

## Story of Self: “Self-Portrait” by Shirley Geok-lin Lim

**What is this?** The last poem in Lim’s poetry collection *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* (1998)

**Text:**

I want to write a self-portrait  
like Rosario Castellanos  
who knew herself so well  
she could knife herself in the back  
and laugh. She knew how she  
appeared to the world, her desire  
awry like a misplaced wig.  
But I cannot see myself.  
My eye is mercurial.  
I flake, the particulars  
drizzling with deformations.  
I know how to be happy  
but lack the means.  
Unlike my friend Rosario  
my skin is thin. Inside its bag  
are late-night monsters  
impossible to describe.  
They watch even as my green-  
stem son eats noodle soup.  
I have more desires than  
there are wigs in the world:  
to be what I am not.  
Also to be myself. To speak  
many languages, each  
as useful as this one  
I wipe my tears with.  
I want to be good and better  
than I am. I want to sway  
like the swaying palms  
and hold heavy books in my hands.

## Part 1: Analysis

Read through the story of self above and then answer the questions below.

**Text:** "Self-Portrait" by Shirley Geok-lin Lim



1. What aspect of **selfhood** is this writer focusing on?

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2. What are the **moments** or **events** they focus on in relation to that aspect of selfhood?

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3. What is the **tone** of this piece? Or, how does this writer **feel** about the aspect of selfhood they are writing about?

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4. What **details** and **images** they use to communicate that tone/feeling?

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5. What are **three words** you would use to describe this writer, based on this piece of writing? What can you tell about their personality, values, or passions?

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## Part 2: Write-alike

A write-alike is an exercise in which you take inspiration from the format, structure, and themes of a piece of writing, but replace the original content with your own.

### The Original:

“Self-Portrait” is a free-verse poem that describes some of the speaker’s core desires for herself and the kind of person she wishes to be.

### Questions To Think About For Your Write-alike:

- What do you want for yourself? What kind of person would you love to become?
- What specific images, symbols, or behaviors represent that kind of person to you?

### Starters For Your Write-alike:

One way you might begin is by imitating Lim’s line, “I have more desires than there are wigs in the world.”

You could start by writing, “I have more desires than there are \_\_\_\_\_ in the world,” replacing Lim’s reference to wigs with something more relevant to your own life (or keep it as wigs, if you like).

Then continue your poem by detailing the things you want for yourself.

### Examples:

To find examples for this exercise, visit [www.storiesofselfworkshop.com/writing\\_samples.html](http://www.storiesofselfworkshop.com/writing_samples.html)

- Gayatri’s “Self-Portrait” write-alike

### Your Turn:

Set a timer for 15 minutes and go!



A large rectangular area containing 25 horizontal lines for writing, enclosed by a thin grey border.