

## Light and Heat

On the day 17 Ch'en 8 Kan I was ten years in this world and became a boy. For three days before this day my father and my oldest uncle drank only water and ate only ritual bread, to purify themselves for the ceremony. On my birthday my father woke me just after Father Sun rose, and in our courtyard my uncle made a small fire by our lineage-shrine. He placed onto my forehead a feather tiara my mother created, and then he said a prayer and jabbed my forehead nine times with the knucklebone of one of our ancestors, to drive away the nine lords of the night, and then one more time to drive away ah-Puch. That was what he said when he did that, he told me the reason for his actions.

“Have you done any wicked things, as a child?” said my uncle.

“No, only a few stupid things,” I said.

“Name them,” he said, and I named some embarrassing things I had done. As I said each one, my uncle swatted my head with a white fan, and when we were finished, he dropped the fan into the fire. It must be said that there were only a few swats, this part of the ceremony did not take long.

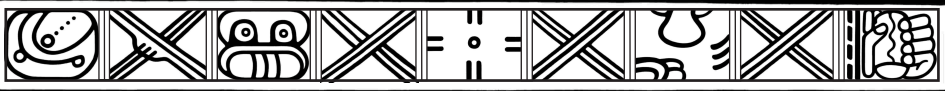
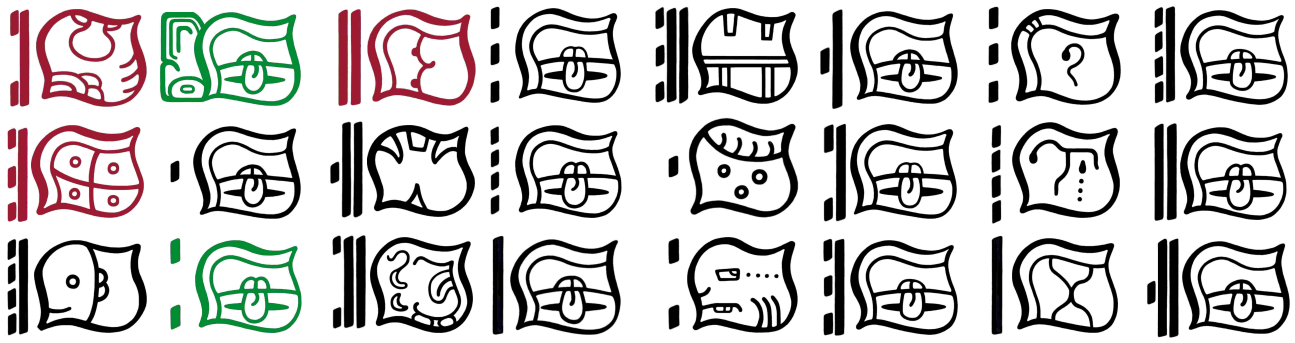
Then my father exchanged my child's waist cloth for a boy's waist cloth, and he burned the old one. My uncle put a little gruel made from maize and cacao into my hand, and I flicked this and the feather tiara into the fire, so that the child in me would be burnt to ash and the boy could sprout. The last thing my uncle did was to draw straight lines on my face and hands and feet, with brown body-paint also made from maize and cacao juice.

“This is Father Sun's sign, the straight line,” he said. “Now you must begin walking it.”

My uncle did not ask me, as he had with Atlatla, to declare my path. I was not the oldest son, and so this was my father's question to ask and not my lineage-father's.

That evening my mother made a little feast for me, as she had when Atlatla became a boy. Even the foods were the same. My father's brothers and their families came, it was pleasant to be seen so fully by my lineage.





My father gave me a set of my own dishes like those of my older brother, but my plate carried the signs of our ancestors for nine generations instead of thirteen. My oldest uncle gave me a small wheel of ceiba wood with twenty tiny symbols along the edge.

“These are the signs for the holy days,” said my uncle. “I can teach you their names now, and their significance. When you are a man I can teach you how to honor them fully. But for now you can at least name them without danger, and understand them, a little.”

After our feast my father said to me,

“The storyteller came, yesterday afternoon. He wants to know if you might want to walk his path.” He looked at me, but I did not say anything for many heartbeats.

“I see the path of the priest, and I see the path of the storyteller,” I said finally. Both of these are long and difficult paths, both take years to learn. The storyteller had come asking about me, so that path was open. If I wanted to become a priest I would have to go to his work-son, Akbal Nik, and declare myself; the priest himself would not see me until I was a man.

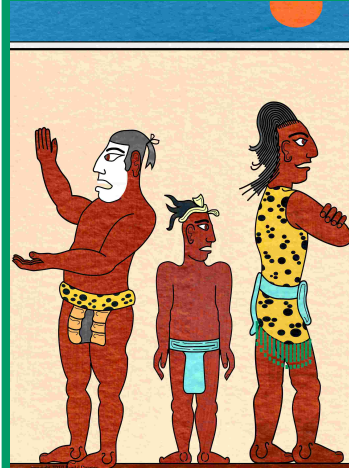
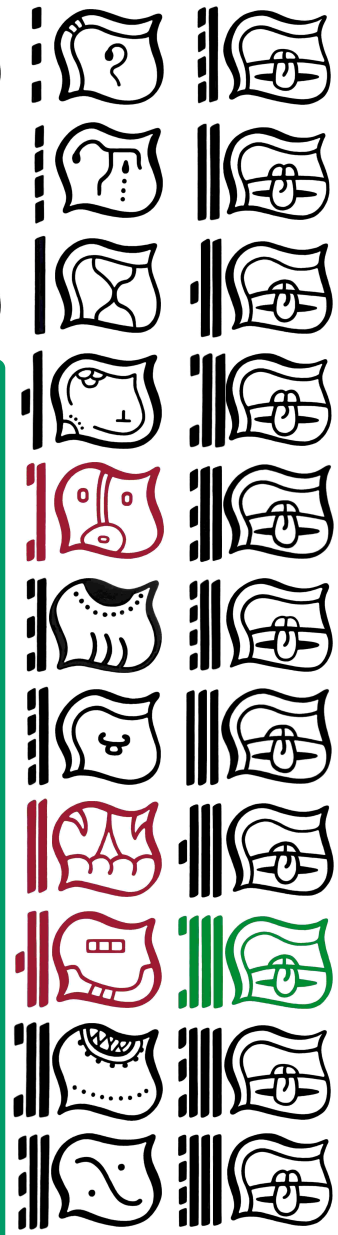
“Then your uncle should ask our ancestors for guidance,” said my father.

“Very good,” I said. It was strange to talk with my father like this, and to be seen; I was pinned in his vision like an animal under the claws of the puma. It was Atlatla I thought of then, beaten bloody and weeping, and I nodded and turned away.

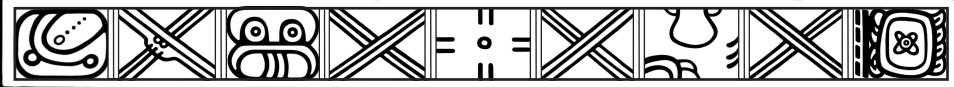
After this conversation my father did not go outside for a cigar, as he usually did after dinner. Instead he looked at my new waist-cloth, and then he went to the room Atlatla and I had shared. He was in there for many heartbeats, and when he came out from behind the cane wall his face was tired and unhappy. Then he went and got some cactus fruit liquor and sat on his stump in front of our hut and drank the entire gourdful. My mother said nothing about this, she only told me that I looked much taller than when I was a child. Later that evening she brought my father inside.

That night I slept poorly, because I understood so clearly my place in the hut of my father and the position my brother would always have there.

The next morning my uncle performed a divination for me. That day







was 18 Ch'en 9 Chicchan, a good day for discoveries. My father brought him a turkey to sacrifice, because of the importance of the question, and with a sliver of flint my uncle cut its throat above the shrine of our ancestors. Then he performed the divination, he counted the seeds and prayed.

"Which of the paths before this boy will receive the stronger light and heat?" he asked.

Two times he performed the divination, two times he counted seeds and days. His face showed nothing, but I understood from his silences that something was odd.

"A sign will be sent," he said to my father, finally. "He must be patient."

"Patient for how long?"

"Until our ancestors are ready to guide him."

My father was not pleased with this divining, he wanted a third time with the seeds and stones.

"The answer was clear," my uncle said. "He should wait for a sign."

When we returned to my father's hut, he grumbled, "For a turkey, couldn't our ancestors have simply said what they want you to know?"

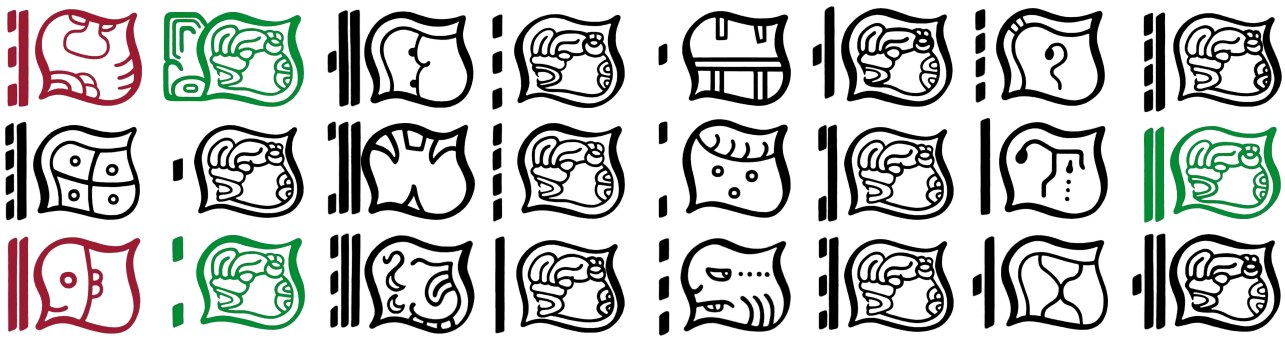
Later my father told my mother about the divination, and she said, "One of my sisters was told to wait for a sign, and it did not come for seven years."

