

## The Great Sacrifice on 13 K'awil

In the time of our fathers, in the time of the cities, things were not as they are now. In those days, illness and madness were forced far away by the strength of the priests, the warriors, and the lords. It was the spears of the hunters which kept ain, the crocodile, in his place in the river, and it was their spears which kept balam, the jaguar, from tearing the travellers. In the time of our fathers, what woman died in childbirth, when the wise herbalists were there? What child died of the poison of kan koch, the fer-de-lance, when our fathers had driven him out of the valley? In those days, the city of our fathers—that place we call Ch'ulwitznal—was a place where the men of power gave rich sacrifices to the gods and the goddesses and crushed down the servants of ah-Puch. Listen, then, to the words of our ancestors on that holiest of days, 13 K'awil. Listen as they give what must be given to stay in Father Sun's light and drive away ah-Puch's emptiness.

Now it is the dawn of 13 K'awil, the day of closeness between living people and their ancestors. All the people of the city are awakened, all the people of the villages who have come for the ceremony have risen. They have been preparing for days and only await the call for the ceremony to begin. No one is outside, yet. They are all within their walls, listening.

There it is, the first horn-blow of the priests. The call echoes from the treetops, from the mountains. It is the sound the god ah-K'awil most loves to hear, horns made from the shells of great sea-snails. Now some families leave their ancestral houses on platforms of mud. These are the humble people, the gatherers of wood, haulers of logs, sweepers of plazas. Out they come, children, wives, men, walking in a line one behind the next. In their hands the fathers carry bundles of brown cotton filled with balls of copal incense mixed with their blood. They bled themselves that very morning. These laborers are quiet; they do not disturb the thoughts of the god on his day. They wear no jewelry or armbands, only a headband of brown cloth is their decoration on this day.

The humble people walk out of the city and circle around to the south and then to the west, on the sacred roads. It is on the black road that they line up, one family behind the next. Behind them is the black west, where the sun goes down, where the spirits of the dead are judged. It is with their ancestors behind them that the laborers enter the city. At the acantuns—the standing stones at the entrance to the city—there are those priests who serve the humble people. As the lines walk past, the priests take their place behind them, with their staff in hand. The priests dress as the laborers do, with a brown headband. They do not raise themselves above the people.

Here are two calls on the shell-horns, two long hoo-whoos to call the people to sacrifice. At the edges of the city, near the fields, the door-cloths of the houses move aside, and out come the farmers and their wives and children. They feel



the power of the god, they move quietly in the grey morning. The farmers wear headbands of brown cotton with the sign of ah-K'awil made of maize seeds drilled through and sewn onto the front. So they identify themselves on the holy day.

It is the wives of the farmers who carry the family gift, for it is from them that it came. Each wife brings a gourd from a calabash tree in her hands, with the top carved through as a lid. Their husbands made the jugs, and into them the wives placed an umbilicus made from woven maize husks.

The farmers circle the city as did the humble people before them, around to the south and then to the west. At the black acantuns the priests who serve the farmers step behind the families, with staff in hand. The priests dress like the farmers, with a headband bearing the sign of ah-K'awil. Together they walk to the great plaza and take their place at the feet of the pyramid-mountains.

Three times now the priests sound the horns. Two thousand fishermen and turtle-tenders come out of their houses, two thousand penitents and their families line up to visit the god. They are watchful men, patient men, directing their wives and children with little touches. This is the mark of the fishermen: a headband of brown cotton and the fluff of river reeds.

It is the children of the fishermen who bear the family gifts. In their outstretched hands the children carry white lily flowers from the quiet places on the rivers. It is from such flowers that the souls of our ancestors are reborn in our memories.

Like those before them, the fishermen cross over the white road, the red road, the yellow road. It is the black road they walk, with their ancestors behind them. At the acantuns they are joined by their priests, each with his staff, each dressed like a fisherman.

There come four horn-blows, four calls to bring out the hunters. They hurry their women, they hurry their children, they line them up with whispers. All of them are coming: the hunters of bright-feathered birds, of coh the puma, of balam the jaguar, ceh the red deer, ain the crocodile. Even the beetle hunters are coming. All the hunters wear armbands of the hides of their patrons, the animal lords whose children they claim. So they set themselves out among people.

Each hunter carries a cage of twigs and wicker. It is mo', the scarlet macaw, who squawks inside. At the beginning of time, mo' attacked the children of the first people, and so it is mo' who is sacrificed to the lord of bloodlines. This is the word of ah-K'awil, that those who injure the generations will be injured, that those who cut the cord will have their cord cut.

The greatest hunters bring the tzitz-tancaz, the bird with feathers of darkest blue and eyes the yellow of pus. It is a spirit in the shape of a bird, the spirit of a dead child caught by ah-Puch and given feathers so it can fly around and spit poison into the mouths of sleeping babies. Only the most clever hunters can catch these spirits, and such will be their sacrifice on the holy day.

When the lines are ready, the hunters circle around the city to the black road. Father Sun is climbing above the mountains, and the hunters push at their wives



and children. It is not long before they pass the black acantuns and are joined by their priests.

Five times the horns blow, five long calls, and those who are talking fall quiet and come out of their houses. They are the merchants who walk between the cities, the carriers of goods, and even on the god's day they can not be silent. The traders of jade, the sellers of obsidian, the buyers of quetzal feathers: all are ready to honor the god on his day. This is the ceremonial clothing of the merchants who walk the roads: they wear a simple wrap of white cotton. The eyes of the land merchants, the eyes of their family, are blackened with soot, the sign of ah-Ekchuah, their god.

