

CHAPTER FOUR

— EARTH MOUNTAIN SKY —

The moon has long gone into the west, leaving the midnight sky diamond bright. In the absence of moonlight, because of an illusion created by the thin air of equatorial high altitude, stars appear brighter and closer. There is an urgent quite. A silence falls. Stillness stalks. The wind calms, dies, the only movement is the slow traverse of stars.

I wake up cold. It is below freezing and ice is forming on the grass. I sleep in long underwear with a fleece cap on, and even zipped up in a down sleeping bag, I am uncomfortable. Every part of my body aches. Though not the quaking cold of higher altitudes, it is so shivery that I cannot get back to sleep.

Sebastian is awake too. From the warmth of his poncho and blankets, he extends an arm and points to the Southern Cross, *Huch'uy Chakana*, and then to other constellations, naming them one by one in Quechua.

“This is *Urkuchillay*, the little llama. This is *Yakumama*, the serpent. And this one is *Willka Wara*, our sacred star.”

The Milky Way arches overhead. Our sun, *Inti* in Quechua, is but one of billions of stars in the spiral galaxy. The Chinese call the Milky Way the “silver river.” The Spanish name it *El Camino de Santiago*, “The Way of St. James.” Santiago is the patron saint of Cusco, and my namesake in Peru. The Q'ero, and their Inkan forefathers, know it as *Mayu*, the sacred river in which all souls swim. Masters of the seasonal rhythms of *Mayu*, the celestial river that flows across the sky until it joins the Southern Cross at its terminus, the Q'ero inherited an extensive applied astronomy from the Inkas. The Andean sacred star is Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky. Traditional Andean agriculture depends on a detailed knowledge of stars. The night sky is the Q'ero “clock” timing planting and harvesting.

“Santiago,” Sebastian says softly, “we are the smallest of the small in the great body of Pachamama.”

The Q'ero consider humans mere cells in the infinite body of the cosmic mother, Pachamama, which forms the visible and invisible universe. Though Pachamama is vast and we are infinitesimally small, even she is but one layer of existence in an even greater universal body

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where time and space coexist simultaneously; where every memory, every thought, every emotion is stored in one great field of cosmic intelligence.

In Sanskrit this cosmic field is called *Akasha*, the eternal source of all energy, the supreme source that creates and nourishes everything; all directions at once. Ervin Laszlo, the author of *Science and the Akashic Field*, called it the “heart of the cosmos, a Metaverse of super-dense energy, super-rich information field transcending cosmos and consciousness.”¹⁸ The Q'ero call it *Pacha*.

According to the Q'ero worldview, every aspect of life is interwoven in one seamless tapestry of cosmic order. The Earth is the visible realm of Pachamama and therefore, everything in life is sacred. Our living planet is but one of the many manifestations of Pachamama. The physical earth, *la tierra* in Spanish, is called *allpa* in Quechua, and is our biosphere, the envelope of life. Pachamama in the greater sense is the divine feminine, the creative energy of the universe. We are part of a whole from the earth's core to the biosphere, upward to the heavens as one interconnected web of life and energy. Plants in their sprouting, growing, and ripening; animals in their fertility cycles, weather patterns, and the transit of stars in the night sky are all part of this cosmic web of intelligent, living, energy.

For the Q'ero, these heavenly connections are interlinked and overlap the human sphere. Even human logic, as well as emotion and the unpredictability of human behavior, are interconnected parts of one universal whole. From the calligraphy of clouds to bird song in the trees, the hum of dragonflies, humans laboring in the fields, the stars overhead, all one hive of being and becoming.

This encompassing worldview takes in everything terrestrial and celestial with humans playing an integral role between the microcosmic world and the macrocosm. Ever conscious of their place between heaven and earth, the Q'ero favor humility in their role as custodians of earth-based wisdom and spiritual knowledge. The Q'ero are integrated holistically, not as lords of the land, but as caretakers. To this day, they keep an ember of pre-Inkan earth-based wisdom burning in the Andean wilderness, a territory of beauty and violence where nature is majestic, and also extreme. Condors devour newborn alpacas. Pumas kill llamas. Humans, as the Q'ero remind us, regardless of where they live, are responsible to keep the balance of heaven and earth; to practice acts of reciprocity in order attune with Pachamama. Though not completely vegetarian, the Q'ero shun hunting for sport and even for food. They are agriculturalists and pastoralist, who eat fish, primarily mountain trout, and occasionally sacrifice a lamb or alpaca for meat, and they use every part of the animal so nothing is wasted.

