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The City on the Lake

1470–1518

A musician plays his drum. The Bodleian Libraries, the University of Oxford, Codex Mendoza, MS. Arch. Selden. A.1, folio 70r.

Outside, the bright sun seared the stones of the patio; inside the thick adobe walls, all was coolness and shadow. One afternoon in 1479, Quecholcohuatl (Ke-chol-CO-wat), a young Chalcan nobleman, paused on the threshold of the Mexican tlatoani's palace, letting his eyes adjust. "He was considering what judgment would come forth from the king," a man from his altepetl explained many years later.[1] Never had Quecholcohuatl felt such fear in his very gut, for he could tell from the looks passing between his compatriots that they thought he had been summoned inside to face a brutal punishment. They thought he would be escorted to one of the dreaded wooden cages the capital city was famous for; from there he would be taken to be burned to death. "Will we all be burned to death?" his friends wondered. Quecholcohuatl found it almost impossible to move forward, following the signals of the servants. But he did so. His name meant "Flamingo Snake"; it was a chosen name, in keeping with the gorgeously colored, finely embroidered clothing he wore when giving a musical performance before the king, as he had just dared to do.[2] The tassels swayed as he walked. Here in Tenochtitlan, he represented the greater altepetl of Chalco. He did not want these Mexica people to see his fear, only his pride. He steeled his nerves and put one foot in front of the other.

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AT A DISTANCE of more than five hundred years, it is impossible to know exactly what happened on that day in the palace of Axayacatl (Ah-sha-YAHK-at). The existing account was written at least one hundred years after the fact, by someone who obviously could not have been there. Nevertheless there is much to be gleaned from it. The author was Chimalpahin, the Nahua historian who lived in Mexico City in the early 1600s. He was Chalcan, and his beloved grandmother had known Quecholcohuatl in her girlhood—though by then, he was an old man and had taken the Christian name of don Jerónimo.[3] So the Chalcan historian got his information from aging relatives who had known people of the ancien régime. The story that he recorded fits perfectly with numerous other sources that illuminate a variety of subjects—

including political relations between Tenochtitlan and Chalco, the architectural patterns in Tenochtitlan, and even the cultural mores of the city. For instance, at about the same time as Chimalpahin was discussing this event with his grandmother, some Mexica men were telling the Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún how terrifying it used to be to present musical pieces before the ruler, as he might punish an inept performer.[4] There is thus no reason to doubt the gist of Chimalpahin's account, and in fact, much can by learned by analyzing it in the context of other extant sources, for the author vividly describes life in Tenochtitlan's imperial court.

By 1479 almost fifteen years had passed since Chalco had been destroyed by the Mexica, its royal houses disbanded. Enough time had gone by that there was a new generation of young adults who did not clearly remember the horrors of the war; yet not enough time had passed for the Chalcan people to forget their ancient royal lines and the self-governance they had enjoyed for centuries. So Quecholcohuatl's generation had grown restive: they had begun to talk among themselves and insist that Tenochtitlan give them a place at the council table and treat them as relative equals, as they did the other major powers of the central valley.[5]

Flamingo Snake and his fellow singers and drummers had come to perform before the high king Axayacatl at his palace. They were there only to entertain him, or so they said. In reality, they had carefully chosen their song with a political agenda in mind. The piece was called "the Chalca Woman's Song," and when they sang its words, they were lodging a protest of sorts.[6] The singer adopted the persona of a female prisoner of war, of a concubine. Everyone in their world understood the parallels between a captive woman and a conquered altepetl. In ordinary times, in ordinary marriages, women were understood to be complementary to men and in no way inferior. But in times of war, the female sex truly suffered. A captive woman lamented her fate, not necessarily because she was subject to any daily violence but because she had lost her sense of self as an honored being; she could no longer take pride in the idea that her children would inherit her place and carry her family line forward. She had become a nonentity in a social sense, a sexual object without lasting power, a bearer of relatively unimportant children; she had lost, in short, her future. The singer of the song varied in her reactions from stanza to stanza. Sometimes she flirted, as any young girl in such a situation would do, trying desperately to regain a sense of agency in her own life. "What if I were to pleasure him?" she wondered. She cried out, "Go stoke the pot and light a big fire!" And finally, in case the point still was not clear, she began to make direct allusions to sex and even to the king's penis:

> Will you ruin my body painting?
>
> You will lie watching what comes to be a green flamingo bird flower …
>
> It is a quetzal popcorn flower, a flamingo raven flower.
>
> You lie on your flower-mantled mat.

It lies inside.

You lie on your golden reed mat.

It lies in the feathered cavern house.[7]

Then suddenly, in the very next lines of the song, the young woman found her heart breaking. She remembered what her life used to be, how her family had thought she would bear the children of her people's future. "As a noble girl child, I was spoken of in connection with my marriage." Her hopes had all come to nothing, and she did not think she could bear it. "It is infuriating, it is heartrending, here on earth. I worry and fret. I consume myself in rage. In my desperation, I suddenly say, 'hey, child, I would as soon die.'" *Manoce nimiqui*, I would as soon die. It was a strong statement.[8]

In the performance that afternoon, another nobleman from Chalco had originally been the lead musician, but either the heat or his fear of what the group's punishment might be—or both—had caused him to faint. Quecholcohuatl knew that his own fate and his altepetl's hung in the balance: if they were going to convince Axayacatl to consider Chalco's feelings about the current situation, the entertainment would have to be superb. He stepped around his unconscious compatriot and took the lead himself. He gave the performance everything he had: he made the gilt-edged drum throb and call aloud.[9] He sang the lyrics with feeling. The song ended with an offer on the part of the concubine to live with the king, her new master, without rancor, if only she were treated with respect. "Don't let your heart take a needless tumble…. Here is your hand. Come along, holding me by my hand. Be content. On your reed mat, on your throne, sleep peacefully. Relax, you who are king Axayacatl."

In the midst of the performance, the ruler Axayacatl suddenly began to pay attention. "He came out from inside where he was with his women, and went to dance. When he got to the dance floor, Axayacatl lifted up one foot, completely happy in hearing the music, and began to dance and move in circles." He wore a gold headpiece trimmed with symbolic clusters of feathers: each element represented not only his own rank but also his city's relationship to others. The carefully crafted diadem was itself an object of awe. It was considered a great honor, a momentous occasion, when the tlatoani joined the dance. So the signs were good; the Chalcans were hopeful. When the song ended, however, the king suddenly went inside and sent a messenger to summon the lead performer. The Chalcans did not know what to think, but they feared the worst.[10]

When Quecholcohuatl came before Axayacatl, he found him surrounded by his women, all wearing lovely embroidered skirts and blouses, edged with dyed rabbit fur or yellow parakeet feathers or other colorful features.[11] He made the traditional Nahua sign of obeisance, kneeling and making the gesture of scooping up earth and touching it to his lips.[12] He said something along the lines of "Oh, lord king, may you burn me, I who am your vassal, for we have done wrong in your presence." Self-denigration was a polite style of greeting, and Quecholcohuatl apparently thought it might be useful here.[13] He was overly

cautious, as it turned out. “Axyacatl did not want to hear these words.” The tlatoani liked the song, and he liked the singer. He took Quecholcohuatl to bed forthwith and asked him to promise to sing only for him. Chimalpahin claimed he even said joyfully to his wives, “Women, stand up and meet him, seat him among you. Here has come your rival.”[14]

