

INTRODUCTION

My name is Dr. Surendra Sankar. I am a consulting psychiatrist. Between March 1 and December 27, 2000, I had regular consultations with Mr. Adam Avatar. His case is unique in my experience and, as far as I am aware, in the psychiatric literature. This is one reason I have decided to publish the following account, but it is not the main reason.

I wish to assure the reader that I did not come to my decision lightly. Doctor-patient confidentiality is the most sacrosanct of all professional relationships. There is also the fundamental principle of the medical profession, Hippocrates's first axiom: "Do no harm". My dilemma lay in these two principles being in conflict. I pondered the problem for several months. All my colleagues advised me against publication of these transcripts, notes and records. At the very least, they pointed out, I ran the risk of ruining my professional reputation. I might even have my licence revoked. The reader holds my decision in his hands. When the entire account has been read, I hope the reader will agree that I made the right choice.

When I first met Mr. Avatar on February 29, I had no inkling that he was to provide me with a unique professional experience. He was unusually relaxed, but that is sometimes a trained characteristic of people who live under great stress. What I first noticed about him was his skin. He had a glowing copper complexion, like a new penny. Coupled with his trim, athletic appearance, he seemed to be bursting with health. When he told me he was forty-nine years old, I thought he was lying. But his birth certificate confirmed the truth of his statement, although, as it turned out, he believed himself to be more than five hundred years old.

I did not discover this at our first meeting. That was spent with Mr. Avatar interviewing me (hence the reason I do not count it as a consultation). No patient had ever done that. He was pleasant, but quite persistent. He evaded my questions. He wished to know about my childhood, my education, my ideological beliefs, my views on marriage, sex, art, my favourite books and films. He was particularly interested in my religious beliefs, and seemed pleased when I said I was an agnostic. I readily answered all his questions. We established trust.

Finally, I asked him what he had come to me for.

He took out a large envelope and said, 'I want you to read this and tell me if I am mad.'

I said, 'I will read it and I will tell you if you have a problem we need to deal with. When would you like to come back?'

'As soon as you read it,' he said.

I said, 'I can read it today.'

'Then I'll come back tomorrow,' he said.

Before he left, I conducted a standard physical examination. I found Mr. Avatar to be in excellent condition. He had the physique of a healthy thirty-year-old. That night, I read the story of Guiakan, the Taino, who Mr. Avatar believed was his first incarnation.

Chapter One
AMERINDIAN

I

My first memory is of walking out of a cave. That was more than five hundred years ago. My people believed that our race came out of a sacred cave on the small land of Ciguayo, that came to be called Hispaniola and later Haiti. They said I was a special gift from our supreme zemi Yúcahu, who was the lord of the cassava and the sea. When I was older, I heard that my mother had walked into the cave with her stomach flat like a *buren* and come out three days later as round as a *batey* ball. The *bohutis* said that Atabey, the goddess of fertility, had planted the seed in my mother's womb. That made me kin to Yúcahu, who was Atabey's son. My mother never removed her virgin's headband. That caused much talk among the tongue-waggers, but their gossiping was whispered because of what the priests had said.

When her time came, my mother returned to the cave with a *bahanarotu*, who was to be the midwife and to read the signs of birth. The village waited outside. The cave was somewhere in the mountains that rose in the centre of the land like the backbone of a sleeping giant. The people waited three days, and when I walked out there was a great and fearful silence. I remember the tall trees and my people with their bodies like smooth wood, and the green land falling away to a silver strip of sea, and I remember the bright blue sheet of the sky. I must have fainted, for I remember nothing more until I awoke in the *bohio* of the cacique.

They told me later that my mother had died in giving birth to me and that the *bahanarotu* was found raving mad in the cave. So the Ciguayao people, and later all Tainos, knew that my coming was not a good sign. The priests talked about what to do with me. The *bahanarotu* only said the same words over and over again in her madness – 'water demon, water demon' – but it was not clear whether I had been sent to stand against the demon, or whether I was the demon itself.

My people were not a fearful race, for Taino means 'noble', and the priests said that Yúcahu would not have sent me unless it was for a good

purpose. Talk stopped when our cacique, Guacamari, took me as his son and brought me to live in his *bohio*. Guacamari was a good chief and a good man, but he did not take me in because the sap of his heart overflowed. Later, when I was older, I understood that he won respect in the eyes of the other five caciques of the small land by what he did. If I were a protector, having me in his home would bring fortune. If I were a demon, he showed courage by taking me into his home. In either case, I was kin to Yúcahu, as my sea-green eyes showed. But it was all for nothing. Neither I nor any other Taino could have protected us from the *guamikinas*, the covered men. Our god, Yúcahu, gave the Tainos cassava; their god, Jehovah, gave the *guamikinas* swords. My true nature was one which no one could know. Only the mad *bahanarotu*, whose name was Maiakan, might have known. But she now spent her days mumbling to herself.

I stayed out of this woman's way. She began screaming whenever she saw me. It was hard to keep out of her way, because Guacamari put her up in a hut right next to his own. He wanted her close if she ever began to speak in the voices of Atabey or Yúcahu or some other powerful zemi.

There was always a space between me and everyone else. How could there not, when at birth I was already a child of five seasons and, I was told, grew to the size of ten within one passing of the rains? I do not remember any of this. I only remember that this tale of my life was sung in the *areyto*, which told the deeds of our ancestors, and that particular song was not made until the covered men came and it was known that Yúcahu had sent me because of them. Then everyone understood why, even before I was born, my mother had said that my name was to be Guaikan, which means 'precious crossing'.

I had no kin. My mother had been marked from childhood. Both her parents and her two younger brothers had been drowned in a storm when she was ten years old. Her father, who would have been my grandfather, was a trader. He rowed his *canoa* over the sea as far north as Guanahani and to many of the small lands in between, and even paddled as far south as Iére and up the rivers of the greatland for the stone tools and the gold ornaments that the Mayans made so well. It was on one of the short trips that the family was caught by a storm on the sea. The girl-child was the only one who survived. She was found two days later holding on to an oar by a lone fisherman coming from Cubanacan. So our people knew she had been protected by Yúcahu, and when she became pregnant by no man, no one was surprised. After she lost her family, she was brought up by her father's brother and, even among our well-made people, was considered of great beauty. She was

named Wai'tukubuli, which means 'Tall is her body'. But by the time I was born, her father's brother had died. He had been killed by a demon in the forest who had pierced his neck with a dart dipped in cassava juice. But I do not know if this is true. The imaginations of the village tongue-waggers were as fertile as the land itself. I was born shortly after my uncle's death and my having no blood relations was a sign that I was indeed a Chosen One. What need has the kin of Yúcahu for any earthly family?

The grown-ups looked on me with respect, but because of this the children did not play with me. I had no friends until I was nearly a man, and then only one. This would be hard on a child anywhere, but it was especially hard on a Taino child. Tainos lived by three things – worship, cassava, and *batey*. I was allowed to help with the sweet potato and squash and beans in the small garden at the back of the *bohio*, but I never got to play *batey* with the other children. When they were playing hide, I was never asked to seek. When they were playing with a wooden ball between three or four of them, they never chose me to be on a team. But, like all small children, I was not aware of my hurt.

Batey was the centre of our lives. We worshipped the cassava because it was a crop that did not need much tending and it could keep in the ground for three seasons if need be. This left plenty time for *batey*.

This is what I was left out of. The only friend I had was the only other boy in the village who also did not play the game. His name was Caonabó. He did not have any parents, either. His mother had also died in childbirth and his father had rowed out to sea and never returned. Caon was a strange-looking boy because his kinfolk, given the newborn baby at the time of the yearly celebrations for the cacique's zemis, did not bind his head with boards as carefully as they should have. As a result, his forehead was straight instead of sloping back from the brows as it should have been. He was not ugly but he looked like he was of another tribe, like the Arawaks or the Caribs. That was enough reason for the other children not to be friends with him, since children never like those who are different. This proves that most grown-ups stay as children inside.

Caon was called a bad boy by the grown-ups, because he was not interested in planting and would work in the fields only if forced to. He was also strange in his ways. He wore three times as many decorations as the grown-ups. He had coloured feathers stuck in his hair and on cotton strings tied around wrists and ankles. He wore several darts of wood and bone in his ears, and on them hung various pendants and a long feather. He did not just paste on the dyes which we put on their bodies to keep off insects, but pasted them on in different colours and designs. I thought he decorated himself to draw attention away from his

odd features – a foolish idea, since his decorations made him look even stranger.

But it was not only his appearance that was not usual. He would disappear into the forest for half-a-day, but he never came back with any fruit or fish. When he did not go into the forest, he would spend hours sitting at the edge of the clearing, chipping stones into knives and whittling pieces of wood. This habit added to the strangeness of his body, because regular playing of *batey* made everyone's bodies as taut and as flexible as carved spears. But Caon looked smooth and full, like an almost-ripe squash, and he did not have scars on elbows and knees like everybody else.

I did not have these scars either, but for a different reason. I did not play with the other children, but I was always busy. I went into the forest alone to try and catch iguanas, and climbed the trees to set traps for parrots, and I went down to the river that ran behind the village with a cotton net I had made myself to catch fish. I also walked to the sea and played on the beach with a *batey* ball that I borrowed from Guacamari. I did not tell him I was borrowing it. *Batey* balls were the most valuable and valued objects in the village. The *balata* trees, from whose sap the balls were made, grew only on the greatland. The small land Tainos got the balls by trade and they were kept by the cacique in his *bohio*. I knew Guacamari would never lend one to a child, kin to Yúcahu or not, and so I got a large cloth from one of my *bohio* mothers and I would conceal a ball in it when I was going into the forest or down to the beach alone. I became quite skilled at keeping the ball in the air using only shoulders and thighs and head. This did not mean I was good. After all, I was playing only against myself. But another child might have given up on *batey* entirely. To me that would have been admitting defeat. By practising *batey*, I refused to be defeated. It is in such small things that a man's spirit truly shows itself, though there can be no pride in this since that spirit is given to him at birth. And so I played one-person *batey* every day in a cove where no one could see me. The only movement I could not do was the body dive and twist to keep the ball bouncing, because there was no one to bounce it back to me.

