

OWL-MAN: A HISTORICAL FICTION WORK IN 16TH CENTURY MESOAMERICA

by

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ABSTRACT

ANDREW MARQUIS HARTIS. Owl-Man: A Historical Fiction Set in 16th Century Mesoamerica. (Under the direction of DR. AARON GWYN)

“Owl-Man: A Historical Fiction Set in 16th Century Mesomamerica” is the start of a novel that aims to take both the reader and central character through a karmic process of rebirth as it would be viewed under the lens of Mesoamerican thought. Santiago is a Spaniard who, in 1502, has no home, is burdened by sin, and has given his life to a ship to the New World. Believing himself a monster who can only kill others through a cursed fate, he watches as everyone he comes to know dies again and again. Yet with these horrible situations he continues to live, for though he wishes he was never born, now that he was he cannot help but struggle to survive. This life of suffering is explored through the Mesomamerican cultures he encounters and, through these explorations, he is eventually reborn again after living as a metaphorical psychopomp—he who ferries the dead to their afterlives. In this thesis, the beginning of his journey is described. Along with it a series of poems called the Song of Eleuia are offered. These songs reflect Mesoamerican ideas by encoding meaning behind their symbols. Through their deciphering and the eventual discovery of Eleuia later in the novel, both the reader and Santiago will begin to understand a new mode of thought that gives joy and meaning to an otherwise horrific life.

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INTRODUCTION

This project began three years ago when I was still an undergrad in the Psychology Program. At the time I had been having trouble getting into the classes I needed to progress, I was not taking my studies seriously, and for several years I had barely written a word in any form. That Spring, bored with what I was doing, making C's across the board, I decided to take *Intermediate Fiction Writing* and a beginner's poetry course. It was with this choice that I unknowingly shifted my path forward in a way that would eventually lead to this creative thesis.

In Aaron Gwyn's fiction writing workshop, we were told to come up with novel ideas that could be pitched to an agent. For a long time up until this point, the only writing I had ever done was fantasy, without a lick of poetry involved and no real-world research. By this time, though, I was disillusioned with fantasy; most of it seemed to be grinding the same gears and, more importantly to me, reexploring the same cultural ideas. Pick up a fantasy novel and when you see the elves and dwarves inside, these are Nordic ideas, which while fresh when Tolkien used them, have become a tired stick for fantasy authors to rely on. So, wanting to explore a new cultural avenue—both to better myself and to better explore the human experience—I started looking at other cultures.

Cultural appropriation is a problem that results from a lack of proper research and a mishandling of a culture's ideas. Reaching into the noosphere of human thought required me to also dig in deep, to find something that I could

write about only after exhaustive research. This inevitably led to me finding the “rabbit hole” that is Mesoamerica.

To many, Mesoamerica is just the Aztec Empire, and the Aztec Empire is something about removing people’s hearts and the Crystal Skull and the Temple of Doom from Indiana Jones. When I first started my research, however, I found there was so much more to this near-forgotten region of human history. In fact, just from picking up my first piece of historical research, Burr Brundage’s *A Rain of Darts: the Mexican Aztecs*, I was quick to learn that the Aztec Empire itself is essentially an invention of convenience. In other words, what was really called the Triple-State Alliance has instead been renamed in an attempt to make the region easier for scholars to discuss in the 20th century.

Intrigued by this little bit of trivia, I read through *A Rain of Darts* and found myself absolutely in love with this culture. It was one that lived by the sword and by its poetry and that saw life as both resources to be spent and resource to be guarded. The Triple State Alliance, which formed officially in 1428, was the latest (and last) of a series of government powers that dated back as far as 2,000 B.C. That’s a lot of time and a lot of culture that is has had nothing but a minor effect on the United States, who sits just above it. The more I read, the more amazed I was. I learned of Xolotl, whose name means both “Prodigy” and “Monster,” who was a deified character that took over the basin of Mexico in the 14th Century. I learned about the droughts and the famines, the purposes of human sacrifice, what it meant to wear the jaguar skin and the eagle feather, what their poetry sounded like, and most importantly of all, I learned that this entire culture, from

the Triple State Alliance to the Mayan Empire to the Zapotecs and more, had all been deleted from history.

Past human cultures are important because they are created by humans. Though their beliefs and ethnicities are different from mine, they thought about the world in enlightening ways that is not discussed in English speaking academia today. Though hostile they were towards many of our concepts of morality, the Mesoamerican peoples—who were diverse, endless, and advanced—had religions, beliefs, and arts that now survive as only scraps. When it is discussed, it is always under the lens of Cortez and the conquistadores coming over and annihilating them. The philosophies of the Mesoamerican peoples before that moment are treated as backstory for what many seem to view as the real story. This I find to be a great error in both historical fiction and academia. To ignore the boundless knowledge of the Triple State Alliance and its contemporaries, as well as those who came before it, is to deny the world access to a vital part of the human experience. And, to me, the purpose of all art is to capture that very same experience and to communicate it to the wider world.

So, my decision was set. Research in hand, I wrote up my ideas and, by the end of the semester, had written the first chapter of a never to be published Mesoamerican novel and switched my major over to English. Mind you, this chapter was never to be published because, in the endless quest that was the writing of this thesis, I realized that the only way to properly get into the mindset of these people was to start from the outside and work your way into the spiritual core of these beliefs. Starting there, when so many of the beliefs run counter to

what we know now, is something that many people will be unable to do. While I think in the future my work will eventually allow for these kinds of stories, I had to start from a different perspective to get to what I wanted to do—the translation and communication of these human experiences with our modern world.

Along my path, there have been novels and poems that have showed me how to accomplish this feat. The first of which, and the one who has had the biggest influence on my style of writing and overall aesthetics, is Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*. This novel takes place in the 18th Century "Wild West," or the period before the fences were established and expansion westwards became an unstoppable force. Told in a third-person objective perspective, it details the absurdly violent and terror-inducing journey of a kid throughout Texas and Northern Mexico. The violence in this book and the poetry of McCarthy's prose links back to the philosophies of Mesoamerica where blood was currency and poetry was how those crimson currencies were spent. Through *Blood Meridian*, I learned the power of precise metaphors, specific images, and of startling violence on the reader's imagination.

With this was also Guy Gavriel Kay's *Under Heaven*. This is a piece of fantasy mixed with Kay's historical research into China's imperial past. Kay constructs a universe that almost mirrors our own and blends into its DNA the most subtle of supernatural ideas. This, to me, was integral, for even if historical fiction is devoid of the paranormal, the people of these times believe strongly in spells, sorcery, mysticisms, religious providence, and so on. With *Under Heaven*, I learned ways of subtly weaving in supernatural elements into my narrative in a

way that could be questioned as being real or being created by the collective imaginations of the characters themselves. Along with this was Philip Meyer's *The Son* which, as another historical fiction novel centered in Texas, not only served as a blueprint for showing how an outsider can progress into another culture's spiritual core, also weaved in the slightest of supernatural elements.

Lastly, Gary Jennings wrote a behemoth of a novel, the first in a series, simply called *Aztec*. This work has a Spaniard priest interviewing a Mexica elder about the entirety of his life. Few times have I read prose that was as poetic and as tight as this. The images and research inside only fueled my own vision; that of a beautifully human Mesoamerica with differences and similarities to our modern world and shaped from the very stuff of history itself.

Years of research and exploring these ideas has led me to this thesis. It is the first six chapters of my novel interlaced with four poems (of which there are planned to be more) that run concurrent with the narrative. It takes place before Cortez comes over but when European exploration was still happening in the New World. I have taken the main character in it and, just as the Kid or the Colonel were in *Blood Meridian* and *The Son*, I have divested him from his roots and sent him hurdling into the spiritual core of the Triple State Alliance. Eventually, the Song of Elehuia, a set of poems encoded with Mesoamerican symbology, will lead my main character, Santiago, to the very heart of who he is, where he will then experience his rebirth from the accumulated wisdom of a now forgotten culture.

With this thesis done, I hope to expand this work into a full-length novel. My desire is that this will be the gateway into me doing an entire series of Mesoamerican works where I explore the human experience of these blood-thirsty, flower-tending, people-loving warriors throughout the ages. Though I am not of Mexican descent myself, I have only the utmost respect for this culture, which exists now in an oppressed and near-obliterated state, and I hope others grow just as I have upon learning of the deep wisdoms these people once had.

the song of eleuia: a coiled snake's meditation-hiss

Only choice has value.

Lesson learned when you

Said "I love you" and

Took from me the danger of taking from you.

Yes, only choice has value.

Bones upon the altar picked by your hand.

Doe-neck with which fangs you bite.

Tree-roots under where lies god-burial.

When land found, choice.

Eagle with serpent in talon.

Said, here.

Was, here.

Never chosen, we judged.

Synonym for slave: weak,

Or unintelligent,

Or ugly,

Or unmanly,

All uninspired.

Beneath us—broken bones.

Inside us—broken bones.

Destined us—broken bones.

Ours? Mayhaps.

Greatest trick: letting bloom the flower.

Bloomed and ungrown.

Petals color of

Security false as priest-mask,

When plucked, rebirth many times over.

But—

How many times broken before healed?

How many times searching but never finding?

How many times is the choice made for us

For to let a slave make the choice

Is to admit that the judgement was false all along

And that choice is naked-god, red-painted, sacrifice-natured.

Upon enlightenment-eve

Gold eye sees all choices lead to two:

Pluck the flower and eat/Let

Blossom the flower and starve.

Ohuaya, ohuaya.

CHAPTER ONE

It was the thunder of boots that woke Santiago and the thunder of a distant storm that warned him.

Before he'd wiped the sleep from his eyes he was being yelled at by Quarter-Master Pedro de Coria. Someone ran into Santiago from behind and the Quarter-Master shouted more orders, slugged around, yelled at anyone who would listen. Someone else brushed past, pushed Santiago into the railing where with one eye open he saw the reason for riot.

So dark that distant sky it looked as if night ate day. Waves against the starboard side were already splashing up the railing. Santiago looked from predacious sea to predacious clouds who rose into Heaven black and angry as God's first mountains. There dwelt demons or death-lipped angels. Look! someone said, and Santiago looked back at Ruy, shirtless and bronzed, and then up with his finger. A great stream of birds was flying overhead, seagulls whose bodies were shadows upon sun, other birds too, marching in flight towards a distant shore.

Ruy looked around, smiling, but no one saw him. The eighty men on board were too busy running here and there, some grabbing clothes to put on, others, the knights and fighting-men, gathering up their armor and weapons to hide below deck. None saw the holy sign above them.

There's land nearby! Ruy said.

Someone whose helmet half-disguised their face in the style of a foreign mummer shoved Ruy in their rush so hard he almost fell to the ground. Did they not understand? There was land near-by! The storm could be escaped by the birds.

Santiago understood, but there was no hope in him. He looked to the captain's cabin and knew that the man who led this criminal-driven expedition was hiding and slugged. Then that sun-bleached door opened and from the hideous darkness within stepped not the captain but his daughter, fourteen years of age, blonde of hair and looking just like Catalina did in the face, the eyes.

Leonor! Santiago shouted.

The sailor's press between him and girl was ungainly. The Quarter-Master was screaming and just lightly over all of it there was another raptorial peal of thunder.

Leonor! Santiago shouted again.

She was young and more than a little stupid, knew not the dangers of a storm-beat deck. Her ignorance was not without its excuse. May had been quiet for *el Atlántico*. Those storms that did cross were casual in their chaos, enough so that Leonor was safe stepping just outside the cabin.

This is good, Father Isidro had said weeks prior. The Lord is with us. He tells us our quest across this water is holy, and that He will do his work through our devices!

Sailors untouched by evil believed him. Those who'd been criminals their whole lives thought better. To be a sinner developed a sixth sense for when death's cold wings shadowed the doomed. Too few storms or those that were too light prophesized some evil awaiting at the end of this trip. Santiago, never one to cross his chest or pray, regretted his coming as he looked over his shoulder to that night-slashed horizon.

Yes, all sinners had the sense, Santiago too. Death followed him so tightly as to be his boots all across Spain and now it had found him here at last.

That was no reason to let a girl who reminded him so much of Catalina die, for to do so would be to kill his sister a second time over.

When he shouted Leonor! again, she whipped her head at him with a princess's annoyed arrogance.

Leonor was hoping that she came off as perfectly above him as she thought herself to be. Of everyone on her father's ship, this *negro* was the one she hated the most. When he was brought on-board last minute by that loud priest she told her father how evil she thought he was. Not just because of his Moorish skin but because she smelled from him something similar to rotten fish, or worse still, rotten men.

