



# Revision Guide

## Life Mask

Jackie Kay

Scrbblly.





love  
grows  
green  
shining,  
leaves





## THE POEM

“When the senses come back in the morning,  
the nose is a mouth full of spring;  
the mouth is an earful of birdsong;”

*(Full poem unable to be reproduced due to  
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## VOCABULARY

**Camomile:** a pleasant herbal plant that has flowers that look like little daisies.

**Lawn:** a patch of consistently maintained, short grass in a garden or park.

**Pear:** a sweet, slightly gritty yellowish- or brownish-green edible fruit with a narrow stem and wide base.

**Spring:** change direction abruptly, either upwards or forwards.

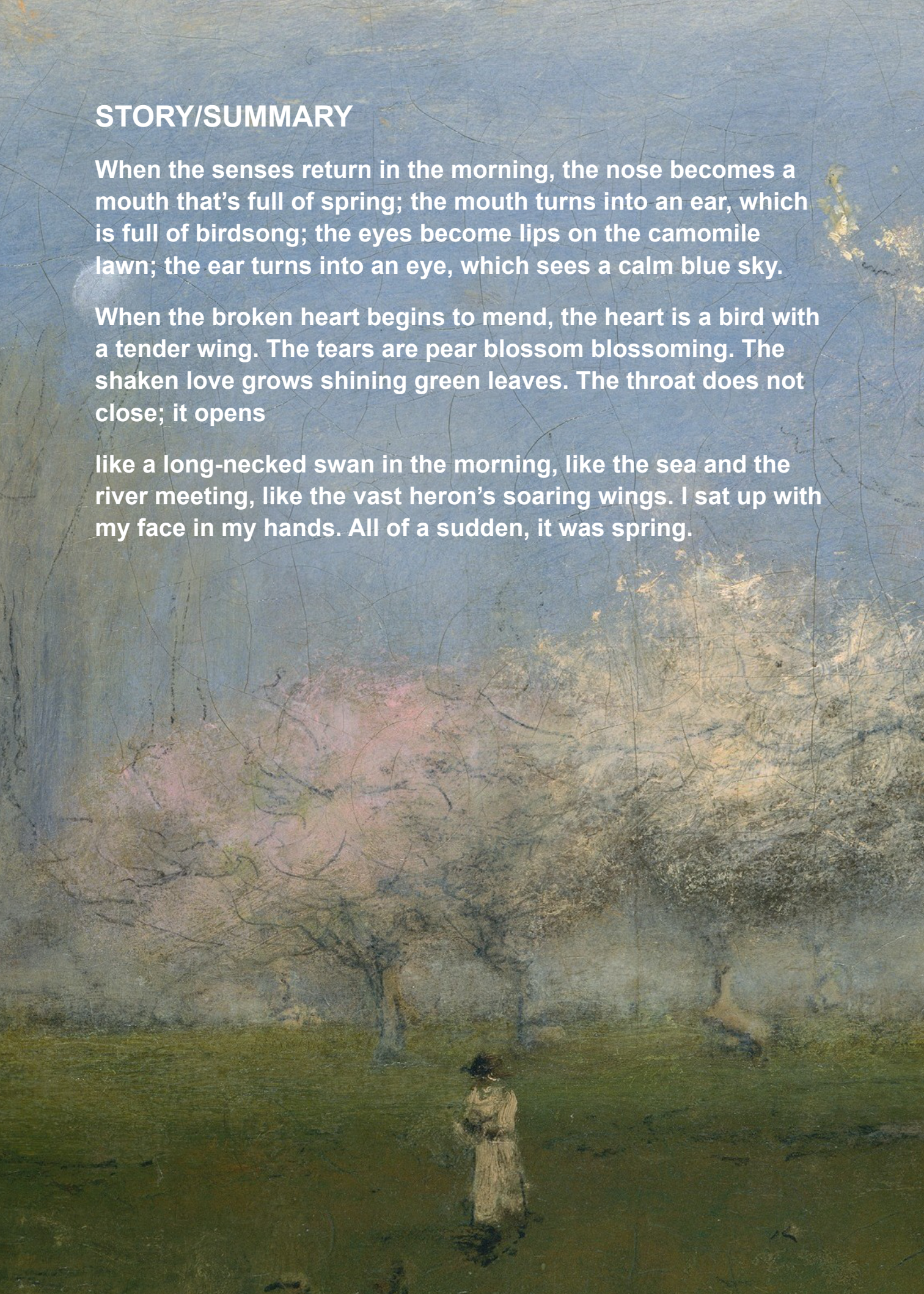


## STORY/SUMMARY

When the senses return in the morning, the nose becomes a mouth that's full of spring; the mouth turns into an ear, which is full of birdsong; the eyes become lips on the camomile lawn; the ear turns into an eye, which sees a calm blue sky.

When the broken heart begins to mend, the heart is a bird with a tender wing. The tears are pear blossom blossoming. The shaken love grows shining green leaves. The throat does not close; it opens

like a long-necked swan in the morning, like the sea and the river meeting, like the vast heron's soaring wings. I sat up with my face in my hands. All of a sudden, it was spring.





## SPEAKER / VOICE

**TASK:** What tone can you identify in the poem? Find three quotations that support this tone.

The poem paints a vivid picture of a person taking in the morning's beauty with all their senses. They are presented as being attuned to the world around them. The nose is described as a "mouth full of spring," signifying the scent of fresh foliage that comes in the morning. The mouth is an "earful of birdsong," suggesting they appreciate even the most minor details in nature, such as songbirds waking up and beginning their day. The eyes are presented metaphorically as "lips on the camomile lawn," indicating that they are taking in small moments of beauty, even with their vision. And lastly, their ears are likened to an "eye of calm blue sky," signifying that they take pleasure in simply gazing out and noticing how peaceful it can be before the chaos of daily life begins.

