

# Model Self-Portrait Poems

## Phenomenal Woman

Maya Angelou

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.  
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size  
But when I start to tell them,  
They think I'm telling lies.  
I say,  
It's in the reach of my arms  
The span of my hips,  
The stride of my step,  
The curl of my lips.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

I walk into a room  
Just as cool as you please,  
And to a man,  
The fellows stand or  
Fall down on their knees.  
Then they swarm around me,  
A hive of honey bees.  
I say,  
It's the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth,  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.  
They try so much  
But they can't touch  
My inner mystery.  
When I try to show them  
They say they still can't see.  
I say,  
It's in the arch of my back,  
The sun of my smile,  
The ride of my breasts,  
The grace of my style.  
I'm a woman

Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Now you understand  
Just why my head's not bowed.  
I don't shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud.  
When you see me passing  
It ought to make you proud.  
I say,  
It's in the click of my heels,  
The bend of my hair,  
the palm of my hand,  
The need of my care,  
'Cause I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

## Still I Rise

Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.  
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

## Animal of Light

Pablo Neruda

I am in this endless lack of solitude  
an animal of light corralled  
by his mistakes and by his foliage:  
the forest is wide: here my brother creatures  
swarm, back away or roam around,  
while I retreat accompanied  
by the escort that time chooses:  
waves of the sea, stars of the night.

It is small, it is wide, scarce and is everything.  
My eyes from looking into so many eyes  
and my mouth from so many kisses,  
from having swallowed the smoke  
of those trains that vanished:  
the old merciless stations  
and the dust of countless bookshops,  
the man I am, the mortal, weary  
of eyes, of kisses, of smoke, of roads,  
tired of books thicker than the earth.

And today, deep in the lost forest  
he hears the rustling of the enemy and flees  
not from the others but from himself,  
from the interminable conversation,  
from the choir that used to sing with us  
and from the meaning of life.

Because one moment, because one voice, because one  
syllable or the passing of one silence  
or the undying sound of the wave  
leave me face to face with the truth,  
and there is nothing left to decipher,  
nothing more to say: that was all:  
the doors of the forest are closed,  
the sun circles opening the leaves,  
the moon rises like a white fruit  
and man suits himself to his destiny.

--Pablo Neruda, from "Winter Garden"  
trans. by William O'Daly

## I Hear America Singing

by Walt Whitman

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,  
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,  
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand  
    singing on the steamboat deck,  
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,  
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or  
    at noon intermission or at sundown,  
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of  
    the girl sewing or washing,  
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,  
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows,  
    robust, friendly,  
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

## I, Too, Sing America

by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.

## Self-Portrait

by Adam Zagajewski

translated by Clare Cavanagh

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.

## Self-Portrait: After Adam Zagajewski

Linda Pastan

I am child to no one, mother to a few,  
wife for the long haul.  
On fall days I am happy  
with my dying brethren, the leaves,  
but in spring my head aches  
from the flowery scents.  
My husband fills a room with Mozart  
which I turn off, embracing  
the silence as if it were an empty page  
waiting for me alone to fill it.  
He digs in the black earth  
with his bare hands. I scrub it  
from the creases of his skin, longing  
for the kind of perfection  
that happens in books.  
My house is my only heaven.  
A red dog sleeps at my feet, dreaming  
of the manic wings of flushed birds.  
As the road shortens ahead of me  
I look over my shoulder  
to where it curves back  
to childhood, its white line  
bisecting the real and the imagined  
the way the ridgepole of the spine  
divides the two parts of the body, leaving  
the soft belly in the center  
vulnerable to anything.  
As for my country, it blunders along  
as well intentioned as Eve choosing  
cider and windfalls, oblivious  
to the famine soon to come.  
I stir pots, bury my face in books, or hold  
a telephone to my ear as if its cord  
were the umbilicus of the world  
whose voices still whisper to me  
even after they have left their bodies.

## Choices

Nikki Giovanni

if i can't do  
what i want to do  
then my job is to not  
do what i don't want  
to do

It's not the same thing  
but it's the best i can  
do

if i can't have  
what i want . . . then  
my job is to want  
what i've got  
and be satisfied  
that at least there  
is something more  
to want

since i can't go  
where i need  
to go . . . then i must . . . go  
where the signs point  
though always understanding  
parallel movement  
isn't lateral

when i can't express  
what i really feel  
i practice feeling  
what i can express  
and none of it is equal  
I know  
but that's why mankind  
alone among the animals  
learns to cry

# Self-Portrait Poem Study

**Instructions:** Read each poem in your packet twice, writing notes on it as you go, before answering the following questions on your own paper (you'll need the space!). Be specific—always use details from the text of the poem to support your responses.

“Animal of Light” by Pablo Neruda

1. In the first stanza, to what does the speaker compare himself? Under what specific circumstances?
2. What effects on tone and mood does this first metaphor and image have? (What does it show about his attitude toward himself? What effects does it have on the reader?)
3. What does he say about the man he is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza?
4. What is happening in the story of the poem “today”?
5. What does he say about truth in the final stanza? How does this stanza bring closure to the poem? How does the speaker ultimately see himself and his place in/relationship to the world?
6. List the specific images in the final stanza. What effects do they have on how we understand the tone of this poem?

“I Hear America Singing” by Walt Whitman (read this one BEFORE the Hughes poem)

1. List the specific people the speaker hears singing along with the circumstances of each song (when and where are they singing them?).
2. How does he describe these songs in the first and final lines?
3. What do the speaker’s choices of people and descriptions of the songs they sing say about his attitude toward America (tone)? What do they say about his view of himself as an American?

“I, Too, Sing America”

1. In response to the Whitman poem, what does the speaker of this poem say about his place in America?
2. What are the particular circumstances of this poem? (its story—what is literally happening in it?)
3. What is the speaker’s tone toward himself? Toward his fellow Americans? How do you know?

“Self-Portrait: After Adam Zagajewski”

1. How does the speaker define herself in the opening lines? What does her diction (the words she chooses) reveal about her tone?
2. What roles does her husband play? How does she relate to him?
3. Where in this poem do the story and tone shift? How do you know?
4. What metaphor and imagery does the speaker use to show the relationship between the speaker’s present and past? What effects do they have?
5. How does the speaker view her place in the world? How do you know?



## Self-Portrait Questions

1. How do you see yourself/your life in relation to the rest of the world? Where do you fit in? What do you think your purposes for being are?
2. Answer the next set of questions with whatever pops into your head first:
  - a. Are you a dog or a cat? What kind? Pick a specific breed and explain why. (EXAMPLE: I'm a golden retriever—joyful, bounding, and a little scattered at times . . .)
  - b. What kind of vegetable are you? Why?
  - c. Which do you prefer—the mountains or the beach? Why?
  - d. What do you like most about yourself? Why?
  - e. What do you like least about yourself? Why?
  - f. Three things that make you angry?
  - g. Four things that make you happy?