books while the town's geriatrics susurrated their disapproval over their card games and called him *el lector loco* - the lunatic lector.

Señora Huaman did not approve of her son's obsession. "You have completed the high school curriculum," she told him. "If you start work now you could be a millionaire at forty-five." She urged him to write to Herr Huber and see if the man would make him an apprentice in Lima.

But Hernán was set on university - he would apply to the National University of Trujillo on his sixteenth birthday. And until that day arrived he continued to search - with all the intensity of a puma in heat - on every page of every book in the municipal library of Huaraz for a topic for his doctorate.



The first time that a landslide carried off the municipal library it also carried off: half of the geriatrics of Ancash, who had been playing canasta inside the building; the statue of Atahualpa that had stood in the city's Plaza de Armas; and Señor Hector Huaman, leaving Hernán and his mother without a breadwinner. The 1941 disaster took place without warning – not even Doña Almendra Hernández de Soto, for all of her prayers to the saints, had foreseen the event – almost a fortnight before Hernán's sixteenth birthday, the very day he had determined to send his application to the National University of Trujillo.

What was there to do? Hernán felt his filial obligations strongly. Hernán abandoned his university application to seek a steady income and support his mother. He would, he promised her, write to Herr Huber in Lima and seek an apprenticeship.

In a moment of romantic indulgence he stood on the hilltop outside his home and scattered the sheets of his university application form on the Andean winds. As he watched the paper curl and ride away across the sky, scraping the clouds and soaring higher than the condors, his mother leapt from the hut and clobbered him around the head with a leg of beef that had been sent her by the city mayor to console her in her widow's grief. "You could have used the backside of that paper to write to Herr Huber!" she lamented.

Without paper on which to write to Herr Huber, Hernán was reduced to begging in the city for stationery. The mayor's secretary was appalled when Hernán turned up at the town-hall to ask for paper.

"Didn't you receive the leg of beef his excellence sent you?" she asked over her spectacles.

"We did, ma'am," Hernán replied.

"Then why are you here begging?" she sniffed.

"Because I cannot write on a leg of beef."

In the end it was the baker who gave him paper - not letter paper, but a piece of baking parchment, and it was on this baking parchment that Herr Hezekiah Huber received a letter of application from Hernán Huaman from Huaraz, seeking an opportunity to apprentice with him in Lima.

Herr Huber replied offering said apprenticeship at the headquarters of Huber's Haulage, but explaining that this apprenticeship was unpaid and therefore - if his family's financial circumstances had not changed in the 10 years since their first meeting - Hernán might find it more suitable to take up his late father's role as truck driver, for which he would be willing to continue to pay his father's salary, despite the boy's relative lack of experience and skill.

Señora Huaman intercepted the letter and, after professing in her heart that Herr Huber was a most generous man indeed, she tore a strip from the bottom of the headed paper and on that strip replied confirming her son's acceptance of the role of truck driver. As she handed the reply to the mailman the cock crowed three times, which she took as confirmation that her act was sanctioned by God himself.

When Hernán discovered his mother's deception he did not have the energy to feel anger: his father's corpse had been unearthed several kilometres down the valley and was miraculously unscarred. The *campesinos*<sup>3</sup> who found it had recognised him as the driver of the still much-venerated Huber's Haulage and had cleaned up his body and carried him into Huaraz in an open casket littered with wild flowers.

---

<sup>3</sup> Peasant farmers.

And so, still sodden with grief for his father and laden with anxiety over his mother's welfare, Hernán Huaman began driving for Huber's Haulage on New Year's Day in 1942.



Hernán Huaman from Huaraz was born on Christmas day in 1925, which his mother had believed to be a celestial sign that he would bring prosperity and success to her family and to Huaraz. When the young Hernán seemed more interested in books than cash she had felt cheated by God. When her husband had died she had felt positively victimised by the heavens. But then when Hernán began driving for Huber's Haulage she felt certain that he would become the most esteemed driver in Ancash - in Peru - in the entire Americas - and that he would, in time, be showered with riches and fame.

To her disgust, Hernán brought home nothing beyond his meagre driver's salary and a steadily growing collection of worthless bric-a-brac that he collected on his travels around the country.

The first knick-knack which Hernán presented to his mother had been given to him during his first assignment to transport a consignment of rubber from the Amazonian city of Iquitos to the Limeñan port of Callao by a rubber farmer in gratitude for saving his child from drowning in the Amazon. Hernán sat at the table across from his mother with shining eyes full of mystery.