I was less than ten seasons old when I started doing these things, but there was no grown-up watching to stop me. Since I had no parents, it was easy to slip away. Guacamari ignored even his own children, as he was occupied with his duties, and his wives naturally paid more attention to their own children than to me. Once I came back at mealtimes or was there for planting, no one noticed my long absences. I was injured often when I first started running away. The first time, I

fell from a tree and broke my leg. It hurt very much and I cried for hours, alone in the forest. But I was able to straighten the leg, and by the time I returned to the village late that evening, it was strong again. On another occasion, I was attacked by a quenk. But I ate some fruit and drank lots of water and my wounds closed enough so that when I returned home at nightfall no one noticed. I always got very hungry and very thirsty when I was injured, and the few times I was unable to get food or water I fell asleep and awoke healed, but very weak. I never had any scars. I did not think there was anything strange about any of this, and it was not until much later that I found out that other people were not like me. Yet I must have known by instinct, or at least by the power of observation that all small children have, that I was unusual. I always felt that other people were less brave than I. I was not afraid of anything. I think it was this bravery that prevented the other children from teasing me, as they teased Caonabó.

For all these reasons, I realized Caon was like me. I do not mean that we had anything in common. I mean that he was like me because he had nothing in common with anyone else, including myself. That in itself can be a stronger bond than same interests, tastes or character. I do not know whether he felt this same connection. He was about two or three seasons older than me, I think, but he was even more reserved and more separated. I, at least, had the respect of the elders. So it was I who made friends with him when, returning one day after a day's iguana-catching in the forest, I almost tripped over him at the edge of the village clearing – I had not returned by the trail.

'I am sorry,' I said.

He was sitting cross-legged with a stone knife in one hand and a wooden bowl in the next. He looked up at me. He was surprised, but the expression had come on his face after I apologized, not when I stumbled out of the bushes. I suppose he was not used to politeness from the other small-ones.

'It is well,' he said.

I gestured with my right hand – I was holding two fat iguanas tied like bows with cotton string in my left – at the bowl he held in his lap. 'Is that from Gonave?'

He was carving a pattern into the side of the bowl. When I looked closer, I realized that the bowl was unfinished. 'No,' he said.

I saw that he was pleased at my mistake. Gonave was a very small land on the sunset side of Haiti, and its people had such skill in woodcarving that it was said that even the food of the worst cook tasted wonderful when served in a Gonave bowl.

I put my iguanas on the ground and sat down cross-legged beside Caon. 'Where did you get the knife?' I asked. Most of our stone tools came from the mainland to the south.

'I made it.'

'I can never find a good stone,' I said. My own knife was the usual limestone shard wrapped with cotton. Caon's knife was a longish stone flaked until it had a razor edge. It even had a carved wooden handle wrapped in cotton.

He did not answer for a while, then he said, 'I can show you a place where you might find some good pieces.'

'Yes?'

'Yes.'

I looked up at the sun. 'Tomorrow?'

'That would be well.'

I got up and then I untied one of the iguanas and re-tied him, neck to tail. 'You can have this for your pepper-pot.'

Another boy of my age would have said for your mother's pepper-pot. But neither of us could make that mistake. He nodded.

'Thank you.'

We were friends from that day until he died twelve seasons later, in the giant stone *bohio* of the covered men.

II

We set out the next day before the sun got too high. But it was a cool day, for there were long black clouds in the sky. Caon led me into the forest, in a direction I had never gone before. It began to drizzle almost as soon as we left and then a heavy downpour started. We squatted underneath a large tree, still getting wet, but the pelting drops were broken by the tree leaves so they did not sting. We both wore loincloths so we did not have to carry our knives in our hands and would have bags for game or shells. Caon had stuck several things into his loincloth—his stone knife, as well as a limestone one, and a gouge made of conch shell. He had also strung the small bowl he had been carving the day before around his neck. Now, as we squatted beneath the tree, he began carving an intricate pattern around the outer rim of the bowl.

'You like carving, eh?' I said.

He nodded.

I said, 'I like it a little. But it is hard work.'

'It takes much effort. But it is not like work for me.'

‘How so?’ I asked. I expected to hear a secret of how to make work seem not like work.

‘I like to make things beautiful,’ Caon said.

It was not the answer I had been hoping for, but I thought it was a good answer. I did not know anyone else who liked to make things beautiful so much that they would carry a bowl on a trip just to do that. I had walked only with my knife and fishing cord wrapped around my waist. I sat and watched Caon carve his bowl in the rain. He used both his limestone knife and the shell gouge. He did not make a simple design of lines or circles as most people did. Instead, leaves and vines appeared around the lip of the bowl. I was almost disappointed when the rain stopped and he got to his feet.

We walked for a long time, often leaving the trails and at one point climbing down a low cliff, until we came to a small valley. One side of this valley was of gray-blue rock and at the foot of it were many pieces of stone. It did not take long to find a long, tapered piece that would make a fine knife-blade.

‘How did you find this place?’ I asked Caon, for even the men of our village did not know of it. Those who had stone knives had got them from trade.

‘I go everywhere,’ Caon said.

We started back up the trail. We did not want to reach back to the village too late. I said, ‘Is that what you do when you come in the forest? Walk on the trails, look at animals?’

Caon nodded.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘It gives me ideas. And I see interesting things.’

I didn’t quite understand this. Things were interesting if they were useful; and ideas were only ideas for getting food and other things of value. But Caon meant something more than this, which I could not grasp. But I did not mind. The stranger Caon seemed, the more I liked him. For I had always been viewed as by other people as strange, and I thought of myself in that way also. In most ways, we all become what we are told to be. But, as far as it is possible to escape that fate, Caon had done so.

III

So the moon grew ripe and was eaten many times Caon and I learned from each other. He taught me stillness, for we spent long times in the forest simply looking at animals. To learn the habits of animals – the

trails they used, the prints of their feet and the shape of their droppings, where they fed and where they lived, how best to catch those worth catching – all this was basic knowledge for any Taino male. But Caon's knowledge went further than this. He knew the movements ants made when signalling that there was food. He could tell what the different sounds of different animals meant – danger or a call for a mate. He knew that the presence of a certain plants or insects meant that certain types of animals were close by or would visit a particular area regularly.

With such knowledge, and given his skill with his hands, Caon could have been a master hunter. But he was not interested in killing animals, not even for food. Even fish he ate only sparingly. His kin, who would have known of his strange diet, must have thought Caon was mad. To not eat meat was like a man deciding to live by smoking tobacco alone. But Caon's connection with the animals was a special gift from Atabey. While I squatted hidden in bushes upwind, he would stand in a clearing, making a strange squeaking sound and after a short time a tree rat would appear, small round ears upraised, nose twitching. Caon would stand perfectly still, still squeaking, and the hutia would eventually shuffle forward and sniff his feet, at which point Caon would be able to pet it and play with it. He could imitate most bird-songs almost perfectly and I had even seen him bring a parrot, which men spent long hours trapping, down from a tree on to his shoulder.

All the animals interested him – he showed me how even frogs had beauty, for, after birds and fishes, there are no more colourful animals. We would even spend most of a day just looking at spiders and their webs. And, because he had spent so much time in the forest, he knew where many useful plants and trees grew. I was able to please my *bohio* mothers by bringing back many roots and herbs from these trips, and I urged Caon to do the same for his relatives. But he did not see the point. He seemed to me at that time to have no need for affection. Once he had his knife and some *duho* wood, he seemed perfectly content. Caon would sit for hours, carving small animal pendants or belts or leaf designs into bowls. Many of these he just threw away. He seemed always to be trying to express some vision from inside himself and always failing.

I had no skills I could teach Caon in return for all he taught me. But once he showed me something, I often seemed to get an instinctive knowledge about it. It was I who told him that the eggs of a frog had to be fertilized outside the body and, later, he told me he had seen this. I also knew more about the various uses of plants than he did, though how I came to this knowledge I could not say. Caon already knew a lot from looking at what plants the animals ate.

In all this, I learned more patience than most Tainos had, though we were not a hurried people. It was not a hard lesson for one who had no sense of urgency about time. (*In all my lives, I have always known instinctively that I cannot die.*) That was part of what made Caon and I friends. And to learn that even ‘useless’ knowledge could be interesting, and that beauty could be its own point, provided a path to peace that I never equalled until five centuries later. I felt that Caon and I were closer to Yúcahu than other people, including Guacamari with his many zemis.

There were two things I gave Caon in return—my friendship and *batey*. I think he did not know his own loneliness until we became friends. I have said that he did not seem to need affection. His reaction to my appreciation for his work showed that this was not true. I was the first person to really see and appreciate Caon’s work. And, whether it was because of this, or whether it was just because he had reached a certain stage of maturity at the time we became friends, his carving got even better. There was a new precision and delicacy of line in his pendants, a sweeter curve and exactness to his carvings and bowl designs.

There were surprising advantages to Caon’s useless skill, as I saw. As he sat carving on the side of the clearing one morning, a girl named Nitika walked by and stopped in front of us. Although her breasts had barely begun to grow, Nitika already showed signs of becoming one of the most beautiful women in the village – her newly-rounded hips moved like flowing water and her smile was like sunlight. I straightened up and cleared my throat. But she only glanced at me.

‘Hello, Caonabó,’ she said.

Caon, concentrating on his carving, had not even realized anyone was there. I elbowed him.

‘What is it?’ he said, angrily, then looked up. Nitika smiled, and the day seemed suddenly brighter.

‘Greetings, Caonabó,’ she said again.

‘Mph,’ said Caon.

‘He gives greeting,’ I told her.

Her smile widened, and she gave me a glance that was almost a wink. Her interest was in Caon, but that little glance was enough to fill my belly. And I was curious. What had Caon done so this girl wished to speak to him?

Nitika squatted down beside us. She wore a little flap of cloth around her hips and her hidden femaleness was suddenly more enticing than the nakedness we saw all the time. She said, ‘I have watched you carving.’

Caon swallowed three times before he spoke. ‘I like to carve,’ he said.

'I like your pendants,' said Nitika.

'Thank you,' Caon said and then, proving himself not entirely a fool, felt around behind him and held up a small but well-carved pendant in the shape of a fish. 'You may have this, if you wish.'

