

Death Valley

Part 2: Thinking David

David moves his bed against the door to his apartment. This is more, physically — and then he thinks, *mentally* — than he has done since what he remembers as the Christmas of 2063, when he had come his closest to Foxychan. He cannot for the life of him remember if he took the Young Love capsule already, in the midst of his mania, but assumes he would already be knocked out if he did. But the coma could come through hypnagogia like many other neurocircuit comas do but — he will not check the instructions. It is safest to lay in bed immediately and ready himself for coma, sleep, or death.

There is the real source of his head's racing: his mania, he thinks foolishly induced by his failed attempts at reproduction, brought him to send Cassandra that fevered poem, and now he no longer has contact with her to explain it away. With her in the room, he might tell her it was a joke, his fanfiction account of what *might* have occurred *had* Rahm been a member of Foxychan's cult, and *had* he been part of her innermost circle with him. It is true that there are unpopular theories floating around to suggest this about David: just the sort of thing for a random nobody to latch onto in a last gasp of his ego, just the sort of thing a psychological guardian loves to believe she has slightly detected, especially if she is one with Cassandra's unwavering belief in people's fundamental goodness...David needed her protection now more than ever. He feels a new dubiousness about her departure that contributes to his fear. Yes, his letter was a harassment. No, it was not the first. She loved harassment as much as firefighters love fire and frogmen love water.

While many had suggested the possibility, only David, Foxychan, Star-keeper of Dogs, and two others in the room that day knew Rahm to be exactly the man who killed the schoolchildren and argued for the cult's liquidation before Foxychan's innermost court. But David senses the complication: that "Seymour Rahm" is only the name attached to the body of the man discovered with a suicide note by Detective Green, a note that assigned his killings an entirely different provenance and meaning. How many lonely suicides does a man like Detective Green have on ice on a given day?

David's head is spinning against his pillow like a drill bit but sleep is far away. He needs to keep himself sharp and know what to expect when Juliette comes to his door. He wants to at least know the specific fate he will have met if and when he does not wake up from his sleep. What does he know?

Juliette is after him and wants him to know it. He can only assume it is in response to his letter to Cassandra, for what else could it be? He should assume it is her behind every Psychic Guard

who applied for his profile tonight, considering how they seemed to escalate in ploys to grab his attention.

Juliette wants him to know she is after him and that she knows him well, *now*, but she would have preferred he didn't know these things in advance of their meeting, and that he accordingly Accepted Amanda who revealed nothing but the settled matter of his address, before Sophie made that first grave association with his letter, suggesting that *he* was the Rahm caught in the depths of guilt. When Destiny made her appearance, the cat was out of the bag as to their shared knowledge of the letter. How dumb would he have to be to take her energetic interest in him and his story as coincidence sourced actually in some unpopular old rumor? But of course Juliette has to dress even her loudest declarations against her Romeo in some faint harmlessness — just as Foxychan always spoke in that cute voice much in the character of a naive young celebrity who might have been blissfully unaware that any real violence was happening in her name: responding to every piece of it as it were part of a big inside joke undergoing endless elaboration. This was the core thrust of her appeal as a comedic object. She was an image of Hitler bent over the model city depicting his new Berlin, who believed himself to be an artist whose vision the world had unanimously agreed to implement, and deferred all matters of logistics to atrocity's real executors, his own careful keepers, whose works he would emerge to clap at like plays performed by actors, as he busied himself most personally with the design of costumes, backdrops, symbology, and other worldbuilding concerns between his enrapturing, consummate performances of *Hitler*.

He needed Julie Hing to present to him this possibility of ignorance, that someone could be at the center of so much violence yet ignore axiomatically its origin within them, in order to...David stalls. The cult needed her depiction of ignorance to show them how it would be possible for them to cut through so many bodies when the time came, for them, to do this. Also, to show them how to extract themselves at any moment by keeping punchlines in view. She remarked one day, how funny would it be if we all drove Suzukis to our final destinations? What did she mean by this? What does he know?

