



POETRY COMPETITION 2021

MASKS

26 schools
114 poets
18 judging panels
2 sections
8 winning poems
1 theme 'Masks'

And one overall judge, OIB Cambridge Inspector, Dr Celia O'Donovan

The theme of masks unsurprisingly triggered a number of very different individual responses. It has been, as always, a difficult task to select the winning poems. The poems in the final shortlist were of a high quality and the young poets demonstrated considerable maturity in their use of language, metaphor, and reference. The winning poems stand out because of their relevance to the theme, their emotional impact and the way in which they take the reader on a journey of the imagination. It has been a very enjoyable and moving experience reading the poems and it is clear that the last year has given young people a real opportunity to reflect on life, love and literature.

Celia O'Donovan

Results 'Senior' competition

Première / Terminale

Winning poems

First place: 'If my mind was a ballroom', Stephanie Reed, EIB Etoile, Paris.

Second place: 'Muses' Masks', Jackie Slipper, CSI Lycée internationale Europole, Grenoble.

Third place: 'Masks', Carlotta Barone-MacDonald, Cité Scolaire Camille Sée, Paris.

Fourth place: 'Canvas', Clémence Rebora, Lycée International de Saint Germain en Laye.

Finalists

'Picture-Perfect', Salomé Manach, Lycée International Montebello, Lille.

'Masks Off', Salomé Loiseau, Lycée Salvador Allende, Hérouville-Saint-Clair

'Five Four' Maya Cavet Bette, Lycée Georges Duby, Aix-en-Provence.

'Lost Faces', Sol Mingo, CSI Lycée internationale Europole, Grenoble.

'Blind Eye', Aurélie Coop, Cité Scolaire Camille Sée, Paris.

Results 'Junior' competition

Troisième / Seconde

Winning poems

First place: 'My Mask is My Battle', Emma Goffinet, Section Internationale, La Celle St Cloud

Second place: 'Halloween Masks', Veronika Cameron, Cité Scolaire Camille Sée, Paris.

Third place: 'Earful', Nicolas Kosterev, Collège et Lycée Saint Joseph, Le Havre

Fourth place: 'The World Is A Masquerade', Evane Rouvière, Lycée International Charles de Gaulle, Dijon

Finalists

'The Knight', Amélie Bhuiyan, Lycée Français International de Bangkok, Bangkok.

'The Hidden Colours', Chloe Soualle, Cité Scolaire Internationale, Lyon

'Now You See Me', Julie Schnoebelen, Cité Scolaire Camille Sée, Paris.

'Covered', James Rebiscoul, Lycée Notre Dame du Grandchamp, Versailles.

'Identity', Colm Daly, Lycée Français Jean Monnet, Brussels.

If my mind was a ballroom
To Mama and Papa

There would be many a word,
Draped in cerulean velvet and crème duchesse satin
Tangoing across moonlight padded floor, undeterred.
They spell out : your truth is a sin.

There would be many a sound
To which *him* and *her* go about their usual to and fro
Like the clarinette playing and the soprano singing,
Singing the song of my lies.

There would be many a wish,
Undisclosed, unmentioned, unstated, untold
Like how I imagine two brides veils instead of just one
How I wish this secret undone.

There would be many a gift,
How I would like to give you one too, a bouquet of words maybe
Each flower a truth. But all I have are petals
Misspelt, and my love.

If my mind was a ballroom,
It would be trapped in a masquerade
Of unsayable, unspeakable, unmaskable words.
I hope you won't throw the flowers away.

Muses' Masks

Under the gaze of the scarlet seats,
and the flare of the golden orbs,
two roles face each other, about to
break the eager silence of the stage.

Curtains of cloth cascade over
one's shoulders, ivy laced into her hair,
her trumpet lifted to ivory lips:
the joyous, the flourishing.

Crowned with a wreath of vines and grapes,
the other raises her marble club,
where carved within its surface:
forsan miseros tragicum sequentur.

One wears Thalia; the other Melpomene.

The start of a tale, a fantasy.
Here, in the world where masks do not
shield or conceal, but enchant,
and break the bounds of your life.

Masks

Thespis'
wagon rolls
down the hill,
A vehicle of deception.

I browse the playbill,
anticipating Intermission.

Behind the scenes,
I browse through the racks of Sephora.
A safe haven, where flaws are
Forbidden by law,
Not forgiven -

Everything is the best
in the best
of possible worlds.

