I was born in a small, ethnically German village in Rumania; my ancestors emigrated to Eastern Europe early in the nineteenth century. They had taken with them their cultural heritage—language, customs, folklore, religion—within which they continued to live. I had the good fortune to have a grandfather who knew most of the Grimm tales and who told them in an unforgettable and captivating manner to the grandchildren sitting at his feet. He would wink at one of us, letting that child know he or she would be the hero or heroine of the tale he told. Since we were surrounded by Rumanian, Turkish, and Tatar villages, cultural interchange was inevitable. My grandfather wove fantastic elements into his stories that I later learned are more characteristic of Rumanian tales. Thus, very early on, I developed a great love for and interest in folktales.

Many years later, when I became a professor of German literature, I never failed to include these kinds of narratives in my literature courses. I also developed a course specifically devoted to a comparative study of folktales (concentrating primarily on German, French, Italian, Russian, Rumanian, and Hungarian tales). In my study and research about these stories I was struck by the universality of their motives and themes.

In the late 1980s I traveled to Oaxaca, Mexico, to read Old Spanish texts with a professor at the local university. I am proficient in the Romance languages and teach a course in the history of these languages. It was during this stay in Mexico that I got to know Antonio Mendoza, who was teaching Zapotec at a language institute in the city of Oaxaca. Because of my background in linguistics, I took an interest in Zapotec; I wanted some practical experience in a tonal language.
I became Antonio’s student, and after a while his friend. He took me to his village, Teotitlan del Valle, and introduced me to his family and to Zapotec cuisine. He also gave me—along with two folklore students from Indiana University whose names I cannot recall—a tortuous tour of the mountainous landscape surrounding Teotitlan; he even showed me the cave in which the local deity was said to dwell.

Teotitlan del Valle is a flourishing Zapotec community, fairly well-off in comparison with other Zapotec towns in the region. Its weaving industry has made the town prosperous: tapestries from Teotitlan can be seen in many department stores in the United States. The town also prides itself on preserving and celebrating Zapotec culture, including the Zapotec language, traditional customs and costumes, and events that feature dance and song.

Confronted by a culture much different than my own, my curiosity was piqued. What kind of narratives were told in this town? Would I find the same motives and themes I had encountered in so many other ethnic traditions? Driven by curiosity and a disciplinary interest in the field, I approached Antonio. At first, he hesitated. People in Teotitlan normally do not tell folktales to foreigners. I was told that there is also a distrust of foreign and Mexican archeologists who tend to remove local cultural artifacts to museums in faraway cities. But since I had gotten to know Antonio’s family, he promised to find narrators for me. He succeeded in setting up sessions with his father and a relative. There were other tellers of tales in town, he told me, but since they did not know me, they refused his request.

Emiliano Mendoza

I was invited to a special room reserved for festive occasions such as posadas. At one end of the room stood an impressive altar dedicated not only to the Christian God and Christian saints but also to native deities; the altar was lavishly decorated with fresh and artificial flowers. Emiliano Mendoza, Antonio’s father, a master weaver and erstwhile mayordomo, would be the featured narrator. Of limited institutional education, he was nevertheless a wise and knowledgeable man who commanded respect not only in his family but also in the village as a whole.
Mr. Mendoza’s performance of “Las tres preguntas” (The Three Questions) was brilliant: he held the listening audience, family members and myself, spellbound. He told the story first in Zapotec and then in Spanish (for my sake!), and his narration was continuously accompanied by remarks and exclamations—coming primarily from Antonio—that implied awe, wonderment, surprise, and sheer joy. Even though I was the only listener to the Spanish rendition, Mr. Mendoza told it with as much animation as he had the Zapotec original.

Emiliano Mendoza’s story is of considerable length; he stopped at several intervals to take a drink of water. I have indicated these pauses in my translation into English. The accompanying remarks of Antonio were so frequent and constant that I can’t possibly indicate them in my translation. I have to resort to a literary figure of speech to describe the narrative event: Antonio represented the bass section of an orchestra, his father the string and wind sections.

As I transcribed the tale from tape, I was reminded that Mr. Mendoza’s Spanish was the Spanish of the bilingual Zapotec villages, abundant in local slang, jargon, and grammatical constructions. My translation into English tries to stay as close as possible to the original. However, since I attempt to render the meaning of local circumlocutions and slang expressions that simply defy exact equivalents, the translation cannot always be literal.

Mr. Mendoza died two years after I recorded his tale. His family immediately called me and requested a copy of the tape; the story had made a lasting impression on them. They, of course, also wanted a memento of their father’s speech.

Margarito Cruz

The storytelling session with Mr. Margarito Cruz was very different. Mr. Cruz lived in a small adobe house, walked barefoot when I met him, and wore rather shabby clothes. Antonio introduced me, then the two of them exchanged news about family members for about half an hour. Mr. Cruz told the two stories I present here primarily to Antonio and myself, although there were children in the background who listened furtively and yelled out every once in a while. Cackling chickens walked in and out of the room, but Mr. Cruz paid no attention to them.
Antonio seemed fascinated by the tales and impressed by the storyteller’s talent. He accompanied the narration by nodding his head, asking short questions, and expressing wonderment, awe, and amazement about the incidents related. In fact, I would say that the performance was an interactive event between the narrator and Antonio. Even though I could not understand the two stories in Zapotec, I was struck by the almost hypnotic effect of the rhythm, the tone, and the intonation of the narration. Mr. Cruz’s delivery hummed and droned in a way that was captivating. It was a memorable performance!

Mr. Cruz had heard these stories from close relatives. When I asked him, via my interpreter Antonio, to comment on the tales, he mentioned that to him, the protagonist in the “Crescencio” legend represented an indigenous hero fighting against the Spanish and Mexican authorities, and that the woman who betrayed him reminded him of the famous Malinche.

Antonio listened to the tape of Mr. Cruz’s performance innumerable times and tried to approximate the Zapotec original as closely as possible in his Spanish translation and transcription. It is important to note here that Antonio studied law at the University of Oaxaca and is thus a sophisticated user of the Spanish language. His translation lacks many of the grammatical and stylistic idiosyncrasies evident in his father Emiliano’s speech. Antonio’s Spanish here is not the Spanish of the village, but the more standard Spanish of the city of Oaxaca.

Antonio translated these two narratives without indicating line or paragraph breaks; the editors have created paragraphs based on narrative content and lexical patterns. I have access only to the Zapotec tape version of the two stories as told by Mr. Cruz. As I mentioned before, the telling of the stories sounded more like a continuous interactive performance between teller and listener (i.e., Antonio), with Mr. Cruz pausing every so often—for a very short time—to take a deep breath. In the telling of “Crescencio” he clearly indicated—through a change in his voice and by looking at us straight in the face—that a particular remark was an aside. These explanatory asides are set off by parentheses or long dashes in the printed text.
Las tres preguntas

Contado por Emiliano Mendoza Martín en la lengua Zapoteca
y después contado en la lengua Castellana
Diciembre 1988

Había una vez un virrey que era demasiado poderoso. De eso se trata el cuento. Pero el virrey por tener tantos intereses tenía muchos quehaceres y estaba ocupado por todo el tiempo.

