

City of Masks

by Marc Lowe

1.

There is something in the air. It makes people sick, makes them want to die. They cannot inhale too deeply for fear that it will turn them mad. The people wear masks, white masks over their noses and mouths, covering up the orifices in their faces so as to keep the demons out. They walk about the city like this, their visages hidden, only their dark brown eyes and black hair left to meekly define themselves. They are like ghosts, seemingly alive yet already dead. Can this really be called living? Is this really life?

2.

They avoid looking at or brushing up against another, as if to do so would mean certain death, would shatter the other's fragile body into fragments. Those eyes that do not look are ringed in purple-black, reddened, dead. Hollow eyes, glazed over, not focused on anything at all. As they wander about, fearing the air they breathe, they forget that they are human, forget that they are made of flesh and blood and bone. They might as well be floating five feet above the floor, might as well be lying in a cold grave, stiff as a board.

3.

This is the City of Masks. No one dares to step outside without first covering up their mouths. They do not speak, do not communicate except through vague, slight gestures. They only nod or bow slightly to express something, but mostly they just walk, walk anywhere, no apparent goal in sight, no particular direction in which to head. Watching them is like watching zombies on a movie screen, like watching comatose patients try to move around. Without their masks, it is doubtful they'd be able to do anything at all.

4.

What separates the masked people from myself is this: they are unaware, whereas I see it all clearly. It is true that I, too, am afraid to breathe the air. It is true that I, too, wear a white mask over my nose and mouth. And it would not be false to say that I do not look at my fellow masked men, or that I avoid brushing up against them, touching any part of their bodies for fear that something bad might happen? Yet I — I am awake, I am cognizant, I can report on the situation with a clear mind. I am unique! I am alive!!

5.

Please listen to my voice. Do you hear my words through this veil, this weathered white wall? Can't you detect my individuality, my sui generis thoughts? Can't you see that I am an individual, unlike the rest?! Please say something. Please look at me. Please... Ah, but you too are wearing a white mask, you too are afraid to inhale the elements, you too cannot speak, look, share your hopes and fears, you too are, dare I say it? Dead.

6.

We dwell in the City of Masks, where no one gets out or stays in alive. Not even us.

