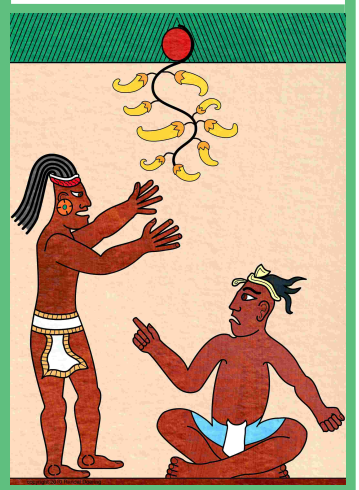


Planting

The first words I can remember hearing were not those of my mother or my father but of my brother Atlatla, whose name comes from the word for the dart-thrower.

“Listen to me, little brother," he said, and he told me a story to frighten me and show me that he was the older brother and I was just the baby. It was the story of the three hunters and the spirit of a dead boy he whispered, when my parents were sleeping. Only Mother Moon's light was there, shining through the windows, to protect me from the fear my brother was trying to put in my heart. His voice filled my ears, and it was the words of that first story that brought me out of my baby's world into the world of my brother and my father and my lineage.

Atlatla was three years older than I was, and everything he said was a little dart thrown from his mouth. "Stop doing that," he said when I played with things that were not mine. "Come with me," he said when he wanted to take me to see a nectar bat sucking at a flower or an orb spider glowing in the dark. "Don't look at those men," he said when the men of power of the village came out of their mat house meetings. It was my brother who took me to the edges of the village, where the trails into the jungle begin and the guardian stones are raised. There are five of these guardian stones, acantuns they are called, there is one in each of the four directions and one in the center of the village. Each stone is as high as a man, they are carved with pictures of our ancestors, and inside them live the spirits of our grandparents who have stayed in this world to protect their children.

"Never go beyond these stones without our father or another man," Atlatla said. "Never. The animals will kill you, or the servants of the god ah-Puch will destroy you. The evil winds are everywhere, in the jungle." His voice was very serious and frightening, and when I looked out into the jungle I saw only green darkness and heard only the snarling of hungry animals and wicked spirits, looking for a little boy to gobble up and destroy.

Sometimes I did not listen and played with my brother’s toy dart thrower or knocked over his little clay men, and he grabbed my hair and pulled me, and I would hit him, and he would only laugh. "You know nothing," he would say. "You are only the little brother, and I must teach you everything." So he would drag me by the arm to show me these lessons he wanted me to learn, while I struck at him, and if I did not wish for people to laugh at us I had to do what he wanted.

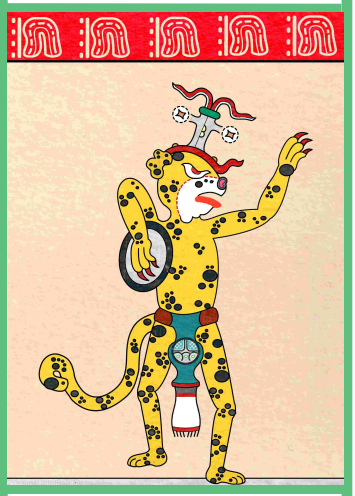
Only when our father was near did he not do those things. Once when I was very small and we were sitting on our mats eating dinner, Atlatla seized my hair and started to say some thing or other, and our father smacked him on the side of the head with a loud clapping sound. "How do you like that?" my father said, and his eyes were obsidian chips.

"I didn't hit him!" said Atlatla, and my father struck him again so that he fell over.

"Did you hear what I said, son?" said my father.

"He doesn't listen," grumbled Atlatla, but our father only finished his tamales and went outside to smoke a cigar. My mother sat looking at the floor, this was her way when there was anger, and when our father went out she tried to help Atlatla sit up. He pushed away her hand and went to his sleeping bench and lay facing away from us. My mother stood and took the cups and plates for washing, and I was alone with the empty mats.

My father never struck me. The youngest son in his hut was hardly seen, hardly heard. I always placed my father's mat and Atlatla's mat before every meal, and after we ate I put them away, and that was all my father wanted from me. He was a wood cutter, which was not a good path to walk in our village; it is a low place, and a poor one. But we were saved from humiliation because my father was also a wood carver who made plates and cups and bowls, and this skill brought him a little respect. Very early in the morning, even before Father Sun's first light came over the eastern mountains, my father would take up his axes and his dragging-rope. One axe was flint, for chopping soft wood, and one axe was obsidian, for biting into hard wood and making a starting place for the flint axe. My mother did not rise with him but always left him meat-buns and honey-bread or some other tasty thing, and when he had eaten he would go into the jungle and cut trees for whatever people needed. Most families would cut their own wood for their needs, but some families have no boys or only small boys, and these were the families who paid my father with obsidian carving blades or other things. Sometimes when a family was building a new hut or making fish-traps, they would pay my father to help them, because he knew how best to manipulate the many types of wood and also where all the kinds of trees grew. On days when people needed nothing from him he would cut sapodilla or andiroba or coroboro and drag the pole back to our lineage-compound and carve new sets of dishes from it. When the day was growing old my father would go into the jungle and cut heavy loads of brush and garbage trees for firewood, and he would sell the bundles for people to use the following day.



Each year my father planted a field of maize and squash and beans, but this alone did not provide enough food for our family. It was my two uncles who grew large fields and tended our lineage orchards, they were potent farmers who provided for our needs. My father only kept his milpa because everyone in the village, even the priest, even the caçique, plants at least a small field of these crops. If a man is crippled or sick his sons care for his milpa, or he pays others to tend it. No one wants to offend the gods and the goddesses by refusing to raise the food they made for us. In truth it was wood carving that my father did most, since selling these things brought a little money to our family and our lineage.

When I was small, my brother was often taken into the jungle when my father went to cut wood or tend his milpa. Only boys who are at least seven or eight are taken outside the village, and many fathers wait until their sons are nine or ten. The jungle around the village is very thick and dangerous; kan-koch the fer-de-lance snake lives in the brambles, waiting to poison anyone who walks past his home, and balam the jaguar or coh the puma might become crazed and seize small children and drag them away before anyone sees. So, young children stay in the village and the raised fields by the river and never go into the jungle, and they are not taken there by their fathers.