Pues era un hombre flaco, un hombre delgado, pero si está de buena salud, nada más su cuerpo era delgado y no estaba conforme porque un amigo de él que era arzobispo.

"¿Por qué, el arzobispo?" dice el virrey, "Es demasiado gordo, y yo que soy el rey tengo manera de engordarme, pero por tantos trabajos que tengo no me gusta que el sacerdote o sea el arzobispo esté gordo. Hay que ponerle a trabajar un poco," dice el virrey.

Entonces le dijo a su señora. Pero su señora, o sea la reina, le contestó: "Pero si el sacerdote o sea el arzobispo está trabajando de diario."

"Sí," dice él, "pero no veo que se enflaque un poco," dice, "porque yo, porque soy tan flaco," dice. "Pues él casi no se preocupa; pues hay que ponerle a trabajar un poquito más," dice el virrey.

"Bueno," dijo la reina. "Tú sabes lo que haces."

"Sí, digale a mi muchacho," dice, "que por favor tiene que ir a varios lugares donde están mis buenos amigos, los grandes amigos virreyes míos," dice, "mis buenos amigos que va a llevar una invitación por escrito de decirle que para tal mes, para tal fecha vamos a tener que hacer una fiesta.

"Según," dice mi virrey, "porque pues se va a tratar de tres preguntas y si el arzobispo no contesta a las tres preguntas que el virrey lo haga, pues lo quiere sentenciar a muerte."

"Está bien," dice el muchacho. "Si Ud. lo ordena, mi majestad, pues yo voy a dejar las invitaciones."

Entonces ya él pone su silla al caballo y se va a repartir todo mientras que el virrey estaba pensando cuáles eran las preguntas que
le va a poner al arzobispo para que delante del público del invitado
del virrey va a resolver las tres preguntas que le va poner como
cuestionario al arzobispo.

Entonces ya están repartidas todas las invitaciones y el muchacho
que ya fue a repartir todas las invitaciones que para tal fecha van a
llegar los invitados.

“Está bien,” dice, “muchas gracias; qué bueno, ahora va a ver.
¿Pero quién va saber qué es lo que piensa el virrey? ¿Quién sabe?”

Pues todo el mundo estaba emocionado. “Ojalá que llegue.”
“¿Cuándo llegará el día, cuando llegará el día?”

Pues en el palacio del virrey pues que es allí estaba la campana
que va a repicar para que el pueblo también se reúna y de los invitados
y muy lejos.

Ya pues casi se aproxima porque nada más le puso tres meses.
Entonces faltaba un mes. Cuando el virrey ya dejó pasar dos meses
porque el plazo que él puso en resolver las tres preguntas con el padre.

Pues eran tres meses nada más, y se transcurrieron los días y llegó
transcurrir dos meses y faltaba un mes nada más para cumplir de lo
que las invitaciones le decía a todos sus invitados y que lo llame al
sacerdote al día siguiente.

“Pues le llama a Ud., señor padre,” dice.
“Está bien, mi virrey; pues a sus órdenes, estoy presente.”
“Sí,” dice, “porque quiero que Ud. sepa,” dice el virrey, “quiero
que Ud. sepa que vamos a hacer una fiesta para tal fecha.”
“Sí,” dijo el padre. “De qué se trata?”
“Pues se trata de su fiesta de Ud.”
“¿Cómo?,” dice el padre, “¿Mi fiesta?”
“Sí, es su fiesta, la fiesta de Ud., padre.”
“Está bien. ¿De qué se trata?”
“Pues se trata nada más de que Ud. se resuelva tres preguntas que
yo estoy pensando,” dijo el rey.

Entonces el padre quedó un poco como realmente se dice chirriado
o algo asustado.

“¿Pero de qué se trata, mi virrey?”
“Pues se trata no más de tres preguntas,” dice. “Si Ud. lo resuelve
así detalladamente tal como lo estoy explicando, pues a Ud. no le va
a pasar nada,” dice. “Sigue viviendo, sigue su libertad. Pero si Ud. no
lo resuelve las tres preguntas que yo le hablo, pues yo le voy a matar. Eso es, porque yo ya pensé," dice, “ya hice repartir todos mis invitados que van a llegar. Ya los invité y está escrito esto,” dice, “Ya nada más que llegue el día, el término y el plazo que se va realizar la fiesta.”

“¿Ahora, qué tanto del tiempo?” dice el padre.

“Pues un mes,” dice. “Un mes tienes para pensar esto y estudiar porque Ud. es una persona de estudio, de escuela y Ud. sabe perfectamente. Por algo yo escogí a Ud. para que Ud. resuelva las preguntas porque Ud. es una persona de capacidad y de mucho estudio.”

El padre quedó pensativo. “Si no, señor virrey,” dice, “Si Ud. ya pensó eso, pues yo acepto.”

Entonces ya el padre, lo que hizo, se fue a agarrar su papel donde el rey escribía la primera pregunta.

“Quiero que me diga,” dice el virrey: “¿Cuánto valdré si yo estoy de venta?”

“La segunda pregunta,” dice el virrey: “¿Cuántas horas emplearé para dar vuelta al mundo entero?”

“Y la tercera pregunta,” dice el rey: “¿Qué es lo que pienso y qué es lo que propongo y no es cierto? Son tres preguntas, nada más. Entonces si Ud. no lo resuelve, pues entonces Ud. está sentenciado a muerte.”

Esa fueron las tres preguntas.

“Está bien,” dice el sacerdote, “Pues me voy.”

Ya cuando era un mes de la cita que había citado el padre o sea el sacerdote pues ya fue a su casa. Llegó a su casa y comenzó a buscar en los libros que él estudió cuando estaba en el seminario. Muchos libros tenía en su casa. El padre imaginaba que en estos libros iba a encontrar pues alguna cosa que iba a resolver para que le ayude a las preguntas que el rey le estaba haciendo. Pero pasaban días, pasaban noches y él no tenía nada de hambre, él no tenía nada.

Pues está entristeciendo el padre y se está enfadando. Cuando se fue a los diez días, los quince días que le pusieron este cuestionario, pues ya el padre se veía muy triste y se veía muy decaído de salud, pues estaba enfadado y se veía muy triste de salud.