He'll kill us all, she told her father.

He answered with a burp and a shrug.

You should get inside, said Santiago.

Leonor bared her teeth. Don't tell me where I should be, *negro!*

At that a man struggling by carrying three *vara* of coiled rope stopped and looked at Leonor. She saw him as beautiful; tan of skin, blue of eye, hair long and blonde as straw.

Why are you out here, princess?

Santiago watched. Because I like to watch how you fight the storm, said Leonor.

The blonde-haired man smiled then, handed Santiago the bulk of rope without looking at him.

This will be a hard fight, princess. Watch for now but go back in when the rain starts.

Leonor, licking her lips, nodded. Santiago saw the astonishment in her eyes. Then the man, whose name Santiago did not know but whose blue eyes he recognized, took the rope back from him and said something under his breath that Santiago did not hear but knew was an insult all the same.

You're in my way! Leonor shouted, and she hit Santiago on his thigh to move him aside.

Quarter-Master Pedro de Coria saw all of this and felt a deep fury inside his chest then. Landsmen, the whole lot! Their shoes were discarded over the rails but all of them moved with the half-pumped energy of children beginning their morning chores.

I told you to secure our cargo under deck! shouted Pedro de Coria.

Many turned to face him, but Santiago, like a drunkard, turned slowest of all. It was his eyes that Pedro met.

Pedro could have killed him then, had his pistol been on hand. Stop staring and get to work before you damn us all!

The *negro* shuffled off and Pedro de Coria turned back to the horizon. Close, now, that stormfront. A wind came from it so gentle that its hidden, envenomed lie was made obvious. A decade he'd been at sea. Every decade she took something else from him. Youth and kindness first, soon after his teeth, now his strength. Father Isidro assured the crew that the Heavenly Father was with them now but Pedro de Coria doubted that very seriously. All of this felt as hideous as the first time he saw an executioner take a man's life where everyone after cheered and Pedro was confused and cheered too but knew then as he does now that the executioner and criminal did not which meant something opposite was present and opposed to the spectator's joy. This crew inspired deeply in him that opposite feeling. The captain was an incompetent bastard of a man good only at getting ships from one place to another. Much of the crew were petty-criminals too, not a one trustworthy enough to sail with.

The Lord had a plan and Pedro de Coria always trusted in it but now he wondered if all along that plan meant their forsaking.

Santiago, fumbling with a length of rope, looked back at the Quarter-Master. The sea had aged him far beyond his years; there were wrinkles so deep

set in his face, skin so thoroughly leathered, hair bleached so bright that maybe a young man with his name never did live. In his eyes Santiago saw something of truth, though. The Quarter-Master knew that there was a promise of oblivion in this storm. Santiago wondered which criminal he lambasted as the cause for their curs'd end finding them now.

Lightning leapt from cloud to distant cloud. Each bolt was the earnest singer of a thunderous funeral dirge. Gone were the seagulls. Over the railing, no fish in the wine-dark sea gathered under the hull in hungry conference. Sailors shouted that there were voices in the wind. Ruy proclaimed again that there was land but no one who climbed the mast could speak truth to this so dim was the storm-sky. Clouds turned thin in the heavens, so thin and so low that the sun was grey-shifted and then totally hidden, that hopeful sky-blue too, leaving only this chopped storm-grey sea, malefic mirror that it was.

Captain Sancho de Tovar looked out of the round porthole window in his captain's quarters and burped from dissatisfaction. The storm looked bad but he'd seen worse. Sancho stepped out, looked for his daughter, saw her and shouted for her to get back in. Without seeing if Leonor listened or not he walked over to the water-trough, sitting as it was at the splashing against railing. Crumbs of hard tack and a few swollen maggots floated drown-quiet. He scooped out a handful of water. Tasted sour. Drank again as if it were pulped juice. Sancho's head pounded with the rage forced onto him from thirty days of drinking. The

wind grew stronger. Sancho almost vomited when it shoved him against the railing.

With each stair the captain climbed Santiago became sure of the captain's drunkenness. That doom-sense he'd felt all his life grew ever stronger now. It was in his shoulders, his back, his chest and stomach. The melancholic humors in him were assuming just sovereignty. Only when he was last sick did he feel this way. Now Santiago felt the urge to cough and knew then, for sure, what was to happen.

The rain came over them as a swarm of summer-hot arrows. Pedro de Coria was still shouting but now the wind was fighting his orders. That storm-grey was darker now, and then it went darker still until it was night-black. A wave broke past the railing. Bone-white foam spilled across the deck. Eighty men were up here doing their damndest to keep the ship afloat. Santiago did not feel as if eighty men were enough. The Quarter-Master was commanding as many as possible now to get under the deck as the storm was on them.

Leonor, slipping and sliding with the waves under her feet, was picked up by a gust of wind, moved onto a crate, lifted up off her feet by another wave and then washed out to sea. Only Santiago saw this.

Flashes of lightning were dawn-bright, forked the thoughts of Santiago so he knew not if he screamed or was dazed into catatonia. They revealed those other, bigger waves. Their shapes were etched into Santiago's eyes and he saw them then as he did the demons in his nightmares; mountainous at the shoulder,

crested white horns upon midnight-blue heads, looming, bending, raging down. The ship was not turning into them. It was being rammed sideways by these Heaven-fallen envoys and each time they struck something on the deck went flying off. Santiago felt seawater pressed into his eyes blinding him, invading his mouth and his nose, his chest stinging as raindrops crusaded into him on a wind so demented that he questioned how any ship had ever managed to cross this sea. He was on his knees. He was sliding and he was on his stomach. The ship was turning at an angle steep. Ruy was screaming, or maybe that was someone else who sounded like him, and then that great, hateful sound of squashing ocean carried away Ruy's voice.

Pedro de Coria was under deck, on his back, a great press of flesh against him. He knew the ship was turning at too steep an angle but he couldn't push his way past the men here to get to the captain. Maybe there wasn't a captain anymore out there.

Father Isidro could be heard somewhere in this void screaming prayer. Pedro de Coria pushed a blind man away, then another, groped through the darkness down here, stopped only when he heard the tell-tale doom of cracking wood. Water geysered into his face from a place he could not see. His ears told him that more wood was cracking. Ten years he'd been a sailor. There wouldn't be ten more.

Down came another wave. So loud the thunder, the crashing, that Santiago thought surely this was a sound kin to the hollering cacophony played during the creation of Earth. He could not see and he could not find anything to

hold onto and there was a terrible crashing from underneath him that sounded as if the ship itself splintered in a child's hand and as that sound howled and the wind howled too and the night around him grew deeper still Santiago felt that he was lifted from the deck of the ship by a force utterly wrong, water underneath him then around him, sending him head over heels through what felt like an infinite, ever-growing void of ocean that soon grew still and silent and calm in a bizarre, contradictory way.

Never did Santiago think that drowning would be how he died. Yet he knew that your executioner could come in any unearthly form, and he thought then of Leonor who did not, and the Quarter-Master too, and his *padres*, Catalina, all of whom he had killed, all of whom he wished had killed him first.

Drowning was not how Santiago died.

The upside-down trough once pregnant with hardtack and maggots carried him a ways before the storm cruelly baptized it and never did the trough surface again. A whirlpool of a barrel reached out like the arm of the savior to Santiago a rope and he grabbed it so that the thing would stop its calamitous waltz which it did but not before pulling Santiago in tight against it. Loud explosions like rifles or eastern fireworks were profoundly twinned with the height of waves. Night blind he was. Seawater probed deep into his eyelids with all the nasty sub-fluids that same water was made of so even if not for the storm Santiago still was blind. With the barrel as his vessel, through this devilish festival Santiago did sail.

Time existed in no comprehensible form. If there were others floating as he did they were as stars in the night sky but without a moon to illuminate them nor no other lumes otherwise. At times Santiago called out into the storm. Said storm was the only creature who answered back.

Did not remember falling asleep, did not question how either. Maybe it wasn't sleep at all but instead a hibernation brought on by deliriousness but too tired was Santiago and too uneducated besides, so he did not meditate long on such higher order ideas.

Waves slapped him still but now he could somewhat see. The sky was a white light sun-absent, cloud-devoid. Santiago's lips were bleeding or scabbed and his mouth enflamed by saltwater. In his left ear he could hear fluid moving whenever he shifted his head, and when he shifted his head to look over the barrel he saw a faint mirage just over the horizon that warbled in ocean's heat and floated just barely off the horizon itself.

Were this Father Isidro or the Quarter-Master then thoughts unbidden would have come to Santiago. Uneducated but that did not mean he was stupid though a lack of understanding with civilization's foundational philosophies brought no thoughts, intrusive or otherwise, to him at such bittersweet vistas. Instead Santiago stared dumbly at the horizon, kicked his legs behind him, sometimes felt something brush past and looked but saw no fish nor the corpses

of his fellow crewmen who he suspected were under him now watching and waiting like the crowd at a noble's passing carriage.

Kicked and kicked and kicked some more, kicked still, kicked further, stared dumbfound at the mirage then laid his head down, Santiago, but kept kicking because the kicking felt good and the splashing water made him feel like those demons who destroyed the ship and who dwelled in storms whose power all men did desire and kicked again because kicking meant he was alive and though he wished he was never born now that he was he had to live and so he kicked more even though his legs were tired and his stomach empty and the crew watching underneath the waves laughed and jeered and touched his leg and circled him with fins peeking above the water's surface like wolves into a child's window at night, hungry, knowing that something delicious is inside like an unprotected chick or a sickly babe.

A train of birds passed over head. Santiago craned his neck to look where they flew. Ruy was in his ear and Santiago understood not a word but understood still all the same.

Mirage breached from the spirit world into the physical one so that it took on a physicality enormous and impossible. From left to right as far as Santiago looked there was a beach whose wings unfolded outwards in the same manner an albatross did when spreading its weal and its woe.

Santiago floated in the cooing waves maybe thirty *vera* away from that alien shore of white sand capped by bushes and trees never had his eyes seen before.

Possessed then by that instinct which demanded life in the face of death Santiago kicked harder than he should have so that he let go of his barrel and was at once submerged. Weak arms he had and they flailed out uselessly in the crystal blue. Underneath him were green-and-black striped fish darting too fast for him to track and a strange squid whose body shot like an arrow away and ground, the seafloor, all one *azul* with darker shades where the white sun-sky didn't reach. Then Santiago was above the surface gasping. Flailing as if he could fight off the entire ocean. At some point he found the discarded barrel and pulled himself up by the shoulders out of the water and felt the sun lancing his brown skin black. Santiago kicked while crying to reach the impassive shoreline. Soon there was the mushy territory between sea and continent underfoot where before there was but *el Atlántico*. Santiago pushed off it and then let go of his barrel again who slid back out to the sea as if it was there she belonged. Waves pushed at his back like hands and then drug him backwards too. Santiago ignored his crew who now were like to be hollering instead of cheering. No word-thoughts filled his mind. Instead there was only the forward before him, green and brown and white.

CHAPTER TWO

Underneath a nameless tree of an alien species Santiago found shade. In this shade with his sopping pants as a pillow did he find sleep. In that sleep he found no rest and no peace yet neither did he find predacious nightmares or witching dreams.

Blood-dark sea that bordered the great Spain and back to it Santiago looked and in this dream that he knew at once what it was for he knew this dream as well as a murderer knows his knife there on a boat was a girl. Catalina, said Santiago. Leonor, too said he. They, she, it said his name back and in the non-light of an absent sun somehow did Santiago see that their face was that of a skull and with her and her was his *madre* naked and covered in the bubonic buboes that were black and weeping and spelled across her chest his name not with letters but with the distorted reflection in the puss of her death. Further, further drifted that boat, on the still-surface of the blood-dark sea, and in a cloak of dog skins there was Santiago's *padre*, hooded and unseen, and underneath the boat a darker shape still outlined only by guilt and paranoia that moved them further, further out into the blood-dark sea.

Awoken. Santiago saw before him all the night. Over the ocean calmly swirled the eventide which reflected in those stygian waters who'd bared him from there to here stars brightly shining. A few constellations had he learned on ship. Orion's belt and the North Star were in different places but not by much.

Santiago was dry of mouth. His eyes stung badly. At a touch he felt the left lid was swollen and knew then the eye to be pink.

