

POPUL VUH

in English

Preamble

This begins the ancient histories of the Quiché Maya people. Here we tell of their origins and the things they did. And we take stock of how things were brought to light by the Lords of this green plate and blue bowl. Now, shrouded by the din of preaching—which carried the conquest over the waters to our shores—we reveal, an image of our hidden sacred book, The Popul Vuh, whose clear light of words may yet guide us through the gloom even in this alien tongue. The original book you cannot see: too great its revelation of the forming of the sky and earth. You cannot see how the plumb bob plunged the deep, measuring out with its cord the four quadrants, above and below, and set them turning, as is said, by the Creator and Shaper, Mother/Father—who breathe happiness into the lives of children, and carry the light of knowledge of all there is through the lineage of the people.

PART 1

Chapter 1

This is the account of how everything that was held in abeyance still emptied its emptiness. Out of nothing came the first telling, before man, bird, fish, tree, grass, or stone. The face of Earth had not yet shown itself—only the reach of ocean. There was nothing afoot.

Then revealing themselves from behind feathers like a hidden world emerging from the dark, the makers, holding their great knowing in unspoken words, began to speak what wasn't there into being.

Nothing was done without their thinking it. Clarified in the Heart of Sky, the earth was exposed and their substance flowed into it and nourished the forms they were arranging. The surface of the ground was scored, the mountains raised, the meadows prepared for flowers, as the rivulets forked through it. The limbs of trees, evergreens and oaks, reached out. Rising clouds of insects unfolded; all the creatures were fertilized by the sap of water, by their prodigies of thought. We were awakened when their great breath moved a wind of fire through everything, underground and over, connecting one to another.

Chapter 2

And the Progenitors asked, why should there be only silence and immobility under the vines and limbs, no one to love and shake the air? So they made the small, wild animals, geniuses of the woods: deer, birds, puma, jaguar, snakes, and vipers, guardians of the thicket. Just by thinking, they did it.

You, deer, will sleep in the meadows near the river or ravine. Here you'll multiply and run on your four feet through the forest. Even in speaking, it was so.

Then the great architects designed the dwellings, large and small.

You, birds, will build your nests in the branches and curling vines; there you'll shake yourselves and reproduce.

And the land animals of the ground and air did what they were told by the creators, the ancient shapers.

—Now call, shout, trill, cry, and speak to one another. Say your names and praise us, the heart of sky, the heart of earth, they were told.

And they began to scream and shout, cackle and cluck, not like the speaking of men. The great formers saw that they spoke well in their own way, but could not actually say the names of their makers; naturally, it was determined that this was not enough.

That's why they decided to create other beings who could invoke them and obey them and why they changed their minds and added to the destiny of the quadrupeds and the birds. Because they could not speak properly, now they had to accept their lot in life to have their flesh cut to pieces every now and then.

So they decided to try their hand again and see if they could get lucky and make someone to adore them.

As the dawn approached, the forefathers and foremothers said, the animals will be sacrificed for food, but let us now make one to nourish us.

We failed in our first attempt to make respectful creatures to venerate us. Let us try again, they said. So they created a man of mud. But it was a mess. The flesh just flaked off and its head just hung down; its face was full of water and slid down the side. The thing could talk but lacked all understanding. It fell down when it walked, because there was nothing inside to support it. Worse they thought it can't even do it to multiply. We'll have to consult about this, they said.

Then they spoiled their own work of creation and admitted they didn't shape a good one to invoke and admire them.

These alchemists, looking down at the mud wondered how they could perfect it.

Hurricane, Tepeu and Cucumatz spoke to the soothsayers of the dawn, Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, as they were called. Reveal your true natures, sculptures of wood and stone, carvers of the blue sky, the green plate, that we may cut their eyes from the very woods. Help us. We must find the means to create those who will support and feed us, invoke and remember us.

And the makers told them to hold one another that the wood too might be connected and asked that they honor their makers and do not torment them. And they told the men of wood to look and talk like men, populating the earth.

But these soulless dolls did only as they were taught; lacking mind, these quadrupeds wandered the earth, forgetting as they went, forgetting as they ceaselessly multiplied.

Chapter 3

But they had no minds and could not name the name of things. They thought of nothing but themselves. It was because of this they were punished with a black rain. The Heart of the Sky produced a flood; a great deluge of black rain formed and fell down on the empty woodenheads. Immediately these mannequins were annihilated.

First there came the small animals, the big animals, the sticks and the stones, then their plates, pans, dogs, and grounding stones. All of them rose up in a flood of anger to speak: a lot of evil you were doing us; you were eating us, and now we will bite you. We were tormented by you; every day, every day, at night, at the dawn, all the time.

Their dogs growled: why didn't you give us food? All you could do is hit us with sticks. Now we will prove that the teeth in our mouths are real.

Their pots and pans began to talk: you rubbed our mouths and stained faces with pain and put us on the fire to burn us. Now we will burn you, the hearthstones agreed.