Nitika smile was like the risen sun. 'My thanks!' she said. My mouth dropped open at her obvious delight. Who would have thought a beautiful girl would like a man, even one such as Caon, just because he could make beautiful things?

Caon threaded the pendant and Nitika leaned forward for him to tie it around her neck. Her face was close to his and she watched him all the while he was tying the pendant. He usually had very sure fingers, but he had to try several times before he got the knot right.

'There,' he said.

'My thanks,' Nitika said again. She stood up. Only then did Caon realize that the flap of cloth he was wearing around his loin had been raised like a door-curtain by the sudden pole of his penis. He crouched forward, and Nitika's smile moved from mid-morning brightness to high noon's.

'I shall see you,' she said, and turned and walked away. Her still lean but quite shapely buttocks rolled a little more than was necessary.

'Oh Atabey!' said Caon, wiping real sweat off his forehead. He got to his feet and rushed into the forest. I lay flat on the ground and laughed.

So Caon always had some females around him. This attention had certain bad effects – Caon was now even more disliked by the other males, who could not understand what the girls saw in him, with his indifference to hunting and over-decorated appearance. I did not mind the attention Caon got, because I naturally benefited as his best friend. I lost my virginity before he did, with Nitika's older sister. This was only because I was more aggressive. Nitika almost had to beg Caon to sex with her.

It was around this time that our relationship with the other people of the village began to change. Our friendship had at first made us more, rather than less, isolated. The devil-child and the mad-boy had to become friends with each other since no one else wanted to be friends with them, said the tongue-waggers. But Caon and I were now becoming men. Hairs grew on our chins and we plucked them out or shaved them with conch shells. Hair grew on our lower bellies and we wore loincloths more often now. Females were now interested in us. Sexing with the girls was just part of growing up, but soon we would have to think about choosing a woman and starting a family.

Because we were becoming men, we could not vanish from the village as often as before. Now we had to be heaping the mounds of earth in the fields and digging the holes with *coas* for planting the cassava cuttings and the potato and the maize. We also had to hunt and fish and gather plants for the women to cook.

These changes were much harder on Caon than on me. It took him away from his carving, and at a time when his hands had just begun to acquire the skill to express his spirit. I was not very pleased at having to do all these common tasks, either. My *batey* had begun to swiftly improve now that I had a partner to practise with. Because it was just me and Caon, we spent a lot of time doing what would now be called drills. Even the best players among us got their skills only through actual play. So Caon and I had a more disciplined approach to the game. And, because of this, we were often absent from the fields and put the least amount in the pepper-pots. (Caon, refusing outright to hunt, put nothing at all.) One day Caon was beaten up by some boys. Later, Guacamari himself took me aside to tell me that I should work harder, especially since I was kin to Yúcahu. (Guacamari really meant especially since I was kin to him – a lazy son, even if adopted, embarrassed him as cacique.)

Caon and I met that night outside the village to talk about the situation. In the moonlight, his swollen face looked like a *zemi*'s. He had not been badly hurt, but the boys had pulled off and trampled all his feather armllets and his pendants. They had been angry because Caon had gone into the forest to do some carving when the rest of them had had to go to the fields. They had attacked him as he returned to the village around midday. No adult had interfered.

Caon was very angry. He planned to carve a powerful *zemi* that would bring down disaster on all the boys who had beaten him. He also wanted to go around by their families' pepper-pots and put copious quantities of *gioia* herb in them, but I pointed out that that would make everyone in the *bohio* vomit, not just the boys.

'I hate spending the day in the *conucos*!' Caon said.

'So do I,' I said. 'But the village must eat. We have to do our part.'

'Then they should treat us as though we are part of the village.'

'We must be patient,' I said.

'That is easy for you to say. You have a destiny.'

'So do you.'

'But I cannot depend on it. I must make it.'

'How?'

'I do not know!'

'I will think of something,' I said. But I made the promise only

because he was my friend and I wished to comfort him. I had no idea what we could do to change our situation, except submit to the routine of the village. That was not a choice, though, since neither he nor I could live like that for the rest of our lives. And, odd as it may seem, that was the first time I asked myself the obvious question – could I die? But it is not really strange that I should have almost become a man before this question ever occurred to me, for even mortal youths tend to behave as though death will never find them.

A few days later, Maiakan, the *bahanarotu*, came out of her madness. It happened quite unexpectedly. She came out of her hut one morning, blinking in the sunlight, and asked one of my *bohio* mothers for some cassava bread. Her face was quiet, so everyone saw that the madness had left her. My *bohio* mother immediately called Guacamari, who came hurrying to see this miracle. He took Maiakan into the temple and they stayed there for a long time. When they came out, he announced that there would be a special celebration in three days.

The entire village became full of work. We usually had such celebrations twice in every season, but this time it was not only the people of our village who would be at the ceremony. All the chiefs of Ciguayo, with the *nitainos* of each village, would be attending – Guarionex, who ruled Magua; Guacanagar, chief of Marien; Canabó, ruler of Maguana; Behechio, who ruled Xaraguá; Higuana, only woman chief of Ciguayo, who ruled Higüey. And – do not ask me how – even two chiefs from other islands, Hatuey of Cubanacan and Caicihu of Xaymaca, arrived on Ciguayo on the day of the celebrations. For this celebration was to end with a prophecy – everyone knew that Maiakan had come out of her madness to pronounce on the fate of all Tainos in the islands.

So in every *bohio*, cassava was peeled and grated, and you could almost hear the groaning of the many plaited straw sieves turning as they hung from the roofs as the poison was squeezed out. The dried cassava flour was then mixed with water and laid on the *burens* to bake. Fires burned day and night. *Zemis* were cleaned and *bohios* re-thatched. Pendants were fashioned, feathers dyed and several people carved *guaizins* to wear on their faces. *Caoba* was harvested, rolled into cigars, and new *tabacos* made to smoke it. The thin white smoke of simmering pepper-pots hung like a sheet over the village, with the men constantly bringing in fish and hutias and quenk and other animals to be cut up and thrown into the stew. The women picked the small, hot-tasting *axis* and beans and starchy *hagis* and added them to the pots. And, of course, all the *batey* courts were cleared, the earth beaten, and boundaries redrawn.

Maiakan remained in the temple for those three days. The only ones

who saw her were Guacamari and two priests. They never carried in any food, only *caoba* leaves and new *tabacos*. I watched everything, for I knew that my fate was tied to whatever Maiakan would say on the day of the ceremony. Perhaps she might declare that I was sent to protect the Tainos or perhaps she would say I had to be sacrificed to protect the Tainos. I was very nervous, but not for my life. Even if I could be killed, I had concluded that doing so would not be easy. No one, not even Caon, knew my secret. But what had Maiakan seen at my birth? Was it something that had revealed what I was, and was it that knowledge which had driven her mad? I had to know. So, on the second night, I went to the temple.

That large, circular hut was lit by a small flame on a raised platform in the centre and was filled with the smell of *caoba* smoke. In the flickering light, I could see *zemis* all around, on the ground or hanging on the walls. I stopped at the entrance. I was afraid. Then I went inside. Was I not kin to Yúcahu? Maiakan sat cross-legged on the platform, her head bowed. I thought she was sleeping but, as I walked up to her, she raised her head. I was ready to flee. But she only watched me.

She said, 'Hello, child.'

'Greetings, mother *bohuti*,' I answered.

She was very old. Her hair was completely white and her face had creases at nose and mouth. I had never seen anyone like her before, since most Tainos died by forty seasons with their hair still as dark as night and faces as smooth as a windswept beach.

I said, 'Do you remember me?'

'No, child.'

I said, 'I am Guaikan. You were *bahanarotu* at my birth.'

'Ah,' she said.

She took up a handful of wood chips and shredded *caoba* leaves and added them to the fire. The flames rose and the smoke grew thicker. Maiakan drew in her breath. I waited for her to say something, but she was quiet. She looked as if she could sit in this temple, breathing *caoba* smoke for an eternity, and I suddenly felt quite close to her.

'Do you remember my birth? I asked.

'No,' she said.

'Oh.'

I felt both disappointed and relieved. I drew in a deep breath, and the smoke made my head buzz as though a small insect was trapped behind the centre of my forehead.

'So you do not know what you will say tomorrow night?' I said.

She raised her thin shoulders. 'I shall know on the morrow.'

I left the temple and did not sleep at all that night. But I was comforted. I knew now that Maiakan did not mean me harm. I fell asleep just before the sun rose but was awakened very soon by Guacamari himself.

‘It is time,’ he said.

I nodded. Guacamari’s face was shut away, but his gaze was sharp upon me. As I took up the calabash of water and bathed my naked body, I understood. At the end of that day, Guacamari might either have to sacrifice me or give way to me as cacique. He handed me a cloth to dry my skin.

I said, ‘I do not want to be cacique.’

He said, ‘We must do what Atabey commands.’

The other path we did not talk of. I saw then that he had true affection for me. For a moment, I thought of telling Guacamari my secret. But I kept silent.

We went out of the *bohio* together. In the plaza outside, the seven other caciques sat on wooden stools, surrounded by their nobles. Hatuey and Caicihu had arrived that very morning. Caicihu was a small man with a big head and a calabash belly. Hatuey was of middle height and looked very strong. He had brought five wives with him, who stood or sat around his *duho*. The other caciques looked all the same to me, well-decorated men with soft bellies and set mouths. Only Higuanama, the woman cacique of Higuey, stays in my memory. Like Maiakan, she was very old, but her hair was dark and her eyes, though bagged below, were very black and very sharp. She had high cheekbones, a nose like a parrot’s beak and a strong chin. She looked as though she had been very beautiful once. Even though she was sitting, I could see that she was tall. She wore a dress dyed in many colours that covered her body completely and she held a carved staff.