Entonces el virrey le decía a su reina, a su esposa: “Ya ve lo que pasó al padre ahorita, porque antes como no se preocupaba nada,” dice, “gordo que estaba,” dice, “porque se estaba enfadando a ver.
Así es lo que vamos hacer, ese padrecito, para que se enflaquezca un poco. Yo que soy virrey,” decía, “como estoy de flaco y él nada más,” dice, “celebra la misa y se acuesta a dormir y no trabaja; por eso está bien gordo.”

Era pues la inconformidad que tenía el virrey con el padre.

“Está bien,” le dijo su esposa, “Pues si así es tu idea, tu forma de pensar, yo no puedo decir nada.”

“Sí,” dice él, “sí, así le vamos a hacer al padrecito para que se ponga a trabajar un poco. Y si no resuelve estas tres preguntas que le puse con el cuestionario,” dice, “yo voy a ordenar que le sentencien a muerte. Porque no estoy de acuerdo como estás de salud.”

“Está bien,” dice la señora del virrey, “si es así.”

Entonces el pobre sacerdote, pues día y día pensativo, sin ganas de alimentarse está preocupado que no encontraba nada. Pasaron los quince días, pasaron los veinte días; ya faltaban tres días casi cuando llega su hermano, un borrachito.

“¿Qué estás haciendo, mi hermano? Veo que,” dice, “pues parece que volviste otra vez al seminario, porque veo que todos los días estás con tus libros, tus cuadernos.”

“No, tú que sabes,” le dijo el padre, “tú que sabes, sabrás de tus copas,” dice, “que te llegas a la cantina y te echas tu mezcal, pero no sabes nada. Quitate.”

“No,” dice. “¡Dígame! ¿Qué es lo que te está pasando?”

“No,” dice, “no sabes para que te platico, pero tú no sabes.”

“No,” dice el borrachito. “¡Platicame, hermano, no seas necio, platicame!”

“Mira,” dice, “para que veas, yo te voy platicar porque tengo tres días nada más de mi vida,” dijo el padre. “Me van a sentenciar a muerte.”

“¿Y eso?” dice el borrachito.

“Sí, así me dijo el virrey que para tal día va a tener una fiesta grande en su casa,” dice, “va a reunir todos los virreyes y todos los invitados y toda la población, porque van a repicar la campana del palacio del virrey que se reúna la gente,” dice, “para que en vista de toda la gente me van a matar.”

“¿Y por qué?” dice el borrachito.
“Sí,” dice, “porque tengo tres preguntas muy difíciles y si no los contesto el cuestionario que el virrey me hace, pues . . .,” dice, “no tengo perdón, me van a matar.”

“¿Pero de qué se trata?” dice el borrachito.
“Pero tú, ¿qué sabes?” dice el sacerdote.
“No,” dice. “¡Dígame, ¿Pero de qué se trata?”

Bueno, y tanto y tanto ya pasó otro día y el borrachito se fue. Ya faltaban dos días que llegue. . . . El día siguiente medio, medio tomadito.

“Está bien. ¿De qué se trata? ¡Dígame, carnal! ¡Dígame!”
“Bueno,” dice, “te voy a decir nada más, porque tú eres mi hermano, pero tú ¿qué sabes?”
“Bueno. ¡Dígame!”
“Mira,” dice, “la primera pregunta que el rey me hace: quiere que yo le diga ¿cuánto vale si está de ventas?”
“Ah,” dice el borrachito, “¿y otra?”
“Él pregunta: ¿Cuántas horas emplearé para dar vuelta al mundo entero?”

“Ah, bueno,” dice el borrachito, “¿Y otra?”
“La otra,” dice, “pues qué es lo que piensa, qué es lo que está relacionado su carácter, y no es cierto?”
“Ah,” dice el borrachito, “es fácil, es fácil. Mira,” dice, “que pena te da de que si el público te ve o que le ordene el virrey que le mate el sacerdote. Tú eres un sacerdote renombrado, tú eres un sacerdote que el pueblo también lo quiere mucho y que en público te van a matar ahí, es una pena, es una vergüenza,” dice el borrachito. “Mejor me presta tu traje la misma hora cuando ya se aproximan diez, quince minutos y me lo pongo. Me voy en lugar a tí. Más mejor que maten un borracho pero que un sacerdote en tu lugar.”

“Bueno, déjame ir ya,” dice el borrachito.

Entonces ya faltaba como media hora y llegue el caballo de la sentinela o del muchacho del virrey con un caballo para que monte el sacerdote. Y este señor borrachito que era su hermano se mete ahí en el vestuario donde viste el sacerdote, pone su traje del sacerdote, todo su equipo, y se va, monta el caballo; se le llevaron los soldados;
llegaron la gente, todo el contingente reunido en el palacio del virrey. ¡Qué aplauso! ¡Qué aplauso! Que ya llegó el sacerdote porque va a contestar las tres preguntas del virrey y si no las contesta pues está sentenciado a muerte.

Está bien, pues que llega y saluda y saluda a toda la población y al virrey. Aplauso reciben.

“Siéntese,” dice el virrey, “siéntese Ud., padre.”

Y cuando vió que ya eran las nueve de la mañana que le daba un sonazo al timbre.

“Señores,” dice, “aquí el padre va a resolver las tres preguntas. Pues, la primera,” dice, “va a tener un tiempecito de diez minutos para pensarlo todavía.”

Le dieron un tiempecito al padre y este señor que se siente como padre sin dar motivo que no era él el padre, pues era su hermano, y cuando le dió el manazo al timbre sonó la campanita y todo el mundo . . .

Dícese el virrey: “Quiero que Ud. me diga, señor padre: ¿Cuánto valdré si estoy de venta o si estoy para vender?”

Dícese el padre: “El señor virrey,” dice, “pues quiere saber que cuánto vale pues, fíjese,” dice, “Ud. señor virrey por ser un grande personaje, por ser el superior de nosotros y de los demás virreyes también, pues Ud. vale . . . veintinueve monedas de oro porque a nuestro Señor lo vendieron en treinta monedas y Ud., por ocupar el segundo lugar de Dios,” dice, “le tocan veintinueve monedas.”

Aplauso, aplauso.

“Está bien,” dice, “¡Qué bueno! Así es;” dice el virrey, “Sí, sí. ¡Siéntese otro poquito!”

Y ya le dieron otro término de diez minutos y cuando le estaban llegando los diez minutos se levanta el virrey y todo el mundo.


“Ah,” dice el padre. “Mire señor virrey,” dice, “está Ud. muy al tanto,” dice, “pero muy al tanto cuando el sol se pone en la montaña y te subes . . . el sol,” dice, “Lo harás por veinticuatro horas, porque el sol lo hace en veinticuatro horas nada más y se vuelve a poner en el lugar donde se pone.”
"Está bien. Sí, sí," dicen los demás señores, "que está contestando la pregunta."

