

Burning

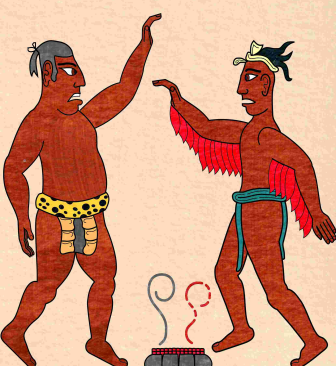
The day of my manhood ceremony was 10 Ch'en 7 Ahau. This was seven days before my sixteenth birthday, but it was the day the priest set, since 7 Ahau is the day for boys becoming men, or men remembering their sons. I was not so excited to go to

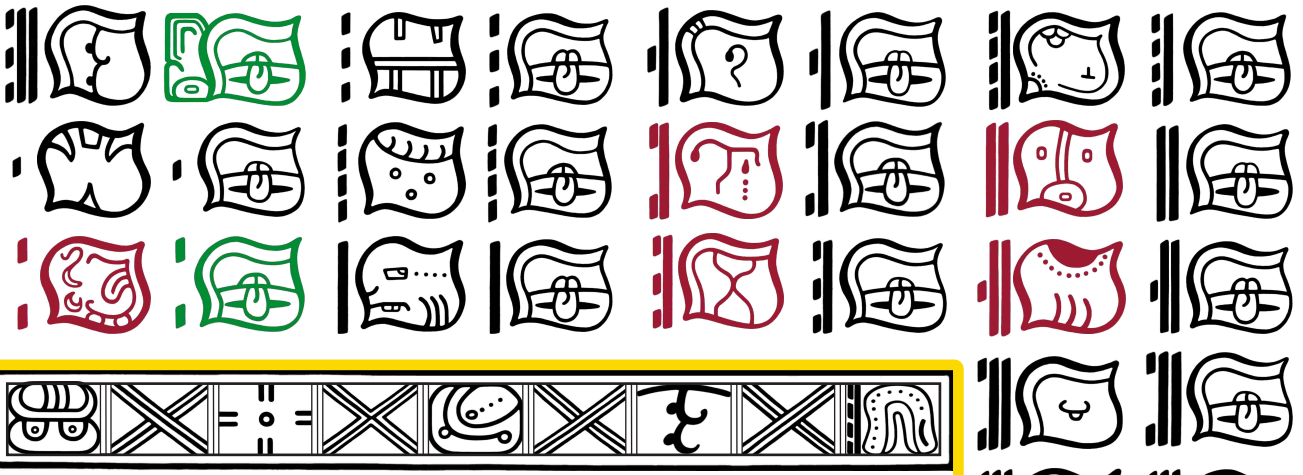
the river, this event lost much of its glow because of the danger to the spirit of my brother and the worrisome talk of marriage.

Nine days before the ceremony I began to fast, only ritual bread and water were available to me. All other foods were set aside, spices were abandoned, there was no honey, there was no tobacco. Four days before this the men of our village started their own fasts, there were thirteen lean days for them. During these days K'aakik' made much grumbling and entertained himself by pretending to smoke his bird-bone pipe and tossing his pouches of tobacco into the air and watching them fall into their basket. Because the river ceremony is rigorous there was no story training for those days, and we busied ourselves instead with harvest and repairing masks. A few days before the ceremony K'aakik' and I practiced the Dance of the Burning Boys; it was an absurdity we committed in the storyteller's hut, staggering around the fire like empty-headed fools.

On the day before the ceremony there was a celebration, all the village came, there was music and dancing as there is at this event every year. Six other boys were passing through the river, seven was our number in all. When Father Sun was high we danced the Burning Boys dance before all the people, my mother and aunts had made the costume with strips of red cloth coming from the back, to be the flames. The dance was long and heated, Father Sun was not gentle that day, by the end of the stamping and leaping it is true that the sky and the world were melting together in a strange fashion. After this the unmarried women of the village danced the Water Girls dance. Because of exhaustion and the fact that I was starving, there seemed to be very many unmarried girls moving, two hundred girls seemed to vibrate through the center of the village. This made me anxious about my uncle's meetings with Te Ek', how many unmarried women could there be to choose from? It is said there are more girls than boys in our village, but I did not know if that was true or just words.

After the dances the women went to their lineage-compounds, the village belonged only to the men. Now there were stories told, and tobacco smoked, and amusing animal-dances were performed by some of the boys. I could smoke during this time, there are certain tobaccos allowed before death in the river, but I only puffed a little. Already my head was dizzy and strange. When Father Sun began to sink over the western mountains, the lineage-fathers introduced the boys who were to become men. Because my birthday had not quite happened yet I was the sixth one introduced, I stood with my oldest uncle and turned in a circle to be seen





by all the men and boys while he said:

“This is Maxam Cab Coh. He is the storyteller’s work-son, this is his face when he is not wearing a mask.” Those words brought good laughter, even the lineage-fathers laughed a little. It was strange to be seen by the men, all those eyes looked straight at mine, fear of my lineage-curse went out of my head as I looked into so many faces. I did not wish to shame Cab Coh or seem stupid, I turned in my circle and then stood tall while my uncle said:

“Already he has learned many of the true stories, already his feet move in the old dances. The ways of our fathers flow in this boy’s blood. Cab Coh is proud to bring him to die in the river ceremony and see him born as a knowledgeable man.” Then my uncle was seated, and I squatted as the seventh boy stood and was introduced.

There was much smoking after this, and the center of the village became a drifting grey haze that made many boys fall senseless and made my head float. As Father Sun disappeared and night came there were stories told by the old men and the lineage-fathers, and there were riddle-contests, and fathers and sons played games with their lineage-fathers and the old men. My own father clapped my back several times, and both of my uncles said things to me, but I was not suitable for game-playing or riddling. Once when my head was not so airy I looked at my father, but his face was empty; he was gazing across the plaza to where Atlata had stood during his own river ceremony. And I felt sympathy for him then, for my father and his hurts, and his son trapped in the jungle, perhaps forever.

When the night was growing old, K’aakik’ came out of his hut with the masks for the story of the death of boys and the birth of men. Everyone found their way to the story circle, only a few had to be dragged or carried, and then my work-father spoke the old words and performed the steps and changed the masks. There was a pulling in my heart while he told this story, in truth I could hardly watch K’aakik’ or listen to his voice. My brother had heard those words, he had stood where I stood, he had done what I was doing. It was his place I was stepping into as much as my own, this stalk of Cab Coh lineage had to bear ears for two.

In the dim light before dawn, the staff of the priest looked like a war-spear.

“The gods are calling these boys to the river,” said Puksik’al Tok. He wore his crocodile headdress and high sandals made from the hide of kan-koch, and because my head was floating he did not seem to stand on the ground but drifted above it, on the tobacco-smoke. He raised his staff, and I took off my boy’s waist-cloth and threw it into the story circle fire, with those of the other boys. My father painted me with red dust, it was Father Sun’s fire I wore to protect me from ah-Puch and his servants. The priest led the procession to the river, my uncle and I were first behind him because of the age of our lineage. And this is what I saw from that place: that Puksik’al Tok had white hairs among the black. They were not so many, but it was true that the priest was wearing these signs of age. He





was gaining strength, growing ever closer to the gods and goddesses, would there be a day when he could drive away Tzak Balam?

At the river the priest threw in herbs to keep ain away, and the seven of us left our lineage-fathers and knelt behind him, facing the river. Father Sun was nearly up, we did not wait as we had for Atlatla's ceremony.

"Today these boys must die," said the priest. And though these were alarming words when they were meant for me, the fasting and dancing and smoking took the worry out of them so that it was only a little buzzing the priest was doing, far away. Concern for my brother came and left me again, I could hold nothing. The men began their prayers, and the priest said,

"Their time is over. Today they must be reborn as men."

We stood, seven boys stood at the edge of the river while men prayed for them. The priest walked in front of us, saying old words:

"In the story of the death of boys and the birth of men you heard the prayers, you know what to say to the gods and the goddesses. Give our greetings to them, and return as men."

We stepped into the water and walked until it rose over our waists; there was stone on the bottom, a shelf of stone held me up. In that place there was no current to be felt, the river god did not tug at all. We turned to face the men, the shore of the river was filled with faces. I lifted my chin, for Atlatla this always looked good, and hoped I was not making a fool of myself or my lineage in any way.

I was from the oldest lineage going through the river that day, and the priest came next to me first and said,

"Are you ready to die?"

"Yes," I said, and these were not just ceremony words but the truth. Being a boy had not been very pleasing for me, I was ready for that boy to pass away.

"Are you ready to be reborn as a man?"

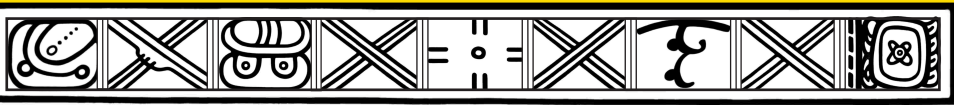
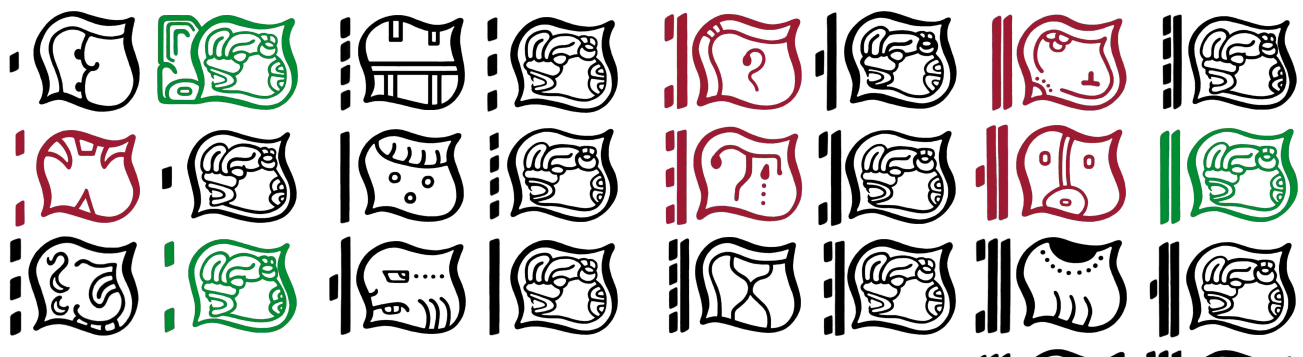
"Yes."

Then Puksik'al Tok leaned down next to my ear, and with one hand he put a bundle of herbs into my mouth. "Take many deep breaths," he said. "You will be under the longest." And so I did this, I prepared myself for the river in this way.

"Father Sun!" the priest called out. "Take this boy and give us a man!" He put his hand on top of my head and pushed me down, and I knelt into the river. Water washed over my face, and then I was under the surface, and the priest walked past me.

And this is what happened, under the river: there was fire in my mouth, from the herb bundle. The fire burned my cheeks and tongue, the inside of my head lit on fire, my throat and then my chest and then my body caught flame. There were lights at the corners of my eyes, red and black, white and yellow, green lights were present. There were stars in my eyes, the Milky Way was there, I opened my lids and saw not water or fishes or the legs of the priest but the night sky filled with





stars. Strange sounds rushed into my ears, men were singing the prayer for the dying boys, their words were like night wind, under the river. I fell into this wind that rushed past the stars, their little fires were warm but far away, the wind pulled at my arms and legs and hair. Worries for my brother could not follow me there, fears for my mother's spirit could not find me, my feet were far above the storyteller's path and the curse that was devouring my lineage. I called out prayers for the gods and goddesses, I called out words for ah-K'awil of lineages and ah-Itzamna of medicine and Mother Moon who had guided me to the ancient city in the night.