Sat up naked as the day he was born. Sand caked his feet, his buttocks. Reached behind him to see if his pants were dry and when he did something scurried out that in the night was a wisp of living smoke and disappeared into the underbrush. Tried to cross his heart Santiago did but felt the gesture useless and grabbed his pants to shake them free of other living things. When nothing came out he put them on still-damp. Sand was a second skin he could not take off.

As he walked back to where the ocean's ink washed the shore Santiago looked down the beach both ways. To the left there was the same as to the right so to the right he urinated and washed his feet and almost drank seawater but knew that was wrong. When Santiago licked his lips he tasted blood, found three or four cracks. His eye started to itch like hell so he scratched it and it hurt like hell and some gunk on his finger was sticky which he washed too in the seawater.

Firelight twinkled to life to the right. So far was it that Santiago when he first looked thought it was a red star hovering over the horizon but then it moved and flickered in a way a star will not.

Weird songs were sung in the underbrush by creatures Spaniards could not name.

Santiago moaned from hope. He moaned and he walked then he tried to run but a hurt muscle in his leg arrested him so he limped towards that distant

firelight instead. Behind him was a darkness mysterious with mysticism. In that shadowing underworld did Santiago feel that he was being watched but knew that to turn would be to lose the wandering firelight ahead. One time, he remembered, his mother read him a story about lost souls out in the marshes and said that those lost souls were fires that drew others to them to be remembered. Santiago remembered this story but he bit his cracked lips, moaned again, slowed till he stopped. Firelight moved further away. He limped towards it faster, one fear trumping the other.

Half-tripped on something that smashed his toe so that Santiago hollered in pain. Picked up whatever it was and saw that it was the wet barrel of a rifle smashed to pieces somehow come to shore. The iron was black from night, water, pieces here and pieces there glinting in starshine. Santiago looked up though he knew not why to see that the moon was full faced and pock-marked as a plague victim and he received the message then that not until later would he know was wrong.

How the dead hounded him! They deserved their play, though, as all wrong-dead things did.

Doubt-ridden survivor in the New World looked at the distant firelight as it floated still above the rim of the ceaselessly stretching beach-horizon. That light then went out.

This was too cruel. Santiago thought this thrice over. He screamed and jammed the rifle barrel at the moon then turned back to where that fire once

burned and there he ran, ignoring the pain in his leg, making the pain in his leg worse. He shouted something again but the shout was wordless yet carried by his intention. The sand underneath his feet was strangely soft. It kicked up around him and there was sweat getting into his infections and then something screeched in the trees or in the brush as something else tackled him from the side.

Sprawling, Santiago and predator. Neither knew if the other was human. They rolled in the sand and Santiago found himself weak so he let go of the rifle barrel and lay there as the shapeless man pressed their knee into his spine and held his head down with the heel of his hand.

The first of the *Caxcanes*, who a hundred years from now would be facelessly assimilated into the non-group of the *Chichimeca*, looked down at the night beast under him and realized that this man hadn't painted his skin at all.

Look! he said in a foreign tongue, and Santiago knew not what this extrinsic word meant. Bring the torch. Look!

His brother wandered out of the shrub in which he'd hid when they heard the screaming. Above him was an owl he could not see. That owl's brow was horn'd and its eyes void and its feathers in the midnight were different sable shades all stapled onto one ovaline body. Not knowing the owl was there the brother put the torch between his legs and used a piece of flint and his *tecpatl* to light it.

Santiago groaned as his head was shoved into the sand. That very same sand dug deeper into his vitiated eye. With the one unburied he saw naked feet tanned by an old sun with toes missing toenails and knees disappearing underneath a brown loincloth.

Please, Santiago said. My ship, it, it was lost in the storm. Don't know if others...

Both *Caxcanes* listened to the strange tongue, looked at one another. Skins Dogs, who pinned the black-skinned wraith on the ground, saw fear in his brother's eyes.

What is he saying? asked the brother.

A curse? suggested Skins Dogs.

He liked not the idea of a *nagual* being so far north but knew no other thing that this could be. Then he looked to the moon, who was She Painted with Bells, and saw that she was full tonight and the stars around her close in their watching. Fear spiked a deep shivering into Skins Dogs then. Deep this hating shiver went until instinctively his own *tecpatl* was in hand and lowered.

Santiago saw the obsidian knife brought to his lips, felt it without feeling it as it brushed his throat. No, no, no, no he said and the words were not from the mind but from the heart and spoken they were as screeched the owl psychopomp.

Trebling un-song conjured by the dead maybe or maybe a thing fouler or a mysterious unknown that while unknown if not for fear was notorious. Skins Dogs jitter-jumped. His brother did too though backwards and dropped the torch and Santiago was possessed by that which does not wish to die now that it is born so that he, Santiago, took up the dropped torch and scrambled forward grabbing the discarded rifle barrel while bounding to his feet amid the unstopped un-song. He turned with a yell, more a croak trapped in sickened lungs, his arm the fulcrum slashing with the archangel's enflamed sword, torch. Sweat-slick the warring hand. Torch was thrown backwards where it, like so many other things life, was taken by the sea to be drowned.

All men stopped now to decipher this reckoning.

Santiago saw in the night two men who looked as if one was shaped to exactly model the other. Both were bald save for their crowns where their black hair was pulled into a braid with seashells whose night-dyed colors looked mulberry and snow-blue. They were shorter than he. Their faces were sharp and inked, the one with the knife in hand more so, the tattoos making a mask of his lips, nose, chins and cheeks and even a bit of his neck. Were it not for those loincloths they'd be naked. In all manners did Santiago see them as savages, though he knew those who ruled where he once lived saw him as much the same.

Knew not what *they* saw, the *Caxcanes*. Never was a man with skin like this witnessed by them nor with hair napped like that nor who made the sounds that he did. The brother, Drinks Grass, turned to look behind him and saw the

tecolotl tree-perched above him. This he pointed out to Skins Dogs who, knife still in hand, was crouched back on his haunches like a wolf but too afraid by this *nagual* to do anything.

He is *Tecolote*, said Drinks Grass.

When Skins Dogs did not answer, his brother continued. He will curse us for attacking him! He knows we have found one of his lost, will see us return it!

When Drinks Grass said what he said in that never-heard tongue he jabbed his hand to something past Santiago. With his half-drowned mind he never thought it to be a trick and looked and saw lying or maybe half-floating in the shallows was a body wrapped by black upon which sat an emblemed cross dull and blue-gold in the moonlume. Santiago looked back to the two *Caxcanes* who stared at him one like he was to attack and the other white-eyed by foreign fear.

Inched back, Santiago did. Another inch, another. Neither twin stopped him, stared only with weapon and fright. Gentle swells massaged the sand from his feet. Between Santiago's toes he felt tickling foam. Breaking waves this far up shore made a susurrus pleasing to ear and deeper, more important nerves.

Now he was by the body and there, still looking at the twins, he went to one knee. Looked at last and met Father Isidro's heaven-facing death-stare. So fat his already fat face with seawater and corpse-juice that he looked like he might rupture as the overripe blackberry that he was. His legs and vestments

floated a bit. At any moment it looked like the sea might take this one crewman back to the halls Santiago damned them to.

Though he felt something in him empty out, Santiago was taken by exhaustion so thus knew neither anger nor sorrow true.

He touched the dead man's face. It was slimy and stiff and ruptured a bit where pressure was put. Santiago wiped the stuff off on his trousers, put the rifle barrel under his armpit. For a moment he stole a glance at the *Caxcanes* who were still watching though the kneeling one now stood and looked passive. If they were judging then Santiago let them judge. He grabbed the dead weight of Father Isidro by the shoulders and pulled him out of the shallows where he then let drop the weight onto dry sand.

Moving something so cumbersome was all Santiago had in him. He went to the sand too and stared for a minute out at the tracks and the sea who far off radiated argent light sky-stolen. In the center of everything there was a massive pearl disk and maybe a whirlpool of water underneath it, so strange the shimmering glimmer there. When the twins behind him shifted Santiago was reminded that they were there and he picked up the dropped rifle barrel so that it could be used as a stick to get him to his feet. When he finally looked upon both men they had silence for words and faces that held a revenant emotion Santiago did not fully understand.

Both *Caxcanes* fell into whispering conference. Santiago stared at them mutely. Whatever he said he knew they would not understand so instead he tried

to think of a new way to communicate. Mind was still lost in the storm though; it was fogged, wracked, lightning forked to cinders.

When his stomach rumbled he put a hand to it and the twins looked up, nodded to each other, one going back into the bushes and the other, who held the knife, stood there and watched. Adrenaline made from cluelessness put the rifle barrel in both of Santiago's hands, sword of the nothing-man.

Drinks Grass stepped out. Skins Dogs raised his hands in peace.

Show him we need not be cursed, said Skins Dogs.

Drinks Grass nodded, raised his hands too and took the slow steps of the sycophant towards both him and Father Isidro.

Santiago saw a rope in the approaching twin's hand and stepped back. Don't do it, he said. Don't do it. Please don't do it.

Whatever it was he moaned meant naught for the sound made Drinks Grass skin yellow or maybe white. He looked back to Skins Dogs who was now mouth agape in his stare. Guideless and entering territory only *Caxcanes* legends did tread Drinks Grass found an inkling of bravery and rushed to the corpse.

Shouted, Santiago, and he swung the rifle barrel through open air sending Skins Dogs to the ground where he stood as if he were dodging some curs'd wave and Drinks Grass covered his head as if to protect himself too.

Santiago saw that neither man was attacking him.

In the silence afterwards Drinks Grass unfurled the rope in his hands and started tying it around Father Isidro's shoulders.

Realization mixed with weariness. Santiago belly-laughed hard enough that he dropped the rifle barrel. Both *Caxcanes* traded a look to make sure the other was as shocked as the first. Skins Dogs nodded then, which Santiago did not see, and Drinks Grass acted as his brother did earlier.

With all the bravery of a thousand years of legends instilled into him from birth until now Drinks Grass launched himself chest first into the *Tecolote*, the Owl-Man, took him to the ground with a strength fostered in the arid God Land. Before so much as a curse was uttered he stuck a piece of torn cloth into his mouth, rolled the *Tecolote* over onto his stomach, punched him once, twice in the back of the head and tied tight his hands with a hunter's deftness behind the small of the back.

Not an iota of strength inside of Santiago burned bright enough to struggle, and if there had been then the kick to his ribs, long-toenailed and hard, took that out of him too. So dry his mouth that he knew not if it was sand or cotton.

Santiago could not on anything else think besides the pain-radiations, the nausea in his stomach, the bewildered, slow-to-come and fog-warped analysis of whatever was going on. He heard the *Caxcanes* whooping and laughing, heard words too but they all sounded like one long, causeless sentence instead.

One rolled him over. It was he whose mouth was decorated more so; whose name Santiago would never learn but was Skins Dogs. This *Caxcanes* grabbed Santiago's face in his fingers. Moved his head to the left, to the right, pulled at the infected eye and made a sound that universally was only made out of disgust by homo sapiens. Something he said sounded cold to Santiago.

Skins Dogs looped a hand underneath his prisoner's arm and scooped him up to his feet. He wouldn't stand right or the strength needed wasn't there because he fell back to his knees.

Don't belly-button me! Skins Dogs shouted, then kicked Santiago in the same side as his twin.

He makes weird sounds, commented Drinks Grass.

Skins Dogs picked the prisoner up again. This time, he stood, if barely.

CHAPTER THREE

Off the beach the *Caxcanes* went. Santiago was led by a rope leash as if he were a dog for whipping. In the gloom they looked to be hateful twinned shadows loping through the bushes and over mesquite roots.

When they first pulled their prize off the beach hesitation weighted Santiago's feet. Those same feet were bare though calloused but still not used to the dry sticks, the needled bushes, the desert-shore ground where insects pulled from the bible's darkest verses did crawl, the naked rock that poked through the grass when there was grass and instead became whet dust when there was none.

One twin pulled Santiago by his roped hands into the line of shrubbery whose leafless branches were skeletal fingers bloodthirsty in a way Santiago himself was not yet to understand. When he ventured to look up into the tree from where that owl once sung one of the brothers slapped him from fear. Santiago did not look up again. Instead he took his first step, felt his wrung-out skin being scratched by the shrubbery. Sand caked feet picked up the detritus of this world. Boots fashioned themselves from alien refuse.

Beyond the shrubbery was a narrow path that Santiago only knew of because of how different it felt when compared to the surrounding ground. Little light made its way into this shadow land. Moonshine tried to push through the slight canopy and by all rights it should have but they were here gnarled and

twisted over one another, hungover old men that vomited a green underworld unto Earth.