The houses wanted to return to the trees and throw themselves upon them. The caverns longed to swallow them up.

This is what the selfish deserve, the blockheads who do not live for the others living beside them and for the ones yet to come. Heart of Sky/Heart of Earth will not let them continue to use up the creation.

But they asked the Grandmother Xmucane and Grandfather Xpiyacoc not to just be defeated but to try one more time. That was when they made the people of corn. The corn is the staff of life and holds the roof of heaven. Under it our on houses may stand and provide nourishment for the people sitting around her table. They were not perfect people, but they had minds and a mouth to speak. They had a chance to learn and grow wise and to do the right thing.

PART II

Chapter 1

Now we give the history of One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, the fathers of the hero twins. They were the children of the grandparents Xmucane and Xpiyacoc. Hunbatz and Hunchoen were their sons; Ixbayayalo was their mother. These children were magicians, alchemists, and artists: diviners of the earth, the flute, song, paint, clay, and smoke.

Now One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu loved nothing more than the ball game. And days would find them with their sons playing at the courts.

Meanwhile way down under in the underworld of Xibalba, you could here the Lords of Death complaining. In those days they were the greatest. Whenever someone died that was the end of it. They were there just to gloat. Their job was to make people suffer and die. They had terrible names like One Death and Seven Death, Pus Master, Bone Scepter, Blood Sucker, Pox Maker, and terrible names like that. They did not like the sound of things.

Who is making the ground shake over our heads. They're just playing ball, those boys: they don't respect us, they said. They're just playing over our heads, said the lords of Xibalba. They wanted a ball for themselves, not just skulls to play with. They wanted their gloves, their masks, all the accoutrement.

Now we shall tell of their journey to Xibalba and how they left behind the two children, One Monkey and One Artist—whose mother had died—and eventually say how the hero twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, defeated them.

Chapter 2

Hard by came the keepers of the mat, the messengers of the Lords of Death, who told them to summon One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu: Go to the ball court they love and say that truly they are wonders and must come quickly and carry their equipment, yokes, armguards, and the rubber ball, so they might gladden the faces of the ones who sent you.

In a flurry of wings, the messenger owls—Flying Arrow, One-leg, Red-back, and Head Owl—flew out from the zones of Xibalba and alighted on the ball court called The Great Abyss. Here they repeated the words of their masters: One Death and Seven Death, Pus and Jaundice Master, Bone and Skull Scepter, Corner and Blood Sucker, Trash and Stab Master, Wing, and Packstrap, as they are called.

The boys went to tell their grandmother, Xmucane, that they must go. To One Monkey and One Artist, they said, we shall leave our ball in the rafters as a pledge of our return. Do not be afflicted. Play the flute, paint, and sculpt to warm the heart of your grandmother. She, they left weeping in a pool of grief.

Then the messengers took them down a sudden steep, through a narrow of rapids and onto a river of many thorns, which somehow they passed without being pierced. And came to a stream of blood before they arrived at the cross of four roads: red, black, white, and yellow. The black road said fellow me for I am the road to Xibalba that leads to the Lords of Death.

They had already lost the game, for they were led into the council chambers before nothing but wooden dolls disguised as lords. These the two greeted in turn; when the hidden lords burst out in derisive laughter welcoming them and offering a bench to sit upon. But it was only a hot seat that burned their butts. This sent a coil of laughter up the scepters of Xibalba as the lords held the stitches of bones on their aching sides. Among themselves they knew the boys were already gone and led them to the first of many tests of Xibalba.

The twins were brought to a house and handed torches and cigars and told to light and smoke them. In the morning the lords asked the boys to return the cigars, whole and intact. This was the defeat of one Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu. This was as far as they got in the tests of Xibalba.

They were sacrificed at the place of ball game sacrifice. One head was removed and buried in the fork of a calabash tree, which bore fruit that resembled that head. So amazed were the Lords of death, that they forbid anyone to eat of that tree.

But a maiden had heard of this remarkable event and this is her story.

Chapter 3

This is the history of a maiden, Little Blood--daughter of the Lord Blood Sucker. Now, when her father spoke of the strange fruit growing on the tree, she was amazed. Why shouldn't I go see what they tell of, she said. Truly the fruit must be delicious? So she went alone to the foot of that tree. Ah, she exclaimed, Isn't it wonderful to see how it is covered with fruit? Will I truly die if I pick one?

Then one of them spoke: you do not want one of these. They are not fruit at all, just skulls that have turned round on the branches of a tree.

--But I do want them, the maiden answered.

--Very well, said the skull, stretch out your hand.

At that moment, the skull spit in her hand and said, I have now given you a sign. My head has no mean on it any more. That is what kings and convicts come to. When the flesh is gone we are no longer beautiful and everyone is scared by the bones. But if you have understanding, know that you live on in your children like an embedded sign. Now trust me when I say that you will not die and to live well on the face of the earth, said One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu.

