

**LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL COMMUNITY PROGRAMME
POETRY AND PICTURES POETRY WORKSHOP
SEPTEMBER 2020 : SELF PORTRAITS**

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EXERCISE ONE: This is a warm-up writing exercise called Univocal Writing

This is a form of writing that only uses one vowel. Look at these examples of univocalics (poems that only use one of the five vowels: in these cases the letter 'o'). *Low Owl* by John Rice:

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=GFvSdZQGa3kC&pg=PA400&lpg=PA400&dq=low+owl+poem+john+rice&source=bl&ots=vqOyoVZ7dH&sig=ACfU3U1HalTAGjZD5ZqxINhcvqsL_G98bg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjip9q07YvsAhWSTcAKHS5fBd8Q6AEwEXoECACQAQ#v=onepage&q=low%20owl%20poem%20john%20rice&f=false

and an extract from *Ron's Knockoff Shop* by Luke Wright:

<https://www.mixcloud.com/lukewrightpoet2/rons-knockoff-shop-univocalism-in-o/>

See Luke perform the whole poem here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ukaoR2VnpE>

Write a poem, story or piece that only uses one of the five vowels, in this case the letter 'e'. Use this sheet of 'e' words to help you! See Appendix 1 below

Now have a go at writing other pieces using only one vowel each time. This exercise makes you put words together that you wouldn't do ordinarily. A playful exercise where you can experiment with words.

Credit and thanks to Leanne Moden at Nottingham Writers' Studio for the resource. I attended an excellent online poetry workshop with Leanne and this was one of the writing exercises she set.

EXERCISE TWO: The theme of this exercise is SELF-PORTRAITS

I thought of exploring this theme because of the recent rise in use of video platforms. We can now see ourselves in situations like online meetings, social gatherings etc. We are part of a Gallery in Zoom. We can see ourselves as self-portraits. This is new for us. We are not used to seeing ourselves interact and communicate with people. How do we feel about that? Do we modify our behaviour/expressions? What about reading body language? How different is it to 'live' and 'real' communication and interaction? Have we noticed things about ourselves that are interesting, surprising, unwanted? Have there been any revelations?

Here is some further information about the theme:

A self-portrait is a representation of an artist that is drawn, painted, photographed, or sculpted by that artist. Although self-portraits have been made since the earliest times, it is not until the Early Renaissance in the mid-15th century that artists can be frequently identified depicting themselves as either the main subject, or as important characters in their work. With better and cheaper mirrors, and the advent of the panel portrait, many painters, sculptors and printmakers tried some form of self-portraiture. The genre is venerable, but not until the Renaissance, with increased wealth and interest in the individual as a subject, did it become truly popular.

Look at the following paintings and consider how they work as art, why they were painted, how they were created, how they make you feel, etc.



From L to R clockwise:

1. Self-Portrait, 1889 by Vincent Van Gogh

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_van_Gogh

Vincent Willem van Gogh (30th March 1853 – 29th July 1890) was a Dutch post-impressionist painter who is among the most famous and influential figures in the history of Western art. In just over a decade, he created about 2,100 artworks, including around 860 oil paintings, most of which date from the last two years of his life. They include landscapes, still lifes, portraits and self-portraits, and are characterised by bold colours and dramatic, impulsive and expressive brushwork that contributed to the foundations of modern art. He was not commercially successful, and his suicide at 37 came after years of mental illness, depression and poverty.

Van Gogh suffered from psychotic episodes and delusions throughout his life and, though he worried about his mental stability, he often neglected his physical health, did not eat properly and drank heavily. His friendship with Gauguin ended after a confrontation with a razor when, in a rage, he severed part of his own left ear.

Van Gogh was unsuccessful during his lifetime, and he was considered a madman and a failure. Today, Van Gogh's works are among the world's most expensive paintings to have ever sold, and his legacy is honoured by a museum in his name, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, which holds the world's largest collection of his paintings and drawings.

