Growing

On the day 17 Ch'en 9 Muluc I was eleven years in this world, and K'aakik' said to me,

"You are a good work-son, more attentive than I was."

"When did you choose this path?"

"It was chosen for me, by my father." He made a face to close off any more questions, and I wondered how anyone could walk such a difficult path without choosing it.

"Well," he said, finally. "You are ready to speak, in the circle. And I will begin teaching you new stories."

"Very good," I said.

"Here now, something new." He handed me a long, thin bird bone with tobacco stains on one end. There were tiny picture-words along one side, these were carved into the bone and filled with black ink to be clear, but I did not know those symbols or their meanings. K'aakik' slid this bone out of a deer-leather sheath made for it, and then he withdrew a second bone for himself. Into these he inserted shreds of torn tobacco, I do not know what kind that was. My father's older brother grows twenty kinds of tobacco in his milpa, and I think only he knows them all.

K'aakik' showed me how to take a burning twig from the fire and light the tobacco within the bone tube, and then we smoked. The blue smoke bit at my throat, it clawed inside my mouth, and I coughed it all out. He laughed a little and said,

"This is strong, perhaps you're not ready? Try again, and hold it."

I drew a little smoke into my lungs, and my head grew dizzy, and I let the smoke go out my nose. Then I grew even dizzier, and the clawing of the fumes did not so much matter, and K'aakik' said, "Good. Now that you will live here, you must get used to smoke."

That evening I returned to my father's hut to sleep for the last time. My mother's roast rabbit and baked squash were delicious, there were little onions and carrot pieces in rabbit gravy, and she made frothing cacao for my father and me. Though she said nothing about it, I knew she was unhappy that I was moving. My father said,

"Be careful of that tobacco. Too much makes people odd in the head."

I was surprised by his words and then realized he could smell the smoke on me. Many men smoke in the village, but it was only then that I thought

about the smell that clung to them. Cigars are different from pipe-smoke, my father has a different smell after he takes his cigar, at night.

"How did K'aakik' become the storyteller?" I asked him. Even then, at eleven years old, I did not ask my father many questions. It was work for him to see me, and I did not want to anger him as did my brother, so often.

"Hmm," said my father, and he thought about this. "His father was the old storyteller, but then he became sick. The priest spoke to the old man's ancestors, and they said that he would die soon. So he made his youngest son learn the stories. That was an ugly thing, some people are crazy."

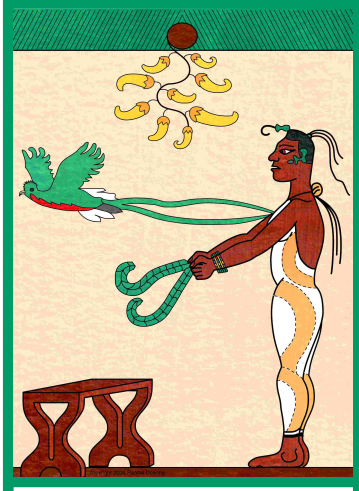
My mother said, "People say he made K'aakik' learn too quickly, the boy cried constantly from the beatings."

This made my father angry, his voice rose as he said, "The old man stuffed all those words into that boy's head in just three years. He beat him in front of everyone and called him a piece of filth. You don't do that to a boy." He said this very forcefully, my mother just nodded.

Then my father saw me staring at him, his defense of the storyteller was a second surprise, and he said, "Eat. If he tries to stuff your head too fast, or beat you, you just come to me."

The next morning my father woke me just before dawn. "Time to go," were his words. He looked at me from the side of his eyes and then took up his shucker and net bag and went to harvest his milpa. I went to the river and collected some wild flowers and put them in an urn for my mother, then I took all my things to the storyteller's hut. My mother was still sleeping, and I was quiet when I left. Her spirit would fly to the mountains, I was certain it would leave as soon as she woke and found me gone. That day was 18 Ch'en 10 Oc, a good day for journeys, and I said little prayers for my ancestors to protect her quetzal-spirit in its flight.

Later that day my father brought my sleeping bench to the storyteller's hut, and he and K'aakik' put it in place under one of the windows, so I would receive sweet air. My father and the storyteller said a few words, and I put my things under the bench. Because it was harvest, the storyteller and I went to his milpa and picked maize and squash and beans, and when we returned to his hut I told stories while he listened and corrected. That evening, after his wife made our dinner, K'aakik' smoked a great amount of strong tobacco, until his eyes were glazed. The smoke went out the window over my sleeping bench, but I still breathed enough of that to make my head twirl.



"Welcome to your second year on the storyteller's path," K'aakik' said.

On 4 Zac 10 Cib the storyteller gathered up nine masks for the story, "The War Between the Cities." He moved slowly and looked at the faces for a long while before he brought them down.