Green in daylight, black under star.

Infected eye wept. Between the itching, the gunk, the swelling, all sights blurred into something else. Distorted shadows took on new authorities much the same as those storm-summoned waves at sea. *Caxcanes* stopped to scoop things from the underbrush. Their silhouettes became bulked mutants. Both slung wet things and war things and bagged things too over their shoulders and whispered to one another. Hunched, they loped on.

Santiago looked for horses. He prayed that he was not to be dragged. No horses were to be seen, and in the coming months he'd learn that never had such a creature ever walked the New World before.

Loud, this green-and-black death-land. Loud yet quiet. In the night there was great mystery to these hushed swan songs. Will-o'-wisps were not native to this world. If there were demons, unlike any he'd ever heard tell of. Sometimes he'd know a bird call by its similarities yet the differences were confounding.

Those *Caxcanes* made mute by the land. Walked swiftly. Santiago did not and so was pulled to keep up. Slithering almost, moving over fallen branches and between things their prisoner had to struggle over or around—here a log heavy with rot under which the path disappeared but was still walked; there a secret hole dug deep and uniform into the earth and from out which came a weird

whistling and eldritch splash. An idea came to Santiago that maybe his captors made these traps for men like him.

Reached out the land its fingers warrior-dry wanting to be war-wet. Santiago was bleeding about his shins. Something stung him because his ankle was itching as bad as his eye and when he touched it there was a tender bump but he could not scratch it as scratching was stopping and the *Caxcanes* would not stop.

If the dead were underneath the sea now they were in the wild. Between full-lung breaths Santiago, where the heart was mid-beat and the body silent, heard Leonor laughing somewhere in the distance, maybe crying instead. Out of breath, Santiago could not tell them her was sorry.

Along the distant southern horizon there rose waves starker in their blackness than the rest of the night sky. Lights red and orange flickered in the way torches did too. When those man-made constellations were seen the *Caxcanes* went corpse-still. After ensuring their safety they replaced the piece of cotton in Santiago's mouth. Drinks Grass murmured to his brother that maybe they should take a different path. Skins Dogs did not answer. In Heaven there streaked a jade shooting star that Santiago saw but no one else. Again satisfied that the distant firelight came no closer the *Caxcanes* pulled their prisoner further into the bleak.

Yammering like dogs something ahead. Those *coyotl* squealed to each other to name themselves present. When the yammering slowed a loud *coyotl*

voice screamed once and none did answer. Three more times the mother screamed and at the last the yammering started again. A bad sign. The two *Caxcanes* traded looks midnight-veiled. Skins Dogs went back to their prisoner who by now was only half-standing.

Does he curse? asked Drinks Grass.

Skins Dogs watched the *Tecolote* and the *Tecolote* was mute in his crying.

He has no corn to do so, nor our blood, said Skins Dogs.

Pulled Santiago to a different path, one that led down a small gulch where the earth seemed to roll and break at the bottom. Where the rocks were shattered their flowed a stream. Santiago wobbled and fell to a knee then to his side. Skins Dogs laughed. Drinks Grass filled a leathery doe's bladder with water, drank, filled again, threw it hard at Santiago. Where it struck he moaned and Skins Dogs went to him. A spell on me and I'll drown you, he said. These words were driven not by malice but by fear.

When the cotton was pulled out Santiago's tongue felt so fat he let it loll swollen from his mouth. Skins Dogs lost his merry mood at this, and at his own fear-spoken words. He was about to put the cotton back in. As a *Caxcanes* though he knew thirst as no other people did by the smell on one's breath (sour, like rotten tomatoes) and how a tongue grew fat with desperation and how the eyes were sunken in the head and yellow though in this dark light he only knew one to be yellow from the slimy sound it made when blinked. Like a lover Skins Dogs instead put his prisoner's head onto his lap. With a dirt-thumb he kept open

the cracked mouth and poured into it with his other hand water from the bladder. Only a little, enough drops to wet the mouth and a few more to agitate the stomach. Santiago was coughing and he wanted to puke but the cotton was back in his mouth and Skins Dogs was pulling him to his feet.

We are almost home, Drinks Grass said.

There was relief in his voice, like that of the soldier finally returned from war and Hell.

To Santiago, he might as well have said they're a thousand *milla* away for all the help it did.

Through the gulch they threaded, needle and eye. They were being followed. Santiago did not know this until he saw the *Caxcanes* look back for the third time which they'd not done until now. He looked back too at a time where both twins had so he would not be caught. Distant the shadow which rose from a bush on four legs and disappeared underneath the adumbrate sea. There were fewer brushes now and the moon had moved but the stalker still sometimes peeled itself from the rest of the night then dived back in only to somehow move to a place no living creature should have been able to reach. Drinks Grass took a dart the length of his forearm and held it close to his chest. Skins Dogs had already done so. Their fears were misplaced this night; the shadow dared not bare its fangs until a darker eventide.

Delirious, the Santiago the twins finally brought home. Closer to dead than halfway. He was unable to notice the change in terrain from forested underbrush

to pathway going down into a small canyon where there were things that to his bewildered Hell-infected senses were illusions cruel in their lying comfort.

Homes made from dried skins thrown up as tents sat inside this dry canyon colored and dyed with paints that in the firelight were blue and red and orange. Shadows of people red-skinned and black-haired with inked faces conjured themselves up and vanished again. Children naked and playful as apes ran around and up and pinched Santiago. Heads staked, tar-doused, some covered in butterflies, each as mute as Santiago who no matter how he wished to reckon this shoddy village could not for soon he knew he'd die how his *padres* did for he felt as they bemoaned themselves to feel in the last of their hours.

Skins Dogs pushed Santiago down to his knees before a bonfire two men wide. On the other side awash in the shadow-play of night and flame was a man whose neck and shoulders were mutated by bulbous callouses white and dead. Lowered, the head of the elder. Long hair grey enough to glow silver in moonlume waved dead over the crackling flame. Santiago looked to his chin, the cheeks and brow and lips all wrinkled, all wrinkles leading to the black pits of his eyes.

Somewhere else, a man scared away dogs in the night, yelling and throwing grey, round stones at them.

This is not a fish, said the Fish-Carrier.

Drinks Grass looked over his shoulder, but only for a glimpse. All the *Caxcanes* here were gathered, all fifty of them. A woman screamed and a few

turned away and she screamed again as if she were being disemboweled by her own birth.

We found him by the sea, said Skins Dogs. Another too, wearing a black dress and white of skin. We think he a *Tecolote*.

Tecolote. I send you to fish and you bring back a *Tecolote*. The Fish-Carrier leaned back on the cut log-stool he sat upon and then spit into the fire where it sizzled into hush. You want us to live off Owl-Men as we head back to the God Land.

Skins Dogs shook his head. No, no, but he tried to curse us, so we...

The woman screamed again and Santiago looked under and through the legs of the gathered people who he was too delirious to comprehend the faces of and saw a writhing cotton blanket with bare legs raised above it.

Cursed! *Tecolote* cursed you?

Owl appeared behind us and screeched. He also was waving this instrument, Drinks Grass said.

The Fish-Carrier took that thing, long and made of a metal he'd never seen. Then he looked back to the *Tecolote* who stared off blankly in the direction of Eats Mesquite's birth.

He thirsts, said the Fish-Carrier.

The birthing woman went to panting. She sounded like an arrow-struck doe so rapid were her breaths. Then she grunted and Santiago could hear the grinding of her teeth in that grunt and she screamed again.

And his *tonalli* is cold. Look.

At what is he staring? asked Skins Dogs.

Mind me, boy, said the Fish-Carrier. You have brought a dying man here tonight instead of fish. Gave him to me thirsty and cold.

Now when the woman screamed she was muffled. Maybe a stick was put between her teeth or cotton instead.

You brought him here when we are to go out. With what do we feed?

Skins Dogs looked from the prisoner to the Fish-Carrier and the Fish-Carrier saw in his face the confusion young men had when they were told they'd done wrong.

We can bleed him, said Skins Dogs said. He is a *Tecolote!* If we bleed him, root out his heart and *tonalli*—

Root out a sick heart and cold *tonalli*? The Fish-Carrier frowned now in a way he did when fury was close at hand. You want to give this tribute? You think this will bring something from the land to us?

Santiago listened to the birth and he listened to the unknown tongue of these people and he dragged his eyes across the crowd who stared at him and murmured, children and men and women and maybe four or five elderly peoples.

They smelled of earth and food, a sweaty perfume common to those who lived off the Earth in the ways of the now-distant past. Many were topless in this crowd and more wore but loincloths. Some cloaked in a fabric white-orange in the bonfire. Faces were decorated in the ears and lips and sometimes the brow and there was ink over body parts that great pain had to be suffered to have been inked at all. The shapes of those tattoos were in patterns he did not understand, could have been heroes or pagan gods or animals and he was none the wiser. Delirious, Santiago couldn't understand their faces and he forgot he was staring. A child ran off to hide.

Argued the twins with the elder. This Santiago knew for their voices were toned as all aggressive men's voices were toned. Someone laughed. The birthing woman screamed again. After this, she went quiet.

Newborn cry.

It was to Santiago a sound that wormed its way into the space between his brain and his spinal column. There, it severed everything. Santiago was a floating head swiveling on ether trapped in a jar of pickled crying. His eyes were misted and blurred but through the fire he saw the Fish-Carrier raised by a woman to his feet and the crowd split to let him through, an ocean of faces now facing the crying and the panting and the sobbing.

A long word the Fish-Carrier said. Hands reached out and grabbed Santiago. Some hands did something behind him and then Santiago's hands

were free. Some hands pinched his sides, his buttocks; one grabbed between his legs.

The twins watched.

Santiago's ether-floating head was lifted. Swiveled. The tribesmen supporting him had a round skull and a square forehead and not a lick of hair anywhere to be seen. His eyes were brown and the nose thrice broken and the lower jaw jutted out a bit too much making this man into something akin to a barbaric creature whose ugliness masked deep compassion. His left ear was missing. The right was pierced by jade.

Are you really a *Tecolote*? Makes Flowers asked.

Santiago coughed and Makes Flowers pulled his face back, laughed. He walked him somewhere distant from the crowd to a place in the canyon where sticks staked down a tarp of leathered skin. Underneath that tarp onto a blanket of fibers hard and coarse did he put Santiago down. He covered him in that same blanket. A piece of dirty cloth hung from one of the stick-stakes. It was taken and watered from the stomach of a New World creature. The water was placed to the eyes, wiped away slime. Water was poured into a wooden bowl and left by Santiago's head. The man said something Santiago did not hear and left.

A newborn was crying in the distance.

Stretching from the shadows was a short-furred dog sable as the night with eyes no brighter. Its ears were knives and its snout foamed. It walked lightly across the dry canyon-bed so that it made no sound. Santiago was sleeping. The

dog sniffed his infected eye, his mouth. It licked up water from his bowl from which Santiago would soon drink. Nine circles did the dog walk in. Slept by Santiago a while and left before anyone came to check on him.

the song of eleuia: north sets the sun for dusk-facing girls

Glass-black skull bone-made,

Voice-eating,

Hummingbird-sings from northern skies.

Backs idol-bent, swollen,

Hard, spear-hard, the coils of a snake whose spine is bronze

Pilgrimage to coatl-nest.

From Aztlan,

Aztecs.

Chichimec and Mixtec and Mexica and Zapotec.

Eight-armed mask

Eight-eyed. Mother Earth-Spider

Ruling blood and reed is told:

Sever arms,

Wear feathers,

Grasp heart,

Remove heart,

Offer heart and skin and heat.

Hummingbird petal-perched.

Long beak gilded.

Sip me.

Taste me.

Where world has been demasked,

Or remasked, I don't know,

Identity-bless me.

Childish thoughts.

Western seas lap shores.

Eastern jungles hemorrhage.

Southern graves roil storm-blue.

If cacao lies only to the north

So I face, bareness-blind.

Ohuaya, ohuaya.

CHAPTER FOUR

Skins Dogs woke not the *Tecolote* as sun came cresting over foothills. He set to finishing the work he knew to be more important than nursing the should-be-dead. An obsidian spearhead he beat at, chipping away the edges to make it faultless and sharper with that faultlessness. Four laid on the ground beside the sorrel doe-skin where he smithed in the manner his people had smithed for thirty-eight cycles of the calendar round.

When the *Tecolote* woke it was a short affair coupled with fear. He'd open his mouth and from it came a ghastly stench. Words were repeated that Skins Dogs did not know how to repeat.

