

Sprouts

This is the path Atlatla was seeking, when I was seven years old: that of the hunter. When we walked together in the village it was not the people he spoke of but the succulent birds, fat pacas, roast

deer. In his visits to our father's milpa he saw many animals, and he learned their names and became clever in their ways. Sometimes he would sit by hunters when they were cleaning their kills at the edge of the village, and from those men he learned where to spear the animals and how to clean them and prepare their meat. Our father made him a blowgun from cane, and Atlatla practiced shooting leaves and twigs and insects. Boys are not allowed to shoot birds or even snakes, nothing greater than insects, for boys do not know the ceremonies which must be said and the sacrifices which must be made when killing animals.

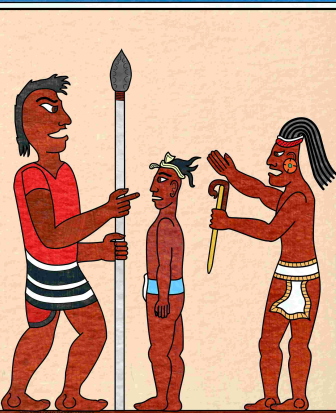
I had a blowgun, too; my father made me one when he made Atlatla's, but in my hands this object was not useful. Though I shot many pellets, little was struck by them, and after a few months I set my blowgun aside and did not use it again.

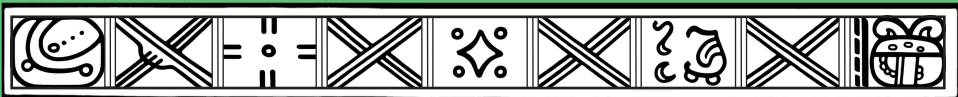
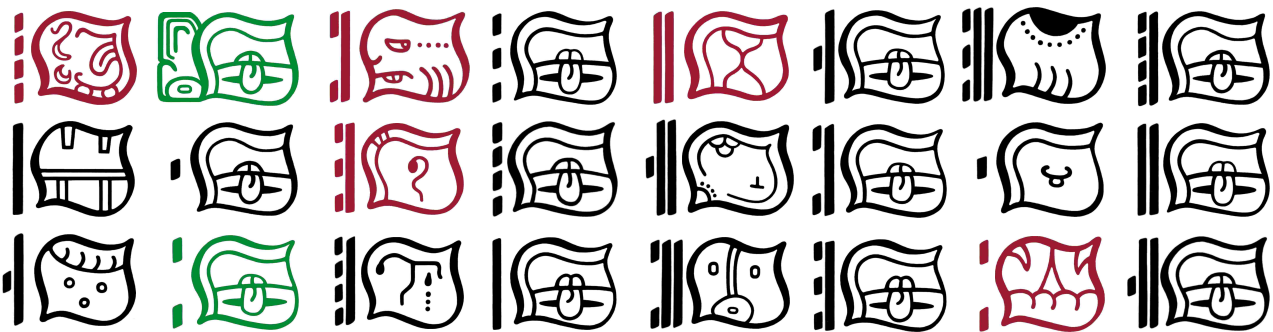
Atlatla was given a dart-thrower by our father, too, but good darts are difficult to make or expensive to buy, and he did not want to use it.

"I'll learn when I'm a hunter," he said.

"You won't walk far down that path, if you can't use an atl-atl," our father said. So my brother cut and carried twenty bundles of firewood to a craftsman who makes darts, and for this sweat he received ten darts that he shot at targets of reed in our lineage-compound. Only once did he aim his dart-thrower at a person, who was me. This was just after Father Sun showed his face and we were standing at the edge of the jungle looking for animals. Some hunters saw us, and one of them said,

"Hey, fool! You'll get a caning, if we see that again!" There were four hunters in that group, they all looked at Atlatla in an ugly way, and he coughed and pretended he was aiming at some leaves over my head. I had not seen him aiming at me, but after that I did not walk in front of him when he had his dart-thrower.





On the day 14 K'ayab 4 Imix the boy K'an Siit died of evil worms. They were in his brain, it was said, so his eyes were always bloody, and one day he slept and did not waken. He was nine when this happened, he was my brother's age. The priest could do nothing for him, and his family burned his body on a day of low, grey skies.

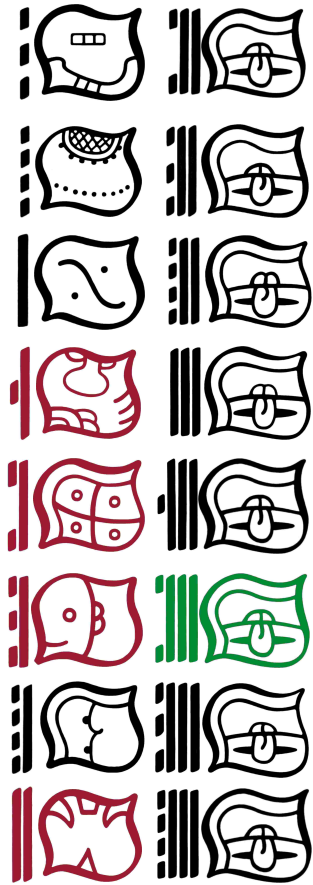
6 Sek 5 Etz'nab was the day Atlatla would have turned ten years old and declared to our lineage-father his desire to follow the path of the hunter. But on the day 4 Sotz' 9 Cib, twenty-two days before my brother's birthday, something happened to turn him away from that direction.

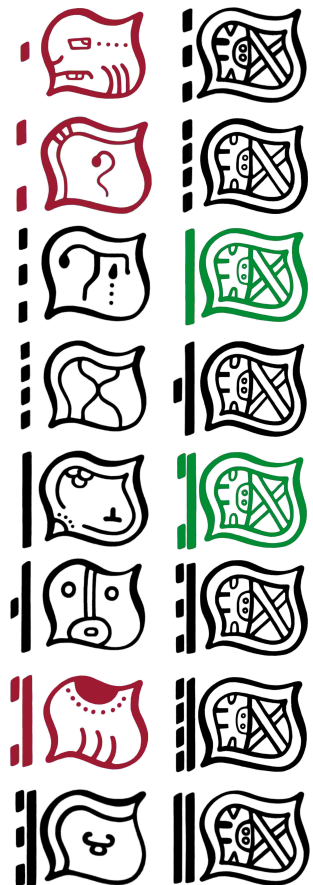
This was where the event occurred: in the hut of our father, after our evening meal. Father Sun was disappearing in the west, shadows were filling our village, and already I was on my sleeping bench and facing toward the wall. Atlatla came into our side of the hut, and I thought he was going to sleep early, too. I heard him breathing, behind me, and he made soft laughter, and my eyes were closing when I felt the heavy body of kuluch the giant cockroach fall onto my neck. Then his legs dug into my skin, and he ran up my neck and onto my face, and I screamed. I tried to knock kuluch off but only struck the wall and pushed myself off my sleeping bench.

It was then that the dirt embraced me, it was then that my head hit the wooden bench. This was the tearing of my scalp, the opening of the finger-long gash, there is blood splashing onto the bench and the floor. Great was the amount of blood, my neck and arms ran with it, it went down my face and chest in zigging stripes. My mother came to see what had happened and made a choking cry, and my father came as Atlatla's laughter dried up. And then my father's face became so purple that I forgot my own hurt and only stared at him. He whacked Atlatla with the back of his hand, the blow made a terrible sound, and my brother's nose and mouth broke open, and there was new blood on my father and Atlatla and my bench. Drops of his blood fell even onto me and kuluch, who was running very quickly away.

"What are you doing, fool?" cried our father, and it was not anger in his voice but fear that I heard. Then he shoved Atlatla so that he fell onto his own sleeping bench and lay gasping there.

My brother could not speak, he could only raise his hands in a weak





way, and our father said with his voice hoarse, “You and your brother are our lineage, son, you are the only ones, don’t you understand this?”

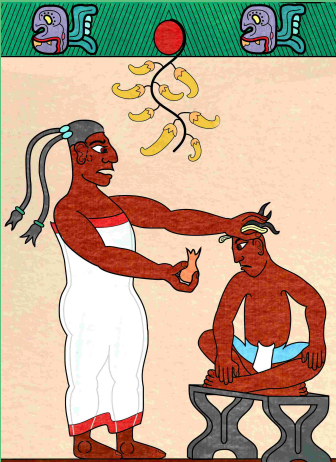
My brother began to weep, then, the tears mixed with the blood and streaked down his cheeks, and he just made little sounds in his throat.

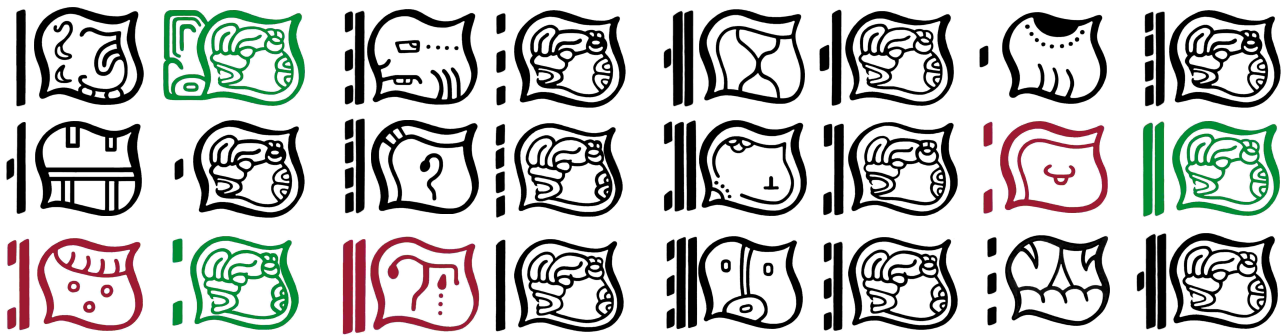
“Atlata,” our father said, and anger came into his voice, then. “Atlata CabCoh.” He walked in a little circle and then fell onto my brother so that the air burst from Atlata's lungs. And he pulled Atlata's head back by his hair and leaned toward him until their eyes were very close. “In twenty-two days you must choose a path, you must accept some responsibility,” said my father. “You will learn to act like a man, son, and not a fool. I must teach you, and you must learn.” He lay there on my brother for many heartbeats, breathing heavily, and Atlata closed his eyes and wept, and my head and my heart were aching, and suddenly I retched up everything I had eaten for dinner.

