

Self-Portrait with Plastic Bag

You Did Not Ask to be Born

but admit that you still wanted it: life,
the world opening to an explosion
of light, your amniotic mouth saying yes,
your hunger a beacon for your mother's
breast, the milk itself a form of yes,
each drop becoming part of your flesh,
your hummingbird heart, fontanel, each
part of you a yes, bones growing, fusing

into a single yes, as lines form to make
a poem, your skin conversing with someone's
skin, tongue, a voice repeating yes, how else
will you admit this want, this life you never
asked for, what other choice did you have but
to say yes, language as explosion
of what might be said, as you open your lips
and begin a breath with one syllable, yes —

Self-Portrait as a Carpenter's Tools

Not framed but kept in a box
for a purpose. The mind's pure
invention to whittle a rough

surface, easing wood
into what it could become.
You are steel's tensile strength,

extension of muscle that nicks
away excess, pounds a joint
into place. Each line measured

to be enough, nothing more
and nothing less than faith.
You are cross-cutting teeth

sawing across the grain, bone
of timber broken because
it must. To be the exact

thing a hand needs to turn the screw
on a hinge, for a door to be
the door. You are hammering.

Autobiography of Fernando Amorsolo

I was born at the turn of the century in Calle Heran, a speck in a tapestry.

Manila verged on revolution and my family moved to Daet, Camarines Norte.

Playing at the beach, I was nimble with a stick and traced pictures on the sand before the waves erased them.

In the delirium of summer, there was nothing to do but memorize all the textures and amplitudes of light.

After Father died, Mother embroidered to make a living, the fabric of our days creased and ragged.

Childhood was a cracked vessel from which everything else flowed.

From my uncle Don Fabian dela Rosa, I learned about brushstrokes, perspective, the syntax of clouds.

Every window held, if not a truth, then a way of looking into the world.

My trick was to conjure the tropical landscape on the canvas.

When I painted a portrait, I saw how someone could inhabit a face.

I married twice and fathered twenty children and thousands of paintings.

The sky throbbed and flickered while fire licked the parchment city but it was not a dream.

A hand pointed at my brother Pablo and he was executed by guerrillas.

It was easier to dig one hole to bury all the bodies in the aftermath of war.

I walked along the charred streets and collected shards and shrapnel.

The past became a patina of dust that the wind blew away.

Two of my sons died and I carried grief like a stone, fingering its heft wherever I went.

A blade pierced my eye to remove its cataract.

The dark funnelled into my iris and I stared and stared at an eclipse that would not end.

Ornamental

Vanitas means that all art
is a lament, the mantled

table with an antler, a map
depicting the realm of the known

world, a skull against a lantern.
A mirror. Still life of an altar

whose tenor is loss, pure
as the moan of a dowager

in her deathbed. What manner
of dying must we learn and how

can we atone for everything
laid out, each name ornate

in another language? None
of these remain, however real

they were and heavy
with omens. Worms have long

eaten the apple caught
in sweet decay. We make

a meal from what we reap
while some devote their hands

to the fluency of brush
and pigment: this spot a dab

of bone white and cerulean,
here the rust of iron oxide.

After Félix Resurrección Hidalgo's *Las Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho*

I am in a cathedral
of light – no, I meant half
shadow, half light. The usual
drama of chiaroscuro,
how it begins

in medias res for the sake
of the viewer. I am nude
and your gaze is naked
as need, almost an affliction.
If I avert my eyes, is it out

of being drawn
forsaken, the spoil
and spoilage of an empire
about to be undone? I am subjected
as virgin, as soon

to be ruin, each hand yearning
to graze the tips of my breasts,
the fever in my skin.
My voice is walled
by other voices, clamorous

for attention. How blind they are not
to see the edge
I have become. I am a knife unsheathed.

Escher's Dream

Stairs ascending and descending in a loop.
Holding a spherical mirror, a man stares,

reflecting on himself, his face dead
center, what we know only a reflection

of what he sees. Perspective's a tricky
game: the door a ceiling, portal of

another world where one might change, be changed
into a bird, a fish, a cresting wave. An Other.

