A PRE-COLUMBIAN BESTIARY
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FANTASTIC CREATURES OF INDIGENOUS LATIN AMERICA
For my “twin sister,”
Josefina López Caballero, aka Vicky.
Tell all the truth but tell it slant.

—EMILY DICKINSON
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Azcatl

(*atz-kah-tl*, Nahua)

The Azcatl is an enormous ant, the size of three jaguars. Its body consists of a series of never-ending curves, which have the capacity to hypnotize its pray. According to the ancient Nahuatl legend, the original Azcatl was created in order to defend Aztlán, the “place of the herons.” It is the location—a kind of Xanadu, somewhere in today’s Utah or Nevada—from where the original Mexicans walked south in search of a place to settle. Their elders described their destination as a series of lakes with a rock emerging in the middle. A cactus would grow from the rock. On top of the cactus, an eagle would be devouring a serpent. Throughout their journey, the Azcatl protected the Mexicans by confounding their enemies through hypnosis.

In some graphic depictions, the Azcatl looks like a spider (Arachnida), with an internal respiratory surface in the form of tracheae, lateral and median eyes (ocelli), and sensory hairs that provide them with a sense of touch. In his diaries, Franz Kafka considered various words to describe the shape of Gregor Samsa, protagonist of the novella *Die Verwandlung (The Metamorphosis*, 1915), opting in the end for *Ungeziefer*, a term from Middle High German meaning “unclean animal not suitable for sacrifice.” In English, *Ungeziefer* has been translated as cockroach, beetle, and other insects. In passing, Kafka, who suffered from dream-like, hypnagogic hallucinations during a sleep-deprived state leading to the writing of the novella, mentions looking at a pictorial dictionary of Nahuatl creatures and pondering the Azcatl as an option. “Too seductive!” he states (entry of March 16, 1913).
Imix Cipactli
(EE-miks see-pak-tlee, Maya)

This is a crocodilian alligatorid belonging to the family Caimaninae. Commonly known as a caiman, it is found in marshes and swamps, keeping a nocturnal routine. With its scaly skin, the Imix Cipactli was only seen once, by German botanist and phytogeographer Andreas Franz Wilhelm Schimper. He described it as having “the shape of a staircase.” Dutch artist Maurits Cornelius Escher is known to have been obsessed with it. It was a source of inspiration for his piece “Relativity” (1953).
The Xólotl is the Nahua god of light and darkness. He protected the sun from disappearing on the firmament. It is also associated with dogs, which, according to Hubert Howe Bancroft’s *The Native Races* (1883–86), are “in charge of leading the soul of the dead through the underworld.” But Xólotl is also about mutability. He has a stunning capacity to transform himself: he might be a dog with earrings at one point, an enormous mouth at another, a devouring tongue at yet another. The amphibian creature axólotl descends from him. The Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, whose novel *Rayuela* (**Hopscotch**, 1963) is about the inevitability of exile, paid tribute to it in an eponymous story. He portrays these salamanders as having Aztec faces. “I imagined them aware, slaves of their bodies, condemned infinitely to the silence of the abyss, to a hopeless meditation” (579).

Years ago, I had an axólotl. A shaman asked me to take care of it. Since it needed water, I placed it in a bathtub.
Zulin
Zulin
(tchoo-leen, Aztec)

The Zulin is a double bird—or else, a set of birds—that exists by looking at the mirror. Its shape depends on position: one zulin has a pair of wings, one on the left side and the other on the right. The other zulin also has a pair of wings, one on the right side and the other on the left. Neither zulin knows which is which. Everything connected with the Zulin is multiplied by two, then reversed, and finally relocated upside down and inside out.

Japanese-American novelist Aki Takahashi, in his book *Is the End of Time in Time?* (1985), whenever Zulin is mentioned, repeats the word twice. The narrator makes a reference to Zulin Zulin as “an enemy of the 1nglings (Inter-Nocturnal Gammas [beings]), sewer-dwelling people who have developed their own culture. They worship a tilapia fish with violent tendencies” (78). Zulin Zulin eats tilapia as a strategy to counterbalance their power.