Guacamari went to the entrance of the temple and sat on his *duho*, a drum between his knees. I stood beside him. He began beating the drum and, from their *bohios*, the villagers came out carrying baskets of cassava bread, and wearing their finest ornaments. Guacamari began to sing, praising the gods, and the villagers raised their voices in chorus as they paraded around the plaza. The other caciques were silent. I saw that Guacamari was very aware of the occasion—no matter what happened at the end of this day, his village would always be important from now on. I looked behind me – the temple’s doorway was closed and, between the close-bound canes which made up the walls, smoke drifted. All the *zemis* had been placed outside against the walls. Only one *zemi* was not there – Atabey. Maiakan would stay inside with her, inhaling snuff made by

crushing the seeds of the piptadenia tree until she had a vision and was ready to speak. It could happen any time, but I thought she would be in there until night came.

The singing and dancing continued. I wanted to join – even Caon was there dancing, almost hidden under his many pendants and coloured feathers. He wore a well-carved mask. I knew it was him only because he was wearing more ornaments than anyone else. Caon had his desire, at least for that day, to be part of the village. I looked at my people dance, and the idea of doom seemed foolish. I remained beside Guacamari. I could not truly be of them until Maiakan spoke, to tell what my place among the Tainos was.

The priests, as many as the fingers on my hands, came to the temple. They placed pendants of gold and semi-precious stones, as well as garlands of flowers, on the zemis. The people stuck a paddle stick down their throats and vomited into a small calabash and threw the calabash into the running river and came pure in body to the zemis. The women gave bread to the priests who offered it to the zemis with the proper prayers. After this was done, more dancing followed, with songs for the gods and for those chiefs who had died and were now with Atabey and Yúcahu. Maiakan still had not come out of the smoking temple. After the dancing, the bread which had been offered to the gods was broken and shared out to the heads of the families of each *bohio*. Usually, only some of this bread was eaten and most kept as protection against misfortune. I noticed that this time, though, no one ate any of the bread – in fact, most people slipped into their *bohios* to place the bread on their personal altars at once.

After this, everybody ate, most sitting cross-legged on the ground in groups, the *nitainos* on their stools, everyone talking. It was now midday. After the meal, people went to their *bohios* or under the trees to sleep, as we always did after midday. But the nobles and the caciques did not sleep. They sat and talked and smoked *caoba* cigars. They were waiting for Maiakan.

When the sun was one handspan lower in the sky, everyone came fully awake once more. Guacamari announced that the *batey* would begin and everyone clapped. He sent me into the *bohio* to bring out the cotton net which contained all seven *batey* balls of the village. The other caciques had also brought balls with them, so all the courts would be in use and people would play on the sides as well.

Guacamari chose teams and told them what courts to use. Three of the courts were given over to men teams and two to women teams. Those who were waiting to play made a circle and bounced the balls

between them. None of the *nitainos* took part, but to everyone's surprise Hatuey, the cacique from Cubanaca, joined the team on the largest court. He had brought elbow and knee protectors and his own stone belt. He was a very good player, skilled at keeping the ball bouncing by hitting it with his stone-belted waist, and very accurate at sending it past the other team's defenders to score between the marked stones.

Caon and I stood around the edges of the batey groups, hoping to be asked in. We were old enough. But no one asked.

'The kin of Atabey is not good enough to play batey, eh?' Caon said. 'The zemi I made for today's celebration received the most bread, but its carver is not good enough to play *batey*, eh?'

'I know what to do,' I said.

I went to Guacamari. We had been watching for some time now and the sun was already only a handspan above the horizon. Guacamari was lying on his *duho* watching the match on the largest court. Caon stood a little way off, listening.

'Cacique,' I said.

'Yes, son?' he said, his eyes still on the game.

'I want to play in a game today.'

'You do not play *batey*,' he said, not even watching me.

I opened my mouth to say I did, then thought better of it.

'Today is the day I should start.'

I spoke very firmly and now he looked at me.

'Why don't you practise with one of the groups?' he said, not unkindly.

'No. I want to play.' I hesitated, then said, 'Yúcahu commands it.'

Guacamari straightened up. 'How do you know this?'

'I dreamed it after the midday meal.'

'Are you certain of this?'

'Yes.'

He nodded. 'Then you must play.'

'And Caonabó was in the dream, too.'

Caon's mouth dropped open.

'Then he shall play too, on the main court,' said Guacamari.

Caon began to shake his head, but Guacamari glanced around and he froze in mid-shake. I, too, became a little nervous.

'Well, perhaps not on the main court...' I said.

'Nonsense!' said Guacamari. 'If Yúcahu came to you in a dream on this day, it is clear that you must play *batey* on the main court. Any other would be an insult to the gods.'

To this day, I do not know if Guacamari was serious or if he just

decided to play me along. His face was perfectly serious, but I am sure that I saw a little laughter in his eyes.

'The main court? The main court!' Caon almost screamed as we went off to put on borrowed knee and elbow protectors. 'We are going to make complete fools of ourselves. *Bigger* complete fools!'

'Be calm,' I said, tying on the wooden cups. 'We know how to play. We have been doing it for many moons.'

'Only between ourselves. These men have been playing for seasons! And we have never played in a team.'

'We shall be all right,' I said. I checked to make sure the cotton padding was firmly in place below the cups on my right elbow and right knee.

'Oh, I am sure we shall be well-loved. People like a good laugh.'

'We shall be all right,' I repeated.

And so it was we had our first batey game, in front of the entire village on the main court on a team of only ten persons, instead of thirty where we could at least have kept out of the way. I shall not tell you that Caon or myself scored the winning goal or some such story. But we performed well enough and at no point did the ball come to rest with either of us. Our team lost, but that was because of the skill and speed of Hatuey on the other side. When we walked off the court, Guacamari looked upon me with pride and I saw the head of Caon's household actually clap him upon the back. It was enough.

IV

Maiakan came out of the temple a little while after the sun had set. Word passed through the village quickly and everyone gathered to hear the words she would speak. A large fire had been built in the centre of the plaza. Maiakan sat cross-legged on one side. The seven caciques sat on their *duhos* to the right of her and the other priests stood the left. I sat opposite, watching her over the flames. Her gaze was unfocused and her eyes looked like small eggs in her wrinkled face.

The head priest, whose name was Xiaiabo, said. 'All are here, O *bahanarotu*.'

'All are here,' Maiakan repeated.

Xiaiabo lifted his arms. 'You have meditated long and well, O *bahanarotu*. Speak now so we may know what lies ahead.'

'Yúcahu, he who has a mother but no beginning, has spoken to me,' Maiakan announced, and a sigh like a passing breeze went through the people.

‘Speak to us the words of the invisible one, O *bahanarotu*,’ said Xiaiabo.

Now Maiakan’s voice changed, becoming a voice that was neither male nor female. ‘Brief shall be the enjoyment of life,’ she said and, although I was looking at her right across the jumping flames, I did not see her parted lips move. The villagers stirred, but were silent as death.

Maiakan spoke again. ‘The covered men shall come, rule, and kill.’

‘What do these *guamikinas* want, O *bahanarotu*?’ asked Xiaiabo.

One word issued like doom from Maiakan’s unmoving lips.

‘*Guanin*.’

There was a stir of surprise. I fingered the necklace that Caon had made for me moons ago. The alloy of gold, silver and copper was beautiful, but it was nothing to kill for.

‘And if we give them *guanin*, O *bahanarotu*?’

‘The covered men shall come, rule, and kill.’

Xiaiabo looked around at all the caciques before asking the next question. His job was interpretation, but in that was also the need to find a path away from the doom. ‘And what of the boy, he who was named Guaikan, O *bahanarotu*?’

‘Brief shall be the enjoyment of life. But he shall preserve the Tainos.’

And again there was a stir through the crowd. I felt my body relax and I was surprised, because I had not known I was tense.

But Xiaiabo strove for clarity, as a good head priest should.

‘He is our protector, O *bahanarotu*?’ he asked.

‘No! He is preserver of the Tainos, not protector, for none can protect against the *guamikinas*.’ Now that voice, that was of neither a man nor a woman, shrieked into the night. ‘The covered men shall come, rule, and kill!’

And with that Maiakan’s head fell forward and she was silent. Xiaiabo stepped forward and, stooping beside her, put his hand to her breast. Then he rose, shaking his head. ‘Atabey has taken her.’

I sat where I was, a sudden burden on my shoulders. I was Preserver, but not Protector. What did this mean? Suddenly, I found that I would have preferred if Atabey had sent me to be sacrificed. For the burden I felt was the weight of the Tainos in all the small lands, and I did not think I was strong enough to bear it.

V

Life went on as always after that day. The caciques returned to their chiefdoms and Yúcahu’s words spread throughout the Taino villages,

even to the Mayans and the Aztecs on the greatland. The prophecy had been made – what was to be would be. As always happens, the message became confused the further it travelled. When I went to the other small lands in later days, I was to hear that the prophecy described the *guamikinas* as ‘great traders’; that the prophecy had been made by the ‘great chief Caicihu’; that Yúcahu has promised that the Taino race would be preserved for all time. Meanwhile, there was cassava to be planted and fish to be caught and children to be seen to and *batey* to be played. Atabey had sent a preserver – the future was my worry, not others’.

But my worry after that day was not of the future, but of the present. I could not believe that nothing had changed. Neither could Caon. To be sure, we had won acceptance and respect from the village on that day. But this made people even more expectant that we would be there to plant the cassava and pick the beans and play the *batey*. This last we did not mind, but the rest still irked.

‘The only way I can get my carving done is by working on *zemis*,’ Caon said one evening, as we sat on the river bank talking about the situation. This was a moon and a half after Maiakan’s prophecy, and I had done much thinking in that time.

‘I have a way to get us out of planting and hunting,’ I said, and Caon looked at me with hopeful eyes.

‘You know what I like best about your plan, Guaikan?’ Caon said, when we had finished our talk.

‘What?’

‘That only the two of us in the entire village could probably do it.’ I shrugged. ‘Only the two of us would wish to.’

For the next few days, we worked in the fields. Caon even went fishing, although alone, and brought back some large and tasty fish that greatly impressed his kin. I was very active around the *bohio*, planting and making many containers from calabashes. Guacamari noticed and smiled approvingly on me. He thought I was taking my destiny seriously. When I went to him many days later and told him that Atabey had spoken to me in a dream, he became very excited.

‘What did she tell you?’

‘She wants me to make a journey,’ I said.

‘Where?’