But of course, after six months her father found out and he was angry.

--Very well, said the other Lords, make her tell or go out and sacrifice her.

So the father interrogated her.

--Who is the father of the bastard child in your womb?

And she answered--I have not known any living man.

He called her a liar and a slut, and called the messengers to take her out and sacrifice her.

--Get your flint knife and cut out her heart and put it in this bowl, called the other Lords of Death, so we can make sure.

When the owls took her away, she asked, is it possible that you messengers will kill me?

They didn't really want to do that, but asked, what can we put in the cup but your heart?

--Very well, she said, but this heart does not belong to them, and we must learn to give them only what is theirs.

--Now gather red sap from that special tree. It is named, copal. Shape it like a heart and place it in the bowl. Then give it to the greedy Lords of Death, said the young woman to the owls.

When they returned, the Lords asked if everything had been terminated.

They said, that everything is concluded, and showed them the heart in the bowl.

The great Lords saw what they wanted, and breaking it, watched the blood oozing out. Then they placed it on a fire and smelled the sweet fragrance of blood rise in the smoke. Truly, that is all they are entitled to. And as they indulged themselves, the owls guided her to the opening that leads to the surface of the Earth, and bade her to live there long and well.

Thus were the great Lords of Death blinded by the smoke made by the wise and knowing Little Blood.

Chapter 4

After her long journey Little Blood came before the grandmother Xmucane and said, I am your daughter-in-law and your daughter, dear mother.

--Where do you come from?, asked the grandmother. As for my sons, they died in Xibalba. Their two boys here, One Monkey and One Artist are all that is left of them. Now get out of here.

Nevertheless, I am your daughter-in-law. And your children have not died, dear mother. You will see their faces again in the children I bear.

One Monkey and One Artist were becoming jealous, not just amusing themselves playing flute or singing or sculpting as they always did to console their grandmother.

The old woman spoke.

--I do not want you. It is just your fornication that you carry. You are a deceiver, and the children you spoke of are already dead. Still, she said, I want to give you a chance. Take this net to the cornfield and fill it up. Then bring it back.

--Very well, said Little Blood. But when she arrived at the milpa, she found only one tiny corn plant. She was full of anguish. How can I fill up such a net with such a puny plant? I am such a sinner she said. Oh guardian of the field, oh spirit that makes things grow, take pity on me and make things happen.

Because her heart was pure, the goddess granted her request, and from a single cob came a plethora to fill her net.

When Little Blood came back with the net, the grandmother was amazed to see the net of corn.

--Where did you get all this corn? Surely you have told the truth. Surely this is a sign, since the name Hunahpu means net full of corn. What you have already shown proves they are my grandchildren and that they are already magicians.

Chapter 5

Now we tell the birth of Hunahpú and Xbalanqué. When the big day came, they were born like a crack of thunder on a mountaintop—and they came swiftly into the house of the grandmother. But nobody in that place could sleep, because they were so loud.

--Get them out of here! said the old woman; it's really just too much putting up with all that crying.

Their older, half brothers, One artist and One Monkey, were great artists. They were knowers, these two, and well understood that these two young interlopers were destined to be the true successors of their fathers. They could not accept being replaced like that, so they tried to kill them on the anthill or in the place of thorns--so filled with jealousy were they. And it is hard to believe, but true that in suffering much they had nonetheless grown wise, and that wise though they were, they could not abide their younger brothers in what was their home. But the wee boys did not die. They just grew up wild in the fields and in the mountains—shooting their blowguns and living off the birds they brought down from the trees. They got no food from their grandmother, but brought what they could and gave it to the household. Moreover, Hunahpu and Xbalanque did not grow red with anger. They brought their brothers birds to eat too and tried to be good to them. At best, One Artist and One Monkey ignored them and sank deeper into their music and song. This went on for some time, until the twins had had enough. They brought nothing home.

That's when their grandmother asked Hunahpu and Xbalanque, why are their no birds for dinner? The two answered that the birds they shot were still caught high up in the tree, that they just wouldn't fall. But maybe their dear brothers would join them in the morning to help get them down.

The young twins had had enough of their brother's treachery. They decided to give them a bit of their own medicine. So the next day they showed their brothers the tree where the birds do not fall down to the ground. Go up the there and get them, they said to these dear brothers.

--Oh very well, they answered. But the more they climbed, the more that tree also grew; so they could never reach the top. Now things had changed; the older ones now called for their younger brothers to help them. Truly it was the magic and knowledge of these hero twins that was causing all the change. But the two were glad to help and suggested their dear brothers undo their pants and tie one leg to their waists and one to the tree to hold on. That's when they began to take on a new form. This was how the two became what they always were, mere monkeys, swinging and howling, and scratching their privates.

But when they returned home and told their grandmother what had happened, she was angry that they had hurt their brothers.

