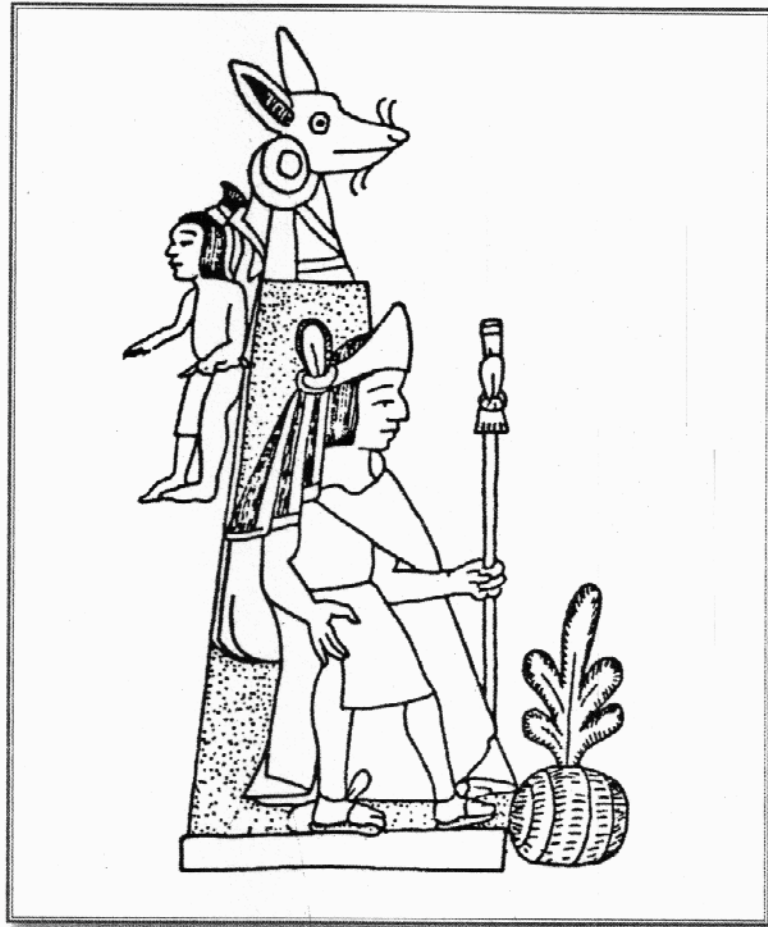


THE LIFE OF HUNGRY COYOTE

(1402-1472)



Nezahualcoyotl. Codex Azcatitlan.

Ce Mazatl Acolmiztli Nezahualcoyotl was born on the day 1 Deer in the year 1 Rabbit, or April 28, 1402. He was the first legitimate son of the Texcocan ruler Ixtlilxochitl and his queen, Matlalcihuatzin, an Aztec princess. His blood joined the peoples of Texcoco with Tenochtitlan, which was to become his second home. Acolmiztli, his original given name, means "Shoulder of Puma." Later he received the name Nezahualcoyotl, Hungry Coyote, during his hard years in exile. He was also known by the astrological day of his birth, Ce Mazatl, 1 Deer, and the nickname Yoyontzin. He had many siblings and half-siblings.

Somewhere between the ages of six and eight, he started attending the *calmecac* school, where noble children were sent. There the foremost Aztec scholar of his time, Huitzilihuitzin, took him under his wing and taught him the history and wisdom of the Toltecs. The *calmecac* was presided over by the Toltec deity Quetzalcoatl, while the *telpochcaltin* schools, which the majority of the population attended, were presided over by the patron deity of the city, Tezcatlipoca. Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca were in many ways opposites and opponents, yet they also formed a strange unity, a dynamic dichotomy that worked itself out in the society and was to play an essential role in Hungry Coyote's life.