Because my father and Atlatla were often outside the village, there were many days when I was alone with my mother. In the mornings, after my father took Atlatla into the jungle, she would waken me and take me with her to the river to collect water for our hut. There she would talk with other women from the village of her birth, and sometimes she would talk with the women of my father's village, but they did not like to speak with her and would only say those things they had to not to bring the evil winds upon themselves. This was because my father's lineage was a cursed one, and no one wanted our luck. For three generations there had been many more girls than boys in our lineage, and more boys had died than should have if the gods truly embraced us. My father had two brothers who were older than he was, and their wives had borne only girls and sons who were stillborn or died not long after they were born. So my father married my mother, who was from the village of Chacwitz, to escape the bad luck. He had two healthy sons, but people still did not believe that our lineage's luck had changed.

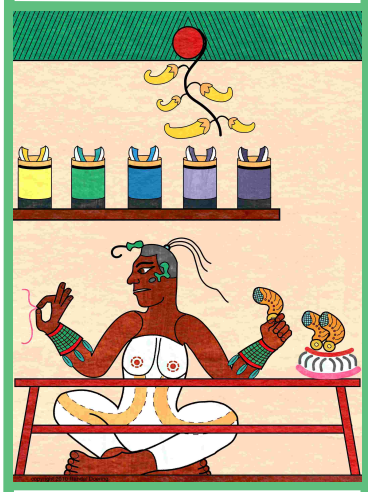
This was how the days of my early years went: watching the sky for interesting birds and trying to make their calls to bring them down to me, but they never came. I poked at strange insects and was scolded for playing

with scorpions, even flipping kitchen cockroaches over with a stick seemed to irritate my mother, nor did she like it when I stuck shield-bugs to my forehead with tree-gum. So, in the dust of our lineage-compound I made stupid stick-drawings of the animals that came around, and though I could draw a good raccoon, rabbits were beyond me and only made my uncles laugh. This too I did: helping my father make piles of brush for us and my uncles to burn at night, and feeding sticks into cooking fires for my aunts or my cousins, who were all girls. Two of my cousins were very good cooks and let me help them mash fruit for making into tarts; since I got to help eat these, this was a task I became excellent at.

Mostly, though, I would watch my mother do women's things: soaking maize kernals in limewater and grinding them into flour for tortillas and bread, weaving strings into clothing, making vegetables and meat my father brought home into food, keeping the hearth fire burning, cleaning our hut. All these things she did every day, she was like any good mother. But my mother was also different, she was well respected in the village. As a girl she had learned a secret craft, turning the feathers of brilliantly-colored birds into headdresses and arm bands and belts for the ceremonies of the priest and the caçique and the men of power. There was one other woman who knew these things, she too was from my mother's birth-village. But it was said that my mother's fingers felt more love for the birds, and so they gave her the brightest feathers. That was not really true, it was bird-hunters who brought feathers for her, but that was what was said, anyway. The feather-things my mother made were always beautiful, and each item took her days to create because she had so many other tasks.

When my mother was making her feather clothing, she would sit cross-legged and lay her feathers on a low table my father had made for her. She kept the feathers in many little clay urns, separated by their length and their colors. For a long time I did not understand why she kept the jars in certain rows, but after I was five or maybe six and had seen many rainstorms, I came to understand that she kept her feathers in rows like the colors of a rainbow. One thing my mother never let me do was touch her feathers, not even to help her sort them when the hunters brought them, or to put them away.

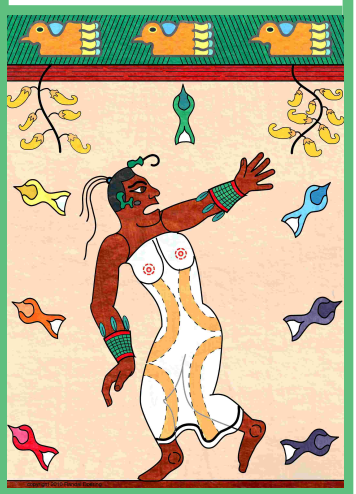
"This is a woman's craft," she said to me, shooing away my fingers. If I tried to grab her feathers, she would catch and squeeze my hand until I stopped. "Who knows, when you go to be initiated as a boy, you might turn into a girl instead!" I did not like to think of myself wearing a skirt and carrying water from the river and burning my fingers making tortillas, and



so I never really tried to take her feathers. It was only teasing that I did.

My mother would lay out many feathers on her table, and strings of all colors, and then she would choose this feather or that one and place them closest to her. I saw this happen many times, saw her make many things, and never did I hear her say any magic or spells. Never did I hear her call upon wicked spirits or the lords of the night. There were only feathers, and threads, and her long fingers moving slowly to make things that powerful men wanted. Some women said she must be calling upon spirits to weave her feathers, but this was not true. Those women were only lying, it was their resentments alone that moved their tongues.

Because my mother made these things for the powerful men of the village, our family did not have to bear burdens that other families did. Others had to give maize, or fruit, or fish, or woven cloth, they had to send sons and sometimes daughters to work for the village for part of each year. Because of my mother's feathers we did not have to pay these prices, and sometimes our lineage was even given sweet cacao from the village orchards, when others had none. Still, my parents never spoke foolishly of these things, never boasted. I think my father prayed that my mother's secret craft would bring luck to his lineage, and that was why he did not tempt ah-Puch and the lords of the night with arrogant words.

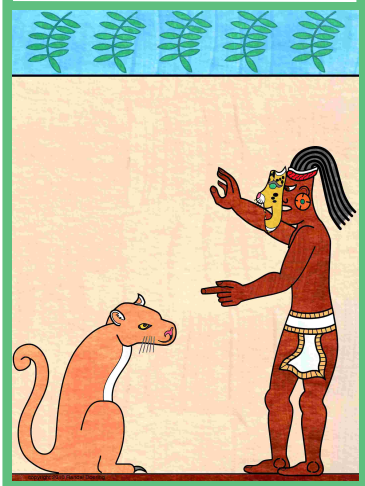


Here is another discussion about insects and animals, a little more must be said about these beings that fascinated me in my little years and taught me so much about life. Our lineage-compound was near the edge of the jungle, and many sorts of insects came there: black rock-scorpions and brown tree-scorpions, shining ma'kech beetles and prowling mantises. Twenty kinds of spiders come into the village, jumping spiders and web-making spiders and drop-from-the-ceiling-next-to-you-at-dinner spiders, and people do not drive them out for fear of offending the goddess ix-Ai, whose children they are. And spiders eat roaches and mosquitoes, so they are welcome for this. Shield bugs live by the streams that go past the village, and their green shells are paid for by some young women who use them in earrings and necklaces. There were dung beetles, rolling their nasty dinners right through the village, and there were lightning-bugs flashing in the night. Dragonflies came into the village, and people cursed them, for they are said to bring bad luck. And this is the truth I learned about insects: they are killers and are killed without end. Every animal eats insects, even other insects, even animals much larger that should be hunting bigger food. Everywhere they were pounced on and

devoured, everywhere they were casually destroyed. It is said that is why their mother, ix-Ai, births so many of them. It is because insects are tiny, and annoying to other creatures, or pleasing to their bellies. Truly, Lady Insect has a hard place in this world!