And they said to their grandmother: do not fret that you will never see their faces again. But we must tell you their returning will be a test for you. You must promise not to laugh or you will have to say good-bye to them forever. She agreed; and they began to play the monkeyshine on the flute.

Finally the older brothers came and started dancing to that music. But the old woman burst out laughing when she saw their funny faces and their wide buttocks and silly bellies. Three times they came to see her, but she could not contain her guffawing. She just held her aching stomach.

So even as the two went away in shame, Hunahpu and Xbalanque consoled her. Dear grandmother, love us and love our mother and we will be with you dear grandmother. And we promise that our brothers will always be remembered. They shall ever be One Artist and One Monkey, and the people shall always honor their music and art. They shall be a lesson to all of us about how to use our gifts. And yes, dear grandmother, for the life of the people, they shall be praised for their great art and what great things they did in your home. And as we know, what they said is true.

Chapter 6

Then they told their grandmother what their work would be. Do not grieve, they said, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, to her, their grandmother; here we are, your grandchildren. We are going out to sow and tend the milpa, said Hunahpu and Xbalanque. Immediately they took up their axe, pick, hoe stick, mattock, and of course their blow guns, and put them over their shoulders. They asked their grandmother to bring their lunch, when it was time to take a break at noon.

--Very well, my grandchildren, the old woman answered.

Soon they came to the place of seeds. And after sinking the mattock in the ground and laying down their other tools, they rested as the tools began to work by themselves, clearing the ground, felling odd trees, getting rid of the troublesome thorns, and tilling the soil. Then they taught the morning dove to climb up on the top of a great tree and sing out when it saw their grandmother bring the food. That way they could pick up the hoe and axe and pretend to be working when she arrived.

Soon the bird sang out, and they picked up the farm implements. One rubbed his hands and face with dirt; the other poured woodchips on his hair. They really looked like farm hands. They put on quite an act for their grandmother.

--We're so very tired they said to their grandmother. And when they got back home they massaged their weary legs and arms in front of her and said they just had to just go to bed. Thus they ate up the grandmother's food, who felt sorry for the poor boys working so hard for their grandmother. But they didn't do any farming at all. They just watched while the tools did everything.

They got a surprise when they returned the field the next day; something had happened. All of their work had been undone; everything was just like it was before they started. In short, someone had cleaned them out.

--Who pulled this trick on us?, they wondered, as they began to have their tools prepare the field again. But that night, they decided to hide out behind a bush and see just who the culprits were.

All around them the stars whirled the menagerie of constellations. That's when the animals came down to the milpa and began to gobble up everything. The boys saw all their work being eaten. All the animals small and big came down, puma and jaguar, the deer, the cat, coati mundi, the rabbit. But the boys couldn't catch them. The coyote slipped away, the birds; the peccary shuffled off. They got away by the skin of their teeth. The hearts of Hunahpu and Xbalanque were burning with rage. They were just frustrated because the animals would slip through their fingers and slide back into the dark sky and get away. But then they caught a rat by the neck. They burned its tail in the fire and made its eyes bulge out. That's why they look that way now, with no tail hair and pop eyes.

Then the rat said don't kill me don't kill me. It's not my fate to die at your hands.

--Then tell us why you and the other animals keep devouring the crops, said the boys.

--First give me something to eat, the rat said please.

--No. First you tell us; then we'll give you something, the twins asserted.

--All right, all right, said the rat as they squeezed its neck. It's not your job to tend the field. Your not farmers your ballplayers--like your fathers before you, One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu who died in Xibalba. Their balls and ring and gloves and other ball court implements are hidden under your grandmother's roof, because she did not want you to learn about the ballgame. She was afraid you would die in Xibalba as they did.

The boys were delighted to learn that they were not farmers. They danced at the news, and said, as a reward for this and doing one more favor, dear rat, your food for all times will be the corn and the chili pepper, frijoles, squash, and chocolate. And if anything gets left behind in the trash you can eat that too.

--That's really great boys, said the rat. But what if your grandmother sees me when I try to get your ball game equipment?

They made a plan to trick her. And the next day, they asked their grandmother and mother to bring them some water from the well to go with their delicious hot plate of chilies. They arranged with the mosquito to poke holes in the water pitcher so the water would keep draining out and they would never be able to get back in time. Thus, as soon as they were gone, the rat climbed the rafter by the road of the rat, as it is known today. It chewed through the ropes and the ball game equipment tumbled into the waiting arms of Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

It was in this way, that they found their way to the mysterious and wonderful rubber ball.

Chapter 7

With great pleasure they went over to play the ballgame, the one that takes place in the center of the cosmos, the one that reenacts the telling of the skies, where our stories come down to greet us, that some say we put them up there first, but I cannot say.

