

Sabrina La Mantia, “The Devil You Know”

The Magician

A familiar skyline slowly materializes
 suspended high above a solid wall of fog
 hovering
 my eyes trace the buildings
 a city under siege
 home.

This is it.

The last show of this sold out tour, night after night
 the doors open at six and already at three there’s a line of people, new and old wrapping the
 building.
 Any more and we’d be in the arena
 headlining.
 So many new faces this time
 fresh, bright eyes framed by halloween black.
 Our album sold over half a million
 so it’s no surprise, yet every time I see the line of people
 that pay to see me break down on stage;
 it’s alchemical.

Inside and out I’ll see them
 pause and pose for posterity with all the visages,
 shocked they saw me before the show
 and not just at the merch table, flush with postcoital glow.
 I won’t change even though they’re already fans,
 it’s my job to make them feel at home
 to thank them for coming to my show.

This is for them as much as it’s for me.
 Harsh lights obscuring
 faces, pinched and sweating
 screaming.
 Call and response just like at church,
 let the sermon begin.

□

Too much is too much, even of a good thing
 hours spent on the road fall away
 years lost to the streets
 I'd rather be taken slow
 to savour every second that's mine.

A presence, like memory brushes the edge of my mind
 pale light reflected in my rear view mirror,
 the city is far from here
 but it follows me home.

The early sun glances off the dirty windows
 reflecting dew covered asphalt
 obscuring faint and weathered lines
 not touched up in years,
 but every car is perfectly parked in between each space
 except for mine.

One window as dirty as the others was lit.
 My bones creak up each stair to delay
 the inevitable,
 there's nothing like the smell of ammonia to prepare the face,
 I can already smell the blood.

We were expecting
 the same as the last and every time before, this is
 my curse. I can create so much
 except life.

I step through the threshold - uninvited - but it's mine
 blood; lots of blood.
 My steps carry me into the bathroom to find
 its source a figure, slumped on the toilet, face pressed against the wall.
 The room is a silent film in vivid colour a miscarriage,
 I see
 a sudden start, rapid blinking followed by a long stare.
 We're vultures with crooked teeth enjoying our private wake, she's aware
 and lets loose with a soft sigh: "I fell...up the stairs."

□

Nothing compares to walking through the streets in disguise
 absolutely nothing can rival the glory
 and freedom of swapping hair.
 Up becomes down, a signifier
 stripped raw blending in a throng of people,

a leather jacket with legs
suddenly, I can walk among them
regardless of the tattoos on my hands.

Painting the city green with broad strokes
the afternoon sun dances in the ravine
drawing people to come and see it
the brightest green, because there's concrete everywhere else.
I come here to remember all the places I've slept rough
the safety and freedom to live under a bridge,
a lifetime ago now
but manic episodes of nostalgia
trigger an awful lot.

There's a special place in my heart for the time spent
tucked away inside a tent, warmed by the sun and kept tightly
by the corner of this ravine.
A tinker's camp, rainbow tents now bleached with age and scattered with refuse
meet my eye with the sharp snap of a needle underfoot.
Rustling the ragged flaps
a child emerges, young not even thirteen
our eyes connect
here comes the panic, palpable, on display.

The warm nostalgia dissipates with startling clarity
I remember that blurry age spent wasting in this ravine,
searching for relief in this very spot.
The face changes
a subtle, slight relaxing around the eyes
incredulous recognition, wearing one of my shirts
ripped and fake, but hell
"Here's fifty bucks kid. Get the fuck out of this city."

□

Half a million.
That's how many records I sold:
half a fucking million.
Food stamps litter the dashboard of my noisy old van
huffing its way down the the quiet street.
Half. A. Fucking. Million.

It's the trade off for signing with a record label
Asmodeus offers a better bargain,
endless tours booked and promoted
magazines with my face plastered on the front.

I used to think I'd happily die on the road.

But milestone after milestone passed
 Warped Tour, Reading, Download, Soundwave
 years of non-stop touring, we played them all
 and my drummer still lives with my bassist
 sleeping on fucking the couch.
 I love what I do
 it's necessary; I feel too much
 this is the only way to find some peace
 retreating to my crypt, there I keep
 each of the four elements contained:
 fire, water, earth, and air
 the tools used to turn water into wine
 with a blood red cloak and a view from down below to the open sky.

Alone, I'll create again the only way I can
 in the dark, ripping these thoughts from my breast
 compressing the waves; I'll play each part
 recorded in one take.