"What is it?" his mother asked with the corner of her lip turned up in disdain.

Hernán opened his hands to reveal a jam jar that had been tied closed by winding brightly coloured wool around it to form a tightly woven lattice. Between the interlacing strands of wool Señora Huaman could see that the jar was empty.

"Well?" she sighed. "Is it the key to our fortune?"

"It is the whistle of *El Tunchi*," Hernán whispered, gently placing the jar equidistant between them.

His mother rolled her eyes.

Hernán spoke in a low voice like the rumble of distant thunder through the mountains.

"The spirit of *el Tunchi* roams the rainforest, whistling a deadly tune and waiting for someone to whistle back. His tune is tempting, addictive, almost irresistible, but those that whistle in reply to *el Tunchi* draw his spirit towards them, closer and closer, until he finds them and slaughters them mercilessly.

"A rubber farmer I met had caught the whistle of *El Tunchi* in this very jar, mama! And he gave it to me. Here it is! Can you imagine?"

Señora Huaman hauled herself up from her chair onto her walking stick, hobbled over to Hernán and, with all the strength she could muster, slapped him around the face.

"Demon! Get out!" she cried. "You speak heresy and devilry. Take your cursed jar and take it far from my house. I will house no demons here."

Hernán snatched up the jar and bolted from the house, but he did not have it in his heart to dispose of the thing. If he threw it down the hillside it would surely smash and unleash *El Tunchi* upon his hometown. If he hid it in the woods someone might find it and, in ignorance, release *El Tunchi* and certainly be killed. Desperately Hernán looked about and his eye fell upon a small opening in the trunk of a nearby Queñua tree; there, among the moss and twigs, he hid the whistle of *El Tunchi*.

Undeterred and driven by his thirst for knowledge, Hernán continued to collect artefacts on his travels - a feather from the invincible fighting cock of Iquitos; the hat worn by Hiram Bingham on the day he 'discovered' Machu Picchu; a locket filled with flakes of yellow paint chipped from the façade of the infamous haunted Casa Matusita in Lima - and he hid them

all in the hollow of the Queñua until the day when, many years later, his mother would die from all the bile and bitterness that rose up in her throat: on that distant day he would bring his eclectic collection into the house which would, at last, be his alone.



Unbeknown to his mother, Hernán Huaman returned to his studies, snatching visits to the municipal library between his trips to deliver consignments to and from every corner of Peru. He checked-out books and read them on his rest-stops by the sides of the dusty roads on which he travelled. Having no paper on which to write, he scribbled his notes anywhere he could find space – he scrawled them on his arms and legs with ink; he etched them on the inner walls of his truck with chalk; he scratched them into the sand of the Atacama desert with sticks and even cut them into the trees of the Andes with his penknife. For decades Hernán inscribed his thoughts into the landscape of Peru by any means he could find.

Propelled by the fruitfulness of his furtive study and by his outrage at the reduction in his wages when Huber's Haulage was taken over and nationalised by the Junta Government of General Velasco and renamed 'TransporPeru', Hernán determined once more to apply to university. In secret, personal protest against General Velasco he used TransporPeru's fuel and time to detour from his assignment to transport maize from Cajamarca to Lima in order to pass through Trujillo and collect his university application form. With all the ire and indignation of a revolutionary he completed his papers, sealed them in the most expensive envelope he could find in all of Ancash region and fervently licked the stamp and slammed it down.

It was as Hernán left his hilltop home at twenty-three minutes past three in the afternoon on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1970 to descend to the city centre and post his university application that an

earthquake with a magnitude of 7.9 on the Richter scale rocked the earth just off the coast of Chimbote and then all the land around. In the space of forty-five seconds, as he clung to the Queñua tree while the earth shook beneath him, Hernán fearfully, helplessly, desperately watched the landslide swoop from the mountains, gather ferocious speed, destroy his city and carry away the municipal library.

It was a sign. It must be a sign. Twice his attempts to apply to university had been thwarted by deadly disaster. Twice his ambition had been laid low by acts of God of the most epic proportions. Mother Earth stared him in the face and unquestionably, undeniably and indomitably reminded him of his insignificance and his audacity at attempting to rise even an inch above his allotted station, which was that of a middle-aged peasant-born truck-driver living at the mercy of the cruel elements and a poison-tongued septuagenarian mother and working for pitiful pay at an outpost branch of a nationalised haulage company. And tomorrow he was to deliver a consignment of manure.



