

Those who eat worms

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The old woman knew that cavern well. Her own had traversed all its passages and inner chambers for generations. In the most secluded depths the remains of the dead ancestors piled up. These weren't burial mounds or sacramental places, but simply mortuary deposits where they hid corpses to prevent, on the one hand, vermin and scavengers from approaching the settlement, and on the other, that the new neighbors from across the valley might develop an interest to access and eat them. They had sometimes seen them opening the skulls of their own kind to feed on the inside pulp and were horrified by the prospect. The old woman herself, who now stared blankly at what was happening outside the cavern, had wondered about the reason for such a grim custom. It seemed contrary to survival. But in her senile reverie, she now saw things from a different perspective, no longer bound by that cycle of observation and learning that is existence. From inside the cave, she watched her people move around the fire and felt a sense of joy at having belonged to a group that cared for its members even after death. However, when they gathered around the fire, both them and their cannibal neighbors behaved in similar ways. And it was there specifically, by the bonfire, that these two groups had established a meeting point in which to exchanged culture and technology. Around the fire, there was a common understanding between them. They did not have a name assigned for those creatures, but they had developed a gesticulation which they used to alert each other of their proximity. They would place the palm of one hand, with the fingers outstretched against their heads, in allusion to those unmistakable flattened skulls that characterized them. In their inner consciousness, many thought of them as "those who ate worms", because that's what they did. They had the habit of leaving the meat to rest for several days until it reached a state of such putrefaction that flies would fill it with eggs, eventually allowing maggots to proliferate. The stench that fermented around these unusual delicacies seemed to have no effect on them. Encounters between the two groups always took place in a general state of alertness and certain tension; nevertheless, these creatures always brought with them elements of particular interest, difficult to disregard. Despite their limited language, they could quickly learn other groups' languages, which gave them an advantage in conducting trade. Furthermore, they used the skins obtained from hunting large beasts as clothing, even during the hottest days. That day, one of the foreigners had wanted to explain what the place of origin of his race was. He tried a series of lines and impressions in the dry dust of dirt on the ground. He persisted for a while, but his pictograms were cryptic and clumsy. So he discarded that option and did something bold and unexpected. He took the dried out femur of an animal carcass and split it at one of its ends, exposing a series of sharp protrusions. The crowd watched tensely. He stuck the bone into the ground as vertically as he could, looked up at the sun hovering directly overhead, and retreated toward the ravine of a nearby river. The group was astonished. Throughout the afternoon, until the stranger's return, they all assumed the prudence of not altering this creation. They circled the femur. They contemplated it with a scientific zeal, trying to find that which due to expressive inability or omission had been left unexplained. Finally, the neighbor returned, and satisfied with what he saw, he carried out what at first seemed the most improbable of actions. With the outer edge of his right hand, he drew a line from the base of the spiked bone along the entire length of the shadow it cast on the ground. As the afternoon wore on, a faint shadow had begun to lengthen in one direction. None of those present had paid any attention to it. Not even the group's elder woman, who had remained seated for a long time with that same shadow silhouetted and twisting in the folds of her own legs. Then the stranger raised his outstretched arm and, with complete conviction, pointed in a direction roughly perpendicular to the line of the cast shadow. That was where his people had come from. He stayed with them until nightfall. When they lit the fire, the visitor withdrew to the other side of the valley to join his own. No one dared move the bone from its place. The old woman, still prostrate in front of that funereal totem, thought that she would have liked to ask that mysterious being the reason behind his herd's migration. Perhaps she sensed that there had been dangers in driving them away, and that perhaps those dangers would have followed the same direction, in which case they too would be under threat. But she thought too that her own days were drawing to a close. The events that had transpired had left her very tired, and for the first time in her life, she felt an interest for the fire. She felt it was her time to die. She asked the young men of the group to help her into the cave. They carried the old woman inside and carefully transported her to the third chamber, through a rather flat and low opening, for which they had to lay her down and drag her gently. That chamber was special. In it there were no remains of corpses, but a central space for a small hearth and a large wall with drawings and stains made with pigments blown through reed tubes. The old

woman asked that a fire be lit and some yarrow flowers be burned. She took some pieces of dried mushrooms that had been placed in a crevice in the rock and chewed them slowly. Soon the air was filled with a light smoke. As the young men finished positioning her body against one of the walls, she recalled, already imbued with a certain lysergic quality, that impaled femur, the meridian sun, the edge of that astounding foreigner's hand cutting a trace in the shallow dust outside the cave. It seemed to her that the drawing, which in reality had been nothing more than a straight line, carried detail and depth. There was an element of intrigue in that torn furrow on the earth. She handed one of the young men a piece of charcoal she found near the fire, gesturing for him to draw. The young man moved toward the wall with the drawings, the charcoal in his hand. As this was happening, the other walked over and interposed himself between the fire and the wall, remaining there unperturbed and static. The shadow of his figure projected itself with a gentle flickering over the countless markings accumulated over the years. It was like a dark mirage ominously dancing over the history told by the dead of her race. The old woman, now immersed in a profound epiphany, ordered—perhaps through her voice or aided by some metaphysical recourse—that the outline of that shadow be drawn on the wall. The artist followed the figure's contour, beginning at the lower edge of one leg in an upward stroke to the head, then descending again to the other leg. But the very movement of the shadow, stimulated by the flames' unstoppable dance, compelled him to depict a dynamic, fleeting figure. That anthropomorphic streak resembled nothing that had been drawn before. This drawing narrated through movement, as if the frenzy of the fire had indeed entered the drawn body. The young men remained with the old woman until she, closing her eyes, definitively relinquished her existence. Then they left the room. The young man still holding the charcoal in his hand, dropped it and as he left looked at the wall, regretting that the old woman had died before he had even begun to draw.