Originally, Hungry Coyote's metropolis of Texcoco, which means "Place of Rest," had been founded by a wandering Chichimec people who called themselves the Alcolhuans and were hunters and nomads from the desert, formerly living in caves and wearing animal skins. They arrived about the year 1000 at Lake Texcoco. The Alcolhuans settled there, receiving permission from Xolotl, the Chichimec overlord of the region, who had taken over hegemony of the Valley of Mexico after the fall of the Toltecs of Tula.

One branch of the Toltecs' own ancestors had also been Chichimec nomads, immigrating from the north a century earlier into the area where Teotihuacan's great civilization had once flourished. Although Teotihuacan was deserted when they arrived, many of the descendants of people who had dispersed from that great city still lived in towns nearby, while others had moved further on, notably to Cholula. By living near them over a period of time and intermarrying, these rough Chichimecs became the sophisticated Toltecs of Tula, the inheritors of Teotihuacan's culture. In Nahuatl, *toltecatl* means a craftsman, artist, or engineer.

A century later, Hungry Coyote's Alcolhuan ancestors went through a similar process of transformation. The same civilizing forces continued at work in the Valley of Mexico. Near the spot where the Alcolhuans began to build Texcoco was a small community of Toltec refugees from Tula. Learning the ways of civilization from them, the Alcolhuans soon shed their animal skins for cotton clothing, their nomadic ways for farming and village life.

Through several generations, the Alcolhuan chiefs adopted Toltec-Teotihuacan culture as their own. Under Xolotl's grandson, the Chichimecs changed from a hunting to an agricultural people. The succeeding ruler, Quinatzin, moved the Chichimec capital from Xolotl's Tenayuca across the lake to Texcoco. Thus Texcoco became the political center of the region. The fifth ruler, Techotlala, Hungry Coyote's grandfather, decreed that their official tongue would no longer be their rough Chichimec language, but the silvery Nahuatl of ancient Tula. He summoned learned scribes from the land of the Mixtecs, where the Toltec arts had been highly preserved, to teach them hieroglyphic book painting. The Texcocans began to follow the Toltec religion, taking Quetzalcoatl as their cultural divinity, while integrating their old tribal deities into Tezcatlipoca, the patron of the military orders. The dichotomy of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, peace and war, day and night, opposites in an eternal struggle but forming a strange unity, runs through Mexican history. The history of Texcoco, like Tula before it, was swept up in this struggle.

While the little Alcolhuan settlement was busy growing into the metropolis of Texcoco, on the opposite lake bank another wandering desert people arrived, the Mexica

or Tenochca, known to us as the Aztecs. They too took Nahuatl as their new mother tongue and began their own city, Tenochtitlan, on a barren island across the lake ten miles away. While the Aztecs were still struggling with survival, the Texcocans were the dominant force in the region and were becoming a high culture.

At the same time, a third center was growing powerful, the Tepaneca city of Azcapotzalco, ruled by another branch of Xolotl's imperial Toltec lineage. Azcapotzalco, not far from Tenochtitlan, became the dominant city on the west side of the lake and held the Aztecs as a subject people.

When Hungry Coyote was eleven, his grandfather died. A struggle ensued between his father, Ixtlixochitl, and the ruler of Azcapotzalco, Tezozomoc, over who had the right to succession in the line of Xolotl as the next Great Chichimetl, the supreme ruler.

The Texcocan army surrounded and sieged Azcapotzalco for four years. Finally Tezozomoc sued for peace, agreeing to recognize Ixtlixochitl as supreme ruler. Texcoco's army quickly disarmed but as soon as their guard was down, Azcapotzalco attacked, with help from Tenochtitlan. This happened in the year 4 Rabbit, or 1418, when Hungry Coyote was sixteen years old. Ixtlixochitl was caught unprepared. Texcoco held out for fifty days, but finally Ixtlixochitl, Hungry Coyote, and the rest of his family fled. The Tepanecas pursued.



Nezahualcoyotl in a tree watches his father's death. Codex Xolotl.

Leaving the rest of the family hiding in a nearby forest, Ixtlilxochitl, Hungry Coyote, and two Texcocan captains climbed down a deep gorge, followed by enemy soldiers. As the enemy approached, Ixtlilxochitl ordered Hungry Coyote to hide in a tree. From that vantage point he watched his father fight to the death. The Tepanecas left him where he fell. When they were gone, Hungry Coyote cremated his father's body in accordance with Toltec ritual.

