

Miguel Aju

Margaret B. Young

DUST-WHITENED SANDALS KICKED DIRT into Miguel Aju's mouth as he lay by the side of the road. He spat it out and groped for his bottle. Clutching it to him, he closed his eyes and drifted.

He saw Tomas — gentle, serious, tender, but with an unweathered face and eyes that seemed too eager to have lived long. Tomas: wise and educated, able to read. He had attended two years of school. Often, after the work was done, he read to Miguel or, before the work began, read alone under a tree by misty dawnlight. Often he sat quietly with a closed book on his lap. Thinking. To Miguel it seemed his brother had always been a thinking man.

When Tomas married Rosa, Miguel stood by him. Rosa's eyes were both clear. (It would be many years before the disease would take her right eye, blacken its lid, and put warts in place of eyelashes.) She was pretty, radiant.

As a wedding gift, Miguel carved a violin from the wood of a gum tree. Tomas plucked the strings and chanted notes with a sometimes resonant, sometimes strained voice. He sang the song of their brotherhood. Miguel could not think of Tomas without hearing the music of the violin.

The notes faded, and Miguel moved through the years from childhood to manhood, and finally to his own wife, when she was young. He spoke her name and saw her. Her bronze cheeks glowed, her teeth were white and strong, her eyes sparkled. Her hand moved to cover her eyes, and she lowered her head as she walked towards him wearing white bridal shoes and socks. A veil covered her face and made her look misty and elusive. He blinked as he had blinked then (but then it had been from nervousness) and found the dirt road again.

He felt his tears but made no effort to keep them from trickling down his face. He closed his eyes quickly and his wife was there again, this time bulging at the belly.

MARGARET B. YOUNG lives with her husband and daughter in Provo, Utah, where she is working on her MA in English at BYU. This story was her first piece of creative writing and won 2nd place in the Mayhew Short Story contest in 1978.

The moon was full. She was restless next to him, her breaths uneven and strained. She turned and sighed, then groaned. Her forehead was wet and cold, and when he touched it with trembling hands, she breathed, "Ya."

It was too soon for the baby to come.

He was sweating as he put on his trousers. His lungs burned as he ran for the aged midwife, who was solemn and foreboding when she answered his frantic knock and recognized him. She said nothing, only looked at the circle moon.

He understood. Neither spoke as they hurried back to Miguel's hut.

He waited outside as the groans of his wife became louder and deeper. A scream cut through the night like an arrow. Miguel jumped to his feet. He heard a moan and weak sobbing. The midwife was speaking but he could not understand her words. She began singing a low and reverent dirge. When the sobbing ebbed, the door opened. The midwife walked towards him. "*Ca'i*," she murmured. "There were two babies." She looked up at the cloud-webbed pearl in the sky. "The moon," she whispered.

"My wife?" His voice quivered.

"Asleep." The old woman drew her shawl over her silver hair and walked away.

He would buy a coffin in the morning, one large enough for both babies.

He entered the room which held the dead and the sleeping. The evidence of life which had swollen his wife's stomach was wrapped in a blanket. Trembling, he unfolded the cover and looked at his children: a son and a daughter. Wet, shiny, lifeless. He wrapped the tiny bodies again and lay next to his wife.

The next day, the weight of the little coffin pressed on his shoulders like too many pieces of *leña*. The Indian men removed their hats and nodded to Miguel as the funeral procession passed them. His wife, supported by her mother, moaned and chanted while the gates to the tombs were opened.

That was the first day he had tasted liquor.

He turned and tears trickled across his nose. He knew that he was crying audibly now, but he did not care. A bare foot on his stomach jarred him. "Quiet, old man. You're dreaming."

Miguel forced his eyes up to see a man standing above him. "Let it be so," he murmured and closed his eyes. The tears began again. "Let it be so." The brown foot dug suddenly, brutally into his belly. Sand sprayed into his face and mouth, sticking to his wet cheeks and lips. He choked and spit and reached for the bottle beside him. It was nearly empty. He gulped the last bit, then closed his eyes, and waited.

The corn was just appearing in dots of green over the field as his wife appeared. She put her hands on her stomach, and he knew she was with child again. She blossomed with the corn. But this time the moon made a cradle for the child. The baby boy came right, and his birth cries summoned Miguel's first real prayer.

To whom he prayed, he was not sure. Perhaps to the god who was celebrated in processions of bloody statues, perhaps to the god to whom great towers were built anciently, perhaps to his own god. Perhaps they were all one. But long, formal sentences of thanks came to him, and he knelt as he spoke them.

Estevan, his son, was born. Praise God.

The little hands, like delicate, brown seashells, curved around Miguel's thumb and held tight. The half-open eyes fought for focus. The tiny, pink mouth moved in tentative sucking. A son.