Additionally, this is written from the perspective of a persona who has experienced a broken heart and is going through mending it. Through a series of vibrant descriptions, we can see that this person is starting to find peace and hope in their journey towards healing.

The phrase "I sat up with my face in my hands" suggests an internal struggle—the persona is recognizing their pain, while still being resilient enough to look forward to a better future. Altogether, these elements paint a vivid picture of someone contentedly sitting at the moment, appreciating their surroundings with newfound optimism.



## LANGUAGE

**Similes:** "like a long-necked swan in the morning/ like the sea and the river meeting/ like the huge heron's soaring wings" The poem contains many similes. The similes make it easy to draw imaginative and direct analogies. The poet appreciates using similes because it allows her to generate engaging visual pictures and accentuate emotional tones. The idea of the throat opening 'like a long-necked swan' creates an image of beauty and grace, as if the speaker of the poem finally feels as though she can speak again.

**Anaphora:** The poet begins multiple lines with words like "the" and "like" in all three stanzas. The use of **repetition** at the beginning of the stanzas' lines to generate the effect of emphasis is known as "anaphora". The use of anaphora appeals emotionally to the audience, in the hope of convincing, inspiring, motivating, and encouraging them - it is typically a rhetorical device that is used to construct an argument. In this case, we could see the use of anaphora as a strong affirmation of the speaker's return to life and joy - after a long, symbolic 'Winter' where she felt closed off and shut down.

**Metaphor:** The poet applies metaphor in most parts of the poem. For example, "the mouth is an earful of birdsong" metaphorically implies that people enjoy even the most inconsequential aspects of nature, such as the morning ritual of songbirds getting up and starting their day. The use of metaphor allows the poet to communicate vivid imagery beyond literal meanings. In this instance, it provides a **multisensory, synesthetic experience** for the reader, where the speaker's senses are all interconnected.