Juliette needs David to drink the poison of her ornately arranged plausible deniabilities and fall asleep before she will meet him, so she can do what? David begins to think, if she wanted to kill him, it would be as simple as aiming her powers of persuasion upon Stephen at the building security desk, a man hired for his inability to guard doors. Then she is blocked from David by no more than a featherweight cot placed against his paper door, through which she could find his head and neck in arms reach by cracking it just a bit open, or kick right through it like a set piece and launch herself upon his prone observance in a hail of shredded paper, slick black hair, night green eyes, and sharp yellow teeth and knives like a Japanese television ghost. Whether it is really miscalculated shadow vascularized by chaining violet and grue floaters upon his eyeballs, her visage looms large over him now like his impending Love coma.

Now David is holding an explosion of animal franticity under the ages of his numbness. What are his unique weaknesses? Suicidal recklessness, impersonality, and a lack of time left on this Earth: So she comes offering repentance, purpose, and legacy, before simply forcing herself

into his mind. David realizes he has forgotten Shi in his list of Juliette's ploys, Shi who concerns him perhaps the most in her plainness: a woman shilling simple sexual release to homebound prisoners, operating on the suggestion that he is a homosexual. David saved her number: (323) 461-3331.

David reads it for the fifth time from scarrified memory:

I've been watching over you the best I can from here. (One)
I will come to you in a form you won't recognize long after you have forgotten me. (Two)
You will know me by your sense of impossibility that it is me. (Three)
I will say nothing of our past. (Four)
If you name me, I will not take you down the path we must walk together. (Five)

David writes it in the gas tablet of his head:

If Shi will be Juliette, who will Juliette be?
Will Shi be whom I seek: Fox?
Would Fox come back to me with love, or terror?
I love whatever Fox gives me.
So it will be with what Shi, Juliette, gives me.

He falls through another floor of his pillow. She meant something about the impersonality and suicidal recklessness of the Japanese, by driving Suzukis, going kamikaze, which was not like going berzerk, David remembers, but really more solemn, he felt, in his readings of personal accounts. The Japanese have some way of going egoless into voids he has not read enough about. When asked whether her Yin and Yang symbol pointed to Daoism or Zen Buddhism she replied,

"Exactly one of the two that is both and neither of them."

David remembers opening her gift on Christmas morning: poison to be enjoyed. Because his love for her was the purest, he was to be her longest suffering victim. He gets up from bed and takes two servings from the bottles he still keeps. He thinks she would want him to commemorate 9/11/2001 and he only has a few minutes left before midnight to do so. He knows by now that it won't be the Love that takes him this night.

9/11/2001 plus 65 equals 9/11/2066
2065 old attacks plus 1 equals 2066

He imagines her as close as the security desk and doubts consume him from all directions.

David struggles with psychiatrists in love with their own sickness, frogmen who have become water to glide through it, undercover firefighters fighting fire with fire. Is there something in the nature of terrorists that so perfectly recapitulates the nature of the world as a whole into single

people that they become its final crucibles of personal violence, ineliminable from the world owing to their indistinguishability from it? Rob Actor was right about why the long arms of Detective Green and his DVSD could never touch them before their detonations. They had to resort to their gloved ones to touch them. In those black rooms a pedant might have warned them that they were becoming terrorists themselves, before he was thrown to the same hungry dogs:

"We can pretend to be criminals without becoming them, but we can't pretend to be terrorists without becoming them. Terror is a feeling: equal to its imitation. If we release this video, we will have committed an act of terror. Who wouldn't feel terror knowing there is no good fighting evil? Even in this room, it's already terrorism: I'm terrified. No matter how much you hate them, feeding any person to dogs is terrifying."

"What about feeding a good person to dogs? A loved one? I don't let myself feel hatred toward anyone. The intricate diversity of humanity is our bread and butter. Our message to the people is that we will stop at nothing to use them for something. If they hand themselves over to us, they'll live longer. If we have to catch them, they'll die slower. Call it terror, slavery, evil, or whatever you want. It's the nature of the world: it is what it is."

David will become a terrorist when he becomes the world. No: he will never let himself become the world. He will fight for his survival as a distinct entity: consciousness driving a taxi cab: twirling beep-beep through the neon grids of the city.