"Don't clean these," he said. "I will prepare them." He set them on the bench in the mask room and took up a soft cloth. "Tonight is a dangerous storytelling. So, we eat nothing, and we do not go out. We drink water only, and we do not smoke." I did not smoke much, anyway, because of my father's warning, and I was pleased not to receive the storyteller's smoke.

K'aak'Ik' cleaned the masks slowly and carefully, turning them and holding them first very close and then at arm's length. All morning he stood at our work-bench, brushing and polishing and making small repairs. When he was finished he built a large fire, and we sat and sweated while he watched the wood burn. His eyes were narrow and gleaming, and the flame-light moved on them in a hard way that made them look like little embers, and the weight of the telling that was to come pushed out of him and crushed against me. My place for that day was to sit and be quiet, to absorb the heat of the fire and to bear some of the weight of the story as it rested on my strong work-father. Receiving this burden wearied me to sleep, most of that afternoon I was insensible, but because of this resting I was alert when K'aakik' shook me awake that evening. He had brought out a different bird-bone pipe, this one was short and had a fat mouth at the end, and into this he stuffed bits of some black plant that stank greatly.

"Don't breathe any of this," he said. "Not even a tiny whiff." Then he twig-lit the black weed and sucked in the smoke, and his face swelled an angry red. He tilted his head back and blew the swirling cloud upward, and it drifted out the ceiling-hole. Two wads of this vile stuff K'aakik' smoked, with each puff he held each breath for a long while, until the veins in his face stood purple against red. Great heat seemed to come from him, his body burned from the black weed, and I had to sit back and draw my legs up to my chest.

As Father Sun was leaving this world, K'aakik' put away the black-weed pipe and brought out white paints and erased his face.

"Help me bring the masks." And this was the sound of his voice: it was rasping and harsh. It was as though he was someone else, an old and frightening man who might be a sorceror.

He handed me four masks, and he took the other five, and we went to

the story circle and set them down and made a low red fire. Next to the pole K'aakik' stood without moving, and I sat on the stump that was my place. Many people came to hear the story, maybe three hundred people came, and the world was dark before they were seated. Then K'aakik' looked up and made a rumbling noise in his throat that stilled everyone. He put on the mask of our ancestors, drawing it slowly over his whitened face, and then he opened his eyes and began the storytelling.

There are only a few stories told in this solemn way, they are all stories of great destruction. "The War Between The Cities" is long, and K'aakik' told it with great forcefulness in his buzzing voice. I had heard parts of it before, but my mother did not like me to hear it, as a child, and we always left before it was finished. This is what I heard that night, in the complete story: the pride of our ancestors when they made their bargain with the lords of the night, endless sacrifices in return for gifts of magic to break the strength of the people of the mountains. The storyteller's voice was filled with pride when he spoke for our fathers in the city. But each of ah-Puch's killing gifts brought with it a curse, and these unfolded one after the next, and our ancestors turned against each other and destroyed themselves. It was the cries of the savaged warriors that filled my ears, their spears fell on the night lords and drew only laughter. It was the screams of trampled lineages that I heard, and the despair of the powerful men when they realized what fools they had been. I was shaking to hear this story to its end, because of what I had seen in Ch'ulwitznal, the silence of the dead city. The truth of the old words was terrifying.

And the people at the story circle also felt the words in their hearts. No one spoke, the children hardly moved, as the storyteller danced and laughed in the back of his mouth when he was speaking for ah-Puch, laughed at our ancestors for the arrogance of their pride. When the story was done the faces of many people were pale, and there were two twenties who were weeping, and the storyteller removed his last mask and made a brave smile through his white paint. Then he handed me four masks, and he took the other five, and we left the circle. Back in his hut he washed the paint from his face and went to sleep. Such was the weariness of K'aakik', after that tale of the end of our ancestors and their city.

I did not rest well that night, thinking about the telling. There was too much death in the story, too much suffering, the old words broke my sleep and made my heart small.

The next morning K'aakik' slept very late, and I went to speak with my

mother. She was sweeping my father's hut, and though she greeted me well, it was hard to hear her, in my worries.

"What's wrong, son?" she said.

"There was a telling, last night."

"I know the story."

"I did not realize how completely ah-Puch smashed down our ancestors." This was the shadow of my fears, if the night lord could crush the great cities in their time of strength, our little village was nothing, he could claim us all whenever he liked.

My mother moved her broom a little and pushed the dust out of my father's house. "Our ancestors ceased to worship Father Sun and Mother Moon," she said. "They wanted death more than life, so they turned to the lord of murder. There was no one to protect them when they embraced ah-Puch, and he embraced them in turn."

For a long time I shaped my fears with my tongue, it was very hard to push them out under Father Sun's face. "There is no way to win," I said. "Our ancestors embraced ah-Puch, and he destroyed them. Now we fight against ah-Puch, and still he murders us."