This painting, with the artist looking sideways, was painted while the artist was in an asylum in Saint-Rémy, France. Van Gogh admitted himself to the small asylum in May 1889 and was struck down by a severe psychotic episode in July that lasted for a month and a half. In a letter to his brother, Theo, dated 20 September 1889, Van Gogh referred to this self-portrait as "an attempt from when I was ill".

It has been noted that the self-portrait depicts someone who is mentally ill; his timid, sideways glance is easily recognisable and is often found in patients suffering from depression and psychosis. The image is dominated by a greenish-brown tone. Louis van Tilborgh, professor of art history at the University of Amsterdam, said Van Gogh was frightened to admit he was in a similar state to other

residents at the asylum. "He probably painted this portrait to reconcile himself with what he saw in the mirror: a person he did not wish to be, yet was," he said.

"This is part of what makes the painting so remarkable and even therapeutic. It is the only work that Van Gogh is known for certain to have created while suffering from psychosis. It belongs to a group of pictures that show something of his mental health problem and how he dealt with it, or tried to deal with it."

Van Gogh would have been looking in a mirror as he was painting so the ear in view is his right one, not the one he severed with a razor blade. The ear in this painting is vague and presumably deliberately so. Within a year he was dead, aged only 37, after he shot himself in an apparent suicide.

2. Self-Portrait As The Allegory Of Painting, 1638-9 by Artemisia Gentileschi

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemisia_Gentileschi

Artemisia Gentileschi (8th July 1593 – c.1656) was an Italian Baroque painter, now considered one of the most accomplished seventeenth-century artists. In an era when women had few opportunities to pursue artistic training or work as professional artists, Artemisia was the first woman to become a member of the Accademia di Arte del Disegno in Florence and had an international clientele.

Artemisia was known for being able to depict the female figure with great naturalism and for her skill in handling colour to express dimension and drama.

She was invited to London in 1638 by Charles I and produced *Self-Portrait As The Allegory Of Painting* there when she was 46 years old. She holds a brush in one hand and a palette in the other, cleverly identifying herself as the female personification of Painting, described as such in the king's inventory. The work is also, however, a self-portrait: as a woman artist, Artemisia identifies herself as the female personification of Painting.

Artemisia wears a brown apron over her green dress and seems to be leaning on a stone slab used for grinding pigments in which the reflection of her left arm is visible. The area of brown behind her has been interpreted as background, or as a blank canvas on which she is about to paint. Particularly striking is the rolled up sleeve of her right arm, where fluid strokes of white delineating the edge of her sleeve meet the brown shadow of exposed ground.

As a self-portrait the painting is particularly sophisticated and accomplished. The position in which Artemisia has portrayed herself would have been extremely difficult for the artist to capture, yet the work is economically painted. In order to view her own image she may have arranged two mirrors on either side of herself, facing each other. Depicting herself in the act of painting in this challenging pose, the angle and position of her head would have been the hardest to accurately render, requiring skilful visualisation.

Few of Artemisia's self-portraits survive and references to them in the artist's correspondence only hint at what others might have looked like. It is clear that Artemisia's image was very much in demand among 17th century collectors, who were attracted by her outstanding artistic abilities and her unusual status as a female artist.

3. Interior With Hand Mirror (Self-Portrait), 1967 by Lucian Freud

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucian_Freud

Lucian Michael Freud (8th December 1922 – 20th July 2011) was a British painter and draughtsman, specialising in figurative art, and is known as one of the foremost 20th-century portraitists. He was born in Berlin, the son of Jewish architect Ernst L. Freud and the grandson of Sigmund Freud. His

family moved to England in 1933 to escape the rise of Nazism. He served at sea with the British Merchant Navy during the Second World War.