"He will be a man by then," said my father. "If a sign does not come soon, he can just decide which path he wants, and our ancestors can correct him if they really want to."

The next day was 19 Ch'en 10 Cimi, a strong day for ancestors. I walked all around the village, trying to look everywhere for signs, until I realized that people were watching my strangeness and had to stop.

And this is what I noticed, now that I was a boy and could be seen in the village: nothing was different for me. Instead of looking from the sides of their eyes people looked at my face, but as though I was far away. It was only courtesy they showed me, no one was truly friendly when I came near. Nothing would change until Atlatla and I married and had sons. Only then would people believe that the curse on our lineage had ended. What I saw when I spoke with people were masks, and I thought of the ix-Xtabai, the spirit that is only a mask of a pretty woman used by certain very old, evil





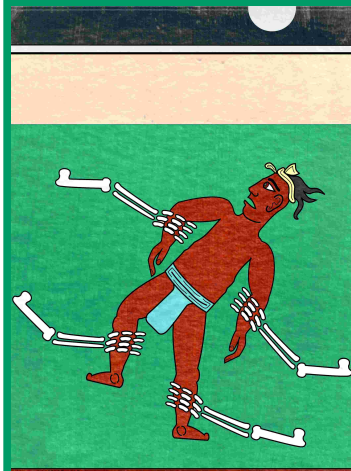
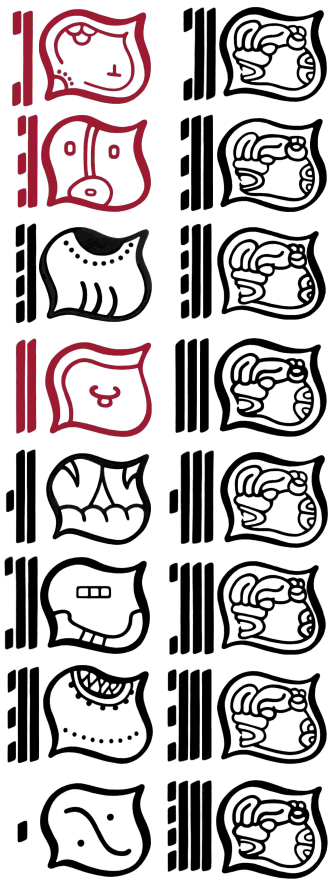
ceiba trees to lure people close enough to murder. My life was better when I was a child, when people did not see me at all and I was hidden from them.

During that day I thought of the words my mother had said, about our ancestors sometimes requiring years to make their wishes clear. Soon it would be known in howler monkey clan that I had not declared a path, that I was doing nothing. Boys are sometimes caned for this; it is said to be laziness that causes their confusion. So I went to sleep rubbing my charm pouch and thinking of curses and the lick of the cane.

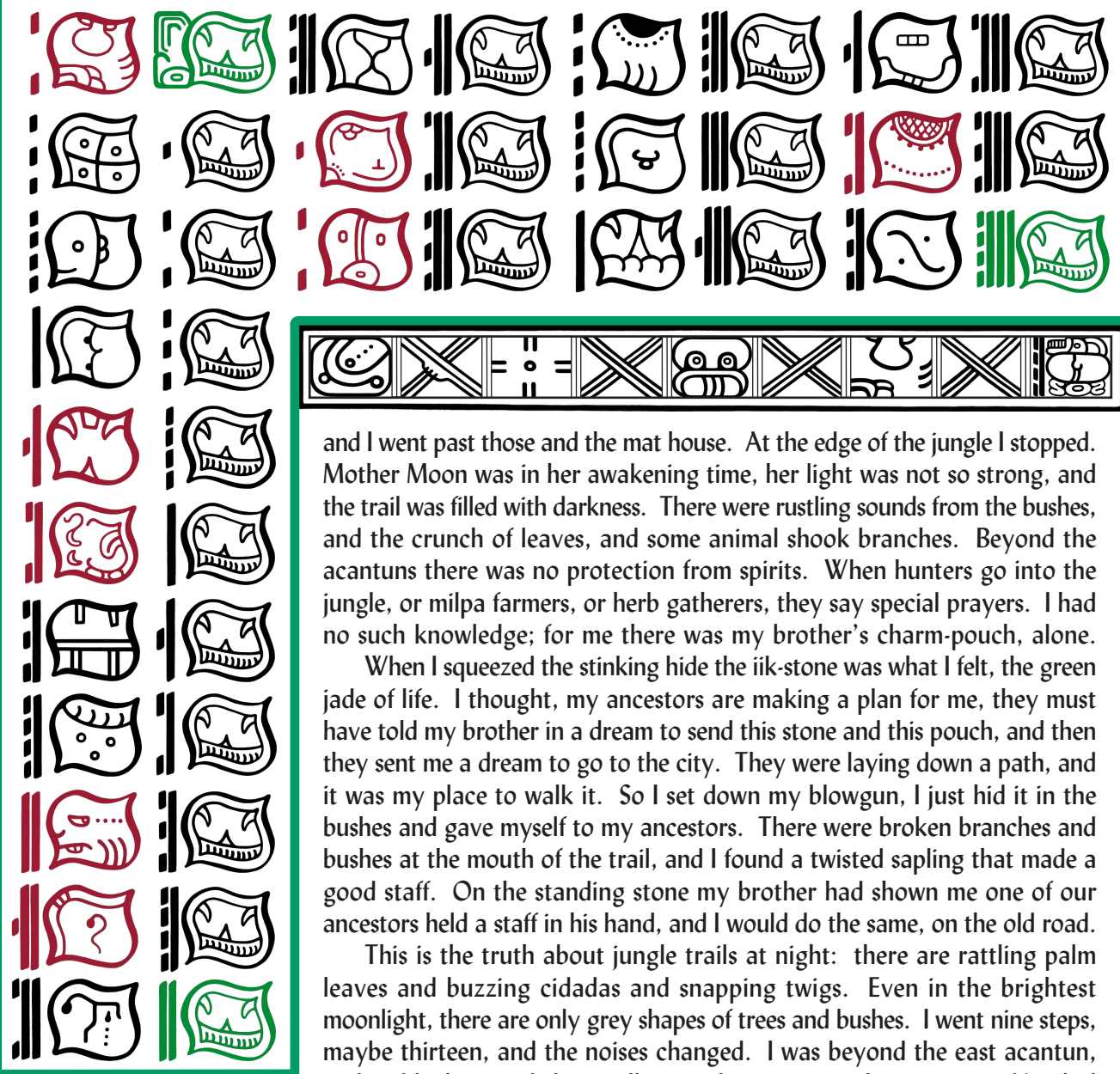
That night a fearful dream occurred to me. It came not long after I went to sleep and brought wet darkness into my head. This was the chill that came in my dream: it was like water from the bottom of the river, surrounding me. There were others in the darkness, their hands turned me this way and that. I could not stir, I could make no sounds, when I tried to cry out I woke instead. My body was shaking, and my breath came out in a little puff. But then I did not notice myself any more, there was a sound from outside our hut. It was a splashing of water, but there is no stream in our lineage-compound. And I thought: I know what these are, this dream and this sound must be the sign my uncle had spoken of. My ancestors did not want me to receive a caning, there would not be a seven-year wait in this matter of choosing my path. The chill was the touch of distant ancestors, the darkness and the water were the portal to the underworld. Because of these thoughts I pushed aside my blanket and put on my waist-cloth and went outside.

The door of our hut is like the door of all the huts in the village, it faces east in the proper way. It is not possible to see anything from our doorway except our lineage-courtyard and the huts of my uncles and some flowering trees that my grandfather planted. But that night I stood in our courtyard and saw the tops of the temples in the city of our fathers, as I had seen them from the road with my brother. They were faint white in Mother Moon's glow. It was just for a moment that I saw this, then there was only the night.

I went back inside and put on my sandals, and I picked up my blowgun and pellets. The desire of my ancestors seemed clear: I was to journey to the city of my fathers. There could be no going by day, someone would see me on the trails, my mother would notice if I was gone so long. Our lineage-compound is on the north side of the village, there are not many others near,







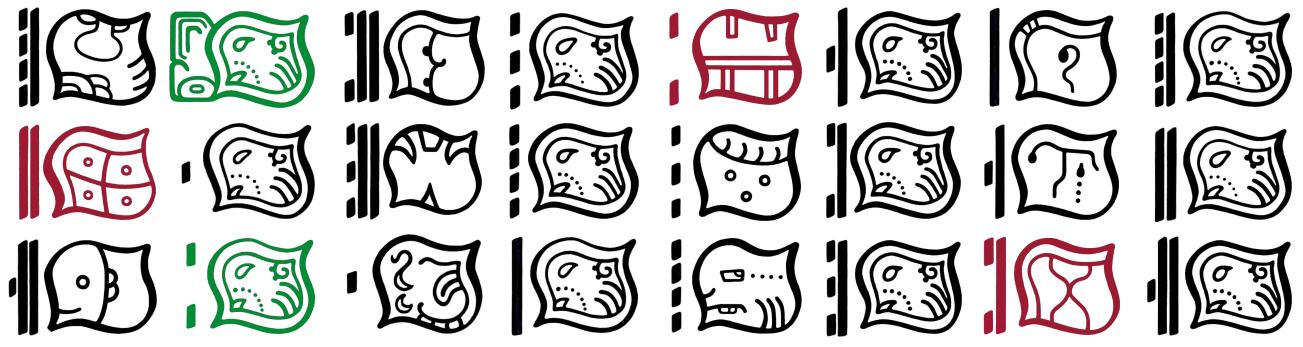
and I went past those and the mat house. At the edge of the jungle I stopped. Mother Moon was in her awakening time, her light was not so strong, and the trail was filled with darkness. There were rustling sounds from the bushes, and the crunch of leaves, and some animal shook branches. Beyond the acantuns there was no protection from spirits. When hunters go into the jungle, or milpa farmers, or herb gatherers, they say special prayers. I had no such knowledge; for me there was my brother's charm-pouch, alone.