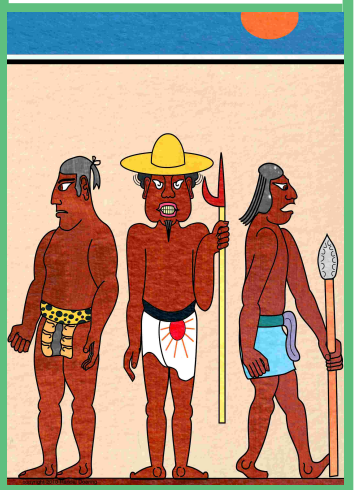
Because our village is on the great river, there are many birds there, but even when they landed inside our lineage-compound I did not go near them. I was fearful that if they dropped a feather on me or brushed me, I might become a girl as my mother had threatened. So, even though there are beautiful parrots and woodcreepers and toucans near our village, even though the blue heron and the tiger heron and the black-collared hawk are always near the river, I just called to them from a distance and tried to get them to leave feathers for my mother. I just admired them flying above the treetops on their way to the swamps and the mountains. Only they see the world as the gods and goddesses see it, from their garden in the fifth world high above.

In the village of Xunich small dogs are raised for food. Traders who have gone there have said this, and Xunich people who have married into my village say the same thing. In our village there are fish and turtle pens at the river and pens for ocellated turkeys, but we raised no other animals. They become sick too easily and die, so it is better to hunt. Because there are many hunters in the village, there are few animals near. Anything that could be eaten had learned to stay far away, and anything with beautiful fur stayed hidden when Father Sun's face was out. Only during rainy season, when men do not go hunting, only when the grey clouds make the days dark and hide the faces of everything, do animals come to dig at garbage heaps at the edge of the village. Sometimes on those days Atlatla would take me to the trash-piles, and we would see a raccoon pawing through maize husks and squash rinds or an oppossum chewing on pumpkin seeds or a coati licking the rinds of discarded fruits. My eyes are not animal eyes, and even when animals were close I often could not see them. But Atlatla saw all of them, he was born with their ways in his heart. He would point and say, "See by that stump, the fox?" Or he would suck in his breath and say, "Up in the guanacasta tree, do you see bobilché the margay cat, hunting that stupid sparrow?" And there they would be, always, animals that only experienced hunters could see. It is said that in the beginning times the animals could speak, or at least their lords could speak, but none of the animals I saw with my brother said anything to us. They only made sounds that were not intelligent. Atlatla said he understood their words, but he was only trying to make me feel ignorant.



When I was very small I did not go outside my lineage-compound ever, all my world was three big huts with a courtyard between them, and our ancestors' lineage-shrine in the center of this. When I was four, however, Atlatla began to take me into the village. There are twenty-seven lineage-compounds in the village on the river, some have several plazas and are very large, and at the center of all these compounds are the huts of the public men. There is the hut of the priest, who leads our prayers, and the hut of the caçique, who leads the powerful men. The wise-woman herbalist is near the village center as well, her hut is down a little trail. In the east is the mat house, where decisions are made by the lineage-fathers and the caçique, and in the south is the god house, where the private ceremonies of the priest and the lineage-shamans are performed. The hut of the storyteller is also in the center, southeast is its direction. The heart of our village is a foot-trampled plaza where festivals are held, there is a fire-circle for storytellings and certain prayers and sacrifices. Children do not go into the center alone but can stay at the edges and watch people, in this way Atlatla and I learned much.

And this is what I saw, in the world outside my family: in the dry season the jungle farmers would take up their axes and go to chop out new fields, and when the brush and trees had dried the farmers burned them to clear their milpa. Then they took digging sticks and bags of seeds and planted. After that they only went out sometimes to weed, and finally they harvested their crops into great woven baskets, before the rains came. Here were the faces of the farmers: they were lined reddened faces, these were men under Father Sun's heat all day. None of them saw a small boy such as I was, they only walked past, murmuring to each other, the fathers and their sons went together into the fields.

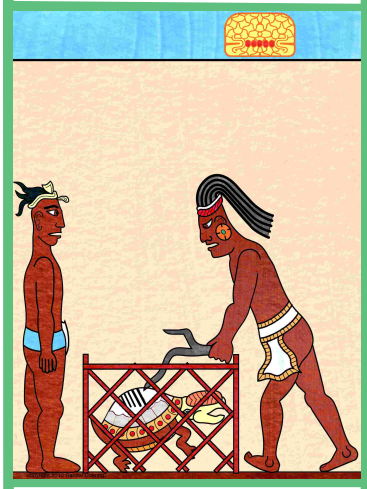


The river-farmers went through the village center, too, those are men who make raised paddies of mud on the river flats and grow their crops just above the water. Their fields are richer than those of the milpa farmers, but they are sick more often, too: the spirits of those who have drowned in the river or were eaten by crocodiles are angry at the living because they became servants to the river god and cannot rest. So in their anger they send sickness to those who spend so much time near the river. And this is the way of river farmers: they are never hurried, their fields are close to the village and very rich, they do not have to walk long distances as do the jungle farmers. But their voices are quieter, they do not laugh very much because of all the sickness they suffer.