I could see my mother did not enjoy speaking of these things, it was only my great fears that brought out her thinking in this matter.

"This is how it is," she said. "If we are respectful of Father Sun and Mother Moon, they will fight for us, and we lose only a little to the night. Otherwise, we could lose everything."

"This is no good, it is no use to fight if you cannot win," I said, and I left that comfortless place. It was fighting that I was thinking of, my boy's heart wished to fight the night lords, somehow. But our ancestors raised obsidian against ah-Puch, and they were broken. In their time of greatness, their spears were useless, their magic was weak, their prayers were empty.

That was a foul day in the milpa, harvesting and shucking maize, hanging it to dry.

On the day 2 Keh 2 Ix a girl toddler was killed in our village. It was a jaguar that murdered Yax Ich, as she wandered at the edge of the jungle. The hunters searched all day, but they found only tracks. The priest called upon the gods and the goddesses, he called upon our ancestors in divining, and then he said, "This is one of ah-Puch's servants, it is wrapped in darkness." He performed sacrifices of turkeys and copal, honey and white flowers to give

more strength to our ancestors in the guardian stones, and he prayed to Father Sun and Mother Moon to defend our village. The family of the dead girl made a great pyre in their lineage-compound, and they called for the spirit of the toddler to return from the jungle. The priest performed a divination for the lost one but could not find her in the garden of the gods. Her family grieved for many days, knowing that their daughter's tiny soul was only a toy for ah-Puch's vicious servants.

That same night I dreamed of the killer bat camazotz', he flew in circles with the head of the dead toddler bobbing in his mouth. His laughter was sickening, and after this nightmare my heart ached for many days.

On 0 Pax 2 K'awil there was a celebration for the seating of the new month, and K'aakik' told the seating story, "The Calling of ix-Pax." This is told during the feasting and dancing, people listen as they wish to the poems and the songs in the story and then return to the celebration. When the god's festival was over, K'aakik' took the masks for that story back to his hut and hung the mask of the babies on the story pole. So it was that my first storytelling was announced.

2 K'awil is the day for the children's story, "The Time the Babies Grew Fangs and Hunted Their Parents." When Father Sun began to leave this world I painted my face white, saying the little prayer K'aakik' had taught me, and we carried the seven masks for this story to the circle. As the children and their mothers arrived they sat to watch, and I had to stand by the storyteller's pole and look at no one. All that time I felt like a lizard whose skin was too tight. Though I think only fifty people came to the story circle, it seemed that all the people of the world were watching.

When Father Sun left our world, I pulled the storyteller's mask over my face and found that my head had become empty. For a time as long as my whole life I searched, seeking the stories that were no longer there. Then a child coughed, and with that sound the first words of the story burst from my mouth. The little cougher yelped and clutched his mother, who laughed and held her son. Other children stared at me with huge eyes. I spoke the first part of the story and danced close to the people, and then I took up the mask of ah-Puch, with its fangs and obsidian eyes, and I put it on and growled. Many children shouted, one boy cursed the mask of ah-Puch, many raised their arms at me. Some of the women laughed, and some frowned, but the story grew from my heart and my head and my tongue. I stepped from place

to place in the Dance of the Babies, as K'aakik' had taught me, and sometimes I jumped from side to side. I raised my voice so that the children leaned away, and I whispered so that they had to lean closer. Through their eyes, through the eyes of their mothers, I saw the story take root in their hearts. At the end of the telling I dropped three ears of black maize into the fire, a sacrifice to ah-Puch in place of the children of our village. Then the story was over, and the people left the circle, and I took up the masks. At that time I saw the priest standing across the center of the village; he had been watching the telling from over there. He walked away, then, and I could not see his face to know if he was pleased or not.

My mother was one of the last people to leave the story circle; in truth I had not noticed her, in my fear of performing a poor telling.

"That went well," she said. "The story was strong."

"The faces of the people bring out the words," I said.

She nodded at the maize ears burning in the fire. "That is how we hold back the night, son. With good words, and sacrifices. This is how we make ourselves strong."

"Yes," I said. I knew this was true, I had thought such things myself. But I still wished to hurl darts at spirits, or slap them with strong curses, like the priest.

When I returned to the storyteller's hut, K'aakik' was sitting near the fire, watching the flames and smoking mild tobacco. He waited until the masks were on their pegs before he said, "You remembered the words perfectly, and the dances. A good telling. But I could see you behind the masks. The audience must see the story-people and not the teller; they must hear the story words and not your growls."

"You were growling, when you were speaking ah-Puch's words," I said.

"No, you heard ah-Puch growling," he said. "It was a boy out there tonight, playing with his audience. From now on it must be a storyteller in the circle, planting our ancestors' words."