When I squeezed the stinking hide the iik-stone was what I felt, the green jade of life. I thought, my ancestors are making a plan for me, they must have told my brother in a dream to send this stone and this pouch, and then they sent me a dream to go to the city. They were laying down a path, and it was my place to walk it. So I set down my blowgun, I just hid it in the bushes and gave myself to my ancestors. There were broken branches and bushes at the mouth of the trail, and I found a twisted sapling that made a good staff. On the standing stone my brother had shown me one of our ancestors held a staff in his hand, and I would do the same, on the old road.

This is the truth about jungle trails at night: there are rattling palm leaves and buzzing cidas and snapping twigs. Even in the brightest moonlight, there are only grey shapes of trees and bushes. I went nine steps, maybe thirteen, and the noises changed. I was beyond the east acantun, and suddenly sounds burst all around me as animals ran away. Nearly I turned back, there were so many noises. I did not go forward boldly. It was carefully that I walked, pushing the end of the staff into the leaves in front of me so that kan koch the fer-de-lance would strike wood instead of me. The webs of spiders wrapped around my face and clung to my arms, and I brushed them and their weavers quickly away. And I stumbled on stones, and roots tripped me, and I struck my head on woody vines, and I was certain I would never find the city before I fumbled to death in the dark. A hunter can go to Ch'ulwitznal in the morning and return before Father Sun is high, but it would be harder for a boy, in the dark. A hundred times I squeezed my charm-pouch, a hundred times the iik-stone dug into my fingers. That was the strength that moved me, my own body was just a bruise-toy for the amusement of the plants.

Then I came onto the edge of the road, and the way was smooth before





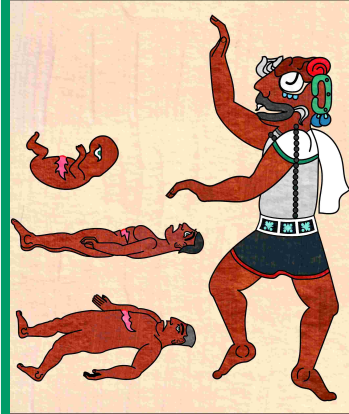
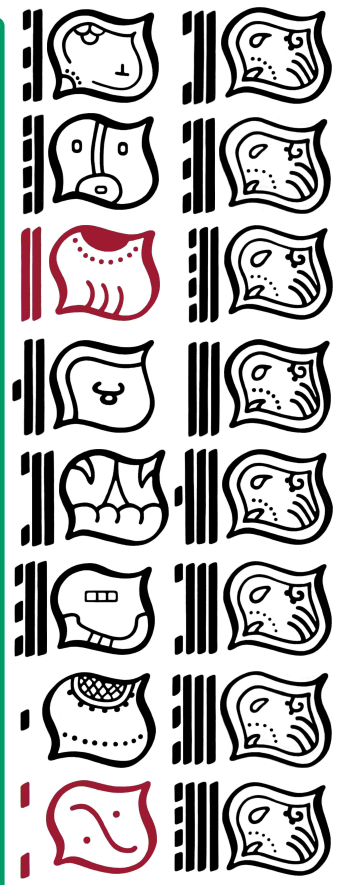
me. The trail from the village was not so long, the darkness had stretched it to seem much longer. Xinan the scorpion moved near me, many scorpions clicked across the stones. Xinan is a child of Lady Insect, he does not serve ah-Puch, and so I stepped over him without fear.

On the road there were no more vines, no more spider webs, no more hidden roots, and I walked freely. At the standing stone I halted before my ancestor and presented my staff to him, then I walked down the old road to the edge of the city. It did not take long, the road was easy to follow, and when I came to a round marker-stone I knew from the stories that I was at Ch'ulwitznal, the city of my fathers.

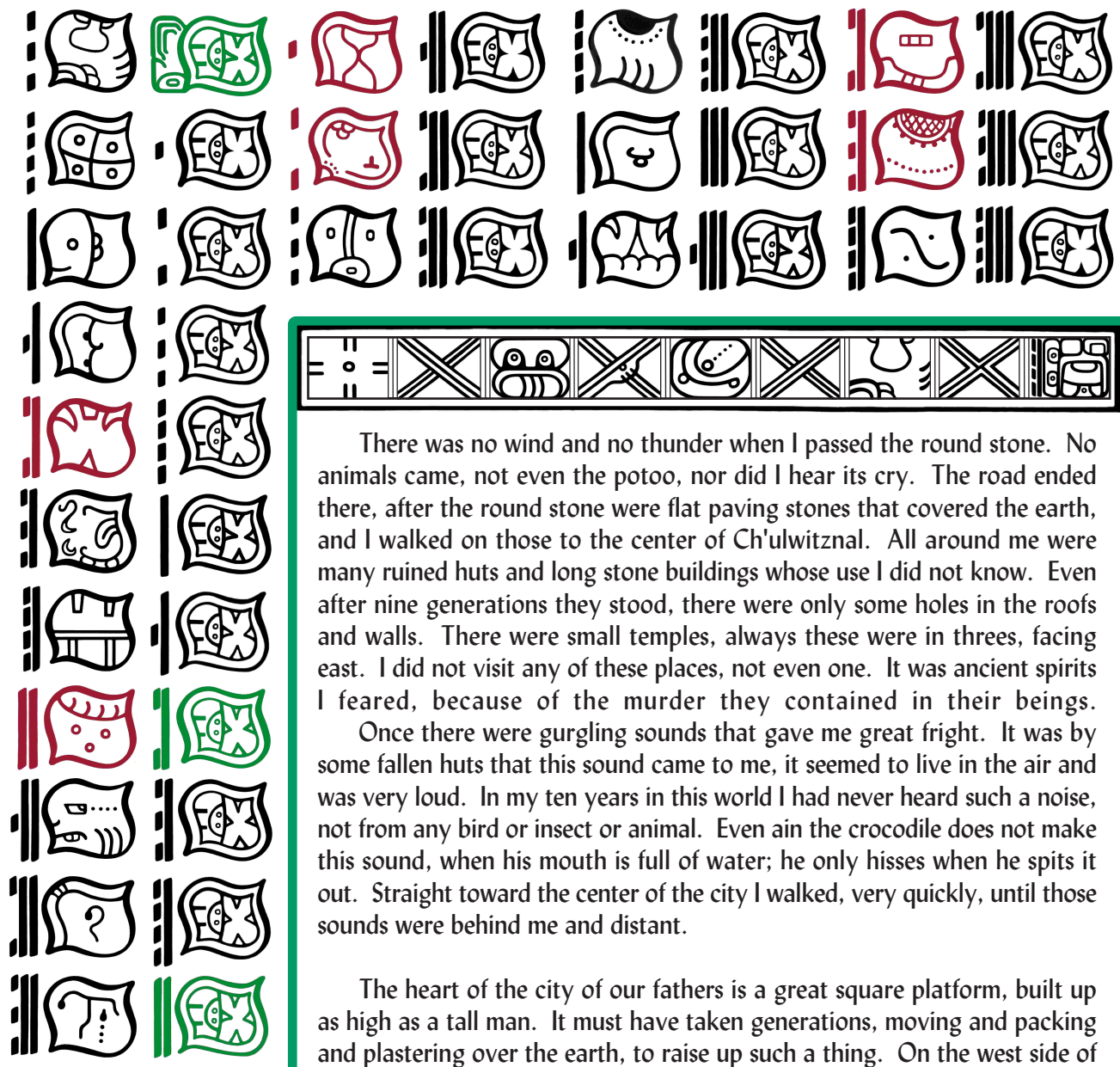
And this is what I could see from that place: almost nothing, and darkness. Mother Moon's face was hidden behind clouds. There were shapes of trees to the north, there were small pyramid-mountains to the south, and before me was a low, round stone two paces wide that was flat on top and carved with many picture-words on its edges. There were carved men in the center of this stone, but I could not see them clearly.

In that place I stood for many heartbeats. In the last days of their war with the mountain city, our ancestors became crazed. They killed their own children, it is said, to feed ah-Puch's hunger and gain strength from him. These were called sacrifices, but in truth they were just murders, ah-Puch twisted our ancestors for his own pleasure. The warriors of the two cities fought in the mountains and in the jungles and on these roads. There were curses called out by the priests, ah-Puch gave them poisoned words to throw at each other, many people died of blood vomit and fear-burst hearts. The old stories say that our ancestors' souls still move in the city, they can enter into people and cause killing madness. Only the priest can go into Ch'ulwitznal, for certain holy days; all others should only go as far as the round stones.

Far ahead were three pyramid-mountains, higher than all the other buildings; they were the ones I had seen with my brother, and in my dream. Under the clouds they were dark, but under Mother Moon's face their stones shimmered white. It was then that I made a decision, I asserted myself before my ancestors: I would continue to give myself to the protection of my brother's iik'-stone. I would enter the city and walk to the three pyramid-mountains. If there were further signs, I would be watchful along the way.







