

Weeding

On the day 6 Sek 11 Lamat my brother was sixteen years in this world and was to become a man. Because there is a river ceremony for this transformation, there was only a small feast in our lineage compound. The

three wives cooked, there was bubbly cacao and roast chili-deer and turtle dumplings and many stringy squashes, steaming. There were even fig tarts, from fruits my brother gathered. No one brought gifts; gifts for men come only with marriage, and responsibility.

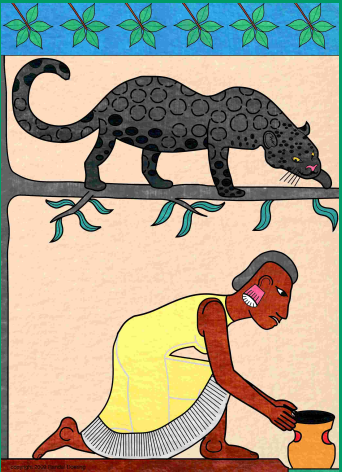
At the feast my brother smiled more than he had in many months, and he spoke with our father and uncles about the river ceremony. Almost two years had passed since his return from Chacwitz, and except for his teaching me our lineage-song, he said only pleasantries to me, only empty words. His days were burned in our father's milpa and in the jungle, gathering fruits, and in the evenings he learned woodcarving from our father and spoke often with our oldest uncle. What they discussed I did not know. Though I lived only a hundred paces from our lineage-compound, I did not see my brother often. My own training required great attention, I was telling many stories in the circle, maybe it was just more comfortable in my own place of strength than in the place of my father and my brother.

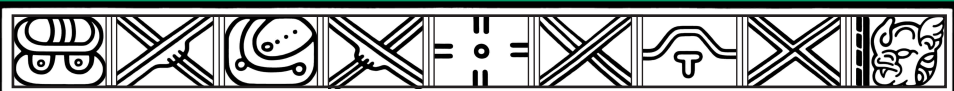
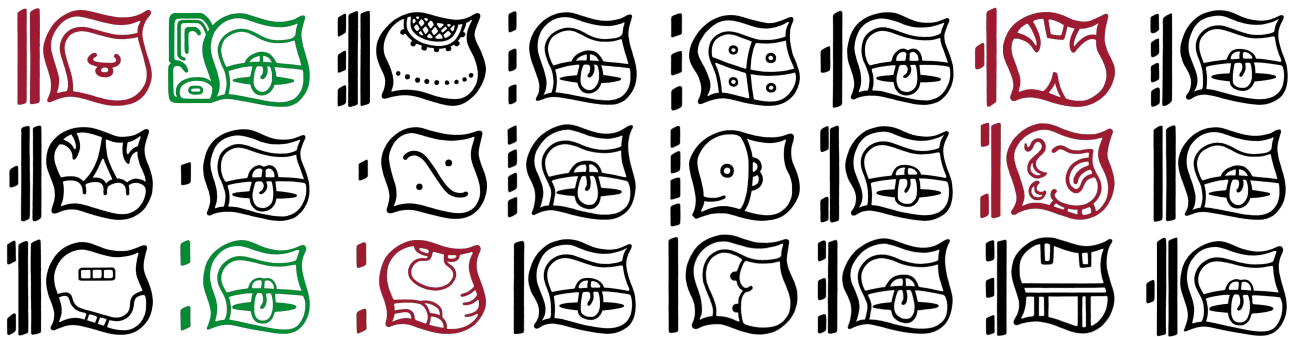
On 6 Yax 7 Lamat the demon-jaguar Tzak Balam killed a girl from Xunich. Chel Can-na was taken near a stream as she went for water, she had risen earlier than the other girls and went alone. Tzak Balam's prints were unmistakable, and he left so much blood that the hunters knew the girl was dead. For two days they tracked this animal through the jungle. Though they found pieces of the girl's clothing, they did not find her bones or the demon-spirit. Our priest performed sacrifices of turkeys and flowers, copal and his own blood to strengthen the guardian stones for our village.

After this murder I rubbed my charm-pouch often and prayed for protection from Tzak Balam.

"There is no use in charms," K'aakik' said when he saw me doing this. "It will only be the gods who crush such a servant of ah-Puch." We did not bother to take spears to our milpa, flint would do no harm to this spirit.

On the day 18 Keh 7 Ahau my brother went through the river ceremony with eight other boys who were also becoming men. And this was the way of the ceremony: it began with nine days of fasting for the nine boys and





five days of fasting for boys who came to watch, and thirteen days of fasting for the men. The day before the ceremony was a celebration in the village center, but it was feastless; not one fruit was eaten nor even one tiny baked quail but only a few drops of mother's milk for the littlest sprouts. There were musicians from all lineages, drummers and flutists and rattlers banged and swayed and spit, and the nine boys danced the Burning Boys dance, and then the unmarried women danced the Water Girls dance. All of this was very pleasant, because of the excitement of the people, and because my brother was one of the dancers and did not stumble.

After the dances the women and girls left the village center to the men and boys. All that afternoon there was more dancing, and smoking, and listening to old men talking about when they were children. At the end of the day the lineage-fathers brought the nine boys into the middle of the village and introduced them, each boy's achievements were named under Father Sun.

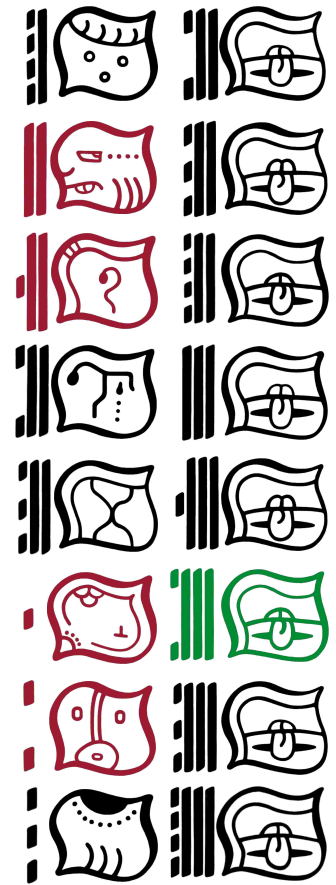
"This is the boy Atlatla, of the lineage Cab Coh," said my father's oldest brother, when it was Atlatla's turn. "Already he has journeyed far and seen many things. When he came of age to choose his path, our ancestors told him in a dream to go to Chacwitz. In the mountains he mastered many kinds of trees, and he has returned to place his feet firmly on the tree-climber's path, and that of the honey-gatherer. He is the oldest son of our lineage and stands tall in the light. Today this boy becomes a man, Atlatla." In truth my brother looked ready and strong, in spite of his fasting and having danced and smoked so much.

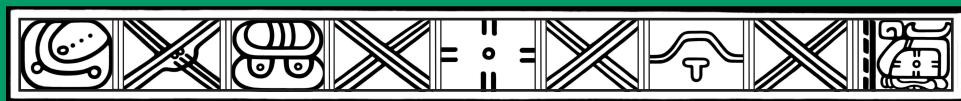
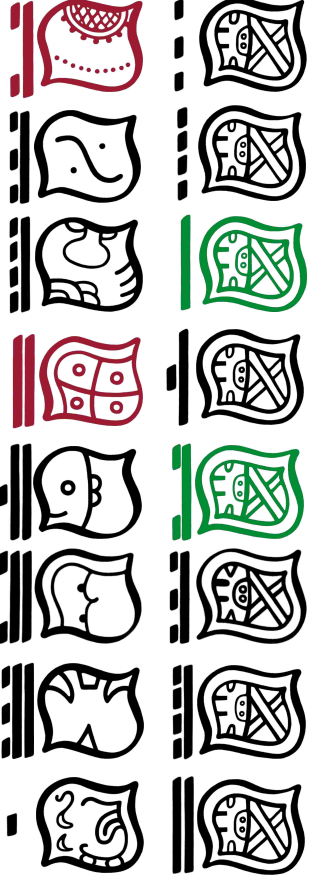
After my uncle's words were finished, the men nodded. If they were thinking of our lineage curse, this was not in their eyes, not on their faces.

The introductions were completed, there were more dances by the men, more smoking and jokes and stories of old times. This continued all night, the center of the village became hazed with smoke. At the end of the night K'aakik' told the story of the death of boys and the birth of men; for this he squatted near the fire circle and spoke quietly so the women could not hear. By dawn Atlatla and the other boys looked very tired, but they were not allowed to sleep; their death still lay ahead of them.

When the story was completed, the priest said, "The gods are calling these boys to the river." At those words the nine boys took their waist cloths off and dropped them into the story circle fire, and then their fathers came to them with pots of red dust and painted them the color of Father Sun. In this way the boys in their nakedness were protected from ah-Puch's servants.

When they were completely painted, the priest led the boys to the river.





And this was his clothing that day: he wore the headdress of ain the crocodile, and on his wrists were feather cuffs my mother had made, and from his waist-sash hung many pouches of herbs. His high sandals were the hide of kan koch, the fer-de-lance, and the tunic and the leggings of the priest were of clean, white cactus fibers. All through the dances and smoking, all through the old men talking and the storyteller's words, the priest carried his bloodwood staff with its copper crown shaped like Father Sun rising. When he was watching, when he was speaking, his face looked always the same, like a stone face in the city. The burdens of his path made him a serious man, like my uncle. I thought that if there was anyone who could defeat the spirit jaguar, it was Puksikal Tok.

The nine boys and their lineage-fathers walked side by side behind the priest, and the other men came with their sons beside them, in order of the lineages. At the edge of the river the priest scattered herbs into the water to keep ain away and then turned to us. The nine boys left their lineage-fathers and squatted on the river bank, facing us. Father Sun was almost risen, his light glowed behind the eastern mountains.

"Today these boys must die," said the priest.

Around me, men murmured prayers to Father Sun.

"Their time as boys is over."

The men around me nodded, many clasped their sons sitting with them. My father tapped my shoulder, this quick touch was what he had for me.

"You have heard the words the storyteller told," the priest said to the nine boys. He raised his staff, and the nine stood and walked into the river so that its waters rose over their hips. The priest stepped beside the first boy, all faced us from the river's embrace.

"Are you ready to die?" the priest said.

"Yes," that boy said, and though his voice was strong, he looked nervous and weary.

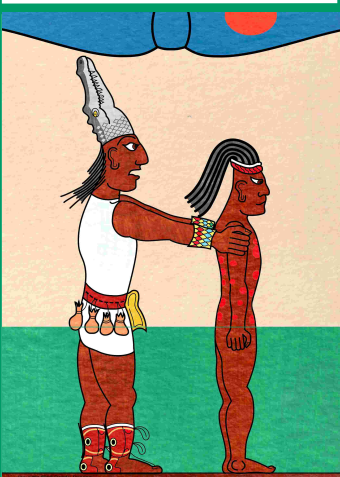
"Are you ready to be reborn?"