To this I said nothing. K'aakik' was not a severe work-father, his criticisms were painful to bear. "I didn't realize," I said at last.

"That is why I'm telling you," he said, there was amusement in his voice. "Smoke?"

"No, thank you," I said.

I lay facing the wall that night, thinking. The only way to tell stories as

K'aakik' wanted was not to hear each story myself as I spoke it, but only to tell it for others. It was a dry path, the way he walked it, but I knew that for those who listened the words were nourishing. I would live, then, in the thin place between our ancestors' words and the hunger of my people. The way of K'aakik' reduced me to no thicker than a mask, no thicker than a layer of white paint, was my last thought before sleeping.

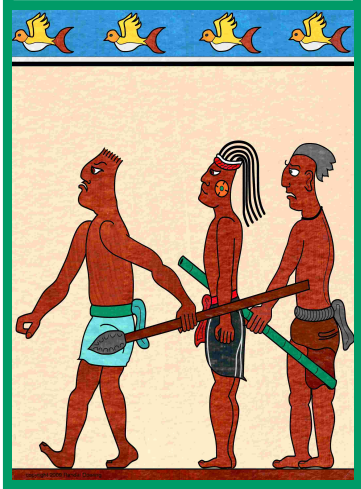
It was not long after my first telling, on the day 18 Pax 7 Oc, that a group of hunters came to the village on the river from Chacwitz. With them came Atlatla. 7 Oc is a very good day for journeys, and my brother and the hunters arrived safely and in good health.

When I heard that Atlatla had returned, that afternoon, I abandoned the storyteller's hut and went to our lineage-compound. My mother and aunts were there, and my father's older brother, but my father and his oldest brother were in the milpas. All of us gathered around my brother, who stood near our ancestor-shrine. And this was what was odd about him: he stood stiff with his legs bent against us, not an oldest son in his own home but a stranger, threatened. He was dressed as he had been the day he left, with his plain waist-cloth and a pair of tough sandals, but it was only his clothing that was the same. He was fourteen and taller, his skin was darkened by many days under Father Sun, his face had become handsome but hard. The arms and legs of my brother were chafed and scraped from tree-climbing, many scars curled across his skin. My mother brought him tamales, and my oldest aunt gave him tree-fresh cacao, and he accepted those things with good words. For my aunts he made little jokes, and then they returned to their huts, and my uncle went to tell his brothers Atlatla had returned. After our mother took his plate and cup inside to wash, my brother turned to me. His eyes had become black and piercing like those of the priest, I was held until he said,

"A wise choice. The storyteller's path will keep you safe from many troubles." His voice was as I remembered, he still threw words like little darts.

"We didn't hear you were returning."

"I have something for you, later," he said. "Your real gift, after the others are given." He turned from me, and that was all. I could not think of anything to say, and his stiffness did not let anything be said anyway. Not long after this my father came from his milpa, from all the twig-welts he bore he must have run through the jungle, and my brother for the first time looked pleased, and embraced him.



And this is what I felt: surprise at these actions, and the sting in my heart that said Atlatla had returned and reclaimed his place.

That evening my lineage had a feast, there was stewed turtle and many sliced fruits from our orchards. The seeds my brother had sent to my father years before had not sprouted in the valley soil, but Cab Coh lineage has its own fruit trees, and we ate very well. There were many questions about Chacwitz and the mountain people, and though Atlatla answered them all, his voice was pressed-down and flat, and it seemed he did not enjoy talking about that place.

My father's oldest brother squeezed my brother's shoulder, which is something he almost never does, and he said, "You look stronger. We will have to see some of this tree climbing."

My brother just nodded, but I think he was greatly pleased at this.

After the feast, when my little family was alone, Atlatla said, "I have things for all of you."

In his travelling bundle he had brought brightly-embroidered women's clothing for my mother, to remind her of her village, and three fluffy quetzal feathers. For our father he brought a granite axe head; there is none of this hard stone in the valley, and our father's pleasure was plain on his face. For me he brought a wasp as big as my fist that he had carved out of fragrant cedar wood. "The wasps in the mountains really are this big," he said when he handed me the carving.

"Yes, and they sting like it, too," said our father, and we laughed.

My brother tossed his gift bag next to his sleeping bench. "It is good to be home," he said.

As I returned to the storyteller's hut, I felt the eyes of many people upon me. If I looked at anyone they just looked away or made a masking smile, but I knew what was being said:

"We will see now, what he is like, this oldest son of the dying lineage. We will see if their curse has weakened, or did it become stronger?"

That night I smoked strong tobacco with K'aakik', to drive away the whispers. Even though my head was fogged, I thought before I went to sleep that the path of the treeclimber is not a very respected one. My brother feared the envy of others against our lineage, and if there was such envy, he was not walking a protected path.

