



# Beyond the Mask: The Collection

An anthology of poems written by our hospital community, in honour of the nurses and midwives at Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Creatively led by guiding poet, Sean Borodale

2020-21 International Year of the Nurse and Midwife

**Beyond the Mask was made possible through generous funding provided by Addenbrooke's Charitable Trust**

# Introduction

**Natalie Ellis** *Head of Arts, CUH*

2020 was not the year we were expecting.

With a calendar full of IYNM celebrations, it felt heart-breaking to pull plans as the pandemic took hold. But what we could not have predicted back in March 2020 was that it would lead to this – a collection of some of the most heartfelt poetry you will ever read.

We launched **Beyond the Mask** as a means for our hospital community (patients, staff and wider public) to explore and acknowledge the skills, qualities, characters and stories that lie beneath and beyond the uniform. With so much public gratitude being shown for our healthcare workers, we wanted to find a creative way for those emotions to be captured, and for nurses and midwives themselves to explore their experiences.

Under the brilliant guidance of acclaimed British poet Sean Borodale and our wonderful poetry consultant Helen Taylor, we put out a call for contributions, and were amazed at the response – over thirty completed poems, and many more donations of words and phrases.

These sit alongside a sonnet written by Sean, which draws upon the many voices heard and is a gift to our wonderful community of Nurses and Midwives here at CUH

We hope you reading the Beyond the Mask collection. My advice would be to take in one or two at a time – they are incredibly moving!

A heartfelt thank you to Sean and Helen, and to all our poets. Writing poetry is a deeply personal act, and we are so grateful for your willingness and generosity in sharing your words with us.

## **Sean Borodale** *Guiding Poet*

Beyond the Mask has been an incredible journey, listening to the voices of the community of Cambridge University Hospitals, and this is my response, which I offer humbly.

It is important to state that like all of us I have been struck by the presence of the nurse this year; above all years in living memory, the image of the nurse stands as an iconic presence, throughout societies and their citizens, across the globe, central to the well-being of all of us.

A call-out was made for poems and I was astounded by the response. I encountered depth, pathos, humour and a deep faith in people in the face of sometimes intensely traumatic experience.

I chose to write in the sonnet form, because in the Italian it implies a sounding, and I liked the idea that the sonnet could capture a moment in time. It also scans, charts and regulates rather like nurses and midwives are trained to read our bodies and our health in order to give us the best condition for life.

My poem speaks alongside these poems. It does not speak for them, and can't.

## **Rae Stevens** *Artist*

In the months following Beyond the Mask, the poetry caught the attention of sculptor Rae Stevens – a professional artist who once worked as a nurse at Addenbrooke's. The Beyond the Mask collection sparked memories from her time working as an Infectious Diseases unit in London during the Aids epidemic.

Rae took inspiration from the powerful words of Sukhpreet Singh Dubb, Penny Fisher, Jo Franklin and Joanna Rowley for her latest work (pictured below). Accompanying the sculpture is a beautiful set of letterpress prints that feature some of the poets' words.

Many thanks to Rae for generously allowing us to share her images in this collection.

Read more here:

<https://www.raestevens.com/nhs-behind-the-mask-collaboration>



Rae Stevens, *Anamnesis*

Powder coated aluminium, installed at Canwood Gallery, 2021

## **Beyond the Mask: A Sonnet for Nurses and Midwives**

This sonnet is a patient, its reader a nurse  
taking a temperature, seeking a pulse  
to monitor beat; she/he uncovers possibility,  
opening lines to energy, with care.  
Probably such a reader also saves life  
through diagnosis, converting work to a vivid house.  
What are the symptoms of home? A sonnet  
at peace, light lowered, a meal together;  
then, to carry patients through the turns of a year;  
as midwife, attending births of rhyme, easing a labour  
through fierce strengths. At the end of a shift,  
scrubs on the ward, scrubs of commonplace;  
a walk to a door, blown wide in air like the watch of breath;  
hurting for bright health, you who never rest.

**Sean Borodale**

Guiding Poet, Beyond the Mask

## Beyond the Mask

Don't mourn for me,  
My family and friends  
For despite your absence,  
You were there to the end.  
Holding my hand,  
Until last gasp,  
Thanks to my angel -  
Beyond the mask.