To appreciate the concept of Pachamama and Ayni is to understand the Q'ero worldview, the Metaverse of the Inkas, *Pachakawsay*, the blending of time and life.

In reverse—*kawsaypacha*—means one's lifespan. This two-way, alternate current implies that we have to live on the planet as one human family, in good relations with all living things. In

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awe and reverence to the Metaverse around us, Pacha, and we are guided by one master principle—Ayni.

Pacha is the wholeness of life. Everywhere without being anywhere, Pacha is the entire living universe: energy and matter, visible and invisible, organic and inorganic, the mundane and the mystical, everything and nothing, the human and the divine. All that ever existed and will exist, and everything that could or could not exist are in the realm of Pacha.

For the Q'ero, Pachamama is the Universe: being and becoming, known and unknown, time-bound as well as transcendental. A cosmic being, the divine feminine, Pachamama is everything and nothing, simultaneously—the “mother” of all things.

When asked to describe her, a Q'ero shaman will answer with a pure and steady silence.

Sebastian lies quiet and his regular breathing tells me he is asleep. He is genetically well adapted to high altitude, and is accustomed to harsh conditions. For him, sleep comes easily and goes deep. It is not the same for me; nights can be difficult at this altitude. It is hard for me to breathe, and lying down worsens the condition so sleep comes interrupted with gasping and sudden waking. As we go higher, my heart and lungs will work harder, the thin air is never enough, so sleeping is even more difficult. I am grateful, however, for tonight will be my last good rest. Eventually, I fall back asleep bundled in my alpaca poncho, good insulation against the freezing night.

I wake up slow. Sebastian is already stirring, but not up yet. Ice is on the ground. It is not warm enough to get up. Wrapped in layers, we wait for the rising sun. We talk quietly, so as to not disturb the Apu, and make plans for the day's trek upward towards the mountain. Perhaps I should rename it Cold Mountain from the book by the Chinese Taoist poet, Han Shan. It will get well below freezing as we venture skyward, but Sebastian's concern is not for the cold or the altitude, but rather our *attitude* as we approach the mountain. So I stay warm in my cocoon thinking about the day ahead, listening to the soft guttural sound of Quechua interspersed with heavily accented Spanish. After a while, I fall back into a deep dreamless sleep.

I waken to brilliant sunlight and a cloudless blue sky. A lacework of white ice, dazzling in the morning sun, covers the ground. The landscape glistens and the ice crackles under foot as I get up and move about. Sebastian, already up, is heating water for coca leaf tea, maté de coca, which has little of the consciousness-clarifying effects of the chewed leaves, but is warming and stimulating enough to energize the start of our day. In the dry air, dehydration comes quickly, and this altitude compounds it. The warm maté adds electrolytes, but it's also a strong diuretic and good for

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cleansing the kidneys and bladder. For best effect we make it strong, but I do not drink too much at one time, otherwise I will have to make frequent stops to urinate, and become more dehydrated. Little sips of very concentrated coca tea work best.

The propane stove I bought in Cusco spares us from using dried alpaca dung, which is the traditional way to make a fire in the Andes. On my other trips we did it the old way, but now, even with the blue flame of propane it still takes a long time to boil water.

During the night the clouds that had blanketed the mountain have dissolved, leaving Ausangate dressed in new snow, pure white against a sapphire sky. I shiver inside, as much from the morning cold as from apprehension for the day ahead: How high will we go? How cold will it get?

While the water boils, I walk to the top of the nearest hill. The landscape spreads out in all directions cloudless, immense, and unfathomable, snowcapped mountains forming a perimeter in the distance. In this air, visibility is more than forty miles. To the west is Apu Salkantay, near Machu Picchu, that forms the northern border of the sacred Cusco region, Apu Ausangate forming the southern border. To the right is Apu Veronica, north of the Sacred Valley, then Apus Pumahuanca, Chicon, where the people of Urubamba stir at its base, and then Apus Pituisiray and Sawasiray. Further to the south is a cluster of mountains that form the border of Q'ero territory, Apus Qoyllur Rit'i and Sinakara. The legendary birthplace of the Q'ero, Apu Qollquepunkqo, stands at the border between cloud forests and the Andes.