"Sí," dicen, "como lo contestó; pues así, en veinticuatro horas lo hará Ud."

"Es cierto," dicen los demás virreyes, "que así es, el señor virrey."

"Sí," dice, "sí, es cierto."

"Pero sabe mucho, este padre, sabe mucho este padre," dicen los demás virreyes.

Todo está resolviendo y muchos están esperando nada más que lo sentencie porque son difíciles preguntas.

"Entonces," dice, "falta la tercera y la última," dice el virrey. "Si la resuelve, pues ya se salvará su vida," dice, "y si no, lo vamos a sentenciar como uno que se pierde."

Y al fin, a la tercera pregunta entonces.

"Mire Ud., señor padre, quiero que por favor Ud. me diga: ¿Qué es lo que yo opino, y qué es lo que yo pienso y lo que siento, y no es cierto?"

"Ah," dice el padrecito. "Pues Ud., señor virrey," dice, "está pensando de que pues me está haciendo un cuestionario muy difícil y Ud. también está sintiendo de que Ud. está preguntando al señor padre. Pero, desgraciadamente, no es el padre, yo soy el hermano del padre. Cuando se acercó su hora y estaba así . . . ."

No era el padre, pero qué tal si viniera el padre, pues no estaba el padre. Y el padre estaba ya muy jodidito por las preocupaciones y sin ganas de comer porque estaba pensativo de las tres preguntas, pero su hermano fue a resolver y hasta le dio más preferencia a su hermano el padre—

"Porque," dice, "¿Qué tal si viniera mi hermano; qué sirve Ud. de las preguntas que Ud. le hace?"

Pues, hasta ahí fue el punto final del cuento del virrey con el sacerdote.
The Three Questions

_Told by Emiliano Mendoza Martin in Zapotec and Spanish_  
_Translated from the Spanish by Hans Ternes_

Once there was a viceroy who was too powerful. This is what the story is about. Because of his many interests, the viceroy had many tasks to perform and so was always busy.

Well, he was a skinny man, a slender man, but of good health; it was just that his body was slim and seemed out of sorts compared with a friend of his who was the archbishop.

"Why is the archbishop," says the viceroy, "so fat, and I who am the king have trouble gaining weight? For all the work I have I don't like it that the priest, or rather the archbishop, is fat. He must be put to work a little," says the viceroy.

Then he said it to his wife. But his wife, or rather the queen, replied: "But the priest or rather the archbishop is working every day."

"Yes," he says, "but I don't see him losing any weight," he says, "whereas I am rather slender," he says. "But he hardly worries; so it's necessary to put him to work a little," says the viceroy.

"All right," said the queen. "You know what you're doing."

"Yes, tell my servant," he says, "to please go to the various places where my good friends live, those great viceroy friends of mine," he says, "to bring my good friends a written invitation telling them that on such and such a month and such and such a date we will hold a fiesta.

"And then," says the viceroy, "it will be a matter of three questions, and if the archbishop does not answer the three questions that the viceroy puts to him, then he will have him sentenced to death."

"That's fine," says the servant. "If you so order, my majesty, I will deliver the invitations."

Then he puts his saddle on the horse and goes to spread the news. Meanwhile, the viceroy was considering the questions he was going to put to the archbishop so that, in front of the viceroy's invited guests, he could solve the three questions that he [the viceroy] was going to give the archbishop in the form of a list.
Then all the invitations had been distributed and the servant had gone to deliver all of them so that the invited guests would arrive on such and such a date.

"That’s good," he says, "thanks a lot; great, now we’ll see. But who will know what the viceroy is thinking? Who knows?"

Well, everyone was excited. "I hope that it arrives!" "When will the day come? When will it arrive?"

Well, in the palace of the viceroy there was a bell which was going to ring so that the people would gather along with the invited guests from far away.

And then the event was almost near because the viceroy set it up to take place within three months. And then there was only one month to go. That’s because the viceroy let two months pass for the date that he had set for the three questions to be addressed to the padre.

Well, there were three months, no more, and the days passed, and two months came to pass, and only one month was left in accordance with what he said in his invitations to all his invited guests, and it was time to call the priest the following day.

"Well, I am calling on you, distinguished padre," he says.

"That’s all right, my lord; I am at your command, I’m here."

"Yes," he says, "because I want you to know," says the viceroy, "I want you to know that we’re going to have a fiesta on such and such a date."

"All right," said the padre. "What is it about?"

"Well, it’s a fiesta for you."

"What?" says the padre, "A fiesta for me?"

"Yes, it’s your fiesta, a fiesta for you, padre."

"Okay. What is it about?"

"Well, it’s about nothing more than your solving three questions that I have been thinking of," said the king.

Then the padre was left, as they say, a little chirriado—shaken or somewhat frightened.

"But what is it about, my viceroy?"

"Well, it’s only about three questions," he says. "If you solve them in as much detail as I am explaining them to you, then nothing will happen to you," he says. "You will continue living and have your
freedom. But if you don’t solve the three questions that I ask you, well then I’m going to kill you. That’s it, because I made up my mind,” he says. “I already informed all my guests who are going to come. I already invited them in writing,” he says, “All that’s left is for the day, the time, the date to arrive so that the fiesta can take place.”

“Now then, how much time until then?” says the padre.

“Well, a month,” he says. “You have a month to think and study because you’re a learned person, an educated man and you know everything perfectly. That’s why I chose you to solve the questions, because you’re a person of ability and great learning.”

The padre remained thoughtful. “Why not, my lord viceroy,” he says, “If you thought of it that way, well I accept.”

The padre, what he did then, he went to grasp the paper on which the king had written the first question.

“I want you to tell me,” says the viceroy: “How much would I be worth if I were for sale?”

“The second question,” says the viceroy: “How many hours would I take to walk around the entire world?”

“And the third question,” says the king: “What is it that I am thinking of and proposing and is not certain? These are the three questions, no more. So if you don’t solve them, well then you’re sentenced to death.”

These were the three questions. [water break]

“Fine,” says the priest, “I’ll be on my way.”

With just one month left before the event to which the padre or rather the priest had been called, he went to his house. He arrived at his house and began to look through the books he had studied when he was in seminary. He had a lot of books in his house. The padre imagined that he was going to find something in these books that was going to solve, that would help him with the questions the king had put to him. But days passed, nights passed, and all he had was hunger, he didn’t find anything.

Well, the padre became sad and began to lose weight. When ten days and then fifteen days passed since they had asked him these questions, the padre appeared very sad and sickly.

Then the viceroy said to his queen, his wife: “You see what has happened to the padre now, because before when he worried about
nothing," he says, "he was fat," he says, "because now it’s plain to see he’s getting thin. That’s what we’re going to do to this dear padre so that he gets a little thinner. I who am the viceroy," he was saying, "am lean and he," he says, "does nothing but celebrate mass and sleep and doesn’t work; that’s why he is rather fat."