Within three months of the birth, Estevan was laughing and squealing delight. "He will be a happy boy," said Miguel, "a great man."

And he grew well. He became strong and quiet, like Tomas. His legs became slender and muscular after he was weaned. When he was just four years old, he could haul a small, tumplined load of *leña* from the forest to the village. So Miguel took him wherever he went: to the forest, to the market, to the city.

The daughter Miguel's wife bore him two years later was a joy also. She would serve her husband well when she was grown.

But Estevan was Miguel's hope.

The boy's muscles stretched and strained and hardened as his load of wood grew heavier. The two of them, father and son, smiled, sweating, as they climbed the hill from the forest after chopping wood.

How good it felt to enter their gate, thrust the loads to the ground with great jerks of their backs, and walk unburdened into their kitchen hut! Estevan imitated his father's motions exactly.

And there, in the firelight, was Miguel's wife, her skin glowing, her plaited black hair shining in the orange glow, her night-dilated eyes fixed on the flame as she blew on it. She slapped the *masa* from one hand to the other and placed the tortillas on the ceramic plate which rested over the fire. Their daughter patted out tiny tortillas like her mother. When one stuck to her finger, she ate it with delight and they all laughed at her.

Estevan laughed hardest, then grew quiet and serious, like Tomas, as he ate. Miguel's wife poured coffee and turned tortillas on the *comal*. She spoke. Miguel heard not so much the words as the rhythm of the Cakchiquel sounds. And he ate the thick tortillas, soothed by the music of her voice.

How beautiful she was.

Had been.

He opened his eyes. He could see much from the road.

To the south was the forest, its trees taunting machetes with laughing leaves and waving strings of moss. Birds nested in those green towers, flying above the reach of the gum trees and the cones of the pines. Crowing and chirping, they dared the wind and beat it, teased the rain and hid from it, challenged the predators and escaped them with a flutter of wings, and hovered, laughing, over man, whose muscles were tired from too many days of wrestling the wind and fighting the rain and avoiding the killers and thieves.

To the east was the village of San José. All that was necessary was there: the green cornfields alongside each smoking hut, the corn *masa* inside, the women, and the men. Each hut breathed the life of the people.

To the west was the land of the sun, hidden by jagged, blue-cliffed mountains. The sun would descend behind the mountains soon tonight, and with his fiery majesty say, "You may watch where I go, but you may not enter my land."

To the north was the church. Just a small building. Only a metal signpost identified it as *La Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Ultimos Dias*.

The church. The missionaries. (How shyly his wife had greeted Elder Carson and Elder Stevens. How tall and pale they were.)

Miguel stared up the road. The church had been rebuilt after the destructions. It appeared unchanged, as many of the houses and stores surrounding it appeared unchanged. Only those who knew could tell the brick was new. Oh yes, the church was still there. With his people, the Indians, with visions of sacred lands, with promises of freedom beyond the birds', as it had been before.

He closed his eyes.

Elder Carson was the taller of the two missionaries. He smiled more than Elder Stevens and spoke *gringo* Spanish slowly and with great concentration. They showed Miguel bright and colorful pictures and told him good stories.

"Will you read the Book of Mormon?" Elder Carson asked.

Miguel looked down. "I cannot read." He felt Elder Stevens's nervous eyes on him, met his stare, and tried to laugh. "My brother Tomas can read," he apologized and looked at Elder Stevens. "But I never went to school."

"Could your brother read it to you?" asked Elder Carson.

"Yes."

Elder Stevens relaxed a little.

"Will you pray?" Elder Carson asked.

"I don't know how —" he began, but Elder Carson told him the words to say, and Miguel prayed.

"My brother, Tomas, can read the book to me," he repeated as Elder Stevens shook his hand. "Tomas, my brother."

"*Mi hermano*," he said aloud, and practiced again the sound of his brother's name. He had said the words clearly then, and the missionaries had understood him. He had not been drunk, then.

The wife and children of Tomas joined Miguel and his family to listen to the scripture stories. Tomas put on thick glasses and read the Spanish slowly, translating it afterwards into Cakchiquel.

Miguel remembered best the night Tomas read about Jesus.

The two families and the *gringos* first sang Spanish hymns the missionaries had taught them. *En el Pueblo de Zion* and *Santos Venid*. Then Tomas played his violin, plucking the strings, chanting the song, straining for the high notes, whispering the low ones.

After Tomas began his music, Elder Carson took a marvelous machine from his bag: a shiny, black box upon which two transparent wheels spun.

Miguel watched the wheels. Elder Carson held a stick-like piece of the machine close to Tomas's mouth as the song came, high notes dropping to low, low notes leaping to high, loud, soft, full, thin notes. When the music ended, Elder Carson turned a knob and the two wheels spun more rapidly. He turned another knob and — magic! The music of Tomas began again, but Tomas was not singing it. It had been captured in the machine!

