



SKULL POEMS

DÍA DE MUERTOS



CALAVERAS LITERARIAS



2025

VOL. 1

POEMS BY SCHOOL CHILDREN AND TEACHERS

EDITED BY JANE LAVERY AND DAVID STALLEY





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A heartfelt thanks to all the school children and teachers for their beautiful *calaveras literarias*. They are trailblazers in instigating this poetic genre in British schools!

A special word of appreciation is due to the Embassy of Mexico in the UK.

I extend my thanks to the editorial team from University of Southampton Press.

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About the Editors

Dr Jane Lavery is an Associate Professor in Latin American Studies at the University of Southampton (<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2301-7274>). The author of several books and articles in gender and cultural studies, she is also passionate about her other research project on the Mexican *Day of the Dead* which has garnered media attention in the form of interviews on the BBC news and radio and coverage about her work (e.g. <https://www.bournemouthcho.co.uk/news/23208796.highcliffe-secondary-school-winnational-day-dead-contest/>; <https://www.hampshirechronicle.co.uk/news/25692049.perins-school-awarded-dia-de-muertos-video-project/>).

She is author of articles on *Day of the Dead* (2021; 2022) and the co-author of another related article (2025), and a monograph with Professor Nuala Finnegan (University College Cork) entitled *Changing configurations of Día de Muertos during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2026).

She has also developed a toolkit for CPD and teaching resources on the *Day of the Dead* for schools.

Mr David Stalley is the Director of the Language Langton Consortium and the MFL Centre at Simon Langton Girls' Grammar School, Kent. The Langton Language Centre is, currently, an independent Language Hub run from the Langton Language Centre based at Simon Langton Girls' Grammar School, Canterbury, Kent.

David is one of the recipients of the Network Champion for German Award (German Embassy London), which recognises exceptional efforts in promoting the German language in the UK

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Introduction:
Día de Muertos Skull Poems/Calaveras Literarias

With its Catholic, Pagan and Aztec roots, *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead) is an important event which is celebrated annually on 1st and 2nd of November. Although there are regional variations within Mexico in terms of how and when it is celebrated, the ritual sees many Mexicans in Mexico, the USA, Ireland, the UK and globally, happily and lovingly honour the lives of their departed ancestors. Families, children and adults remember their beloved ones, place altars in their homes or in public spaces, decorate tombs and attend huge street events. In the UK and Ireland there is an important community of Mexicans who play a vital role in contributing to the local economy, society and culture. Many of them celebrate *Día de Muertos*. The ritual has also been taken up by many non-Mexican communities to commemorate their beloved ones.

What is a skull poem or *calavera literaria*?

As part of the *Día de Muertos* celebrations, there is also a popular tradition which sees many communities of all ages in Mexico and in other countries, writing short and fun skull poems or *calaveras literarias*. Every year, numerous competitions or calls for *calaveras* take place in Mexico and abroad, which are organised by public libraries, schools, universities, civic groups, or newspapers. They are exhibited in schools or other locations such as art centres, as well as made available online, often compiled in poetry collections. Both *calaveras literarias* and the popular skull imagery associated with the Mexican festival are directly attributed to the satirical and humorous visual portrayals of different social skeletal types produced by lithographer and visual artist José Guadalupe Posada and the accompanying skull poems written by writers and journalists which were published in political broadsides in the 19th and 20th centuries in Mexico.

The poems are mock-epitaphs and are not written to offend. These poems may seem strange to some, but in Mexico this is a way that allows some Mexicans with the use of humour to cope better with the idea that one day we will all die. The poems can be dedicated to people who have passed away or are still alive; to fictional or real people such as public figures, celebrities and politicians; to teachers, families and friends; to pets; and even to objects. Most *calaveras* feature Catrina, the 'grand lady of the afterlife'. She goes by many nicknames (e.g. "La Catrina," "la Calaca" (the Skeleton), "la Huesuda" (the Bony One), "la Flaca" (the Skinny One), "la Dientona" (the Toothy One), "la Pálida" (the Pale One). Catrina is often seen in the poems interacting with people and trying to snatch them away to take them with her to Mictlán (the underworld). She is typically not a kind character, and is presented as mischievous, haughty, playful, and rather foolish at times.