Lancôme, Chanel, And Snap!
A candid shot. No "filter".
A tragic subterfuge.
A mugshot up on the news.
No place to hide, nor disguise.
A race to uncover identities,
To erase discrepancies,
Deceptive tendencies.

Thespis' wagon rolls down the hill,
A trolley gone off track, out for the kill.
A play, a plague,
A weapon of mask(less) destruction.

Behind the scenes lay
A myriad, the masses,
And I stay,
Melted among masked middle classes.

'Canvas'

What is growing up about? Someone said to me they could draw their feelings.
In my head I asked how honesty tasted on their brush.
My friend asked me how loneliness could be the only friend that clings
In my head I asked what heat kept warmer than its flush.
You hide until you realise everyone else is not okay

Poems turn pain into art, I heard.
Generations of teenagers hide theirs because only sharing it with itself makes you the poem.
A mask is only a mask until it's a metaphor, I suppose.
Disguising pain as pretty words and alliteration heals as much as it condemns.

And maybe that is what growing up is.
Stopping to believe that your pain shapes you,
And realising pain does not belong to you.
That the hurt is neither a stain on your canvas or the central image,
It is a layer that eventually has to be drawn over.

Growing up is realising there's actually a thousand ways to hide and a lot of them are obvious.
Noticing them in others, in their words, the way they draw their feelings or the way their poems
taste on your own pen.
Growing up is admitting you will not always want to be a page or a canvas.
And knowing there is art in putting down your mask.

Picture-perfect

The voice whispered too loudly.

It spoke all night, didn't even pause to let you breathe.

In it you heard all that is unworthy and sad, that is dark and screams your name.

You closed your eyes, retreated into another part of yourself,

Ball of limbs and tears until the morning came.

Still, the air had thickened and left a mark : an odd wrinkle on your cheek.

You laugh and say : I'm growing old, and put back your sunglasses on your eyes.

The universe turns against you every day, insidiously and yet so violently :

The rain silently batters your skin and the wind rocks you against the walls.

It leaves a mark on your ribs and inside, deeper.

I used to see it in your eyes, but now I only see the light of the fire we lighted to laugh around.

For you sewed yourself a mask, with shreds of sun,

Decorated it with dried flowers and the buzz of bees (they sting you when no one's near)

You laugh louder than you used to, at least no one noticed.

You force daffodils into your dress, and golden sparks in your faded hair.

The mask tastes like sweet and grass, summer or maybe late spring nights

Spent dancing in a field.

It leaves a warm spot on your cheek.

It's everything that you're not,

It's all so foreign to you.

Masks off

“Masks off”, he says

As fear slithers down my spine,

Standing statue, I stay

Unable to draw the line

Tick. Tock.

Time passes and I become made of ice.

Time passes and this is still too high a price.

Tick. Tock.

Slowly, he silently

Slides towards me

Silky fingertips on my skin

Whispering sweet threatening nothings.

I see hell in his eyes.

His burning fingers on my icy body.

His voice, sinful and scary.

It's me he tries to demonize.

Breathless, I brutally awake.

Sweat on my forehead, Fahrenheit 451 in my bones,

The burning sheets make me choke.

But thankfully, my only company is the midnight moon.

FIVE FOUR

Who are you?

The words come, filtered through blue
material we're now accustomed to -
other hues too, however. You pick, you choose.
Your eyes *will* fog, your teeth *will* clench. More than they already do.
Mine did. My knees were stuck, eyes were glued to you.

Red says fire. Uncontained. But, lift the fabric (your finger's all it takes)
to reveal my meek blue. Seep through:
Cocoon at noon, but, breaks out as soon
as midnight strikes. A true-blue way to speak with you. You let me speak with myself, too.

And it straps tighter, and it straps tighter.
As in a dream, to bite a sweet cornflake is to bite cardboard and
there's not much explaining to do.
I unbuttoned my collar, called her. You made my gums ache, you.

And now under these masks I discreetly mouth the sax
melodies from Desmond's "Feeling Blue" -
listen. My motionless lake has been rippled.
Listen. I can *feel* you.
And still I ask, and still I ask,

You are who?

Lost Faces

Masked marauders raid the night,

Searching-

Searching-

For their faces.