Understanding the nature of homosexual sex among the Aztecs has long been a troubled issue, for scholars have largely relied on sources produced under the auspices of the friars, in response to direct and highly judgmental questions about the matter.[15] The people answering those questions were well aware that they were not supposed to approve of the practice, and they made some negative comments, but it is hard to know what they really thought. In later years, indigenous writers of the seventeenth century would describe brutal punishments meted out by the church to homosexual men, but they apparently did not relish such scenes. If anything, they seemed to disapprove slightly. “One [of the men] was named Diego Enamorado [Diego In-Love] … The [authorities] did not specify the reasons why they hanged them.”[16] It is clear from the few available sources that before the conquest there was no category of people who lived their lives full-time as gay individuals in today’s sense. However, Nahuatl-language sources produced beyond the purview of the Spaniards suggest that many men sometimes chose to have sex with other men. There was a range of sexual possibilities during one’s time on earth, understood to be part of the joy of living, and it certainly was not unheard of for men to go to bed together in the celebrations connected with religious ceremonies, and presumably at other times as well.[17] In any case, king Axayacatl was a famous warrior and a man who fathered many children, and he could be drawn to a man as well as to a woman. “The king really loved Flamingo Snake because he got him to dance,” Chimalpahin, the Chalcan historian, later commented. Chimalpahin made no judgment at all, unless perhaps he evinced a bit of pride, for Flamingo Snake’s song became a multigenerational hit, with repeat performances over the next several decades, and it brought fame to his hometown. “Because of it Amaquemecan (Ah-mah-kay-MAY-kahn) was [once] famous, an altepetl which now appears small and unimportant,” he said.

At the time, the singer’s relationship with the tlatoani was definitely a source of great pride. To reassure the Chalcans waiting tensely on the patio, Axayacatl sent Quecholcohuatl back outside, bearing aloft symbolic gifts: a full outfit—cloak, loincloth, and sandals—embroidered with jade, all of which items had been the king’s own. Flamingo Snake’s companions were aware of what such gifts meant, for public gift-giving was a political language, a code that everyone knew. In the *Annals of Cuauhtitlan*, for instance, all the narrator had to do to establish that the Azcpotzalcan ruler, Maxtla, was abusive and planned to undo Nezahualcoyotl was to state laconically, “He gave him only one *tilma* (or cloak).”[18] When the Chalcans saw the richness of Axayacatl’s proffered goods, they let out a great whoop of joy, and those who had been more confident turned to tease those who had predicted only doom and gloom. Their laughter rang out.[19]

That night, the visiting musicians celebrated in the greatest city in the known world. They were lodged in the very middle of the island, in a house maintained for entertainers.[20] Tenochtitlan was divided into four

subdivisions (Moyotlan, Atzacualco, Cuepopan, and Zoquiapan), and each one occupied about a quarter of the city. As with most conglomerate altepetls, the people of each segment placed their finest buildings in the "four corners" area where the quadrants came together, thus creating a truly urban area in the center of a partly agricultural world. Around the edges of the swampy island, they still had their chinampas (the gardens hanging in the muddy water), and they reserved certain areas for fishing and aquatic foraging for birds' eggs and other delicacies. In the center of the island, where the visitors were, rose the temple precinct, including the huge, gleaming pyramid dedicated to their own Huitzilopochtli, and next to it, the edifice dedicated to Tlaloc, the rain god. Directly behind these was Axayacatl's palace. It received fresh running water, the supply fed by a clay aqueduct that originated on a hill on the lake's western shore and then crossed over a causeway to the island, part of an extraordinary waterworks system containing dikes and sluices as well as causeways and aqueducts.[21]

The palace of the former king Moctezuma (the Elder), on the far side of the temple precinct, was dedicated to other purposes than the housing of royalty now that Moctezuma was dead. The most powerful monarchs each left impressive architectural remnants of their reigns, visible to all the world for all time (or so they hoped), and the state found plenty of practical uses for them. In this central area, for example, the war captives who faced sacrifice in the near future were closely guarded; some of them were housed sumptuously, others much less so, depending on the ceremonial role they were to fill.[22] Not so many years earlier, Chalcans would have been among the prisoners, but they were not now. Nearby, the Mexica king maintained a sort of zoo filled with animals brought as tribute from subject states far and wide. Some of these, too, would face the cutting stone on holy days, but many were displayed indefinitely as a testament to Mexica power. The visitors could have seen fascinating reptiles, or jaguars, wolves, and mountain lions, among dozens of other creatures.[23] Unlike in the wild, the visitors didn't need to fear the yowling of an animal. In the forest lands, if one suddenly heard the mewling or scream of a flesh-eating animal, some people feared it meant that one would soon be taken prisoner and enslaved or killed, or that one's children would become prisoners.[24] On Quecholcohuatl's evening in the city, however, he had nothing to fear, but rather much to hope. He and his peers were focused on the possibility that their beloved Chalco might yet be restored some measure of independence.

Their hosts offered them food, and they feasted. The tamales boasted decorative designs on top, such as a seashell outlined with red beans. Guests could choose between turkey, venison, rabbit, lobster, or frog stewed with chilis of various kinds. On the side, there were winged ants with savory herbs, spicy tomato sauces, fried onions and squash, fish eggs, and toasted corn. There were all kinds of fruits, tortillas with honey, and little cakes made of amaranth seed. Indeed, a former servant once counted two thousand different dishes made for the Mexica king and then passed on to be sampled by his councilors, servants, and

entertainers. At the very end of the meal always came chocolate—crushed cacao beans steeped in hot water and flavored with honey and various kinds of dried flowers, such as vanilla pods or roses. To render it even more special, the drink was served in carved or painted gourds, often from faraway lands.[25]

Yet perhaps it was neither the zoo nor the food that the visitors especially recalled in later years. People who saw the city always remembered first its beauty. It was because of the gardens—the gardens overflowing from ordinary people's flat rooftops, as well as the gardens of the tlatoani. There, Mexico's most gorgeous flowers—many with names never perfectly translated into European tongues—blossomed amid trees whose fascinating shapes could make them appear enchanted. In large, finely wrought wooden cages, the brightest birds from the jungles in the east and south fluttered and sang—quetzal birds and parrots, flamingos and tufted ducks, parakeets and pheasants—too many kinds to count. As the birds flew quickly in and out of the foliage, the colors of their wings glinted in the evening light, like flashes of magic, the result of some spell, just like in the stories people told back in Chalco. As the darkness grew, the stars appeared. Priests observed and charted them, but ordinary people just admired them. The stars looked, the Mexica sometimes joked, like popcorn scattered in the night sky.[26]

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WHERE HAD THIS CITY COME FROM? Tenochtitlan in the 1470s and 80s was a far cry from the somewhat scruffy, marshy town inhabited by Itzcoatl when he made his initial bid for power. But under him and Moctezuma the Elder, victories had multiplied until the Mexicas' relative wealth and power were truly significant. The central valley of Mexico now contained about 1.5 million people, most of them farmers. In the very center of the fertile basin, on this little island of 5.5 square miles, there lived as many as 50,000 people.[27] Counting the people of other altepetls who clustered on the far shore of the lake, facing the island, there were perhaps a total of 100,000 in the wider urban area. Tenochtitlan's population growth had outpaced that of other regions. This was partly because the city's wealth and political dominance encouraged in-migration, but victory in war also brought more captive women to the city, and as any demographer would predict, more wombs had birthed more babies. Clearly, the relatively few chinampas on the outskirts of the city could not support so large a population. Instead, the city folk obtained much of their food from the rural hinterland. Mexica success in warfare made it possible to demand greater amounts of food as tribute, and in addition, their growing population made it economically attractive for the people of the basin to voluntarily bring food to sell, in exchange for the artisan craftwork the urbanites were becoming so adept at producing. In this context, the city's location on an island in the center of a great lake rendered it almost easy for its market to become a great hub of trade, tying together all the peoples who lived near the surrounding lake shores.

