

JABARI UNMASKED

after “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar

by Nikki Grimes

Fresh out of middle school, **we**
all understand the rules: **wear**
whatever’s in, scowl on cue to convince **the**
world we’re fearless — anything to **mask**
the million insecurities **that** [5]
pockmark our skin like acne. Gone the **grins**
when we strut down the hall. We talk tough **and**
hope to God it’s enough to get us by. It’s all **lies**.
We despise the masquerade¹. **It**
may disguise our fears, but also **hides** [10]
our kind and tender hearts, **our**
agile minds, the wit that sits behind our **cheeks**
—
who’d guess that some of us are geeks **and**
nerds and poets, too? Clothed in **shades**
of chocolate skin, our color works to camouflage **our** [15]
character and promise — at least, in certain **eyes**.
One look, and we are neatly judged **this**
gang, these thugs, these dark delinquents² in **debt**

to society. Meanwhile, you fail to see that **we**
are college-bound (more than a few), prepared to **pay** [20]
attention to psychology, the sciences, the arts, **to**
thoughtfully unfurl the scrolls of **human**
history. Instead, you see a thief who uses **guile**³.

Is such unfairness what the world is filled **with**?
The evidence is seen in spirits ripped and **torn**. [25]
Still, the world needs the dreams we offer, **and**
should we leave those dreams **bleeding**
on the road, we’d shrink our own **hearts**
down to nothing, and that **we**
would regret. Better to let our anger go, and **smile**. [30]

The ignorant ignore as best you can, **and**
in the end, mask aside, freshen your **mouth**
with ferocious lines of potent poetry, **with**
metaphors that mightily reveal the **myriad**⁴
of emotions you feel – yet, in all their **subtleties**. [35]

¹ a false show

² someone who regularly performs illegal or immoral acts

³ **guile** (noun) sly or cunning intelligence; the use of clever and usually dishonest methods to achieve something

⁴ **myriad** (noun) a countless or great number

POETIC REFLECTION

Question 1: Choose one metaphor from Jabbari Unmasked that you think is especially effective. In multiple complete sentences, explain what is being compared in this metaphor and how it helps you understand the poem better.

Question 2: Golden Shovel poems often respond to the ideas of the original poem they use. What is an idea from We Wear the Mask that Jabbari Unmasked deals with? What does the speaker of Jabbari Unmasked have to say about that idea?

Theme Statement: