



Mask and Screen



by Rogan Wolf

Forward

The twelve poems in this short series were written during the early Summer of 2021. By then, the world had been experiencing the effects of the Covid-19 virus for well over a year and - at least in visual terms - the face-mask had become a familiar and frequent replacement for the human face.

The mobile phone is of course a rather less recent phenomenon than the Covid-19 face-mask. Its shape by this time refined to an elegant thin rectangle, it was so ubiquitous that - even more than the face-mask - it had begun to seem almost like a natural extension of the human body.

This series of poems addresses issues suggested by the two items, offering an initial and tentative exploration of what they mean and how they compare and relate, both in literal terms and by association.

However, there is rather more emphasis here on the screen than on the mask. This is at least partly due to the fact that the series originally came about following a question put to a teacher of children just approaching their teen-age years - what are the chief concerns, these days, of children of that age? And of course the answer was that the mobile phone and the world it can connect you to, was high on the list.

The “I” in these poems is not consistent and never personal in any particular way. The intention is that “I” could be any of us, at any age. In the first poem, for instance, I imagine myself as a ten-year-old dealing with some grumpy old person, frowning inside a mask. Someone like me, perhaps.

In conclusion, I just want to make clear that there is no sense in which this series represents a denial of the need for face-masks during the virus crisis, or of the reality of the virus and the need to counter it by following expert medical advice.

*Rogan Wolf
July 2021.*



I

A man who had no face -
just eyes intent above a mask -
glared at me:

Take your nose
out of that screen, he said.

Take your nose
out of that mask, I answered.



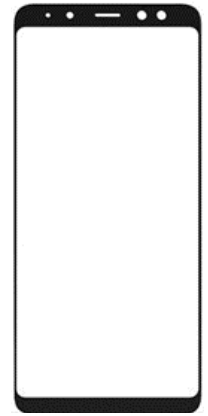
2

Masks all round me everywhere
have made me wonder
whether anyone really has a face.
What is a face, after all,

if not just another
screen to hide behind,
layer of camouflage,
instrument of disguise ?

I look into your face uncovered
hoping to find your heart revealed there
but all I see is a high-speed rotation
of hide and sell techniques

behind which shadows cavort
and strange protuberances
slide and swim
and slither about.



I see in one moment
more through this small strip of glass
than all my ancestors with naked eye
saw in their whole lives.

And yet my screen debars me
from what is real ;
it turns my face away
from where I actually belong ;
from my child, for instance,
here walking beside me
looking to me,
wondering where I've gone.

It takes my eyes
away from my being
here to the world.
It places itself between me
and my own.

It puts replica and camera's eye
where real and between should be.



4

A tiny talking rectangle
connects me
to the world.

It shows me each mind
each household
everywhere.

Nothing escapes me.
I escape nothing.

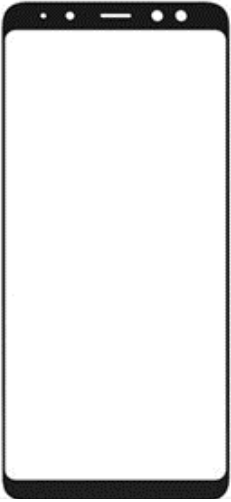
I'm plugged in
to frenzied global gridlock.

I fizz.
I sizzle.



5

The livid drama in my hand
reminds me
of where I belong.
It keeps me attached.
I daren't look away
in case it lets go of me.



6

Every thought in the world
flits and flickers across my screen
before spinning off at high speed
into deep space.

My vantage-point entralls me.
It draws on me all day,
shines on me all night.





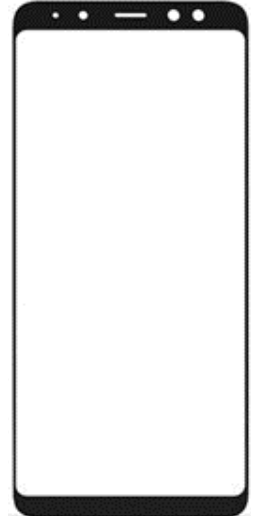
At the touch of my finger,
my pilgrimage to the binary
can change how everything looks.
When I've finished the work of my devotions
I review it lovingly
and sometimes it pleases me
more than the real world does.
I am tempted, in fact,
at the touch of my finger,
now to emigrate to my home-spun utopia
and explore the prospects
of making my living there.





8

And I make a magic circle
in the blinker of my looking glass
where I dance as if on stage
so that my “followers”
in magic masks say *oooh*
what a star
what an influencer
and all of us are
just one happy family
gathered on a screen
dancing to the beat
of a greedy algorithm.



I hold this miracle in my hand.
It has extended my reach
from arms length to world-wide.

But has it really opened up the world -
or just swallowed it ?

Does it reveal a greater truth -
or mask *all* truth

in world-wide worship
of the sell, the binary, the projected self ?



IO

When I see someone
across the pavement, eyes fixed
on a small, glowing screen,
I know a great magician
is poring over tremendous spells
that will change the configurations of the universe.

When I see someone
across the pavement, eyes fixed
on a small, glowing screen
I know a blinkered child
spell-bound, is peering
through a glass, darkly.



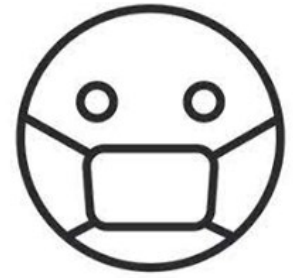
II

This mask between us
is eloquent and keeps saying :

some fearsome
possibility lurks unseen
behind me here
and I'm hiding it from you
even while
deployed upon each face as a shield.

Like grief, or night-thief, this evil
has no limit and the dread of it
lours over us all.

I am guard but also warning.
You dare not remove me.



12

Screen that bewitches me, holding me captive -
window, microscope, telescope,
camera lens, periscope,
virtual eye, voracious half-brain...

In creating a new world
it separates while connecting,
reduces while extending,
distorts while revealing.

It's an investment
in apartness and the counting of pixels.
It breeds delusion and falsity.
It flourishes in swamps.

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