Now deep down in Xibalba, the lords of death cried out bitterly. What's that noise? Who's that playing ball on top of our heads again? Don't they know what happens to those who don't respect us? Haven't they learned that we will make those who try to lord it over us pay the highest price?

Then One Death and Seven Death and all the lords gave their messengers instructions. You tell those boys to come here in seven days. Tell them to bring all their equipment; say we want to play with them!

Straight off the owls flew till arriving at the foot of the grandmother. To Xmucane, they gave the terrible invitation. As they departed, her heart was full of anguish and the poor afflicted woman gasped her secret knowledge that this was indeed the same message their parents had received before they were killed.

She knew that she had to deliver the message to the twins, but, time being relative, she decided also to take matters into her own hands. She then took up a tiny louse and said, my little child, I'm going to put a word in your belly to take off and deliver to my grandchildren at the ball court far away. You tell them to go play ball with the lords of death in seven days, said the grandmother, among other things.

The grandmother looked satisfied as the louse went slowly off. But then as the louse proudly walked, it came upon a toad. I notice you seem to be going somewhere, said the toad. Yes, I carry a word for the boys, answered the louse. That's good, but I can't help that you seem to be going very slowly. Perhaps if you let me swallow you, I can carry your message faster, the toad said to the louse. The louse agreed, and the toad went on in his self-satisfied kind of way. Not really hurrying, he came upon a snake in the road. After inquiring about his mission, he convinced the toad that the word could travel ever so much quicker inside his belly. As the snake moved along, he too, met a helpful creature. The falcon told the snake that the word could be carried in his stomach even better and that the message would be delivered right away. Then the falcon landed on the edge of the court crying in its usual haunted way. They brought it down by shooting its eye with their blowguns. Why are you making all that noise, the boys asked?

--I carry a word in my belly that many have carried before me. That is the way the world is made. If you treat my eye first, I will give it to you, the falcon said. Very well, they said, and they put a little gum from that magic ball into the falcon's eye and cured him. Now speak they said to the falcon.

That's when he vomited the snake, who vomited the toad. But the boys had to crush its back to make that toad give up its prize. Even then it tried to only give up a little spittle. But the louse came out from behind its teeth and began to speak.

--I carry a word in my belly. The lords of death want you to go down to Xibalba in seven days. You must bring your ball game equipment, your rings, gloves, yokes, balls, kilts, and all the rest. They say to you they want to amuse themselves with you. This is what your grandmother gave to me to say to you that the owls told her that the lords of death said to them to say to you, said the louse. But you must know that because of this, your grandmother ululates in a dark place all her anguish and fear that you too will be killed.

Is that right, they said. And then, they came to the house of their grandmother to comfort her and to say goodbye.

Dear grandmother, we know that you are distressed at our having to go, they said to their grandmother.

But we ask you to place this corn under the rafters of your house as a sign of our fortune. Corn indeed is that which holds up the sky. And they said, to plant it under the roof in the middle of the house. It will hold up the world as it is meant to do. Everyone can gather near it and be sustained by it. If the leaves are green, they said, you will know that we are well. Otherwise, we must certainly die. So do not cry, dear grandmother, the twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, said to her, their dear grandmother, Xmucane.

Chapter 8

Off they went, taking each one his blowpipe, going down to Xibalbá. Taking the treacherous steps between river and barranca, they had many adventures. First they defeated the big mouth Seven Macaw, who was so bright and beautiful he claimed to be the sun and the moon.

He would just stand up on a great tree spreading his wings saying, I am he who brings the light to the world. I am the sun himself. I am the moon.

--My jewels are precious stones; my face is the face of sky, my teeth shine with perfection. My throne is silver; the earth bends down to genuflect when I pass.

He made everyone sick with his speech. Even Heart of Earth and Heart of Sky could not abide his bragging; so asked the boys to take the shine off his face and teach him a lesson. They shot his beak with their blowguns and knocked his jewels right out of his mouth. Every creature is important, but no one is all-important. This lesson he had to learn. The world is not put together that way.

But the sins of the father are often visited upon the sons. So it was with Seven Macaw's two sons, Zapacna the maker of mountains and Earthquake the destroyer of mountains. These two also had to be taught a lesson by the wonderful boys. Zapacna was always bragging about how no one could build greater than he; since he was the one who raised the mountains. He killed The Four Hundred Boys who were trying to raise up the tallest tree to hold up the world. He acted as if he were more important than that. The twins set a mountain on top of him and turned him to stone. Earthquake, the second son, was just like him, but tearing down the mountains at the corners of the world, just for himself. The twins turned him into a piece of earth. Now they are all truly part of something—strangely to say, something they always were.

But seven days were coming fast, and the boys just continued on their way toward Xibalba. They made it through the rivers of blood and shit. The Lords of Death had hoped to trap them there, but the twins rode over the poisonous waters on their blowguns.