Each merchant brings a bundle of white cotton that hangs from a cord around his neck. Inside the bundle is a round piece of polished hematite. The mirrors came from the northern cities, far over the mountains, and their cost was great. But this is a gift that pleases the god, and so it is the gift he will have.

The merchants leave the city through the white gate, the red gate, the yellow gate. They circle to the west and come back into the city. There they are, four thousand merchants, walking past the black acantuns. In that place their priests join their lines and rows.

There are six calls on the horns of the priests, six long hoots from the center of the city. Now the merchants of the water come out with their families. Their children and their wives mix together, and the men mix together, too. They act like they do in their trading canoes, everything in groups. They have to remember to line up and begin their walk. The water merchants and families wear sandals of uban, the rabbit, and twisted cedar bark. It is the scent of cedar which distinguishes them, and their green cotton head-wrap. The eyes of the water merchants are sooted, like those of their god. That is the sign of their respect.

The gift of the water merchants is in their hands, it is a war-axe of flint carved with the face of ah-K'awil and the sign of his name. Only flint is acceptable to the god, only the stone which is born from strikes of lightning, for lightning is the voice of ah-K'awil, and thunder is the roar of his passing. The lightning in the blood of daykeepers is the whisper of the god guiding them.

The water merchants line up and walk around the city until they come to the west acantuns. Their priests join their rows, and the water merchant families enter the city.

There are seven horn blows, and door cloths are shoved aside. The strong men step out, men with lined faces and dark eyes. They are warriors, and they come out before their women and children. They say nothing; there is no laughter, no smiles. This was in the days before the war, before ah-Puch turned the warriors mad with killing, but even then they were hard men. On the holy day the warriors wear cloth helmets of black cotton, with two quetzal feathers hanging down the back. Thus they are known on the god's day.



None of the warriors carry gifts. It is in the center of their lines and rows that their offering is found: a man with a brown cotton hip-cloth whose hands are bound behind him. He is K'ak Balam, Burning Jaguar, a servant of ah-Puch who lived in the jungle and killed herb-gatherers and butterfly hunters. The warriors captured him, and now his cord will be snapped to quench the anger of the god, because of the killing of the people.

The houses of the warriors are all through the city, so that if ah-Puch comes in strength, there will be warriors everywhere to crush down his servants. After the seven horn blows the warriors circle the city and walk to the black road. The priests who serve the warriors join their lines, walking with them past the standing stones and on to the plaza of Father Sun.

Eight times the priests blow the sea-snail horns, and here come the artisans from their workshops near the markets. There are feather-workers and weavers, idol-carvers and shapers of pots and plates and vases. There are sculptors and jewelry-makers and furniture-makers. Father Sun is sending his first light over the mountains, and the artisans move their wives and children into line quickly. On this day the hip-cloths and tunics of the artisans are white cotton with hems of orange and green, red and blue. The colors and the patterns show what sort of stuff each artisan works and for how many turns of seasons.

Each artisan bears a gift-bundle of red cotton cloth. The woodcarvers and statue-makers bring small idols shaped like ah-K'awil. The featherworkers bring fans of red and black feathers. The jewelry-makers and stone-carvers bring jade beads, and the potters bear painted vases. The gift of the flint chippers is the spark-striker from which to kindle new fire, and the obsidian chippers have made sacrificial blades.

The artisan families go out the white gate and the red gate and the yellow gate and circle around to the west. At the black acantuns are the priests who guide the artisans, to take their place behind the rows. Each priest bears his staff of office, his sign of power and affection for the gods.

The priests blow nine times on the horns, and they are not playing: soon it will be time to start the ceremony. And here come the nine-call people from the palace where they live. They are the scribes, the makers of pictures that are the essence of everything that is thought and said. There are not many, four twenties or maybe five, and it takes only a moment for them to line up with their wives and children. For the holy day the scribes wear a headband of white cotton, and in this is tucked one fine quill for writing, and one fine brush, for pictures.

Each scribe bears three pieces of rolled paper in his hands. From the bark of the fig tree they made the paper, and upon each sheet is a drawing of a lineage-tree, and its fruit are the written names of children and parents and ancestors. Each scribe knows three great lineages of the city, all the names for nine generations, for thirteen generations. It is the place of the scribes to present the names of the branches and the fruit to the god and show him how his seeds have grown.



The scribes live on the island Hun-nal, First Place, and they must walk across a bridge to the yellow stones before they may enter the black road. At the black acantuns, the priests who are their guides bring their staff and their wisdom, and the scribes welcome them.

The priests slap the shell-horns as they blow, they make ten rumbling calls, and the thunder men come out from their houses. Here are the ball players of Ch'ulwitznal, the stompers on the portal to the underworld. How many are they? Three twenties, maybe four twenties, not more. They clasp hands when they see each other, they forget to line up their families, it is their wives who put their children in rows. The ball players talk in loud voices, and only when they see their families waiting do they join the lines. For ah-K'awil the ball players have bared their chest; their muscles are their declaration.

The gifts of the ballplayers are in bundles of black cotton tied to their waist. That morning the ball players bled themselves, it was their blood that they mixed with soft rubber, on the hearth-fires. Here are the numbers of the rubber balls: nine for the team of night players, thirteen for the day players, seven for those who play for festivals.

The ball players live in the center of the city, near the ball courts, and they lead their families through the white acantuns of the north and circle around to the black road. There they are joined by the five priests who serve them, and they walk on to the plaza of Father Sun.