The next day Atlatla climbed all the different kinds of trees in our orchards and brought down many ripe fruits. He did this quickly, with the assistance

of some stout sticks that he lashed onto his feet and a piece of cord that he looped around the trees to help him climb. It is true that anyone can climb many-limbed trees, but smooth-skinned trees require skill to climb, and some trees have sharp spines as well. My brother could ascend all these, and my father and uncles were pleased to see how easily he could do this. Many fruits are wasted because they fall and are smashed, or they fall at night and are eaten by animals. By climbing to check the fruits, my brother could ensure a richer harvest for our lineage.

"This is superb," said our father. "When you are ready, I will take you into the jungle and show you some wild trees whose fruits are being wasted."

"I heard you can claim honey, as well," said my father's oldest brother.

"Yes," said my brother. "There is a chant I learned."

"Very good," said my uncle, it was respect that was in his voice. Wild honey is a rich gift for the powerful men, not many people know how to gather it. This was a better path than treeclimbing, my brother had after all chosen a good path for himself. But it is true that it was also hard to hear so many compliments for him, when nothing was said of my storytelling. In every lineage, the oldest brother gets everything. When I went back to the storyteller's hut I smoked with K'aakik', for a while. His strong tobacco was good for my aching heart, because it suffocated the heart worms invited by jealousy.

That evening a powerful man visited our lineage-compound. His name was Te Ek', he is speaker for howler monkey clan and lineage-father of the powerful Chac Ceiba lineage. He met with the Cab Coh men, they all had a little discussion about my brother. The meeting was short, and Atlatla did not speak, since he was still a boy. It was my mother who told me of this meeting, the next morning, when I came to speak with her. She had poured drinks for the men and heard everything that was said.

"So, was he pleased about Atlatla's paths?" I asked.

"With such men, who knows what they think? They know how to talk much and say nothing. Anyway, everyone must wait until your brother goes through the river ceremony before they say anything, because boys so often leave their paths to do something different when they become men."

"Hmm," was all I said. It was surprising that our clan's speaker came to talk about a treeclimber at all. Many boys climb trees, though not as well as my brother. I thought that in truth Te Ek' visited to hear of this oldest son returned from the mountains, and to see for himself my brother's new face.

"Now that your brother is on his path, and tanned and strong, the girls will be watching him."

"Maybe," was all I said, and then I returned to K'aakik'. My mother could fan fires all she wished, but I did not think my brother would escape our curse with just a little wind-burn and a few tree-climbing scars.

Several days passed, and I only saw my brother in the mornings as he and my father went into the jungle. Near the village, all the important trees belong to this lineage or that one, but farther away, the fruiting trees are wild. It was those Atlatla could pluck. Because my father was a wood gatherer, he knew where many such trees were, and several wild-bee logs. Those two were away for long days, and though I wished to speak to my brother alone, there was no chance for this.

Here is what happened instead: on the day 8 K'ayab 4 Ahau Atlatla came to me, before Father Sun rose. He just reached through the window of the storyteller's hut and flicked my ear until I woke.

"Come on. Hurry." He did not say more but pulled his hand away and waited until I tied on my waist-cloth and sandals and came outside. Harvest was over, only the orchards had to be tended, for that moment we were alone by the storyteller's hut.

"I have a gift for you, but we must hurry."

"Where…" I said, but already he was moving toward the jungle. I had to walk quickly behind him, it was almost running I did.

"Where is your dart-thrower?" I said, but he did not answer. In a few breaths we were moving between the shrubs and trees, on the trail to the black road. Father Sun was returning from the underworld, the sky was beginning to glow in the east, and many animals ran from us as we moved.

"There is a crazed jaguar—" I said, and Atlatla said, "These other animals would not be here if balam was prowling around."

My brother was clever in the ways of animals; I could only accept his words, and pray. When we came to the standing stone he stopped and looked at me, and in his eyes was the hard look I had seen when he first came down from the mountains. I did not like this change I saw in him, this was not the brother who took me to the turtle pens and the story circle, when I was young.

"I told you there are men who want our lineage to die. Do you remember?"

"I remember."

"They hurled their darts all the way to the mountains. Their hate followed me even there. So I sent things to protect you, and our parents. Now I have

brought you something more."

"Which men?" I said. "I only see people who think we are cursed."

"You are not watching the right people," he said. "And don't begin looking, either. That is a burden for the oldest. Now be quiet, and take this."

He crouched down and dug out something from under the standing stone, it was an oiled leather bundle wrapped in palm leaves and tied with twine. He opened it and took out a thin tablet of dark brown wood, three boy's palms across and five palms high. The face of it was covered with little pictures of people, and picture-words.