There was no wind and no thunder when I passed the round stone. No animals came, not even the potoo, nor did I hear its cry. The road ended there, after the round stone were flat paving stones that covered the earth, and I walked on those to the center of Ch'ulwitznal. All around me were many ruined huts and long stone buildings whose use I did not know. Even after nine generations they stood, there were only some holes in the roofs and walls. There were small temples, always these were in threes, facing east. I did not visit any of these places, not even one. It was ancient spirits I feared, because of the murder they contained in their beings.

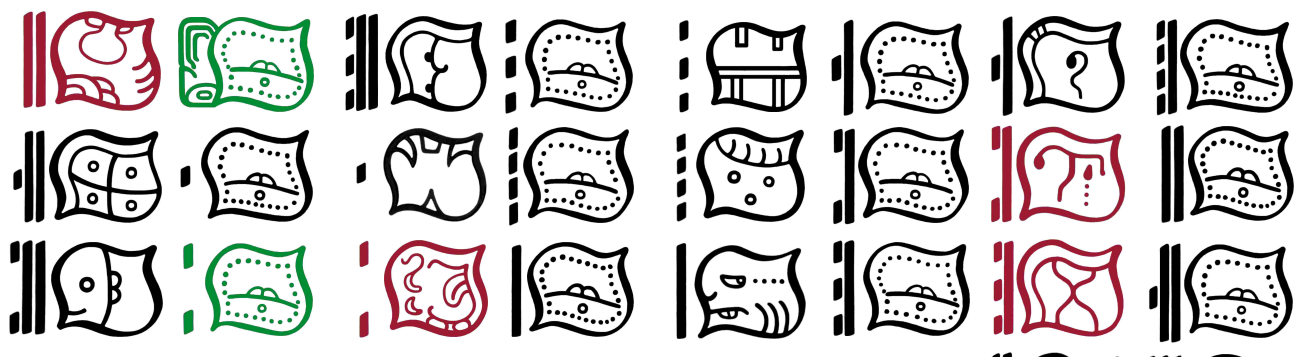
Once there were gurgling sounds that gave me great fright. It was by some fallen huts that this sound came to me, it seemed to live in the air and was very loud. In my ten years in this world I had never heard such a noise, not from any bird or insect or animal. Even ain the crocodile does not make this sound, when his mouth is full of water; he only hisses when he spits it out. Straight toward the center of the city I walked, very quickly, until those sounds were behind me and distant.

The heart of the city of our fathers is a great square platform, built up as high as a tall man. It must have taken generations, moving and packing and plastering over the earth, to raise up such a thing. On the west side of this are two stairways cut into the platform, this is how one ascends. Before these stairways are standing stones with carvings of men, and picture-words. I did not know their purpose, they were in the wrong place to be acantuns. I presented my staff to the carved men and said,

“Tzicile Kakmo’ is the name of my lineage-father, my thirteenth-generation ancestor. This was his place: the mat house. This was the number of his sons: eleven. It is in his name that I request to pass.” This is all I said, because I was only a boy who did not yet know his own lineage-song. Just bits of it were in me, I put a few of these together and sang them and walked up the stairs onto the central plaza.

Here is the world at the top of the platform: there are three huge pyramid-mountains, with temples at the top. Their feet are square, and they have tiers as they rise. In front of each pyramid-mountain is a row of three or four standing stones, and a round stone. The greatest pyramid-mountain



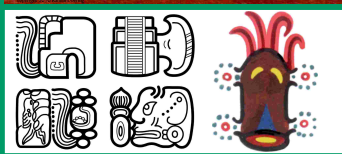
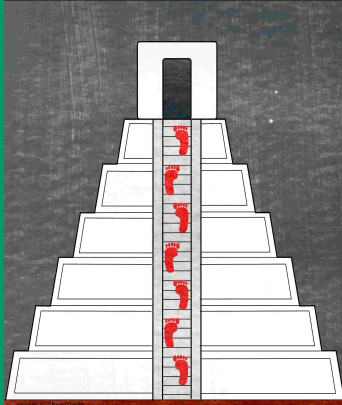
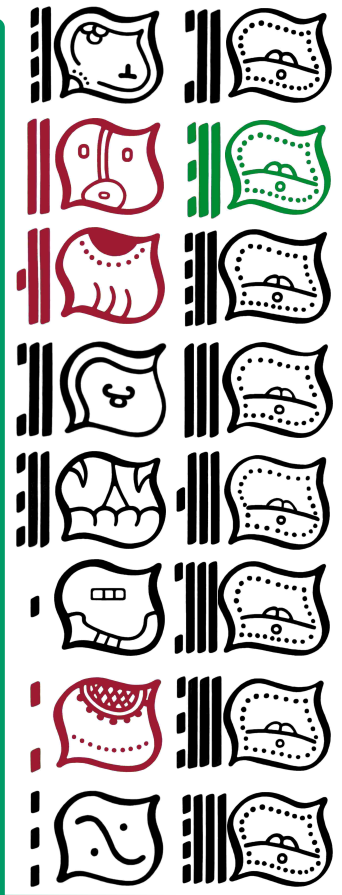


is to the east; it is the temple of Father Sun, and it has thirteen tiers. On the north side of the plaza is the temple of Mother Moon, it is smaller but also has thirteen tiers. To the west is ah-Puch's temple, with nine tiers; it is the lowest and narrowest. Between these three is the plaza where our ancestors worshipped and danced. Nothing grew in that place, not grass or trees or vines, not even weeds. And this is the size of that plaza: all the eight hundred people of my village could dance before the pyramid-mountains, and all the five hundred people of Chacwitz, and still there would be empty space for many more.

The great plaza was quiet, even the cicadas sounded very far away. It was the temples that made the stillness; the strength of the gods and the goddesses brought peace to that place. I walked past the temple of ah-Puch, the end of my staff knocked on the plaster as I stepped. And in the center of the city was a large, round stone, buried in the earth so that only its flat top was seen. It was carved with many men sitting and talking, and picture-words surrounded them. I did not walk onto this but only stood before it and wondered what their names were, wondered if any of them were men of my lineage. Again I presented my staff, but no sign was shown to me. And I thought, 'I am far from my father and mother, I should not be in this place.' Only the dream of my ancestors held me there. Only my brother's iik-stone gave me strength in my aloneness.

That was when I made another decision; truly the boy in me was sprouting from the ashes of the child! Because it was in a night-dream that I saw the temples shining, I went to the pyramid-mountain of Mother Moon and climbed the stairway. For a boy's legs those steps were high, and there was moisture on the stone from the breath of the night, and it was long climbing, and slippery, and the hard ground looked farther and farther away.

At the top of the stairs was the white-stone temple of Mother Moon. It was not large, only the size of my father's hut, with an open doorway to the east. Through this I could see out another doorway on the other side. Because I am not a priest I did not go into that place but only looked through. At the sides of the doorway were picture-words and carvings of Mother Moon with her smiling young woman's face and the serious face of her years of strength. On the crest of the temple, above everything, was a great







carving of Mother Moon. She was seated and talking with others, but I could not see them well. Only Mother Moon was clear, I saw her eyes over me, and they were looking not up at the fifth world but down onto the city.

Those stone eyes had seen the days of cacao and jade, when our ancestors were strong and wise, and they had seen the days of madness, when the people of the city were devoured by ah-Puch's hunger, and they had seen the empty days since the war, when only animals lived in the old buildings. And now they saw me. I stepped under the edge of the roof, where I was no longer visible, and then I turned around to look out over the city.

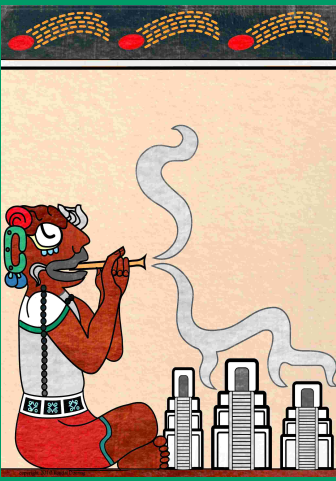
From that high place I saw pyramid-mountains and temples and palaces and plazas in all directions. The road I had walked on and the buildings I had seen were only a tiny part of Ch'ulwitznal. At the edges of the city trees and vines were growing over the huts, but the plazas were still clear, the pyramid-mountains were not overgrown. Maybe it was the magic of the ancient priests that kept the stones bare, or the power of the sorcerors that did this. I understood then that the stories were true, there had been many thousands of people in the city when ah-Puch broke my ancestors and desolated their homes.

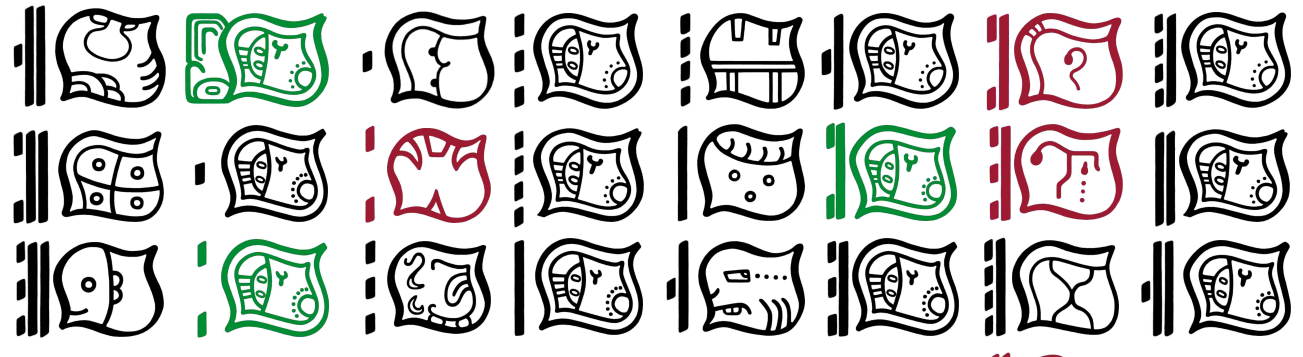
Then I could not look any more, I could not bear to see how crushed we had become. My heart shrank too much to keep seeing. All around me was the sign of ah-Puch's power, silence was peace but was also the cry of his victory. It was silence that followed the death of children, silence that followed the death of Chelna, silence that came to Ch'ulwitznal after ah-Puch's destruction. I lowered my eyes from the empty city and climbed down from that place.

