

Mucho Somos Series
Number Twelve

DECADE: THE 1990s



John Curl

OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

Poetry

Tidal News (1982, Homeward Press)

Cosmic Athletics (1980, Poetry for the People)

Ride the Wind (1979, Poetry for the People)

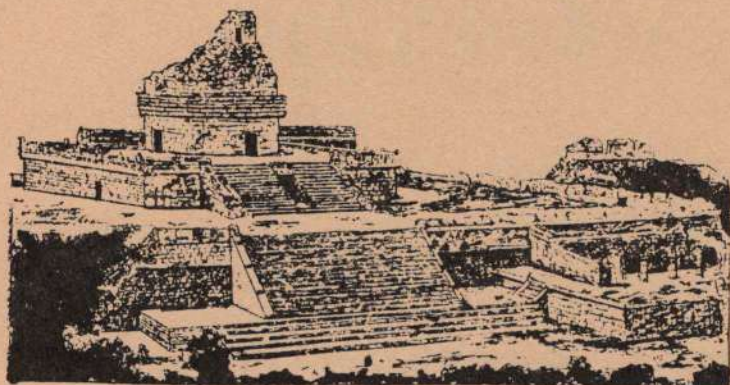
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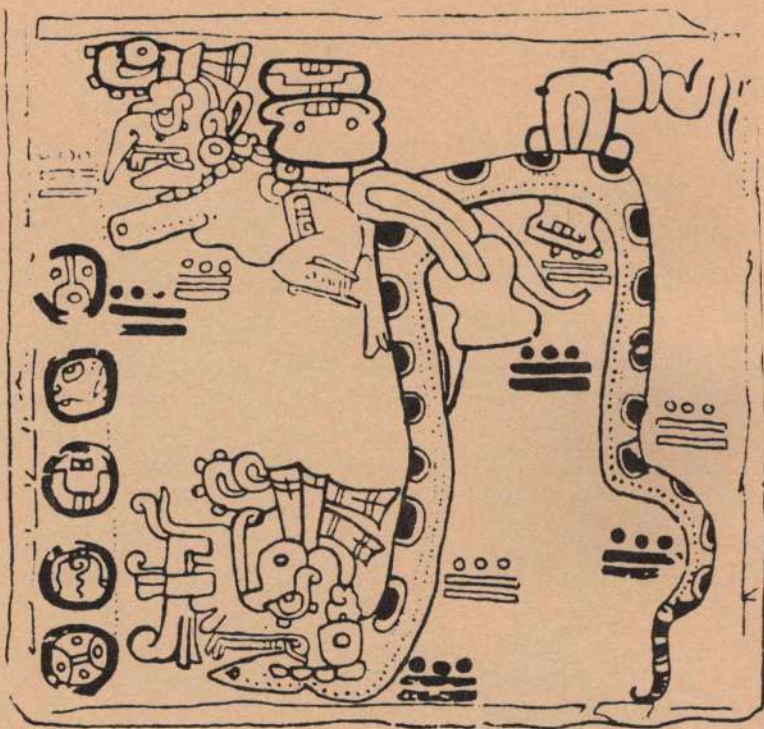
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Number Twelve

DECADE: THE 1990s

John Curl

1987

MOTHER'S HEN



Berkeley, California

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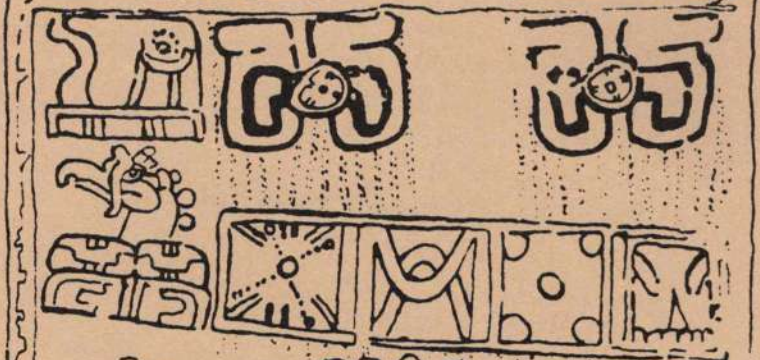
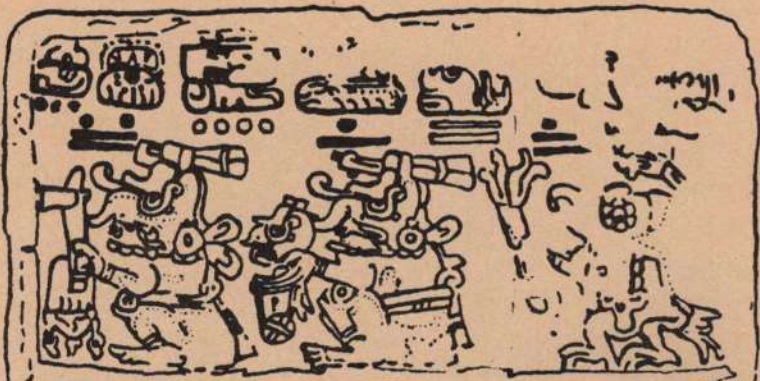
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CONTENTS

Incident of Travel in Yucatán	1
Decade: The 1990s	13

ILLUSTRATIONS

Lintel 26, Yaxchilan, Redrawn by Marta N. Hoyos Cuneo	cover
Pages from the Mayan hieroglyphic book known as the Madrid Codex	
Codex p. 31	facing title page
12	facing p. 1
14	6
37	11
39	12
66	14
73	25
Katún wheel from Diego de Landa's <i>Relación de las cosas de Yucatán</i> (1566)	5



INCIDENT OF TRAVEL IN YUCATAN

1

I didn't come to Yucatán to see the ruins of ancient Mayan ceremonial centers and cities, or because I wanted to spend time in an area still very Indian, or even just to lie on a palm-shaded Caribbean beach; I came because my relationship with Stella had reached an intense estrangement. It was only on the plane, as I read the guidebook, that I became increasingly interested in where we were going.