‘To the greatland.’

‘I shall get my *canoa* ready,’ he said, as though he would leave that moment.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Atabey said I must build my own. It is to be a *canoa* like no other.’

'But you are still a boy.'

'That is why I need your help.'

His eyes shone. 'Did Atabey say so?'

'Yes,' I lied.

'You shall have the help of all the men in the village,' he said, speaking loudly as if Atabey might be a little deaf.

'No. She wishes me to build the *canoa* only with one other person.'

'Who?'

'Caon.'

'Caon! Why?'

Now I too spoke loudly, for the benefit of the tongue-waggers whose ears I knew would be pricked up around Guacamari's *bohio*. 'Because there must be special carvings on the *canoa* and Caon has been gifted by Atabey herself.'

'How may I help?'

'You must choose the tree and have it brought to a place where Caon and I can work without interruption. And you must arrange for us to go to be taught the ways of the sea so that when the *canoa* is finished we can make our journey.'

'It shall be done!' Guacamari declared grandly. He, too, knew the tongue-waggers would be listening.

Several suitable trees were cut and brought to the village the very next day. I made a great show of choosing one, walking around the pile and pursing my lips. Caon walked with me. The other youths stood watching some distance off.

Finally, I stopped. 'That one,' I said, pointing.

Caon whispered in my ear.

'And we shall need three logs of *duho* wood as well,' I added.

The four logs were carried by six priests down to the cove where Caon and I played *batey*. Guacamari went with us. The priests put the logs where we wanted them and Guacamari ordered them to build a small lean-to.

'We can make a *bohio* later on, if Atabey wishes,' he said.

'No,' I said. 'But you must forbid anyone from coming to this place while we do Atabey's bidding. Except yourself, of course.'

Guacamari's face almost split with delight. I smiled inside my mouth. It was not for nothing I had grown up in his *bohio* – our *cacique* knew how to please people.

So we were freed from the routines of the village life. Caon and I had wanted so much to be part of the village and, when that had happened, we found a way to separate ourselves from it.

We began work at once. I dug out the log, using a stone axe given to me by the best boat-builder from the village – an older man named Higuó who had forearms like small tree trunks. He was pleased and excited that his celts were to be used by the Preserver in the service of Atabey. He gave me many instructions in the following days, showing me first how to char the log just so and dig and then char again. Caon already had all his own tools– scrapers, gouges, awls made of strombus and conch shell, woodworking rasps made of fresh coral, and several limestone knives. He was to carve a zemi that we would attach to the front of the *canoá*. That had been Caon’s idea and, as far as we knew, no Taino had ever made such a boat.

The days passed quickly. We would work perhaps a sun’s handspan in the morning, then fish or hunt, usually eating by midday. We would roast the fish or meat right there on the beach. After the midday meal, we would sleep for half-a-handspan or so and do some more work. I worked much faster than Caon – not only was my task simpler, but I never got tired. This was something I had noticed only when I began growing hairs on my face – that I slept less and my muscles never grew weary. The last fact I learned to hide from other people – Tainos in many ways lived a good life, but it was also a very demanding life. That was why so few of us lived more than forty wet seasons .

Caon soon noticed my tirelessness – it only confirmed suspicions he had had since we were children. Seeing his big-eyed glances at me as I went about my work, I eventually told him that Atabey had given me a gift of ever-renewed vigour. But I did not wound myself to show him how, within a day and a night, flesh and skin would weave together without even a scar to show for the injury. That was my deepest secret, which I could share with no one.

Our work slowed as time went on, though. Once we got the basics out of the way – me digging out the centre of the log, Caon shaping his basic design for the boat’s prow – we had to pay more attention to the finer aspects of our respective tasks. But there were other distractions – Guacamari came to see us after some days and brought with him a *batey* ball for us to use. (He did not know it, but it was the same ball, the smallest, which I had often borrowed in my younger days.) Yúcahu, he said, would want to be worshipped as we carried out Atabey’s words, and batey was the best way to do so. He also offered to have food brought to us every day. Caon wanted to say yes at once, but I told Guacamari that I would have to consult Atabey. (Atabey agreed three days later.) When the bread and the steaming iguana-fish-maize pepper-pot was brought on the first morning, the basket and the calabash containers were carried by Nitika

and her older sister, Nakana. I saw that Guacamari knew everything that went on in his village.

So all our appetites were taken care of. Nitika always came, although the girl with her would vary. We were still too young to choose a permanent mate, but Caon preferred to sex with her only. He was afraid of getting the sores that came from sex with too many women. I did not worry – I felt that the same power that healed me would prevent any disease.

Every other day, I went out to sea with the best boatmen from the village. Caon came with us only sometimes, preferring to stay and work on his carving. But we both learned sea-craft – to notice the tides, the currents and the movement of the waves; to fix our position by the sun during the day and the stars at night. I went further, learning how to locate schools of fish by looking for sea birds hunting or, more difficult, the little winks on the water by which a school of fish or a single large fish betrayed its presence. And we learned many little tricks of survival – to always have a large cloth in the boat to protect against the sun overhead and its blinding light off the sea; to keep spare oars, rope and bread; to scrub the hull after fishing so sharks would not be attracted by the blood; to put hooks and lines into a bag tied to the inside in case the boat capsized; and many more things that experience would have taught too late.

I finished the boat within two moons. Caon was still working on the zemi. So while I waited for him, I scraped the boat's hull so smooth that it felt almost like a woman's skin. I wore out five coral rasps and then I spent days just rubbing the pale wood with handfuls of sand held in a cloth. Finally, while Caon put the finishing touches to his zemi, I went into the forest and gathered oil berries to rub into the wood. My boat would glide through the water like a limestone knife through the flesh of an overripe papaya.

Finally, Caon's zemi was complete. It was the best carving of Yúcahu I had ever seen. It was carved in the likeness of a man's head and torso. The zemi's hair was like cassava roots, while the face was part-man and part-fish, with elegantly sloping forehead and straight nose but round eyes and fang-filled mouth. Caon had actually given the zemi's face an expression – a look that was both uncaring and terrifying. Before we attached it, Caon spent the next days carving designs into the front of the boat – patterns that at first looked meaningless, but on closer scrutiny revealed themselves to be intertwined figures of people and animals dancing in many positions. The pattern ran up zemi's torso, so figure and boat seemed as one body.

We had chosen a log with a steep curve at one end to make the *canoa*. The log from which Caon had carved the zemi was similarly curved and he had hollowed it out so it fitted like a sleeve over the front of the boat. We pasted sticky sap from the *glatua* tree on the outside of the boat and on the inside of the zemi and fitted both together carefully. But it was Caon who had figured out a sure way to hold the zemi in place. He had bored six holes around the front of the *canoa* and matched these holes on his zemi. Then he had carved wooden pegs which we now drove into the holes, making the zemi part of the *canoa*. We also ran a thin rope from a ring carved into the floor of at the front of the boat, through a ring at the back of the zemi's head, tying the rope off to a carved ring at the back of the boat. Not only would this help hold the zemi in place, but we could tie a cloth to the rope to shield us from the sun or the stinging rains we would meet out at sea.

I do not lie – before the coming of the *guamikinas*, our little *canoa* was the most impressive boat to cross the Caribbean sea.

I always remember that time. In the five centuries that I have lived, I have no better memories than of that time on the beach – shaping my boat with the sun beating down on my naked body, the constant music of the forest animals and the crashing sea waves, making love in the cool of evening with the palm fronds waving against the sky, the smell of salt and wood and clean female flesh. Never again would I know the complete calm and satisfaction I felt as, pasting on dye from the *jagua* tree to keep off stinging insects, I watched the sun sink orange-and-red into the dreaming sea.

But time moves on. So it was that, six moons after Maiakan's prophecy, I left Ciguayo with my best friend Caon, crossing the green and blue waters to visit the other small lands of the Tainos. This was my destiny, although I did not know it then – for it was on this journey that Caon and I became the first Tainos to meet the covered men.

VI

Our journey down the small lands and to the greatland took two years. I shall not give the details here. We sailed down the peninsula called Guanacabibe, which means 'back of the island', to Xaymaca. It took six moons to reach the island farthest south, Iére, where the Arawaks dwelt and the shouting mouth of the Orinoco river poured into the brown sea. From there Caon and I went on to the greatland and there we stayed for a whole season. Here Caon learned the Mayans' art of making skilful

metal jewellery. We then sailed the south current back up the small lands, where the ocean became bluer than the sky above it, until we landed on Guanahan' where the Tainos called Lucayans dwelt. It was a rich island, filled with lakes and thick with forest.

On this journey, I lived with all the Tainos of the small lands, as well as those of the greatland. Since this knowledge of my people was needed for my role as Preserver, perhaps Atabey did place in my mind the idea of building the boat, although I had done so only to escape the village life. It was while we were in Guanahan' that the covered men sailed into our world.

I saw them first. I was fishing on the sunset side of the land when a movement like a fluttering cloud caught my eye. I looked up and I yelled in fear, for it seemed that three *canoas* were about to run over me. I fell back into the sea, dropping my net, and arose spitting salt water. Then I saw that the *canoas* were still very far away. My expectation of size had made me think they were almost upon me. Even at that distance I could see that these boats were five times as big as even the biggest of *canoas*, which could carry people equal to the fingers of seven men. And I noted with even greater wonder that these *canoas* did not have oars and moved on the sea as if by magic.

I ran back to the village, shouting for the villagers to come down to the sea to see the giant *canoas* and, as soon as I reached, I turned and ran back to the beach. Young Taino men followed me like a flock of eager birds. By the time we reached back to the beach, the giant boats were nearer to the shore. We saw the figures of men on them, pulling on ropes and folding large cloths and throwing what looked like large arrow-headed hooks into the sea.

Surely that is too big to catch any fish, I thought, then saw how the ropes attached to the hooks became stiff and the giant boats stopped in the middle of the water. And then I saw that the men who were masters of these clever craft wore cloths that covered most of their bodies.

'*Guamakinas*,' I said, but too late. *Canoas* were already being launched, some of the Tainos were even swimming out to meet these strange visitors. I shouted at them to come back, but my voice was torn away by the winds and the crash of the waves. Caon joined me.