By my side,  
And caring for me  
I felt the love of,  
Those I didn't see.  
So do not grieve,  
You were there to the last,  
Thanks to my angel -  
Beyond the mask.

As I head to the grave,  
I'll share a thought  
I wasn't scared,  
In pain, or distraught.  
In truth I was ready,

To face the dark,  
Thanks to my angel -  
Beyond the mask.

Take from this,  
A single message  
That every death  
Was tearfully regretted.  
Not just by you,  
But those with a task,  
Thanks to my angel -  
Beyond the mask.

From COVID-19,  
There is much we can learn,  
If we give time  
For respectful concern.  
It is important to ask,  
Do we give enough back?  
Thanks to all angels -  
Beyond the masks.

**David Cook**

External Communications Manager, CUH

## **PPE – Personhood Prevention Equipment**

Is this what it's like to be a cyberman  
Obliterated humanity  
Under all the PPE  
No one can see  
Me  
Or like a woman under the Yashmak  
Protected from what virus?  
Made to hide  
What's inside  
From the outside  
But I am me  
And I am MWe  
In this new reality  
No separation but individuality

## **The Lycra Clad men**

They are out in force the lycra clad men  
I wave as I pass them again and again  
On lock down or furlough they're finding a new norm.  
Getting the miles in and developing form  
I would love to be with them turning the pedals,  
But my task is to support the ones earning medals.

### **Mark Stobert**

Lead Chaplain, CUH

## **Beyond the Mask**

What can I see  
What do you see  
My face is blanketed in blue  
My expressions are unseen  
I cannot see your response  
Are we frightened  
Yes we are  
Outwardly Calm is portrayed  
Inside is like a wobbly jelly  
What do I do  
How do I protect myself  
What about my family  
How will I cope  
The weeks go past  
The fear subsides  
The Anger comes  
The loss is great  
Back to normal

What is that  
Reflect on this  
And move on  
What can we plan  
What have we learnt  
Will it come back  
The fear is there  
What is positive  
Time to reflect  
What can we change  
What have we gained  
We have survived  
We were all strong  
We are a team  
We now move on

**Diana Sanderson**

Senior Staff Nurse, Paediatric Intensive  
Care Unit, CUH

## Let the nurses laugh

Let the nurses laugh  
it feels as if laughter has left us

I watch your careful hands  
make a cardboard house for our cat

touching the tape; I know your hands  
have washed corpses  
spoken to their spirits as calmly as you  
speak to me now

your youth engulfed in tears with death  
the lesson of your first day's training

—three years before the pandemic—  
with rising alarm, we study anew

the 'stay strong' twitter-footage  
window-call between neighbours in  
Wuhan.

**Helen Pletts**

Member of Public

## 2020

Twenty-twenty started bad,  
And then went totally mad.  
A new virus came down,  
But we were in town,  
And boy what a ride we've had.