They all listened in awe. When the music faded, exactly as it had faded on Tomas's lips moments before, they laughed. Elder Carson played the music once more. Then he put his machine with Tomas's music back into his bag. Tomas put the violin on a shelf and put on his glasses. He read by the light of two candles.

Miguel's daughter was at her mother's breast. Estevan's head rested on Miguel's lap. Tomas's children leaned their tired heads against their mother's shoulders.

Tomas read the words: "*He aqui, yo soy Jesu Cristo,*" and the beauty of Jesus, who had never been more than a bloody statue or a threatening, unseen force that could turn bread to flesh and wine to blood, began to touch Miguel. He remembered the prayer he had spoken on the day Estevan was born. All the gods he had heard of merged into God Jesus.

God Jesus had wept and had ached and had loved. God Jesus had blessed the babies.

Miguel looked down at Estevan and touched the boy's head. Soft, black hair, warm brows. Beloved son.

God Jesus was all the yearnings Miguel had no words for, all the feelings that sometimes made the earth so glorious and his wife so beautiful. God Jesus was all the peace that Tomas embodied in those childhood, misty mornings. When Tomas read the scriptures, Miguel felt all of this within himself. Jesus God.

Miguel's eyes were wet.

When Tomas finished the chapters and closed the book, there was silence. No wind to move the leaves, no words to disturb the reverence. One could have heard the gentle flutter of a bird's wings. Outside the hut's open door, stars stretched their patterns across the black sky.

"They were your fathers," Elder Carson whispered, "your fathers who saw Jesus and touched his wounds. This is the land where he came."

Miguel touched the earth.

Elder Stevens's head was bowed. He said nothing, did not even look up.

Both families agreed to be baptized. The following day, Tomas, Rosa, their son Humberto, and Miguel and his wife dressed in white and went with the missionaries to the river.

Miguel's wife looked angelic stepping into the little waves. The sunlit water sparkled over her as Elder Carson immersed her. She came up smiling, weeping, her tears mixing with the river water on her cheeks. Miguel helped her onto the bank, looked into her eyes, squeezed her fingers in his. Then he stepped into the river himself.

It was cold around his knees, hips, chest, as he descended. Elder Carson prayed and lowered him into the water. The first thing he saw when he emerged was his wife, like a vision, and Estevan beside her, grinning.

It was he, Miguel, who took Estevan into the river a year later and baptized him. "*Habiendo sido comisionado por Jesucristo, yo te bautizo en el nombre de. . .*" It was he who spoke the confirmation blessing on him, and hugged him afterwards, pulled him to his chest, whispering, "My son, my son."

Estevan.

Miguel's eyes opened quickly.

The mix of market sounds and greetings jumbled his thoughts. He strained to understand the words. He could not. He stared at the sun, right into the forbidden face. When he shut his eyes, the darkness was burnt red and scarred by a picture of that center light, which grew brighter and whiter as he tightened his eyelids. He crossed his arms over his face and let himself drift in the murmur of market sounds.

Tomas was dying even when he was baptized, though they did not know it then. Only a month after his baptism, he collapsed in the fields and was carried inside the hut, still, pale, moaning. The villagers said he was being punished for joining the devil's church. Miguel did not understand his brother's disease. The missionaries did not understand it either, but came often to see him, bless him, pray over him. They were with him when he was ready to die.

A bed had been moved into the tiny hut. There Tomas lay, unmoving. Rosa knelt on the mat below the bed, her arms stoically folded. (The sickness had started on her eye already. It was swollen shut.)

Tomas asked for another blessing. The missionaries placed their hands on his head. Elder Stevens anointed him with oil. Elder Carson spoke the blessing: "You will live one or two more days, as the Lord desires."

Then Elder Stevens whispered hoarsely, "Brother Tomas, my mother is where you are going. Will you tell her please that I love her and I'm fine?" The young missionary wept outright.

Tomas nodded.

Elder Carson took the magic machine from his black case then and turned the knob. The music of Tomas came once more. The notes jumped from one to the next, the chanted notes, the twang of the violin strings, the song of Tomas Aju.

The dying man's smile quivered. Tears slid from his eyes. Miguel sobbed with the women and Estevan as he listened to his brother's music. The song was as it had been. It stopped again as it had stopped before. Elder Carson clicked the machine off.

"*Hermano,*" Elder Stevens said, "do you wish to bear your testimony?"

Tomas nodded.

Miguel lifted him to a sitting position and held him as he spoke.