Water flows down, up, up and down in a never-
ending cycle, powering the mind's water

wheel, perpetual machine that must exist
because perceived. How blindly logic wheels,

turning from one line to the next, a question
engraved on wood, shadow of an image turned,

becoming its answer. The gaze follows
the rungs of a ladder, the day becoming

night becoming day, all in the same page, the same
breath. Memory repeats itself – knights

lined up on horseback, lizards in a fractal
kaleidoscope, the world radiating from one line,

one side with one edge, rotating in an infinite
dance, singing and spiraling as one.

Trilogy

1. *Bella Flores is Disgusted*

by you, dear reader. Nothing
personal but that's how it is,
the diva taking stock with one
withering look, and voila,
a first and final judgment:

You are not worthy. She can hear
your heart trashing inside your chest,
see past your earnest greetings, air
kisses tossed around like trinkets.
Wait, Bella Flores needs to take

a call... She slams the rotary
phone, the thwack a gilded pendant
in the willy-nilly blather
of the party. If she smiles (if
at all), don't flatter yourself

by thinking that she is pleased
with your bouquet of affection.
Behind those lips lie the syntax
of venom, the snake's reflex to sink
its fangs on a warm-blooded creature.

2. *Celia Rodriguez's Turban*

As headgear, of course, but also
as stand-in for a menace
we cannot see. As coiled fabric,
as glamor, necessary cover
of and for a hidden subject.
As object of the gaze, brazen
and sequined. As device to date
the period, which is timeless.
As etiquette for murder,
as sieve, ragged edge of hunger.
As peepshow, as startle, dangling
thread of subplot, as hinge
turning from this world to the next.

3. Self-Portrait as Vangie Labalan

My face looms on the screen, shorthand
for anger, the kind that uses
an avalanche of words for kindling.

With an acute sense of smell,
my nose is a dowsing rod, pointing
to the direction of conflict.

I'd like to think it's all about
me: my frown and philtrum, nape,
my absent clavicle. But the scene

cuts to the meat of the story,
where I am only gristle.
You will not see the fluttering

of my chest or how intricate
the pattern is on my floral
duster. Will you find my name

in the credits? I am hysteria,
I am prickle, I am the grain
of sand that irritates the oyster.

Self-Portrait with Plastic Bag

The plastic bag is light and the properties of light. Its life began in a plant somewhere in China, a lattice of carbon and hydrogen. How far it has drifted to bear a burden not its own. It has the patience of stone and can weather a thousand years. Vessel of necessities, its breath smells of the detergent powder it once carried. And now it is discarded. The plastic bag is free. No longer does it want to be a stand-in for Sisyphus. It dreams of flight, as I do and you do. It asks feathers and clouds to whisper their secrets. The wind hears the plastic bag's prayer and grants it the grace to be lifted. It skims the ground lightly before fluttering among spiraling leaves, its transparent face floating over fireworks and buildings, birds and contrails,

rising, fading,
disappearing
in the sky.

Self-Portrait as Magdalene

I am threading a story
that has yet to be told
how your hands touch me

with a ripple of light
and my heart quickens
when you reveal yourself alive

for morning breaks the night
this world stirs anew
water already changed

by one breath into wine
and it is your face I see
your hair your body bare

your name flowers on my tongue
I come to you dressed
from head to toe in faith

I want to leave you
something to unbutton
something to undo

After Georgette Chen's Self-Portrait

One day in your life will not be a day
like any other. Light becomes a mirror
reflecting your face and for once you can see
who you are. Your skin not as a mask but
as your self. Your eyes meeting the gaze
not of your lover's but your own. Your days
dappling the canvas, each stroke of the brush
exactly where it needs to be. The curl
of your hair. Your black cheongsam, smooth
as obsidian. You close your eyes and paint
a portrait: the absence of sorrow, the sorrow
of absence. One day, you will open a window.
You will see your face before you were born.