'Is it them?' he asked.

The Lucayans' *canoas*, looking like small fish beside the visitors' ships, were already circling, while the rowers and the swimmers shouted greetings. I held my breath, expecting lightning to branch down from the sky and swat my people like so many insects. But nothing happened.

'I do not know,' I said.

Some of the Lucayans had grabbed up darts of cotton thread, wooden carvings, and a few parrots as they ran out of the village, for Tainos were great traders. That was why they were so excited to see these giant boats – the size alone told us that the strangers would have valuable goods. And so it was. After looking at the Lucayans with some caution – which made think that the strangers might have met the savage Caribs of the outer small lands – they lowered small *canoas* from their ships and rowed to shore. I stood waiting to meet them. For I was the Preserver, the Precious One, I was *guaikanique*.

The strangers pulled their smallboats onto the sand and stood in a close group. The Lucayans now became shy and stood behind me. The strangers were covered in cloths of various colours. Only their heads and hands were bare. Some held shiny metal sticks, others small bows, not like those of the Caribs, but cunning devices with the cords pulled and notched so an arrow was held ready in them. It was these bows, plus the strangers' caution, which made me point to ourselves and say, 'Taino'. For, though all of us called ourselves by the names of the places where we lived, Taino meant 'good' and also 'noble', which the Carib raiders were not.

The strangers' leader stepped forward. I already knew he was the leader, for he had stood at the front of the others as soon as they came on shore. He pointed to himself and said, 'Christophorens Colón.'

'Colón?' I repeated.

The man nodded. He was much taller than any of us, and taller than most of his companions. His hair was mostly grey, but with streaks like sunset in it. His skin was pale, as though he had dwelt beyond the sun all his life. But it was the stranger's eyes which amazed us most. They were the colour of the midday sky, and his gaze seemed blind and sharp at the same time. I heard the whispers begin behind me – *Surely he must be sent from Turey by Yúcahu!*

I made a wide gesture with both hands – the leader had given me his name but not those of his people. He glanced at the men behind him, who still held on tightly to their metal sticks and bows. I thought at the time that these sticks were symbols of their religion, like our *zemis*. Only later did I realize how wrong I was, and only later still how right.

'Español,' he said.

I pointed to the forest and made a sweeping gesture. 'Guanahaná,' I said. Then I gestured to the horizon, made a motion like a sea-wave with my hand, and raised my eyebrows inquiringly.

'España,' he said. I nodded to show my understanding. The man

raised his stick in the air, and spoke as if he were speaking to us yet also speaking to himself. I thought he was praying to his gods. I cannot remember all his words, but the words 'dios' and 'hésus' and 'fernando' and 'isabella' were repeated often.

When he had finished, he planted his stick in the sand and motioned to one of the men behind them. The man came forward with a basket which was filled with strange and wonderful objects. The leader took out these objects by the handful and began giving them out to the villagers. There were rings of a shiny yellow-brown metal, impossibly smooth, and ringlets made of a substance like clear smooth stone, and small metal cups that when shaken made a sound like a bird singing like a drum.

The Lucayans and the Españols now crowded around each other, the former anxious to get these gifts from the gods and offering them cotton and birds and jewellery in return, telling them to come to the village to eat. The Españols ignored the cotton and the birds, but examined the pendants and necklaces and bracelets carefully.

Caon, who stood beside me, said, 'Perhaps these are not the *guamikinas* Maiakan spoke of.'

'Perhaps not,' I said.

'They have much power,' Caon said. Besides the ships, he had noted the cleverness of the rings and the singing cups.

'The Lucayans think they have come from heaven.'

Caon said, 'Well, if they have, they are very *smelly* gods.'

I laughed long. The leader glanced at me and I put my hand to my mouth in an eating gesture and pointed back to the forest. He nodded and spoke to his men. We went back to the village together, where the *nitainos*, headed by the cacique, waited to meet these gods on earth.

I did not think they were gods. They were too ugly. The skin of their bodies was pale like palm-heart, while their faces were the colour of raw meat because of the sun. Their lips were thin and their bellies were round and soft. The only beautiful thing about them was their eyes, which varied in colour from the brown of the earth to the green of the sea to the blue of the sky. Their hair, too, made some of them seem like brightly-coloured birds, being red like parrot-feathers or yellow like the sun.

They ate much food very quickly, and returned to their ships a handspan past midday. Before they left, their leader made signs to our cacique indicating that he wanted some Tainos to guide them to the next land. He also indicated that he wanted me. I agreed. It was my destiny. Caon came with me, and four others. Caon would have gone even

without me – I had noted the gleam in his eyes when he had seen the clever metalwork of these Españols .

It was aboard their giant *canoas* that I began to believe that these men were in fact gods. Their ships moved across the waters faster than any Taino *canoa*. They had many magical objects, such as sand-filled containers shaped like a woman, made of stone as clear as pond water, which they used for marking time (as though the sun was not dependable enough). They had two finger-thick joined metal needles, which they used to find out where they were. Most wondrous, however, was the round cup with a needle in it, which always pointed in the same direction no matter which way you turned the cup.

Caon was especially fascinated by all these things. But he was fascinated by everything, including the way the Españols weaved their clothes and sails and made their great ships and their metal knives that cut so easily. Many moons later, when he learned to talk with their tongue, he said to me, ‘There are so many things we never thought of. To use wind to drive our *canoas*, to use fire to shape metal and turn sand to glass, make drawings for our words...’

‘We never needed those things,’ I said.

‘No,’ he agreed. But I knew the nameless longing he had felt throughout his life had now become named in the objects of the Españols.

What most bothered Caon, I think, was that the power of the Españols, although great, was that of men, not gods. They could not move without the wind and their ships stopped the next night because there was none. Even so, we reached Cubanaca in less than two days and Ciguayo in less than one moon. By that time, I had begun to understand their tongue. In all my lives to come, I would always have a quick grasp of languages, and the leader had me follow him all over the ship, telling me words, and he was a man who stopped moving only when he slept.

By the time we reached Ciguayo, one of the ships had gone another way. Colón and the master of that ship had quarrelled and I had picked up enough of their language by that time to know that they had argued about gold. The master of the other ship, which was called the *Pinta*, had sailed in another direction to find this yellow metal. I could not believe that these men would become so angry over such a thing. Indeed, I could not believe they had come from the other side of the world just to find this. The iron, which they used to make their devices, seemed to me to be far more valuable and the glass of their ornaments far more beautiful. But, despite their cleverness, the Españols seemed in many ways to lack reason.

So by the time we reached Ciguayo, I had come back to my first opinion – that these men were not true gods, although their power was godly indeed. And even that power had its limits, for the second of their great ships ran aground when we approached the shore. My people, the Ciguayaos, welcomed the strangers warmly, as had the Lucayans. They ate with us and, as soon as he had a chance, Guacamari drew me aside for a private talk.

‘Are these the *guamakinás* the *bohutu* Maiakan spoke of?’

I said, ‘They cover their bodies and they seek *guanín*. But they are generous with their gifts.’

‘The most deadly danger is that which you do not see,’ Guacamari said. He thought for a while, then said, ‘Many of them have strange skins.’

‘Like the belly of a fish,’ I agreed.

Guacamari shook his head. ‘Their skins have many small marks, as though an insect had eaten small bits of their faces.’

‘Oh,’ I said. I had not noticed.

Guacamari got to his feet, dusting off his legs. We had been sitting in Maiakan’s now empty *bohio*. The Españols were being fed by several unmarried women in Guacamari’s *bohio*.

‘We must become friends with these *guamakinás*,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said. I was glad to know that Guacamari did not accept the prophecy as though it had to be.

‘Their leader wants some of us to return to his *bohio* with him. The men who were on the ship that cannot float will stay on Haiti. He promises to return within a season.’

‘I will go.’ I did not need to think about it. It was my destiny, my very name. But I left with a troubled mind. It was not only that the *guamakinás* were to be on my small land while I, the Preserver, left. But on the very day I sailed away on the ship named *Nina*, I saw for the first time the man – the creature who has pursued me through the centuries – whom I call the Shadowman. The *Nina* was pulling away from the shore, wind billowing in the sails like a giant bird’s wings. The entire village, headed by Guacamari, had come to the beach to see us off. The Españols who were left behind stood in a group by themselves. I stood on the deck, looking at my people, my throat a lump and hot tears running down my face.

Then, in the trees behind everyone, I saw a figure standing by himself. He was partly hidden but I knew at once he was not a Taino. He was dressed in a brown tunic that left his arms and legs bare. I knew he was not an Español, either, for his skin was blacker than a bat’s wing.

His immobility and the unusual thickness of his arms and calves made me think for a moment that he was a stone statue. But then he drew back and was hidden by the forest, leaving me to wonder if he had been real or a trick of my eyes.

So I returned with Christophorens Colón to the land of España. The Shadowman came often to my dreams during the moons I stayed in the land of the *guamakinas*. Colón left over thirty Españols on our island, who were to cause great troubles while they lived there and even greater trouble when Colón returned to find them all dead. And the first thing I would think of was the Shadowman, walking the land like a doom.

VII

I do not remember much of my stay in España. There was too much that was new and beyond my understanding. The Españols' villages had buildings of stone and wood, so big that they could have contained a thousand *bohios*. Men rode on animals that snorted like demons, and which were so big and fierce that they could easily have killed the Españols who controlled them. The sun seemed too high in the sky, as though the land were further away. Perhaps because of this, the air was always very cool, so everyone was always covered. Even the least of these Españols wore many finely-woven cloths, often dyed in rich colours, like the green feathers of the parrot or the pink of the flamingo or the red of the cardinal's tuft or the blue of the kingfisher's back. It was a rich land – most people carried knives made of metal, and there were many ships in the harbour even larger than the ones Colón had come in.

España confused my mind. But there were far more confusing things about the Españols than their possessions. First, I could not understand why these people would come to our seas seeking wealth when even their lowest, it at first seemed, had so much more than the highest cacique. Then, for all its magnificence, their cities had a stink so high that all six of us were faint for days and could not eat. It was a smell of animals and waste and unwashed bodies and rotting food. After we had settled in the small stone room, we tried to go to the river every day to bathe. The wife of the Españols' cacique, when she heard of this, forbade bathing as being against their god's will. We could not understand why their god would object to a man being clean, but it was so. Many of their priests, especially the female ones, who covered even their heads, boasted that water had never touched their bodies, save for the tips of their fingers when they had to sprinkle the special water allowed by their god. So it was not surprising that their city stank.

