

MASTER'S DEGREE  
(Felis pardus)

Black leopard, I've released you  
with rich pigments and consummate skill,  
freed you from my camera, the dead-ends  
of zoos and legends. Beneath my jungle brush  
your sulfurous stare is like fixative.

Felinity perfected, you are  
smoldering ebony on sheet ice.  
Draining my palette, you spring  
from my canvas. Out of context you stalk  
the stretching shadows in my studio,  
looking for a confrontation.

I try to warn the presiding tomcat  
of your coming, my drab native mouser  
who may not make way. Too attached  
to this bland background, I'm stilled life,  
voiceless and impotent,  
not in command of the mix of my media.

Tom bounds atop an empty pedestal, looks down  
at you then locks his gaze to me. Flexing  
his grayness around form and motion, he arches,  
preens, poses. From a corner crouch  
your tail-tip undulates. The point is made,  
the artist is confronted. I push away the paint  
and pommel a mound of clay. You emerge swift  
and sure, matrix of muscle, master of surprise.

Ah leopard, at last you're free--  
but mine!