My father stood and said to my mother, “Get the wise-woman herbalist, pay her whatever she wants,” and this is what I remember, right before the darkness sucked me away: that my father caressed my head, he caressed my neck. He lifted me up with great care and said my name and wiped the stinking mess from my mouth with his hand. Then he sang a prayer for me, but I could not see him, my eyes were closing. It is my father's fear that I remember, it was his misery for our lineage and the curse that lay on us.

For thirteen days I was sick. It was poison in my blood that sickened me, the wise-woman told my father and mother; some wicked spirit had poisoned me when I was cut and weakened. Because I was only a boy the priest did not come, the wise-woman is strong enough for boys, and she bathed the rip in my head and sealed it with herb paste. During those days I often felt great heat in my body, and everything I looked at twisted this way and that. Sometimes Atlata's voice was there, but I cannot remember what he said. There was often the touch of my mother, and maybe my father squeezed me sometimes, but I cannot truly remember. The wise-woman came every day, sometimes more than once, to rub on more paste and give me small bundles of nasty herbs to eat.

On the ninth day of my sickness, as my intelligence was returning, my





mother did a strange thing. My father was out in the jungle, and Atlatla was staying in the hut of my father's oldest brother. I stood up to walk around a little and came out from behind the cane screen that closed off the part of my father's hut that was for Atlatla and me. My mother was cooking our dinner, and when she saw me, she set down her cooking spoon and looked at me for several heartbeats. I was very thin, and shivering from weakness, it was hard to walk or even stand. My mother reached into the darkness of the shelves where her feathers were kept in their little pots, and when she drew out her hand she held two long, green tail feathers from k'uk', the quetzal bird. Then she came to me, and I smelled her scent when she was near. I had never thought about this before, but my mother had her own scent that I knew and that brought me comfort in my fevering.

She looked down at me and stroked my face with the feathers, but I could not enjoy this pleasure because of the clouds that lay over her eyes.

"It is said that when a good person from the mountains dies, the flying quetzal lifts their soul to the garden of the gods." Then she smiled and stroked her own face with her feathers and raised them over her head, flying away. The strangeness in her voice frightened me, and I hugged her legs and said,

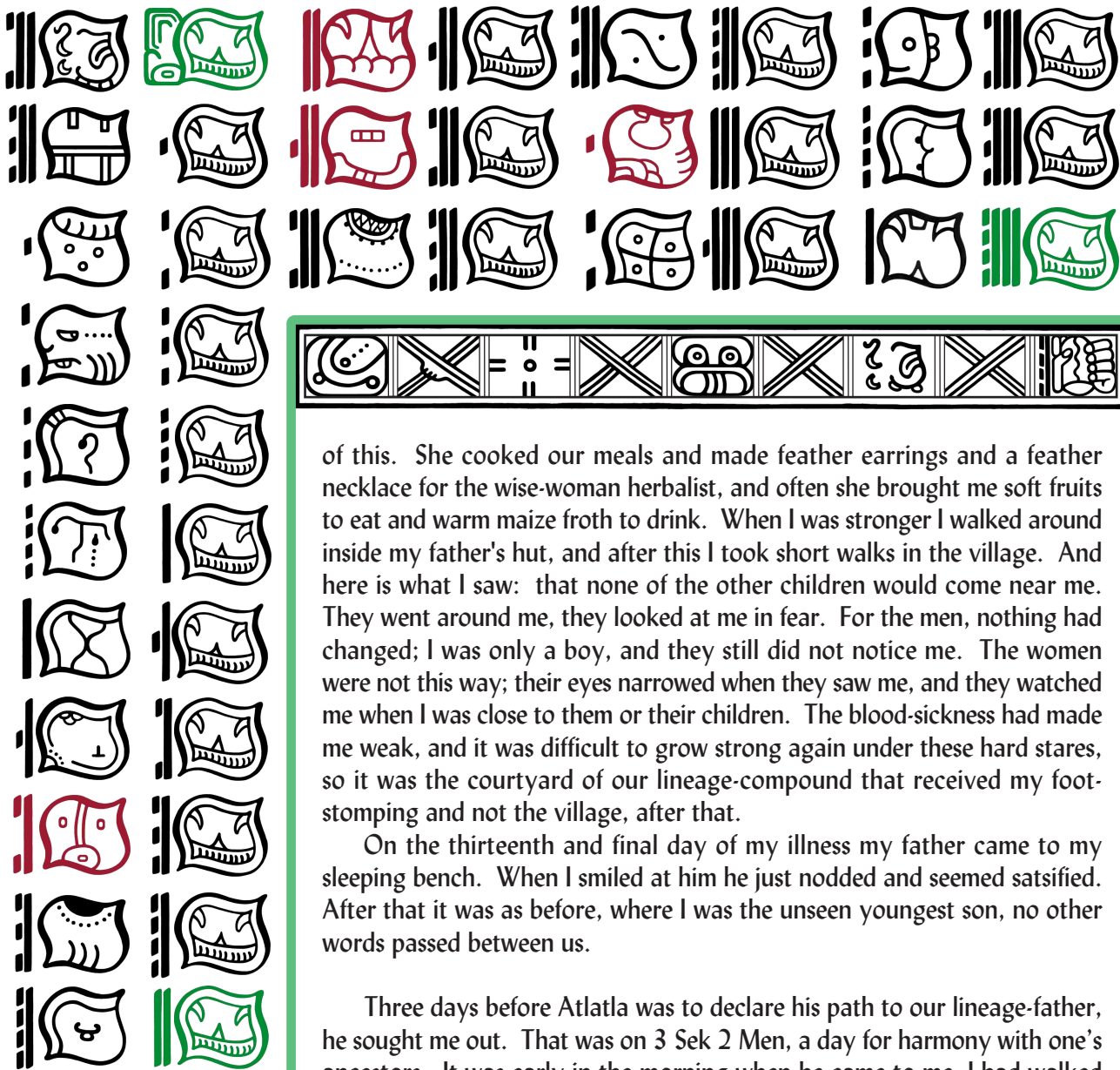
"Don't fly away, mother. Don't fly away."

She stroked my face with the feathers, again, the soft tips went even over my eyes, and then she lifted them up, flying away.

"Shhh," she said, and she let her arms sink down to her sides. I could see in her eyes that her spirit was far off, maybe in the mountains, maybe flying with the quetzals in the mists. I was afraid for her, because it is said that evil spirits can capture or kill the souls of people when they leave our bodies, but in my weakness all I could do was go back to my bench and lay down and sleep.

As I became sensible again, as the wise-woman drove out the blood-poison demon, I realized that almost nothing was being said in my father's hut, the voices were stilled. My father went into the jungle as always, and he did not return until late each evening. Atlatla was staying in the hut of my oldest uncle, as I have said, and my mother would tell me nothing more





of this. She cooked our meals and made feather earrings and a feather necklace for the wise-woman herbalist, and often she brought me soft fruits to eat and warm maize froth to drink. When I was stronger I walked around inside my father's hut, and after this I took short walks in the village. And here is what I saw: that none of the other children would come near me. They went around me, they looked at me in fear. For the men, nothing had changed; I was only a boy, and they still did not notice me. The women were not this way; their eyes narrowed when they saw me, and they watched me when I was close to them or their children. The blood-sickness had made me weak, and it was difficult to grow strong again under these hard stares, so it was the courtyard of our lineage-compound that received my foot-stomping and not the village, after that.

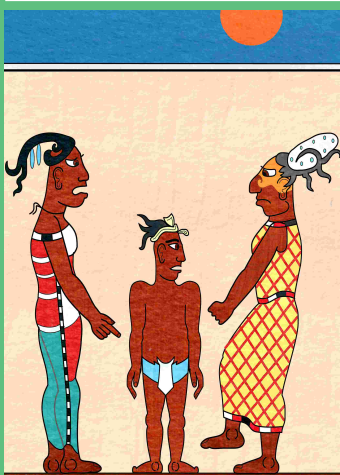
On the thirteenth and final day of my illness my father came to my sleeping bench. When I smiled at him he just nodded and seemed satisfied. After that it was as before, where I was the unseen youngest son, no other words passed between us.

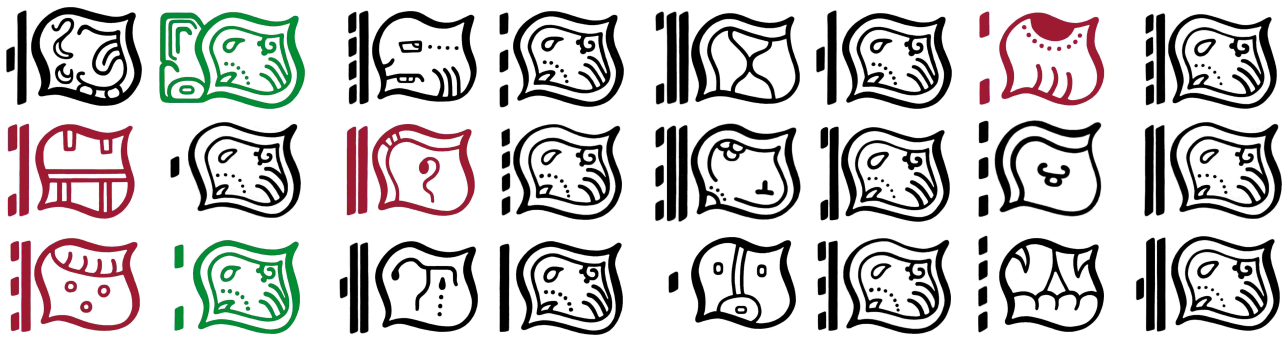
Three days before Atlatla was to declare his path to our lineage-father, he sought me out. That was on 3 Sek 2 Men, a day for harmony with one's ancestors. It was early in the morning when he came to me, I had walked to the east edge of the village and was waiting for Father Sun to rise and share his strength. Atlatla had not gone into the jungle with our father since the stupidity with kuluch, and I had not spoken with him for all those days, and when I saw him that morning he looked peaceful and content.