All those years wasted searching for the solution,
 the method by which lead becomes gold
 missing in what plain sight
 the power to transcend that follows
 subsuming others, consuming, taking from within.
 Immortality is attainable
 to become gold
 even for a moment
 recorded becomes eternity.
 So I've been told.

□

The lights flare and for a second
 everyone can see the people around them, faces in vivid detail
 breathing heavily
 grim, ecstatic
 sharing fluids to avoid passing out.

I see their faces too
 and they mine.
 Boundaries lose their sharpness
 one body blending into the next,
 even mine.
 Sometimes I forget that line

the demarcation to signify
 another soul when they've already consumed
 my lyrics, my passions, my many lives,
 I see myself reflected in the light of their eyes.

As above and so below
 before and after the show,
 I see myself scantily clad, pointed heels and alluring face
 dark makeup in perfect place.
 Looking to buy a shirt
 my eyes speak a different tongue
 and like two opposite charges attract.
 Clinging together adrift, swiftly
 tossed high on rotting timbers in a black sea
 counting the seconds before the next sharp wave
 crashes, breaks our grip
 as magnets can so easily flip.
 Repelled we cling no more
 my spirit restored; whole, whole once more.

Depraved, longing to be complete
 the feeling used to last for weeks.
 It depends how buried, how deep I am
 to transcend time and culminate
 in ten lovely digits; I collect myself behind venues but always remember
 there's a lot of trash in back alleys.

□

Dawn in the graveyard near my crypt feeds my soul
 relishing the silence, surrendering control
 I have always been a creature of the night
 black hair pale skin, but my golden eyes could not give up the sun
 left behind to pursue my dark art
 a promise kept and vain attempt to travel the world,
 to find out exactly what it tastes like.

Though it must be said, my art is tainted
 I don't own any of it
 heart and soul bare to world,
 shrieking every night. Suffocating under this weight
 none of it is mine,
 save for that shard trapped behind another's eyes
 calling, calling to become the whole.

Alone, surrounded by strangers
 that spectral knowledge envelopes.
 Alone, surrounded by ghosts
 I breathe deeply of their life and of their silence,
 revealing the path ahead;
 revelling.

It won't be the fucking same.

□

The Devil

Another rotation around the sun
 three decades come and gone.
 Let's celebrate with some two-bite brownies
 the entire pack gone in two bites,
 chain smoking the same cigarettes in different cities
 except now everything is mine.
 Manifesting the tour, the merch, the label. Mine.
 Each night the lights grow dim, the crowd roars and chants my name
 every time that moment creates me
 defines me
 one thousand times more than any disembodied voice
 moaning my name; they were already mine.
 I've banished my ghosts.

Haunted no more. Voiceless houses and filthy streets
 reflect the empty echo of quickened steps. Hurrying forward
 bathed in silver, the moon doesn't discriminate
 even against a graveyard tryst.
 But still, I hate silver.

A private empire, the byproduct of these trysts
 found many pieces of myself scattered
 in every city across the globe,
 even at home.
 At first I thought it was for merch or afterparty access
 a means to an end, but it's me.
 I've always longed for myself
 and these days, I'm oh so bloody needy.
 I need to hear myself repeat the lies,
 these motions we go through
 while I diligently continue collecting myself,
 piece by piece by piece, contrary to the disbelief
 every word I wrote I fucking meant.
 Every one.

□

A full moon reflected familiar glass
 forcing a recollection of the contrasting darkness.
 The night was empty the last time I was here
 but now, it is blood red.
 The kind usually seen at the end of September
 a harvest moon in April.
 This can't be good.

A well worn mat hides a shiny key.
 I know the way and feel my phone vibrate as the door clicks open
 but there is time for that later, now time is short.

The interior is bathed in red light.
 Too many empty windows with large panes let everything in.
 Tall, straight stairs creak as I make my way towards a single door illuminated
 from within. Gently, fingers rest on the elongated handle
 an antique. How long since I was last here?
 Forever and a lifetime are just a blink away,
 while I long to stay.
 A soft presence and the shadow of a fluffy tail curling around my leg
 purring loudly, she will not be refused. I offer up the desired affection
 it's bad luck to refuse a cat, trust me I believe that.

Satisfied
 the laminate creaks as she returns to sleep in the shadows.
 Returning my attention to the door, it opens with a will and reveals
 a beautiful form lying on a double bed, scrolling on a mobile, ethereal.
 The face turns and locks eyes with mine, a familiar warmth wells up inside
 swelling, longing for the moment that disembogues and reunites
 scattered pieces of myself.
 Soon the smell of iron wafts, filling the room
 with confusion and contractions, bloody contractions.
 Not now. Not again.
 Remaining as long as possible, I inevitably pass back into the crimson night
 unsatisfied.