His early career as a painter was influenced by surrealism, but by the early 1950s his often stark and alienated paintings tended towards realism. Freud was an intensely private and guarded man and his paintings are mostly of friends and family. They are generally sombre and thickly impastoed, often set in unsettling interiors and urban landscapes. The works are noted for their psychological penetration and often discomfiting examination of the relationship between artist and model.

In his self-portraits, Freud turns his unflinching eye firmly on himself. Spanning nearly seven decades, his self-portraits give a fascinating insight into both his psyche and his development as a painter – from his earliest portrait, painted in 1939, to his final one executed 64 years later. When seen together, his portraits represent an engrossing study into the process of ageing.

Here is an interesting article about *Interior With Hand Mirror (Self-Portrait)* by art critic Martin Gayford (scroll down to read it):

<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/lucian-freud-five-self-portraits-martin-gayford>

"This little picture from the 1960s presents two crucial tools for Freud: a window and a mirror. The first was important because – after his youth – all of his work was done indoors, in a studio. There were various reasons for this. One was that he found the “changing light outside was a difficulty”. Another was that, always intent on privacy and averse to what he called “attention”, he hated being watched by strangers as he worked, as would occur outdoors. The result was that for him “the quality of light in the studio is of great importance”.

Freud was a connoisseur of light. As we talked one day in his Kensington studio, he exclaimed, “The light is very good here just at the moment, better than it was a few minutes ago!” I asked if he meant it was brighter. “Clearer,” he replied. Doubtless he felt the same about the window in his studio at Gloucester Terrace, a street near Paddington. He must have spent countless hours next to it. This picture is, obviously, a portrait of that window, but also a self-portrait. Since artists cannot, of course, see themselves directly, all self-portraits have to be mediated. Since Freud did not use photography, that meant his self-portraits were all pictures of reflections in mirrors – such an important fact for him that he took to adding the word “reflection” to the title of self-portraits.

As he told Lawrence Gowing, “the information gathered from a mirror is a very different kind of information”. The reason was, he felt, because the light was different. So *Interior With Hand Mirror (Self-Portrait)* is a depiction of these two kinds of light: one coming in from the street, the other reflected behind the subject. It is also a meditation, at once factual and poetic, on the difficulty of seeing oneself."

4. Self-Portrait, 1902 by Gwen John

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gwen_John

Gwendolen Mary John (22nd June 1876 – 18th September 1939) was a Welsh artist who worked in France for most of her career. Her paintings, mainly portraits of anonymous female sitters, are rendered in a range of closely related tones. Although she was overshadowed during her lifetime by her brother Augustus John and her lover Auguste Rodin, her reputation has grown steadily since her death.

In 1916, John wrote in a letter: "I think a picture ought to be done in 1 sitting or at most 2. For that one must paint a lot of canvases probably and waste them." Her surviving oeuvre is comparatively small; oil paintings which rarely exceed 24 inches in height or width. The majority are portraits, but

she also painted still lifes, interiors and a few landscapes. She wrote, "...a cat or a man, it's the same thing ... it's an affair of volumes ... the object is of no importance."

It became John's habit to paint the same subject repeatedly. Her portraits are usually of anonymous female sitters seated in a three-quarter length format, with their hands in their laps. One of her models wrote of John: "She takes down my hair and does it like her own ... she has me sit as she does, and I feel the absorption of her personality as I sit".

Her notebooks and letters contain numerous personal formulae for observing nature, painting a portrait, designating colours by a system of numbers, and the like. Their meaning is often obscure, but they reveal John's predilection for order and systematic preparation.

Gwen John's art, in its quietude and its subtle colour relationships, stands in contrast to her brother's far more vivid and assertive work. Critical opinion now tends to view Gwen as the more talented of the two. Augustus himself had predicted this reversal, saying "In 50 years' time I will be known as the brother of Gwen John."