That was the problem the viceroy had with the padre.

"Fine," his wife said to him, “If this is your idea, your way of thinking, there is nothing for me to add."

“Yes,” he says, “yes, that’s what we’re going to do with the dear padre so that he devotes himself to work a little. And if he doesn’t solve the three questions that I put to him in this questionnaire,” he says, “I’m going to order that he be sentenced to death. Because I don’t like the way he looks.”

“Fine,” says the wife of the viceroy, “That’s the way it is.”

The poor priest, thinking day after day, with no desire to eat anything, is worried because he hasn’t found anything. Fifteen days passed, twenty days passed, and only three days were left when his brother, a drunk, arrives.

“What are you doing, my brother? I see,” he says, “it appears that you have returned to the seminary again, because I see that every day you are with your books, your notebooks.”

“No, all you know,” the padre told him, “you know from your drinks,” he says, “how to get to the bar and how to gulp down your mezcal, but you really know nothing. Get out of here.”

“No,” he says, “Tell me! What has happened to you?”

“No,” he says, “you know nothing about what I am talking about, you just don’t know.”

“No,” says the drunkard, “Tell me, brother, don’t be stubborn, tell me!”

“Look,” he says, “so that you’ll see, I’ll tell you because I have no more than three days to live,” said the padre. “They’re going to sentence me to death.”

“And that’s it?” says the drunk.

“Yes, that’s what the viceroy told me, that on such and such a day he is going to have a huge fiesta at his house,” he says, “he’s going to gather all of the viceroys and all of the invited guests and all of the population, they’re going to ring the viceroy’s palace bell for the people
to assemble,” he says, “and then in front of all the people, they’re going to kill me.”

“Why?” says the drunk.

“Well,” he says, “because I have three very difficult questions and if I don’t answer the questionnaire that the viceroy gave me, then . . . ,” he says, “I don’t have a chance; they’re going to kill me.”

“But what is it about?” says the drunk.

“Well, but you, what do you know?” says the priest.

“No,” he says. “Tell me! What is it about?”

Well then, before long another day passed, and the drunk went away. And then only two days were left. . . . The following day he was only half drunk.

“All right. What is it about? Tell me, my blood brother! Tell me!”

“Okay,” he says, “I’ll just tell you this, since you’re my brother— but what do you know?”

“Fine. Just tell me!”

“Look here,” he says, “the first question that the king asks: he wants me to tell him, how much is he worth if he were for sale?”

“Ah,” says the drunkard, “And the other question?”

“He asks: How many hours will I take to walk around the entire world?”

“Ah, good,” says the drunkard. “And the other?”

“The other,” he says: “What is it that I am thinking of, what is it that is related to your character and is not certain?”

“Ah,” says the drunk, “it’s easy, it’s easy. Look,” he says, “what is it to you if the public sees you or if the viceroy orders the priest to be killed. You’re a renowned priest, you’re a priest whom the public also loves very much, and that they’re going to kill you here in public is painful, it’s a shame,” says the drunkard. “It’s better that you lend me your habit by the time ten o’clock approaches, fifteen minutes before, and I’ll put it on. I’ll go in your place. It’s better they kill a drunk than a priest.”

“Fine,” says the good priest. “If that’s the way it’s going to be,” he says, “that’s hard.”

“Well then, let me go,” says the drunk. [water break]

Then only half an hour was left, and the horse of the sentinel or of the servant of the viceroy arrives along with a horse for the priest to
mount. And this dear drunk who was his brother goes to the room where the priest dressed, puts on the priest’s habit and other things and goes to mount the horse; the soldiers accompanied him; the people arrived, the entire contingent assembled in the palace of the viceroy. What applause! What applause! Now the priest has arrived to answer the three questions of the viceroy, and if he doesn’t answer them, he’ll be sentenced to death.

Well, he arrives now and waves and greets the entire population and the viceroy. They receive applause.

“Sit down,” says the viceroy. “Sit yourself down, padre.”

And when he realized it was already nine in the morning, he had the bell rung.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he says, “the priest here is going to answer the three questions. For the first one,” he says, “he will have a time limit of ten minutes to think it over one last time.”

They gave a short time to the padre—this man perceived as the padre since there was no reason to think otherwise, because he was his brother—and when they hit the bell, the bell sounded and everybody . . .

The viceroy says: “I want you to tell me, distinguished padre: How much would I be worth if I was on sale, or if I were for sale?”

The padre says: “My lord viceroy,” he says, “you want to know how much you’re worth; well, look,” he says, “my lord viceroy, for being an important person, for being the superior of us and of the other viceroys, well you’re worth . . . twenty-nine pieces of gold because they sold Our Lord for thirty pieces, and you, for occupying second place to God,” he says, “they’ll offer you twenty-nine pieces.”

Applause, applause.

“Great,” he says. “Wonderful! That’s it,” says the viceroy. “Yes, yes. Sit down for a while longer!”

They gave him another time limit of ten minutes, and when the ten minutes were over, the viceroy and everyone else get up.

“The second question, now the second question,” he says, “please tell me padre,” he says. “Tell me: How many hours will I take to walk around the entire world?”

“Ah,” says the padre. “Look here, my lord viceroy,” he says, “you’re so close to it,” he says, “so close that when the sun sets in the mountains, you just climb . . . on the sun,” he says, “You do it in twenty-four hours,
because the sun takes twenty-four hours, not more than that, and returns to the place where it set."

"That’s great. Yes, yes,” the other lords say, “he is answering the questions.”

"Yes," they say, “it is as he answered, you’ll do it in twenty-four hours."

"It’s certain," the other viceroys say, “that’s the way it is, lord viceroy.”

"Yes," he says, “yes, that’s true.”

"But he knows a lot, this padre, this padre knows a lot,” the other viceroys say.

Everything seems to have been resolved, but many are hoping for nothing else than that he be sentenced because the questions are difficult. [water break]

"Then," he says, “only the third and last question is left,” says the viceroy. "If you solve it, then your life has been saved," he says, “and if not, we’ll sentence you as the one who lost."

And finally, the third question.

"Look here, distinguished padre, I want you to please tell me: What is it that I am presuming, what is it that I am thinking and feeling and am not certain of?"

"Ah," says the dear padre. “You, distinguished viceroy,” he says, “you’re thinking why you’re putting such difficult questions to me, and you’re also reflecting on why you’re asking an honorable padre. But, unfortunately, it’s not the padre; I am the padre’s brother. When his hour approached and he was . . . ."