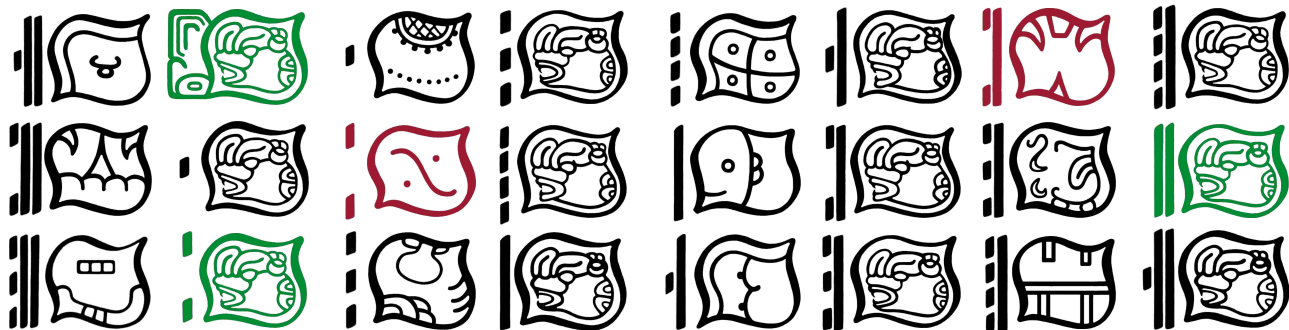
"I am."

The priest took a small bundle from a pouch on his belt and put it in the boy's mouth, and he said something to him that I could not hear. "Father Sun!" the priest called out. "Take this boy and give us back a man!" He put his hand on the boy's head and pushed him down until he was squatting in the water, even his head was submerged.

The priest did this for two other boys, then he came to Atlatla. "Are you ready to die?" he asked my brother.

"Yes."





“Are you ready to be reborn?”

“I am ready,” Atlatla said. His voice was not good, there was hardness that came from his bitterness toward the priest. Some of the men murmured, my brother’s anger was there for all to hear. I did not look at my father or lineage-father, I did not move when men looked at us. Then the priest put an herb-bundle into my brother’s mouth and pushed him down into the river.

When all the boys had been under water for many breaths, the priest said, “Those boys have died, we must call them back from the garden of the gods before they lose their way.”

Everyone knew what to do. There is a little poem that is sung for this ceremony: the song of the dying boys, it is called. It is not long, its words came out of me as I had heard them in other years at the river ceremony. Singing this was painful, the song meant the brother I knew as a child was dying, and only the hardened stranger who came back from the mountains remained. The voices of the men were strong, and though I wished to lose my pain in their singing I could not because of my lineage-curse, because the sideways looks of the men would kill me if I let their voices into my heart.

Then Father Sun rose and poured forth his light, and the howler monkeys began to roar, and many birds squawked and chattered, and the river turned to glowing jade in the clean light. It was in that green flow that my brother was reborn.

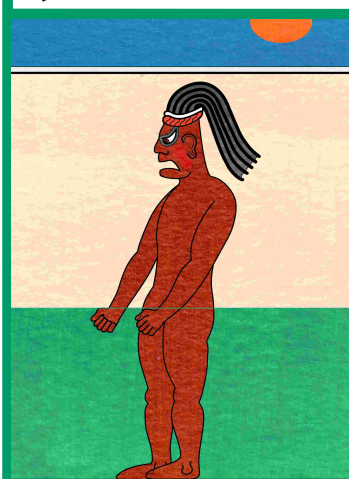
The priest reached into the water, and the first boy stood up. And this was his face: his eyes were ringed with black, he was exhausted, but he looked at us with pride.

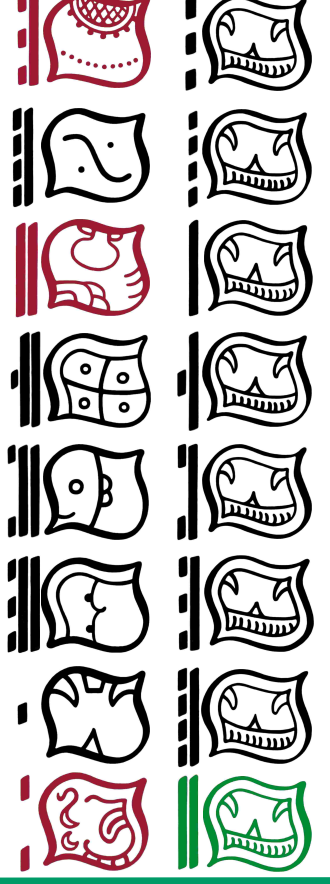
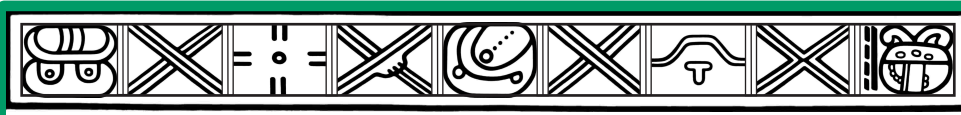
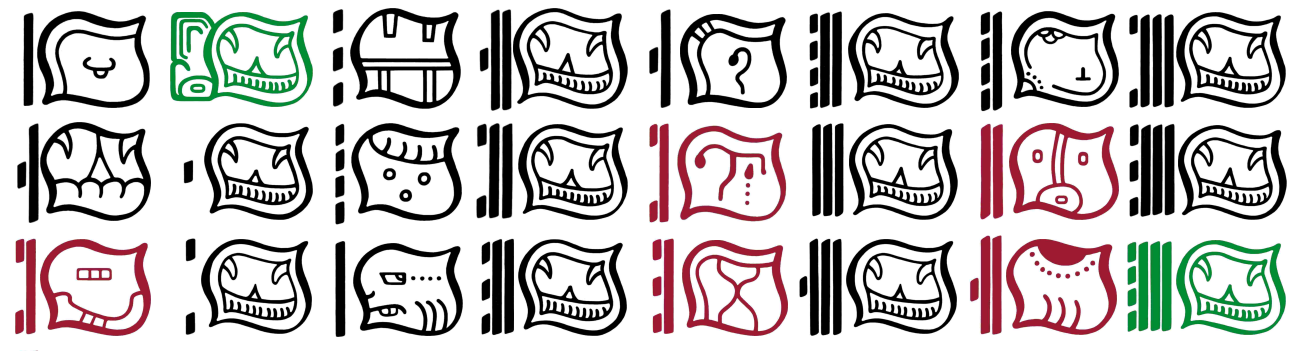
“This is Keh Akot Waxuban,” said the priest, and the new man was seen.

In this way the priest reached to each boy and raised him up, until he came to my brother.

When Atlatla rose his face was a mask from the underworld; his jaw was clenched and he was pale and his eyes were black and glittering, even when he returned from the mountains he had not looked so fearful. It was an anger that was showing, but its kind I did not know. Right there I prayed to our ancestors to protect my brother from the worms eating his heart. Then it was only his own face, very tired and with black-ringed eyes. He smiled a good smile and lifted his chin, but it was too late, he was seen. My father’s hand was on my arm, squeezing very tightly, his press was so tight that I leaned into his side. His breath came out in hard little puffs, he wanted to go to my brother but had to sit still and look strong.

“This is the man Atlatla Cab Coh,” said the priest, and then he went on to the others. When all nine had risen they rejoined their lineages, and we





returned to the village. If there were looks at us I did not feel them, in my concern for my brother.

As we entered our lineage-compound my oldest uncle said, "When I went through the ceremony, the old man who was priest then put chilis in my herb-bundle. That was because I once said something foolish about his headdresses. That was a very long time under the water, for me."

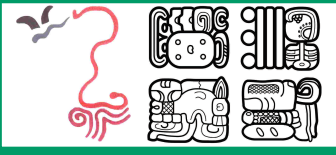
My father laughed at this, as did I, and my uncle looked at Atlatla in a way to encourage him to say anything that needed to be spoken.

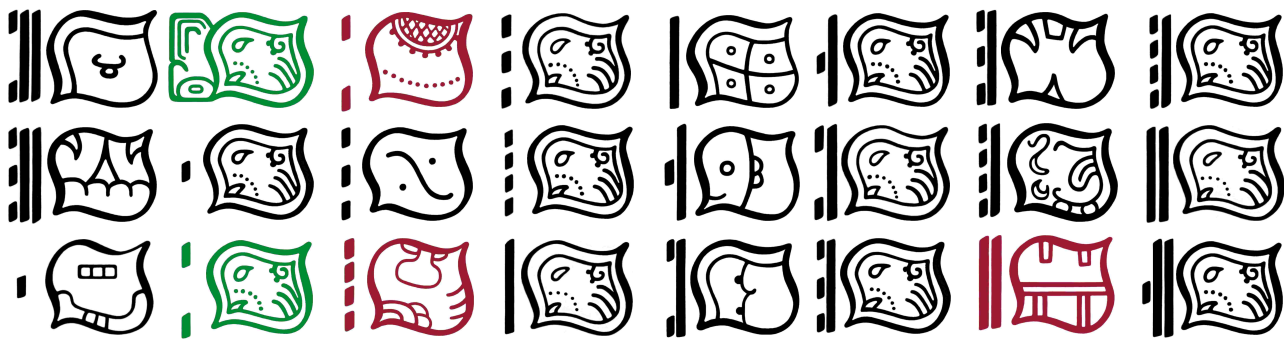
"I am tired," said Atlatla, and he went inside. My uncle gave my father a firm look, and then he left for his own hut. My father stood with his face growing red, and his jaw became set. Because there was only going to be ugly argument and snarling in his hut, I did not return there for many days.

A short time after the river ceremony, on 6 Muwan 3 Lamat of my thirteenth year, there was another murder in our village. It was a boy child, Waxaklahun Cutz', who was torn from us. He was playing with other children outside his family's lineage-compound, they were running along a mossy log when he fell onto the spike of a broken branch and was gored through the belly. His was a death with much suffering, the priest's work-son could only lessen his pain a little. And this is what the other children said: that he did not fall, he was thrown forward by unseen hands. An evil spirit had seen its chance when the boy was beyond the acantuns at dusk.

The priest's work-son performed a ceremony that same night to drive away the spirit, and some men from the boy's lineage axed the log to pieces and burned it. The family of the boy offered many ears of dried maize, five turkeys, and a yellow-green feathered belt, along with endless prayers, to ah-K'awil, and because of this, and perhaps because the boy's lineage-father is strong in the keeping of the holy days, the soul of the boy entered into the garden of the gods and did not become a wretched slave to ah-Puch's servants. Even so, the boy's mother poured soot on her face and fasted until she was weak and slobbering, because she had allowed her children to play on that log. It was the wise-woman herbalist who spoke to her and made her eat again, who gave her back her heart so she could continue living and care for her other children.

The day after this death I went to the place where the log had been, I went to see where this person had been killed. There were crumbled herbs scattered around, these were some of the strong herbs that can be used to wound spirits and even kill them. For many beats of my heart I stood contemplating the injurious ways of ah-Puch and his children. It was a good





thing, to wound his servants and afflict them with misery as they do us. There was pleasure for me, dreaming of the suffering of his favorites at the hands of my people; there was warmth in the thought of the sandals of the priest kicking the faces of vicious spirits. Such were my thoughts, in that place of flower-scented herbs and dried blood.