Tezozomoc offered a reward for Hungry Coyote's capture dead or alive, but, with help from his great-uncle Itzcoatl, who was destined to become the Aztec ruler, Hungry Coyote escaped over the hills to Tlaxcala, where he had relatives and friends. He did not stay in one place long, but moved around the various nearby city-states. Already a poet, he composed "Song of the Flight" while in exile. There are many stories of this period filled with danger and narrow escapes.

To stamp out a budding revolt in Texcoco, Tezozomoc sent soldiers asking every child in the region who the king was. Those who answered Ixtlilxochitl or Hungry Coyote were killed. He made Hungry Coyote's own brother, Tilmatzin, puppet governor of Texcoco and instituted annual tribute payments. He dismantled Texcoco's realm, dividing up the land among bordering states, each governed by one of his allies. Texcoco itself he gave to Tenochtitlan. Tezozomoc and his harsh regime became increasingly hated.

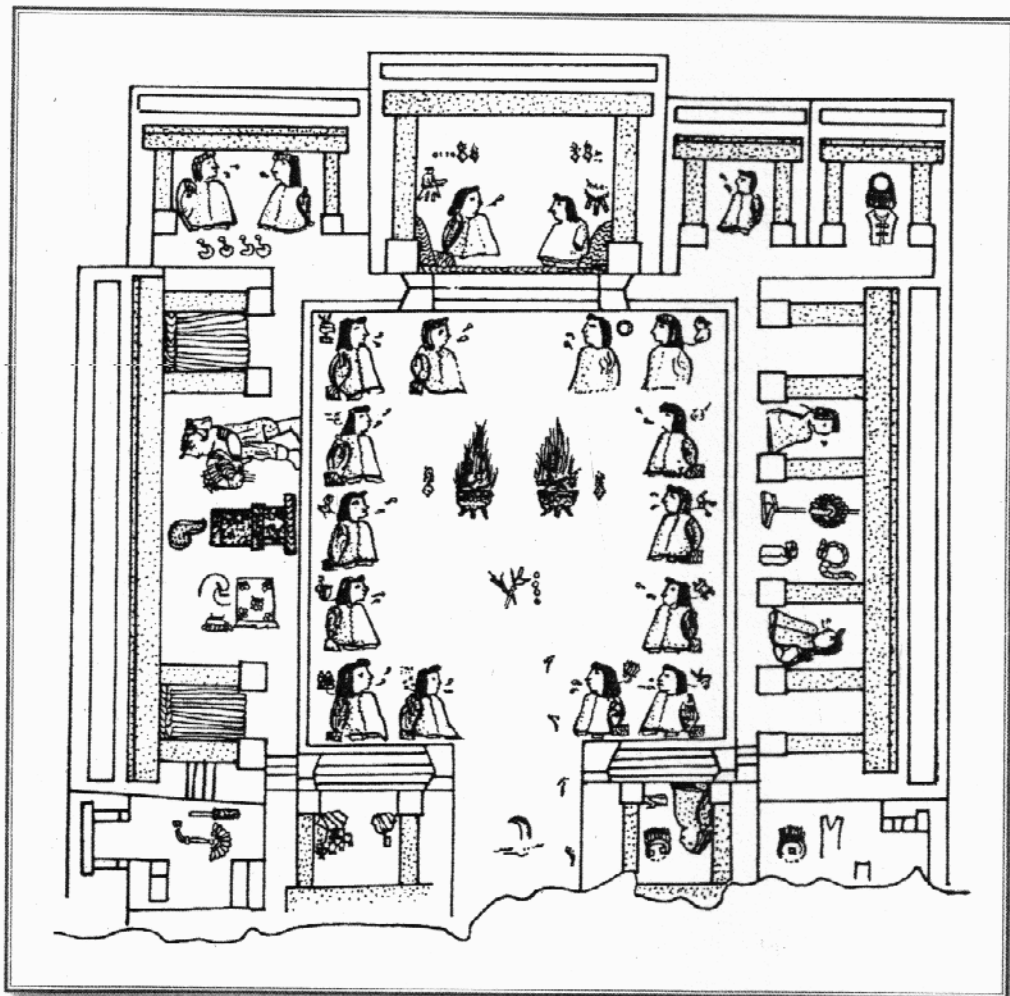
Hungry Coyote lay low for six years. Finally several of his aunts convinced Tezozomoc to permit him to come out of hiding and live in Tenochtitlan, arguing that the threat had passed. Hungry Coyote spent the next two years there quietly working as a builder. He found he had a genius for construction, creating the park at Chapultepec and engineering an aqueduct from it to Tenochtitlan, alleviating the city's fresh water shortage. At the end of that period, those same aunts convinced Tezozomoc to grant Hungry Coyote permission to return to Texcoco. His presence there, they claimed, would help support the regime.