Because the city had grown so quickly from scratch, rather than evolving gradually, like ancient Paris or London, its construction was planned and organized. The buildings ranged along orderly, straight streets.

Ordinary households consisted of adobe buildings on three or four sides of a central courtyard. The flat roofs held gardens and sometimes additional small rooms, often used for storage. Generally each woman had her own hearth—whether the women of the house were co-wives or mother-in-law and daughters-in-law—and each one had her own supply of *cihuatlatqui*, woman's gear arranged in orderly baskets and boxes—spindles and looms, grinding stones and pots, brooms and dustbins, as well as clothes and jewelry for adults and children. In a prominent location in the home, men kept their own gear hanging on the wall—their carefully accumulated handmade weapons, battle headdresses, and mementos of war. There was no furniture; people sat and slept on thick, comfortable mats and pillows.[28]

Over the simple structures loomed large neighborhood temples in the form of pyramids, with highly decorated compounds near each of these for the nobility. Towering above were the great twin temples of the central plaza, bordered by the royal tecpan (or palace) where the Chalcan visitors performed. Itzcoatl had long ago begun the process of turning the simple shrine that had once stood at the center of the island into an ornate structure on a broad stone platform. Since then, there had been several more building stages, each enhancing the splendor of the two temples, for the city's architects and builders—in the pay of the tlatoani—never rested. An early aqueduct, built to bring fresh water to the island, had collapsed in a flood in 1449, just before the great famine had started, and under Axayacatl a new one had recently been built, significantly higher, and with two water troughs, so that even if one needed to be cleaned or repaired, there would be no interruption of water flow.[29]

The Mexica were able to bring all this about so successfully largely because the transition to the next generation of leadership had twice gone relatively smoothly. Itzcoatl's son, Tezozomoc, had kept his word and willingly foregone the possibility of ruling, as agreed long ago (accepting lands and tribute payers in Ecatepec near Azcapotzalco instead). Itzcoatl was succeeded by Moctezuma, from Hummingbird Feather's line; after Moctezuma's death, the selection of a ruler was made from among Tezozomoc's sons, also as agreed. Tezozomoc's elder sons had been born to wives whose marriages predated the rise of Itzcoatl and his family, but the youngest one, Axayacatl, or Water Beetle, was his son by one of Moctezuma's daughters, Atotoztli. Perhaps the young woman was actually Moctezuma's granddaughter (child of a daughter of Moctezuma's who had married Tlacaelel); the bards did not agree on this point. In either case, she was a close connection to Moctezuma, someone whose sons he was directly related to, and whom he wanted to envision as occupying the reed mat someday. Axayacatl was thus the son of Tezozomoc whom Moctezuma desired as a successor.

Before Moctezuma died, he did everything to ensure that the royal clan would elect to follow the boy when he himself was gone. He bribed and threatened and, whenever possible, displayed young Axayacatl to advantage. It worked. After he died, at the customary council of royal family members, two of Axayacatl's older half brothers, Tizoc (TEE-zoc) and Ahuitzotl (Ah-WEETZ-otl), complained loudly. They insulted the young prince in crude terms: "Is he really a manly warrior? Does he really take captives? Are they not

really … slaves whom he buys and brings here, so that he appears to be a manly warrior?"[30] However, although the two older brothers insisted that they be considered themselves if there were to be another transition in their lifetimes, they let the matter drop when they were given high military titles and lucrative sources of income. Axayacatl became king in 1469, immediately after Moctezuma died. This seemed to bode well for the consolidation of Mexica power.[31]

Unfortunately for the athletic young Axayacatl—who did indeed zip around in a war canoe like a water beetle on the surface of the lake—one specific issue related to the succession had never been resolved, and it exploded into a crisis. Many years earlier, not long after the Mexica settled their island and began to make a home for themselves, some sort of internal disagreement broke out, and a dissident group established a separate village on the north shore of the island, where they became known for hosting the island's largest market trading with villages on the perimeter of the lake. Their separate altepetl was called Tlatelolco (Tla-tel-OL-co), and it had its own tlatoani, as the smaller, breakaway group had no wish to live and work under the power of the larger group's king.[32] Still, despite the split, the Tlatelolcans were nevertheless Mexica, with Mexica history and pride, and they continued to face the outside world alongside the people of Tenochtitlan. When Maxtla of Azcapotzalco murdered Chimalpopoca back in 1426, he sent some of his relatives to kill Tlatelolco's king as well. So it was without hesitation that the Tlatelolcans threw in their lot with Itzcoatl when he roused the Mexica of Tenochtitlan to follow him in bringing down Azcapotzalco. For the next half century, Tlatelolco acted as Tenochtitlan's junior partner, helping the larger town to secure victories and collecting a share of the winnings. The people of Cuauhtinchan (in the east) and of Toluca (in the west), for instance, later remembered the high-handedness of the Tlatelolcans who collected tribute from them.[33]

By 1470, however, the people of Tlatelolco had grown resentful. They believed that Tenochtitlan's meteoric rise was due to the military support that the Tenochca had always received from their kin on the north shore of their island, and they therefore felt that they had a right to a larger share of the available wealth and power. Moreover, they were the ones who operated the great market patronized by all the people of the valley. They were undoubtedly irritated that it was Axayacatl who had become king, rather than one of his older half brothers, some of whom had a Tlatelolcan mother. Had one of the half-Tlatelolcans become king, Tlatelolco might have expected richer payoffs in future. Now they wanted to make it clear that they would no longer unquestioningly support Tenochtitlan unless changes were made. Their tlatoani, Moquihuixtli (Mo-kee-WEESH-tli), began to do what Nahua kings were wont to do in such situations: he rearranged his marital relations in order to make a statement about the succession. Moquihuixtli started to insist that his Tenochca wife would no longer be his primary consort and that her children would not inherit power. Indeed, he said, she would have no children, for he certainly would not sleep with her. Such a thin, fragile-looking little thing could appeal to no man, and he preferred his other women, he added snidely. Whether Moquihuixtli really believed he would elicit better terms from

Tenochtitlan, or whether he actually wanted to provoke a war and try to topple Axayacatl is not clear; the latter seems plausible, as he was known for bellicose statements that verged on the irrational—or even crossed the line.[34]

