‘A gut-puncher of a book’
Oliver Balch, author of *Viva South America!*

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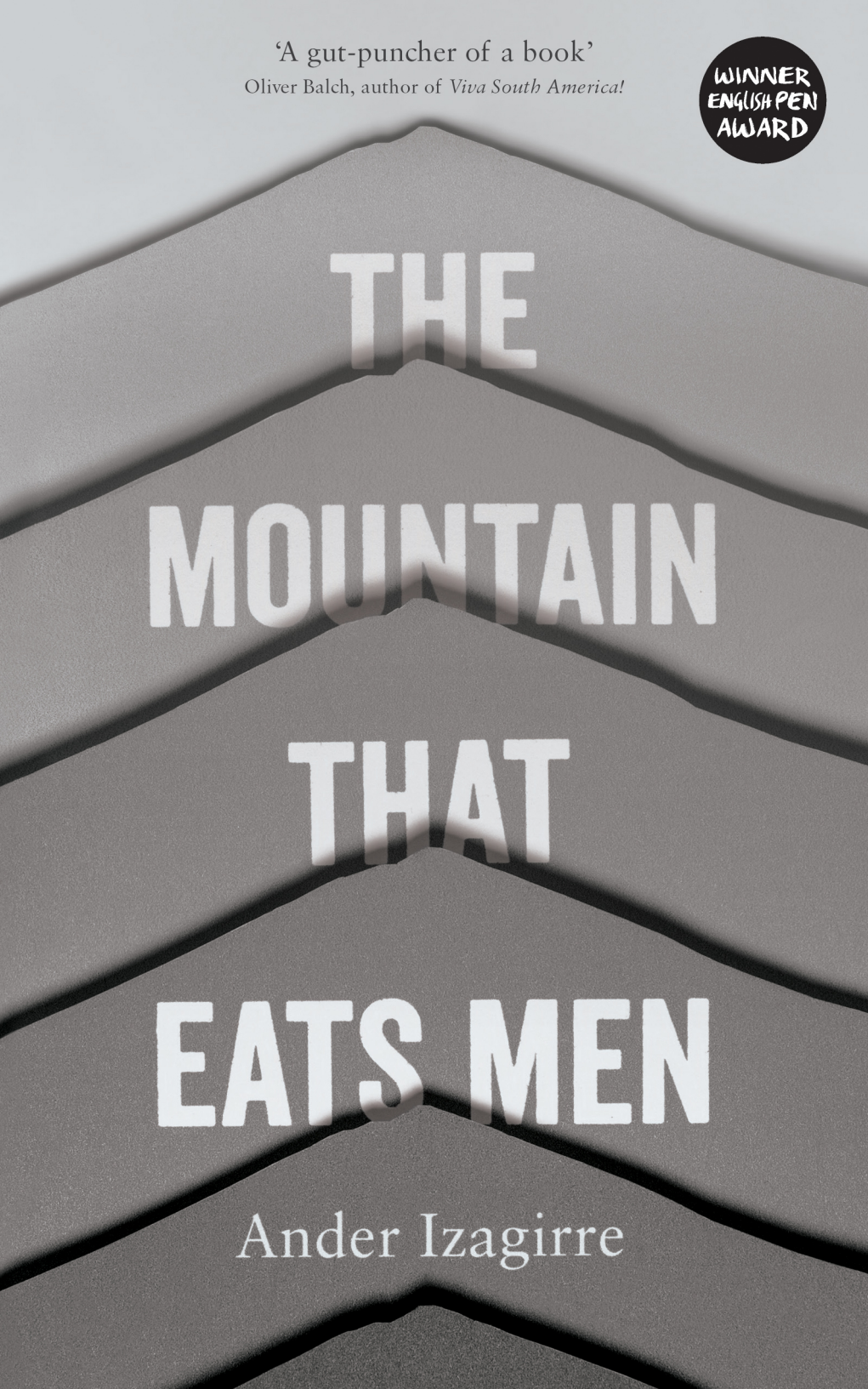

THE MOUNTAIN THAT EATS MEN

Ander Izagirre

‘Izagirre brings to life the Cerro Rico, its history and the people who work its seams. Clear-sighted and unsentimental, yet burning with a quiet power and rage, *The Mountain that Eats Men* will move you to tears and to anger.’
Mark Mann, author of *The Gringo Trail*

‘A gut-puncher of a book. A powerful, important work that puts the human back into human rights.’
Oliver Balch, author of *Viva South America!*