**TASK: Find three sensory images in the poem, that explore the way in which Kay uses imagery to paint a vivid picture of the arrival of Spring.**



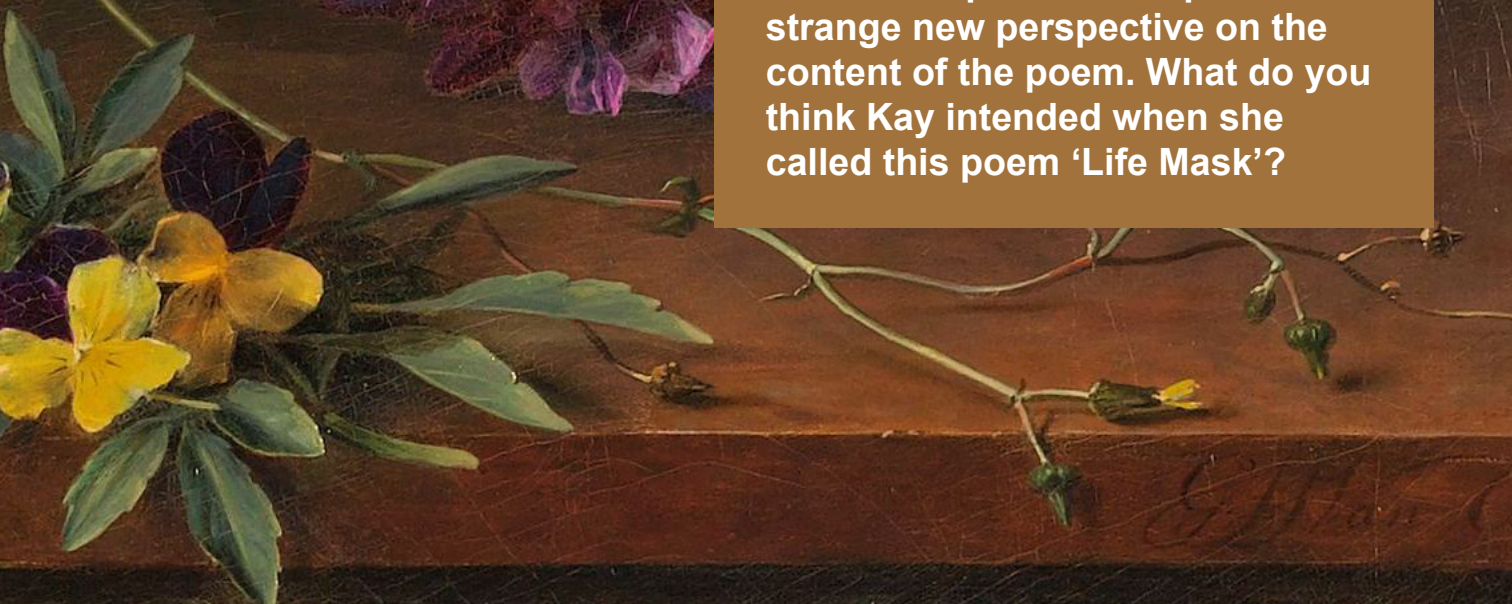
## STRUCTURE + FORM

**Stanzas:** This poem uses three quintains (five line stanzas). The stanzas contain short lines, with a simple choice of words to make it clear for readers to read and understand the poem. This also mirrors the simple joy that the speaker takes in connecting with the natural world around her.

**Dramatic monologue:** The poem's first-person point of view and focus on the person's internal monologue suggest that it may be read as a dramatic monologue. The reader may learn much about the persona, the character they describe, and their connection with their world. However, **the use of first person is deferred until the penultimate line**, so the poem reads as if it is third person until the end, when with a **volta (turning point)**, we realise that it is being spoken from the perspective of an individual, who is experiencing a revival of joy in her life.

**Short lines:** The stanzas in this poem are built from a sequence of short lines. This not only helps set the rhythm of the poetry, but also quickens the speed. The clarity of the writing allows the reader to feel the same intensity and enthusiasm as the persona.

**Rhyme scheme:** The general rhyme scheme of this poem is irregular: AAABCDAACAAAEEA. Here, we can see that the first three lines form a triplet, as they rhyme with each other. Then, the final six lines almost all rhyme with each other, apart from the penultimate line. This creates a recurring 'ing' sound to the poem, which also uses a range of **continuous verbs** to give a sense of constant movement and action, as nature in Spring is continually budding into life.



**TASK:** The poem's title provides a strange new perspective on the content of the poem. What do you think Kay intended when she called this poem 'Life Mask'?