**Carolyn Hutchinson**

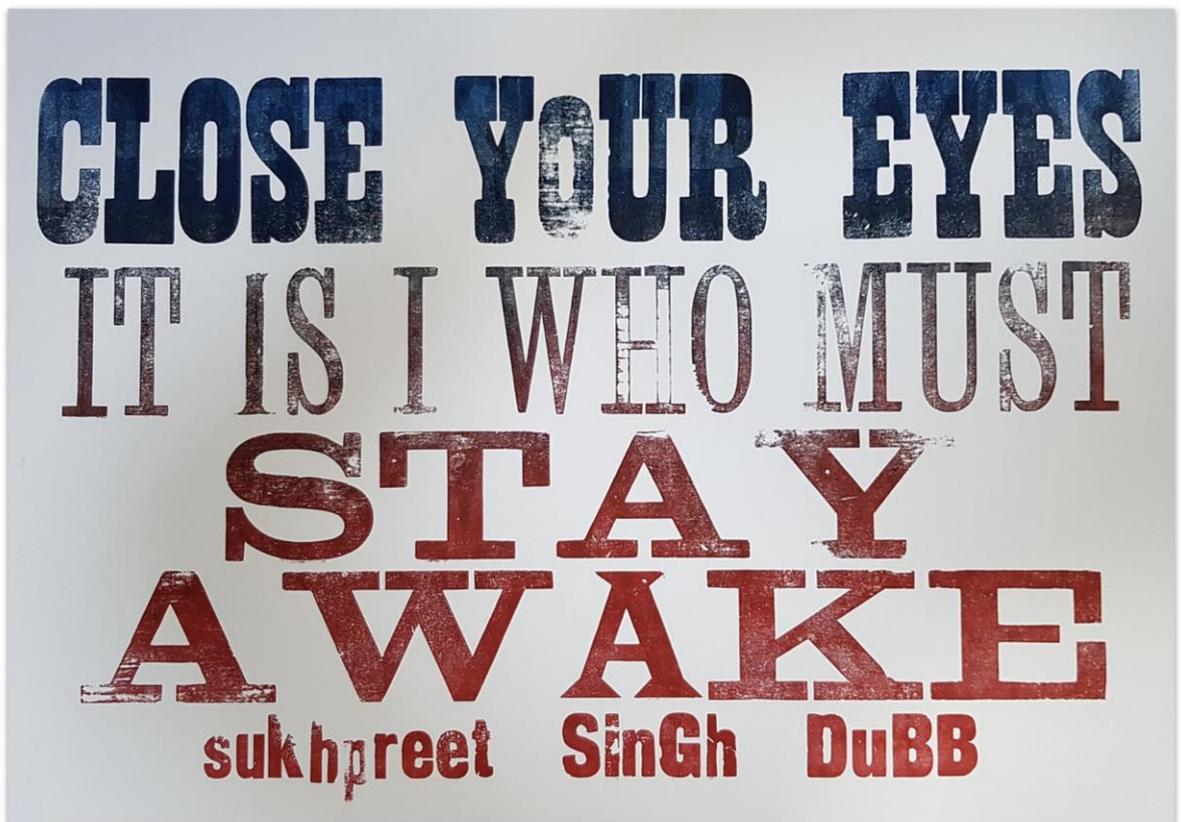
Healthcare Support Worker, CUH

## **Behind the Mask**

Stay near me for my light is low,  
Within you is my entire world and I cannot let you go.  
Stay here with me don't fade away,  
Without you there is no difference between night or day.  
For I love you this way without knowing any other way,  
where your breath is in my chest and your heart beat fills my veins.  
This way where there is no I or you,  
and each smile makes me nervous again.  
This fever steals that which belongs to me,  
and with each cough you fade further away.  
I am not that strength that may hold fast death,  
Nor have I that will to keep you far from heaven.  
Your hand is shaking and these tears won't stop,  
No one hears what I have to ask, no longer can I hide behind this mask.  
For I love you this way and only this way,  
as you finally close your eyes, it is I who must stay awake.

**Sukhpreet Singh Dubb**

Oral and Maxillofacial Registrar, CUH



Letterpress print by Rae Stevens

## **The little things**

An unsettling 10 weeks,  
Out of kilter, off balance. Finding new ways of life and living.  
Had to dig deep. Breathe deeply. Look forward. Head up.  
What helped were often the little things.

A sense of togetherness. Unified us all.  
Smiling. Pause for laughter.  
Free hot lunches. The Sanctuary. A safe place to be.  
The kindness of our community. Gifts and treats.

Kept going by other key workers.  
As important as us.  
Shop workers, lorry drivers, bus drivers ....  
Keeping the outside world going.

The prickle of tears from a virtual hug,  
As I drove over the sign on the road. Feel proud.  
Thank you NHS.  
We are part of a whole. Never alone.

**Tina O'Hara**

Lead Nurse, End of Life Care, CUH

## Beyond the Mask

I look at you and I don't know who you are,  
I look beyond the mask and I see bravery, courage  
And I feel pride that you are there to help us all.  
I look beyond the mask and I realise  
That's my sister  
And I smile, shed a tear  
That I haven't see you for weeks

**Zoe Harvey**

Sister of Staff Member



## Behind the Mask

Beat The Bug

Let's beat the bug

You know we should

So pull up a chair and fill up your mug

Only go out if you must, you know you  
should

That's not too good, if you're a bug

We can beat it if we try

That will give it a pock in the eye.