We are some ways off from the next camp, but in Q'ero style we will cover three times the distance a typical trekking group would do in the same amount of time. Sebastian knows exactly how much energy to expend and how intensely we need to walk, at times run, to cover the ground necessary to camp before nightfall. There will be short rests, but no lunch. Along the way, he never drinks water. However, I will sip from the water bottle I brought along to ward off dehydration.

Andean people know that abundant fluids are necessary in the dry climate of the altiplano, but believe that though water is good for plants and animals, it is not healthy for people. Instead, they drink large quantities of fermented corn or quinoa called *chica*, potato soup, and herbal teas called *matés*. Sebastian, in accord with Q'ero tradition avoids drinking water, and cautions me to do the same.

He will go without fluid from after breakfast to dinner. I, on the other hand, dehydrate easy from an imperceptible evaporation of sweat. If I pant heavily, gasping air through my mouth in a futile attempt to charge my lungs with oxygen, it's worse. Mindful of his advice, I drink only in sips, as cold water drops the body's core temperature. There is an internal balance to maintain. The Q'ero are masters at this, but as a lowlander, I am handicapped.

There is also the difference of age. Sebastian is ten years younger than I am, and he is born to these mountains. I cannot go at his pace but keep up, metering my progress with brief rests

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stops. Though my sojourns in the high Andes have been many—and long enough for my blood to have more red cells and higher amounts of hemoglobin than ordinary, which allows my blood cells to carry more oxygen—I am disadvantaged genetically. Still, I am tempered to the journey and never fall far behind.

Though the sun has been up for over an hour, the ground is still frozen and the thin air biting. As we head out towards the mountain, breathing comes hard. I meter my respiration, adjust my pack, let my legs loosen to find their rhythm.

The pace takes over. It's less about strength, which is rigid and breakable, and more about flexibility, fluidity, and flow. It's about letting go, adapting without resistance. The mantra, as in all holy places, is to go silent. Allow the spirit of the land to measure my steps. Breathe. Walk. Breathe. Walk.

For this journey, I hoped to illuminate some aspect of Q'ero shamanism, but at this elevation, pushing past 16,000 feet, now my only desire is to put in a good showing. I have three rules. One: don't drop behind. Two: stay focused and alert. And three: keep hydrated. Break one and things get tough.

Sebastian has his rules too: get up and go, slow down when it gets higher, but do not stop until you arrive, and never get caught in the open at night. When about to cross very high passes, stop to rest for about one hour before summiting, however during the climb, no matter how steep, keep a steady pace upward, even if slow, advancing without stopping until reaching the top. Surrounded in beauty, acknowledge the Apus: make a small stone altar, place some coca leaves as an offering, play your reed flute, say a prayer; then start down the mountain with a good heart.

My head bowed, the dry grass meets my eyes and melts into a golden haze. When I look up, there are the mountains; unbearably beautiful, knife-edged fins layered in wind sculpted snow.

The way ahead is over immense rolling hills, one bigger and higher than the next. Some of the crests are dotted with cream-colored alpaca and always behind is the snow mass of Ausangate. There are no valleys and no ridges now, and the hard ground makes running a natural for Sebastian, but an effort for me. Even under a heavy load, he still finds energy to sprint.

Bad fitting shoes are the bane of high altitude trekking. Mine are of good quality and fit well, as I have learned the hard way with sores worn to the bone, blood in my shoes, and deep open wounds so painful that I could not walk for days and took weeks to heal. If my feet swell from the low pressure of high altitude, I will change them for trekking sandals, which Sebastian agrees is the only true footwear for high mountain travel.

My body is lean and hardened, but the first few days bring intense soreness of muscles and joints. The cold stiffens and it takes me some time to warm up to a comfortable pace. After three days, tendons and ligaments adapt, and body intelligence memorizes what must be done to survive. Contracting cold and swelling heat trains muscles and joints to work more efficiently. In

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time, ligaments become more flexible, resilient. I can walk days without tiring. It's this second day of arduous climbing, alternating between running and walking, however, that tests mind and body.

I plod on behind Sebastian. His calves are the size of melons that pulsate when he moves. Before starting off, he never warms up, never stretches out before or after these long marches. I've never seen him hobble on sore feet or complain of cramped legs.