When the first Spaniards arrived, the Mayas had hieroglyphic books, advanced mathematics, astronomy, stone architecture, calendrics, history, sculpture painting. The first Spaniards, on the other hand, were illiterate.

Central to the ancient culture was their calendar. The Mayas measured time in repeating complex cycles, the most immediate being the katún, about twenty years. There were thirteen different katúns, each named after a different number Ahau, or "Lord," one of the days, whose hieroglyphic sign was a face with circle eyes, lines for a nose, and a round open mouth. Each katún had different omens, as did each year, month, and day. Twenty rounds of the thirteen katúns made a Great Cycle of 1,872,000 days. The present cycle began in 3113 B.C. and will end in 2011 A.D. By recording historical events in each katún, the Mayas thought they could foretell what was to happen in similar katúns present and future. The changing katúns were pictured as a wheel of thirteen Ahau faces spinning counter-clockwise . . .

At the end of the gravel road was a shack with a rusted metal soda sign. It looked closed. Heat built up as soon as I stopped the car.

"Look," gasped Stella.

In the clearing to our right, a creature poked its head through the leaves.

"A coatimundi," she whispered.

It darted across, pointed nose, bushy tail, catlike, and disappeared into the low jungle on the other side.

"I've never seen one."

"They're a kind of racoon." She quickly pulled out her diary and began writing.

A Mayan boy of about nine appeared at my window holding several small stuffed bags. The dust behind him shimmered and throbbed in the sun.

"Cacahuates? Manis?"

"How much?" I wasn't hungry.

"Cuarenta pesos."

The price was outrageous, but I fished out the money and took the peanuts.

"Is the store open?"

"Not today, I think."

"Where is the cenote?"

He pointed down a path beside the store. Mayan children have such clearness in their eyes.

Stella was still writing. "Are you coming?" I asked.

"Wait a minute."

She had no sense of time. I got out of the car and shut the door. The air was heavy and unmoving, the sun directly overhead. I stepped into the shade of a broad-leaved tree, the boy coming with me.

"How long since it's rained around here?"

"Mucho tiempo."

I realized I had the bag of peanuts in my hand, and opened it. "Quiere unos?" I offered him the bag, and he reached his hand in.

I started down the path, the boy beside me. I wished I'd brought my straw hat. A small spiral of wind whipped up some dust and leaves, moved across the path a ways in front of me without disturbing the air about me.

Turning a bend around some rocks, we were suddenly at a place where the vegetation was lusher. Between boulders a stone staircase led down into the earth. The boy jumped in front of me, bounded from step to step and disappeared. I slowly followed.

The atmosphere was suddenly fresh. A cavern opened before me: a pool of immense clearness, a rock ledge, light pouring through a fissure in the dripping moss-hung roof, small pale fish shimmering in the shallows.

The rivers flow underground in Yucatán, through limestone, and they surface only in sinkholes, cenotes.

The boy stood on a rock at the edge of the water.

"Can you drink it?"

"Se beba, sí."

He leaped onto a rock further into the cenote, squatted, cupped his hands around some water and brought it to his mouth. He stood and began to jump back to the first rock, but as he did, a cry came from behind me. I glanced back and saw Stella at the entrance, calling my name, but through the corner of my eye, I saw the Mayan boy, distracted too, misjudging his leap, slipping, and falling backwards into the cenote.

I ran over. He was below the surface, on his back. It was deep. I jumped in and grabbed for him, but he was sinking. I dove under and caught his wrist, and as I did I looked, underwater, into his face. I was startled to see instead, the face of the hieroglyph Ahau, with circle eyes, two lines for a nose, and a round open mouth. This occurred in an instant, so quickly that a moment later I wasn't even sure that it happened, but while it was happening that instant seemed to take a very long time. The Ahau face began to laugh.

The next thing I knew, we were back at the surface, the boy was swimming around, laughing, while I was floundering back to the shore, fully clothed, losing one shoe. Stella helped me out.

"What did you do that for?"

"I thought he needed help."

"He was just going swimming."

I sat on a rock and poured the water out of my shoe.

"Hurry," said Stella.