"I know this church is true," sighed Tomas Aju. "Oh, my beloved ones, my brother and his family, my wife and my children. . . ." The Cakchiquel sounds were hoarse and faint. His words faded as his breaths ran out. He swallowed, breathed again, and continued with diminishing strength. "Stay loyal to the truth. I know I will go directly into the presence of Jesus. Come to me clean and pure." He moaned, "Ay, Jesus!" and Miguel lowered him back to his bed.

He died the next day.

There were the pine needles strewn over the floor, the black cloth, the coffin, the lifeless face, the stiff, still body. And there was Estevan, staring at death.

"This is how dead men are?" asked the boy. "Do all dead men look like this?"

Miguel nodded, and Estevan began to cry softly, and then to wail. Miguel held him and watched his own tears spill onto his son's head. Estevan shook with sobs, shook and shook, and Miguel could not stop his shaking. "Shhh," he said. "Shhh. Be brave. Be a man. Let me wipe your tears. Everyone dies." Estevan still shook. But his cries quieted to whimpers.

"His spirit is alive," said Miguel fervently. "Do you remember he promised us he would live? With Jesus! He promised we would live with Jesus. And do you remember that Elder Carson has Tomas's music in that black box? His spirit, Estevan, will never die."

The boy nodded and inhaled a braked breath.

"Stop shaking," Miguel said. "Stop shaking."

And his words had power. Estevan let his shoulders fall and his back relax, and stopped shaking.

The funeral was small. The missionaries brought corn to the widow of Tomas and some to Miguel also, after the rituals of death.

"*Hermano*," came a voice.

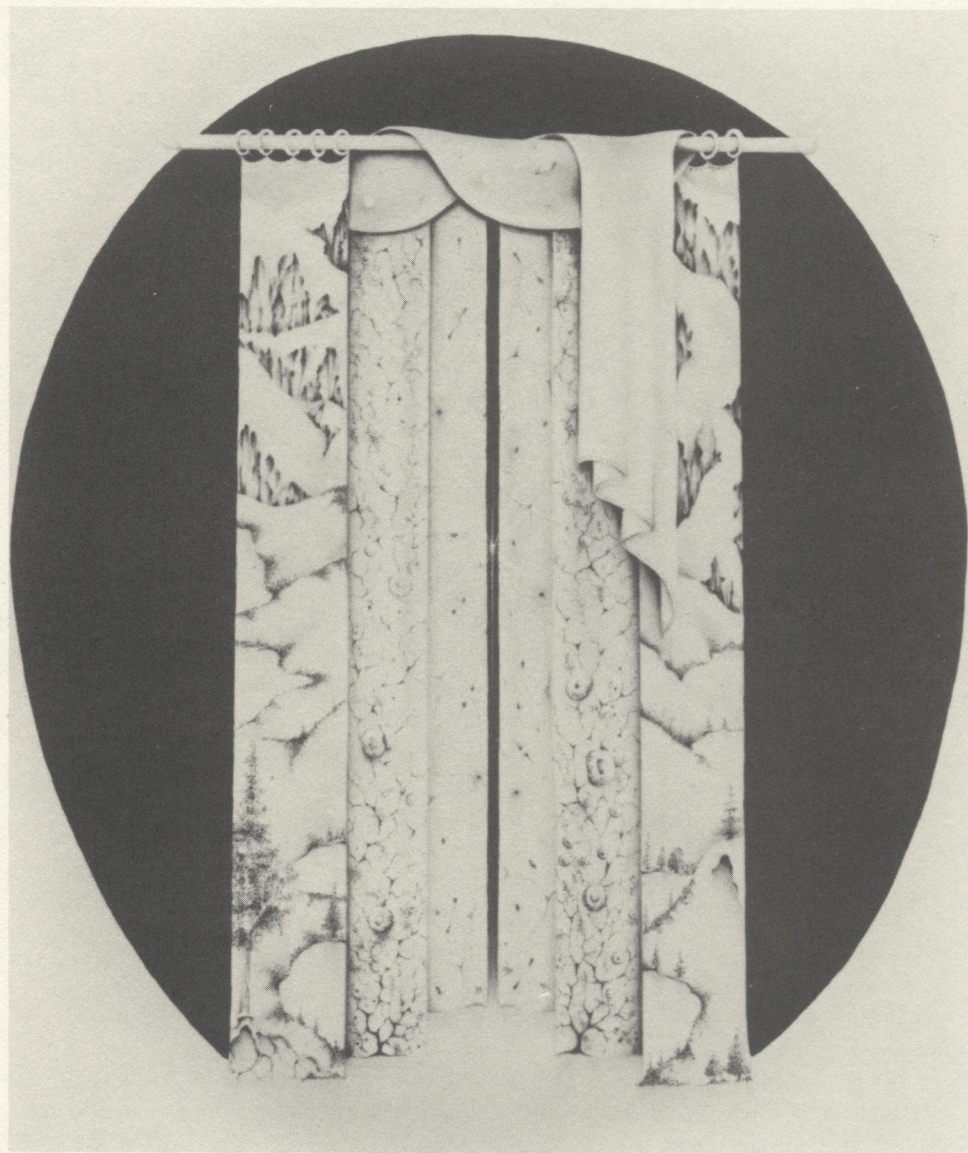
Miguel spat into the road and pushed himself into a sitting position. Smiling, Manuel Poro approached. He wrapped his arms around Miguel in drunken greeting and asked if he had more liquor.