Sometimes the *Tecolote* looked so pitiful in his dying that Skins Dogs would take the bowl of water and hold open the dry crust of mouth to pour just a little bit in. There was a rattling relief in the *Tecolote's* barren throat chords when Skins Dogs did this.

From when the sun was hidden during the blackest hour of night to now did this ritual repeat itself four times over. On the fourth time, with slanting slashes of sunlight pouring into the already awake canyon, the *Tecolote* opened his eyes and closed them not again.

Delirious no more, Santiago. So mutilated his bloodless brain by thirst that the shockwaves of pain that went blasting from head to stomach shadowed all ills besides. Then itched his eye, too stubborn a thing to forget.

Both prisoner and warden looked at each other. Santiago had open one eye only because the other was hardened shut by yellow mucus. The other Skins Dogs held and he knew then that this *Tecolote* would never die by natural means. Preluding this understanding was the feel and weight of the spear in his hand. This weapon now felt mightier than a thousand curses. Were it not for Drinks Grass's loud footsteps over the gravel of the canyon floor the spear would have struck the *Tecolote* dead.

He lives? asked Drinks Grass.

Skins Dogs did not turn to face his twin, so captivated was he by sick-eyed, one-eyed gaze.

He is.

Santiago stared at this foreign man and saw him anew in the gold light of God. There was youth to him that marked him younger than even Santiago; it could be seen in the fullness of his cheeks, the plumpness of his lips, how he wrinkles set not where inked flesh passed. This foreign man had potted dirt eyes and skin red-bronzed by the sun. Santiago thought he a warrior from the Moors, or maybe further East—from a land of perfumed rumors.

The Fish-Carrier sent me with this, said Drinks Grass. Make him eat it. We leave soon.

Skins Dogs turned then and looked at his twin and to the thing he brought with him. In a small bowl of yellow ceramic, one of the few owned by the

Caxcanes, there was cornmeal smashed together with boar meat, tomatoes, chilis, water.

That is too much meat for him, said Skins Dogs, but he took the bowl from his twin anyway.

Back to the *Tecolote* Skins Dogs looked. Felt that same instinctual fear from earlier. This creature was to eat from the same stores as the rest of the *Caxcanes*. It was a thing done for other peoples they found lost in the God Land but to do it for this curse-spewer felt a betrayal to what he believed in. Find a jaguar eating its kill and try to earn its trust after it turns on you, tears your arm to strips and strands—that was what this was.

The Fish-Carrier was wiser than every other *Caxcanes* for his mask was that of a *teteo* older than owls and their *Tecolote*. This Skins Dogs remembered and, with his fingers, he scooped out mushed bits and, squatting closer to the *Tecolote*, fed him by sliding his fingers into those ruined lips.

Santiago felt an instinctual gluttony that appeared only when death was near to possessing him. He ate and he ate and he ate and the stuff was hot, it was spiced, and he stopped because he started coughing and Santiago was in pain now but so hungry and he opened his mouth for more. Other than the spice he couldn't taste anything but later would recount that this meal was better than any of the maggot-swarmed tack he enjoyed at sea.

The man who fed him looked disgusted with himself when all was said and done. Skins Dogs was so, and he stood to leave. Santiago wanted him to stay

but knew they could not understand one another and so instead he watched his warden head back into the small, already collapsed village.

For a while Santiago lay watching the people reduce their home to nothing. Thoughts and the daemons that made them stayed coyly away. There was no food in Santiago yet sufficient to promote the operations of a higher brain and besides that water was lacking too. Suddenly a pain burst from the epicenter of his eye and he gagged from the shock of it, balled up and put his face into his palm, rubbed the fat, swollen lids with the base of his hand. When he pulled it away there was blood for he rubbed too hard.

Later, Skins Dogs came again. Drinks Grass was with him. They both had spears in hand to protect themselves should the *Tecolote* had recovered his black strength. Their prisoner was sitting up and licking the dried moisture from the inside of the doe-stomach left the night prior.

In one of the twin's hands there were ropes. Santiago saw this and sighed. The stick-stakes were being undone by the one who brought him food and the other who watched him with a contempt unmissable grabbed Santiago roughly by the shoulder and pulled him off of the skins in which he'd been swaddled. Small tent collapsed. Drinks Grass set to rolling it up while Skins Dogs picked the *Tecolote* up to his feet and yanked his arms harshly behind him. The ropes were secured tight.

Drinks Grass stood where before Santiago slept. The Fish-Carrier said we need not tie him.

The Fish-Carrier said we need not tie him, Skins Dogs mocked.

That smarted his brother and Drinks Grass shook his head and walked on. Santiago watched him go but then Skins Dogs turned him hard so that they faced each other.

Shorter the *Caxcanes* by some height but healthy with chorded muscles that spoke to a prowling life.

A mistake to bring you with us, said Skins Dogs. There was a respected man called Laughing Bird. He was the best. He brought us tribute even when food was scarce when the season was harsh. Then he ran into one of you in *Anahuac* that he killed. He killed him with his spear, Laughing Bird said, because the *Tecolote* there said if he didn't take his own life to feed the *teteo* then he was cursed to a Mictlan death. Laughing Bird brought back the dead *Tecolote* and made his head-stake and covered it in the black-earth and left it out at night for other owls to see.

After that, Laughing Bird grew tired. Every day he'd wake up and he wouldn't do anything. The Fish-Carrier knew it was a curse because you can only curse. Laughing Bird stopped waking when he was needed. Couldn't get anything done when he did rise. When the *Tecolote's* head finally went rotten, Laughing Bird went to sleep and though we fed him water and the Fish-Carrier gave him medicine he never woke.

Skins Dogs stopped and looked at the *Tecolote* who stared at him with the same expression a dog had when a mad wanderer tried to explain to it the secrets of the world gleaned through poisoned mushrooms or burning bushes.

So furious grew Skins Dogs then that he felt his teeth grinding and he stepped back, turned away, turned back, ran his hands over his now-glistening head, growled, and then grabbed the *Tecolote* by his shoulder and pulled him towards the gathered and still gathering village.

Santiago knew not what to make at the barrage he'd just weathered but knew now his name by these people. He thought the word *Tecolote* over, flipping the length of it, the syllables put together in such a way that never would he have made this word himself. Santiago said, *Tecolote*. He said it in a whisper but Skins Dogs stopped and turned and leered at him and in that leer Santiago watched a shadow fall across his face the same way it did when a murderer was soon to commit the third of their unholy acts.

Eats Mesquite was watching with her newborn at her breast suckling and she herself chewing a piece of mesquite bread. She had been alive sixteen years. In none of those years had she ever seen something like the *Tecolote* and she'd only seen Skins Dogs act like this when he came back from a hunt for hearts to the north and he was crazed in the eyes and terrified of something he would repeat only to the Fish-Carrier. So she shouted at Skins Dogs. He turned back to her and pursed his lips with embarrassment. He walked the *Tecolote* to them.

Your off, she said.

Skins Dogs waved her off. You sound just like him.

Eats Mesquite didn't say anything else and instead looked at the black-skinned, pink-eyed, cut-lipped creature behind him.

At her too Santiago looked. Seen no women for months now so felt the energy shift that preludes arousal; a flare up around the navel that went up and then down to the root and then up higher and back down again. Her face was a knife with hair black and straight and in no uncertain terms knife-like too because of this. Santiago looked down at her exposed breasts, her child. Eats Mesquite turned away.

Fish-Carrier's ritual begun. The people were gathered around him in a strange geometry where they line-curved walls painted with symbols Santiago could not decipher. Everything they owned on their backs. Tents and skins tied to their chests and arms by ropes. In hands were spears and bows. On hips there were obsidian knives glistening in the crawling sunlight. Faces were placid and deadpan or else jittery with different expressions, a sign of excitement. A few were still eating, namely the naked children.

No one was old. The Fish-Carrier was unique in age and burden. Women naked save for their skirts. Men who wore loincloths all looked to be men who'd just had their first drink or women who only now were ready to have children.

At them all the Fish-Carrier who stood in the middle did survey. Black pits that served as eyes. Said he words in a tongue now forgotten. Hunched lizard of

a man bowed at the back and bowed in the legs and from how he spoke he was bowed too in the soul for he spoke like Father Isidro did in sermon. He threw his hands up and dry pieces of bone were launched and where they fell the Fish-Carrier went to his knees which were already low to the ground and crawled on all fours to them and put his face to the dirt where he did nod. Approached a new spot where bone and gravel intertwined. There, said words and the *Caxcanes* attitudes were changed by these same words. Some grew frightened and others indignant at some curse and others cheered as if the Fish-Carrier said to them that finally a glory known only to heroic warriors who after death would be venerated as gods now would come to these peoples.

Where the Fish-Carrier originally stood there was an idol. It was a fish of unknown species driftwood-carved. Glittering in the cracked scales was gold. The sunlight caught that heaven-gild in such a way that it was impossible for this to be happenstance or miracle for now the fish was bursting with light and that light cut a swath northward into the crowd, into Santiago, to the lip of the canyon and whatever world laid just beyond.

Forty eyes followed that light and they looked to the *Tecolote* and there was a wild murmuring in the *Caxcanes* and the violent twin looked at his other and Eats Mesquite was staring with an emotion unreadable but somehow still known as a cousin to dumbfounded embarrassment. Another woman who stood by Skins Dogs and wore little and was tattooed around her nipples and throat smiled the degenerate's smile. Upon their stone minds there was made a proclamation by this sunbeam. The Fish-Carrier worked that wordless and deific

language into their own human words. He wrapped ropes around his fish-idol and with a strength that the dry branches that were his limbs should not have had he pulled this wholly onto his back with exertion that sent film and spittle and a series of scattering breaths tumbling into the world.

Nomads cut their ties and set themselves adrift. Out of the canyon they rose like a snake emerging from its den. Men were running and they carried less than others and into the brush they went.

To the north melted the land into greenery, red, ghost-pale grass, era-burned dust. Look eastward and there the strange trees with brown seedpods waiver in a non-wind. South there are mountains who the night before were the haunting waves of the Hell-sent storm. West was as North and in a combination of these directions the *Caxcanes* went.

In the prophetic morning the *Caxcanes* crossed a feathergrass continent that was tall and puffed and in the wind it made a rustling song. Children ran through it smiling. Red skin redder from the sun, sticks in hand. Mimicked the Fish-Carrier on all fours. Sniffed out from the soil insects and poemed their names. *Cuchamás* they dug up bisque and brown and scarlet and maggot-like. Added to a bowl that one child, a girl maybe eight years of age, took back to the walking women. Child whose ribs almost pushed through his sides and not so naked and had only on his head a close crop of sable hair screamed and was running amongst the sharpness of the needle grass and behind him there were

buzzing black bees that were not bees but ants, so Santiago saw, and they were flying, their wings buzzing, enraged to war. Children laughed and called them *Chicatanas*. Men laughed, women laughed, and one of them somehow produced a flame in the time it would take those who wandered the Silk Road the turn of an hourglass to do. These flames were held on torches above the tall grasses and the smoke they produced sent the *Chicatanas* on a spiral to the ground where the children put them into stomach-bowls and brought them back to the women from before.

Skins Dogs led the *Tecolote* on paths no other could see were they not from this New World. Vines with thorns long enough to push through boots were pointed out and cholla and other green-brown cacti that jumped and swung their needled arms were taught to the *Tecolote* to avoid. It was strange that someone of this world knew not these things and Skins Dogs thought his ignorance the beginning of some scheme.

Sick, Santiago. He wanted to eat but knew not how to say this. Women who looked as if they'd never weighed more than a crate of bones picked off the ground dry and fallen mesquite. They chewed it and Eats Mesquite looked at the *Tecolote* and gave him hers. Skins Dogs was watching so he did not give thanks. Chewed it like he watched the others chew. Crud fit for cows but to an empty stomach tasted like overripe plum. There was little water to drink and it came from a skin that everyone shared, one of many, and when Santiago took his share Skins Dogs stopped him after his first sip and took the skin for himself.

A long dusk chased the sun away. Word spread through the *Caxcanes* and they turned and looked upon the dogs in the yestermiles whose shadows were omens reaching through the desert. People yelled and threw stones, sent them a-scattering.

Covered in red dirt with faces painted black and crimson were men bloomed from brush. Hunter revenants spoke with the Fish-Carrier for a time and stopped did his caravan. Went to listen, Skins Dogs. Santiago watched from afar, sat where there were no vines and where the needlegrass would not bleed him. A mutant of a black spider crawled over his foot but he did not feel naught but something light, maybe grass or a vine, and then it was on his pant leg where it anointed him in a way only death can do and then it leapt from his leg and back into the brush.