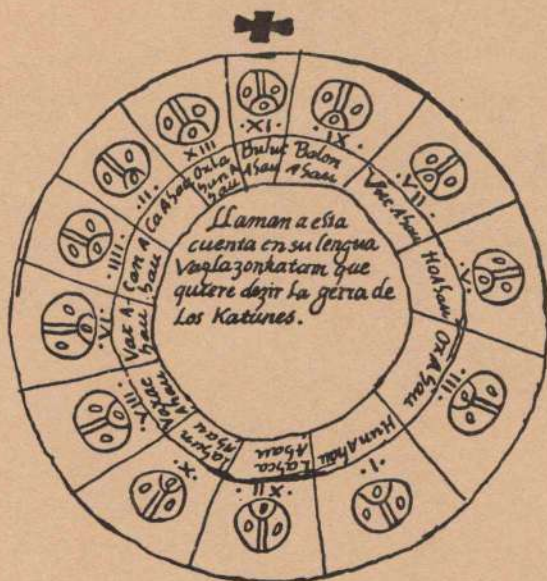
"Why?"

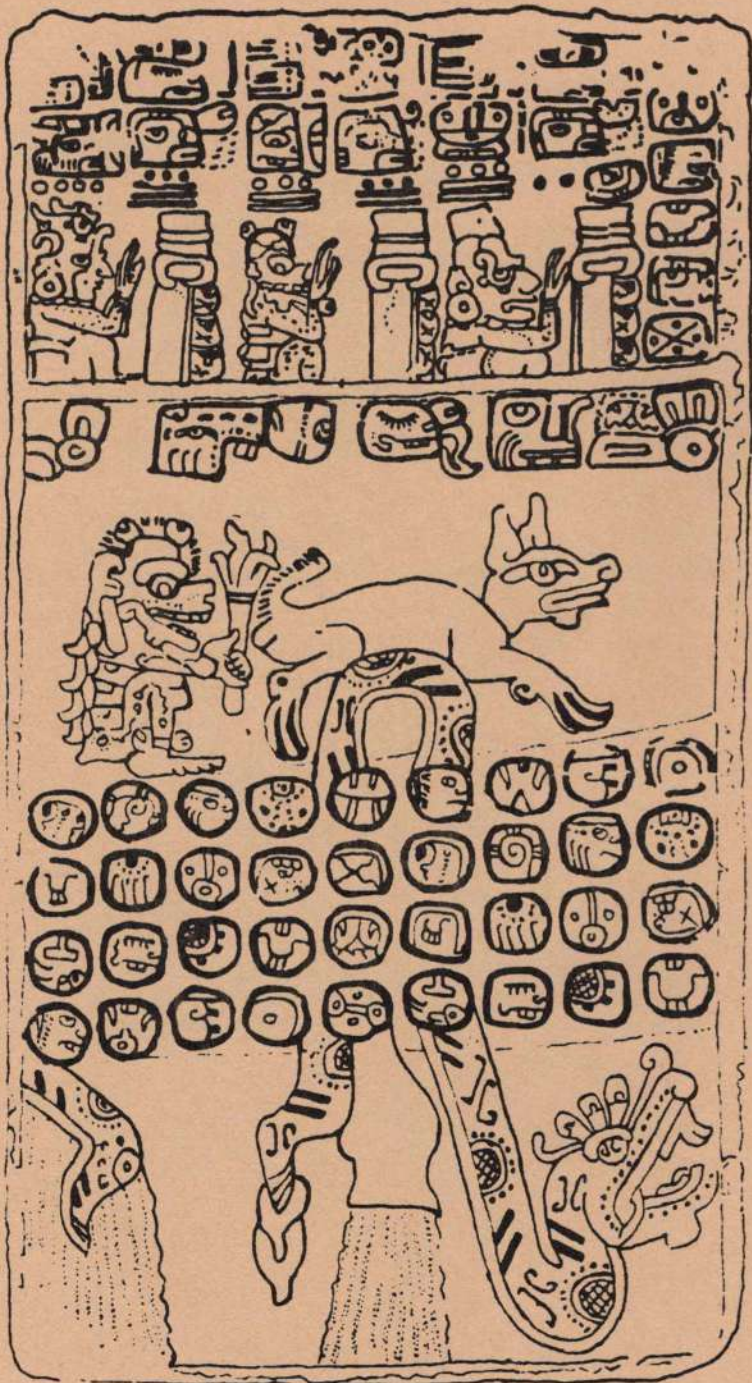
"I couldn't get the car window closed, and it started to rain."

I looked up at the roof the cenote, and saw droplets falling through the fissure and sprinkling the pond surface below it, where the boy was still swimming.

I slogged up the stone stairs as fast as I could. It was pouring. We stumbled down the path toward the car, pounded by sheets of wind and rain; Stella was almost as wet as me. The car window was stuck, everything was getting soaked. We tugged on the handle to no effect, and finally found a plastic poncho to throw over the hole. As soon as we did, the rain stopped, the clouds passed, the air stilled, and the sun was scorching again.

Stella and I looked at each other, then broke into the best laugh we'd shared in a long time.





"If you sight through this opening between the inside right corner stone and the outside left one," Stella read, "you'll see the exact center of the setting sun on the first day of spring." She shut one eye and drew a bead between the points.

I came behind her and tried to see over her head.

We were in the observation chamber of an ancient observatory, a round turret, led to by a spiral staircase, forty feet above the ground. One entire section of the building had crumbled, but the west side was still intact.

We were above the level of the jungle. A roof of trees stretched in every direction in a precise flatness, broken only by the top of an occasional temple. I sighted between the two stones toward the distant horizon, wondering who were some of the other eyes that drew this line of sight a thousand years ago. A plane appeared in the center, coming toward me.

Stella turned. "These days have been good." She put her arms around me.