Now there are eleven buzzings on the horns, eleven rasps made with the tongue on the blow-hole. In the palace of the sorcerors, the men come out of the dark doorways. There are no wives, no children. It is not families that ah-K'awil has given to the sorcerors; it is his magic. He is the lord of paths, and to the sorcerors he has given the knowledge of travelling through the empty places between the worlds. It is the place of the sorcerors to bring assistance and wisdom to the king and the lords, from the garden of the gods and the underworld. The sorcerors line themselves up, from work-sons to masters, only two twenties men, and they do not speak as they move. Each sorcerer wears a headband of black cotton with red stars, these represent burning ashes rising on dark smoke.

The sorcerors have captured kan koch, the fer-de-lance, and quieted him with their magic. There are the vipers now, wrapped around the forearms of the sorcerors. The path of ah-K'awil from his palace in the garden of the gods to this world is the winding serpent of stars that is the ecliptic. It is the gift of the sorcerors that opens the path of stars for ah-K'awil to be born into the ceremony.

The palace of the sorcerors is on the island Hun-nal, and the black acantuns are far from there. The sorcerors walk so swiftly, it is like wind that they go. They pass the black stones right behind the ball players, only two steps behind them. There are no priests who serve the sorcerors; they speak to ah-K'awil directly. That is how ah-Puch corrupted them so easily, in the last days of the city. They would listen to no other voices than his, when he tricked them with



deceptions.

Now everyone is inside the city. Eighty thousand, one hundred and sixty thousand people, are at the feet of the pyramid-mountains. Still the horns sound, twelve long calls. The lords of the city, who have been standing on platforms and watching the people as they entered the acantuns, come down and join their families. There are only fifty twenties lords for all the city, for all the villages, no more than this. Dignity is in their steps as they approach the ancestors' acantuns. There the priests who guide the lords become one with them and their families.

There are three kinds of lords in the city, and each has marked himself for the holy day. There they are, the bearded t'aakinob, the wise ones chosen by the men of each trade to speak for them in the mat house. Each Speaker wears a cape of the soft fur of the river otter. The headdresses of the t'aakinob are shaped like owls, like messengers, and are adorned with black and golden owl feathers.

The ones who walk as though they hear only their own thoughts are the cahals, the makers of order. It is they who oversee the villages and the five parts of the city. It is they who keep the roads and rivers clear, who ensure that prices are fair, who see that enough maize is stored. The capes of the cahals are made of the brown and black feathers of falcons. Each cahal wears a headdress bearing the face of ah-K'awil, with a mirror of polished hematite in its forehead. Two long, green tail-feathers from kuk, the quetzal, hang from the back of these headdresses, and when the cahals move, their feathers ripple.

And here are the lords who have not yet been named, only ten twenties are left. They are long-haired men with the eyes of hawks, whose hands are always near their spears. These are the sahals, the leaders of warriors. It is they who must capture murderers and bandits and bring them to Ch'ulwitznal for judgement. When the lords of other cities want to magnify themselves over our fathers, it is the sahals who raise their spears for the city. On 13 K'awil the sahals go bare-chested: their scars and tattoos serve as decoration and fabric. All the sahals wear long capes of the bright red feathers of mo', the scarlet macaw. In the beginning days, mo' shed the blood of children, and it is the place of the sahals to shed the blood of those who stand against the city.

All the lords have brought bundles woven of the white feathers of zac-boc, the white ibis. Every day zac-boc walks in the shallow water of the rivers and ponds, looking down into the underworld. She knows the face of everyone who is there, so it is her feathers that the lords use to wrap their gifts. Each lord has brought the god an ancestor flint, shaped like the tree of life, with its branches bearing the faces of the great ones of their lineage. ah-K'awil is the one who gives greatness to those who can bear its burdens.

In the plaza of Father Sun, the lords climb up the pyramid-mountains. Their place is the first tier, where they stand above everyone except the high priests, and the king.



Now there is only one call, one long hoot. The twenty high priests, the chilam balamob, lower their horns and leave their places by the acantuns. They do not declare themselves when they pass the black gate. They just touch the carved stones. Their wives join them, their children join them, and they walk to the plaza. The high priests do not seem to see this world; they are thinking about what must be done for ah-K'awil to attend the ceremony. For the holy day they wear head-wraps of green cotton which bear the golden face of Father Sun, father to ah-K'awil. It is the strength of the father that embraces the son, it is the strength of the son that embraces the people.

Jade celts are the gift from the priests, celts engraved with the Tree of Life. Each priest brings his family's celt, hanging from his hip-cloth on a white cotton cord soaked in his own blood.

The temple of ah-K'awil is very high, with seven tiers, but the priests go right up the steps. They don't even use their staffs to help them. On their left and their right, all the way up, are clay braziers as tall as a man, carved with the face of ah-K'awil. Each high priest stands next to a brazier, and their families go out onto the second tier for the ceremony. The high priests drop balls of copal incense into the fires, and the clouds of smoke are the call for the ceremony to begin.

One high priest goes into the temple of ah-K'awil, alone. He is Bolon Saasil, Nine Bright Thought, who has walked four twenties years on the gods' path. While the old man is inside the temple, Father Sun rises high above the eastern mountains. He draws a little sweat from the people, and they show their respect for his strength by sitting on the plaza stones and raising their sun-fans. They just break up his light, a little.

