

Harvest

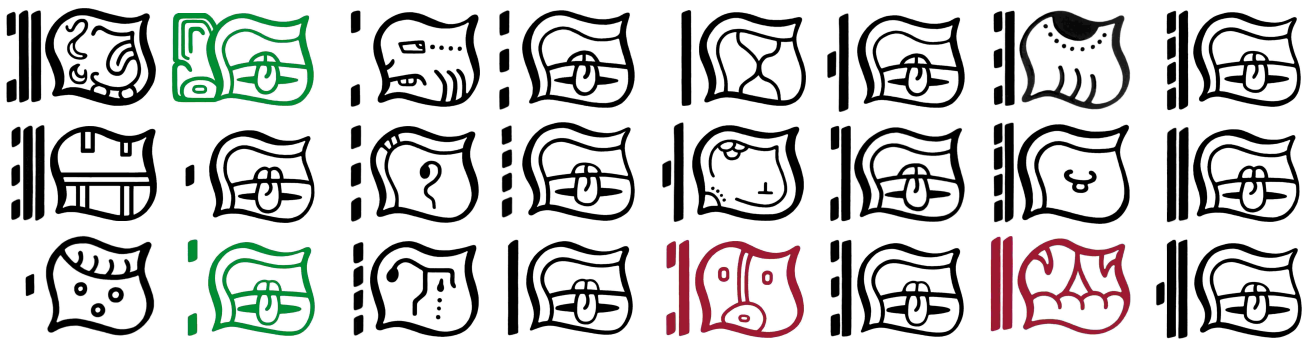
The day of my fifteenth birthday was 17 Ch'en 13 Muluc, it is a day for old wisdom to be brought forward, but on that day I committed a killing instead. This was my first purposeful destruction; other than cockroaches and mosquitoes I had never killed anything intentionally.

I had not awakened thinking of murder; the day was fine and breezy and pleasant, it was a good day for a celebration of one's birth. Harvest was well along, and so I went with K'aakik' to his milpa to carry heavy baskets of maize ears and squashes and other ripened things back to his storage-house. The dirt was warm already that morning, clods of it fell onto my toes and crushed into my sandals and gave good heat into me. My killing took place there in the milpa, so it was seen by all the gods and goddesses: the lords of the night cannot peer inside our acantuns, it is said, but outside the guardian stones the dark spirits see everything.

And this was the way of the black sprout that grew so suddenly and swiftly in me, it came after K'aakik' filled his basket and carried it staggering back toward his maize-house, and I was alone. An animal came into the milpa, it was a small cacomistle that came cautiously into the storyteller's field. They do not have this animal in Xunich or Chacwitz, I think, so I will describe it a little: it is like a raccoon but smaller and thinner, it is a lesser raccoon and not so clever, either; it bares its teeth often and is ugly to look at. And this one was black, its fur was all black, it was one of ah-Puch's servants right there in our milpa. It was just going to plant some evil magic for its master, in our field, or destroy something, or ruin something. I was close to it, it showed itself very near to me, its narrow little teeth came together many times as it crept into our field.

I thought then of the children who were killed by ah-Puch's servants, I remembered the tiny girl Yax Um with blue flowers in her hair and the boy Waxaklahun Cutz' who was pushed onto the broken log-branch and impaled. Here is how it was right when the killing came into me: it was not actual thoughts in my head but the attacks of too many spirits that struck at my heart, there were infants with pustules and men and women torn by crocodiles in the flood and clouds of dark smoke rising from more and more funeral-pyres. There was the woman Chel Na who died groaning in childbirth, and the laughter of camazotz' from my dreams. When the cacomistle was wholly on the field and creeping toward some pumpkins I lifted my foot very swiftly and leaped over onto it. In truth this was awkward and clumsy, it was only the will of my ancestors that I did not snap my ankle. And my lifted foot



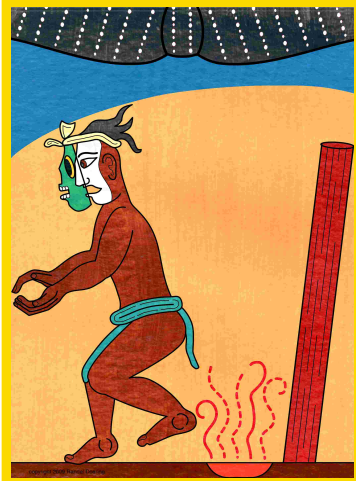


smashed down on the soft fur of the cacomistle, the night-black fur, and its back was broken. And its long tail curled and whipped, its teeth came around and buried into my calf, but I felt no pain. My foot drove into that animal and destroyed it, its narrow black eyes looked viciously at my face. I said something to it, I cannot remember what, perhaps a nasty message for its masters, or just some foul cursing.

And then I dropped the basket and pulled the jaws from my leg, thanks to the gods and the goddesses the wound did not fester. I kicked that evil thing into the jungle, into the bushes, droplets of blood flew from its mouth and splattered on the yellow-ripe maize stalks and leaves, and then I took up my basket and finished my part of the harvest for that day. It was a heated pleasure in my heart, there was a fierce singing joy in striking this blow for those wrongly torn down or wounded by the lords of the night, and their master. My mother and the storyteller said that words were my darts, but that morning it was my own strength that was my spear. My very body was ah-Puch's means of punishment; as he breaks the bodies of my people I broke his servant and savored the deliciousness of his loss.

For my fifteenth year I began learning the rest of the seating stories of the lords and ladies of time; nine was the number to learn, eighteen in all. As they entered into me I understood that only the gods and the goddesses could have handed down such stories. Things that happened in the story of Pohp were discussed with new eyes in the story of Sek, things created in Ch'en's story were destroyed in the tale of Kum' u. The eighteen seatings were the finest weaving, no mere person could have tied together so many discussions and thoughts and doings. K'aakik' once told me that many stories came from the gods and goddesses themselves, they were given to powerful men and women in dreams to instruct the people. Now I knew him to be correct, he was not just teasing me because I was a boy but spoke plain truth. The gods and the goddesses are superior in their ways, we are their children, and the clever-woven beauty of their stories is their means of teaching us what we must know to become wiser.

In the story circle I said the words clearly and moved my feet properly and spoke through the masks in the voices of our ancestors and the animal lords. And this was the strength of the storyteller's path, that there were no loathsome looks for me in that place of strength, no smirking, no murmured words about my brother. The white face-paint and the story circle are potent magic and gathered respect even from strong men. Only outside the circle did I face the ground, or hold my head up and pretend to see nothing.





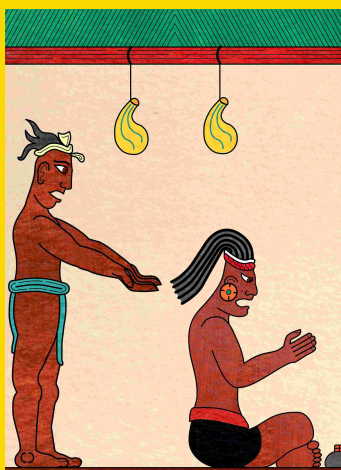
On the day 1 Keh 5 Ben we finished my brother's hut. My oldest uncle performed the last ceremony on this day and kindled a new fire in the hearth, and after that there was only whatever Atlatla wanted to do, to make it his own. There was a celebration that evening in our lineage-courtyard, and we ate well from the new harvest, but there was not much laughter. It is a very strange thing for a young man to have a hut, with no wife. The feasting was short, and then my uncles and aunts left us, and my father and I helped Atlatla move his sleeping bench and other things into his hut. That new place was scented of liquor and of the meat that had been cooked in the hearth for our celebration; in this way his hearth was blessed and our ancestors welcomed inside. Our father said a few words to Atlatla and returned to his own hut, and I too left him alone there, feeding wood into his fire. Then I turned to ask him if he wanted a little tobacco, for K'aakik' always has much from his lineage. It was a pouch or two of this I was going to offer, I did not think K'aakik' would be angry for such a gift.

And here was my brother as I saw him that night: he was sitting cross-legged on his mat near his fire, he was truly a man now and nineteen. Most men marry not long after the river ceremony, only difficult or worthless men marry so late, and perhaps it was this he was thinking about, that put so much unhappiness on his face. Though he had held off Te Ek' once again, soon a woman would be forced on him anyway. She would not want such a frustrating man, and he would reject her, it would be as cold in his hut as it had been for K'aakik', who was also forced to marry.

This was just another thing I could not comprehend, my brother's rejection of the women of the valley. What were they in his anger at powerful men? Perhaps he had cared for a mountain woman but had to return to Cab Coh and take his place. Perhaps he had refused to trick her down to our village as our father had our mother, he refused even to ease his own loneliness and provide sons for our lineage because he knew the reason for our mother's unhappiness. Atlatla could not run to the mountains now, no woman would have an oldest son who abandoned his lineage at his age. For him there would be endless angry and bitter words, endless liquor, endless pain.

Because he did not know I was seeing him, I left him that way and returned to the storyteller's hut, and it is true that my heart ached for my brother, in his house of thorns.

ah-Puch moves in threes, it is said, his evil touches always come one, two, three. On the day 16 Mac 1 Lamat the craftsman Oc K'awil was killed in his own shop by a fer-de-lance, the snake stung him and rotted him with its poison. Three was the number of steps he took toward his sons, to shield





them from the serpent, and then he fell and was dead. His sons searched inside and all around their father's work-hut, but there was no sign of kan koch. Then they went to their lineage-father, who sent twenty men to warn everyone in the village that a fer-de-lance was near. Everyone said that serpent was hiding itself in the shadows and waiting to kill again, it was under someone's hut or inside a maize-house, watching. Even though hunters sought ah-Puch's rippling son, it was not found, all the searching came to nothing.