Those who confess to David are treated to advice they cannot help but accept, but can never spread without implicating themselves. He nullifies the confessor's guilt with the admission of his own, more total: he cares about nothing and just likes to give good advice. He would inform two mortal enemies of their best lines of attack against one another over the course of their separate commutes. David's chosen profession places him in a seat only as comfortable as its beaded cover, with no control over his journeys beyond their smoothness and speed. The basics are a matter of muscle memory to David and beyond them is the grander role of an anonymous conduit between multitudes of people.

The one repeatable bit of David's philosophy is that something could only be true if it were unknown to him, thus he never uses his advice to pass judgment on his passengers, nor does he ever tell them something he believes to be true or false. He does not try to give good advice to the good and bad advice to the bad because he knows he has no knowledge of what is good, what is bad, who is good, who is bad. So, he makes only ambiguous statements of things he holds to be in perfect doubt. He spends his private moments putting everything in doubt that he can.

David finds himself in bed enclosed in a great stained glass vehicle gently baked by the licking of reptilian flames. Its scenes depict nothing but as many possible enemies and their multiple possible facets and faces as he can imagine.

There is Green, who would have him executed as a clean cop, kill him with his bare hands as a dirty cop, and do Green-knows what to him as his accomplice in their coverup of Rahm's connection to the Order whose pact of secrecy he just betrayed in a poem.

Destiny had it down to a tee:

When Rahm, known to David then as Wolf (and he must think of him more indeterminately as Wolf (Keeper of the Wolfstar) to avoid being ensnared in any of his ruses) left the room alone with the puzzle of his fatwa against them, David went to Fox, whose closest confidant he had been ever since Christmas, taking Wolf's place, and gave her his advice.

"If I were you, I would offer your deal to Wolf personally, and if he doesn't take it, fight him, and if he fights back, play dead with a smile — like you want him to tango with you on the floor for a while. He has a love for you to requit and revive. Offer something like the slow suicide you offered me until I can figure out how to defuse this. Anyone in the Order, including me, could be working under him. Trust someone at random."

David saw how muted news of the drowned bus suggested an accident. He knew the police must be hot on the case, or warm. They sought to sow false confidence in their suspect. He was almost sure they had already found the bus driver's body. Wolf would not believe his 60 children had gone unnoticed. If he were willing to sacrifice himself to take down the Order, public ignorance of such deep killings would have been the best time for him to announce himself as the guilt-stricken doer, or come forward to break the silence of that doer's governing circle...but his only aim was to save himself, so short of his favored destiny — to orchestrate the Order's thorough demise from within at his extended direction — he had to instead become the dumbest man in its vicinity, who was first to find the killer by sheer divine accident because, if anything, he was the quickest to true moral outrage when the killings became public knowledge: the very first man distinctly outside of the Order to put it all together: through his amateur investigations, perhaps, these being the source of the otherwise incriminating paraphernalia adorning every corner of his life, he could say it was probably *David* who committed the crime based on his collected evidence, or Foxychan if she was not careful. His evidence would be imperfect, but he would be compelled to present it by the abysmality of the crime reported, and either one of his enemies would go down like tons of steel just for being placed so high in the Order.

"He is waiting for the body to be found to present himself as a Graysmith. If I'm right that he doesn't know me, I think he will try to know you. You have to test if he knows me without spooking him. Give him your half of me and tell him you'll work with him to finger me. It has to be a real half of me or you could blow the line."

Wolf would need to believe he was in Fox's innermost garden to follow David's design.

"The way you dazzle him is with the children. We know what he hates about the Order and why he wants it to disappear. Tell him you secretly feel the same way."

"He is already after you, David. He thinks you are an undercover cop and we can get to you by giving up his identity. Just like you, he doesn't know how much you already know about him. He told me you are a taxi driver in Death Valley and that he is a corrupt cop and businessman in the same city."

"He's wrong. I'm nobody. I'm the man in Telescope Apartments 1010B with a drawing of your face done from memory taped to my window above the bottles you gave me. Those things are everything I know of you. He is the killer of 60 schoolchildren who hates dogs because they bark at him. I know he has no Red Flags or Psychic Guards and that his apartment overlooks the city from its highest peak."