From the doorway of the temple come the high priest and the king of the city and the valley. The king is Kan Boar, king during the days of jade and endless maize. It is his desire that has raised temples and palaces, his prayers that have brought good fortune, his will that has defended the city. But on this day, king Kan Boar is just a penitent, respectful before the god ah-K'awil, Lord of Lineages.

This is the king's appearance on the holy day: he wears a hip-cloth made of strips of jaguar hide, with paper strings tied onto them. He has bled onto the strings, the blood is soaking into the white paper. He wears a long cape of red feathers and white feathers, black feathers and yellow feathers and green feathers. His black cotton headdress carries a jade mask of ah-K'awil, with a water lily coming from his forehead. Above that mask is a mask of Wuk Batz', the first king of Ch'ulwitznal and the ancestor of Kan Boar.

Now they stop, the chilam balam and the ahau, at the top of the steps of the pyramid-mountain. The people fill the plaza and the squares around the plaza, they stand on the steps of the pyramid-mountain and on its lowest tiers. The priest Bolon Saasil raises his old man's voice and speaks out over the city, he talks to all those people in the loud voice of a strong old man:



"Here we all are, then  
Penitents and sacrificers  
We who grew from the fruit of the world-tree

Today we remember its planter  
The caretaker of its blossoms  
The pruner of its branches and sprouts

Today we pay our respects  
We pay our debts  
Before the god, before his father"

He steps back where the people cannot see him, and the king alone looks out at the people now.

"For thirteen generations we have lived in this sacred place," says Kan Boar. "Our lineages have grown stronger, and wiser, who has not prospered? On this day the priests offer their thanks to ah-K'awil for his wisdom. On this day the king makes known his respect to the lord of generations. Who else will join the ceremony? Or are you just watchers, just onlookers?"

"We will make offerings!" say the lords of the city. "We will join the ceremony!"

"Join, then, lords!" says the king, and the lords bow their heads, and their wives and children bow also. Kan Boar bows to the lords, and then he stands, and the lords stand again also.

It is the sorcerors who call out next, "We have come to give our gifts."

"Then give them, sorcerors!" says Kan Boar, and the sorcerors bow. The ahau bows, and when he raises his head again, the sorcerors do the same.

"It must be time to begin," says the king, "Since no more voices are raised."

The ballplayers shout, "We have brought thanks for ah-K'awil!"

"Call forth your thanks, ballplayers!" says the ahau. The ballplayers and their wives and children bow, and the ahau bows and releases them.

"We have words to say and nourishment to give," say the scribes.

"And may they be pleasing, scribes!" says the ahau. The scribes bow to the lord of the city and the valley, and he bows and lets them rise. "So, who are you who have not spoken?"

"We are bringers of prayers to the lord of the day!" say the warriors, as they bow.

"Then you must give them, warriors," are the words of Kan Boar. He bows to them, to their wives and children, and lets them rise. He says, "Is this all, then? Are there no others?"

"Yes!" say the artisans. "It is adoration we bring to the incense burners." And they bow, too.

The ahau says, "Let your adoration be received, artisans." He bows to them and lets them rise.

"Our gratitude brings us to the plaza," say the merchants of the water. "We





have come to present ourselves to the lord of the day."

"Let your gratitude be well presented, merchants of the water," says the king. The water merchants and their families bow, and the ahau bows and straightens to release them.

"We bring admiration for the keeper of the tree," say the merchants of the land, and they bow.

"May he hear your admiration, merchants of the land, and be pleased with you," says the king.

"It is vengeance we bring for the god," say the hunters, and they, too, bow to Kan Boar.

"ah-K'awil will favor your fierceness, hunters," says Kan Boar, and he bows.

"And we have come to give thanks for the god's blessings," the fishermen say, as they bow.

"Rise, fishermen, and give your thanks." Kan Boar bows and releases them.

"Do not forget us, great king!" say the farmers. "We, too, have come with offerings and prayers!" They hurry to recognize their king.

"How can you be forgotten, farmers?" says the ahau. "ah-K'awil will see you, on his day of strength." He bows to the farmers and releases them. "But, here are a few who have said nothing. Are you just mice, then?"

"No, oh, lord," say the laborers of Ch'ulwitznal. Their voices are low, they just murmur. "We, too, wish to share our nourishment with the god. We, too, wish our faces to be seen by him." They are humble before the lord of the valley.

"Share what you have brought then!" says the ahau. He releases them.

That is how the people of Kimitun-nal begin the ceremony. They declare themselves before the lords, before the ahau, before the god. They make their desire to serve ah-K'awil known.

This is when Kan Boar raises his voice and says:

"Mine is the blood that waters the tree;  
Mine is the blood that jewels the smoke;  
Mine is the blood that nourishes the god;  
That all the people grow stronger."

He shakes the paper strings on his hip-cloth, and they are red; the white is gone. "People of the valley of three rivers!" says the king. "You say you give thanks to the keeper of the tree! Are you not just sinners? Or do you truly bring prayers? It is time, the god is near!" He drops incense into the incensarios on top of the steps, and all the high priests on the stairs put handfuls of sweet copal incense into the fires. That is how the prayers rise to ah-K'awil, riding the smoke.

The high priest, Bolon Saasil, says, "Here are the words ah-K'awil wants to hear, the words he taught our ancestors, at the beginning of time:

"Are the new souls falling toward us?  
Have the departed begun their return?"

Our children are softly falling  
Our Ancestors return as mist



Oh, ah-K'awil, our teacher!  
Oh, wise keeper of the tree!

Won't you release the souls of our children  
To enter the wombs of their mothers?