And now comes this time of anguish for me and my lineage, it is the third killing in my fifteenth year, my brother Atlatla is destroyed by the spirit-jaguar Tzak Balam. The day of his death was 8 Muwan 7 Ahau, it was a day with only a few clouds and light rains. Atlatla went into the jungle and brought back a basket of fruit at midday, and then he went out again. When night came he had not returned, and my oldest uncle went to Te Ek'. Ten men were sent with torches to look for Atlatla, my father and uncles were with them, but he was not found. There was only his carrying-basket, and too much blood. The paw-prints were clear, Tzak Balam had left his sign, and so there was no more searching. Everyone knew Tzak Balam could not be found. It was when they returned that my father came for me, he arrived red-faced at the storyteller's hut and said, "Your brother was taken by the jaguar."

I was finished with stories for that day, and my father and I left K'aakik' sitting at his fire, shaking his head. I heard the words of my father but did not let them inside myself, they were kept far outside. In that short walk through the village there were no other people, no other huts, no trees or stars or sounds. There was only a cold wind blowing through my spirit, each step fell onto a lily pad floating on the freezing waters of the underworld.

In our lineage-compound the priest had made a little fire and was divining, his seeds and light-stones were spread on a cloth before our lineage-shrine, and my uncle knelt with him and gave sacrifices of burning incense and two turkeys and blood from his own earlobes and tongue. The priest counted the days once, twice, three times. It was ah-Puch's servant he sought, but there was nothing, the divining was worthless. My uncle and the priest knelt with their faces almost touching as my uncle whispered his questions. There was a second asking, a second three-count, and then the priest and my uncle ceased their divining because they could see nothing through the black smoke ah-Puch blew over their eyes. Such was the strength of Tzak Balam and his closeness to his master. It was here my father stayed, watching these two holy men consulting our ancestors and the spirits of our village.





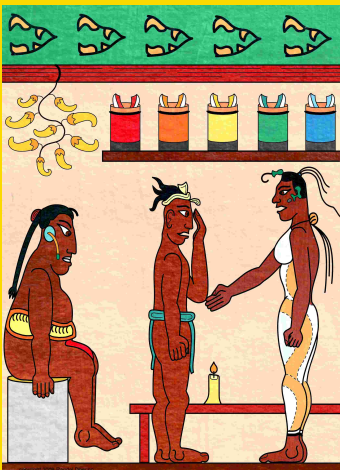
His fists were tight at his sides, and he stood stiffly with shining eyes.

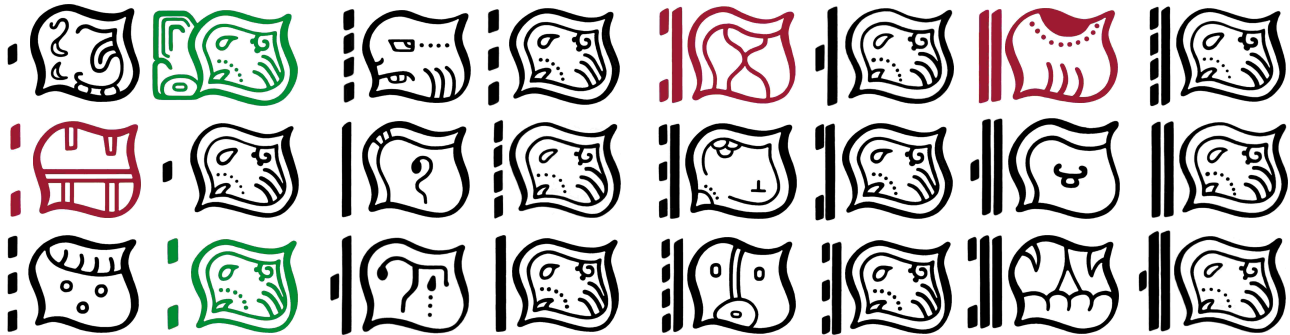
In my father's hut my mother was sitting at her work-table and weeping, her face was wet with tears. She was biting her curled fingers, and when I came near she pulled me close and held me very tightly. It was then that my own heated tears came and banished the cold wind and placed my feet again on the earth. It was not my father's grief that saved me from this slipping but my mother. And they were not tears for Atlatla, it is true, they were tears for her, my mother's long unhappiness crushed through the chill around my heart. I did not try to escape from her and seek my own way; there was nowhere else to go, without my brother.

My uncle came and told us that Tzak Balam was hidden and that no hunters could seek it in the dark. His face was beaten and weary, another burden had settled on him because of Tzak Balam, and he did not stay to speak to us but went to seek rest and comfort with his wife.

When he left us, my mother released me and lit a tall yellow candle that had come down with mountain traders, it was carved with lines of yellow and black, green and white and red, and she burned a green quetzal feather in my father's hearth-fire. I watched her face very carefully as the feather burned, it was secret pleasure I was looking for, at the destruction of my brother and the humiliation of Cab Coh. But it was only pain I saw, it was only my mother that I knew and not this twisted way. All that night we were there, as my brother's candle burned. My father came in and sat quietly with his hands folded in his lap and his face empty. I had never noticed the many scars on his fingers and hands; obsidian claims its own sacrificial blood, and rough bark and splinters force respect. My mother just watched the little burning light and wept. People say it is unwise to weep too much when a person dies, or the soul of the sorrowing one might follow the soul of the dead one. So my father scolded my mother, but she did not listen. My place was between them, and though they were warm, there was no comfort. My brother's spirit was alone in the jungle and the dark, and with my eyes closed and my body quiet I tried to send my own spirit to stay with him.

On the next day, 9 Muwan 8 Imix, there was a funeral pyre made for Atlatla in the center of the village. My father and his brothers built it up, and I carried bundles of kindling. Howler monkey assisted us, everything was done swiftly because of the strength of the spirit that killed my brother. All morning my mother wove with feathers and string, and when Father Sun was well risen she set two cuffs with Cab Coh colors and signs onto the pyre. All the village came for the burning, Te Ek' sent out runners to the other clans, and the center of the village filled with lines of people. When





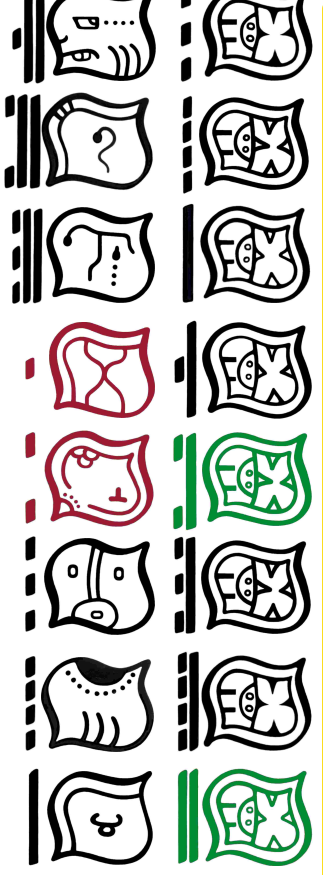
Father Sun was high the priest took his place before everyone and said: "Yesterday the jaguar came, and now Atlatla of Cab Coh lineage is dead. Today we call him in from the jungle, we call him into the fire to ascend to the garden of the gods." And the priest began to pray, many lineage-shamans prayed, blood was shed and no one's stingray spine or cactus spine was wetter than those of Cab Coh. My father pierced his ears and hands many times, my mother let her own blood, my uncle pierced himself under the eyes and wept out precious essence. I pierced my own hands between the fingers with cactus spines, and when I shook my hands over the pyre the red droplets fell on the cuffs and the kindling. Then we knelt before the wood; Cab Coh blood called to my brother's spirit to seek its way home.

The prayer of the priest was not a long one and was said with great urgency, and the lineage-shamans chanted and burned copal incense as Puksik'al Tok lit the fire. And this is what he did, what the priest did, as he leaned to light the kindling with a torch: he reached out and squeezed my shoulder with his hand, and though I felt him there I could only watch the little flames growing in the moss and grass and sticks. Perhaps I wept a little when the cuffs burned. This is what was in my heart: I was thinking murder for Tzak Balam, I was thinking of my raised foot crushing the spine of that squealing cacomistle, and what should be done to the spirit-jaguar.

Behind me many voices chanted, if there was laughter it was silent, eight hundred people called for Atlatla's soul to return. The voices were raised very powerfully; no one wants their sons to die in the jungle, so far from their family. The priest turned to the village again and chanted in the old words, and the flames grew very high and hot, but my father and mother did not move from their near places, and neither did I. There were only seven of us left from Cab Coh, we opened ourselves and gave our blood and prayed. The heat pushed against us, and though I bowed before it, it is true that my eyes were open slits, and I saw the pyre blacken and crack into pieces. The orange flames jumped high and disappeared, the red and black made faces of men and jaguars; perhaps it was my ancestors who showed themselves, in that way.