Miguel took the empty bottle and turned it upside down. A single drop fell from the bottle's mouth. Manuel took the bottle, loudly kissed its rim and hugged Miguel again. "To be drunk is to be free," Manuel said.

Quietly, seriously, involuntarily, Miguel replied, "like the birds." His words were not directed at Manuel. They were not directed at anyone.

Manuel took Miguel's head firmly in his hands and leaned towards him. "We fly together," he whispered. "And we will die together, no? With a bottle between us! To fly from our graves." He kissed Miguel's cheek.

Miguel shuddered and stood. His legs were numb. He knew his steps were not straight. But he could walk away from Manuel. He staggered to his hut, where his daughter, suddenly grown and beautiful, greeted him. "*Hola*," she said, smiling. But he saw sadness in her eyes. She was her mother again.



He ate the tortillas she prepared for him, though he was not hungry.

He looked at Estevan's machete, covered with unfamiliar dust, in the corner of the room.

How strong Estevan had become! How powerful a man!

Miguel lay across the floor and closed his eyes again.

Estevan never doubted the family's new belief. Though he was chased by threatening gangs and told he would go to the devil, Estevan believed. He was a good son. When Miguel repeated the story of Jesus coming to their fathers from the sky (as bright as the sun he descended, like a glowing bird, to the earth, and wept and blessed the children), Estevan listened wide-eyed and never questioned.

Miguel could hear his laugh, bouncing free, full, and innocent. He could imagine the boy playing a game with his friends. He could see him talking to playful, pretty Julia Acabal Chun, the girl he was to marry. He could see Estevan touch the girl's fingertips and Julia lower her head just as his own wife had done before their marriage.

When Estevan was almost a man, he decided to become a missionary before becoming a husband. He told his father of the decision after supper one night, and Miguel, holding a thick candle, took him to the bed hut. "You were born here," said Miguel.

"I know."

"I prayed when you were born."

"Yes. Prayer has always been part of our family."

"No, it has not. Not always. But you brought it. Perhaps the angels who guided you here stood by me and put prayer in my mouth. Perhaps they led the missionaries to us because you were so loved by God, and so needed by your people. You are —" He could not speak. He put the candle on the ground and embraced his son. "My pride, my hope," he whispered. "And now you will be the pride and hope of our people. God is with you."

Estevan clung to him. "I love you, Papa," he said.

"My prayers will go with you, Estevan."

Estevan would work in Tecpan for a time, to earn some money for his mission. He would perhaps even visit a temple. And then he would be called.

Before leaving for Tecpan, Estevan spoke at the church, now grown to twenty-five members. Julia was there, too.

Striped sunlight came through the barred windows and lit Estevan from behind. It seemed to shine through his eyes as he spoke about chastity and family and about being a missionary. Miguel sat straight-backed in his seat and watched his boy.

Nothing about Estevan was really different from his childhood appearance, yet he was not a child. The same easy delight shone in his eyes; the same seriousness and playfulness which had always taken turns on his face now showed as he spoke. He was not different, only refined and grown. Handsome. Humble. Wise. Strong.

"I know the Church is true," said Estevan. "I wish to thank my father and mother for giving me a good name and the true gospel. I am proud to be an Indian — a Lamanite — and a Mormon. To my father . . ." Estevan's eyes filled. Gesturing mockingly to the tears, he managed, in a very low voice, "Papa, I love you, honor you, wish to be like you."

The next Thursday, the Aju family walked down the cobblestone street to the bus which would take Estevan to Tecpan. It would be the boy's first time away from home.

Miguel carried Estevan's clothes in a red wool bag. His wife carried a dish of *chuchitos* for him to eat on the bus. Estevan carried his scriptures, a gift from a missionary couple, embossed in gold with his name. Julia walked beside him.

An Indian woman selling mangos called from across the street, "Kiss him now; you may never see him again." She grinned, showing pink, toothless gums. "He'll find a rich *Latina* wherever he's going and marry her."

They all laughed. Estevan called back to her, "I'm going to Tecpan. There aren't any pretty *Latinas* there."