In the plaza I dropped my staff in front of the round-stone men. The staff is the sign of the priest; I would not seek that path. The priest and his work-son and the wise-woman herbalist fight for the people, they go in front to attack ah-Puch and his servants. That was not how I felt in my own heart.

"I have seen your city, I have seen your works," I said to my ancestors on the stone. "I will carry the old stories for you. I will not let our people forget what happened in this place."

Mother Moon did not show her face for the rest of that night, not in the





city and not on the road. Though I was very tired, I walked quickly. Maybe I rubbed my brother's charm-pouch, I do not remember. It was the empty buildings, the empty plazas, that filled my heart. When I came past the acantun, there was not yet a sliver of light in the east, and the village was quiet. Beneath my blanket I slept without dreams, and the next day I asked my father to speak with the storyteller, without telling him of my visit to the city.

Early on the day 1 Yax 12 Lamat my father had his discussion with K'aakik'. He took gifts of tobacco and chilis, and he and the storyteller spoke all morning. When he returned he was red-faced and strutting oddly, my father was suffering greatly. He does not like to talk much, and a storyteller is all words. He looked at me hard before he spoke, I think to be certain I comprehended the pain that the discussion had caused him.

"This is how it is, then," he said to my mother and me. "The storyteller will take you as a work-son. But his path is full of things to know, there is too much to learn a little now and a little later. You must take your meals with the storyteller, his wife will cook for you. For now you will sleep here, but in a year, if you are not stupid, you will move your sleeping bench into his hut. Then the difficult teachings begin. Such is the price of this path."

"I understand," I said. It is this way for the work-sons of the priest, and the work-daughters of the wise-woman, as well.

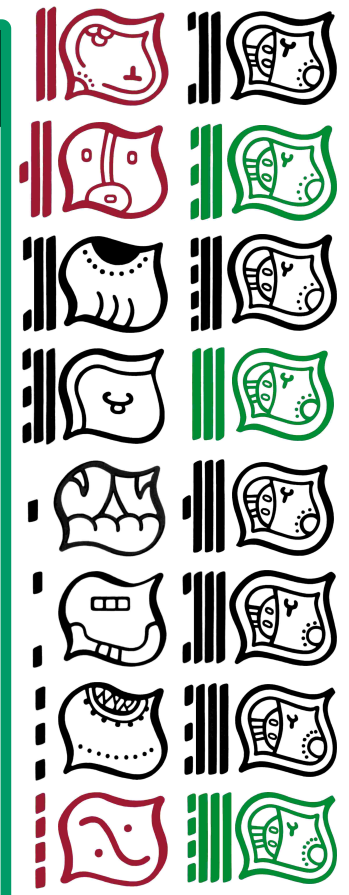
"Tomorrow morning go to the storyteller's hut, and you will begin."

My father looked unhappily at my mother, as though he would say something more, but then he took up his maize shucker and net bag and went to harvest his milpa.

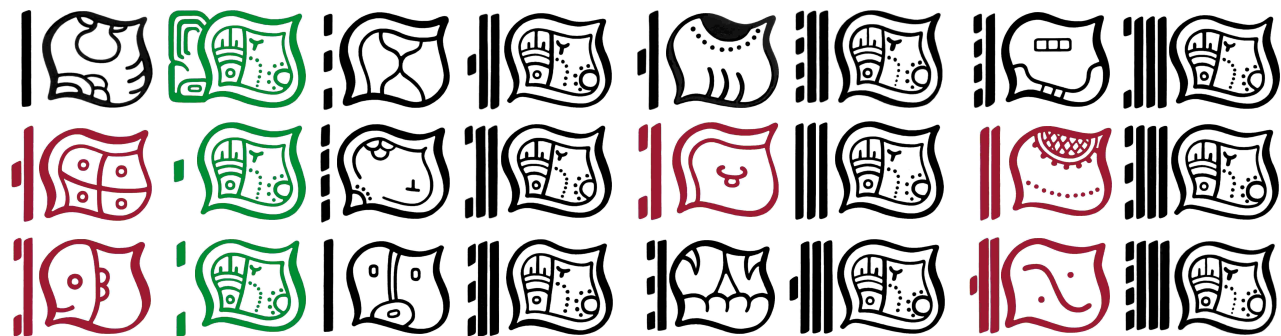
"It is only training," I said to my mother. "I will not be so far as Atlatla."

"It is the immorality of the storyteller your father worries about," said my mother. "You've heard what people say."

And this is what I had heard said of the storyteller: he and his wife did not live together. They quarrelled so savagely that she had miscarried four infants, and their little son died in his sleep. The priest said it was better for







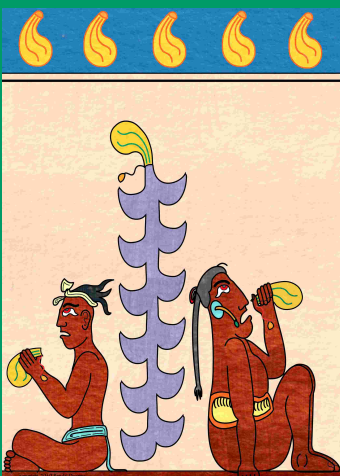
them to live apart than to live together and kill their children with bitterness. Even those hard words, even a fierce caning for K'aakik', could not make them set aside their quarrels, and so the storyteller lived in the storyteller's hut, and his wife lived in the hut he built when they were married. It was only their duties they performed; she cooked for him and made his clothing, and he kept her hut and gave her food and barter-maize. For their anger, they were cursed with no more children. Since they were in their years of strength, there was no burning of the marriage, no second planting. It was better they lived in this immoral way than broken apart and alone, as lunatics.

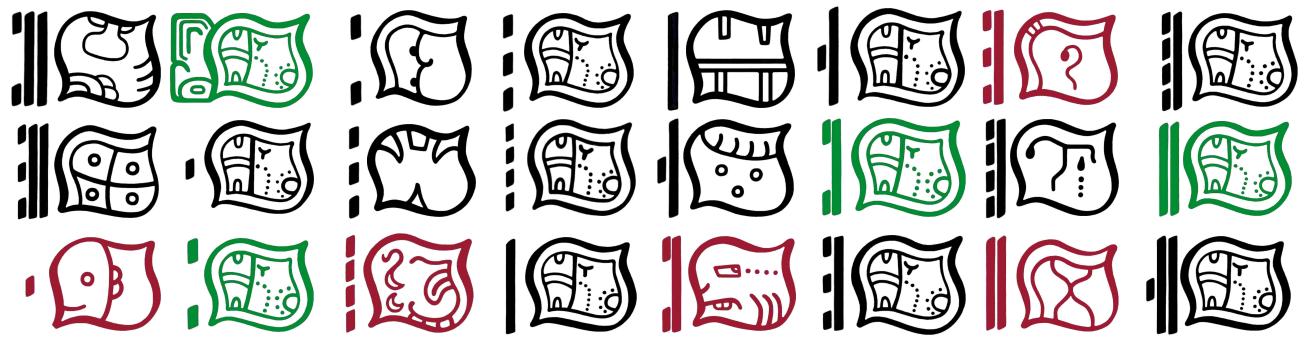
This was the man whose path I was walking, and my mother spoke truthfully when she hinted that people would find more to say about me and my family. The place of the storyteller is an esteemed one, but strange. Storytellers wear masks of gods and goddesses, animals and ancestors and the dead. They do not show their own face when they walk their path but are always someone else. They dance alone, they speak the words of others instead of their own, they bring forth the memories of things people want to forget. Walking this path would not end my frustrations, it would only be a new direction. There would be a little respect for my choice, if I was not stupid, but now people would have the strangeness of the storyteller's path to speak of as well as our lineage-curse. In a way my choice would only provide extra nourishment for the sharp-tongued people of my village.

When my father came home that evening with a gourd of cactus liquor, it was longing to share it with him, that I felt. That was the first night I bore a tiny shard of the weight my father carried, that evening when I was ten years old and about to begin walking a respected path.

The next day was 2 Yax 13 Muluc, a good day for boys and men to do things, but when I woke it was fearfulness I felt, and the desire to stay in my father's hut. It was he who woke me, who saw I was not rising very quickly and cuffed me playfully on the head.

"Go, eat someone else's food. More for me." And so I rose grumbling, and my mother caressed my shoulder when I went out, and I was irritated





because I was only going a hundred paces away. But her eyes were weeping-red, and I left my father's hut swiftly, to escape her sorrow.

Hearts are traitors, I heard an old man say once, and in my traitorous heart I remembered that my mother had not been red-eyed when my brother went away to the mountains.

The door-cloth of the storyteller's hut was tied up, and he was sitting at the hearth fire with his wife. I have said that K'aakik' was a man in his middle years, like my father. Though he did not lift and move heavy logs as my father did, he was muscled and very solid, his thick belly and heavy arms said, 'strength' and not 'too much food'. His face was not memorable, except for the lines around his mouth. There was much suffering there, but his voice held no pain.

