

The adults are asleep. Cancer slides the tape in. The convex screen distorts the image into glowing fuzz.

There is exactly one tape store in walking distance that will rent tapes¹ to him. It is a tiny store bigger inside than outside, subdivided into categorical pockets, the space your hips can fit inside is a genre, and many flies have died in the dusty cracks. The proprietor is an old zodiac immigrant who doesn't seem to understand that some videos are age-inappropriate. He just takes the money and smiles and says something Cancer can't understand, but he smiles back, ducking his head.

PORCELAIN PRISONER: ACT TWOUSAND

She's back.

She is the ultimate vengeance. They thought they could break her spirit. But they were wrong. She splats bug entities across the walls of the hell they made. Each bullet is the tear of an angel.

A mosquito man, or woman? Androgynous bloodsucker is coming for her. And she has a lot of backstory reasons to hate them. Sometimes he(?) exsanguinated her family. Sometimes she(?) personally imprisoned and tortured her in the most maximal hellprison of the Ur-pelago.

Don't you remember?

Never fuck with destiny.²

Practical effects splatter her tits. He knows what they use for blood. Chocolate syrup (he has to sell his chocolate). In the early *Porcelain Prisoner* movies, they used red dye and kaopecate, an anti-diarrhea medicament. And in kaopectate, there is pectate, the gelatinoid acid (keep it inside) made from overripe fruit (touch your aching belly) and there is kaolinite, used to make porcelain. A beautiful connection throbs in him. Connected as all the sewers, connected like his dark passages, if only they could be

¹OUTWELL

The cover has a bloody hand on a carbonic acid molecule, with a backdrop of mangrove trees.

Every year, mangrove forests excrete surplus carbon into the ocean, enriching the local fish supply and lining the pockets of all who ply their trade in the ways of aquaculture.

But no one ever thought to ask....

²She decapitates the bug man and he falls in the fire with a scream. *TRUE BRAIN DEATH* flashes in the corner of the screen.

Don't fuck with destiny, he whispers, then covers his mouth. He's not like the other people who watch these movies, who take them very seriously and ENJOY MURDER. He is very careful to feel bad about what he is seeing.

exposed to the light. He doesn't know if he could survive that feeling, any more than the Porcelain Prisoner could survive the eruptions of the belly-bursting tapebeast, tapeworm, VHS tape, slithering around the reels, her belly is a television, but it was just a dream.

Always a dream.

He was twelve and he was returning a copy of *Porcelain Prisoner* (Everything is a copy out here. Even the diseases are a copy of you.) and he found a new kind of tape. It had a glowing girl on the front, surrounded by crystals. And she was extremely. Extremely fashionable.

SCOUTS OF THE SEVENEVER

Scouting is big on Continent, the great land mass, originator of ALL TRUE CULTURE, and it spread through the Archangelpelago, offshoots of the youth couriers and scouting auxiliaries used during the war.

In scoutlaga,³ scouts go on incredible adventures. Their badges unlock paths to secret worlds. Their skirts are higher than he sees on normal videos. It feels wrong to watch, but he can't stop.

He was fostered. He joined scouts. The uniform made him feel like a real boy. He belonged to something. And he got a knife. But it wasn't like the videos. So when the bag tortures started, there was a sick relief that something, anything was beyond this. A SICK DAY FOR THE WORLD

But like becoming a scout, or having a family for the first time, it feels like another dead end. At least in the mosquito-filled orphanage, falling asleep on the smelly mattress, he could dream of something better. Under that mattress he hid yellowed YA paperbacks, boys and girls with no future who were suddenly inducted into a magical and interior world, pages falling out so he had to fill in the blanks. Those dreams were so pure and so sweet, crunchy and golden.

Dreams don't survive reality. The DarkAtoll is just a collective delusion. He and his friends found a toxic ruin and got high off the fumes. Their badges are inert crystals. No angels respond to their calls. Everything you eat turns to shit.