Back home in Texcoco at last, Hungry Coyote stayed out of politics and seemed to be living the life of an idle young lord. But as Tezozomoc aged, he became concerned that Hungry Coyote might challenge his choice of succession, seeing that his abilities and personality had won him many friends. Rather than attack him openly, Tezozomoc arranged several plots on his life, all of which were foiled.

As Tezozomoc approached death, he named a young son as successor, passing over his eldest son, Maxtla. At the public declaration of the new emperor, Maxtla stopped the proceedings and claimed the throne. He killed his brother, as well as the rulers of Tenochtitlan and Tlaltelolco, and sent his men to kill Hungry Coyote. Once again Hungry Coyote fled the city and went into hiding. Another price was put on his head.

From the mountains Hungry Coyote began to organize rebellion, slowly forging an alliance of Texcocan exiles with many of the neighboring city-states, Tlaxcala, Huexotzingo, Cholula, Chalco, and others. Their combined armies routed Maxtla's garrisons on the east side of the lake, and, on August 11, 1427, at the age of 25, Hungry Coyote led his triumphant followers into Texcoco.

But Maxtla still dominated the west side of the lake, with Tenochtitlan still under his control. Hungry Coyote forged a secret alliance with his great-uncle Itzcoatl, who had become ruler of Tenochtitlan. With the smaller city of Tlacopan, their Triple Alliance attacked Azcapotzalco by land and by canoe. After a campaign of one hundred fifteen days, the Tepaneca capital was burned and Maxtla was dead.



*The palace at Texcoco. Nezahualcoyotl and his son in the throne room (top middle).
In the courtyard are two perpetual fires. The hall of science and music is left of the courtyard;
storehouse to the right; judges' chambers top left. Mapa Quinatzin.*

Crowned supreme ruler (*tlacatecutli*) by his people, Hungry Coyote set to work to rebuild his shattered city. Under his leadership, Texcoco rose from destruction and reached heights of culture not seen in the Valley of Mexico since the fall of Tula. Toltec learning, after an eclipse of generations, blossomed again in Texcoco and instigated a cultural renaissance in the entire Valley of Mexico.

At the very heart of Texcoco, Hungry Coyote placed an innermost courtyard surrounded by a square of buildings housing the council chambers and halls of justice, and quarters for himself and for four hundred other chiefs, scholars, artists, historians, philosophers, musicians, and poets. In a large hall nearby was the university, whose library of hieroglyphic *amoxtli* books was the greatest on the continent (later burned by Cortés).

He promoted the arts, sciences, and humanities: astronomy, calendrics, engineering, architecture, history, philosophy, law, sculpture, painting, music, song, and poetry. He saw that they recorded and preserved their knowledge in the great library.

Hungry Coyote's engineering genius made it possible for Texcoco and Tenochtitlan to become great metropolises. He engineered the first aqueduct to bring fresh water from Teotihuacan to Texcoco, as he had already done from Chapultepec to Tenochtitlan, and watered the fields with canals. He planted a park with a thousand cypresses. He devised and built a dike that stretched across the entire lake, separating the brackish water of the northeast from the fresh water of the southwest. Before that, during flood years salt water had often ruined the harvests at the *chinampas* of the floating gardens of Xochimilco.