For Father Sun there were respectful words, only a few because I was just a young man, it is not wise to say too much. In all those stars there were no spears, no servants of ah-Puch, no Tzak Balam. Only a small part of me held to those things. So it was that I received mercy at the river ceremony, all my burdens were burned away by the gods themselves, and their ashes fell into my heart to feed the man I would become.

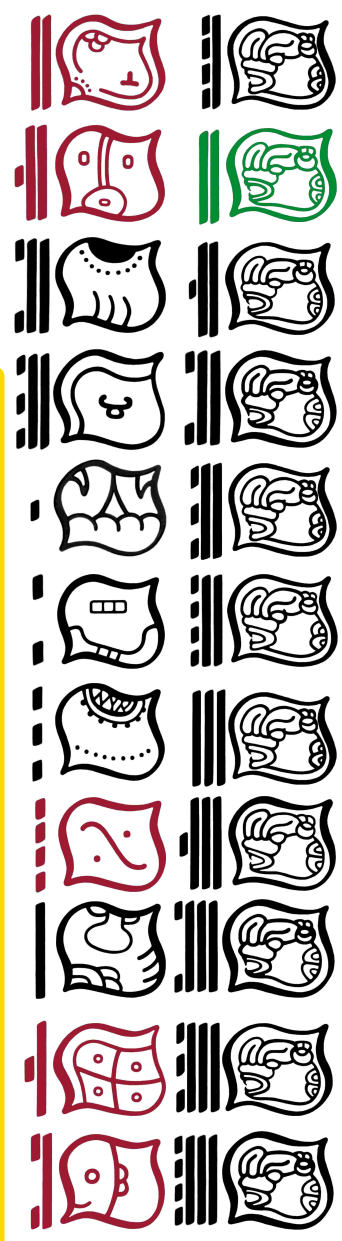
The priest reached down and tapped me on the back, and I stood and saw the world I knew. The stars faded, the flames puffed out and left my tongue aching. Our river glowed with green light as it had for my brother, Father Sun had risen and shown his face on the world for another day.

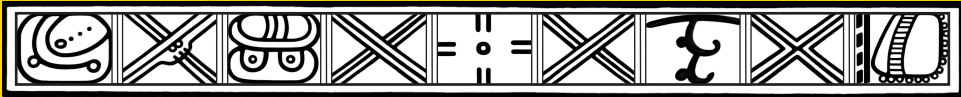
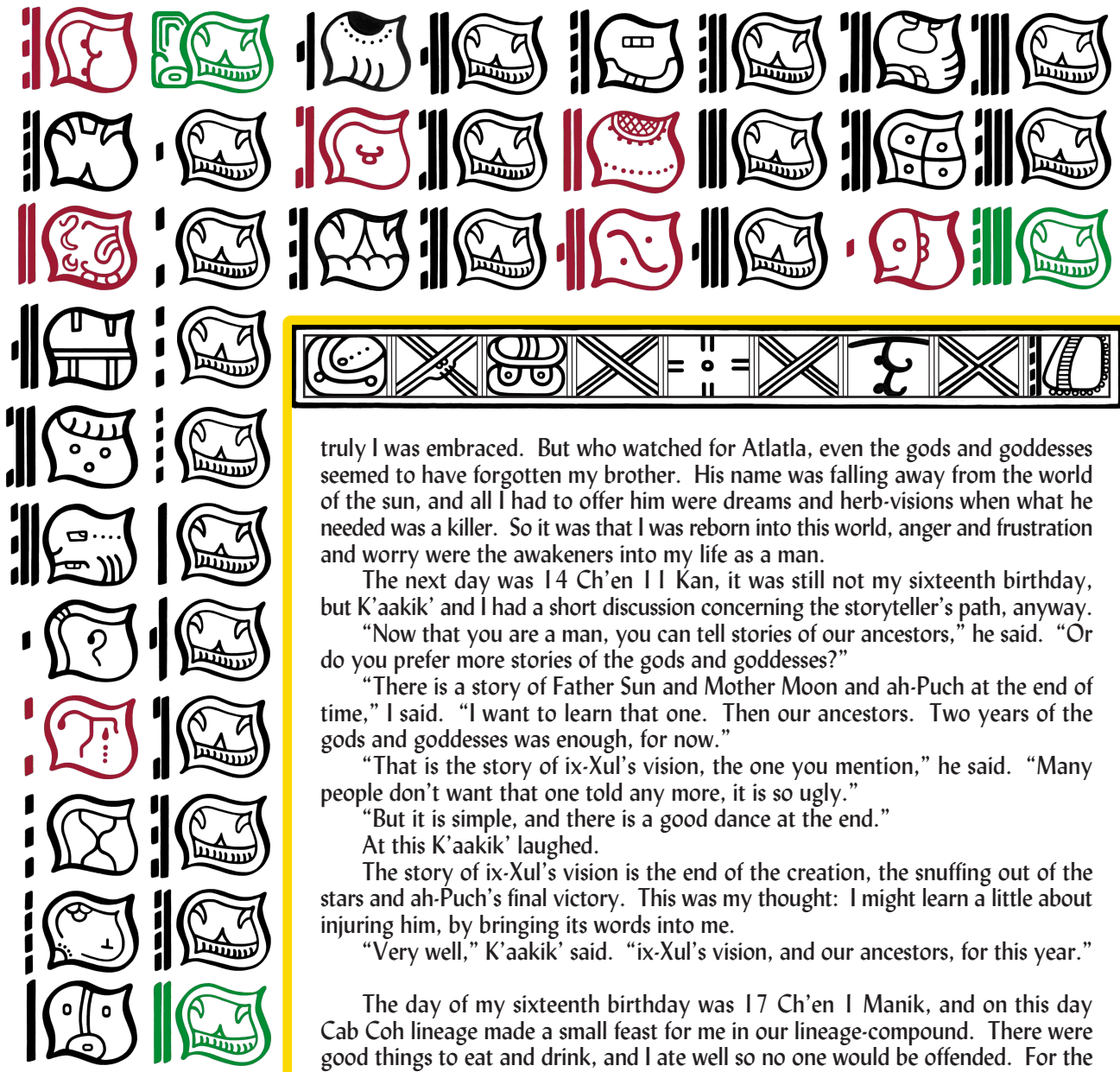
"This is the man, Maxam Cab Coh," said Puksik'al Tok. Though my legs were now weak I held myself up as well as I could, and my uncle and father nodded to encourage me. It was difficult to see anything other than them; the world was dark at the edges, and the darkness was filling my eyes.

The priest raised up the other boys, and when all were seen we pushed through the water to our lineages. My father and uncle received me, my uncle looked into my face and seemed startled. His eyes widened, and he said to my father, "Get him to his sleeping bench, swiftly." For me the world disappeared again. The Milky Way returned, my eyes turned black once more, again came the wind. There were many little soul-fires in the dark sky, I called for Atlata but he was not there. In the true sky there will come a time when the stars will burn out, the stories say. Only ah-Puch will remain, he alone will triumph.

For three days I lay senseless on my sleeping bench, K'aakik' built a very hot fire in his hut to keep spirits of sickness away from me. My uncle came but gave no herbs, and the wise-woman was not summoned. Once I saw my uncle's face, very near mine; he wanted to know what I had seen and wanted to hear something of the fire the priest had kindled in my mouth. At the end of three days I became sensible again and woke feeling tired but not weak, it was not like when I had blood-sickness, as a child. Morning light was coming into the storyteller's hut, there was a rustling of scorpions in the thatch of our roof. K'aakik' was sleeping next to his bench; he had fallen asleep there, and spittle had dried at the side of his mouth in an amusing way.

This is what occurred to me, right then: there were people to watch for me,





truly I was embraced. But who watched for Atlatla, even the gods and goddesses seemed to have forgotten my brother. His name was falling away from the world of the sun, and all I had to offer him were dreams and herb-visions when what he needed was a killer. So it was that I was reborn into this world, anger and frustration and worry were the awakeners into my life as a man.

The next day was 14 Ch'en 11 Kan, it was still not my sixteenth birthday, but K'aakik' and I had a short discussion concerning the storyteller's path, anyway.

"Now that you are a man, you can tell stories of our ancestors," he said. "Or do you prefer more stories of the gods and goddesses?"

"There is a story of Father Sun and Mother Moon and ah-Puch at the end of time," I said. "I want to learn that one. Then our ancestors. Two years of the gods and goddesses was enough, for now."

"That is the story of ix-Xul's vision, the one you mention," he said. "Many people don't want that one told any more, it is so ugly."

"But it is simple, and there is a good dance at the end."

At this K'aakik' laughed.

The story of ix-Xul's vision is the end of the creation, the snuffing out of the stars and ah-Puch's final victory. This was my thought: I might learn a little about injuring him, by bringing its words into me.

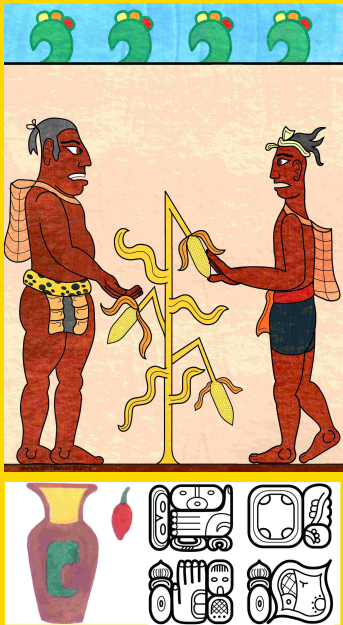
"Very well," K'aakik' said. "ix-Xul's vision, and our ancestors, for this year."

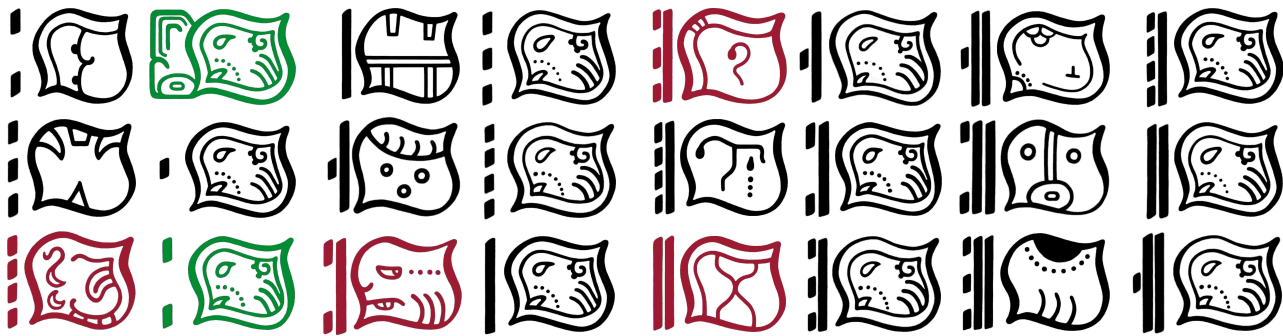
The day of my sixteenth birthday was 17 Ch'en 1 Manik, and on this day Cab Coh lineage made a small feast for me in our lineage-compound. There were good things to eat and drink, and I ate well so no one would be offended. For the first time I felt truly seen by my lineage, I stood as a man and no longer as a boy. The faces of my people were the same that I had always known, but the lines and white hairs were all strong and easy to see. Nothing was said of the river ceremony or my exhaustion, since many men sleep for two or three days after this event. When the celebration was over, my uncle said:

"Come to my hut in two days, there are things to discuss." Then he was gone on his way, and my father said he did not know what it was my uncle wanted.