He keeps watching. The subtitles are poorly translated, hacked onto the bottom of the screen. Their words are passionate. Their love is hyper-emotional. He knows he is losing so much meaning. Most of the tapes aren't even translated at all. But he can

³ He knows scoutlaga is the byproduct of a shattered and subservient city-state, just as videolaga is the pulpy secretion of a diseased archipelago. Movies by people too primitive and backwards for the final stage of artistry: making something that provides no enjoyment whatsoever. Videos for children.

hear it in their voices.

A very few of the videos are official releases by INNOCENT, with edited dialog and recut scenes (skirts painted longer, panties covered up), to celebrate and promote scouting. Something lost he can't even know the absence of, like the missing pages of his adventure books. The cut tapes feel like what happened when he got too close to his dream. Every day is a replay and his voice is dubbed, a cheerful exaggeration that leaves no room for true feelings.

But one of the translated theme songs is really beautiful, and he listens to it over and over.

*Did you know
We have been chosen
For a path that is beautiful
And a path that is strong
Don't tell me I don't know
Don't tell me I'm wrong*

*We are secret heroes
We are keepers of the deepest heart*

*Going on a special mission
Chosen by secret hearts
All over the world
People need to believe*

*Remember when you're sleeping
The dream that you're keeping
I always prayed for you
I never gave up on you
I always believed in you*

The singer is so happy and passionate and her skirt is so short it makes him sad. He rolls over in bed and squeezes his backpack, full of unsold chocolate bars. If he squeezes too tight they'll melt.

As the song plays, he thinks of his brother just across the hall, but he might as well be across the sea, and it aches.

The biology instructor intrudes on his mind with nothing so slow as an ache. Sudden and hot and druglike, coming on like his first taste of sacramental wine. A whine that sneaks up on the back of the neck, setting the hairs on fire like the flick of a lighter. The sting of a ruler on his wrist. Excised panty shots, always in your blind spot.

It feels wrong. Riparian shouldn't be taking that much interest in him. Nausea curls through his stomach. But only sickness allows him to dream while he is awake. And he has to know, if something bad could happen again. If it was his fault, or if it could be different this time.

The toilet flushes just on the other side of the white paint he is staring at. He has to keep the volume down because the walls are thin. The noises of the human body and the gurgle of plumbing have been leaking into his dreams for years. His eyes fall shut, then open again. The screen is glowing ash. The song ended a long time ago. Eyes shut, then open. The screen is black.



Walking quickly through the corridors of a building. At night every building is the same. Every building is like him.

He doesn't know the way out. He doesn't know how he got in. A dark window with a face he doesn't recognize. Outside, men in veils, face masks with trailing fabric, walking around the perimeter. They pretend to be garbage men but he knows they too are concealing their identity. When all disguises are stripped away, they will be men, and he will be garbage.

He presses his face to the glass and it fogs with a sulfurous mist. No one is there. That was another window on another black night. A different smoking mirror.

He likes to smoke. They painted plumes of it coming from his head, smoke, breath, so similar to the word scrolls which rippled like ribbons to the gods. Now they have word bubbles; insular, parenthetical, paranoid. No wonder they can't communicate with the gods.¹ But that carries a price.²

On this veintena, the "month" which you may call³ May from its ankles to its neck: Toxcatl, the festival of Tezcatlipoca.

In preparation for this festival, a young man, the ixiptla, would impersonate Tezcatlipoca for a year. And the boy they selected must be without scars.

(Trace your smooth face, without blemish. As long as you bind yourself to me.)

The boy was trained in the noble arts. He played the flute and sang. His ankles were belled with gold. He smoked from a reed, artfully dyed so the designs only appeared as it burned. He fucked the four impersonators of four goddesses, and ate well. He was painted black, except for his eyes, in inversion of the god who would complete him, Tezcatlipoca with the black band across the eyes.

¹The volute, the phylactery, the speech scroll was perverted into the slithering body of the parasite which emerged from its host like a tail, a communion, a question, who will bear me, or the other way around, a supplication for the gift of this immortal viscera. But the armada defaced these depictions, eliminating the tyrant rectum from the equation. The creature of the face dreads to acknowledge, this earth has always been a violent conversation between the invisible cultures in our guts.