In the dry season, hunters went into the jungle to find ceh the red deer

or haleu the paca or tzub the agouti. No hunter goes out of the village without stopping at the guardian stones to say a prayer and make a sacrifice of palm-leaf animals or incense to the animal lords. Otherwise those lords will consider their hunting to be mere murder, and they might be killed by peccaries or die in a foolish accident. Each hunter carries his own special tools, his spear and dart-thrower, a knife of obsidian or flint. There are bird hunters, too, those who hunt cutz the wild turkey and maxix the muscovy duck and koba the chachalaca. Bird hunters use blowguns, and for shooting birds with colorful feathers they use clay pellets covered with rubber. They just shoot the bird in the head and make it silly, and then they pluck feathers. Foolish bird hunters kill their birds, but wise ones only take the finest feathers. That way the birds may be plucked again later. Hunters go into the jungle in twos or threes or fours, because one man alone is too easy to ambush. Kan-koch the fer-de-lance is everywhere, and with his fearsome poison this serpent kills more people than all the other animals together. They are ah-Puch's first-born children, it is said, and they have hated us, the children of Father Sun, from the beginning of time. There is always one hunter watching for kan-koch. Also, sometimes mighty balam the jaguar becomes crazed and starts killing men, and he can grow very large, indeed.

There are men in the village who hunt fish and turtles in the great river. These men grow maize and squash and beans like everyone, but in the darkness before Father Sun rises they go to the water and seek food there, with slender fish-spears and nets. Many people do not eat this food, because they fear river-spirits, but our family ate fish and especially delicious turtles and dumplings. Our mother did not have turtles in her village in the mountains, and always she was asking my father to talk with the turtle-hunters to secure snapping turtle for our dinners. Sometimes Atlatla liked to take me to the snapping turtle pens and tap their shell with branches of very hard sapodilla wood. The beak of the turtle would come out of the shell, and ak' would open his little black eyes. Then suddenly his neck would come out, as long as the forearm of a boy, and ak' would seize the stick and snap it. Strong men cannot break a sapodilla stick in their hands, but for ak' it is a small thing. Atlatla would laugh and tug the broken stick, and then he would let ak' have it. I did not do these things because my hands were not quick, and I did not want ak' tearing off my fingers. Once I said to Atlatla that he should not do such teasing because Lord Snapping Turtle would see and punish him for tormenting his children, but Atlatla only shoved the stick into my hands right as ak' seized it, and I was almost pulled into

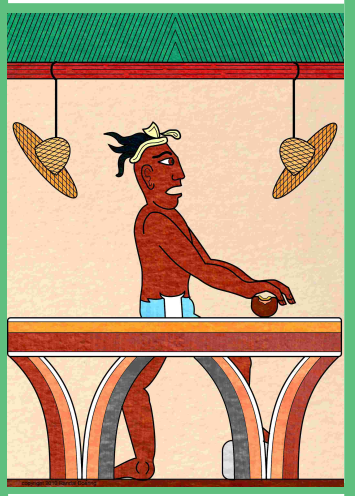


the pen with him.

"Don't do that, Atlatla," I said, but he only laughed and went back to our lineage-compound. He didn't even look to see if I was following.

Very early in the day all of these people were in the village center at once, as they went to work, and there was a noisy hustling of people moving around. And someone would smack into someone with a tool, and there would be cursing, and Atlatla and I would snicker a little. When there was fog the whispers and mutterings were unnerving to me, because it was difficult to see anyone, and voices were crushed-down and everywhere. My brother and I watched people often, because they were interesting and because Atlatla was three years older than me and looking for the path he wanted to walk in the village. Once he and our father were discussing this, and our father said: "Choose your path carefully, or one will be chosen for you."

I think this is what happened to my father, though he never said this. His oldest brother became a river-farmer and also raised chilis in the jungle, and his older brother was a milpa farmer who every year planted a huge field of tobacco and tended our lineage's fruit orchard as well. I think my father did not want to be a farmer but did not want to be anything else, either, and so the caçique appointed him as a woodcutter. Only after he came to understand what a poor place that was did he learn to carve wood and so raised his place. I only think this because of things I heard his brothers say about him. My father was not lazy, but at an important time he could not make a choice, and the one that was made for him was a hard one.



In all this time while I was a child, Atlatla and I were alone. In our lineage-compound there were five girls, the daughters of my uncles, but by the time I was sensible to the world they were learning the ways of young women and were of little interest to Atlatla or me. So it was Atlatla who taught me everything, it was his hand I clasped when we went to storytellings or ceremonies. Sometimes women would say things to their children about us, the other children would stare as their mothers told them of our family curse. Those were painful looks for me, other children's eyes became large with fear, and it was shame I felt. Atlatla sometimes stared in at ugly way at these women, and they would pull their children closer or become still and make their own ugly looks at him. My brother's eyes were very fierce when he was angry, even as a boy. Because of this situation I did not enjoy walking in the village and almost never went alone there, without my brother.

Once I did go alone to the open huts of some craftsmen, to watch them work. This was when I was six years old. In our village only certain men are allowed to make canoes, or fine darts, or furnishings for holy day sacrifices and ceremonies. These men have open-sided work-huts near the village center, where everyone can watch them shape the stone and wood and be sure no spirits are being summoned to do this work for them.

One of the craftsmen—Chan Ceh was his name—saw me watching him and invited me into his work-hut. When I came in, he gave me a fat mamey apple seed that filled my whole hand.

"Here," he said, "Watch my son, and then do as he does. Maybe this is something you would do well."

His son was ten years in this world and had just chosen his own path as a craftsman. He was polishing a round table of dark, fragrant mahogany, by rubbing it with a mamey apple seed just like mine. He used the shiny part and not the flat side, and with much rubbing the wood was becoming smooth.

"Yes," I said. "I can do this."

"Do it, then," the son said. He was laughing at me, in his eyes. I rubbed the wood just as he had, but even when I rubbed for a long while, hard, it did not polish. There was some trick that he knew, some little spell, maybe, that they did not show me. I grew tired, and my hand slipped a little, and one of the spines of the seed scraped the polished part of the wood.

"Hey!" the son said, and I shouted,

"I didn't mean to do it!" and Chan Ceh shouted,

"Hey, little howler! This is a place for people, not monkeys! If you can't talk like a person, run back to the trees and howl with your own people!" Chan Ceh thought he was clever, because the clan of my lineage is the howler monkey clan. So I threw down the mamey apple seed and ran out of that work-hut, and I never again thought of the path of the craftsman as my own.