‘Explores the fascinating and tragic story of the exploitation of Potosí, one of the richest deposits of silver and tin on the planet. Izagirre’s narrative of characters eking out a living amidst what, for many, ultimately became silver-lined tombs is deft, admirable, and haunting.’
Kim MacQuarrie, author of *Life and Death In the Andes*

‘Izagirre uses what appears to be a small, personal story to tell a much wider, more universal one. Like Kapuściński, he finds the drop of water that reflects everything around it.’
El País

‘Izagirre … is an old-style reporter in terms of his exquisite technique and his professionalism, but also a journalist of the 21st century when it comes to the risks he takes, his incredible commitment, his irony and his humour.’
El Descodificador

‘Shares the spirit of Eduardo Galeano – and also of Naomi Klein’s Shock Doctrine. But Izagirre gets closer to the ground.’
Culturamas

The Mountain that Eats Men

ANDER IZAGIRRE

TRANSLATED BY TIM GUTTERIDGE

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I

In The Land of Fabulous Treasures

'A woman can't enter the mine,' Pedro Villca tells me. 'Can you imagine? The woman has her period and Pachamama gets jealous. Then Pachamama hides the ore and the seam disappears.'

Villca is an old miner, an unlikely combination in Bolivia. He's fifty-nine and none of his comrades have made it to his age. He's alive, he says, because he was never greedy. Most miners work for months or even years without a break. Most miners end up working twenty-four-hour shifts, fuelled by coca leaves and liquor, a practice for which they have invented a verb, *veinticuatrear*: 'to twenty-four'. Instead he would come up to the surface, go back to his parents' village for a few months to grow potatoes and herd llamas, fill his lungs with clean air to flush the dust out of them, and then go back to the mine. But he was never there when his companions were asphyxiated by a pocket of gas or crushed by a rockfall. He knows he's already taken too many chances with death and that

he shouldn't push his luck. So he's decided to retire. He swears that in a few weeks' time he'll retire.

Villca is barely five feet tall. Even so, he has to crouch down to avoid banging his helmet on the eucalyptus beams that hold up the gallery. He walks bent almost double and with his arms pinned to his sides because in this tiny tunnel …

'This damn wormhole!'

… because in this tunnel if you flex your arms they brush against the walls on either side, and if you raise your head your helmet bangs against the roof. We're inside a mountain. There are a few inches of air around our bodies and, beyond that, millions of tons of solid rock. It's as close as you can get to being buried alive. This wormhole is the only way back to the surface, as long as you know how to find your way through the labyrinth of snaking, crossing, forking, twisting, rising, falling galleries. There's nothing in the tunnels, in the caves, in the shafts – no light, no breeze, no sound – to indicate if we are heading back towards life or down into the depths of the mountain. It is as if a single sneeze would be enough to make the mountain contract and crush this gallery as we feel our way along it like two insects, touching the walls, walking with our feet and with our hands.

It's hard to breathe. In this position, crouching, with our arms held rigidly at our sides, our lungs can't expand fully. Each intake of breath requires conscious effort: I flare my nostrils and pull in air that is stiflingly hot,

saturated with humidity, sticky like cotton wool soaked in turpentine. It leaves a metallic taste on my tongue as if I've been sucking coins. It's *copajira*, the acidic sweat of the mine that floats in the air and trickles down the walls, forming puddles of orange mud.

Villca is in his element. He's enjoying himself. He tells me to sit down for a moment and switch off the torch on my helmet. Then he turns off his own. As soon as I hear the click, darkness falls like a flood, like a black wave that washes me down the gallery into the depths of the mountain. I haven't moved but I feel movement nonetheless. A wave of dizziness crashes against my brain, I lose my balance, my ears are buzzing. I observe a stoical silence because that bastard Villca is laughing. I breathe deeply and I can feel my carotid artery pulsing in my neck.

'Fuck.'

'Turn it back on,' he says.

I turn on the torch and look at Villca, and his long shadow is projected against the roof, stretched out tall across the beams. He smiles.

'And those beams?' I ask. They're rotten, buckled into a V-shape by the weight of the mountain; some of them have already started to splinter.

'*Callapos*. Thirty years since they were replaced, the bastards. Nobody has money to invest in safety, the mining gangs are small, we barely make enough to survive. We work the find, pray it doesn't fall in, then look for another one.'