In either case, the young Tenochca wife whom he turned against was called Chalchiuhnenetzin (Chal-chew-ne-NE-tzeen, Jade Doll), and she was Axayacatl's full sister. When the young tlatoani heard what Moquihuixtli was saying, he publicly sent his sister rich gifts as a gesture of political support. Moquihuixtli took them from her; he also took the fine clothing she had brought with her to the marriage and left her to borrow coarse skirts and blouses from the household's working women. Eventually, so the gossips and storytellers said, he even beat her and made her stand naked with the other women while he looked them all over. Chalchiuhnenetzin now slept among the grinding stones used to make the corn meal. But perhaps the borrowed clothing and the adoption of the role of servant helped her. One day, she was able to slip away, presumably traversing the streets incognito, and she made her way back to her brother's palace. She told Axayacaatl everything. "He has given [his allies] shields and obsidian-bladed war clubs. I have heard what he says. There are consultations by night…. He says he will destroy us Mexica Tenochca, that the only rulership will be in Tlatelolco."[35]

In 1473, the war came swiftly. Moquihuixtli had prepared by establishing numerous alliances, mostly with altepetls that were his tribute states and whose royal lines were intermarried with his family. Numerous others rejected his overtures—or at least told Tenochtitlan that they had. Axayacatl did not wish to appear to be committing many resources to a shameful, internecine squabble. So at first, the Tlatelolcans held their own. They swarmed into the center of the island suddenly, via dozens of canoes. They were beaten back, but by no means destroyed. The results of the battle were inconclusive. Each group retreated and hunkered down in its own part of the island. People long remembered the grim silence.

Such a situation could not last though: Tenochtitlan was too powerful. Eventually—it is not clear if it was days or months later—the men of the city and the allies who had come to them were fully prepared for what they had to do. They went forth in a great body. Some said that the people of Tlatelolco were by now so enraged that the women bared their bodies in an insulting gesture, and that those who could squeezed milk at the oncoming enemy. It might be true: the author of the *Annals of Tlatelolco* claimed almost proudly that their women fought in the last stages of the war against the Spaniards, too, as if it had been something they considered culturally appropriate for their women to do in moments of extremity.[36] If the women of Tlatelolco fought on this occasion, though, their actions did not deter the men from Tenochtitlan, who were led by Axayacatl himself. There were far more of the Tenochca. They drove the remaining Tlatelolcan warriors off the northern tip of the island into the marshy lake. And still they chased them, beating the reeds and killing them wherever they found them. It was said that the Tenochca "made them quack like ducks," and thereafter, if anyone wanted to taunt a Tlatelolcan, they had only to call him a "duck."[37]

More importantly, perhaps, the Tenochca ended Tlatelolco's royal line, forbidding anyone to sit on their reed mat ever again. Moquihuixtli was either thrown from the heights of his people's temple pyramid or he chose to hurl himself downward and end his own life. The history tellers could not agree about this; probably few men ever knew the truth, only those who battled their way to the top of the temple. The story of his fall lived on in popular memory. A drawing of his great descent from the pyramid made a dramatic image in a history later prepared for curious Spaniards.[38] From now on, said Axayacatl, the Tlateolcans would pay tribute like everyone else, including a quota of slaves for sacrifice. The latter was a heavy charge, for it committed the losing party to waging wars against others that they were presently ill-prepared for. In the end, however, he does not seem to have enforced the demand. An old man who was a relative of both his and Moquihuixtli's prostrated himself before the king and begged for mercy for the Tlatelolcans in this regard.[39]

During this period of the 1470s and 80s, Mexica power grew significantly. Axayacatl intervened routinely in the governance of other city states. In 1472, for instance, old Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco, who had joined with Itzcoatl to bring down Maxtla and the Tepaneca in the 1420s, had died, marking the end of an era. He left behind him, according to one count, sixty sons and fifty-seven daughters, with a significant number of the boys wanting to rule. Axayacatl naturally wanted a son by a close female relative of his own to be the heir. One had already been picked out: Nezahualpilli, his name meaning "Hungry Prince" and encompassing a reference to his father, "Hungry Coyote." The problem was that he was only nine years old—some said he was actually only seven—and it was going to be difficult for him to best fifty-nine older brothers, several of whom had noble mothers of their own. Later, the Spaniards would nod sagely and say the tiny child must have inherited because he was the only *legitimate* heir. One friar imagined tragic scenes in which an aging Nezahualpilli had almost given up hope of his wife producing an heir. At the time, however, the idea that only one woman's son could conceivably inherit was not a notion that existed in the polygynous Nahua world; the people would have been highly amused at the idea that there were no other possible choices when there were 117 siblings in existence. The problem was not that Nezahualcoyotl had no heirs, but that he had too many.[40]

Axayacatl was proactive in protecting Nezahualpilli's claim. Some of the older sons had actually been gotten rid of even before their father's death. One called Tetzauhpiltzintli (Te-tzow-pil-TZEEN-tli, literally, Prince Terrifying) by the history tellers was accused of stockpiling weapons and failing to obey his father; he was put to death. The Tenochca king insisted on this, even though the aging Nezahualcoyotl was said to have wept. Whether or not that was true, after the old king's death, Axayacatl sent both warriors and bribes to Texcoco posthaste. Most of the half brothers accepted a buyout, but a few, fathered in Nezahualcoyotl's early years as a fugitive in the Tlaxcala region, came to make war. Their arrival helped some of the other

brothers—who had been raised in Texcoco—to make common cause and side with their baby brother, Nezahualpilli, in order to keep power out of the hands of the easterners, their father's children by a long-ago wife.[41]

It also helped that the child was the favorite candidate of Tenochtitlan. Naturally, there were some resentments about the Mexica always dictating to them, but Axayacatl paid the rejected candidates generously in lands and titles. And because there were so many potential heirs, his emissaries' arrival on the scene averted an internal Texcocan bloodbath that might otherwise have ensued. Axayacatl implicitly promised to continue to support Texcoco faithfully in its dealings with other altepetls, as long as his chosen candidate was king. Mexica rule, in short, was not all terror tactics, at least not among their friends. On some occasions, Axayacatl even knew enough to step back and let the local people have a bit more of their own way. Such was eventually the case in Chalco. After the 1479 performance of Quecholcohuatl's political song, parleys were initiated, and eventually, the royal lines of the four altepetls of Chalco were reinstated. They in effect became part of the inner circle of theTenochca state. Within the central valley, Axayacatl sought to maintain perfect stability.