"Now, while there is no one to see us, I have some things to show you," he said. His voice was unusual, because he was talking quietly; my brother's voice has always been loud, and sharp. I felt nervous and did not want to hear what he would say, but he went around me and onto a path into the jungle, and slowly I followed after him.

"This is the way to our father's milpa," he said.

"I know that," I said. The path turned south, and there were cleared places on either side where fields were planted, and there were skinny trails that went off to other milpas. I had never been in the jungle and did not like it. The thick air smelled of rotting soil and too many plants and too





much rain without clean light. The trees and bushes were close, and many of them had thorns, and the vines brushed my skin like the fingers of vicious spirits. Father Sun was coming up, but in the trees it was only a short distance I could see. There were shadows behind the lit places, shadows beyond the trail, and I did not know many of the animal sounds I was hearing. Everywhere were ix-Ai's children, insects were on the plants and the trail and crawling on my feet and zuzzing around my ears. I wanted my blowgun, even if I couldn't hit anything with it, and I saw that my brother did not have his blowgun or his atl-atl, and I became very fearful.

"His milpa is off that way, on that path," Atlatla said to me after a time, and he pointed, but I could not have told that path from any other. "Here is his mark." And he showed me a sign on a tree where the path began.

"I didn't know our father had his own sign," I said.

"He paid the priest to teach him how to cut his name," Atlatla said.

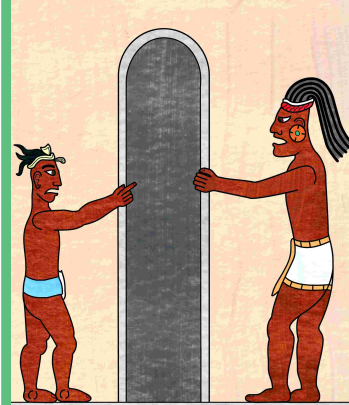
I had never heard this, and I looked again at the sign. It is such signs that name gods, and spirits, and heroes, and ancient places.

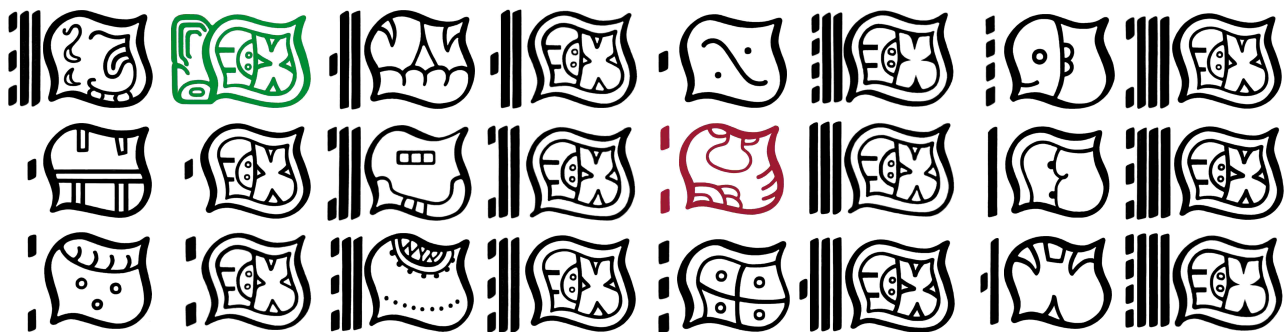
"What does the priest want, for such knowledge?" I said. It was my own name I wanted to learn, to cut this into wood or other objects, or write in blood or colored ink.

"Ask our father."

Then we left that place and turned on a side trail to the north. It seemed like a long time we were walking, but in truth I just didn't know the way and did not like being outside the guardian stones. We came to a road laid down in the jungle, a road of huge black stones that was partly covered with grass and weeds. Twenty paces wide is the heft of the road, twenty paces of a young boy. There was one spot where the road was a little wider, that was where the trail came out, and in the center of that wide place was a standing stone made of blackened rock that had once been white. The road was filled with Father Sun's glory, and I pushed past my brother to get out of the jungle and stand in the light. I was very tired from walking and had to put my hands on my knees and rest.

"That marker was carved by our ancestors, from the time of the city," my brother said. "Look." We walked up to the stone, and carved on the front and back were men. The rock had been chipped away so that the





pictures were higher than the rock around them. On one side was a man dressed in jaguar skins, and in his hand was a spear, and he wore a growling jaguar mask. Under his feet were crouched people, he stood on their backs, and their faces were full of unhappiness. There were picture-words on the stone, in rows and columns, and I touched these but could not understand them.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“Our forefathers, who do you think? The priest could read these words, but he would lie about what they say.”

“Why?”

“Now, look over here,” he said, and he went around the stone.

The picture on the other side was different: it was the same man dressed as a priest, and he stood beside a fire and tossed droplets of something into the flames. There were many picture-words, more than on the other side, but I could not understand those, either.

“See there,” my brother said, and he pointed above the trees. When I came next to him, this is what I saw: white stone gleaming above the swaying treetops. The trees of the jungle are taller than ten men, it is said that in places they are taller than twenty men, but the roof combs of the temples of our fathers stood above all of them. It was my heart I felt rising, then, like my mother's quetzal dreams, flying into the city. Here was that place my ancestors called Ch’ulwitznal, or Holy Mountain, and that people now called Kimitunnal, the Place of Dead Stones. It was the place of all the stories, the home of my ancestors; my oldest uncle could name men of our lineage from that place.

I had risen onto my toes to see better, and suddenly Atlatla pushed me hard so that I stumbled back. He no longer looked contented, and he said:

“I am going away.”

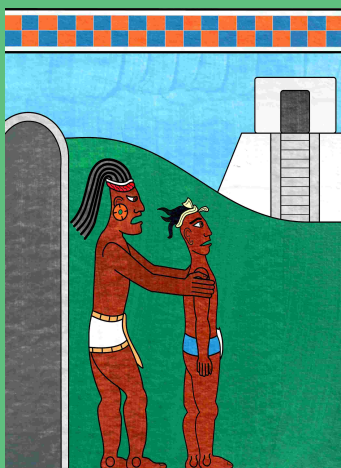
“What?” I said.

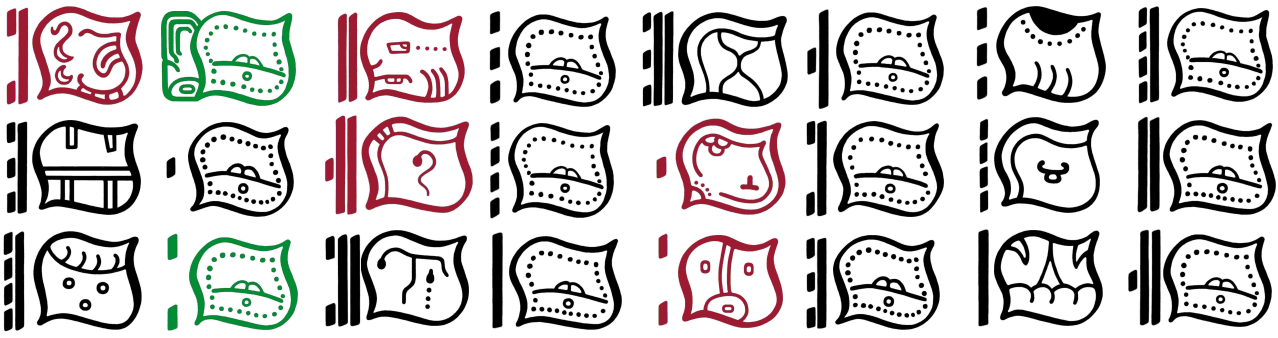
“I am going to Chacwitz. I’m going to live in our mother's village.”

“But—”

“I have told our lineage-father. The mat conversations are finished. Today I tell our father.”

I felt sickened to understand that I would be alone in our village. It was





the looks of the women I felt, their watching me with hardened eyes. "There is nothing for you in Chacwitz," I said. "Our family is here." "I am not staying here to be beaten every time our father is angry. I am not staying to watch the priest feed babies to crocodiles and people admire him for it."

"That is not how it is," I said.

"Hear me now, little brother, because no one else will tell you these things. Find a path of strength to walk in the village. I am leaving, and powerful men will be watching you. Many lineage-fathers hate our lineage. We remember the time of the cities, and they want to forget the cities. They are hoping we will die out, they are hoping we are the end of our family and our line. If you don't find a place of strength they will grind you down and devour you through little humiliations. This is why our father is fearful, he knows what they are thinking and cannot stop them."

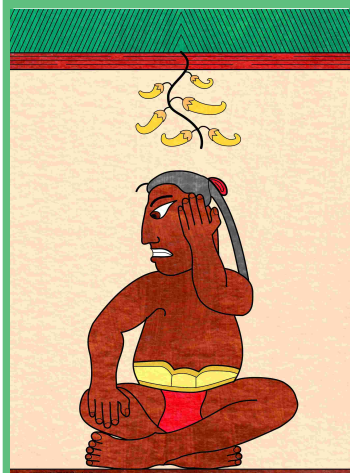
To these words I could say nothing. The men of power must answer to the gods as do all people, what could they do but wait and see what the gods decided for our lineage?