He keeps going. He's agile, despite his fifty-nine years. He bends down, stands up, crawls on all fours, stands again. I can't keep up and I lose sight of him when the gallery curves to the left. It's only twenty seconds but I'm relieved when it straightens out and I can see him again. We've reached a larger gallery, with rails on the floor, and we can stand upright.

'You're in good shape!'

He laughs.

'Yeah, I'm still pretty fit. My comrades, if they're not dead they've got miner's disease, silicosis. Lots of them are bedridden. My neighbour, he can't take four steps without the oxygen bottle. He walks from his bed to the door, from the door to his bed. I'm good, thank God.'

He points to a narrow shaft, silted up with rocks: a chimney.

'That's from the Spaniards, from the colonial times. They used stone hammers, we still find them sometimes. In this part of the mine there are chimneys like this one, full of rocks they threw away because all they wanted was silver. They chucked them down from the levels above, the chimneys gradually filled up. The ore wasn't pure enough for the Spaniards, but it's plenty pure for us. Plenty. When Comibol was here, emptying the chimneys was forbidden, they said the mountain would collapse.' (Comibol is the Bolivian state mining company.) 'Now, everyone does what they want. Some gangs empty the chimneys. Others mine the columns the Spaniards left in the chambers. You

can't touch the columns, the roof falls in. But the ore in the columns is very pure, the miners dig out the rock, they dig it out and dig it out, while it holds. Until one day it doesn't.'

Villca's cheeks are the colour of copper, the skin smooth and taut, but his eyes are framed by deep lines, as if forty years working underground had carved his face into a mask. When he tells some terrible story he smiles as if slightly embarrassed and his eyes are submerged in creases: small eyes, red as embers, full of life.

His son, Federico, started in the mine when he was thirteen. One day he was helping a driller who was working at the face when the ground gave way under their feet. They only fell a few metres, dragged down by an avalanche of rocks, and they managed to scramble back up to the gallery. The driller and Federico ran for it. They were still running when a huge crash shook the mountain and a blast of dust knocked them headlong. Behind them, the whole gallery had caved in. The kid came out covered in blood and dust. He didn't want to go back into the mine. He found work on a building site, carrying loads of bricks and sacks of cement. In the open air.

I follow Villca along the large gallery, which I think is finally leading back to the outside, back to a different opening from the one we entered two hours ago, but I have no way of knowing. Although I say 'large gallery', it's only two and a half metres high and three metres wide. In the darkness, we splash through long, deep puddles, our lamps spilling stains of yellow light on the walls.

Villca says, 'This is a stroll in the park.'

And he stops.

We listen to the dripping, the subterranean sounds, the whispering of the rocks.

Villca turns slowly, sweeps the darkness with his helmet lamp and suddenly illuminates a human form, a man sitting against the wall, his eyes staring and a demented grin on his face. It's the devil. A devil sculpted in clay, with twisted horns, a wide mouth that stretches from ear to ear, and a dozen cigarette butts between his lips. Villca walks over to him, smiling, lights another cigarette and delicately places it in the devil's mouth.

'There you go, Tío.'

The Tío is the spirit that rules the depths, the patron of the miners, the one that fertilizes Pachamama, mother earth, to produce the seams of ore. If he's content, he makes the seams appear; if he's angry, he causes rock-falls. In the Tío's lap lie boxes of cigarettes, bottles of rough liquor, and a tangle of streamers, confetti and coca leaves that the miners throw during the *challas*, the thanks-giving ceremonies. He smiles and sits with his legs wide open, showing off his principal attribute: a huge, erect penis.

Villca unscrews a half-litre bottle of Guabirá, the 96° proof liquor that the miners drink during their breaks, neat or diluted with a little water and sugar. He holds the bottle to the Tío's mouth and pours its contents down the statue's throat. The alcohol bubbles out of the tip of the penis. Villca chuckles.

'One day we had a visit from María Álvarez, the vice-minister for mining. We let her come in but we said: Madam, you've got to kiss the tip of his member. If a woman wants to enter the mine, first she has to kiss the tip of the Tío's member. She bent down and she gave him a kiss right there.'

Villca laughs and walks on. At the diagonal intersection with another gallery, we hear voices. Villca sticks his head round the corner and shouts:

'Sons of bitches!'

* * *

When I come out I want to kiss the light, gulp it down, smear it all over my face.