The *Caxcanes* set to arguing. Skins Dogs was yelling and Drinks Grass was silent and the Fish-Carrier was bowed under the weight of his paganity. Makes Flowers hacked something up and then spit a wad of it into the grass. Santiago saw his warden argue against the others by himself. Twin gave no aid. Watching women busied themselves with making food without fire and children were given tasks too so as not to be caught staring for too long. Eats Mesquite sat close to Santiago and was nursing her child and she caught the *Tecolote* trying not to look but now that the sun touched him she did not mind but his black skin and his swollen eye and his evil speech all sent something down her spine that reminded her of the premonitions she had before her lover had died.

Skins Dogs screamed no more. Greater group of men gathered spears and poured water into a bag that they then reached into and rubbed the resultant mud on their faces. The Fish-Carrier said words over this bag. Trembled under his idol. Skins Dogs watched, turned to Santiago. There on his face did Santiago see the reason for the argument.

Departed those night-cruel hunters into the mystery, the wind. Returned when the moon was hurdling towards the horizon. Someone hollered their arrival and there they were, all of them and more. Bound by ropes were three men who as they stepped closer to the group and into the now lit bonfires were seen to have been savaged for their faces were bloody and one was limping and the skin was pulled back to show the white meat of his thigh. Five girl were there too, all young enough to be of Leonore's age. Nodded, the Fish-Carrier, as if this was the good work of a just god. The *Caxcanes* women turned away and busied themselves for they knew what was to come next. Captured men had their ropes tied around stick-stakes. Women were led off by the hunter-warriors. Sound of their rape was the only music that told the legend of this night.

One of the captured prisoners whose face was swollen by battle shouted and without knowing the language Santiago understood he begged them to stop. To this prisoner Skins Dogs walked and he took a club from his loincloth and beat the screaming man until he was silent and kept on still. His blows were mighty for he raised high into the heavens to gather his strength that then came down with an intention to annihilate at the atomic level and there were cracks and something wet and sticky being mixed and no one stopped him, not even the

Fish-Carrier, and the children watched as this prisoner's jaw was broken and then his skull caved in in such a way that his eyes popped out of their sockets and the brain spilled through in a blended mess and still Skins Dogs struck him until the neck was broken the wrong way and there was no head left to hit and he moved his club to the arms, the chest, breaking the ribs and caving in no longer breathing lungs.

Returned, the rapists. Some of them laughed yet Drinks Grass did not. Skins Dogs stood over the slaughter breathing heavy and covered in the splattered blood as if a painter had gotten mad at him and threw buckets at the man. The woman whose throat and nipples were inked walked over to them. A finger did she trail across Skins Dogs and then she supped the blood. With moonlight her hair had an argent sheen and it fell like obsidian sheets moon-kissed to her breasts and she squeezed Skins Dogs arm and then reached to his loincloth and took from him his *tecpatl*. Rapists lined themselves up and she squatted by the slaughter and cut and handed each rapist a piece that she cut. Other two prisoners were sobbing in silence and the rest of the men returned with the girls where they saw what had happened to who could only be their father and these girls wailed until Makes Flowers turned and backhanded one so hard she struck the ground where he kicked her thrice and looked to the others in mute warning. One backhanded was Three Dog and Three Dog laid there staring at nothing then staring at Santiago knowing not what he was or how he could be and lost herself in the mystery of that black-skinned savage.

Cannibals sat laughing around the bonfires eating their cooked meat. With their meat was brown mesquite bread and maggots well roasted. The heart was lifted by the Fish-Carrier above the flames. He squeezed it and blood burst from the pulped organ. Vitae ran in tributaries through the knuckles and down the wrists and down the arms. Was thrown fully into the fire. Through a means Santiago would not understand until the day of his death this fire became a roaring blaze and people cheered and the cannibals sat eating and laughing and joking and telling stories for in the flames that outlined them they looked like primordials who knew a secret no other civilization did and this was a secret that made them above all sin. The woman who served them their meat took Skins Dogs into the bushes where the girls were raped and there they made love.

Makes Flowers was possessed of fierce coughing. He felt hot thus rested early.

Three Dog was brought by a boy called Speaks Doe to the *Tecolote* and he pointed at him laughing and the girl whose jaw and eyes were of Leonore's own and thus another girl too stared at him without life in her face and Speaks Doe took her back to the fire.

Human meat was offered to Santiago by Eats Mesquite. She looked at him expectantly and said, We offer this to you. Betraying tradition, the *Tecolote* refused, held up his hand, his black skin off color.

When reported back to the Fish-Carrier this was taken as divine defamation and the mood the cannibals enjoyed went sour. Skins Dogs returned

and him they blamed for his wonton slaughter. The woman he fucked was laughing and an argument turned into fists and Skins Dogs had the younger Speaks Doe on the ground. His fists rose and fell four times before Drinks Grass pulled twin off boy. Santiago hid himself amongst the needlegrass, the feathergrass, where he noticed not the bird-eating spiders crawling on him.

People were singing and some were dancing and a few were fucking too in the same place where evil was wrought upon this desert and those prisoners now captured were passed around and then tied up where they were neither cleaned nor fed nor treated as anything resembling human at all.

The next night another man was slaughtered and eaten, and the night after the last was given in sacrifice.

He was he with the mutilated leg. Wing'd ants were pushed to his wound the first night where they bit-bound skin to meat before decapitation. The prisoner was delirious from lack of water and the green rot spreading from his leg. He was hung by his hands from a low mesquite tree. All day the children spent gathering small crimson bugs. They smashed them up with their hands and feet into dye. That dye was painted onto this prisoner's genitals, over his heart, his neck and his face and his navel.

Twenty paces away from the tree's base there were stones put in a circle. Around these stones were men dancing to the beat of skin-drums that women played, Eats Mesquite among them. Singing women and singing children and preaching Fish-Carrier. All hunter-warriors danced save Skins Dogs who stood

painted with four spears fashioned with obsidian heads impaled in the ground around him in a crescent moon. Tonight, the moon was a deformed blob. The hunter-gatherers wore grass skirts and grass over their heads with bones and skin-masks over those made from animals that looked like wolves but with lighter furs and deer with patterns unknown and one a cat that looked as if a tiger but with spots and not stripes and smaller with the mouth open and the trapped inside. In hands were *tecpatl*, to the bone fragments from the already cannibalized prisoners.

Harlequin energy took hold of the *Caxcanes*. Children dance-twirled. Women pounded away at the drums and sung and the men leapt into the air and cartwheeled behind one another and twirled too and flashed their genitals and mimed killing one another, mimed killing were-beasts and *naguals* and some shouted *Tecolote! Tecolote!* and whooped and jabbed and whooped some more. Spoke, the Fish-Carrier, of the blood of the universe and the need to keep the land alive and of the *Tecolote* who graced them not with curses but with curiosity. Of creation did the Fish-Carrier speak and of the end of days and of death and life and the snake that coiled in on itself forever being reborn but always in a manner of some difference for the snake was time and as it coiled into the future one merely need pay attention to the past to understand what was to come.

Whoops and shouts, whoops and shouts. Constellations eddied around their deformed moon. Sable dog and his companions who had fed on prisoner remains watched with lightless eyes this primeval. Jolted into fleeing they were when Skins Dogs screamed and ripped from the red earth the first dart and threw

it over the dancers. Hear now the scream of the prisoner as it lanced his navel. That rattle was matched only by his raped nieces forced to watch the savage though holy renewal of time and earth.

Skins Dogs sailed into the air his Neolithic darts and they all struck well the painted flesh. The prisoner was a cancerous porcupine spinning on the rope from which he hung. Torches lit from the bonfire were thrown at the mesquite tree. Inferno raged and conquered the branches desert-dry, leaves, seedpods, ate the rope and the man that hung from it, from his skin made darkened leather and the darts eviscerating him popped, they crackled, his eyes melted in their sockets and bleeding out burning. When the rope snapped the cooked the hunter fell to the roots which were now more like coals. There he smoked and his smoke was the lettering of *Tezcatlipoca* and it the Fish-Carrier read and transcribed orally to his *Caxcanes*. Enkindled, the sacrificial pyre, and thus the song ended, Ohuaya, ohuaya.

CHAPTER FIVE

Caxcanes moved further North and West. Days where the sun burned so hot it steamed piss when it hit the rocks. Nights where spiders crawled over sleeping cannibals and their rapes. With a stick, children hungry for the violence they'd learned would spear these spiders and roast them over open flames. The *Tecolote* did not take part in this food for some time. It was rumored he'd forgotten who he was.

Wind blew. Brought with it a vermillion dust that clung to skin as armor of this untouched world. Hunter-warriors rolled in it, wrapped maguey thorns around their waists and spears, went off into the night and came back with dead jackals, eggs. These the Fish-Carrier had the eyes taken from. With those eyes he made a soup with the feces of a dog and the hollow bones of the birds. He gave the soup to Makes Flowers who now slept more than he woke and was hot in his skull, a fever dangerous in a fever dream world. When it worked not the rumors spread more and the *Tecolote* was treated with a veneration never had he known.

These nights Santiago sat by himself upon the camp's edge. No tent was given to him and only Eats Mesquite approached and where she went there were still many paces between he and her. Every night he stared into the void. No where did he hear the voices of the dead for they were in the fires behind him, in the cries of the ravished where Leonore's voice threaded through the screams, the anguish. Food and water brought back a thinking mind that stewed on inward

evils. Dreamed not of his *padres* or of anything else these days, not even on the brutalities Santiago could now never forget. Instead he looked into the night where dogs yapped and for them he left food, pieces of meat given to him that his jaw was too sore to chew. Wanted to run out there. The sensation all sinner's feel when doom is nearby was once again upon him. Wanted to flee for his life and wanted to die and wanted to live and in all these paradoxes he was left without energy and staring into the vastness of the outer dark.

Women who asked the *Tecolote* for mercy gave him their blankets so he could sleep comfortably. Water went to the *Tecolote* first whenever it was found. Tributaries this time of year ran scant. Mud trickles, an ounce of stagnant fluid. The *Caxcanes* would put a skin bag treated with something that shined over a fire and raise the water to a boil and then serve it to the *Tecolote* pure as the day it'd fallen from Heaven.

On a night where the moon was slivered into a horn that, if blown, would marshal the souls of the dead, the *Tecolote* was brought before the flames. Those here were coughing and drowsy and delirious in new ways.

The throat-and-nipple inked woman sat beside the Fish-Carrier. It was she who slept with Skins Dogs and served the cannibals their meals. Naked and sat on a skin of unknown origin. Painted, her arms, her face, her neck, her breasts, her sex. The paint was cobalt and never had the Santiago seen such a color save when those who claimed nobility in Spain walked the streets seeking whores and peoples to abuse. Braided, this woman's hair, with feathers jade and quetzal, seashells too, things that he did not know the *Caxcanes* did possess.

The Fish-Carrier pointed to a spot on the ground where a skin without occupant sat. There the *Tecolote* took position.

There was fear in his eyes, this she saw. It had been there since the owl flew into their mob and grew worse with sacrifice.

She pointed to herself, said her name, said Itzel.

The *Tecolote* stared at her and said nothing for he knew that these people had in them the same hate-fear as Skins Dogs.

Itzel pointed to the *Tecolote* and said his name too. Then she pointed back to herself, said Itzel again, waited.

Itzel, repeated the *Tecolote*.

On his tongue it sounded barbaric and warped. Those watching who had yet to fall sick murmured evil amongst themselves and grabbed tight their clubs and daggers. Quelling their anxieties was the Fish-Carrier with a raised hand and a barked word.

Itzel said, You. Made. Us. Sick?

When the *Tecolote* did not respond, she pointed to the small tent where lay Makes Flowers. Inside his hacking made a cacophony, blood in phlegm.

Sagged, the Santiago's shoulders. He knew this day would come. He thought the thoughts that so far his desert-blasted brain, sea-drowned too, had avoided. To his hands he looked and to his arms and he saw there faint as stars in daylight the pock scars of plague. Somewhere in the distant past there was a

man who fished and who farmed too and a woman who worked for those richer as a servile person. Santiago looked to the people gathered and saw that those whose heads overflowed with mucus and whose brains were being cooked and who could barely keep down water were killed just the same way those past parents were: by his hands.