And this is what I saw as the large timbers fell in and the sparks and heat poured over me: a four-cornered star appeared in the blackness of the fire, only for a heartbeat was it there. The flames opened into a black portal, and then there was a swirling of fire and wind and my brother's sweat-scent passing by me. And I wanted to laugh at Tzak Balam for his failure, my brother's spirit had heard us and run in from the jungle and leapt into the portal. He was ascending, he was soaring above the jungle and the lords





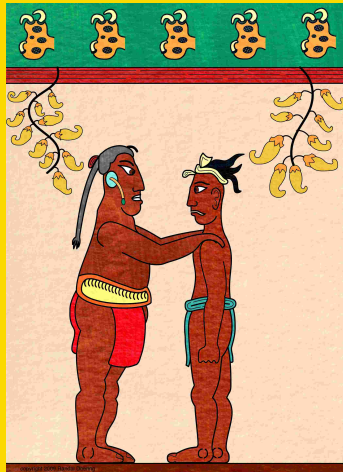
of the night and their murderous ways. Then the portal was gone, the flames burned high for a short time and slowly sank down to mere embers. There were blisters on my hands, blisters on my face; all in Cab Coh were burned in this way. The people ceased their chanting, the lineage-shamans and the priest ceased their words as well. Father Sun was nearing the west, this is the direction of death, and the priest performed a divining for Atlatla. My uncle assisted him and knelt with him before the pouch and the cloth, the faces of both men were grave. Their words were quiet, their voices were for our ancestors and gods and goddesses alone to hear.

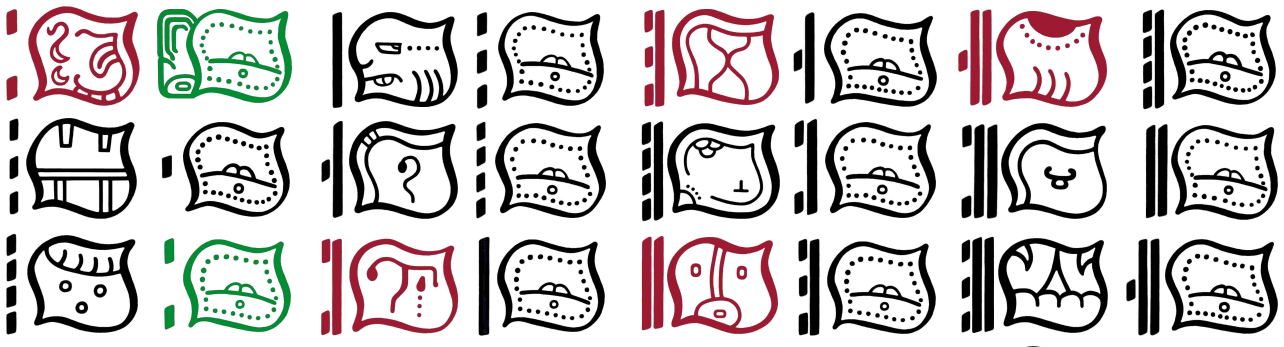
The seeds and light-stones were poured out and piled up and counted, and then it was done again, and a third time. The priest said a few quiet words to my uncle, who only closed his eyes and made a hard little nod. The priest stood and set the end of his staff into the embers and said,

“This is the word of our ancestors, of the Cab Coh ancestors, of the gods and the goddesses themselves: our voices were heard, our prayers were received and gave great sustenance in the garden of the gods. But the soul of Atlatla Cab Coh was not received there. In two days we will divine again, perhaps his spirit is hiding in the jungle and will come to these embers, later.” He collected his divining tools and departed, and the people of our village shook their heads and returned to their huts. The howler monkey lineage-shamans came for words with my uncle, the lineage-fathers came to share a little drink of liquor with my father, in the ritual way. Many were the faces looking at mine, but I was could hardly feel them. The words of the priest were all I heard, that my brother was not received into the garden of the gods even though I had felt him leap into the black portal. My father guided me to our lineage-compound, and a small meal was prepared for us by howler monkey women. We had not slept since word came of my brother’s disappearance, no clear thoughts could come into my head. Sometime during our meal my father came away from the other men and stood next to me. When I looked up he said,

“Your brother Atlatla is dead, son.” And he did not let me look away until I nodded at him, and then I went to the hut of the storyteller and fell onto my sleeping bench. It was the blood-wetted muzzle of Tzak Balam that received me so very gently into sleep, the little hairs and whiskers seemed to tenderly brush my neck as I became senseless.

On the third day after my brother’s death, that was 11 Muwan 10 Akbal, the priest and my uncle performed another divining before our lineage-shrine, and again they could not find my brother’s soul in the garden of the gods. My uncle had another question, this one is rarely asked:





“Is the soul of this man in the underworld?”

The priest performed the divining.

“He is still in the jungle,” said Puksik’al Tok. “Tzak Balam has him.”

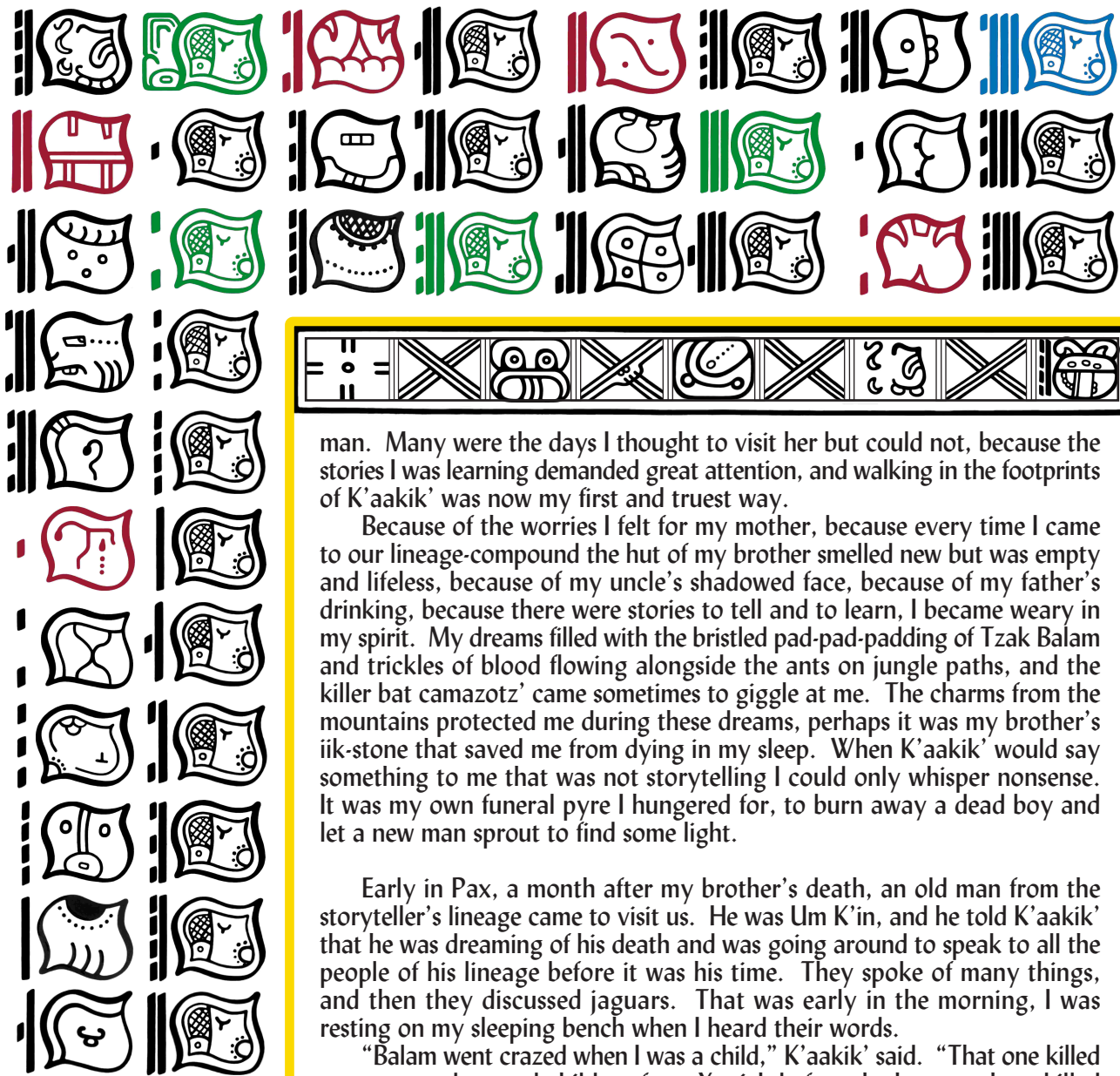
And my uncle accepted these words, though they brought little gasps of pain from my mother and broke the face of my father into that of an old man. The divining of the priest made no sense to me because of what I had witnessed; his spirit should have been in the garden of the gods, or on its way. The priest gazed at me as he took up his divining tools and departed our compound, and though I saw him his steps were made of air, there went the face of a person whose position no longer held weight for me.

For twenty days after my brother burned I ate only gruel and drank only water, learning new stories was beyond me. Often I was in our lineage-compound to comfort my mother and assist my father with minor things, often I prayed for Atlatla. After this time it was necessary to return to the storyteller’s path, and my heavy feet walked the story circle once more.

Atlatla’s death brought many changes to our lineage. There were discussions for my oldest uncle, with Te Ek’, and there were discussions with other lineage-fathers and lineage-shamans as well. From these talks came one tiny mercy, too great was its price: the evil means of my brother’s murder brought Cab Coh back into howler monkey’s embrace. Though the rest of the village stayed turned from us, our own clan extended its prayers to Cab Coh once more. My uncle became much older during this time, the look of patience that had always been his was overtaken by many creases and shadows that were not good to see. My father drank too much liquor, pleas from my mother did nothing to stop this, and he did not work at his wood carving. It was his heat that was leaving him, his arguments with my brother had kept his heart warm, and now those embers were dying.