Sebastian wears ajutas, simple sandals made of rubber from worn out tires. His weathered feet are toughened by a lifetime of rough walking in cold water, traversing over ice and snow, and jagged stones. Nothing deters him. In the old days, the Q'ero as well as other Quechuas wore sandals made from alpaca skin. The ones they wear now are cheap commercial versions, but nearly indestructible, and easy to repair with a rock and knife. Men and women, and children, wear ajutas in rain or sun, heat or cold, rocky terrain and when crossing icy streams, and in snow and sleet.

Without picking up or slowing my pace, my eyes half closed, I traverse a landscape where in the morning our shadows followed to our right, then behind us, and are now to our left. Sebastian's expression is set firm, each footstep steady. The ascent laborious at times is now tediously slow as we pass beyond the rolling terrain of morning and into rougher rockier ground of the afternoon. Here rocks come loose and crumble noisily underfoot. Twelve-foot high boulders litter the landscape where the glacier dropped them when it receded, leaving hundreds of egg-shaped, ice-sculpted stones precariously balanced and ready to come loose at any moment.

We press on, ever upward, the mountain sometimes in view but at others, as we move through sharp crevices, hidden from sight. Concave valleys, smooth as the curve of a cup and absent in the morning are now seen over nearly every hill. On each rise we crest, the mountain reappears. Ausangate is grander and looms larger until it is an enormous presence that fills my field of vision.

I stand on a hilltop; my thoughts turn to nothingness. There is only mountain. Sebastian joins me and we lie down on our backs looking up at a transparent sky, immersed in the seamless beauty of things. Pure sky. Spirit mountain.

We continue on, but go slower now, long past grazing alpacas, too high even for these hardy animals, and find ourselves at an elevation where there are no trees, no bushes— where even tufts of grass are confined to sheltered places between large stones where the wind cannot tear them out. Soon there will be none at all. The terrain is rockier. Some are partially covered in thin lichens, but most are bare, too cold at night and too hot by day to support even simple forms of

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life. The loose gravel and sharp stones make for difficult footing. Huge boulders are scattered across our path, so we weave around them, slowly working our way upward.

For the last miles, we climb beside a stream purling over boulders into deep pools. Sebastian says there are no fish at these heights, even though the stream looks ideal for firm-fleshed, sweet tasting Andean trout. But any way, there will be no meat or flesh of any kind on this journey as such ceremonies require a strict diet of simple vegetarian food and coca leaves. At extreme altitude, appetite is almost non-existent, so this restricted diet is acceptable to me, and there is no limit on the amount you can consume. I've learned from the Q'ero that consuming volumes of hot liquids like potato soup, rich in antioxidants and electrolytes is essential. At high altitude, even if my appetite is suppressed, I spoon in as much as he does. Staying well hydrated helps thin the blood; lack of fluid does the opposite. Thinner blood gets oxygen and nutrients to body tissues faster than thick, sticky blood.

Equally important, we do not drink cold water even when thirsty. Drinking cold fluids or sucking on ice or snow reduces core body temperature and it also acts as a diuretic, so as urination increases, dehydration accelerates. At high altitude, profound changes take place in body fluid balance, blood becomes more concentrated, and the kidneys excrete more fluid, which increases the concentration of red blood cells. This counteracts edema, but as a result, you urinate more. Keeping warm, including the head is also important, one reason the Q'ero always wear the traditional knitted cap. A colder body temperature can lead to hypothermia, and the combination of dehydration and hypothermia can result in death.

Another symptom of altitude sickness is headache—a horrible combination of pressure and pounding. It feels as if one's head is held in a tight vice while being struck with a hammer; the pain from brain swelling is deep, piercing, and vision blurs. Sometimes, high altitude headaches are due to dehydration; other times it's the accumulation of fluid in the brain. Either condition can produce severe symptoms, often accompanied by nausea and extreme weakness, and incapacitating headaches. In its worst form, high-altitude cerebral edema occurs. This can cause mental confusion and emotional instability leading to irrational behavior, delusions, and hallucinations.

The effects of high-altitude hypoxia increase with age. My passion drives me to be here as it once did years ago. It is more than raw passion—I am called, I believe, to serve, and there are consequently risks when climbing high to hear the Apu speak. Over the years, I have tried unsuccessfully to convince myself that these journeys are dangerous, life threatening. In the mean time, between sojourns to the Andes, I grow older, and I tell myself: Next time, I'll do it differently. I won't bolt up the mountain. I'll savor a slow ascent and dally along the way, photograph more, talk longer with local Quechua, write notes with greater precision. Already the cold and effects of altitude are making my handwriting almost illegible.