For they have lost, four years before,

Their features, robbed by unknown creatures.

In their quest for their identity they fashioned from the world

A mask of sorts, with scavenged parts

To replace their unfound souls.

From the creek below the meadow they picked

Irises to fill their eyes

And for their fluttering lashes they caught

A butterfly's glass-stained flitting wings.

Searching an ancient professor's dusty collections

The marauders looked amongst the countless shelves, and cautiously selected their knows.

Pleading to Zephyr they were gifted

A breath, to voice their views and sing their sorrows.

But alas, as the masks approached their final form

It was Death who gave his ending touch

Hollowing their forms forevermore.

Blind Eye

Hidden in the shadows, pining,
Burning for the last fatal flight:
A moth awaits the all-knowing sight

That the high smirking Sun deprives.
Forced to watch as his twins do twirl,
Red and blue, inequivalent dance.

The darkness shunned for sister bright,
It has wings but cannot take flight,
Unfortunate consequence of light.

Unwanted yet ever present,
Fate's arbitrary messenger,
It waits for the Star to be chased away.

For you cannot lie to the moon
She will tear the light away, strip
It of fantasy. The milk-eyed witch:

Carrier of the deepest truths,
Bridge to the world behind the eye,
Where the midnight's death-head masked riders pass.

For not all that glitters is gold.
Truth forgotten: a man will fall
Each time a butterfly flaps its wings.

Death works in mysterious ways,
Dread not the still, keeper of souls:
Feared omen, guardian of the home.

My Mask is My Battle

Darkness. Silence. The lyres explode.

The curtain rises. Act One, Scene One.

My dry lips struggle to move, paralysed by fear.

I feel my sweat dripping down my mask.

It is a wooden mask of Agamemnon.

His face is horror, as if struck by lightning:

His jaw is dropped to the floor, his almond eyes are agape,

His meticulously carved wrinkles exaggerate his fright.

A first *faux pas*... My mask attempts to slip away.

I shall - I need to keep my balance.

If the mask falls, I fall, drowning in an ocean of insults.

I am a proud Athenian actress, forbidden from her passion

And my mask is my battle.

I shall thus disguise my pain from this pathetic persecution,

And keep my head up high for the new generation of women who will fight for their rights

The bottled-up anger starts to seethe.

I look deeply into the audience and shriek “έγω ,Αγαμέμνων”*

*” I, Agamemnon” in ancient Greek

Halloween Masks

I.

I always liked Halloween.
Sweet strawberry jam smeared on my lips,
my flushed face sticky from candy and cream.
We pretended, but we knew we were pretending.
Not fantasy or fiction, but our own reality.
It didn't matter that my uncertain fingers couldn't tie knots yet
And that my cheap mask fell off all the time. Muddy face paint.
Princesses rolling in the dirt, queens and witches holding hands.
We played catch with paper crowns that we flung in the sky
Straining our necks to watch them fly.

The only thing I truly feared on Halloween,
among the crimson stains of ketchup blood, were the clowns
and their masks of paint, the thick-mouthed smiles on their red lips.
It was sickly, unnatural happiness, a human laugh from a non-human face.
Any true emotion was concealed under a pretence, a lie.
Whenever I saw a clown I started to cry.

II.

People say Halloween is for children, but I don't think we ever stopped pretending.
Sour red lipstick. Perfect makeup. I've learned to tie knots so well
that people see my mask more than my face. That my mask has almost become my face.
I feel like a witch, while others seem like queens.

And whenever I see a clown, I still want to cry.
Only now, I wipe away the tears and smile.

Earful

“We are fed up!” declared the ears.

“We have been dutiful for years!

We’ve carried glasses and earrings,

Earbuds, all sorts of useful things.

But this is just a dreadful task –

Why do you have to wear a mask?”

Yes, with the ears I must agree:

I’d also like them to break free.

The tiresome synthetic fabric

Makes me feel sad and pathetic.

And when I finally go to bed

Everything’s jumbled in my head:

Colourful masks Venetian-made

And our school’s boring masquerade,

Bandit masks on birds and raccoons,

Surgeons saluted with balloons.

This new reality is grim,

But soon we’ll see the smiles beam!

I really can’t wait for the day

That I can throw my mask away!

The world is a masquerade.