The poems, which often have a catchy rhyme to them, describe imaginary situations, can include political and social satire or irony, and the themes can range from current affairs and sociocultural issues; celebrities; to what it is like to being a Mexican living abroad; as well as everyday situations.



Día de Muertos and *Calavera* Writing in British Schools

The *Día de Muertos* is sometimes misunderstood in some countries, including the UK, where the perception by some is that this highly important ritual is simply a ‘Mexican Halloween’. To break such misconceptions we are calling for schools in the UK to do more to teach children about what the practice is actually about – and why it is not an extension of Halloween but something culturally distinct underpinned by its own (non) religious history, meaning and rituals in order to break with issues around mislabelling. In doing so, this will help to promote sensitive interculturality and cultural exchange by encouraging for example schools to invite local Mexican communities to collaborate with schools to promote all things *Día de Muertos* from their perspective.

Jane Lavery and the Embassy to Mexico in London have teamed up to promote *Día de Muertos* activities in schools such as a video competition and now the creation of this digital compilation of *calavera* poems written by secondary school teachers and children, the first of its kind to be published in the UK. This collaboration and associated activities have already resulted in around 8000 children and teachers engage in all things *Día de Muertos* in the UK!

Whereas the teaching of the tradition is prevalent in schools in Mexico and - due to a large Mexican and Latino demographic - in the United States, this is not the case in the UK. Though *Día de Muertos* is taught in some schools as part of the Spanish language or art curriculums, for example, provision is patchy or non-existent. The *calavera* tradition as a focus of study is even less present in British schools.

Thus, following a series of workshops with secondary school children from schools in Britain exploring the *calavera* origins, its tradition and how to write *calaveras literarias*, their poems have been published in this book called *Día de Muertos Skull Poems/Calaveras Literarias. Poems by School Children and Teachers. Volume 1* (2025). These workshops have been kindly supported by my co-editor and longstanding collaborator in all things *Día de Muertos*, Mr David Stalley. The poems have been translated from Spanish into English by the authors of the poems so as to make them more accessible to wider audiences.

The inspiring poems written by the children and teachers are rich and varied, and feature topics that matter to them such as football, education, videogaming, the environment and languages, amongst others. They are a powerful testament of the children’s and teachers’ creativity, multilingualism, sagacity, wit and sensitive interculturality and awareness of the *calavera* genre and more broadly around the Mexican practice, and the importance of engaging in important conversations of death and commemoration.

Dr Jane Lavery, Associate Professor in Latin American Studies,
University of Southampton

El ladrón



En una noche lluviosa en París
Había un hombre de Brasil, de las favelas de Río
'Joga Bonito, renacido', dijeron.
Pero esa noche, cambió todo

Luego la redención llamó a la cara de la muerte
Y dijo:
'Para convertirte en la persona que deseas', se detuvo.
'Debes destruir la persona que eres'

Entonces, comenzó la remontada.
En primer lugar, en Newcastle,
Luego en Madrid,
Y finalmente, en París

La ciudad donde murió el pequeño Raphi
Y se vengó
La multitud gritó
'*Vai Rapha! Vai! Vai!*'

En los últimos momentos del partido
Lo único que se oía era el disparo,
el rizo y el sonido del balón al impactar
en el fondo de la portería
Hubo silencio por un momento cuando de repente:

'GOLAZO! RAPHINIA! ¡¡¡QUE GOLAZO!!!'

La venganza fue suya...



Illya (Year 10, Holcombe Grammar School)

The thief



On a rainy night in Paris
There was a man from Brazil, from the favelas of Rio
'*Joga Bonito*, you are reborn', they said.
But that night, everything changed

Then redemption came face-to-face with death
And said:
'To become the person you wish to be,' it paused.
'You must destroy the person you are'

Then, the comeback began.
First, in Newcastle,
Then in Madrid,
And finally, in Paris

The city where little Raphi died
And took revenge
The crowd shouted
'*Vai Rapha! Vai! Vai!*'



In the last moments of the match
The only things heard was the shot,
the curl and the sound of the ball hitting
the back of the net
There was silence for a moment when suddenly:

'GOLAZO! RAPHINIA! WHAT A STUNNING GOAL!!!'

Revenge was his...

Illya (Year 10, Holcombe Grammar School)



Luis Enrique

Hace seis años,
La Catrina conoció a la hija de Enrique
Y La Catrina se la llevó.
Enrique estaba muy triste.