Won't you release the souls of our Ancestors  
To bring us their strength and wisdom?

If we have been forgetful, don't punish them  
If we have been neglectful, don't close their path

Let them come savor the essence of incense  
Let them come savor the essence of flowers

Oh, mother! Oh, father!  
Oh, child to be born!

Come and eat with us a bit of this maize  
Come and drink with us this honeyed bark wine"

"Speak, now, and let the smoke wash away your sins against ah-K'awil and our ancestors!"

The high priests are the first to stand and pray. They begin calling loudly to ah-K'awil, they shake his tree. Then they mutter, their voices become whispery, to beckon the god to listen. Father Sun moves two spans across the sky as the high priests sweat and chant and toss incense into the fires. Then they say their own special prayer, but we do not know it today. All of the high priests died in the war between the cities, and their prayers died with them.

Now the lords of the city stand, and as Father Sun looks straight down upon them, they chant the words of his son's prayer. The wives and children of the lords chant, too, from their seated places. The priests who serve the lords raise their voices to guide the prayers, and the penance of the lords can be heard even in the villages. The lords, too, have their own prayer, but their words burned in the war, when the lords of Ch'ulwitznal died by the spear, died by the dart. For two spans of Father Sun the lords pray, and then they sit again.

The sorcerers stand and look at the sky—not at the people, not at the high priest, not the king. They speak to the god alone, to he who opens the path to their power. Then they chant their own prayer, they are whispering, who knows what words they said? Not one sorcerer lived through the last days of the city. Maybe that is why they are so quiet on I 3 K'awil, because they have seen that they will all be destroyed by darkness in the future.



The ballplayers jump up to offer their thanks. The words burst from them, their prayer roars in the plaza. They are proud of their sons and daughters, they are proud of their ancestors, and it is their pride which cannot be quiet. For two spans of Father Sun, the ballplayers and their priests say ah-K'awil's prayer, and then they say their own prayer to the god. How is it said, the special words of the ballplayers? No one knows. All the ballplayers were dragged into the underworld in the last days of the city, and none of their words remain today.

These are the scribes standing, and here are their priests, rising with them. They chant the prayer to ah-K'awil clearly and with care, these shapers of words and their priests. Their wives say the prayer, too, and their children. The high priests drop incense into the fires, and the words of the scribes are lifted to the god. The scribes have their own prayer to give to the god as well, but that prayer was lost when the scribes were smothered in the yellow mist. None of their prayer is remembered today.

There is something different, when the warriors stand. All of them rise at the same time, in the same manner, to chant ah-K'awil's prayer. Even the priests who guide the warriors, even their wives and children, speak the prayer like one person. Always the warriors are alike in their thinking and their ways. The warriors say ah-K'awil's prayer, and then they say their own. We do not know those words any more. The warriors were defeated in the war with Sactun-nal, and their prayer passed into the underworld.

The artisans stand with their priests and bow to ah-K'awil before they speak. Their wives and children stand and make circles around them. To everyone in the plaza they just look like standing people, but to ah-K'awil in his high place the artisan families in their pure cotton are white flowers. The artisans sing ah-K'awil's prayer, and then they sing their own. Who can say what words were in their special prayer? The artisans died in the war, they were all burned by fiery rain. When two spans of Father Sun pass, the artisans and their families form their rows and are seated.

The water merchants and their priests pray in the deep voices of underground rivers. Even the voices of their wives and children murmur and flow. They chant the words of ah-K'awil's prayer, and then they give their own prayer. In the last days of the city ain, the crocodile, gnashed the canoes and the water merchants, and their words floated away with their bodies. Only a few water merchants survived the war between the cities, they left us these crumbs from their prayer:

"Let us see their faces  
This one time, Lord ah-K'awil

Our mothers, our fathers  
On this side of the river once more

Let them rise to the surface  
Let them glow like the lily



Just this one time  
Just this final time"

Then the words of the water merchants are finished, and they stop speaking and sit.

The voices of the land merchants are the voices of long days walking on the sacred roads—dry and raw. They say ah-K'awil's prayer with respect, for they have seen the work of the god in the farthest of their travels, and they know he walks even farther than they do. Then they chant their own prayer, but who can say how it went? The land merchants were the first to be devoured in the war. Their prayers blew away with the dust of their bones, and all we have are some broken words, remembered by their children:

"We see you in the faces of the red people of the east  
Great ah-K'awil

We see you in the faces of the white people of the north  
Planter of lineages

We see you in the faces of the black people of the west  
Trimmer of branches

We see you in the faces of the yellow people of the south  
Bringer of blood thunder

We are all born of the flowers of your tree  
Perfect in the beginning"

Here are the hunters standing to pray. Their voices are hushed, the voices of their priests are soft, their wives and children speak in echoes. They say ah-K'awil's prayer and then their own prayer for their children and their ancestors. We still remember a few words, two twenties hunters fled into the jungle and lived through the war between the cities:

"It is true, Lord Serpent, Lord Mirror  
Our darts and our blowgun pellets cut short the animal generations

Do not grow angry with us, do not hate us  
We are respectful, we give proper sacrifices

The blood of the animal generations  
Waters our tree, makes our children grow

We do not take too many  
Their lineages remain strong



Do not punish our children, our ancestors  
For the blame that is ours alone"

The fishermen are not talking people, and they grumble when they pray. Their wives and their children mutter; only their priests speak clearly. The fishermen say the prayer for the holy day, and then they offer their own prayer.