Here is an interesting article about Gwen John's self-portrait by artist Celia Paul in *Frieze Masters*: <https://www.frieze.com/article/celia-paul-restraint-and-freedom-gwen-johns-self-portrait>

"In this self-portrait, her hair is parted in the middle. She looks like Emily Dickinson, who also parted her hair in the middle. Both Gwen John and Dickinson are famous for their reclusiveness. John's gaze is direct but withdrawn. She holds the secret of her inner life intact. The painting glows from within like a dark room lit only by firelight. A brown shawl is half-slipping off her shoulders: a brilliant device that adds movement to a composition which may otherwise be too stiff. The whole image is held together by an interplay between restraint and freedom. A locket is held in place at John's throat by a narrow, black ribbon. The face on the locket is in profile and stone-coloured. I feel that it is the face of her mother, who died when John was only eight years old. The loss of her mother must have been a sadness that she always held close to her. The quietness and intensity of this image affects me deeply. I have learned from John that you don't need to shout in order to make an impact."

5. Soft Self-Portrait With Fried Bacon, 1941 by Salvador Dalí

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvador_Dal%C3%AD

Salvador Domingo Felipe Jacinto Dalí i Domènech, 1st Marquess of Dalí de Púbol (11th May 1904 – 23rd January 1989) was a Spanish Surrealist artist renowned for his technical skill, precise draftsmanship and the striking and bizarre images in his work. Born in Figueres, Catalonia, Dalí received his formal education in fine arts at Madrid. Influenced by Impressionism and the Renaissance masters from a young age, he became increasingly attracted to Cubism and avant-garde movements. He moved closer to Surrealism in the late 1920s and joined the Surrealist group in 1929, soon becoming one of its leading exponents.

Dalí's artistic repertoire included painting, graphic arts, film, sculpture, design and photography, at times in collaboration with other artists. He also wrote fiction, poetry, autobiography, essays and criticism. Major themes in his work include dreams, the subconscious, sexuality, religion, science and his closest personal relationships.

After World War II, Dalí became one of the most recognized artists in the world and his long cape, walking stick, haughty expression, and upturned waxed moustache became icons of his brand. His boastfulness and public declarations of his genius became essential elements of the public Dalí persona: "every morning upon awakening, I experience a supreme pleasure: that of being Salvador Dalí".

Amy Plewis on the website *Art-Theoria* says:

<http://www.art-theoria.com/painting-of-the-month/soft-self-portrait-with-fried-bacon/>

“I have found the weird and macabre works of Dalí both compelling and comforting. When it came to studying self-portraits I returned to Dalí for inspiration because I felt that to depict myself accurately I could not paint my reflection in a mirror, but what I saw in it; sensation over reality.

Megalomaniac and provocateur are words associated with Dali, which when paired with his extreme appearance (his trademark moustache and flamboyant fashion sense) creates a caricature, untouchable on a human level. This is how he interacted with the world around him, but a self-portrait is an opportunity to say a lot more with honesty and without a facade, in this case quite literally.

The painting can be looked at on a basic level, without getting too deep into ideas and theories. As a Surrealist Dalí blurred the line between reality and imaginary in an often dark and haunting manner. Creating art could unlock the subconscious mind, allowing us to experience and explore our true selves in an unrestricted way. He wrote “to the outside world I assumed more and more the appearance of a fortress, within myself I could continue to grow old in the soft, and in the super-soft.”

At its most simplistic this is a painting of an outer appearance, a mask or flayed face. Dalí presents it to us as an object to be revered and studied, it is an artefact on a plinth. It could also be seen as a trophy, a memento of a victorious quest that immortalises the artist. Upon its stone base the title has been inscribed in an authoritative font. It is a trompe l’oeil of a self-portrait, but it isn’t about the artist’s technical ability, it is about transcribing something deeper through paint on canvas.