## CONTEXT

Jackie Kay was born in the year 1961 in the city of Edinburgh, Scotland. She is a poet, writer, and dramatist from the United Kingdom. Her mother was of Scottish descent, while her father was of Nigerian heritage. She was raised in Glasgow by a white couple who adopted her as a child. Her biological parents were communists who participated in anti-apartheid demonstrations and marches for peace and brought their children with them. She attended Stirling University for her studies in English. She left Scotland partly because she thought the country lacked multicultural peace and wanted to provide a more tolerant atmosphere for her son, Matthew, who was born in 1988. So, she relocated to London and worked various jobs when she got there - including cleaning and portering at hospitals.

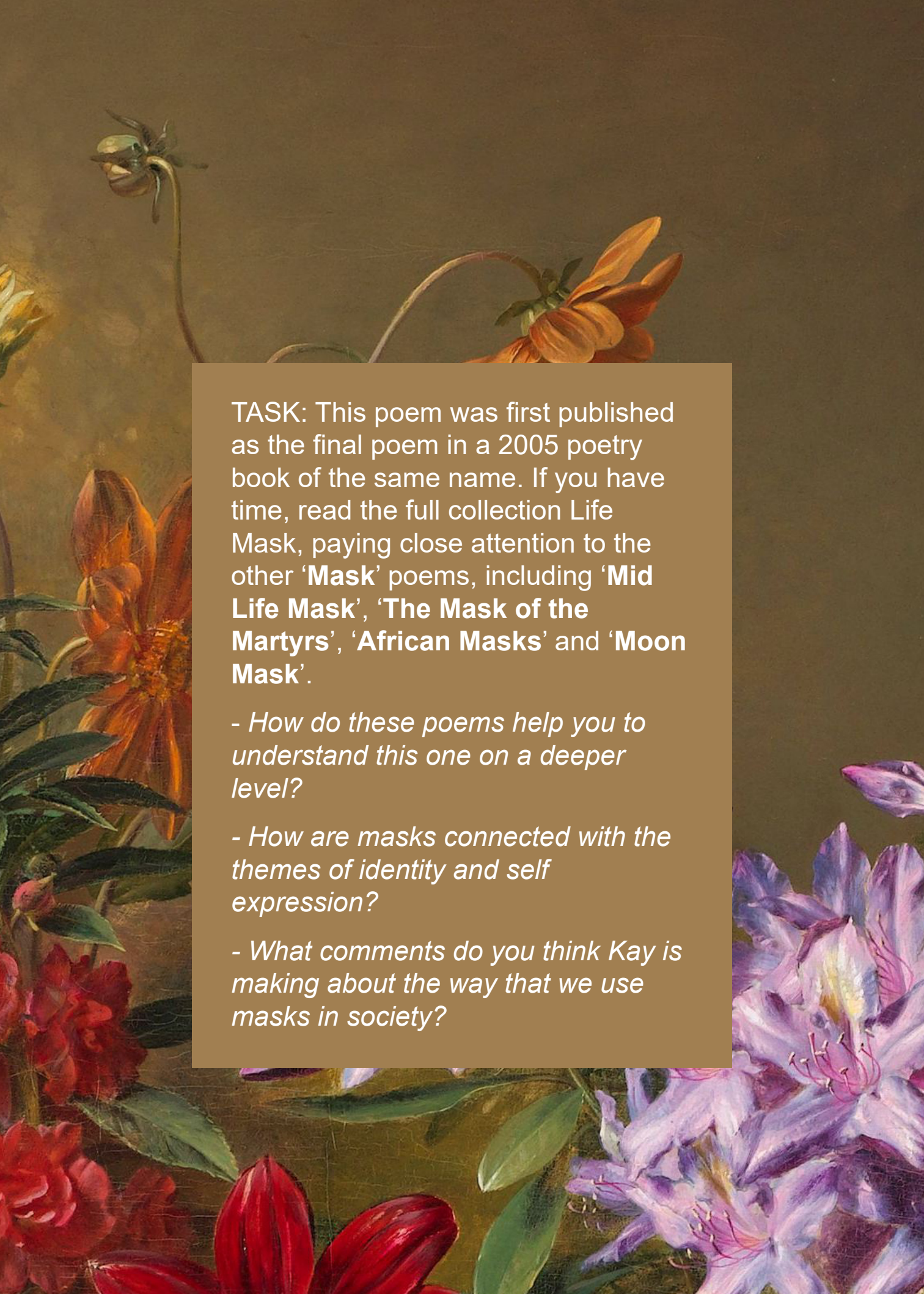
Kay's first book of poems, "The Adoption Papers," published in 1991, was influenced by her experience of being adopted and raised by a white family. This collection was awarded the Scottish Arts Council Book Award and the Saltire Society Scottish First Book of the Year Award.