Then they reached the deadly crossroads, black, white, red, and green. But they were not confused. They asked mosquito to do them a favor. Go down and sting each lord in turn until he cries out. Learn the name and bring it back to us. Your reward will be for all times to drink the blood of travelers who move along the road, they said to mosquito.

--Very well, answered the mosquito. And immediately he entered the black road and proceeded to the Lords of Xibalba to sting them all. He first stung the first two; but they were mere manikins, tricks to fool the hero twins. The third one he bit screamed. What's wrong One Death, said another. Then they bit Seven Death. Yeow! What's wrong Seven Death. And on like that. Each one they bit, House Corner, Blood Sucker, Pus Master, Jaundice Master, Bone Scepter, Skull Scepter, Wing, Packstrap, Bloody Claws, Bloody Teeth. Each one yeowed in pain and was named by his fellow. Mosquito then returned and told the boys everything. He told them about their tricks as well. The boys continued with confidence on to Xibalba. They were not fooled by the dolls made of wood, but greeted each real lord by name. They knew that giving it a name often defeats evil.

The Lords of Death were deeply disturbed. How did they learn our names? And who are these boys? Soon they sought to regain their composure by inviting them to have a seat, as they pointed to one right in front of them. Make yourselves comfortable they insisted. We want you to feel at home, they said.

But Hunahpu and Xbalanque were not fooled. That is just a hot seat, they said. Why do you try such silly tricks, they said, what kind of hosts are you?

The lords were not pleased, but took hope that they would be defeated in the first terrible test of Xibalba, The House of Darkness.

Chapter 9

When the twins entered the house of gloom, the Lords of Death knew it was the beginning of the end for those lucky boys. The lords gave them each a burning torch along with two cigars. Make sure that you return them whole in the morning. They were already gloating. This was a test of time and how could they defeat its unchangeable and inexorable march. Each lord knew that everything ended with the defeat of every living thing and the triumph of death. That made them smack their lips.

--The boys said okay, but they did not light those pine torches, but merely put the tail of the bright Macaw on them. Neither did they light their cigars, but just put fireflies on the tips, and pretended to enjoy them.

All through the night the sentries thought on the defeat of the two boys, as they watched the lights flicker through the windows. They knew they were lost.

But in the morning Hunahpu and Xbalanque gave the lords their due

--How can this be, the angry hearts of the Lords burned? Where did these boys come from? Who gave them birth? Their faces are strange; their manner is strange, said the great lords.

They tried to shake off their confusion. Let's just play ball, they said. But at the same time they interrogated them. Where do you come from, they asked the boys, trying to wheedle it out of them?

But the two were not falling into any traps. They answered, O who really knows where they really come from?

The Lords hid their irritation and said, let's play with out ball; it's just a pretty decorated rubber one.

The boys caught it in one of their yokes. It was not a ball, but a skull, and from its center came a flint knife aiming right for their sweet hearts.

--What's this? exclaimed Hunahpú and Xbalanqué. All you want to give us is death? But didn't you invite us here? I guess, we'll just have to leave, said the boys.

And of course what the Lords of Death had in mind for the boys was that they would just die. But the boys were not defeated; they would not just die. So the lords decided to try something else.

--No boys don't leave. We really want you to stay. Let's play with your ball, they said to the boys, as they put it in play.

After that they determined what the winner's prize would be. Four bowls of flowers, the lords said, red, white, yellow, and black.

--Very well, said the boys.

Still, as the game ended the Lords of Xibalba had won. The boys were strong but that is how it goes sometimes.

Now the lords were feeling good. They knew they had won. First they will have to cut those flowers, but where will they get them, the lords hissed between their teeth.

--So they said to Hunahpu and Xbalanque, you are to bring us the flowers, without fail. And they thought that since the twins had defeated them with a strategy of time they would win a strategy of space. After all, how could they have something that wasn't there, the great lords thought about that.

--Very well, the twins answered. And at dawn we'll play ball again, they said to the great lords.

Now the boys were tied up with rope and entered the House of Knives--another of the terrible trials of Xibalba. Here the lords wished their hearts to be cut to pieces; but here, they did not die, but spoke directly to the knives.

--If you will be still, yours will be the flesh of animals for all time. And with this thought in mind, the razors moved no more.

All night they spent, the clever boys, in that House of Knives. Then they called their friends the ants. Come cutting ants, come and cut the different kinds of flowers we need and carry them in the morning to the Lords of Death.

Previously, the lords had placed their guards at the gates and told them not to let the boys enter the garden to cut any flowers. They understood what it meant to be told; so they cried and sang through the night to stay awake, but did not see or hear the tiny ants walking by or cutting the blossoms. They were vigilant the whole of the night, of everything but what was moving past their feet.

Only the ants sent by the boys moved among them cutting the flowers and walking past them with their bowls full of blossoms. When they had finished, they did as Hunahpu and Xbalanque had asked and took the four bowls and placed them before the doors of the Lords of Death.

