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Quiche

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Quiche

Keith Cohen

On the way to Muskeefka there was a large hole filled with freshly shucked corn. It is possible that the corn had been gathered from nearby farmland, though few—if any—large-scale cornfields were located in the vicinity because of the high clay content of the soil. Everywhere the sun was shining, so that the yellow kernels stood out in jagged rows, and the cobs formed bright irregular peaks above the edge of the hole.

“They must be offerings to the gods,” said Anhilo.

“But we’re in New York,” replied Renaldo, “not in Guatemala.”

“We’re in old provincial New York,” added Rosalind, “but not old like from the sixteenth century.”

On the slightly crested hood of Renaldo’s car was a chrome-plated figure of a sprinting deer. From inside Anhilo watched it speed across the wooded background as the sun aimed its beams through the pines opposite. It moved with a perfect yet never-changing grace. The flashing sun alternately hid and illuminated the woods that the deer traversed, never flagging from its own course. It seemed to move through the prickly branches at the deer’s command. And even when the sun went red and the woods began to conceal the deer, dull brownish reflections appeared across the fleeting chrome body like eyes straining to stay awake. Two bodies sped through the dusk together, transfixed. But the chrome-plated deer never disappeared.

Rosalind read up on the sources of power in Muskeefka. Its reservoir held 3,000,000 cubic feet of water, and the dam on the Anaconda River unleashed enough electrical power to light up the entire town.

“Then why is it so dark around here?” she demanded.

Renaldo stopped the car outside the municipal building, but realized in a moment that it was well after five o’clock. He approached a guard who had his head on the desk he sat behind. Renaldo coughed politely. But the guard only lifted his forehead slightly, not even looking at Renaldo, and then slouched even further over the desk, his head nestled in the crook of his arm.

The convention was scheduled to begin in less than five minutes, and no one

was available to tell them where the Squeegee Auditorium was located. As the three of them walked down the main street where Renaldo had parked the car, the streetlights seemed to be growing dimmer and dimmer. But off to the left a banner was unfurling in the sudden evening breeze. The sun, which was now not even a thick red ball pinpointed on the mountains and behind the pines, somehow illuminated this banner with arching rays. Only the constant rippling of the banner made it difficult to read the entire group of words spelled out. "New York's Indian . . ." was fairly clear, but there was at least one more word which began with the letters HER

Renaldo wanted to say "Heresy," Anhilo "Hermeneutics," and Rosalind "Hermaphrodites." But on they walked to what all knew as the conference on New York's Indian heritage.

It was a great, white clapboard house. From a distance it seemed to be glowing. And as Renaldo, Anhilo, and Rosalind approached the house, each window produced a scene of animated activity. It seemed as if everyone in town had left his home to come to this old-fashioned auditorium. Inside they were met by a small reception committee and given name tags to pin on themselves.

"So now," said Anhilo, "just as I expected, we've got to choose some workshop or other to be in. What a drag."

"Come on with me," said Rosa. "I'm going to the one on fertility rites."

"Oh, no—this is supposed to be a conference on the continuity of Indian tradition," said Renaldo, "not the apotheosis of its idiosyncrasies. Come on, Anhilo, let's go to the one on teepee and lean-to construction. Think of what we can learn there."

They walked down a long and perfectly straight hallway, off of which were large conference rooms. There were no anterooms to enter in order to listen to what was going on. The hallway led to the auditorium, which was decorated with imitation Greek columns in bas-relief to either side of the floor-to-ceiling entrance.

It was at this moment—either after noting the absence of anterooms or the presence of bas-relief columns—that Anhilo first turned to Rosalind and Renaldo and then turned around to retrace his steps.

"These principles have satisfied me that it is possible to reach knowledge that will be of much utility in this life, and that instead of the speculative philosophy originally imported from Europe we can find a practical one, by which, knowing the nature and behavior of fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies which surround us, we can employ these entities for all the purposes for which they are suited, and so make ourselves masters and possessors of nature."

"So far as we have hitherto proceeded, by examining objects in comparative anatomy which from their magnitude cannot be misunderstood, we have been led to conclude that, independent of the systems of parts marvelously forming the individual animal, there is another, more comprehensive system, which embraces all animals, and which exhibits a certain uniformity in the functions of life, however different in form or bulk the creatures may be, or the conditions of the globe to which they have adapted."