My shadow moves along the slope. It climbs the rocks, stretching and shrinking as it advances, feeling its way across the mountainside. Cerro Rico was a majestic red pyramid when I saw it from afar two days ago; the mountain I am walking on today is a pile of rubble. It crunches beneath my feet, as if the loose stones could slip at any moment, dragging others in their wake; isolated rockpiles at first and then the whole mountainside sliding 800 metres in an avalanche that would bury the huts of the guards, then the miners' districts, and on down to the squares, the streets, the grand colonial houses, the baroque palaces, so that only the twin towers of the cathedral would be visible poking up through a sea of stone.

After 500 years of mining, Cerro Rico is crumbling. Every day, the miners remove three or four thousand tons of rock to obtain silver, lead, zinc and tin. According to the calculations of Osvaldo Arce, a geologist, the mountain still contains 47,824 tons of pure silver: more than have been removed in its entire history. The problem is that the silver is no longer concentrated in rich seams. Instead, it is to be found in tiny veins, at very low concentrations. The only way to get all the metal out would be to extract, crush and process the entire mountain.

That's what they seem to be doing: 8,000, 10,000, 12,000 miners go underground every day and carry on drilling. They work for thirty-nine cooperatives. On the outside, a big mining company – Manquiri, owned by a US multinational – processes their output. It also processes the *pallacos*, the huge deposits of rock and gravel that the miners extracted for centuries and discarded because the proportion of ore was too low. With modern technology, it's profitable for the company to crush these mountains of rubble and extract the silver and zinc from them.

Every dynamite explosion opens another hole in the Cerro. A study by the Ministry for Mines identified 138 rockfalls – some of them recent, others centuries old – and it also identified many points in the labyrinth of galleries where the risk of collapse is particularly acute. There are huge caverns, abandoned by the miners, which are crumbling as the acidic waters eat away at them. In 2011, after heavy rainfall, the pointed peak of the mountain began

to disintegrate and in just a few days a crater 40 metres wide and 40 metres deep had opened up. The mountain is 4,800 metres tall; the government prohibited all mining operations above an altitude of 4,400 metres, the zone that is weakest.

The mountain of Cerro Rico is, among other things, a symbol. It's the great pyramid that looms over the city of Potosí, the silhouette that appears on Bolivia's coat of arms and on the country's stamps, on posters and postcards, in baroque landscape paintings; it's a huge triangular monument, an icon of earthly wealth and of divine power. But it's collapsing. In Bolivia's newspapers, columnists write of their fear that the nation's symbol could be mutilated. Or that it could crumble. The metaphors abound.

Meanwhile, unconcerned by the future of the coat of arms, thousands of miners enter the mountain every day.

The inhabitants of Potosí fear the day of the final collapse, the apocalyptic avalanche that will bring the history of Cerro Rico to a close. Inside the mountain lie the bones, or the dust of the bones, of tens of thousands of miners, from the first Indian slave in the times of the Spanish colony down to Luis Characayo, the driller who was named in yesterday's paper after he was crushed by a rockfall. Cause of death: fractured skull, severe brain trauma and asphyxia. Cerro Rico has another name. *La montaña que devora hombres*. The mountain that eats men.

* * *

Alicia Quispe is fourteen years old. She is wearing tatty yellow overalls (the sleeves several inches too long) a pair of oversized rubber boots, and a miner's helmet over black hair which is tied back in a ponytail. Her almond eyes are constantly shifting, as if she is looking to see what's going on behind me.

* * *

I've been told she'll come out soon. It's seven o'clock in the morning: this is my second visit to Cerro Rico and I'm relieved I don't have to go inside the mountain again. I don't mind waiting here on the *canchamina*, the rough esplanade of blue-grey dust, 4,400 metres up, in front of one of the 569 entrances recorded in a recent report on Cerro Rico. There are two Toyota Corolla cars belonging to the miners, four empty trucks for transporting the ore – three of them so rusty they appear to have been abandoned – and a pile of rails to replace the ones inside the mine when they are eventually corroded by acid and worn down by the trucks. The esplanade is also home to two huts built of adobe bricks and covered with corrugated iron. One of them is a store where the miners keep their tools; the other is the house where Alicia lives.

I read the local newspaper, *El Potosí*. There was another accident yesterday:

TWO MINE WORKERS DIE IN
ROCKFALL INSIDE MINE

Two mine workers aged 37 and 41 have died after being buried by a rockfall inside the Encinas mine, Cerro Rico, Potosí, according to public prosecutor, Fidel Castro. The tragic accident occurred as both men were extracting ore, a preliminary investigation has found. 'Unfortunately, due to an occupational accident, both men have died, one with a closed thoracic trauma and the other with a closed cranioencephalic trauma. They appear to have been buried by a rockfall in the mine,' the public prosecutor stated.