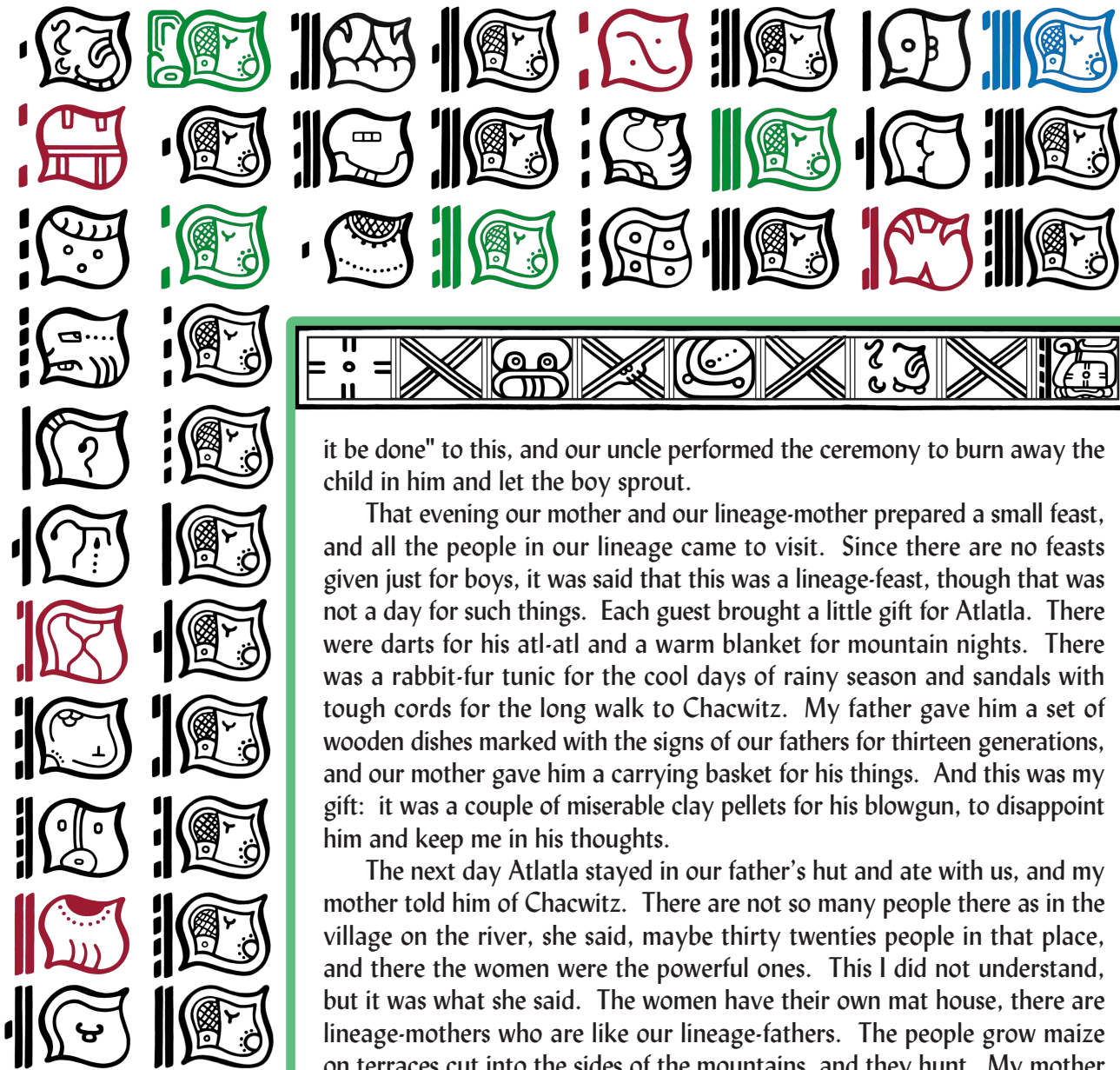
He put his hand on the back of my neck and squeezed until I felt limp, like a kitten in the mouth of its margay-mother.

"Find a path of strength," he said. Then he started walking swiftly down the black road, and I trotted behind him. Soon the stones turned into a trail that took us into the village behind the mat house. Father Sun had risen only a little way, but already his light poured into the village and breathed life into everything, and we returned to the hut of our father.

Later that day my mother took me with her to visit some bird hunters from howler monkey clan and barter for feathers while Atlatla and my father talked. When we came back, Atlatla had returned to the hut of our lineage-father, and his things were gone from our father's hut.

On the day 6 Sek 5 Etz'nab my brother declared his choice to our lineage-father and our father: he would go to Chacwitz and seek a path in that place. Our lineage-father said that a group of hunters was leaving for Chacwitz in two days, and Atlatla could go with them. That day was 8 Sek 7 Ahau, a good day for men and boys to do things. Atlatla said "Let



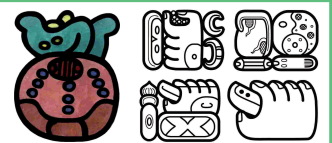
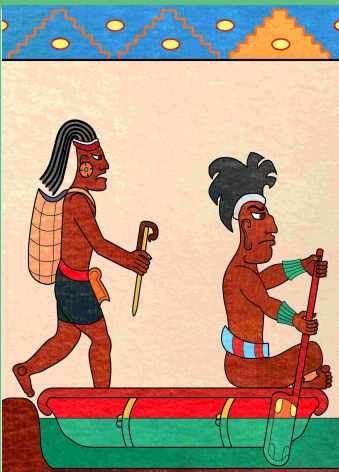


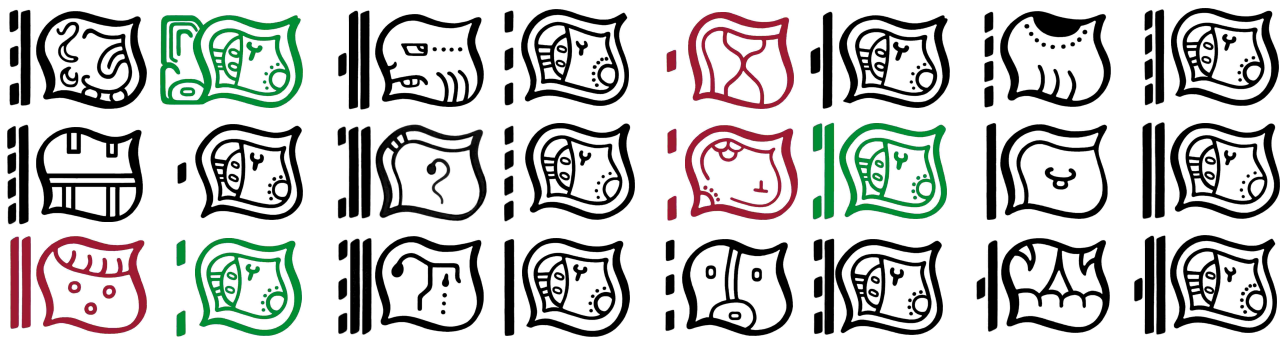
it be done" to this, and our uncle performed the ceremony to burn away the child in him and let the boy sprout.

That evening our mother and our lineage-mother prepared a small feast, and all the people in our lineage came to visit. Since there are no feasts given just for boys, it was said that this was a lineage-feast, though that was not a day for such things. Each guest brought a little gift for Atlatla. There were darts for his atl-atl and a warm blanket for mountain nights. There was a rabbit-fur tunic for the cool days of rainy season and sandals with tough cords for the long walk to Chacwitz. My father gave him a set of wooden dishes marked with the signs of our fathers for thirteen generations, and our mother gave him a carrying basket for his things. And this was my gift: it was a couple of miserable clay pellets for his blowgun, to disappoint him and keep me in his thoughts.

The next day Atlatla stayed in our father's hut and ate with us, and my mother told him of Chacwitz. There are not so many people there as in the village on the river, she said, maybe thirty twenties people in that place, and there the women were the powerful ones. This I did not understand, but it was what she said. The women have their own mat house, there are lineage-mothers who are like our lineage-fathers. The people grow maize on terraces cut into the sides of the mountains, and they hunt. My mother told him the name of her lineage, and she thought her family would give him a place to stay. Our father told him to send blades, for there is fine obsidian in the mountains, and my mother asked for feathers, especially from the quetzal. My brother said he would send these things if he could. It was a strange day of talk, Atlatla was acting like a man and not a boy. That beating from our father was a great amount of heat, and it ripened him very quickly. All these things I thought but did not say. It was resentment I was feeling, so I asked him for nothing from the mountains. Perhaps he saw this, for he turned from me and did not say any words at all. In the evening he and our father went into the village to visit other people in howler monkey clan, and I was asleep when they returned.

On 8 Sek 7 Ahau we rose very early, and my mother made a huge breakfast and fed us. When the hunters came, Atlatla took up his carrying basket and spear-thrower.





"Dream of me," he said, and my mother nodded, and I saw that her spirit was far away.

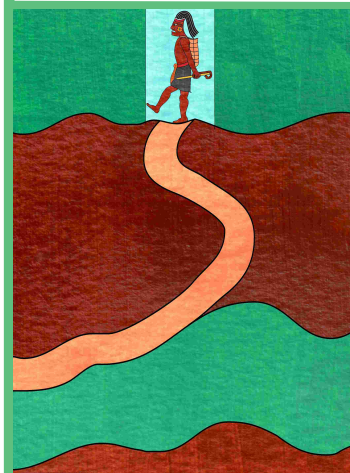
"Watch for kan-koch, that damned snake is everywhere," our father said, and he squeezed my brother's shoulder. This was my father's face: it was sorrow that was there, his eyes were sunken like a sick man's.

