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 the door to be a 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 funneled into my iris, and I stared and stared at an eclipse that would not end.
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 thrashing 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

dapping 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.