Thematically, the collection of poems deals with the author's quest for cultural identity. The poems are presented from the perspectives of an adoptive mother, a birth mother, and a daughter, and they were delivered in three separate voices.

The title 'Life Mask' suggests that the poem will be about the masks we put on throughout our lives, including those we wear to hide our true selves from others, and those we wear to fit in and conform. By the end of the poem, the speaker affirms that she sits up "with [her] face in [her] hands", implying perhaps that this mask has fully slipped away, and that now she is left with her true self. In terms of Kay's own identity, this could be related to her lesbianism, as she felt for a long time that she had to hide her true sexuality from those around her, particularly from fear of receiving disapproval from her parents. It could also be related to her unusual dual Nigerian and Scottish heritage, or her status as an adopted child, and the idea that she struggled to fully fit in with the world around her and fully express her true self.







TASK: This poem was first published as the final poem in a 2005 poetry book of the same name. If you have time, read the full collection *Life Mask*, paying close attention to the other '**Mask**' poems, including '**Mid Life Mask**', '**The Mask of the Martyrs**', '**African Masks**' and '**Moon Mask**'.

- *How do these poems help you to understand this one on a deeper level?*

- *How are masks connected with the themes of identity and self expression?*

- *What comments do you think Kay is making about the way that we use masks in society?*





## ATTITUDES

**We all have access the healing power of nature** - The persona celebrates the beauty of the natural world and emphasises the potential for renewal and hopes it offers in the wake of sorrow. The symbol of the 'broken heart' implies that the speaker has started to heal after a traumatic break up with a loved one, although it could also be interpreted more generally as a suggestion of her suffering. Additionally, the persona provides a gentle reminder that, despite the pain of heartache, life can still be filled with joy and beauty. The persona's attitude of embracing nature's restorative power provides comfort and optimism, conveying that our souls need more than just time to heal—we need the healing power of the world around us.

**We can approach life with a sense of optimism** - The speaker symbolically uses the idea of seasonal transitions to express the feeling of coming out of spiritual or psychological darkness and into the light. This is achieved through the imagery of a broken heart starting to mend, the tenderness of a bird's wing, and the lushness of blossoming pear trees. The imagery of a swan's neck, a river and sea meet, and a heron's wings soaring all combine to provide a sense of freedom and growth. The poem ends with the speaker, sitting up and declaring, "suddenly it was spring." There is a sense of both joy and victory at this moment. This poem captures the spirit of resilience in the face of grief and gives hope that even when things seem broken, they can be mended, and the beauty of life will reveal itself again.