Enrique tiene un trabajo que hacer.
Tiene a gente a quien impresionar,
O La Catrina podría volver.
Así que debe empezar a trabajar.

Enrique se fue de Barcelona,
Para tomar un descanso.
Para evitar a La Catrina
Y trabajar en Francia.

El trabajo fue difícil,
Pero Enrique era fuerte.
Ganó la UCL para impresionar,
Y estar a salvo de La Catrina.

Six years ago,
La Catrina met Enrique's daughter
And La Catrina took her away.
Enrique was very sad.

Enrique has a job to do.
He has people to impress,
Or La Catrina might return.
So he must start working.

Enrique left Barcelona,
To take a break.
To avoid La Catrina
And work in France.

The work was difficult,
But Enrique was strong.
He won UCL to impress,
And keep safe from La Catrina.

Matthew and Noah (Year 11, Holcombe Grammar School)

El videojuego del newb

‘¡Hora de cenar!’
‘Perdone mamá,
estoy jugando a Forza.’
‘¿Qué pensará Catrina?’
‘¡Va a llevarse!’

‘Pues, es la verdad
que no trabajas en la universidad.
Tu vida tendrá exigüidad,
y tendré que llevarte a la ruralidad.’

Luego, Catrina apareció.
Mamá miró y lloró;
El Newb miró y empezó
a correr. Catrina se echó a reír.

‘¡Ay, no! ¡Mi cerebro!’
Catrina le agarró la cabeza.
‘¡No me laves allí!’
No es compasiva. Es Catrina.

William (Year 12, Holcombe Grammar School)



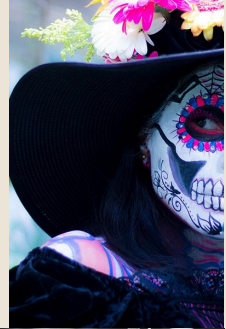
Newb's videogame

'Dinner time!
'Sorry Mum, I'm playing Forza.'
'What will Catrina think?'
'She's going to take it away!'

'Well, it's the truth
You don't work at University.
Your life will have exiguity,
And I'll have to take you to rurality.'

Then, Catrina appeared.
Mum looked and cried;
The Newb looked and started
To run. Catrina burst out laughing.

'Oh no! My brain!
Catrina grabbed his head.
'Don't take me there!
She isn't sympathetic. She's Catrina.



William (Year 12, Holcombe Grammar School)

Mo hay escapatoria de la muerte

La muerte trajo enfermedad
Para todos los malos
Pero había muchos en la ciudad
Todos se fueron o intentaron irse
Pero la Catrina los alcanzó



There is no escape from death

Death brought disease
To everyone who is bad
But there are a lot in the city
Everyone left or tried to leave
But Catrina found them

Tristan (Year 10, Holcombe Grammar School)

La venganza de la naturaleza

La muerte trajo la enfermedad a todos.
Los habitantes de la ciudad malvada fueron afectados.
Intentaron curarse con bienes robados.
Sin embargo, no tuvieron éxito.
La naturaleza recuperó su tierra robada.

Nature's revenge

Death brought disease to everyone.
The inhabitants of the wicked city were affected.
They tried to cure themselves with stolen goods.
However, they were not successful.
Nature reclaimed its stolen land.

Hasan (Year 10, Holcombe Grammar School)

El mal estudiante

El profesor dijo, 'haz tu trabajo'
El estudiante dijo, 'eres bajo'
El profesor le dio dos advertencias
Ellos estaban en una clase de ciencias

La Catrina vio al estudiante
Y pensó que el estudiante no era brillante
El estudiante fue abordado
La Catrina estaba a su lado

El niño preguntó, '¿Me he metido en un lío?'
La Calavera dijo, 'me has dado un dilema'
'Necesitas tener más disciplina'
'Por eso, te estoy llevando a La Tomatina'



The bad student

The teacher said, 'do your work.'
The student said, 'you're short'
The teacher gave him two warnings
They were in a science class

La Catrina saw the student
And thought that he wasn't very bright
The student was approached
La Catrina was by his side

The boy asked, "Am I in trouble?"
The Skull said, "You've given me a dilemma"
"You need to have more discipline"
"That's why I'm taking you to La Tomatina"

Ethan and Kairan (Year 11, Holcombe Grammar School)



Dinero del muerto

La Calavera llama a Heisenberg,
Ella quiere su bebé azul,
Él responde, pide beber,
Confiado, como un cónsul.