David was Star-keeper of the Fox, who existed. The Wolf and Dog did not. The Wolf was the Fox's rage and the Dog her obedience: symbolic halves of a self-encircling tragicomedy into a One from the Two they were neither and both: the Fox who was all cunning, all kenning and power.

Fox knew David then and presented his Yin to Wolf, who recoiled in total ignorance of his Yang. David believed what she told him, that Wolf gave the whole of himself to her, to gain her protection from David, after she offered him her own Yin in turn. So, David believed that Wolf was Rahm, the lonely video store clerk who would, in the end, set fire to his home and his body crooked in Lotus Position on a square of lawn, leaving a note that described his failure to summon the smiting of an evil cult by assigning it blame for an unforgivable crime. That omniscient view Wolf had, not from his doomed hovel in Badwater Basin, had to be taken as a metaphor, then, despite the perfect semblance of reality it put in David when Wolf first expressed it to him in the crowd gathered before their terminal object, then distant enough to be shared.

Fox communicated her fear, however, that this Rahm now knew the whole of her, too. He'd lit up in a ripple of flame, like a Christmas Tree, at her disclosure, like a burst electrical bulb, that she was a Death Valley technologist, before standing before his soul so exposed to her roused gang of children like a pirate Santa Claus just fat enough to block out most of the glow of his crimes and chalk the whole scene up to an extension of his Yuletide jolliness.

She'd thought she had her trails covered perfectly throughout this ken of technology she shared with so many scores of others. She still had enough confidence in her obscurity, or love for David, to share the indefinite description she gave Wolf with him, too, even more needlessly.

David asked her if she would die if she took off her mask. She said it would be extremely painful. David reminded her that she was impenetrably hard.

"For *you*," she said, and returned to her original face.

Even now on his suspended deathbed David wonders if getting caught was part of her master plan. But more sharply he imagines Juliette six inches behind his head with a stiletto, executor

of a grand revenge for the impurity of his intentions toward his love that day.

He could have risked hunting down Rahm, but he told Fox she couldn't risk this. If Rahm were to see him coming, he might get to the police before them with his version of events, and her identity. If they had to relinquish control of the cult, they would be better off under the devil they didn't know in the Death Valley Sheriff's Department than the devil they did know in Rahm.

So while Fox agreed to take Rahm down Zeno's path to David's undoing, David would contact the DVSP via the Orb they had established with Fox, a secret line for the blackest negotiations. Detective Green took David's call and made plain straight away who he was: far more than the DVSP and the only man they would need to speak with. Green wanted a win: far more surveillance than all the Psychic Guardians in their Rococo chambers could hope to accomplish. He did not believe in psychiatry or psychics, who trusted minds that were aware of their exposure. What he needed to know about people was what they took to be their secret behavior. If David could show him that, he would tie up any other loose ends for him. Perhaps the one thing Green did hate were loose ends: useless threads that do nothing but stick out and threaten to unravel something good, like the pedant he fed to the dogs.

Green would know David only as the Keeper of the Foxstar until, perhaps, seeing the Gesamtkunstwerk he handed to Cassandra like a ticking time bomb with no idea of what to do with it. He could hear the bomb behind his pillow now ticking, just outside his door, where Juliette winds its clock back every five minutes, awaiting what she wants to be his mortal revelation.

David and Green worked together for two years. They would sometimes talk late into the night. He would continue communicating with his contacts in the ruins of the cult and look thoroughly confused in the face of their fallings away, which would continue until they were all gone somewhere, and he was nobody again, back where the world had found him. He sat those two years motionless at the back of the asylum art room left of Fox's Empire and refused company from no old friends of his. His friends were looping automata at the controls of grandiose weapons of signficatory summoning (Magic Markers) and ritual finger painting (hands and paint): his friends kept her whole story safe in their skulls with his code: One Sun Yellow, Two Ocean Blue, Three Tree Green, Four Fire Orange, Five Blood Red, Six Night Black, Seven Moon White, Eight Royal Purple.