The years were cruel to Hernán. He grew old traversing the dusty roads of Peru, for with almost no pension saved he was forced to work long into his dotage. His days off work he spent alone on the blustery hilltop outside Huaraz, watching over the city as it was rebuilt painfully slowly, piece-by-piece, and dragged into the modern age.

His only consolation came in the form of bric-a-brac which he collected on his journeys gifted to him by thankful hitch-hikers whom he picked up on his way, or by anti-Velascan rebels and guerrilla fighters whose secret messages he smuggled, or simply by *campesinos* who took pity on the wizened man so desperate for conversation and so thirsty for knowledge that he was willing to trade his lunch in return for the telling of a local tale.

Just before sunrise on the day of his seventy-fourth birthday Hernán Huaman from Huaraz left Tumbes and drove onto the empty Panamericana to deliver cacao beans to the port of Callao for exportation to Europe. In the back of his truck the cacao beans rattled in their crates with every rut and bump in the road. From his rear-view mirror a rosary swung and on his dashboard stood a plastic statuette of Saint Christopher, stuck down with a fruit-flavoured chiclet. Hernán drove with his foot pressing the accelerator as far as it would go – he aimed to reach Piura before eleven, when the sun would make it too hot to drive. There he would rest, buy some lunch, maybe pay a beggar for a story.

As the sun's rays insinuated themselves above the horizon Hernán spotted a black dot in the distance by the side of the

road. Driving closer he could make out the shape of a man, suited and bespectacled and clutching a brown satchel to his chest. His arm was out, thumb-up, hitching for a ride.

This was a most unusual hitch-hiker - not the usual backpack-heaving, bandana-wearing, sweat-dripping Anglophone teenagers Hernán was used to, but a well-dressed, respectable-looking man; but what respectable man would be out looking for a ride at this hour on Christmas day?

Hernán pulled up alongside.

"You need a ride, Señor?" he asked.

"I do."

"Where are you going?"

"To Lima."

"I can get you to Callao," Hernán told him.

"In time for the New Year?" the man asked.

"I hope to be in Lima within three days."

The suited man surveyed Hernán in the soft haze of the morning light and saw his wrinkled face, his dusty calloused hands, his dishevelled clothes and took pity on him.

"Can I pay you, Señor?" the suited man asked.

"I am old," Hernán replied. "I have no use for money. Pay me with your company."

"Very well," the suited man said, climbing into the passenger seat and placing his satchel by his feet.

At first the pair rode in silence while huayno played scratchily out of the truck's old radio, but as they drove through Mancora, where young tourists - drawn by the town's fame for surfing and marijuana - were languishing by the roadside, hungover from the previous night's festivities, the suited man laughed and said, "The stupidity of youth, eh?"

Hernán shook his head in disagreement. "But to be young again," he replied, "Full of dreams and possibility."

The suited man looked over. "Excuse-me, Señor, if I am too curious, but aren't you a little advanced in years to still be driving trucks?"

Hernán smiled. "Yes, I am. But what can I do? I have done this all my life, and I have no other way to earn my living."

The suited man was silent a moment, stared straight ahead and squinted his eyes at the horizon. "You must have some stories to tell..."

Hernán's eyes lit up, and with a sly smile he replied, "I do!"

For the first time in his seventy-five years Hernán Huaman from Huaraz told stories instead of listening to them, and he was initiated into the supreme pleasure that it is to share a life-time of accumulated knowledge. As he drove, he told the suited man about the jar containing the whistle of *El Tunchi*, of the feather from the invincible fighting cock of Iquitos, of the hat worn by Hiram Bingham on the day he 'discovered' Machu Picchu, and of the locket filled with flakes of yellow paint chipped from the façade of the infamous haunted Casa Matusita in Lima.

Then he told the man of the piece of cloth he had been given by an archaeologist's assistant, surreptitiously torn from the swaddling cloak of the Moche mummy Juanita discovered on Mount Ampato.

He told of the song of an Amazonian siren, captured on a Dictaphone and gifted to him by a struggling journalist, disbelieved by all the newspapers to whom he tried to sell his story.

He told of the fingernails shared with him by an undertaker's errand-boy who had snipped them from the hands of the corpse of Julia Hernández Pecho Viuda de Díaz, the witch of Cachiche who had foretold the destruction of Ica from her deathbed.

At the insistence of the suited man, Hernán made a detour via Huaraz to show him the collection of trinkets hidden in the Queñua tree. Proudly Hernán laid them out on the table in his one-room hut and showed the hitch-hiker the hair of Santa Rosa de Lima, which she had cut from her own head in

desperation to repel her many suitors and safeguard her subjugation to God.