In the afternoon of 19 Ch'en 3 Muluc, after K'aakik' and I were finished with harvest for the day, I went to visit my uncle. Muluc is a time for beginning new things, and though three is an unlucky number, there were three things we needed to discuss, and so he had chosen this day for our conversation. My aunt served chili-cacao; this was the first time I had this man's drink, and it burned my mouth and burned my throat and brought fierce heat into my belly. My uncle smiled to see this, and then he said,

"Now that you have passed through the river, we can build you a new hut. Or make a new hearth in your brother's hut."





I did not want my brother's hut to be burned down; it was all that remained of him, that and my iik-stone. "Just a hearth, I think."

He nodded. "It can be done in a few days, 7 Ben will be good for the dedication." He tapped on his vase for a while and then took a long sip of chili-cacao. This is the way of men's talk, it is not like the silly babble of work-fathers and work-sons, when things are often said quickly and without thought.

"I have spoken with our ancestors. I have consulted the gods and the goddesses about teaching you divining and the holy day ceremonies," my uncle said. "They say you are ready, it is time to begin." I would have said, "Very good," but from his stiffness I knew he was only saying these things because he had to. He was not pleased with this for some reason, so I only said, "I see."

"We can begin on 16 Yax 7 Cimi," said my uncle. "It takes years to learn all of the holy day ceremonies, but there are only a few for a young man to know. And of course there is divining. I will tell you the days you need to come here, and what to bring, and in half a year you should be ready."

Now I did say, "Very good." And I thought I knew what worried him: where were the words about my dreams, words about blood-lightning? These are signs of the daykeeper's path, these things are always discussed between lineage-shamans and their work-sons before anything is taught. But my dreams of Tzak Balam and Atlatla could not be spoken of, the only blood-lightning I had felt was in the city of my fathers.

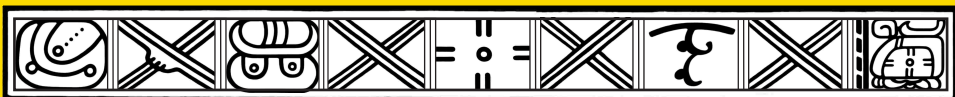
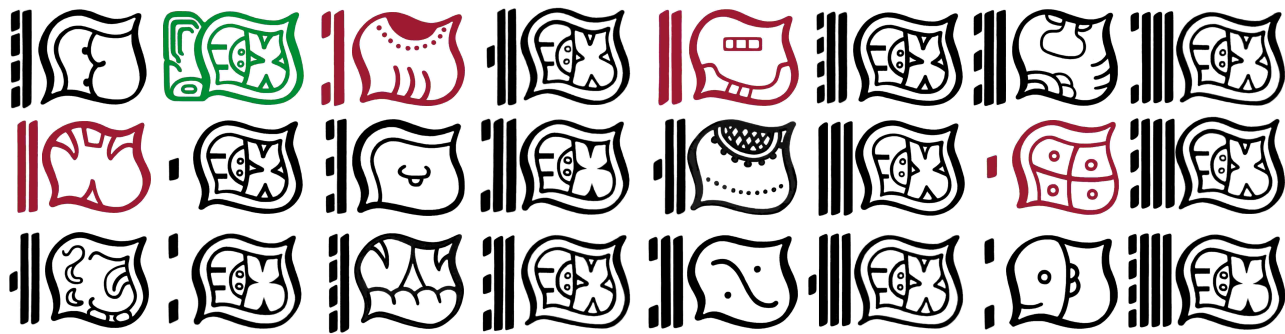
"If there is blood-lightning for me, I will remember," I said. "I will take care to remember my dreams." He looked more pleased, then, and he brought out the third thing:

"Te Ek' and I have spoken of young women, there are three for you to take dinner with. All have shown themselves to be clever. On 4 Zac 2 Ix the first will come here to my hut, and you two can meet. Koh Chel is her name."

"Yes," I said. In truth it was nervousness I felt, even though the meetings were to be in my uncle's familiar hut. For most young men it is different, their parents meet with the parents of the girl and arrange everything, but this could not occur for the storyteller, from an old lineage. For me it was the lineage-fathers who spoke, they were the arrangers. I did not know what sort of women my uncle thought were clever, or what kind of cleverness he meant. But his face said our conversation was finished, and I left his hut very uncertain of what was to happen.

That night my brother was in my dreams, he was somewhere in the jungle near Chacwitz. He was not seen directly, I only heard him moving on the paths above or below me. He was growing distant, his whispers were becoming thin and broken, wherever he was he no longer faced me but looked toward somewhere else. I woke before Father Sun rose and went to Atlatla's hut, his cleaned-out place that was to be mine, seeking any sign from my brother. Before the hearth I knelt and listened, but only the insects made sounds, in their hunting-dances. There





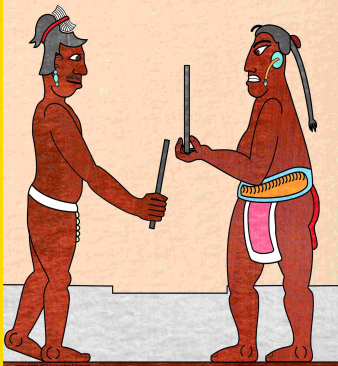
were just some old marks on the floor where I had swept out the hut, nothing with meaning awaited me.

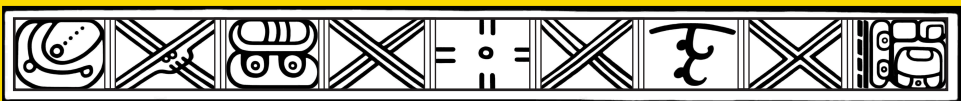
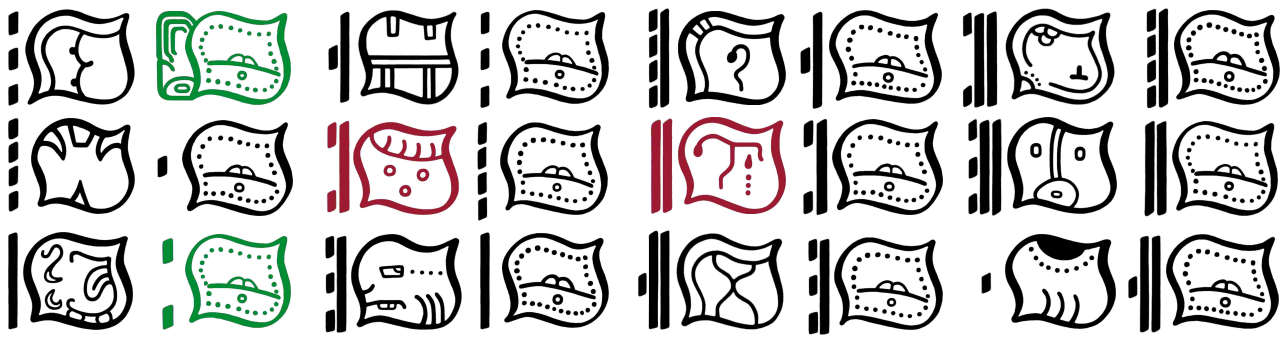
Many thoughts flowed through my head, my heart was pulled toward the mountains and Atlatla, and I did not push these pains away but allowed them to present themselves. And here is what came from this little bleeding, an idea was born in brother's blood: the rains were coming soon, and when the sky was darkened and no one could see me, it was the city I would return to. Perhaps it was not a spear I needed, perhaps some other tool would break Tzak Balam's power and release my brother. Perhaps it was a narrowness in myself that kept me from seeing what my brother truly needed, and it would be better to look with open eyes like a man and not a noisy-headed boy. Great was my desire to speak with my uncle about this matter, but he could not allow me to walk such a path, I could say nothing.

A few days later my father and uncle destroyed the hearth in my brother's hut. The flat stones were broken to pieces and thrown into the river, and fresh stones were laid down. On 3 Yax 7 Ben my uncle blessed the new hearth, he poured good liquor onto the stones and said blessings and kindled a new fire. Again there was a celebration, the seven of us from Cab Coh ate well and commemorated the new hut. The lineage I had grown up in seemed small and frail. All my cousins were gone, five girls grown and given to other lineages, Atlatla burned to ash. My uncle said a few words about the girls I was to meet, my aunts made some little comments about these meetings as well, and my mother smiled at all the nonsense. Not a word was said about Atlatla, no one remembered his name out loud. His hut was my hut now, and as soon as I married I would move into it with my wife, until K'aakik' ceased being the storyteller and I moved into that hut.

On the day 16 Yax 7 Cimi I met with my uncle at our lineage-shrine as Father Sun rose, and before those old stones he burned copal incense and sacrificed a turkey in my name. We bled ourselves, Cab Coh blood fell onto the shrine and the sacrifices, and my uncle prayed in the old words. So it was that I was presented to our ancestors on this day. Then my uncle began to teach me to divine and to honor our ancestors and the gods and goddesses in the proper ways.

4 Zac 2 Ix was the night the girl Koh Chel arrived at my uncle's hut for dinner, he chose that day because it is a good one for young women. My mother and father were not there, they did not want too many Cab Coh people with one girl, so it was only my aunt and uncle, and myself, when she came. This young woman was pretty in a delicate way, it is true that my uncle chose a shining-eyed girl for that meeting, but she was unhappy in the house of my uncle, or very nervous. When my aunt served squash and roast quail she dropped her bowl, then she





laughed uncomfortably over this and flushed red in the face. My aunt made small comments to her about her fine weaving, and I saw that the girl's clothing was indeed well-woven, but these compliments were no comfort to her. She just smoothed her skirt many times and said that she had a clever mother who had shown her how to weave well, and again she turned red, and looked at the fire. My uncle poured cacao for us, this was not vanilla-cacao or chili-cacao but pure liquid chocolate, very soothing, but poor Koh Chel sloshed her drink on herself anyway and apologized again. Now she closed her mouth very tightly and put her curled hand to her lips, and she frowned, and then my uncle said a few funny little things about a raccoon that was raiding his maize-house. This made her laugh, she is a girl whose whole body shakes pleasantly when she laughs, but so nervous was her voice that nothing could be said directly to her afterward.

Because of this fearfulness in her, there was only a little for me to say. Every word I spoke caused Koh Chel great torment, she nodded quickly and bowed her head. Indeed this was the most painful meal I have ever eaten, my aunt served only half of what she cooked and did not bring out the honey bread at the end. When we were finished, there was a little quiet, and Koh Chel understood that her misery was finished. My uncle rose, and then all of us, and he placed his hand on her back and led her gently outside. They spoke for a little while, this time her laughter was not so pained, and then my uncle returned her to her lineage-father.

That was all for that meeting, when my uncle returned he said, "A little more ripening, for this tender sprout," and we all laughed.

My aunt made her own little joke: "Maybe we should have served liquor?"

"Well," my uncle said, "She would be a Cab Coh woman if she married here, so a little more strength would be necessary."

That would have been the end of the painful dinner, but three days later K'aakik' said something to remind me of this again.

"Now, I don't want you to worry about this," were his words to me, as we smoked some smooth tobacco. "This is not a trouble for you, but maybe there is something you can do."

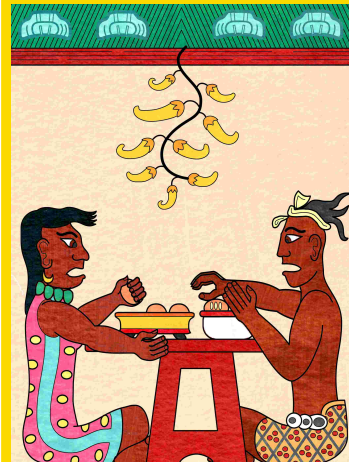
My head was full of the words we had learned for that day and filled with dances and changes of masks, but the way of his voice made me listen carefully.