My mother sought to disappear into her feathers: a great celebration was coming at the end of that year, and she turned away no one who asked her for feathered things. In the first days after my brother’s death my father and I were there often, near her. She wept more than people of the valley like to see, flowers and scoldings and the touches of my father did little for her. After I returned to the hut of the storyteller the wives of my two uncles stayed with her, she was never alone. My aunts are ripened women, it was their strength that held my mother up in those skidding days. Once I thought of telling my mother to flee from the valley, to run away with the traders and return to her own lineage and be free of Cab Coh suffering. It was a stupid thing to think, she was a woman now going into her years of strength, this was the idiot thinking of someone who was still a boy and not yet a





man. Many were the days I thought to visit her but could not, because the stories I was learning demanded great attention, and walking in the footsteps of K'aakik' was now my first and truest way.

Because of the worries I felt for my mother, because every time I came to our lineage-compound the hut of my brother smelled new but was empty and lifeless, because of my uncle's shadowed face, because of my father's drinking, because there were stories to tell and to learn, I became weary in my spirit. My dreams filled with the bristled pad-pad-padding of Tzak Balam and trickles of blood flowing alongside the ants on jungle paths, and the killer bat camazotz' came sometimes to giggle at me. The charms from the mountains protected me during these dreams, perhaps it was my brother's iik-stone that saved me from dying in my sleep. When K'aakik' would say something to me that was not storytelling I could only whisper nonsense. It was my own funeral pyre I hungered for, to burn away a dead boy and let a new man sprout to find some light.

Early in Pax, a month after my brother's death, an old man from the storyteller's lineage came to visit us. He was Um K'in, and he told K'aakik' that he was dreaming of his death and was going around to speak to all the people of his lineage before it was his time. They spoke of many things, and then they discussed jaguars. That was early in the morning, I was resting on my sleeping bench when I heard their words.

"Balam went crazed when I was a child," K'aakik' said. "That one killed two men and several children from Xunich before the hunters there killed her. That was she-balam."

Um K'in said, "I was a hunter then, and I went to Xunich to see that one. She was as long as a man stands tall, and I don't mean with her tail."

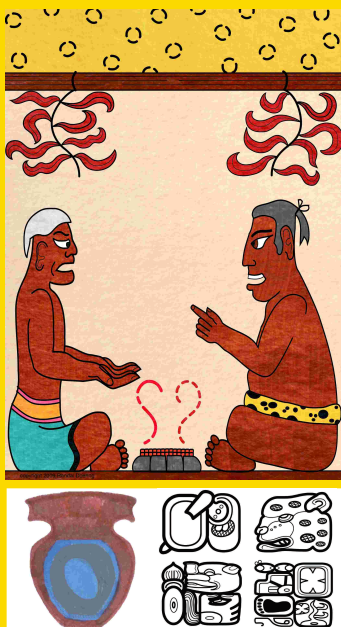
"I wonder who sits on that pelt," K'aakik' said.

"There was another, when I was a boy," said Um K'in. "That one lived near the old city and killed people in all three villages. They never found it. The old priest drove it away with his magic and stopped the murders, but they never killed it."

"My father told me that," K'aakik' said. "It was like this Tzak Balam, it served ah-Puch."

"Balam serves whoever rewards him best. He does not care about sun or night. These spirit jaguars, though, they are ancient things. They were summoned for the war between the cities, and they return, sometimes. There is never a hunter clever enough to discover them, the priest must find a way to seal it off before it kills too many people."

Then they spoke of other things, it was not long before the old man

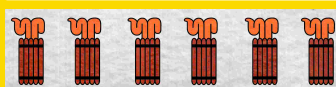


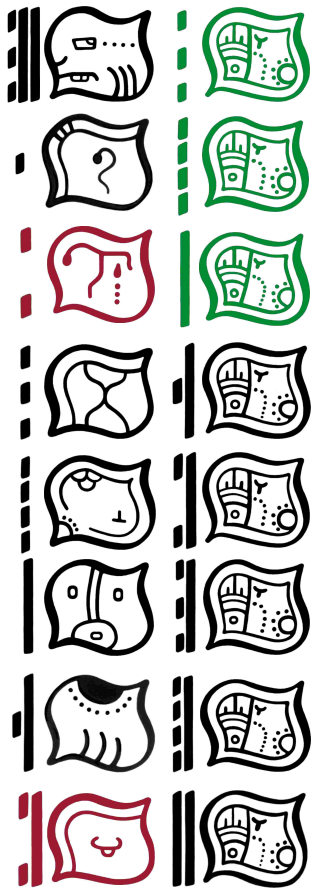
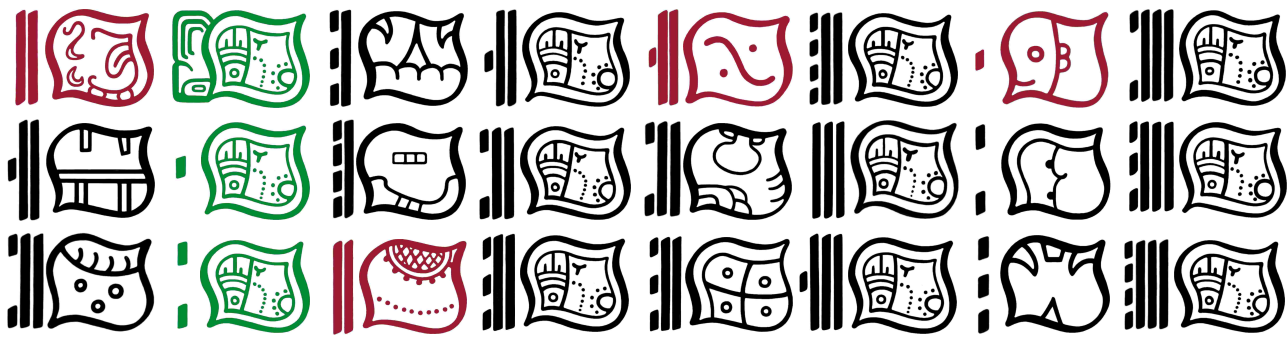


went on and left me with these thoughts about Tzak Balam. It would take strong magic indeed to fight such a creature, who could raise a spear against this demon and extinguish the fire in its eyes?

On the day 5 Pax 11 Caban K'aakik was gone from his hut all day, visiting his lineage. When he returned for our lessons that afternoon he bore a basket filled with many pouches and small clay jars and woven net-bags. These were gifts from his lineage-father, K'aakik' received such gifts for bringing respect to his lineage by walking the storyteller's path. There were fifty small pouches of tobacco: smooth tobacco and hacking tobacco and fogged-headed tobacco, tobacco for smoking around boys and tobacco for men only and tobacco to be smoked around women. There were pouches filled with lumps of chocolate, and jars of chocolate paste, and there were several jars of sweet-scented vanilla paste as well. There were net-bags stuffed with chilis, the little yellow ones for making powerful men weep and the large green ones any infant can suck on all day. Four was the number of net-bags of passion fruits from Chacwitz, four more were filled with plump fruits from Xunich. The smells of these things were strong, for days the storyteller's hut was filled with luscious scents, and though K'aakik' offered me my pleasure I could not accept anything or think of amusing myself with vanilla or chocolate or a good smoke or a contest of chili-eating with my work-father. My brother's soul was trapped between worlds, there was no pleasure for him, and because of this the laughter had departed from me, and my enjoyment of good things.

My brother was murdered in the rainy season, it was only a blessing from the gods and the goddesses that allowed us to burn his pyre as we did, and the days after his death were wet days in the valley. Because of the clouds it was not possible to see any stars; our loved ones who die ascend and become new sky-fires, it is said, and I wanted to look for Atlatla. But the skies were grey every day, even Father Sun was hidden, and the nights were black and rumbling, and Mother Moon could not show her face. The evil dreams continued for me, month after month, almost every night I dreamed of Tzak Balam and camazotz' and my brother walking in the mountains. People say it is a misfortune to dream of the dead, because it means the dead one is trying to call a companion to them. But my brother was not threatening, only lost and alone. He was grey and misty; his head was always down, and he was walking outside Chacwitz, in the wet forests up there. He was speaking to me, or whispering, but there were no words I could hear, sometimes I woke reaching for him but could not grasp him.



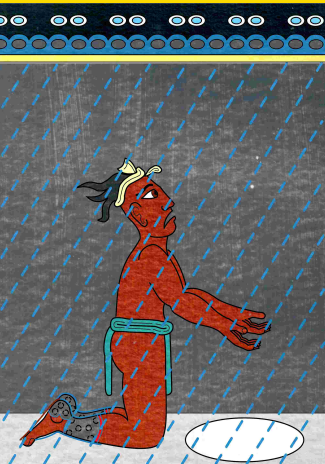


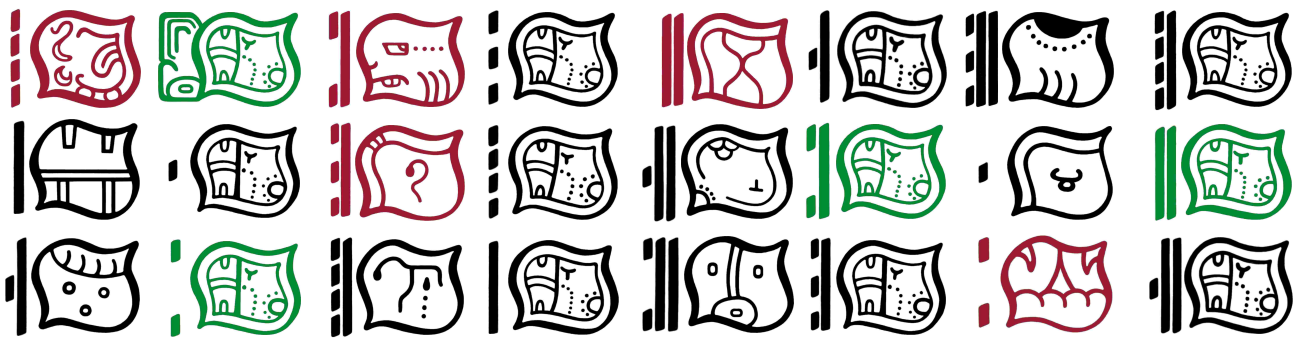
Sometimes after I woke from such dreams I went into our lineage-courtyard and looked as far as I could see, from a place near our lineage-shrine I could glimpse the northern peaks, in flashes of lightning. In that place the white-stone city lay full of rotting bones. All those spirits despise the people of our valley, it was they who had sent the murderous flood. And this is our world: powerful men and women struggle for more power, and angry spirits struggle to release their ancient hate on those who live, and Mother Moon and Father Sun struggle to keep ah-Puch from ruining the creation. In our village, our tiny place guarded by five little acantuns and one strong priest, I struggled for my brother. I walked with him in my dreams, I accompanied him on his silent path and listened to him whisper murmuring words. And after many such walks I understood a way to help him, the shape of an idea stayed in my head after I returned to this world.