Hernán showed him the goat foot of *el Chullachaqui* – the malevolent shape-shifter of the Amazon who leads explorers astray, deep into the rainforest, to be lost forever – severed by a logger who had vanquished the creature in hand-to-hand combat.

Hernán showed him the garrotte (given by a lonely old widow in Cajamarca in return for one night of love-making) that was used to strangle Atahualpa, the Sapa Inca imprisoned by the conquistadors, who traded a roomful of gold and two roomfuls of silver for his release only to be executed and burned.

When they returned to the road, Hernán continued to share with the suited man his collection of tales, bought in return for morsels of food or tokens of affection, along the highways and byways of Peru during six decades of haulage.

His passenger listened in awestruck wonder at how this dirty, ailing and, he presumed, uneducated old man could have accumulated so vast a body of knowledge. And, out of the insensitivity of his thirty years of privilege, he asked, "Did you never think of being something other than a truck-driver?"

Hernán fell silent. Sailing south down the Panamericana, with the vast Pacific Ocean spreading out to the west and the first of the Andean mountains undulating out to the east, he was struck again by the inconsequential smallness of his life. But itching in the deepest corner of his mind, like a day-old mosquito bite, was the memory of his old dream.

"I once wanted to earn a doctorate".



After the old man had dropped him off in Callao on the evening of 29<sup>th</sup> December 1999, the suited man hitched a lift with some sailors into the centre of Lima. The whole city was festooned with lights and streamers and heaving with tourists and revellers rehearsing their drunken antics two days early. Young civil servants, sent to oversee the erection of scaffolding in the Plaza de Armas for official government celebrations of the new Millennium, had abandoned their clipboards on park benches in favour of downing pisco sours and dancing in the flowerbeds.

The suited man hailed a taxi to take him to the Avenida Universitaria. As the taxi driver blasted cumbia tunes from the radio, the suited man leaned back and pondered how a week before his preoccupation had been to complete his fieldwork in Tumbes, drop off his notes with his secretary for typing, then to get home in time for the Y2K celebrations and dance in the new millennium with his wife and children. But now he could not tear his mind from Hernán Huaman from Huaraz, the humble truck-driver whose tales had left him reeling.

"Señor?" the taxi driver said, looking over his shoulder and calling his passenger back from his reverie. "Ocho soles."

The suited man paid the driver and, dragging his brown satchel of field-notes by the shoulder strap so that it bounced off each stone step, he climbed to the front doors of the Pontifical University of San Martín y San Ambrosio.

The doorman greeted him: "Buenas tardes, Professor."



Early in the new millennium the elderly Hernán was visited by three learned men. They came separately from Lima to meet the man with the thousand stories of whom they had heard much. The first, a silver-bearded priest, arrived while Hernán was away and so sat for three days and three nights on his front step, waiting. He listened to Hernán's narration silently, pensively and, before he left, gifted Hernán a golden crucifix to add to his collection and foretold the coming of his two comrades.

The second visitor was a nervous middle-aged lecturer who always carried on his person a vial or orange flower water to steady his nerves, spoke with a stammer and caused the whole hut to shake because he trembled so violently. But as Hernán spoke, the man's face softened and his quaking slowed and then stopped until the two men were sat perfectly still and not a single straw of the hut's thatched roof nor a speck of dust on the hut's dirt floor stirred again. So elated was the lecturer with his new-found confidence that he left Hernán his orange flower water and those who saw him say he walked all the way back to Lima, strutting like a rooster.

The third visitor, who arrived at the crack of dawn with a single, punctual knock at the door, was a young professor - an arrogant and ambitious teacher of the law. The youth sat stiffly, dressed in a black suit ill-suited to the January heat, and inspected Hernán with the same wide, dark, Moorish eyes of the conquistadors. While inside the hut Hernán told his tales for the third and final time, outside the hut the sun crept up the sky. With each tale that Hernán told, the

young lawyer sweated more profusely, first in beads on his forehead, later in ribbons from under his collar and in rivulets down his chest and back. By mid-morning his clothes were drenched and a puddle was forming around his chair, and he began to peel off his clothes, piece by piece, until at mid-day he was sat entirely naked and afloat on his chair in a sea of his own perspiration. When Hernán opened the door of his hut the lawyer floated away down the hill on a river of sweat, leaving behind only his funereal clothing.

