

Written by Viyaan Baranwal:

'THIS MASK'

Every day, I wear a mask.
An invisible mask.
One manufactured by the thoughts I suppress.

It's a part of me now.

This mask
is my second skin.
It is the dam
Preventing the bursting of my
Emotions inside.

It's protection.
It's necessary.
It's a dark closet of pretend.

Though it isn't even
That dark now, is it?

I mean, what is a closet?
I ask.
It simply withholds
your light,
To prevent the
Darkness outwards
From entering your mind.

It's the same
With this mask.

This mask is useful,
it allows no penetration.

This mask even smiles.
It even acts.
This mask even guffaws,
when I can't.
It also has tact!
It's beautiful, really.

What else could I need?

This mask is humorous too,
It makes jokes I don't like.
It starts conversations
About things I do not know:
Like footballers whose names
I pretend to recognize.

Its function is
To protect
The silly little soul
I keep inside.

And it does just that.

Sometimes the other, weaker me,
looks into the mirror and ponders
Whether it helps me survive
Or stops me from living a free life.

That's foolish,
I know.
Why shall I feel the need to express myself?
When this mask has already granted me
Close male friends.

So what, if it feels
Like a corset,
Whose laces have no forgiveness left?

So what, if it's a tad
Sexist?

I mean, does it even matter
After all, it's just a joke, right?

So what, if my true opinions
Don't match with what the mask says?

The mask has granted me
the masculinity,
a boy like me,
so desperately needed!

So, no matter what my
stupid self says,
Fitting in does
Come at the cost
Of fitting
The mask on.

And yes, I may *think* it hurts me, but actually,

The mask does keep me happy.
The mask does keep me happy!
The mask does keep me HAPPY!

I swear it does!
If I'm lying,
then I'll gladly drop dead.

As I look into the mirror though, I wonder,
as this feeling of dread sets,
am *I* not already dead?

How much longer?
How much longer can I play pretend?

16 years I've spent,
in this mask.
Sixteen years.

Can't even remember
when it started
Maybe, when I was five?

When I was five,
I had chosen
The Hot Wheels over
The Barbies.
Not because I wanted to.
Because I had learnt the hard way
That cars were the toys,
to be played with by boys.

That was probably when
I had started playing this horrible pretence.

Since then,
I have suppressed
The child in me
Which wanted to experiment.

Since then,
I have been caught up
in the race
Of being the manliest man.

Refused to Buy Jewellery,
even though I looked
Stunning.

Refused to Write Poetry
Because it showed Vulnerability
Was too 'girlish'
For a Boy.

All, because I was afraid of
What people
Had to say.

Afraid to be
Different, Soft.

I remember having read about a 'feminine' boy
in a city not far from mine.
They beat him till his own mother
couldn't identify his face.
The comments said he asked for it.
Dressed too bright. Smiled too wide.

Since then,
I had refused
To let weakness show.

As if,
Humanity
was something to be
Ashamed of.

Now, really, really, I've been wanting
For so long.
So long spent, just
Wanting to be
Free.

Free like a bird
That flies in the sky.

Unbothered by
The other birds.

Unbothered by
The bird society.

Instead, I have trapped
Myself,
In a cage
Of my own making.

“Man is born free,
And everywhere he is in chains,”
Rousseau wrote.
God, if I had only known before,
That this quote would become my whole life.

So long,
I have justified
This Mask.

Tried to gaslight myself
into believing that
This mask is the best form of I.

It feels like,
I am
Cracking.

Like how the land
Suffers, breaks and cracks
during Drought.

Maybe this Mask
Really is
Too heavy, too rough.
Too taut, too fraught.

I wish,
I wish,
There was someone
Who could break through
This barrier I've put up.

Break through,
And see me.

But, I think,
Maybe, I realize now...
In order for
Someone to see me

It is essential
That I
See myself first.

I know that
The World,
It's Ruthless.

But maybe,
It's not that bad,
To have
A soft side?

Maybe it's
Okay to feel empathy?
To nurture?
To grow and let grow?

To maybe,
Let your feminine side
Shine through?

Because maybe,
It's the divine feminine
In all of us,
Which shall lead us to the truth!

I like Pink.
Maybe, I'll tell myself
that.

Maybe, if I'm nervous,
there's no need, at first,
To tell others?

Hell!
I like Jewellery.
I like Poetry.
I like Rom-Coms.
I like all things 'Girlish'

And now,
I'm ready, I think.

Ready to
Take off this Mask.

No, I'm no longer
Afraid
Of a beating.

I'm more afraid
to continue
Living like I am

I think,
I am Ready to
Take off this Mask.

Finally,
Ready to
be True
To Myself.

I glance
at Myself
in the Mirror.

The Mask
Feels like it's been
Ripped off

And for the first time,
in a while,
I actually smile.