It wasn’t the padre—but [perhaps the viceroy was thinking.] what would happen if the padre came and he wasn’t the padre—and the padre was really screwed because of his worries and the fact that he no longer had any appetite because he was thinking of the three questions, but his brother came to solve them and stood in for his brother the padre—

"Because," he says, “what would happen if my brother came? How would you benefit from the questions you put to him?"

Well, this is the end of the story of the viceroy and the priest.

Ed. note: “Las Tres Preguntas” is an example of AT 922. The King and the Abbot or The Shepherd Substituting for the Priest Answers the King’s Questions: the riddles posed correspond to examples e, h, and k in the Aarne-Thompson description of this type.
Crescencio

Contado por Margarito Cruz Vasconcelos en la lengua Zapoteca
Traducido en la lengua Castellana por Antonio Mendoza Martín
Diciembre 1988

Esto es un hecho real que aconteció hace mucho tiempo. Hágase de cuenta que había una persona que no era de Teotitlán del Valle, una persona de la Sierra.

Este hombre se radicó en Teotitlán hace mucho tiempo. Vivía en la casa del señor Augustín Rodríguez. Como él era huérfano, lo único que se sabía de él era su nombre que era Crescencio.

Crescencio trabajaba en la casa del señor Augustín y cuidaba sus animales; era vaquero. Como siempre andaba en los montes y los cerros, se encontró una vez con un tigre. Como él era muy valiente y llevaba un machete, se enfrentó contra el tigre dándole muerte. Luego de que le dió muerte, Crescencio le cortó el cuello al tigre y empezó a beber su sangre, lo que le hizo tener las virtudes y los poderes sobrenaturales del animal. Desde ese momento él empezó a sentirse otro hombre; eran extrañas sus reacciones, su forma de ser. Se sentía como una especie de tigre, porque al tomar su sangre el tigre le dió todos sus poderes.

Crescencio actuaba como actuaban los tigres. Entonces él empezó a robar usando todos sus poderes; él era un hombre imparable para robar. Él robaba mucho, pero no robaba a la gente pobre, sino que robaba el dinero del gobierno. Él usaba el sol para saber el lugar de dónde y cuándo venía el dinero del gobierno. Como acostumbraban antes los gobiernos, los soldados llevaban el dinero. Él, al saber y al ver el sol, les decía a sus gentes que se prepararan porque el dinero estaba en camino. Y así empezó su trabajo como ladrón.

Crescencio y su gente tenían un refugio que era una cueva (esa cueva existe todavía ahora y se llama Lodábi). En esta cueva guardaban todo el dinero que ellos robaban; era pura moneda, moneda 07.20 [zero, siete, veinte] de pura plata. En esta cueva también existía el
dios del buen viaje que era un hombre que llevaba una serpiente en sus hombros (ahora todavía existe el dios).

Al pasar el tiempo, Crescencio robó una muchacha que era de San Miguel del Valle y la llevó a su cueva y la muchacha aceptó todo, pero como Crescencio y su gente saltan a menudo a hacer su trabajo y la muchacha se quedaba sola, después de un buen tiempo se aburrió. La muchacha dispuso escaparse y lo hizo llevándose consigo dos costales de dinero. Al llegar a un paraje que se llama Yázakwi había un río crecido que no podía cruzar para llegar al pueblo. Entonces se fue caminando río abajo. Crescencio, al regresar de su trabajo, encontró que su muchacha no estaba en la cueva. La muchacha, mojada por el agua del río, llegó a la casa del señor llamado Guillermo. Este señor era muy pobre y vivía muy humildemente; la muchacha le dió un poco de dinero para que construyera su casa.

Al ver esto Crescencio buscó otra muchacha que era de Oaxaca. Y entonces el gobierno supo que tenía una novia en Oaxaca y por este medio el gobierno quiso atraparlo, pero como él era muy hábil se escapaba del gobierno. Muchas veces lo rodeaban los soldados, pero él en medio de las balas se escapaba, se convirtió en un hombre famoso, y en cualquier parte del estado se escuchaba su nombre Yázakwi —que significa piedra abajo guayaba—renombrado y conocido también como el famoso ladrón, el ladrón inmortal e invencible.

El gobierno buscó otros medios para atraparlo. Entonces utilizó un abogado que conocía a Crescencio. Este abogado era del pueblo de Matatlan. Él invitó a Crescencio a su casa para una fiesta y Crescencio aceptó. Entonces el abogado le mandó un papel diciéndole el día y la hora en que iba a llegar. Al saber ésto Crescencio fue disfrazado con un uniforme de soldado federal. Cuando el gobierno mandó a un grupo de soldados a rodear la casa del abogado, Crescencio, con este disfraz de soldado, penetró en la casa del abogado sin ningún problema y su gente rodeó a los soldados. Después Crescencio le dijo al abogado que esa no era la forma de capturarlo y le dijo: “Tú me dijiste que me querías ver y ahora aquí estoy y ahora me tienes que dar todo lo que tienes, de dinero, de comida, animales, todo.” Y Crescencio y su gente empezaron a vaciar su casa. Pero antes de ésto amarró al abogado y a su esposa y los desvistió enfrente de los soldados. Después de todo esto, cuando llegaron los mozos del
abogado que fueron al campo se encontraron con el abogado amarrado con su esposa.

Al saber ésto el gobierno quiso hacer paz con Crescencio, pero Crescencio no quiso. Él le dijo al gobierno: “Si ya me conocen como bandido y Uds. quieren agarrarme vamos a ver quien pierde, Uds. o yo.” Al decirle esto al gobierno, él se volvió más feroz y ya no asaltaba al estado sino que asaltaba al gobierno federal e iba hasta México. Entonces era un hombre conocido a nivel nacional.

Regresaba a su cueva y ahí guardaba el dinero. Entretanto el gobierno veía la posibilidad o la forma de poder capturarlo usando a su novia quién lo vendió por diez mil pesos que el gobierno le ofreció. La muchacha fue quien entregó a Crescencio; ya Crescencio no pudo usar su habilidad porque la muchacha había planeada muy bien todo. Cuando llegaron los soldados del gobierno lo capturaron muy fácilmente.

Pero antes que lo agarraran, Crescencio pudo escapar una vez más y aquí fue donde dió su golpe más grande. Esperó el dinero en el paraje llamado Las Palmas y aquí se encontró con una persona que también poseía virtudes sobrenaturales. Y se enfrentaron los dos. Este señor se convirtió en serpiente y Crescencio se convirtió en águila; fue una lucha muy fuerte, pero cuando Crescencio dispuso convertirse en trueno—guzío—mató a la serpiente.