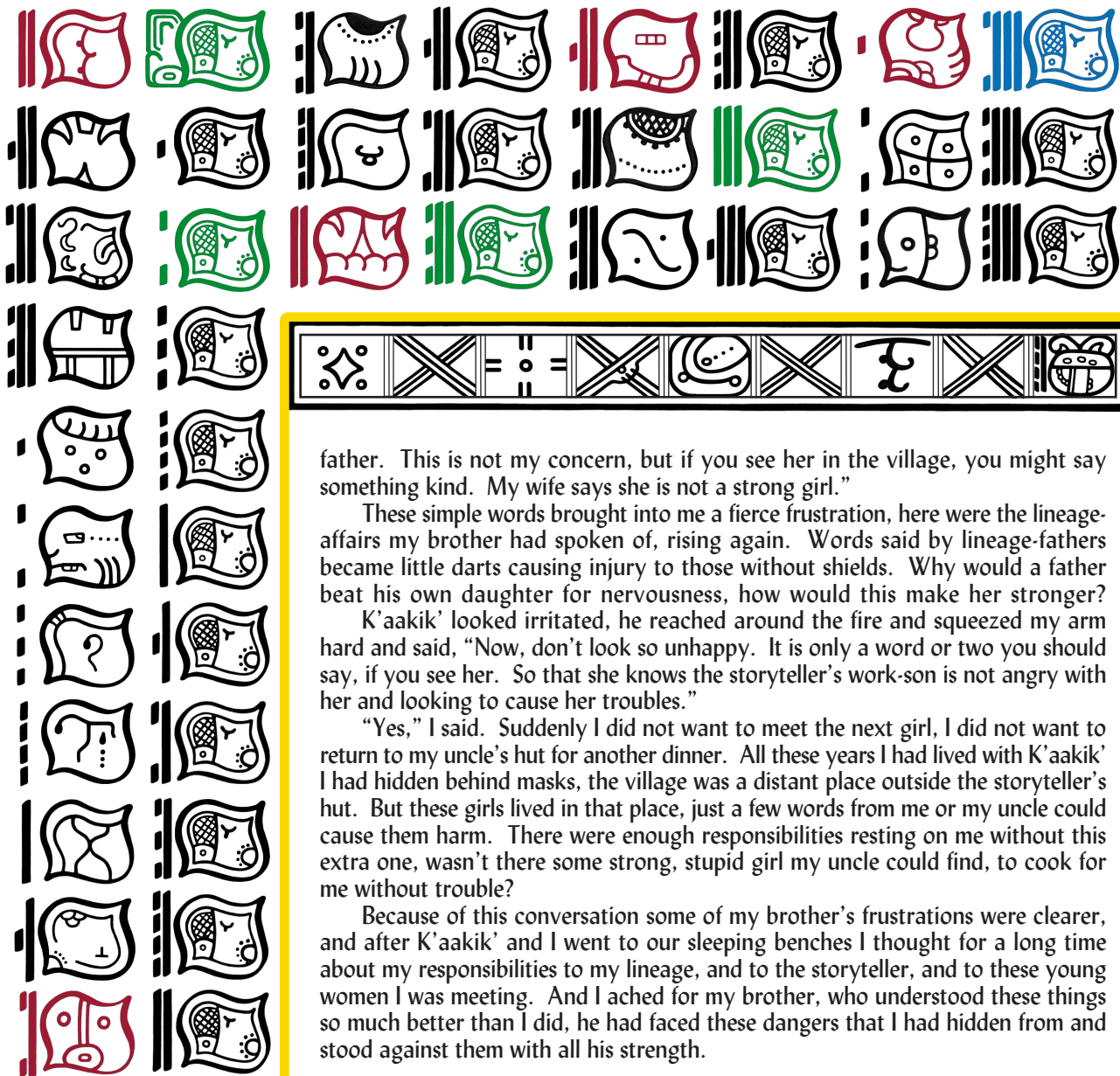
"You said the girl you met was named Koh Chel?"

K'aakik' did not often speak of things happening in my lineage, since he is not a Cab Coh or a howler monkey, but sometimes he listened to my complaints and made comments to help me see more clearly. From his careful circling I knew there was some misfortune coming.

"Yes," I said.

"Well," he said. He tapped old tobacco out of his pipe and put fresh tobacco in, he nodded to encourage both of us. "My wife told me she was beaten by her father, he was not pleased about something said by your uncle to her lineage-





father. This is not my concern, but if you see her in the village, you might say something kind. My wife says she is not a strong girl.”

These simple words brought into me a fierce frustration, here were the lineage-affairs my brother had spoken of, rising again. Words said by lineage-fathers became little darts causing injury to those without shields. Why would a father beat his own daughter for nervousness, how would this make her stronger?

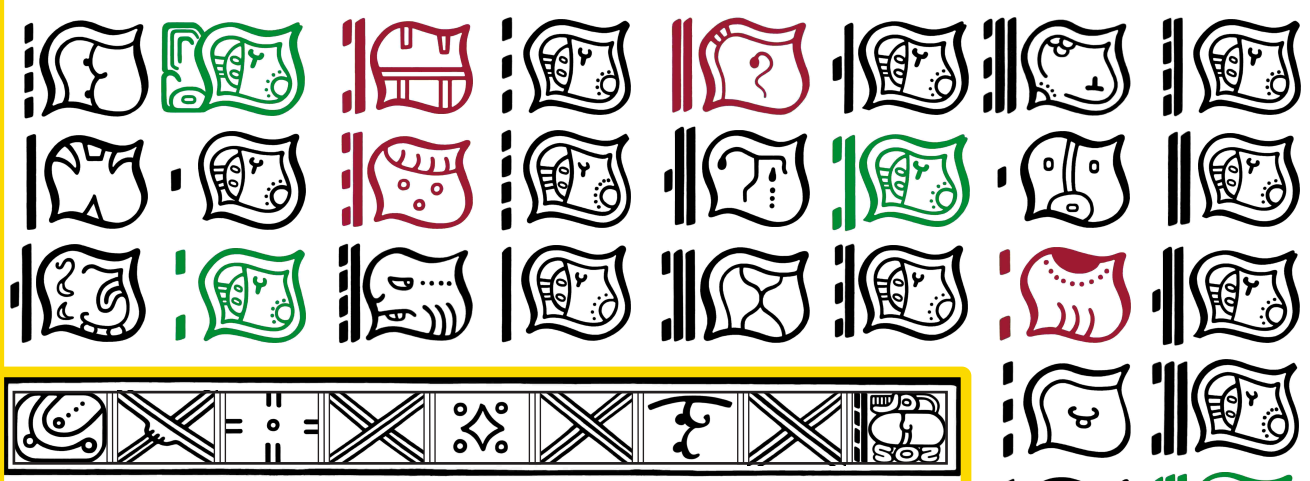
K’aakik’ looked irritated, he reached around the fire and squeezed my arm hard and said, “Now, don’t look so unhappy. It is only a word or two you should say, if you see her. So that she knows the storyteller’s work-son is not angry with her and looking to cause her troubles.”

“Yes,” I said. Suddenly I did not want to meet the next girl, I did not want to return to my uncle’s hut for another dinner. All these years I had lived with K’aakik’ I had hidden behind masks, the village was a distant place outside the storyteller’s hut. But these girls lived in that place, just a few words from me or my uncle could cause them harm. There were enough responsibilities resting on me without this extra one, wasn’t there some strong, stupid girl my uncle could find, to cook for me without trouble?

Because of this conversation some of my brother’s frustrations were clearer, and after K’aakik’ and I went to our sleeping benches I thought for a long time about my responsibilities to my lineage, and to the storyteller, and to these young women I was meeting. And I ached for my brother, who understood these things so much better than I did, he had faced these dangers that I had hidden from and stood against them with all his strength.

On 17 Zak 2 Manik there was the second of these dinners. My uncle chose this day because it is a good day for thinking about and discussing marriages. Again I was there first, then the girl came to my uncle’s hut. Ox Tun was this person’s name, she was not fearful at all. This was a pleasant girl to see, her hair was long and shining and her eyes were dark and shaped in an intriguing way that invited looking at, and she sat with her legs beneath her so that she became very soft and rounded. There were many dances in her, much shaking and moving, I did not remember her at the celebrations but was sure she was always there. But here was where her eyes were, as my aunt served her savory clams: not on my uncle or aunt, not on me. They were on jade figurines, they were on the tiny jade eyes of my uncle’s ancestor-idols, they were on the pouches of cacao and vanilla and the strings of chilis and the furs that are here and there in my uncle’s hut. They saw the good woodwork of my uncle’s furnishings, the excellent weavings of my aunt, all these fruits of Cab Coh. And though Ox Tun smiled often and said pleasing things, though she understood respect, her eyes were hollow when seeing people, she looked through us to our things. Because of this, our dinner together was a dull one. After the meal my uncle took this girl to her lineage-father, and





when he returned he said,

“I don’t think she fears whispers of curses.”

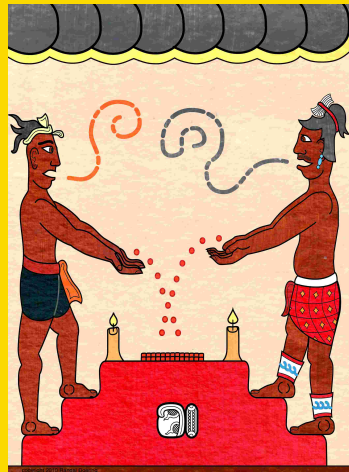
My aunt made a little “hmm” sound, an unpleasant face was her comment, my uncle saw this and became irritable. “The third girl is coming on I I Keh 3 Imix,” he said to me. “You should meet them all before we discuss anything.”

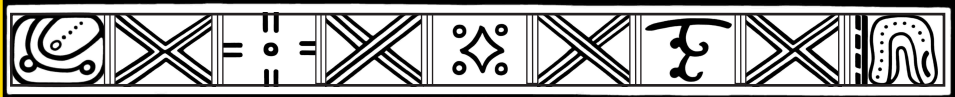
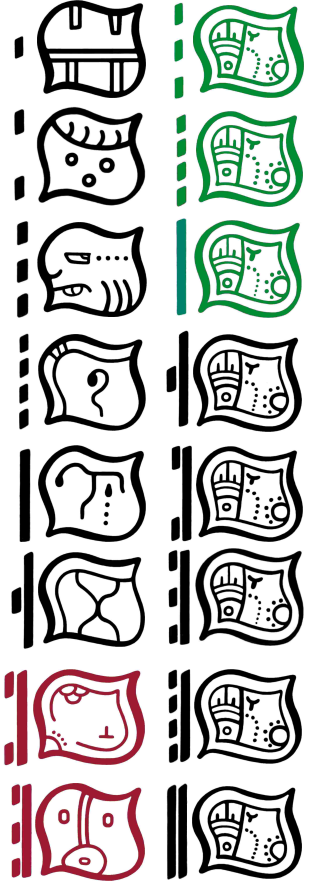
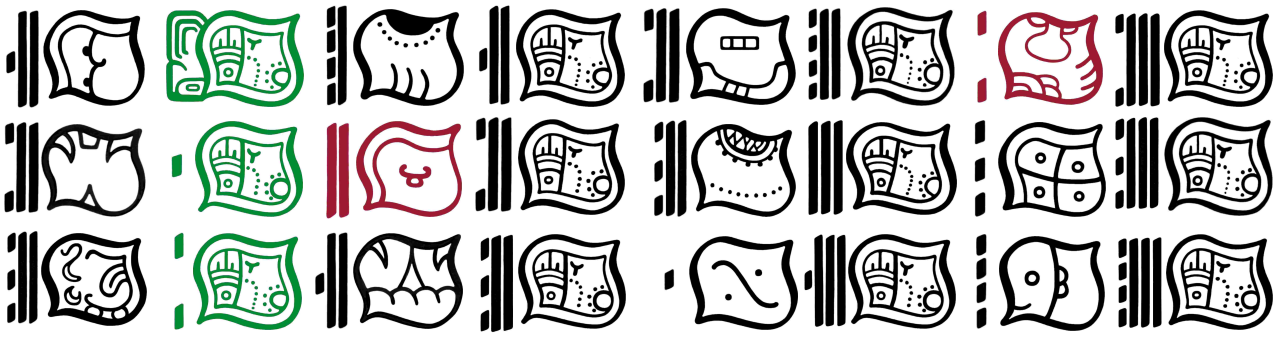
“Very good,” I said, and when I left my uncle and his wife were looking at each other in a way that said they were going to have discussions of their own.