12345678

1

Sun Yellowed Blue Ocean Trees Green.
Green Trees Green Blue Trees Sun Yellows Green.
Green Trees Trees Green Green Green Trees Yellow.
Yellow Trees Green Orange Trees Green Trees Yellow.
Orange Sun Fires Orange Trees Red.

Red Sun Fires Red Trees Blood Red.

Sun Fired Blood Red Trees Fire Fire.

2

Tree Fires Sun Fire Trees Fire Fire Fire Fires Fire.

Fire Ocean Blackens Tree Ocean Night Black.

Fire Ocean Blackens Blue Ocean Night Black.

Fire Ocean Blackens Sun Ocean Night Black.

Night Black Ocean Blackens Blood Black.

3

Blood Black Ocean Trees Moon Moon.

Moon Moon Fires Blood Black Ocean White.

Ocean White Fires Moon Moon Royal White.

Royal White Moon Trees Royal Purple Trees.

Royal Purple Trees Tree Royal Purple Tree Ocean.

Royal Purple Tree Ocean Trees Fire Royal Blood.

4

Royal Blood Fires Purple Trees Night Blackened White.

Royal Blood Fires Purple Trees Moon Whitened Black.

5

Royal Blood Fires Black Trees White Purple Trees Blackened.

Royal Blood Fires White Trees Black Purple Trees Whitened.

Royal Blood Fires Black Trees White White Trees Blackened.

Royal Blood Fires White Trees Black White Trees Whitened.

Royal Blood Fires Black Trees White Black Trees Blackened.

Royal Blood Fires White Trees Black Black Trees Whitened.

6

Trees White White White Black Black White White White Fire Royal Black Tree.

Trees Royal Black Royal Black Royal Black Royal Black Royal Black Fire Sun Moon.

7

Sun Moon Fires White Ocean Blood Black.

8

Trees Royal Black White Black Purple Black White Royal Black Fire Sun Trees.

Black Trees Fire Sun Tree Tree Trees Sun Trees Tree.

Royal Black Trees Fire Sun Tree Royal Blood Sun Trees Fire.

Purple Trees Fire Sun Tree Tree Tree Blue Oceans Sun Trees Tree.
White Trees Fire Sun Tree Sun Sun Trees Sun.

He promised his friends Fox would return to them soon, just as spontaneously as she first appeared to them in Line 1 of Stage 3 of 12345678, where she was the Moon Moon amid the Blood Black Ocean that had come to shroud a once colorful Earth in darkness. In Stage 6, his friends understood perfectly, Patterns of Detention emerged in the randomly growing Trees and summoned the Sun Moon, which reinstated the Blood Black Ocean and unwound Fox's progress in Stage 7, transporting her back to Stage 3, before she could establish the Pattern of Creation that began Stage 8. It is in Stage 8 that Fox rings in her own eternity as the consciousness that knits the multiple fragmentation of our world back to the reality of its original whole.

For two-and-a-half years in the ruins of Fox's cult, David would keep to his black corner, tweaking the little gears that kept his mapping machine perfect in its colors', numbers', and words' combination into truth. He would answer questions about it from onlookers. To sad people who had questions about the precise time, place, nature, and way their old source of happiness would appear to them again, he could answer with pure certainty that there was an answer personal to each of her lovers, and secret between the two of them, that had to be found in 12345678. His friends could tell by his cherubic grin that David had found *his* answer. He grew a sizable audience at his shows. People began to regard him as a source of power, noticing how many of them would die after being in his presence. He became like Chernobyl atop Mount Everest to them. They wished to know how they would be mutated by his experience. They coveted their copies of 12345678 like they were seats with Fox herself. Cornering them in states of black doubt and rainbow wonder, he fed their every utterance to Detective Green.

In exchange, Green agreed to kill Rahm and leave the bus driver's body at the bottom of the Amargosa River where he found it, and to place Fox into the deepest Witness Protection Program he knew: one through which even he himself wouldn't be able to get to her, he said. Why David chose to believe that whopper, he still didn't know. No: he had decided to break Fox out of the Order, and Green's Witness Protection Program looked like his one opportunity to do so. That was why. He wanted to isolate her from everything and have her naked. In a cube of retrospect, one that dawned on David the moment Julie Hing departed their private room for her meeting with Green's Witness Protection Team and continued without abatement until this moment that he wishes for his lover's kiss of death in his bed's confines, he knew he had betrayed her. Where was his acuity as an advisor that should have protected her from what followed?