"For me they've been the best."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll understand . . . that I have to get away by myself."

"When . . . ? Why?"

"Right away. Now. Just trust me." She kissed me quickly on the cheek, then hurried down the stairs.

Through the window I watched her head toward the parking lot. Why didn't I run after her?

Her things were gone from the car. Two tourist busses were unloading; I saw her nowhere; they said a bus had just left.

That night I couldn't sleep. Snakes kept appearing in my dreams, I'd wake up in a sweat. I never wanted her more.

The next day I sat in a cafe near the marketplace all morning, then wandered through the crowd, drowning my senses in the sights, sounds, smells of foods and wares, the sibilant drone of so many Mayan voices, the shuffle of sandals along the ground.

A hammockmaker's we'd stopped in a few days before. Walls lined floor to ceiling with neat bundles, the proprietor twisting and knotting henequin string. I went inside. There were numerous patterns; I decided to buy a yellow and black one.

Across the open doorway Stella walked, on the arm of a Mayan man.

I drove around the city, then found myself on a highway out of town. Past the last houses it became filled with potholes, turned to dirt, and just seemed to keep going into the jungle, walls of vegetation on both sides. I decided to turn around, backed up in a circle, lost the side of the road on one wheel, and spun in some loose earth. I was dug in; no other car appeared.

Finally I saw a figure in the direction I'd come from. An old man with a bundle of sticks on his back, tied by a tumpline around his forehead. I assumed he was going to stop, but walked right by. I caught up and explained as best I could in my broken Spanish.

"Can we get help?"

"It is too late today."

The sun was approaching the treetops, an almost full moon climbing the other side of the sky, with Venus, the evening star, a gem close by. He led me to a thatch house. Inside the single room, an old woman in a white embroidered huipil was patting tortillas near a small fire.

They exchanged a few words in Mayan. He motioned me to sit on a low wooden bench. A young girl and boy came cautiously over.

"I remember you," I said. "Are we near the cenote?"

The old man answered: "It is down the road."

We ate the tortillas hot, with a few beans. The hammocks were strung from one wall to the other, almost filling the room. I could see the moon and stars through the pole walls.

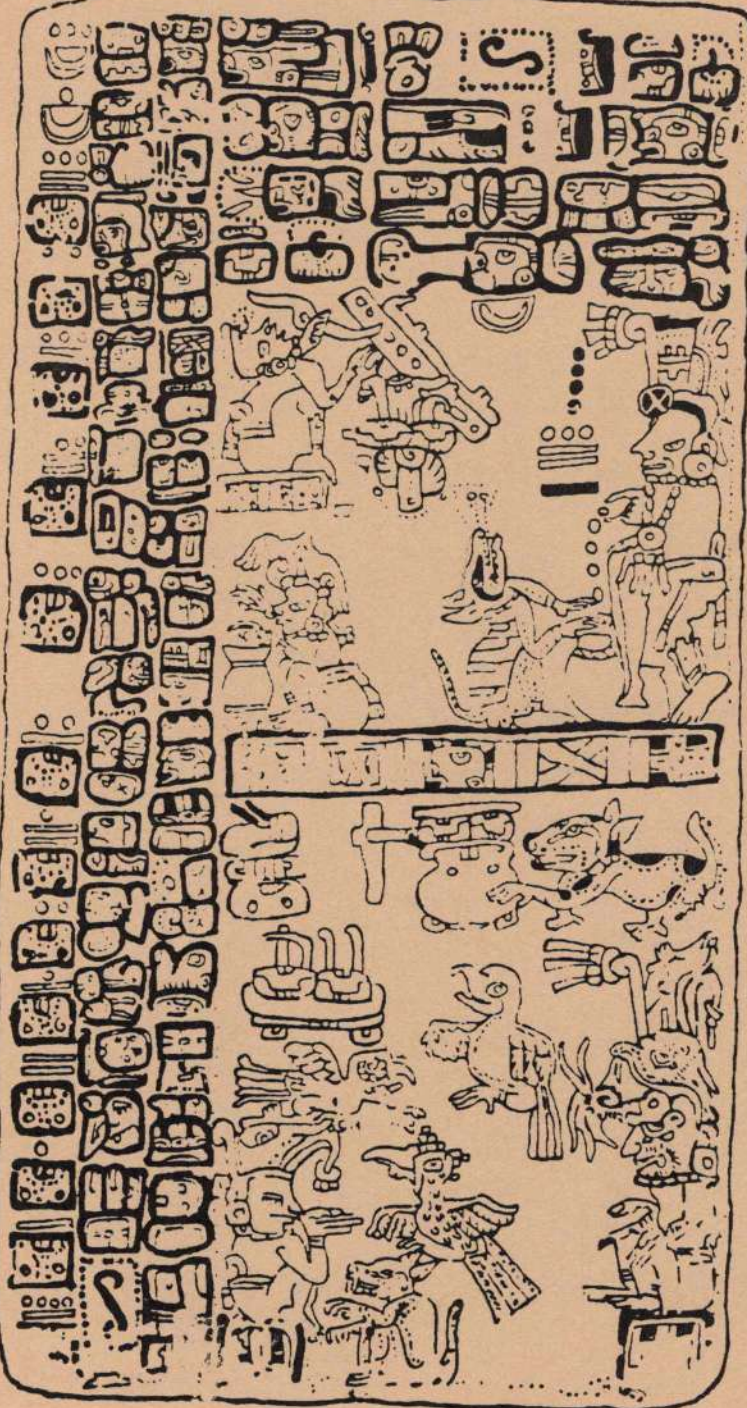
I kept thinking of Stella as I lay in the quiet, but her image was not clear; in my mind's eye I saw the Ahau face instead. It was somehow comforting; I settled into the hammock and was swept into a dream that I was flying through space from star to star.