"Sit, eat," he said. He was drinking cacao with chili powder, which boys are not allowed because of its heat, but there was refreshing hot maize drink and soft morning-tamales for me. These were made by the storyteller's wife, a hearth woman with a moon-round face who never smiled near her husband. One of her cheeks was fiercely scarred from their fights; people said he had struck her with a chunk of firewood and scored her face in this way.

I thanked her for the breakfast she had made for me.

"Eat, and I am pleased," she said. She did not eat with us, then or ever, and she did not stay near us while we fed ourselves but instead went outside and sat on the bench outside the storyteller's hut. When we were finished she washed our plates and left us.

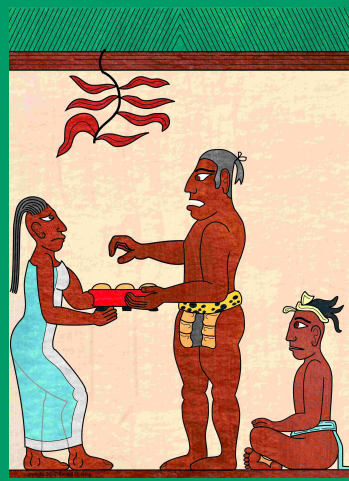
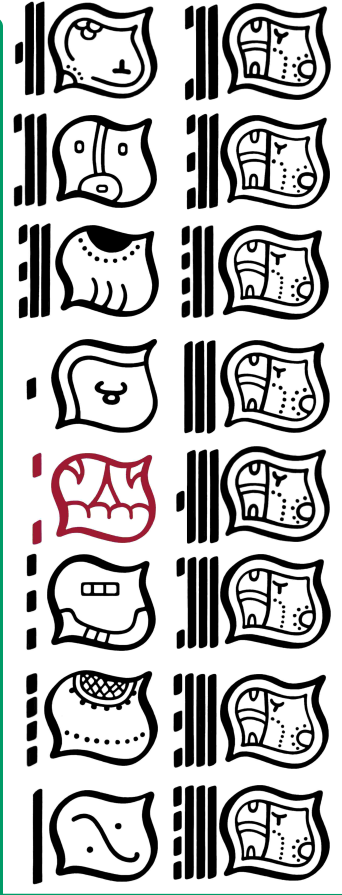
The storyteller said, "The first step on any path is maize. Have you been to the milpas?"

Nearly, stupidity overcame me, so that I almost said yes, with my brother, but then my intelligence returned, and I said, "No."

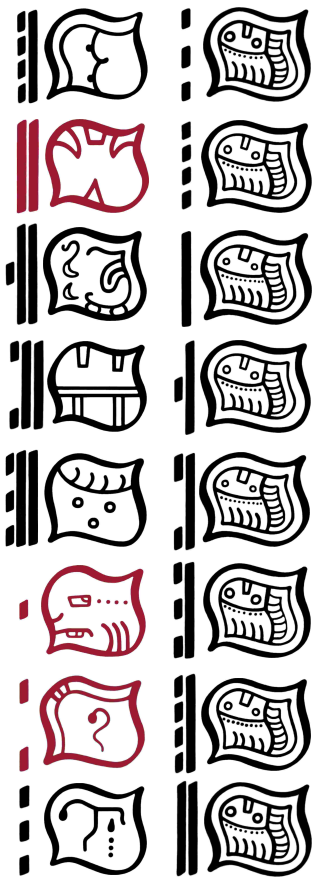
For a long moment the storyteller said nothing, he only looked annoyed.

"Very well," he said. "There is a shucking stick hanging by the door. You know it is harvest time for slow-growth maize?"

I nodded my head and took up the shucker, it is shaped like a thin penis with a sharp tip, and he took up a second shucker and a carrying-basket,







and we went into the jungle. The storyteller's field is close to the village and surrounded by other milpas, so I did not fear pumas or jaguars. His milpa was not large, fifty paces to a side, but it was filled with maize stalks bearing fat ears. And there were mounds of beans and squashes, many things were ready for harvest.

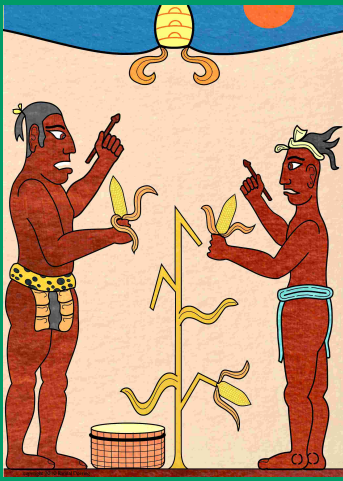
The storyteller showed me how to snap off the ears of maize and pull away the tassels and then peel back the husk with the shucker, one thrust and the husk is torn away to hang from the bottom of the ear. Then the ripe kernals are brought into the world: yellow maize and white maize and red maize were the colors of the storyteller's harvest. There were three stalks of black maize as well, ah-Puch's maize as it is called, it is his corrupted food from the beginning of time. This we also harvested and dangled in the storyteller's maize-house, so that ah-Puch would not be offended. We placed it for the pleasure of the rats, since they can eat anything and stay strong.

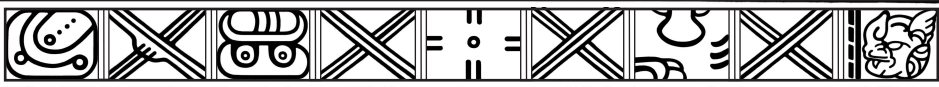
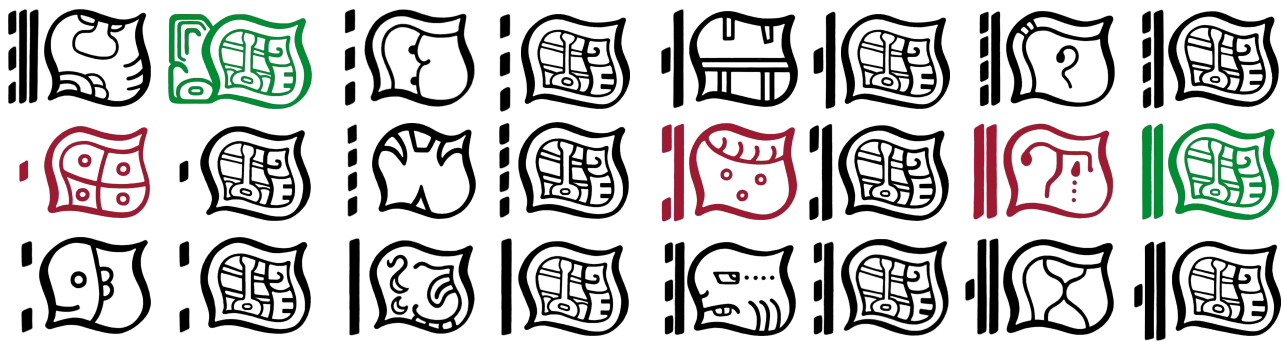
So it was that my first lesson as a storyteller was the proper harvesting of maize, and the twisting of fat squashes and bean-pods from their vines. K'aakik' spoke little during this instruction. He showed me what to do and seemed pleased that I was careful with the food the gods and the goddesses had given us. When we were hanging the maize ears in his hut he said,

"Harvest goes twenty or thirty more days. Because you are new to the milpa, I will not teach you anything else during this time. When the rains begin, we will speak of storytelling."

"Very good," I said. Then we ate dinner, again his wife fed us wholesome things from the fields, and I returned to my parents. My mother made me a tall vase of vanilla-cacao, and honey-bread, these things were hot and tasty. When I told my father that I was learning the ways of the milpa, he nodded and looked at me from the sides of his eyes. I was disappearing for him, he was handing me to the storyteller.

"Now you will know how to grow food, when you marry," said my mother. It was a little fire she was trying to light, but I was not thinking of these things, her words made no sparks for me.

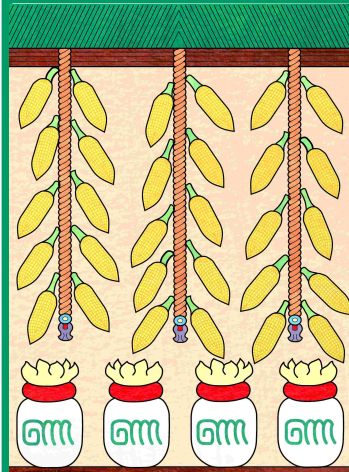




For all that month of Yax I was a harvester and hanger of maize. My fingers became green from twisting squashes and bean pods, and every day I returned to the storyteller's hut tired and ready to begin discussing stories. On the day 13 Yax there was a storytelling, and so we did not harvest. In the morning the storyteller hung the mask of the maize husk men on the pole in the center of the village, to remind everyone of the telling. Then he brought the seven masks for the story into his hut from the special room where they are kept.

"When harvest is finished, you will learn to care for the masks," he said. "They must be kept free of dust and spider webs, and Lady Insect's children must not be allowed to make their homes in them. There are prayers for handling each mask, and I will teach these to you." He brought forth rags and brushes and small pots of paint and cleaned and repainted the masks; my place during all of this was to watch, and learn.

That evening the storyteller painted his face white and became no one. When Father Sun was down we brought the masks to the story circle, and K'aakik' lit a warm, red fire. A stump was my place that evening, watching and listening was my duty. Three hundred people came to the telling, there were four hundred people, maybe, and K'aakik' stood unmoving as they made places for themselves. Then he began the story of the maize husk men and the burnt harvest, he put on the masks and danced and said the words of the gods and the goddesses, and when he wore the mask of ah-Puch he leered at the people. He just leaned toward them and hissed, ah-Puch's voice was ugly, and cold. And this is what I saw, that the children were wide-eyed, and their mothers listened, and the men were quiet and thoughtful when K'aakik' told the story. And this was the voice of the storyteller: it was strong like the river, he did not just say words but gave forth the wisdom of our ancestors with his voice. Each mask had its own spirit, each thing said carried its own light, Mother Moon's defeat of ah-Puch made my heart beat faster in my chest, though I had heard this story before. On that night I knew a little pride for my chosen path.