The Españas' religion was the strangest thing about them. The largest and most beautiful buildings in the city were not for living in, but for their god and his son Hésus. One of the first things Colón showed me was the inside of these buildings, which had many beautiful things such as finely-carved *duhos* of polished wood and cups of gold and silver, some with brightly-coloured jewels embedded in them, and windows with glass dyed in colours that gleamed like a humming bird's feathers. And yet, in the middle of such beauty, these Españas had set the statue of a man hanged on a cross with thorns on his forehead and pegs driven through his hands and feet. It was for this man, who was the son of their god, that this great temple had been built.

'Why do you worship a man being tortured?' I asked.

'God so loved the world the He gave His only begotten Son,' Colón answered, 'that man might not perish but have eternal life.' I did not understand. He said, 'This is the sign of God's great love for us, that Hésus died for our sins. It is the love we worship, not the torture.'

I found out later that the reverse was the truth.

His god was very important to Colón. Once I had understood enough of his language, he immediately began teaching me the god's ways so I could pass on his words to my Taino brethren. The first act he had us do when we met the cacique Ferdinand and his wife Isabella was to recite some words, a call to his god in a language that the Españols did not speak save for their prayers. After we had said these words, one of their *bohutus* sprinkled water on our heads. We were then all given Español names. I was named Diego Colón, which was also the name of Colón's son. He seemed to have a special liking for me.

After this ritual, I asked Colón many questions about the Español religion, which he was glad to answer. But his answers left me even more confused. It seemed that the cacique Ferdinand was not the chief priest—the main *bohutu* lived in another country and there was always much argument between him and Ferdinand about who ruled over the lesser *bohutus*. And, in the same season that Colón had come to Ciguayo, Ferdinand had begun something called the Inquisition. The purpose of this Inquisition was to make people worship the Español god by imprisoning, torturing and killing those who did not. The main targets were persons of a tribe named Jews, but there were too many of them to kill or put in the small rooms with iron bars. Many of these Jews, enough to fill seven hundred large villages, had been driven out of España. Their crime, Colón explained, was that their forefathers had killed the son of the Español god. Yet Colón had told me just days before that the god had sent his son to be killed. It also turned out that

the Jews' god was the same as the Españols' god and that the son of this god was also a Jew.

I doubted the sanity of these Españols.

At this same ceremony, the cacique Ferdinand and his wife Isabella presented Colón with several of the soft barks upon which the Españols marked their words. These cloth pages, which he showed me afterwards, had both drawings and symbols. There were flowery designs on all the pages. One page, which Colón kept looking at again and again, was divided into four parts. The first two sections on top had a golden Español *bohio* against a red field on one side, and on the other side in a silver field there was a great golden beast with fangs and hair on its neck and enormous clawed paws. The lower two parts of the page showed on one side a silver ocean with many golden small lands and, on the other side, a golden continent and a deep blue ocean with five large golden anchors.

'My design,' Colón told me, in the voice of one speaking about his newborn child.

This cloth, he explained, gave him land and wealth and authority. Yet I could not tell what he loved more – the cloth or the small box filled with metal coins he had received from the cacique Ferdinand. The Españols used these coins for trading. When we went outside to the stone courtyard, one of the men from Colón's ship ran up to him and tried to take the box away. There was much shouting and some of the cacique's fighting-men came to Colón's defence, so the sailor ran away. I understood that the box of coins was supposed to be given to the man who had seen Guacamari first, but Colón felt he deserved it since he had guided the ships from España to the Taino small lands.

That was the moment when I began to mistrust Colón.

In the following days, all the Tainos saw much of the country. We were carried everywhere to be shown to the Españols, who took great delight in touching our skins and hearing us speak, even though they could not understand us. It was a big country, whose land never ended. But it was not as beautiful as Bohio – the trees had less leaves and the grass was shorter and there were many parts where almost nothing grew. What shocked me most, however, was that most of the people in this rich country were poorer than even the least Taino. They had clothes and objects, but they did not have enough to eat and were not allowed to use the land to plant food as they wished. I could not understand how this could be so, and all the Español nobles I asked to explain simply laughed. But I understood that the land was owned only by the nobles, who were very few in number, and they told the other

people, who were very many in number, where to live and what to plant. I did not understand how anyone could own the earth, which was created by the One above Yúcahu – and above the Español god, too – and who did not concern himself with the things of this world. But this was how it was in España and the nobles grew fat and wore many cloths and lived in *bohios* that could have held almost an entire village.

Caon was very happy in España. The rest of us wanted to go home, especially when the winds blew from the west where the mountains rose like a dim wall up to the sky. We smelled our small lands on that wind, and our longing clutched at our hearts like a closed fist. But Caon was too busy exploring the wonders of the land– from the weavers’ *bohios* where they spun their rich cloths to the foundry where they turned metal to gleaming water and, of course, the artisans’ *bohios* where dyes were mixed and barks painted. He learned much in the months we stayed in España and, when Colón was ready to sail back to Ciguayo, Caon said he would stay.

I was not surprised. In España he had the tools to make the things in his head real. But, if it had been that alone, he would not have stayed, he would have returned with the tools. But in his travels through the city he had seen men who did nothing but make beautiful things and who were respected for doing so. They were not his people, yet in some way I did not – could not – understand, Caon felt himself to be one of them. So, when the air in that land grew so cool that our very bones ached, we left with Colón to return to our small lands. There were seventeen ships with fifteen hundred men on them. Caon, dressed in the bright cloths of the Españols, looked a lonely figure on the crowded and shouting docks as we drew away over the grey sea. But I understood that those visions in his head were like commands from Yúcahu.

Five hundred years passed before I found out what happened to Caon. He died only a few years after we left. I returned there for the first time in centuries three years ago. In some of the architectural designs of the smaller palaces, and in some of the faces of the church sculptures, I thought I saw traces of Caon’s work. But no doubt this was just my imagination.

VIII

There was a steady wind so we made good time leaving España. We stopped at some small lands to pick up strange animals. There were squawking, silly-faced birds named chickens which could not fly, and fat round-nosed beasts like our quenks, and huge beasts such as horses

and cattle. We had not seen much of such animals, except for the horses and the cattle, while we were in España and I now began to understand at least one secret of the Españols' power. With such beasts to work their fields and to be killed for their meat, they did not need to hunt. They had more time to create their clever devices. But I was not jealous – with all their power, I did not think that they were a happy people.

There were several priests on board Colón's ship. One of these priests talked with me often. His name was Ramón Pané and all the Españols called him 'father', although his god had forbidden him to sex with women. Pané wanted to know everything about how Tainos worshipped Yúcahu and Atabey. This surprised me, for I knew the Españols believed only their god was a real god. But he was a kind man, and even taught me how to make the marks of words on the long journey back to our small lands. Colón hardly spoke to me any more, although I now carried the name of his son. I often saw him looking at the other fourteen ships with an expression of both pride and worry.

We had told him of a shorter way to reach the small lands, for on his first trip he had not realized how far across the ocean they spread. Colón was pleased at this, but the first question he asked was whether these small lands had gold. We did not know, but he followed the path we set. There was a very clever Español who used the compass and the needles and the hourglass to make a drawing on paper-cloth of the path the ships sailed. Within two moons we landed on the first island, which the Españols called Dominica. We stayed there a short time and then we went to a neighbouring island. We stayed here a little longer, for the Españols who went ashore became lost in the forest. They also found a Carib settlement which, though empty, still had body parts from one of the Caribs' raids on a Taino or Arawak village. The Españols thought that the Caribs were people who ate of their own kind. We knew that they only ate certain parts of their enemies' bodies in order to get their enemies' strengths, but we did not tell the Españols this – we did not want them making friends of the Caribs, who often raided our villages and carried off our women. But the Caribs themselves soon made enemies of the Españols, for on the next island the Españols landed on, the Caribs came out in their *canoas* and attacked with bows and arrows. I saw then the true power of the Españols. Arrows bounced off the metal shirts the Español fighting men wore, and they loaded iron balls into the round tubes that looked like penises without heads and, using fire, sent these balls flying into the middle of the Carib war party with a mighty splash and a sound like thunder. The Caribs surrendered.

But this small battle did not have the effect I had hoped for. After the

captured Caribs had been locked away in the ship's belly, Colón asked me who they were. The question surprised me.

'They are Caribs,' I said. 'They are the eaters of flesh whose huts you found.'

'They look just like you Tainos,' he said.

'No, they do not,' I said.

'How are they different?' he asked. The black dots of his blue eyes had become very small.

'Their foreheads are not flattened and they scar their faces and their ornaments are different...' I shrugged. If Colón could not see what was right before him, nothing I could say would make a difference. The seed of suspicion in the *cunoco* of his heart grew into a twisted vine when he landed at Ciguayo. All the men he had left behind had been killed. The huts they had built close to the beach had been destroyed, and we found many graves close by. The picture that entered my mind was so clear it was like a vision – the black-skinned man in his brown tunic walking among the Españols who fell like mosquitos before his very gaze.

When Colón spoke his voice was as cold as the air of España. 'Let us go see your cacique, Diego,' he said.

We knew something was wrong as soon as we entered the village. Several of the *bohios* had been broken down, including the square-shaped *bohio* of Guacamari. Some of the Españols had chosen to dwell in the village – now there were only circles of blackened ash to mark the *bohios* that had been built for them. All the Españols except Colón drew their swords when Guacamari came out of the hut Maiakan had occupied and greeted us. He had a cotton bandage wrapped around his thigh and walked with a stick.

'Ask him what happened to my men,' Colón told me.

Guacamari began by denying that he had killed the Españols. He pointed again and again to his destroyed *bohio* and to his wounded leg. It was the cacique Caonabó who ruled Maguana in the south of the island, he said, who had killed the Españols for mistreating his subjects. Colón watched Guacamari unblinkingly as I translated. He asked only one question.