There was no way to communicate the specifics of his sin to this woman. In the gulf of flame between them, evils had no definition, only wavering, fluid shapes, the plasma of Hell and malice-heat. So, the *Tecolote* nodded in confirmation and the uproar thus began.

Skins Dogs exploded from where he sat in the back of the encampment. Galloped he did over the shouting, the scared, children pulled out of the way, women watched in shocked, men watching none the better. In his hands was his blood-brown club. The *Tecolote* rose a hand in pitiful defense and as the club came down Drinks Grass was like a dart thrown that could lance the very sun itself and he speared into the side of his twin and the two went into the grass and the dirt where a plume of sanguine rose, wound of the word, maguey thorns taking what they wanted in supplication, snakes writhing and scattering and hissing and their tails set to rattling and a spider jumped clear and another was twisted and Skins Dogs was standing, yelling, and Drinks Grass went to stand too but before he could the club came 'round and Drinks Grass never stood again.

Deafening that suffix of silence. Drinks Grass pulled his hands and knees to his chest, looked as if he was a newborn brought fresh into the world. The

Tecolote looked and through a tuft of needlegrass there was the ear and temple freshly warped into a dimple from which blood frothed out. There was a sound coming from him that only the dying did speak.

Skins Dogs was flecked in the bloodied raiment of fratricide. With eyes that this night looked like a pair of full moons for so wide were the whites he looked at his twin, to himself, to the Fish-Carrier and Itzel and the watching *Caxcanes* and to the *Tecolote* at last and when he saw that curs'd monster who brought with him despair in all its forms Skins Dogs knew himself then to have coiled this doom'd destiny and he lurched forward like an eastern Ghoul only for now the rest of the tribe to move as one in suppressing their monster.

Screaming and crying now, so much that the *Tecolote* turned and on all fours crawled away from the writhing press. Shadowing him was the sinful turmoil he'd caused. Memories of the storm giggled at the edges of his consciousness. Itzel stepped into his path.

The *Tecolote* looked up and her sex was in his face and she was looking down at him with the cold expression that all religious zealots mask themselves with when they feel the spirits of higher powers flowing into them. In her knife was a *tecpatl*. Its blade caught the firelight so that it looked as if it was still molten earth, hot with revenge. With that knife Itzel pointed to a tent empty. There were eyes on them but Skins Dogs was fighting with all the hatred inside of him that in its scope eclipsed that of a hundred wars and so none of these eyes cared for long. To that tent the *Tecolote* crawled and Itzel turned back to see her lover's fate.

There was blood on the grass. Hunts Wind was screaming, How could you?! He screamed it in-between sobs and no one answered him.

Skins Dogs sat naked with ropes binding his arms. His face was swollen and there were teeth that could have been only his lying on his lap or else half-rising from the small puddles of blood like monuments from ancient cultures unearthed by the same cataclysm that buried them. Like a jaguar after hunt did he breath with full lung breaths that wheezed in an odd way. He turned his head but looked away for no man can bear to see the twin they've killed with their own hands.

There was an argument about what to do with Skins Dogs but quiet went that debate when the Fish-Carrier barked for them to stop again. Hunched he was and he crawled over to where lay Drinks Grass. A spider scurried out from inside the man's cratered. On the boy's face was a blank, dumbfounded look, as if a great confusion overcame him in these dying moments. Reached down, the Fish-Carrier, and he closed those wide eyes, dust-filmed, and let out a sigh carried only by the impossible weariness of his countless years.

Killing a *Tecolote* brings death, said the Fish-Carrier. You learned little from Laughing Bird.

He made me, murmured Skins Dogs. Cursed us all sick. Is killing us.

When the Fish-Carrier said nothing, Skins Dogs found his second wind. Makes Flowers is dying! We all are! Our heads grow hot and we cannot move

when the sun tell us to! Water does not quench the fire. The *Tecolote* has worked treachery! Evil! And he...and he...

Rage and sorrow were a strange mixture that many a times had the Fish-Carrier seen. Every warrior who wished to one day join the sun's questing slaughter of the stars felt it deep in their hearts. Those who mastered this feeling succeeded in this quest. Those who took it as venom to their veins knew only dust-pledged agony. This the Fish-Carrier repeated and Skins Dogs spit out more blood.

Skins Dogs, said the Fish-Carrier, sitting back by the fire. His eyes looked into it for some time and other than the quieting of children by their parents there was a profound muteness born from the waiting of his words. You are to go into *Mictlan* alone tonight with nothing but your club and what you wear. You will be marked upon your face so that all know what you are. When at last your *tonalli* is taken and returned with a new mask to *Anahuac*, may you have the wisdom you know not now.

Defeated was Skins Dogs so he said nothing and some were happy and Speaks Doe was not for he said, through his still healing lips and a sputtering of coughs, We should kill him, and to that there was some agreeance but the Fish-Carrier did not respond.

Forward came Itzel. Her painted face was tear-smeared and she knelt before the man whose violence planted in her great affection. Skins Dogs looked at her and held her gaze and watched the *tecpatl* come up and press itself to his

swollen eye and he ground his teeth hard enough that there was a crack somewhere in his mouth for the dagger was drawn down along the side of his face and smeared upon that wound was a black mud to seal the cut. In his ear she whispered something. Skins Dogs stifled a sob, cracked his voice.

Do not kill him, said the Fish-Carrier.

There were no sounds of struggle and they returned before the moon had yet to move more than a star's space through the sky. Dry, their hands.

Santiago lay alone in this wyrding woman's tent. Through its opening flaps he watched the pyre building. Sung were songs that needed no translation for in those voices was a pathos pure in its truth. Remembered songs of similar make in Spain by those who loved his parents and by those who took Santiago and beat him for what he'd done.

A *Caxcanes* child who knew not what emotion to have turned and looked at Santiago and from fear or maybe embarrassment he retreated back into the tent.

Weird smelling, the pyre's smoke. The songs were interrupted with violent fits that originated from sickened lungs. When the wind brought this foreign vapor to Santiago he felt lightheaded and dizzy and laid down. In his limbs there was sloth and once more the thoughts that surged from his black history were for a time scraped out of his skull and left discarded or maybe evaporated and blown away. This is how Itzel found him when she returned and she washed her body with a bag of water and spit into her hand and rubbed that spit on her sex and

kept rubbing until she was done and with her hands bloodied from where she cut
Skins Dogs she touched the sides of the *Tecolote's* face and brought his head
into her stomach and there she curled around him to sleep.

Five days later, six *Caxcanes* died shitting water. Four days past that
there went into the next world another ten, the Fish-Carrier among them.

the song of eleuia: we are tlacatlaolli

Soon the buzzard comes hungry.

Filled with lust,

Glory,

Soothes.

Dread no blacker than obsidian,

But ever sharper,

Drawing blood before drawn from womb, throat, heart, heart.

Almanac-calendar, limestone god-engraved to be godly, shows me

Thus:

Valley of Commoner's Skirts

Situated on the edge of my broken water.

Children whose arms are jaguar-savaged

And girls knowing not touch are flayed.

Flowers on the water,

Flowers on the shore.

Noble-kings demasked, dethroned,

Teeth-jade stripped, worn in bone.

She, city, reed—

Brother, mother, kid—

Priest, god, mask—

—Blood, blood, gold.

Paint-captured vision feather-chiseled

For eyes pupil-absent and iris-lost

Settles on the peyote-precipice.

Clear the corn and there it is:

Women-value, man-value, fear-value all.

Ohuaya, ohuaya.

CHAPTER SIX

Itzel stood with the *Tecolote* and together they watched the remnants of the *Caxcanes* head deeper into the God Land. With her and he there were six more. Makes Flowers was somehow among them, as was the child Speaks Doe. The other four were women—Finds Rain, Six Spiders, Knows Clouds, and Three Dog. The last two were women who'd been taken in the raid the night she and Skins Dogs made love for the last time. Three Dog was not sick but Speaks Doe demanded she be left with him, for he and he alone captured and used her.

Looked to that girl did Itzel and then to the *Tecolote* upon whose back was carried her life. In the parting she took very little. She wore a cross of bones that served as a skirt and a shed snakeskin somehow whole crowned her. Her hair was still braided and those supplies she needed and what her sister, Eats Mesquite, could afford to part with consisted of a tent, some skins, water for three days, mesquite bread, few other foods. Out here on the skirts of the God Land a *Caxcanes* could live for many a day by themselves. With what she had there was no fear to be had save for predators of man and beast alike.

I am going to *Anahuac*, said Itzel.

She looked at those with her.

That place is death, coughed Makes Flowers. You go there to be raped and skinned.

Smiled, Itzel; it was the smile of someone who could avoid no danger. I go there because it's the only place left for us to go.

You could have stayed, said Speaks Doe. You aren't sick. The others didn't want to leave you behind with us.

With us? Itzel laughed at that, an ugly laugh, cackling and hag-like. I stayed behind with him.

Itzel pointed at the *Tecolote* who stood dumbly watching the conversation. At the mention of his name he looked up then around, no trace of understanding to be found in his eyes.

The *Tecolote*? asked Speaks Doe. Wasted blood! What will you find with this curse with you?

Wisdoms, said Itzel.

Wisdoms, repeated Makes Flowers.

He stopped, a fit took him. When Makes Flowers spit the phlegm out of his mouth there was in it blood. What a stupid thing to say, said he.

Is the judgement of someone already dead supposed to mean anything? asked Itzel.

Makes Flowers went to retort but instead went to his knees coughing. Itzel tut-tutted at this and looked to the women.

I will be going with none of you, said she. I will not risk your death coming to me.

Six Spiders, who was eldest beyond Itzel among the *Caxcanes* shook her head. You have gone wrong, White River.

Itzel, corrected Itzel.

You will always be White River to me. No matter how far you go. Six Spiders sagged her head. Spears Eagles should have taught you better. We all thought it.

Itzel was silent then. In her bosom there was a sudden rage and the hand with which she used to sacrifice man and creature alike twitched with urgency.

He and the fish he carried had nothing to teach me, even in death, said Itzel.

Lie! You lie and you disgrace yourself! Six Spiders was standing now and in the leanness of her face there was a taut anger fueled by the knowing of her coming doom. You alone he took in! He made sure you were touched by no man. Everything Spears Eagles knew, all the wisdoms of our people, to you alone he made them a gift. And you...

And I was never any man's right, nor any man's daughter, nor the fish any man has ever carried.

Why are you still here? asked Speaks Doe.

In the silence that followed that question the *Tecolote* watched with his back hunched under the weight of all the things he carried. It was hot so his breath came through an open mouth and sweat beaded his brow. Unable to find

death or peace of mind he resigned himself in his subconscious to be pulled by these people where they went but now he understood that those left here were those he had killed and those that went on left him to die. Still locked were his thoughts, arrested his reflections. There was a desire in him to lay down and become as the red dust that covered this New World was. There was also a desire to run from them so that he could forget their faces though he knew in dreams and in fires and in the night their faces would always be there.

He looked to ta Three Dog. She looked at the *Tecolote* and then quickly away. Three Dog said no words to any of these *Caxcanes* since her capture but this black-skinned *nagual* was a strangeness that remained ever present in her mind. Was he a prisoner too, she wondered? When her father was...the *Tecolote* declined the meat given to him. It was a heresy she could not reckon.

The *Tecolote* was still looking at Three Dog when Itzel grabbed him by his arm.

Going, said she, pointing to those mountains in the impossible south.

Again she yanked at his arm and started walking. The *Tecolote* followed nine paces and then looked back. No one else was coming but all watched.

What are you doing? asked Itzel.

The *Tecolote* heard the question in her voice, turned to her and shook his head.

She should come too, said he.

Itzel walked to him, knowing that neither understood the other. We are going. Leave the *xolo* food behind.

The *Tecolote* shook his head and stepped back. We should bring the little one. She's too young to be left like this.

He pointed to Three Dog who went white as sun-bleached bone. Itzel looked at the girl herself and then laughed her ugly laugh.

You want that thing? Itzel laughed again and pointed to her sex. You want her for that, not me?

It was a message no language could keep hidden and the *Tecolote* furiously shook his head and arms while sputtering half-said words. Then he paused suddenly, as if something hitherto now unseen, some will or mental power, flowed into him from the universe beyond. Itzel saw the change in how his jaw was set, how the *Tecolote* held her eyes with an authority known only to those who fought with stars and vice.

She's too young to leave here, said he.

Itzel did not understand but she understood enough.

To Three Dog she looked. There is something special about you. That's what the *Tecolote* says.

You don't understand him, accused Six Spider.