Here was the great mistake I made in my thirteenth year: I tried to speak with my brother about his anger against the priest. After the river ceremony Atlatla began to quarrel with my father and with my oldest uncle, their frustration with him pushed many words from their mouths. On 4 Pax 8 Cimi there was one of these arguments, when I was visiting for dinner.

“You can’t continue to disrespect the powerful men,” were my father’s words to my brother. “I am told you do not say the greetings, you do not bow to the lineage-fathers.”

“They receive their respect.” Even this small comment brought out Atlatla’s bitterness.

“You cut it short. They will take something else if they do not receive what is theirs.”

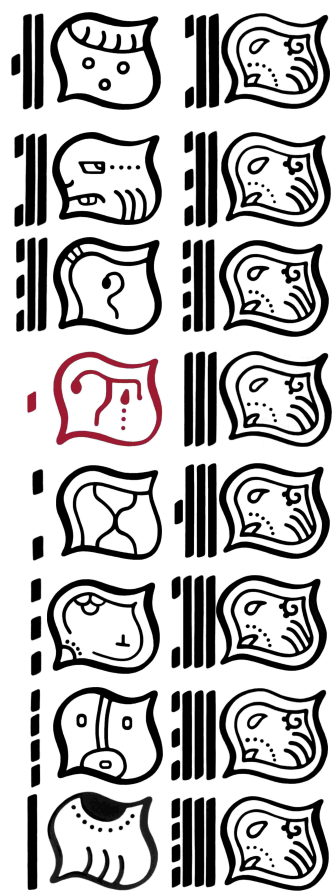
“We are Cab Coh, not mud people. We decide how much is enough.”

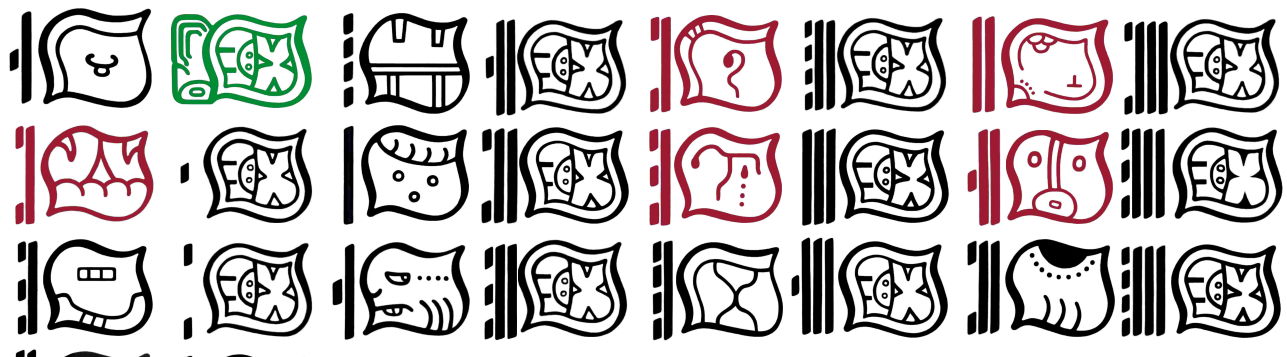
“Just give them what is theirs!” my father said.

And this is what my brother did: he leaned forward and forced his anger down into himself. When he was a boy he was sullen after quarrels with our father, but now he swallowed his anger until his eyes turned to sparkling jewels. It was this look that was on him when he rose from the river, this was the look of hot frustration with no place to burn but his heart. My father saw this, his teeth crushed together, and a burst of heat seemed to come from his entire being. Then I returned to the storyteller’s hut, it was no use staying there. Though my mother listened to everything, she only bore a face of suffering and looked down at the great empty place between these men.

The next day I went with my brother into the jungle to assist him on his path and to seek relief from the smoke and the words, words, words of the storyteller and his way. My brother and I still did this sometimes, but it was always I who came asking and Atlatla who was silent or said nothing important when we went. On the day 5 Pax 9 Manik, a day for planting seeds, I caught the fruits he dropped down and placed them in his carrying-basket. There was nothing in particular in my head to speak of, and after a while I spoke of something our mother had mentioned:

“Last year no women died in childbirth. More than ten died in Xunich, but none here. Everyone says this is because of the wise-woman herbalist





and the priest, their magic is strong.”

My brother ceased his rustling.

“Little brother,” he said. “Shut up about the priest. You know nothing of the priest.”

“Then tell me.”

“You have a good place in the center of the village. Stay there. Don’t look off your path.”

I heard from his voice that he would accept no more questions from me, he was closed once more. He returned to fruit-picking, and I caught the fruits and put them into the basket.

That evening I smoked many wads of tobacco in the storyteller’s hut. I did not understand why my brother so disliked the priest, and it was clear he would never say. Puksikal Tok did his duties as priest, he did not go out of his way to worry my family or my lineage. When my brother returned from the mountains, I thought we would assist each other on our paths, we would be true brothers. But all Atlatla wanted was to be alone in the jungle, alone with the trees, it was his anger he was close to. Some of that anger had always been in him, even as a child, and some came from our father’s fists, and some maybe from the priest’s path, somehow. There seemed to be nothing else in my brother for me, nothing I said could find this new brother; staying away did not break him open nor did speaking to him, he closed me out until I was as far away as the dead.

So much tobacco I smoked that K’aakik’ set aside his own bird-bone pipe and said, “There must be a woman.”

My head was so filled with smoke that I did not have any sense left, I just said, “No one from my lineage comes to the storytellings.” It was this other pain that revealed itself, the truths within me were beginning to run on twisting paths.

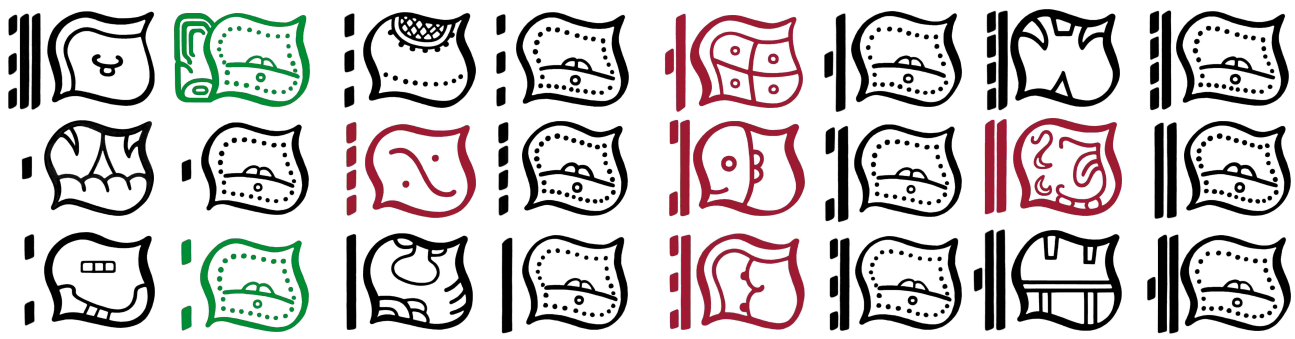
“Grown men, coming to listen to children’s stories?”

“My brother was a boy when he returned from the mountains. Everyone was excited for his tree-climbing. For storytelling, they say nothing.”

He looked at me as if considering something, then he lowered his head a little. “Your uncle visits sometimes when you are out, to ask how you are doing. Perhaps we both thought the other was saying something. You are doing well, Maxam. You bring pride to this path.”

Maybe I nodded a little at this compliment, I do not remember. The strong tobacco suffocated my thoughts and took me away from all pains, all worries, all fears. My brother did as he wished, and the Cab Coh men clucked over him and gave him their hearts, and I followed the path I had





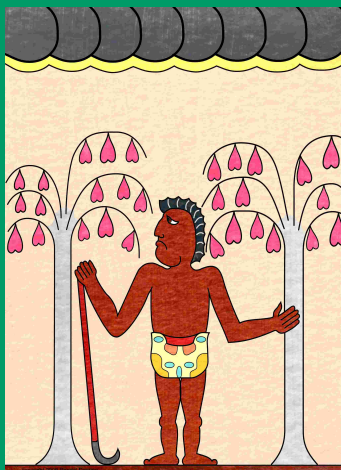
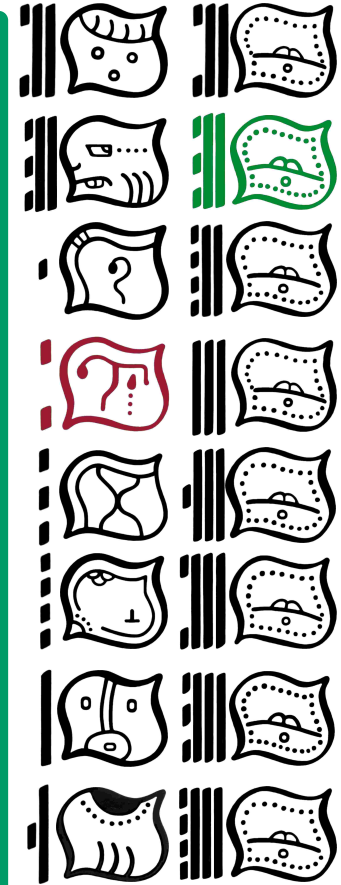
chosen and fought to become stronger in its ways.

For my thirteenth year there were eight new stories to learn. These were words about farmers, hunters, lineage-fathers and other paths. I continued to tell stories of animals and plants, of monsters, and stories for children. After my discussion with K'aakik', when he pulled a little pain from my heart, he was more careful to speak to me when I was doing well and when I was not. He also stopped smoking so much and visited the hut of his wife in the evenings, sometimes. She still did not smile or bring tarts or other tasty foods when she came to cook for us, but she did say something about how I was becoming "a little meatier," and she spoke with her husband less spitefully as well.

My mother continued her own visits to the storyteller's hut, bringing honey loaves and fruits and reminding us of holy day observations. These also were the words of my mother: of miscarriages and stillbirths, of who asked her for feathered things, of talk of spirits at the edges of the village. Sometimes my mother would make comments about this girl or that one, she just mentioned these things to K'aakik', who would laugh at the silly things young women do. I did not take part in these conversations, it was not possible to think of marriage. The curse of my lineage was a blade between me and the girls of the village. I hardly saw them, and I did not notice any of them looking at me in a favorable way. The young women I enjoyed were seen through masks, when I was no one, or someone else.

On the day 3 Kumk'u 8 Chicchan a farmer named Waxak Mo' saw Sak Chicchan in the northern sky, the great sky serpent was moving across the distant mountains. Waxak Mo' was alone in the milpa of his lineage-father that day, his sons were fishing when this occurred, and though he only mentioned this to his wife, soon all the village heard of this sighting. Very rarely do the Chicchans allow themselves to be seen, and always this means rain. Since Kumk'u is the driest time of the year, it was strange for someone to see a Chicchan, and everyone knew the farmer had been drinking too much cactus wine or smoking too much strong tobacco.