‘No, no, conduzcamos’
Ella se rió,
Él tuvo que aceptar,
Así que condujo.

‘¡Para!’ gritó ella,
Un niño con sus padres en la calle.
¿Las drogas utilizadas?
Azules.

Dead man's money

Skull calls Heisenberg,
She wants her blue baby.
He answers, asks to drink,
Confident, like a consul.

“No, no, let's drive.”
She laughed,
He had to agree,
So he drove.

‘Stop!’ she shouted.
A child with his parents in the street.
Which drugs were used?
Blues.

Alex (Year 11, Holcombe Grammar School)

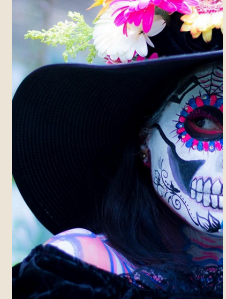
La conciliación laboral

Lo llaman la conciliación laboral
pero lo podrían llamar la mentira sin igual
uno siempre está ocupado sin rival
La Catrina se ríe sin parar

Dicen que con esta conciliación laboral
tendrás tiempo sin igual
para poder trabajar
para poderte relajar
para cuidar de los demás

La Catrina se destornilla de risa sin parar
ella sabe que es una mentira más.
Otra mentira que los políticos te cuentan
Mientras ellos con cuidadoras cuentan

La Catrina fue al Congreso
Y con todos terminó
Nadie se escapa de la Catrina
Ni gobernantes ni comandantes
La Catrina siempre victoriosa saldrá



La profesora Ortega (Holcombe Grammar School)

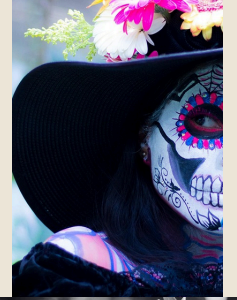
Work-life balance

They call it work-life balance
but they could call it the unmatched lie.
One is always endlessly busy,
La Catrina laughs without stopping

They say that with this work-life balance
you'll have extra time
to be able to work,
to be able to relax,
to care for others

La Catrina bursts into unstoppable laughter;
she knows it's just one more lie.
Another lie politicians tell you
while they, of course, have caregivers

La Catrina went to Congress
and finished with them all.
No one escapes La Catrina—
neither rulers nor commanders.
La Catrina will always emerge victorious



La profesora Ortega (Holcombe Grammar School)

Al profe de lenguas que la Catrina no se llevó



Esta calavera a un profe extraordinario se dedicó
La historia cuenta de un profe legendario,
Y de cómo, de las garras de la Catrina, él la evadió.
Y así es lo que pasó:

La Catrina disfrazada de monolingüe desde Mictlán llegó
Con la intención de llevarse a todos aquellos fanáticos de Duolingó.
'Ya basta!' la huesuda gritó
'De tantas formas ajenas de decir buenos días,' se quejó

'¿Bonjour? ¿Buongiorno? ¿Ni hao? ¿Egun on?'"
Hello's the only way!
'Con lo nuestro basta, lo demás *non non*,
No way Joséy'

Con los políticos de la derecha y la izquierda, la huesuda acordó:
'Aquí hablamos solo en nuestro idioma natal,'
Pero ellos con mente tan parcial,
Y tan parroquial

¡Ay! La ironía que La Dientona y sus compinches trágicamente
No se percataron de que aviesamente
La palabra Brexit
Rimase con la palabra multilingüe Inuit

Pero gracias a un encuentro fortuito,
Y mientras que la Catrina buscaba siguiendo su habitual manuscrito
De llevarse a inocentes a Mictlán en su pepena,
Que fue cuando la Muerte entró en una nueva y desconocida escena

Pues con el gran maestro políglota maese Stalley se topó
Un gran hombre aquél,
Destinatario de premios por enarbolar
La bandera alta para los idiomas, de veras él es ejemplar

**Al profe de lenguas que
la Catrina no se llevó (cont...)**



Apasionado él era por la melodía en *bom dia*,
Por la reverencia en *au revoir*, por el fuego en *amar*,
Por las historias que palpitan en cada vocal y cada verbo,
De forma solar

Y así, la Catrina entendió por fin. Se transformó
‘dejemos la vista estrecha,’
Ella gritó
‘celebrems la lengua que se despecha’

‘Hablar, aprender, comprender
Con otros, mano a mano,
Es sostener el mundo en tus manos,
hermana y hermano.’