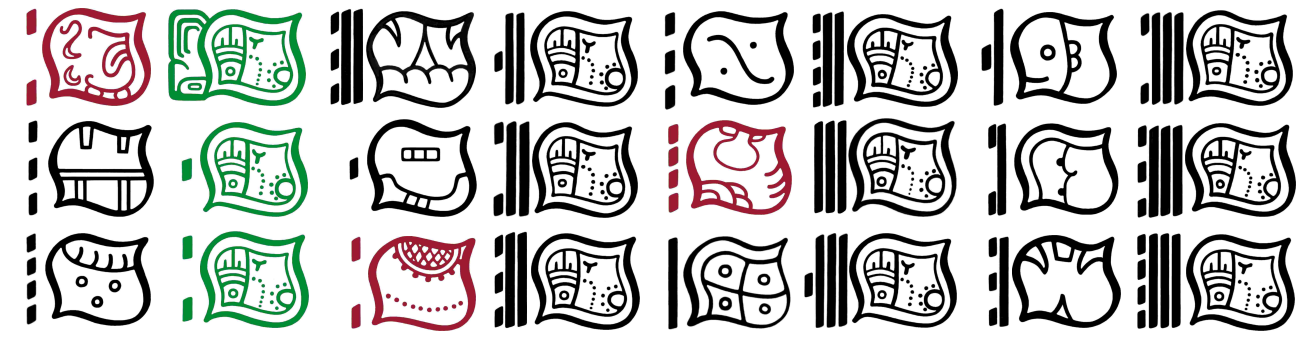
Then my brother glanced at me, and his eyes narrowed, and I thought of his bitter words at the standing stone. Maybe things would be better for him in Chacwitz. Maybe away from our lineage curse he would find contentment. "Good-bye, Atlatla," was all I could say.

"Go," said the oldest hunter, and they walked away, toward the west. They had to canoe across the river, and then it was three days walking through the jungle and into the mountains to reach Chacwitz. My brother's dart-thrower was the last I saw of him as he went away.

During this time of troubles in my father's house one of my cousins married, this was the oldest daughter of my father's older brother. This girl was pleasant and strong in her health but was not a good weaver, and everyone knew she was not very intelligent. That was an arranged marriage to a man in the Ektun Sotz' lineage, which is powerful. He was also not very intelligent but was not cruel, and so the parents just arranged everything. That young man had to work in our lineage's fields and orchards for three years, and his family gave gifts of obsidian blades, chilis, woven clothing, and cacao, as well. The marriage ceremony was in the Ektun Sotz' lineage compound and was pleasant, but in truth I thought only about my brother's going away and was not very attentive to the marriage. Once this cousin married she was taken from our lineage and passed out of my life forever.

On the day 0 Yaxk'in 13 K'awil, the woman Ha' Na died in childbirth, and her infant died not long after. The priest and the wise-woman herbalist fought for her, they fought the spirits that came to take her, but there were too many, too strong. Her body was burned in her lineage-compound, and her family gave many sacrifices to their ancestors and the gods and the goddesses to see her soul to the garden of the gods. The priest read the signs and said that her soul had not arrived there, the spirits had probably





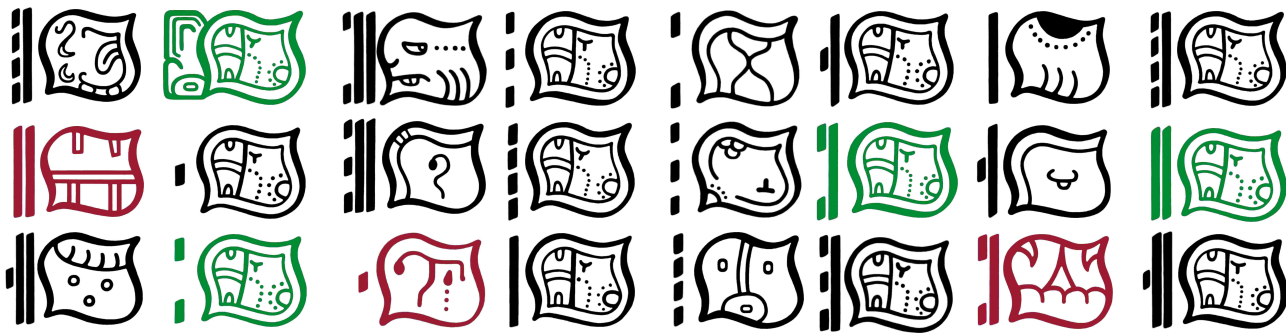
seized it, but it is difficult to know these things for certain because ah-Puch is a liar who can foul the signs of other gods. Other people said Ha' Na was definitely in ah-Puch's palace in the underworld, because the child that killed her was not by her husband, but these were only ugly words, no one knew for certain.

Once Atlatla was gone my father did not speak of him unless my mother spoke of him first. Then he said a few words like, "I hope he is fighting with your father and making him miserable," or, "Maybe they can teach him to shoot darts, up there." In spite of these words he began to drink many gourds of balche-wine and stayed out in the jungle until late in the evenings. He embraced two work-sons from other lineages in howler monkey clan and taught them the ways of trees and wood, and their fathers paid for this teaching with fine cigars and blistering chili paste. In the mornings my father went out to work his milpa, and in the heat of the day he returned for sleep and wine and my mother's food. Many afternoons he just sat on the stump in front of our hut, drinking wine and looking toward the mountains. After the hottest part of the day was over his work-sons came, and they went into the jungle.

Because my father worked hard and took two work-sons, he could buy many lush feathers for my mother, and she made new cuffs for him, for the holy days. These were the colors of the cuffs: crisp yellow feathers for my father's ripeness, thick red feathers for his old lineage and his man's heat, fluffy black feathers for the spirits of our ancestors, and two small green feathers for Atlatla and me. These things my mother said to me as she worked, as her fingers brought together the feathers and stitched and knotted colored threads to hold them. All her feathers were symbols, every color had its signs and portents. I do not know why my mother gave me this knowledge, I never asked for such understanding. Maybe she felt the hush that wrapped around me after my brother went to the mountains, and her words were to brush some of it away.

Two was the number of kinds of silence that tried to smother me once my brother was gone: there was the silence of no one to speak to about boy's matters, and there was the silence of the people of the village on the



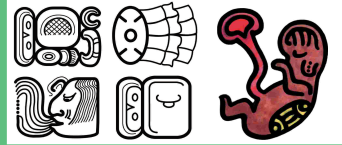
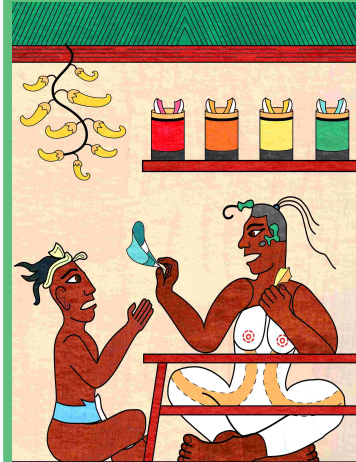
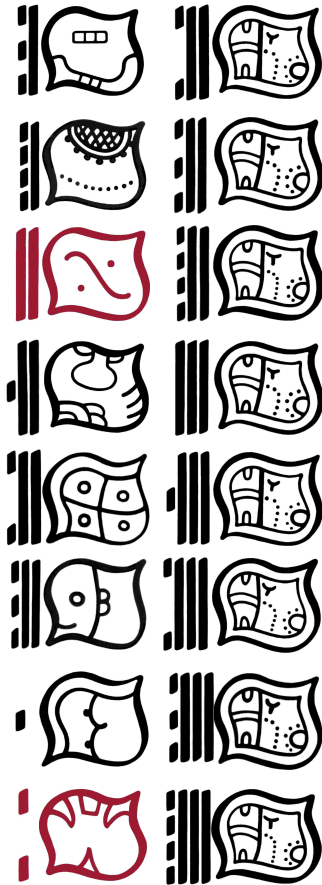


river. Sometimes my mother tried to talk with me about boy's concerns, but because she knew nothing, I could not converse with her. After this she spoke instead of feathers, and she told me little stories of talking animals and jungle monsters and other interesting things. Her words drove away great boredom, and even though she merely spoke and I merely listened, each tiny bit of new knowledge fed me for another few days.

Much uglier was the quiet judgement of the people outside our lineage. The hardness of their eyes and the closing-snap of their mouths pushed me away, this began when I came near and ended only when I was leaving. It was because Atlatla went away in such a strange manner that people were speaking of our lineage again, it had been years since a boy went to the mountains, by himself. When people poured their silence against me, I could not open my own mouth for fear I would drown. Even children acted like this, certainly it was their mothers who taught them, small children like myself learned to drown me in this way. Walking in the village remained very painful, and I only went to watch Father Sun rise or set.

My seventh birthday came, but instead of being pleased I lay sweating all that night because I thought the silence would strangle me. I could no longer hear myself in my head and could no longer raise my voice in the world. Many days I went to the huts of my father's brothers, with their wives and unmarried daughters, to hear their talk. But those girls were too old, they were seeking husbands and did not much speak with me, and my father's brothers were men with many burdens who only said small things to me sometimes. All I could do was sit and listen to their conversations. Sometimes my aunts would ask little questions about my days, and I would gasp for air and startle them, before I spoke. I know they talked with my mother, but I do not know what was said. I was never welcome for women's talk.