# THEMES

Hope

Suffering and Despair

Survival

Nature

Healing

Love

## TASK

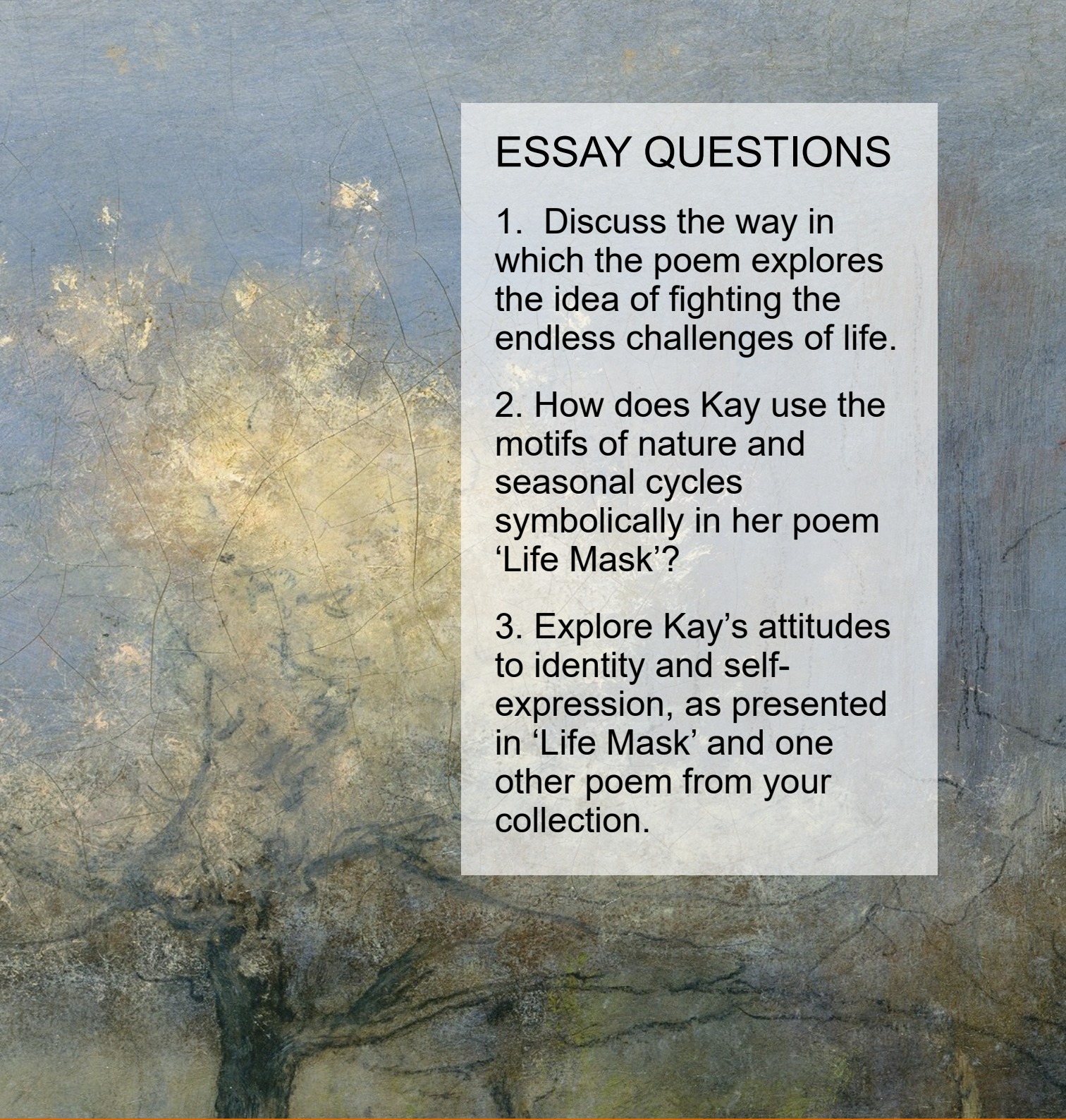
Pick two of these themes, make a mind map and add four separate quotations from the story that relate to it. Make short notes of analysis, explaining how and why each one relates to your theme. What, in your opinion, is the author's final message or statement about each theme that you chose?



## EXERCISES

1. Identify and explore the poem's use of symbols.
2. Discuss the personality and character of the speaker in the poem.
3. Read Philip Larkin's 'The Trees'. Compare and contrast the attitudes in Larkin's poem, with Kay's 'Life Mask'.
4. Explore your own attitudes to nature, specifically the season of Spring. Write a couple of descriptive paragraphs, or your own short poem, about the feeling of Spring that arrives after Winter. Use imagery in your piece to precisely capture the sensory experience of the season.





## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the way in which the poem explores the idea of fighting the endless challenges of life.
2. How does Kay use the motifs of nature and seasonal cycles symbolically in her poem 'Life Mask'?
3. Explore Kay's attitudes to identity and self-expression, as presented in 'Life Mask' and one other poem from your collection.

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