Hungry Coyote devised a code of eighty laws, the first codification of the law in the Valley of Mexico, which covered property rights, criminal activities, and morality, harsh by our standards but so comprehensive and concise that all the other Nahuatl city-states adopted the code as their own. He organized a form of government by councils. The Council of Justice, the supreme court of the land, had seats reserved for common citizens.

The Council of Music was directed to encourage art and science, and its members would meet regularly to exchange information and teach. Hungry Coyote paid the teaching fees for orphans. On certain days, new works of poetry and history were presented before the council by their authors. Goldsmiths, feather workers, poets, and musicians would receive prizes for achievements and punishments for bad craftsmanship.

There was also a school of divination art. In the innermost courtyard at the very center of Texcoco, the philosopher-poets debated in "the dialog of the songs." The Council of Justice awarded prizes for merit, while the willful falsification of historical truth was punishable by death. That harsh punishment was in response to what had happened in Tenochtitlan, where the emperor had ordered all history books destroyed and history rewritten in order to better legitimize his branch of the Aztec dynasty as heirs to the Toltecs.

Hungry Coyote saw that widows and aged and wounded soldiers were taken care of with food and clothing from the royal storehouses. He opened the forests to permit the poor to gather dry wood for their fires, which had been forbidden. During times of drought he opened the royal storehouses to all people in need.

A sensuous man, Hungry Coyote had numerous concubines and children by them but approached the age of forty without ever having married, and so he had no heir apparent. Feeling loveless, he fell into a great melancholy. One day while walking along the lake shore in this sad state he met Cuacuauhtzin, the governor of a small neighboring city, who invited him home to dinner, where a young woman named Azcalxochitzin served their table. Hungry Coyote was so taken by her charm and beauty that all sadness left him and he realized that she possessed his heart. However, she was Cuacuauhtzin's betrothed. Crazed with desire, Hungry Coyote ordered Cuacuauhtzin to be sent into battle against their perennial rival, Tlaxcala. He fought there and died. Hungry Coyote took Azcalxochitzin as his wife. The following three years were filled with drought and plagues of locusts, which Hungry Coyote took as punishment for his transgression.

It was not long before the question arose over whether Texcoco or Tenochtitlan would be the dominant city-state in the region. Tenochtitlan had swelled to double Texcoco's population of about 150,000. That clearly tipped the balance toward the Aztecs, together



Nezahualcoyotl, Azcalxochitzin, and two artist-scribes. Mapa Tlotzin.

with the militancy they had developed as they rose from slaves to masters. When his great-uncle Itzcoatl died and Moctezuma I succeeded him as ruler of Tenochtitlan, Hungry Coyote journeyed there and proposed a continuation of their alliance. The Aztec council replied that the price of peace would be Texcoco's recognizing the primacy of the Aztecs. Hungry Coyote handled the situation with statesmanship and arranged a fake war. The two armies met on a field and exchanged ritual insults. The Texcocan army retreated, and a small Aztec force followed to the outskirts of Texcoco. Hungry Coyote himself set a symbolic fire to the temple atop the main pyramid in Texcoco. Thus the Aztecs gained recognition as the dominant power of the region, and no one was hurt.

But with the rise of Tenochtitlan came an obsession with heart sacrifice, which involved cutting out the victim's heart and offering it, still beating, to a deity, usually one associated with war. The cult of sacrifice, intimately connected with the Aztec warrior orders, spread as the Aztec ascendancy spread throughout the entire Nahua world. The Aztec cult made inroads into Texcoco. A temple to the war god Huitzilopochtli was begun in the center of Hungry Coyote's city.