"This is the song of our ancestors, it is Cab Coh's thirteen-generation song. There are people in the mountains who know how to make marks for words, as our ancestors did. They will even teach others. It is not like here, where only a few may know these things." He said this bitterly, and there he was, the brother I knew, angry at the priest once more. And I was afraid for him, because there were powerful men asking about him, he could not keep such bitterness in his heart.

"For our lineage, I had this teaching-board carved, and I learned the signs," my brother said. "And now I will teach you."

"For our lineage? What about for me?" It was his voice that was troubling, he spoke not to me but at me, to someone I could not see and did not know.

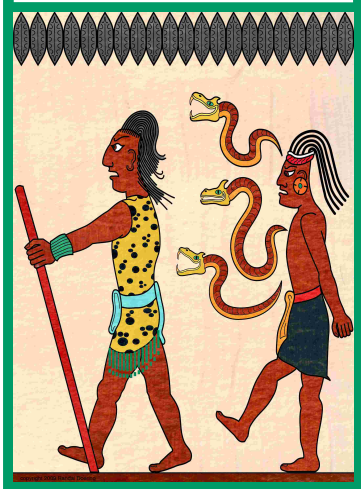
"Little brother, have you never heard our father's words? You are not *you*." And his voice became fierce: "What you are, is, the youngest sprout… of… *our*… *lineage*." His face moved strangely, it was my father's face I was seeing, just under his. I wanted to flee, all the heat from that old beating was still in him, burning his spirit and hardening his heart.

He tapped the words on the standing stone. "These symbols are the spears powerful men throw, in the mat house. They are the old titles. They are the signs of the lords. They break lineage-fathers and make fools of lineage-shamans and reduce respected families to servitude. I must teach them to you soon, while they are strong in my head. We will need them, in the future."

In truth I did not want these signs, my brother gave them an unhealthy heat, and our ancestors had already guided me to a good path. But I saw that Atlatla would not let this idea fall aside. It was my uncle I thought of then, his uncomplaining way of shouldering burdens.

"I will try to learn," I said.

"Good. For now we will keep the song here. I will show you how some of the song-words are also on this stone. Later, our uncle can keep it for you,



if the storyteller's hut is not safe."

"The priest will be angry, if he discovers you are teaching me these things."

"Who will tell? There is no milpa work now, your mornings are empty?"

"Yes."

"Then that is when we will come here. It might not take you long to learn. A few months."

"Very good," I said.

He wrapped the board and put it back under the standing stone. "We will say I am showing you tree-climbing, and you are helping me gather fruit."

And so we raised ourselves against the powerful men.

Only three days later, on 11 K'ayab 7 Akbal, there was another murder in our village. It was a grown woman who was struck down, Chan Chamac was her name, a fer-de-lance bit her when she was going with other women to the river. The dead woman's sister seized a large stick and beat that snake to death, she killed it right there. The lineage-father of the dead woman took the body of the snake and cursed it in front of everyone, and it was burned, and people spat on the hissing pyre. Chan Chamac's smoke rose straight to the fifth world. The priest performed a divination and said her soul had reached the garden of the gods, because of her sister's fast killing of the wicked serpent, and because of the family's strong prayers and many sacrifices.

In truth it did not take many days for me to learn our lineage song and gain knowledge of all thirteen Cab Coh generations. Keeping words in my head was becoming simple for me, my brother was irritated with how quickly I took the song into myself.

"It is no good just to repeat words, like a parrot," he scolded. "You must understand them."

So I said the passages in different order, and then in proper order, and for my own amusement I said all the words from end to beginning. My brother's face became very red, and he said,

"We will see in a month if you still remember." And when twenty days passed I sang the song in its proper way, without looking at the tablet. My brother knew then that I was not merely repeating words but had burned them into my heart, and he gave me the song-board to keep behind my sleeping bench. That day was 17 Kumk'u 7 Muluc, a day for studying sacred teachings; I prepared myself so that we finished that day. By then Atlatla

had also taught me the picture-words for our song, and I could point out the correct ones as I sang. This satisfied him, he placed no more burdens on me.

During those mornings of learning our lineage-song and collecting fruits I asked my brother many times about Chacwitz. He would say only small things about his time there, he spoke of cold winds and terraced fields and hunting for pebbles of dark green jade in the deep stream-beds. He said nothing about my mother's family, or any friends he might have found there. Only once did he mention something unusual, I cannot remember what day it was when he said:

"In Chacwitz they do not tell the stories you tell here. The women of power make their own words for the storyteller. Only the stories of the creation are the same, I think."

"That is crazed," I said. "The stories hold the wisdom of our ancestors, how do they find their way without that?"

My brother was picking fruits high above me, I barely heard him say, "The women of power of Chacwitz *are* crazed. And so are our powerful men. Everyone with power becomes crazed."