It was a spear I needed, a spear of wood and flint or a spear of the spirit to strike down a powerful demon, and I began to look to the heavens for it, I began to look in the river for it, I began to look in the fire for it, I began to look into the faces of the people for it. From my dreams I knew that this weapon was not like those that men use today, a boar spear or a deer-hunting spear. It was a war-spear I needed. It was the ancient way that was called for, a true destroyer, a spear that could pierce Tzak Balam's glittering heart and kill him and release my brother from his hold. That was what I was looking for, from the northern city or the valley, from any place where such a thing could be found.

On the night of 14 Pax 7 Cimi, when the rains were falling so loud that K'aakik' and I could not even speak for learning stories, I crept again to the city of our fathers. The demon-spear was pulling me, it was not my own heart that sent me out into the rain. When K'aakik' was sleeping I put on my margay sandals and went past the mat house onto the jungle trail. There was no wind, but the rain fell so hard that there was no other sound, even my walking on the paving stones of the road was silent. In the darkness I could see almost nothing, it was the memory in my legs and feet that carried me safely to the city. At the round stone set into the road I stopped and said a prayer to my ancestors, it was their guidance I sought on that 7 Cimi day. For many heartbeats there was only the rain, and then there was small blood-lightning in my right leg. There were four or five twitches, deep under the skin. Because of that I left the road and found an animal trail going to the south. The blood-lightning ceased, it was the tiniest sign I was given, and then I went that muddy way.

That was an old trail, long-abandoned and filled with fallen branches.





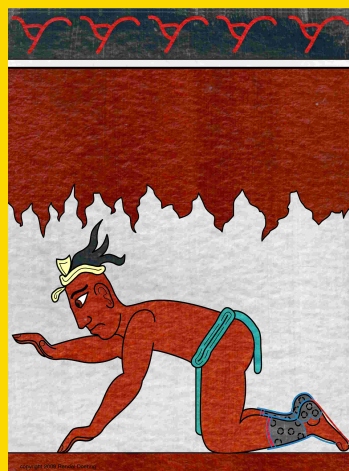
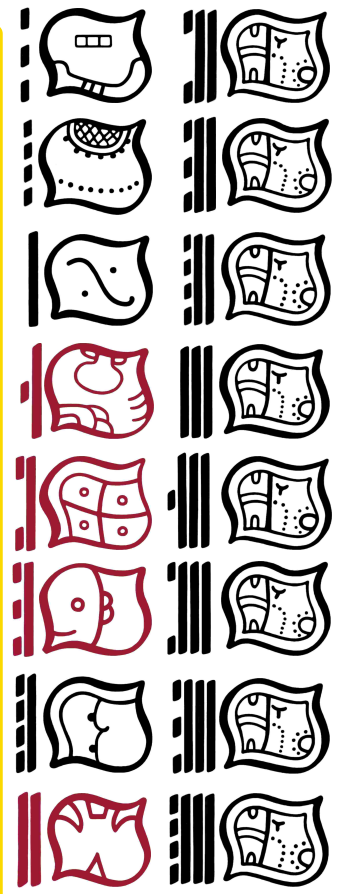
My arms were ripped by tree-spines, my feet were shocked by stones. Once I slipped when sliding over a fallen tree, and its crushing strength between my legs made me sit whimpering for a long while. But the way of the spear was strong before me, I would silence camazotz' and murder Tzak Balam under his father's own face to set my brother free. And so I collected myself from the log and continued the twisting way, under the rain, under the lightning. All through the city that trail seemed to go, four hundred fallen branches broke under my sandals, four hundred times the muck slid me around, and then the trail ended at a heap of tumbled stones. I climbed onto the carved rocks, xinan the scorpion is inside his home on such nights and is not a danger.

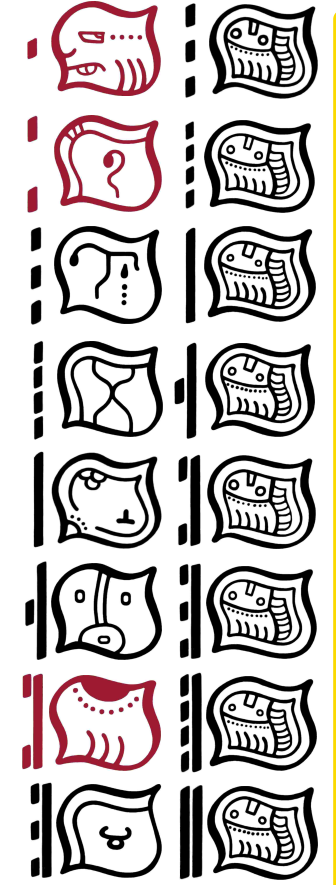
The building had been a small pyramid-mountain, as tall as six men. Vines and roots grew over the steps and the tiers, in this broken place the magic of my ancestors could not keep the jungle from pulling apart the stones. My brother's sandals let me climb the jumbled rocks without falling, and it is true that my thoughts were of my brother when he lived in the mountains and had good sense. At the top of the pyramid-mountain was wreckage that had been the temple, there was a moment of terror for me because I saw kan koch the fer-de-lance waiting. I had no walking stick in my hands, I thought I was to be poisoned and die there, but in the next lightning flash I saw it was only a root.

The altar was gone, perhaps the white-stone warriors had smashed or stolen it, and the picture-words were gone or broken to small pieces. In that place I stood waiting for the crackles of yellow lightning that flickered across the sky, and during each burst I looked over the piled stones and shrubs for the tip of a war-spear, or any useful thing. It was on the back side of the pyramid-mountain that there was something unusual, a dark hole halfway down. The stones on that side were not yet broken, there was a smooth, steep slope to the ground. Now the vines were useful and not just foot-tangle, now they opened the way. And this is what was down there: a tunnel into the pyramid-mountain. It must have been the northern warriors who broke through the stones, but their reason for doing so was not clear.

There was no light in the tunnel, and I could not return to the village for an ember-pouch and a torch and come back before dawn. In truth just looking into the hole made my heart small, there was nothing in me that wanted to seek that place. But my ancestors had pulled my blood to bring me there, now that I had arrived no other path lay open before me.

So it was that I crouched down and crawled into the darkness, praying for any guidance my ancestors cared to show me. My fingers found the





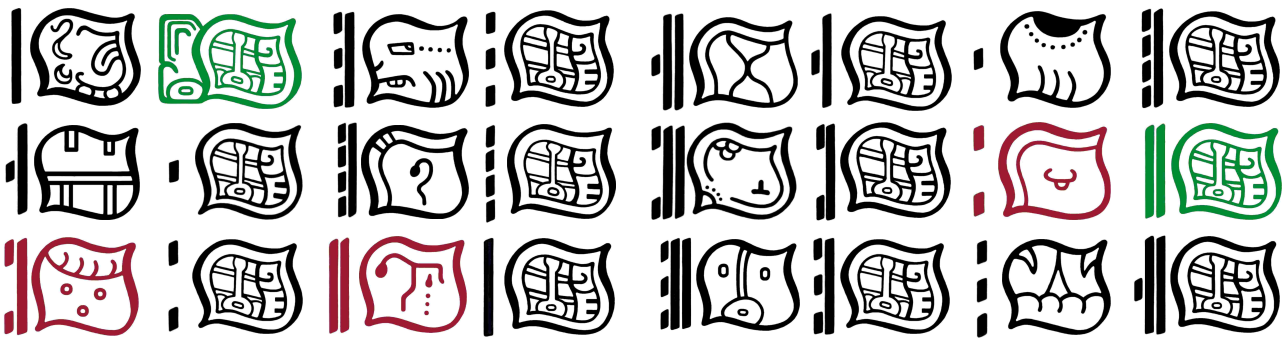
way through the tunnel, it was straight but heaped with fallen earth from the ceiling. The inside of the pyramid-mountain was just dirt, my ancestors built it with stones and filled it with soil. At one place a few clods of earth fell from the ceiling, and I could not go on, because all that dirt might fall on me and bury me. But this was my thought, that if the tunnel truly was made by northern warriors, there might yet be a spear there, or at least its stone head. And so I took off my clothing and went on, over the heaps of earth, writhing through narrow places, and praying.