When that year was coming to an end, my mother brought news to the storyteller's hut, that the howler monkey clan was going to give the year-ending and new year's feasts. This is a great festival which lasts for fifteen days, and there is much preparation. Because it was dry season and I was not working in the storyteller's milpa, I burned my days in the orchards of





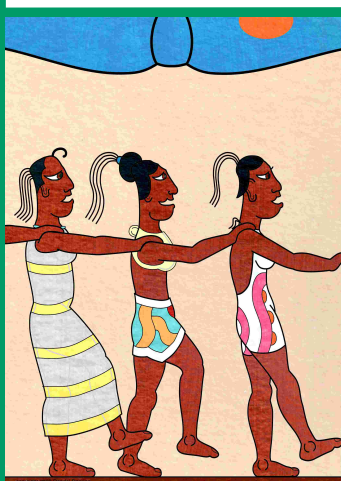
my lineage, gathering fruits for this event. There was maize brought out of our store-houses, and there were feathered trinkets made by my mother to bring bright color to the festival. There are a hundred people in howler monkey clan, there are a hundred and fifty people in all, and the five lineages of the clan occupied themselves with readiness for all the month of Kumk'u.

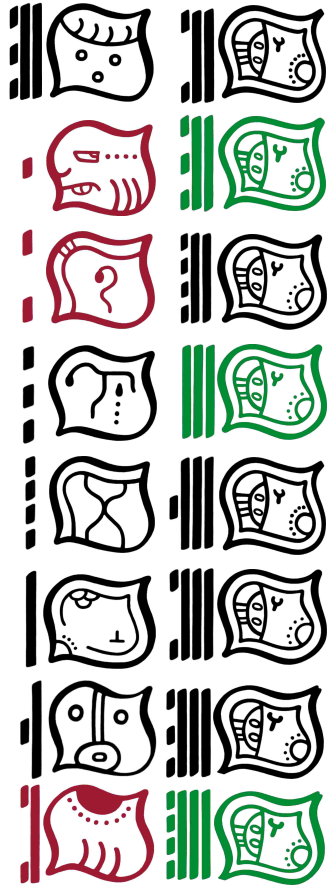
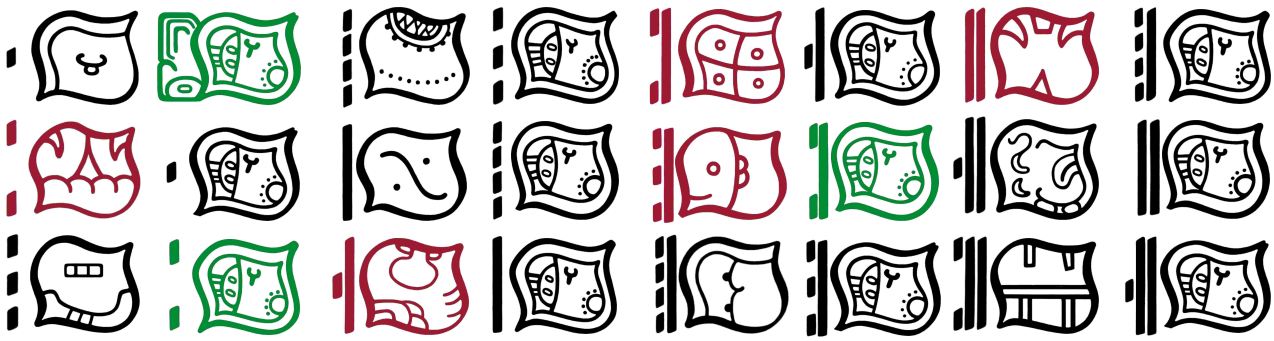
There was only one unhappiness among these preparations: my father was not chosen to carve the idol of the year-bearer for the new year, and for this he was bitterly disappointed. A craftsman of the lineage Chac Ceiba was chosen instead, and for the twenty days of Kumk'u this man fasted and lived in a hut specially made for the festival, where he did nothing but carve this one idol. My father burned these days in the jungle, gathering wood for the earth-oven fires and making log-seats to sit on for the feasting.

Because Te Ek' of the howler monkey clan gave many sacrifices and paid the priest to bless the festivities in the proper way, no wicked spirits came to the ceremonies, there were no deaths or injuries or loathsome events. ah-Puch and his servants and children were forced to stay outside the village, though the lineage-shamans and the priest did place sacrificed turkeys and small bits of bloodied paper outside the acantuns so that the spirits could feast and watch the celebrations without loneliness.

And this was the way of the fifteen days: in the mornings there were games with blowguns and dart-throwers for men and boys, while the women walked loudly in their finest weaving. Traders visited from Xunich and Chacwitz, they came with stacks of dried tobacco leaves and bundles of herbs and the well-tanned hides of rabbits and raccoons, margays and jaguarundis and pumas. There was trading between the games, many blades and jewels and carved bones and shells went from hand to hand. Later in the day there were dances, married men and women danced alone and with each other, and the unmarried men and women danced their own dances. There are very good musicians in howler monkey clan, they made generous noise all through the days and into the nights. When Father Sun was over the village the caçique spoke about the richness of the last harvest and the good trade between the three villages. The lineage-fathers spoke, too, about things that were happening in the new year: there were fresh milpas being burned and more raised fields being made on the river flat. All the plans for the new year were shared, everyone knew what was being done.

When the lineage fathers were finished speaking, howler monkey men brought out steaming meats and set them on the tables, and the women brought out fruits and drinks and treats. There were tables heaped with roast deer and baked pheasant and snapping turtle tamales, there were plates





of sweetsop and avacado and nance and passion fruits from the mountains. Coconuts were split open for their pulp, and their juice was poured into calabash cups for drinking. Quails and turkeys were baked with tasty herbs, and many small dogs were roasted for the feast. Howler monkey women served maize drinks and spiced maize drinks, there was cacao and vanilla, cacao and chilis, cacao and fruits, cacao alone.

For the men and women there was cactus fruit liquor and bark wine, for the children there were many sweet fruit juices. Here were large women to watch the treats, because children tried to take them all, and in truth there were so many kinds of fruit breads and honey breads, chocolate breads and puffy breads that I was nearly sickened on them all.

In the evenings stories were told while the people devoured sweets. K'aak'ik' performed all of these tellings, the new year's celebration is too important for a boy to dance in the circle. These festival stories are very amusing, they are the only stories with silliness running through their words, and I watched and listened carefully because I wished to tell them well when my time came. Then there was more drinking and pipe-puffing, endless cigars were rolled and lit, some clever people told jokes and riddles, and howler monkey women cleared away everything and made food for the next day.

So went the new year's festival, until the old village fire was extinguished and the new fire was kindled and planting began. Many people said it was an exceptional celebration, and for these comments I was proud of my lineage and my place in howler monkey clan. Because I was careful to speak to few people, and because I stayed with my own lineage, I was not sickened by ugly looks or words and nibbled through this festival with good pleasure.

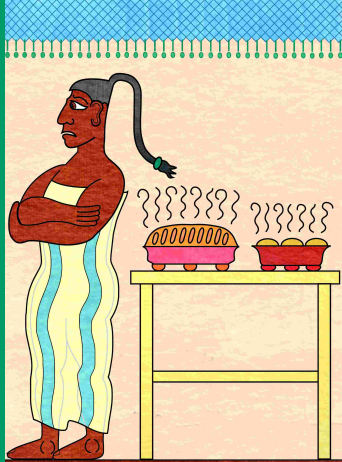
It was at the end of the celebrations, on the day 10 Pohp I Caban, that I heard my uncle speaking with my brother about marriage. This was at the edge of the village center, after K'aak'ik' had finished the story, "Mother Moon is Torn in Half, and Her Blood Creates Maize," and I had stepped aside to think about his telling. Atlatla and my uncle were near our lineage-compound, but their voices came to me with the breeze.

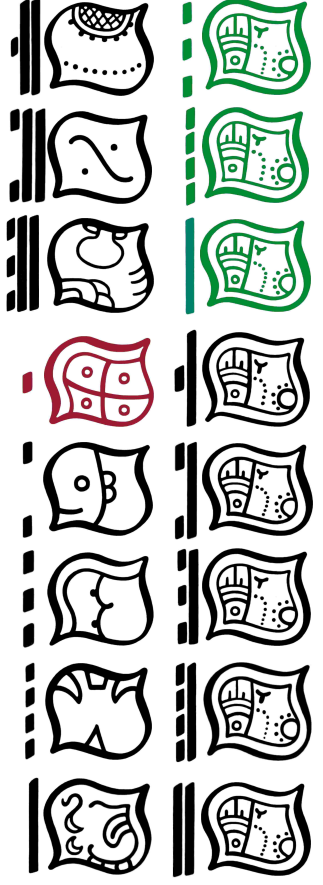
"I won't marry any of these women," my brother said, and his voice was filled with disgust.

"It is the mountain women you are thinking of?" my uncle said.

"Perhaps I should return to the mountains," my brother said. "Everything is better there."

"If you do not decide on a wife soon, you will be called out, to move you along," my uncle said. "Four of the boys you were with in the river ceremony





have married already.”

To this my brother said nothing.

“Maybe I should look for a good wife for you. There are several young women who think you are handsome, I have heard.” This seemed entertaining to my uncle, his voice was amused.

“I will find my own wife. From a lineage that does not think we are freaks.” These words were truly darts, my brother flicked them at my uncle to injure him.

Now it was my uncle who was heated, very rarely does heat come into his voice. “It might be difficult to find a woman who will marry into our lineage, but there are a few who are bold. If you wait too long even those will become nervous, there will be too many things talked about.”

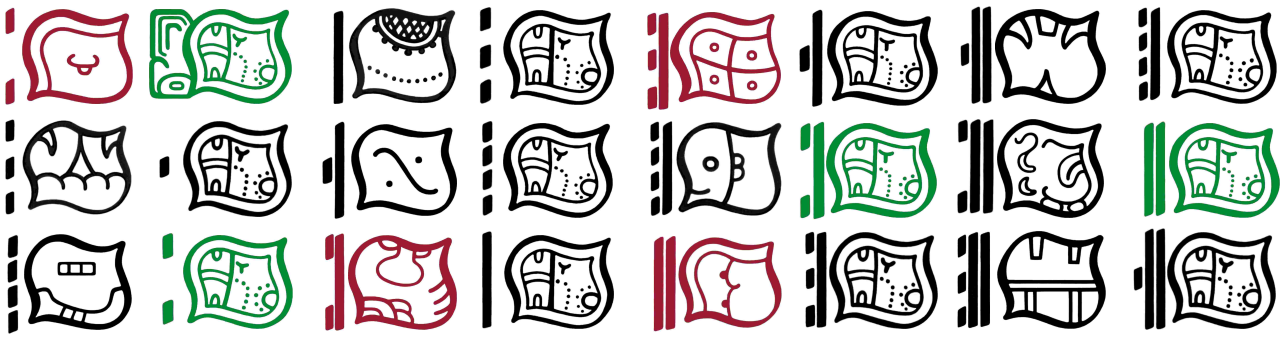
“I will find my own wife.” Then the breeze changed, and I could not hear them any more.