El gobierno no encontraba forma para atraparlo. Entonces fue la situación donde intervino la novia de Crescencio que por diez mil pesos lo vendió. Ya atrapado y estando por ser fusilado, Crescencio pidió una jícara de agua y empezó a tomarla, pero alguien se dio cuenta de lo que sucedía y no le dejaron tomar toda el agua. Si lo hubieran dejado tomar toda el agua, él se habría convertido en una laguna y habría escapado de nuevo.

Aquí fue donde se terminó la vida del famoso Crescencio. El gobierno le cortó su cabeza y su oreja y lo llevó al paraje llamado Kialup—cabeza alta de un cerro—puso ahí como ejemplo para que la gente viera el destino de los ladrones y así fue que hasta hace poco todavía se encontraba la cabeza de Crescencio, pero era puro hueso. Ahora se ha desvanecido lo que quedaba de Crescencio. Lo que se dice de Crescencio ahora es que su dinero está escondido en estas montañas.
This is a real story that happened a long time ago. It is about a person who was not from Teotitlan del Valle, a person from the Sierra.

This man settled down in Teotitlan a long time ago. He lived in the house of Mr. Augustín Rodríguez. Since he was an orphan, the only thing people knew about him was his name, which was Crescencio.

Crescencio worked in the house of Mr. Augustín and took care of his animals; he was a cowboy. Since he always wandered about the mountains and hills, one time he met a tiger. As he was very brave and always carried a machete, he confronted the tiger and killed him. After killing him, Crescencio cut his neck and began to drink its blood, which gave him the virtues and supernatural powers of the animal. From that moment on, he began to feel like a different man; his reactions and his sense of himself felt strange. He felt like some sort of tiger because after drinking its blood, the tiger gave him all of its powers.

Crescencio acted like a tiger. Then he began to rob using all of his powers; he was now an unstoppable thief. He stole a lot, but he never robbed the poor; rather, he stole the money that belonged to the government. He used the sun to find out the place and time the government money would arrive. As was the custom of governments in the past, soldiers carried the money. Upon observing the sun, he told his people to get ready because the money was on its way. And this is how his work as a thief began.

Crescencio and his people had a refuge which was a cave (this cave still exists today and is called Lodäbi). In this cave they kept all the money they stole; it was genuine money of pure silver 07.20 [zero, seven, twenty]. In this cave there also lived the God of Travelers, who was a being who carried a snake on his shoulders (this god is still alive today).

As time passed, Crescencio robbed a young woman who was from San Miguel del Valle and took her to his cave, and the girl accepted everything, but since Crescencio and his people used to leave
often to do their work and the girl remained alone, she got bored after awhile. The girl set out to escape, and she did so carrying two sacks of money with her. When she came to a place called Yazakwi, a river had risen that she couldn't cross to get to town. So she started to walk downriver. When Crescencio returned from work, he discovered that his girl was not in the cave. The girl, drenched from the riverwater, arrived at the house of a gentleman called Guillermo. This man was very poor and lived very humbly; the girl gave him some money so that he could build his house.

When Crescencio found out about this, he looked for another girl who was from Oaxaca. The government then learned that he had a girlfriend in Oaxaca and saw in this an opportunity to catch him, but since he was very clever, he escaped. Many times the soldiers would surround him, but in the midst of the bullets he would get away. Thus he became a famous man, and in every part of the state one could hear his name Yazakwi—which means stone under the guava—renowned and well-known as the famous thief, the immortal and invincible thief.

The government looked for other ways to catch him. So they used a lawyer who knew Crescencio. This lawyer was from Matatlan. He invited Crescencio to his house for a party and Crescencio accepted. The lawyer sent him a note telling him the day and time he was to arrive. Upon finding this out, Crescencio disguised himself in the uniform of a federal soldier. When the government sent a group of soldiers to surround the house of the lawyer, Crescencio, in the uniform of a soldier, entered the house without any problem and his people surrounded the soldiers. After that, Crescencio told the lawyer that this was not the way to catch him, and he said: “You told me that you wanted to see me, and here I am, and now you have to give me everything you own, money, food, animals, everything.” And Crescencio and his people began to empty the house. But before that he tied up the lawyer and his wife and undressed them in front of the soldiers. After all that, when the servants of the lawyer, who had been out in the fields, arrived, they found the lawyer and his wife tied up.

After hearing of this, the government wanted to make peace with Crescencio, but Crescencio refused. He told the government: “Now that you know me as a bandit and want to catch me, let’s see who loses, you or I.” Upon saying that to the government, he turned more
ferocious and assaulted not only the state, but also the federal government, and even went as far as Mexico City. Thus he became a well-known figure at the national level.

He returned to his cave and there guarded his money. In the meantime, the government saw a possibility or way to capture him by using his girlfriend, who sold him for 10 million pesos that the government offered her. The girl was the one who delivered Crescencio to the government; Crescencio couldn’t use his cleverness because she had planned everything very well. When the soldiers arrived, they captured him very easily.

But before they caught him, Crescencio was able to escape one more time, and it was then that he inflicted his biggest blow. As he was waiting for his money in the place called Las Palmas, he encountered a person who also possessed supernatural powers. And the two faced off against each other. The man turned himself into a snake, and Crescencio turned himself into an eagle; it was a very intense battle, but when Crescencio was able to transform himself into thunder—guzťu—he killed the serpent.

The government couldn’t find a way to catch him. It was in this situation that Crescencio’s girlfriend, who had sold him for ten million pesos, intervened. Caught and ready to be shot, Crescencio asked for a jug of water and began to drink, but someone realized what would happen, and they didn’t let him drink all of the water. If they had let him drink all of it, he would have turned into a lagoon and escaped again.

Here was where the life of the famous Crescencio ended. The government cut off his head and his ear and took it to a place called Kiälup—the top [head] of a hill—and left it there as an example so that the people would see what happens to thieves, and so it was that not too long ago one could still see the head of Crescencio, but only as pure bone. What was left of Crescencio has now disappeared. What they say about Crescencio now is that his money is hidden in these hills.
Era una persona muy pobre. Él iba al monte a traer leña. En camino él escuchaba a las personas que decían que el gentil y el diablo daban dinero.

Todo el tiempo Macario pensaba en ésto. En uno de tantos días decidió buscar a estos hombres para que le dieran dinero y anduvo en busca de ellos. En la mitad del monte encontró a un hombre quien le dijo: “¿Dónde vas?” Y él dijo: “Ando en busca del diablo para que me dé un poco de dinero porque soy muy pobre.” El hombre contestó: “El diablo no da dinero; lo único que da son problemas y cosas malas, pero no da dinero.” Entonces Macario le preguntó: “¿Quién es él que da dinero?” Y el hombre le contestó: “El gentil, y yo soy el gentil. ¡Vamos a mi casa! Si tu nombre aparece en mi libro te voy a dar dinero.”