"If they don't remember the days of the cities, then they are lost," I said. "They are like animals, living only right now. I hope I never have to meet such bizarre people."

My brother laughed. "Not everything there is cockeyed. There are many clever women." Then he became quiet, and soon after that he climbed down and started back to the village.

"Atlatla, what is wrong?" I asked him, because he did not look well.

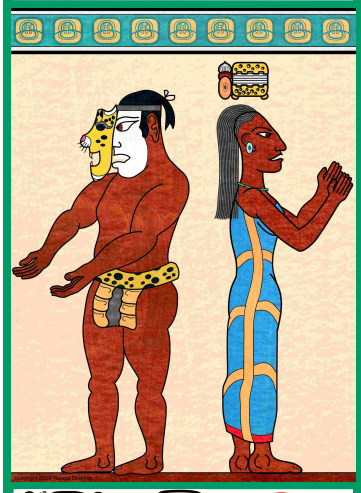
"I feel sick," he said. "I must rest."

"I'll get the priest's work-son," I said. I thought maybe xinan the scorpion had stung him, many scorpions ran up and down the fruit trees he climbed.

"No. None of those people. Not even if I was dying. Do you hear me?"

I nodded and looked away, and we returned to our lineage-compound. For the rest of that day Atlatla was ill in our father's hut, but after another day he became strong again, and we returned to the jungle and resumed our lessons.

A few days after I finished learning our lineage-song the new year began, and after the celebrations and the kindling of the new year's flame it was time to begin planting for another year. My brother worked in our father's milpa



and climbed trees, and I worked in the storyteller's milpa and learned stories. And though we were brothers, I saw Atlatla only when I visited my father's hut, every five or ten days. My mother said things to him about looking at women and seeking a wife, but he always said,

"Mountain women are prettier," or "Mountain women are more clever." To this my mother would smile, such words made her shy. My father always nodded, he had married a mountain woman himself.

On the day 7 Wo 3 Kan our lineage-curse returned with great strength when the wife of my father's older brother miscarried a tiny infant. I had not known she was carrying a baby, since her belly was not showing and no one had spoken of this matter. The murdered one was a boy, he would have been a new sprout for our lineage. The priest's work son came and divined and said it was the night lord Yellow Mist who killed him and that she was certainly summoned by someone. My father's oldest brother called the priest, and though no one told me what they spoke of, they must have hurled a curse at whoever summoned Yellow Mist. On the next day, 8 Wo 4 Chicchan, we burned the tiny body in our lineage-courtyard, and many gifts were sacrificed to ensure that this seed could sprout again. Though the priest's work-son assured us that the infant soul had returned to the tree of life to be reborn, the faces of my lineage were gray as we watched the fire burn.

And it is true that the village quivered with the news of this miscarriage, never had so many gleaming eyes followed me from their corners. My brother had come back from the mountains tall and handsome and strong, the oldest had learned his paths well, but it was only our curse that truly mattered. These looks and the pleasure that hid behind them brought quivering sickness to my belly and mis-beating to my heart. There were only a few people who gave a little nod and seemed honest in their sympathy for our sorrow, all these were howler monkey people. For three months after the miscarriage I hardly left the hut of the storyteller, and when I did it was only to go to my lineage-compound or to tell stories. On that path I wore always the white face paint that took away all pain, and when I looked into the faces of the people it was through a mask, as someone else.

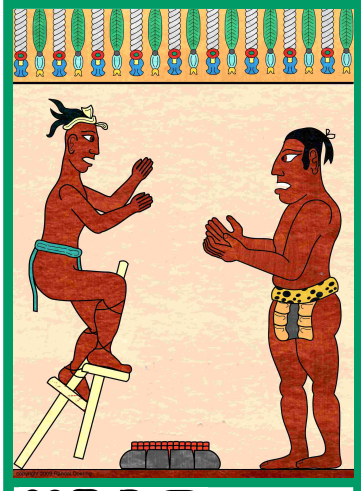
There is something that should be said now, should be made clear: my life with the storyteller did not change much after my brother returned. My eleventh year in this world came to an end, and my twelfth began. During

the day we planted and weeded and harvested the storyteller's milpa, and in the evenings he taught me to walk his path. There are five twenties stories to learn in all, I understood that it would be years to gain them completely. This was not so troubling to me, since life in the storyteller's hut was not difficult. After the one time K'aakik' was displeased I was more careful in my tellings, and after that there was peace between the two of us. K'aakik' was teaching me ten stories each year, thirty was the number I would know by the end of my twelfth year of living. All of these I had to dance to, all of these required knowing which masks to use and when to change them. There were stories for children, there were stories of how animals and plants received their names, there were stories of spirits and monsters. Because I was a boy, I could not yet learn or tell stories of powerful men, or gods.