Harvest was finished during this time of wife-dinners. The rains began, and the days became dark and wet. The Chicchans slithered across the clouds and made the sky burn with sheet-lightning, thunder boomed under Father Sun’s face and Mother Moon’s as well. K’aakik’ enjoyed this time of year most, he often built a pleasant and scented fire and sat listening to the rain fall. He taught me new words, many were the dance steps I learned, and sometimes we had contests of eating chilis until we wept, or smoked until one of us grew ill and surrendered. In this way we burned away the last of the boy in me, that stupid little sprout died of amusement in the house of the storyteller. Though I thought often of going to the city, my brother did not guide me in my dreams, nor did Tzak Balam or camazotz’ trouble me, nor did my ancestors or the gods and goddesses send me blood-lightning or other signs. Each time I approached the trail to the black road my strength went away, and I returned to the storyteller’s hut in defeat.

On certain holy days I woke early and went to my lineage-shrine and met with my uncle. As he had promised, he taught me ancestor-prayers and took me through jungle to Cab Coh orchards and fields to introduce me to our shrines there. Atlatla had once shown me the trail to our father’s milpa, but in all the years I had been in this world I had never seen it for myself. In the rain the fields were sodden, our milpas were mere mud holes and our empty fruit trees dripped and waited for the return of Father Sun in his strength. Those were strange days of learning, because what I truly wanted was to bring death to Tzak Balam. Instead there were the teachings of my uncle, in the ways of life, while I dreamed of destruction.

Here was the dinner with the third girl, Yax lik’ was her name, the evening was 3 Mak 2 Ben. This young woman was taller than the other two girls, and she was not very sturdy; “bony” was the word the storyteller’s wife would have had for her. Her hair was short and not straight-combed but curly and seemed uncared for. Only a few young women wear their hair this way, my uncle says girls like this were born on days for men and so will always be like men in their ways. But here was her face: Yax lik had the smooth lines of a woman whose girl-face had grown with her into womanhood instead of burning away into a hard shell as it does for so many women. This was my thought, when she saw me and smiled a little but turned away: she was someone who did not make herself visible but sat





behind and listened carefully and spoke only when necessary. There was only one odd thing that I saw, as she sat cross-legged on my aunt's mat: her toes were rounded and smooth, no calluses or scars, this girl knew how to walk in the world.

There are more things to say about Yax lik', a little more before the dinner is all. The skirt of this young woman was not the plain white with a few patterns of color that most unmarried girls wear but already had designs worked into it. Her lineage marks were along the edges, boldly, and there were a few playful little birds as well. Yax lik' was already becoming a person, on her own, she was not waiting for a husband. This irritated me a little, she was not acting properly on her path, but it is true that I also wished to speak with her, there were things happening in her head.

And now that I wanted to talk, this is what happened: my mouth would not open. Only imbecile sounds rose in my throat. Yax lik' heard this and was amused, and then my uncle poured heated liquid cacao for us, and my aunt fed us steaming squash and beans and made comments on the good weaving Yax lik' wore. I thought to ask this girl for a chili-eating contest, or to smoke, but these thoughts only disappeared immediately and left me confused. It was then that I reached into the fruit bowl my aunt had set out for us and brought forth a custard apple, a plump fruit, and I said, "We have several custard apple trees in our orchards, these are late fruits but tasty, anyway."

She took it from my fingers and said, "Thank you," and as she ate it she thrust forward her chin and made a small sound of pleasure, this was something else that was her own way. And I said, "Very good," without thinking, and after this we ate and spoke when my uncle or aunt said something. This quiet with Yax lik' was not nervous, we saw each other without things being said. When our meal was finished my uncle returned this girl to her lineage-compound, and when he came back to his hut he said,

"I don't think a mountain of jade is what this girl desires." We laughed at this, and I said,

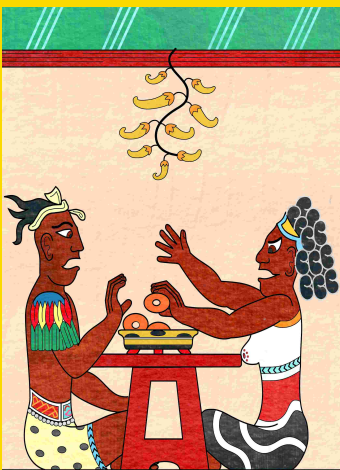
"She was not nervous, and she weaves well."

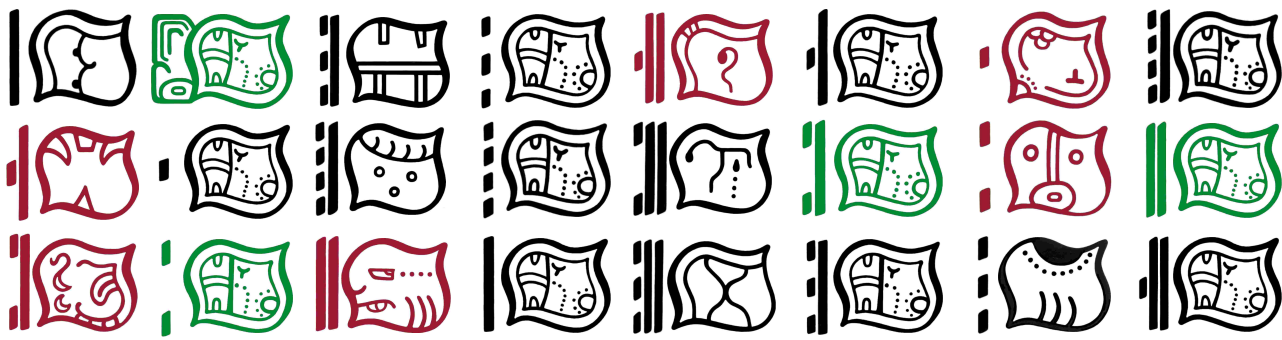
My uncle drew himself up and said, "Well, think about these three girls and what you learned of them. You should speak to them again, if you see them in the village. We'll talk later."

That night I dreamed of a small fire in the hearth of my brother's hut, and in the large room where life happens, someone I could not see was humming to herself, and weaving something.

A few days after my dinner with Yax lik' the storyteller had news for me, after we had eaten:

"The mountain storyteller is sending her work-daughter to us soon, they are worried that they are forgetting the proper telling of the story of how Mother





Moon was torn in half and her blood created maize. This young woman is coming to hear it from us. She also wants to see the river god ceremony, so we need to make a place for her.”

“She should stay with the wise-woman, shouldn’t she?” I said.

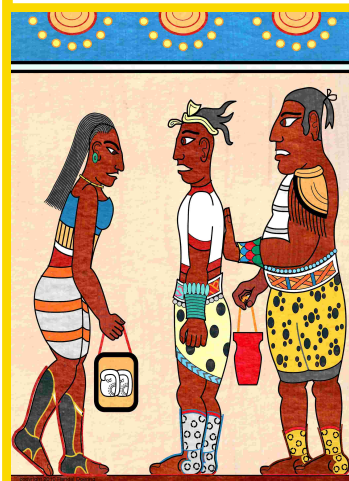
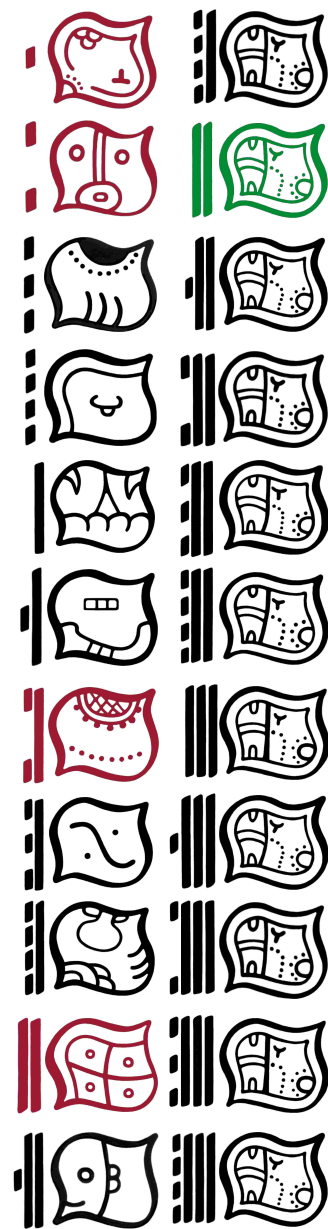
“The wise-woman says she stays here,” was my work-father’s comment, and I saw the corners of his mouth turned down in an unhappy way. We had to be very careful with this female guest, only a tiny comment from her could get us both caned, or worse. So with a reed screen we created a new room in our hut, and we added a sleeping bench and blankets and a wash basin, and K’aakik’ arranged with his lineage for excellent food and drink to be provided.