Estevan embraced his father, mother, sister, and Julia at the bus. They all cried. Then Estevan boarded the bus. He looked at them through a window, all his joy and energy focused into a brilliant smile. They waved. The bus rumbled off and Estevan was gone.

Estevan. Estevan newly born. Estevan carrying *leña*. Estevan in church. Estevan with Julia. Estevan on the bus. Estevan shaking, shaking, shaking.

The quake hit at midnight. Jolted, Miguel reached for his wife and together they ran from the hut, pulling their daughter. The earth thundered and quaked and they were thrown to the ground. Their house collapsed into broken sticks and pieces of adobe. The storage bin, too, with their supply of corn, fell to the ground. Dust blotted out the stars. More rumbling from within the earth, and the Ajus lay stunned in the dust and darkness as the ground moved. Thunder. Then silence. The survivors waited mutely, prostrate, expecting another roar of movement. A few more houses in the distance fell to the ground with hollow sounds. The village had been leveled.

The next day the streets were lined with mourners and crowded with hurried funeral processions. The sepulchers had fallen and the new dead were buried in mass graves with the broken bones of the old dead.

A new missionary came to Miguel's broken house three days later.

"You are Estevan Aju's father?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I've come from Tecpan."

"You have news of Estevan — is he all right?"

The missionary looked down, shook his head. "Dead," he said.

"*Muerto*?" repeated Miguel, thinking at once that the missionary did not know what the word meant. The *gringos* spoke terrible Spanish sometimes. "*Muerto*?"

He nodded and looked at Miguel with red-rimmed eyes. *Gringo* eyes, the color the sky had been last week, before the dust had filled it.

"*Muerto?*" Repeated Miguel, whispering the word now. Could the missionary really know what that word meant? He put his hands on his heart, pressing them to his chest and then clenching them together, clenching them into two, overlapped fists. "*Muerto?*" he repeated.

The missionary said the word again, then reached into his satchel and took out Estevan's scriptures. They were streaked with gray now, but Estevan's name was still shiny gold. Miguel took the books. They were heavy. In fluent Spanish, the missionary said that Estevan had died instantly in the quake and had been buried with the other dead in the faraway town to which that terrible bus had carried him.

The scriptures were almost too heavy to hold.

The missionary said he had loved Estevan. Then he cried. Miguel's wife and daughter came from the *pila*, and the missionary began to tell them. Miguel nodded and walked away to the forest, skirting the rocks that had been thrown onto the path.

Some of the trees had fallen. Most still stretched into the sky. The birds laughed and disappeared into the haze. Miguel knew that they were flying above it, in the blue, in the sun.

He sat on the slope where the forest began and threw rocks at the birds. But the rocks hit only dirty air, then skidded down the hill.

He returned to his family after night came. His wife was sitting by the fire, an unsheltered shadow. He put Estevan's scriptures next to the flame, and slowly his wife brought her arms around his neck and drew her quivering face to his throat. Her sorrow hummed in her throat, trapped. Her tears fell to his chest. He let his arms come around her back, and they held each other in the firelight, shaking again.

A small memorial service was held for Estevan a month after the quake. Miguel watched Estevan's *novia* throughout the meeting. He saw how slender she was. Still a bud. And Estevan would give her no seed for her blossoming.

Miguel rebuilt his hut, knowing how easily winds could destroy it, rains could erode it, or the whims of the earth could level it. He knew the futility of it all, but he knew too that the hut, the dust-ruined fields beside it, and the forest of firewood below it were his life.

The night after the funeral Miguel had the dream. It was not the nightmare of Estevan's death which he had half-expected, but a dream of flying: flying with Estevan over the forest, flying with his firstborn twins to the crescent moon and drinking milk out of its pointed tip, flying with Tomas, flying with his wife, and flying by himself over all the world, over all people who were suddenly small and helpless. And when he awoke, it was his life that was the nightmare.

Lying on his mat, he saw his wife's gray hairs. There were not many, but they shimmered in the filtered moonlight. He felt his face. Wrinkles were carved deep into his flesh. His wife opened her eyes and touched his head. Tears slid across his cheeks and into his ears. He arose and went outside again, walked the streets, glaring at the cemetery, the broken houses, the piles of rocks around him. He stared down the road towards the collapsed walls and the bent

metal sign which identified *La Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Ultimos Dias*.

He had been betrayed.

He remembered then the days of being drunk. He remembered the heat running through his whole body — the fire in his nose and mouth and eyes, the numbness, the chills, the freedom.

Weeping, he walked the streets up and down and up and down, then returned home.

The next night, the dream of flying came to him again. Again, he walked the streets, and again the next night, and the night after. His wife asked him what he was thinking, why he couldn't sleep. He could not talk to her.