"The estimate we form of the intellectual capacity of one species is founded on an examination of the accumulated labors of generations of men, whose power of inductive foresight has led them to inquire into realms hitherto cloaked by the estimate they formed of the 'creator' of the visible world."

"It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life . . ."

Or rather, was grandeur for those who had in their minds at any one moment this scheme of an overriding design, a design that could be deducted from any one part, from a hand, from a mandible, from a jaw—from what was really a driving obsession to get it all in and to make it all work out like so many rigorous bank accounts, which, laid side by side, suddenly represent the collective wealth of the world, and just as the real, that is, clanking wealth of the world no longer can be called "collective" because it is so conspicuously *collected*, that is, stolen and stored, by a measly bunch, so the once so-called kingdom of nature regards itself in the convenient morning mist, appalled to see no fine line linking its constituent parts, many of which are captive, like zebras, or else captivated by their own intrinsic power, like oil, nor any careful balance among these heterogeneous elements for so long self-possess and conscientious, nor even so much as a delicately tinted paleolithic blur that would blend together these nevertheless rare and from time to time required essences.

When he got outside, Anhilo could not even see the street they had come down. Now the electric streetlamps were no brighter than candles. The light of the town seemed drained into the Squeegeon Auditorium, from which Anhilo now walked toward a brighter light coming from the fields they had passed awhile before. It was a light more yellow than the gradually disappearing phosphorescent white along the streets. He walked through the fields of unplowed dirt clods. Now when he looked back at Muskeefka there was only the dull white clapboard of the convention site. And in between this light, dimming either by distance or by atmospheric interference, and the new yellow light, was Anhilo.

"I am a Seminole Indian girl, come from the forests of Florida."

Anhilo squinted toward the now glaring yellow light and distinguished a beautiful brown-faced girl with long black hair pulled in front of one shoulder. Her silky pink blouse formed billows that reflected at the outline of her form the blaze behind her. It tugged slightly under her short leather skirt as she separated a huge blue feather-flower from the bunch she held in one hand.

"These are the feathers that burnished a continent."

She held out the blue flower to Anhilo, who took it and then followed her toward the yellow blaze. It was the great hole they had passed in the car, and now the corn was emitting giant flames. Each cob glowed a deep yellow without

burning or smoking or in any way disintegrating. As he followed the Indian girl around the corn-filled hole, Anhilo realized that he had been facing the back of a huge source of light, like the rough surface of translucent marble. His vision had until now been limited by the corona of the corn blaze. Beyond this halo, like an aurora separating night from day, lay a vast field of thriving yellow grasses. Along the floral borders of this field were constructed four immense ceremonial temples whose walls were inlaid with shiny stones and metals.

Anhilo wanted to know why a Seminole Indian girl was revealing the treasures of the Maya. With this question, a bevy of yellow rabbits descended, as if from the peaks of the smokeless blaze, to the feet of the Indian girl, who took off her silky blouse and cuddled them with it.

"These are the great American ancestors."

Her firm young breasts extended slightly as she bent over further to pet the ears of these ancestors. She then remained in a squatting position, extending the blouse around the mass of yellow fur. In a flash, Anhilo seemed to understand it all. The Maya had once been cultural leaders of the North American continent. According to their beliefs, as Anhilo knew quite well, the Indian soul at death attains an ideal immortal form, such as that of the sacred rabbit. Now these spirits of permanence were returning to re-establish their pristine rule and to dominate the northern lands so long exploited by the Europeans. This meant nothing short of the potential spiritual and perhaps physical hegemony of the ancient Central American tribes over most of the American continent.

But the Seminole Indian girl had said nothing. She had gone to the steps of one of the temples to collect some small objects out of a large ceremonial bowl. This bowl was brightly decorated with a grand procession of priests and animals. The girl came back and sat down on her knees next to the rabbits. She had gotten a mirror made of shiny but imperfect sheet metal with a handle in the form of a man on his head and a small ivory comb decorated with painted leopard's teeth. She smiled at herself in the mirror and then picked up the feather flowers, which she had laid down by the rabbits, and began carefully rearranging them.