Then in 1481, after only twelve years of rule, Axayacatl died. Since he was young when he took the throne and was an active warrior, it seems likely that he died in battle, but his people's historians do not say, though they do mention moments when he was wounded or nearly captured or made marvelous captures himself.[42] His death apparently occurred before his people were quite ready for a transition, as a fraternal struggle ensued after his death. His oldest half brother, Tizoc, was elected to the reed mat by the royal clan. He must not have mustered the needed margin of support to maintain power, however, for he went down in the histories as a coward despite waging nearly constant warfare. He died after only about five years of rule—some said four, some said six—and people talked openly about the probability that he had been poisoned by an enemy faction. His brother Ahuitzotl now followed. He ruled successfully enough, but by the time he died in 1502, it was certainly expected that the pendulum of power would swing back to the other branch of the family—the one descended from Huitzilihuitl, not Itzcoatl. Under Ahuitzotl, Tlacaelel, the old Cihuacoatl, had died and been replaced by one of his sons; the institution of the council had solidified and its meeting continued uninterrupted despite the loss of a key individual. In their selection of the tlatoani, the royal clan overwhelmingly backed a son of Axayacatl, Moctezuma Xocoyotl, or Moctezuma the Younger.[43]

In 1502, Moctezuma was a young and charismatic figure. Posterity would later characterize him as fearful and pusillanimous, but early Nahuatl sources portray him quite differently. He was a hard man, with a hard agenda. Although he himself wouldn't have used such terms, not having studied twentieth-century political science textbooks, his goal was nothing less than the creation of a true state apparatus, capable of exerting control far beyond face-to-face situations. By now, there were no more upheavals coming from within the central valley—no more rebellions on the part of such altepetls as Chalco or Tlatelolco. The

Mexica were thus ready to establish a more complete dominance over the several hundred altepetls outside of the inner basin, from whom they (and their partners in empire) already extracted tribute, but who generally had been left to their own devices as long as they did not rebel.

Moctezuma wanted to increase the level of direct control. He started by setting up thirty-eight administrative provinces (there were later fifty-five provinces), each with its own tightly organized bureaucracy. Representatives of his government were sent to live in each. In a town far away in the Toluca valley, they created such neighborhoods as (in Nahuatl) “Place of the Temple Lords,” “Place of the Merchants,” “Place of the Rulers,” and “Place of the Mexica people.”[44] Permanent military garrisons were built at key locations in order to support the Mexica who were scattered far and wide. The chain of command between the tlatoani’s highest officials in Tenochtitlan and those lesser figures who lived locally was carefully delineated, and then recorded in documents that illustrated these political relationships.[45] Archaeological studies have revealed that people in the countryside outside the central basin largely continued to prosper. The prior “Triple Alliance” rulers had encouraged interregional trade: local markets sold such useful items as copper needles, jars of salt, and small bronze bells (for dancing and ceremonies). There was no reason for life to change much. Only rarely did a recalcitrant local noble find his compound attacked and his lineage destroyed. That was generally not what Moctezuma had in mind.[46]

The local Mexica officials’ most important task was to collect all required tribute on time. They continued to work on synchronizing various altepetls’ calendars, so it would be clear when tribute was due, and they held public ceremonies, recorded in paintings, delineating what and when each altepetl owed.[47] But tribute collection was no longer the officials’ only task. They supported Nahua merchants engaged in long-distance trade, who were at the mercy of locals if not backed by Mexica royal authority; with such support, they could orchestrate luxury trades over impressively long distances.[48] The officials also oversaw local diplomatic negotiations concerning, for the most part, chiefly marriages and inheritance, and they acted as judges upholding certain notions of law and justice, especially regarding landholding, which Moctezuma wished to see standardized, since in each area some lands were dedicated to helping to support Tenochtitlan. The tlatoani of each local altepetl would continue, as he always had, to distribute farmlands among his own people, but in the case of any unresolved disputes, and certainly of any disputes with other altepetls, it was the prerogative of Tenochca judges to decide upon the proper distribution. They intervened with some frequency; years later, long after the Spaniards were in power, some local families were still simmering about Tenochtitlan’s decisions, which were generally still in force, by then having the weight of custom behind them.[49]

The vision Moctezuma and his councilors held of a well-regulated body politic was in some ways a product of generations of Nahua tradition. Their political organization had long revolved around what a leading historian has called a sort of “cellular principle.”[50] That is, no individual human being was considered to stand alone in life but existed only in relation to others; nor did any group exist alone but

rather thrived by virtue of their connections with those who surrounded them. Families were grouped into kin-based clans (usually called *calpolli* but sometimes by some other name), and these in turn were grouped together to form an altepetl, and altepetls in turn were often collected into a greater altepetl. It was understood that harmony among the whole depended upon each cellular segment doing its part: from time immemorial, unpleasant tasks (like maintaining a local temple, or clearing weeds away from a lakeshore to form a port, or collecting tribute to turn over to a conqueror) had been rotated between the different component parts of a polity. So, too, was there the tradition of passing the chieftainship back and forth between lineages, so as to avoid breeding resentment. In a sense, the Tenochtitlan state had become powerful enough to formalize some of these traditions on a vast scale, but with a twist—they, and no others, would always be the head of this carefully balanced body politic, a position they had worked hard to achieve.

The social organization began at home: Tenochtitlan offered a shining example of the world Moctezuma had in mind. There, the city's four quarters or sub-altepetls were further divided along the lines of the calpolli, in units akin to parishes or wards, each with its own noble (*pilli*) families, in the midst of the commoner (*macehualli*) families. The macehualli families supported the noble families by paying them tribute; they worked hard in the chinampsas or a craftsman's workshop, while the noble families organized their endeavors. In general, over the years, there had been relatively little tension within each calpolli: certain families had been more special than other families for so many generations that their lineage was unquestioned. And, as in all aspects of life, it was understood that every category of person had an important role to play. Often the Mexica conceived of society as one of their beloved birds; the pipiltin might be the head, but the macehualtin were "the tail, the wings." And what bird could fly without its tail and wings? It was a beautiful idea and one deeply familiar to the Mexica.

There are signs, however, that in later years the relative peace was threatened more often than it had been before. As the nobility brought home increasing numbers of captive women, they had more children. The families of the pipiltin threatened to become unmanageably large relative to those of the macehualtin. As far back as the reign of Moctezuma the Elder, it had been concluded that the king had too many children to expect the macehualtin to support them all with their tribute. He was remembered as saying, "Not all of my children will rule." And he concluded that they should be trained to support themselves as elite artisans, such as lapidaries, sculptors, and scribes.[51] The problem only grew. It was the same in Texcoco. One old woman in the sixteenth century remembered how it had been in her girlhood in the late 1400s: "Back when I was growing up there was an infinite number of nobles. How many noble houses there were, the palaces of those who were nobles and rulers! It was like one big palace. There were countless minor lords and lesser relatives, and one could not count the commoners who were their dependents, or the slaves; they were like ants."[52] All of this created more than a few logistical problems. The nobility worked out complex understandings as to which family members would count as nobles in the sense of depending on tribute

from commoners, and who could and could not be considered a possible heir; they even created an accompanying terminology. One absolutely had to inherit one's official status through the male line, they decided, thus reducing claimants by half.[53]

At this point, the organization of each calpolli was tightened. Each had its own officials charged with storing tribute and organizing public works (like the repair of the temples), and with hearing and settling disputes. There were separate officials to handle commoners' grievances and those of the nobility, as well as a sort of high court that supervised both: the latter was called the *tlacxitlan*, meaning "the place at the foot [of something]"—implicitly, in this case, the foot of the ruler. No laws were written down, but certain principles of legal tradition were understood by all, and the judges issued penalties for breaking them. Adultery, for example, was a crime for everyone, punishable by stoning or strangling. The exact nature of the crime differed according to sex. A married woman could not have any sexual relations outside of her marriage; a married man could, but if he slept with a woman who was married, then he, too, was guilty. An indebted person could sell his or her child into slavery, but a young person who became a slave in this way was entitled to certain protections and to buying his or her way out of slavery if it were ever possible. In theory, those rights persisted everywhere. When questioned by Spaniards, some people later insisted that the Mexica kings sometimes tried to help families buy their loved ones back from distant places; in reality, it would have been impossible to find them once they were taken to the east. Still, the concept of a fixed law existed in the minds of many thousands of people, even without a written code.[54]

