

LOOKING TO WRITE GRADES 7-12

Constructing Self-Portrait Poems



CAPTURING SELF IN A MOMENT

In this 1964 self-portrait, photographer Kwame Brathwaite (b. 1938) gives viewers visual clues to both his passion and his profession. Emerging from velvety tones of gray and black, the artist leans forward, his hand arrested in motion as if directing someone off camera. He holds the bulb, ready to squeeze. It is the instant before capturing the image. His gaze is direct, outward. We feel he is about to speak. In fact, we can almost sense the intake of breath just before action.

View the artwork in more detail on the Museum's [collection page here](#).

CONSTRUCTING SELF IN WORDS

In his self-portrait, Kwame Brathwaite gives viewers a visual instant that describes who he is. In contrast, Polish poet Adam Zagajewski (1945-2021) creates a self-portrait in words. But rather than capture an instant, he describes an arc of actions, affections, and aspirations that reveal his character. Both men use the tools of their respective professions to present to us an image of how they want to be seen. On the following page, read Zagajewski's poem titled *Self-Portrait*.

ACTIVITY: WRITING A SELF-PORTRAIT POEM

Write a self-portrait poem using Zagajewski's poem as a model, or try taking a photograph—a selfie with substance—that reveals something essential about yourself.

READ: POEM BY ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI

Self-Portrait

Between the computer, a pencil, and a typewriter
half my day passes. One day it will be half a century.
I live in strange cities and sometimes talk
with strangers about matters strange to me.
I listen to music a lot: Bach, Mahler, Chopin,
Shostakovich.
I see three elements in music: weakness, power, and
pain.
The fourth has no name.
I read poets, living and dead, who teach me
tenacity, faith, and pride. I try to understand
the great philosophers—but usually catch just
scraps of their precious thoughts.
I like to take long walks on Paris streets
and watch my fellow creatures, quickened by envy,
anger, desire; to trace a silver coin
passing from hand to hand as it slowly
loses its round shape (the emperor's profile is erased).
Beside me trees expressing nothing
but a green, indifferent perfection.
Black birds pace the fields,
waiting patiently like Spanish widows.
I'm no longer young, but someone else is always older.
I like deep sleep, when I cease to exist,
and fast bike rides on country roads when poplars and
houses
dissolve like cumuli on sunny days.
Sometimes in museums the paintings speak to me
and irony suddenly vanishes.
I love gazing at my wife's face.
Every Sunday I call my father.
Every other week I meet with friends,
thus proving my fidelity.
My country freed itself from one evil. I wish
another liberation would follow.
Could I help in this? I don't know.
I'm truly not a child of the ocean,
as Antonio Machado wrote about himself,
but a child of air, mint and cello
and not all the ways of the high world
cross paths with the life that—so far—
belongs to me

A PATTERN TO FOLLOW

You might choose to use these phrases or prompts as Zagajewski did to construct your poem by completing them with details from your own life, or create your own version.

I live...
I listen...
I see...
I read...
I like to...
Beside me...
Sometimes...
I love...
Every... (name day or time increment)
I... (name an action)
I am truly not...
but... (name what you ARE)



Image: Adam Zagajewski