The world is a masquerade
Full of devils playing charades.
Sweet lips speaking sugar-coated lies,
Knives planted in backs of so called allies.
It's hurt or be hurt,
With death we flirt.
Some hide behind their laughs,
Their true self in photographs,
And a thousand cries,
Only shown to the moon's caring eyes.
Some are ashamed of the void
They carry inside because they've been destroyed
By a pretty mask.
Why? you may ask,
They only wanted a toy to play with.
Humanity is now but a myth.
We wear masks like paper-thin bulletproof vests,
Our pained souls tainted by Life's blade.
The world is a masquerade,
A competition of who'll pretend best.

THE KNIGHT

I walk into the hospital,
Greeted by a familiar scene
I hear soft murmurs and a snuffle
The room disinfected, sterile, clean.

Shrugging off my coat, I put on my scrubs
The stifling tightness of my mask,
The sharp snap of latex gloves
The nurses go to battle, no questions asked.

Let me present the first brigade
Overworked and overburdened,
Understaffed and underpaid
Always chivalrous and determined!

When will the battle ever end?
When will the virus be defeated?
When will the wounds heal and mend?
When will the patients be cured, treated?

The Hidden Colours

I know a city
In a sun-warmed land
Where life is merry
Where troubles we mend

And once a year, every year
Come the costumes, the laughs loud and clear
There is a king that crowns this land
Of colorful costumes and glitter like sand

The new face they put on, all 'till the end
Through happiness and anger, as the world still stands
A dazzling row of joy, two sparkling eyes of stars
Bright sunny yellow cheeks, sparkles to hide the scars.

A silent thunder, the sad blue they're seeking
Their diamond tears running and twinkling.
The blood beneath the sun
The storm that has begun.

No one sees the real smile, no one sees the real pain.
They only see the weak, fake colors that remain.
A white canvas painted, brought to covers the tears
And that'll hang on the wall, through all the coming years

Now You See Me

Now you see,
But do you really?
Tell me, does the sky above me
Translate my treacherous thoughts?
Or does my smile substitute my sadness,
silently sinking inside?
What you may perceive beyond the horizon
Is my happiness hovering high,
unreachable
Yet doomed with dullness and cursed with cries,
Masked by a merciless disguise
Just like a candle shining bright but weeping wax,
Just like a snowman softly melting
Performing my life, the uniform I wear,
Like wallpaper pasted to my skin.

A little light inside me glows.
Criticised, he never shows.
He chews my sinews and beats my bones,
hollering in undertones
Maniacally dancing in his cell,
Like a demented soul in hell,
squeezing between iron bars,
Reaching out to touch the stars.

Covered

Covered,

Like the leaves on the October ground

Like the bark on the old tree.

Hidden,

From the smiles, the sound of life, the bursts of laughter,

The glitter in the eyes.

I am cleansed soul and body, I disappear in the insane mass

Of the sanitary.

I am no more to be seen,

A meteor that flies off trying to find a path across infinity.

I am hidden in myself, like all the artists in this world

That leave us and dream.

But can I even dream when I cannot think?

When an oblivious theme lays a screen over my mind?

A film over my face,

I forgot how to kiss, I forgot how to love,

I can only embrace the youthful desire

For today to leave

And tomorrow to thrive.

IDENTITY

Hiding in the shadows,

The mask concealed me.

Identity and anonymity, blending together, intertwined.

Lined with doubt, interrogating, I wanted answers.

This crippling need turbulently swelling,

Who am I? *What* am I?

Venturing into a safe deep inside,

Away from the perils of deceit and lies,

I stop, what I want at the tip of my fingers.

Will this satisfy me, the insatiable thirst for solutions quenched?

Or will I never be free, bound here by my own self, by the shackles and chains of guilt and shame?

By my memory, lethally selective, leaving my conscience to castigate me?

Impatient, I open it swiftly:

Inside, laid out on the dark surface,

A black anchor, glistening and hefty.

Grounding me to my essence,

I float up to daylight.

Free to drift,

Free to change,

Free to breathe.

But tethered nonetheless?



Poetry Competition 2021

To all the teachers who support the competition and organise poetry competitions in their schools,

To all the young people who wrote their poems,

To everyone who took part in a judging panel,

To all the teachers who said encouraging things about the competition,

To ASIBA for funding the prizes,

To Dr Celia O'Donovan,

Thank you!

Olive Kavanagh

Lycée International Montebello, Lille.