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Our Health Workers

Never in the field of human health

Has so much been owed to nurses and  
carers

They will fight in the hospitals and in the  
care homes

We will clap them in the streets and in our  
hearts

We will defend the weak

We will stay home until safe to step forth  
once more.

## LIFE

Life is a marathon, not a sprint

So take your time and do your stint

If you can help someone every day, Ha  
that's O.K.

All of us have a skill, so make yours count  
as much as you can

We only have one planet to share

So treat it with care

Then pass it on to our kids, INTACT

**Keith Ollier**

Member of Public

## **Beyond the mask**

Anxiety is building – it's tight within my chest,  
my stress levels are soaring, I really need a rest.  
Flashing lights and visual blurring, the same nightmares keep occurring,  
my mind and body scream out 'no more!'

My knees give way as I fall to the floor.  
Behind closed doors in the dark I stay, wishing the world would just go away.  
All of a sudden a pandemic is here – it arrives with angst, panic and fear.  
Now it's not just me locked away, my loved ones, my friends, all stay away.  
The shadow of death swoops over the lands,  
we are all at the mercy of God's mighty hands.  
Isolation of mind body and soul,  
sinking slowly into that big black hole.  
Little by little the earth moves round,  
shoots and greenery emerge from the ground.  
Spring arrives, with sun and blue skies,  
but the COVID death toll continues to rise.  
Loved ones lost, no time to mourn, unable to cuddle or hold new offspring born.  
Yet out of the chaos a new life to find, of sharing and helping and just being kind.  
We are all brothers and sisters, a family affair,  
with love, trust and peace we'll hold on in there.  
Anxiety is calmed and stress blown away,  
together we stand proud to face a new day.

**Joanna Rowley**

Lead Nurse, Breast Unit



Letterpress print by Rae Stevens

## And then

You once had a routine  
Of structure and duty  
Going home each evening  
for dinner and footie  
Maybe it was just a job  
To pay the rent and keep  
you in shoes.  
Customer service like no  
other  
That you didn't choose.  
And you saw how people  
Depended on you  
whatever.  
There were good days  
and bad  
People came and went  
But all knew the care that  
they had had.  
The difference you made  
Seemed already  
underpaid.  
Then you had a bad day  
Followed by more  
Everything changed  
No easy parts to the day  
You persisted with hope  
Dedication and grit  
Hoping that today  
That that would be it.  
Every day seemed worse  
Had you really wanted to  
be a nurse?

Eating and sleep were  
rare  
And seeing friends - you  
didn't dare  
You couldn't see an end  
You felt at night  
Inadequate and spent,  
Just not right.  
Like a bad joke, the  
horrors of new stuff  
Left you feeling as though  
You couldn't do enough.  
The bad days went on  
Thursday claps brought  
tears to your eyes  
And you knew that just  
getting through the day  
Was the only prize.  
Your heart broke several  
times  
Was this to jolt us  
awake?  
Was it in response to our  
crimes?  
No that could not be.  
Nature we have abused  
Resources we've over-  
used  
But we couldn't know this  
was to come.  
The government stalled  
and wavered  
No measures would  
suffice  
But how we now

Appreciate life.  
Drained and depleted  
You fight on through the  
war  
You made the choice  
yours  
And decided to stay  
Of this they must surely  
now say  
A noble profession, to be  
recognised today.  
When this is all over  
There'll be no more  
doubt  
Our caring professions  
Were somehow left out  
You have saved the UK  
Against an evil that came  
Every person in your care  
Knows it's been unfair  
You couldn't have done  
more.  
Human spirit you have  
saved  
Let us all truly praise  
Your resilience  
Your care  
The fact that you  
were there.