When I was five or six I became aware that many children in our village were dying. My parents talked quietly about these things, but children hear everything. Babies died of pustules and fever, girl children died of seizures and gurgling lungs, boy children died of drowning in the river and twisting in the belly that made them scream until they grew too weak to live. There were many miscarriages among the women, always there was this mother grieving, or that one. Even my own mother miscarried three babies. One

was before she had Atlatla, and then there was another between him and me, and again when I was three. All of this dying was frightening to me, I was not certain why some children died and others did not. When I asked my mother, she told me it was the spirits of the evil winds that bring suffering, and their masters the lords of the night. But our ancestors in the standing stones fight to keep them from the village, and the priest drives them away with his prayers. My mother took me to our ancestors' shrine, in the center of our lineage-compound, and had me touch the stones there. Now I was protected, she said, and her words took some of the worries from me and drove the fear from my dreams.

Because of all these things I saw and did when I was a child, I grew to understand the place of the insects and birds and animals in the world. I came to know the paths my father and uncles walked, and I saw the paths of people in the village, and I learned how things were for our lineage. But it was not until I was six years in this world that I understood the place of our people in the eyes of the gods and the goddesses.

It was the priest's work-son, Akbal Nik, who spoke to my father and told him there would be a ceremony for the infant Kan Xul. That was early in the evening on the day 17 Keh 12 Kan. He came as my mother was cooking tamales, when my father was sitting in front of our hut carving a plate, and I was inside resting.

"There is a ceremony, on 12 Mak 1 Cauac," Akbal Nik said to my father. The priest's work-son was a young man, only a year past his river ceremony, but his voice was strong, and when he spoke, men looked at him. "It is for Kan Xul." I looked out of our hut then and saw him looking right at my father, and the eyes of Akbal Nik were black and piercing and frightening.

"Is there anything to bring?" my father asked.

"Copal incense, prayers," said Akbal Nik. "Itz day colors." Then his eyes saw me, just for a moment, and I moved back into the doorway.

"Very well," my father said, and Akbal Nik went on to another hut.

My father spoke to my mother about the ceremony but did not tell Atlatla or me what it was about; he just said we were going to a difficult holy day ceremony and should be quiet there. Ten days before the ceremony he stopped eating chilis and stopped drinking cacao and did not smoke any more cigars. Five days before the ceremony, he stopped eating anything but sacred bread. Atlatla wanted to join him in his fast, but our father said, "These are men's burdens." When Atlatla refused food from our mother

anyway, our father grabbed his arm and squeezed until tears came from Atlatla's eyes. Still my brother just sat on his mat, glaring at the fire, until our father let him go. I did not understand my brother when he fought with my father in this way. Atlatla was born on a K'awil day, which should have made him wise, but his way was that of Chicchan serpent people, who are stubborn. Maybe it was one of our ancestors who hardened him like this.

When the day of the ceremony came, my father's oldest brother woke us before Father Sun rose. He did not stay with us but went back to his own family, and we put on white clothing and covered our faces and hands with white skin-paint. My father painted a teardrop of yellow under our eyes, and then he painted black curls at the corners of our mouths. I asked Atlatla what the tears and curls were for, but he did not know, and our father only scowled. We picked up our sitting mats, and our father took up many balls of copal incense wrapped in maize husks.

When we came out, my father's brothers and their families were already lined up one after the next and walking past our hut. My family joined the line behind them, and we walked through the village. Along all of the trails the other lineages came, in long lines, shuffling their feet and looking straight ahead. Only a few babies cried. There are eight hundred people in our village, everyone moved very slowly, and Father Sun rose before we reached the river hill. Over the river flew parrots and yellow-tailed oropéndulas, disrespectful of the holy day with their noise.

The river hill is north of the village and rises above a wide place in the water. Its top has been flattened for ceremonies, and the north guardian stone for the village stands in the center of the flattening. When the families arrived at the hill, everyone unrolled their mats and sat. The place of my lineage was near the river on the east side of the hill, and I could see across the water to a flat wallow where ain the crocodile lives. There were more than twenty of ah-Ain's children in that place, already they were warmed in Father Sun's light and were moving into the water.

At the top of the river hill stood the priest, whose name was Puksik'al Tok. He was a large man in his years of strength, and that day he wore a white robe and sandals of jaguar hide. His headdress was shaped like a crocodile's head, and from the back of this rose a tiny tree with white flowers. In his hand the priest held his staff of red chacté wood, with a golden sun on top.

"Look at the priest," Atlatla whispered to me. "He is a wooden-head."

Our father knuckled him in the ribs, and Atlatla gasped and was quiet. I did not laugh with him; even then I knew it was not wise to laugh at the priest, for the gods see through his eyes.

When everyone was seated, the priest began the ceremony. He threw many balls of copal incense into the fire-pit and chanted greetings to the gods and the goddesses. During this time I was watching ain cross the river, ten crocodiles swam toward the river hill. Usually they did not come close to people, and I pulled at Atlatla's arm to show him, but he only elbowed me to stop. Then I could not see them, because they were behind the hill.

The priest took a stingray spine, and this is what he did with it: he pierced the skin between his thumb and finger. Then he dropped the spine into the fire and walked among the people, and each lineage-father raised his hand to receive the blood-touch of the priest.

"This is the day 12 Mak 1 Cauac, a day for bringing things to an end," said the priest. "The gods and the goddesses are watching."

"We are their people," murmured the lineage-fathers, and then each declared his lineage's name and clan. There are twenty-seven lineages in the village on the river, it did not take too long for the declarations, and then the priest returned to the standing stone and bled himself a little more into the fires. I looked for the crocodiles but did not see them.

The priest raised his hands to Father Sun and began a new chant, and the lineage-shamans chanted with him, all around me their voices were raised in old words from our ancestors. Then the priest's work-son made a small motion with his hand, and each lineage-father went up to the fire pit and fed his lineage's incense to the gods and the goddesses. This feeding took more time, Father Sun rose high before the last copal was devoured. Only then did the priest stop praying.

"This is the way of babies," the priest said. "They are born of the seed of the mother and the father, they are born of our ancestors and the gods and goddesses. In the time of the great cities, we are told, all the babies were fit, all the babies were strong. But our fathers turned from the sun and the moon, they turned to ah-Puch's path, and sometimes ah-Puch amuses himself by injuring us. He just laughs when we weep.

