

INTO

CHAPTER ONE

On steep slopes above the Valle Sagrado, Peruvian farmers grow beans and barley on terraces that fed their Inca ancestors.

I arrived in Colquepata riding on top of seven thousand bottles of beer destined for the Amazon jungle. I had come to this remote pueblo high in the Peruvian Andes to learn

about a culture that had survived for more than sixty generations on land so steep that farmers there have been known to fall out of their fields.

Careening down a narrow, rutted dirt road, every few miles the truck would become mired in knee-deep mud, and we would leap over the sides to the driver's call of "*Pico! Pala! Pico! Pala!*" for the picks and shovels to help to dig it out. Then we were off again, bouncing and sliding, the top-heavy truck swaying out over sheer vertical canyons; it was a full day into the four-day journey before I could bring myself to look at anything but the road.

As the truck forged deep into the mountains, glimpses of life began to draw me in. A dense mist filled a canyon, concealing all but the most distant views. As the sun burned through, the vertical face of a mountain came clear, broken into hundreds of mysterious shapes of brown and green: terraced fields of potatoes, barley, and beans.

Made by hand and expertly engineered by eye, some terraces were no larger than a suburban front lawn yet contained more than thirty varieties of potatoes. In fact, some terraces, as I later learned, had been in continuous use since the time of the Incas, whose short, hundred-year reign had created a range of tools and techniques that allowed people to flourish in a difficult environment. I imagined the many hands and ancient footplows that had made their indelible mark on that steep hillside—a land worked for centuries—yet I could see virtually no erosion.

THE PAST





We drove to the top of a rock outcropping that rose from his land. From here we could see the whole of his field and beyond, into millions of acres of open desert. There was nothing more sacred, nothing more important in this man's life than his field of corn. I could see it the moment we arrived from the way he touched his plants and looked down and beyond the rows.

Later in the day he sat in the hot Arizona sun silently examining the few ears of corn we had harvested. One by one he picked them up, turning them over and over in his hand. There were white, blue, red, and yellow—representing, I was told, the four human races and the four directions.



A Hopi woman winnows beans in Arizona. Halfway around the world, in northern Thailand, a Karen tribesman echoes her rhythm.