All of the faces of Xibalba turned pale when they saw the flowers. Then they cracked the whippoorwill's beaks in twain to do something about it. The way they look today is the anger of the Lords of Death. The lords could not get over it. How could those boys go where they were not? How can you give flowers when you have none, they asked about the boys. The Lords were defeated again.

When the boys showed up they just played ball. The game ended in a tie. Then they agreed to play again the next morning.

Chapter 10

Next they entered the House of the Cold, something impossible to describe that mansion full of hail and ice. No doubt the Xibalbans wanted them dead. But they did not die. In the center of that place they found remains of the ancient trees that hold the sky. In their trunks they built fires and stayed warm through the long night.

--How is it, the Lords of Xibalba asked, that Hunahpu and Xbalanque live? Why are they not dead already, they asked in amazement?

Then they went to the House of Tigers. They calmed them by offering them bones, and saying that these shall be yours for all times. The tigers went after the bones, gnashing and tearing them.

In satisfaction, the sentries reported to the lords that they heard the boys being torn apart, their entrails being devoured, their bones crushed.

But they did not die.

--Of what race are these two? Where have they come from?, the Xibalbans despaired.

--How did they then survive the fearful House of Fire? Perhaps they called on the great ocean turned by the great axis turning to cool them, but in any case, they did not burn. Only the hearts of those terrible lords burned when the boys emerged unharmed.

They were then put in the House of Bats, mere snatch bats with claws and teeth, sharp as knives. All through the night they fluttered by and squeaked terribly, as the boys slept soundly in their blowguns. They went silent, but one stayed quiet, resting on top of them.

--Hunahpu, is it morning already, asked Xbalanque?

--Perhaps, I'll just look and take a look-see, answered Hunahpu.

That's when that terrible bat snatched his head off.

Again, Xbalanque asked, has it dawned yet? But Hunahpu was not moving. - Where has he gone?

Xbalanque felt ashamed and disgraced as he exclaimed, alas, we are certainly defeated.

The Lords had won for sure. They hung his head at the ball court in joy. They certainly had won, had they not, and it had not come easy. Such were the feeling of the Xibalbans as the glad tidings spread.

Chapter 11

Xbalanque called upon all the animals for help, the boar, the coati, things large and small, and asked that they bring the food they like.

--Very well, they answered, and went off bringing what they like, grasses, dirty things, rotten things. Then Coati rolled in a pumpkin.

This would do for the head. And Xbalanque worked long on the face, but needed the Heart of Earth, the Heart of Sky to finish it.

It was very good; the hair was beautiful appearance, and also, he could speak. They seemed to be ready; even so, buzzard darkened the rosy dawn to delay its coming.

When it was finished, Hunahpu asked if it would be good enough to fool the Lords of Death?

--It's good enough, but you better just wave your arms and look threatening and let me play the game.

He had given a plan to everyone in the night, and come morning, told rabbit to take his special place at the oak grove.

The boys arrived at the ball court.

The Lords were howling, you're already defeated, as they played with Hunahpu's head, up and down the court. Can't you see, you've worked your own ruin. We've already won, the lords gloated.

But the ball did not cooperate. It just jumped out of the court and rolled over to the oak trees.

That's when rabbit took his cue, and rolled out just like Hunahpu's head.

All the Xibalban's chased it, just as planned. Meanwhile Xbalanque put the real head back on the body. Hunahpu felt much better, of course.

The Xibalban's thought they saw it hanging in the oaks. It was just that pumpkin head. But when they returned they were surprised to find Hunahpu's head restored.

What's all this, they exclaimed, what do we see here?

They played to a draw, and then they began to play again. After being hit with something, that pumpkin split open wide and all of its seeds spilled over the Lords of Xibalba.

That is the way they were defeated. Death was covered in seeds. This way the lords were conquered by Hunahpú and Xbalanqué. The hero twins had done everything asked of them and they did not die. They had big hearts and knowledge to boot. They had understood how things relate and had moved within the limitation and reach of things. But their story is far from over.

Chapter 12

Now we shall recount the way Hunahpú and Xbalanqué died.

Having survived all the terrible tests of Xibalba, they called the shamans responsible for seeing into the practices surrounded death. The hero twins told them, that when the Lords of Death come to talk about the means of their death, you are to suggest that we be thrown into the river. You are to see to them that this is the best way for them to die. But you must also say to the lords that we must first grind their bones like cornmasa and make them into tortillas. We will break these tortillas and cast the pieces onto the waters.

The soothsayers agreed and prepared all the things for their death.

The Lords tried to trick the boys once more. They called them over to a bonfire used for cooking.

--Come the lords said to the boys, try this sweet chicha that we have made just for you. Drink from the four bowls and for each jump over the fiery oven in the earth. We so want to enjoy this with you.

Like everyone, the boys had to die. But those boys knew something that even the lords had to learn—something that would truly rob them of their prize. For now they would teach them only the lesser lesson of life, how to die. Later the great teaching would come.