On 12 Yax 10 Cauac the youngest daughter of my father's older brother was married. This was the last of my cousins, she married a man of lineage Keh Ha'. Her husband's lineage father wanted the husband's labor in their own fields and orchards, and so they gave gifts instead of a bride service price. The marriage ceremony ended early because of rain, and my cousin left for her husband's lineage-compound and went out of my life forever.

Near the end of Yax, the day was 18 Yax 4 Oc, traders from Chacwitz came with word of Atlatla. There were now frequent arguments between him and my mother's father, they said, though they did not know what drove the splinter between those two. My brother had become a strong treeclimber, and he had also learned to gather wild bee honey. He said nothing of returning to us, there was not a whisper of this happening. This time he sent no blades for my father; instead there were the fat seeds of some mountain fruits, to plant in our lineage-courtyard.

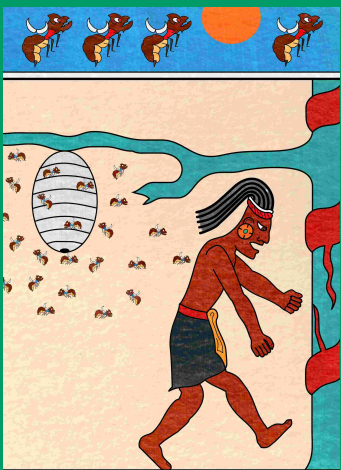
"Of course he sends these a few days after my last blade breaks," my father grumbled, but he took those seeds to his oldest brother right away, and on the next caban day they were planted. They would become valuable indeed, if they could grow in the valley.

For my mother there were two beads of amber, which is good for a woman's health.

For me there was nothing. One of the traders said, "Your brother says he will send something for you when he hears your choice of paths."

"Then tell him, please, I will be a storyteller," I said, and the trader nodded. My mother and father had gifts for Atlatla and a pouch of cacao beans for the traders. When they were leaving I walked with them a little way and asked their speaker to carry a few private words for me: "I have tied flowers to the tail of the quetzal, to keep it close."

He did not understand these words, but after I promised that there was no wicked magic wrapped in them, he agreed to take them to my brother. In this way I told Atlatla that I understood his words to me from three years





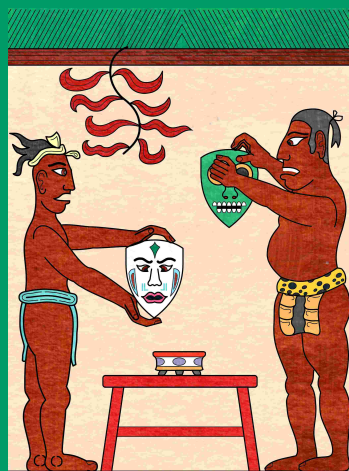
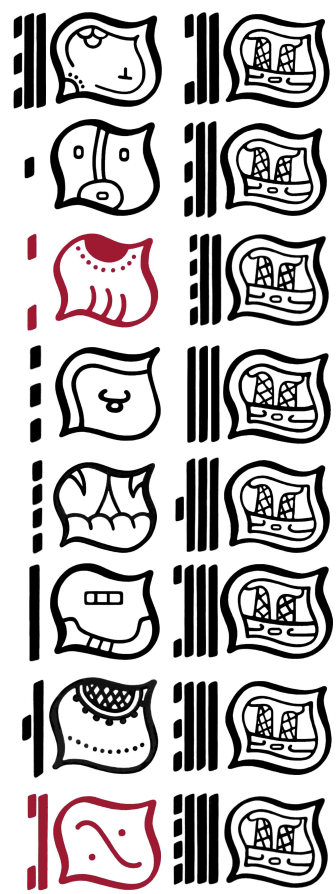
before, when he told me that our mother’s spirit sometimes flew outside her, and I told him that I would fight for our mother while he was gone. I had to wait three years to tell him this because it was only when I was ten that I thought to hide meanings inside words that I could send with others. It was thinking about stories that allowed me to do that; my ancestors’ clever words were making me more clever, too.

After the harvest was completed and the dried maize stalks burned, K’aakik’ took me into the mask room and introduced me to the storyteller’s faces. There are forty-five masks, each is cared for its own way. The mask of Mother Moon has shells set in it that must be polished, Father Sun’s face has strips of copper that must be kept shining, the feathers in the mask of ix-Um need to be often replaced. ah-Puch’s mask has sharp teeth that must be bloodied so that he will be satiated, and it became my burden to prick myself for his sustenance.

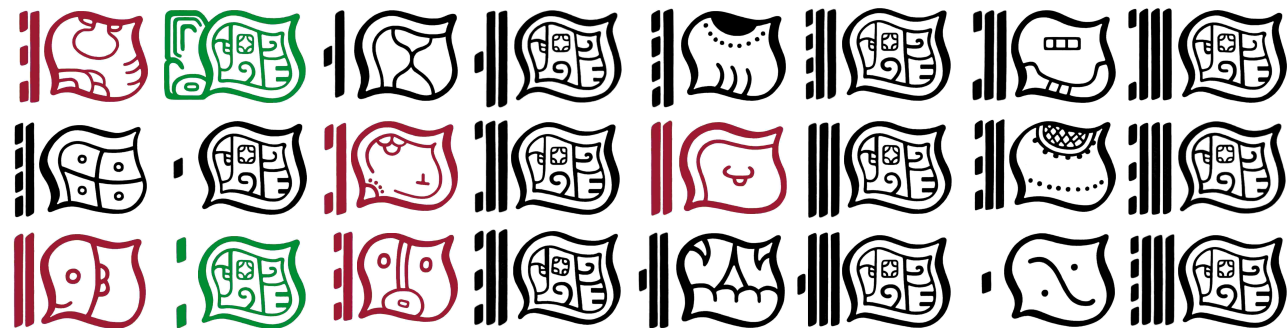
“These masks are seven generations old,” K’aakik’ told me. “It is said that our ancestors and the gods and the goddesses look through their masks, sometimes, to make certain we are being respectful. We keep them clean, we keep them strong. We never play with them.”

I looked at the faces hanging on their wall-pegs, staring so seriously at me. “I understand,” I said. And then K’aakik’ taught me the little prayers one must say before taking a mask down to clean it or use it in a telling, and I was careful to learn the words properly and without mistakes.

When the rains started to fall, my story training finally began. It was the children’s stories that K’aakik’ taught me first, because those are not long and were already well known to me, from listening. And here was how this teaching went: sitting cross-legged in his hut, K’aakik’ would tell me a story, in pieces, and I would repeat each piece back to him, and then the entire story. We did this two or three times each day, until I could tell that story with no mistakes. Sometimes he would have me start in the middle and say it to the end and then start at the beginning and go to the middle.







Sometimes he asked me only to say parts and not the entire story. When he was satisfied that I knew all the words of one story he would teach me another, and then later he would return to the old one and have me say it again. Because of this training, I became very good at remembering stories.

K'aakik' was not a difficult teacher. He saw that I wished to learn and so did not curse me or beat me as some men do their work-sons. When I made a mistake he corrected it, and I said that part again, and we went on. Once, to demonstrate what he expected from me, he told a story from its end to its beginning, word by word.

"Don't worry," he told me, when I was amazed. "You too will learn them that well."

When we were not walking the storyteller's path K'aakik' liked to sit and watch the hearth fire burn, and like my father he enjoyed smoking his reeking tobacco at the end of the day. He did not go into the village like the priest, to talk with the powerful men, and if he visited his wife or people from his lineage or clan, I did not know when. Of all the people in our village, there were none more alone than the storyteller.

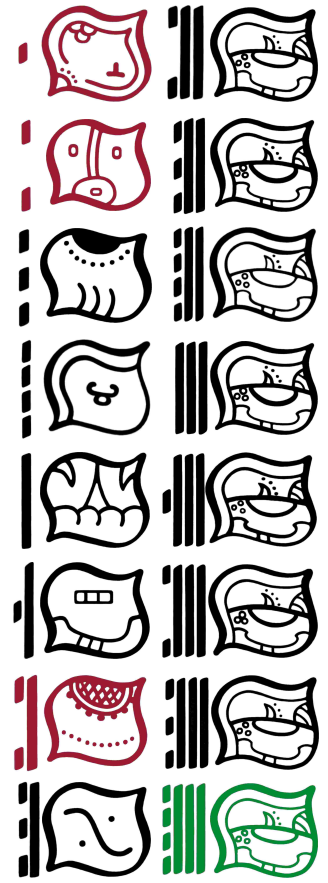
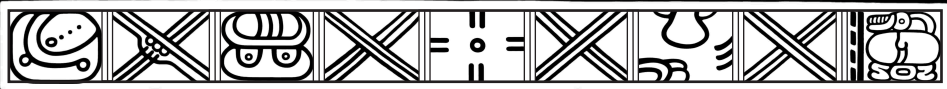
After the rains ended and the new year began, K'aakik' and I took digging sticks and planted the seeds for the new milpa. His lineage-father came and blessed the field and the seeds, and three quails were sacrificed, along with some good liquor.

"Next year we will have to let this milpa rest," K'aakik' said. "We'll clear a new one, then."

During the months when the maize was growing I learned two new stories and watched many tellings. K'aakik' told me, "Soon you can tell some of the children's stories. First, though, you have to learn to use the masks and do the dances." So he taught me, and so I learned.