"Red is the flower of the northernmost hunters; green is the flower of the tribes of the plains; white is the flower of the Aztec warlords"

As she spoke, she placed each feather-flower reverently before the rabbits, and with each such offering a corn cob burst, and from the midst of each dazzling explosion emerged an ornately decorated chieftain. Anhilo began backing up slowly, gripping his blue feather-flower more and more tightly. The array of Indian chieftains was stunning in the deep yellow light. He wanted to regain some distance. Right now he felt an odd magnetism all around the blue flower, the flower of his own Inca ancestors. The chieftains were now standing on each others' shoulders to form a gigantic pyramid shimmering at the edge of the ceremonial blaze. Anhilo still faced the scene, as if turning around might erase the sight from his memory.

Thus we are stupendously divided. Between a perception and the grasping of that perception there intervenes the world of knowledge. And close the gap as

much as we wish, we never know which to follow. You, for example, followed the Seminole Indian girl and, when you took her under the walnut tree, found she had turned to mud. And you pressed your blue flower inside a book, only to find the pages eaten irreparably away. And you went so far as to join in the ceremony, trying all at once to remain an observer. But a physical law that has its truer and more ideal reflection in the psychic realm persists: that we can only live with this division and never profit from it. And for each such limitation there is an equal and reciprocal advantage—that advantage we seek in all things—an assurance that distance, purged by the power of memory, will be finally overcome from within.

Backing further and further away from the yellow light, Anhilo felt a growing tug from the flower. When it began to surge upward, as if lifted like a kite by the wind, he tried hard to overpower it but let go when he felt his heels leaving the ground. The feather-flower sailed high into the sky and landed somewhere near the corn fire, now indistinguishable and distant. Anhilo took off for the town, running.

While the Seminole girl was still sitting before the bevy of yellow rabbits, the roughly polished mirror she held in one hand suddenly jumped from her grip. And the rabbits became restless. And from the temples fell strips and blocks and counterweights of precious metals and precious stones. And from inside the temples tumbled pans and stew-pots and crockery and grinding stones and coffers and mirrors.

And the grinding stones rolled toward the human pyramid of royalty shouting: "We were tormented by you; day in and day out, at night, in the morning, all the time our faces went *holi, holi huqui, huqui*, because of you. This was the tribute we paid you. But now that you have stopped being real men you will taste our forces. We will grind you and reduce your flesh to dust."

And the pans and the stew-pots spoke out from the temple steps: "You caused us pain and suffering. Our mouths and faces were blackened. We were always put on the fire and you burned us as if we didn't feel pain. Now you will feel it—we'll burn you." With that, the pots and pans leapt into the sacred fire and then bounded against the faces of the chieftains, inflicting great pain.

The human pyramid began to teeter and fall apart in places, as the precious metals aimed their sharp-hewn edges at its foundation and hurled themselves through the air, shouting: "You extracted us from our homes in the earth, then you mixed us together and bent us indiscriminately. You polished our faces as if our surfaces were immune to dissolution. You adorned porticos and trinkets with our windswept and rustless faces, and you had us dig, plow your corn, fight your wars, carve your votive stones, and inscribe your decrees. But now you will feel the exacting edge of our decorative splendor."

Of all the stones and pots and metals, few missed their mark.

When Anhilo got to the white clapboard house, it was dark and deserted like the rest of the town. The streetlamps were out, and no cars moved along the streets. Now only a dull yellow was reflected off the white boards of the house. Anhilo was certain that Rosalind and Renaldo would be waiting for him some-

where inside, but each of the conference rooms was empty. Folding chairs were still arranged in various circular designs. Lists still appeared on blackboards. In the Squeegeon Auditorium itself smoke was still lingering around the balcony bannisters, and ice cubes were gradually disappearing in half-filled glasses of water.

Anhilo rushed to a cloakroom in the back of the auditorium and found an elaborate telephone. It was in a large booth where he could sit down, yet there was no receiver, only the regular set of numbered buttons plus a few more. When he put a dime in the slot, he noticed a sound box from which emanated mechanical tones when he pressed "Operator." But then there was silence, as if the call had been intercepted and then cut off. He tried again, and, after a long wait, finally got a sleepy-voiced operator, who said no calls were going through tonight.

