

CONTRAPASSO

Matilda Lin Berke

I. Exile

If you're in a dark wood, it's your fault.
You've cast off all your old skins for a new one,
but everybody knows just what you are.

Think for a moment on the things you've lost
and they'll consume you. You've never lost a thing!
(By you, I mean the guilty you: that's me.)

The more you get, the more you start to want.
The more you want, the farther down you go.
You're in it now. You'll get what you deserve.

Here lies the entrance to your underworld.
Here marks the margin of your wandering ways.
Here you will meet the faces that you've made—

II. Amphitheater 1985

In the Hollywood Forever Cemetery,
a peacock perched upon a granite slab:
abominably blue, distinctly blue

cyanotype over dead cinema.
I know just how I must have looked
to you: the beatific face of love,

when really, you loved her.
But you thought about me more—
the faulty mechanism

by which what happens
always seems to happen.

It was a teenage night,

as from a jewel box
mounted, emerald-cut—
you asked me if I'd see a band downtown.

Nothing is real until it really happens.
After the concert, high above the city,
you parked your car where no one else would go.

You slept that night. She stayed up thinking of you.
I stayed up thinking of her thinking of you—
the reel in motion.

Against the night, a shape projected
in a midnight film, guilt enfleshed,
stretched tight over its own protruding ribs—

they all KNEW WHAT I DID, THEY KNEW, THEY
KNEW—
in the headlights, the sorry truth emerged:
a half-alive coyote slunk away.

III. Kandinsky & Klee

In red, I launched a caustic triangle
across a canvas forested in green,
mortally wounding your Schiele *Self-Portrait*—

you laughed, you said you liked him more that way.
I know this now—you'd carved him out for days:
your favorite martyr, rendered faithfully.

I knew this then—
the face of your devotion.
It was easy to hurt you, then forget.

Dear friend, you were too quick to canonize,
sketching your patron saints, and watching me.
At turns I was Kandinsky, at turns Klee:

both sides, both halves, the answer to all things.
Just like you always told me—*form and feeling*,
dodging empty paint tubes I tossed aside,

and every time I cried, you wrote to me—
Dear friend, you are yourself, not St. Sebastian—
you bleeding heart. As if I'd ever suffered

from a surfeit of compassion—
well, that's love:
the savage gift of wanton oversight.

Now you know what I've done.
Oh, now it's out. My dear departed friend,
you drew me on the wrong side of the tree.

IV. Camera Obscura

The storm spooled down in silver on the lake,
expectant, soaking through your coat—and you,
a shadow on the foreground, begging me

to stay there with you, even for the moment—
how could I tell you no? You'd laid it out
in tableau, all right there, and just for me:

the picture, framed, the optical illusion
drawn up in perfect, or drawn close enough
if I squinted through the tight knit of the rain.

I think love is a nice word for attrition:
a slow erosion of the surface image.
I redrew it from inside, in sepia—

la dolce vita stitched up from a patchwork
pattern—vague ideas of real, sweet lives.
An image of us talking at a party:

two strangers trying to tell each other something
chrome-fixed that should have been left free and fleeting—
how could I have said no? It was right there.

A storm looks like a storm, a port a port,
a portrait made for two. The aspic portrait:
the face of love, a face we know too well.

V. Sillage

If everybody wants him, then I want him.
It's easy to be wanted in return. All I must do:
become a perfect replica. Observe

the honeybee, his routine transgressions
from flower to flower. He chooses carefully—
color, fragrance, feel, a distinct tone

of voice, all patterns set in early childhood—
forgone conclusions, the time-distant products
of random attars, chemical reactions—

nothing I can't fake, since basically
it's all just synthesis. I can do that—
make myself up to be the very same,

except for what? Except that it's not real.
I want what you have. You don't want what I have.
The absolute—and don't we all want that?

VI. Beatrice

I'm looking for an object of devotion:
not love, but something. Something to observe.
This is an invitation: observe me further—

you see me now, that means I've made it out.
I'm writing from dry land, finally removed
and faint, the brush tail of a pleasant dream—

and when I wake, I don't need more than this,
the sole recourse of being so estranged—
you listen, then you tell me what I mean.

Nothing, it seems, feels like it's meant to feel.
I stayed up all night to see a meteor shower
alone—the dull and thickly plastered sky

tinselled with flaccid motions towards light.
I stared at one until it swelled and arced
in imitation of a falling star—

the difference: really seeing it, or not.
The distance between love and the other thing—
what does it matter, if you can believe it?

My dearest friend, my dearest Beatrice—

*I stayed up, half-believing in the sky,
believing in that chimerical light,
elusive, far-effulgent, quick retreat—*

*a secret held between that night and me.
The truth is less important than it seems.
The truth? A secret, hidden in between*

*the face you've made, the one you've waited for,
the sacred secret—what does it mean?*

Yours,

from the dark further back, or farther on.