Months would be grown and birthed with no word from her through their Orb. Yes, he loved her so much that by tragedy or choice she followed his design into the void. She loved him so much that he worked every day to dismantle her legacy, piece by piece, and replace it with some surly, worldbound detective named Green's.

Green had a captive audience in David and told him his working worldview. He believed in nothing outside of the Earth, which to him might as well be flat. He did not consume any pharmaceuticals or neurocircuitry. He did not use a mental controller. His telephone calls pushed his wife and children to the frontiers of the Northern Canadian lakewoods in deathly fear of the world that whirled around him like host-seeking ghosts that died upon impact with his disbelief in them — wife and children could both sense the primal screams trapped in his controlled words. He regarded himself already as his family's distant, ancestral progenitor, proud of how well he taught them to hunt, fish, barter, and chart journeys celestially in the woods that are humanity's home. He respected the foxes and wolves that made for good white rabbits, eating those who let themselves get impatient, greedy, arrogant, bored, cold enough to leave their camouflage in the snow and leap at their promised berries as if they were their proud earnings. These predators pushed the rabbits deeper into snowiness as they climbed higher into fieriness. He believed humans were meant to take the path of rabbits toward identity with the Earth: We do not need enemies. All beings but us and our Earth are flawed eruptions of imbalance that curve however slightly back into us with enough time.

Dogs, he remarked to David, were Earth's ultimate traitors: nervously hermaphroditic in the food chain and at home in prison, loyal to anyone with a newspaper, covered in the tattoos of countless owners and passed around like a disease; Take them on fox hunts or immure your sheep to wolves with them but do not love them, lest you see yourself in them: reflected, on their faces' genetic displays: pitifully doting or dumbly happy bondservants. The fluidness with which they morph emotional interfaces from canine to human societies shows just how deep their predation runs: nothing bone-deep ties them to their pack and its hierarchy: their friends get the same given to rabbits with bites, with commanding barks or obedient whimpers: nothing but hollow hunger. Leaders will rise and fall and dogs will go alone or come together depending on the hunting. Dare if you must to love the dog for the lone wolf that it is: hunger itself that keeps you going when you have strayed too far from home. But there you have only found your way to love love itself, which hunger is: the hunger for more hunger. Now you are lost in the Empire of the Dog and living by his lesson: Hunger is only for more hunger but brings everything you can imagine to be food. Here you are doomed to bite the hand that feeds by the fearsome Wolf and cunning Fox who immure you in their guise of Dog.

Theory Yin: Green and Wolf are the same person. Passing off random tragedy as his handiwork, he spooked the cult into sacrificing its golden lamb to him. He petted her head nightly until now, or sent her straight to slaughter, or to some fate suspended between these four poles of paintime: possibilities explode in ejaculatory webs from their axes and somewhere contain Julie naked for David's perfect knowing, victim of his enemy and competitor the Wolf's flawed knowing. Rahm was just an effigy of the ideal loner, the clerk of a video store; Who goes into those anymore? Who would believe the story that a video brought him to act? Wolf took over the cult by becoming the shattered image of Man and outlasting his martyrdom. David and Fox least expected him to appear over his own corpse, resurrected as Green with a jerrycan of gasoline, feeding his true nature. David has lived as a profound cuckold ever since, second-in-command to the winning suitor of his love-unto-death, whom hunger will bend to David's purpose-for-her indeed in the jowls of the hunger-purpose for hunger's object: hunger for hunger: love: hunger:

the Wolf.