"What do you mean, not going through? You must have lines to the City open. I can't imagine calling anywhere from Muskeefka but the City."

The operator rang off. But before the line went entirely dead, Anhilo heard a strange music, unlike the mechanical chimes that precede a connection. It was something like the Indian music he used to hear as a child in Ecuador, low muffled beats against high interlacing melodies. Then there was singing while a single voice spoke.

"Ours was the peak of civilization. We approached perfection in all things. We looked out to either side of ourselves at the vast rolling sea, and we were happy knowing nothing of where the sea ended. We planted shining crops and carefully paved our streets. We built temples to the gods, as was fitting and proper. In the winter season dusk came early, and we retired to hammocks by the forests and by the sea. Rains came to drench our skin and our land. And one morning we would wake up to the silent and steady sun of the new season.

"Ours was the peak of civilization. And we gilded this peak with solid commemoratives. On votive blocks were carved the birth of a prince, an eclipse of the sun, a fertile spring, a song feast of the stars. We wore these same signs on our heads and around our waists. And we sent these signs throughout the continent, for we knew the tribes of the plains and of the swamps and of the mountains. We married their daughters and sent architects for their cities. But nowhere can the token of friendship and generosity pass unharmed, nor can an astrologer predict the wages of jealousy. That was the next—unfinished—block, the attacks of the Mexican warriors, which, like an earthquake, toppled our monuments and loosened the very stones beneath our feet. Then the invaders from over the eastern sea.

"We, the ancestors, return not to give a cosmic signal but to fire again our now immortal crop and mourn our bodies' loss. Like our rain forests, we remain thick in the air yet evanescent. For once in a hundred years our cry is acute; it is itself a memorial, warped by water blasts, hoarse as a human voice. What luxury, what ease, what main philosophy that would not, with the rest, have been demolished? This question pulls our spirits back to earth. It gives fire to our sacrifice, to our breath, and to our now dissolving forms.

"Ours was the peak of civilization. Now it is no more."

Across the horizon from Oswego to Ballston Spa a low yellow blaze suddenly cropped up as if ignited by a gunpowder trail. The sound of so many blow-torches, or hummingbirds, filled the night. And this corona of a dead star lit up momentarily all the towns in the vicinity—especially Muskeefka, which was at the center of the blaze. It lit up the houses, the trees, the mountainsides, and the riverbanks, leaving them illuminated but not burned. It lit up the street signs, the white fences, and the birds' nests. It lit up row after row of astonished faces, which, now burning with shame or envy, began to look away. But in that very instant the fires rose up and, like solar explosions, catapulted themselves into the air and out of sight. An equal burst of energy rebounded to the earth and converged upon the pit of sacred corn. Now the sacred corn is gone. The grinding stones, the stew-pots, the rare metals have all done their work and returned to the anonymous earth. And now the chieftains, like so many different versions of creation, exist religiously in the memories of individuals.

"We ask," said Anhilo as they rode back through the night, "not so much for a definitive signal as for a simple opportunity to return to an expansive view of the universe. We haven't found it by splitting up matter to its most elemental forms. We haven't found it by leaving the earth on a rocket. We haven't even found it to anyone's honest satisfaction by inventing a maker in charge of the whole thing. This is a constriction that makes us search for all the artificial connectives learned by rote. It deadens our facility for seeing through and beyond. But do we really need to see beyond? A man will grind a bit of corn and make bread. A god will grind a bit of corn and make man. This is a sequence that defies common logic. Yet remaining unresolved, it manages to go in two directions at once"

Thus we talk on into the night. Lunar modules hasten the vision that one of these generations an interstellar chain of minds will grow up and out. A hundred different prophets say, This is an age that change will ennoble. A hundred different bald heads lean from a limousine to say, This was an age of monumental achievement. And a hundred different teenagers say, This is my age. A blind faith springs up more fervent than any flagellant's. A weed is smoked, an herb is cooked, a chemical is compounded, and the world expands. For a moment the inner dream outstrips the outer fact by a process known as obliteration. Then this moment disappears, and the faith appears recalcitrant. Once again, no one has bothered to note the Spanish sail gradually rising from beneath the horizon. And, like so many men in the land of Quiché, we leave the American continent for a netherworld of equivocal immortality.