**Rosemary Hewitt**

Member of Public

## Nursing in Covid

We have changed everything to fight it  
We will continue to change everything we  
do to fight it  
We change the way we do stuff just to  
cope with driving to work  
Let alone do our job

Nurses and all staff are fighting for the  
lives of us all  
We fight for our patients first  
We fight for each other and together

We are learning from each other  
We learn  
what to do  
what not to do  
How to do it

We try and predict  
What will happen  
What won't happen  
What we really don't want to happen

People ask us how is it at the hospital

We don't know what to say  
Because how can we explain it

Stay home

We don't complain about caring for Covid  
patients but we do complain if we can't do  
it to the ability we want to

But overall

I love my job  
I love the people I work alongside

I care a lot about the patients and families  
I care about how this will affect the NHS  
long term  
I care about all things while trying to do  
The small things

Would I change it .....no

This is nursing and what I'm trained for  
and together we have got this.

**Felicity Tyson**

Paediatric LTV Nurse Specialist



**“Flick & Vicky – the greatest of friends!”**

Painted by Felicity’s cousin.

## Isolation in lockdown

The reflection from the sunlight causes some glare on the glass.

My eyes are searching, I can feel my heart thumping.

Then - I see her.

A solitary image, my mother - locked away under the beams of artificial light.

She is still smiling, looking out from the window.

Smiling and waiting,

waiting to see someone familiar

again.

### Rosie Tween

Daughter of patient

*"I wrote these few lines after waving to my mother last weekend; it was the first time she was able to get to a window and see anyone from her family since the beginning of lockdown.*

*I'm an ex-nurse and worked for over 20 years at Addenbrooke's before I had to take medical retirement following a spinal stroke which has left me paralysed. I still feel I'm part of Addenbrooke's though!*

*My mum was admitted to Addenbrooke's at the beginning of the first lockdown, following several falls and a fractured spine, and then was discharged to a nursing home. She has only just become well enough to get to a window where she can look out and see us.*

*Your chosen title 'Beyond the Mask ' prompted me to send my few lines, as recently Mum told me that she hasn't seen or spoken to anyone since the beginning of Lockdown who hasn't been wearing a mask, and what she's looking forward to most is seeing someone's whole face again."*

Vulnerable people,  
Face to face follow your will.  
Vulnerable people,  
Distancing.  
Protect our people who fall,  
Speak, offer, enable,  
Remain safe.  
Live, encourage, discuss.  
Vulnerable people,  
Please first.

**Rosie Browne**

Business Development Executive, Nuffield Health

## **Beyond the Mask**

My friend is small but her enemy is smaller.  
Decades ago, our only enemies were Bad Boyfriends.  
She has to wear this ridiculous get-up.  
I wish I could give her spiky armour, like the virus.  
To go with her perspex crown.

**Amanda Walker**

Clinical Trials Data Manager, CUH

## **Beyond the Mask**

With a mask we look the same.  
Faceless, emotionless.

Behind the mask we are individual.  
Diverse, expressive.

Beyond the mask we work together.  
Proudly, effectively.  
Sharing laughter and sadness.  
Making lives matter.

### **Maggie Luff**

Senior Biomedical Scientist, CUH

## **Beyond the Mask**

The hospital has gone quiet

I hadn't realised how important visitors were until there were none.

Blasted coronavirus.

Patients miss them. No more, 'anyone coming to see you today?' conversations from me.

It isn't just the patients that miss them, I do too. The wards are quieter.

I have become a nurse detective!

Cards, photos, incoming phone calls have become my clues...

Stories of family, friends, pets, fun times.

Being able to say that someone called and wanted them to know that they love them,

Tears in my eyes understanding loved ones' distress of not seeing their mother or father.

Nevertheless, these cards, photos, phone calls have brought joy.

Smiles, conversations started.

Even the most poorly of patients have managed to show a glimmer of recognition

Memories of happier times and places beyond the masks on the wards...