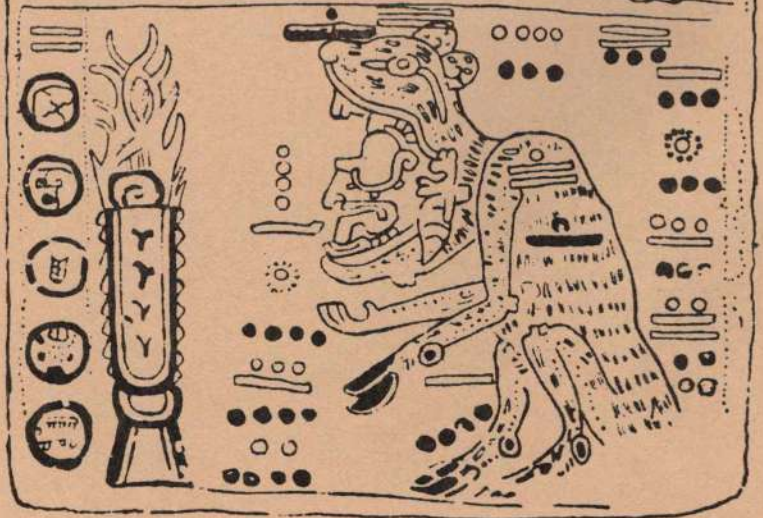
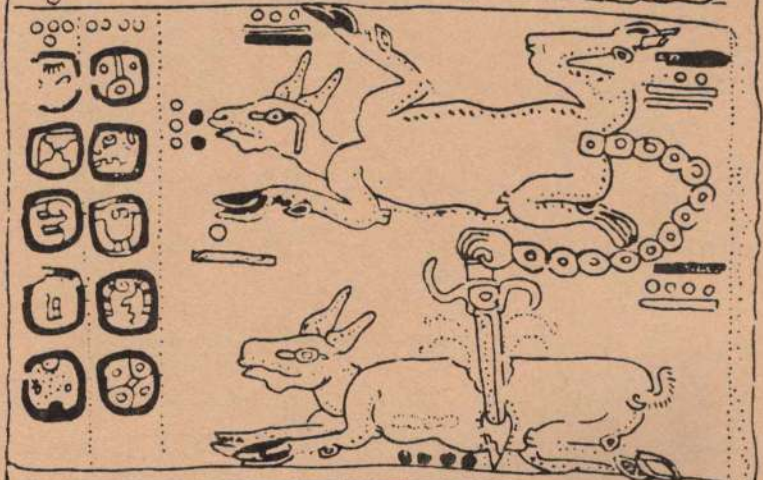
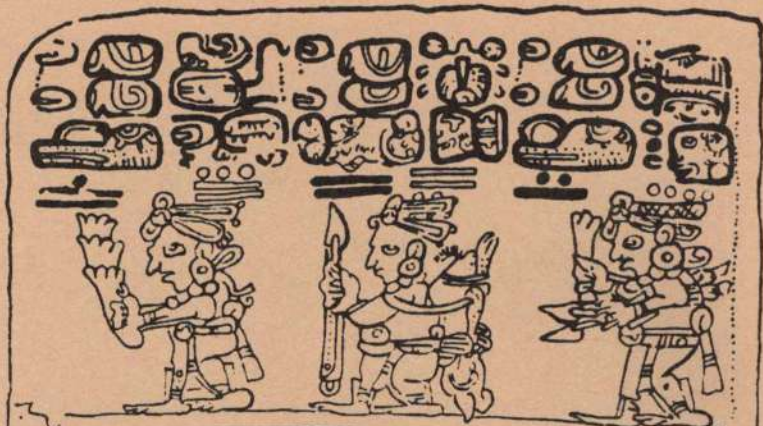
I woke at firstlight. The woman was already up, grinding corn on her metate; the old man was already gone; only the children were still in their hammocks, in perfect sleep.

I stepped outside. The morning was fresh as I'd never seen it in Yucatán. I walked down the path; birds spoke to each other in the trees all around. I lost track of time and kept walking; it felt like the world's dawn.

Then I saw the shack with the rusted metal soda sign; past it, to the rocks, the stairway down. An intense quiet filled the cavern; a droplet fell from the roof, the splash echoed, circles of light rippled across the almost invisible pool surface.

I rolled up my pants and waded in. The water was healing. I threw my shirt onto a rock, and dove under.

