

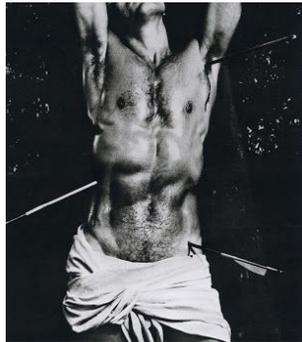
# REBIRTH OF A MASK

Isabel Rodriguez  
A reflection.

Simply put.



Interior, a mostly empty, decaying room. Wallpaper peels, the wood of the floor threatens to cave in. In the center, an androgynous individual, limp in a chair. They are the Protagonist.



Photographs on the back wall, shelves of votive candles, icons, mementos, trash, junk, a record spinning on the runout groove since God knows when.

Dressed in a long black dress, black boots, holding a spiked flail in the limp arm to their right, cradling a cheap Valentine's plush to their chest with their left arm. Violently delicate. Reluctant to fight, craving tenderness.

A black, faux leather sack over their head, no eyes or mouth, fitted at the neck with a zipper running down the back. Hear nothing, see nothing, say nothing.



Three large framed photos on the wall in front of them above a sealed door, shot like the portraits of North Korean leaders, though fully lacking the politics that come with.

First image, left hand side. A girl of about 10, uniformed, smiling before a soft blue backdrop. This child does not know (or at least fully grasp) terror, this will not stay that way. Her eyes have been blurred out.

Second image, center, an individual of unknown gender, about 17. Most of their face is covered in gauze but their eyes indicate a half-hearted attempt at joy. They don't know these are the last few years of normalcy they have, they won't believe you if you tell them. They don't care.

Third image is faceless, poised, perfect. Could be a woman, about 20 but it's not certain. Faceless. Does this individual exist? Are they here? Were they here?

Portrait of a girl, portrait of someone, portrait.



All three catch on fire, stemming first from the third blank face. The room burns, the flames all-consuming, hungry and vicious.

As the room burns, as the walls crumble and the ceiling vanishes, the Protagonist stands alone in the middle of a vast field, completely alone.



They discard their items to the side and reach for the zipper, pulling it down past the mask, down their back, unraveling. As they slough off the body, the mask...

Nothing, nobody where they just stood, except a black pile of cloth.

The Protagonist is still here, and here they will stay.