Translated by Edward Kissam from Angel Maria Garibay's Spanish version in Llave del Nahuatl, Text V. (Original source: Sahagun, MS Laurenciano, Book III, Chapter 7.) A large collection of Kissam's pre-Columbian poetry etc. to appear from Anvil Press in England in collaboration with Michael Schmidt.

THE DEADLY DANCE

Aztec

That shaman, owl man,
dressed himself in shining yellow feathers
once he had won.
Then he planned that the people
should come together and dance.
So the cryer went to the hill
and announced it,
and called to all the people,

Everyone in the country around heard him,

and left quickly for

Texcalapa, that place in the rocky country.

They all came,

both nobles and the people, young men and young women, so many they could not be counted,

there were so many.

And then he began his song.

He beats his drum,

again and again.

They begin to join in the dance.

They leap into the air,

they join hands weaving themselves together,

whirling around,

and there is great happiness.

The chant wavers

up and breaks into the air,

returns as an echo from the distant hills

and sustains itself.

He sang it, he thought of it,

and they answered him.

As he planned,

they took it from his lips.

It began at dusk

and went on halfway to midnight.

And when the dance

they all did together

reached its climax.

numbers of them hurled themselves from the cliffs

into the gullys.

They all died and became stones.

Others, who were on the bridge over the canyon,

the shaman broke it

under them

though it was stone.

They fell in the rapids

and became stones.

The Toltecs

never understood what happened there,

they were drunk with it,

blind,

and afterwards gathered many times there to dance.

Each time,

there were more dead,

more had fallen from the heights

into the rubble,

and the Toltecs destroyed themselves.