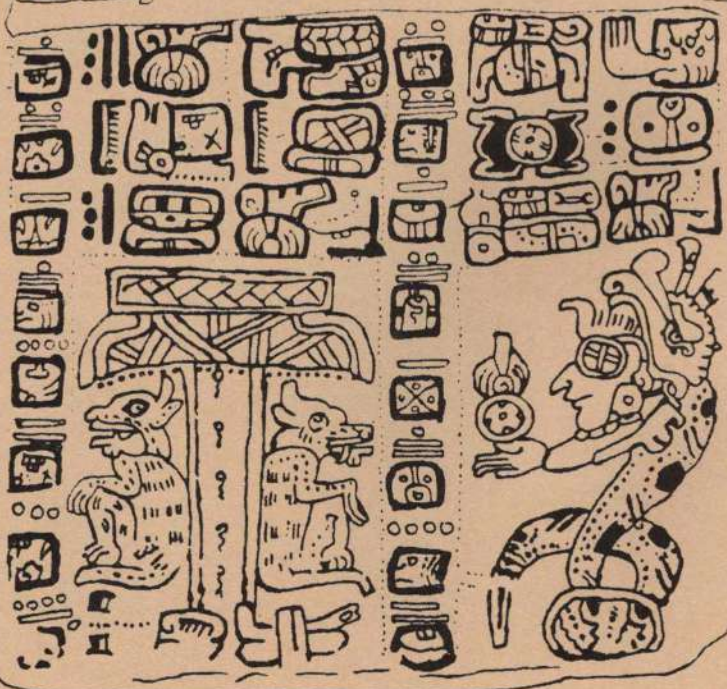
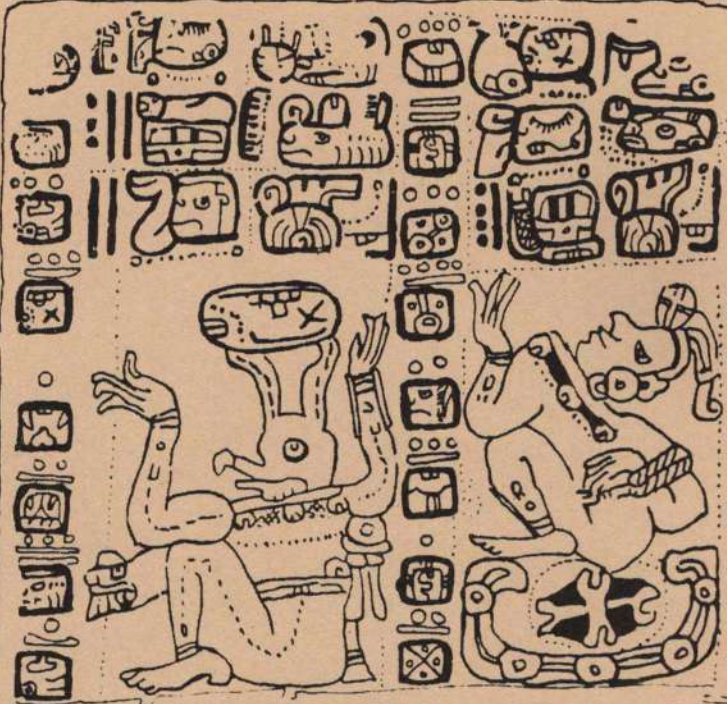




DECADE: THE 1990s
a poem in ten parts

The first bishop of Yucatán gathered all the Mayan hieroglyphic books he could find, and burned them. The devastation was so complete that only three survived.

Forced to give up their hieroglyphic writing by the Spanish conquerors, the Mayas quickly learned the Roman alphabet, and used it to write the *Books of Chilam Balam*, filled with astronomy, astrology, mathematics, history, myth, ritual, prophesy. Largely translations of hieroglyphic books into alphabetic Mayan, they were guarded as bibles by every Mayan community.



1990

YOU OPEN AN ANCIENT BOOK
AND FIND A PRESSED CLOVER

the first day of Spring in Yucatán

would it be

a child wakes up in a coughing fit

would it be

the grandmother bent under her sack

would it be

jaguar walking backward yellow eyes

the moth furls her wings before the ghetto

they forget how to love

singing the unhealing wounds

the puppet glares at the puppet master

rapture the decadent blood

forgetting obsolete distinctions

would it be

lightning bugs appear in your hair

would it be

she spreads her jewels before you on the ground

1991

THE STONE IS PLANTED IN THE EARTH

comes the makeupman to powder the leader's cheeks
comes the heat lightning flashing overhead
comes the swarming of bees about the exits
comes the waves crashing against the coast
screams in the night
it will speak in the heart of the rain
when the branches burst into flame
the wooden mask turns and laughs
comes the mouths run backwards
comes the stepchildren make ready the madness of the time
comes it will speak in the changing of the law
you stand on a mountaintop and watch the clouds

1992

THE GENITALS BEG TO DISAGREE

on the day

 inside the mountain a mouthless cave

on the day

 a vaulted room, a silent lake

on the day

 the darkness is almost palpable

 droplets trickle down the rock walls

 blind fish, hardly moving

 no light reaches this point

 wives and husbands do not recall each others'

 names

 they stagger under invisible loads

 they mull about the well

on the day

 they glance desperately about

on the day

 they beg each other for water

 your lover taps your shoulder you

 remember your dream

1993

THE HEALING OF OLD WOUNDS AND
THE CREASE OF FRESH SKIN

babies will be born to mothers
 in its time
a calico cat will hiss at a chattering squirrel
 in its time
the green city will float above the sea of skulls
 in its time
caterpillars will eat the bay leaves
orchid buds will suddenly open
sperm as large as salmon will clog the estuary
a little wind will whirl through the squashblossoms
plum branches will push up the eaves
your chest will uncontrollably heave
ants will disassemble the mantis
you take a mouthful of your lover and swallow
her pride
echos of the conversations of birds from a
distant time