**Margaret Cletheroe**

Staff Nurse, CUH

## Beyond the Mask

Putting others before ourselves is all that  
we were asked  
Breathing in and calming down  
Before putting on the mask

Each shift our job to care and heal  
To save, to mend, to nurse  
Each patient an individual  
With needs all so diverse

We liked to know about them  
Their job, their likes, their wife  
What they enjoy and how to bring  
It back into their life

There were so many shifts it seems  
When all did go so well  
But how do they remember that ?  
Only time can tell

But even when the worst news came  
We always did our best  
We shared, we hugged and cried in PPE  
And we got through the hardest test

To show compassion on an iPad  
Or even down a phone  
Was the hardest thing we had to do  
But we hope they never felt alone

When we listened to the music  
You chose to play out loud  
The tears that rolled down our cheeks  
Could only make us proud

To have compassion was to listen  
To give you time to share  
That a shave for your Dad did mean so  
much  
When you could not be there

What many people do not know  
Is beyond the mask so tight  
We can  
Hold space for the love within  
Every patients dying right

We choose not to forget  
The sound of your deep cries  
As you bravely took the final chance  
To bless them with goodbyes

We held hands and stayed beside them  
And never let them be alone  
We knew what we would do for them  
If they were our very own

We thought of where a life was going  
And what did it all mean  
And we sent them on their way with love  
Hoping it would be somewhere serene

They were not alone at the end  
And emotions held the space  
We couldn't wipe our tears away  
Beyond the mask upon our face.

**Jo Franklin**

Palliative Care Specialist Nurse, CUH



Letterpress print by Rae Stevens

## Behind the Mask

Behind it, in front of it  
We're on the same side  
Our enemy....invisible  
There's nowhere to hide  
You look to me for safety  
Calmness....no fear  
Behind my mask it's just as scary in here  
I don't have your answers  
no crystal ball  
my questions are the same  
It affects us all  
our children, our families  
The futures' unclear  
Hope I get through this safely, and those I hold dear  
Stiff upper lip, off to work every day  
knowing for some a high price will be paid  
Bravery, courage I'm so proud to be  
An NHS key worker - solidarity  
Amidst all the differences our world offers to see  
Some we must value, but what's clear to me  
behind it, in front of it, it's all the same side  
No room for prejudice, there's nowhere to hide.

**Lynda Poulter**

Midwife, CUH

## **Beyond the Mask**

Beyond the mask, behind the shield  
A professional body, the medical field,  
Those who give their all, their time their energy  
For people like you, for you and me

The missing smiles, the expressive eyes,  
For those who are sick, undercover spies  
They see the world behind the hospital doors  
The kindness, the effort, not their flaws

Be kind, send love, we all miss someone  
Look after each other, there can still be fun  
And smiles and air kisses and virtual hugs  
Together we will fight the virus and bugs.

### **Sam Bradbury**

Staff Nurse, Paediatrics, CUH

## Beyond the Mask

Behind this mask is more than a set of green eyes.

You may not see the freckles I've acquired  
from days off spent in the sun,  
For I wish you too could spend days in the sun.

You may not see my smile as you  
leave the hospital bed for the first time,  
But I see yours.

Behind the mask know  
We are more than a set of eyes.

Jasmine Christi  
Addenbrookes - ward C2.

## Today

“Do you want us to wash your mum  
today?”-

“Yes, please; because today.....”

The body lives;  
though fragile and stroke-stricken.  
Today, this body who gave me life  
is soothed, softly bathed and  
tenderly dried.

Today, the hair- so proudly worn;  
resembling Her Majesty’s own,  
is gently combed.

Today, the nightdress is changed  
to a little pink number-  
her favourite colour.

Today, the refreshed body is  
lifted and turned;  
pillows are rearranged to  
cradle the head;  
its closed eyes looking  
skywards;  
the mind wrapped into itself,  
like the enfolded petals  
of a Mme. de Pompadour rose.

Today; like a queen exploring new parts  
of her life’s commonwealth:  
new, virgin shores that await every  
traveller; ready or not.

She has been made ready.

Today, the swelling noon-tide current is  
caught; its cargo assured it takes  
this cot-barque with its clean sheets  
further out into calmer waters-  
beyond the last lighthouse that  
winks at her as she passes,  
in valedictory recognition.

With three more half-breaths and a sigh,  
Today my mother dies.