'How did my men mistreat the Tainos?'

Guacamari answered that the Españols had started taking the possessions of the Tainos and several of them had claimed three or four women as their own and carried them into their *bohios*.

'Not that I minded, cacique Colón,' said Guacamari, 'for your men were our guests. But Caonabó did not feel he was under the same obligations of hospitality as myself. Your men left my village and raided

his. That is why he destroyed my *bohio* and stabbed me in the leg...’

Colón listened to Guacamari repeat himself for several more minutes, then told his men to hold him. Colón then cut away Guacamari’s bandages. The flesh beneath was unmarked and, for a moment, I thought that Guacamari possessed my own powers of healing.

‘Forgive me, cacique Colón,’ Guacamari began to babble. ‘Everything I told you is the truth. I only faked this injury to help you believe me...’

I translated rapidly, feeling ashamed. This was what Guacamari’s need to be cacique had brought him to – begging for his life. He could have told his story with dignity – and I knew he was speaking the truth, for he would not have killed the Españols in his own village and remained there for the return of Colón – and accepted the consequences. But now he was like a pleading child.

I thought that Colón might kill Guacamari. I thought he would set out for Maguana at once, to take revenge on Caonabó. But he did neither of these things. Instead, before he left, he unrolled a bark upon which was marked the words of the cacique Ferdinand. This Colón read out to the entire village while I translated. I have forgotten many things in my five hundred years, but the words Colón spoke on that day are burned into my brain forever.

‘In the name of King Ferdinand and Juana, his daughter, Queen of Castile and Leon, etcetera, conquerors of barbarian nations, we notify you as best we can that our Lord God Eternal created Heaven and earth and a man and woman from whom we all descend for all times and all over the world. In the five thousand years since creation the multitude of these generations caused men to divide and establish kingdoms in various parts of the world, among whom God chose St. Peter as leader of mankind, regardless of their law, sect or belief. He seated St. Peter in Rome as the best place from which to rule the world but he allowed him to establish his seat in all parts of the world and rule all people, whether Christians, Moors, Jews, Gentiles or any other sect. He was named Pope, which means admirable and greatest father, governor of all men. Those who lived at that time obeyed Saint Peter as Lord and superior King of the universe, and so did their descendants obey his successors and so on to the end of time.

‘The late Pope gave these small lands and mainland of the ocean and the contents hereof to the above-mentioned King and Queen, as is certified in writing and you may see the documents if you should so desire. Therefore, Their Highnesses are lords and masters of this land; they were acknowledged as such when this notice was posted, and were

and are being served willingly and without resistance; then, their religious envoys were acknowledged and obeyed without delay, and all subjects unconditionally and of their own free will became Christians and thus they remain. Their Highnesses received their allegiance with joy and benignity and decreed that they be treated in this spirit like good and loyal vassals and you are under the obligation to do the same.

‘Therefore, we request that you understand this text, deliberate on its contents within a reasonable time, and recognize the Church and its highest priest, the Pope, as rulers of the universe, and in their name the King and Queen of Spain as rulers of this land, allowing the religious fathers to preach our holy Faith to you. You own compliance as a duty to the King and we in his name will receive you with love and charity, respecting your freedom and that of your wives and sons and your rights of possession and we shall not compel you to baptism unless you, informed of the Truth, wish to convert to our holy Catholic Faith as almost all your neighbours have done in other small lands, in exchange for which Their Highnesses bestow many privileges and exemptions upon you. Should you fail to comply, or delay maliciously in so doing, we assure you that with the help of God we shall use force against you, declaring war upon you from all sides and with all possible means, and we shall bind you to the yoke of the Church and of Their Highnesses; we shall enslave your persons, wives and sons, sell you or dispose of you as the King sees fit; we shall seize your possessions and harm you as much as we can as disobedient and resisting vassals. And we declare you guilty of resulting deaths and injuries, exempting Their Highnesses of such guilt as well as ourselves and the gentlemen who accompany us.’

We left Ciguayo to go to Xaymaca and then to Cubanaca and on every island Colón read out to the Tainos the words of the cacique Ferdinand. Though we did not know it yet, that bark was the sentence of doom upon our people.

IX

Little more remains to be told. This might seem an odd cliché to apply to the genocide of the next twenty dry seasons. But there are certain things the human mind, even a mind as old as my own, cannot encompass. The death of one person is a tragedy; the death of thousands is a statistic.

In the time it takes a boy to become a man, nearly every Taino had been killed – by too much work and too little food, as the Españols searched like devils for the yellow metal they worshipped; by suicide,

as many Tainos killed themselves and their children, rather than live as slaves; by disease, especially the pox which struck us down by the thousands; and by the Españols' savage sport, such as testing their swords' sharpness on our bodies or tying us to racks over slow fires for their amusement.

What more can I say? And, even if there were more to say, I would not want to say it.

On that second voyage, Colón found gold in Cubanaca. I left him when we sailed back down to the coast of Xaymaca. I think he barely noticed my going- the blue eyes, which had once looked upon the beauty of our small lands and called them a paradise, now saw only the yellow metal. I settled on Xaymaca, whose mountains filled the sky, and I took a wife and lived quietly. I saw Colón once again, ten wet seasons later when his ships, infested by wood-eating worms, were sunk in the white sands of Cow Bay, where the manatees often sported. I was living in the village of Maima, which was close to the sea, and I went to meet him. I had to remind Colón who I was, although I had changed not a whit in the passing years. He, however, had grown very old. His hair was now completely grey and the blue of his eyes had become as pale as a midday sky. His Español magic was still strong, though. After the villagers had gotten enough trinkets in exchange for food, they refused to continue supplying the stranded Españols. But Colón was able to make the sun disappear during the day, and so frightened were we all that we gave the Españols as much food as they wanted, although they ate in a day what would have kept us for a week.

But the gods always demand tribute, and that one feat of great magic drained Colon's power. His men fought among themselves, and Colon's hands became like claws, and an Español ship came and only watched from the distance before leaving without them.

I visited Colón once aboard his stranded ship before he was rescued the following season. His men had built palm-thatched huts on the decks, since the insides of the ship where they slept was flooded. My visit was to ask him to stop the Españols who had left him to stop raiding our villages. But I was also curious.

'Why do you want this yellow metal?' I asked.

'God has commanded me to spread His word every land,' he answered. 'The gold will give me the power to do this.'

I understood. Colon's god had eaten him up, and he did not know it. So too had Yúcahu separated me from my own people at birth, and now was eating them all save for me. But I knew it.

'Your people are killing us,' I said.

'I do not want that. You should have given us the gold.'

'What we had, we gave.'

He shook his head – he could not believe there was not more.

'Your people called Hamaica the source of the blessed gold. But we have found only a little.'

'That was a joke. Xaymaca means "the land of wood and water". That is what is precious to us.'

Colón seemed not to hear my words. 'And we have heard many of them speak of the Golden Man. A statue made of gold bespeaks gold to spare.'

This made me laugh. 'My people speak of "The Precious One." There is no golden man.'

'And who is this Precious One?'

I shrugged. 'I am.'

I saw that he did not believe me. 'And why are you called so?'

'It is difficult to explain.'

Colón stared at me for a long time, with those sky-coloured eyes that now saw so little. 'There must be gold,' he said finally.

I shrugged again. I knew what I had to do. I had brought liquor made from maize as a present for Colón. We drank together, and in that liquor was a special poison made by a *bohutu*. I knew it would not affect me. But Colón would die in a few months, perhaps a few years if he was very strong. I did not want him to die on our shores, to bring the wrath of the cacique Ferdinand down on us. And so we drank and a few moons later, when the ship came, he left. The poison took two dry seasons to work and, somewhat to my surprise, Colón's bones were brought to Ciguayo, now called Hispaniola, at his request.

By then, most Tainos had died. My wife and everyone else in the village had been killed. I spent the next few years travelling from island to island, fighting the Españols. But my efforts were all in vain. Even on the seas, the half-eaten bodies of Tainos floated like seaweed, staining the water red. I was immortal, but I was only one man. The Españols swarmed over the small lands like white bachacs, using sword and whip and gun to make my people dig for the gold which was never enough. I fought alongside those Tainos who were able and willing. Many times over I received wounds that would have killed any ordinary man. Always we were defeated by the superior weapon of the Españols, and my people fell like cut grass.

Eventually, when I knew we were doomed, I retreated to the mountains of Hispaniola, once called Ciguayo. In the cave where I had been born, I stored several *zemis* and *batey* balls and ornaments and

even tools and dishes. I also spent my days writing down the words of my people on the thin barks of the Españols. The prophecy of Maiakan had come true and I could not protect – I could only preserve.

So I lived out my days. I did not grow old nor was my natural force abated. But I stayed in the mountains, unable to bear the ever fainter cries of my dying people. Sometimes, though, a rage would seize me and I would go into the Español settlements under cover of night and kill the unwary. So there was talk of a devil who lived in the hills. It was when I was returning from one of these forays, moving quickly through the forest to reach my cave before the silver sky turned blue, that I felt a terrific stabbing blow to the back of my neck. I fell like a cut tree. I knew at once that I was dying – my spirit was floating up a dark burrow towards the bright moonlight. I could hear the loved voice of my mother and I could almost see the welcoming arms of Yúcahu. *But I cannot die*, I thought. With my last breath, I turned my head and I saw the thick calf of a man with skin so black it seemed like stone.

X

Twenty years ago, I returned to Ciguayo, once called Hispaniola, now called Haiti. I found the cave where I had been born with some difficulty. The shape of the mountains had not changed in five hundred years, but where once there had been thick trees and abundant grasses, there is now only sparse bush and naked red earth. I did not take a guide. I remembered being Guiakan and so I remembered all my old forest skills. But even the forest has changed – banana and plantain and orange and coconut trees now grow everywhere, like strangely familiar weeds.

In the cave, buried in a wooden chest, I found all the items I had stored. The lettering on the curled, yellowed pages is faded almost to illegibility. But the signature is clear enough – ‘Guiakan, a Ciguayao, a Taino’. So I knew that I am not insane. But, when I recall the life I lived next, I also knew that there was once a time when I was exactly that.