1994

CLAY CRUMBLES IN YOUR HAND

this is the time, the mole's teeth
this the corner that does not turn
the mistake that refuses to sound
the scorpions defying the crescent moon
fallen is the edge of the sea
fallen the folds of time
horned toads clamor in the crossroads
centipedes swarm out of the grottos
nations shriek blindly along the jammed freeway
the rule of the burning flies spreads its jaws
you are afraid to open the letter

1995

WHAT COULD BE EASIER THAN
ERASING THE FACTS?

startle

the old men sit, shaking their heads

startle

afraid to speak, afraid to listen

startle

the attack dogs wag their tails

startle

all the pistons have been shot in the head

the music is burned

the sidewalks are removed

snackfood piled rotting in the gutter

the Treasurer books his flight

trampling boots can be heard from the roof

startle

what you're left with after the passions of
youth fade away

startle

the roses swaying in the breeze

suddenly there are no secrets

1996

THE TREE OF THE SACRED CLOWN

in the time you ascend the downstaircase
in the time what has gone before will come again
in the time they shake the rattle of the decade
in the time the living rock will crack
when the wooden drum is two days sweet
when the word of day is declared
when the burden is bound with compassion
under the command of the precious stones
in the hills of the fatherless the motherless
in the time the walls will be destroyed
in the time the house is thrown down

1997

THEY DO NOT RECALL THE REMOVAL
OF THEIR LUST

their feet trample the crumbs
 shall it happen
vultures peer out of the courtroom window
 shall it happen
press secretaries cough up the evidence
 shall it happen
great armadas are sent to stamp out small
disobediences
 shall it happen
what will we eat?
where will we drink?
when will we take up stones?
startled by the jungle's sexuality
the president soils his pants
 shall it happen
the night sky becomes visible above the
innermost city
 shall it happen
you climb your lover's body you
dare to pull down the fire

1998

THEY DISPLAY THE BALLOT BOXES
BEFORE THE TV CAMERAS

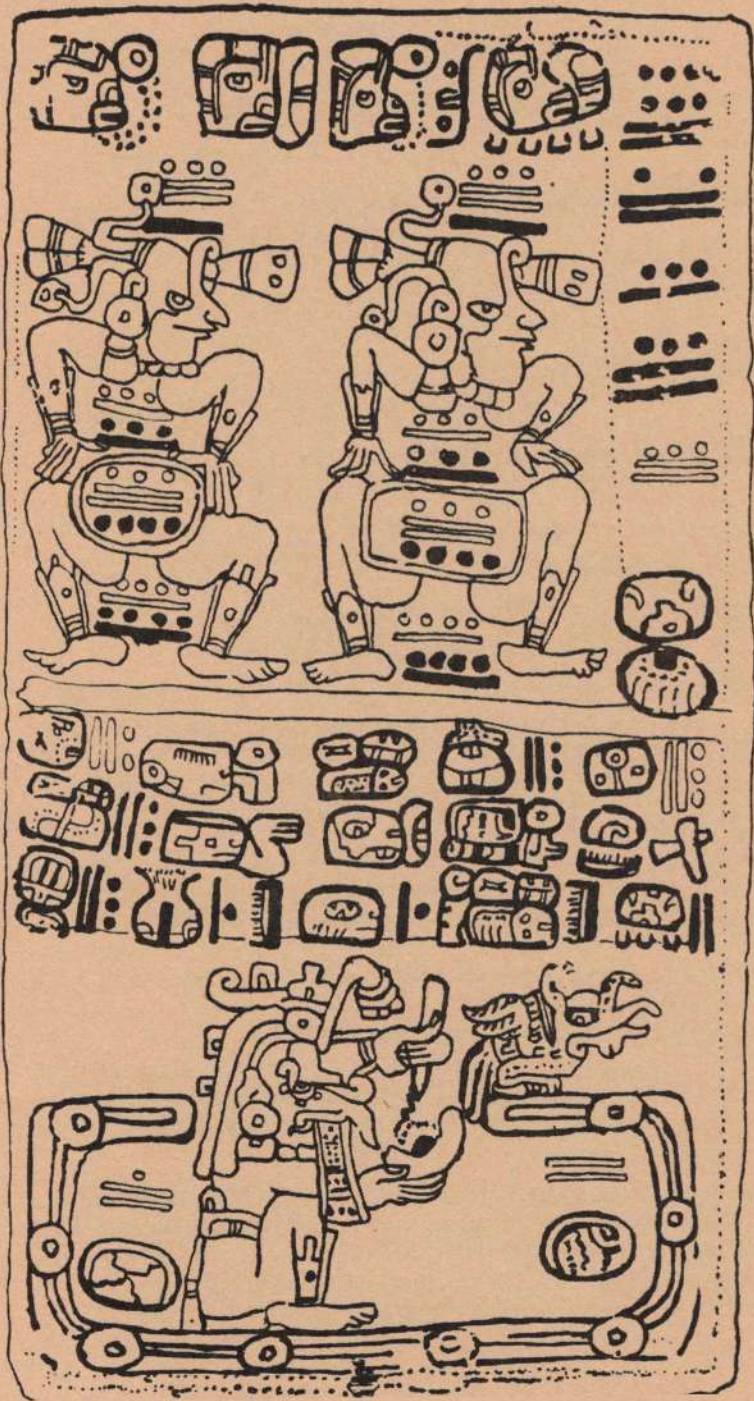
the colonel's whore reaches for her knife
the last train leaves Washington
beasts roam the desert night at will
the captives chained neck to neck
they cheer the great leader as he waves on by
their noses clipped and bleeding
a time when
 children dance in circles of snapdragons
a time when
 will anything really be different?
a time when
 paying the bills
the coyotes at twilight
kisses are stolen by a flood of night
a landslide opens an unforeseen

