

## **The Mask**

*by Maya Angelou*

We wear the mask that grins and lies.  
It shades our cheeks and hides our eyes.  
This debt we pay to human guile  
With torn and bleeding hearts...  
We smile and mouth the myriad subtleties.  
Why should the world think otherwise  
In counting all our tears and sighs.  
Nay let them only see us while  
We wear the mask.

We smile but oh my God  
Our tears to thee from tortured souls arise  
And we sing Oh Baby doll, now we sing...  
The clay is vile beneath our feet  
And long the mile  
But let the world think otherwise.  
We wear the mask.

When I think about myself  
I almost laugh myself to death.  
My life has been one great big joke!  
A dance that's walked a song that's spoke.  
I laugh so hard HA! HA! I almost choke  
When I think about myself.

Seventy years in these folks' world  
The child I works for calls me girl  
I say "HA! HA! HA! Yes ma'am!"  
For workin's sake  
I'm too proud to bend and  
Too poor to break  
So...I laugh! Until my stomach ache  
When I think about myself.  
My folks can make me split my side  
I laugh so hard, HA! HA! I nearly died  
The tales they tell sound just like lying  
They grow the fruit but eat the rind.  
Hmm huh! I laugh uhuh huh huh...  
Until I start to cry when I think about myself  
And my folks and the children.

My fathers sit on benches,  
Their flesh count every plank,  
The slats leave dents of darkness

Deep in their withered flank.  
And they gnarled like broken candles,  
All waxed and burned profound.  
They say, but sugar, it was our submission  
that made your world go round.  
There in those pleated faces  
I see the auction block  
The chains and slavery's coffles  
The whip and lash and stock.

My fathers speak in voices  
That shred my fact and sound  
They say, but sugar, it was our submission  
that made your world go round.

They laugh to conceal their crying,  
They shuffle through their dreams  
They stepped 'n fetched a country  
And wrote the blues in screams.  
I understand their meaning,  
It could an did derive  
From living on the edge of death  
They kept my race alive  
By wearing the mask! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha

### **We Wear the Mask (1895)**

By Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!