None of those words survive now. A few fishermen escaped from ain, the crocodile, during the war, but they forgot their special prayer. Ain frightened the words right out of their heads.

And now it is the turn of the farmers to stand and declare the strength of the roots and branches of their generations. The voices of the farmers raised in prayer are plain voices, but there are a thousand twenties farmers, and their wives and children and priests, and the words of ah-K'awil's prayer rumble in the plaza. The farmers have no prayer of their own, and for two spans of Father Sun they chant the Lineage Prayer slowly and loudly, many times.

The humble people crouch when it is their turn to stand, they look at the paving stones and mumble. Only those who are close to them can hear their hearts in their words, can hear their gratitude to ah-K'awil. For two spans of Father Sun they chant the Lineage Prayer, and their families chant, and their priests lead their voices in giving thanks and begging for forgiveness. The laborers do not have a special prayer. The words of the god are enough for them.

It is the voice of the king which is the last and the loudest. Father Sun has crossed the sky and is lowering toward the western mountains. All day Kan Boar has stood before the people. He has not been seated, he has not rested. Only when the humble people sit does he say ah-K'awil's prayer. He is only one man, one voice, but all the people hear him. The wives and children of Kan Boar chant the prayer with their father, with their king, from their place just below him, on the sixth tier of the pyramid-mountain. Then Bolon Saasil drops a handful of pine sap into the fires, and Kan Boar drops three balls of copal, and clouds rise.

Now Bolon Saasil says, "ah-K'awil takes his nourishment from our words, from our smoke. It is time for us to take ours." He lifts his vase of frothy maize drink and says:

"Well, then, let this be the first drink  
For all our fathers, for all our mothers

We thank you for our lives  
We thank you for your wisdom

Take this, then, ah-K'awil  
Take this, then, Father Sun

There are a few drops here for you  
There is delicious essence here for you



We will share them with you  
From our place in your shadow."

He takes a drink from the vase, and it is time to break the long fast of the day. Everyone has brought a little something wrapped in a maize husk—a bit of turkey, some squash, some maize gruel. There is nothing rich, just tortillas and beans. Only the smallest children talk and smack their mouths, only those who are still close to ah-K'awil anyway and cannot anger him with disrespect. When the meal is finished, when Father Sun has almost disappeared behind the black acantuns, the maize husks are thrown into the burners for ah-K'awil to consume.

Now the high priest and the king stand again above the people. Kan Boar says his own words, the prayer of the king:

"All have spoken, ah-K'awil, our lord  
All have remembered your words from the dawn

Now receive this, my fire, smoking-torch lord  
Now receive this, my droplets, lord of all lineages

Take this pom incense, to nourish your soul  
Take this white cloud, it is filled with our prayers

I ask for my people, forgiveness and pardon  
I ask for our families, strong and fat branches

We will honor our mothers, honor our fathers  
We will embrace our children, that their souls grow strong

We do these things as you have asked, ah-K'awil  
We do these things as you have taught, dawn-speaker

So take these, our gifts, to lighten your burdens  
So take these, our prayers, to lighten your soul"

The king unties the blood-strings from his hip-cloth and drops them in the incensario. The smoke is black and twists into the shape of serpents. There are thirteen strings in the front of the ahau's hip-cloth and nine in the back, and he feeds them to the flames one by one. His is the first sacrifice, and when he is finished, he stands over the people to lead them to ah-K'awil.

Now the high priests and their families come down from the pyramid-mountain. In the plaza before ah-K'awil's temple is his white stone altar, encircled by four tall incensarios bearing the face of the god. All of the families line up before the



altar, and together they bow their respect. Each high priest holds up his family's gift, a green celt hanging on a blooded string, and together they set them upon the altar, with these words:

"The blood of our sacrifices washes the path." ah-K'awil will not come to the ceremony if his path is not clear. It is the high priests who ensure his road will be clean, with their blood and jade.

The high priests and their families return to the pyramid-mountain, but their time is not done. On the altar, their celts take root and grow into a great ceiba tree of green smoke. It grows higher than the pyramid-mountain, even its lowest branches hang over the head of Bolon Saasil and Kan Boar. Then the nourishment of the sacrifice is drawn up by ah-K'awil, the celts are gone.

It is the lords who next bring their sacrifices. There are the flints of the t'aakin, set in a circle onto the sacred stone. Then the cahals hold up their gifts for all to see and set them down on the flints of the Speakers. The sahal are last, the warrior lords set their flints on top of all others.

When the sacrifices are given, the lords call out, "The strength of the great ones braces the tree." That is the burden of the lords, to support the Tree of Life with their sacrifices and their wisdom so that all the families of Ch'ulwitznal may grow strong and thick with branches.

The lords have not even walked back to their place before their flints become a swirling column of white smoke. In the smoke are the faces of the ancestor lords, all the strong ones who made the city great. Then ah-K'awil sucks up the nourishing smoke, and all the flints are taken.

The sorcerers bring their vipers to the altar; kan koch hisses from their arms. At the stone, each sorcerer takes an obsidian sliver and cuts the throat of his serpent. The bodies drop onto the altar, the blood flows onto the rock. The symbol of ah-K'awil glistens with blood.

"Our minds and our knowledge open the way," are the sorcerers' words.

When the sorcerers go back to their place, the bodies of the serpents are devoured by the altar. The spirits of the serpents will burn in the fires of ah-K'awil's hearth, until they have repaid all the suffering they have caused. Only their blood remains, on the stone.