The many markets—the small ones in each calpolli neighborhood, as well as the massive one that had grown up at the north end of the island, in Tlatelolco—were also carefully administered by officials who ultimately answered to Moctezuma and his council. Women were an important part of market life, as both buyers and sellers, and for this reason, some of the officials who governed commerce were themselves women. They carried their staffs of office proudly, and were not afraid to report on and punish any delinquents. Anyone who stole from vendors or cheated customers or even got into a fight at the market would regret it.[55] Later, a Spaniard who saw the market at Tlatelolco four days after the Europeans first arrived remembered it with a sort of awe, as it was both so huge and yet so well controlled: "We were astounded at the great number of people and the quantities of merchandise, and at the orderliness and good arrangements that prevailed, for we had never seen such a thing before. The chieftains who accompanied us pointed everything out. Every kind of merchandise was kept separate and had a fixed place marked for it."[56]

One part of the market featured luxury goods—gold and silver, turquoise, jade and other gems, the feathers of exotic birds. Merchants sold these to artisans as raw materials, and to wealthy customers as finely crafted textiles and beautiful jewelry. Likewise, they sold plain cotton thread or cloth and also beautifully made embroidered cloaks and other clothing. In another area, they offered firewood and lumber, as well as wood carved into tool handles, paddles, and columns for buildings. They sold copper axe-heads and needles, white bark paper, pitch pine for torches, rubber balls, herbal medicines, tobacco, pipes, and

row upon row of ceramic pots and dishes. They hawked goods made of sisal: twine, rope, nets, and sandals, as well as all manner of animal furs, tanned or untanned, dyed or undyed. They sold rough grinding stones and fine obsidian knives or mirrors, in which one could see every detail of one's face.. In one corner, men could pay to have their hair cut. In another, they could buy a slave or find a prostitute.[57]

It was the section selling food stuffs, though, that most impressed people who had never been to the marketplace before. The stalls offered everything—every type of corn and bean, all varieties of salts and herbs. Birds and animals rustled in their cages. There were fruits and vegetables, cacao and honey, bird eggs and the delicious bars of dried algae from the lake. But what was remarkable about Tlatelolco, what made it different from neighborhood food markets, was that food could be bought partially prepared, for urban customers too busy to make everything from scratch. One could buy pre-made tortillas and little cakes, squash already cut into pieces, smoked chilis, and ground cacao. Hungry shoppers could go to what was effectively a restaurant—a stand where prepared meals were available for sale.[58]

Doctors and healers, both men and women, also operated out of the market. They sold a variety of herbs that experience had taught would help with different ailments—blisters, constipation, diarrhea, itchy skin, eye sores, headache, or fever. They could also cast stones, a like throwing dice, to try to determine the best treatment for a mysterious ailment, or make a house call to perform a ceremony designed to oust a malicious force from the body. Later, well-meaning Spanish friars would try to insist that there had been some doctors who dealt only in efficacious herbs, while other evil ones preyed on people's superstitions. It was the friars' way of trying to save the reputation of some of the indigenous doctors in European eyes. But the extant descriptions make it clear that those who often worked with medicines and those who conducted ceremonies were one and the same.[59]

Startlingly—at least to newcomers—the market also served as a repository for the urine collected in clay pots in households across the city. Whether people were paid for what they brought or fined for what they didn't bring is not clear. In either case, the practice served two purposes. The collection of the waste in one place rendered most of the city very clean. Ammonia was also needed for tanning hides and making salt crystals, and there was no better source than the urine from the island's tens of thousands of people. Canoes full of basins of it were lined up near the market, and there the tanners and salt-makers brought their requisite supplies.[60]

It was not just the courts and the markets that were governed by an increasingly well-defined apparatus: the temples and schools were likewise becoming the bastions of a highly organized set of officials. By the time of Moctezuma, almost all of the city's children, boys and well as girls, nobles as well as commoners, were educated in temple-run schools. They entered these boarding schools around the age of thirteen and stayed a few years. Thus they passed the most trying adolescent years away from home—much like European youths who entered apprenticeships. Every girl learned the proper prayers for her marriage ceremony and for daily life. She learned to spin and weave and embroider if she had not already become

adept, and she also learned her duties as a future wife and mother. She discovered, for instance, that she would have very little sleep for much of her adult life, and that she must not resent it. “Here is the task you are to do: be devout night and day. Sigh many times to the night, the passing wind. Call to, speak to, cry out to it, especially in your resting place, your sleeping place. Do not practice the pleasure of sleep.” Nursing mothers and the mothers of young children could expect to be up part of every night, and they must still rise early to haul the water, rekindle the fire, and start the breakfast without complaint. When that time came, a young woman should not be surprised. The adults in her life were preparing her to handle the harshness of reality.[61]

Every boy studied warfare, unless he had been selected as a likely priest or had been born into a merchant family. Merchants formed their own tight-knit group and educated their children for the harrowing treks across unknown country; priests were educated in a separate school, where they would learn far more than other boys about religious matters, the calendar, and the pictographic writing system. Those two groups aside, every young male had to learn to be a warrior. That had always been true in almost every village in Mexico, but now the Mexicas’ predominant position absolutely depended on their success; there was no room for failure or for doubt if they did not want all the surrounding altepetls that hated theirs to rise up against them. The boys learned a craft from their parents at home—perhaps sculpting ceramic vessels, or making tiny golden animals with charcoal and wax molds, or gluing the velvety fibers of exotic feathers in intricate designs on shields—but when they were about thirteen, they all left home to train as warriors. In the early weeks after starting school, they swept and collected firewood; they sang in the evenings and enjoyed themselves. The violent exercises began gradually. The boys learned to withstand pain and to fight. As older teenagers, they might accompany warriors to battle, on the understanding that whole groups of them should try to bring in a captive by separating a man on the battlefield from his cohort and then working together as a well-practiced unit to bring him down.[62]

By about the age of twenty, the period of apprenticeship was finished. If a man did not then make kills or take captives on his own, he had to fear a life of shame. If in the years of training, it became clear that a particular boy simply could not fight successfully in any capacity, he could be designated as a burden bearer. For the rest of his life, he might, for instance, ply the aquatic edges of the town in a canoe loaded with vats of fresh water, leaving them in appointed places, and everyone would know why. How often such a fate became real we do not know, but the threat of such a destiny must certainly have weighed heavily as a boy grew into manhood.[63] If, on the other hand, a young man was especially adept at fighting, he won honors for himself and his whole family. A commoner could rise to become a *quauhpilli* (kwow-PIL-li), an eagle lord, or honorary nobleman. The slaves and other loot he brought back from battle made him rich. If he liked, he could take more than one wife, just like a born nobleman, for he could support them and the resulting children. Often such men were honored with an official position, and no one quarreled with their right to hold it.[64]