At the end of this crawling I came to stone again, there was a little chamber at the heart of the pyramid-mountain where I could rise off my knees and squat. The tunnel broke into this, and very carefully I entered. Small things moved away from me, I heard their rustling but no clicking like xinan makes on stones. There was a foul stink there, it was old death, and when I moved a little I kicked a clay pot that crunched and broke. This made no sense to me, and I moved my fingers and found many more little pots, already broken. With my hands in front of me I searched that little room, it was only a few paces wide and eight paces long, there were a few old spider webs but nothing moving in them. In the center of the room was a long stone box that contained someone's bones; the northern city men had broken open the box and scattered everything around. Immediately I said prayers for the dead one, now I knew why the northern men made their tunnel. Their warriors destroyed the temple and then came to take jade and obsidian from my ancestors, truly people were degraded in the last days of the cities.

I did not know what to do, it was only confusion I felt. Because of the rustlings I did not want to touch around any more with my fingers, eventually there would be a sting from some angry child of ix-Ai. I waddled around the stone box again, slowly, and tapped with my sandals for anything I had missed. Then my hair brushed a spider web, thus was the will of my ancestors revealed: a lightning bug made its light, it was trapped over my head. That was only a pale green glow, but in such a small place it was very good. I took the bug out of the web, it had not yet been wrapped by any spider, and held it out in my hand. After a time it glowed again, and in this long flash I saw that the stone box was indeed empty. There were only some bones and a few crickets, nothing else.

When the insect glowed a third time I saw something oddly shaped, in a corner of the room, beneath some shattered pottery. Many centipedes slithered away when I moved the broken bits, some of these were huge and fearsome, I had to do this with my feet and not my fingers. It was many many breaths before the lightning bug lit again. I shook it a little, but it





lit when it wanted to; this was ix-Ai's revenge for all her children I ever stepped on. When it finally lit I saw what was under the pottery: it was a conch shell, from the distant ocean. Its tip was sawed off and polished, and it was carved with picture-words and the signs for smoke and fire. This worthless thing I did not even pick up, I was not going to beat Tzak Balam to death with an old sea shell, no matter how well-carved it was.

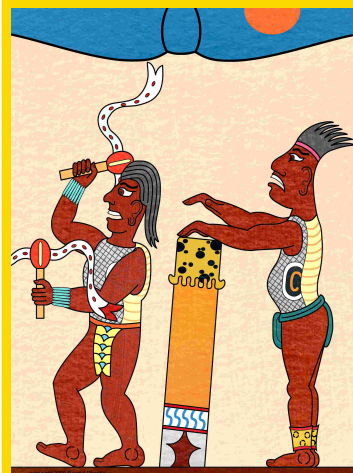
Though I stayed for many more glow-flashes and looked for spearheads, there was nothing more, and then the bug flew out of my hand and did not light again. I had to leave, I departed that house of death. Outside the tunnel the rain cleaned the dirt from me, and then I dressed myself and returned to our village. Frustration was my reward for this journey, my brother's spirit remained lost, and my plan to assist him stayed empty.

At the end of that year was a great celebration, a thirteen-day festival was held for the end of the fifty-two year dance of Father Sun and Mother Moon and the lords and ladies of time. These days have no names, they do not exist under Lady Time, the gods and goddesses are resting before the next dance begins. Only the holy days continued and were marked by the priest and the lineage-shamans.

For this celebration was a great gathering of foods and flowers, a great making of tables and festival-chairs, many idols were carved for the lords and ladies of time. These were perfumed and incensed and fed cacao and liquor and blood; it was our precious essence that we gave to them, to continue their duties for us. K'aakik' and I helped harvest fruits from his lineage's orchards and my own, there was much silent tongue-biting for me as we picked up fallen fruits and put them in baskets.

The festival began with parades of idols, marvelous were the feathered costumes of the powerful men as they danced, and the lineage-shamans bore their staves and pouches as they pounded at the sides of the lords and ladies. Musicians from all the lineages came out in their boa constrictor tunics, with drums and pipes and crossed-bone sticks, and they made thunder for thirteen days almost without ceasing; in truth they played and drank and played until they fell senseless, and when they became sober they played again.

On the first day of the celebration, that was 6 Caban, my uncle spoke with me after the first procession of idols. When he found me he was eating dripping honey-bread, not a drop of gold escaped his tongue, and for a time we watched the parades together. My uncle smells of man-sweat; it is the smell of work in the fields and tobacco smoked in the mat house and during howler monkey discussions, and maybe the scent of his wife. This is not an





unpleasant smell but is strong with him, as with my father. I was surrounded by my uncle there, his familiar presence brought peace to my heart.

“There are dances, later,” my uncle said. “Your brother would have joined them, I think. He was difficult with people, but he liked to dance.”

And now the calm that came with my uncle departed, this reminder of my brother’s lost spirit brought forth fresh hurt.

“I say prayers for him,” said my uncle. “He will never be forgotten.”

Now many memories of my brother came into me, and a thick fear, for this is the terrible thing that happens to the dead; they are left behind. Every family remembers its lineage-fathers, but others are let go, they fall into the dark and are lost. That was where my brother was, in the darkness between worlds, a toy perhaps for Tzak Balam. It was his loneliness that afflicted me, even at that celebration.

“Your brother’s hut will become yours, in half a year,” my uncle said. “I will perform a new dedication, a new hearth will be put in place. Or we will burn it down and start over, if you wish.”

“I have not thought about this,” I said. I did not want to replace Atlatla, I could not.

“You know Te Ek’ was going to assign your brother a wife. You have spoken with the storyteller about his own marriage, you understand what that means?”

It was difficult to speak of these matters, only respect for my uncle kept me there, forcing sounds that were supposed to be intelligent out of my mouth. My manhood ceremony was coming, my uncle was trying to prepare me for my place as a man. “We are said to be cursed. This is more than K’aakik’ had against him.”

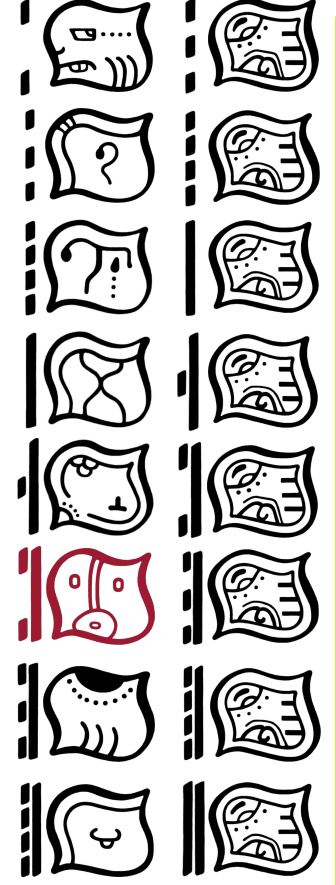
“Some young women are less fearful than you might think,” my uncle said. “There are those who appreciate the skill of the storyteller’s path.”

I glanced at his face to see if he was mocking me, but he seemed serious. “I can ask a few questions, say a few things,” my uncle said.

To this I nodded, it did not really matter what I thought. What girl were they going to drag into Cab Coh now, to be broken like my mother? An assigned woman was the best way. My uncle understood our place in the village with great wisdom, let him find someone who could bend this way and that in the Cab Coh winds.

My uncle sighed and lowered his head, and my eyes found him again.

“I know, it is a bad time for us, and here is one more thing,” he said. “But this is important, Maxam, a good wife is a great comfort. I know you can listen, even if you don’t want to hear. Watch the dances, watch these young women, and appreciate them. Look a little, talk a little. Start seeking,





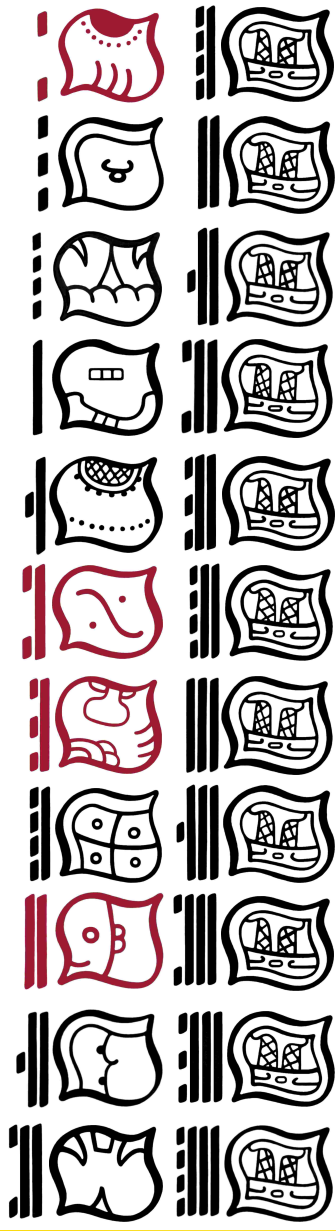
even if it is difficult at first.” Then he nodded and left me, perhaps it was thoughts of own wife that were exciting him.