It was months later that he saw Manuel Poro staggering out of the reconstructed cantina. Miguel began to walk past him, but the *borracho* grabbed him by the shoulders, held up his bottle of liquor, and laughed.

"Drink is wicked," Miguel muttered. "You are a bad man. My religion —"

But the drunkard cut him off. "Freedom is my religion! To be drunk is to be free!" He laughed again. "I will share with you," he said. "We will be friends. Brothers, no? Here. Take some." He offered his bottle. "We will be free together."

Miguel broke into a sweat. He was not thinking of anything, not of his son or of revenge. All at once he was weak and helpless and unprepared. He wanted the liquor. Frightened, he tried to turn away. Manuel held him tighter. "I meant it. Take it." The drunk man wiped his face with his dirty sleeve. "I know who you are," he said. "Take it. Friend. *Hermano!*"

Miguel's mouth watered. He stared at the liquor, feeling a power hold him and fix his eyes on the clear liquid in the bottle. He swallowed hard.

"Take it," Manuel urged. "A man must be free."

He moved his hand hesitatingly towards the bottle, and Manuel pushed it to him. His fingers curved around its neck, then in one quick motion he raised it to his lips and let it burn down his throat.

When he staggered into his hut several hours later, his eyes red, his face and clothes dirty and sweaty, he fell to the ground and cried, "Forgive me!" His wife said nothing, only blew on the fire. She tossed the *masa* from hand to hand as her husband sat trembling on the floor.

On a Sunday he drank again. When he returned home, his bitterness exaggerated by the liquor, his wife was at the fire. She did not even look up at him.

In an unfamiliar rage, he grabbed her by her braid and threw her across the dirt floor. She stared at him with stunned terror. He lunged for her and began slapping her. She held her hands, clenched, in front of her face. With one swing of his arm, he hurled her to the corner. Crazy, he searched the room, found Estevan's gold-embossed scriptures and threw them into the fire. The Miguel Aju stormed outside, raised his arms to the sky, and howled.

A week later, he saw Maria outside the cantina, her unbound hair falling to her hips, her *huipil* loose around her breasts. He told her how he had to be free. She smiled and they went off together, laughing.

Miguel was sitting lethargically on the floor of her hut several months later when someone knocked at the gate. Maria lifted the lock.

"He is not here," Maria said.

"Where else would he be?" The voice was his daughter's. "He is not in the other place."

"Perhaps in the forest."

"Who can hold wood and whiskey at the same time?" said his daughter.

Miguel stiffened.

"His wife is dying," the voice continued softly, "and I have no money for food or for the coffin. I must speak with him." She raised her voice. "Papa — Papa, are you here?"

He kept still.

"I told you he wasn't here," Maria scolded the girl.

"If you're here, Papa," the girl shouted in uncertain defiance, "we need you. She will die soon. Her stomach is bleeding inside. The old woman told her it will be soon. She is almost dead now. She will die by the next moon. What nightmares will you have then — Papa? Please, Papa!"

The last plea came from far off. He heard the gate slam and the echoes of his daughter's rapid steps.

Maria returned to his side, smiling.

But there was no sleep for Miguel that night. He arose hours later and took four *quetzales* from Maria's purse. It was not enough to pay for a coffin, but it would buy herbs to ease his wife's pain. Then she would not haunt him.

Quietly, he walked to the adobe hut which he had built himself only months ago. He opened the gate as though he were a thief and slowly approached the door. It opened, and his daughter stood in its frame, waiting.

His wife was inside, lying on her mat. She looked up at him. There was no life in her gaze. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but said nothing. He held his lips straight, placed the money beside her, and walked away.

His stomach ached and his throat burned. He went to the cantina and drank until he could feel nothing. Manuel Poro told him a few days later that his wife had died. Miguel took a bottle of whiskey to a hill overlooking the cemetery, watched the funeral procession, and drank while they buried her.

Soon after, his daughter began bringing tortillas or *chuchitos* to Maria's house. Once or twice, she brought sweet-bread. Miguel could always hear her conversations with Maria

"Please give him this."

"Fine," Maria would answer, "but he is not here."

The gate would close. The girl would never ask to see him.

One day, he overheard Maria ask the girl why she continued to bring food. "He is a drunken fool," his mistress whispered, not low enough to miss his ears.

The girl answered quietly, "It was my mother's last wish."

Miguel shut his eyes hard.

The next time his daughter came, he answered the knock. The girl greeted him with downcast eyes. "I am staying with Rosa, Tomas's widow," she said. "Rosa wants you to come and stay with us. She prepares the food I bring. She

says you are Tomas's brother and you can be her husband. Will you come?"

"I will come with you," he said, "but we will go to our own house, and you must care for me each day as your mother did. Even on Sundays. You must not go to church."

Her voice was low when she answered, "I will do as you say."