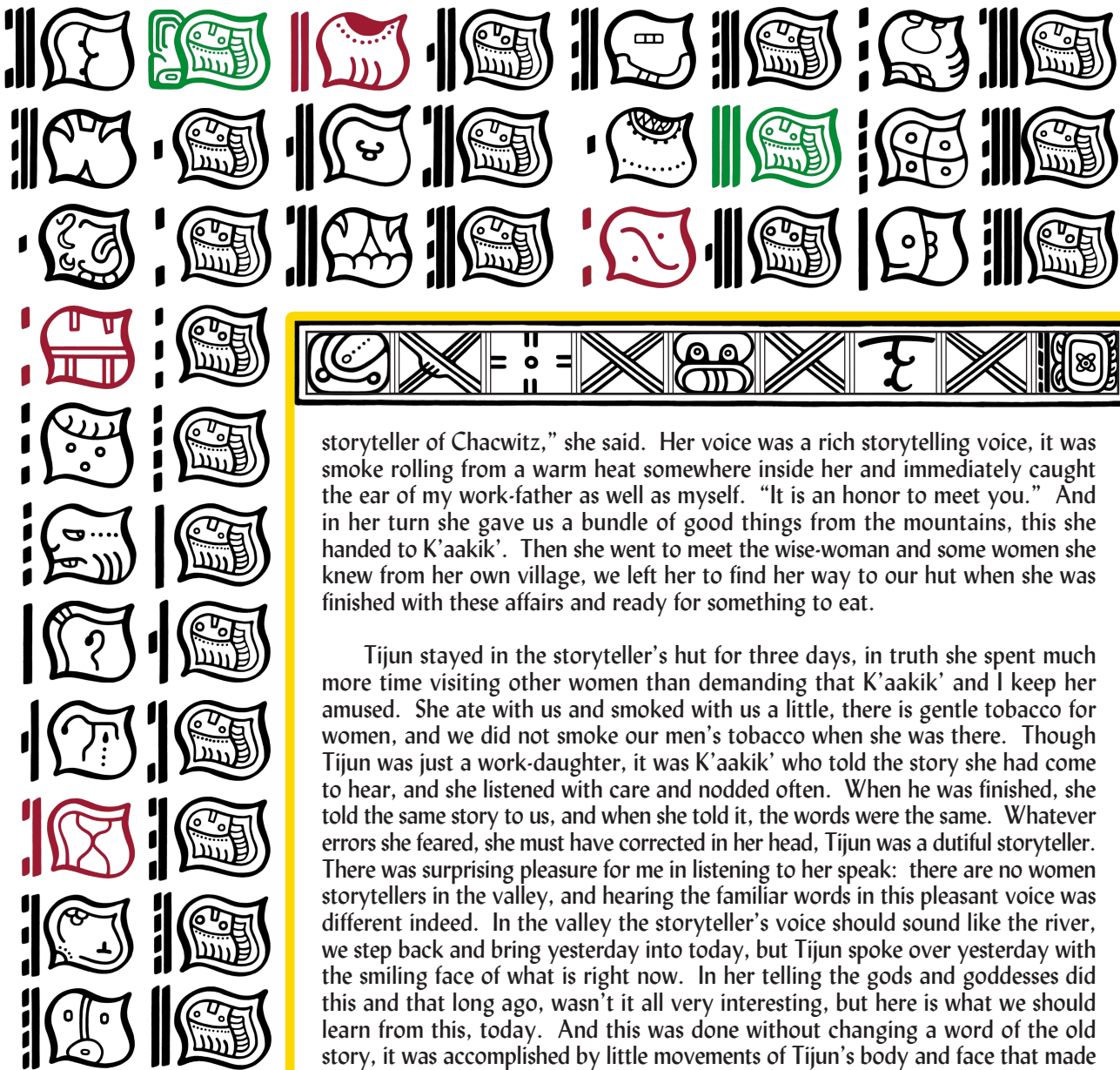
There were many things I was thinking about as we created our guest’s place, these thoughts pulled this way and that: the three dinners and the decision I now had to make, whispers from my fading brother, the weaving of the stories I was learning, the delicacy of the divination path my uncle was teaching me, the destruction of Tzak Balam. The visit of the mountain storyteller’s work-daughter brought much nervouness, my brother’s words kept returning about struggles between my mother’s lineage and the women of power of Chacwitz. Troubles were coming, my brother said that dangers from the mountains would be pretty, and poisonous. But in the days before this person arrived there were no dreams for me, no blood-lightning, no signs.

13 Mak 12 Akbal was the day of the arrival of the mountain woman, K’aakik’ had known for some time she was coming but for me she was almost a surprise. Tijun was this woman’s name, she came to our village with traders who were bringing interesting things for the river god ceremony. K’aakik’ and I went to meet her when they came over the river, and it is true that when I saw her step from the canoe my heart beat much faster. Tijun was a young mountain woman: she was taller than valley women and had long legs and high travelling sandals of patterned leather. Slenderness is the way of mountain women, this one also had long black hair and very bright eyes. Her clothing was dark, Chacwitz people do not like bright colors except on their hems. Here was Tijun when she came closer: she was sweaty and dust-streaked, there were little bits of leaf and moss and tiny twigs on her from her journey through the jungle. Sixteen was her age, or seventeen; her face was too soft for more years than that. Tijun was the first truly beautiful woman I had seen, beautiful was her face and her form and her walking all together, and when she stepped up to K’aakik’ and myself there was a very pleasing scent as well. It was difficult to remember she was a storyteller, if not for the warnings of my brother I would have been careless around this person.

“I am K’aakik’, the storyteller, and this is my work-son, Maxam,” my work-father said, and he gave the mountain woman a small bundle of tasty gifts.

She made a little nod to us. “I am Tijun, work-daughter of Waxaklahun Ha’,



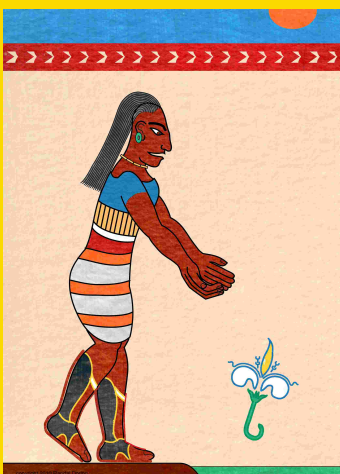


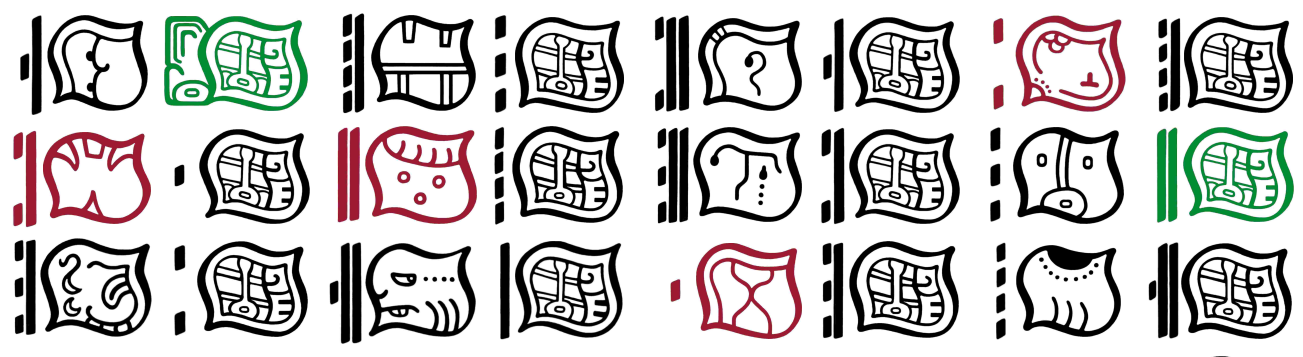
storyteller of Chacwitz,” she said. Her voice was a rich storytelling voice, it was smoke rolling from a warm heat somewhere inside her and immediately caught the ear of my work-father as well as myself. “It is an honor to meet you.” And in her turn she gave us a bundle of good things from the mountains, this she handed to K’aakik’. Then she went to meet the wise-woman and some women she knew from her own village, we left her to find her way to our hut when she was finished with these affairs and ready for something to eat.

Tijun stayed in the storyteller’s hut for three days, in truth she spent much more time visiting other women than demanding that K’aakik’ and I keep her amused. She ate with us and smoked with us a little, there is gentle tobacco for women, and we did not smoke our men’s tobacco when she was there. Though Tijun was just a work-daughter, it was K’aakik’ who told the story she had come to hear, and she listened with care and nodded often. When he was finished, she told the same story to us, and when she told it, the words were the same. Whatever errors she feared, she must have corrected in her head, Tijun was a dutiful storyteller. There was surprising pleasure for me in listening to her speak: there are no women storytellers in the valley, and hearing the familiar words in this pleasant voice was different indeed. In the valley the storyteller’s voice should sound like the river, we step back and bring yesterday into today, but Tijun spoke over yesterday with the smiling face of what is right now. In her telling the gods and goddesses did this and that long ago, wasn’t it all very interesting, but here is what we should learn from this, today. And this was done without changing a word of the old story, it was accomplished by little movements of Tijun’s body and face that made us look at her first and listen, second. To me the mountain way was a strange way of telling stories, it was a lie that placed the storyteller between the old words and the listeners and pushed our ancestors into the dark.

On her second day with us, K’aakik’ showed Tijun the masks, and she told us that in the mountains people sit as we do in the valley, but there are no masks or dances, only voices, and listeners can make much noise as the story-people live their lives. So the three of us spoke of the storyteller’s path, and the usefulness of masks, and how to make voices for people and animals, ancestors and gods. All of this was very interesting, Tijun was clearly used to looking behind things as well as at them. Many times I reminded myself of my brother’s words, so every time I saw Tijun glance at me, I wondered what poisons she carried in her being.

On 15 Mak I Chicchan there was a festival day for the river god, the morning was celebrated by women while the men and boys stayed inside, and the afternoon was celebrated by everyone. This is because long ago the river was only water, it held no life within itself until a young goddess bled into it for her first time, and from this itz and mud and water, the river god was formed. Tijun went to the





women's celebration, and later K'aakik' and I joined her in the village center for the feast and the dances. There were many good things to eat, we all feasted well, and Tijun joined many other people in tossing white flowers into the river. All day people made these sacrifices to the river god, endless white flowers and tiny canoes filled with honey to keep safe the souls of their family members who were taken by the river spirits and to secure plentiful crayfish and fishes and turtles for the stewpots. Many people approached Tijun to speak with her; powerful men came just for a few words, young men came to pester her, valley women came to talk about life in the mountains and in the valley.

The river god's day was a sideways one for me; though I ate plenty and spoke with howler monkey people about the celebration, my brother was never far away, he seemed to stand near the place where he had become a man. All the other people became distant, my mother and father seemed like dream-people, even though K'aakik' was only a few steps away he gave off no heat or scent. Even Tijun looked like a shadow, pecked by the hungry birds of my village. Atlatla was neither seen nor heard, but all that day he was only a few steps from me.

The next morning was 16 Mak 2 Cimi, it was a day for ancestors and the dead. The traders were to rise early that day and begin their journey back to the mountains, but before they could come for Tijun, she woke me and had me come behind the screen to her part of our hut.

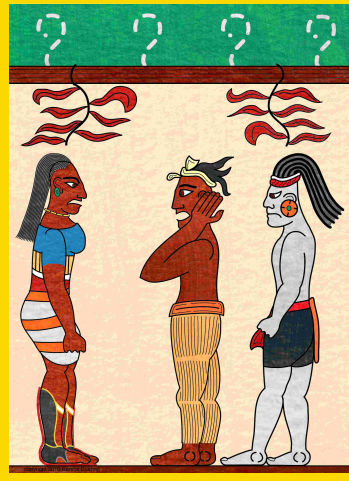
"I hoped to speak with you before this," were her words to me, she whispered because K'aakik' was only a few steps from us, sleeping. "But they are always near, I have not been able to say anything."