□

The dark side of collecting ten perfect digits
 requires the exchange of my own.
 Very quickly I become a crutch,
 a self-help line; their mentor for AA
 except that I am their higher power, their raison d'être.

It's hard work. They speak of killing themselves every day,
 but they live for me. They live through me. Through the little piece of my soul
 stolen, continuing to elude my grasp.
 I am legion, an army of lost
 trying to feel something and belong, no matter how brief.
 This subculture is dying,
 but what's left is mine.

The other day I saw them: naive with big black Xs on their hands
 braces on their teeth, they stayed late even though it was Sunday.
 One of them brought in a fucking rock from a gypsy store
 carried it around all night and then forgot it
 without even buying a shirt.

What a fucking joke
 but they're the future I wrap my arms around tightly and smile
 my crooked smile, almost a grimace, enhanced by long streaks of black.
 One of them - gangly, muscular, and hopeful - catches my eye
 but even in the harsh light those eyes reflect nothing, as though I am but a vampire,
 like all the other eyes. Spread so thin
 am I legion?

Haunted by flat and greedy eyes I hurry on,
 impatient and seething
 movement towards the next horizon.

□

A moment of weakness
 a timid message lights up the cold phone screen
 "What do you think I should do?"
 "Quit."
 The response before I can stop it
 while my eyes roll, spinning backwards
 rattling in their sockets.

No one should stay in a job they hate.
 Add it to the list of complaints:
 their body
 their weight
 not good enough
 not pretty enough
 not a suicide girl
 without doing anything about it.

Fucking do something.

There is nothing to reclaim here
 and yet I know the game, every savoured response
 desperately waiting for the next.
 It's infectious to give this way, to give hope itself.
 One day I'll crack and snap straight in half.

Ignoring the response, I continue my ennui.
 Endless scrolling through vibrant blue
 connecting the empire end to end, from soul to soul.
 Languishing.

Lately, they do it all
 street teams, merch, marketing
 some of it is paid, most of it is free
 and they beg to do it.
 To show me their worth, their brilliance
 by doing everything they can to make my life easier.
 It's no surprise I'd want to see myself succeed.
 I contain multitudes, my 20 lovers and I,
 we might be a cult.

□

The fey phone won't stop tonight, one right after another
 "Does this make me look fat?"
 "Should I paint my room black?"
 "What did you think of my friend?"
 "Are my eyes too wide?"
 "Can my friend get on the guest-list?"
 "What do you think of the colour green?"
 "I am getting another degree to avoid working. You're right."
 "Does silence mean yes?"
 "I don't look like the others... Are you mad?"
 "Are you mad at me?"
 "U mad???"

Of course I'm mad at all of this. At all of this fucking nonsense.
 I can't remember the last time I recovered a piece of myself.
 No matter the extent of my devotion, these last few continue to elude my clutching hands.

A deep, slow breath
 my eyes wander along the throne set up
 inside the warehouse.
 Some people work printing shirts
 sweating.

There's a goblet waiting to be filled
to be stained once more,
handcuffs attached by chains to the base; two pairs.
I'm the devil you know.

□

Blood begets blood.
The exquisite link between pleasure and pain
is universal. A language written deep into the marrow of our bones.
I breathe deeply, savouring
but it's gone within the hour like the welt left from my whip
impotent. Like the blood that will result
the price paid to reclaim what remains.
Once a common veneer, now the lived reality of a select few.
I will have them back no matter how elaborate the method
or before which dark god I must lay myself prostrate.
I will recover them.

More timid messages shake my phone, drawing my eye.
These monologues are growing on me, a propagating fungus.
Was I this persistent in another life? Is it in the blood?

“You know we met last week? I was there last Sunday. You took a photo with my friend and I.
She said she knew you, but I called that bluff. You met two strangers that night. We realized I
was cut out of the photo, but I knew better than to ask you again. I've never felt so drawn in to
someone so intense. I forgot my crystals inside and went in after everyone had left to get it. The
security remembered. You were still so angry... why?”

Does it matter?

Reasons are all the fucking same.