On the day 0 Sip 2 K'awil a jaguar killed a boy infant from Xunich. Traders said the baby was taken from his hut after dark, it was the paw prints that told what happened. Though it was tracked into the jungle, the





jaguar was not found. It is very strange for a jaguar to do this, and many people said it was serving ah-Puch. When I heard this I thought of the jaguar I saw dying at the edge of our village, murdered by camazotz'. For several days after this event my dreams were filled with the laughter of the death bat, and though I wore my brother's charm-pouch, the suffering eyes of balam were what I saw when my father woke me to go to the storyteller's.

Not long after this killing, traders came from Chacwitz; that was 15 Sip 4 Manik. They said my brother was no longer fighting with my mother's father and that always he was out gathering fruits or honey in the jungle. He sent four black obsidian blades for my father, long yellow feathers for my mother, and for me a pair of fine sandals that rose almost to my knees and had the beautiful hide of bobilche, the margay cat, up the sides.

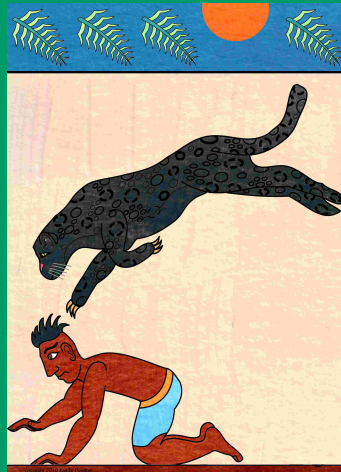
After the traders left, my mother said, "Your new sandals will make people jealous."

"It is a brainless gift," said my father. "Those are made for climbing rocks in the mountains, see how the hide is hard-cured? You don't need to climb any rocks, here."

I was startled at his words, for the only rocks to climb in the valley were the buildings in the city of our fathers. No one knew of my visit to Ch'ulwitznal, how could my brother know?

"If I wear these at the tellings, people will stare at them, and no one will listen," I said. "I will use them for festivals, when everyone is wearing fine things."

"It is just your brother, not thinking," my father grumbled, but in truth I believe he was pleased because that was the Atlatla he knew and wanted to return.





I have said that my oldest uncle taught me the signs of the holy days, and their portents. This is good knowledge, for to have an incomplete understanding of such things can cause great harm. Since it is only the beneficial uses of the days that my uncle taught me, that is what is here. Of the evil uses for the signs of the days, I know nothing.



On Ik' days, old debts

increase their weight (ikatz), so it is a good day to pay them off; chili peppers (ik) are given as interest for loans. It is a day to show responsibility toward one's lineage (k'ik'), and family shrines are renewed. Strong wisemen are appointed lineage-fathers on Ik'. For the sickly, an evil wind fans the illness, (kakal mozon ik') and death comes near; only the priest can stop it.



Akbal is a bad day to start or

to try out anything, because the sons of the night (u mehen akab) are close and can come out of their caves (aktun) to cause trouble. All things undertaken on this day will end up as inferior as the ancient mud men who were made from the watered ground (akzah). Illnesses of the soul will become much worse, driving one mad (u co akab) with terror of unseen opponents.



Kan is a blessed day for

finishing projects and celebrating ripe (k'an) marriages and trading partnerships. Ancestors and village guardians (kanil) are thanked and given sacrifices of wine and roasted foods, for protecting one's own lineage. Guardian stones (acantuns) can be renewed with flowers on this day. Blessings for milpa guardians should be performed, so that maize will fill many cloth bags (sabucan) at the harvest.



The great sky rain serpent is

Chicchan, and this day brings forth his forcefulness (chiich). The clear vision of Chicchan can be called upon to discover powerful enemies who have kept themselves hidden (chictahal) and show them to everyone. People who are suffering brought it upon themselves by being far too forceful with others (ah chich), and the prayers of those others brings sickness in retaliation.



Cimi is the day of the

dead. Those who have recently suffered the death of someone close may fall senseless with pain and longing (zac cimil). The dead should be honored on this day, and ignoring them will anger them into sending sickness (cimil). Angry ancestors may even assist one's enemies by dreaming them to make harassing demands in public (u tza cizin).



Many people think

Manik is the day of the deer, but my uncle says that in truth it is a day for buying (manik), selling (konik), and lending (mahantik). Manik is a strong day to start new ventures in general (neek'), especially fresh marriages (hoynak'). The best sign of this day is the curled white flower (sak nicte) that a man gives to the woman he desires as a wife.



Lamat: Hatreds that were

submerged (laman) come into the light, there is no stopping their re-emergence. Those who have neglected their ancestors suffer in the home as even their cooking pan (xamach) turns against them to burn and injure. The sick never get well on a amat day; without medicines or the attention of shamans they are swiftly overcome (laamal) by evil spirits.



Muluc is a day for thinking

(tukul); even very difficult problems will be solved if one thinks them all the way through (muuk). The wisdom written in the priest's books (kulem zib) will be clearest if read on this day. Some problems can never be solved, however, and on Muluc one sees this clearly and knows to run away (luk'ul) rather than struggle in vain. The sick gain strength if they rest and meditate.



During Oc days, journeys

(chekoc) should be undertaken, both for trading and visiting family. The priest travels to the ancient city on the sacred road (sac be) to speak with our founding ancestors. Those whose faith (ocolal) has faltered can pray and renew themselves on this day. Oc is the best day for planting maize (co). For the sick this is an evil day, pestilence (oc na kuchil) falls upon the weakest ones.



Chuen: Spirits of the watery

underworld are watching, and burnt offerings (chukab') of deer fat and copal should be made. ah-Puch's path is aloneness (chen), so it is unwise to begin new things on this day without the counsel of one's lineage-father, who is the trunk of his lineage (chun). Sickness lingers (ch'uyul), without growing worse or better, so the sickly should rest.





**K'awil:**  
Here is  
the lord

of lineages who opens the portal to our ancestors and raises the stairway from this world to the garden of the gods. Some people say this day *is* the stairway, Eb, but that is not so. K'awil is a day for living family (lak'tzil) and the newly dead. Illness arrives (k'uchul) when ancestors are made to beg for their sustenance (kawilyah). The soul-essence (c'ulel) of sacrifices is pleasing to this god; he is most satisfied with burnt blood and pine incense.



**Home and  
the hearth  
(koben)**

are honored on Ben. Forgotten ugliness in marriage is now remembered and may cause hurled accusations (pulben), but a new hearth fire can be kindled on Ben days, to burn away old hurts and bring new warmth. New huts should be commemorated (kinbezabal) on this day, and many people find it good for making marriage proposals and holding weddings. The sickly grow better if they stay home, eat wisely, and are cared for by the herbalist and their living family.



**ix is the  
day for  
women**

(ix), and it is proper to remember one's mother and female ancestors with gifts of flowers, jewelry and clothing. A wife's ancestors may resent her marrying out of her lineage and attack her children with ugly confusion (nixpahal) so that they turn against her with lies or even fists. Sometimes ah-Puch releases his evil black ants (xulab) to attack the souls (pixan) of sickly women as substitutes (kex) for Mother Moon, who he would like to kill. Dutiful children stay home to guard their mothers.



**Men days  
show  
blessings**

on matters of spirit. Lineage-shamans (ahmen) finish their training on Men days, and if one questions a shaman on this day, their answers will be much clearer. For those who have well kept their family shrine, benefits flow from one's founding ancestors (p'en). On Men the spirits of one's founders may injure or even kill people of outsider families who are disrespectful to their lineage (emal), but they also torment their own who are stupid or neglectful of them.



**On Cib  
days the  
elders are**

honored, especially one's father (cit), with little songs and good words. It is also a day to renew marriages with steaming fresh bread from the sacred earth oven (pib). Troubles and illness arise from disrespect toward one's elders, angering them into making humiliations (cip) and denials of one's proper place in the family (chibil). Gifts of honey, creamed honey, chewing tobacco, smoking tobacco, and medicine for gum worms cause frustrations to dissolve away (yib').



**Cab an  
days are  
strongest**

for barter and trade (yalcab) and are very good days for savoring the sweet things of the land (u cil cab). Those who have forgotten to properly bless their fields or their houses can do so on this day to clear away their debt (hanil). Illness and trouble come from devouring too much food and drink, until one falls senseless in a heap (chil-cabal).



**Etz'nab:  
Nothing  
but fights**

and troubles (dzata) come on Etz'nab. Enemies from the past return strong, seeking to cause destruction (zat). Slanderers will try to do harm, "biting" like rattlesnakes (tzab) with clever lies and twisted truths. It is wise to give a rich sacrifice such as a turkey (cutz') to one's ancestors so that they will be watchful and strike ferociously to destroy dangers.



**Cawac is  
a day for  
finishing**

ongoing projects (chowak). However, new tasks started on Cawac never end, they just dangle (ca'aw). On this day one weighs one's achievements, and the wise sacrifice cacao to their ancestors, for their assistance. Those who are ungrateful for their blessings or try to claim the work of others as theirs become ill by their own swollen importance (waak).



**Ahau is  
the day of  
strength**

for men (ah) and men's matters. Ancestral lineage-fathers are honored at each family's ancestral shrine (uaybil), and lineage-songs are sung. Lineage-fathers and the caçique are honored with a feast (uahaluah). Troubles and sickness come from not respecting the powerful men, forcing them to sit in judgement (xotom ahau) until they receive their due.



**Forgotten  
troubles  
see the**

like mud (xix) in a flooding river, making anything undertaken difficult or even worthless (mixba'al) on Imix days. It is also bad to make choices, because one will want to say no to everything (mix), without thinking. Illness on these days comes from having swept away (miiscah) festering problems without solving them, and they return to plague.