²Smoke comes from burning life. Crops from shed blood. And the four winds were born from the final battle for four suns, all extinct. From each dead world, each vain battle, the wind of the noble dead, their howling warriors and their wailing widows, was all that remained, blowing into the next. Please accept our sacrifice.

With the first wind, it was possible to sail from island to island. With the second wind, it was possible to return to the land of our ancestors. The third wind brought the gift of the voladores, the sky-craft played by flute (tapitzalli) and drum (huehuetl). The fourth wind brought the armada. And now we fight for the fifth sun, our last.

³Or Tepopochtli, "smoking", "incensing" (you love your cloves, yet you love nothing, cleaved from love).

The boy ascended to the pillar where the airships⁴ are moored, breaking a flute with each step. And then his heart was cut out with the tecpatl, a razor petal of obsidian, and he was devoured, and the next impersonator wore his skin.

And in exchange, many live. Mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters. The venerable old and the innocent young. Is this not love?

Even the tlahtoani, the great king, the “speaker”, must beg Tezcatlipoca for breath.

O master, O our lord, O lord of the near, of the night, O night, O wind... Poor am I...for I am blind, I am deaf, I am an imbecile, and in EXCREMENT, in FILTH hath my lifetime been... Perhaps thou mistaketh me for another; perhaps thou seekest another in my stead...



As the boy's blood flowed down the steps it clotted with the grains of the amaranth, the immortal plant, and these were sculpted into divine figurines, just as a fast-living human clots to the amaranthine essence of the parasite. Dolls to be played with.

All these faces we have worn:
Telpochtli, the male youth,
Yohualli Ehécatl, the night wind,
Nécoc Yaotl, the enemy,
Tezcatlipoca, the smoking mirror in who your reflection drowns,
the creator of himself,
the ageless,
obsidian, night, and strife,
lust and treachery,
Titlacauan, HE WHOSE SLAVES WE ARE



At some point, the impersonators became the vessel of a very real power. The traditional fasting took on a new meaning, as they made their bowels empty and receptive for the wriggling gift of the gods. And as the year waxed and their fever grew, they began to perform miracles. Then, at the height of their power, they were killed, and this blessing was returned to the earth, and their heart flew to the sun.

It would have been obscene to retain that power. True beauty cannot co-exist with

⁴The voladores, now lost due to sin and treachery.

The four captains came to beg for good wind, and bent close to inhale his expiring breaths. At the end of the ceremony, they were scarred with the broken flutes.

this sinful earth without being contaminated. And the oldest priests and scholars had reasons⁵ for why it must be no longer than a year.

Riparian was one of these noble impersonators, selected from the finest young men. For a year he waited to have his heart ripped out and his entrails spilled. But how sensual to be trained into the perfect vessel. To be cultivated in the arts of speaking and singing, and to step with the grace of a divine being. And as the power grew in him, he was able to accomplish miracles. He could purify the land with his urine, and cure illnesses with a kiss.

And now he had to die.

But in this time, the atoll was choked with dead fish, the lagoon a buzzing lake of flies. The crops were black. Their enemies triumphed. So this year, it was decided not to sacrifice the impersonators, but to allow the fever of the gods to blossom.

The people of the atoll weren't stupid. The very existence of their culture proved their rituals worked. It was only when that culture was threatened, that they modified the ritual. An opportunistic infection.

The blade of culture cut both ways. This new ritual honored the act of impersonation, even as it defiled the valor of sacrifice. To lay down your life for others, and become part of the cycle. But desperation made the choice simple.

So when the time came for his sacrifice, he was allowed to keep his racing heart, and the knot of his entrails was not cut. The priests proclaimed an endless spring. Tlālōcān on earth!

The year passed, and his power grew. It became enough to cure the blight and resurrect the fish. He sent a night wind to destroy the fleet of their enemies. And with his brothers and sisters, his fellow impersonators, beautifully flushed and sparkling with sweat, he made the atoll a jade crown on the ocean, and none could stand before them.

The festivals became endless, a fever that would not break. Time meant nothing, and the cencalli tonalli, the family of days was ripped apart. Nothing could be sacrificed, so nothing could be gained. But they had everything.