"Papa," his daughter was saying, "are you in pain?"

Miguel opened his eyes and saw her, so much like her mother, standing over him. He had been crying again. "I am not ill," he sighed.

She had been to the river and had washed his trousers to a spotless white. He did not know how long he had been on the floor and in the past, but it was dusk now. His daughter patted out tortillas and put them above the fire where the beans cooked. He ate with her and told her she was like her mother.

A knock came at the gate.

"Papa, I think it is the Mormon missionaries," the girl said. "I saw them today at the marketplace. They wanted to speak to you tonight, but I did not invite them. Shall I tell them to leave, Papa?"

Miguel shook his head without looking at his daughter. "Tell them to come in."

She went to the door and returned with the Americans.

"*Hermano*," they greeted him.

Miguel did not rise or look up at them. He murmured, "No more."

"We have come to visit. We miss you in church. And we miss your daughter."

Miguel turned his face up to them. They were so much like the first two Mormon missionaries he had seen.

He beckoned them down to his level. "Come here." They sat. He placed his dark hands on their white ones.

"I cannot," he began. "I am no more an *hermano*." Slowly and with conviction he said, "A man must be free." Then his voice broke and he pulled his head to the ground and cupped his face in his hands. He shook with sobs. Tears ran through his fingers. He wept for a long time. Then he raised his head and wiped his face with a handkerchief one of the elders offered him. His voice was jerky and hoarse. "I know the church is true. I know it. But my spirit is weak. Whisky is my whore." He pushed words past the sobs in his throat. "I love my daughter. I want her to be like the angels. Pure and clean, and to go to Jesus when she dies. Take her to church with you. I am no good for her. I fear sometime I will beat her." His chin quivered. He tightened it and closed his eyes. He was silent for a few seconds. "Brothers, I am lost," he whispered as new tears followed the streaks on his face. "I am lost, brothers. I am lost." He sobbed once more, without control.

"Let us pray for you," one of the elders said gently and touched Miguel's trembling shoulder. Miguel nodded.

The three of them knelt then, and the tall, white missionaries prayed for him. They begged forgiveness and mercy for him. They pleaded that he could be able to withstand the temptation of liquor. When they finished the long prayer in Jesus' name, Miguel said, "Amen."

"*Hermano*," one elder said, "We want to spend the night with you, to give you strength so that you don't go to the cantina."

Miguel got two mats from outside and set them on the floor. The elders slept there beside him that night, and the next. They did not leave Miguel Aju until the following Sunday.

When they asked him to go to church with them, he shook his head, "I am still full of shame. I cannot face the members. I will go with you next week, when I am a better man."

"Will you be all right?"

"Yes. I can resist."

Miguel sat in the darkness of the adobe after the elders and his daughter had left. "I want to be a good man," he whispered. He stood and walked into the sunlight. "I want to be a man like Tomas. Estevan Aju is my son. I want to be a good man!" He walked out the gate and towards the forest, imagining green on green and Heaven and Jesus.

Then, from afar, he saw Manuel Poro waving furiously with both hands, shouting, "*Hermano*!"

The emptiness hit him. The taste and smell careened through his brain.

"A good man," he repeated, desperately trying to fill the emptiness with visions of peace. "*Hermano*," he whispered to himself.

The pictures of his life crushed down on him. "Tomas!" he spoke, but he could taste the liquor even as the name filled his mouth.

His steps were those of a starving man with the scent of food in his nostrils. They took him, breathless, into the cantina. He was panting, "a good man," as he sat down and stared at the filled bottles.

"I want . . ."

An arm circled his shoulders. An unsteady voice whispered close to his ear, "Welcome, *hermano*. I was waiting for you."

Miguel turned cold when the drunkard breathed on him. His hands shook. "To be . . ."

He pointed to a bottle.

"To freedom!" the drunk one said.

The two hit their bottles together. Miguel clutched his stomach with one hand, the bottle with the other. "A man is what he is," he said, and gulped his liquor.

He drank for the rest of the morning. He drank until he fell to the floor, a few swallows of liquor oozing from his mouth. The owner of the cantina put him outside, on the edge of the street.

When Miguel began to gain consciousness, he heard birds. He could feel them close by him, beating their wings, watching him.

Buzzards.

He opened his eyes to noon light. He saw a boy with a load of *leña* tumplined to his forehead.

Estevan. His son Estevan.

With all his strength, he willed himself to stand and called his son. But the boy backed away.

Miguel was sweating. His whole body was wet.

"Estevan!" he whispered. "Come to me, son!"

The boy cocked his head and squinted.

"Come!"

The boy did not move.

"Come!"

Miguel took a step towards the boy, raised his arms like mighty wings, and fell forward with a stunned look on his face.