Peace, or at least order, had come to the entire Valley of Mexico and beyond, where the Triple Alliance now ruled largely unchallenged. Wars became increasingly distant as the empire expanded. Yet despite the triumph and ascendancy of the Aztecs, the inner contradictions of their society eventually came to a head. Peacetime proved a less than convenient event, as many of their social structures had been built around war. The Aztec warrior orders flourished in war, though it became increasingly difficult to find city-states willing to confront the Triple Alliance juggernaut. Warriors were rewarded with the highest honors, and those who met death on the field of battle were believed to live eternally in the fields of the sun. A new generation was recruited into the warrior orders, but they complained of too few situations in which to test their skills or win glory. According to the creation myths of the priests of the warrior orders, the priests of Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli, the world had been created and the sun made to move by the sacrificial deaths of the deities. The priests of the warrior orders believed that it was the God-given mission of the Aztecs to keep this world alive by ritual blood sacrifice in re-creation of that myth, and for that they needed prisoners of war.

Terrible floods and unseasonable frosts devastated the region in the year 10 Rabbit or 1450, followed by a great drought and famine. Nezahualcoyotl did all he could to succor his people, distributing the reserves of corn from the state granaries. But the calamities seemed endless. The year 1 Rabbit or 1454 began with a full eclipse of the sun. The rulers of the Triple Alliance held a summit conference to discuss the best remedy. The priests of Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli from Tenochtitlan cried that the gods were angry that there were not enough captives to sacrifice and demanded more. In former times, they claimed, when they did not have enough captives they would sacrifice their own sons and slaves.

Hungry Coyote was strongly opposed, arguing that it always used to be enough to sacrifice captives of war and, since these would have died in battle otherwise, no further lives were lost; besides, it was a great feat for a soldier to capture a live enemy. The priests argued that the current wars were very remote and that the captives who arrived back in Tenochtitlan were too few and too debilitated.

As a solution, the Triple Alliance instituted the War of the Flowers, staging combat every twenty days with Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, and Cholula, "the enemies within the house," to capture prisoners for sacrifice and to provide a venue where young warriors could gain glory. The battles did not extend beyond the limits of the field, so neither land nor political dominion was at stake.

Hungry Coyote had witnessed death and sacrifice throughout his life and had become increasingly sickened by it. He had always struggled with the sacrificial priests of "black" Tezcatlipoca by promoting Quetzalcoatl, the Giver of Life (also known as the "white" Tezcatlipoca). Now he also had to deal with the Aztec priests of Huitzilopochtli, who were far more devoted to the heart sacrifice than the priests of the "black" Tezcatlipoca had ever been. He found himself in the same situation that the legendary Toltec *tlatoani* Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin had been in during an earlier epoch in the city of Tula, when Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin had fought Tezcatlipoca-Huemac over the issue of blood sacrifice. That struggle had resulted in the exile of Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin and the destruction of Tula, and Hungry Coyote did not want this struggle to destroy Texcoco.

Instead of the weapons of war, Hungry Coyote struggled using the weapons of poetry and music. He stopped attending the blood sacrifices. At the dedication ceremony of Huitzilopochtli's temple in the year 1 Reed (1467) he performed a poem in which he prophesied the temple's destruction in another 1 Reed, when the Aztec calendar repeated its fifty-two-year cycle.

IN A YEAR SUCH AS THIS

In a year such as this, this now new temple will be destroyed. Who will be present? My son or grandson?

Then the earth will be diminished; the chiefdoms will end; the small and seasonless maguey will accidentally be cut, small immature trees will bear fruit, and the defective earth will be continually diminished.

Then malice, transgressions, and sensuality will reach a height, young boys and girls will have sexual relations, people will rob each others' homes.

Awesome events will occur in this time; the birds will speak and the tree of light, of health and sustenance, will arrive.

