

POEM PLUS PROMPT (PPP) - Self Portraits

Dilruba Ahmed | <https://www.dilrubaahmed.com/writing-lab>

WARM-UP

The Personality Test

1. Who are you?
2. If you could be any animal, what animal would you be?
3. If you could be any color, what color would you be?
4. If you could be any sound, what sound would you be?
5. What texture are you?
6. What movement is most like you?
7. If you could be any space (cupboard, canyon, church, etc.) what space would you be?
8. What object are you?
9. What do you want to be?
10. What are you not?

Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/157329/the-self-portrait-poem>

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How does the poet “paint” a self-portrait? How does the poet flesh out the physical/emotional/intellectual contexts of the poem?
2. What is revealed about the self? What is withheld? What are the poem’s sources of tension?
3. How would you describe the tone?
4. What craft strategies seem to play a significant role in depicting the self? (diction, metaphor, sensory details, narrative, etc)

POEMS

Self-Portrait at Ten

BY [ROXANE BETH JOHNSON](#)

A boarded-up house. Ransacked inside — broken glass and toppled tables, chairs overturned, books shaken for hidden money.

There are mouths in dreams full of gold teeth, chewing bread and meat. The body is hollow as flame and will burn down anything if pointed straight.

A bird flies in through the door, then flutters at the window. Although he is tiny, I am too afraid to help him escape.

I’ve made myself another house. I hum to fill its empty rooms. I fold in like saloon doors closing, then swinging out, keeping out thieves.

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Self-Portrait with Profanity

BY [SAFIA ELHILLO](#)

ninety-nine names for my god
though i know none for my []

a failing not of my deity but of
my arabic not the language

itself rather the overeager mosaic
i hoard i steal i borrow

from pop songs & mine
from childhood fluency i guard

my few swearwords like tinkling
silver anklets spare & precious

& never nearly enough to muster
a proper arabic anger proper arabic

vulgarity only a passing spar
always using the names of animals

i am not polite i am only inarticulate
overproud of my little arsenal

a stranger blows a wet tobacco kiss
through the window of my taxi

& i deploy my meager weapons
[dog] [pig] [donkey]

& finally my crown jewel
i pass my tongue across my teeth

crane my neck about the window
& call [your mother's]

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Self-Portrait as So Much Potential

BY [CHEN CHEN](#)

Dreaming of one day being as fearless as a mango.

As friendly as a tomato. Merciless to chin & shirtfront.

Realizing I hate the word “sip.”

But that’s all I do.

I drink. So slowly.

& say I’m tasting it. When I’m just bad at taking in liquid.

I’m no mango or tomato. I’m a rusty yawn in a rumored year. I’m an arctic attic.

Come amble & ampersand in the slippery polar clutter.

I am not the heterosexual neat freak my mother raised me to be.

I am a gay sipper, & my mother has placed what’s left of her hope on my brothers.

She wants them to gulp up the world, spit out solid degrees, responsible grandchildren ready to gobble.

They will be better than mangoes, my brothers.

Though I have trouble imagining what that could be.

Flying mangoes, perhaps. Flying mango-tomato hybrids. Beautiful sons.

WRITING PROMPT

Write a self-portrait in which you reveal and/or explore key aspects of the self. Think about how to flesh out the physical, emotional, and intellectual contexts. Is the self cohesive, murky, clear, contradictory?

Options: write a self-portrait at a certain age - or “with” / “as” a concrete or abstract noun.

Revisit your warm-up writing to see what you might “mine” from that material.

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MODE OF SENSORY DESCRIPTION	NOTES: How are these details used to establish the physical & emotional contexts?
visual: sight	
auditory: sound	
gustatory: taste	
olfactory: smell	
tactile: touch	
kinesthetic: movement, tension	
organic: internal sensation (hunger, thirst, fatigue, fear)	

More self portraits: <https://poets.org/self-portrait-poems>