‘Por fin entendí que las lenguas dan tanto color.’
Y así pues por la bondad de su causa, pasión y dolor,
la muerte al señor Stalley respetó
Y no se lo llevó

No way Joséy!

Anónmio – de una profe a otro profe. Con gran
admiración.

To the language teacher whom
La Catrina did not snatch away



This *calavera* was dedicated to an extraordinary teacher
The story tells of a legendary teacher,
And how he escaped the clutches of La Catrina
And this is how it went:

La Catrina, disguised as a monolingual, arrived from Mictlán
Intent on taking all those fanatics of Duolingo.
'Enough!' the bony one cried,
'I'm fed up with all these foreign ways to say good morning,' she sighed

'Bonjour? Buongiorno? Ni hao? Egun on?'
Hello's the only way!
'Ours is enough, the rest—*non non*,
No way Joséy!'

With politicians from both right and left, the bony one made a pact:
'Here we speak only our mother tongue,'
But they, with minds so narrow,
And so parochial

Oh! The irony that the Toothy one and her cronies tragically
Did not realise,
That wickedly the word Brexit
Rhymed with the multilingual word Inuit

But thanks to a chance encounter,
While La Catrina followed her usual script
To take innocents to Mictlán during her sweep,
She entered a new and unknown scene

For she came upon the great polyglot teacher, Maese Stalley,
A great man indeed,
Recipient of awards for flying high
The flag for languages—truly exemplary

To the language teacher whom
La Catrina did not snatch away



He was passionate about the melody in *bom dia*,
About the reverence in *au revoir*, about the fire in *amar*,
The stories pulsing in every vowel and verb,
Radiantly so

And so, La Catrina finally understood. She was transformed.
'Let's leave behind this narrow view,'
She cried,
"Let's celebrate the language that is despised!"

"To speak, to learn, to understand
With others, hand in hand,
Is to hold the world in your hands,
Brother and sister."

"At last I understand that languages bring so much colour"
And thus, for the goodness of his cause, his passion and pain,
Death respected Señor Stalley,
And did not take him away.

No way Joséy!

Anonymous – from one teacher to another.
With great admiration.

**Para todos aquellos a quienes
el sistema fracasó**

La educación que no ayudó
Muchas posibilidades le ofrecieron
Pero la paradoja se estableció

La Catrina lo vigiló
Salirse de su situación intentó
Por el sistema viajó

Creyó
Asimilarse a todo
A la clase en que se encontró
Pero falló
La paradoja se subrayó

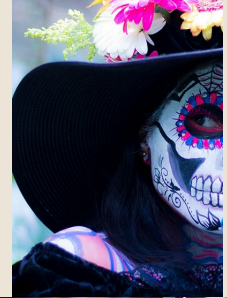
Detrás se quedó
Nunca se recuperó
Lo cuál lo sorprendió
‘Hizo todo lo que debió hacer
La Catrina juzgó

Nunca en el sistema cupo
Se sentirá siempre discapacitado, pensó
Su colega lo adelantó
Y él, por completo, falló
El sistema no le ayudó
La Catrina decidió

Llevárselo a él, pues ella lo salvó

Y atrás el sistema de educación roto se quedó

El profe David Stalley
(Simon Langton Girl's Grammar School)



**To all those failed by
the system**

Education did not help
Many possibilities were offered
But the paradox set in

La Catrina watched
Out of his situation he tried to escape
Through the system he travelled

He believed in
Assimilating into everything
Into the class he found himself in
But he failed
The paradox was highlighted

Behind he was left behind
Never did he recover
Which surprised him
I did everything he should
La Catrina judged

Never into the system did he fit
He will always be disabled, he thought
His peer overtook him
And he, completely, failed
The system did not help him
La Catrina decided

Carrying him away, she then saved him

And the broken education system left behind

Teacher David Stalley (Simon Langton Girl's Grammar School)





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