In the absence of eyes (often described as the windows to the soul), a recognisable facial expression, a posed body with clothes and adornments set against a backdrop, we may feel that we have little to read in terms of traditional visual information. Or perhaps we can feel undistracted so that we may reach another dimension of understanding. There are a few symbols though; ants, bacon, and crutches – objects that reoccur in his work. The ants that are crawling into the tear duct represent death and decay. Bacon can represent food and sustenance, while on the other a slice of a dead animal flesh that will rot. Its crisp and undulating texture contrasts with the softness of the mask, making it look all the more flaccid and fragile. The crutches suggest weakness or vulnerability, without them the face would become a featureless liquid pile.

The overriding thing this painting says to me is that this famous moustachioed face was just a veneer, something that Dalí hung up when out of the public eye. Something mortal that would die with him. He described it as “the glove of myself” and denied any psychological content – in fact he called it anti-psychological. But it is interesting that as a painter who continually painted his thoughts, fears, fantasies, and dreams openly, that when it came to a self-portrait we are denied a psychological reading of a man with a brain that was so interesting.

While the physical ‘self’ is exposed, the inner ‘self’ will always be somewhat private, and a self-portrait cannot tell us what a person is really about at their core. Most of the time we do not fully know ourselves, and even if we did how that could be translated into a painting. Faces are rarely transparent, and no-one knows what’s going on behind the surface of the most composed and controlled self-portraits in art history. Yet we can relate to this elusiveness, and I find that a consolation.”

6. Self-Portrait With Thorn Necklace And Hummingbird, 1940 by Frida Kahlo

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frida_Kahlo

Frida Kahlo (6th July 1907 – 13th July 1954) was a Mexican painter known for her many portraits, self-portraits, and works inspired by the nature and artefacts of Mexico. Inspired by the country's popular culture, she employed a naïve folk art style to explore questions of identity, post-colonialism, gender, class, and race in Mexican society. Her paintings often had strong autobiographical elements and mixed realism with fantasy.

Following a terrible accident in her youth and with only herself for a model, Kahlo's self-portraits usually depict great pain, physical as well as mental. Her 55-odd self-portraits include many of herself from the waist up, and also some nightmarish representations that symbolize her physical sufferings.

Kahlo's paintings often feature root imagery, with roots growing out of her body to tie her to the ground. This reflects in a positive sense the theme of personal growth; in a negative sense of being trapped in a particular place, time and situation; and in an ambiguous sense of how memories of the past influence the present for either good and/or ill. In Kahlo's paintings, trees serve as symbols of hope, of strength and of a continuity that transcends generations. Additionally, hair features as a symbol of growth and of the feminine in Kahlo's paintings. In most of her self-portraits, she depicts her face as mask-like, but surrounded by visual cues which allow the viewer to decipher deeper meanings for it. Aztec mythology features heavily in Kahlo's paintings in symbols like monkeys, skeletons, skulls, blood, and hearts.

EXERCISE THREE: Write a poem inspired by the theme of SELF-PORTRAITS

This part is about writing your poem. Look at these example poems on the theme:

Self-Portrait In The Nude – Allison Funk (American poet):

<https://poets.org/poem/self-portrait-nude>

Rembrandt's Late Self-Portraits – Elizabeth Jennings (scroll down to read the poem):

<https://fisunguner.com/listed-poems-inspired-by-paintings/>

An analysis of Jennings' poem is here:

<https://poemanalysis.com/elizabeth-jennings/rembrandts-late-self-portraits/>

Self-Portrait – Adam Zagajewski (poet, novelist, essayist, born in Lwów in 1945 and is a prominent member of Poland's contemporary poetry scene):

<https://poets.org/poem/self-portrait>

Think about the form, patterns and repetitions in the poems, the 'word music', what each poem is saying to the reader, how you feel when you read them, how they reflect the theme, imagery, metaphors, etc.

Choose an image from the paintings we have looked at to work with. What does it make you think about? What do you notice about it? Memories? Stories?

Here's a way of getting started:

- Write notes about why you chose this work of art, how it makes you feel, and/or what it makes you think about.