"This ceremony is for the infant Kan Xul, who was born without light in his eyes. One year it has been since his birth, but he does not see, he does not hear, he does not move when touched. ah-Puch broke this one, and it is time to return him to the great tree to be born again."

"What is he saying?" I said, and my father rapped the top of my head.

I was shamed then, and silent.

Now one of the lineage-fathers came up the hill with a bundle in his arms, it was a baby in a blanket of white cloth with yellow itz-tears woven into it. He turned the baby this way and that so that everyone saw the mark on the little forehead; with his own red blood the lineage-father had written the sign “V”, the split earth ready to receive new seed. The priest received the baby-bundle and blessed the lineage-father, who went back down the hill.

"This is Kan Xul," said the priest. He held up the bundle, but it was hard to see the baby’s tiny face. "Today is his one year day, his naming day. If ah-Puch had not broken him, he would have grown and become a boy, and a man. He would have chosen his path and married and had children of his own. He would have served Father Sun well and brought pride to his family and his lineage.

"But none of those things can be. The gods and the goddesses have been consulted, and they have asked for this infant to be returned to them, returned to the world tree," said the priest. "So this is our purpose today, to pray for him to be reborn to his lineage in a strong body, with a strong spirit. It is through the river portal that Kan Xul is returned, it is through the path of ain that he returns to the tree."

The priest turned from the people and walked behind the acantun, to the side of the hill facing the river, and he raised the infant bundle in his arms and tossed it into the water. There were hissing roars from the crocodiles, and many women began to weep, and the faces of the men were saddened. Then the priest came back to the people side of the hill and said a short prayer, and he spread out a white mat with yellow itz-tears on it and knelt before it. On the mat he performed a divination with his light-stones and seeds. Once, twice, three times he divined, and then he said,

"Kan Xul has reached the world tree. It is the lord of lineages who will see to him, now." And he said a prayer to the god ah-K'awil, all the fathers and mothers of our village chanted with him, and in the river I saw a scrap of white blanket floating away. Finally the priest said,

"Tonight is a mourning night. Do not be in the jungle after dark. ah-Puch will be looking to deepen our misery." Then everyone stood, and one by one the lineages returned to the village.

I had heard many stories of the lord of the night and how he corrupted and destroyed our ancestors in their cities. I had heard those stories with a child's ears, with a child's heart, and I had not understood them as truths but

only as stories for amusement. But that day, when I saw suffering on so many faces, when I heard the words of the priest and saw the opening of the portal to the world tree for the infant Kan Xul, I felt cold, in my heart. ah-Puch had reached into the womb of Kan Xul's mother and twisted her baby and broken it, and the baby's mother and father could do nothing to prevent this. Their lineage-father could not stop this attack, the guardian ancestors in the standing stones had not stopped it, the priest was powerless. Truly I felt tiny, walking through the village after the ceremony, fearing that ah-Puch was looking at me and my brother to kill, next.

When we returned to our hut I had to speak. It was my father's words I needed, though I did not often ask him for explanations. For most things Atlatla was the one I spoke to, or it was my mother who received my questions.

"The priest is very strong," I said to my father. I do not know why those were the words I chose. The shivering in me just came out that way.

My father said nothing. He wiped the white face-paint off and then handed the towel to my brother.

"Why do you say that?" my mother said. She was making tortillas and beans for us, and we were on our mats, waiting.

"Ain the crocodile is very strong. Only a man who is even stronger could use him as a messenger to the gods and the goddesses," I said.

"Or a man who loves ain more than babies," Atlatla said.

"Be quiet," my father said. "The caçique is walking the village tonight."

"Then let him hear. There is no law that everyone must love the priest."

"Atlatla!" my father said. "There is a law saying that those who criticise the men of power can be fined or caned."

My brother clenched his teeth and said, "This is your own hut."

My father slapped his mat with his hand. "I said speak quietly, son."

Atlatla punched his own mat and looked down.

"If you admire the priest, maybe you should think about that path," my mother said to me. "He might be looking for another work-son, now that Akbal Nik is a man."

"I am only six," I said.

"You should start looking for your path," she said.

I had not told anyone what happened with the craftsman, and I only said, "Yes, Atlatla and I are looking and thinking."

"I am thinking," my brother said. "You're just looking, little brother." Then I smacked Atlatla, and he smacked me, and our father laughed.

Because my father was pleased at our squabbling, I did not say anything

about ah-Puch or the cold I had felt at the river hill ceremony. This fear stayed buried in my heart, there was no way to bring it out before my father.

After the river hill ceremony for Kan Xul I began to watch the priest. It was his strength I wanted to understand, and so I risked the humiliation of being told to look away. Children did not stare at the priest. But by pretending to watch birds or animals or other people, I came to see his life in the village. Puksik'al Tok was in his ripening years, with a few white hairs, and his black eyes saw everything. His skin was dark, for his father's mother was from Xunich. He was taller than most men, and when he walked he looked not at the world, like a child, but at other people. This was the shape of his face: it was squared, with a large mouth that always seemed tightly closed and turned down at the corners. His ears were pierced with great holes and hung far down with jade plugs. Around his waist he wore a belt of ain's hide from which hung little bags full of priest things: picture-stones, roots, tiny carvings of animals, herbs. The priest wore sandals of the strong hide of ain the crocodile, no one but he and his work-son could wear such sandals, and around his neck he wore a feathered string holding a small crocodile of green jade from the time of the city. He did not wear this during ceremonies, but all the rest of the time it was there, a sign of his power and his path.

And this is what I saw, watching the priest: always he was moving, always he was thinking, always he struggled for our people against ah-Puch and his servants. On days when my mother and I went to see Father Sun rise, Puksik'al Tok was already at the east acantun giving copal incense and dropping scented flowers into the sacred fire. In the evenings he went to the west acantun to see Father Sun into the underworld, and on holy days he pierced himself and burned his blood for the gods and the goddesses. When people were ill, it was the priest and the wise-woman herbalist who were called to drive away the spirits and restore the sufferers.

