

## Hills Baked Brown

Out the classroom window, a soft brown hill rises like fresh baked bread. Cacti emerge from the undulating folds like raisins. A moment ago, from the southeast sunshine cracked a mountaintop, split it. My eyes wander a wide dirt road a hundred yards distant beneath the hill. The s-curved road disappears into scrub brush around a stiff bend in the distance.

In half-an hour, close to 7:00, the road fills. Schoolgirls dressed in plaid green skirts walk toward the Troncal. Sometimes alongside them, boys scuffle reluctantly to prison in dark pants and white shirts. They will catch the bus to school, a building without running water, devoid of equipment, but optimistic.

And women and some men travel this way too with lunches in plastic bags, apples and a slice of bread wrapped in napkins. At the highway, they will taste the warm goodness of empanadas cooked roadside. Their barrio lies behind a mountain curve where I cannot see.

No travelers plod the quiet. Then, I notice a figure. His hair is a bundle of smoke, but for the valley through the crown. He shuffles. Like the schoolboys perhaps he scuffles for different reasons, perhaps the same. A walking stick steadies a fragile frame. It's a blue walking stick, bright blue, likely scavenged from a construction site that borders the barrio.

I watch him patiently, he patiently walking. I'll lose sight of him when he disappears around the curve. He makes an abrupt right turn onto a steep rutted track. The shuffle slows. He barely moves up and forward. He moves toward a line of five houses that my first glance ignored. They lean together. Tentatively they rise with concrete block walls. Corrugated metal thatches the roof. Some sides are nailed with

wood or cardboard. I judge them uninhabitable. But of the world's dwellings would denounce my silly judgment. It dawns on me, these are homes.

I squint to follow the old man to his home. I find him barefoot. He leans the blue walking stick against the threshold. He turns toward me and looks up. I step away from the window in the fear he's looking at me. Silly. I step back to the window. The old man has turns and surveys the Hill Backed Brown as he has for many mornings. With his bare hand he wipes sweat from his head. And then vanished inside his home.