1999

A NEW STONE APPEARS
A MOMENT OF FIRE

you soar over the city
below are pyramids under construction
robes of flowers and feathers
egrets flock in the red ceiba tree
a crowd is gathering in the great plaza
screech owls and wasps will be implored
when the earth appears in the heart of the sky
what's below will be thrown on high
the end will depart
you'll stir your lover's rosehips in your favorite cup
the ship will glide perfectly into the dock
this a buffalo said to me

DECADE



Mucho Somos Series

- Number 1 *Gurgle of Little Feet*, Tom Ross *
- Number 2 *Behind Dark Glasses*, Karen Lee Hones *
- Number 3 *Chronicle*, Edward Mycuc *
- Number 4 *I See America Daily*, Harold Norse *
- Number 5 *Bronka Stooler Boo Boo Boo*
Pablo Cuneo, 9 pages, \$1.25
- Number 6 *Wheatberry Fantasies*
Garrett Lambrev, 23 pages, \$1.50
- Number 7 *Musical Trees*
H. D. Moe, 28 pages, \$1.50
- Number 8 *Voices and People Forgotten*
Louis Cuneo, 24 pages, \$1.50
- Number 9 *Jazz Pajamas*, David Moe
Poems by a San Francisco frontiersman.
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Work by one of the leading poets of the San Francisco Bay Area—a special mixture of prose, Irish ballads, experimental verse and multi-voiced drama. Preface by Larry Eigner. Cassette tape available.
- Number 11 *Going to China and Other Places*, Mary Rudge
Poetry written by a world-acclaimed poet with a rich history in the San Francisco Bay Area's literary movements. "Mary reminds us of our basic human connectedness, one possible antidote against war."
- Number 12 *Decade: The 1990s*, John Curl
Work reaching back to our Pre-Colombian heritage, connecting the past and the present in personal terms with short fiction, poetry, and ancient Mayan books.

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BIO

John Curl grew up on the streets of Manhattan in the winters, and in a New Jersey pine forest in the summers, a war baby of World War II. Irish-Catholic, English-Protestant, and Roumanian-Austrian Jewish blood mixed in his veins, with one grandfather a Republican, the other a Communist, and his parents New Deal Democrats. The astrologers say his chart is a Grand Trine.

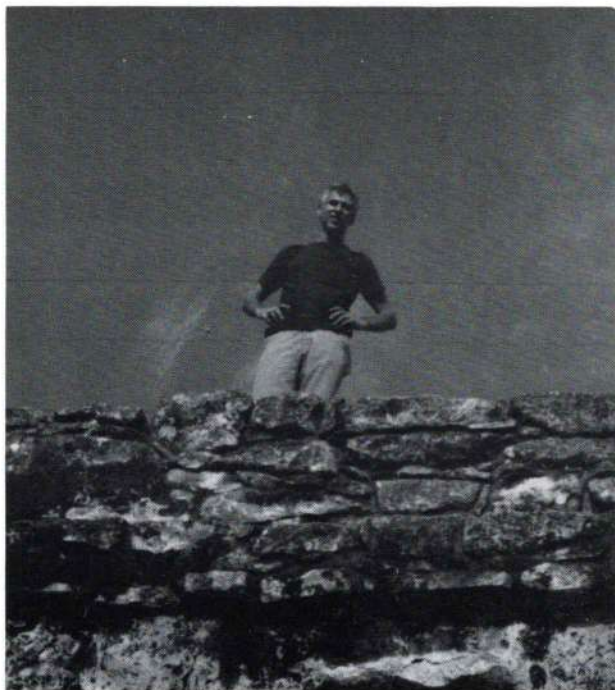
His poetry has appeared in magazines and anthologies such as *Third Rail*, *Blake Times*, *The Unrealist*, *Soup*, *What is Real? Peace Or Perish*, *Amerus*, *Left Curve*, *Sparks of Fire*, *Merlyn Gorky*, *Clay Drum*, *Love Lights*. His play, *The Conquest of America*, was produced by the Nature Theater of San Francisco in 1982.

“His is the wholistic vision of Whitman, a hologram of fragments—each of which mirrors the inner harmonies as they leap out at you, all like circuits wired to some luminous inner board.”

—*Poetry Flash*

“The procreative force, the cosmic sensibility, the oracular insight Curl brings to the reader is constantly astonishing.”

The Unrealist



John Curl reaches back to our Pre-Columbia heritage, connecting the past and present in personal terms with short fiction, poetry and ancient Mayan books. The final section is a poem cycle, one for each year of the 1990s, based on the Mayan calendar forecast for the coming decade.