With the departure of the last of the three learned men, Hernán was plunged back into his life of relentless travel alternated with hilltop solitude. The learned men had left behind in Hernán a feeling of ennui that he could not shake. It took weeks for the humidity of the young lawyer's sweat to dissipate from his hut. He caught a chill from the damp and was forced to take time off work. As he lay in bed during those days, his eyes passed over his accumulation of trinkets and he re-lived each journey he had taken to discover them and each story he had collected along with them.

When Hernán returned to work in March, his ennui had taken physical form. He felt it heavily in his body. His joints creaked. His muscles stuck to his bones. His movements were laboured. His blood felt thick in his veins. Then the burdensomeness of his body translated to a pain that started as a dull ache the size of a pinprick in his stomach, but as autumn wore on the pain expanded until it throbbed through his whole body. At the end of April, he tendered his resignation.

The mystery of the three learned visitors was solved on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2000 – the day of the festival of *El Señor de la Soledad*<sup>4</sup> – when, early in the morning, the mailman called Hernán out of his hut to hand to him, in person, a large envelope made of elegant marbled paper. For decades the only post Hernán had received was his trucker's pay-cheques, which

---

<sup>4</sup> The Lord of Solitude.

the mailman shoved unceremoniously under the door of the hut. These cheques came without even a covering note or a letter of thanks upon completing ten, or twenty or fifty years of service and were printed on flimsy, creased greyish paper that smelled faintly of mould.

Hernán turned the envelope over in his hands. It was sturdy - heavy even, for paper - but deliciously smooth, as if woven with silk. Hernán wondered if this envelope had come to him by mistake, but every time he read it over he found his name clearly printed there: HERNÁN HUAMAN FROM HUARAZ.

Sat in the hollow of the Queña tree, the cock bleated like a goat just as Hernán opened the envelope. ☒

H|E|R|N|A|N| H|U|A|M|A|N|

F|R|O|M|

H|U|A|R|A|Z|

*Pontificia Universidad San Martín y San Ambrosio*

*Founded in 1917*

*Hernan Huaman*

*having satisfied the requirements prescribed by the Rector  
and upon the agreement of the Board of Governors,  
is awarded a*

**DOCTORATE OF ANECDOTOLOGY**

*On this 6<sup>th</sup> day of January in the year 2000*



From far below in the city, *huayno* music was beginning to rise on wafts of breeze to Hernán on his hilltop. The shaking of *shak-shaks*<sup>5</sup> and the beating of drums punctuated the morning air between the quivering high notes of flutes and panpipes and the tremulous voices of singers.

As throngs of worshippers lined the pavements of Huaraz to watch the painted body of a plastic Christ carried solemnly through the streets, far above them Hernán stood alone, clutching his doctorate with both hands.

And above Hernán, high in the sky, condors soared and swooped, diving between the clouds, watching all below them with detached curiosity.

The day was still young. The air was gentle, like calm breaths exhaled softly.

With a fingertip, Hernán traced the letters of his name on the doctoral certificate.

Then he looked about him, at the verdant neighbouring hillsides, at the mountain tops in the distance, at the vast expanse of sky all around.

He noticed that his pain was gone.

His whole body felt light.

He tried bobbing on the balls of his feet.

He felt lithe.

A breeze rustled the branches of  
the Queña tree.

He turned to it.

---

<sup>5</sup> An instrument similar to maracas worn around the ankles to create percussion while the wearer dances.

He walked to it.

He sat and nestled into its trunk.

And there he listened  
 to the distant calls of pumas  
 and the babbling of the Rio Santa  
 and the creaking of jungle trees  
 and the weeping of *El Tunchi*  
 and the beating of a hummingbird's wing  
 and the roar of the Pacific  
 and the clicking of beetles on the Amazon floor  
 and the cry of the matador  
 and the rustling of dust in the Atacama desert  
 and the praying of nuns  
 and the beating of hooves of advancing Spanish horses  
 and the hum of traffic on the Panamerican highway  
 and the resentful whispers of Atahualpa's soul  
 and the stir of bodies in the rich earth.  
 When the wind picked up pace  
 and whipped up the branches of the Queña tree,  
 Hernán opened his hands  
 and let the wind take  
 the doctoral certificate.

It floated higher and higher  
 far above the hilltop  
 far above Huaraz  
 and Hernán went with it  
 higher and higher  
 until the roads  
 he had driven  
 were like  
 pencil lines  
 on paper  
 and he saw  
 the whole country  
 like a map

on which

he could trace

the entirety of

his life.

Hernán realised

he should never have

given up

so early

on his dream to

find a PhD.