### Janice Moore

Daughter of a patient

*“Thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution to this collaborative work to say both a personal, and a collective 'Thank you' to all those caring NHS professionals who every day and night care for every patient with great skill and humanity.”*

## For the patient in the night, who asked, "What's behind the mask?"

What's behind the mask, you ask,  
if it fell, what would we see?  
Do you smile behind the mask, you ask,  
are you smiling now, at me?  
  
Is there strength behind the mask, you  
ask,  
is there love, and faith, and hope?  
Or is there despair behind that mask,  
a fear that you cannot cope?  
  
Is that mask hiding a sorrow,  
or is it stifling a joy?  
Do you regret ever having to wear it,  
do you question your choice of employ?  
  
There are all of those things, I answer,  
behind this mask I wear.  
But, the filter allows the good things out,  
the compassion, the hope, the care.  
  
This mask gave me courage to enter the  
fray,  
take up battle against the foe.  
It veiled the fear, and steadied the nerves,

when my fate I did not know.  
  
I'll never regret having worn it,  
and the part it allowed me to play.  
If truth be known, the regret would have  
been,  
had I not played my part, stayed away.  
  
This mask is but an obstacle,  
protecting you and I.  
I know it makes life more difficult,  
that's a truth I can't deny.  
  
But, the secret is found above the mask,  
the truth is in my eyes.  
That smile with your achievements,  
and weep for your goodbyes.  
  
So, look beyond the mask, I ask,  
look closely and you'll see.  
There's nothing to fear beyond this mask,  
for behind it, I'm still me.

**Penny Fisher**  
Staff Nurse, CUH



Letterpress print by Rae Stevens

## In your care.

Waiting room strangers, sit side by side.  
Carrying their pain which flows like a tide.  
Holding their breath as you call out a name.  
Will they be next?  
It's the waiting room game.

A lady is perched on a chair in the corner.  
She's frail and sad, but an elegant mourner.  
Her mind is brimming with memories of love.  
A husband, deceased.  
Her eyes look up.  
You listen to the stories.  
You give her your time.  
A moment of contentment, about her  
lifetime.  
You witness the sorrow lift from her face,  
by her restored faith in the human race.

A gentleman sleeps quietly, to bide his time,  
As a transfusion drips along the line.  
Breathing slow; A heavy head.  
He is given a chance by the Venetian red.  
He carried his fears as the needle went in.  
You gave him your comfort when touching his  
skin.  
Admired for your knowledge, and gentle  
hands.  
You reassure the restless, and meet their  
demands.

He opens his eyes to his visiting wife. Forever  
grateful, you saved his life.

Another patient walks through the door.  
Outside she's invisible. She looks at the floor.  
You give her a welcome to make her feel  
noticed.

She hides her troubles from those who are  
closest.

A safe environment to restore the broken.  
She knows you see words, left unspoken.

Her mother sits close in a chair filled with  
guilt, as she watches her daughter starting to  
wilt.

You give them your time and provision of  
hope, at the darkest point when they struggle  
to cope.

A kind gesture from you is all it may take, to  
lessen the pain of the deepest heartache.

Fixing the broken, healing the pain.  
Working long hours to manage the strain.

Experienced and gifted. Trying your best.  
Giving your all when put to the test.

You trained for years to recognise the signs.  
Carefully adhering to changing guidelines.

Thank you for your care and diligent work.

For your individual contributions and amazing  
teamwork.

**Lucy Carpen**

Member of Public

## Front line workers

It came so fast – out of the blue

Virus was no joke - no one had a clue

Hospitals built in - just 9 days

People came to help - all sorts of ways

Healthcare workers - who have already retired

Came back to work - proud and honoured

Dyson change - Hoovers to ventilators

People change their holidays - for much later

Key workers separated from - their families

One mum cried not able to - hug her little Emily

Some left us early - for a better world

Life on earth felt like - put on hold

But that's not the end... there is more to say...

No division colour - religion or race

They all share the same - goal and faith

What other proof - one will prefer

Every life on earth - really does matter

Key workers even the - deliveryman

Saved the vulnerable and - stayed in the van

Some say this the worst - they ever struggle

But some see the light at the - end of the tunnel

Strength and powers – also their sacrifices

Will win this war – with front line workers

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