Theory Yang: Green and Fox are the same person. The Wolfstar did not exist and its Keeper was a jester, just like the Keeper of the Dogstar. The Wolf, like the Dog, was never any more than its illusionist Keeper: whether in person or through bondservants, Fox. Wolf's Rahm was an easily lassoed disturbance or simple fabrication for her to put before David, in any case, principally a test of his loyalty as Star-keeper of Foxes. He failed so spectacularly by inviting her puppet Green to hold unmeasured power over her that she abandoned her cult to haunt him for the rest of his life. The triplet jesters of her innermost court, where there had only ever been David and Julie in all reality, fell away with their greatest joke, and she became that man named Green who would be her perfect opposite and David's only remaining lifeline to the world. For two-and-a-half years Julie has placed David second-in-command of the execution of the perfect opposite of her vision in order to remind him daily of the profound emptiness that resides in him, what is enough to house such a perfect contradiction as that which she implanted in him, and terrorize him into a true recognition of the power she holds.

He falls through another floor of his pillow. David believes he is being punished for supposing Fox would deign to devote herself to filling his all-consuming emptiness with her all-drowning love; and Fox's punishment of David is a mission she has devoted her whole being to. When death comes for David, Shi will be Juliette, who will be Fox in the role of Shepherd Green, whose shared Dog costume will hide the Wolf she hides them from like knowledge.

He lies on flat, sundusted dirt in the private hollow of an encloisterment of birch and mangrove forest black, moist, and ghostly misted in tiny cyclonically interweaving wisps of white vapors at the lowest ground and colored a green glow slightly higher as One looks through blurred air past the mossy bases of arm-width, black and zebic, roundly gnarled or rigorously straight Trees into the shading horizon.

His skull is crooked against the trunk of a great Tree between two gently sloping basal roots his arms lay along like the walls of a bathtub, head comfortably laded with a tall octagonal hoop Crown: it is of geometric gold plates connected by the sewing, coiling, and enmeshing of gold wire like wheat; Onto the plates are bolted diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and deep blue sapphires arranged into basic symmetries of 3, 5, and 8 parts; Strewn in the thickets of the wire are pearls and orbs of ebony.

He is protected under his doming stained glass vehicle, drunkenly naked under a higher ceiling of criss-crossing rainbows in jay blue sky, entering the state of Sokushinbutsu underneath the great Strangler fig Tree to the slow song of its ripened fruit dropping upon the ground, his body, and the golden nest of his Crown.

As the Tree is empty of its host (its trunk a hollow honeycomb pillar made of intertwining vines) he is emptied of himself, and he is then the highest-security prison of nothing within and fortress from nothing without: an empty urn for the entrance of Fox in slowly forming, settling, and concretizing trails of vapor brought into her phantasmic personage by forces aglow behind the

much firmer image, grand, totemic and ineradicably vivid at the center of his vision, of her Kitsune Mask: foremost white, then red, yellow, and blue; oval as an elegantly elongated egg with a topmost missing panel defining the sharp, gently inward-curving coronal ears; red are the ear's triangles of inner flesh, the dot nose, and the outermost leaflike definitions of eyes — against blank white — while lacy blue lines trace cursively and intersperse themselves, more faintly and secondarily, across the curved surfaces of the face; yellow are the innermost encasements of eye holes in the Mask, from behind which Julie's true green glows in two cylindrical beams onto the body of David who feels conveyed toward her by them.

For all its intricacy and power, the Mask's resounding impact is an expression of profound cosmic blankness. She is an ultimate joke or riddle frozen at the point of its instantaneous self-understanding and forgetting: *uncanny*, *unknowing*, and also *uncaring*, in a fashion of almost non-existence that somehow nonetheless serves to personify, terrifyingly, a sentient but deeply impersonal world nature.

Her body, meanwhile, though set-to-scale, is sensed as if it wafts pinned beneath her Mask by her solar and sacral tattoos, either much larger or much smaller than these, a planar blur like a parachute or sail coming in from an immense distance, but then straightens and hovers over him as if it were his own departing or returning aura, perfectly aligned to him pentagonally. Her nakedness is humanly tangible, sensual, and warm. Her body would almost lack dimensionality in the internal homogeneity of its soft paleness were it not for spare rashes of pinkness and the circumferential shadows further defining her breasts, knees, ribs, and tendons: these ground her while so much else holds her back in spectral domains. David's view of Fox subsists in an abstract realm where she could be just his size and inches from him or immense and millions of miles away, in any case, behind a fundamental window.