Here, too, was the way of the priest: he conversed with the lineage-fathers, he talked with the wise-woman herbalist, he discussed with the men of power. He sat in the mat house for the meetings of the clan-fathers and the lineage-fathers, and it was said that his voice was second only to that of the caçique. I did not know why he talked to these people so often. I thought he was telling them they were too lazy or too stupid and that they had to work harder or think before they did things. These were words my father said to me sometimes, and what was a priest if not someone who brought the scoldings of the gods and the goddesses to powerful men?

There were two other responsibilities of the priest, these were performed

with the knowledge that had come to him from the time of the city. Sometimes he came to the story circle and passed around sacred stones that had come from the city. The stones were flat and square and small enough to fit in my child's hand. On each were little pictures, carved into the stone. These were parts of animals, and knots, and hands, and many other things. During certain stories the storyteller would pause in his telling, and Puksik'al Tok passed around stones and said things like,

"This is the sign of ah-Puch, as our fathers set it down for all time."

In this way I learned that the pictures were words, they were one way our fathers shared their wisdom, through time. When the stones were handed to me I stared at the pictures until they floated in my eyes, even after I passed the stones to someone else. This knowledge was strength from our ancestors, and so I learned the meanings of the picture-words. All of them were names of gods and animal lords and creatures of ah-Puch, and two twenties and ten was their number.

The other knowledge the priest received from our fathers was his magic. There are many men and women in the village on the river who divine the future and keep the holy days; there is one for almost every lineage, even a small lineage like mine. People go to the lineage-shamans and ask questions, and they pay with some maize, or a turkey, or woven cloth. But only the priest can divine for the men of power and the caçique. On certain days he divined for the whole village, as he did to discover that the soul of Kan Xul had gone to the world tree. He made little piles of seeds and light-stones and murmured his prayers, and he called to spirits and ancestors, and they showed him what would be and gave answers to problems in the village.

This, too, is the magic of the priest: on each holy day, on every holy day, he went with flowers in his hands to the five acantuns and knelt and took down the old flowers that hung on the standing stones and put up the new ones. His work-son went with him, and together they prayed for the safety of the village. This ceremony I saw myself, many times, and it is true that the priest and his work-son were always attentive to their duties to the gods and the goddesses.

I have already spoken of the river hill ceremony and the magic the priest performed there. It was because of that ceremony that I stopped being a foolish child and began thinking about our village and the people in it. When I spoke with Atlatla about my thoughts, he did not want to hear.

"The priest is a man of power, and telling people what to do is what he

loves," he said.

"He gives blood for the people, he renews the flowers and says the prayers and leads the ceremonies," I said.

"He does those things to receive cacao, and jade, and feathers from our mother and the other woman," he said. "He only pretends to care."

I had not heard words like those from Atlatla before, he spoke them bitterly and with anger.

"He was chosen by the gods and the goddesses," I said.

We were walking along the edge of the jungle when we were talking, and he turned to look at me, and his eyes were fired:

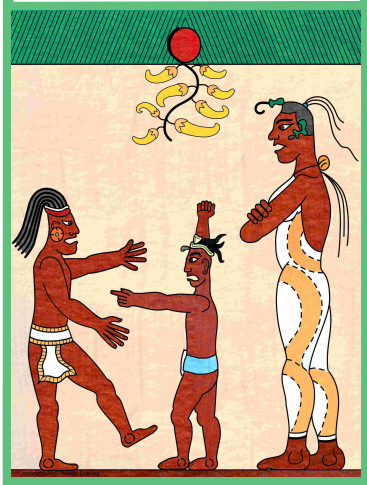
"It is not a strong man who feeds babies to crocodiles, it is a terrible man. If he is so strong, why do so many children die puking up blood? Things are not like this in Chacwitz, our mother says. Things are not like this in Xunich. The priest just wants his things, and he says pretty words, and people die anyway." He was careful to be quiet, his voice was only an ugly whisper.

"Our mother says I might be a good priest."

"Our mother can not see what would be good," he said. "You don't know her yet, you are too little. In truth our mother's heart is far away, and she cannot see us at all."

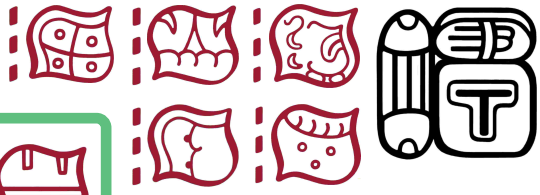
Those words were even more bitter than what he said about the priest, and I hit him, then, for saying so many hateful things. He struck me hard and knocked me into the dirt, and we fought there at the edge of the jungle. It was the growling of an animal that made us stop, the low growl of coh the puma or uch the lynx, maybe. The animal was very close, and we ran from that place back to the hut of our father. And that was all I said to my brother about my thoughts, for a while.

At the end of my sixth year one of my cousins married, this was the youngest daughter of my father's oldest brother. This girl had sometimes given me delicious fruit tarts, and I was not pleased to see her taken away by her husband to live in his lineage compound. Because she was a youngest daughter, the lineage of her husband did not want to pay a bride service price for her. They gave many packets of cacao for this girl, and packets of medicinal herbs, and some chocolate as well. There were carrying baskets given, and woven clothing and obsidian blades. But my father's oldest brother was not pleased with a pile of things, and even though he lost that daughter to the lineage Yax Tun, it is true that her husband had to come and work in our fields and orchards for two years.



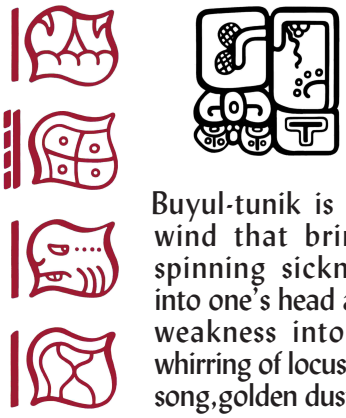
In the village on the river many children die of blood-vomit, many women die in childbirth. These are the names of the sicknesses and their spirits, these are the killing paths of ah-Kazil's servants, and here too are their unholy days:

Can-tippte are the worms in the belly of children that cause thinness and death; the sound of crunching leaves is their song