□

The Hanged Man

I can see the blue light
behind my sealed eyes
Is this what it's like
waking up to the sun
The truth is it never went out
All night across five different time zones
the messages never stopped
An empire rushing to ruin burning
people turn so easily Distorted by envy

to become a lascivious horde with broad grasping claws lodged deep in my heart
 I never grew golden horns to repel the malevolent eyes
 and remained the flesh silver scorns
 It's a shame because the grassroots movement finally had success
 this tour was the biggest yet
 All the faces are summoned to my mind and blend
 one bleeding mass of colour with opaque eyes, vulture's eyes
 Dissolved and just like that
 my heart is made of stone
 The final few pieces plucked out from the world
 whole once more
 Time to head west Time to go home
 The light fades the vibrating ceases
 and still my eyes remain sealed

□

There would be the usual price to become whole
 as each piece simultaneously returned
 an impossible coincidence
 another red moon to synch the cycles of the horde
 I used to think it was a physical reaction
 A poison carried in my blood that corrodes theirs
 with the promise of hope
 of life
 and so lost creates the endless cycle
 An eye for an eye even if it's their own
 weaponized Suffering desperately
 a staged suicide with the blame to be laid at my feet
 Of course I had nothing to do with it
 Of course
 They are out for my blood
 trying to steal back what they lost
 but it was never theirs and this wonton waste
 confirms the presence of another poison more lethal and consuming
 Perhaps the cryptic message jests
 in love with my old century and obsessed with the past games we've played
 But the cruel moon shimmers and darkens with crimson light
 and like a nightmare falling down straight through the ground
 the truth is revealed to me with a soft crunch
 as a bat drops dead into the yard below
 leaving no streak on my window

□

“I really need your help.”

“It’s my friend.”

“The one who knows you?”

“She told me you told her to kill herself and to do it for you on a void moon?”

“What the hell!”

“What does that even mean?”

The separate lines roll off the screen one by one

What is that

I don’t know either and sigh as a warm sensation tingling

creeps throughout my body

A new experience surrounded by familiar piles of unsold shirts

The goblet tossed aside

dented

I read each message out loud

They are no longer timid

Two pairs of eyes watch mine

staring at my mouth utter each line

candles flicker in the dark room

twitching with every breath

Picking up speed the screen flashes

a crescendo of exclamations rising to a peak viciously

hurling the the phone against the wall

shattering glass and

bliss

□

Upside down the world is a very different place

on a ledge or even on a bed

Blood rushing suspended in time

upside down I do know

The void moon is tonight

What an odd request

I would never suggest

What purpose would a sacrifice on a void moon serve

Perhaps in person exquisite

but little deaths were never so dramatic

Once a god fearing people

now everyone has a set of tarot cards

crystals herbs and coloured candles

The moon is potent but not for me

An empty sky stares back through the filmy window

There’s still glass on the floor

□

Moonlight filters through bathing the throne in silver
 shuddering it's crescent form illuminating
 the warehouse
 My chains are strewn across the barren floor
 sparkling sharply with shimmering crystal shards
 Abandoning my lair I brave the light directly
 it's much worse in the open following each dogged step
 illuminating torn newspapers lying in gutters
 All sorts of tabloid stories decorate the pages
 so many pictures of wild eyes
 My eyes
 Everyone thinks they know what I did
 my immediate dissolution was suspicious
 but the police saw messages that weren't from me
 Every story needs a monster
 Funny enough it was actually my friend with the rock
 who figured out what happened
 who hacked into the victim's accounts and connected the dots
 all days too late

□

A familiar route takes me through the graveyard
 that leads to my crypt Perhaps now is the time to stop calling it that The media would riot
 To my studio I sigh pausing by a random grave
 slice a long shallow cut across my hand and watch my blood spill
 needlessly
 I once went to protests and screamed on the street
 to protest police brutality but nothing ever changed
 despite the promises from indecisive demigods
 There was blood there too
 That smell I'll never forget mixed with metal and smoke
 and all the screaming faces indiscriminate
 Placing my hand flat against the stone I continue to watch the progression
 It's cathartic
 A tantalizing reminder of what was for those who sleep
 Only scratches remain of the abandoned script
 with my luck it was probably a baby's grave
 stillborn
 Who fucking knows
 Things turned out badly
 I grew a heart of stone but even stone can soften
 and smooth with time until the most ardent archeologist can no longer decipher the scars
 My phone vibrates gently with space and intention

I saw myself reflected in fresh eyes
infectious golden light that warms and binds
grinding even diamonds to dust

“You never thanked me you know. I still think you’re really fucked up and now I probably am.”

But that’s wrong too It’s just
we’re both the fucking same

◁