One thing that changed after Atlatla returned was that I smoked with K'aakik' much more often than my father liked. He complained that I stank of smoke, and so I always sat away from him when I ate with my family. In truth I did not return to my lineage-compound often; it was the storyteller's hut that held warmth. All the heat in my father's hut was for my brother.

Atlatla's words about my place in this world returned to me many times. Once he had cared for me, when I was a child, but now he spoke of me as a Cab Coh sprout. Was this what waited for me, as I grew older? So much worry about lineage, about paths, about powerful men? My uncle bore all these burdens and others, and his heart was neither searing nor cold. It was my father's pounding that closed Atlatla and set fire in him, its roar was all he could hear.

These thoughts about the problems of my lineage and the changes in my brother chased themselves around and around inside me and grew very troublesome. On the night 18 Yaxkin 10 Men I could not sleep because of such concerns. The Chacs were dropping rivers of rain on the village, but its sound on the roof brought no comfort. I prayed all night to my ancestors for alleviation of this swelling of my heart. Though I was profuse in my prayers, and the day 10 Men is a good day for ancestors, there was no rest and no guidance. Long before Father Sun was to awaken I put on an old waist-cloth and old sandals and went into the jungle. My thoughts were not clear, it was not a wise thing I did, it was only my desire to find relief from the hardness of my brother that pushed me. The trail was slick with mud, and the branches and vines were dripping, and I slid many times on the way to the city road.



Balam the jaguar does not go out in the rain, it is said, even black jaguars stay in hidden places on such days, and so I was not shrinking from teeth and claws.

At the standing stone I slowed a little and mumbled my name, but I did not stay in that place. Skin was torn from my toes, blood was taken from my ankles, in the darkness and thick rain there was only blind skidding and stumbling. This was the essence of my thoughts: emptiness, stupidity, hollow ringing from sleeplessness. Nothing was clear or sensible, it was not even certain to me if I was in the rain or fevering on my sleeping bench. When I came to the round stone set into the ground there was trembling in my legs, the cramping of my calves doubled me over gasping. After a time Mother Moon shone a little light through the weakest clouds, and I could see the two carved men sitting and moving their hands as they spoke. The picture-words were still in columns behind the men, nothing had changed from my previous visit, and when I lowered myself onto one knee I could see clearly. The men were clothed in the skin of balam and wore fine sandals, and at their feet were bundles that bore the picture-words for “gift” and “cacao” and “turquoise.” But the meanings of most of the picture-words were still unclear, because of my ignorance.

When Mother Moon was hidden again I stayed kneeling by that stone, praying for strength to bear my burdens. My ancestors offered nothing. The only voices were the Chac-gods, speaking in thunder and lightning. When the rain began to fall hard once more, I stood and returned to the village on the river. Water ran into my eyes and down my body, I did not care. On the jungle path my waist cloth was torn away by a shrub, and I picked it up and carried it into the village. It is only luck that no one saw me in that lunatic way. When I returned to the storyteller’s hut I dried myself off and at last found some small peace in sleep.

At the end of my twelfth year of life I realized that it had been many months since I had heard of any women dying in childbirth. It was my mother who spoke with me and K’aakik’ about what was happening in the village and what was said; she came to visit sometimes and brought us frothing maize or sweet cacao. The storyteller’s wife never spoke to us about anything, she never brought sweets or performed any exceptional duties for us. When I finally asked my mother how long it had been since any woman died giving birth, she said the wise-woman herbalist and the priest had saved the lives

of three women who were attacked by hungry spirits during childbirth in the last year, and not one had died.

K'aakik' said, "It is the first year I can think of, when no women have died giving birth."

"Many women are very pleased that those two are so strong," said my mother. "But there will be angry spirits, because they have not received what they feel is theirs."

After my mother left, K'aakik' did not smoke but stared into the morning fire. It was cool in the valley, because of wind from the white stone mountains, and we sat close to the flames.

"I think your mother is correct," said the storyteller. "There will be a killing soon. Until it happens, we will carry weapons to the milpa." I nodded, and after that we carried spears to our field.

It was only a month later, 19 Mol 5 Cib was the day, that a jaguar killed a boy in Chacwitz. We heard this from traders who said no one knew where the boy was killed, exactly, because he liked to wander the trails around the village. When he did not return to his father's hut, the hunters went searching and found blood and balam's prints. Everyone knew even before our priest did a divining which jaguar had done this, it was the same servant of ah-Puch that had been hunting people for three years. That demon was given a name then, it was called Tzak Balam, or "Summoned Jaguar," since it was a servant of the lords of the night. Because of what I had seen with my own eyes, I knew this name to be truthful, and I understood as did everyone that the killings were not going to stop any time soon.