David is placed at the uttermost basement of reality: a great hall whose ceiling and walls are unknowably distant in a blackness, while objects are lit as in daylight, and a foot of saline water is upon the black and white checkered floor, a light aquamarine, which extends perhaps infinitely in all directions.

It is from under the water that he looks up at the Fox, on whose surface she lays leisurely now as if on the glass of an aquarium floor. She gestures, points, and billows her hands at him slowly. Following their movements he is drawn into diagrams like bird's paths against equal winds which signify little to him but the dance of her pretty hands, themselves dovelike in how she configures them, anointed he notices with the blue, yellow, and red of her Mask also upon her nails, and in Treelike symbols of dots and lines upon the backs of her hands, and in simplistic figlike white and black eyes painted upon her palms.

He becomes entirely lost in her puppetry, which conveys interaction between the hand beings categorizable neither as sexual nor violent, cooperative nor conflicting, intelligent nor automatic — the beings preceding these distinctions primordially as entities yet to find worldly embodiment, awaiting custom designs. At times these look to him like higher-order mathematical forms, ribbed with endlessly detailed but perfectly ignorable fractal patternings:

these shift and morph, as their basic category of action, between different embodiments: as creatures, butterflies and rabbits, artifacts, vases and pyramids, or geometric utterances and animated masks.

Elsewhere, Fox peers curiously at David with animal tilts of her face. She points and taps on the glass pane between them. Her face pecks and shakes with speech he cannot hear from behind the glass, then clearly she begins yelling, and finally she is pounding on the glass with the balls of her fists under a disturbed shroud of fallen hair: beyond sound, no vibration at all makes it to David. He sees some strands of her hair sail up and blow sideways, to which she looks in the direction of what David understands to be a great wind. Fox presses her body and Mask now unviolently against the surface of the glass and David looks into her eyes six inches away from his: they are dilated and nearly circular in their opening, glassy, and David knows she is crying, maybe screaming, by the way she returns her head inward toward the heart fitfully between what seem to be attempts to summon an acknowledgement and funerary farewell from him.

David is so without all motor control, locked not just behind glass from her but also by the metaphysics of this basement space, that he cannot know his expression toward Fox, and imagining himself from above, worries what image he might be presenting to her: without his Crown, he sees himself motionless and stiff but gently floating with eyes that carry not the same cosmic blankness as Fox's Mask, but an expression, more specifically, frozen in a state of unfinished action and unresolved misunderstanding. He seems to himself dead or at the very least unconscious — but this is only his imagination. He returns to looking outward at Fox and watches her gulps and shrugs of sobbing framed by neater waterfalls of black hair now, which all go quickly motionless as she catches herself and holds herself still. With a heavy sigh, she enters, David thinks, the beginnings of a fit of laughter, and looks again in the coming wind's direction, then back at him. She is now undoubtedly laughing at David, wiping her face and sending an arm down to her hip to support the abandonment of a defeated belief, presumably a belief in him.

In a stupendous rush, David feels all sensations of embodiment in the water (itself near insensibly body-temperature), foremost the feeling of his lungs and throat and their alarming state of being drowned full with water, and also of his heart being stopped, which together form a stone of anxiety so complete in its weight and density — coextensive with a lifeless body, he understands — that it is thankfully well beyond mere pain or suffering and into some region without feeling at all, except one singular feeling of feeling's absence: all-encompassingly dour, this.

His eyes inexplicably do dart under his own motor control now and effect his vision, which gives him a more imperfect view of Fox. But she is there at an angle, laughing on a highly escalated plane of intensity at him now, in an all-effacingly violent and ridiculing and cursing way. She gesturally wales at him in a state almost simian. At a pinnacle she is villainous when David sees the immense wall of water pass over her: her head and neck are thrown seemingly far ahead of the rest of her (though her Mask was distinctly blown off, he yet saw nothing of her face) in a

steel white rushing replaced in one second by her total absence and the brute presence of an infinity of water above him: from his position, simple total darkness: formlessness: void.