Because of these words, I thought about the young women before I fell asleep that evening. It was the dances, truly there are women who move deliciously in the dances. But these thoughts only brought sickness to my belly, the words of my uncle about finding bold women to marry into our lineage were strong in my head, and the gleeful looks of too many people secretly praying for Cab Coh misery, were in my heart. And there was the bride service price, years of working for another lineage, and the many gifts as well. I thought of K’aak’ik’ and his quarrels with his wife and their children who died. I thought of the fierce beating my father gave Atlatla, because of his fears for our lineage and our family. It seemed clear why some men thought a calling out was better than marriage, the weight of this bond is so great and the troubles that come with it, so many.

On the day 16 Xul 3 Akbal of my thirteenth year a great tragedy happened in our village, there were many wrongful deaths. This is what happened: there were several days of gray skies over the northern mountains, and much lightning. There is always rain in Xul, but it was unusual to see so much sky-fire. The priest was consulting with the powerful men that day and did not do a divining, but his work-son Akbal Nik said the Chicchans were irritable, and there would be high water in the river. Several men went out in their canoes, because high water brings many fish close to the surface to be speared, and the turtles move closer to shore and are easily caught. This day was like any other for me, I worked with the storyteller in his milpa that morning and then returned to his hut to learn new stories.

It was in the early afternoon when the flood came, no one knew it was





on its way, there were no warnings or visions or dreams from our ancestors to tell anyone what was going to happen. When K'aakik' and I first heard the water roaring we thought it was the great sheet-lightning that rumbles over the jungle and swamps and shakes the roof-beams.

K'aakik' laughed and said, "The Chacs and Chicchans are having a great dance in the sky, today." And in truth his hut shook, wood dust and flecks of tobacco floated down in little clouds, and the masks jittered on the walls so that all the faces seemed to be speaking with each other.

The roaring grew louder, it was a greater noise than I had ever heard, and K'aakik' stopped smiling and said, "Flood." So we went out of his hut and under the dark sky to see how fierce the water would be.

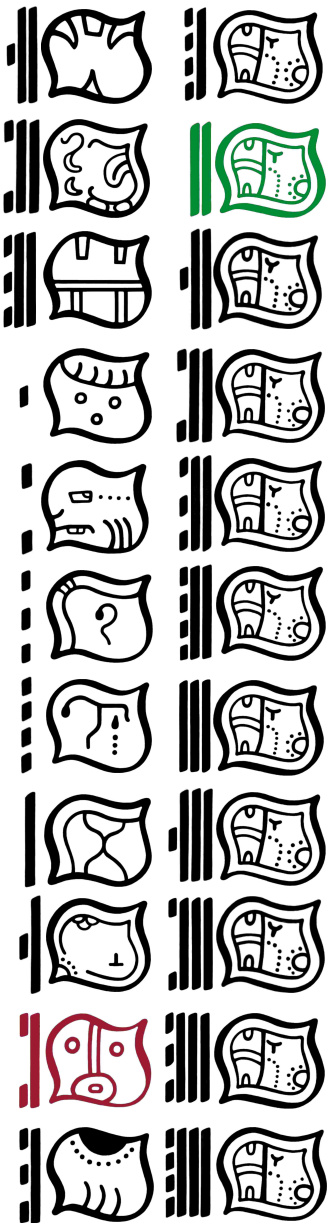
And this is what happened, in the river: the flood came all at once, there were no little waves beforehand to tell the danger but only a sudden gnashing of piled-up white water around the bend. Three times the height of a man was this water, the white-mountain flood jumped onto the green river of my village and slid over it like a spider skimming across a pond. At the front of this frothing were many destroyed trees and great stones which smashed together and made a loud crackling inside the roar of the water. There were four canoes on the river, the men were paddling swiftly toward the shore, but the flood pounced on them and bit down on them with tree trunks and boulders. Their canoes were destroyed, their bodies were destroyed and never found. Then the flood smashed into the high bank to the north of our village, there was a clap of thunder as water and splinters and stones hurled high into the air.

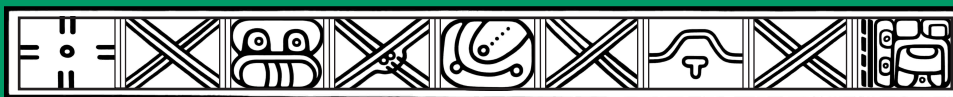
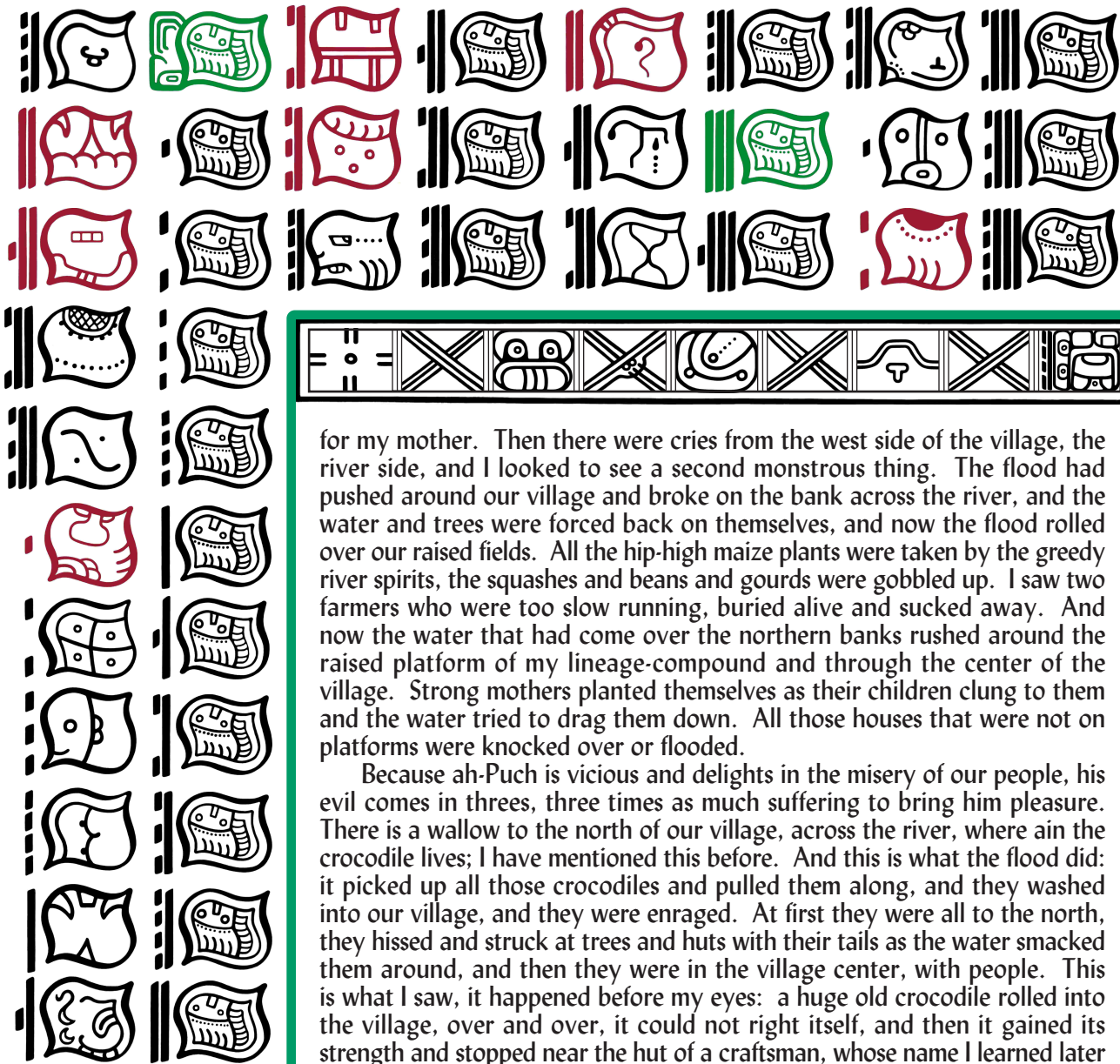
All this time K'aakik' was pounding on my arm, he was shouting at me, but I could not hear him until he yelled into my ear:

"On the roof!" He made a lift with his hands so that I could climb onto the roof of his hut, and then he went inside for something. While he was within there was new roaring from the north, water was pouring over the banks. Our lineage-compound is north, my mother was there, and I jumped down as K'aakik' dragged out his sleeping bench to lift himself up. Other people were doing this also, young men were helping their brothers and sisters get onto the roofs, everyone was running toward higher ground or climbing. The hunters and farmers were in the jungle, they were not near to assist.

"Stay here!" the storyteller shouted, and he grabbed me and forced me to climb onto the roof.

"Your mother knows what to do," he said, when he joined me. And this was my heart: I resented his hands forcing me to climb, and I was terrified





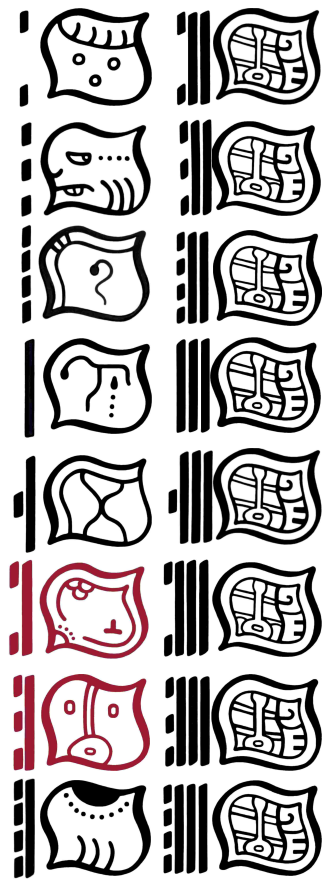
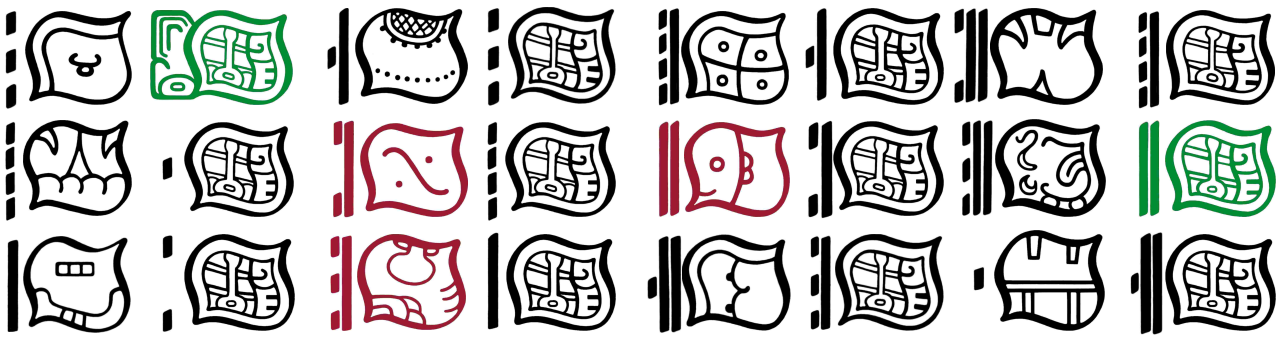
for my mother. Then there were cries from the west side of the village, the river side, and I looked to see a second monstrous thing. The flood had pushed around our village and broke on the bank across the river, and the water and trees were forced back on themselves, and now the flood rolled over our raised fields. All the hip-high maize plants were taken by the greedy river spirits, the squashes and beans and gourds were gobbled up. I saw two farmers who were too slow running, buried alive and sucked away. And now the water that had come over the northern banks rushed around the raised platform of my lineage-compound and through the center of the village. Strong mothers planted themselves as their children clung to them and the water tried to drag them down. All those houses that were not on platforms were knocked over or flooded.