So the two face each other and held each other and jumped together, headlong into the furnace.

In a manner of relief filled with gladness, the citizens of Xibalba hailed and hissed, Now we have truly conquered them. At last their time is ended.

The lords followed the instructions of the seers Xulu and Pacam with the final means of disposing of their bodies. Their remains were sprinkled over the river. As they fell, two fish ate them. Above two fishers caught them and ate them. In this was their victory and their knowledge. The boys had been reborn into the great circuit of life.

Chapter 13

On the fifth day, people reported seeing two catfish, and fisher eating them, and later two vagabonds in rags. All the Xibalbans saw these people of poor appearance do their special dances. They danced the whippoorwill; and they danced the weasel; they also danced the armadillo, the centipede, and also the stilt dance.

Also, they worked many prodigious acts of magic. They burned houses down but brought them back whole. Something like this made many of the Xibalbans contemplate them with admiration.

Then they tore each other to pieces but came back alive and well. The wonder of the Xibalbans was really the victory of Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

News of their successes preceded them to the court of the Lords of Xibalba.

--Are they truly marvelous, they asked? Do they really bring such pleasure?

With such sweet talk, they told their messengers to go and get them. You will say, they were told, that we want only to see what they do so they may astonish us and we may admire them, they said.

But the boys pretended to be shy. Oh we're just humble folks who don't know anything, they said. We just came off the turnip truck. You'll be disappointed.

The lords smiled at each other saying no no, but where are you from?

--We don't know that; we don't even know our mother or our father. The boys bent their heads in shame.

--Don't worry boys; we will admire you and give you money for your efforts too.

The boys had them on a short leash. Oh no that feigned, we just couldn't; we don't want anything we're too, too, afraid, they said.

This was just how the lords wanted them to act. Don't be afraid they said. Dance, burn down the house, and kill yourselves, the different lords yelled. Our hearts wish this to happen, they said.

They began with singing and dances, the poorwhil, the armadillo, and the weasel. All the Xibalbás came and to see them.

Then one of the lords cried out, cut my dog to pieces, then resuscitate him, he said to them.

They did as they were told. Truly, not only was the dog enchanted when he was revived.

Another lord said to them, burn down my house and bring it back the way it was. The lords began to move about wildly to see them do it.

The other lords wanted it done to their houses too.

--This is marvelous they said. They were feeling such pleasure they could barely contain themselves.

They wanted to move to their dances as well.

--Kill my servant, said one, and bring him back.

--Very well, they answered. And taking the man, they caught out his heart, and raised it before all the Lords of Xibalba.

The lords began to salivate when they brought him back to life.

The gentlemen were amazed. Now sacrifice each other and let us see it. Our very hearts desire to dance with you.

--Very well, gentleman, they answered. And next they sacrificed themselves. Taking turns, they separated their hearts from their bodies and their hearts were removed.

The Lords of Death were fascinated.

Their hearts filled with lust and anxiety. They wanted to dance to the theatre of the twins, to become the dance itself. They gave orders to Hunahpu and Xbalanque. They told them to sacrifice us, one by one, and bring us back to life. Do the same thing to us they begged.

And they sacrificed each one in turn, One Death and Seven Death and all the others behind them. But of course, the hero twins had no intention of bringing them back to life. Now they, too, were meant to die.

Upon seeing this, all the children and vassals of Xibalbá flew off into a deep abyss. They fell like innumerable ants, fearing the great lesson before them.

It was in giving them this that Lords of Death were defeated by the hero twins.

Chapter 14

The two stood before the folk of Xibalba and told them who they were. We are Hunahpu and Xbalanque. Our fathers were One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu.

Hearing this, the Xibalbans fell to their knees and begged the twins for mercy for all the evil they had done.

--We will now tell you what your punishment will be. None of you will escape. No more will you be great. No longer will you wait at the end and gloat over the suffering and loss of life. Now you too are merely part of a great story, not the end of every story. We are transformers my friends. And now your part is like the rest, all important, but never all, and is to die. That is your sentence. Each individual life will end.

As they pondered their cruel fate the Xibalbans shook in fear, though what they were given was truly just a compassionate revelation. It was just an announcement of the end of the empire, for truly people may never have what isn't theirs and that they may have only that which is truly theirs.

Meanwhile, under her roof, the grandmother, Xmucane was crying before the withered corn. As she watched, the corn revived right there in the middle of the house. The green returns and everyone is joyful.

The two boys, contemplating the wonderful ball game that is played in the mouth of heaven, looked down at the garden, as their old fathers rejoined the vibrant living world.

Those four hundred boys who were killed by one of the boastful children of Seven Macaw became the innumerable stars.

And the hero twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, lifted up and took their place in the turning heavens as the sun and the moon.

We are ourselves coming and going, becoming something else.
The game continues after all; let us all learn how to play.