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The Face of Francisco Goya

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The Face of Francisco Goya

He places his mournful face—
the turned-down, crooked mouth,
eyes that seem haunted and are yet
still bright, nose like a ship's prow aimed
into the wind—directly in front
of the artist and challenges him: make
the image last. If his life has been true,
he cannot ask for mercy.

Still, he doesn't have to be happy
about it. Eighty-two years old,
he keeps muttering to himself.

The self-portrait he sketched in red chalk
at fifty-three showed a gentleman in flattering
three-quarter view, wearing a top hat
and waistcoat, but the downturned lines
of mouth and eyes foreshadow
this face. Even as a court painter,
Goya was known for his candor.

In Madrid, 6 February 1799,
along the Calle de Desengano, his *Caprichos*
went on sale for 320 reales, hawked in shops
next door to those selling liquor and perfume.
He included the self-portrait—not for fame,
but to say, “This darkness is the vision
I see. Disillusionment and nightmares.”

Now, so many years later, he cannot doubt
what he reached for, wearing out his hands,
sore now from acid and ink, bending over a table
at his work. If he misses the raucous call
of the crow, the song sparrow's lilting notes,
or the human voice, he doesn't let on.
What's done cannot be undone—like marks
etched in cheek or brow. He dares us
to question him—the journey
not yet over—and steps past us
into the relentless dark.

Patricia Clark is an Associate Professor in
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published poems in *Slate*, *Cortland Review*,
Poetry Miscellany, and *Gulf Coast*.