Because ah-Puch is vicious and delights in the misery of our people, his evil comes in threes, three times as much suffering to bring him pleasure. There is a wallow to the north of our village, across the river, where ain the crocodile lives; I have mentioned this before. And this is what the flood did: it picked up all those crocodiles and pulled them along, and they washed into our village, and they were enraged. At first they were all to the north, they hissed and struck at trees and huts with their tails as the water smacked them around, and then they were in the village center, with people. This is what I saw, it happened before my eyes: a huge old crocodile rolled into the village, over and over, it could not right itself, and then it gained its strength and stopped near the hut of a craftsman, whose name I learned later was K'an Kin. He had just helped his wife onto the roof of their hut, and that brave man kicked at the crocodile, he kicked its face, and it moved away from him with the waters. Then it swung around its tail, and there was a thumping, and K'an Kin was broken and killed. The crocodile was swept away, it fled after its murder, and the body of the craftsman floated away, too.

All over the village this was happening, those people still in the water found angry crocodiles next to them, snapping and lashing. I was crying out then, and K'aakik' wrapped one arm around my middle and one hand over my face, and for this mercy I was not made crazed at the bloodletting.

When the flood had passed all the raised fields were gone, half the food for the village was destroyed in one day. Eleven huts were pulled down, thirty-nine canoes were destroyed, the turtle pens and fish-pens were gone, and the pens for turkeys were filled with drowned birds. There were nine dead men in the village, and five dead women, and three dead children;





seventeen was the number taken from our village by the flood. Thirty more people, maybe fifty more people, were ripped open by ain and the splinters in the waters; their suffering lasted many months, and their bodies forever wore the wounds the flood gave them.

No one in my lineage was injured, nor was the wife of K'aakik'; this was the only mercy shown on this day.

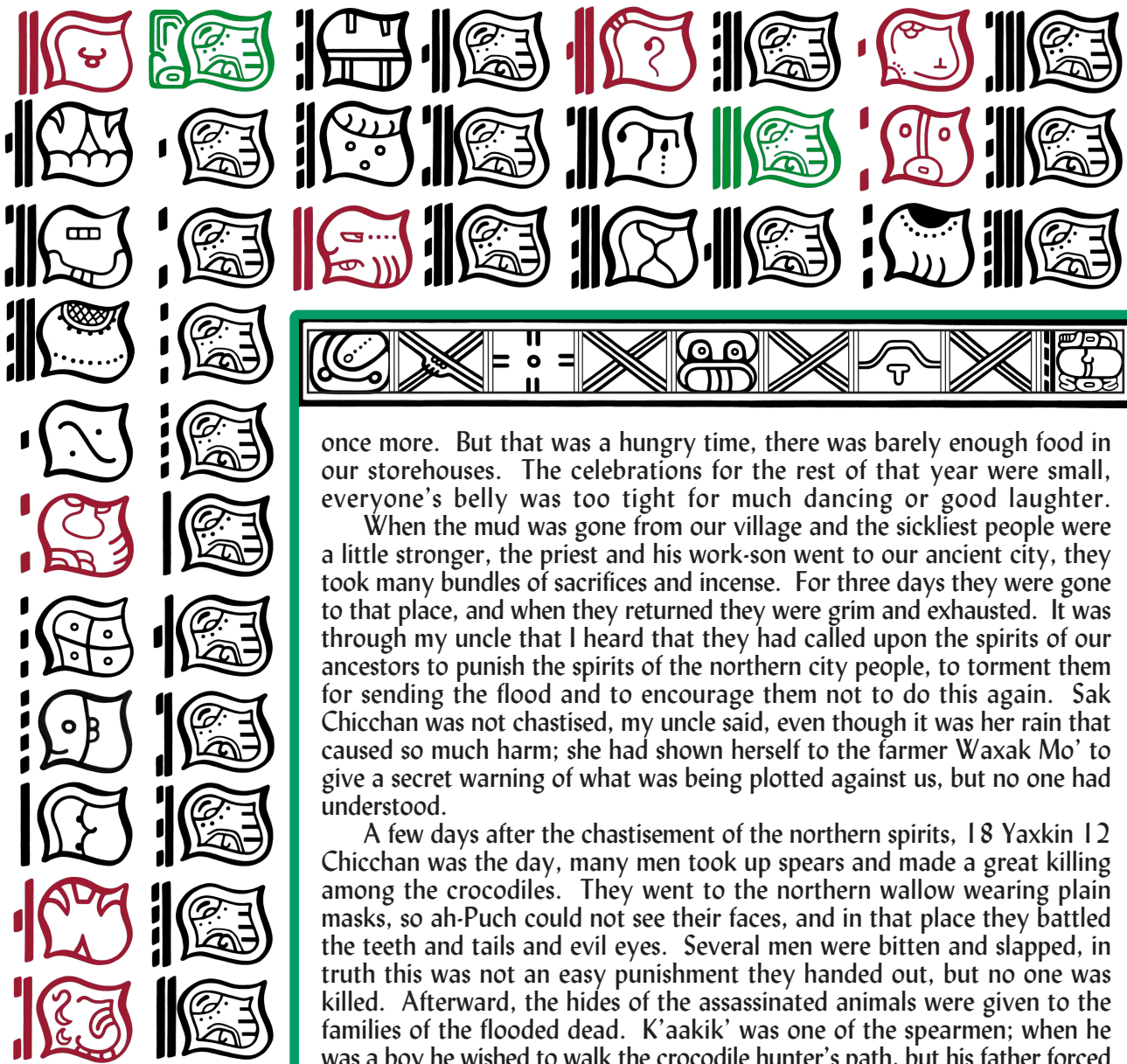
On the next day, 17 Xul 4 Kan, those bodies that had been found were burned in the village center. I was one of those who helped build the pyres, two people from howler monkey clan were among the dead, and all of us placed a few branches and sticks for those in our clan. The fires were poor ones because the wood was wet from rain, and the bodies did not cremate well, even with the priest's prayers and those of the people. The families of the dead called out to the spirits of their lost ones to return to the village, to go through the fires into the fifth world, but the priest in his divining said that several of the dead were captured by the river spirits, as slaves. There was only a little weeping during the funeral-fires, so many people were broken, so much was destroyed. After the fires burned down the caçique spoke about clearing the trees and mud from the village, and rebuilding. Then the priest spoke, he said a few words:

"I have been to the north acantun, and it stands, and it is not damaged. I have been to the south acantun, and it, too, is strong. I have been to the west acantun, it is whole and safe. And the east acantun was not reached by this flood.

"We have been steady in our observation of the holy days, we have given the gods and the goddesses their due, and our village remains in their embrace. This flood came from the northern city. The spirits of the angry dead of that place used their magic to force Sac Chicchan to drop too much water. Ah-Puch's children rode the flood into our village, their lord had them ready for this day. These servants of the night will be punished, they will be chastised. But first, there is healing to be done."

And it is true that in the days after the flood, the priest and his work-son and the wise-woman herbalist and her work-daughters gave much for the village. They opened their bundles and spread their pastes, they splinted and bound the broken arms and legs, they liquored the acantuns to thank our ancestors for keeping the flood from being worse. The men of all the lineages cut up fallen trees and cleared mud and began rebuilding their raised fields and animal pens. I too carried baskets of river muck, these went onto the milpas close to the village and onto the new raised fields on the river flat, and in a month our village was a place for people, and not turtles and fishes,





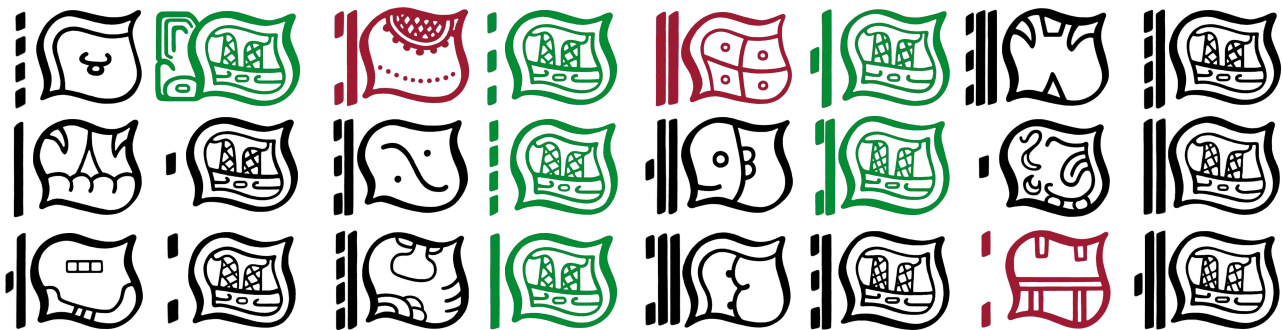
once more. But that was a hungry time, there was barely enough food in our storehouses. The celebrations for the rest of that year were small, everyone's belly was too tight for much dancing or good laughter.

When the mud was gone from our village and the sickliest people were a little stronger, the priest and his work-son went to our ancient city, they took many bundles of sacrifices and incense. For three days they were gone to that place, and when they returned they were grim and exhausted. It was through my uncle that I heard that they had called upon the spirits of our ancestors to punish the spirits of the northern city people, to torment them for sending the flood and to encourage them not to do this again. Sak Chicchan was not chastised, my uncle said, even though it was her rain that caused so much harm; she had shown herself to the farmer Waxak Mo' to give a secret warning of what was being plotted against us, but no one had understood.

A few days after the chastisement of the northern spirits, 18 Yaxkin 12 Chicchan was the day, many men took up spears and made a great killing among the crocodiles. They went to the northern willow wearing plain masks, so ah-Puch could not see their faces, and in that place they battled the teeth and tails and evil eyes. Several men were bitten and slapped, in truth this was not an easy punishment they handed out, but no one was killed. Afterward, the hides of the assassinated animals were given to the families of the flooded dead. K'aakik' was one of the spearmen; when he was a boy he wished to walk the crocodile hunter's path, but his father forced him onto the storyteller's path instead. He wore the mask of Lord Snapping Turtle, who is the enemy of ain, and when he returned he burned many strips of paper soaked in crocodile blood. That evening he set aside his pipe and did not smoke, and when the cloud rose from the fire in his hut, it was his frustrated desire to walk this other path that I saw smoldering in his eyes.