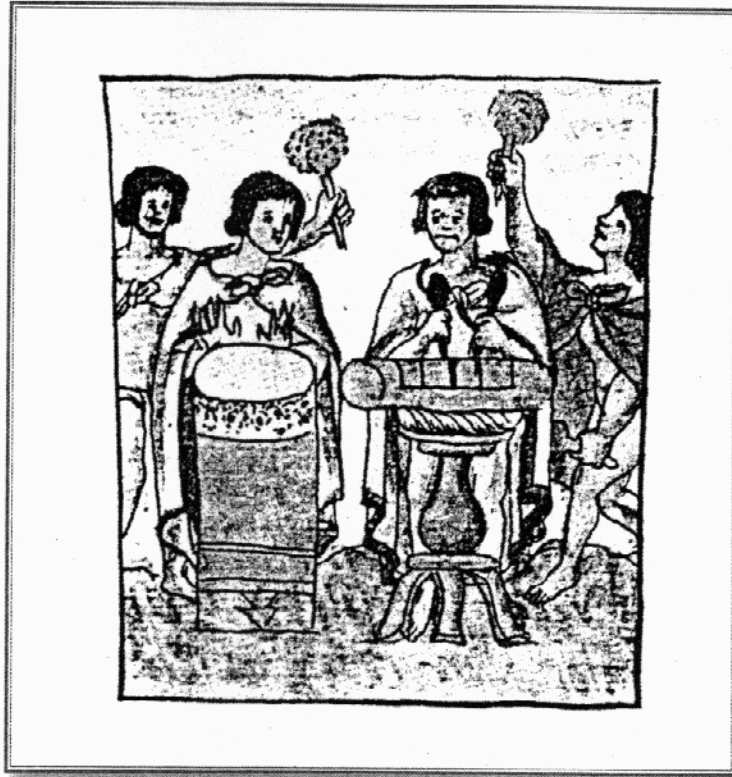
To free our children from these vices and calamities, make sure that from an early age they give themselves to integrity and work (Alva Ixtlilxochitl, II, Chap. XLVII).



Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin, the Toltec chieftain-priest of the Plumed Serpent.

Diego Durán, Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y islas de tierra firme, and Atlas.

Directly facing Huitzilopochtli's temple, Hungry Coyote built an opposing pyramid. On its top he placed a tower nine stories high, one for each of the nine heavens; on the ninth story he put a chapel filled with musical instruments, drums, shells, horns, flutes, bells, cymbals, and then a tenth story with a black roof gilded with stars on the outside and gold, gems, and precious feathers within. This temple, which the people called the Chililitli after one of the instruments, he dedicated to Tloque Nahuaque, the Lord of the With and the By, the Unknown God, Creator of All Things, God of Causes, Master of the Far and the Near, He Who Invented Himself, Life Giver, Who Is as Night and as the Wind. No image was allowed in this temple, only flowers and incense, and no sacrifice of blood. Every day at dawn, noon, sunset, and midnight, the hours at which the sovereign prayed, the instruments would be played to call the people to higher consciousness.



Nahua musicians. Huehuetl, teponaztli, and rattles. Sabagún, Florentine codex.

In recognition of his accomplishments as a visionary, the people began to address him as *tlatimini*, “he who knows,” the highest honor that could be paid to a poet in ancient Mexico.

Meanwhile, Azcalxochitzin was approaching the end of her childbearing years and Hungry Coyote himself was aging, but still had no heir. He retired to his hilltop garden retreat at Texcotzingo, where he had built rock-cut baths, sculptures, and a massive aqueduct system. There he fasted forty days. Every day at dawn, midday, sunset, and midnight he prayed and offered copal incense. There he composed sixty songs of praise to the Unknown God, the creator and principle of all things. When he emerged from his retreat, he received news that Azcalxochitzin was pregnant. She bore him a son, Nezahualpilli, “Hungry Prince,” who was destined to become a poet almost as renowned as his father.

Nezahualcoyotl’s health and vigor remained extraordinary until he reached seventy-one, after reigning forty-two years. Falling ill and realizing his approaching death, he called his children together and named Nezahualpilli, seven years old, as his successor. “I find myself very close to death,” he said, according to Fernando de Alva Ixtlixochitl, his descendant and biographer, “and when I am dead, instead of sad lamentations, sing happy songs, showing valor and strength in your spirits. . . .”

Hungry Coyote died quietly in his bed in the year 1472, 6 Flint.