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There is no easy fix. Conscious, slow breathing helps. I count my heart rate, balance inhalation and exhalation. Coca leaf tea is good and chewing coca leaves, in volume, with *llipht'a*, even better. To be effective, you have to chew coca several times a day, both a palliative and preventive remedy. *Llipht'a* is black caustic alkaline paste used in minute amounts that aids in extracting the active alkaloid compounds from the crude coca leaves. Made by cooking vegetable ash from quinoa or cocoa, too much can burn the sensitive lining of gums and lips, so great care is taken by the Q'ero when combining it with coca leaves.

To clear the head, they recommend inhaling vaporized isopropyl alcohol or *agua florida*, floral perfumed water. A puff or two of a strong organic cigarette is good too (not right after the alcohol—one would not want to catch on fire). We are well prepared with an abundant supply of coca leaves for ceremonial offerings, gifts, and for our use, as well as *agua florida* and *mapacho* cigarettes. But I wonder if there is enough to protect my brain? Brain damage at extreme altitude has been documented by magnetic resonance imaging.

The climbing now is not at all like walking, but the heavy lifting of one leg at a time, putting each foot down carefully, so as not to slip on loose stones and gravel. It's not so much the danger of cuts and bruises, but the debilitating effort of picking oneself up afterwards that necessitates purposefully paced steps.

Every so often, I crane my neck under the weight of my pack to see Ausangate coming closer and closer. It rises higher and higher, grows more immense each time I look. But, after a while, even raising my head is too tiresome. I settle into the climb, steady in the placement of my feet so not to slip, trying not to get too far behind Sebastian, who though somewhat ahead of me, is also showing signs of fatigue. We slow to an imperceptible pace.

Breathing slow and deep, I pull in what little air I can, pray to the Apu for strength, holding before exhaling and with every breath there comes a richness of energy. The Chinese call it *chi* (or *qi*); the Q'ero call it *kallpa*. As we come closer, the life force of the Apu lends me *hatunkallpa*, much energy, and I feel lighter, and do not need to rest as often. My rhythm in slow motion, weaving between boulders, coming closer and closer to Ausangate, turns into a deep meditation, a fine synchrony.

A momentary vision of a frozen oasis, the great shimmering mountain goes out of sight as we move through a narrow ravine. The glacial lake that births the stream comes upon us suddenly. The side we approach is full of rough boulders, though many have been smoothed by centuries under the glacier that left them behind as the ice receded. We go in and around them, sometimes climbing over them. Of course this retards our progress, but it's necessary. There is no easy way around them.

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Sebastian is unyielding now and keeps an unrelenting pace so we can camp before dark. We come to a gravel bar, likely once under water and ice. At last we find a place flat enough to pitch our two tents and make camp. But first, I walk to the lakeshore, still and opaque, the color of green slate. A blue gray glacier is at the far end and the snows of Ausangate are reflected in the lake's mirror.

The tranquility of the water reminds me of the American Zen Master, John Daido Lorri,¹⁹ when referring to the thirteenth century Japanese Zen Master, Dogen, who said that water does not depend on mind or body, does not arise from karma, and is neither self-reliant nor-reliant on others: “Water, being dependent on water, is liberated.”

Like the Chinese comparing the Tao to water: a still and clear mind is free of thought-generated intention—even the intention to become enlightened. Water, exists according to its nature, has no intention or non-intention. It cannot be any thing other than water, or its transformation into ice and snow, steam and clouds. Like water, the mountain is not in a state of becoming. Water and mountain are pure beings, enlightened ones by grace of their essential nature.

Water is water; mountain is mountain.

I take coca leaves, and select a perfect k'intu, perform the phukuyr'tti, and pray:

“Apu Ausangate, great earth mother, Pachamama, sun father spirit Inti, lake water mother Qochamama, I am here.”

I carefully chew the leaves, acutely aware from the effects of the coca, I harmonize my body mind with the spirit of the mountain. Then, choose another k'intu, and placing the three leaves gently on the water, I listen. Nothing; the only sound is deep silence.

The leaves float as one, turn around several times. Then like sails catching the wind they are drawn across the lake toward the mountain like three small boats. I watch until they are out of sight.

This lake, this mountain, and these clouds offer a magnificence beyond my transient life. For this moment, this time, this place, I and the water, I and the mountain, I and the coca leaves are one and the same.

On the edge of being, on the shore of sacred ground, we shimmer.