This is what became of me after the flood: my dreams became torn-up shadows of the world ah-Puch wanted to bring into being. Huge crocodiles swam through our village in the moonless night, they crawled into huts to devour our women and children and smash our men. The killer bat camazotz' flew overhead, squealing and picking up dead bodies to suck dry and drop onto the rooftops. Outside the acantuns the spirit-jaguar Tzak Balam stalked from tree to bush to boulder; because his fur was black I saw only his golden eyes and bloody muzzle and the shimmer of his endless pacing. When I woke from these dreams I was weeping, my hands were fists because I could not strike these evil ones but only huddled behind the acantuns. My mother





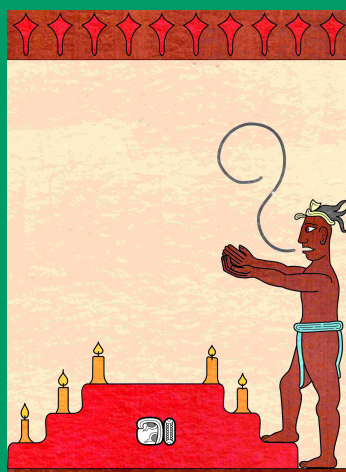
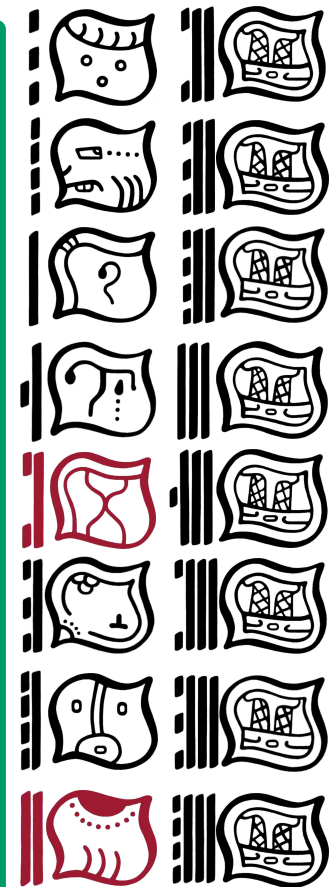
saw how thin I was becoming and brought me treats, she could not bring much because of the hunger in the village, and I saw K'aakik' watching me from the sides of his eyes. I smoked powerful tobacco to smother these dreams, but even when I smoked myself sick and K'aakik' had to take my pipe away the dreams were waiting, they were always clear. It is true that after twenty days of such nightmares I was tired all the time, and my fingers twitched even when I was not using them. The night lord camazotz' was sucking the life from me, each day another drop of my essence was taken.

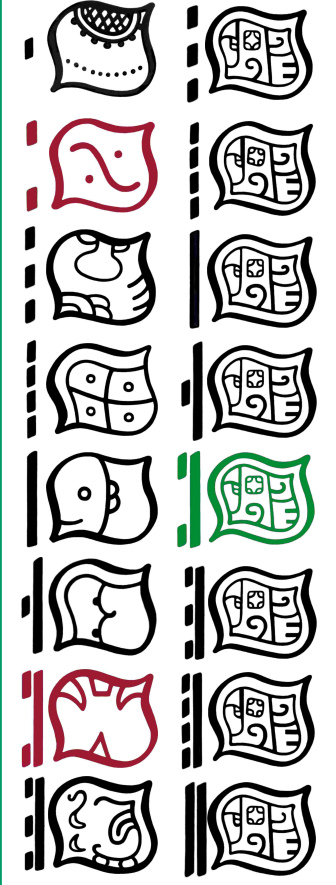
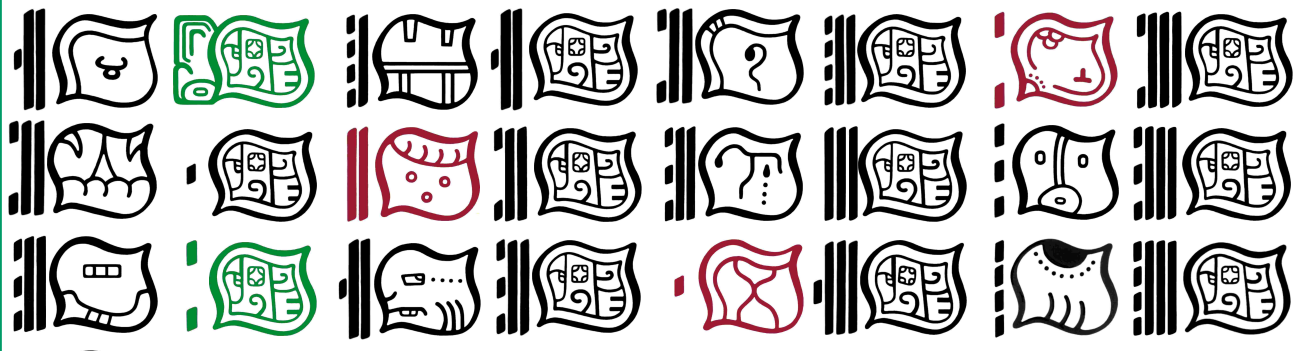
On 19 Yaxk'in 13 Cimi I shook awake from one of these dreams, it was the growling of Tzak Balam I heard fading as I woke. My veins were jumping, there was twitching in my arms and legs, my ancestors were sending me a message through their blood that flowed in me. Lineage-shamans are taught the meaning of such blood-lightning; I had heard of it but did not know how to understand it. I only knew that my ancestors had some matter with me.

That night there was rain, no one was outside, and I put on my waist cloth to go out. It was then that I saw my brother's gift-sandals under my sleeping bench, the margay sandals I wore for festivals. Because these came from Atlatla I put them on, it was a little of his oldest-brother strength I wanted during this time of headache dreams. Then I went from the storyteller's hut into my lineage-compound and knelt at the shrine of my ancestors. The rain struck hard into my face, there were fierce winds, and I closed my eyes and prayed and sang our lineage-song. This was not reciting for my brother but true singing, the words came from my heart even if my poor voice could not carry them well. Before the bones of my elders I sang until the lightning in my veins ceased. When I opened my eyes I saw that I was not alone in our lineage-compound, a small turtle had come into the courtyard, from the river. It looked at me as I looked at it, and then it crawled toward the east, toward the ancient city.

This is the way of the tortoise: it gives protection, the essence of its hard shell wraps around those in need, when it so desires. This was the message my ancestors wanted me to receive, here was the sign of my direction, and so I walked through the village to the start of the trail into the jungle. In that place I braced myself against the wind for many heartbeats and stared into darkness. In truth I did not wish to go outside the acantuns, not to the city or anywhere else. The servants of ah-Puch were so many, I had seen their strength often, the darkness hid many terrible things. But the sign from my ancestors seemed clear, and I stepped onto the path and went east.

My journey was swift this time, my feet knew the way, and I was not





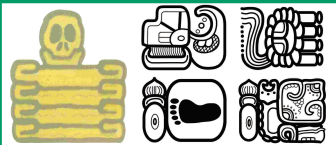
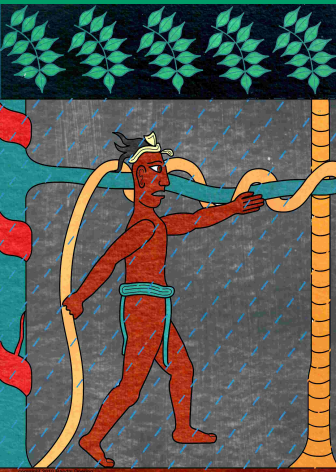
such a small boy any more. Because of the rain there were no spiderwebs and no bats. Mother Moon was strong behind the clouds, even in the storm there was enough light that I did not much stumble. At the standing stone I halted on the watered paving and named myself, and then I went on. When I walked on the road before in the rain I slid on the stones, but the words of my father were true, my margay sandals were created for moving on stones, and this time I did not slip. When I was halfway to the city, two thirds of the way, I felt a little blood lightning in my left leg, the veins in my thigh jumped, and I looked north. An old trail was there, it was one more animal trail like four hundred others, like four thousand others. It was on to this that I stepped and began to walk.

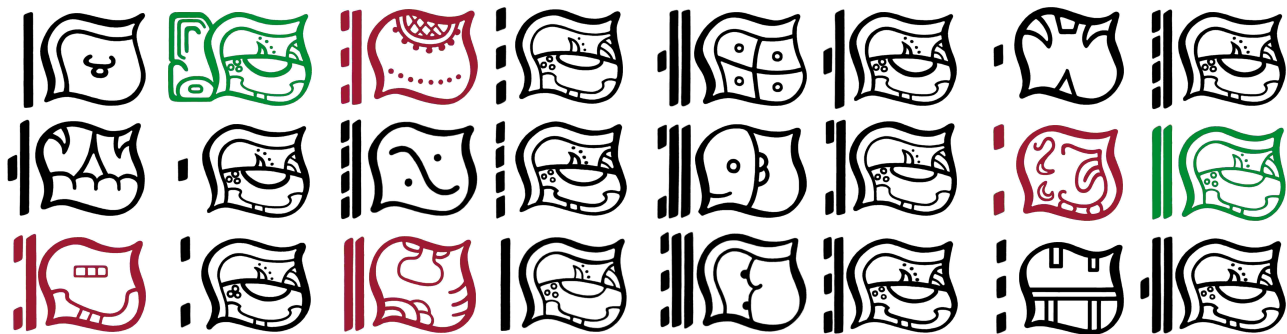
Because of the wind I heard nothing but branches striking each other, fronds and sticks swished and rattled and creaked and cracked. There was no light on that trail, it was narrow and torn by roots and black under the leafy trees and shrubs. It was only because I understood my ancestors to be with me that I went on it at all.

It was three hundred steps I counted, staggering and tumbling and sweating, before I came to an overgrown lineage-compound. That had been a large lineage, twenty huts faced the courtyard under the open sky. In the storm-light all the doorways were dark, and empty. I climbed onto the platform and went toward the center of that place, moving around trees and watching the doorways. The roofs of most of the huts had fallen, some of the frames were filled with saplings, others were only heaps. I did not know if the bones of the people were within, if the families had been murdered in their own homes by the lords of the night in the last moments of the city. Their skulls might be there still, in the doorways peering out at me, and only the wind hid their whispering. These thoughts made me stop, for a long time I stayed hunched down where I was. Only when Mother Moon shone a little did I move again, into the center of that place.

There I discovered a broken lineage shrine. Its form was a stepped platform as high as a man and made of stone blocks, but tree roots had broken it apart, and the bones of many people were open to the sky. I seized my brother's charm-pouch and squeezed the green iik-stone, I could not understand why my ancestors directed me to such a dangerous place. Though I whispered many prayers, there was no guidance from them. I had to make my own path.