In the meantime, other boys were educated to become priests. The priests who trained them, who held such power in their lives, seem to have encompassed a wide range of personalities. Some were remembered as wise and thoughtful; others, unsurprisingly, were brutal. They were there, after all, to teach a new generation to take over their duties in the bloody sacrificial rituals. When a student at a *calmecac*, as the schools were called, committed a particularly serious infraction, such as drinking, he was doomed to participate in a ceremony in which the priests attempted to drown him—or seemed to attempt to do so. "They plunged him under the water and dragged him. They went pulling him along by the hair. They kicked him. As he swam under the water, churning, beating, and swirling it up as he went, he escaped the hands of the priests…. When he finally reached the shore, he lay half dead, breathing his last, gasping in his last agonies." At that point the boy's parents were allowed to take him home. The system was not without a certain moral impurity. If a mother and father were convinced that their child was not a good swimmer and thus might actually die, they could bribe the school officials. "They would give the priests a turkey or some other kind of food, so that they would let [their boy] be."[65]

The priests in general wielded increasing power as they became professionalized and closely entwined with the state. Traditionally, every month in the Nahua ceremonial calendar had seen sacrificial victims die, but by the end of Moctezuma's reign, so many were killed in Tenochtitlan every month that a significant number of priests had to have worked full time preparing for, orchestrating, and then cleaning up after the deaths. They cleaned the skulls and plastered them into great *tzompantlis* (skull racks). They no longer killed only specially arrayed impersonators of the god but also a variable number of ordinary captives, whose dead bodies, sprawled on the lower steps, were understood to receive the god figure into their arms as he or she fell down the pyramid. The priests who drugged the victims, tied them down, cut out their hearts, and burned what was left of them must have become inured to their activities over time. Spiritually infused potions were made with the remains of the dead; undoubtedly priests had touched these to their lips from time immemorial. But now parts of the sacred stew were sent to elite households for them to partake of as well, figuratively if not literally. As the polygynous noble families grew rapidly, this practice touched the lives of an increasing proportion of the people. Moctezuma himself spent an exorbitant amount of time playing a sacrificial role: he was constantly called on for participation at key junctures in many of the monthly ceremonies. For him, going to the battlefield was no longer feasible as he would have been too busy participating in the public ceremonies that ran with blood.[66]

Only a few decades earlier, Mexica society could not possibly have dedicated so much time, manpower, and psychic energy to the rituals of death. But their strength enabled them to do so by the later decades. And their leaders were convinced that if they could do so, they should, as they believed the practice reduced distant altepetls to abject terror. By this time, a number of elite figures and their priests clearly took a cynical view of the question of human sacrifice. When they were making war on peoples at the edge of their empire whom they wished to incorporate into the realm, they would seize some of the men and bring

them to Tenochtitlan, not in a public procession so that they might serve as sacrifices, but secretly, so they could be made to watch. Then they were released to bring word home to their people of what awaited them if they did not accept Mexica terms peacefully. “Thus they were undone, and disunited,” a man who had seen these spectacles later commented.[67] Moctezuma especially liked to bring such visitors to see the gladiatorial sacrifice ceremony in the month of Tlacaxipeualtli, when captured warriors were forced to fight for their lives—only to be slain anyway. There was definitely an underside to the controlled, well-oiled workings of the beautiful city.

The levers of control sometimes even threatened the central valley’s most elite citizens. In 1498, just before Moctezuma took office, daughters of many of the city’s leading families were taken to nearby Texcoco to see a horrifying spectacle as a lesson on the importance of obedience and self-control. Years ago, before he died, Axayacatl had married off his daughter, also named Chalchiuhnenetzin, or Jade Doll, like her tragic aunt, to the young Nezahualpilli, the boy whom he himself had set on the throne of Texcoco. When the two young people grew up, they found they were not suited. Perhaps Jade Doll was arrogant, given who her father was. Then Axayacatl died, and his daughter was left vulnerable. Her uncle Ahuitzotl—who had never accepted that Axayacatl was chosen before him—now ruled in Tenochtitlan. He undoubtedly wanted a different primary wife for Nezahualpilli. Gossips claimed that the Mexica princess had committed adultery with at least two men. Nezahualpilli either believed that she had done so, or was convinced by the hostile Ahuitztotl that he must pretend to believe it. He ordered that his wife and her lovers and all the many people who had covered for them be put to death by stoning and strangling, just as the law demanded for all adulterers. Many years later, an old woman would recall the day’s events. “People came from the towns all around to see. Ladies brought along their daughters, even though they might still be in the cradle, to have them see…. Even some Tlaxcalans, and people from Huexotzinco and Atlixco, although they were our enemies, came to see.”[68] She remembered that Nezahualpilli had regained his honor by hosting an unforgettable feast; she said it put to shame any that the Mexica had ever held. She had been a child, and the food had made a great impression on her, more so than the public executions.

We will never know if Axayacatl’s daughter really showed such poor judgment as to take lovers. Even if she did, she might have gotten away with it had there not been those in Nezahualpilli’s court who wished to see another woman become the primary wife. The enemies of her lineage had clearly moved quickly, thinking they could improve their own position in regards to the succession.[69] Her death, however, did not settle matters in favor of anyone in particular. It merely left the playing field open. A noblewoman from the Atzacualco quarter of Tenochtitlan was a favored wife who bore Nezahualpilli eleven children, and many assumed that one of her sons would inherit.[70] The eldest, Huexotzincatzin (Way-sho-tzeen-CAH-tzeen), was a popular man. In Moctezuma’s reign, he became known for his participation in the evening entertainments of singing, dancing, and the telling of histories. Unfortunately, in the politically competitive environment in which he lived, his love of these arts was to cost him dearly.

What happened to Huexotzincatzin is a long story that illuminates both politics and gender at the peak of Mexica power. There was among his father Nezahualpilli's women one who was particularly valued. She was not from a noble lineage but was the daughter of a merchant from Tula; thus the bards did not even give her name, as they nearly always did for princesses, but merely called her "a lady from Tula." What made her famous was not her beauty—for there were many beautiful women in the household of any tlatoani—but rather her ability to spin poems and turn them into songs like any man. She was not the only woman with this skill—the art of speaking was always valued in the Nahua world, and other women are on record as having been painters, speakers, and singers—but among young women, who were ideally supposed to be demure, she was nevertheless a rarity.[71] Still, when the Lady of Tula later got into trouble, it was not because she was a woman, or even because she was an assertive woman in public. Rather, it was because she, too, like everyone else, was enmeshed in the dangerous politics born of polygyny.

In the courtyard performances of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and other altepetls, there was always give-and-take among those who held the floor. It was expected that representatives of more than one sub-altepetl would offer their version of a crisis moment in history, or that more than one noble would offer a song lauding a leader or remembering a battle. Different performers would take their turn in succession. The expression of different points of view, they knew, worked to bind people together. What Huexotzincatzin and the Lady of Tula became known for, however, seems to have been a bit different. They earned a reputation for composing works addressed directly to each other, and for teasing and being witty in front of an audience. In breaking with tradition, they created art.[72]

What poems did they sing aloud? We have the lyrics of dozens of Nahua song-poems from the era, which overlap in theme and metaphor, but we cannot know exactly which lines were their favorites or how they spun them into new works, as all performers did.[73] We can, on the other hand, get a good sense of the possibilities. At some point one of them must surely have sung one of the perennial favorites about the fragility of flowers, the fleeting nature of earthly joys. Such a song would have flowed easily from the heart of a woman taken from the land of her birth to serve others until her death:

> My heart is angry.
>
> We are not born twice, not engendered twice. Instead we leave this earth forever.
>
> We are in the presence of this company but a moment! It can never be—I will never be happy, never be content.
>
> Where does my heart live? Where is my home? Where does my house lie? I suffer on this earth.