On the day 6 Keh 2 Etz'nab ah-Puch's demon-servants tried to murder me. It was my weakness that drew them, such spirits always know where their teeth will sink deepest. That evening a baby was stillborn, and the cries of the family's grief came out of their hut into the village. Their wails were very loud in my ears, and I walked away from the sounds of the grieving people, all the way to the eastern side of the village and the path toward the





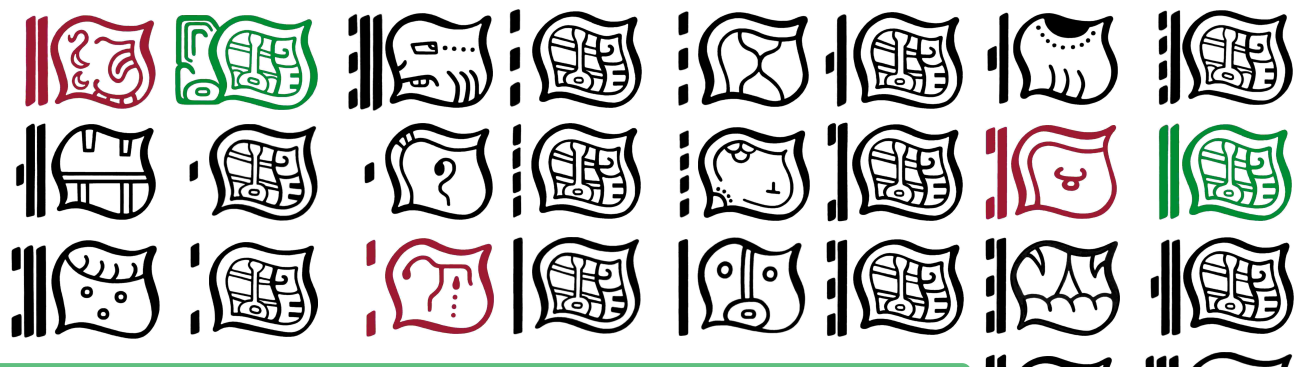
city of my fathers. Even there the weeping seemed loud, and I stepped past the east acantun and onto the jungle trail. My back was to my people, and there was a new rustling sound from fallen leaves in the jungle not far away. It was cabcoh, I thought, a kinkajou was eating a fruit, and I decided to go a little way and see her.

These were the sounds I heard when I went closer: heavy padding on leaves, and a squeaking noise. These are not the sounds of cabcoh, and I took only one step toward them, off the path. In a hollow place between bushes were shapes moving, but I could not see them clearly. Then a puff of wind came from the west and opened the leaves, everything was revealed.

And this is what I saw: it was balam the jaguar, with his hair the color of Father Sun, and he was thin and wet and miserable-looking, and his eyes were shot with blood and weepy with pus. And on his back was camazotz the death bat, the blood-sucker, clinging to his fur and tearing at his neck with its teeth. Blood was on balam's shoulder and soaking down his leg, camazotz was feasting on him. Then those two realized I was there, they both looked at me. These were the eyes of camazotz: tiny and red and evil. His nose looked crushed, his ears were crinkled and hairless, his mouth was a blooded snarl. And these were the eyes of balam: green and full of pain. It was his breathing I heard, wheezing and ragged, he could not save himself from ah-Puch's servant. In my own weakness I did nothing, I did not know words to drive away camazotz, nor did I have any useful strength. Balam closed his eyes, and his legs folded, and he fell onto the earth. And camazotz shook its head and gaped, I heard its squeaking laughter, and I fled that place before it came for me.

I told no one of this disgusting thing I had seen, I could not say I had been outside the village. When I awoke the next day I thought someone would be talking about it, surely hunters had found dead balam when they went into the jungle. But nothing was said, no one talked of such a thing. Later that day I went back to the bushes, but there was nothing there. I feared the blood-sickness was coming back and bringing fever-dreams, and I rested that day and the next day. After that there was mercy from the gods and the goddesses, and no new horrors were revealed to me.





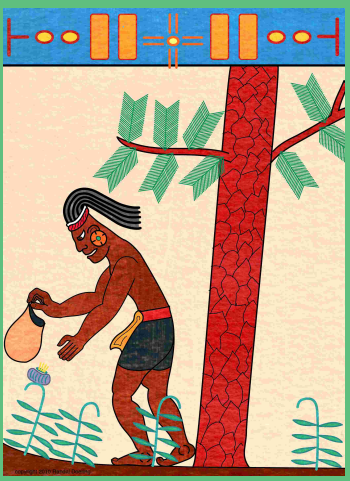
The lords of time are marching, now, each carries the burden of days and sets it down, and their brother or sister takes it up and carries it on. I did not go outside the village again but stayed inside the acantuns and learned to walk without my brother, learned to survive on the words of my mother and my father and my father's brothers and their families. Many times I dreamed of what I had seen at the acantun, and when I heard men talking of balam or camazotz I listened for knowledge but heard nothing to explain what I had seen.

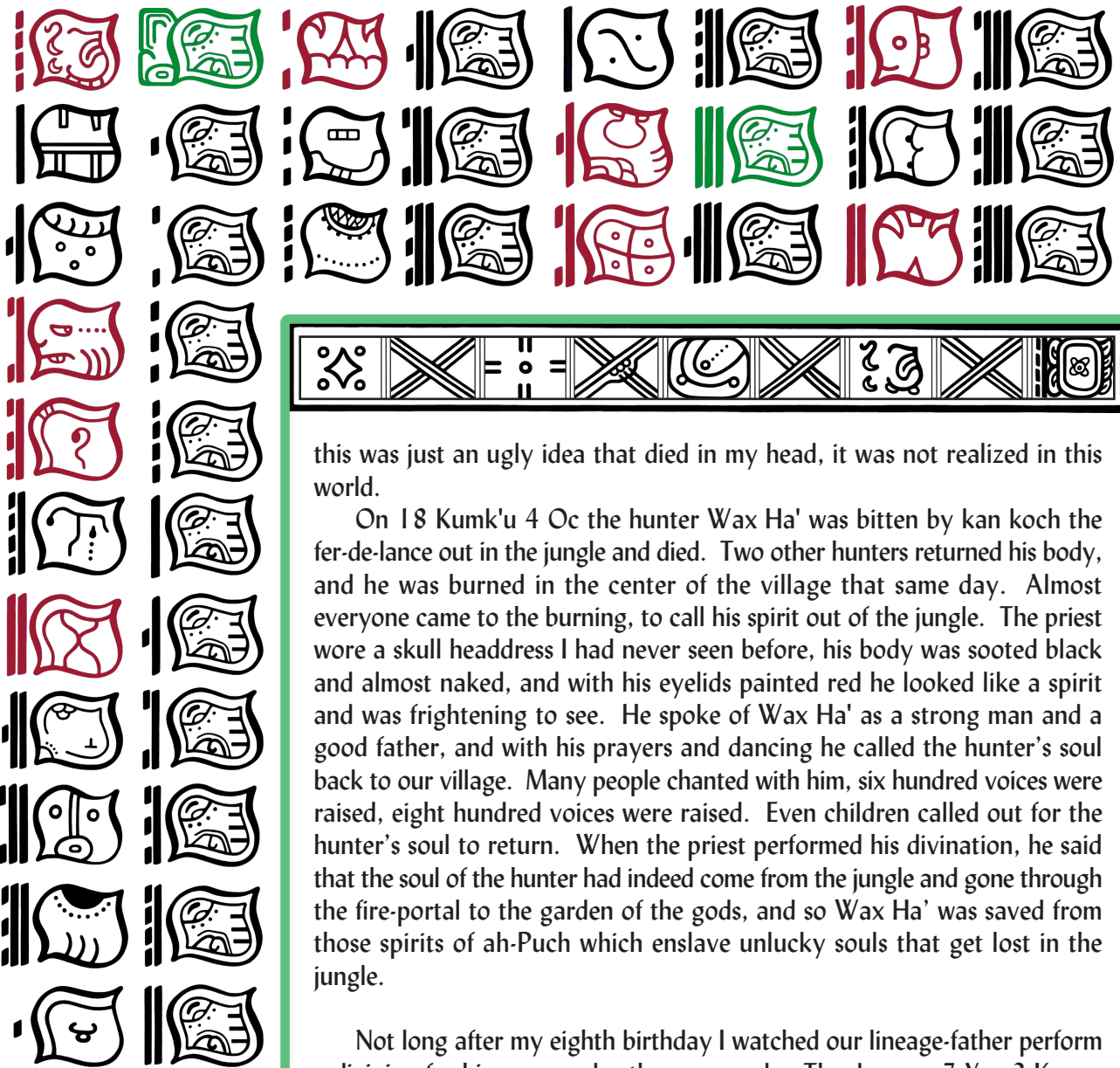
On 9 K'ank'in 6 Imix the child Yax Um died of running sores and fever. She was seven, this was a pretty-faced girl who smiled even at me and my brother when everyone else pretended not to see us. She liked to put pale blue flowers in her hair and was always pleasant and cheerful. Her body was burned in the courtyard of her lineage, and though only her own people were there, her ashes rose above us all. My mother and father said little about this, but I grieved for her and her flowers.

When Atlatla had been away for half a year, some traders from Chacwitz brought word of him. He had been given a place in my mother's family and had sought the path of a treeclimber, one of those who ascends fruit trees and brings back the sweetest and ripest fruits. Each village has its own orchards for fruit, but there are also wild fruits in the jungle, and many people desire their different taste. There were no words for why he left the hunter's path and sought this new way. He sent things, four obsidian blades for my father and four quetzal feathers for my mother. For me he sent a strange thing, a tiny feather-bundle that smelled of old moss and dead frogs.

"It is a charm," my mother said. "It drives away evil winds and envy."
"It will drive everyone away, with that stink," my father said, and his hut was filled with laughter for the first time since my brother went away.