Here was the action that moved me: I went closer to the leaves and bones that filled the cracks in the shrine. I touched nothing, just placed my feet carefully and only looked. There were jewels there, jade beads and gold

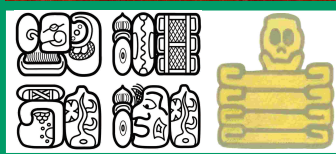
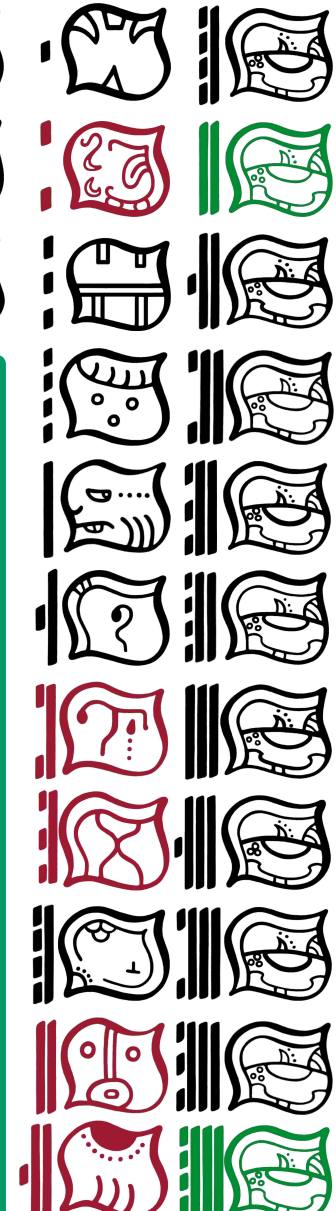




bracelets, tiny bits of gold for earrings, pieces of obsidian chipped in shimmering ways. And there were a great number of wet and glistening bones: ribs and backbones and long, smooth bones from arms and legs. Twice I looked into the hollow eyes of skulls, but it was sorrow I felt for them and not fear. Those elders should rest peacefully but were abused and humiliated by the jungle.

My ancestors gave me no further signs, so I just followed what was in my heart. With a stick I moved the bones back into their hollow resting-places, it was not difficult to push them back where they belonged. For half the night I did this work. The leaves I flicked away, the tree roots I ignored and placed stones where they fit best. It was poor building that I did, my hands are not clever at such things, but when I was finished all the bones were covered and not naked. When I was done reburying those ancient ones I hurried back to the village and to the warmth of the red coals in the storyteller's hut. After this the evil dreams ceased, my ancestors gave me relief from suffering, for doing this work for them.

On 7 Mol 8 lx the young woman Oxtun Na died in childbirth. Her infant was born dead, it was two murders in one day, ah-Puch surely declared a celebration in the underworld. The woman's family burned her body, and her baby with her, and the priest in his divining declared that both were taken to the garden of the gods. It was one small victory for our village in my thirteenth year, the rest of that time was lived under the shadow of the night.



Every lineage has a song to celebrate its ancestors for as many generations as can be remembered. Usually it is the god ah-K'awil who appears in a dream and demands a singing, for he is the lord of lineages, and to worship him properly requires knowledge of one's family. It has been seven generations since the war between the cities, and the two generations before that were times of troubles for our ancestors. This is the Cab Coh lineage-song, these are the words that can be shared:

Here is the unfolding
Of the thirteen ears of our lineage, Cab Coh
Pulling away the tassels
Peeling back the husks
So that the names are revealed
Our lineage-fathers revealed
Before the gods and goddesses

Now we are peeling the top ear
Waving strong in Father Sun's light
Sak Nal is his name
Two sons are known, not his
Water-digger, chili-father
Keeper of days, singer of songs
Born in the dark light of ah-Puch's star

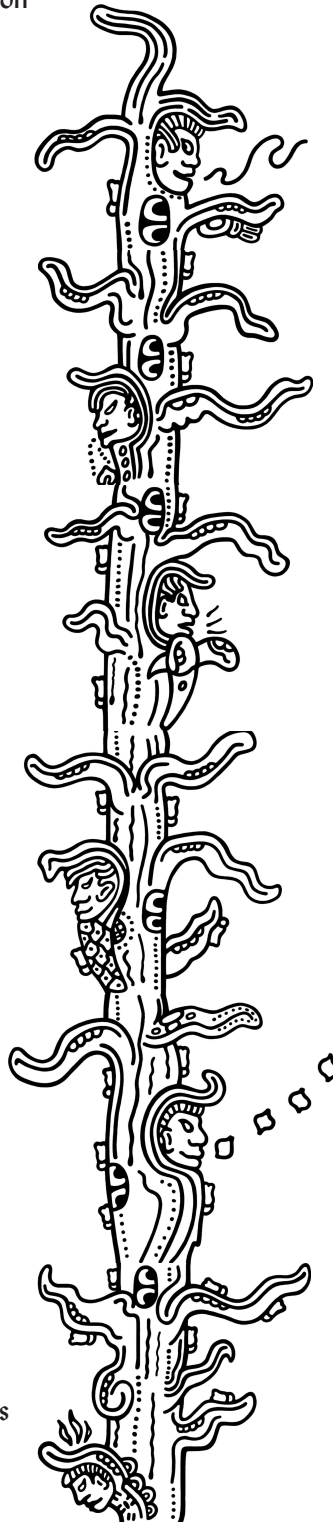
We turn next to the second ear
Close to the light of this world
Ki'ix is his name
Father of three sons
Carver of wood, maker of furnishings
Keeper of days, shaper of sacred staves
Born in the dark light of ah-Puch's star

This is it, the third ear of our stalk
Still in the light, still in the heat
Iktz'ib is his name
Father of two sons
Piercer of earth, planter of maize
Brewer of balché, caller to monkeys
Born in the dark light of ah-Puch's star

Here we have it, that's the fourth ear
Tassels and husk in the spotted light
Kan Ahk is his name
Four sons were his seeds
Hunter of turtles, spearer of fish
Glider on water, canoe-carver
Born in the dark light of ah-Puch's star

A litter farther down is our fifth ear
Light in slivers falls upon it
Chactok is his name
He who had only one son
Carver of idols, chopper of wood
Keeper of days, setter of bones
Born in the dark light of ah-Puch's star

Down the stalk is the sixth ear
Only on holy days found by the light
Chan K'in is the name
He whose five boys all were born sickly
Carrier of goods, dreamer of fierce dreams
Incense-gatherer, spark-striker
Born in the dark light of ah-Puch's star



We offer these words
We remember these names
We honor our ancestors
Under Father Sun

In the darkness before creation
Father Sun was singing
Of what could be, what can be
Men sing of what has been

We pray for your ascension
We pray for your peace
Set down your burdens
In the garden of the gods

These are the men
Who planted our lineage
Who watered our lineage
Who shed their essence for us

Hear these names
Father Sun, Mother Moon
ah-K'awil, ah-Itzamna
Keep their faces in the light

We are builders of cities
Dwellers in jungles
Makers of villages
Well-known to this world

Let there be recognition
Of the work
Of the lives
Of these men and their families



In the middle of the stalk is the seventh ear
Hanging in the shadows
Seeb Ha' is the name of our seventh father
Only two sons were there
Keeper of days, diviner of omens
Creator of our lineage-shrines
Born in the dark light of ah-Puch's star

Toward the root is the eighth ear
Its husk is in the dimness
K'aak' Ain is his name
Four was the number of his living sons
Hunter of balam the jaguar
Warrior against the white stone city
Born in the days of Mother Moon's glow

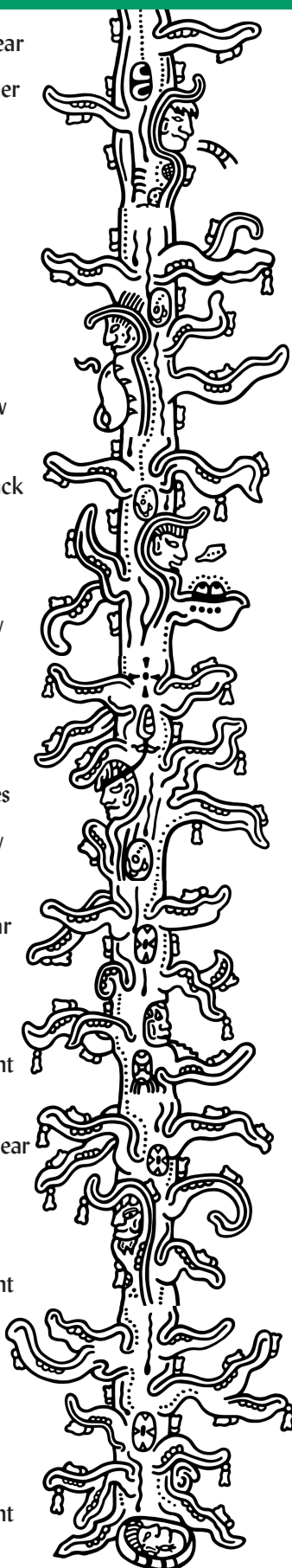
The ninth ear is farther down, farther back
It no longer receives light
Bolon Pax is his name
Of his sons, there were five
Reed-blower, drummer
Player at weddings and funerals
Born in the days of Mother Moon's glow

We reach down now to the tenth ear
Faded is its husk
Kin K'awil is his name
Seven sons sprouted forth
Walker with baskets, wearer of tumplines
Known to mountains, known to seas
Born in the days of Mother Moon's glow

Near the root of our lineage, eleventh ear
Murmuring to shadows
Chac Chamac is his name
Nine were his sons
Cutter of earth, shaper of limestone
Pyramid master, temple builder
Born in the brilliance of Father Sun's light

Just above the root now, tattered twelfth ear
Hanging in darkness
Me'ex Cuc is his name
Six was the number of sons
Brain-masher, herb-mixer
Hide-master, furrier to lords
Born in the brilliance of Father Sun's light

This is the bottom, the final thirteenth
Growing at the root of creation
Tzicile Mo' is his name
His sons were eleven, it is said
Speaker for artisans, bearer of burdens
Keeper of days, progenitor
Born in the brilliance of Father Sun's light



We have known jade
We have known pearl
We have known turquoise
We are jeweled men

Four is the name of our lineage-shrines
Three is the number of our crop-shrines
Two is the number of our wealth-shrines
We always keep the days

This is our tree: chacté
This is our bird: potoo
This is our clan: howler monkey
This is our birthplace: Ch'ulwitznal

We keep three stones in our hearths
We keep three thrones in our hearts
We are children of sky, earth and water
Remembering our makers

We are releasing our miscarried children
We let go our stillborn children
We give back our mindless children
Relinquished to the Tree of Life

We weep for our murdered ones
We pray for our broken ones
We call out to our forgotten ones
All of them are honored

Now we have reached the end
Of the four-folded stalk
Of the four-layered kernal
Of our lineage, Cab Coh
Born in the light, begotten in the light
Walkers in darkness, keepers of days
Respectful before gods and goddesses