The singer's next lines were addressed to the creator god, who had such power to dispense joy in the midst of earth's sufferings: "You are a giver of jade stones, you unfold them spun like feathers, you give flower crowns to princes."[74] Huexotzincatzin could have responded to such a salvo with a typical poem of joy and

laughter, trying to get the woman to smile, rather than continuing the lament. If so, the change of genre would have been a startling move to the audience. Or perhaps the man did continue with the same type of song laced with sadness, but looked meaningfully and directly at the originator of the dialogue, reminding her that, like all who have lived on earth, she would not be forgotten. He could easily have referenced their common Nahua ancestors—for the songs were full of such images—and complimented her beauty at the same time. The old song, known in Itzcoatl's time, ran thus: "You died among the mesquite plants of the Seven Caves. The eagle was calling, the jaguar cried. And you, a red flamingo, were flying onwards, from the midst of a field to a place unknown."[75] In reading the surviving songs, hearing their cadences, and noting their powerful imagery, it becomes clear that the possibilities for a charged literary encounter were virtually infinite.

Whatever the two young poets did, Huexotzincatzin was the king's son and the lady his woman, and the aging Nezahualpilli did not like it. Under normal circumstances, he surely would have handled the matter in private, since the culprit was his son. But in Tenochtitlan, Moctezuma the Younger had been looking for an excuse to replace Huexotzincatzin as the presumed heir, and now he had one. He wanted the Texcocan's king's heir to be a close relative of his own, someone who would always do exactly as he said. His nephew Cacama, a son of Nezahualpilli by a granddaughter of Tlacaelel, seemed a likely candidate. But first he had to get rid of Huexotzincatzin and his numerous brothers without causing a civil war in the central valley.

In the mid-1500s the elderly woman who remembered seeing the executions of 1498 also remembered Huexotzincatzin's strangulation a number of years later. She didn't like it. "He was punished just for composing songs to the Lady of Tula," she said briefly. Rumor had it, she added, that Nezahualpilli shut himself up in his palace to suffer his grief. But Moctezuma had been implacable. He claimed there would be no order if the nobility were allowed to flout the laws and even make cuckholds of their own fathers. He insisted that the cord be tightened around Huexotzincatzin's handsome neck. (No source says explicitly what happened to the Lady of Tula, but undoubtedly she died, too, since other sources show culprits being punished in pairs.)[76] Moctezuma must have hoped that this tactic would frighten Huexotzincatzin's younger brothers into allowing his nephew to become the heir. Two of the older ones did come to bargain immediately: they accepted lands and titles, which their sons and grandsons still held in the 1560s. The younger boys were not considered a threat, and so Moctezuma left them alone, and this was a tactical error. Not so many years later, one of them would be among the first to ally with the newcomers from across the sea.[77]

But for now, in Nezahualpilli's and Moctezuma's courts, voices rose in song, and then dropped to relate the passionate tales of history. Conch-shell trumpets called hauntingly. In the early 1500s, Flamingo Snake, the drummer and singer who had so pleased Axayacatl, was still alive, and he loved to hear the performances. As a Chalcan, he knew all about the darker side of Mexica power. But he also knew and loved the beauty of the world the Mexica had helped to build, for he saw artists of the different altepetls

responding to each other's work and inspirations. They were not caught in traditional patterns but were eager to experiment. He listened to it all, and then bent to his drum and made it speak (as he would have put it), just as he had when he was young. If he were of a philosophical turn of mind, he might have said that in order for the central valley to have such peace and space for their art, then the chaos of warfare and the predicament of hunger had to be expelled to the distant villages of strangers whom he himself would never see. Thus it had always been, and thus it would always be: the residents of great cities almost never saw the vulnerable, shattered peoples in distant lands who supported them—except briefly, in an almost unreal sense, as honored sacrifice victims in magisterial ceremonies. The people who lived in Tenochtitlan were convinced that they had built something worth protecting for whatever time on earth they could.

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NOT FAR FROM THE PALACE courtyards where the voices rose, there stood many storage chambers. Some of these were for *in tlilli in tlapalli*, the black and the red, meaning the painted texts of the scribes. They were carefully rolled or folded up accordion style and placed in the proper wooden bins and reed chests. A few were timelines illustrating histories, and the history tellers used these to remember what to say during performances or to help determine when a song might be appropriate. Most of the painted texts, however, had nothing to do with art or beauty. Whether Flamingo Snake knew it or not, most were business records—records of boundary decisions and chains of authority, of noble lineages, and tribute due. Moctezuma even sent people—often frightened merchants—to record their observations of the type of business conducted in as yet unconquered areas and the kinds of resources available there. About 1515, Nezahualpilli died and tensions broke out in Texcoco, as some of Huexotzincatzin's younger brothers had proven unwilling to keep quiet about their right to inherit; they again had to be bribed with a large share of the realm, at least for a while. Moctezuma was very busy with that matter, and with a brief war involving the ornery altepetl of Huexotzinco: When they lost a war with Tlaxcala that he himself had incited them to begin, he had to receive many refugees from their land. He nevertheless kept track of what was going on in more distant regions as well. In 1518 he sent observers to investigate some strangers who had apparently made several appearances in Maya country along the sea coast. Governing the precarious lands he ruled required eternal vigilance, for the collectivity was a finely tuned organism—like life itself, where ferocity and peace lay side by side—and such an organism could not be expected to maintain itself. As king of the Mexica, he certainly believed that it was worth protecting. And his people trusted him to guard it; it was their very definition of the duty of a tlatoani. "The ruler used to keep vigil through the night," they remembered.[78]

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FROM WHERE THEY WERE HIDDEN, Moctezuma's messengers could see a long stretch of the beach. The newcomers galloped their beasts—like huge deer, they thought, but much more stalwart—up and down the hard-packed sand, wheeling around suddenly and giving great shouts of laughter. Their arrow-shattering metal raiment glinted in the sun. The strangers glanced self-consciously at the bluffs, knowing they were being watched. The observers knew they knew … but didn't care. It was not their mission to maintain secrecy but to gather intelligence. They took notes, carefully recording in glyphs all that they saw before them. Beyond the beach, the strangers' great boats were anchored in the waves. The watchers had seen many canoes in their time, but none as big as these. In a stroke of pure genius, the boats' makers had thought to hang cloth blankets from poles, so as to catch the wind and speed their travel. Men could live for many days on boats that size; they could have come from far away indeed.[79]

When the messengers were ready, they turned to begin the trip back to the city. They knew the shortest routes leading from the humid lowlands up into the pine forests. They knew where to find passage through the ring of mountains that surrounded the great valley. They knew when to rest and when to push forward relentlessly. In a matter of days, they knelt before their king.