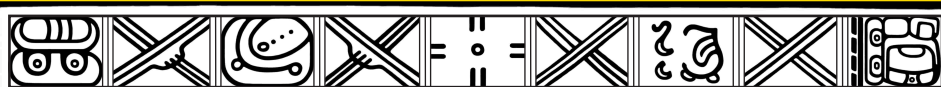
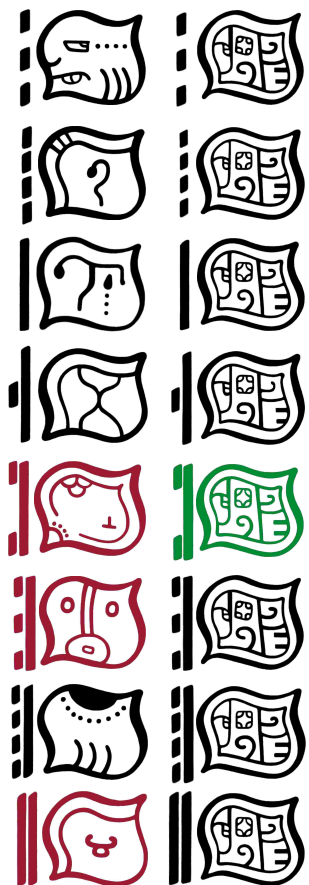
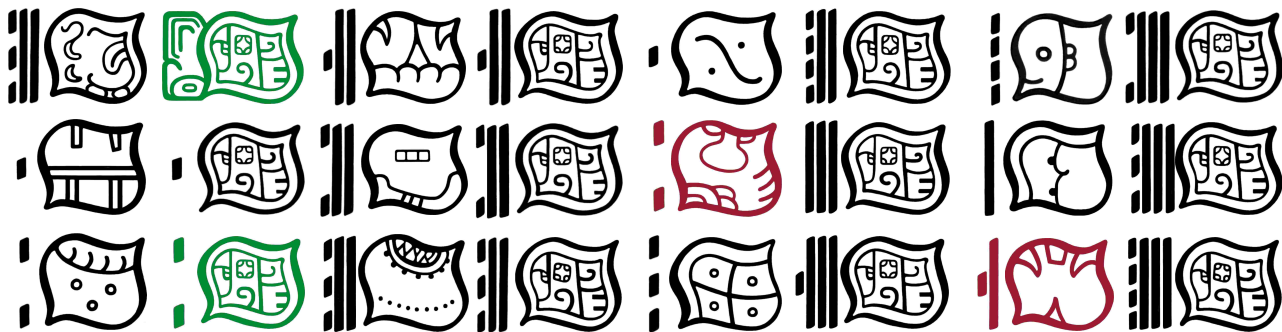
In fact I did watch the dances, there are women who swish their hair this way and that, they smile very curved smiles and shake and shiver and move all the world with their hips and their calves. My uncle’s wife was like these when she was young, I think. Later she became wise and learned herb-lore and a little bone-setting and the making of excellent chocolate drinks. It was very difficult to see these women through our lineage-curse, through my mother’s tears, through things K’aakik’ said about his wife. For my uncle, perhaps, his wife was his companion and his strength. But this was not so true for my father and mother, and for K’aakik’ his assigned wife was only a dry thorn.

Such were my thoughts at the greatest festival in the memory of our village, these were the concerns that kept me at the sides and not in the middle with the babblers and the riddlers, the smokers and jugglers and swayers. The previous year had been a good one for our people; the damage of the flood was gone, and the harvest had been bountiful. There were many babies, ah-Puch’s servants had not seized nearly so many as I had feared, and no women had died in childbirth that year. Only two murders had taken place, the craftsman and my brother, and so for most of the village the celebration was filled with thanks. Never had I seen so many drunkards, every night fifty people slept under the feasting tables. Children ran everywhere while their parents talked and traded.

All the clans served food, every kind of devourable was there, roast pig and deer, twenty kinds of kebabs, baked birds and fishes, turtles in soups and tamales. There were sliced fruits, and honeyed fruits, shelled fruits and fruit-pulp tarts. Twenty-four were the kinds of breads I counted, there were hard breads and soft, white and yellow and brown, plain and filled with spices and fruits. Sixteen kinds of honey were present, each had its own color and scent and taste, every lineage kept its bees differently, for flavor.

Though I saw all these things, and smelled their deliciousness, there was only a little eating for me, during the thirteen days of the fifty-two year celebration. Atlatla would have enjoyed these dances and parades, was my thought; he would have enjoyed the foolishness of the stumbling drunks. Bits of vanilla-soaked bread were what I took away, and fat tamales floating in steaming sauce, and each day I dropped these into the fire in the storyteller’s hut, with copal incense, to keep my brother fed. For myself there was just enough to stay strong, nothing more. A full belly makes for an empty head, many people say, and I did not wish to become forgetful. K’aakik’ told all the festival stories, we did not do any learning during this time, so the





thirteen days were a rest for me. When the new fifty-two year dance and the new year began, the idols of the lords and ladies of time were burned in the center of the village, there was a huge fire with many sacrifices. Everyone sent gifts into the flames and called out prayers for the new year.

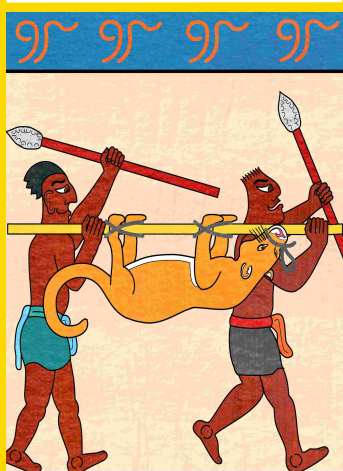
On the last day of the celebration was the new fire ceremony, every fire in the village was put out except the storyteller's flames. A puma was sacrificed, it was a huge animal that had torn open four hunters who seized it and brought it back living to our village, hanging from a pole. Its heart was cut out in the old way, this is done once every fifty-two years, and the beating organ was burned with copal incense in the storyteller's fire. It was this sacrifice that began the new dance between the gods and the goddesses, the strength of this great cat invigorated them. A jaguar is not good for such things, balam invigorates no one but himself.

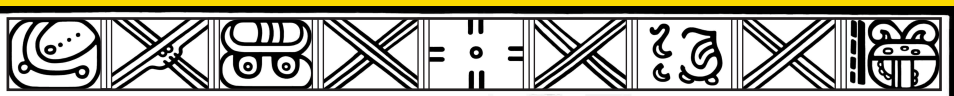
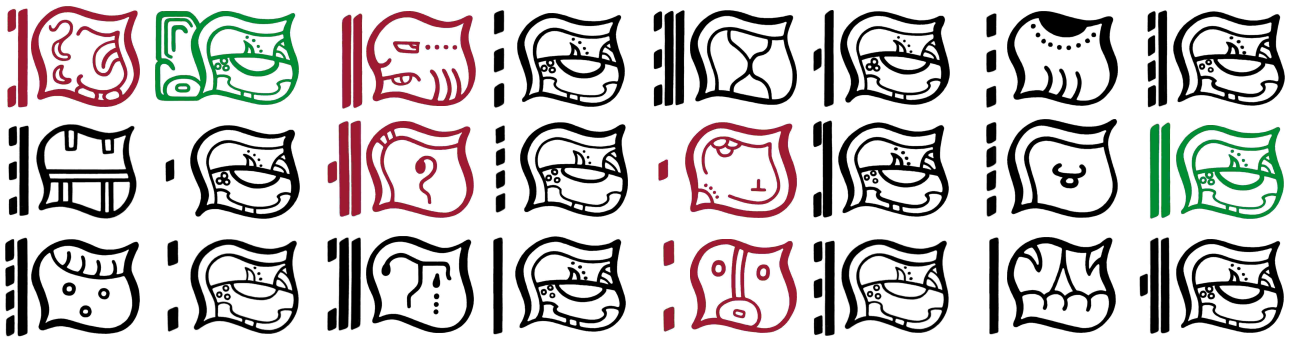
When the heart was consumed, a small fire was kindled in the open chest of the dead puma, it was fed with moss and dry herbs. The caçique sparked the fire with raw flint while the priest and the lineage-shamans spoke their prayers. Every fire in our village was re-lit from that little flame; the lineage-fathers came with torches and lit them from the puma and carried them to their compounds. Then the puma skin was tanned and given to the priest, and it went into the god-house, to hang for the next fifty-two years. The meat was burned, and the bones were carved into pipes for future celebrations. Then life in our village became as it had always been, except that my brother was no longer part of it.

The lords and ladies of time did not cease carrying their day-burdens, at Atlatla's passing. Planting came, and K'aakik' and I put seeds in the ground and then weeded around the sprouts when they broke through the soil. When the maize plants were as high as my knee, early in Sip, my uncle and I spoke a little more about a wife. That day was 10 Sip 4 Ahau, I was visiting our lineage-compound to look at my brother's hut and determine if I wanted to live there or have it burned down. This was in the afternoon, my father was away cutting wood, but my uncle was there. He came out of his hut when I was walking around my brother's place, and he said,

"I heard your mother say she was making your new clothing, for after the river ceremony."

It was my coming sixteenth birthday that I was thinking of also, this was why I was at my brother's hut. Every hearth in the village had a fire except this one, it was too dangerous to leave a hearth-fire burning in Atlatla's hut. His lost spirit might try to return to the warm fire and then do harm to the living people of Cab Coh, in his frustration and anger at his





murder. Only if I moved into his hut could there be a fire again.
“I saw the dances, at the celebration,” I said. “But I do not know these young women, their names are unknown to me.”

Now he looked irritated, and he said, “This is why you have to speak with them. Every month there is a seating festival, every few days there is a feast for this or that. Do you see nothing at these celebrations?”

“I see a bride-service price,” I said. “I see years before I own this hut.”

“We will pay a bride price in things, I think,” said my uncle. “The storyteller’s work-son cannot be expected to break his back in another lineage’s fields.”

It was a mistake I made then, I looked at my uncle and saw in his face that he understood my words to be petty concerns covering some other truth. He is fearfully wise, my uncle, and I had to look down before he saw too much of me. He could offer prayers for my brother, if he wished, but it was the murder of Tzak Balam I wanted. No thoughts of wives planted in my heart, my brother’s spirit tossed out such seeds.