- Next, write a detailed description of the work of art. Be specific enough so that someone else could clearly imagine the work of art in his or her mind after reading your description. Be sure to include words that indicate size, shape, colour, light/shade, objects, figures, positions etc.
- Finally, write a poem in response to your work of art. If you need inspiration, look back at your answers above. Also, remember there are many different ways to go about this.

Here are some approaches your poem could take:

- Relate the work of art to something else it makes you think of.
- Write about the experience of looking at the art.
- What is being revealed and what concealed? Disguise?
- Speculate about how or why the artist created this work.
- What are the clothes saying? What does the pose say? Props?
- Imagine what was happening while the artist was creating this work.
- Speak to the artist of the painting, in your own voice.
- Write in the voice of the artist.
- Do we know someone from a self-portrait / not know them / which is it?

Your poem could be written in the style of one of the example poems – a self-portrait in words about yourself, almost as a monologue, like Adam Zagajewski's poem; a structured poem in verses with a rhyme scheme like Elizabeth Jennings' poem; an imagination of how you would paint your physical self and its changes over time in a stylistic form like Allison Funk's poem.

And, of course, you are perfectly free to write about the theme in your own way and in your own style!

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Appendix 1

A selection of E words - a complete list can be found online

be,	beeps,	bell,	berths,	brewed,	censer,	cheers,	clemency,	creepy,	decency,	deserve,	drew,
beck,	beer,	belled,	blenders,	brewer,	censers,	cheery,	clement,	crept,	decent,	deserved,	dryer,
bed,	beers,	bellmen,	blends,	brewers,	cent,	cheese,	clench,	crescent,	decently,	desk	dryness,
bedded,	bees,	bells,	bless,	brewery,	centre,	cheeses,	clenched,	crescents,	deck,	dessert,	dwell,
bedeck,	beet,	belly,	blessed,	brews,	centred,	cheesy,	clenches,	cress,	decked,	detect,	dwelt,
bedecked	beetle,	belt,	blessedly,	bye,	cents,	chef,	clergy,	crest,	decree,	deter,	dye,
bedecks,	beets,	belted,	blew,	byes,	check,	chefs,	clerk,	crested,	decry,	detergent	dyed,
beds,	befell,	belts	bred,	byte,	checked,	cherry,	clerked,	crestless,	deed,	deterred,	dyer,
bee,	beg,	bench,	breech,	bytes,	checker,	chess,	clerks	crests,	deem,	detest,	ebb,
beech,	begged,	benched,	breeches,	cede,	checkers,	chessmen	clever,	crew,	dented,	detested,	eddy,
beechen,	begs,	benches,	breed,	ceded,	checks,	chest,	cleverest,	crewmen,	deny,	dew,	Eden,
beeches,	beheld,	bend,	breeder,	celery,	cheek,	chests,	credence,	crews,	deplete,	dewy,	edge,
beef,	behest,	bends,	breeders,	cell,	cheeks,	chew,	creed,	cycle,	deplete,	dredge,	edged,
beefed,	behests,	bent	breeds,	celled,	cheeky,	chewed,	creeds,	cycled,	depleted,	dredged,	edgy,
beefy,	bejewel,	bereft,	breeze,	cells,	cheeps,	chews,	creek,	cycles,	depress,	dregs,	eel,
been,	bejewels,	beret,	breezed,	Celt,	cheer,	chewy,	creeks,	cygnet,	depth,	drench,	effect,
beep,	belch,	berets,	breezes,	cement,	cheered,	clef,	creep,	cygnets,	derby,	drenched	effected,
beeped,	belched,	berry,	breezy,	cemented	cheerless,	clefs,	creeper,	cypress,	descend,	dress,	egg,
beeper,	belches,	berserk,	brethren,	cements,	cheerless	clef,	creepers,	cypresses	desert,	dressed,	egged,
beepers,	belfry,	berth,	brew,	cemetery,	ness,	clefts,	creeps,	debt,	deserted,	dresses,	eggshell