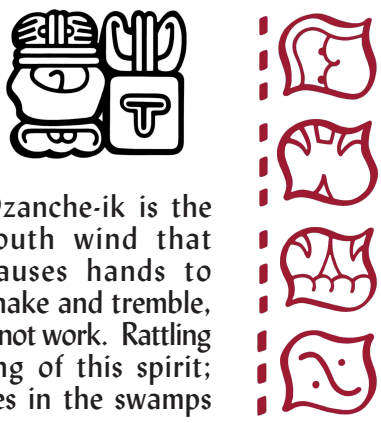


Coc-ik is the wind from the west that causes asthma and suffering in children; wheezing and whining is the heart-song of this spirit

ix-Holom-xal is the spirit that takes a woman's soul after childbirth, leaving her to waste away; shrieks in the far mountains is its song



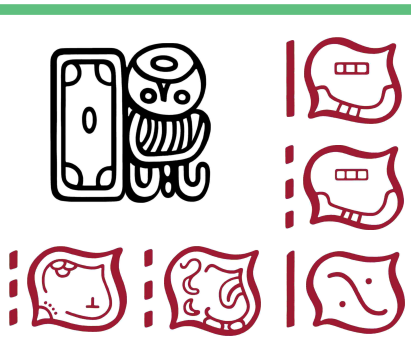
Buyul-tunik is the wind that brings spinning sickness into one's head and weakness into one's heart; the whirring of locust wings is this spirit's song,golden dust is left in its passing



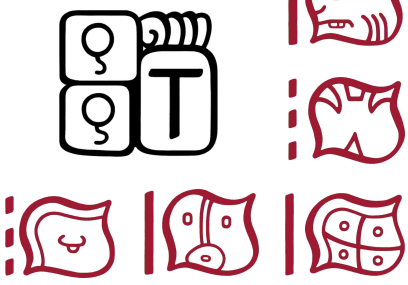
Dzanche-ik is the south wind that causes hands to shake and tremble, until a person cannot work. Rattling reeds is the song of this spirit; something moves in the swamps

Hommek-ik is the north wind that causes people to shiver until they die of weakness; clacking bones are the music of this spirit's song

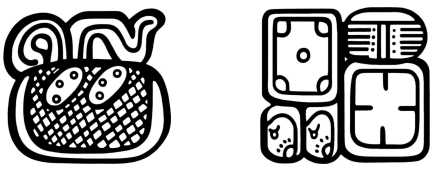
Kakaz-ik is the wind that makes the joints of men and women swell with terrible pain; the creaking of old knees is the song of this spirit's arrival



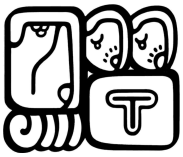
Kan-lacay is the bright-sky wind that brings yellow-faced sickness and death to children; the sizzling of water over embers is the song that makes this spirit dance



K'aak-c'u is the spirit that brushes people with its fingers and causes red and bleeding pustules; popping swamp bubbles make the music of this spirit's song. Swamp lights signal its arrival and departure, it is said

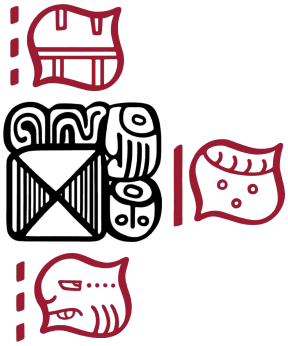


Kanpedzkin is the wasp-spirit that goes into the head of men and crazes them with pain; the punching of tanned hides is this spirit's chosen song



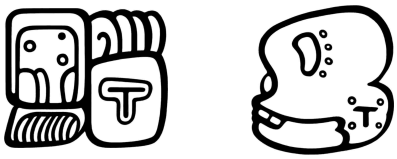
Kazap-ik is the powerful spirit that causes yellow pustules and blood-vomit and death; the song of this spirit sounds like rain on a fat round lilypad

Mawenel-ik is the wind that causes sleeplessness and weakness in old people, even unto death; hooting owls carry this spirit's murdering song and sing it when all fires die



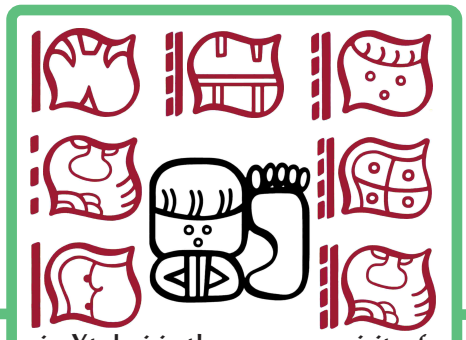
Nabal-noctenok is the fire worm that gets into teeth and causes great pain and sometimes sickness; the bouncing of rubber balls on stone is its song

Tancaz-ik is the wind from the south that causes seizures, diarrhea, fever and death in children; the slap of swamp water on old logs makes the music of this spirit's song

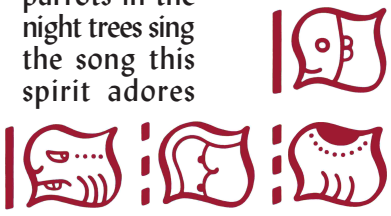


Xibi-ik is the wind from empty caves that causes terror in men and makes their hearts burst; only those who go into the jungle meet this spirit. Dripping stone rods make the music that is known for Xibi-ik; all his songs are sung deep in the darkness

Naktan-cocik is the spirit that sticks invisible thorns in people to cause pneumonia; its song is played by the wind that rattles no palm leaves and moves no dust

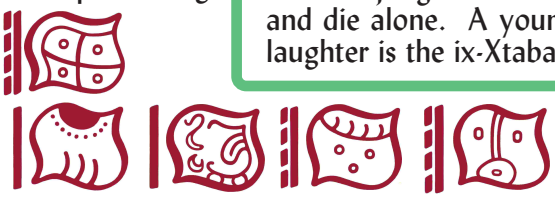


Uayak-tunik is the west wind that enters through ears and gives crazed visions and fever; macaws and parrots in the night trees sing the song this spirit adores



ix-Xtabai is the woman-spirit of an evil ceiba tree, whose kiss takes the life out of men; when her tree is young she leads boys into the jungle to become lost and die alone. A young girl's laughter is the ix-Xtabai's song

Yoom Kaaxob are the spirits of murdered children who go into the heads of people and make them kill. Marching ants make the pattering of this spirit's song



Zukuy-ik is the wind from the north that weakens the heart and causes death; cockroach scuttling is this spirit's song

Here they are, then, these wicked servants of ah-Puch, and now you will know their names and their signs when they come for you.