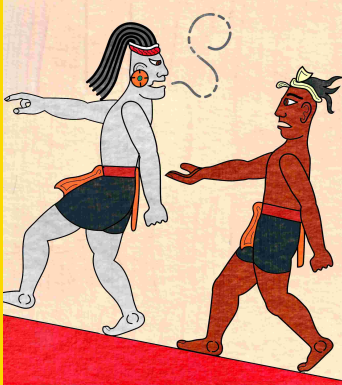
“Maybe it would be good if you said a few things,” I told him. “There are lineage concerns I do not know, Atlatla said things sometimes.”

For a long while my uncle stood looking at me with fierce annoyance, until my insides became pulp. “Very well, I will speak with Te Ek’. If you cannot find someone of your own to hold, we will find someone suitable.”

To this I nodded, and then I went inside my brother’s hut to chase away scorpions and other pests. All his things were gone, his blowgun and spear and clothing and baskets all burned on his pyre. There was nothing to call to him, nothing to entice his spirit to return. The final thing I did was sweep out his hearth and throw the ashes into the jungle.

On 4 Sek 12 lx, Tzak Balam returned with another killing. It was in the mountains this time, a woman trader was killed at the edge of their camp. She was bathing in a stream, and Tzak Balam left the water filled with blood, and his prints in the sand. The trader’s name was Yax Copal, she was in her strong years and had many children. So it is that ah-Puch entertains himself, by making each wound burn many times over.

After this killing Atlatla grew angry with me, in my dreams. He tried to lead me somewhere on the mountain trail, I understood that there was something he wanted me to see, but I could never keep up with him. Sometimes he turned to say heated words, but they were frozen in the cold mountain winds, and lost. I woke from these dreams frightened and grieving, something truly evil was going to happen to my brother if his soul was not rescued and sent on its proper way.



Often I have spoken of Father Sun and Mother Moon and their children. Here are the names and the signs of the strongest and most respected gods and goddesses, thirteen is their number, and here, too, are the seven god-children and world-gods who most shape the life of our village. Oxlahun-ti-ku is the title of the thirteen, twelve live in the garden of the gods and one in the underworld. Mighty is the strength of their persons and their ways.



Hunab Ku is the name of the creator of everything. No one speaks with Hunab Ku, no one has ever seen the true face of this god. Before the beginning he was there, he made the lightning and the darkness into which Father Sun and Mother Moon and ah-Puch were born. It is only through the words of Father Sun, to the priests of many generations, that we know the name of the creator.



Father Sun was first-born of the first gods; he emerged from the red plumeria

flower in the darkness before creation. He separated sky from earth and earth from water, he created the seven worlds. From his blood and maize dough came the first people, our ancestors. Each night he descends into the underworld to trouble his twin brother, ah-Puch, and keep him from tormenting the world. His spirit companion is the great bird, harpy-eagle, lord of the skies.



ah-Puch is the second-born of the first three gods, he is the younger twin of Father Sun and came

from a black plumeria flower. ah-Puch is lord of the night, it is he who discovered murder and brought it to the world. Pain and suffering and madness are his, he is lord of the underworld and the broken and mutilated souls that go there. Ceaselessly he works to ruin Father Sun's creation, undoing the work of others delights him. It is ah-Puch who brought jaguars into the world, a black jaguar is his spirit companion.



Mother Moon was third-born of the first gods and is wife to Father Sun. She was wombed in the

white plumeria flower, and soft white light is the sign of her presence. It is her blood that made maize for the first people to eat, and she brought many birds and butterflies into the world. Her cycles govern the lives of women, much wisdom is whispered to women shamans and herbalists under her face. She protects those who go out at night, against ah-Puch and his servants and children. Her spirit companion is a white rabbit.



ah-Itzamna is the first child of Father Sun and Mother Moon. He

is Lord Medicine by the axe, chopper of evil spirits and reshaper of broken bones. It is ah-Itzamna who taught our ancestors mathematics and writing, in his intelligence he is alone among the gods and goddesses. The green iguana is his companion. This god was the first beekeeper and waxman.

ah-K'awil is the quiet second child of Father Sun and Mother Moon. He is the lord of lineages, in his blood he carries the memory of every soul that



has ever been. He fought ah-Puch early in the creation, to save our ancestors from being destroyed, but his own leg was turned into a serpent to fight against him. A timber rattlesnake is his spirit companion.

ix/ah-Xp'enkin is the god of time, s/he is the first-born daughter of Mother Moon and Father Sun and was born exactly at dawn. S/he laid down the path of the days



and ensures the order of planting and harvest. Her children are the lords and ladies of time, they carry the burden of days so that their mother may push back ah-Puch, who tries to destroy her works. A lightning bug is her spirit companion.

ix-Nikak' is the lady of plants. She is the second daughter of Mother Moon and Father Sun. Squash and beans, manioc and cassava, chilis and tobacco are hers. She smokes like a man, even cigars are hers to enjoy, only Father Sun



can smoke more harsh weed than she does. Though she is often appealed to, she rarely hears prayers. A cutworm is her spirit companion.



ix-Chel was born of a rainbow and is Lady Medicine by prayer and healing; it is ix-Chel who taught our ancestors herb-lore. She is the wife of ah-Itzamna, together these two carry great knowledge. In the rainbow this goddess

is young and incites young women to odd ideas and silly pleasures; in the herb garden she is in her strength. A hummingbird is her spirit companion.

ix-Yamanha' is the third daughter of Mother Moon and Father Sun. Silent streams and ponds, pools and springs are her places, all things that happen near still waters are known to her. This young goddess is a busy lover, but her heart is uncaring, and her children are cold. Some say that the evil spirits, ix-Xtabai, are her daughters, and at least one lord of the night is said to be her child. A tricolor heron is her spirit companion.



ah-Ekchuah is a younger son of Father Sun and Mother Moon. He is the lord of merchants and those who travel to see new places. This is a grim god, he has witnessed terrible things on his journeys and broods much.



Long ago he painted his face black, to mourn the ugliness in the world, and this mask has never washed away. A black hawk is his spirit companion; this is a silent bird.

ah-Hunnai is the Maize Lord, he is young and quite handsome. He was born in a pool of water from the monthly blood of Mother Moon, and a little soil. ah-Hunnai seeks the company of many goddesses, even married ladies are not safe from his attentions. Because of this he is often thrown out of the palaces of other gods and is barred from many parties and gatherings. A raccoon is the spirit companion who chews his ears.



ah-K'oxol is the twin brother of ah-Hunnai and was born in a bolt of lightning striking a flint boulder. Customs and traditions are what he fights for, the proper way to do things is always known to him. ah-K'oxol has no patience, he is teacher by the stick, those who know him learn quickly when he is around. ah-K'oxol has no spirit companion, but he is alive in axes and hatchets and can be summoned through these objects to provide guidance in rituals and prayers.



ah-Hunbatz is the first-born twin son of ah-Itzamna and ix-Chel, here is the first grand-child of the gods. His father taught him to write down words and pictures, and now he appears in the dreams of those who know this skill and scolds them if they become careless. As a traveller this god journeys to villages to examine the writings of the priests and lineage-elders; those who stammer on paper find their prayers turning sour. A sandpiper is his spirit companion, this is the shore bird that leaves tracks like writings and scolds beach-walkers.



ah-Hunchouen is the second-born twin of ah-Hunbatz, he is much more patient than his brother. Crafts are what are his, especially carving and painting masks and jewelry and pottery, but the rolling of leaves into good cigars for long smoking is also the gift of this god. Sometimes he appears in dreams to tell people to take up the ways of the craftsman, these are the ones who make special items for the holy days or their family shrines. The brown-hooded parrot, with its masked face, is his companion.



ix-Ai is Lady Insect. It is not clear where she came from; probably she rose from the world without Father Sun or Mother Moon giving her form. She lives alone in a great palace filled with many insects and has no lovers or admirers, though Mother Moon visits her sometimes. Mostly she irritates people, only her spiders are friends to weavers. This goddess has a million spirit companions, she is everywhere, you must forget hiding from her or her children. Eggs are the great secret of ix-Ai, gift-bundles that bring excitement were her present first to birds and then to our ancestors.



ah-Pawatun is a four-folded god, his faces are red and yellow, black and white. His four aspects live at the four corners of the world and hold the ground up over the underworld. It is not clear where the Pawatuns came from or why they serve Father Sun; my uncle says the Pawatuns arose from the world itself, but from the priest there is no word in this matter. Earthquakes happen when these old gods shift their burdens. They have shrews for spirit companions, each shrew is the color of its master.



ah-Bacab is another four-folded god, these are the four-in-one lords who hold sky over world. The bacabs are said to be made of clouds and are always asleep, prayers to them are useless. When they fart there are windstorms, breezes are their exhalations. In the early days of this world Father Sun created the bacabs from his own sweet breath, people say the bacabs are strong in spirit and slow to anger. Birds of some sort are their spirit companions, no one seems to know which ones.



ah-Chac is also a four-folded god, here again is the red and the yellow, the white and the black. These are the rain gods, they alone are responsible for sky waters, but they are old and sleepy and often neglect their duties. The Chacs came from outside the creation and live in caves at the far edges of the garden of the gods. The Chicchans are their spirit companions and their children, it is said.



ah-Chicchans is the great sky serpent, there are four individuals or four faces of one. Here are the soul-children of the Chacs, it is their racing over the black clouds that drops water onto the fields and the shaking of their rattles that makes thunder. Rarely do these serpents hear the prayers of men; they are obedient only to their fathers, and what happens in the world interests them little.