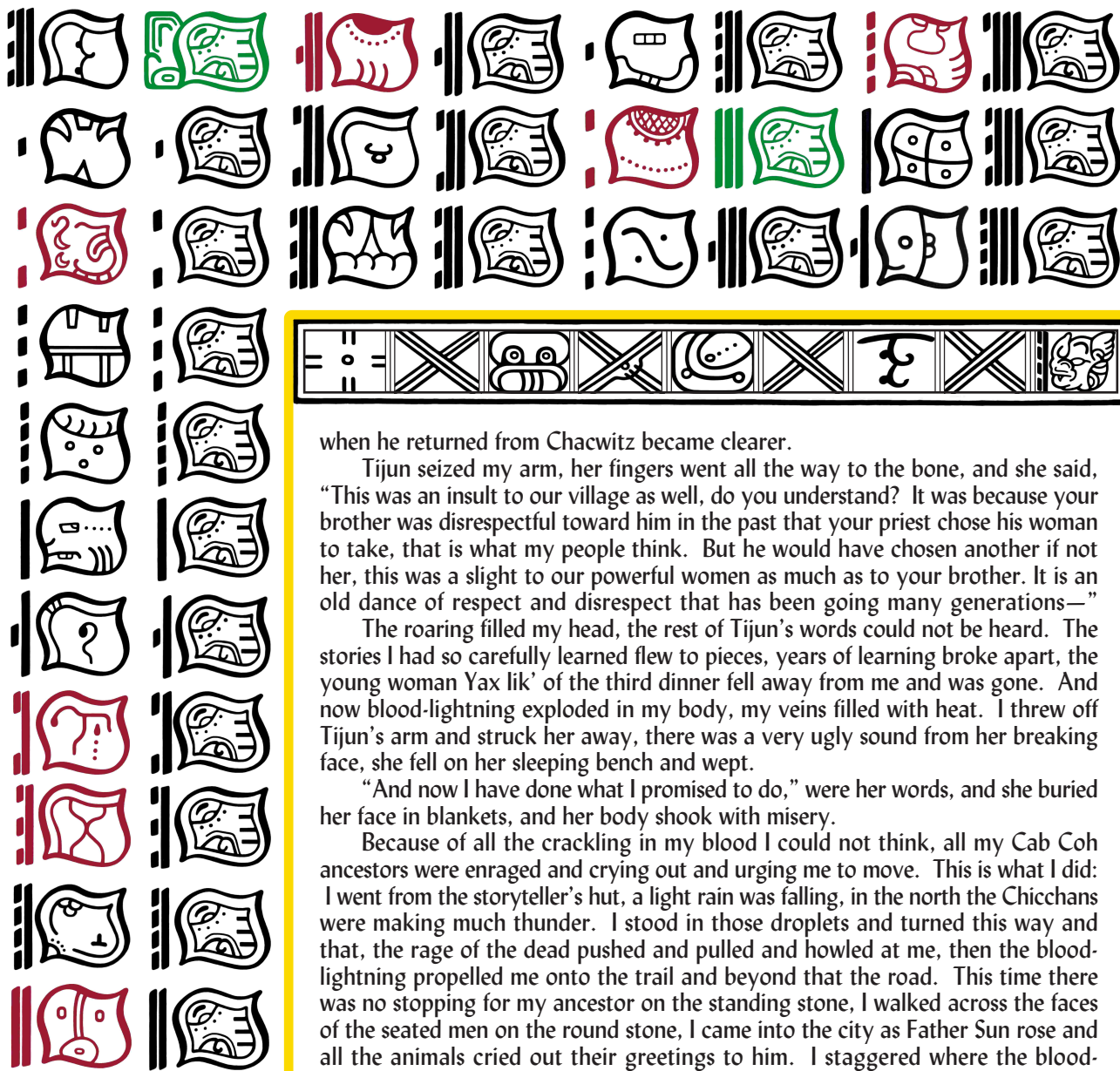
And now I felt my brother step up to me in a little puff of cool air, it was a Cimi day and he was right behind me, my skin prickled in an unpleasant way at his breath on the back of my neck.

"Who is always near?" I said, but she ignored this. Her eyes were like my brother's when he came down from the mountains, it was a similar fire, a great anger was in her.

"I promised your mother's people I would tell you this, and so here it is: when your brother was in the mountains he loved a young woman, he met her in my village, they would probably have married, in time. She was three years older than he was, they met when your handsome brother was thirteen." She looked at me with her fierce eyes, I could not look into her face but could only hear her words. "Your priest comes to the mountains sometimes, there are ceremonies he performs at your village's shrines up there. He took your brother's woman by force, claiming an old privilege of priests since the beginning of time. After this your brother could not marry her, in their shame. Are you hearing me?"

In truth I could not hear her, there was a great roaring in my head. Things my brother said made more sense, the looks he sometimes had and the way he was





when he returned from Chacwitz became clearer.

Tijun seized my arm, her fingers went all the way to the bone, and she said, "This was an insult to our village as well, do you understand? It was because your brother was disrespectful toward him in the past that your priest chose his woman to take, that is what my people think. But he would have chosen another if not her, this was a slight to our powerful women as much as to your brother. It is an old dance of respect and disrespect that has been going many generations—"

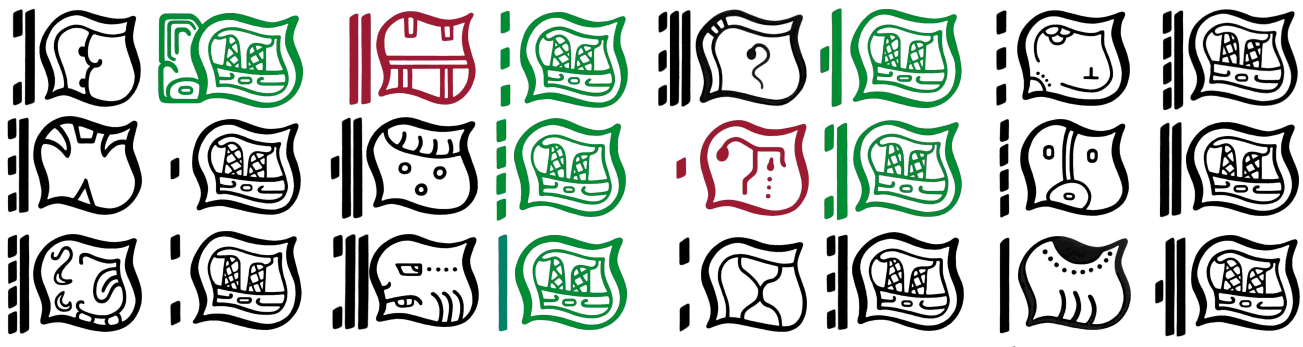
The roaring filled my head, the rest of Tijun's words could not be heard. The stories I had so carefully learned flew to pieces, years of learning broke apart, the young woman Yax lik' of the third dinner fell away from me and was gone. And now blood-lightning exploded in my body, my veins filled with heat. I threw off Tijun's arm and struck her away, there was a very ugly sound from her breaking face, she fell on her sleeping bench and wept.

"And now I have done what I promised to do," were her words, and she buried her face in blankets, and her body shook with misery.

Because of all the crackling in my blood I could not think, all my Cab Coh ancestors were enraged and crying out and urging me to move. This is what I did: I went from the storyteller's hut, a light rain was falling, in the north the Chicchans were making much thunder. I stood in those droplets and turned this way and that, the rage of the dead pushed and pulled and howled at me, then the blood-lightning propelled me onto the trail and beyond that the road. This time there was no stopping for my ancestor on the standing stone, I walked across the faces of the seated men on the round stone, I came into the city as Father Sun rose and all the animals cried out their greetings to him. I staggered where the blood-lightning forced me, all that morning I went here and there in the city, up the dead temples and into fallen palaces. Stones tumbled in every direction under my feet. The scorpions ran away from me, the snakes fled, raccoons and peccaries and tapirs trotted into the bushes. I kicked through rotting houses, ran through lineage-compounds, climbed over broken pyramid-mountains. There were roots and vines and branches and thorns and wasps; none of these received any respect. Many times I was scraped and torn, many times I fell and picked myself up and went on. At every lineage-shrine I stopped and stared at the broken and rotting bones, and the blood-lightning eased a little and then erupted again. There were picture-words carved into these shrines, our ancestors marked their houses for their dead, there were many many lineage signs but never Cab Coh.

When Father Sun was high I found the place my ancestors were pushing me to, it was a great lineage-shrine. And it was broken into, someone had torn away blocks from one side and tunneled into the soft earth. Into that tunnel I went, there was no removal of clothing and no thinking but only crawling and cursing at the children of ix-Ai who clambered across my fingers. There was light in there, the tunnel ceiling had fallen in a few places and made little cracks that went all



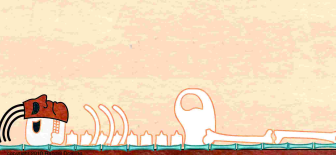
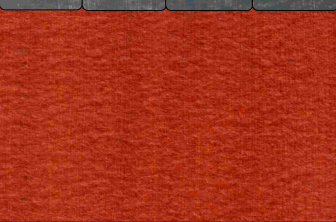


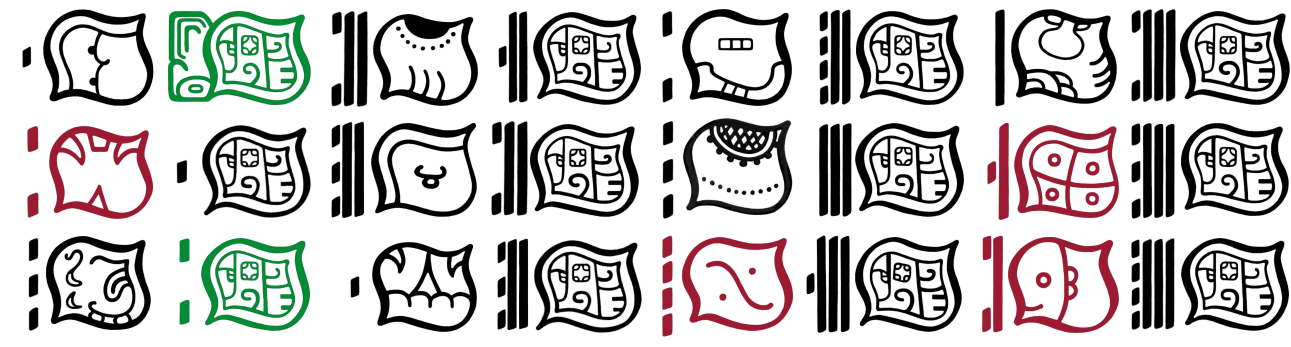
the way up and opened to the sky. In that weak and dribbling grey I crept forward into the center of the shrine. The fresh-mud tunnel came into an ancient stone room, I could not stand but could only crouch in that place, seven very low tunnels went away from this center. The city-men had made seven burials in the shrine, each worshiper had their own chamber. Here was the smell of that central room, not an old stink but strangely new: copal incense and burnt blood, cedar chips and bubbled pine pitch. The soot of these sacrifices was all over the ceiling, the burnings were fresh and not ancient.

I was not allowed to think, the blood-lightning of my ancestors moved me, the noises in my head were like four thousand drunken musicians playing. And I went into the first stone tunnel, here was only one crack and very little light, so that I wrapped my face in spider-silk and had to spit out the crawler. A rotting bed of reeds was at the end of the tunnel, in a tiny stone room there was a bed of reeds only a few years old. This room was also too low to stand, it reeked of death and copal incense and pitch. On the reed bed was a small skeleton, a child's bones, and over their face was a wooden mask with bits of shell and jade and gold inlaid into it. Here were the picture-words carved into the wood, they were a girl: Chel Cana was the name.

And now I went into another tunnel, I crawled like an animal so fast that my shoulders were ripped against the stone walls, my head cracked on the ceiling several times and opened for precious itz to pour out. The second tunnel ended in another low room reeking of copal and pine pitch, a second reed bed was there. The bones were an old man, his mask was rotting and his name unreadable. And I went into the other rooms, there were six skeletons in that place, each bore a mask with a name. All of the people killed by Tzak Balam were there, they lay on rotting reed beds with their arms folded over them, their masks proclaimed their names and lineages. Atlatla was one of these, there were his bones and his face, in wood, here was why his soul could not go on to the garden of the gods. His bones were never burned, he was trapped on the reed bed that someone had made for those destroyed by the spirit jaguar. Only one room was not used, there was a new reed bed but no one on it yet, sitting next to it were bundles of copal incense and pine pitch and flint for sparking. And in this room was one more small object, it was the figurine of a jaguar made of a very hard black stone; it was sitting in the center of the reed bed with its tail curled around itself, waiting to be called.

I think I began to cry out then, there were animal noises of fear that came from me. This was an ancient thing I was seeing, something evil that should have died in the time of the cities. Strong priests could take the shape of jaguars, in this way they could better serve Father Sun, and strong sorcerors could summon black spirit-jaguars created by ah-Puch at the beginning of time. But ah-Puch does not give away this power, the sorcerer has to commit murders to gain such strength. And I understood the meaning of that place, then, I knew Tzak Balam's true face.