Anduvieron a la casa del gentil y el gentil buscó su nombre en el libro, pero no apareció el nombre de Macario. El gentil le dijo: “Tú no eres acreedor de este dinero. Pide a dios que te ayude porque yo no te voy a ayudar.”

Macario regresó triste a su casa y empezó a trabajar en el monte. Pero al poco tiempo Macario estaba cansado ya de su pobreza y le dijo a su esposa: “Prepárame un pollo; voy a comerlo en el monte porque si lo comemos aquí tengo que compartirlo con nuestros hijos.”

te voy a dar nada porque donde das mucha comida das mucho y donde no das, no das nada.” Y Macario tomó sus cosas y se fue. 

Continuó en camino y se dispuso a comer su comida. En esos momentos llegó una persona flaca de puro hueso y le preguntó a Macario: “¿Qué estás haciendo?” Le dijo Macario: “Me dispongo a comer mi pollo.” Le dijo el hombre: “¿Me regalas un pedazo de tu comida?” Le contestó Macario: “Cómo no, si me dices quién eres.” Le contestó el hombre: “Soy la muerte.” Le dijo Macario: “Sí, te voy a dar la mitad de mi comida porque tú agarras parejo sea pobre o rico, tú lo llevas.”

Terminaron de comer y después le dijo la muerte: “Ahora somos compadres y en prueba de nuestra amistad te voy a conceder el poder de curar. Tienes que ir a recoger las hojas de cada uno de los árboles que hay en el monte, las mueles con agua y las haces líquido; las metes en un frasco, y cuando vas a curar le das dos gotitas al enfermo y le sanará. Si yo estoy ubicado en la cabeza del enfermo, vas a sanarlo, pero si yo estoy al pie del enfermo, tú le dices que ya no va sanar porque yo me lo voy a llevar.”

Bajo estas condiciones que le concedió, Macario recibió el poder de curar. Al poco tiempo Macario se hizo famoso por la región como un curandero muy bueno que daba alivio a todos los enfermos.

Había un rey que tenía una hija muy bonita que se encontraba enferma. El rey mandó llamar a Macario para que curara a su hija. Macario acudió a la llamada y fue a la casa del rey. El rey le dijo: “Cura a mi hija y te daré todo lo que quieres.” Macario le contestó: “Voy a hacer lo posible para curarla.” Se metió al cuarto de la muchacha y vio a su compadre la muerte que estaba jalando los pies de la muchacha. Pero como él era el único que tenía el poder de ver a la muerte, su compadre, ningún otro la vio. Se rascó la cabeza y dijo: “No estoy seguro si es posible curar a tu hija.” El rey le pidió de rodillas y le prometió riquezas inimaginables. Macario tuvo compasión de la muchacha y la volteó, ubicó la cabeza de la hija donde estaba su compadre, la muerte, y así la sanó.

De esta manera Macario rompió el pacto que tenía con su compadre. Muy enojada la muerte le dijo: “Porque me engañaste, compadre, tengo que atraer a otra persona en lugar de la hija. Pero no importa, tienes otros días de vida. Nos veremos cuando regrese por ti!”
Macario the Healer

_Told by Margarito Cruz Vasconcelos in Zapotec_  
_Translated into Spanish by Antonio Mendoza Martín_  
_English translation by Hans Ternes_

Once there was a poor man. He went to the mountains to fetch wood. On the way some people told him that a nobleman and the devil were giving away money.

Macario couldn’t think of anything else. One day he decided to look for these men hoping that they would give him money, and set off in search of them. Halfway up the mountain he met a man who asked him, “Where are you going?” And he replied, “I am looking for the devil, hoping that he will give me a little money, for I am very poor.” The man answered, “The devil doesn’t hand out money; the only things he passes out are problems and bad things, but he doesn’t give away money.” Then Macario asked him, “Who is it that gives away money?” And the man replied, “The nobleman, and I am that nobleman. Let’s go to my place! If your name appears in my book, I’ll give you money.”

They went to the house of the nobleman, and the nobleman looked for his name in the book, but Macario’s name wasn’t there. The nobleman said, “You do not deserve this money. Ask God to help you, because I am not going to help you.”

Macario sadly returned to his house and began to work in the mountains again. But soon he was tired of his poverty and said to his wife: “Prepare a chicken for me; I’m going to eat it in the mountains, because if we eat it here, I have to share it with our children.”

His wife obeyed him and killed a hen. Macario went to the mountains to eat his chicken. He found a water hole and sat down to eat. At that very moment there appeared an old man with a white beard and white hair who asked him what he was doing. Macario answered, “I am going to eat my chicken.” The old man asked him, “Will you give me a piece of your chicken?” Macario replied, “Gladly, but first I would like you to tell me who you are.” The old man responded, “I am God.” “Oh,” said Macario, “I am not going to give you anything, because wherever you offer food you dish out a lot and wherever you don’t you give nothing at all.” And Macario took his things and left.
He followed the road and got ready to eat his meal. At that moment there appeared a man of mere skin and bones, and he asked Macario, “What are you doing?” Macario said to him, “I am getting ready to eat my chicken.” The man asked him, “Will you give me a bit of your food?” Macario responded, “Why not, if you tell me who you are.” The man replied, “I am Death.” Macario told him, “Yes, I will give you half of my food, because you take equally from the rich and the poor.”

They finished eating and then Death said to him, “Now we are comrades, and as proof of our friendship I will bestow upon you the power to heal. You must collect the leaves of every tree in the mountains, grind them with water until they turn liquid, put them into a flask, and when you go to heal a sick person, give him two drops and he will be cured. If I am standing at the head of the sick person, you are going to heal him, but if I am standing at his feet, tell him he can’t be cured, because I am going to take him with me.”

Under these conditions, which he agreed to, Macario received the power to heal. In a very short time Macario became famous in the region as a great healer who provided relief to all who were sick.

There was a king who had a beautiful daughter who had fallen sick. The king called for Macario so that he would heal his daughter. Macario heard this summons and went to the king’s house. The king told him, “Heal my daughter and I will give you everything you desire.” Macario replied, “I will do my best to cure her.” He went to the girl’s room and saw his friend Death, who was about to grab the girl’s feet. But since he was the only one who had the power to see Death, his friend, no one else saw him. He scratched his head and said, “I am not sure it is possible to heal your daughter.” The king begged him on his knees and promised him unimaginable riches. Macario felt sorry for the girl and turned her around, placed her head where his friend Death stood, and so cured her.

In this way, Macario broke the pact he had entered into with his friend. Very angry, Death told him, “Because you fooled me, compadre, I have to take another person in place of the daughter. But no matter, you have more days to live. We’ll see each other when I come back for you!”

Ed. note: This tale combines AT 332B, Death and Luck, in which the poor man allows Death to share his meal of chicken, and AT 322, Godfather Death.