When the traders left our village, we sent things with them for Atlatla: good valley tobacco and darts from my father, warm clothing from my mother, and from me a small sandal I made, to show him I was seeking a strong path. In truth it was a whistle I wanted to send him, a whistle with no holes or reed, to demonstrate for him the silence he had left for me, but





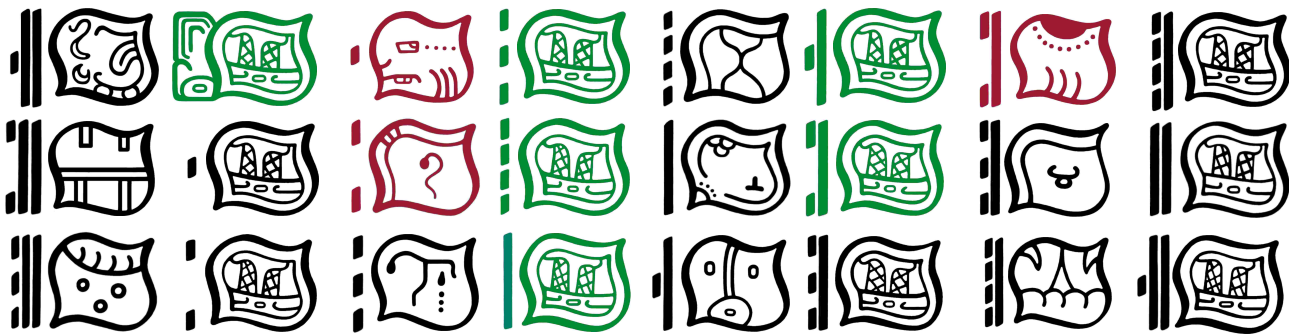
this was just an ugly idea that died in my head, it was not realized in this world.

On 18 Kumk'u 4 Oc the hunter Wax Ha' was bitten by kan koch the fer-de-lance out in the jungle and died. Two other hunters returned his body, and he was burned in the center of the village that same day. Almost everyone came to the burning, to call his spirit out of the jungle. The priest wore a skull headdress I had never seen before, his body was sooted black and almost naked, and with his eyelids painted red he looked like a spirit and was frightening to see. He spoke of Wax Ha' as a strong man and a good father, and with his prayers and dancing he called the hunter's soul back to our village. Many people chanted with him, six hundred voices were raised, eight hundred voices were raised. Even children called out for the hunter's soul to return. When the priest performed his divination, he said that the soul of the hunter had indeed come from the jungle and gone through the fire-portal to the garden of the gods, and so Wax Ha' was saved from those spirits of ah-Puch which enslave unlucky souls that get lost in the jungle.

Not long after my eighth birthday I watched our lineage-father perform a divining for his younger brother, my uncle. The day was 7 Yax 3 Kan, a day for ripening and thinking about fields and orchards. The divination was in our lineage-courtyard, next to our ancestors' shrine, and I was allowed to watch. My oldest uncle set down his little divining table and covered it with a cloth, and then he sat cross-legged facing north, the direction of wisdom. His brother sat across the table from him and set a pouch of tobacco on the table, it was a little sacrifice for the fires, and then he leaned forward and quietly whispered a question into our lineage-father's ear. Our lineage-father brought forth his pouch of seeds and light-stones, and he touched this to the four sides of the table and to the center, and there were words he said, but I could not hear them because he only murmured. After this he said:

"There is a question of fields for this man, for this sprout of our lineage: would a second orchard be as rewarding as the first? I ask this in the name of our fathers who planted our fields, I ask this in the name of our fathers who planted our orchards, I ask on this day of choosing wise paths."





He looked east and said, "I call red crackling-lightning from the fire in the east."

And he turned west and said, "I call black forked-lightning from the darkness in the west."

And he faced north: "I call white bolt-lightning from the northern storms."

And he made a motion of throwing something over his shoulder and said, "I call yellow sheet-lightning from the swamps of the south."

Finally he touched his own chest and said, "I call green blood-lightning from inside my own heart, to guide me to an answer."

Then he opened his pouch and poured from it a handful of dried red seeds and small light-stones of the kind that are sometimes found in the river or traded from Chacwitz. He mixed the seeds and light-stones and said a prayer, and then he made little piles of seeds and counted the days: "Four Chicchan, five Cimi, six Manik..."

I understood that he was counting the holy days forward, one day for each pile of seeds. And when all the seeds were in piles he said, "Lord Caban, this is your year, this is your question, what is your word?" He waited for a time, and then he grunted as though agreeing with someone.

He poured more seeds from the bag, and he counted, and he repeated, "Lord Caban, this is your year, this is your question, what is your word?"

For a long time he closed his eyes. Then he said,

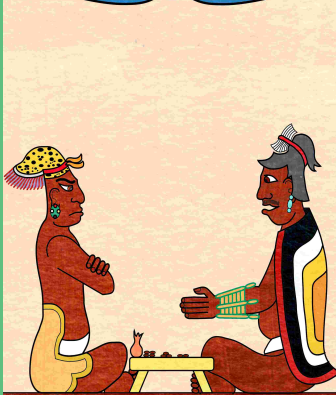
"Here are the words of the divining: if planted now, a second orchard will be weak and troublesome for three years. After that it will be generous."

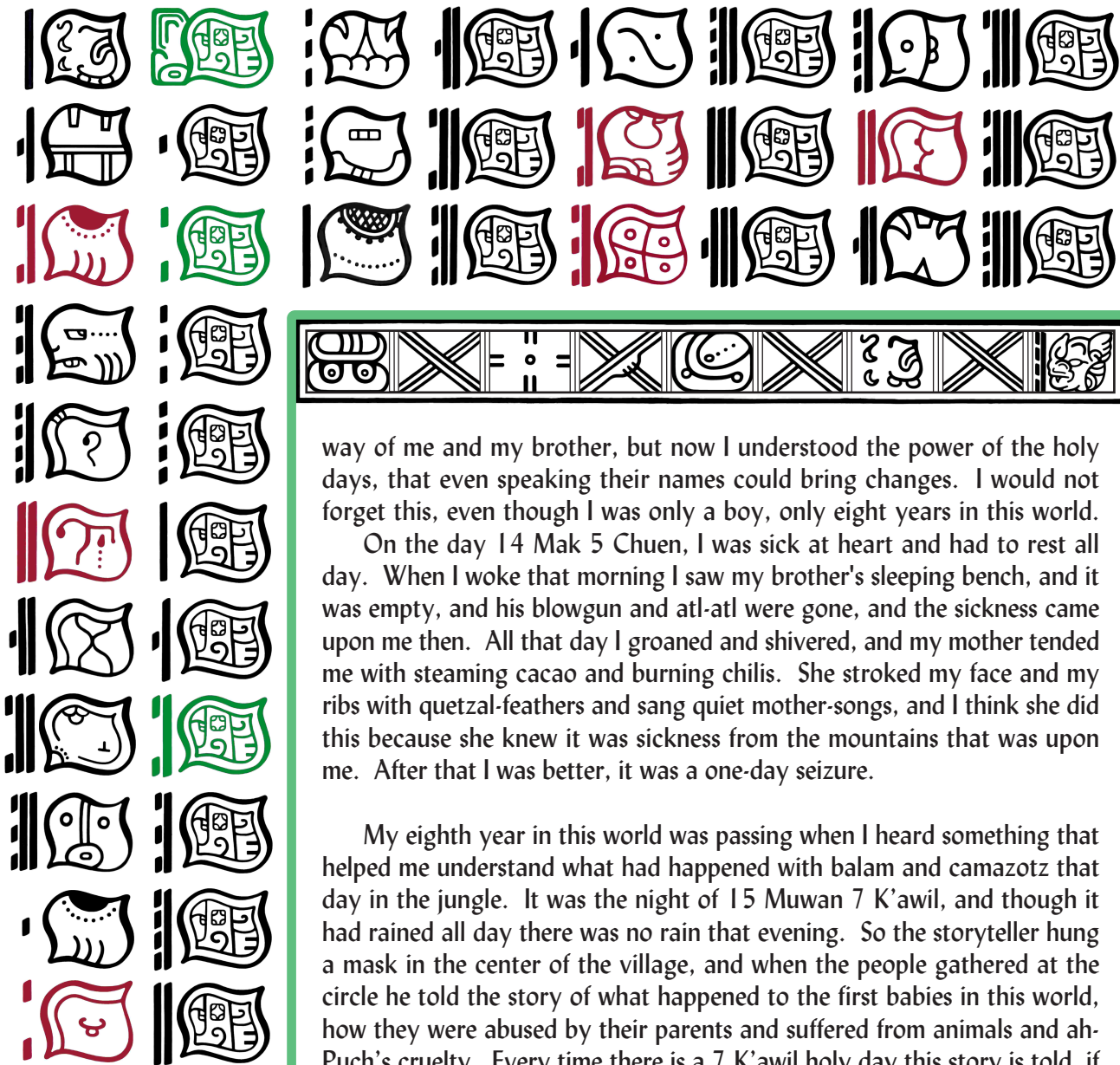
His younger brother demanded another divining, but it was done, the answer was given. My uncle stood and left his older brother in anger, it was clear he wanted to plant immediately and not wait.

My lineage-father put away his seeds and saw then that I was mouthing the words he had said, I was naming the holy days, and there were strange tingles in my legs and my face. He dropped his pouch of seeds and came quickly to me and clapped his hand on my mouth.

"Never," he said, with strong fire in his eyes. "There is much training first, never call the earth lords and spirits without such training. Don't tell me you are as foolish as your brother, doing without thinking."