It was beautiful, at first.



⁵ This fever will become unbearable. We kill you out of mercy. Or is it because you would become a threat to us? Or this only a superstition of the old, and you are young and brilliant...

Let me show you how we survived outside of God's light.



Stalking through the park before it was a park. Riparian smells the slave like a fire in the trees, because they are never allowed to shower.

Even in this cursed form, he slinks like a cat, his jaguar essence.⁶ He is hunting. But fresh meat brings no pleasure, beyond the tyrant joy of spilling blood. It must rot. And so when the hunt is over, they suspend the bodies for the flies and the atoll sun.

Riparian has an alpha-gal problem. He has a lot of problems, most of them allergens. The bite of a tick may trigger an immune response to a carbohydrate in its saliva, galactose-alpha-1,3-galactose, also found in mammalian meat. This is how the parasite trained his body. He is incapable of digesting fresh meat, vegetables, any living thing unless it is decayed. Rotten. Degraded.

Why should you eat what I cannot? Your lips will come to despise bright fresh fruits.

Dogshit in the glove compartment, from a bag someone left like takeout in a garbage can. He eats in a trance and sucks his fingers afterward, and only then does he remember to gag, dogshit twice over, but the true humiliation is that his saliva smells worse than the shit itself, filling the car with the reek of his bacteria that preserves the living, and his enzyme that accelerates the dead.

If you rip me out, you will dissolve.

He is under the tree again. The body was hung upside down so he could get at the tongue. He caresses that rotting mouth and bites down and his body, the impersonator, struggles with the texture of a human tongue, this thing it once kissed in so many mouths so tenderly and must be kind to, this early lesson so hard to erase, the preservation of flesh which a god can ignore in itself and in others but it always feels like running to a cliff's edge and leaping over and it forces the same clenching in his stomach. But he needs to eat this fucking tongue, so he brushes aside the veil of flies and hooks the cheeks with his claws and holds the mouth open and bites down and putrid blood squirts into his mouth and as he retches he bites down harder to stay latched on, allowing his bile to empty into the corpse's stomach instead of his own, keeping his passages clear for eating, and as he starts chewing, the corpse wakes up and the tongue spasms as it tries to scream, and after all that torture last night they must have forgotten to actually kill it, and the blood he swallowed, far too

⁶ He lost connection to his tonal, his treasured pal with skills and abilities, the cat which fled and never returned, or bled and fed and burned, this is the ugliness of the parasite, to never see beyond its own lies. And he, the nagual, the shifter, could forevermore only transform into the form of a fly.

fresh, bursts back into the slave's mouth and drains through the upside down nostrils which foam and snort like a dying horse and spray Riparian's face with blood, painting his naked chest in snotty bursts and he falls to the grass, deeply ill, and the slave won't stop screaming and he won't stop screaming and he looks for a rock to slam his head into—



Still walking through the dark hall. There, a way out. He bangs his head on the black glass and as he scrabbles at it, his hands slide off like he's falling, the building is sinking into the earth—

It's the windshield. You're in a car. Close your eyes.

Do it.

The black mirror drips on his face. The vile condensation⁷ of his stomach, a suffocating humidity, a panic that makes him reach for the window crank. But instead of turning it, he rips it off the door.

You don't need to breathe. Not really.

If you asphyxiate, you'll wake up again—

He really needs to breathe, even if he doesn't. A bad flesh dream, waking into the wrong body, forgetting he can never escape this sweating prison of meat and the ten ton shadow pinning it down. He claws his face, peeling the loose skin around his eyes like the membrane of a hardboiled egg, tearing his lips like strips of waxing paper until his teeth are naked—

I STINK
I STINK

GET ME OUT

GET ME OUT

GET ME OUT

And his skin crawls back into place and his eyelids snap over his twitching pupils and his lips slurp back over his teeth and they are so hungry. The cost of your resistance to this hunger is to become even more ravenous.

Gods don't die. They eat shit.

⁷Black bile, the slime of melancholy, melaina kholé. Too much black bile causes cancer.