The ballplayers are next to approach the altar with their families. Each ballplayer holds high his family's bundle of rubber balls and places them on the stone. The night players arrange their nine balls into a flower, and the festival players put their seven balls into a line, like dancers. The day players make a pyramid-mountain of thirteen balls. Now the ballplayers declare themselves:

"We are the pruners of the branches of the tree," are their words, for on the ballcourt it is decided which team will play again and which team will be sacrificed to the underworld.

That is all for the ballplayers, and they leave the altar. Their offerings do not sit still. The balls bounce back and forth across the stone, like the first ball game



between ah-Puch's servants and the twins, in the beginning days. All at once the balls bounce into the sky, taken by ah-K'awil. The god will put a chip of white flint into each one and hurl them at ah-Puch's wicked spirits, to snap their cords. That is the punishment for spirits who would harm the generations.

They only rustle, the scribes, when they come with their families to the altar. Every wife, every child, bows before the god. Each scribe holds high their three bark-paper sheets written with the names of the great lineages of the city, and the blood and lymph flowing in their bodies is the sap of the Tree, as it has been from the beginning and shall be for all time.

"We are the keepers of the tree," are the words of the scribes, for it is their place to remember the names of all the branches and flowers, even those which have fallen and were lost.

The scribes do not unroll the papers but leave them curled as they toss them onto the hungry stone. When all the sheets are put in a pile, they crackle with red flames. Vines grow from the burning papers, vines of yellow smoke that twist together. Tiny white flowers grow on the vines, one for each ancestor. There are more flowers than even the high priest can count. When the vines reach the sky, their yellow smoke is drawn up, and the sacrifice of the scribes is accepted.

It is the artisans who present themselves next. Each family bows, and each artisan opens his red cotton bundle and offers his gift. The woodcarvers and statue makers set down their tiny figures of ah-K'awil at the edges of the altar, facing toward the plaza. A hundred figurines are there, two hundred little carvings. Then the featherworkers set down their red and black fans where they tickle the backside of the god. The jewelry makers and stone carvers place their jade beads to circle the sign of ah-K'awil, and the potters place their vases beside the figurines so that the god may enjoy his maize gruel. At last come the flint and obsidian chippers, to set their spark-strikers and sacrificial blades on top of the beads. Now the artisans say:

"Our hands bring forth the faces and forms of the gods." Only the artisans may shape the gods from stone, clay, paint, feathers. That is their burden, on the holy day. When the artisans return to their place their gifts sink into the altar. Only one remains: an obsidian blade.

Each water merchant holds high his war-axe for the god and the people to see, and then they set the axes on the stone. How many blades are there? Four hundred, eight hundred. They are stacked on top of each other, a circle of flint axes. Now the water merchants declare:

"We bring your axe of lightning, the burning cord between sky and world." For that is what lightning is, a sign of the umbilicus between ah-K'awil and our generations.

Now the water merchants flee back to their places. ah-K'awil's lightning flashes down, and the axes fly into the air. They twist as though they are in a whirlwind, and then each becomes a flash of lightning that shoots into the sky. ah-K'awil will put the axes into the souls of daykeepers, before they are born, so he can talk to them through the blood lightning.





When the lightning flashes have ceased, the land merchants come with their gifts. All their wives tap the altar, all their children rub the stone, to nurture the god with their heat. The land merchants open their white cotton bundles and cover the altar with a thousand pieces of polished hematite, with two thousand round lights, and they say:

"Mirrors are the houses of our ancestors," for it is in our faces that we see what our ancestors looked like, and it is in our faces that ah-K'awil makes his touch known.

When the land merchants return to their place, their mirrors flow together into one great, black mirror. None of the people look into it, only the ahau and the high priest are strong enough to look. The black mirror shows the faces of the people in the underworld tomorrow as well as today, and who wants to see that? It is just a reminder ah-K'awil is giving, that not all ancestors rest easily. Now the great mirror breaks into many small mirrors that spin like whirlpools and are drawn into the stone. They all disappear. ah-K'awil will give the mirrors to lost spirits, so they will remember themselves and find their proper place.

This is the sound of the hunters coming to the altar: the booming of wings. The wives of the hunters bow, their children bow, and then they step away. The hunters set down their cages, and each father takes out his scarlet macaw and breaks its neck and sets his dead bird onto the altar.

And here is the killing of the death-birds, the tzitz-tancazob. The twenty greatest hunters bring out a splinter of green jade and stab their tzitz-tancaz in the heart. The death-birds do not bleed, they only cough and die. The evil spirits go out of them, and ah-K'awil catches the spirits and snaps their cords. Then the hunters put the dead tzitz-tancazob on the altar, and they turn to ash with all the other birds. Their essence is taken by the god. The hunters call out:

"We of the blowguns shoot the enemies of the tree," for that is their burden. ah-K'awil demands that the wicked birds be shot, so that the fruit of the Tree of Life will not be devoured.

When the fishermen come to the altar, it is their wives who first present their faces to the god. Then their children look upward, with their family's water lily in their hands, and this is how ah-K'awil sees them: still green, still sprouts. Their fathers take the white flowers and set them on the altar, and they float in the blood left by the sacrifice of the sorcerors.

"Here are your white flower souls," are the words of the fishermen. "Here is the scent and essence of birth." The flowers draw up the blood, they turn red and float into the sky. They are blood rain, falling to ah-K'awil with their sustenance, until all that is left is the obsidian blade, alone.