Six Spider stepped in front of Three Dog; her arms held firmly outwards as if she were becoming some kind of barrier. Do not spit on the *Caxcanes* anymore, you *tzitzimitl*.

Itzel's eyelids opened wide and did not close even when came a hot wind. There is a wisdom with that girl. Itzel's head moved like a snake's, slid in a way the vertebrae should not have been able to. She is coming with me.

I am! shouted Three Dog.

With an agency she had yet to show she shoved her way past Six Spider. Speaks Doe shouted, No!, and he lurched out but missed and went to the ground where she ran past. Scrambled up he did. In his hands was his club, held tight with both hands.

Even the women you steal do not want you, said Itzel.

At that, Speaks Doe growled and stepped forward and lifted his club. Itzel turned back to the *Tecolote* and pointed at the boy. Kill him.

Speaks Doe stepped back, gasped; the women did too and Makes Flowers was quiet save his coughing. The *Tecolote* looked from Itzel with slow eyes to this boy. He saw in his face the bruises and cuts Skins Dogs had left him. In those dark eyes there was a violence that scared the *Tecolote*. No more than a week dared pass and in that scant time he'd watched this boy eat the flesh of men and rape a girl whose own kin were butchered in the name of powers he yet not knew. He did not understand what Itzel said, the *Tecolote*, but he knew this girl, afraid, trembling, who looked at him with some strange mixture of fear and

obsession in her eyes, reminded him of Leonore and that was enough for him to take her away. In making this decision, the *Tecolote* knew he was killing her. But there was mercy to death, maybe, when living brought only the brutality this girl had come to know.

Speaks Doe said nothing when the *Tecolote* reached down and held Three Dog close to him. A supernatural barrier was put up between Itzel's group and the *Caxcanes* then that no hunter-warrior of any wisdom dared to cross.

Itzel's smile was a brutal and Cheshire grin. I walk the path of the Sun itself.

Then she pulled the *Tecolote's* arm again and led him south into Anahuac.

They were the striders of an unforgiving and burning land. No fire upon this desert but there was an invisible flame still that followed them, awaited, cloaked them in a sufferance, a haze in which they sweat and they cooked. In the rising sun and the noon sun and the setting sun most of all the cholla was gilded bone. At night Itzel looked at the stars and talked to herself in a language not even Three Dog knew. With those stars she led them the days after to small streams where no animals could be seen but their cries heard and none of them did the *Tecolote* know. Nights came and in the gloom that stretched on with impossibility the yapping of dogs followed them but never were those dogs seen. This set the girl to frightful shudders that grew into sobs, the first she'd had since the night of her rape. Never did Itzel speak to her and the *Tecolote* held her close

and together they fell asleep, her crying and him with a face that spoke funerary truths.

Strode south they did and Itzel watched the dirt and in it found a path that no other human walked and thus saved herself from becoming as Three Dog was. At nights in the distance they saw fires and so they made none themselves. If no glittering, orange stars were ignited upon the land still they made no fire until the night after was seen to be just as clear. Yammered the dogs and they grew closer to the encampment, and this Itzel did not know what to make of. When one woke her barking just outside of their tent the *Tecolote* went silent and this Itzel took as a sign. The next day she had a cough and a soreness in her throat that felt as if it were slathered in mashed chili. This was the day she gathered the peyote.

When camp was made the girl and the *Tecolote* could not be separated. They had no way to talk and so sat together and stared into the firefly embers. Three Dog watched Itzel and said no word to her and not a day since their exodus was a word shared between any creature along this exodus.

Patient was Itzel. When all was said and done there was no doubt in her mind that she would have the wisdom of all creation. The mask she wore as Itzel gave her the same powers as that distant southern *teotl* who birthed all those who *teteo* who shaped the world. Deviousness was in her soul. There was no possibility she could not manifest for she was that which made the world itself. In that making in the many eons before the now-violence was engineered and blood was shed and that taste for violence was worn by Itzel for Itzel was a mask of the

divine and a mask worn by a girl who grew up watching men eat men and men beat men and women be taken and raped and beaten and eaten too, women such as her gave birth to all wonders. That was a power no man had and though Skins Dogs and the Fish-Carrier believed themselves to be what kept blood flowing into the ground for crops and rain she knew that in truth it was her and what she would make in the furlong futures.

Itzel watched the *Tecolote* give Three Dog portions from his food and Three Dog held tight to him when the night was cold for warmth was a ghost when the sun set over this New World. Itzel took what little *piciyetl* she could find and what little she had in her belongings. The bell of this flower, white as a rainless wisp of cloud and fringed in pink, had in it the powers of the *teteo*. When the *Tecolote* slept and Three Dog with him, Itzel threw all that she'd found into the flames on a night where the wind blew into the tent. Opened she did the flaps and her spell was set upon them both, empowered by the chanting she weaved into the crackling coals.

They woke but Santiago was he who emerged. He waved away the smoke with his hands and looked for Itzel. The smoke was thick in a way that should not have been. It was grey and it was black and it was a vast fog and the *Tecolote* saw why for he saw the bonfire was four times the length of any man and had in a way unknown been moved closer to the tent. He heard the woman chanting too but her voice was warped in a strange way and from all places did it come.

Like a spirit conjured by foul ritual did Itzel step through the smoke before the *Tecolote*. He looked to her and coughed hard into his hand for now his throat was burning from cinder.

Itzel took his hand and put something in it. They were round things, like buttons, green plants surely. The *Tecolote* shook his hand but before he could step away Itzel took them back and put them into her own mouth. There were six and she chewed and had an arm wrapped around the back of the *Tecolote's* neck. When he tried to push her away she grabbed his head right as another fit of coughing befell him. She kissed him, spit the mushed *peyote* into his mouth, held his head there long enough that he had to swallow. As he did he pushed the witch back and she disappeared laugh-chanting into the smoke.

The buttons tasted like wood and like crud and sour too. Choking still, the *Tecolote* walked and walked until he was out of the smoke and in the darkness, illuminated by the fire, red eyes, many pair, stared back at him and the *Tecolote* found himself backpedaling into the engineered smog.

Itzel was laughing and she was cackling and she was giggling and the *Tecolote* knew not where she was. He turned and from the smoke stepped Three Dog whose eyes were red like blood and who could not stop coughing herself. Three Dog saw the many eyes in the darkness and gasped for she knew the tales of hound-omens.

The bonfire flickered. The *Tecolote* turned back to it. Itzel was chanting still and she was throwing handfuls of dirt into the flames. Soon the fire died and

night swallowed all that ever was. Moon a black hole and the stars spun wildly now free from its gravity. The *Tecolote* looked up and back to the eyes and could see them no longer. In his chest there was a fierce beating of his heart and he felt the fear all things do when danger is nearby or before a drug takes hold of their soul or that he should feel for doing what he's done.

Into the tent he went again, Itzel not following, Three Dog's hand in his own. Inside there were strange lights winking in and out of existence in the darkness. His body was tingling. Flopped to the ground he did and it felt good to sit and he giggled a little and the lights were growing more. Three Dog was still holding his hand and she asked him if he was ok but the words sounded like air being breathed into his ears and it made him laugh more. There was a nausea in his stomach. It convulsed and now the numbness became a vertigo, a spinning, stars whirled around whirls, lights appeared as they faded. The *Tecolote* crawled on all fours to the outside of the tent. Into the grass he vomited all that he'd eaten and all that he'd drank and he looked into the sky and the stars were rainbow gems and where the moon should have been there was Itzel's face and it was growing and distorting as if parts of it were aging and others reverting to when she was a different, younger girl. Turned, the *Tecolote*, and he crawled back into his nest. Inside there were more lights but they illuminated nothing. There was a geography to the world and it manifested itself out of nothing.

Stop, said he. Stop. Stop.

Three Dogs cried something out and the *Tecolote* looked at her and in the shadows he saw Leonore and he saw Catalina though her face was white as

moonlight and her hair longer than ever it had been and she was blonde for some reason and bones and skin were the same. At this, emotions that never the *Tecolote* wanted to feel surged through the subdued layers of his consciousness. He saw patterns on the insides of the tent. There were flowing shapes like men and like women and together they marched on and melted into one another and grew in size until they were nothing and shrunk and everything around them shrunk on top of them too before they expanded into new shapes with wings and serpentine curls that flowed into faces and arms that looked just as the inked figures covering the skin of the *Caxcanes* did look

I'm sorry, said the *Tecolote*—said Santiago.

There were eyes outside and he saw a shadow lope across the outside of the tent and knew it to be Father Isidro something dripped and splashed and it must have been the sea water laden in that man's lungs. There was yapping but it sounded like screaming and it sounded like screeching and it was the dead, Santiago knew, it was the dead and they were here. The patterns grew stranger and there were lights and Catalina was in the tent with him crying. There was smoke still in the air so Catalina coughed and when she spoke the words made no sense to the ear but to the mind Santiago knew that she asked him why he watched Leonore get swept away to the sea just and why he told that sick man he could come and stay and be treated by his father.

Sonic booms from the underworld echoed throughout the tent. Santiago sobbed. Supernovae echoed off the nothing in great swirls of purple and red that outlined one another and traced the patterns. Three Dog was Leonore and

Leonore was growling at him and calling him *negro* and outside the tent the captain asked why Santiago watched as his daughter was swept away and Three Dog's father was a yammering hound who asked why he used not his powers to save his life. Lines of green fire shot up through Santiago's body and he put his hands to his ears and there was a pressure that made sound there and no other noise in all creation could mimic it and closed his eyes he did but when closed Santiago could not open them again for there he saw it all, the great, blood-dark sea where Spain lay drowned and where all curses did find their cradle and in that sea there was a small boat, a canoe, where Leonore sat with a bone-clad face and a girl that Santiago knew was his sister and their mother covered in buboes and underneath moving it for his father not was there was a shadow and that shadow was he who Santiago thought he had saved and when that shadow crested the still-sea it turned back and half of its face was a collection of pustules bursting and the other half Santiago and in the middle this visage did open and there was the Fish-Carrier barking, barking, barking.

I'm dying, said Santiago. I'm dying. He knew that he was because everything died and he had already died twice his journey into the New World and now a third time he died and this was the holy number of the west. Before it there was a Christian man who half-believed and Father Isidro was preaching and Santiago said, I'm dying, and into a gulf without ego did he sail.

Hands were touching him and inside of his body there exploded an anxiety matched only by the euphoria erupting from his bones. Hard, his sex, and there was a wetness on it. Leonore was watching and shaking and Itzel who was old

and young and unborn and dead all at once mounted Santiago. With a hand she kept close his eyes and never had a woman felt as good as she did now to Santiago and even as he spent his seed he was still hard and she kept riding. If there were words that Santiago's mouth formed they were of no language ever spoken.

Out of his mind and out of his body Santiago watched himself be taken by force just as the girl he wished to save was and in this moment everything that he was swirled with everything he could have been and something new, something he could have been had he been born in this New World and not the Old filled him and spent itself into Itzel who screamed, laughed, pulled herself off, looked at Three Dog, laughed, cackled, laughed, tasted what Santiago gave her, chanted something, prayed, took a *tecpatl* to her thigh and bled and took that bloody knife tip and put it in the *Tecolote's* mouth and Santiago tasted himself and blood and glass and was mesmerized by the owl, the snake, the dog whirling in a strange shape on the tent's ceiling.

Lay he there for some time like this. Itzel prayed over Three Dog's whimpering until Santiago closed his eyes and saw a jungle like the ones described to him by the Captain when the sinner-crew was formed and in that jungle a girl with a head that was a skull dance with a living shadow and said the words that Itzel said now.

**the song of eleuia: to swim in lake Texcoco is to dismember, or maybe to
love**

Crocodile's corpse (deified in death as I am now),

Mayhaps snake's or woman's or mother's,

Torn apart for a world we tear apart.

Sway do trees that blossom her bones.

Roots eat marrow just as state eats youth.

Man,

Looming,

Erect,

Feathered,

Viscera-lusting hands on throat.

Flesh on jaw, thunder—cracking branch.

Masturbate with it and wear the necklace-fangs

And her womb where all earth is born and all sins fester and
all virtue sips from that religious umbilical cord is where the
throne is sat.

Sun-zenith.

400 hummingbirds

Beak-flay

Flowers she will not give

And rabbits sing-bell

But she cannot answer for her voice

Pleasure of the Masked Speaker.

Eat her out does the sun.

Object and not god but

Idol and not miracle.

Disjointed mask, this mask, mask-disjointed with

Hunger and sleep: rape-festerings.

Ohuaya, ohuaya.

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