This was me seizing the black jaguar figurine and then crawling and slithering in the mud to escape the crypt. In the room at the center of the seven chambers there was a last jerk of blood-lightning in my calves that pulled me down onto my face. And there they were, seven drops of amber lay in the remains of a small fire. They had melted and become teardrops. There was no ash on them, no charcoal was in them though they had melted in flames and lay in char. Those seven drops were very hot in my hand, perhaps they had swallowed the fire that formed them and thus were not destroyed. It was these I clutched when I left that place, I came out of the tunnel as Father Sun was beginning to sink into the underworld. Much time had passed for me with my brother, I had wept over his bones for a long time and made stupid sounds of longing. Atlatla was an angry person all his life but not wicked, he never deserved to be murdered.

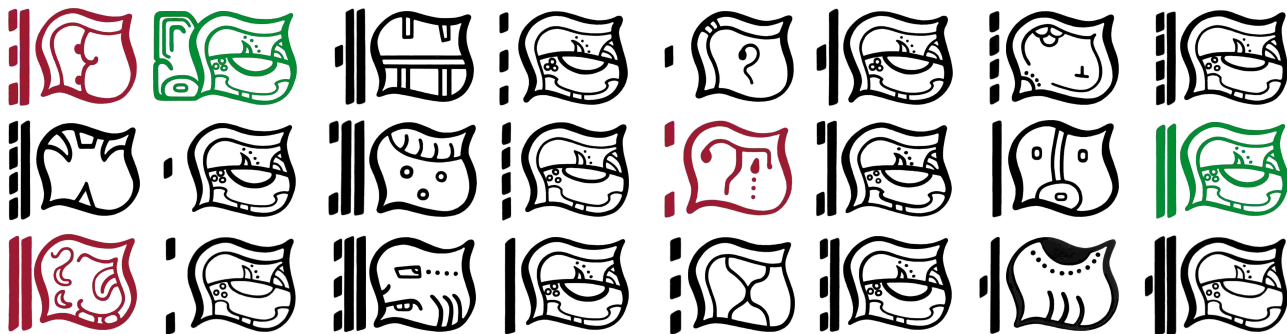
The jungle was very green, my eyes filled with river-tree green, and bones, and ash. Slivers of twilight shone into me as I raced through the jungle, the seven tears in my hand burned. Blood-lightning exploded, it would not stop though I was exhausted and sickened and frightened; my ancestors whipped me with their desire to end these murders. Only the talismans in my neck-pouch saved me from falling and bursting my head on some stone. The rain fell harder, and the jungle hissed and popped. There was no lightning to illuminate the trail; all the thunder was in the northern mountains, over the dead city up there. My feet made their own way, my toes dug new channels on the old path.

When I came to our village there was a meeting in the mat house, the voices of many men were coming from that place. I did not stop, or think. It was into the mat house I went, I was not properly dressed and said no prayer when I entered, I rubbed my charm-pouch and threw open the cloth doorway and was in. There sat the powerful men on their mats, forty was their number, sixty was their number, they sat in a circle around a large fire loudly discussing some thing. All those men turned when I entered, they were not angry but amazed, immediately I saw the face of the priest and the knowledge that came into his eyes. I would have feared to stand before those men, but my ancestors would not allow fear, would not allow anything but going into the center of their circle.

"In the ancient city is a seven-roomed tomb," I said to the caçique and the powerful men. "My ancestors led me there. Six dead people lay on reed beds in that place, they are the dead of Tzak Balam. They were killed by this priest, who is also a sorceror. Puksik'al Tok serves ah-Puch."

And I dropped the black jaguar figurine before the caçique, it lay there as the men stared. The amber droplets in my hand seared me, and I hurled them at Puksik'al Tok. The tiny sunbursts hit him in the face and bounced off, they left fiery wounds where they struck. No words were spoken, all those men were shocked and gaping. Even the caçique in his great strength only stepped backward and away. Thirteen steps were what I counted to reach the priest, he started to rise





and I struck him in the forehead with my palm; there was a meaty sound from deep inside his neck, and he thumped back onto his mat and pissed himself in his dying. I reached then and wrenched away the sign of his office, the crocodile figurine on its necklace was what I claimed. His belt with its pouches was also grabbed, these two things I took when I bowed to those shocked men and turned to leave.

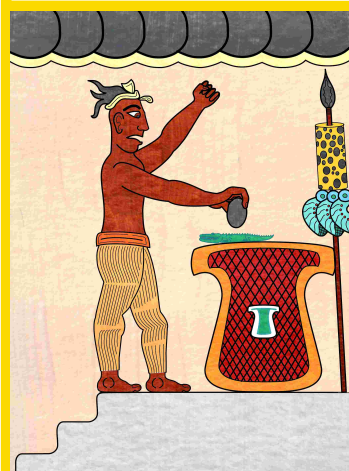
It was then that I saw the thing I had dreamed of, my brother's salvation had been only fifty paces from the storyteller's hut, all along. On the walls of the mat house were ancient objects, from the city; hanging on the western wall was a war-spear. And this is the form of such weapons: they are very long and thick-shafted, the hide of balam the jaguar covers part of the wood. The tip of this spear was leaf-shaped black obsidian, it had never killed a peccary or a puma or a tapir but only men. I went and seized that thing as well, there was a cry from several men when I claimed it, but I raised it against them, and they did not try to retrieve it.

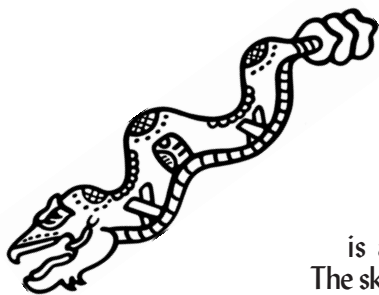
Then it was back into the rain, back into the village and spinning delirium. It was the will of my ancestors that K'aakik' and my uncle were not in the mat house, and so none who were close to me bore witness to any of these things I did.

A last flicker of lightning in my blood was what forced me from my home into the jungle, I was obliged to leave that place where my heart lived. It was my mother I was abandoning, with fresh sorrows, and my uncle, who had nothing left to fight for, and my drunken father, with no more sons. It was my work-father and his storytelling I would hear no more of, my life with the girl Yax lik' was only a sprout that withered and died before it could grow. The storyteller's hut was in sight, and smoke rose from the hole in the roof. Then I was entering the black road of the west and leaving behind the life I had had. That night I slept in the tomb with my brother, I lay in that reeking place with the spear and the priest's things, and though it was cold, there was comfort from Atlatla's presence in that place.

The next day was 17 Mak 3 Manik, it was a day of much thunder and rain, and on this day I went to the center of the city and climbed the pyramid-mountain of ah-Puch. At the top of that place was his temple, and his altar, and upon this I placed the priest's pouches, and his necklace. With a stone I smashed the jade crocodile; Puksik'al Tok was finished, the way of Tzak Balam was over. And then I snapped the war-spear into pieces and threw them on the altar as well. It was a strong thing not easily broken, great were the aches in my muscles, afterwards. The people who told me that words were the better way were correct, there is nothing in killing but cold and endless aloneless.

For many days after this I was fevered and babbling. There are small huts men make in the farthest milpas, and in one of these I found a store of dried fruit, and blankets, and a tiny hearth with some wood. These things saved me from death, there was nothing for me but what my ancestors wanted, what the gods and goddesses wanted. They alone saved me from destruction, after what I did.





Breath

is another kind of *itz*.
 The sky is part of us, our breath
 is made of little clouds.
 Most people only suck in
 and spit out sky, but
 storytellers in their shape the sky
 in their mouth. Here
 is Tijun's strong *itz*, and that of
 K'aakik'; it was mine as well,
 but not any more.



Sweat

comes from us when we
 work, it is the price Father Sun
 demands for making the earth and
 the water and the sky
 for us. Our ancestors
 were given all the creation
 to live in, and all we must
 do is work a little to
 keep it. Sweat is
 best known to the farmers, this
 is their dearest *itz*.



Tears

of water are shed by
 people in their
 suffering. There are
 too many of these in
 our village, ah-Puch's
 strength from us pulls them
 every day.
 It is my mother
 who has the most to weep
 for, this *itz* is hers.



Blood

flows from our wounds and
 hurts, shedding our blood is the
 sign of our affection for
 the gods and the goddesses
 and is the demonstration of
 our devotion. Blood is the
 sustenance of the gods; as
 they gave blood to
 make and sustain our ancestors,
 so we give it in return.



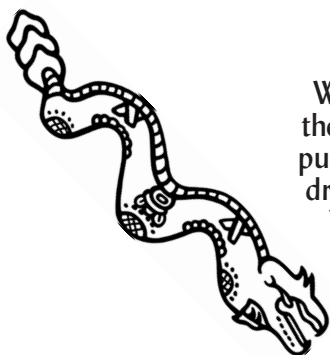
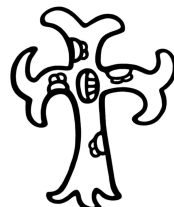
Pus

is what seeps from foul
 wounds, it is the sign of ah-Puch
 and his servants.
 Without the herbalists
 these wounds would kill,
 pus fills with poison and
 drains away all good *itz*.
 The lords of the night delight in this
 filth and pray always for its spread
 to more healthy people.



Dew

drops are the tears of dead
 children, falling from the tree of
 life before they are reborn. All the
 murdered ones, the fallen
 ones, the stillborn and
 miscarried ones, weep every day
 for their lost chance to live.
 Here is the sign of my
 three miscarried brothers, this is
 what is theirs.



There are thirteen kinds of *itz* in all, here are the symbols and ways of the secretions that are signs of life:

Milk

comes from our mothers
to strengthen us when we are
senseless infants. Here is yet another
gesture from
Moon to our
truly she cares
for us. It is
male animals
not snake or insect or lizard or bird;
this is the mother's gift, alone.



Mother
ancestors,
very tenderly
said that no
give milk,



Milky Way is
the exhalation of the
gods and goddesses, it
is the stream of breath
from the discussions in the
palace of Father Sun. Our
ancestors survive as stars,
they drink in this itz from
the gods and the goddesses
and are sustained. Here is
the home for almost all of
us, one day, this is our
final and richest itz.



Sap

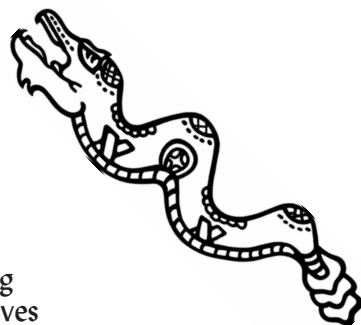
is secreted from trees and
gathered
herbalists
for incense
Some people
the urine of
is yellow and
scented, but
it is the blood of trees and thus
is good for incense.



up by the
and the priest
and medicines.
say that sap is
trees, because it
powerfully
my uncle says

Obsidian

is said to be the tears of
the earth; where lightning
strikes, the
forth lumps
There is black
dark grey,
west there is
obsidian.
My father
honors this stone for his tree-cutting
and wood-carving, this is his
favorite itz.



Chocolate

secretion of the cacao tree,
the blood of ix-Cacao flows
through
and brings
delicious
My oldest
wife knows
her fruits
this most
pleasure.
uncle's
well the
ways of cacao itz, seven clever
drinks she makes of this oil.



Honey

is our gift from the bees,
these children of ix-Ai took pity
on our ancestors and brought them
drops from
when they
Now we care
they give us
is theirs
is the itz closest to me, solid
chunk-honey sucked on a
heated day.



Juice

comes from many fruits, it
is all the
the rainbow,
and delicious in
Flowers make
is what bees are
Ix-Nikak' is
this is her gift to us. Since it was my
brother who so loved fruit trees,
here is the itz for him.