All the plaza moves as the farmers bring their gifts to ah-K'awil. The families stand before the altar, the wives and sons and daughters present themselves to the god. The wives give the calabash jars to their husbands, and the farmers set them on the altar and say:



"From the maize comes our flesh, from our sweat comes the maize." Our first ancestors were made of maize dough, and it is the place of the farmers to plant and grow the precious kernals.

This is what happens after the farmers return to their place in the plaza: there is weeping from inside the tree-fruit jars. They sway from side to side, and their lids shake. They are filled with the spirits of still-borns, those who were murdered in the womb by ah-Puch and his servants. When each jar is filled with a curled-up soul, it vanishes. The jars hang from the Tree of Life, they dangle from their maize husk umbilicus until the spirits inside can be reborn.

The humble people bow their heads before the altar. The priests who serve them stir the sacred fires in the four incensarios, and the fathers drop their blood incense into the flames. Only when the nourishment has burned to ash do the humble people show their faces and mutter:

"We are the givers of sustenance." That is their burden on 13 K'awil, to satisfy the hunger of the god. Then they go back to the shadows.

At last the warriors come forward with the final sacrifice of the day. Their children and their wives present themselves quickly before the altar and return to their sitting places. The warriors drag forth K'ak Balam, the murderer who served ah-Puch for so long, and they say:

"The flame bursts forth from our hearts, the flame bursts forth from our strength." For it is the warriors who defeat the servants of ah-Puch and bring them into the light.

From the temple, from the top of the pyramid-mountain, the high priest Bolon Saasil says:

"Here is your offering, ah-K'awil  
The one you seek, the one you have sought  
The blood-spiller and breaker of cords

Do not fear our anger in taking him from us  
He is yours now  
This motherless one, fatherless one

Let the glow of this fire light your path  
Let the heat of this fire draw you here  
To bless your people, to bless your ahau."

He comes down, the high priest, with four cutting priests. The king comes too to the altar. K'ak Balam tries to strike the priests, but his feet are bound, his hands are bound. Even his mouth is tied, there is a black rubber ball held with a blooded cord in his mouth, so he cannot speak a curse. Three warriors pull him onto the altar by his ropes, and the cutting priests seize his arms and legs and stretch him over the stone. Bolon Saasil takes up the obsidian knife and cuts the ropes. The warriors step back, they cannot be too close when the murderer's



cord is snapped, or their own children might sicken and die.

There is only one cut with the knife—the chilam balam is very old and knowledgeable. The living stone is burst open, and there is K'ak Balam's beating heart in the hand of Bolon Saasil. The heart-blood is fed to the incensario fires, fed to the god in thick smoke. Even the heart goes into the fire, to be devoured. The three warriors step forward and drop long strips of paper into K'ak Balam's burst chest. They put chips of wood and twigs and crumbs of copal incense into the opening. Bolon Saasil sets down the knife and takes up a flint spark-striker. He just taps the stones, and it is not long before there is smoke. He looks up to the god in his tree and says,

"Now we ask you to reveal yourself  
Lord of generations  
Lord of the tree

We have honored our mothers, honored our fathers  
We have honored your father  
We have honored you

Take these, our gifts  
Take these, our blessings  
Take this, your new fire, on your strongest day

Just let the white flowers descend  
Just let the blood flow  
For this day, for all days, until the end of time."

He blows into the chest of the servant of ah-Puch, and flames curl out like petals opening. Wisps of dark smoke hiss from the blood-fire and twist into a long, black serpent whose eyes are filled with stars. The serpent of ah-K'awil is as high as two men, it rises over the cutting priests and the high priest, over the warriors and the king. It stinks of snake and incense and burning blood. Its tongue flickers like glowing coals when it says,

"Your gifts and your words are pleasing to my master. He comes." The serpent opens its mouth, and two hands come out at its corners. Here is the torch of ah-K'awil, lit with the new fire from the sacrifice of K'ak Balam, and here comes the head of the god. He lifts himself out of the serpent's mouth, he gives birth to himself through his own foot. The pupils of his eyes are suns, like those of his father, and their light burns away the darkness. The warriors step back, the cutting priests step back, only Bolon Saasil and Kan Boar are strong enough to stand before ah-K'awil.

Here are the words of the god to those two, in front of everyone:

"Your gifts and your words are pleasing, high priest, king. I have heard the prayers of the people of this city and its villages, and their sacrifices are nourishing



and delicious. Very well, then. The white flowers will fall. The blood will flow. The paths between the living and the ancestors will remain open. This is my word to you, given here as it was given in the beginning, to the first people. So long as you are attentive and wise, you will remain strong." ah-K'awil looks across the plaza at the people, and his light warms them all. No one is missed, not the humblest wood gatherer, not the smallest child. Then the god slides back into the mouth of the serpent, and it rolls up into a ball of black smoke that is eaten by the flames.

The people leave ah-K'awil's plaza as they came, in their families, in their rows. The first to leave are the humble people. They walk out the black gate onto the black road and walk around to the yellow road. Their priests go with them, and when all the humble people have returned to their hearths, the priests return to their temples. Then the farmers walk onto the black road, and the fishermen, and all the people, as they came. There is the light of the stars to show the paving stones. The night is almost gone before the king walks onto the black road, with his family and the old priest. They walk along the road like all the people and come in through the yellow acantuns to the south. Only then is the god satisfied, when everyone has returned to their hearth. The white flowers fell, and the blood flowed between the generations. And so ah-K'awil kept his word, until the madness of ah-Puch came upon our fathers and they drove the gods and the goddesses away and were brought low.