The bodies were removed by a state forensic team and personnel from the Special Anti-Crime Force.

The families of the miners have collected the bodies for burial.

I come across an item like this every few days: miners crushed by rockslides or who fall down shafts. Occasionally, one is killed by a dynamite explosion or falls into the grinding machine. Dozens die every year: you have to trawl through scattered sources of information; there are no clear comprehensive statistics. There are other kinds of information that don't generally appear in the newspapers or on the news or in the official documents, information that goes unreported. Of silicosis, there is the odd mention. Of violence, not even a whisper.

The mountain trembles. Softly at first, a vibration that is scarcely perceptible. Then the sound of metal and rock gradually grows from a rumble to a deafening thunder. A truck appears at the entrance to the mine, loaded with stones, and rolls past me at full speed. Pushing it are two miners wearing overalls, helmets and boots, one tall, the other short, their arms held straight as they strain against the truck, their heads tucked between their shoulders, their legs taking short rapid steps. They continue for another fifty metres, until the rails run out, at the edge of an embankment. A third miner is waiting for them. He walks over to the truck, stands on the lever that releases the hopper, and tips its contents out onto the slope. Two or three times a week, a lorry comes to remove the accumulated rocks.

The two adult miners – one of the miners who was pushing the truck and the one waiting on the esplanade – rub their blue hands on their overalls, take cigarettes from their inside pockets, and light them. It's quarter past seven in the morning and their shift is over.

The third miner, the shorter of the two pushing the truck, is a girl: Alicia Quispe, fourteen years old, wearing oversized clothes. One of the adults offers her a bottle of water and she takes a long swig.

I don't approach, I stay fifty metres away, wandering back and forth across the esplanade. I hope they'll take me for a tourist, even though it's a bit early. I'm carrying a backpack and a compact camera, and I take some photos –

of the mountain, of the entrance to the mine – and when I turn towards them I nod in greeting. Alicia sees me, recognizes me, but doesn't respond. I walk slowly away from the mine towards her house.

Alicia Quispe is not her real name. I prefer to conceal it so that she isn't dismissed from her clandestine employment. From the job that a director of the mining cooperatives will tell me doesn't exist. That doesn't exist but which, well, if it did exist wouldn't be such a big deal, because the kids, you know, they already live here, at the mine entrance, they help their families, like we used to, they say at the cooperative, like we've always done, because what would they do otherwise, the children of Cerro Rico?

Alicia performs a job that doesn't exist, a job that used to pay her twenty pesos a day – or rather, twenty pesos a night – a bit more than two dollars. And which now doesn't pay her anything at all. Now she works for free to pay off a debt that the miners in the cooperative attribute to her mother, a trap to keep them enslaved.

Yesterday I spoke to Alicia in a classroom at the foot of the mountain, where Cepromin organizes special lessons for the children of the mines (and other working children: construction workers, domestic servants, shoeshine kids) to keep them from falling behind with their schoolwork. And where they also eat eggs, meat and fresh vegetables – all the things they never get at home. Where they can have a hot shower and spend time playing, reading, relaxing. Where nobody hits them. The teachers told me I had to

meet her. The first time I saw her she was sitting at a long table, with four or five other girls of her age, all doing their homework; she was leafing through an illustrated edition of *Cinderella*. I went over to say hello, talked to them, asked them some clumsy questions, and Alicia was the only one who asked me a question in return. I carried on speaking to her while her friends went back to their homework, and she invited me to come and visit her at home if I wanted to.

* * *

Cepromin is the Centro de Promoción Minera, an association founded in 1979 when the military dictatorship was in its death throes and Bolivian democracy was just beginning to emerge. The mining unions had been one of the most powerful forces in the struggle for freedom. And at the start of the 1980s they were full of enthusiasm.

'The miners had spent many years fighting to overthrow the dictatorship, and now it was time to take part in democracy. Cepromin was created to provide miners with political training, to prepare leaders, with the idea that the profits of the mining industry should no longer be sent abroad but should instead, for the first time in our history, serve the interests of the country.' I was listening to the organization's director, Cecilia Molina, in her office in La Paz. 'And look at us now. It's all gone. We just work to survive. Look at our projects: food programmes, schemes to combat extreme poverty, campaigns against child