Those words stung very hard, I was shamed that my uncle thought this





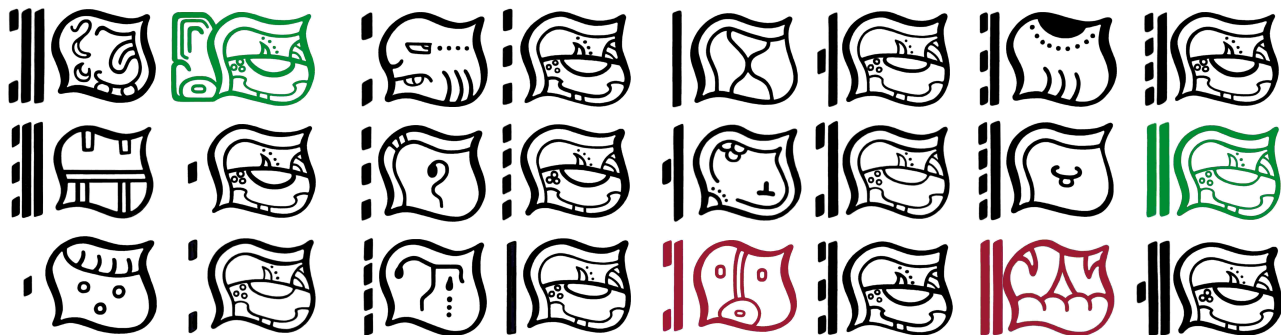
way of me and my brother, but now I understood the power of the holy days, that even speaking their names could bring changes. I would not forget this, even though I was only a boy, only eight years in this world.

On the day 14 Mak 5 Chuen, I was sick at heart and had to rest all day. When I woke that morning I saw my brother's sleeping bench, and it was empty, and his blowgun and atl-atl were gone, and the sickness came upon me then. All that day I groaned and shivered, and my mother tended me with steaming cacao and burning chilis. She stroked my face and my ribs with quetzal-feathers and sang quiet mother-songs, and I think she did this because she knew it was sickness from the mountains that was upon me. After that I was better, it was a one-day seizure.

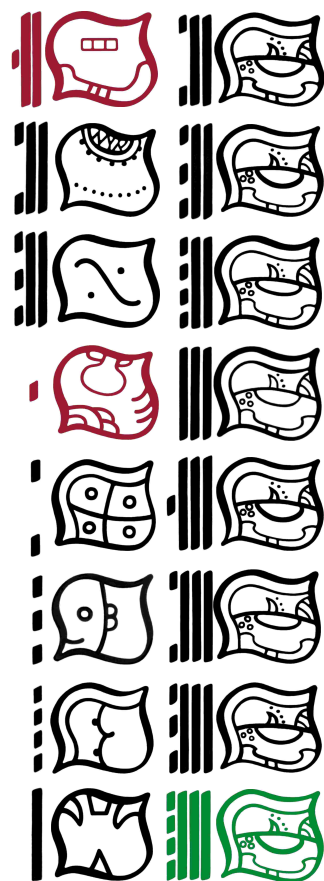
My eighth year in this world was passing when I heard something that helped me understand what had happened with balam and camazotz that day in the jungle. It was the night of 15 Muwan 7 K'awil, and though it had rained all day there was no rain that evening. So the storyteller hung a mask in the center of the village, and when the people gathered at the circle he told the story of what happened to the first babies in this world, how they were abused by their parents and suffered from animals and ah-Puch's cruelty. Every time there is a 7 K'awil holy day this story is told, if there is no rain, and I had heard it several times before. But that day the words truly came into me, and I listened to the storyteller as he spoke of how balam the jaguar sometimes serves his father ah-Puch and carries out his wickedness in this world. Sometimes, however, balam chooses to serve Father Sun, and so he is punished by ah-Puch.

It must have been such a punishment I had seen that day at the east acantun. The death bat is always ah-Puch's servant, and it was sent to murder that jaguar for refusing to serve the night. There was no dead body because ah-Puch took it, to mock and abuse in the underworld. Though I understood this, I was fearful that I was shown such a thing, that there was a west wind to open the branches and show me this foulness. The west is ah-Puch's direction, he or his servants wanted me to see this punishment. I did not know why they wanted me to see, but it could not be a good reason, it was wickedness they were planning for me.





The thin laughter of camazotz squealed in my dreams many nights after that; I slept poorly and woke fearful and prayed often to Father Sun and Mother Moon and my ancestors for protection. During this time I remembered the charm my brother sent, I had buried it in my lineage-father's courtyard because it stank so much, but after these dreams I thought that somehow my brother knew I would be afflicted and had sent the pouch to ease my sleep. And it is true that once I began to wear it around my neck these evil dreams ceased, and in their place came a sadness because Atlatla was thinking of me but was so far away. That hollowness was not so terrible, because it reminded me of him, and it was far better than the laughter of camazotz and the ugliness of the killing of the jaguar.





Here is the sign of ah-Puch, lord of evils, he who flings out disease and madness and revels in suffering. In the beginning, it is said, there were three great gods born from plumeria flowers; this was in the darkness before the creation. ah-Puch was the third of these, he is the younger twin of Father Sun and was born from the black plumeria flower. The night is ah-Puch's home, his palace is in Xibalbe, the first and lowest of worlds in the order of creation, and to reach it one must go west through the mountains and down the blood river. His world is one of sickly swamps and is filled with the broken spirits of criminals and the unlucky and the insane, who are his worshippers and his servants. Death days are his holy days, and blood and copal incense in large amounts are his sacrificial gifts. Only Father Sun is stronger, all other gods must bow to ah-Puch except Mother Moon, who is a better dancer and thus does not have to respect him. The spirit companions of ah-Puch are many, the bone serpent Sak-Bakan is first among these. So here, too, is the sign of this wicked spirit; where badly-shed blood and wickedness and old bones are found, Sak-Bakan comes into our world.



There are nine children of ah-Puch, they are powerful lords in their own right, and each has a realm in Xibalbe. Each night a different lord walks our world and does harm to anyone who is not protected. This symbol is the sign of the nine, "bolon-tiku", it does not identify any one of them but all of them together, when they are sitting in their father's house feasting and planning evil. Learn their names and their signs, and fear them always.



ix-Ha'ich is the oldest and strongest of the nine lords, she is ah-Puch's oldest daughter and sometimes lover. Her name means "Watery Eye", and her animal spirit is the red-eyed cormorant. Her way is death by mysterious circumstances, rumors and evil talk surround her. Frightened gasps are the introduction to this goddess. Swamp lights are the sign of her presence. On evil-numbered water days she is given sweet perfumes and copal incense, to please her.

ah-Kaachikbak is next in strength, he is ah-Puch's oldest son and is called "Bone Snapper." The praying mantis is his animal spirit. His way is falling stones that shatter, the flood that pulverizes, the splintering tree that mangles. Bodily destruction is his realm, no one can bear to look upon those he has claimed. Cracking ribs are his laughter. On the evil-numbered bone days he is given broken animal skulls and smoking copal incense.



ah-K'iiik'ts'ay is "Bloody Fang," lord of teeth and claws. A puma is his animal spirit, it is crouching on the branch above you. When the serpent bites, when the peccary slashes, when the jaguar rips, these are the signs of Bloody Fang. Tearing skin and muscles is the sound of his pleasure, the snapping of tendons is his joy. On evil-numbered animal days this lord is given fine spear heads and arrow points and darts to show the respect of the people.



ah-Kak is known as “Pus Wound” or “The Burning One.” Death by pustules and rotting sores is the way of the oozing lord, immediate burning is what waits for those he corrupts. A blind, white slug is his animal spirit. Gurgling mucus is the sound of his amusement, liquid filth is the trail he leaves in passing. Evil-numbered Itz days are strongest for this lord, and on these days he is given droplets of mercury, drippings of copal sap and pine pitch, melted animal fats and the flowing blood of



powerful men to satisfy his great hunger.

ah-Tst'uts is ah-Puch's middle son, this lord called "Sucker" or "Blood Sucker." Smoke and shadows are his hiding places, death by exhaustion and loss of strength are the signs of his embrace. His animal spirit is the pauraque, the bird which chases and chases its prey before dropping on them. Steady creeping is the means of his approach, wheezing is the sound of his delight. On evil-numbered spirit days, pine pitch and copal incense and the burning blood of the priest are those things that are granted to his appetite.



ah-Puch'ikho'ol is a younger son of ah-Puch, his name means “Skull Breaker.” Staggering drunkenness is his path, death by stupefaction or a spinning head is his realm. This lord's animal spirit is the ceiba beetle, the black bug that flies in circles and never goes straight. Stumbling is his introduction, babbling is the sound of his gladness. Evil-numbered earth days are his times of strength, and on these days the priest sacrifices cactus liquor, powerful tobacco and maybe a bowl of dewy mushrooms or a fat marine toad.



ah-Camazotz' is "Black Wing," the lord of killing by confusion and terror. Whispering is the signal of his approach, sobbing is the sound of his merriment. Evil dreams flow from Camazotz', even strong men cry out in the night. The vampire bat is his spirit animal, bloody scratches on the neck mark those he will take. Ill-numbered darkness days belong to this lord, and in these times copal incense and the spinning blood-dance of the priest are done for him.



ix-Kanyeb is the lady of suffocation and drowning, she whose name means "Yellow Mist." Rising vapors are the sign of her presence, stinking farts are her giggles. This is her animal spirit: the spotted skunk. Water hides this wicked goddess, rivers and ponds and even cups give her shelter. Wind days are her days, when the evil numbers rise, and swamp water mixed with the blood of powerful men are boiled away for her.



ah-Tsaypachtik is “Stalker,” whose realm is sudden death by chest pains, sudden death by flickering lightning. The dying sigh of air is the sound of his contentment, crackling thunder is his laughter in passing. The wolf spider is his spirit animal, its spin and pounce is the way of this lord. Evil lightning days are his, and on those he receives tiny copper bells, globs of pine incense and freshly-decapitated turkeys to satisfy his lusting hunger.



These, then, are the nine lords of the night, and their realms, and their ways. Each of these lords has many servants, those spirits named earlier, who cause sickness and death under the instruction of their masters and in their names.

